

**Original citation:**

James, David. (2017) Reading Rousseau's Second Discourse in the light of the question : what is the source of social inequality? European Journal of Philosophy.

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## Reading Rousseau's *Second Discourse* in the Light of the Question: What is the Source of Social Inequality?

David James

Rousseau has been cast as someone who is primarily interested in developing a normative social and political philosophy based on the idea of a non-inflamed form of *amour-propre*, which consists in a desire for equal, as opposed to superior, social standing. On this basis it has been argued (1) that inflamed *amour-propre* is the principal source of social inequality in his *Second Discourse* and (2) that the normative aspects of this text can largely be isolated from its descriptive ones. I argue against both claims by showing that the desire for independence provides an alternative principal source of social inequality, and that the *Second Discourse* points the way to a genuinely critical theory precisely because it describes in narrative form dynamic, concrete social processes in such a way as to challenge the claims of ideal social or political theory, including attempts to interpret the *Second Discourse* itself primarily in terms of an independent normative social and political philosophy.

The fact that the word 'origin' appears in the title of the *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men* (*Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*) suggests that this text aims to identify *the* source of inequality. In other words, in telling a story about *how* inequality arose, it is also possible to tell a story about *what* initially produced it. One way in which the role of the term 'foundations' in the title might be understood is that it refers to what must be in place for inequality to become a prevalent and persistent feature of human societies, just as a building, in order to remain standing over time, requires solid foundations. Thus, if the 'origin' of inequality can be identified with the source of inequality in the sense of that which first produced inequality *in* time, its 'foundations' would explain the continued existence of inequality *over* time. If, then, there is a single source of the origin of inequality, that is to say, something that explains how inequality first came about, it might be a necessary condition of inequality without also being a sufficient one when it comes to explaining the prevalence and persistence of inequality in human societies.

In the case of the foundations of inequality, there is the problem, however, that Rousseau's own use of the term 'foundations' in the *Second Discourse*, as the text is otherwise known, does not invite the understanding of this term outlined above. He claims that his 'study of original man, of his true needs, and of the fundamental principles [*principes fondamentaux*] of his duties is ... the only effective means available to dispel the host of difficulties that arise regarding ... the true foundations of the Body politic' (*les vrais fondemens du Corps politique*) (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 126; Rousseau 1997a: 128). The foundations that Rousseau here has in mind appear to concern the principles that would characterize a legitimate social and political order and generate a set of duties in accordance with which the members of a political body are obliged to act. Similarly, Rousseau claims that, 'Arbitrary Power, being by its Nature illegitimate, cannot have served as the foundation for the Rights of Society nor, consequently, for instituted inequality' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 184; Rousseau 1997a: 179). Although Rousseau refers to inequality in this passage, he can be taken to mean a form of inequality that is compatible with certain rights that give some people authority over others without this authority being arbitrary or unjust. The 'foundation' in question appears, therefore, to be a normative one. There is no reason, however, to think that Rousseau is not *also* seeking to provide an account of the foundations of inequality in the sense of the conditions of its prevalence and persistence. Thus, the full title of Rousseau's *Second Discourse* points to three potentially interrelated tasks: (1) the task of identifying the source of inequality; (2) the task of identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions of the prevalence and persistence of inequality in human society, or at least in human societies of a certain type; and (3) the task of identifying certain normative requirements that can be used to judge whether existing or potential forms of inequality are justified.

One account of the *Second Discourse* that promises to explain how Rousseau seeks to do all these things has been offered by Frederick Neuhouser. First of all, it is claimed that Rousseau identifies *amour-propre* as 'the principal cause' of inequality (Neuhouser 2014: 79). This is *amour-propre* in the 'inflamed' form of the desire to achieve superior social standing in the eyes of others, and it is the source of 'social' inequality in particular. As this term suggests, we here have a form of inequality that depends on the existence of social relations, especially ones in which individuals or groups exert power over others or possess certain advantages in relation to them (cf. Neuhouser 2014: 16-18). Rousseau himself speaks of the 'moral, or political inequality' which 'depends on a sort of convention, and is established, or at least authorized by Men's consent' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 131; Rousseau 1997a: 131). Secondly, an account is offered of how Rousseau seeks to address the question as to what

makes social inequality into an enduring feature of the human condition. Here the widespread existence of a particular state of affairs is assumed, namely, the prevalence and persistence of social inequality in human society, and certain factors are introduced to explain the possibility of this state of affairs. Although inflamed *amour-propre* is the ‘principal’ cause of the relevant form of inequality, other factors must be introduced in order to explain this state of affairs (cf. Neuhouser 2014: 79-80). Finally, it is argued that Rousseau’s genealogy of social inequality has an evaluative and critical dimension (cf. Neuhouser 2014: 4-5). This in turn suggests that Rousseau’s genealogy of social inequality is informed by certain normative claims in the light of which the legitimacy of particular forms of social inequality can be judged. This account of the aims of the *Second Discourse* represents an example of two interpretative tendencies. First of all, there is a focus on *amour-propre* and the distinction between two different forms of it: the inflamed form mentioned above, which is held to be the principal source of social inequality and thereby the ultimate cause of the ills connected with it, and the healthy form of *amour-propre*, which consists in a desire for *equal* social standing only.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, there is the view of Rousseau as someone whose ultimate aim is to discover the principles in accordance with which a society and state ought to be ordered.<sup>2</sup>

Despite promising to make sense of some of the key aims announced in the proper title of the *Second Discourse*, I intend to challenge Neuhouser’s claim that inflamed *amour-propre* is the principal cause or source of social inequality by identifying the desire for independence as an equally, if not more, plausible candidate, given what Rousseau himself has to say about the emergence of social inequality. The type of independence in which Rousseau is mainly interested in the *Second Discourse* is not the form of independence made possible by the self-sufficiency allegedly enjoyed by individual human beings in the ‘original’ or ‘pure’ state of nature, but a form of independence that must be achieved and preserved within a condition of human interdependence. This particular form of independence is bound up with the need or the mere desire to exercise control over material resources. The principal source of social inequality concerns, therefore, the material conditions (whether real or perceived) of human existence, rather than any purely psychological factors. This is not to say that psychological factors such as *amour-propre* will not have an important role to play in explaining the persistence and prevalence of social inequality, nor that these psychological factors can themselves in each and every case be explained in purely materialist terms.

