

A TWO HORSE RACE: AN EXPLANATION OF *THE VIRGINIAN'S* NATURAL EQUALITY BASED ON MAN'S FACULTY OF REASON AND SENTIMENT OF PITY

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INTRODUCTION

The Virginian and Its Usefulness in Discussing American Equality

Man is by nature free. So states John Locke, so states Jean-Jacques Rousseau, so states the Declaration of Independence, and so states *The Virginian*. *The Virginian*, a novel by Owen Wister published in 1902, was the first complete script of what would become an American tradition of Western literature and film. The book contains all the ingredients: the Virginian who is the book's cowboy hero; Trampas who is the book's villain; Molly who is the Virginian's love; the raw Western plains; and the decisive gunfight in which justice is vindicated. Our hero, the Virginian, begins the book a rough, wild, yet good man. In the pursuit of success and a woman he develops his great talents, proving that he is equal to every task at hand. He becomes the cattle rancher Judge Henry's most trusted hand, leads men east to sell cattle, hangs cattle thieves stealing from Judge Henry and other ranchers, develops a taste for Shakespeare and other arts through the

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education of Molly, and consistently thwarts the wrongs that Trampas and other bad men seek to commit.

The Virginian began the romantic look at how Americans acted, or at least how they ought to act, in the state of nature. By 1900 America needed literature to rekindle the dream of natural man outside the confines of civilization, for the West had closed. Endless land to the West had served as the American dream and solution to poverty from colonial times through the late 1800's. The poor, the immigrant, or the man needing a fresh start could always pull up stakes and move west, resting assured that he would find profitable land to lay claim to. During this long westward expansion, America remained very much the land of Thomas Jefferson's yeoman farmer. Civil order, economic success, and equality were based upon land, of which America had plenty for all. By the late 1800's, though, the profitable land had been settled and civilized. Wealth was no longer so abundantly attainable by husbanding raw land with labor, the plow, and the cow. The great wealth of the land seemed increasingly small compared to big businesses like steel, oil, and railroads. Men like Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Vanderbilt were becoming the wealthiest men in the world. America by 1900 was rapidly changing from the land of the yeoman farmer to the mercantile and industrial empire dreamed of by Alexander Hamilton.

As the frontier closed, older notions of American virtue, self-reliance, enterprise, and even equality seemed to be disappearing. The opportunities of the past, which were provided by abundant and free land, seemed gone forever. Politics was ushering in the Progressive Era, and Americans were preparing to reexamine and perhaps rewrite their founding principles. Into this atmosphere stepped Owen Wister with *The Virginian*. A graduate of Harvard, born into a well-to-do Philadelphia family, and a man well accustomed to aristocratic travel, including the American West, Wister began this examination of principles in the Western genre. Wister, and the numerous writers and movie directors who followed, used the rugged mountains and plains of the West to discuss American equality. The book's portrayal of natural equality—and the actual inequalities between men that result—is central to Wister's understanding of America. What type of equality does the book support? To help answer that question, it will be useful to think about the nature and equality presented by two philosophers—John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as both philosophers are doubtlessly contained in moments of *The Virginian*.¹ Beginning with Locke and then moving to Rousseau, I will think about the state of nature, equality

¹ Locke, born in England in 1632, is generally considered the founding philosopher of the liberty and equality of America. He spent time abroad in France and Holland, but lived most of his life in England. His state of nature is based on perfect equality and freedom, which by the consent of the people, governments are charged to protect. He died in 1704.

Rousseau, born in Geneva in 1712, settled in Paris and is considered a French philosopher. His philosophy is based on his interpretation of uncivilized man and the freedom that exists in that state of nature. Seeming at times to be self-contradicting, Rousseau is considered by some to be both the father of modern democracy and modern totalitarianism. He died July 2, 1778.

in such a state, and the laws that ought to govern a society without civil government. The state of nature that each philosopher presents will be compared to the state portrayed by Wister. Once we have established a background, the specific interpretations of equality, heroism, religion, and government that are found in *The Virginian* will be presented and compared with Locke and Rousseau.

The State of Nature and its Importance to Equality

Complete freedom and equality exists in the proper state of nature. This state of nature is a place without an established civil law to exert power over men, leaving every man free to order his own actions. This state of nature, however, is not merely a hypothetical place. As John Locke wrote:

He must shew a strange inclination to deny evident matter of fact, when it agrees not with his Hypothesis, who will not allow that the *beginning* of *Rome* and *Venice* were by the uniting together of several Men free and independent one of another, amongst whom there was no natural Superiority or Subjection. And if *Josephus Acosta's* word may be taken, he tells us, that in many parts of *America* there was no Government at all.²

According to Locke, political societies are formed by a contract made amongst free and

² Locke, John, *Second Treatise on Government*, Section 102. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press, 2004. Acosta, born in Spain, went to Peru as a missionary in the late 1500's. His knowledge and respect of Indians there led him to write *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, which was published in English in 1604.

equal men. This state of nature in which man exists is a state of perfect freedom and equality, preceding all political societies.³ At the time Locke wrote, America was the new frontier, for “in the beginning all the World was *America*.”⁴ So too Rousseau argues that man is by nature a free being that forms society upon a compact, albeit a fraudulent one. In his famous critique of society he said, “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.”⁵ Rousseau ushers in a much more complex view of man and society than Locke, but natural freedom, equality, and the possibility of natural goodness closely parallel in both.

Our American founders also thought it helpful to think about the how the state of nature affected equality and politics. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in his *Summary View of the Rights of British America*, “[T]heir Saxon ancestors had, under this universal law, in like manner left their native wilds and woods in north of Europe, had possessed themselves of the island of Britain, then less charged with inhabitants, and had established there that system of laws which has so long been the glory and protection of that country.”⁶ The wild woods of the Norsemen were viewed by the founders as their ancestral state of nature, and it was useful for them to consider the rights and actions of these natural men as they considered the proper equality of a man in civil society. Lastly, the Declaration of Independence famously stated that “all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” The founding of America depends upon a certain understanding of man’s natural equality and freedom in the state of nature.

³ Locke, Section 4.

⁴ Locke, Section 49.

⁵ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 49.

⁶ Jefferson, Thomas. *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. From *Jefferson Writings*, 106.

The *Virginian* recognizes the centrality of equality to any understanding of politics throughout the book. When flirting with Molly, his school teaching lover, the *Virginian* raised the fundamental proposition of the Declaration of Independence:

“All men are born equal,” he now remarked slowly.

“Yes,” she quickly answered, with a combative flash. “Well?”

“Maybe that don’t include women?” he suggested.

“I think it does.”

“Do yu’ tell the kids so?”

“Of course I teach them what I believe!”⁷

The Virginian refines the definition of equality in many different settings throughout the book. Here the hero begins to speak of equality by setting up a flawed inequality between men and women before explaining his own views on the proper origins of inequality. The *Virginian*’s thoughts on equality are both inspired and clarified by the fact that he lives in a state of nature.

Political philosophers have frequently considered the state of nature because political principles can be best understood by examining man in his natural state, untainted by the effects of civilization. Civil laws are props that assist the upholding of nature’s law. For Locke, the law of nature is reason, while for Rousseau, nature is governed by the properly trained will. As Locke said, “The State of Nature has a Law of Nature to govern it, which obliges every one: And Reason, which is that Law.”⁸ As reason defines man for Locke, so the sentiments of the will govern man in

⁷ *The Virginian*, 111.

⁸ Locke, Section 6.

Rousseau: “[B]ut in the power of willing, or rather of choosing, and in the sentiment of this power are found only purely spiritual acts about which the laws of mechanics explain nothing.”⁹ Thus Locke says by nature man ought to be ruled by reason, and Rousseau believes that the will should rule natural man. Man-made law can never be an end; it is merely a means to support natural law. As James Madison wrote in *The Federalist* No. 51, “Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society.”¹⁰ If we are to presume—or even hope—that the law of nature is just, then either reason (Locke) or the will (Rousseau) is necessary to establish and satisfy the demands of justice. If reason is the law of nature, then man’s only problems are with offenders who declare that they “live by another Rule, than that of *reason* and common Equity.”¹¹ Likewise, if a well trained and free will governs nature, then we only need fear society depraving the will by causing “the soul and human passions, altering imperceptibly, change their nature so to speak.”¹² Great men do not need law, for as *The Virginian* says before his duel with Trampas, “It is only the great mediocrity that goes to law in these personal matters.”¹³ So the shrewd political philosopher presents his political theories in the state of nature where they exist in the purest form, in the domain of the greatest men. While civil law may be needed in the end because some men are either unreasonable or have poorly disciplined wills, for great men, the laws of man can only cloud natural justice. Civil laws can never capture justice as fully as nature’s perfect law. As the narrator observed in a well-known scene in which the Virginian demands that Trampas smile when

he calls the Virginian a Son of a --, “the letter means nothing until the spirit gives it life.”¹⁴ The civil law, or letter, is always dependent on the natural spirit, and it cannot institute an equality as perfect as that which nature bestows.

Since *The Virginian* takes the reader back to the state of nature, it forces the reader to rely upon nature, not law, to find true and just equality. That nature and the law that it should build is the topic of this thesis. My goal is to interpret what equality is and how all men are equal—despite their actual inequality—by the law of nature in *The Virginian*.

Introduction to the Equality and Inequality of The Virginian

On the surface it may seem strange to speak of equality from a book with such unequal characters. The Virginian is described as, “a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures. His broad, soft hat was pushed back; a loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his throat, and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips.”¹⁵ By this description, the Virginian seems to be a paragon of American virtue without equal. Preceding the great struggle of wit between the Virginian and Trampas, the book’s villain, Wister observed:

THERE CAN BE NO doubt of this:—
All America is divided into two classes,—the quality and the equality. The latter will always recognize the former when mistaken for it. Both will be with us until our women bear nothing but kings.¹⁶

⁹ Rousseau, 114.

¹⁰ Madison, James. *The Federalist*. (Cooke, 352).

¹¹ Locke, Section 8.

¹² Rousseau, Second Discourse, 178

¹³ Wister, 332.

¹⁴ Wister, 34.

¹⁵ Wister, 15.

¹⁶ Wister, 114.

America's justice, America's Founding, and America's Declaration of Independence base the natural equality of man on his inherent freedom to be unequal. The allowance and preservation of inequality in America is somehow, according to Wister, the substance of true equality. Therefore, Trampas, "sullen, but tricky rather than courageous,"¹⁷ is the Virginian's equal, at least in part.

To our progressive and American minds it may be somewhat a shock to contemplate that inequality may actually be just. Yet all admit that men come in different shapes, sizes, and colors. On a deeper level we know that men have different talents, intellects, ambitions, and abilities that combine together to create vast inequalities. Unless men—as some argue—by law and force are compelled to begin, live, and end their lives at an equal level, it seems clear to Wister that men will be very unequal. The book is rife with such examples. The superior Virginian is a better cattleman, a harder worker, and a superior thinker when compared to the other ranch hands. He becomes an expert cattleman, developing from a wild young hand, to a thinker, leader of men, and finally an independent ranch owner. Shorty, another cowboy on the ranch, lacks such faculties and is rewarded by being out of a job and eventually losing his life. The Virginian and Shorty are two very unequal men, their lives clearly reflect this inequality, and Wister gives each what they deserve without apology. There is no such talk of the government coming to the aid of the man endowed with lesser qualities. By natural abilities and talents, by fate, and by personal choice, men are unequal.

In *The Virginian* a great moment of equality and inequality occurs near the middle of the book when the Virginian wins a battle of wits against Trampas. Wister, the

assumed narrator of the story, joins the train on which the Virginian is leading a group of cowpunchers on the return trip from selling beef back east. With the mission completed and gold-fever running wild among the men, the Virginian has the man-sized task of getting Judge Henry's rambunctious workforce back to nowhere Wyoming to continue their \$30-a-month jobs. In an attempt to vandalize the Virginian's successful completion of the task, Trampas attempts to spread gold-fever and cause the hands to desert. So the Virginian and Trampas lock in a battle of wits to see who could command the loyalty of the men. Despite his obvious disadvantage, for broad was the path of desertion and narrow was the path of duty, the Virginian succeeds.¹⁸ In a battle of lies, the Virginian gets Trampas and the deserters to return to the ranch. The Virginian shows Trampas to be more gullible, as well as proving himself superior at telling tall tales. This was a great American story and moment, of which the narrator said, "the Virginian had been equal to the occasion; that is the only kind of equality which I recognize."¹⁹

Before examining the kind of natural equality that *The Virginian* endorses, it is useful to investigate the equality and freedom that Locke and Rousseau ascribe to man. *The Virginian* is an American story about the American frontier. Many of America's beliefs in equality, freedom, and government are considered Lockean. Yet the stories of the book and the nature illustrated between its covers fail to fit neatly into the John Locke mold. While the Virginian is often a reasoned follower of Locke, certain actions, moments, and his heroic stature introduce the notion of Rousseau. As moments of the book's philosophy seem to come directly from

¹⁷ *The Virginian*, 33

¹⁸ Wister, 134

¹⁹ Wister, 153.

Locke, at other times passages read equally like Rousseau. The Western and *The Virginian* romanticize the state of nature, making many elements of it seem good, which seems to point more toward Rousseau than Locke. The natures that Locke and Rousseau create both demand complete freedom and equality amongst men in the state of nature. As Locke is generally thought to be more influential than Rousseau on the understanding of American equality and freedom, we will examine his work first.

John Locke and the Virginian's Reasonableness

John Locke wrote his *Second Treatise* beginning with the precept that men are created equal. In the *First Treatise*, Locke refutes the argument of Sir Robert Filmer that all political power is vested directly by God in the King who is the heir of Adam. Locke refutes this by denying that God gave any specific grant of power to Adam. Adam is just the example of the power God granted to man; he is not the first king of the world. This argument breaks down the justification for hereditary monarchy and the belief in the divine right of kingly rule. God gave mankind, not a man, all political power. Yet Locke wrote in a world in which nearly all government was at the least loosely based on divine right and the idea that the king was the protector of his subjects because God had made him so. To deny this was to throw the world into anarchy unless another basis for government could be found. This is what Locke sets out to do in his *Second Treatise*. Because his lengthy refutation of patriarchy in the *First Treatise* left men without a basis on which to found government, Locke attempts to reconstruct government on the principle of equality—or as Locke put it:

To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a *state of perfect freedom* to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.²⁰

Man by nature exists in “A *State* also of *Equality*, wherein all Power and Jurisdiction is reciprocal.”²¹ The law of nature, which for Locke is reason, was given to all men by God. Since men are all endowed with this faculty, every man has an equal right to enforce and judge the law of nature as he sees just. Locke writes that the law of nature would be in vain without someone to execute this law.²² There must be enforcement and punishment for breaking this law. The law of nature says that man “is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his Station willfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind.”²³ Men are bound by the law of nature to use their faculties to defend and preserve themselves and their fellow man. In our safe civil society, we look to the government to enforce the law and punish those who break it. Natural man, however, has no government on which to rely and must execute the law for himself. As Locke writes, “in that *State of perfect Equality*, where naturally there is no superiority or jurisdiction of one over another, what any may do in prosecution of that law, every one must needs have a Right to do.”²⁴ To accept

²⁰ Locke, Section 4

²¹ Locke, Section 4

²² Locke, Section 7.

²³ Locke, Section 6.

²⁴ Locke, Section 7.

the natural equality of man is to accept that each man has an equal right to execute the law of nature. This execution and judgment of the law is the only way man is by nature equal. Certain men will be capable of more or less than others in all respects from reason to action. Yet each man has the equal right to spill all of his abilities forth into his interpretation and execution of nature's law.

The equality of man grants him the right to judge and execute nature's law, but it also shackles him with a duty. As all men are "*equal and independent*, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions."²⁵ Being equal demands that one respect the freedom of others to exercise their equality. Another man will need to use the best of his life, health, liberty and possessions to judge and execute the law. For the better reason, the better body, the better power, and the greater wealth a man has, so too is greater his judgment and execution of the law of nature. As the judgment and execution of nature's law is his natural and equal right with all other men, he should be left undisturbed to use all his faculties and possessions to the best of his ability, fulfilling the law of nature.

One might say that people will undoubtedly use their faculties and possessions unequally, or in fact might even be endowed by nature with the same basic faculties yet with different capacities for use. So while all men are born men, meaning they have a mind, reason, and a soul, some men will have sharper minds, better reason, and a less corrupt soul, making better use of what was given. How can such inequality be possible—or for that matter just—in a nature state in which all are created equal? According to Locke, this inequality is both possible and necessary. Certain faculties like "*Age or Virtue* may

give Men a just Precedency."²⁶ Locke understands that some men will be greater and more virtuous than others because of things like wisdom or age.

Man's natural equality for Locke boils down to this: all men should execute the law of nature to the best of their ability and leave their fellow man unfettered to equally execute the law to the best of their ability. This is the right and duty of equality. It means that each man is free to grow food, to build a house, and do whatever is necessary to preserve himself while not interfering with others' preservation. Every man has an equal opportunity to plant grain. He is free to plant grain, and he has a duty to allow other men enough land to plant grain for their preservation. However, this equality of opportunity may still lead to vast inequalities. The men who work harder or smarter will end up with more grain—an inequality resulting from natural equality. This inequality is just because it is not forced on men by civil society or law; natural inequality exists because men choose to exercise their reason and talents differently.

In addition to this natural equality, Locke also writes that men are in "*a state of perfect freedom* to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and person, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man."²⁷ Men are equal, which means that they are equally free—that is free to order their own actions and have the equal right to rule their self and their possessions. I hope that one can already see the great overlap between natural equality and natural freedom. If people are naturally equal, then they must be free to pursue their interests

²⁵ Locke, Section 6.

²⁶ Locke, Section 54.

²⁷ Locke, Section 4.

without interference because no one else has a right to rule them. Likewise, men existing in perfect freedom will have a natural freedom to rule themselves equally. Natural equality means man is free, and natural freedom means that man must be equal. However, it seems that the question of freedom allows for a broader, or perhaps freer, study of Locke's natural man.

What is man by nature free to do? According to Locke he is both free to and bound to "*preserve himself*."²⁸ This means that he must be free to labor and gather food, provide shelter, and so on. The freedom to preserve one's life is no small right. It may well be expanded to the freedom of near endless property in the pursuit of always being surer of one's preservation. And once man has his possessions, he can use them as he believes best preserves his life. This is what man's perfect freedom in nature means.

Locke's perfect freedom presented thus may appear a little too free, but Locke's right to freedom carries with it a complementing duty—for as Locke writes:

But though this be a *state of liberty*, yet it is not a *state of licence*: though man in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use than its bare preservation calls for it. The *state of nature* has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one.²⁹

Man is free to preserve himself with his own life, liberty, and possessions, but man is also required, "when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he

can, to *preserve the rest of mankind*."³⁰ Locke suddenly reigns in the glorious individualism that nature seemed to present. One might say that being forced to preserve other men is a sudden and quite arbitrary burden placed upon the natural man. I would argue, though, that this duty is in fact a part of natural freedom. Remembering that man was only ever free within the bounds of the law of nature, Locke has already stipulated that man exercise his complete freedom in a reasonable manner, meaning that he preserve both himself and others as much as possible. As reason demands that I preserve myself, it also suggests that I preserve my fellow man. Two are stronger than one, and natural man can greatly advance his individual preservation by working in groups. An individualist might object that the group has arbitrarily been afflicted upon man, yet it is imminently clear that at least the basic group of a family is necessary for the preservation of the species. Mankind must by nature work together in certain pursuits, so it is reasonable that where profitable to other aspects of individual preservation, a reasonable man will help others. Since men are useful to one another, it is then clearly reasonable to actively preserve mankind as much as is possible.

Yet Locke indicates that the duty of preserving mankind is more than a reasonable right for men. He states it strongly as if a duty. The preservation of man is not something to be left to a fool's reason. All men, even those who would fail to see the reasons for saving a fellow man, must believe that they are bound by duty to preserve mankind. To help preserve a fellow man, it may be necessary to preserve his property, to protect his land, and to save his life. In this, the duty aspect of the law of nature becomes clearer. Whereas at first

²⁸ Locke, Section 6.

²⁹ Locke, Section 6.

³⁰ Locke, Section 6.

blush Locke's natural freedom appears to be all about getting more for number one, it now becomes clear that it is in the best interest of each individual to see that there is enough for his fellow man. By nature freedom forces man to preserve all that he can, beginning immediately with himself, but also, when possible, preserving other men and their property. This understanding of freedom is the basis for Locke's theory of natural justice, which will be discussed later.

We have seen that, according to Locke, man's natural equality and natural freedom are inexorably connected. But how does Locke's understanding of natural equality and freedom relate to *The Virginian*? As a territory, Wyoming did not have a state constitution or state laws—it was almost the perfect example of Locke's state of nature. Federal territories are under the direct rule of Congress, 2,000 miles away in Washington D.C., which appointed federal marshals and judges to execute and judge their laws. This distant government exercises little authority, for as *The Virginian* shows, federal officials were rarely seen in the vastness of the territory. The only mentions of these official arms of the law in the book have to do with their distance and corruption, both aspects making them ineffective and illegitimate. When the narrator describes the towns in the book, there is never any mention of law or sheriffs. When out on the range, there is even less appeal to proper law.

This environment clearly corresponds to what Locke claimed the state of nature is—a state that lacks an impartial judge, a sufficient executor, and a common legislature:

The great and *chief end*, therefore, of men's uniting into common-wealths, and putting themselves under government, *is the preservation of their property*. To which in the state

of nature there are many things wanting...*First*, There wants an *established*, settled, known law,...*Secondly*, In the state of nature there wants a *known and indifferent judge*, with authority to determine all differences according to the established law...*Thirdly*, In the state of nature there often wants *power* to back and support the sentence when right, and to *give* it due *execution*.³¹

Toward the end of *The Virginian*, the reader is introduced to the first forms of government including counties, juries, and an acting mayor. But these instruments remain ineffective and without sufficient power to enforce the law. Even assuming that these functions were dutifully carried out by the federal government, the juries who judged such cases were illegitimate because they were partial to thieves. In the absence of an impartial judge, the state of nature exists. Since *The Virginian* portrays such a society, men like the Virginian must take the law into their own hands, judging and executing the law of nature. The Virginian and his fellow ranch hands, for example, judge former friends Steve and Ed to be rustlers, convict them, and execute them for their crimes. After hanging the cattle thieves, the Virginian justified the punishers' actions by commenting that, "the thieves have got hold of the juries in Johnson County."³² In these wide open counties there was a distant system that made trial by jury possible—but juries were ineffective in promoting the rule of law and order, and most importantly they lacked impartiality.

This lack of law is further explained by the Virginian's employer Judge Henry (a former judge back east, not a current judge).

³¹ Locke, Sections 124-126.

³² *The Virginian*, 298.

Molly finds out about the hanging that the Virginian commits when she catches the kids at recess reenacting the episode. With Molly's eastern conscience obviously disturbed, Mrs. Henry orders the Judge to attempt to salvage the situation with an explanation. He says, "The courts, or rather the juries, into whose hands we have put the law, are not dealing the law. They are withered hands, or rather they are imitation hands made for show, with no life in them, no grip."³³ The Judge explains to Molly that this type of hanging does not take place in the east because it would be wrong for one to hang another outside of the law. Here there is no law because the trifling law that has been established is a sham. It is not out of passion that the thieves are hung, but as the Judge's stout argument shows, reason demands the application of individual justice. In the state of nature, every man has the right to execute the law of nature. The narrator from the east stumbles upon the hanging and helps the Virginian deal with and talk through it. Steve, one of the men who was hanged, was at the beginning of the book a fun-loving and good man, as well as a former trail partner of the Virginian's. The bond and pain that the Virginian expresses during and after the hanging shows that he did not want to hang the men. Natural passion or affection might have compelled the Virginian to let his friend escape and live. Instead the Virginian forces himself to execute justice because he understands the reasons that the Judge later explains to Molly. The situation and relationship of the characters forces the Virginian to draw the courage to hang these men from reason. The hanging and its justification by a former lawman is the one of the clearest moments of nature and reason in the book.

³³ The Virginian, 314.

The state of nature spoken of here is clearly based off of Locke. Since there lacks an executor, legislator and adjudicator of the laws of nature and reason, men must each have the right to enforce it. In this state of nature, without a government enforcing law, reason, and power to enforce reason, is just and good. The Virginian appears to be the Lockean executor and judge of justice because his own arguments and the judge's show that he is reasoning out his actions especially in regard to the hanging. This execution of nature's law by individuals, as in the hanging, is the only way to uphold nature's rule that all should be preserved as much as possible. The rustlers are harming the preservation of the whole by stealing cattle. In nature, such criminals will continue to destroy the community's sustenance until individuals take action to punish the violators. This execution fulfills the law of nature.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Will of the Virginian

Perhaps few philosophers are as difficult to do justice to as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Despite the historical misinterpretations of his work and the problems that his teaching on man's natural condition present, an examination here will be useful for us to gain a broader understanding of the state of nature in *The Virginian*. There are many similarities between the Virginian—a Western hero—and Rousseau's ideal man. A great man, quick of mind and strong of body, the Virginian can often seem to exemplify natural man uncorrupted by society. The introduction of Rousseau into such an examination of the American state of nature is forced because the western portrays a positive state of nature. Even more than Locke, Rousseau depends on a livable and

positive state of nature in which man has good qualities that allow for justice in both nature and society. Having already examined the basics of nature under Locke, I will attempt to do the same for Rousseau before comparing *The Virginian* to both.

The final conclusion of Rousseau is that there are two different states of “nature” that man can exist in—one as taught by philosophers like Locke, and another prior state of nature which Rousseau will uncover. Rousseau sees both, while most philosophers only recognize one nature of man. For Rousseau, these philosophers have failed to chip off from modern man all the barnacles accumulated on man’s soul as the result of centuries of reason and society. Rousseau says that when society fails, “everything is brought back to the sole law of the stronger, and consequently to a new state of nature different from the one with which we began, in that the one was the state of nature in its purity, and this last is the fruit of an excess of corruption.”³⁴ Realizing that there are two state of natures for Rousseau is how one must begin to understand his philosophy.

Rousseau’s *First Discourse* points out the examples of misery that over-indulgence in the arts and sciences have brought man. He speaks of simplicity, happiness, and excess, corruption and slavery. Much like Locke’s *First Treatise*, Rousseau begins with man. My analysis will focus on the *Second Discourse*, for it is there that Rousseau offers the solution, explaining how man in his natural state was perfectly free and good.

For Locke, natural man exists with the law of nature, reason, and the dictates of that law which are self-preservation and preservation of the whole. But according to Locke, men must discover this law of nature through the use of reason. This involves a

fundamental difference with Rousseau, who believes that the law of nature is built into man’s natural instincts prior to any reason. Rousseau believes that man exists by nature with two natural sentiments—a desire for self-preservation and pity. As Rousseau wrote in the *Second Discourse*:

Throwing aside, therefore, all those scientific books, which teach us only to see men such as they have made themselves, and contemplating the first and most simple operations of the human soul, I think I can perceive in it two principles prior to reason, one of them deeply interesting us in our own welfare and preservation, and the other exciting a natural repugnance at seeing any other sensible being, and particularly any of our own species, suffer pain or death. It is from the agreement and combination...between these two principles...that all the rules of natural right appear to me to be derived.³⁵

Certainly Rousseau differs from Locke in how men know and are motivated to enact the law of nature, but it seems that the law of nature for each is at least quite similar if not the same. Compare the following statements on the law of nature:

Rousseau: “His duties toward others are not dictated to him only by the later lessons of wisdom; and, so long as he does not resist the internal impulse of compassion, he will never hurt any other man, nor even any sentient being, except on those lawful occasions on which his own preservation is concerned and he is

³⁴ Rousseau, 177.

³⁵ Rousseau, 95-96

obliged to give himself the preference.”³⁶

Locke: “Every one...when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can *to preserve the rest of mankind*, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.”³⁷

For both, the natural instinct of man causes him to get food, reproduce, and live—in short self-preservation. Rousseau though breaks from Locke when deciding what motivates man to preserve the rest of his species. Rousseau claims that rather than reason, man has a natural pity or sentiment of compassion that causes him to help others as much as possible because he dislikes seeing anything suffer. For Rousseau these two principles—self-preservation and pity—are in man by nature, while for Locke, reason is the quality of man that is necessary to know one’s individual rights and duties towards others. In a perfect nature these two philosophies produce exactly the same result, both self preservation and the preservation of others. But since men live in an imperfect nature, their solutions to this imperfection—the societies—that Locke and Rousseau create will have differences traceable to the divergence of pity and reason.

How does one even begin to understand a man utterly without reason, as Rousseau’s natural man begins? Perhaps one would think of the creation of Adam and Eve and their life prior to the fall. Apparently they were created by God, if not without all reason, at least without the

knowledge of good and evil. Rousseau’s first man parallels in many ways what one would expect from Adam and Eve. Simply strip away the handful of commands that God initially gave them and you have a wild species in a bountiful earth living with pure and good wills. This man, naked, without reason, has no specific nature other than his pity and desire to preserve himself by satisfying the pleasures and pains of hunger, warmth, etc. This man is not corrupted with sin, so these passions only exist in the right amount at the right time, never subject to abuse. Man has a powerful body and a powerful mind—the two elements of his virtue. These combined faculties of natural man lead Rousseau to conclude:

Pit a bear or a wolf against a savage who is robust, agile, courageous, as they all are, armed with stones and a good stick, and you will see that the danger will be reciprocal at the very least, and that after several similar experiences wild beasts, which do not like to attack each other, will hardly attack man willingly.³⁸

Natural man is strong, independent of the other animals, and eventually superior to them. He is without nature, so he copies animals, and with his greater adaptability soon rules the animals as God would have commanded him. There is no family and no need for one. Each man and woman is a free individual pursuing his or her happiness in a pure way. The natural desires of both assure that the species will reproduce and grow. This nature is what one would imagine if Adam were abandoned by God in Eden, never committing the first sin.

The more definite the examples the more it seems that Rousseau’s two natures hinge on the pre and post fall of man.

³⁶ Rousseau, 96.

³⁷ Locke, Section 6.

³⁸ Rousseau, 107.

Natural man (before sin) has little worry for health because “they finally die without it being perceived that they cease to be, and almost without perceiving it themselves.”³⁹ Adam, until he ate of the forbidden tree, was promised that he would not know death, which was the punishment for eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As in the Bible, Rousseau states, “and the knowledge of death and its terrors is one of the first acquisitions that man has made in moving away from the animal condition.”⁴⁰ Another striking parallel between Rousseau’s natural man and Adam has to do with the innocence that arises from ignorance of right and wrong. Man, whom God created without this knowledge, existed in innocence, or as Rousseau says:

It seems at first that men in that state, not having among themselves any kind of moral relationship or known duties, could be neither good nor evil, and had neither vices nor virtues: unless, taking these words in a physical sense, one calls vices in the individual the qualities that can harm his own preservation, and virtue those that can contribute to it.⁴¹

Without the knowledge of right and wrong in Rousseau’s natural state, there will be very little—if any—moral or intellectual inequality between men; rather the only natural inequalities that originate in natural differences of bodily strength and instincts that help or hinder an individual’s survival. Inequality is thus very limited by nature because Rousseau argues that the combination of the earth’s bounty and man’s adaptability allows all to thrive almost equally despite minor inequalities in physique and mind.

Rousseau’s first nature, therefore, is presented as a state of perfection, or at least how God created man. In a perfect world and with a perfect will man does what he does without reason and always seems to choose what makes him happy. It is a virtual utopia.

While property founds society, it is not the root cause of evil for Rousseau as some would later say. Property is the climax, the bitter fruit or an already evil tree. Rousseau sees that many things lead up to the grand and reasoned concept of property. Man’s dominion over the earth and his eventual mastery of the animals through adaptation and conglomeration of their skills produces in man “the first stirring of pride”⁴² Perhaps this is quite similar to the apparent pride that the serpent appeals to in challenging man to first know good and evil. As men began to have the beginnings of reason—like one can imagine Adam would have when he knew good and evil for the first time—vice soon followed. Men began to assemble in groups, sing, and dance, and they took the first step toward vice with “on one hand vanity and contempt, on the other shame and envy.”⁴³ Man felt shame, exactly the excuse that Adam used when he and Eve covered their nakedness and hid from God after sin.

From this point, Rousseau’s natural man spirals out of control down a path of increasing society, increasing reason, and increasing vice. Families, ideals, prejudices, and finally property are created. With property, men invent reasons to defend property, create complex governments, laws, and tyrannies, at each step manufacturing unnatural inequality and diminishing natural equality. This devolves man into a being that, far from perfect, rules whatever he can by force and serves whatever he cannot rule.

³⁹ Rousseau, 109.

⁴⁰ Rousseau, 116.

⁴¹ Rousseau, 128.

⁴² Rousseau, 144.

⁴³ Rousseau, 149.

This is the nature that other philosophers have always written about. It is the second nature of man, and it has become their nature only after the introduction of reason to man. In this second nature men are corrupt, and without prudent and wise application of reason, men are doomed to remain full of vice.

It is not hard to determine which of man's two "natures" society should be based on. For, like *The Virginian*, Rousseau knows that his true natural man cannot exist because reason cannot be undone. Yet Rousseau hopes that men can overcome the curse of reason enough to reintroduce as much of man's original virtue as possible into our corrupt nature. Good and just society may yet be possible, but that consideration can wait for our study of *The Virginian's* and the Western's transfer from nature to society. For the time being, it is only crucial that we recognize the first and true nature of Rousseau's man. By nature this man exists strong of mind and body, with no impulse towards either evil or good. He is an innocent animal who both cares for himself and feels pity for those beings around him. Man exists equally with these sentiments and the equal freedom to act upon them. This natural freedom to do what he wants, however, just as with Locke, is not license. First man is limited by not having reason. His will, being perfect, only desires what is right by nature. While man is free, nature did not leave him free to abuse himself and others. When Rousseau speaks of modern man in his *To the Republic of Geneva*, he recognizes that man may mistake "for freedom an unbridled license which is its opposite."⁴⁴ So we know that he does not believe that freedom gives one the right to do wrong. Freedom properly understood is the free exercise of mind and body toward the good sentiments of self-

⁴⁴ Rousseau, 80.

preservation and pity. While he differs from Locke's natural man in that he is unreasonable, in practice this natural man will always act rightly. The man with a strong body, mind, and pity that is uncorrupted by reason will always be happy, while in Locke only the man who is exceedingly reasonable and strong can be happy in nature. For Locke, society exists to fix the fact that there are unreasonable men in nature. Civil law's aim is to make men act reasonably. Once man leaves Rousseau's original state of nature—utopia—he can never return.⁴⁵ Instead man is corrupted by reason forever. But Rousseau takes us back to the original state of savage man to show us the qualities, virtues, and natural sentiment of pity that make the happiness of this state possible. Rousseau's society will deal with reason to the best of its ability by creating civil laws that remind men of their natural pity and try to force virtue upon them by reminding them to have compassion rather than use reason. Trusting that individual incidents from *The Virginian* will clarify both these explanations even as the philosophies of Locke and Rousseau battle for the moral foundation of our Western Hero, I will begin to examine the parts of the book that make these thoughts possible.

Quality and Equality in The Virginian

THERE CAN BE NO doubt of this:—

All America is divided into two classes,—the quality and the equality.

⁴⁵ This is evidenced by Rousseau's claim that once society fails, men devolve into a second and evil state of nature ruled by power and injustice. Once reason and society are bestowed on man it cannot be undone (like Adam's original sin cannot be undone). We must deal with the consequences the best way possible.

The latter will always recognize the former when mistaken for it. Both will be with us until our women bear nothing but kings.

It was through the Declaration of Independence that we Americans acknowledged the *eternal inequality* of man. For by it we abolished a cut-and-dried aristocracy. We had seen little men artificially held down in high places, and great men artificially held down in low places, and our own justice-loving hearts abhorred this violence to human nature. Therefore, we decreed that every man should thenceforth have equal liberty to find his own level. By this very decree we acknowledged and gave freedom to true aristocracy, saying, "Let the best man win, whoever he is." Let the best man win! That is America's word. That is true democracy. And true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing. If anybody cannot see this, so much the worse for his eyesight.⁴⁶

By nature, America is founded on equality and the resulting inequality. Compare this passage from the *Virginian* to Jefferson who wrote to John Adams saying, "For I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents."⁴⁷ Wister, within the context of his novel, has carefully shown and stated this very idea. This is perhaps the defining philosophic statement in the book, and it precedes one of the book's most fascinating stories. Following this great quote, "The Game and The Nation" is acted out before the reader. The "Game" takes place as the *Virginian* is assigned by Judge Henry to lead a group of about six hands

east to sell cattle. They get the cattle aboard the train and follow along to Chicago, taking the cattle to market. Unfortunately, getting the cattle safely to Chicago did not finish the work. As the book explains, "Moreover, Chicago finished up the steers; but the new-made deputy foreman had then to lead his six highly unoccupied brethren away from towns, and back in peace to the ranch, or disappoint the Judge, who needed their services. These things sometimes go wrong in a land where they say you are all born equal."⁴⁸ So the *Virginian* is left to lead these rowdy and equal cowhands from Chicago back to Medicine Bow, a truly man-sized task. As they begin the train ride back to duty news of a gold rush up north in the town of Rawhide, which the men will pass en route to Medicine Bow, Trampas realizes the temptations of the young men and determines to lead them on a romantic gold hunt, while the *Virginian* must get them back to punching cows. Thus the game begins; a battle of wits to decide who is the superior man—who is part of the aristocracy of virtue.

The narrator, who is off to visit the Judge, joins the group going west along with Scipio and Shorty, both of whom the *Virginian* hires. Here, the tenderfoot narrator is told a tall tale by Trampas and the hands as a slap in the face aimed at the *Virginian*'s leadership through his friend. The men tell the narrator a tall tale about a snake bite that ends with a ridiculous punchline, embarrassing him, and by extension the *Virginian*, for his gullibility. The mutiny seems well set as Trampas has conducted a successful insult upon the *Virginian* through the narrator. Then, Trampas even works up the courage to tell a joke on the *Virginian*, his leader, in front of the men. A flood along the lines has washed out the rail ahead at a small town, which

⁴⁶ Wister, 114.

⁴⁷ Jefferson, Letter to John Adams, October 28, 1813.

⁴⁸ Wister, 119.

seems like bad news for the Virginian because Trampas will have more time to persuade the others to mutiny. The cards seem to be falling Trampas' way because now there will be more time to sow golden dreams amongst the idle hands. The bridge, which has been washed out for days, has stacked up several other trains ahead of the Virginian's. The small rail town is out of food and lodging, and the people, especially the easterners traveling on the express train, are quite uncomfortable. The Virginian then springs into action. Using information gleaned from the narrator about the eastern delicacy of frog legs, the Virginian begins to weave his own web of deception. Finding a bog, greatly expanded by the flood, he catches a huge mess of frogs. Returning to the train, he and Scipio—who is now the cook—begin frying up batches of frog legs. At first the men are skeptical, but the Virginian assures them that his experience on a California frog ranch is good. The hungry hands devour the frogs, and the easterners begin to gather round. The famished easterners are buying and eating frog legs as fast as they are cooked, providing the perfect setting for the Virginian to weave a tale about the hundreds of dollars he used to make frog ranching in California. Trampas becomes interested, believing that there is actual money in frog ranching. Falling for the tale, Trampas urges the Virginian to tell him more. The frogs were shipped east in glass cars, he says, and graced the tables of the finest eastern restaurants of New York and Philadelphia. Everyone was making money and Trampas was dreaming about frog ranching until the Virginian said that disease broke out and the workers on the frog ranches began to grow webbed feet. When this punch line hits, Trampas is embarrassed in front of both the hands and a huge audience of strangers enjoying the joke. He looks like a sucker. Trampas loses authority,

and the hands follow the Virginian back to Medicine Bow with their tail between their legs. The Virginian is the best man, and he wins. Somehow this game I believe parallels America, "The Nation" and from Wister's view it is a key description of America's basic principle—natural equality allows for inequality, or in other words, freedom means allowing the best men by nature to prevail, and the Virginian told the best story.

It must be obvious in a book of vast inequality that equality does not mean that man is equal in every respect. The first thing that this quote brings to mind is Europe. Wister claims that America was founded on a principle completely opposite of what governed Europe. For in Europe, society operated on a class system; one was born into a class, and remained there regardless of natural talents and abilities. Sometimes fools were born to be kings and so-called aristocrats, and great men were born as peasants. Society did not let each man pursue what his natural talents would have allowed him to accomplish. The fool became king despite the violence to nature, the people, and himself that this caused. For the fool had perhaps only the ability to hoe a field, but society forced him to be a king. Likewise, certain great men with kingly abilities and souls were born into families whose highest station was to work the land. Society would not permit these great men to use their full ability of mind and body because they were, by society's command, only allowed to become what the conventional laws allowed.

By the Declaration, America abolished this "cut-and-dried aristocracy," as Wister writes, and gave each man "equal liberty to find his own level." "Equal liberty to find his own level" seems to be a direct assault on the societies of Europe. In America, we did not decree that a man should necessarily become anything based

upon his birth. He gets to use his faculties, his mind, his body, his labor, and anything else to become what he wants and what he can be. This is the equality of America that comes to mind from *The Virginian*. The Virginian is one of these men who was born lowly but has great faculties of mind and body to rise up and above. He clearly rises above men like Trampas, Shorty, Scipio, and all others. This is his natural ability, and he is free to use it in America—and particularly in the state of nature that is Wyoming.

From the first look, this seems quite parallel to the teachings of John Locke. If true democracy and true aristocracy are the same thing, both massive equality and inequality will result. And is this not what Locke preaches? Man is naturally equal in liberty, and all have the right to use that liberty to acquire property, preserve their lives, and pursue happiness. However, this natural right to pursue property and happiness with one's natural faculties leads to massive inequalities. For the Virginian rises far beyond a man like Shorty. So nature, while at the same time granting all equal liberty, creates massive inequality. Government is instituted among men to protect both the basic equality of equal liberty and the resulting inequalities of property. The Virginian is a great worker and useful man so his boss, Judge Henry, promotes him to foreman and then later makes him a partner. This is justice according to Wister. We Americans abhor the injustice of society predetermining a man's value. American justice rewards men proportionally to their worth.

Consider the greatest example of this type of equality from *The Virginian*. When Shorty comes to the Virginian to ask for a raise, the Virginian tries to make him understand that equality means that all men ought to receive in proportion to what they earn by their own talents. Shorty claims he

can make more money than the Virginian and Judge Henry are paying, but the Virginian argues that even if he could, it would be unjust. The Virginian knows Shorty is less talented by nature than others. He says, "Well, yes. Sometimes a man can—when he's not worth it, I mean. But it don't generally last...After a while," he continued, "I noticed a right strange fact. The money that I made easy that I *wasn't* worth, it went like it came. I strained myself none gettin' or spendin' it. But the money I made hard that I *was* worth, why, I began to feel right careful about that."⁴⁹ The Virginian tells Shorty how equality ought to work. Every man has the equal opportunity to make himself the best possible, and then every man should get what he deserves, according to his talents. Therefore, each equally gets what he earns, which is often a very unequal amount.

Shorty does not understand. He mixes two different versions of equality in his unreasoned mind. First, he is jealous of the Virginian, implying that he believes equality means that all should be equally compensated regardless of worth. This expands equality contrary to the Virginian's understanding because each man would be held to an unnaturally equal level, not free to find his own level. At the same time that Shorty thinks about this version of equality by outcome, he misunderstands the origins of inequality. He thinks that inequality is based on luck, fate, or some other injustice. This is why he does not care how he makes more money or whether his wage corresponds to his worth. He wishes that the world held people to equal levels, but in the absence of this, he hopes to game inequality by getting a salary unequally higher than his value. Shorty is not a Lockean character,⁵⁰

⁴⁹ *The Virginian*, 201-202.

⁵⁰ Some might argue that Shorty can still fit into Locke's nature as an unreasonable person. His lack of mental ability could be because he has not

so it is little surprise to see him fouling up this version of equality. The *Virginian* defines equality as equal opportunity to find your own level, which seems to represent a very Lockean understanding of equality and inequality.

Of course to rest here would leave out the possibility of finding a trace of Rousseau within this equality. When searching for Rousseau, the first thing that comes to mind is that the story does not take place in America proper. It is not in a civilized state, but rather these examples exist in a territory that is in the state of nature. As America cut free the constraints of European society, Wyoming might be seen as breaking down the barriers caused by American society. After all, the *Virginian* does not experience American equality back in the settled east. In fact, the book seems to imply that had he stayed back in Virginia, he would have had people, namely his brothers, telling him what to do all the time. He came west to be free. Somehow throughout the book and the Western story in general, the reader is left with the impression that the pure equality of letting the best man win is lost in the east. That is why we go to the west to see truly great heroes like the *Virginian*. There might not be government enforced class systems in America, but back east, social conventions, religion, attitudes, and so many other factors battle for control of one's life that freedom seems less complete. Has something of the spirit of the Revolution been lost? Has America, founded on liberty and equality,

applied himself and has abandoned himself to ignorance. While plausible, this argument I think ignores the novel's favorable interpretation of Shorty, his kindness to animals, and his natural goodness. Unreasonable men, for Locke, are bad men, and Shorty therefore does not fit. Shorty is best characterized by Rousseau—a man lacking reason who is naturally good because of kindness.

slipped back toward the artificial aristocracy of Europe?

The *Virginian's* love interest, Miss Mary Stark Wood (a.k.a. Molly) of Bennington, Vermont provides an excellent example of the problem with equality even in America. A Yankee of impeccable descent with a proud lineage that is traced to the American Revolution, she and especially her family seem to not understand equality. First, a brief word on Bennington. It seems from all respects a banal town. People scurry around either making money with Yankee frugality or gossiping with churchgoing passion. Molly is courted by the wealthiest young man in the area, Sam Bannett. Bennington is aghast when she turns down his offers. He is respected, suitable, proper, and the darling of the church ladies. While she has the sense to reject Sam out of an impulse to maintain her freedom and pursue happiness in her own way—because she is in love with the *Virginian*—Molly still worries about people saying that “she had married below her station.”⁵¹ There is not anything bad about either Bennington or Sam. Rather they are portrayed by the novel as incomplete and lacking from the perspective of nature. They rely too much upon the opinions of society, the gossip of the church, and other conventions in making their decisions. Therefore, while it is not founded on a false government aristocracy, Bennington seems to have instituted its own private version of unnatural aristocracy. Molly, despite her many virtues in which she is superior to her fellow Vermonters, still assumes that men have a “station.”

This introduces the problem that all society might be a hindrance on equality, even American society. Bennington seems to corrupt the natural understanding of equality, replacing it with an artificial

⁵¹ *The Virginian*, 235.

system of class stations. For Locke, society preserves natural equality by magnifying and preserving natural inequality. For Rousseau though, the state of nature in the absence of society is the most equal state of man. Society which is forced upon us by reason (sin, fall of man, etc.) creates inequalities because it leads to men distinguishing each other based on unnatural standards. This creates the artificial aristocracies that Wister and Rousseau despise so much.

The Virginian and the Equality of Trampas' Reason

The Virginian's state of nature includes two other characters with reasoning and moral capacities that are in stark contrast to the Virginian's. From telling distasteful tales about ladies, to rustling cattle, to abusing men of lesser capacity, and to cowardly shooting a man in the back, Trampas is evil. Yet Trampas, the villain, is by typical standards not an unreasonable man. Is he merely failing in his reason (Locke), or is Trampas a critique on the dangers of reason (Rousseau)? Is he misusing reason or forgetting to care for others because his natural pity has been destroyed by reason? Trampas is introduced to the reader as he plays cards with the Virginian. After accepting much hounding from Trampas, the Virginian finally calls him out—the western challenge to shut up or draw steel. Trampas, recognizing the better and faster man, backs down. The novel writes of the Virginian, “In no company would the black-headed man who had visited Arizona be rated a novice at the cool art of self-preservation.”⁵² The Virginian can use power as well as reason to preserve himself and his fellow man. In comparing him to Trampas at this moment,

the author observes of Trampas, “I looked at his face, and thought it sullen, but tricky rather than courageous.”⁵³ Trampas has a type of reason or else he would not be tricky. He knows how to persuade and use men. He plays to men's passions, and in his attempt to convince the men to desert the Virginian, it is clear that he is a powerful force to be reckoned with.

An example of Trampas' practical reason is displayed during his distasteful comments about Molly prior to the dance. Once Molly shows up in Medicine Bow to teach school, all the men for miles around come courting, and she rakes in numerous marriage proposals. Playing on the men's frustration at their failures with Molly and their natural taste for such humor, Trampas is riding high the night of the dance by implying that Molly and Lin McLean, a local cowboy, are carrying on an improper relationship. The Virginian steps in, forces Trampas to apologize, and gives a statement about how men ought to be decent towards ladies, respecting their honor. Hoping that the crowd would not take to the Virginian's decency, “The liar stood and sneered experimentally, looking at Public Opinion. But this changeful deity was no longer with him, and he heard it variously assenting, ‘That's so,’ and ‘She's a lady,’ and otherwise excellently moralizing.”⁵⁴ Trampas is no fool. When told to shut up by public opinion, he shut up. He plays his cards carefully with shrewd reason. The Virginian's superior ability to control public opinion and persuade men goes quite far in explaining Trampas' own shortcomings with regard to reason. At almost every turn he is out-reasoned by the Virginian. John Locke would explain this as Trampas' misunderstanding of men and reason. While at times Trampas uses reason, his reason

⁵² The Virginian, 33.

⁵³ The Virginian, 33.

⁵⁴ The Virginian, 90.

seems incomplete because men eventually reject him and his ways. He only recognizes his own preservation and his own appetites. Trampas never follows Locke's rule of using reason to look out for fellow men's preservation and preserving all as much as possible. Equality, for Trampas, includes only him. I think that most of the characters in the book—with the exception of Shorty—eventually see Trampas' incomplete and selfish understanding of equality, so public opinion sides with the Virginian.

But the Virginian's victories do not just rely on reason. At cards and at the dance the Virginian uses his physical talents to best Trampas. Trampas knows that he must back down or risk combat with a superior man. Trampas is always scheming and conniving, trying to get an advantage on everyone else, and he is willing to resort to crime to do it. Were Trampas stronger than the Virginian, he might have had his way. If he had forced the Virginian to back down, Trampas could likely have continued to disparage Molly with public opinion on his side, reason ignored. To finally stop his evil something more than reason is required—courage.

The courage required by the state of nature in *The Virginian*, in which Trampas must be faced and defeated, seems to require a hybrid of Locke and Rousseau's teachings on natural man. While reason definitely comes down on Locke's side, courage begins to introduce Rousseau to the mix. This is not to say that Locke does not have a great claim upon the Virginian's courage. The perfect man for Locke should be courageous, strong, and feisty in preserving himself and others. He should stand up with strength to defend others and execute the law of nature. The basis for this courage is of course reason for Locke. Man must reason about what is just, and once he has done so, he should do whatever it takes to defend and promote justice. Rousseau also

believes in a type of courage, but it is the result not of reason but of natural pity and compassion. For Rousseau, pity is the basis of preservation of others, and if the Virginian finds his courage for defending himself and then others from a natural pity, one could argue that his natural courage stems from a source that Rousseau supports. The question of whether courage arises from reason or pity is perhaps the pivotal point in deciding between which state of nature, Locke's or Rousseau's, Wister means to portray in the novel.

Trampas in a certain light could be viewed as an example of Rousseau's critique on reason. Reason for Rousseau is dangerous because men have misused it to negate the natural sentiment of pity. Trampas seems like a cold calculator of reason as he judges public opinion and determines how much evil he can get away with. He completely ignores others' rights because he has reasoned away all pity for them. Man, according to Rousseau, has a natural drive for self-preservation, and a natural pity that leads to the preservation of others. Both of these exist before reason. Rousseau observes that many reasonable men do not care for others at all, so he concludes that reason often destroys men's pity. If Trampas had pity for his fellow man, he would be more concerned for their preservation and act less on his own passion to satisfy his own desires.

Trampas, then, can be viewed alternately as a man with incomplete reason, which causes him to ignore his fellow man or viewed as a man whose reason has damaged his natural pity, leading him to disregard the well-being of others. As no character is as developed or crucial to the story as the Virginian, it is probably best to make final judgments on the reason and pity debate based on this character's actions. When the Virginian uses his raw power and ability with weapons to assist his victories

over Trampas, we know that he is facing the evil that Trampas presents with courage—either as a result of his natural reason or pity.

The Virginian and the Equality of Shorty's Will

The reader is also introduced to and becomes fond of Shorty. Shorty is an enigmatic character because his lack of reason leads him to stupid decisions. However, Shorty makes these decisions in complete innocence of their effects, and Wister shows us the Virginian's respect for Shorty's simple kindness. Shorty is a man who is utterly unreasonable, a lost dog as the narrator calls him. As a man he would seem worthless, yet he draws praise and pity from the Virginian. As such a character, Shorty serves as another source of our understanding of nature and natural man. He is useful both for the way the reader can view him and for the actions and thoughts that he provokes in our hero. Shorty is empty, devoid of reason; he "came, like a lost dog when you whistle to him."⁵⁵ In a world full of reasoned men he is nothing but a slave, gullible to their every trick and turn. Yet despite his having no ideas, one can imagine that the world might be decent if everyone were like Shorty. Shorty is in many ways Rousseau's natural man. He has no reason, but as the Virginian remarks, "Shorty is kind to animals. He has gentled that hawss Pedro he bought with his first money. Gentled him wonderful. When a man is kind to dumb animals, I always say he has got some good in him."⁵⁶ Here we

see kindness to animals, but this is no reasonable kindness; rather it is a manifestation of Shorty's natural pity or compassion. Shorty does not think about preserving the whole or helping animals because it is reasonable; he is naturally kind; he feels natural pity. So despite his lack of reason the Virginian believes that Shorty has some good. And the reader is perhaps even more touched by Shorty's goodness in seeing his love for his horse Pedro. He cares for him like a child, petting, training, and fussing over a horse. It is goodness from a man without reason.

Shorty, our innocent fool, is roped by Trampas into joining the gang of rustlers. Shorty is not bad, but his lack of reason makes him a useful tool for Trampas' evil schemes. Out rustling Shorty is as unsure as always. He is the one that builds a fire, giving away the group's location and leading to the apprehension and hanging of two rustlers, Steve and Ed. Trampas and Shorty manage to escape for the moment. After the hanging, the Virginian and the narrator ride off carrying on this conversation:

"It is kind of pitiful about Shorty."

"Very pitiful," I said.

"Do you know about him?" the Virginian asked.

"I know there's no real harm in him, and some real good, and that he has not got the brains necessary to be a horse thief."⁵⁷

This is Shorty—a man without the brains or reason to be bad. There is some good in him, a natural goodness that exists without any reason. His redeeming qualities are his kindness to animals and perhaps a natural pity that Shorty feels for all beings. And this, in turn, evokes pity in the narrator and

⁵⁵ The Virginian, 125.

⁵⁶ The Virginian, 197.

⁵⁷ The Virginian, 289.

the Virginian. The west was a cruel land of roping, cutting, branding, and shooting when necessary. But the Virginian sees that this has not ruined Shorty's natural kindness, for natural his kindness must be since he has no reason to guide him to such an end. This pity from the Virginian also causes the reader to respect the Virginian even more.

Toward the half-way mark of the book, Wister introduces a new character—Scipio, who joins the train westward with Shorty and the narrator on the return trip from selling cattle in Chicago. The purpose of Scipio's character is difficult to perceive, for he is like the Virginian in so many ways. Scipio is capable of exercising virtue of both mind and body to an extent that is nearly equal to that of the Virginian. The story offers him no opportunity to prove his mettle in action, but his mind follows all the Virginian's logic, he seems to have a deep and true understanding of human nature, and there is never any evidence that his body is incapable of cashing the many checks that his mouth tends to write. So what element of greatness does Scipio lack in this vast nature? One possible answer is that Scipio lacks pity. As the Virginian fusses over poor Shorty, Scipio says, "No, I ain't sorry for him. Any man old enough to have hair on his face ought to see through Trampas."⁵⁸ Scipio has no mercy or pity for Shorty despite being reasonable and good. Perhaps he has not thought through life as fully as the Virginian. Something is good about Shorty and his natural kindness, and the Virginian both recognizes this and adds to it by having pity for the lesser man, or he lacks a proper sense of natural pity.

Shorty also sends money east—to a woman. The story is unclear in explaining the particulars. It may be that this money is a type of child support, or it may be that a former love back east is just taking

advantage of Shorty's foolishness. Either way Shorty is not blamed, and the fact that he wants more money so that he can send more to this woman increases the Virginian's pity for Shorty. Because he has no reason Shorty is easily manipulated and becomes a follower of either good men like the Virginian or bad men like Trampas. The way in which men make use of reason makes it impossible (as Rousseau would say) for men like Shorty to live in our current society of fallen men. Shorty ends up shot in the back by Trampas; his innocent nature defeated by the clever reason of Trampas. When Shorty is left to himself, though, he seems good. He tames animals, acts charitably, and is kind and harmless to fellow beings. Shorty appears to be the embodiment of natural pity, but he also demonstrates that pity is not a sufficient basis for virtue in civil society.

Conclusion of the Virginian, Trampas and Shorty

These three crucial characters, the Virginian, Trampas, and Shorty, all exist in *The Virginian's* state of nature. They are effective at bringing forth different elements of the state of nature. From Locke's standpoint, one could view them all as men in varying degrees of reason. The Virginian has perfectly reasoned out life and is good. Trampas uses his faculty of reason but misapplies it toward bad things and is thus both unreasonable and bad. Shorty, a natural idiot, as Locke might call him, has the capacity for reason but actually reasons not at all. In the absence of reason, making moral judgments is difficult. Reason is good, and unreasonableness is bad, but what is lack of reason in the sense represented by Shorty? Those who are wholly ignorant cannot be rightly judged on a standard that upholds reason as the measure. This

⁵⁸ *The Virginian*, 197.

interpretation does not fit well with the book. The Virginian sees *good* in Shorty. He does judge him, so there must be another element other than reason present in the book's state of nature and natural man.

From Rousseau's perspective, Shorty is uncorrupted by reason, a relic of the first state of nature that is no longer possible for man. He is part of the book to show what man once was without or before reason. As a man without reason, he would be uncorrupted and naturally function on self-preservation and pity if only all others were the same as him. While he does not consciously understand morality, Shorty acts and wills as he should by nature. Secondly, Trampas would seem to be Rousseau's perfect example of reason's corruption. Trampas is reasonable and evil. He uses his reason to corrupt or conceal his own natural pity and poison the actions of Shorty's good will, guiding Shorty away from what he would naturally do. The Virginian has reason and is not afraid to use it, but he has not let it corrupt or supersede his natural pity. Yet for Rousseau, the many examples of reason that I will examine from the Virginian question the correctness of the full Rousseauian interpretation. The Virginian does not merely will things; he often reasons himself through them, and it is not clear that his will is not dependent upon prior or somehow natural reasoning. This would seem to force the Virginian back toward the domain of Locke. It might be that the Virginian represents the right combination of reason and pity—that is, he combines Locke and Rousseau into one heroic and virtuous man.

This examination generally concludes that the basics of the book's state of nature and the characters in that state represent a mix of elements from Locke and Rousseau. I believe that the examples cited provide good evidence for both arguments, but also complicate our attempts to classify

the book's philosophy as either that of Locke or Rousseau. The analysis of characters is not satisfactorily completed by demanding that they must be interpreted exclusively in either a Lockean or Rousseauian framework. Therefore, I am going to broaden the study to include more examples and actions from the book, and other western novels or films that shine light upon the problems of the state of nature.

The Hero

A hero is one who courageously defends what is right. The concept of heroism is a constant in all westerns, and *The Virginian* is no different. I will try to examine the hero problem here because it may shed light on equality, and the specific question of whether *The Virginian* shows that equality is lost within the confines of society. The idea of the "hero" has for good reason been forced upon us most when considering Rousseau. The question in this section, therefore, is whether the Virginian is meant to provide us with an example of a Rousseauian hero.

To begin I should state the obvious—the Virginian is a hero. He can do it all. From fighting, riding, roping, to wooing women, and eventually engaging in politics, he strides the earth with stoutness of both body and mind. The emergence of a hero presupposes the existence of natural equality. A hero is the best man. A hero is a winning man. For the best man to win, natural equality—and with it natural inequality—must be practiced and allowed, for as Wister recognizes in the great quote that started this discussion, unjust and artificially unequal societies keep the best men from winning. Unfortunately in *The Virginian*, there is only one heroic man—the Virginian. No other character can claim that mantle. To help shed more light on the idea of a natural hero, I would therefore like to momentarily set aside *The Virginian* to

examine one of the greatest western movies ever made: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance is useful because it splits the different heroic elements into two characters. The first hero is Ransom Stoddard, played by Jimmy Stewart, who disdains the use of violence, attempting instead to bring law and order to Shinbone—a town that seems to represent the state of nature. The second hero is Tom Doniphon, played by John Wayne. As you can assume by the actor, this is a great man. He dominates the town of Shinbone—it is his town and without him, its existence would be shakier than it already is. For Doniphon is the one man with the strength and will to stand up against Liberty Valance and his band of ruffians. Valance is another great man, but one who uses his natural strength and ability for only his own pleasures and desires—particularly his desire to dominate others as a tyrant. Valance lacks both pity and reason, and, therefore, he cares only about himself. Doniphon uses his strength for good purposes, which suggests that he must either have reason or pity. Many of his actions, however, like breaking up the school in town, suggest that Doniphon is not good because of reason. This great natural man, rather, is made good by pity, as shown at the beginning when he rescues the pathetic Stoddard. Some natural pity in Doniphon caused him to stop and help this other weak man, bringing him back to town after he was beaten by Valance. Stoddard is then nursed back to health by the woman he eventually steals from Doniphon. The heroic courage of Doniphon points toward, or makes possible, the establishment of civil society and law and order out of the state of nature—despite Doniphon's apparent contempt for the efficacy of law. Doniphon seems to prefer enforcing natural law with his gun, for as he proudly tells Stoddard

upon his arrival in Shinbone, “Out here a man settles things his own way.” Ironically, Doniphon's heroic deeds are no longer needed in a land governed by reason, and as reason and law take root, Doniphon's pity is no longer sufficient to make him “good” in society's opinion. