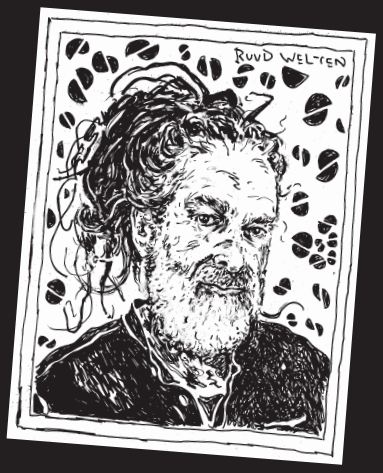
Into the Magic Circle



Why Rousseau's Émile isn't playing

Ruud Welten
ORCID 0000-0002-8069-1782

Abstract

It goes without saying that Children play. Play is the core subject of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. But why does children's play have no room in the first important philosophical text about the child in our culture, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile ou de l'éducation*? Rousseau's *Émile* is in many ways the blueprint for our modernity. Human beings are no longer reduced to a philosophical concept or derived from an idea of God; they are seen as beings who are born and grow. The child carries within it the promise of spontaneous naturalness, and education must aim to guide the child in this, rather than "raising" it too quickly. The absence of play in Rousseau will be examined on the basis of the difference between nature and culture. I do so by referring to recent contrasting Rousseau-interpretations: that of Jacques Derrida and of Paul Audi, the latter working in the line of Michel Henry's philosophy of life.

Keywords.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jacques Derrida, Play, Johan Huizinga

Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*

Johan Huizinga famously presents humans as playful beings rather than rational ones but points out in *Homo Ludens* that this play can be corrupted by seriousness and competition. Although it is difficult to disagree with this idea, we must not fail to examine whether Huizinga does not assume to soon that it is in human nature to play. My intention here is not to undermine Huizinga's idea, but rather to question whether it is as self-evident as it seems. I will do so by confronting his thought with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea of nature and naturalness. At least two questions need to be answered, namely: what is *nature* and what is *play*? If we play 'by nature', how should we understand 'play'? Isn't play rather something that deviates from what nature provides, namely imitation and variation, while 'nature' provides a more or less fixed development that partly eludes us and determines us? Because if that is not the case, what does 'naturally' still mean? In various places in his study, Huizinga distinguishes between

playing naturally, as 'children and animals' do, and play as culture. Play is culture-creating, according to Huizinga. But if it is culture-creating, does play not simultaneously precede culture, which is understood as play? Is there a form of play that is not culture but can still be understood in the realm of nature? I quote Huizinga:

> In tackling the problem of play as a function of culture proper and not as it appears in the life of the animal or the child, we begin where biology and psychology leave off. In culture we find play as a given magnitude existing before culture itself existed, accompanying it and pervading it from the earliest beginnings right up to the phase of civilization we are now living in. We find play present everywhere as well-defined quality of action which is different from "ordinary" life. [...] Play as a special form of activity, as a "significant form", as a social function—that is our subject. We shall not look for the natural impulses and habits conditioning play in general, but shall consider play in its manifold concrete forms as itself a social construction.[1]

So there are natural instincts 'that determine play in general' and which Huizinga must assume in order to develop his thesis. He thinks of children and animals in this regard. Of course, there is such a thing as a culture of children's games, from hooping to games, but Huizinga refers to the 'natural impulse' to play. Because these are natural impulses, there is no question of freedom. It is striking that Huizinga also mentions children and animals together in other places in his study, only to then disregard their play as cultural play. According to Huizinga:

> First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it. By this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off from the course of the natural process. It is something added thereto and spread out over it like a flowering, an ornament, a garment. Obviously, freedom must be understood here in the wider sense that leaves untouched the philosophical problem of determinism. It may be objected that this freedom does not exist for the animal and the child; they must play because their instinct drives them to it and because it serves to develop their bodily faculties and their powers of selection. The term "instinct", however, introduces an unknown quantity, and to presuppose the utility of play from the start is to be guilty of a *petitio principii*. Child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom. [2]

Here we see Huizinga wrestling with the term instinct. Freedom lies, according to Huizinga, in the fact that they enjoy playing. So, is freedom is enjoying and not understood as freedom from determination? If play is not an initiative of the child, but is instinctive and experienced with pleasure, why is that not 'nature'? Finally, Huizinga:

> Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for humans to teach them their playing.[3]

1 Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture* (Roy Publishers, 1950), p. 4.
2 Huizinga, p. 7-8.
3 Huizinga, p. 1.

