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Ignorance as Lack of Imagination (of the other) in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Philosophy

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ABSTRACT. In Rousseau's thinking the anthropological difference is marked by the faculty of imagination, thus challenging the enlightenment consensus on the supremacy of ration. This paper discusses the significance of imagination within Rousseauean philosophical anthropology and philosophy of language, relying mainly on Jean Starobinski's and Jacques Derrida's interpretations. I argue that imagination, which preeminently requires the presence of the other, is the vital spark in the savage man's becoming a social being.

Keywords: *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, state of nature,* amour propre*, imagination, ignorance.*

Introduction

Imagination occupies a central position in Rousseau's philosophy, creating a link between his pedagogical theory, philosophy of language and political thought. "He who imagines nothing, feels only himself; he is alone in the midst of mankind."[1] – he writes in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music* (from now onwards referred to as *Essay on the Origin of Languages*). As one of Rousseau's translators and editors of his collected works in English, Kristopher Kelly

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[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau "Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music", in Ed. John T. Scott, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau vol. 7*, University Press of New England, Hanover, London, 1998, 309.

points out, for the Swiss thinker, philosophical thinking aiming to grasp some kind of truth is a rather boring activity, instead of which he prefers contemplation understood as primarily an aesthetic activity, stimulating imagination.[2]

In Rousseau's thinking, the anthropological difference is marked by the faculty of imagination, thus challenging the enlightenment consensus on the supremacy of ration. Interpersonal relations are set in motion as imagination awakens, causing the savage man to transcend the state of nature. In the essay Rousseau envisions a twofold origin of language. On the northern regions of the world, where the unfavorable circumstances force people to communicate for the sake of survival, language arises from need, while southern languages originate from the desire for company.[3] What these two origins have in common is their interpersonal framing: the call for help motivated by need and the expression of passion are both addressed to the other person. Imagination is set in motion by the presence of the other mediated in the experiences of need and desire.

This paper emphasizes the significance of imagination within Rousseau's philosophical anthropology and philosophy of language, relying mainly on Jean Starobinski's and Jacques Derrida's interpretations. Having examined Rousseau's concept of imagination in the anthropological writings, I attempt to convey that imagination is set into motion by the relation between the self and the other, thus playing a central role in savage man's becoming a social being.

Examining this statement from another angle, one can interpret the concept of ignorance as reluctance or inability to properly exercise the faculty of imagination upon the other person, arriving this way to the concept of *amour propre*. Rousseau uses this concept when referring to the moral corruption of people in civilized societies and their inability to feel neither authentic self-love, nor pity for others because of being preoccupied with appearances and superficial images of their own selves. Ignorance and *amour propre* can therefore be considered intersecting concepts within Rousseau's thought.

Imagined origins

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy is characterized by a strenuous search for origins. In his autobiographies (the *Confessions*, *Dialogues* and *Reveries*), he attempts to uncover the origins of his personality by revealing the deepest, most

[2] Christopher Kelly, "Rousseau and the Case against (and for) the Arts" in eds. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov, *The Legacy of Rousseau,* Chicago University Press, Chicago and London, 1997, 37.

[3] Ibid. 304 – 317.

intimate details of his psyche. Whereas in his anthropological writings – let us gather them using this term for the sake of simplicity –, such as the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and some parts of *Emile or Education,* he is eager to retrace the origins of societal inequality, language and moral judgment – key components of modern societal relations. In these writings, that are going to be discussed henceforth, Rousseau's main question is: *how did all this begin? What made society possible*? This paper attempts to highlight one particular aspect of Rousseau's answer, namely the role of imagination in society's coming into being.

Jean Starobinski argues that Rousseau's main motivation for his strenuous search for its origins is the presumption that society cannot be understood without knowing how it was constructed, just as individuals cannot be understood without knowledge about the environment in which they were socialized.[4] However, the state of nature should under no circumstances be interpreted as a historical concept, first of all because it describes a state both preceding and contrasting history:

> Let us therefore begin by setting all the facts aside, for they do not affect the question. The Researches which can be undertaken concerning this Subject must not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings better suited to clarify the Nature of things than to show their genuine origin, like those our Physicists make every day concerning the formation of the World.[5]

Before turning to our main focus, imagination, it needs to be underlined that Rousseau's method in his search for the origin of society can be best understood as an exercise of imagination itself. He criticizes other contractualist thinkers, especially Hobbes, for missing the point by taking themselves too seriously, suggesting that the state of nature should be interpreted as a thought experiment, the purpose of which is to help better understand society by *imagining* how it came to life Whether it existed or not, the state of nature is necessary for establishing a zero point outside of history from where the historical distance can be measured.[6] Rousseau's vision about the state of nature is driven by the premise that by imagining a state of things contrary to that of ours, we can draw some conclusions about our current reality, which he finds unacceptable and striving for change. Rousseau's search for origin is inseparable from his attempt of gaining useful knowledge about the present of his society.