This difference when it comes to identifying the principal source of social inequality will then be shown to have some wider implications with regard to the approach to interpreting Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* and his social and political thought more generally

of which Neuhausser's account of the aims of this text represents only one example. In so far as it misdiagnoses the problem of social inequality by identifying inflamed *amour-propre* as the principal source of social inequality, this account of the *Second Discourse* and the tendency it represents run the risk of proposing an unsatisfactory solution to the problem of social inequality and its consequences, by claiming that the text points the way towards an ideal, normative social and political theory which can largely (if not entirely) be abstracted from other features of the text. This is to downplay the dynamic, historical nature of human social relations as described in the text itself in narrative form. I argue that the *Second Discourse* provides the model for a genuinely critical social theory which, unlike 'ideal theory', contains a descriptive element that is integral to Rousseau's general project, because this descriptive element functions to make us reflectively aware of the limits of normative social theory itself, both in terms of the assumptions that it itself makes and in terms of the problems of applying this type of theory to existing social and political conditions. To want to extract some kind of independent normative theory from the text is, therefore, to mistake the sense in which it is a critical social theory. Far from being the handmaiden to an independent normative theory, the descriptive elements of the text demonstrate the futility of wanting to apply, in what can be described as an external fashion, a theory of this kind to the type of social process that is being described. I shall begin, however, by saying something more about the argument that *amour-propre* is, for Rousseau, the principal source of social inequality, so as to pave the way for the argument that the desire for independence is, in fact, this source.

### 1. Human Nature and Social Inequality

Given the genealogical element of Rousseau's project, the following way of interpreting the *Second Discourse* consisting of two key stages suggests itself: (1) an analytic stage, at which various factors that might explain the origin, prevalence and persistence of social inequality are identified, delineated and separated from each other, at the same time as close attention is paid to the order in which they appear in Rousseau's narrative; and (2) a process of elimination, whereby some of these factors are ruled out as possible principal sources of social inequality in virtue of lacking certain properties that are essential to social inequality. This process of elimination can be carried so far that we are left with a single source of social inequality in conformity with the fact that the word 'origin' appears in the proper title of the *Second Discourse*.<sup>3</sup>

This method of analysing the text is exemplified by Neuhouser's identification of inflamed *amour-propre* as the principle source of social inequality. Neuhouser suggests, moreover, that this method is employed by Rousseau himself, rather than being a method that is externally applied to the text with the aim of clarifying it, when he claims that the question that interests Rousseau is the following 'analytic' one: 'which new element (or elements) of *human psychology* must be added to his account of original human nature in order to explain why humans create inequalities beyond those that nature bestows on them?' (Neuhouser 2014: 63).<sup>4</sup> This new element turns out to be *amour-propre* which Rousseau introduces into his narrative after having given an account of original human nature, for only it possesses all the essential properties required to explain the emergence of social inequality, whereas original human nature as described by Rousseau lacks these properties and cannot, therefore, be the source of social inequality. *Amour-propre* is, then, the principal cause of inequality in the temporal sense of that which comes first and in the sense of being the most fundamental of all the necessary conditions of its prevalence and persistence in human society, even if it is not a sufficient condition this prevalence and persistence of social inequality. How exactly does Neuhouser's claim that *amour-propre* is the principal source of social inequality depend on the adoption of the type of method described above? The way in which it does so can be demonstrated with reference to the opposition between original human nature and the natural inequality connected with it and certain properties that are required to explain the possibility of social inequality.

To begin with, natural inequalities are absolute in the sense that physical strength, say, is independent of the degree to which it is possessed by others, though it is, of course, relative in that one person can be stronger or weaker than others. The point is, I take it, that this element of relationality has no bearing on the amount of strength that one possesses in absolute terms. Social inequality, by contrast, concerns properties that are, by their very nature, relative or positional, in that having them always depends on the extent to which others do or do not possess them (for example, possessing authority necessarily means that there are people who lack the right to command others and must instead obey them). Consequently, this form of inequality requires being able to compare one's position with that of others. Secondly, what is natural in the original sense and natural inequality are essentially independent of human convention and practices, whereas social inequality is something artificial because it simply would not exist in the absence of human convention and practices that in turn depend on beliefs concerning their naturalness or legitimacy. Thirdly, in virtue of being something merely given, natural inequalities exhibit a type of necessity, whereas the

dependence of social inequality on opinion, human convention and human practices means that it need not have existed and is, therefore, essentially contingent in nature.<sup>5</sup> It is then argued that none of the natural elements identified by Rousseau in his account of the original nature of pre-social human beings, whether taken singularly or together as a whole, can explain the existence of social inequality. If we are to explain the existence of social inequality we must, therefore, be able to identify an additional element (or elements) that possesses (or possess) *all* the relevant properties, that is, the properties of being relative, artificial and contingent. Since *amour-propre* is the first element presented in the *Second Discourse* that possesses all the relevant features, it must be viewed as the principal source of social inequality, though this is not to say that it is a sufficient condition of social inequality when it comes to the prevalence and persistence of this form of inequality in human societies.

An opposition is thereby set up between the following two understandings of that which is natural: (1) that which can be classed as natural in the ‘original’ sense of an immediately given feature of human nature that is absolute or non-relative, independent of human convention and necessary, and (2) that which is not an immediately given feature of human nature in virtue of its being relative, dependent on human convention and contingent, but which, as is the case with *amour-propre*, may nevertheless be regarded as an essential feature of human nature in an extended sense, because it concerns a natural disposition and fundamental characteristic of human psychology that is bound to manifest itself under certain conditions.<sup>6</sup> One way of challenging the claim that inflamed *amour-propre* is the principal source of social inequality would therefore be to show that something natural in sense (1) can, in fact, be shown to possess the *differentia specifica* of that which is natural only in sense (2), and thereby in some way exhibit all the relevant features needed to explain the existence of social inequality. Later I shall argue that this is precisely the case with the desire for independence at a certain level of social development, at which relationality, artificiality and contingency are all present but in such a way as to retain a natural, material basis that is explicable in terms of original human nature as described by Rousseau. This will show, moreover, that material factors must be thought to enjoy an explanatory priority when it comes to explaining the emergence of social inequality, with psychological factors such as *amour-propre* thereby having only a secondary (if nevertheless important) role to play in Rousseau’s narrative concerning the ‘origin’ of inequality. The narrative of the *Second Discourse* provides the description of a dynamic, concrete social process in which original human nature becomes bound up with relational, artificial and contingent elements at a

relatively primitive stage of social development. This process concerns the way in which artificial needs are generated on a natural basis.

In the second part of the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau seeks to reconstruct the ‘most natural order’ in which occurred the ‘slow succession of events and of knowledge’ that led to the emergence of inequality (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 164; Rousseau 1997a: 161). The stage is eventually reached at which human beings have developed, through interaction with their natural environment and with other human beings, such cognitive abilities as the capacity to make comparisons and to recognize the existence of certain relations, both of which are conditions of *amour-propre* and must therefore have developed prior to it. Human beings have in particular developed forms of practical knowledge and certain practical skills, most notably ones connected with the production and employment of rudimentary tools. They are thus now in a position to meet their simple needs more efficiently. This in turn increases the amount of leisure time available to them, and it is in this context that human beings in association with others of their kind begin to develop new needs together with new means of satisfying them. The type of process that Rousseau has in mind can, in fact, be understood as an essentially reciprocal one. In the course of developing new tools human beings become aware of new possibilities in relation to the production of objects that can satisfy existing needs. At the same time, the development of new productive means opens up new possibilities with regard to objects of human consumption and use, with the result that new needs, and not simply new means of satisfying existing needs, are generated. Thus human needs at this stage of social and technological development can be thought to fall into two main groups: the need for the newly developed means of satisfying existing needs and the need for the newly developed means of satisfying needs that did not previously exist, but were instead first generated by the development of the technical means of producing objects capable of satisfying them.