My attention is thus drawn to the relationship between 'play' or 'playing' on the one hand and nature on the other. As soon as we start to define the terms 'play' and 'natural', we cannot escape the distance between them. The difference between nature and culture is, no matter how you look at it, an opposition that dominates Western thinking, with not only scientific-methodological but also moral consequences. Nature is good, whereas culture always runs the risk of corruption. Let there be no doubt that this is not just a modern idea, but a basic idea of modernity. In this image of modernity, it is not that humanity makes progress thanks to culture, but that humanity takes a critical stance towards this progress. Culture is then immediately associated with anti-culture. Nature is then portrayed as an uncorrupted state of being.

Rousseau's *Émile*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was undoubtedly the thinker who thought this critical stance through to its logical conclusion and to whom, whether we like it or not, and with all the paradoxes that entails, we owe this opposition in its modern form. Rousseau's tragic and modern approach to nature consists of thinking of nature as originally given, while thinking about nature takes shape by contrasting it almost obsessively with culture.[4] Nature is that which culture is not; it is defined *in terms of* the unnatural. It appears only as that which has been lost. In modernity, we always find ourselves alienated from nature. The task of thinking is to understand ourselves from the perspective of nature.

The first step towards this is not very difficult: our own birth is by no means conscious or desired or controlled by us. It happens 'naturally'. Childbirth throws us, to put it vividly, into the world, which will then demand that we civilise ourselves. Once civilised, it is too late to be 'natural'. We have lost our naturalness, and it is part of the modernist civilising process to relate to the natural, the past. We start as children, and this childhood is primarily 'natural'. The problem arises is what education should consist of. After all, education implies that the child is cultivated, that it no longer remains in an animalistic, infantile condition. Do we make the child unnatural or do we allow the child to retain as much of its naturalness as possible? This is Rousseau's original premise in *Émile ou de l'éducation* (1762).[5] Rousseau is the history of Western philosophy understands the human subject from its development as a small child. He is often regarded as the father of pedagogy, but it is important to see how revolutionary Rousseau's position is from a *philosophical* point of view, even in the light of many philosophies that came after him. To this day, there are countless philosophers who apparently regard the age of man as an accident of the human subject. How old is Heidegger's 'Dasein' or Kant's 'I that accompanies all our representations'? Does the Cartesian 'ego' experience puberty? And so on. It is a persistent misunderstanding that Rousseau was a thinker of 'back to nature'. Nowhere does he write this, and it is contrary to what he claims. The state of nature plays a crucial role in his work, but always functions as a thought experiment, not as a reality that we should realize. In fact, such a goal – returning man to a state of nature – would be disastrous. Rather than a 'return to', he is concerned with 'faithfulness' to what nature provides. Seen in this light, the child is 'closer' to nature. It is the noble savage that we ourselves once were and for whom we bear a non-colonialist responsibility.

4 Cf. Staborinski, 'Rousseau et Buffon', in *J.-J. Rousseau. La transparance et L'obstacle*, (Gallimard, 1971), p. 380-391.
5 Rousseau, J-J. *Oeuvres complètes* (OC). (Gallimard -'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade' - OC IV - 1969) *Émile, or On Education.*

Man as primarily situated in a stage of life is the common thread running through Rousseau's work, from *Émile* to the elderly man in *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1776-1778).[6] Moreover, it is not difficult to view *Les confessions* as the development of a concrete human being.[7] Rousseau's problem with education boils down to the fact that education should not serve the purpose of teaching things, but rather his education is aimed at allowing the child to retain its naturalness in its development.