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[4] Cf. Jean Starobinski, *Rousseau: Transparence and Obstruction,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London, 1988, 292.

[5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men" (from now on referred to as *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*), in Ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau vol. 3*, University Press of New England, Hanover, London, 1992, 19.

[6] Cf. Jean Starobinski. op. cit. 294.

The state of nature and its overcoming

How does Rousseau imagine humanity's state of nature in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*? The main character of his thought experiment, the savage man, seems to be one among the various species of animals inhabiting the planet, or at least it resembles them more than a human being as we know it today. He has no desires other than his basic needs, which he manages to satisfy on his own. "[T]he only goods he knows in the Universe are nourishment, a female, and repose; the only evils he fears are pain and hunger."[7] Savage men are solitary beings who tend to avoid contact, therefore encounters between them are rare, short and contingent, during which their behavior reveals fear rather than hostility.[8] With this claim, Rousseau intends to counter the Hobbesian argument of *homo homini lupus*.[9] These circumstances do not require neither language, nor abstract thinking – the latter develops as a consequence of the former. Starobinski calls this description a negative anthropology, referring to the fact that it enumerates all the things savage men were lacking and that are impeding their transcendence of the state of nature.[10]

However, there is something that makes us different from other species within Rousseau's paradigm: the faculty of self-improvement or perfectibility. Animals remain the same throughout their lives, do not change or develop in unforeseeable directions. Only humans have the ability to surprise their creator by becoming something else than nature predestined them to be.[11] Perfectibility represents a *superfluity* only humans have. "The other animals possess only such powers as are

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7 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, op. cit. 27.

8 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay ont he Origin of Languages*, op. cit. 294–95. Rousseau uses this argument in the Essay, to support his claim according to which the first expressions had figurative rather than proper meaning, the latter having been established only after the former. "Upon encountering others, a savage man will at first be afraid. His fright will make him see those men as taller and stronger than himself. He will give them the name Giants. After many experiences he will recognize that as these supposed Giants are neither taller nor stronger than himself, their stature does not agree with the idea that he had first attached to the word Giant. He will therefore invent another name common to them and to him, such as the name man for example, and will leave that of Giant for the false object that had stuck him during his illusion. That is how the figurative word arises before the proper word, when passion fascinates our eyes and the first idea it offers us is not the true one." The birth of figurative language is a result of the work of imagination fuelled by fear.

9 Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, 3.

10 Cf. Jean Starobinski. op. cit. 308.

11 Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, op. cit, 26.

required for self-preservation; man alone has more."[12] This faculty of self-improvement is a natural predisposition to leave nature behind, a paradoxical tendency of nature to transcend itself actualized in humans. This inclination drives humans to abandon their original state, as well as to overcome it by establishing language and culture.

Perfectibility is a supplement *of* nature, stemming *from* nature. In the childhood of humanity, perfectibility presents itself as separation from nature as a caring and loving mother.[13] It means the abandoning of a simple, familiar, comfortable and repetitive way of living. The savage man, just like any other animal,

> […] has no sense of separation. No metaphysical divide separates consciousness from objects in the world. Man lives in perfect equilibrium with his environment: he is part of the world and the world is part of him. Need, desire and the world are in harmony. Desire, circumscribed by the present moment, never exceeds need, and need, inspired by nothing other than nature, is so quickly satisfied that feelings of want never arise.[14]

Transcending the harmonious state of nature implies a contradictory occurrence: *the appearance of absence*. A distance emerges between subject and object. Perfectibility gives rise to *desire*, which, contrary to need, cannot be satisfied immediately and exclusively by nature. "It is imagination which enlarges the bounds of possibility for us, whether for good or ill, and therefore stimulates and feeds desires by the hope of satisfying them."[15] As Jacques Derrida puts it, perfectibility is a possibility and a perversion at the same time.[16] Why is this? Natural totality, unity and unmediated presence is both contaminated and enriched at the same time by the emergence of absence. Perfectibility exerts its power in a contradictory way: due to the awakening of imagination absence appears, but the work of imagination is meant to fill this absence created by itself. Once awakened, imagination never ceases to function, its power becomes a double-edged sword, both producing and compensating for absence.

