

## ROUSSEAU'S ENGAGEMENT WITH AMOUR-PROPRE

*Peter Fuss*

A number of years ago, while reflecting on the notion of self, I had occasion to wonder to what extent the French expression *amour-propre* had found its way into North American usage. Several standard American dictionaries had it, though flagged as being a foreign term. The translation given was self-esteem. I tried Larousse's small French-English, which offered two definitions: self-pride and self-respect. A considerably larger Cassell's gave four translations: self-love, self-respect, conceit, and vanity. Even this brief immersion in the ways of ordinary language was enough to bring out in me the frustrated philosopher, with his passion for making distinctions: Are self-esteem, self-love, and self-respect fundamentally the same things? And do any or all of these compounds amount or reduce to uncompounded conceit or vanity? Or is it that *amour-propre* is complicated, ambiguous, perhaps even in some sense "dialectical," so that self-respect and vanity mark out, respectively, its polar extremes?

Lacking sufficient self-esteem (or is it conceit?) simply to retire to my study and think this through on my own, I cast about for inspiration. It took a while to find some. The passions and affections in general are not traditionally among the preferred subjects of the philosophical mainliners, who seem to have a distinctive passion of their own for quarreling about the so-called higher, more noetic human faculties. But quite by accident I did stumble across a strange passage in a student's paper. It was a brief quotation from Rousseau's *Emile*, the treatise on education he published in 1762. It went like this:

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Self-love (*l'amour de soi*), which regards only ourselves, is contented when our true needs are satisfied. But *amour-propre*, which makes comparisons, is never content and never could be, because this sentiment, preferring ourselves to others, also demands others to prefer us to ourselves, which is impossible.

(Book IV, tr. Allan Bloom, Basic Books, 1979, 213-214.)

Here, at last, was a sharp distinction, the kind that forces one to think.<sup>1</sup> But at the time I was having an intellectual affair with Hegel — a passionate love/hate relationship that was, if nothing else, all-consuming. So I did only a few things with Rousseau's distinction, and then let it sit. I checked with some French scholars and was told that the distinction was idiosyncratic to Rousseau: modern French has not adopted it. Further reading led me to realize that no distinction comparable to Rousseau's, at least none with any firmness to it, could be found in modern Italian, Spanish, German, or English either. Rousseau's failure to make such a distinction stick — he being, after all, one of the most articulate, influential, and stylistically seductive of modern thinkers — told me something important about modern self-consciousness, about its own inability to find within itself a sufficient basis for so firm a distinction\*. For what I sensed Rousseau to have been driving at was the difference between a primordially natural disposition and a sociopathological state — a distinction that we in general would neither readily nor willingly make. And then I promised myself I'd some day pursue Rousseau's distinction as best I could within his own writings so as to determine what he, at any rate, had had in mind in making it. It has taken me a decade to get free enough of Hegel to begin to keep this promise. Here, then, is a preliminary report.

I

We find Rousseau drawing his sharp distinction for the first time in the *Discourse on Inequality* (1755):

Vanity (*amour-propre*) and love of self (*amour de soi*), two passions very different in their nature and their effects, must not be confused.

Love of oneself is a natural sentiment which inclines every animal to watch over its own preservation, and which, directed in man by reason

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\* This is not to say that Rousseau's distinction has fallen on altogether deaf philosophical ears as well. One need mention only three German thinkers: Max Stirner, especially when contrasting "ownness" and "possession," and Nietzsche and Scheler whenever they are preoccupied with the psychology of "*ressentiment*." See also note three with respect to Hegel. The distinction I have alluded to between *bourgeois* and *citoyen* is also drawn by Karl Marx in the Paris Manuscripts.

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and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue. Vanity is only a relative sentiment, artificial and born in society, which inclines each individual to have a greater esteem for himself than for anyone, else, inspires in men all the harm they do to one another, and is the true source of "honor." (Footnote 'o' in the Masters edition, 221-222. Honor, as opposed to civic virtue in the "classical" republic, is the highest value known to the ambitions and the socially favored in monarchies of the modern ages such as that of Louis XIV, for which Rousseau had nothing but contempt.)