Now, in *Émile ou de l'éducation,* we see a child who hardly plays. The *homo naturalis* appears to be anything but a *homo ludens*. Isn't that remarkable, and isn't it even more remarkable that Rousseau's almost unfathomable perception hardly mentions this remarkable observation over the years? Certainly, for Rousseau, the loss of the natural is always central, but that is not opposed to play. On the contrary, as soon as man starts to play, he runs the risk of turning away from his nature. Why should this proposition not be as self-evident as Huizinga's?

It is remarkable that the word 'game' (*jeu*, verb *jouer*) does not appear in *Émile*, at least not in the way we would expect, namely as children's play. Now, the verb 'to play' (*jouer*) occurs often enough in Rousseau's work, but mostly in the context of acting on stage, and Rousseau is strongly opposed to acting and theatre. Playing is theatre, theatre is unnatural and therefore pernicious. Acting corrupts. Acting is not real; it distracts from the natural. In his open letter to d'Alembert, 'Lettre a d'Alembert sur les spectacles', Rousseau places himself in the tradition established by Augustine and the *Citivate Dei*: acting is reprehensible because it has the fundamental structure of a lie.[8] *Jouer* (as in 'Jouer des instruments') is an entry in Rousseau's *Dictionnaire de musique* where he notes that the word playing often does injustice to the activity of making music (one says, according to Rousseau, 'Jouer de la trompette', 'donner du cor', 'toucher le clavecin', etc.) and thus quickly becomes pedantic.[9] Rousseau usually uses 'jouer' pejoratively. In a scene from *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, playing appears to be an abject activity of drunks in a pub.[10]

My situation here as a reader of Rousseau is therefore paradoxical: I want to discuss children's play in Rousseau, a theme that we might expect to find in *Émile* — to such an extent, in fact, that I come across all kinds of claims on popular sources on the internet about the importance of play in Rousseau's *Émile*, claims that are not based on anything Rousseau writes — but I am left empty-handed. I am talking about something that Rousseau does not mention: children's play. I can therefore argue that the claim that children's play was important to Rousseau is pure speculation, but I can do little more than try to explain from Rousseau's thinking why he does not mention children's play.

Why is there no role for children's play in the first philosopher who thought about children? Rousseau is said to have played little as a child; he had to stay indoors and immerse himself in books. Perhaps the distance between us and the 18th century in general is playing tricks on us here. Let us not forget that in the eighteenth century, play (as 'games and entertainment') was reserved for the nobility. And for Rousseau, the nobility represented everything that was unnatural. And let us not forget that, however soft Rousseau may seem to us today, *Émile* in particular was unambiguously interpreted as a direct attack on the nobility and thus on the prevailing power structure. It is indeed a politically charged book, as

6 Rousseau OC I – 1959. *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire.*
7 Rousseau OC I - 1959 *Les Confessions.*
8 Rousseau OC V – 1995.
9 Rousseau OC V – 1995. P. 871
10 Rousseau OC II - Lettre X à milord Edouard.

evidenced by its condemnation in 1762 by the Sorbonne and by the Archbishop of Paris, De Beaumont, followed by an arrest warrant and book burnings in various places in Europe.

Playing as *amour-propre*

But it would be too easy to explain the absence of the playing child by Rousseau's biography or historical context. How can we understand it philosophically rather than biographically or historically? It seems obvious to place play within Rousseauian thought on the side of *amour-propre* rather than *amour-de-soi*. This famous dichotomy, which we encounter throughout Rousseau's entire oeuvre, runs parallel to that of culture and nature: *amour-de-soi* is the healthy care for the self that is given by nature, which is individual and which is corrupted in society by measuring oneself against others, by the shaping of competition, pride in achievement, in short, all kinds of things that we can easily recognise today in games and sport. It leads to *amour-propre*, which is vain and haughty, envious and alienated from the self. Playing often occurs in Rousseau's texts (e.g. in correspondence) as the deceitful and unnatural pretence with which people work their way up in society, a game that the 18th-century man in particular had to learn to master (and which is the favourite theme of mockery in 19th-century French literature, as in Stendhal and Balzac). Play is associated with ambition, greed, pride and dependence on others. Seen in this light, play is a representative of *amour-propre*.

