

## Chapter 1

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### PERFECTIBLE APES IN DECADENT CULTURES: ROUSSEAU'S ANTHROPOLOGY REVISITED<sup>1</sup>

#### I

The diffusion of Rousseau's influence over the past two centuries has been so wide and so substantial that hardly a subject or movement appears to have escaped his clutches. According to the old litany, he was responsible only for nationalism, romanticism, collectivism and the French Revolution; now a good many of his admirers, and some of his critics too, inform us that psychiatry and structuralism are also derived largely from his writings; and in the past generation we have witnessed yet another monumental proclamation on his behalf—to the effect that he founded the science of anthropology. In his 'extraordinarily modern view of the passage from nature to culture',<sup>2</sup> Rousseau posed the central problem of that discipline, writes one of its most distinguished practitioners today, Claude Lévi-Strauss. By focusing upon both his own psychic state and character, on the one hand, and the behaviour of savage peoples, on the other, he sought to define the inward and outward limits of mankind, not for the sake of ascertaining our origins but in order to establish the essence of humanity itself within these boundaries. He perceived the polarities between our animal and moral attributes, between our sentimental and rational traits and in general between our natural and cultural patterns of behaviour, along lines which have marked the development of the human sciences ever since and which, moreover, distinguish the perspective of the anthropologist, according to Lévi-Strauss, from the approaches of the moralist and the historian in their investigations of the affairs of men. Of course these general claims about the field will not command universal assent from their author's colleagues, and they may admit of several possible interpretations anyway; but at least there can be little doubt that the writings of Rousseau have exercised a profound influence upon the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss himself. For he has expounded this view of Rousseau's contribution not only in an article devoted specifically to the subject<sup>3</sup> and in the passage from *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui* which is cited here, but similarly at points throughout his major writings from *Tristes tropiques* to *L'Origine des manières de table*, where—in the last case—splendid

citations from *Emile* are employed to introduce the theme of nearly every chapter.

Thus is introduced a whole new world in which the spread of Rousseauism has still to be traced, and the task confronting historians of ideas would already be sufficiently daunting, therefore, were it not for the fact that almost precisely the opposite interpretation of the significance of Rousseau's account of man has been even more recently propounded by Robert Ardrey—that arch-enemy of cultural anthropology in general. Ardrey dedicates one of his latest works, appropriately entitled *The Social Contract*, to the memory of Rousseau and praises the real modernity and 'visionary' character of his thought because of its focus upon our roots in nature rather than our passage to culture. Rousseau 'pondered over the way of the animal as of significance to the way of man'<sup>4</sup> and hence two centuries before the coming of ethology glimpsed a truth which is today wilfully ignored by so-called social scientists—the truth that genetically established forms of behaviour are manifest in human societal systems as well as in the societies of all other organisms.<sup>5</sup> What ought to be studied, according to Ardrey, are the relations between individuals that stem from the innate and universal attributes of animal life, whereas cultural anthropologists who detect a fundamental discontinuity between mankind and other zoological species are just impervious to the revolutionary ideas of Darwinism which have reverberated throughout all the life sciences apart from their own.

Now the gulf that separates Lévi-Strauss and Ardrey is in certain respects less wide than I have so far suggested, and my remarks require at least some qualification. For one thing, Lévi-Strauss has deliberately, if only slightly, modified his views about the distinction between nature and culture which he first exposed in detail in *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* in 1949, and in his more recent writings he has been as much concerned to stress the inseparability of culture from the nature of humanity in one sense as to point to the hiatus between them in another. Ardrey, for his part, has clearly altered his own views on Rousseau in the course of his career, for in his ethological writings both before and after *The Social Contract* he describes Rousseau's conception of man's original goodness (or the idea of the noble savage, on his account) as actually underlying what he takes to be the centrally false perspective of cultural anthropology,<sup>6</sup> and even in *The Social Contract* itself he seems to admire Rousseau's approach to the study of human nature only grudgingly and credits him more for the questions he posed than the solutions he provided.<sup>7</sup> So far as I know, Lévi-Strauss and Ardrey have never really addressed themselves directly to each other's views, either about anthropology in general or Rousseau in particular,<sup>8</sup> and it would in any case be a

mistake to regard their respective claims as expressing a consensus of opinion that divides anthropologists and ethologists as a whole, since both figures (especially Ardrey, who has come to his subject as an amateur and popularizer relatively late in life) have their critics within their own disciplines as well as across them.

The chief principles that distinguish the work of the two men in their analyses of human nature remain, nevertheless, fundamental and decisive. If only in a general way, they even express the most striking dichotomies between the interests of cultural anthropologists and ethologists in turn: that is, myths, rituals, kinship systems, languages and social institutions of savage peoples, on the one hand, and the feeding and sexual behaviour, patterns of dominance and submission, territorial control and, arguably, aggression, perceived across a wide spectrum of animal species—often including man (the naked ape)—on the other. And while these discrepancies may, as a rule, be based more on differences of subject matter in each case than on divergences of methodology, I think it is at least clear that Lévi-Strauss and Ardrey hold essentially conflicting views of what has proved valuable in the contribution made by Rousseau to the study of human nature and behaviour.

Perhaps some historians of Rousseau's influence would regard such antithetical praise as evidence of the immensely broad sweep and complex texture of his philosophy as a whole—as if, like Zimri in Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, he was 'A man so various that he seemed to be / Not one, but all mankind's epitome'. In my view, however, such a rich profusion of ideas would imply more inconsistency than breadth or profundity; if the interpretations of Lévi-Strauss and Ardrey were both accurate, then Rousseau's reflections, by admitting so much and rejecting too little, ought to be less worthy of serious acclaim. In fact, his conception of human nature *is* profound and subtle, I believe, not because it anticipates the views of Lévi-Strauss and Ardrey together, but largely because it excludes the bias of each; the two men, in their different ways, overlook a crucial element of his account of our nature and origins, while focusing upon—and indeed misinterpreting—only one aspect of his thought as if it were the most vital. For Rousseau perceived a historical connection between the animal and cultural features of humanity, and between our physical evolution and social development, which led him to construct a comprehensive anthropological theory remarkably original in his own day, and, in my judgement, still worthy of critical investigation now. My aim here will be to sketch what I take to be the leading features of that theory in the intellectual context which at once most clearly establishes their meaning and, I think, elucidates their significance as well.

## II

It is sometimes suggested that our differing assessments of the natural and cultural determinants of human behaviour have their foundation in ancient philosophy. Such distinctions as were drawn between nature and custom by Plato, for instance, or between nature and art by Aristotle, are said to underlie the fundamental assumptions that still mark off the natural from the social sciences, while claims about the animal origins of human conduct, or about the instinctual roots of social life, can also be traced to the ancient doctrine of an unbroken *scala naturae* which was supposed to join together all living creatures through a succession of anatomical approximations linked to behavioural similarities as well. It is today much less widely appreciated, however, that one of the main points at issue in the Enlightenment controversies about human nature and culture was the character of the relation between mankind and the great apes. In the 1670s Sir William Petty was still able to argue that the second place in Nature's ladder was actually filled by elephants rather than apes, since, apart from their shape, elephants displayed greater signs of humanity.<sup>9</sup> Yet by the 1680s and 1690s few commentators on the subject still doubted that apes resembled men more closely than did any other creatures, and anthropological interest over the next century came to be directed largely to the question of how we might be connected with, or distinguished from, those animals most immediately adjacent to us in the natural world. The great majority of scientific figures of the period—including Tyson, Buffon, Bonnet, Herder and Blumenbach—followed Claude Perrault<sup>10</sup> in contending that our exercise of reason and command of language proved our superiority over the apes, since despite the anatomical similarities between these animals and men they lacked the mental capacity to think or speak which was peculiar to our species. A number of scientists and philosophers, however, such as Linnaeus, La Mettrie, Monboddo and Camper, challenged this perspective of a decisive intellectual gulf between man and beast, sometimes maintaining that infant apes could in principle be trained to speak, sometimes contending, on the contrary, that they could never be so trained, but only because of anatomical or physiological factors rather than any spiritual deficiencies.