Our primitive ancestor in the conjectural "state of nature" from which we have evolved must have been incapable of vanity. Rousseau adds, because he was too isolated, too pre-social to make the necessary comparisons.

For the same reason, this man could have neither hate nor desire for revenge — passions that can arise only from the opinion that some offense has been received; and as it is scorn or intention to hurt and not the harm that constitutes the offense, men who know neither how to evaluate themselves nor to compare themselves can do each other a great deal of mutual violence when they derive some advantage from it, without ever offending one another. In a word, every man, seeing his fellow-men hardly otherwise than he would see animals of another species, can carry off the prey of the weaker or relinquish his own to the stronger, without considering these plunderings as anything but natural events, without the slightest emotion of insolence or spite, and with no other passion than the sadness or joy of a good or bad outcome. (222)

In its broader implications, this portrait of primitive man should help dispel the lingering illusion that Rousseau himself was some sort of primitivist, seeking in his own person or advocating for mankind at large a return to the "natural state." (The most important of his footnotes to the *Second Discourse*, 'i' in the Masters edition, explicitly repudiates any such intentions.) Socialization and the emergence of a sense of self in comparison with other selves are inseparable and irreversible processes: for us there can be no going back. Emergent in this passage as well is the first of a series of paradoxes regarding self, self-love, and love of self. I am most absolutely myself, and in one sense most unambiguously "inner-directed," when I am least aware that I am or have a distinct "self" at all. Conversely, my consciousness of self is never greater than when, in the wake of numerous invidious comparisons, my sense of my own identity has become relativized, compromised, wounded to the core by anxiety-ridden surmises regarding what others think of me. To this

and several related paradoxes we shall return presently.

Neither this passage nor any other in the *Second Discourse* sheds much light, however, on the question how “love of oneself” as a “natural sentiment” inclining us toward self-preservation gives rise to, or is even compatible with, the sentiment of pity or compassion — a sentiment which Rousseau earlier in this same work had claimed to be equally natural and at least almost as primitive. Moreover, we are told little as to why, or in what sense, *amour-propre*, and by implication the socialization process that occasions it, deviates from what is “natural.” Finally, aside from a broad hint in ‘i,’ the *Second Discourse* is silent regarding how love of self as a “natural sentiment” could survive the nefarious socialization process long enough to be “directed in man by reason and modified by pity” so as to produce something apparently no less ‘unnatural’ than *amour-propre*, namely “humanity and virtue.” These three questions contain a fourth, one that I am by now persuaded is the most interesting of all for students of Rousseau: Why did this revolutionary modern thinker, who summarily rejected the “natural law” and “natural right” theories still prevalent in his own day, adopt as his criterion of individual and collective well-being “that which is in accordance with nature”? But our first three questions alone are handful; the fourth is for another day.

## II

In Book IV of *Emile*, his modern *paideia*, Rousseau, who like Plato has been urging non-repressive principles and practices of child-rearing, maintains that our “natural” passions cannot be extirpated and should not even be inhibited or altered. A qualification, however, is immediately forthcoming:

But would it be reasoning well to conclude, from the fact that it is man’s nature to have passions, that all the passions we feel in ourselves and see in others are natural? Their source is natural, it is true. But countless alien streams have swollen it. It is a great river which constantly grows and in which one could hardly find a few drops of its first waters. Our natural passions are very limited. They are the instruments of our freedom; they tend to preserve us. All those which subject us and destroy us come from elsewhere. (212)

The argument continues, but we should linger for a moment over the last sentence. There are passions and passions, it seems. Only those which are

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not *per se* “natural” tend to be self-enslaving and self-destructive. “Natural” passions, since they help preserve and, as we shall see presently, even complete our natures, may be said to be self-liberating. This distinction is hardly a commonplace in the Christian West.

*Affections* are specifically different from *passions*. The former are related merely to feeling; the latter belong to the faculty of desire and are inclinations which render difficult or impossible all determination of the will by principles. The former are stormy and unpremeditated, the latter are steady and deliberate; thus indignation in the form of wrath is an affection, but in the form of hatred (revenge) (it) is a passion. ... while in an affection the freedom of the mind is *hindered*, in a passion it is *abolished*.

That is Immanuel Kant speaking, in the *Critique of Judgment* (29, tr. J.H. Bernard, Hafner, p. 112f). Rousseau, as we shall see, will basically have none of this — principally because of the mind-body dualism it presupposes and reinforces. He proceeds:

The source of our passions, the origin and principle of all the others, the only one born with man and which never leaves him so long as he lives, is self-love (*l'amour de soi*) — a primitive, innate passion, which is anterior to every other, and of which all others are in a sense only modifications. In this sense, if you wish, all passions are natural. But most of these modifications have alien causes... They alter the primary goal (self-preservation) and are at odds with their (own) principle. It is then that man finds himself outside of nature and sets himself in contradiction with himself. (212-213)

It is still less than clear what Rousseau understands by “nature.” But it is obviously his criterion for distinguishing between what fosters and what thwarts our development as human beings. As for what it means to be in contradiction with oneself, this will become clearer when we examine more closely the forthcoming *amour-propre* passage with which we began.

Rousseau continues:

The love of oneself (*l'amour de soi-même*) is always good and always in conformity with order. Since each man is specifically entrusted with his own preservation, the first and most important of his cares is and ought to be to watch over it constantly. And how could he watch over it if he did not take the greatest interest in it? (213)

What strikes me as impressive about this passage is how naturally (in yet another sense of this ubiquitous term) it accounts for the primacy of a first-personal *concern* in each of us, how it makes this primacy seem inevitable and even desirable — without implying or entailing in the least that this concern dooms us to first-personal *bias*. We begin to see why Kant's careful distinction would have seemed to Rousseau singularly unhelpful. One's natural love of oneself is in the first instance an instinct, not an affection. Yet it has from the first the steadiness and constancy Kant attributed to passion rather than affection. And there is nothing about it at any point that would of itself cause it to hinder, not to speak of abolish, "the freedom of the mind" — whenever such a faculty or capacity should begin to emerge.

Nevertheless, a passage closely following makes one wonder all over again whether Rousseau might not have warded off confusion had he saved the term 'passion' for developments posterior to the "state of nature."

... What fosters the well-being of an individual attracts him; what harms him repels him. This is merely a blind instinct. What transforms this instinct into sentiment — attachment into love, aversion into hate — is the intention manifested to harm us or to be useful to us. One is never passionate about insensible beings which merely follow the impulsion given to them. But those from whom one expects good or ill by their inner disposition, by their will — those we see acting freely for us or against us — inspire in us sentiments similar to those they manifest toward us. We seek what serves us, but we love what wants to serve us. We flee what harms us, but we hate what wants to harm us. (213)

Stopping just short of what was later to become Freud's conviction that the experiences of early childhood are decisive for the possibilities of maturation in adulthood, Rousseau now carries on his argument in the context of child psychology.

A child is therefore naturally inclined to benevolence, because he sees that everything approaching him is inclined to assist him; and from this observation he gets the habit of a sentiment favorable to his species. (213)

This "habit," when it is nurtured with some consistency by those who people the child's environment, sustains his "innocence" in this word's etymological sense: the non-noxious character of his spontaneous feelings toward them.<sup>2</sup> And here at last we find the outlines of an answer to the first of our questions. The natural instinct 'self-preservation' and/or the natural senti-

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ment 'love of oneself' come quite naturally to encompass those of our fellows who further our primary concern, and do so in two forms: we become attached to them in our weakness, and we become actively fond of them once we comprehend that they mean well by us. The suffering they alleviate in us out of pity and compassion quite naturally leads us to feel pity and show compassion when they suffer. What under favorable conditions ripens into benevolence is thus not only consistent with love of self but is a natural extension of it. One can even go so far as to identify innocence in Rousseau's "classical" sense of the term with being morally well-habituated.

### III

Unfortunately, the converse is no less true: most of our corruption is the result of being morally ill-habituated.