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[12] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education.* Online Library of Liberty, 45. (*Emile, or Education*. Translated by Barbara Foxley, M.A. (London & Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1921; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1921). Online Library of Liberty: Emile, or Education - Portable Library of Liberty

[13] The topos of "Mother Nature" is strongly expressive in Rousseau's anthropology. The perfect unity and the possibility of the immediate satisfaction of needs makes the reader associate the state of nature with a maternal bosom.

[14] Jean Starobinski, op. cit. 293.

[15] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, *or Education*. Online Library of Liberty, 44.

[16] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1997, 147.

Desiring also means the abandonment of an eternal present and the development of a sense of time and ephemerality. Imagination represents our relation to death in the form of ability to anticipate it. On the other hand, the freedom provided by imagination becomes a *supplement* of the lost unity with Mother Nature.[17] As imagination awakens, the closed original state becomes open.

In Rousseau's thinking the anthropological difference is marked by the faculty of imagination, thus challenging the enlightenment consensus on the supremacy of reason. The superfluity peculiar to humans is produced by the work of imagination which teaches us how to desire, thereby urging us to seek, thus making the once contented man of nature restless and insatiable. The dynamics of perfectibility that gradually turn the savage man into a social being can be followed through the work of imagination rather than that of reason.

Language and pity as products of imagination

In order to have an overview of how imagination functions, one needs to examine more closely Rousseau's vision about the origin of languages, as well as his concept of pity. These two elements of his anthropology are determined by interpersonal relations, as imagination manifests its force through our feelings for the other.

The origin of languages

In Derrida's interpretation, language consists of a chain of supplements compensating for the missing origin.[18] It fills the void created by the appearance of absence. In his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau marks the difference between visual and audible signs (gesture and voice) in the fact that while gestures are more punctual, more expressive, voice is what triggers imagination by managing to attract attention and truly touch the audience. Therefore, voice is a more efficient rhetorical tool than gesture, since it "holds the mind in suspense and anticipation of what is going to be said".[19] Using gestures we show things, while using language we describe them. Gestures require presence, as it can be interpreted only by seeing it, whereas voice implies a distant presence, where distance functions as a stimulator for desire and through desire, imagination.

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[17] Cf. Jacques Derrida, op. cit. 182–185.

[18] Cf. Ibidem 313–316.

[19] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related To Music", in. (ed.) John T. Scott: *The Collected Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. vol. 7*, The University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1988, 290.

Rousseau envisages separate origins of northern and southern languages in a period when men are no longer savage but not yet socialized. This, he believes, was the happiest period of humanity, a "perpetual spring" that should have lasted forever.[20] In the frequently quoted part of the *Essay*, he describes southern languages as love children of the first men in whom desire for each other awakened:

> Young girls came to fetch water for the household, young men came to water their herds. There eyes accustomed to the same objects from childhood began to see sweeter ones. The heart was moved by these new objects, an unfamiliar attraction made it less savage, it felt the pleasure of not being alone. Imperceptibly water became more necessary, the livestock were thirsty more often; they arrived in haste and parted reluctantly. […] Beneath aged oaks, conquerors of years, an ardent youth gradually forgot its ferocity, gradually they tamed one another; through endeavoring to make themselves understood, they learned to explain themselves.[21]

While on the northern regions, where living conditions are harsher, language emerges from need for collaboration in order to survive. The first words pronounced were "love me" (*aimez moi*) on the south and "help me" (*aidez moi*) on the north.[22] The two origins, that of northern and that of southern languages seem to be polar opposites, but in fact they converge, as need and desire are intertwined. On the south, the pleasure felt from seeing the other soon turns into a need waiting to be fulfilled. The literal thirst which the fountain quenches turns into a thirst for the other person's presence and voice. ("Imperceptibly water became more necessary, the livestock were thirsty more often.") While on the north, the raw need for the other to survive soon turns into a pleasure deriving from their desirable presence.

Desire and need enter into a dialectical relation in the perpetual spring of humanity, fuelled by the work of imagination. The origin of languages reveals how imagination is set into motion in our relation to the other person. The invocations of "love me" and "help me" both express the experience of the other's absent presence. We imagine someone's presence motivated by desire for seeing them, when they are missing from our proximity. Imagination compresses a mixture of feelings: joy and curiosity awakened by proximity and the pain provoked by experiencing absence, these manifesting themselves in uttered words. Rousseau's description of the origin of language reveals that the first object of our imagination is the other person.

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[20] Ibidem. 310.
[21] Ibidem 314.
[22] Ibidem.316.

Pity

Apart from the origin of language, the feeling of pity also demonstrates how imagination connects us to the other person in a Rousseauean paradigm. Pity, as described in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, is a natural feeling preceding reflection, which, by being the only common principle of our communal existence,[23] lays the groundwork for our social existence.

Pity is the first feeling that relates us to fellow humans. How does it work? When we see someone suffering, pity makes us put ourselves in the place of the sufferer with the help of imagination.[24] We feel compassion "by identifying ourselves with the suffering being. We suffer only as much as we judge he suffers; it is not in ourselves, it is in him that we suffer".[25] Imagination enables us to feel compassion: from the visible signs of suffering, and our own experiences related to it, we create an idea of how the suffering person might feel.[26] The same line of thought can be found in *Emile*, where Rousseau adds that "no one becomes sensitive till his imagination is aroused and begins to carry him *outside himself* [emphasis mine – E. R.]."[27]

It is important to highlight that pity is made possible by imagination and not by reason. Abstract thinking works contrary to compassion and reduces it. "[R]eason turns man back upon himself, it separates him from all that bothers and afflict him. Philosophy isolates him; because of it he says in secret, at the sight of a suffering man: perish if you will, I am safe."[28]

The *Essay* and the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* reveals that imagination is primarily stimulated by the relations between people and the influence they inadvertently exert on one another. The first words arise from desire for the missing

[23] Marsó Paula, "Forrásvidék", *Kellék*, No. 49, 2013, 26.

[24] Jean-Jacques Roussea, Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, 26–27.

[25] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Essay on the Origin of Languages. op cit. 306.

[26] The concept of pity is significant in understanding Rousseau's political thinking as well. In the *Essay* he states that our experiences need to have some commonality with those of the suffering person, otherwise we cannot be compassionate with them. "How could I imagine evils of which I have no idea? How would I suffer in seeing someone else suffer if I do not even know that he is suffering, if I do not know what he and I have in common?" (306.) This thought returns on the pages of Rousseau's Encyclopedia article on Political Economy, when he mentions that it is impossible to feel compassion for peoples in Japan or Tartary, and even if we can feel it, it remains a passive feeling, without grounding deeds. Therefore, he argues, compassion needs to be limited in order to make it active. Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Discourse on Political Economy*. Ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau vol. 3*, University Press of New England, Hanover, London, 1992, 151.

[27] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education.* Online Library of Liberty, 168.

[28] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on the Origin of Inequality. op. cit. 37.

other, whereas pity requires for the imagination of the other's suffering. These two feelings are responsible for transcending the state of nature and transforming the solitary savage man into a socialized being.

Amour propre as a form of ignorance

Up to this point, this paper highlighted the importance of the faculty of imagination in Rousseau's anthropology. In the remaining part of my paper, I am going to examine the consequences of the lack of imagination. In the beginning of the 9th chapter of the *Essay on the Origin of Languages,* right after highlighting the interconnectedness of pity and imagination, Rousseau makes the following statement: "He who imagines nothing feels only himself; he is alone in the midst of mankind."[29] In order to underline the significance of imagination, I wish to provide an interpretation of this sentence. What does Rousseau claim here? The one who imagines nothing, feels only himself and as a consequence, he will remain alone, even if he is part of society.

If we want to understand how it is to imagine nothing, we need to redirect our attention to man in the state of nature. As we have already seen, the savage man, just like any animal, does not have desires, apart from basic needs. His imagination lies dormant, until perfectibility awakens it. Moreover, the lack of imagination comes together with a solipsistic state of mind resulting in a natural feeling of self-love (*amour de soi*). In the XV-th note to the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau states that man in the state of nature lives in a complete but non-conscious harmony with himself. He regards himself "as the sole Spectator to observe him, as the sole being in the universe to take an interest in him, and as the sole judge of his own merit,"[30] The savage and the civilized men are total opposites from every other standpoint, yet, in this sense only, they bear a resemblance. Someone in society, who is unable or reluctant to imagine, becomes similar to the savage man: he imagines nothing, feels only himself and therefore remains completely alone.

Rousseau formulates a harsh critique of civilization in the *Discourse on Sciences and Arts*, arguing that the development of science and culture results in moral corruption of people. Bourgeois society – Rousseau's generalized description of it is inspired from the world of 18th century Parisian saloons – is dominated by artificial and luxurious lifestyles that disconnect people from their natural feelings

[29] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Essay on the Origin of Languages. op cit. 306.

[30] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality" op. cit. 91.

of self-love and pity. Real virtue is in decline, because the emphasis is put on appearance. People become more preoccupied with maintaining an outer image of themselves than being authentic or virtuous.[31] These circumstances make people disconnect from the natural sentiment of self-love, and their hearts become filled with *amour propre*, a sentiment closest to what could be described as vanity (*vanitas*). Rousseau regards *amour propre* as a deformed version of *amour de soi*, therefore he strongly criticizes it as a dominant sympthom of bourgeois society. While self-love brings peace of mind and contentment, *amour propre* results in restlessness and agitation. The first sentiment is authentic, the second is artificial.
As the examples of language and pity reveal, imagination is strongly related to the other person. *Amour propre* means being preoccupied with how others perceive us, seeing ourselves through the eyes of others; being concerned with recreating others' judgments about us. This type of imagination lacks the *real* relation towards the other. Paradoxically, neither does it create a real possibility for self-knowledge, as it results in a loss of the authentic self in experiencing the other.[32] Paul de Man argues that *amour propre* is a false consciousness (*mauvaise foi*).[33]

This sentiment, unknown to the savage man, can be grasped as the opposite of pity. Pity is an imaginary identification with the other's perspective, with the purpose of understanding what *they* feel, whereas vanity involves identification with the other's perspective in order to perceive *ourselves* through their eyes. Thus, in the sentiment of vanity, imagination leaves the frameworks of our own self only to return to itself after taking a roundabout way. This false self-love is not the work of imagination, but of reason. Comparison, categorization and grading are operations of abstract thinking, and their use indirectly results in men being constantly preoccupied with trying to determine their position within social hierarchies.

Civilized man, whose relation to himself is defined by the sentiment of vanity (*amour propre*) instead of self-love (*amour de soi*), is the one who – just like the savage man – *imagines nothing* – or more precisely noone other than himself throughout the gaze of others, which Rousseau considers to be a degeneration of the faculty of imagination. That is why he *feels only himself and is alone in the midst of mankind*.

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[31] Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "A Discourse Which Won The Prize At The Academy Of Dijon In 1750, On This Question Proposed By The Academy: Has The Restoration Of The Arts And Sciences Had A Purifying Effect Upon Morals?" in Eds. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau vol. 2*, University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1992.

[32] Cf. M. E. Brint, "Echoes of Narcisse", *Political Theory*, No. 4/November 1988, Sage Publications, 621.

[33] Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1979, 165.

However, the main difference between his and the savage man's solitude is that the latter is an original and unbothered state of mind, lacking any alternatives before the awakening of sociability, while the former is a negative condition that goes contrary to both the reasons and the goals of society's existence. According to Rousseau, people being alienated from each other is a pathological phenomenon in society.[34] They resemble *Valère,* the protagonist of Rousseau's early satirical play, *Narcissus, or the Lover of Himself,* who, just like Narcissus in the myth, falls in love with his own image, without knowing that he sees in fact himself. By excluding the relation to the other, *amour propre* sets a barrier to imagination and therefore it annihilates both real desire and pity. It makes man a prisoner of his own self, resulting in a form of ignorance.

Conclusions

By assuming a central role to imagination in his philosophical anthropology, Jean-Jacques Rousseau contests the enlightenment consensus on the supremacy of reason. In his thought experiment about the origin of social relations, perfectibility, articulated by the faculty of imagination, is the driving force in transcending the state of nature. However, as his description of the two definitive elements of the intermediary state between natural and societal existence, the origin of language and the sentiment of pity suggests, according to Rousseau imagination is unintelligible without an interpersonal framing. Imagination means, before anything else, the imagination *of the other.* Having this in mind, Rousseau's harsh critique of civilization can be better understood. He argues that in bourgeois society – his generalized description of it is inspired from the world of 18th century Parisian saloons – people become alienated from each other. As the emphasis is put on appearances, the mind becomes a prisoner of superficial approaches, thus the self is no longer capable of establishing authentic relations neither to the other, nor to itself. This is expressed in the shift from authentic self-love in the state of nature to its artificial equivalent in society, *amour propre*.

To conclude, it can be said that, according to Rousseau, without imagination, which is set into motion exclusively by our relation to other person, the solitary savage man would have never transcended the state of nature. Consequently, a condition lacking the possibility of establishing an authentic relation to the other, like the sentiment of *amour propre*, is equal to ignorance in a Rousseauean paradigm, because it blocks the creating force of imagination.

[34] See Csaba Olay, "Elidegenedés Rousseau gondolkodásában" ("Alienation in Rousseau's thought"), Magyar Filozófiai Szemle, No. 4, 2016, 9–30.

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