Rousseau's thinking, or rather his writing, revolves around the concept of nature. Nature is the 'compass', 'speaks through the heart', 'is the feeling', etc.; it indicates the direction of what is good (Rousseau's thinking is primarily ethical, but not a rational ethics that weighs and considers, that appeals to reason, etc., but rather omits all of this). We must live according to nature; we must listen to what nature tells us. It is maternal thinking, not paternal thinking. For Rousseau, ethics is not based on the voice of the father, but on the voiceless pre-Oedipal naturalness. The father is the one who can only maintain real contact with the child through language, that is, civilization. Ethics in Western philosophy is often paternal, in the sense that it is discursive, proceeding through language (argumentation and judgement). For Rousseau, this is a lost cause, and morality can only be given by a natural impulse that is not corrupted by language, reasoning (which very quickly becomes pedantic and is dominated by self-love - *amour-propre*). Rousseau's morality, on the other hand, is maternal, i.e., from within, womb-like or mother nature.

Is this all something that is only of historical or academic interest? Certainly not: this is the contemporary discourse, ours: 'do what your heart tells you', 'stay true to yourself', follow your 'inner voice ', etc. You hear and read Rousseau everywhere!

But if nature refers to a lost state of being, then the question remains as to what exactly that nature or maternal self is. After all, we are trying to understand the relationship between nature and play. Well, if we want to know nature as nature, we must not study it or turn it into a metaphysical concept, but *feel it* (*sentir*). Feeling, according to Rousseau, precedes thinking and analysing. It is the heart (*le coeur*) that speaks: 'Je sens mon coeur et je connais les hommes. - I feel my heart and I know men.'[11] The 'je' (I) form is characteristic of many of Rousseau's works. In the *Confessions*, Rousseau recounts his childhood: 'Je

11 Rousseau OC I, P. 5.

n'avais rien conçu, j'avais tout senti. - I had not conceived anything, I had felt everything.'[12] The child does not think, read, judge, etc., but *feels*. We begin to suspect why the child will lose this natural gift in its play: it imitates older people, is no longer itself, or wants to win over others.

Culture and nature

Playing is unnatural insofar as nature is understood as an order that determines movement and growth. In *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* Rousseau states that nature has its own laws that are not merely the laws of man.[13] Nature is an order that science can uncover by revealing the laws of nature. But for Rousseau, unlike Kant later, these laws belong to nature and not to human knowledge about that nature. For Rousseau, it is all about letting nature speak, not reducing it to an object of study and then no longer being able to hear its voice. Biology is not a natural but a cultural phenomenon with which we study nature. Nature is then no longer natural, but is forced to reveal its secrets – the laws of nature. It is interesting to see how nineteenth-century Romanticism, so strongly influenced by Rousseau, can be understood as a movement against the mathematisation and scientification of nature. The Romantics want to regain the mysterious and unknowable nature of nature, not through science, but through art and literature, that is, by feeling.

In the seventh walk of *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire,* Rousseau expresses his contempt for this reduction of nature. Rousseau's botany is not aimed at stuying nature, but at letting it speak for itself. 'La botanique est l'étude d'un oisif et paresseau solitaire' - 'Botany is the study for an idle and lazy student', not for a competitive scientist, because if there is competition and vanity anywhere, it is in science.[14] So this is also about the attitude of the scientist versus that of, let's call them, the nature lover. A nature lover knows nothing about nature, but knows how to linger in nature. If we follow Rousseau's ideal type, it is someone who lives life feeling rather than knowing.

Another way of understanding the difference between culture and nature emerges here. Culture (science) superimposes a network of laws and formulas on nature and is not immediately in or with it. The naturalness of nature is thus set aside, and nature now appears as an object of research, and research is culture.

Derrida: play, presence and absence

So, if my interpretation is correct, there is no natural play for Rousseau because play presupposes culture. But let us look at the matter from the opposite perspective to reposition play. What if we abandon any attempt to define nature on the one hand and culture on the other, and instead refer to the interplay between these positions as *play*? This, at least, is what Jacques Derrida does in his text 'Structure, Sign and Play'.[15] The idea of nature, according to Derrida, always presupposes a direct presence. Play, on the other

12 Rousseau OC I, P. 8.
13 Rousseau OC III, P. 125.
14 Rousseau OC I, P. 106
15 Derrida, 'La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines', in : *L'écriture et la différance*, (Seuil, 1967).

hand, is understood as a disruption of this presence. Disruption, because nature is no longer directly present, but is represented by code, language, formula, etc. It is crucial that Derrida uses a structuralist idea of language: it is not based on a correspondence with a reality on which language is based, but on the necessary differences between the signs. The differences between signs (think, at the most basic level, of the differences between letters: a letter functions because it is different from other letters) can be seen as play. Simply put, language functions as play, not as a direct representation of reality. Speaking is playing. We speak *about* reality, which already implies that reality is not directly present. It is not surprising that Rousseau's writings on the voice of nature, the language of nature, etc. are constantly deconstructed by Derrida. Derrida's study *De la grammatologie* is one of the most original studies of Rousseau's work.[16] Presence is not first present or real and then represented, but is the result of the game itself:

> Play is always a play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the altenative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around.[17]

A brief reference to Freud, who is never far from Derrida's thinking, may clarify this. I am referring to the famous passage from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he describes the self-invented game, 'one of the earliest normal activities' of a little boy he observes at the age of eighteen months.[18] The little boy, who can barely speak, has a habit of throwing all kinds of objects away from him while exclaiming a long *o-o-o-o*. The sound stands for the German *fort* (away). Gradually, Freud sees how the game expands. The little boy throws a spool attached to a string away from him and pulls it back towards him, welcoming it with a joyful *da*. What is happening here, according to Freud? The little boy, who, like every small child, will have to learn that his mother cannot always stay with him but sometimes has to leave, stages the departure and return with his *fort-da* game, as if he now has control over it himself. He turns the otherwise unbearable situation into a game, which brings with it the reassuring experience of control, as if the child is now in charge of the mother's absence or presence. What initially causes distress is now repeated by the child in order to learn to deal with it in a playful way. Derrida's idea of presence resonates with this game, which plays with presence and absence. If we continue this line of thought, it becomes possible to understand children's play not so much as an imitation of the adult world, but as a way of dealing with traumatic loss. This traumatic loss should not be understood here as the cause of a particular mental illness, but as fundamental to the development of every healthy human subject. We use the word trauma in its literal sense, namely as a wound, a hole, that which is no longer there and is missing. Play is essentially a game of absence and presence.

True, this view of play in the Freud-Derrida tradition, and this 'trauma' is certainly also present in Rousseau's thinking: civilised man has lost his nature. We could conclude from that man, like Freud's little boy playing *fort-da*, will therefore start playing. Yet that is not what Rousseau's Émile does. Rousseau follows a different pattern. He assumes that nature is buried (alienated) in culture, but that the child initially carries nature with it. The child is the model of a natural human being. It does not speak but cries; it does not read but feels. It is still nature. Incidentally, this also shows how often we think in a Rousseauian way today: the child is 'natural', 'honest', 'innocent', 'spontaneous', etc., all qualities that

16 Jacques Derrida*, De la grammatologie,* (Minuit, 1967).
17 Translation by Alan Bass, Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play', in *Writing and Difference,* (University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 292.
18 Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920). *Sigmund Freud Studienausgabe* Band III, Frankfurt an Main: Fischer 2000. p. 224-227.

adults in their culture have great difficulty regaining. Moreover, these are qualities that represent the Good. The Good is thus given by nature; it is natural; human beings are good by nature. Civilisation means a fall. Nature is therefore presence, and while it may be true that civilised man lives in its absence, the child carries the promise of this presence within itself, and adults must cherish this. Derrida rejects such a view as 'metaphysics of presence', of which Rousseau is an important representative. Metaphysics here stands for the dream of a full presence on which truth is based. All philosophy needs to do is describe this presence, but for Derrida this presence is illusory. A fundamental structure of such presence metaphysics is any form of nostalgic thinking, or of alienation.

