ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project began in earnest in the summer of 1997 when I, a painfully earnest undergraduate who had just discovered ideas, began reading Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* at a coffee shop after an especially trying shift in the kitchen at a local restaurant. My wonderful undergraduate adviser, Larry Hall, had made me aware of Rousseau’s work but, as an avowed and unapologetic critic of his, had done nothing to encourage me to seek it out. But teachers truck almost exclusively in unanticipated consequences, and Dr. Hall’s passionate dislike for pauvre Jean-Jacques had only spurred my curiosity. So, when my shift ended, I—in no mood either to go home to my parents or to go out with my coworkers—decided to browse a few titles at a bookshop. I fell upon the *Discourse on Inequality* and was compelled by the back cover’s confident proclamation that it was “the most important and incisive” of Rousseau’s works. Who was I to disagree with such impressive alliteration? The *Discourse* it was. I was off to search for what Dr. Hall had found so objectionable. I did not, however, succeed in finding it. In fact, I was absolutely rapt by Rousseau’s reinterpretation of why people did what they did, and read the whole work that night. It goes without saying that I was utterly unable to follow the argument, and saw none of its genius—aside from a few scraps about language and some good digs at Hobbes, I understood nothing at all. But I did see that Rousseau had something new to tell me about myself, that he was challenging my self-understanding in a serious and radical way. I knew that I had to come to terms with that challenge and, indeed, with the author who had put it to me. This book is the latest and, I hope, best attempt to do that.
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