The way in which certain features of original human nature, namely, basic material needs and the desires generated by them, become bound up with relational, artificial and contingent elements even at this relatively early stage of social development can be illustrated in the following way. At a certain stage of social and technological development the natural human need for shelter or clothing can be met by a variety of objects, the choice of which is no longer determined purely by considerations of functionality, but also by considerations such as how pleasing they are to the senses. Thus, an element of artificiality, which rests on opinion, is introduced at the same time as the basis remains an essentially natural, material one, in the sense of being explicable in terms of the basic conditions of human survival and a



particular form of interaction with the natural environment associated with gaining the means of satisfying these material needs. Here opinion might, for example, assume the form of the belief that object  $x$  is more beautiful than object  $y$  or object  $z$ , and thus the form of an aesthetic value judgement that is, it might be added, independent of *amour-propre*, for it does not depend on what individual human beings think of each other and how they behave in relation to each other. At the same time, although the aesthetic qualities of objects in part determine the choice of them, the choice remains determined by natural human needs. For example, one item of clothing may be chosen in preference to another one because it is perceived to be more beautiful in virtue of its colour or the patterns exhibited by the material out of which it is made, but at the same time it is the need to keep warm that explains why the choice was made at all.

As Rousseau points out, the need for such objects may then assume the quasi-natural character of that of 'true needs', in the sense that satisfying this need becomes subjectively necessary, even though there is no absolute need to satisfy a particular natural need by means of object  $x$  as opposed to object  $y$  or object  $z$  (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 168; Rousseau 1997a: 164-165). At the same time, the element of choice involved in the satisfaction of natural needs shows that these needs have to some extent come to depend on human beliefs. Indeed, with respect to particular objects of consumption or use, these needs would not exist in the absence of certain beliefs and the desires that they generate. There is, then, both an artificial and a contingent element in relation to these needs and the process of satisfying them. Moreover, this process, through which needs are generated and satisfied, may take place within a condition of nascent material and social interdependence characterized not only by certain relations of production but also by certain exchange relations, though in its earliest stages the main productive unit remains the family, in which there is a division of labour with the wife 'looking after the Hut and Children' and the husband going 'in quest of the common subsistence' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 168; Rousseau 1997a: 164). Thus there would also be an element of relationality. This element of relationality may differ in kind from the relationality of *amour-propre*, in that the latter motivates actions whose goal is to relate to others in some way, whereas in the case of need-satisfaction the goal can be external to the act of relating to others, in the sense that an act of production or exchange can be simply a means of achieving an end. Yet all that is required is an element of relationality that helps explain the existence of social inequality. To claim that this element of relationality must be of the same kind as that exhibited by *amour-propre* would be question-begging.

The fact that we have a relatively primitive stage of social development prior to the emergence of the inflamed form of *amour-propre* that nevertheless exhibits the properties that are said to be required to explain the existence of social inequality (that is, artificiality, contingency and relationality) implies that social inequality may already exist at this stage, together with ways of symbolically expressing it, such as the finer, more elaborate clothing worn by someone who possesses supreme authority within a society. This social inequality could be explained in purely functional terms, rather than in terms of a desire for superior social standing, along the lines that the survival of the community depends on a mode of social organization in which some members of the community are accorded authority over the other members. Thus a form of social inequality that is artificial, in the sense of depending on opinion, and contingent, in the sense of depending on certain beliefs and on developments that need never have happened, would have its basis in something immediately natural together with its material and social conditions. This basis would correspond to the natural drive that Rousseau calls *amour de soi*. He characterizes this form of self-love as a ‘natural’ sentiment and he associates it with the desire for self-preservation and well-being (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 126 and 219; Rousseau 1997a: 127 and 218). The authority enjoyed by a person or persons in this condition could, moreover, be viewed as a *natural* form of authority, even though it is artificial in the sense of resting on human convention and depending on the acceptance of its legitimacy by others, so that in this sense it is ‘established, or at least authorized by Men’s consent’ (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 131; Rousseau 1997a: 131). Rousseau himself speaks of a ‘natural ascendancy’ granted by merit and age (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 186; Rousseau 1997a: 181). It is not the case, then, that social inequality cannot be justified at all in terms of natural inequality. The problem is instead that particular social developments together with the complexity and nature of the social relations to which they give rise make it impossible beyond a certain stage of social development to determine reliably whether social inequality and natural inequality in reality correspond. Rather, naïve belief in such a correspondence must be rejected by ‘rational and free Men who seek the truth’, and attempting to reason about such matters is, therefore, only for slaves seeking to curry favour with their masters (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 131-132; Rousseau 1997a: 131). This does not mean, however, that beliefs concerning the compatibility of social inequality and natural inequality could not amount to justified beliefs at an earlier stage of social development.

If social inequality as such is possible at the stage of social development described above, because it is conceivable that all its alleged conditions could be present at this stage, it

is unclear why inflamed *amour-propre* is required to explain its emergence, unless one is assuming that the social inequality in question is of a particular kind, namely, the kind described later in the *Second Discourse* as a cause of a host of human evils including a loss of freedom. Yet the way in which Rousseau himself introduces *amour-propre* into his narrative hardly provides conclusive grounds for regarding it in its inflamed form as the principal source of social inequality. Shortly after describing the type of primitive community outlined above, in which artificiality and convention have a natural basis in the fundamental material conditions of human life and the social relations to which they give rise, Rousseau claims that the availability of increased leisure time would have produced a situation in which each individual began to look at others and to wish to be looked at by them. This situation, in which public esteem acquires a value it previously lacked, is then described as ‘the first step ... toward inequality and vice’ (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 169; Rousseau 1997a: 166). To be the first step towards (*vers*) something does not entail, however, that what represents this first step is itself the actual origin of something. Rather, this first step could refer only to a preliminary stage which is not identical with the immediate cause of the phenomenon that is to be explained. Moreover, even if this public esteem involves a form of social inequality, the examples that Rousseau himself provides suggest that this social inequality has its basis in natural forms of inequality, such as being stronger or handsomer than others, or possessing certain skills that others lack, skills which need to be developed but nevertheless depend on the possession of certain natural gifts or talents, as in the case of being able to sing or dance better than others can. We do not even appear to have a case of the inflamed *amour-propre* which it is meant to be the principal source of social inequality, that is, ‘relative sentiment ... born in society, which inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else’ (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 219; Rousseau 1997a: 218). Rather, Rousseau himself goes on to speak of the society in question as ‘occupying a just mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our amour propre’ (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 171; Rousseau 1997a: 167). In any case, Rousseau can, in fact, be seen to identify the source of wealth inequality in particular, which depends on the right to exclude others from the use or benefit of something which is held to be rightfully one’s own, not with the emergence of the inflamed form of *amour-propre*, but with a change of circumstances that is contrasted with how the members of this primitive society ‘continued to enjoy the gentleness of independent dealings with one another’, as is evident from the following passage:

[T]he moment one man needed the help of another; as soon as it was found to be useful for one to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property appeared, work became necessary, and the vast forests changed into smiling Fields that had to be watered with the sweat of men, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to sprout and grow together with the harvests. (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 171; Rousseau 1997a: 167)

The origin of the type of inequality which Rousseau wants to explain appears, then, to be essentially connected with the transition from a condition in which there existed independent productive units (that is, families) that had no absolute need to exchange goods with others to a condition in which whole families as well as individuals are dependent on others for the satisfaction of some (if not all) of their fundamental human needs, or what they perceive as such. This transition is the result of the logic of a process in which even the primitive form of society described earlier is caught up in so far as its needs and the means of satisfying them are increasing as a result of the development of new productive forces. This loss of economic independence and the wealth inequality it begins to generate are then explained in terms of a further development. It is here that we encounter a transition to a society in which material interdependence generates a form of social inequality whose basis is no longer to be found in natural inequality alone.

The development in question concerns the social division of labour that results from human labour assuming two main forms, agriculture, on the one hand, and metallurgy together with the various productive activities associated with the use of metals, on the other. Then there are the effects produced by natural inequality in the conjunction with this division of labour, given that ‘the stronger did more work; the more skillful used his work to better advantage; the more ingenious found ways to reduce his labor’ together with the asymmetrical relations of dependence generated by the greater need of the labour and the products of others that some people had relative to the need that others had of their labour and its products: ‘the Plowman had greater need of iron, or the smith greater need of wheat, and by working equally, the one earned much while the other had trouble staying alive’ (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 174; Rousseau 1997a: 170). The ultimate outcome of this process is described by Rousseau as follows:

This is how natural inequality imperceptibly unfolds together with unequal associations, and the differences between men, developed by their different

circumstances, become more perceptible, more permanent in their effects, and begin to exercise a corresponding influence on the fate of individuals. (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 174; Rousseau 1997a: 170)

It is only after this set of developments has taken place that anything like *amour-propre* in Rousseau's sense of a 'relative sentiment' that 'inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else' makes its appearance, and the way in which it is said to appear is instructive: 'Finally, consuming ambition, the ardent desire to raise one's relative fortune less out of genuine need than in order to place oneself above others, instills in all men a black inclination to harm one another' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 175; Rousseau 1997a: 171).

The use of the adverb 'finally' (*enfin*) indicates that the appearance of this inflamed form of *amour-propre* comes at the end of a process. The stage immediately prior to its appearance relates to the development of the desire to appear, when necessary, other than one is, in the sense of pretending to possess certain merits, qualities or abilities that one in reality lacks. This desire can be explained, however, in terms of material dependence on others and the interest that one consequently has in appearing more useful to them than others are, or better and more deserving than they are, rather than in terms of a free-standing desire for superior social standing. This is because individuals may want to appear to others in this way with the ultimate aim of putting themselves in the position of being able to satisfy their material needs, as when one individual seeks to convince another individual that the latter should employ him or her rather than others or buy what he or she has produced rather than that which others have produced. In short, *amour-propre* may be regarded as the effect rather than the cause of social inequality of a certain type, in that wanting to appear better than others is motivated, at least in the first instance, by material considerations.

If *amour-propre* is less the immediate cause of social inequality than an effect of a process in which significant degrees of this form of inequality, especially in so far as it assumes the shape of wealth inequality, already exists, the origins of social inequality can be traced back to the loss of an original economic independence which once existed together with certain social relations. It can, in fact, be traced even further back, given that the seeds of this loss of economic independence are to be found in the development of practical knowledge and its material application. Hence, Rousseau's statement that 'inequality, being almost nonexistent in the state of Nature ... owes its force and growth to the development of our faculties and the progress of the human Mind' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 193; Rousseau 1997a: 188). The question remains, however, as to whether *amour-propre* is necessary when

it comes to explaining a particular form that social inequality comes to assume, in which case it might still be regarded as the principal source of social inequality in so far as this form of inequality assumes a particularly pronounced form. In the next section I shall argue that even here there is another possible principle source of social inequality, one that corresponds to the way in which what is natural in the original sense has become bound up with artificial, contingent and relational elements in an ongoing social process in the narrative of the *Second Discourse*. This other possible principal source of social inequality is the desire for independence.

## 2. The Desire for Independence and the Emergence of Social Inequality

For Rousseau, the desire for independence is an immediate, natural desire, and as we now know, that which is natural in this sense does not exclude the possibility of the existence of arbitrary, contingent and relational elements. The desire for independence is part of original human nature because it is a manifestation of the natural sentiment or drive of *amour de soi*. In Rousseau's account of the original state of nature, one of the fundamental conditions of this desire's frustration, namely dependence on others, is absent simply in virtue of the almost absolute independence that human beings enjoy with respect to the satisfaction of their animal needs as a result of their isolated and simple mode of existence. It is in this sense that Rousseau describes human beings as 'free' in such a condition. Freedom here consists in the absence of something, whether it be the absence of other human beings, the absence of relations of interdependence or (a possibility not expressly considered in the *Second Discourse* itself) the absence of ways of dominating or interfering with others despite the existence of social relations characterized by forms of interdependence. This independence can be identified either with the freedom to act in accordance with one's desires (whatever they happen to be) in the absence of constraints, particularly the constraints generated by social relations, or, more negatively, with the fact of not having to act in accordance with the desires of others.

Another advantage of the original state of nature is that it was a condition in which 'no one needing anyone but himself, everyone made his decision without waiting for anyone else's consent' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 222; Rousseau 1997a: 221). This suggests that threats to independence include the mere possibility of needing the consent of others, as is typically the case with any cooperative undertaking as well as when one individual has the authority and power to grant or to refuse another individual the permission or opportunity to do something that he or she desires to do. Although the idea of a cooperative undertaking

suggests the possibility of a situation in which people with the same desires join forces in order to satisfy these common desires, making it difficult to see how they can be said to suffer any interference or obstacle to doing what they desire to do, Rousseau may have in mind the following problem: obtaining the consent of others would even in this case still ultimately depend on what others happen to desire and would, therefore, be contingent on whether or not what they desire to do coincides with what one desires to do and continues to coincide with it. A human being in the original state of nature, by contrast, is in no way dependent on others because he or she can satisfy his or her natural needs independently of them with the sole exception of sexual desire, whose satisfaction requires, however, only fleeting encounters between men and women. Thus, a human being in the original state of nature remains ‘a free being, whose heart is at peace’ (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 152; Rousseau 1997a: 150). He or she enjoys, in short, the type of independent, solitary existence which becomes impossible with an expansion of needs and the condition of increasing interdependence that it generates.<sup>7</sup>