The history of these eighteenth-century controversies has been sadly ignored by most anthropologists, no doubt because they regard, or would regard, them as preceding the emergence of their subject around the distinctive questions and problems which have since established its coherence. But the Enlightenment debates about apes, men and language did not only antedate the anthropological researches of the next period; they very substantially gave rise to the subject in its present forms. For as

speculative philosophies regarding our place in Nature came in the late eighteenth century to be superseded by comparative anatomy, by first-hand observations of the behaviour of apes and by more extensive investigations into the cultures of primitive peoples, the attention of scientists came gradually to be drawn away from the apparently gross distinctions between apes and men and at the same time towards the seemingly finer variations which mark off one type of man from another. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, that is, with the exhaustion of the Enlightenment discussions of the primate limits of humanity, anthropology came instead to be focused upon the boundaries and distinctions within our species, upon the study of races, in effect, rather than the study of apes and language. And the controversies about human origins and savage societies that have raged since then in both physical and cultural anthropology, while often of immense significance in themselves, have seemed collectively to be at least internal to the discipline and, in their avowedly empirical character, distinct from the approaches to the study of man's nature that had prevailed before.

Yet for at least two reasons it seems to me regrettable that contemporary investigations of primitive cultures and hominid fossils should generally take such little stock of their own historical roots in Enlightenment philosophies of man: first, because, in attempting to establish the zoological frontiers of humanity, eighteenth-century thinkers were characteristically more concerned with defining the scope of their subject than many social anthropologists are today; and, second, because their definitions were more clearly addressed to the idea of language conceived as a cultural barrier or bridge between animals and men than is often the case now in the writings of physical anthropologists and ethologists alike. Enlightenment commentators, that is, directed their attention more to the conceptual boundaries of humanity than to the geographical outposts of civilization, and they did not take it for granted that a study of man's nature should consist basically of the examination of societies in the remote peripheries of the modern world. By addressing themselves to language as the most central manifestation of our capacity for culture, moreover, they were careful to avoid comparisons between men and apes which dealt exclusively with anatomical structures or with similarities of non-verbal behaviour. Enlightenment anthropologists, in short, perceived their subject plainly in terms of the relation between the biological and social characteristics of man, without supposing that human nature was either an assemblage of instincts or a product of culture.<sup>11</sup> It is this conjunction of approaches that forms the most striking feature of eighteenth-century speculation about mankind, as I see it—nowhere more conspicuously, or with greater profundity, than in the writings of Rousseau. What is fundamentally missing from the panegyric of Lévi-Strauss is a proper

recognition of the importance of Rousseau's account of our physical development as a species in the context of his anthropology as a whole; what is absent from the tribute paid to him by Ardrey is an understanding of why culture fills so prominent a place in his philosophy. In the next two sections I shall examine the ideas advanced by Rousseau on both of these subjects and then conclude with some remarks about his conception of the links between the physical and cultural evolution of man.

### III

The main point I wish to stress about Rousseau's view of our physical evolution is that it is based on a set of conjectures to the effect that the human race may have descended from apes. By the mid-eighteenth century it was already widely known that some species, such as the mastodon, had become extinct and that others, like the camel, had undergone a certain metamorphosis as a consequence of selective breeding and domestication by man. In fact most of the then prevailing monogenist accounts of the origins of humanity stipulated that the manifest variations between types of men were attributable to the cumulative effect of what later came to be termed the inheritance of acquired characters, transmitted over many generations. Rousseau, however, was the first and, I believe, the only, major figure of the Enlightenment who inferred from such intraspecific differences that mankind might actually have evolved from some form of animal. His contemporaries interpreted the same evidence only as proof of natural deformation, with comparisons between human development and animal domestication showing no more than that subdivisions of our race must have declined from their original condition—in essence that the non-white communities of individuals which inhabited the more torrid or desolate areas of the earth must have degenerated from an original single stock. Naturalists in the eighteenth century often contrasted the flora and fauna of the New World unfavourably with related species in the Old, and so, too, they regarded non-European men and women as generally inferior copies of an older race.<sup>12</sup> The social customs of aboriginal peoples were occasionally held up for praise by commentators who preferred their apparently natural and simple manners to the refined frippery of advanced cultures, and some observers also depicted wild natives of tropical forests as more like apes and monkeys in their appearance and behaviour than like civilized men. But no one in the Enlightenment before Rousseau suggested that such primitive and animal features of the savage state might imply that our true progenitors were really apes. For however close the resemblances might seem, and however much speculation there might be about the imperceptible nuances between

species in the natural chain, it was in the Enlightenment taken for granted that the chain as a whole was essentially fixed and static, that its main links were points of cleavage rather than conjunction and that man and ape were separated by a qualitative gulf which, as Buffon put it, even Nature could not bridge.<sup>13</sup>

Rousseau, nevertheless, was convinced that the apparent diversity between types of men throughout the world, and, even more significantly, the marked likeness between some of these types and certain species of ape, justified our forming a quite different conclusion. If we recognized that a great number of the variations between our bodily traits might be attributable to the discrepancies between the climate, forms of nourishment and general modes of life which prevailed in widely separated parts of the globe, then why should we not conceive the possibility, which such ancient authors as Herodotus and Ctesias had attested anyway, of still more striking differences in the past?<sup>14</sup> In his *Discours sur l'inégalité* of 1755 he admitted that it would be extremely difficult to trace the course of the material metamorphoses undergone by man, since the study of comparative anatomy was still so rudimentary that we could only make the most vague conjectures about this subject. Just the same, he believed that there must have been marked changes or 'successive developments' in the physical organization of the human body, all of which would have drawn us away from the 'first embryo of the species'.<sup>15</sup> Some of these transformations, he observed, would have been embodied in our faculties rather than our appearance, so that savages must originally have had powers of sight, hearing, and smell more subtle than our own senses, and even now whole peoples, such as Hottentots, were able to see as far with the naked eye as Europeans with a telescope. Other changes, however, would have been perfectly conspicuous in our external features alone. Thus while Rousseau regarded the claims about the existence of pygmies as only a 'fable' or at best an 'exaggeration', the evidence of exceptionally tall individuals in his own day suggested to him that somewhere in the world (perhaps in Patagonia) there are, or might once have been, nations of giants. We even had reason to believe, he added, that differences between particular individuals within our species were sometimes sharper than the differences between some men and some beasts, an observation which the reports of travellers tended to confirm, in so far as they described the state of most of the savages they surveyed as that of animals in general.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, because the taming of mankind has been accomplished by agents whose victims include themselves together with members of other species as well, the distinction between primitive and civilized man was, for Rousseau, possibly even greater than the difference between wild animals and beasts of burden. For by making other creatures serve us, he supposed, we had only fashioned a steeper path of decline from our

natural state; we had bred livestock to satisfy our artificial needs and had thereby made our senses still more dull and our constitutions more frail, so that in modern society we are hardly any longer even animals of a certain degenerate kind, but only pets, or prey, broken in by ourselves—weak, docile, fattened and fleeced.<sup>17</sup>

Now, Rousseau's account of the civilization of humanity as a self-imposed form of domestication points to one of the most original elements of his anthropological theory. For if *l'homme sauvage* and *l'homme civil* were distinguished not only by their social characteristics but also by their bodily traits, and if it was the case that the difference between them is even greater than the divergence between wild and tamed animals of the same species, then it followed for him that the physical properties and faculties which set mankind apart from all other creatures might in fact be less sharply defined than most commentators on this subject had supposed. We still had so much to learn about the several widely disparate kinds of men scattered all over the world, Rousseau insisted, that it was absurd for us to make categorical judgements about the inherent qualities which were necessarily typical of our race in general. At the same time, until we had more reliable evidence about the anatomy and mode of life of creatures reported by travellers to resemble man, we could only be uncertain in our assessments of which natural qualities distinguished humanity from the realm of beasts. He contended that at least some of the animals which had a constitution similar to our own were quite possibly varieties of the human species itself, and in his speculations about this subject, both in the *Discours* and in his later 'Lettre à Philopolis', he focused his attention particularly upon the creature which he described as an orang-utan.<sup>18</sup>

Drawing at length upon the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century African voyages of Andrew Battel, Olfert Dapper and Girolamo Merolla as recounted in the abbé Prévost's *Histoire générale des voyages*,<sup>19</sup> Rousseau put forward the hypothesis that the large Congolese animals described by these travellers, and taken to be of the same family as the 'Orang-Outangs of the East Indies', might really be human beings like the rest of us. A number of modern commentators had imagined that orang-utans and their pongo brethren 'occupy some intermediate place between mankind and the baboons', but Rousseau observed that in the ancient world these same creatures, then called satyrs, fauns, and the like, were held to be divine, and further research, he argued, might confirm that their true place on Nature's ladder was between that of brutes and gods—in other words that they were men. In any case Rousseau was most impressed by the extent to which his authorities were agreed about the orang-utan's 'human countenance' and its striking and 'exact' physical 'resemblance to man'. For if it was true that the animal was in so many respects just like a man, then why should we not accept at least a *prima facie* case for its humanity?<sup>20</sup>



Scientists in the Enlightenment generally agreed with Buffon's lofty proclamation that ours was the most noble species set apart from all the rest, on the grounds that there could be no hybrid progeny resulting from the sexual union of a man or woman with any beast. For Rousseau, on the other hand, this was a matter which had still to be ascertained; we could only establish by experiment, he insisted, whether matings between ourselves and orang-utans would prove fruitful.<sup>21</sup> Neither was he deterred by the monogenist contention that the progenitors of modern man must originally have been white, and in this regard he did not even have to confront the thesis—which Buffon, once again, had already rejected—that apes might represent a stage in the physical degeneration of man beyond that of the Negro.<sup>22</sup> While most eighteenth-century naturalists were adamant in holding to the view that orang-utans were beneath the level of humanity because they lacked the capacity to think and speak like men, Rousseau maintained that our savage ancestors were unlikely to have been wiser or more loquacious than orang-utans, since both reason and speech were just '*facultés virtuelles*',<sup>23</sup> which must have undergone a long history of development in complex social settings before they could have become manifest in our behaviour. We could not point to the languages of civilized peoples as proof of the sub-humanity of orang-utans, because linguistic competence must be mastered and in itself is not a natural characteristic of our race. Hence the apparently mute condition of the orang-utan could be explained merely in terms of the creature's scant opportunity to employ and develop those vocal organs which it shared with the rest of us, and on Rousseau's account that condition lent no support at all to the thesis that Nature had formed a great and unbridgeable gulf between mankind and ape. Indeed, the fact that apes were speechless might be attributable, not so much to their want of training, as to their perfectly rational choice. For according to Negro observers it was a 'trick of monkeys', he later remarked, to pretend that they cannot speak, though they really can, 'out of fear that they might otherwise be made to work'.<sup>24</sup>

Of course since Rousseau probably never saw a true orang-utan, and since his account of the creature's behaviour was drawn from statements of observers who disagreed among themselves, his reflections about its capacities must be treated with a little scepticism and reserve. It was not until the 1770s that a sufficient number of live specimens came to be available in Europe for detailed and reliable studies to be undertaken,<sup>25</sup> and it was not until after Rousseau's death that scientists came to agree that the animal was definitely a species of ape different from the chimpanzee, with which Rousseau, Buffon and their contemporaries had confused it. But the originality, if not the significance, of Rousseau's comments about the humanity of orang-utans was widely recognized in the late

eighteenth century. Some critics treated his remarks with scorn, and in the 1760s he suffered the indignity of having a letter falsely ascribed to him signed 'ROUSSEAU, jusqu'à ce jour . . . Citoyen de Genève, mais à présent, ORANG-OUTANG';<sup>26</sup> others, like Herder, Bonnet and Blumenbach, challenged them on a variety of grounds dealing largely with mental or physiological factors underlying the linguistic incompetence of apes; and a few, most notably Monboddo, braved the ridicule and actually endorsed these ideas, though generally in support of claims about the evolution of language rather than the physical development of man. By the early nineteenth century Rousseau's speechless ape had vanished from scientific speculation about our origins, only to reappear soon afterwards as a silent hero in English satirical fiction.<sup>27</sup>

In the present context, however, two important points should be borne in mind about this account of the humanity of orang-utans. The first is that Rousseau's elaborate commentary in the *Discours sur l'inégalité* forms one of the earliest and boldest sets of conjectures regarding the physical transformation of mankind in an age when most arguments about the natural chain of being remained fundamentally wedded to a belief in the fixity of species. Arthur Lovejoy's excellent history of that idea rightly points to a variety of ways in which the chain was apparently temporalized in the eighteenth century, so that a supposition previously regarded as only portraying Nature's inventory itself underwent a metamorphosis in the Enlightenment and became for the first time a theory that gave expression to her still uncompleted programme.<sup>28</sup> Yet none of Lovejoy's illustrations actually point directly to any cases, or even principle, of evolution from one species to another; all of them, rather, are either more widely focused upon the panorama of organic development throughout the whole of Nature, as was the vision of Leibniz, for instance, or else are more narrowly concentrated upon the succession of physical transformations within distinct species, as was Robinet's conception. Rousseau was, I believe, the first Enlightenment figure to suppose that there might be a sequential relation between *particular* species, and the first, moreover, to conceive that the last link in the natural chain—that is, the relation between apes and men—might be one of genetic continuity.

Of course we must not credit Rousseau with a full-fledged theory of human evolution. For one thing, he supposed that modern man could have developed from certain animal species still present in the contemporary world, rather than from any ancestral prototypes or extinct forebears of the hominoid superfamily in general.<sup>29</sup> For another, he believed that apes and men were together zoologically distinct from all other species, and that monkeys could not possibly be counted among our progenitors, because they lacked the attribute of perfectibility, which was characteristic of the highest primates in all their forms, but of the highest

primates alone.<sup>30</sup> On Rousseau's interpretation, in short, our roots could not be traced to so distant a source in the earth's past nor to so low a place on Nature's ladder as commentators since the time of Darwin have perceived, and, paradoxically perhaps, his conception of the mutability of humanity as against the constancy of Nature incorporated a rather less dramatic view of the organic changes that effected our creation than of the geological evolution of our planet as a whole. At any rate, Rousseau's account of men as descended from apes provided a temporal perspective of the relation between the two species which was exactly opposite to the only course previously considered—that is, the idea that apes might be degenerate men—and it thus marked a significant milestone among Enlightenment accounts of our origins. In the 1790s such figures as William Smellie, one of Buffon's translators and an important biologist in his own right, no longer had much difficulty in conceiving orang-utans to be primitive members of our species, but scientific critics of the doctrine soon won the upper hand, and by the early nineteenth century the sub-humanity of the great apes had been reaffirmed.<sup>31</sup>

The second notable point in this context is that Rousseau's portrait of the orang-utan as a kind of savage in the state of nature was drawn with greater accuracy than any description of the animal's behaviour for a further two hundred years or so—a fact all the more remarkable because there is no reason to suppose that he ever actually saw one. He followed other commentators of his day in recognizing the orang-utan's natural habitat to be the tropical forest, but while most of his contemporaries were agreed about the creature's promiscuity, Rousseau alone in the eighteenth century inferred that it never formed lasting sexual attachments—or permanent pair-bonds—with other members of its species.<sup>32</sup> Some naturalists of the period imagined that orang-utans were carnivorous in their diet and aggressive in their conduct, but Rousseau had no doubt that they were frugivorous and generally peaceable animals.<sup>33</sup> Not until the publication of Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* in 1869, moreover, was it confirmed that orang-utans are nomadic beasts without clearly delimited territorial ranges, again as Rousseau had already perceived in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*.<sup>34</sup> And not until the late 1960s was it established that Rousseau had been right all along in his guess that orang-utans even lack any distinct social system and that, apart from copulations, their lives are essentially solitary and indolent.<sup>35</sup>

I have in this section tried to sketch a few of the more striking features of Rousseau's physical anthropology ignored by Lévi-Strauss, but I think these same elements of his argument point even more sharply to some of the major shortcomings of Ardrey's ethological approach. For it seems to me quite significant that a person so passionately convinced, as he is, of mankind's basic territorial, aggressive and socially competitive nature<sup>36</sup>

should find so little confirmation of any territorial impulse, or genetically coded forms of aggression, or inegalitarian social relations, among those creatures most akin to us in the animal world, least of all among orang-utans. With perfect justification Ardrey observes that recent fossil discoveries suggest that arboreal apes and terrestrial men have been environmentally separated for some 20 million years or more and have therefore evolved along different behavioural paths as well; some of the consequences of this environmental separation, such as the fact that we have become omnivorous hunters in the course of our history, were indeed perceived by Rousseau himself.<sup>37</sup> But it remains the case that all the available scientific evidence—from palaeontology, comparative anatomy, genetics, biochemistry, immunology and the like—confirms what in a sense appears obvious anyway: that mankind is more closely related to the great apes than to any other living species. The truth of Ardrey's general claims about man's basically animal nature, therefore, can only seem rather tenuous in so far as they so commonly rely upon analogies drawn from the behaviour of slime moulds or penguins in preference to studies of the highest non-human primates. At least in his own writings the great apes in general, and orang-utans in particular, have once again become the missing link, and Ardrey appears to be most discomfited by this situation, reflecting in his latest work that it is 'all a bit too Rousseauesque'<sup>38</sup> for his stomach. His explanations for the reconstructed but now inverted barrier between brutish men and angelic apes, moreover, are implausible when taken separately and inconsistent when taken together. For they range, on the one hand, from the claim that the gorilla, chimpanzee and orang-utan are, after all, only 'evolutionary failures' approaching their natural 'extinction' (much like their human counterparts in amiable societies upon whom anthropologists have so mistakenly lavished their attention), to the postulate, on the other hand, that the gulf between man and ape is not really so wide after all, since chimpanzees in captivity display clear signs of aggression.<sup>39</sup> *Inventae sunt caveae ut homo ipse se nosceret.*

It may, in any event, seem odd that Rousseau's own picture of the orang-utan should have been produced, not through observing the animal in its natural habitat, but mainly by abstracting from civilized man those traits which he supposed unattributable to social life alone. For however speculative this method might appear, it enabled him to construct a more exact account of the creature's behaviour in the wild than any which we have had until the last decade. Even today, Edward Tyson's *Orang-Outang* of 1699 remains, I believe by common consent,<sup>40</sup> the best anatomical description ever published of any non-human primate, though that work is of course a study of a chimpanzee. In my view, the *Discours sur l'inégalité* ought to be acclaimed by ethologists as an Enlightenment contribution of similar importance, towering over the field, as it has, for

an almost equivalent period. And yet to my knowledge no one—apart from Voltaire, who characteristically thought the idea absurd<sup>41</sup>—has ever recognized that Rousseau's savage man was truly an orang-utan. A fierce and protracted dispute about the factual standing of Rousseau's portrait of the state of nature in the *Discours* could perhaps have been avoided if this simple truth had been perceived. For if it had, Rousseau would now occupy a prominent place, not only in the history of speculative anthropology, but in the history of empirical primatology as well.

#### IV

I have already observed that anthropologists of the Enlightenment regarded language as the most important manifestation of our unique capacity for culture, and in this section I should like to address myself to Rousseau's own views on that subject. The distinction between man and beast in terms of language is, of course, an ancient doctrine—in Western philosophy as old as the distinction between nature and art or nature and custom—and it has generally served much the same function as these others of underscoring the apparent fact that members of the human race alone are able to behave in morally responsible ways, either through means of verbal persuasion rather than force or intimidation, or through undertakings in speech acts which express our obligations in society.<sup>42</sup> The main contribution of eighteenth-century thinkers in this field was to draw attention once again to the great apes, since, in an age in which the physical resemblances between us and these other primates were held to be more striking than the differences, our linguistic competence often seemed to be the only sure sign of our superiority over them. 'Parle, et je te baptise',<sup>43</sup> dared the Cardinal de Polignac to the chimpanzee in the glass cage at the Jardin du roi, according to the testimony of Diderot; for if only apes could speak, where would man's special place in the universe be then? In the mid and late Enlightenment the debate about the limits of humanity was, indeed, so commonly centred around the question of language and its origins that mute individuals occasionally came to be classified as distinct species, such as Linnaeus's *Homo ferus*, for instance. On some points of principle, moreover, we have not advanced very much since that time. The most distinguished researchers in the field of primate languages today have established that apes show no capacity to relativize or nominalize the lexical markers they employ and hence are apparently unable to generate sentences in the complex forms characteristic of all natural human languages,<sup>44</sup> this despite the claims of Ardrey and like-minded figures who interpret the vocabularies learnt by Washoe, Sarah and other chimpanzees as indicative that the last bastion of man's supposed

cultural pre-eminence is now crumbling as well. Apes that ape have no doubt shown themselves to be far more mentally sophisticated than parroted parrots, but there is as yet no real evidence to suggest that Herder was mistaken when he remarked that 'Der Affe äffet immer nach, aber nachgeahmt hat er nie'.<sup>45</sup>

In certain respects, to be sure, Rousseau's reflections on the origin of languages actually anticipate the arguments of those scientists who today deny that linguistic competence is a specifically human trait, for, like La Mettrie and Monboddo among his contemporaries, he thought apes might in time develop their latent faculty of speech, just as civilized men had done already.<sup>46</sup> Most of his hypotheses about this problem, however, were focused upon what he took to be the characteristics of language rather than the capacities of apes, and his main contention, again expounded first in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, was that language is not natural to man.<sup>47</sup> In our original state, he asserted, we could not have had occasion to articulate thoughts by attaching arbitrary signs to them, because in that essentially solitary condition we would have been unable to master the rules necessary for both the conception and communication of such signs. Unlike Condillac, who stipulated that even two isolated individuals could in the beginning have devised a language by employing abstract labels or words to classify the objects of their experience, Rousseau believed that any such classification—and, for that matter, our cognitive perception of objects of experience at all—already presupposed a number of linguistic categories, so that the relation between language and thought seemed to him one of reciprocal entailment. And while Condillac had imagined that there was a clear connection between the civilized tongues of modern man and the vocalization of pleasure or fear of the earliest savages, Rousseau detected no manifest link between our complex languages and the simple cries of our progenitors. For the verbal symbols we now employ require a common frame of reference, and this, in turn, can only be manufactured in some kind of society, which, finally, requires a vocabulary of shared linguistic signs for its own invention. He thus remarked in the *Discours* that he was unable to determine whether language was fundamentally a social institution or society a linguistic artefact.<sup>48</sup>

In his anthropological theory Rousseau in fact regarded both of these claims as correct, and he pursued each to some notable, if occasionally disjointed, conclusions. On the one hand, the idea of a language system offered him a fruitful hypothetical model of the foundation of human society itself. In view of his contention against the natural law philosophers that men could not have been drawn together initially by any sociable dispositions,<sup>49</sup> he speculated that the first communities would have been formed by accident rather than design—by natural catastrophes such as floods or earthquakes which perhaps tore islands from continents

and brought individuals into permanent territorial proximity for the first time.<sup>50</sup> But once our ancestors would have come to live in such primitive settlements and to confront the same persons day after day, they must have come to take some notice of those qualities which distinguished them from one another. They must have come gradually to recognize which natives among them were the strongest or most handsome, or the best singers or dancers, or the most adroit or most eloquent, for example, and in general they must have begun to perceive, whereas previously they could only have felt the effects of, the differences in their constitutions which were due to Nature. Our savage forebears, that is, would have come to identify other members of their species with whom they were forced by chance to live in daily contact through making discriminations of just this kind, and they must eventually have come in the same way to compare themselves to others and to identify their own traits in terms of what they took to be the impressions formed about them by their neighbours. In Rousseau's judgement, society could only have arisen when men began to attach some significance to these comparisons, for by placing a value upon certain characteristics above others we transfigured our natural variations into moral distinctions.<sup>51</sup> In particular, that primeval individual who was most naturally adroit and eloquent, Rousseau suggests, was the real founder of civil society, for by enclosing a piece of land, claiming it as his own and persuading others foolish enough to believe him, he inaugurated all the misfortunes which have since bedeviled our history.<sup>52</sup> Modern man, that is, arose when *Homo habilis* or *Homo faber* became *Homo loquens* and deceived *Homo ignorans* into supposing that what he said was true.

Now the various human traits esteemed by primitive men were unlikely to have made their appearance all at the same time. Our savage progenitors ought to have been able to recognize those individuals among them who were strongest before they discovered which ones were best able to sing or dance, and they could only have come to be impressed by the most eloquent of their neighbours after they had already adopted the conventions of a language, the general origins of which Rousseau admits in the *Discours* he cannot explain. Because he also suggests in this text, moreover, that there must have been a type of private property in persons—that is, through the formation of family units incorporating sexual partners and their offspring—even before the creation of property in land,<sup>53</sup> his account of the order in which our moral characteristics must have developed seems remarkably vague, and, indeed, it is far from obvious why persons should have found some of their natural qualities to be more worthy of respect than others. Rousseau was nevertheless firmly convinced that as soon as we began to attach importance to our differences we must thereby have embarked upon the establishment of social



institutions, and it must have been the institution of property above any other which truly launched mankind, he contended, upon its path of toil, misery, slavery and conflict.<sup>54</sup>

It is my view, then, that language provides a model of the foundation of society in Rousseau's theory, not only because property relations upon which society is built are largely linguistic in origin (stemming as they do so much from eloquence and deception), but more because language offers a general paradigm of Rousseau's account of the transposition of physical dissimilarities into moral distinctions. In effect, such distinctions are, according to Rousseau, little else but the symbolic representation of natural traits endowed with meanings that issue from the ways in which individuals identify and differentiate one another. Yet this form of interpersonal classification is an exact social counterpart of the manner by which definitions are constructed in already established languages, that is, through the affixation of labels to the objects of thought, as Condillac again had supposed, and indeed Locke and others as well. Of course such a scheme, as I have already indicated, was for Rousseau quite inadequate to explain the origin of language, but it served as an excellent linguistic model in elucidating the origin of society—with this crucial difference: that whereas the lexical markers which we attach to our thoughts are arbitrary, interchangeable and hence all roughly of equivalent status, our classification of moral traits gives rise to a hierarchy of values in which some characteristics are rendered superior to others. In a sense, social inequality for Rousseau originated ultimately from the fact that the cardinal system of identification employed by our forebears must have been transliterated in language into an ordinal system for ranking moral preferences, and the baneful effects of that linguistic corruption of our species, he believed, are with us still.

If it was in this fashion that Rousseau elaborated his view of society as an essentially linguistic artefact, he developed his thesis about the social origins of language with equal conviction. In part his argument consisted simply of the proposition, once again, that until we had formed settled social relationships we could have had no occasion for communicating our ideas, and no shared frame of reference to ensure that our utterances were understood by others, so that the necessary conjunction of society with language in his theory appears almost as close as the link between language and thought. Yet he pursued this point in greater depth and more detail as well. In his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, for example, he observed that while nations are more sharply defined by their linguistic boundaries than by political or any other frontiers, the languages which mark off peoples in that way have themselves been shaped and moulded by the patterns of community life from which they stem, so that it was impossible to understand the nature of man's verbal behaviour without



investigating the social roots of linguistic usage. The most primitive Mediterranean tongues, for instance, must have been articulated in enchanting sonorous voices, Rousseau insisted, because they would at first have expressed the passionate attraction of men and women for one another in societies in which a mild climate and fertile soil facilitated the leisurely satisfaction of their other needs. In the north, however, our earliest languages must have been gruff, shrill or monotonous, because in such inclement surroundings speakers would have been obliged to work before they had time for play and thus would have continually cried out for help rather than whisper any mellifluous love songs to their neighbours.<sup>55</sup> Of course these linguistic differences are in some respects attributable to Nature as much as to man, but Rousseau's main point here was that the distinctive patterns of social life which arose in disparate natural environments must themselves have given rise to diverse modes of linguistic expression.

In any event, when the barbarians of the North eventually conquered the Mediterranean world, he contended, their guttural and staccato speech also came to dominate the melodic inflections that had prevailed in the South before, so that our earliest modulated forms of tonal discourse must have been gradually suppressed and transformed into the humdrum reverberations of our subjugators' prose.<sup>56</sup> This loss of inflection, moreover, came for Rousseau to be a measure of the loss of spirit and passion in human affairs as a whole. For the prosaic character of the languages imposed upon us by our rulers inspired us with little else but servile manners, and in the modern age we have been transfixed into the listless auditors of those who govern by harangues from the rostrum and diatribes from the pulpit.<sup>57</sup> In fact so dispirited have we become under the yoke of kings, ministers and priests that those vocal intonations which had once expressed our pleasures have now been wholly reconstituted into nothing more than the terms that denote our trades. Whereas savages once chanted *aimez-moi* to one another, and barbarians muttered *aidez-moi*, now civilized men only grumble *donnez de l'argent*.<sup>58</sup>

Rousseau's account of the social corruption of language thus corresponds in striking ways to his theory of the linguistic corruption of society. The pernicious consequences that stem from the institution of property through a largely linguistic medium have their counterpart in the afflictions that arise from the substitution of prose for melody in speech, and our entitlements to cultivated land, on the one hand, and our rules of cultivated discourse, on the other, have together engendered much of the moral decadence of cultivated man. Upon the model of inequalitarian property relations we have constructed whole social systems in which the divisions between rich and poor, ruler and ruled, and master and slave form the central features, so that civilization has come progressively to be

defined by its political character and functions, with the principles of dominance and subservience governing almost every aspect of our lives. Philosophers of the Enlightenment often described man's civil state as that of *la société policée*,<sup>59</sup> but Rousseau developed this idea more forcefully than any other figure of his age, and throughout his writings he insisted that everything depends ultimately upon politics and that 'aucun peuple ne seroit jamais que ce que la nature de son Gouvernement le feroit être'.<sup>60</sup> Equally, he perceived that our social and political relations have an essentially symbolic character—that they derive their binding force over human affairs from the values they express and the customary significance that is attached to them in much the same way and at the same level of abstraction as the terms of our polluted and sophistical languages convey their meanings. For, according to Rousseau, our adopted meanings have in fact been a gross distortion of the truth. In civilized societies we have come to be imprisoned by our symbols, ensnared by the images of our freedom as we run headlong into our chains, altogether captivated by our accomplishments which are in fact no more than the trappings of culture. In civilized societies, in short, the very institutions we invented for our advancement have been the cause of our moral decline. We have too much admired those centuries in which arts and letters have flourished, Rousseau remarked in his *Contrat social*, without penetrating the secret object and the fatal effect of their culture. Thus, quoting Tacitus, he concluded, 'Idque apud imperitos humanitas vocabatur, cum pars servitutis esset'.<sup>61</sup>

I have here addressed myself to Rousseau's conception of culture in the light of his claims about the interpenetration of society and language, not because the scientific, religious, literary or artistic features of culture figure less prominently in his thought; on the contrary, his reputation has always rightly been based above all upon his critique of culture in these more familiar senses, and his writings about the decline of music, for instance, are perhaps more extensive than those in any other field. But his accounts of the nature of both society and language provide, in my view, the clearest picture of his idea of culture in general because they define what he took to be the two most central characteristics of any cultural system: first, that it is a collective artefact or set of conventions produced by individuals only in a social context, and, second, that it is a symbolic network of ideas which convey, and often conceal, human purposes and meanings. If we are to believe the most eminent sociobiologist of our day, 'Culture . . . can be interpreted as a hierarchical system of environmental tracking devices', which 'aside from its involvement with language . . . differs from animal tradition only in degree'.<sup>62</sup> For Rousseau, however, a culture divorced from language was no culture at all, and even the perfectible apes that he imagined to be our progenitors have—on the evidence of

their linguistic achievements—shown no sign yet that they are able to manufacture the symbols around which all true cultures are formed, and, indeed, upon which all human societies, but human societies alone, he believed, have been invariably constructed.

Yet while it appears that Rousseau placed greatest emphasis upon the social and linguistic foundations of culture, we ought to bear in mind the moral and historical dimensions which he attached to it as well. For the language of culture was essentially the language of values, in his judgement, and the values prevalent in every nation were always shaped by custom, tradition, and ‘la force de l’habitude’.<sup>63</sup> On the one hand, this perspective of course implied that there was great cultural diversity between societies, and Rousseau often invoked the anthropological literature of his own day to stress that point, condemning the blinkered ‘tourbe Philosophesque’,<sup>64</sup> as he put it, which travelled nowhere but presumed that men in all places and at all times were governed by the same passions and vices as we are. On the other hand, however, Rousseau’s scheme also implied that cultural patterns, notwithstanding their distinctions in different parts of the world, were in each case a conflux of symbols that formed the social manifestation of the inheritance of acquired characteristics within a community, with the history of mankind as a whole predominantly the history of the convergence of Western cultures and their rise to ascendancy over all the rest.

Some recent commentators, impressed by such rough parallels between human social development and biological evolution in Nature, have remarked that culture must serve the same function in the history of our race as natural selection for every other form of life;<sup>65</sup> or that the evolution of culture must have proceeded in the same manner as the evolution of species determined by natural selection;<sup>66</sup> or even that the transformational grammars of our languages serve as a symbolic analogue in culture for the genetic codes upon which all patterns of organic growth and change depend.<sup>67</sup> We shall no doubt witness much important research in the next few years which builds upon such resemblances, perhaps not only with regard to the structure of language, but applied to the formal principles, or what are held to be the formal principles, of other cultural systems too. In this context, however, I should like only to note that I think Rousseau would have been at least as much impressed by the differences between biological and cultural forms of adaptation as by their apparent similarities. For one thing, culture, as he understood it, was not some kind of complex adaptive mechanism at all, but rather an excessively integrated, overly specialized, maladaptive network of functions within which, in his terms, our apparent steps towards the perfection of the individual have in reality led towards the decrepitude of the species.<sup>68</sup> For another, I think he would have regarded any parallels between linguistic

and biological codes of patterned growth or behaviour as fundamentally misconceived, perhaps partly because languages 'have an infinitely greater capacity for hybridization',<sup>69</sup> though more because the meanings expressed in them are normally as false as the purposes they serve unsalutary for man. Linguistic principles and structures that comprise the symbols of our cultures are not mirrors of the world, Rousseau believed, but rather moral prisms that transfigure and obfuscate our behaviour in it; in so far as they are founded upon self-deception, their sense remains opaque and unclear to us, so that their true significance differs sharply from that signified by their constitutive terms.<sup>70</sup> 'Les Sciences, les Lettres et les Arts . . . étendent des guirlandes de fleurs sur les chaînes de fer dont ils sont chargés'.<sup>71</sup> Through culture *Homo faber* has in fact become *Homo fabulator*; *Homo fabricans* is actually *Homo fabricator*; *Homo loquens* no more than *Homo ventosus*; and our species as a whole, not *Homo sapiens* but *Homo deceptus*. We should have been wary of the impostor who founded civil society, Rousseau remarked, for 'l'état de réflexion est un état contre Nature, et . . . l'homme qui médite est un animal dépravé'.<sup>72</sup> On one point, nevertheless, the analogy between cultural development and natural selection would have held good in his philosophy, because it follows from his account of both our physical and social evolution that there is no more fixity about culture and its symbols than about the bodily traits of mankind as a whole. Fixity, for Rousseau, was an arbitrary characteristic of languages rather than a necessary feature of either cultures or species, and from the linguistic base of our specification of terms stemmed the moral emblems of our specialization of roles, and ultimately the fixation of social man in an abstract world of his own making.

In the light of this view of culture it seems to me that the work of Lévi-Strauss could have benefited greatly, and, indeed, disarmed some of its critics, if only he had followed his model more closely. For despite his frequently professed admiration for Rousseau, and despite the immense subtlety of his own anthropological vision and the eloquence with which he presents it, his writings lack the sense of cultural diversity and the rich historical perspective of Rousseau's theory. Instead of focusing upon the primate limits of humanity and offering an account of our cultural evolution, Lévi-Strauss has portrayed the mental processes of mankind generally as if they were universal constants, replacing 'the particular minds of particular savages in particular jungles with the Savage Mind immanent in us all'.<sup>73</sup> In *La Pensée sauvage* he quotes with favour Rousseau's remark that 'pour étudier l'homme il faut apprendre à porter sa vue au loin' and even claims that the task of reabsorbing 'des humanités particulières dans une humanité générale'<sup>74</sup> is only the first stage along the way towards the reintegration of culture with nature and finally life altogether with its physico-chemical foundations. But he forgets that Rousseau's only

portrait of man, painted ‘exactement d’après nature et dans toute sa vérité’,<sup>75</sup> was that of his own *Confessions*—the autobiography of an individual who supposed that he was made like no one else. The idea of humanity in general was for Rousseau a misconception. ‘Où est l’homme qui puisse . . . se séparer de lui même?’ he asked. ‘Nous concevons la société générale d’après nos sociétés particulières’, and ‘il n’y [a] point de société naturelle et générale entre les hommes’.<sup>76</sup> Lévi-Strauss’s circumnavigations of the images of man are too much encumbered by the baggage of an imaginary voyage to allow his passage through the channels of Rousseau’s own anthropological expeditions. In his contention that the aim of the discipline is to locate the ‘invariants’ of human culture (‘l’idée d’une humanité générale, à laquelle conduit la réduction ethnographique’),<sup>77</sup> he departs sharply from Rousseau’s thesis that we are distinguished from all other species by the indefinite flexibility and plasticity of our nature, and he thus joins the ranks of thinkers like Grotius, Hobbes, Pufendorf and Locke, whom Rousseau challenged for having falsely supposed that men were everywhere fundamentally the same.

The ethological approach of Ardrey, on the other hand, fares much worse still against the measure of Rousseau’s cultural anthropology. For Ardrey’s analogies spring from animal to human behaviour in great leap-frog jumps which hurdle over cultures altogether, and his account of the instinctual roots of aggression, territoriality and the like leave us with explanations of a kind which has been aptly described as a ‘bargain made with reality in which an understanding of the phenomenon is gained at the cost of everything we know about it’.<sup>78</sup> But not only has Ardrey left out the realm of culture from his descriptions of how we live; he has also quite misread the philosophy of Rousseau which he praises and condemns in turn, since he maintains that the society conceived by Rousseau was constructed by ‘fallen angels’, whereas his own social contract is an agreement between ‘risen apes’.<sup>79</sup> In fact, however, there are no angels of any sort in Rousseau’s state of nature, and Ardrey ought to have perceived that, according to Rousseau, men are actually fallen apes, literally descended from their condition by a link in the chain of being that is a downward moral slope—with the beastly manner in which we treat these creatures no doubt forming part of the proof of our descent.