But as he (the child) extends his relations, his needs, and his active or passive dependencies, the sentiment of his connections (*rappports*) with others is awakened and produces the sentiment of duties and preferences. Then the child becomes imperious, jealous, deceitful, and vindictive. If he is bent to obedience ((for Rousseau this is an unnatural way of rearing children)), he does not see the utility of what he is ordered (to do), and he attributes it to caprice, to the intention of tormenting him; and he revolts. If he is obeyed ((for Rousseau this is an equally unnatural way of raising children — namely to incubate in them, and then cater to, childish whims)), as soon as something resists him, he sees it as a rebellion, an intention to resist him. (Before long) he beats the chair or the table for having disobeyed him. (213)

Why is such behavior irrational and, in the most important of the several senses in which Rousseau uses the term 'nature,' unnatural? Because it is in principle self-destructive, and self-destructiveness is not the operative principle of any natural world or natural order with which Rousseau is familiar. It was this same fundamental conviction that had already led Rousseau to adopt as his inscription for the *Second Discourse* a suggestively circular sentence from Aristotle's *Politics* (I, 1): "We should consider what is natural not in things which are corrupt but in those which are well ordered in accordance with nature."

But we have now finished examining the textual foreground of our initial

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quotation from Rousseau. The very next words are already familiar to us.

Self-love (*l'amour de soi*), which regards only ourselves is contented when our true needs are satisfied. But *amour-propre*, which makes comparisons, is never content and never could be, because this sentiment, preferring ourselves to others, also demands others to prefer us to themselves, which is impossible. (213-214)

On the face of it, 'impossible' seems rather misleading here, since what Rousseau is describing is something we egoists do all the time. 'Self-contradictory' would seem to be more like it. *Amour-propre* is the height of self-preoccupation engendered by the most aggravating sense of self-loss. I act as though solipsism were the truth of my being even as all that matters to me is what others think of me. Supremely vain (by etymology *vanus*: empty), the fulfillment I seek from others is their emptying themselves by becoming supremely preoccupied with the emptiness that is me. On second thought, Rousseau is right after all: *amour-propre* is in an impossible situation; they live an impossibility. For their vanity, as he puts it most succinctly later in *Emile*, "demands everything and grants nothing." (V, 430)

Indeed, a society of *amour-propre* lives a *retrograde* existential impossibility. For the more that *amour-propre* asks of others what it as such cannot give — namely concern for existence other than one's own, which is the capacity of a self as distinguished from a mere ego — the more it will be dealt with in kind. The more one demands the less one gets: in such a society, this is as true for all as it is for one. If anything is misleading here, it is the term *amour-propre* itself. For what Rousseau has been analyzing ever since the *Second Discourse* (the individual infected with *amour-propre* lives "always outside of himself [and] only in the opinion of others" (II, 179) is really *amour-impropre* or *amour-exproprié*.<sup>3</sup> We have now aswered in our second question. *Amour-propre* is unnatural, and the kind of society that entrenches it is corrupt and degenerate, because what they constitute is the antithesis of good order: an ever-widening spiral of self-contradictory and self-destructive feelings, attitudes, and activities which comes eventually to *seem* natural and to be taken for granted only because so few are able to escape its vortex.



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### IV

There are those who might be tempted to suppose that this personal and social hell animated by *amour-propre* is the product of a modern-day Dante's overwrought, projective, paranoid imagination — that if Rousseau had had a competent psychoanalyst, his demon would have been exorcised, or at least unmasked as a figment. This is a temptation we might do well to resist. Rousseau gave the inmate of his inferno a name. He called him *le bourgeois* — and this time he did make it stick. Convinced that his Enlightenment predecessors and contemporaries had effectively completed the task of undermining the principles of the *ancien régime*, Rousseau devoted his critical energies to the question of who and what might come to replace it. The new bourgeois for whom Hobbes had proposed an all-powerful state was driven by fear of violence and death to seek his personal security at any price. As a freshly enfranchised property owner, this individual was heedless of Locke's feeble and abortive attempts to distinguish between what it means to appropriate (i.e. to make truly one's own) and what it is to expropriate (i.e. to arrogate what in the end one cannot make one's own). Petty, pretentious, slavish in the face of public opinion yet deaf to the legitimate claims of a common or public good, this bourgeois played the role of free and proud *citoyen* projected for him by the French *philosophes* only as a hypocrite and an impostor. Rousseau, whose commitment to the cause of human emancipation was second to none, set himself the task of conjuring up the image of a new human being who would not trash that cause.

The remainder of the passage in *Emile* that distinguishes *amour de soi* from *amour-propre* outlines what Rousseau thought needed to be done:

This is how the gentle and affectionate passions are born of self-love, and how the hateful and irascible passions are born of *amour-propre*. Thus what makes man naturally good is to have few needs and to compare himself little with others; what makes him essentially wicked is to have many needs and to depend very much on opinion. On the basis of this principle it is easy to see how the passions of children and men can be directed to good or bad. It is true that since they are not able always to live alone, it will be difficult for them always to be good. This same difficulty will necessarily increase with their relations; and this, above all, is why the dangers of society make art and care all the more indispensable for us (if we are) to forestall in the human heart the depravity born of their new needs. (214)

It is in *Emile* that Rousseau elaborates the principles and practices he believes can educate an uncorrupted child and prepare him for responsible

citizenhood. Here a very brief recapitulation should suffice. Beginning with Emile as an infant, Rousseau the governor responds with alacrity to his ward's real, physical needs, while pretending not to hear his capricious cries for attention: Emile must learn to trust but not to manipulate his elders. Raising him in bucolic surroundings, his discreetly watchful tutor encourages his young charge to follow his natural inclinations, to accept natural necessity, and to learn self-reliance through tempering his native curiosity with the rudiments of natural science. There is little idle time for indulging in the bogeys of an overwrought imagination, especially those that induce a terror of death and dying. And instead of being made to recite catechisms and memorize abstract moral preachments, he becomes accustomed to stand up for himself and to respect others by way of real-life situations that call for both. As a young adolescent, Emile is self-contained, happy, and whole. Spontaneously truthful, modest in his needs, and relatively carefree, he cherishes his independence and envies no one else's lot, not even the lot of those presented to him as heroes. And yet, having come to realize that he himself is by no means invulnerable to the suffering he sees all around him, he has also come naturally to be caring and kind.

Emile's wholeness, however, is short-lived. When his sexual passions awaken, his tutor (who has by now become his friend) faces a supreme challenge. He must somehow check their urgency by sublimating them without repressing them. Rousseau has not forgotten his own pedagogical principles:

One can hold on to the passions only by means of the passions. It is by their empire that their tyranny must be combated; and it is always from nature itself that the proper instruments to regulate nature must be drawn. (IV, 327)<sup>4</sup>

Having trained himself never to overlook a natural resource, Rousseau avails himself of the tendency in young lovers to romanticize the objects of their affection. He simultaneously stays and intensifies Emile's passion by inflaming his imagination with a poeticized ideal of womanhood — and by appealing to his pride (the kind of *amour-propre* of which even Emile is not free now) in refusing to settle for anything less. This sublimative distraction works so well that when Emile finally encounters an approximation to his ideal in the flesh and proceeds to court her, his mentor is able to lure him away from attempts at hasty consummation by convincing him that he is not yet worthy of or ready for such an ideal mate. And by the time he is, he is also ready for the responsibilities of citizenship. For by learning to suspend the immediate gratification of his appetites in favor of more abiding satisfactions, Emile has culti-

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vated in himself precisely the sort of general will that envisions and pursues the common good.

This, in skeletal form, is Rousseau's answer to our third question, namely how love of self as a natural sentiment might possibly survive and even triumph over the evils of socialization and, guided by reason and affected by compassion, issue in something like civic virtue. But a bit more needs to be said here. In one description of Sophie, Emile's betrothed, it is Rousseau himself who seems to be suggesting, as I did at the beginning of this essay, that *amour-propre* is ambiguous in nature, capable of running a gamut from unbrilled vanity at one extreme to fully justified self-esteem at the other.

(Sophie) is imperious and exacting. She would rather not be loved than be loved moderately. She has the noble pride based on merit which is conscious of itself, and wants to be honored as it honors itself. She would disdain a heart which did not feel the value of her heart, which did not love her for her virtues as much as, or more than, for her charms, and which did not prefer its own duty to her and her to everything else. She did not want a lover who knew no law other than hers. She wants to reign over a man whom she has not disfigured. It is thus that Circe, having debased Ulysses' companions, disclaims them and gives herself only to him whom she is unable to change.

(*Emile*, Book V, p. 439)

This passage, perhaps more than any other in Rousseau's writings, reads as though there can be after all an *amour-propre* recultivated into an *amour de soi-même*. And indeed what Rousseau professes to find in Sophie's character, which he did not help form, is what he insists will be found in that of his ward Emile's as well — at least once he is ready for her. This should come as no surprise. For if, under favorable pedagogical conditions, it is possible to redirect and refashion a budding social vice into a humane virtue, then Rousseau has discovered good ground for not capitulating, as most of the British empiricists and political economists so reluctantly felt compelled to do, to the psychology of the bourgeois ego with its *amour-propric* bent.

The main point here could be restated in terms of another distinction. *Amour-propre* is not Hobbesian "egoism," which could in principle focus on my real vs. delusory interests and could, in a more favorable social environment, grow into compassion and a well-ordered *amour de soi*. From where Rousseau looks, Hobbes at once confounded this "egoism" with the worst kind of *amour-propre* and compounded the two so as to vindicate the need for a single and total Sovereign. And Rousseau's critique of Hobbes — namely that the logic supporting the repressive Leviathan is predicated on this compounding and confounding of valid self-interest ("the natural state") with

vanity, violence, greed, and unconcern with the common weal<sup>5</sup> (the Four Horsemen of civil society) — carries similar force against Locke and Adam Smith. They, the vanguard of the liberal opposition to Hobbes, tried to justify a viable bourgeois free market based on enlightened self-interest — as if this principle had not already degenerated beyond retrieval in precisely such a market society, a travesty of freedom in all but its most trivial form.

A word, finally, about narcissism, currently much in vogue as a sociological shibboleth rather than as a psychiatric category. It seems to me that in its present-day manifestations narcissism is typically neither *amour de soi* nor *amour-propre* — fashionable but one-sided and shallow invocations to the ancient myth of Narcissus to the contrary notwithstanding. For its part, the legend is richly ambiguous, so much so that in versions stressing the fair youth's fascination with the depth, beauty, and strangeness of the human image as such. Narcissus may be said to be unwittingly but authentically engaged in an act of *amour de soi*;<sup>6</sup> while in versions where the accent is on Narcissus' primal discovery and eventual obsession with self, he is no doubt nearer to *amour-propre*, although even then the vanity is of an intensely personal and private rather than social nature. For our part, if narcissism is nowadays more widespread than it used to be, this could be prompted by a not altogether unhealthy satiety in response to decades of unrelenting social pressure on the individual to care passionately about an ever widening range of global, even galactic problems and perplexities which at the same time he is deemed ever more incapable of comprehending and addressing effectually. "Narcissism" as a defensive reaction to such a societally reinforced double bind might well be, in Rousseauian terms, a newly emergent form of *amour de soi-même*, or at least of *amour-propre à la Sophie*.

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#### Notes

1. J.G.A. Pocock, in *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, 1975, pp. 465f), argues that Mandeville had previously made much the same distinction, in different words.
2. It is interesting to note that the ancient Greek term for innocence, *euêtheia*, is compounded from the words for 'good' and 'habits.' Rousseau may well have been influenced in his own use of the term 'innocence' by the way in which Plato used in the *Republic* (Book III, 409a and *passim*) to designate habituation in goodness and even virtue rather than naïveté or lack of experience.
3. As I read it, Hegel's much-anthologized portrayal of a "life-and-death" struggle for mutual recognition in Chapter IV, A of the *Phenomenology* adopts, adapts, and seeks to resolve both from an individual and a social perspective the existential impasse of *amour-propre* as Rousseau had conceived it.
4. In retrospect, Rousseau had good reason to use the term 'passion' plurisignatively. Indeed, as he argues later on (V, 445), virtue itself can become one's ruling passion.

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5. Rousseau develops this critique of Hobbes most incisively in the *Second Discourse*, Part Two.
6. Ortega y Gasset, in *Man and People*, W.W. Norton, 1957, p. 126, promotes this version — too exclusively, in my opinion.

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