Nature as self-affection

Does this interpretation by Derrida, which is mainly elaborated in *De la grammatologie*, do justice to Rousseau? Another interpretation is conceivable. Above, I already wrote how, for Rousseau, feeling always precedes thinking. Let us return to the French text. Rousseau uses *sentir* implicitly and often explicitly in a reciprocal sense: 'se sentir'. I feel myself. Or: feeling feels itself. If that is correct, then we enter a philosophical domain that I would like to dwell on for a moment, namely that of self-affection. I think it is right to characterize Rousseau's thinking as a thinking of self-affection. Derrida also does this in *De la grammatologie,* only to then dismiss this self-affection as speculation.[19] For him, this self-affection is a philosophical mode of the illusory presence discussed above.

An alternative to this Derridian interpretation is possible based on a philosophy of self-affection, as we know it from the work of the French phenomenologist Michel Henry. For Henry, self-affection is synonymous with life. Life is not something that characterizes living things (the biological conception of what life is, in which it is reduced to living objects), but is nothing other than an immediate presence to oneself. Life is nothing other than the immediate self-experience that reveals itself in every step we take. Life reveals itself incessantly to itself; it is a 'se sentir soi-même' La vie se sent, s'éprouve elle-même.'[20] Paul Audi, following in the footsteps of his teacher Henry, has described Rousseau as the thinker of self-affection par excellence.[21] According to him, nature is nothing other than what Henry calls *life*. Seen in this light, nature is not an object and cannot be reduced to objects (as we have seen above a Rousseauian science of nature is not possible), but nothing other than self-affection.

The aforementioned primacy of *sentir* (above thinking, which is always reflection, and therefore at a distance from it) must (according to Audi) be understood as self-affection, which we recognise in the aforementioned Rousseauian idea of *amour-de-soi*. There is much to be said in favour of this interpretation of nature as self-affection. Nature is not something that is thematised or represented, but nothing other than 'Le sentiment de l'existence', 'the feeling of existing'. A quote:

> Le sentiment de l'existence dépouillé de toute autre affection est par lui-même un sentiment précieux de contentement et de paix, qui suffiroit seul pour rendre cette existence chere, et douce à qui sauroit écarter de soi toutes les impressions sensuelles & terrestres qui viennent

19 Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 214.
20 Michel Henry, *De la phénoménologie: Tome I. Phénoménologie de la vie* (PUF, 2003), p. 51.
21 Paul Audi, *Rousseau: une philosophie de l'âme*, (Verdier, 2008).

> sans cesse nous en distraire et en troubler ici-bas la douceur. - The feeling of existing, stripped of every other emotion, is in itself a precious feeling of satisfaction and peace, which alone would be enough to make this life dear and pleasant to anyone who can detach themselves from all the sensual and earthly impressions that constantly distract us and disturb its sweetness here on earth.[22]

Rousseau's thinking (and certainly that of the late, old Rousseau) tends towards passivity, tranquillity, idleness, and not towards activity and playfulness. Hence his aversion to philosophy: philosophers abandon what is natural and merely play with concepts.

Walking is not playing

Reflexive verbs (*verbes pronominaux*) are much more common in French than in English. In other words, the structure of the language itself gives much more cause for attention to self-affection than is visible or audible in English translations (of Rousseau). A crucial example is the role of walking in Rousseau. The title of his last unfinished work is *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*. In it, we encounter Rousseau walking. The French verb for walking is *promener* and is always used reflexively: 'Se promener'. One walks oneself. I use this here as an example of self-affection.

Is walking a play? No, for Rousseau, walking is exercise, but what is crucial is that it is aimless, without rules or structure. You may encounter something, or you may not; you linger in nature, where your thoughts wander in all directions. For Rousseau, walking can hardly be called an activity, let alone a sport; it is characterized by laziness. It lacks the obsessiveness of an organized march and, above all, for Rousseau it is something that is lonely. In *Émile,* Rousseau despises 'des hommes qui marchent trop pour aimer à se promener'-'men who walk too much to enjoy walking'.[23] Walking is musing (*rêver*, daydreaming); musing is walking. So it is not systematic philosophising.

It concerns a self that withdraws into itself, but not through thinking (in the sense of Reason, which Rousseau systematically distrusts) or meditation, but through walking. This walk is both physical and mental. Just as one 'walks oneself', so one has to know oneself. Philosophy is not 'self-knowledge', but 'knowing oneself', which, like *se promener*, is reciprocal: *se connoitre*). 'Self-knowledge', on the other hand, is a noun; it presupposes an object of knowledge, while 'knowing oneself' presupposes the subject of knowledge, which is also a verb. This 'knowing oneself' is not characterised by vanity (*amour propre*) but by being natural, whereby this word in Rousseau always stands for both the nature of the forests and greenery and the *sentiment de soi*. The 'mystical path' of the Church Fathers has given way in Rousseau to a walk, which moreover remains free of the pretentious imagery of travel that all too often serves *amour-propre* (having seen what others have not seen; travelling in order to have something to talk about, travelling as a pilgrimage, etc.). Travelling means going out into the world, whereas walking means coming to oneself, of which self-affection is the phenomenological pattern. Walking does not only bring Rousseau into nature, but to himself. The return to nature means above all a return to oneself, leaving others and culture behind. That is: leaving the game of the other behind. Just as we say that we 'come to

22 Rousseau, O.C. I, p. 1047.
23 Rousseau, O.C. IV, p. 416.

ourselves' when we go out into nature. It is therefore important to relate the two different meanings of the word 'nature' in Rousseau, that of nature as 'physical' and as the inevitability of the *sentiment de soi*. But at the same time, nature is indeed material for him: the metaphor of the uncut forest, which often occurs in Rousseau, indicates more than just an ideal image.[24] In nature, one is oneself, one is natural. For Rousseau, there is no essential difference between ego philosophy and eco philosophy. In nature, we are freed from the compulsion to measure ourselves against others. If the latter is the case, then what nature gives is immediately negated by culture. Walking is done in nature and it also brings us back to and into our nature. Rousseauian walking is aimless and can hardly be called an 'activity'. Being active is part of culture, where one must systematically reason instead of daydreaming and where one 'wants to impress others with vain ideas' in fancy salons.

It will be clear that I am making a very tentative attempt here to see walking as an alternative to the cult of play. To put it more philosophically: walking is recurrent in its structure, play is representative. Play represents something, walking represents nothing.

Preliminary conclusion

I have thus presented two interpretations:

1) In the first interpretation, that of Derrida, nature is absent, and nothing remains but play. Play circles around nature without ever reaching it. Self-affection is an illusion. No wonder we do not know nature; it only appears as an object, i.e. from the outside. It is reminiscent of Rousseau's aversion to studying and categorizing plants and trees, which he only wants to experience. In Les *Rêveries*, botany is anything but science, but a form of idleness, disinterestedness and laziness. (But for Rousseau, it is also characteristic of old age.)

2) We now understand why there is no place for play in the second interpretation by Henry/Audi. Play drifts away from nature. There is no place for the playing child in *Émile*. In *Émile,* education does not consist of teaching children to do what adults do (namely, to regard life as a game; one must play along with what is called society), but of allowing the child to be itself. We should not understand this popular formulation ('being yourself') psychologically (the jargon of self-help literature) but radically phenomenologically: the self reveals itself to itself, which is nothing other than nature. Nature does not play. It is therefore important not to understand nature here as an object that can be known, but as a radical self-manifestation. Radically phenomenological, Michel Henry's criticism of biology as a science is that biology, despite its name, is never about life, but always about living things.

My concern here is not to make a choice or to defend one of the two interpretations. However one reads Rousseau, play is on the side of culture, not nature. For Rousseau, it is inevitable that the accursed seriousness spoils nature from the outset. There is no such thing as natural play. On the contrary, play corrupts what might be called natural purity.

24 Rousseau, O.C. III, p. 135.

Although we encounter only one fleeting remark about Rousseau in Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, the fear of falling into unnaturalness that plays in Homo Ludens is a thoroughly Rousseauian theme. Rousseau is the philosopher that people generally want to shake off but who always sticks with us, including Huizinga. In short, for Rousseau, it is not play that is the natural, paradisiacal state of man (the child). On the contrary, through and in play, the human subject irrevocably loses itself and the voice of nature becomes inaudible.

Ruud Welten is Professor of Philosophy at the Erasmus School of Philosophy in Rotterdam and Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy of the School of Humanities at Tilburg University. He mainly publishes on modern French philosophers and writers.

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