If only Ardrey had worn the anthropomorphic spectacles with which he views the world of Nature while surveying Rousseau’s writings, moreover, he might have taken stock of the abundant collection of zoological or quasi-zoological attributes which Rousseau attached to man. For our cultural world was indeed filled by beasts of certain types, according to Rousseau: beasts that were not so much like slime moulds or penguins as like domesticated animals and fabricated predators. Why else did he so often depict civilized men to be human cattle—‘des troupeaux de bétail’,

‘des Bêtes esclaves’ resembling ‘des Animaux nés libres et abhorrant la captivité’ sharing the anguish voiced in ‘les tristes mugissemens du Bétail entrant dans une Boucherie’?<sup>80</sup> And why else did he regard the attested histories of vampires as but further manifestations of the sombre and nefarious tyranny of opinion exercised by priests over the minds of men?<sup>81</sup> Like Voltaire in his own day and Marx afterwards, Rousseau employed vampire metaphors to account for the benighted and parasitic relations of mutual dependence that prevailed in our societies, since while civilization had denatured the animal in one sense it had supernaturalized the beast in another.

Rousseau’s anthropology, therefore, revolved not just around the divide between nature and culture in our societies but also around the double metamorphosis from animals to men to monsters of our own making which comprises the history of the self-imposed domestication of our species. Culture may have been the principal instrument of our transfiguration, and we could now only curse the few beneficiaries of the founder of civil society with Caliban’s malediction addressed to Prospero in *The Tempest*: ‘The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!’ Yet at the same time the real miscreants of our age—tormented, cowed, vicious and terrible—are represented in Rousseau’s texts as well. Ardrey should recall that it is no signatory of the social compact but rather Frankenstein’s monster who perceived himself to be the fallen angel. Rousseau’s thesis was that civilized men had not only fabricated brutes of this kind but, worse still, were constantly offering themselves as its prey.

## V

According to Lévi-Strauss the possibility of our passage from nature to culture—or, what is effectively the same, from sentiment to reason, and animality to humanity—is explained in Rousseau’s philosophy by our possession of the psychic attribute of pity or compassion. It is because man originally felt himself to be identical with creatures which resembled him, writes Lévi-Strauss, that he came to acquire his capacity to distinguish himself among them just as he differentiated them from the members of other zoological species, ‘c’est-à-dire de prendre la diversité des espèces pour support conceptuel de la différenciation sociale’.<sup>82</sup>

In my view this interpretation of Rousseau’s argument is incorrect. For Rousseau believed that compassion, like the instinct of self-love, is an attribute of animals in general which in no way facilitates their creation of culture.<sup>83</sup> On the contrary, it was man’s peculiar achievement in suppressing his natural sentiment of pity, and in transforming his benign self-love into a kind of vanity or selfishness at the expense of others, that lay at the

heart of his cultural development and moral decadence. In their natural state our forebears must already have been unique, Rousseau contended, not by virtue of their compassion, but because of two special attributes—natural liberty and perfectibility—which together enabled them to construct modes of life wholly uncharacteristic of the rest of the animal world. Every type of creature apart from man, he observed, is nothing more than an ingenious machine provided with instincts appropriate to its self-preservation, so that other animals, while unfettered by any social obligations, are nevertheless fully subject to the commands of Nature. Only our savage progenitors possessed the freedom to determine how best to comply with these commands—by selecting either to confront or flee from danger, for instance—so that in attributing natural liberty to man and his hominid forebears Rousseau meant that they were distinguished, not so much by any particular traits, as by the absence of internal mechanisms which controlled the behaviour of all other beasts.<sup>84</sup>

At the same time he supposed that even the most primitive men must also have been able to organize the manner of their response to natural impulses in a cumulative way, with each person having the power to make his adopted habits a permanent feature of his character and to improve and develop them as he might see fit. In Rousseau's view, in fact, this capacity for progressive self-instruction was a crucial feature of mankind, since it was precisely because we were able to make ourselves more perfect rather than merely different from other creatures that we could undergo a *history* of change. After a few months every animal aside from us is already stamped by the behavioural properties of its maturity, he observed, and after a thousand years the whole of its species is imprinted with the same instincts and patterns of life as the first generation. We alone have shown ourselves capable of improving our faculties, and we are unique among animals as well in exhibiting what is in effect the same capacity to make retrograde steps and impair our nature.<sup>85</sup> Because the offspring of the earliest men and women could swiftly imitate the qualities of their parents, moreover, it followed that we could always transmit our acquired characteristics from one generation to the next, so that the whole of our developing species must thus have been able to depart from its natural state. Our liberty and perfectibility may not have been easy to perceive in our original behaviour, but these inchoate faculties had none the less made possible the cultural evolution of the human race.

I stress these points in connection with the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss because, in my view, they are tantamount to a claim that man's passage from the realm of nature to that of culture—or, to use Rousseau's own terms, the passage from 'le physique' to 'le moral'<sup>86</sup>—must have been facilitated by the exercise of our liberty and perfectibility. He believed that our adaptive dimension was actually constituted by our capacity for



culture rather than the manifestations of culture itself, and he ascribed that capacity to the interconnection between two distinctively human traits. In his own work he in fact often placed more emphasis upon the second of those traits than on the first, since our perfectibility bore witness to our natural liberty in a historical perspective, and in civilized society it was in any case the only one which still remained intact. Thus, Rousseau contended, it was the perfectibility of apes and men together rather than the culture of civilized man alone which set us apart from all types of monkeys, so that, in effect, perfectibility has been the central catalyst of our evolutionary transformation from ape to citizen.

Now it is often argued that our capacity for culture requires a physical explanation of some sort, since even if language and society are the handiwork of mankind, our ability to construct such institutions cannot be the outcome of our endeavours—a point which I think Rousseau himself implicitly accepted, in so far as he supposed our natural liberty and perfectibility to be fundamental traits of our species, that is, neither linguistic nor social in origin. Many commentators have maintained that the human capacity for culture is essentially attributable to the much larger cranial measurements of *Homo sapiens* as compared, to earlier hominids, or to the unique neurological links between the cognitive and sound-producing centres of our brains. Some have focused instead upon the more prolonged immaturity of human infants as contrasted to all other mammals, attempting thereby to explain certain social features of our cultural life which are less obviously connected with intelligence or language; and Ardrey, for his part, asserts that the fundamental divide between man and beast is due to our muscular coordination centred in the buttocks,<sup>87</sup> in this way no doubt confirming his animal hindsight. Rousseau also speculated on these matters, commenting at some length upon the probability that our ancestors were bipedal in nature and upright in stature, which he thought enabled primeval women, for instance, to carry infants in their arms and thus nourish them more easily than the females of other species<sup>88</sup>—a thesis which Herder, in turn, later made the centrepiece of his more lofty philosophy that we are superior to orang-utans because they merely stoop while we gaze at the heavens.

In fact, however, this approach to the subject of man's capacity for culture has so far proved largely misleading, and that for at least two reasons: first, because the environmental conditions determining natural selection for the requisite traits are themselves likely to have incorporated social or cultural features of hominid life already; and, second, because we still have very little evidence of any direct physical correlations between particular cultural aptitudes and any specific organs or bodily structures which can be explained as a consequence of natural selection. Many modern geneticists contend that the shapes and sizes of our organs



are determined by their allometric growth in our phylogenic history no less than by their selected adaptation for particular functions,<sup>89</sup> and it is now widely held that the neurological complexities of the organization of the brain render it questionable that we shall ever have a plausible anatomical explanation of the emergence of language.<sup>90</sup> As for the cultural advantages of vertical posture, I think Georg Foster's excellent comment of 1785 about erect two-legged birdbrains may still be apt: 'Tragen denn nicht alle Vögel den Kopf in die Höhe; am meisten die allerdümmsten'.<sup>91</sup>

Despite his remarks about the advantages of upright stature, Rousseau's main point, moreover, was not to trace the physical or biological roots of our capacity for culture, but rather to describe the general plasticity of our mental attributes in the state of nature—to explain the open texture and unpredictability of the behaviour of perfectible creatures—for it was just the indeterminacy of the activities of our savage forebears which marked their main difference from other animals. Rousseau believed that we are not essentially adapted for culture or language or, indeed, anything else, but rather that we are beings whose genetic makeup includes no mechanisms that prescribe fixed patterns of response to natural impulses. In short, his view was that our lives are not governed by instincts. I cannot imagine what he might have thought about the claims of some contemporary ethologists to the effect that animals, strictly speaking, have no instincts either, but at least his conception of man's native faculties stands manifestly apart, as I see it, from both the constricted vision of culturalized nature set forth by Ardrey and the stereotype images of naturalized culture provided by Lévi-Strauss.

For reasons which obviously stem from this account of the indeterminacy of human nature, Rousseau supposed that the perfectibility of men in their original condition did not ensure that they would become more perfect creatures, and the real development of that attribute, he maintained, depended upon the *actual* choices which individuals must have made when they adopted their various social institutions and cultural styles of life. Our perfectibility established only that there could be cumulative change in one direction or another; and it was as much in accord with the history of our degradation as it would have been compatible with the history of our progress. Rousseau contended, in fact, that by making ourselves gradually less dependent upon Nature and more dependent on other men we had misused our liberty in the course of our development and had brought about, not our improvement, but our debasement by electing to become slaves to new compulsions that we imposed upon ourselves and bequeathed to our children. Our most remarkable faculty, that is, had played the most crucial role in the evolution of social inequality by making possible the transformation of our natural differences into moral

distinctions, so that it was ultimately our perfectibility, he remarked, which was the principal source of all our misfortunes:

Cette faculté distinctive, et presque illimitée, est la source de tous les malheurs de l'homme . . . c'est elle qui le tire, à force de tems, de cette condition originnaire, dans laquelle il couleroit des jours tranquilles, et innocens . . . c'est elle, qui faisant éclore avec les siècles ses lumières et ses erreurs, ses vices et ses vertus, le rend à la longue le tiran de lui-même, et de la Nature.<sup>92</sup>

This idea of perfectibility is, I think, particularly striking both within Enlightenment thought and in the context of subsequent social theory. On the one hand, Rousseau actually introduced the term into the vocabulary of eighteenth-century speculation about human nature,<sup>93</sup> and its importance was quickly perceived by contemporary reviewers of the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, for instance by Grimm and Herder, and by Jean de Castillon in his own work of the same title which forms a reply to Rousseau's text. During the 1760s, moreover, the term came to be employed quite regularly in the field of French natural history, most conspicuously, perhaps, in Robinet's *De la nature*. The fact that it did become fashionable in late Enlightenment thought is, of course, not difficult to understand, since the idea expresses a secular and historical view of man's moral development which was shared by many of the leading *philosophes* of the period who, like Rousseau, conceived it to be a challenge to the orthodox Christian dogma of human corruption through original sin. Yet, on the other hand, the very word which most clearly defines that characteristic Enlightenment perspective has a significance for an understanding of our past, in his theory, which is quite opposed to the sense envisaged by most of his contemporary admirers and critics alike. For whereas in the doctrines of the *philosophes* our perfectibility had ensured our advance from barbarism to civilization, in his account it had engendered only our moral and political decline. Rousseau, that is, joined a highly optimistic belief about human potentialities to a deeply pessimistic vision of man's worldly accomplishments, largely redefining the notions of an essentially theological tradition of moral philosophy in terms which anticipate the more sociological modes of argument of his successors. As one distinguished interpreter of his writings has remarked, his analysis of our evolution thus took on 'l'allure d'une chute accélérée dans la corruption. . . . Rousseau transporte le mythe religieux dans l'histoire elle-même'.<sup>94</sup> Of course the ethical principles of that analysis were not widely shared by the enthusiasts of progress in his own day, for when they adopted his idea of perfectibility, they divorced it from his claims about its implications with respect to the nature of culture and civilization in general. Nevertheless, the theory of history which Rousseau built around his concept—and especially the account of property and inequality which he attached to it—

were to exercise a striking influence upon the development of nineteenth-century social thought, and they were to breathe new life, through new formulations, in the work of Marx in particular.

My aim here has been to try to show how Rousseau's theory of perfectibility forms the central element of both his physical and cultural anthropology together, but it remains for me to stress one final point. According to Lévi-Strauss, the inaugural and profound contribution which Rousseau made to anthropology rests partly on the fact that he undertook the study of human nature in a manner distinct from the approaches of the historian or the moralist. While that proposition may to some extent be true of Lévi-Strauss himself, it is, in my view, quite untrue of Rousseau: first, because his anthropology was an attempt to reconstruct the evolutionary history of mankind which our perfectibility had made possible, and, second, because it forms the most impassioned and most comprehensive moral critique of this history devised throughout the whole Enlightenment. But not only that. His anthropology actually incorporates an elaborate prescriptive moral philosophy as well, and it includes such a dimension because Rousseau supposed that even in the most decadent societies individuals still retain their capacity for self-improvement. Our natural liberty had no doubt been lost in the course of our cultural development, and once that trait was abandoned, he claimed, it could never be recovered.<sup>95</sup> If our perfectibility were similarly lost, however, then there would be no worldly possibility for civilized men to overcome their corruption, and since persons everywhere tended to display only those vicious moral qualities impressed upon them by their governments, this would suggest that it was now beyond the power of individuals or communities to realize any form of virtue. In fact the whole of Rousseau's later philosophy—his studies of the nature of religion, his political writings on Geneva, Corsica and Poland, his commentaries on the theatre and, most important of all, his *Contrat social*, *Emile* and *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*—bears ample testimony to his belief that our natural perfectibility might still be employed to our advantage. In the corpus of his later work Rousseau indeed mapped out at least three major roads to our emancipation from the oppressive state described in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, of which the first was directed to politics, the second to education and the third to solitude, each plan offering basically disparate accounts—in public, domestic and private forms—of the autonomy, self-reliance and independence that could perhaps supply moral remedies for the misfortunes of civilized man. And while these writings suggest that our paths of redemption were likely to prove more heterogeneous than the course of our corruption, I note here only that such alternatives were conceivable in practice because however much men and women had been the victims of their own history they remained its authors as well, and

their perfectibility still enabled them to form a future morally superior to their past.

My concluding point, then, is that the moral philosophy of Rousseau constitutes an integral part of his anthropological theory. I suppose that for some readers this suggestion of adding yet a further dimension to the zoological framework with which I began might seem too much to bear. Was Rousseau's whole theory perhaps no more, in the end, than just another way of expressing that famous anti-vivisectionist cry: 'I have felt all my life an irresistible impulse to rush in wherever anyone is "oppressed" and try to "deliver" him, her, or *it*'?<sup>96</sup> Did he have it in mind to create a society for the salvation of clockwork oranges? Rousseau was not above self-parody, and the lighter touches of his imagination generally show the same deft hand as the deeper impressions that he engraved as well. In my view, however, the moral character of his anthropology has little to do with the resuscitation of the ape within us or the protection of the apes outside. Its aim, rather, is to persuade us of the need to reconstitute or else abandon the cultures within which civilized apes have enchained us. We may have learned from Marx that we have nothing to lose apart from our chains, but if we return to Rousseau we shall find explanations of more links in those chains than any other thinker ever perceived.