The frustration of the desire for independence can be assumed, therefore, to be something that human beings would necessarily experience as an evil that undermines their primitive sense of well-being, and this is to assume the existence of both the desire in question and the self-love that consists in an overriding concern with the satisfaction of this natural desire. This does not mean, however, that the desire for independence is equivalent to the one which non-human animals experience, or that it must remain so. Rather, once the satisfaction of this desire begins to take place within a social context characterized by relations of material interdependence, the possibility of enjoying independence can no longer be considered in isolation from a set of distinctively human desires and the means of satisfying them. Neither this set of desires nor the means of satisfying the individual desires of which it is made up is fixed but is, rather, capable of indefinite expansion. In other words, being able to satisfy a particular set of desires through particular means is an essential part of *what it means* for a human being to be independent in a society of a certain type. As we have seen, the desires in question will include ones that are generated by artificial needs which nevertheless have a natural basis, and whose satisfaction has become subjectively necessary. Independence will then be measured in terms of the extent to which a human being can, through his or her own activity or by commanding others, satisfy needs whose satisfaction is, or is perceived to be, essential to human well-being, without at the same time having to obey others or seek their consent. Independence would in this respect be, somewhat paradoxically, socially determined. The attempt to maintain a purely natural form of independence, by

contrast, would be possible only if human beings could return to, the original state of nature, but there are grounds for thinking that Rousseau himself considered such a return to be neither possible nor desirable.<sup>8</sup>

So far I have shown only that there exists an immediate, natural desire for independence and that this desire is presented before the introduction of inflamed *amour-propre* in the narrative of the *Second Discourse* in such a way that it turns out to be bound up with certain arbitrary, contingent and relational elements. To show that the desire for independence is the *principal* source of social inequality requires, however, something more than this, for it also needs to be shown how it provides an *incentive* for accumulating goods and resources beyond the amount of them required to secure the immediate to short-term satisfaction of one's desire for independence, and, what is more, to employ these goods and resources to dominate others. Such an incentive exists because human beings, whom Rousseau assumes by this stage have developed the power 'to extend their views to the future' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 173; Rousseau 1997a: 169),<sup>9</sup> would be motivated to secure the long-term satisfaction of their desire for independence, a desire which, as we have seen, is formed by a particular, historically variable and socially determined set of needs, without having to obey others or to seek their consent, in so far as this is possible in a condition of interdependence. This explains how we arrive at a situation in which 'it was found to be useful for one to have provisions for two' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 171; Rousseau 1997a: 167), in that the length of time during which an individual is able to enjoy a state of independence is doubled. As this statement indicates, there is potentially no limit to the extent to which individuals would be motivated to accumulate goods and resources with the aim of satisfying their natural desire for independence: for why not try to triple the length of time during which one can enjoy a state of maximum independence, or quadruple it, and so on? Clearly, as it stands, this will be a matter of individual judgement alone.

Rousseau sometimes speaks, moreover, as if the distribution of benefits within a society is a zero-sum game that makes it impossible to further one's own interests without intentionally or unintentionally harming the interests of others, and that this is what leads human beings to become wicked (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 202-203 and 1902; Rousseau 1997a: 197-198; Rousseau 1997b: 173). When applied to the distribution of goods and resources within society, this view of the matter is uncontroversial enough in the case of conditions of scarcity. Yet the conditions of securing independence indicated above provide grounds for thinking that even in conditions of relative abundance this notion of a zero-sum game might still apply. This is because the objective of securing independence could,



depending on what an individual judges to be the necessary means in relation to this end, motivate attempts to accumulate goods and resources that extend well beyond securing that which others may regard as necessary to meet an individual's or a family's needs even in the long term.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore conceivable that some people's success in securing what they judge to be necessary for their long-term material independence will entail the failure of others to secure theirs, with the result that one of the fundamental interests of these others is harmed. Here we can see how the natural desire for independence, once it has become bound up with a set of artificial needs and the means of satisfying them, can explain the emergence of social inequality. This does not mean that the desire for independence represents a sufficient condition of the prevalence and persistence of this form of inequality, and here the introduction of additional factors, including inflamed *amour-propre*, may well be required. Yet this would by itself amount to a significant reduction in the significance accorded to inflamed *amour-propre* when it comes to explaining the phenomenon of social inequality.

One of the main appeals of identifying inflamed *amour-propre* as the principal source of social inequality has to do, I suspect, with the way in which it promises to make sense of such phenomena as 'keeping up with the Joneses' or the behaviour of the super rich whose desire for wealth appears to defy any rational explanation and is, therefore, liable to be identified with some abnormal or unhealthy psychological trait. For example, in relation to the increasing concentration of global or national wealth in the hands of the wealthiest 1 per cent of the world's population or the same percentage of the population in the case of developed nations such as the UK and the US, it is said that those 'who amass fortunes manage to do so partly because they don't like sharing and see themselves as special, as more careful with money, as being worth more than others' (Dorling 2014: 89). One might think that what is meant by 'being worth more than others' is the inflamed form of *amour-propre*, as opposed to its healthy form of the desire for equal social standing. However, this intuitive appeal of the idea that inflamed *amour-propre* is the principle source of social inequality should itself be examined. Such people could be thought instead to view themselves as special, and accordingly to believe themselves better than others, independently of the recognition they might gain from others as a result of the possession of greater material wealth because in their view they are *already* special and worth more than others. They may believe, for example, that they are entitled to recognition and to a far greater share of available wealth simply in virtue of certain merits or virtues that they think have enabled them to become wealthy in the first place, such as the willingness to work hard and prudence

in financial matters, whereas others are assumed to lack the same merits or virtues and therefore deserve to be poor.

Here it is not necessarily the desire for superior social standing that motivates them to accumulate more and more wealth, even if they may subsequently seek to justify what they possess in terms of due recognition of their merits or virtues. Yet, as we have seen, the role of inflamed *amour-propre* in motivating individuals to accumulate wealth is central to the identification of it as the principal source of social inequality. Moreover, one might introduce possible counter-examples to the idea that an endless accumulation of wealth is motivated by a desire for recognition at all, such as the example of an individual who has a seemingly endless desire to accumulate wealth but does not appear to care what others think of him or her, even though he or she lives in a society in which public evidence of greed generates widespread moral disapproval and may even result in some form of social ostracism. Finally, even the excesses of the super rich could be explained in terms of a desire for independence, given that the independence of one individual is always relative to the independence enjoyed by others in competitive modern societies. If super-rich person *x* has more resources than super-rich person *y*, he or she has the potential to make the latter act in ways in which he or she does not desire to act, say, by forcing him or her to sell a stake in a company, resulting in an immediate loss in independence measured in terms of economic power and in a potentially even greater loss of independence in the future as a result of this initial reduction in economic power. This prospect could be sufficient to motivate both super-rich person *x* and super-rich person *y* to accumulate more wealth so as to avoid such a scenario in his or her own case, and to facilitate it in the case of a rival. Of course, one may say that the notion of independence encountered here is fundamentally misguided or, as we might put it, ‘inflamed’. Yet this is beside the point. What matters is only whether or not the desire for independence, however mistaken the beliefs concerning the means of satisfying it might be, is sufficient to explain the desire to accumulate wealth beyond the point that it remains connected to fundamental human needs.

I have argued that the desire for independence represents a credible alternative when it comes to identifying the principal source of social inequality and that it fits the narrative presented in the *Second Discourse*, especially in the case of wealth inequality, which arguably represents the main basis of social inequality more generally in capitalist societies (in other societies without a market economy, such as the former Soviet Union, political inequality will probably form this basis, while sexual inequality may form the basis in a traditional, patriarchal society). I have argued this point in such a way, moreover, as to

highlight how the narrative of the *Second Discourse* describes a dynamic, concrete social process that resists the kind of separation between what is natural in an immediately given sense and that which is natural in only a different sense because it is characterized by arbitrariness, contingency and relationality. I shall now argue any attempt to separate the normative aspects of the *Second Discourse* from its descriptive ones is also problematic, given the way in which the narrative of the *Second Discourse* provides a description of such a dynamic, concrete social process. The usefulness of drawing this type of distinction between normative theory and descriptive theory has been denied (Geuss 2008: 16-17), and I want now to argue that Rousseau's *Second Discourse* provides some grounds for denying the value of this type of distinction. This criticism is connected with the criticism of the claim that inflamed *amour-propre* is the principal source of social inequality, for if this source lies elsewhere, the misdiagnosis of the problem itself is likely to be accompanied by the proposal of an inadequate solution to the problem of social inequality.

### 3. The Critical Theory of the *Second Discourse*

Neuhouser's reading of the *Second Discourse* is representative of a tendency to view Rousseau as someone whose ultimate aim is to discover the principles according to which relations between individual within society and the state ought to be ordered, and as someone whose account of these principles can be isolated from his wider concerns, such as how to ensure that citizens develop the dispositions necessary to establish and maintain a social and political order of the relevant kind.<sup>11</sup> This tendency relates to the claim that the desire for social recognition can only be universally satisfied if it takes the form of a demand for *equal* recognition, instead of the demand for recognition of one's *superior* social standing that is characteristic of inflamed *amour-propre*. Since inflamed *amour-propre* has been shown in the *Second Discourse* to be the product of a set of contingent factors, the universal satisfaction of the inherently social good of the esteem or good opinion of others promised by recognition of one's equality with them cannot be regarded as impossible, provided the right social and political conditions obtain. Rousseau's conception of a general will and a legitimate social contract based on the moral equality of all individuals and the fundamental interests of every citizen are then held to provide the means of determining what these conditions and circumstances would be (cf. Neuhouser 2014: 187). Given its purely normative function, the contract in question need not be viewed as an actual one. Rather, it can be viewed as a hypothetical contract which allows us to determine which laws and institutions every citizen could rationally consent to (cf. Neuhouser 2014: 193).<sup>12</sup>

In this way the normative account of the essential conditions of a legitimate social and political order are detached from the descriptive account of the origin of social inequality and its effects. The relation between the descriptive and normative aspects found in the *Second Discourse* is then explained in terms of how the genealogical account demonstrates that things could have been otherwise than they are, especially if *amour-propre* had assumed the form of the demand for equal recognition instead of its inflamed form. This relation between the descriptive and normative aspects of the text thereby serves to denaturalize social conditions which would otherwise be unreflectively viewed as arrangements whose inevitability we must simply accept, by making us aware of the possibility of reconfiguring social and political relations in accordance with the normative requirements embodied in the idea of a legitimate social contract (cf. Neuhouser 2014: 208-12). Presumably, the actual task of reconfiguring social and political relations in accordance with these normative requirements is a techno-practical matter about which Rousseau's *Second Discourse* has nothing significant to tell us and is not, in any case, meant to do so. To understand the relation between the descriptive and normative aspects of the *Second Discourse* in this manner is to turn this relation into rather a loose one, in that the descriptive aspects then simply serve to highlight the possibility of applying normative principles that are already hinted at in the *Second Discourse* but are fully explicated only in the *Social Contract*. The descriptive element could therefore ultimately be dispensed with once it had performed this function, like a ladder which one has used to scale a wall that one does not intend to climb back down.

I want to challenge this view on the grounds that even if the analytic distinction between descriptive and normative aspects of the *Second Discourse* is to some extent valid, the descriptive element of this text, which after all consists largely in some kind of narrative, is designed to make us reflectively aware of how any attempt to determine the conditions of a legitimate social and political order cannot abstract from questions concerning the actual state and nature of existing social and political relations. This goes beyond demonstrating the possibility of transforming these relations, since it extends to highlighting the challenges involved in attempting any such transformation of them. The descriptive element of the *Second Discourse* must therefore be viewed as indispensable, and as by no means subservient to some kind of independent normative theory. Indeed, this descriptive element should make us suspicious of any such theory. Neuhouser, by contrast, claims that the narrative structure of the second part of the *Second Discourse* tends to 'obscure' the philosophical character of

Rousseau's explanation of inequality that he identifies with its systematic and atemporal features (Neuhouser 2014: 61).

Once Rousseau's main intention is held to be the discovery of the principles according to which human relations within society and the state ought to be ordered, and that apart from its denaturalizing function the narrative of the *Second Discourse* is inessential with respect to this intention, certain considerations would seem to be of only limited relevance. These considerations would include the issue of how individuals happen to think of themselves and others, and how they are disposed to act as a result of existing social and political relations that are themselves formed through social processes that occur in historical time. Rather, the purely hypothetical nature of the social contract allows us to view the parties to this contract in idealized terms as individuals sharing the same fundamental interests. They are then also assumed to be motivated by shared concerns, because as rational agents they will be disposed to endorse and to establish the means of guaranteeing these fundamental interests, while being capable of recognizing that others share the same interests. Yet does the *Second Discourse* really justify such assumptions?

One does not need here to claim that the separation of alleged normative elements from the descriptive or explanatory elements of the text is completely mistaken. On the basis of what I have argued in the last section, the *Second Discourse* provides grounds for claiming that the desire for material independence will figure among the fundamental interests that would to some degree need to be secured by any agreement concerning the principles according to which human relations with society and the state ought to be ordered. Moreover, the extent to which individuals are allowed to appropriate goods and resources in accordance with their own judgement concerning what would secure their long-term independence ought therefore to be limited in accordance with the aim of securing this fundamental interest universally, given that this desire, if left unchecked, is, at a certain stage of economic and social development, likely to produce a situation in which this fundamental interest cannot be universally secured. It should be added *pace* Neuhouser's reading of the *Second Discourse*, however, that these grounds are independent of any claims concerning a desire for equal social standing, though this is not to say that material independence would not be a condition of satisfying this desire as well.

The problem with any sharply drawn distinction between the descriptive and normative aspects of the *Second Discourse* that I have in mind can, in fact, be illustrated with reference to the idea that *amour-propre* in the benign form of the desire for equal social standing is one of the essential goods that a legitimate social and political order must secure,

and that forms of social inequality that make it impossible for each individual to satisfy the need for this form of recognition would therefore be ones to which each party to the social contract could not rationally consent. When the social contract is treated in merely hypothetical terms as the embodiment of such normative standards as the demand for equal social standing, the problems posed by social inequality automatically appear easier to resolve, for it then primarily becomes a matter of judging whether or not an existing social and political order meets these standards, and, in so far as it does not do so, identifying how it needs to be reformed to meet them. The story that Rousseau tells us concerning the genesis of social inequality in the *Second Discourse* suggests, however, that the matter is far less straightforward than this, given that people's ways of thinking and acting are determined, even if not completely so, by the social processes in which they happen to be caught up.

*Amour-propre* is a case in point because Rousseau describes the desire for *superior* social standing, and not the desire for *equal* social standing, as a product of the social process in which individuals are caught up once relations of material interdependence are conclusively established. He claims, in fact, that people 'come to hold Domination dearer than independence, and consent to bear chains so that they might impose chains [on others] in turn' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 188; Rousseau 1997a: 183). In other words, dominating others has become an end in itself for which individuals are even willing to subordinate their desire for independence, and the explanation of this phenomenon can only be that an overwhelming desire for superior social standing has developed within them. If, however, as I have argued, the desire for independence is the principal source of social inequality, the problem is even greater than this, because people will be motivated not only by a desire for superior social standing, which could conceivably be transformed over time into a desire for equal social standing through the introduction of equality-promoting laws and institutions, but also by a natural desire for independence which they seek to secure by acts of accumulation that disadvantage others. There is consequently no guarantee that the establishment of laws and institutions that are compatible with the desire for equal social standing, and even help to foster a desire for it, would at the same time be sufficient to prevent the destructive effects of the desire for independence. Rousseau's narrative suggests, therefore, that the problem of the destructive effects of the desire for independence is to some extent distinct from the problem of the destructive effects of inflamed *amour-propre*.

One may wonder, then, not only how for people at this stage of social development the desire for equal social standing would have come to form part of *their* conception of a fundamental good which they seek to secure in association with others, but also how they

would be willing to moderate their desire for independence, which requires limiting their drive to accumulate goods and resources at the expense of the independence of others, unless they are forced to do so.<sup>13</sup> Thus readings of the *Second Discourse* that emphasize the role of a desire for equal social standing, while ignoring the role of the natural desire for independence, and interpret this text in terms of an independent normative theory that centres on a desire for equal social standing appear to assume two things: that a desire for equal social standing is already sufficiently widespread to explain the possibility of the transition from the social world described in the second part of the *Second Discourse* to a legitimate and social and political order, and that there is no other source of social inequality that might operate in causal independence of the inflamed form of *amour-propre*. Both assumptions are, however, at odds with Rousseau's own account of what we can reasonably expect to motivate individuals at the relevant stage of social development and how a natural desire for independence that disposes people to accumulate goods and resources with no regard for the interests of others can explain the emergence of social inequality independently of the inflamed form of *amour-propre*.

Rousseau can be seen to weave these difficulties into the very fabric of the text. The parties to the social contract of which he speaks in the *Second Discourse* itself - and one might argue the parties to any such contract whose idealization has not been pushed too far - are subject to certain practical constraints that determine what they would be willing to consent to at a particular stage of social development.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, the parties to this contract are described as having the common interest of escaping the condition of potentially deadly conflict in which they find themselves. On the other hand, one group of people, the rich, have an additional interest in securing what they already possess by means of a set of legally recognized property rights guaranteed by the common power invested in the state, whereas the poor lack this same interest, making the social contract far less advantageous to them. It is, in fact, disadvantageous to them, because it excludes them from goods and resources to which they might otherwise have claimed a right. In the case of the rich, then, we have a set of practical constraints that lead individuals to rationalize conditions that favour their own interests at the expense of the interests of others by presenting legal and political measures that will preserve advantages they already enjoy at the expense of others as benefiting everyone. Here the desire for independence, though subject to recognition of the necessity of constraining it so as to secure one's private interests as best as one can in the circumstances, provides a plausible explanation of what motivates individuals to enter into a social contract. The obvious response to this claim would be to say that in order to judge the

illegitimacy of the specious social contract presented in the *Second Discourse*, it must be possible to identify certain normative standards, and that this can best be done by asking what conditions individuals could rationally consent to, given certain fundamental interests they must be thought to share. The problem remains, however, that the identification of these interests themselves, and consequently the normative standards that they generate, will be determined by historical social processes, and that this sits uncomfortably with any idealized account of human rational agency that seeks to abstract from such processes and the way in which they shape people's beliefs and determine their actions.

Reading the *Second Discourse* in a way that respects the integrity of the text requires, therefore, recognizing how any normative elements are bound up with the descriptive ones, so that it is not the case that the latter simply pave the way for the application of an independent normative theory by demonstrating the ultimate contingency of existing social and political relations and thereby the possibility of transforming them. The *Second Discourse* then has the virtue of fostering heightened critical reflection on the assumptions informing any idealized social contract. Moreover, once the dynamic nature of Rousseau's account of the source of social inequality, which depends on its narrative form, is taken into full consideration, the challenges posed by the prevalence and the persistence of social inequality and widespread acceptance of it (whether explicit or tacit) can be better recognized and assessed. These challenges might be compared to those faced by an archer or marksman who must hit a moving target as opposed to the challenges faced by one who must hit a sitting target, for although the former may possess the same knowledge, skills and equipment as the latter, his task of employing them effectively will be much greater.

The *Second Discourse* belongs to the writings that originated from the experience Rousseau had while walking on the road to Vincennes to visit Diderot, who was in prison there. Rousseau describes this experience as akin to a state of drunkenness, during which he was overcome by a mass of living ideas that presented themselves with such force and in such a confused manner that he found himself in a state of incomprehensible turmoil. He claims that if he could have written only a quarter of what he had then experienced, he would have been able to expose with great force all the contradictions of the social system and the abuses for which institutions are responsible, and to demonstrate with simplicity that human beings are naturally good, and that it is only as a result of institutions that they become wicked. As it stands, however, the mass of great truths he experienced are only weakly and partially expressed in his three principle writings, his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, the *Second Discourse* itself, and his treatise on education, *Émile*, which are inseparable from



each other and together form a single whole (Rousseau 1959-1995, 1: 1135-1136). This suggests that the reader of the *Second Discourse* must somehow grasp the elements of the text as essentially interrelated moments of a single whole by means of an intuitive mental act if he or she is to recreate, if only partially, the truth of the vision which this text seeks to express. Thus, despite the fact that certain elements of this text can be logically distinguished from each other, it must equally be recognized that these elements are essentially related. Any process of analysis must, therefore, be accompanied by a process of synthesis if we are even to begin to read the *Second Discourse* in a proper light. Only in this way, moreover, or so I have argued, does the text provide the model for a genuine critical social theory which contains a descriptive element that is integral to it. This descriptive element serves to make us reflectively aware of the challenges and problems faced by any normative theory, not only in terms of its application to existing social and political conditions, but also in terms of the assumptions that inform it.<sup>15</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See especially Neuhouser, 2008. As Neuhouser acknowledges, his reassessment of the nature and potentiality of *amour-propre* is already undertaken in Dent 1988, whose views on *amour-propre* are also endorsed by John Rawls (cf. Rawls 2007: 198-200).

<sup>2</sup> This approach can be traced back to John Rawls's reading of Rousseau (Rawls 2007). A more recent example is found in Cohen 2010. For a helpful summary of the nature and concerns of this approach with particular regard to its focus on *amour-propre* and the normative conclusions it seeks to draw from it, see Hasan 2015.

<sup>3</sup> It is conceivable that what first produced social inequality subsequently ceased to be the principal condition of it because other factors taken together came in time to be sufficient conditions of its prevalence and persistence. Thus the 'origin' of social inequality, understood as its principal cause in the sense of being that which is temporally prior, would not be the principal condition of the subsequent prevalence and persistence of social inequality, because this form of inequality, once established, would have become based on other 'foundations'. Both my account of the origin of social inequality and the one that identifies inflamed *amour-propre* as the principal source of social inequality assume, however, that Rousseau does not think that this is the case.

<sup>4</sup> Rousseau appears to regard himself as employing a distinctive method. This method consists in offering some 'hypothetical and conditional reasonings; better suited to elucidate the Nature of things than to show their

genuine origin, and comparable to those our Physicists daily make regarding the formation of the World' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 133; Rousseau 1997a: 132). This methodological statement is compatible with the idea that he is seeking to identify elements whose historical existence or order cannot be demonstrated, but which nevertheless may form parts of a hypothesis that enjoys greater plausibility than other ones when it comes to explaining the phenomenon of social inequality.

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of these differences, see Neuhouser 2014: 60.

<sup>6</sup> Neuhouser himself speaks of 'human nature in the expanded sense' which includes both 'original' human nature and *amour-propre* (Neuhouser 2014: 33). This phrase indicates how the latter is not natural in the same sense as former, for if it were it would itself have to be classed as part of original human nature, and there would then be no need to speak of human nature in an expanded sense.

<sup>7</sup> This absence of social relations, which is to be explained in terms of being able to satisfy one's needs independently of others, makes it difficult to explain, as Rousseau recognizes, how conditions of the expansion of needs beyond purely natural ones such as the invention of language could ever come to exist, for human beings 'having no relations with one another and no need of any, one cannot conceive the necessity or the possibility of this invention if it was not indispensable' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 146; Rousseau 1997a: 145).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Lovejoy 1948 and Todorov 2001, 9-12.

<sup>9</sup> In the original state of nature, by contrast, the soul of the human being 'yields itself to the sole sentiment of its present existence, with no idea of the future, however near it may be, and his projects, as limited as his views, hardly extend to the close of day' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 144; Rousseau 1997a: 143).

<sup>10</sup> In this respect there is an essential connection between the perceived means of satisfying the desire for independence, or, as one might say, the power to satisfy it, and a notion of freedom, in the sense of independence of others, that implies what might be described as an inherently expansionary conception of freedom, in that any increase in power will be matched by an increase in freedom. This is not to say that human beings must consciously aim to increase their power and with it the scope of their freedom; rather, they might simply and unavoidably be driven by what Hobbes describes as 'a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power' (Hobbes 1996: 70). Rousseau, however, unlike Hobbes, thinks that human beings can themselves curb this desire regardless of its brute strength *vis-à-vis* other desires, and thus avoid producing the human evils for which it is responsible. His notion of moral freedom expressed in the claim that 'the impulsion of mere appetite is slavery, and obedience to the law one has prescribed to oneself is freedom' (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 365; Rousseau 1997b: 54) indicates precisely this possibility. Clearly, then, both the accommodation and the limitation of the desire for independence will be central to any solution to the problem of social inequality.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Cohen, for example, draws a distinction between the normative elements of Rousseau's theory of the general will and elements that are 'fixed not by the content of the general will itself ... but by an account of the conditions required for the stability of the society of the general will' (Cohen 2010: 53). For Cohen, these conditions of social stability are not constitutive elements of a legitimate social and political order, but instead form elements of 'a political sociology' as opposed to 'the philosophical conception of political legitimacy' (57).

<sup>12</sup> Rousseau's *Social Contract* is thus presented as the solution to the problems identified in the *Second Discourse*. Yet, as we have seen, it is debatable that the most fundamental problem identified in the latter primarily concerns inflamed *amour-propre*. John Rawls, whose reading of Rousseau has much in common with Neuhouser's, emphasizes the way in which *amour-propre* can be identified with a desire for equal social

standing and how it thus points the way to an alternative form of society to the one dominated by its inflamed form, namely, a society of equals governed by principles of justice. He then draws attention to the following challenge identified in the *Social Contract* and presents it as ‘the problem to which the social contract is to be the solution’ (Rawls 2007: 219): to ‘find a form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with the full common force’, a task that is achieved in this association when the demand is met that ‘each, uniting with all, nevertheless obey only himself and remain as free as before’ (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 360; Rousseau 1997b: 49-50). Here, however, it sounds as if the fundamental task is to ensure that each member of the form of association in question is able to maintain to the same extent as others his or her original independence in a modified form, that is, to retain it to the greatest possible extent, given that one combines with others in an associative form of life, at the same time as his or her person and property are guaranteed by the overwhelming force produced by the combination of each and every member’s power in the form of association that is thereby generated. None of this by itself entails a solution to the problem of how the desire for equal standing with others can be universally satisfied if this solution is taken to depend on the parties to the social contract also being motivated by this same concern. At most, the solution to *this* problem would only be a by-product of their concern to secure their own independence as best they can in a condition of interdependence. For example, if achieving this end requires enjoying equal legal recognition, as it arguably does, people who were not disposed to accord equal recognition to others before may be led to do so and to desire to be viewed as no more than equals by these others.

<sup>13</sup> The fact that Rousseau himself recognized this type of problem and took it seriously is evident from the following passage from the *Social Contract* in which he identifies a structurally identical problem: ‘For a nascent people to be capable of appreciating sound maxims of politics and of following the fundamental rules of reason of State, the effect would have to become the cause, the social spirit which is to be the work of the institution would have to preside over the institution itself, and men would have to be prior to laws what they ought to become by means of them’ (Rousseau 1959-1995, 3: 383; Rousseau 1997b: 71).

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller account of the role of practical necessity in the *Second Discourse*, see James 2013, Chapter 1.

<sup>15</sup> I would like to thank Hans-Christoph Schmidt am Busch and an anonymous reader for the *European Journal of Philosophy* for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

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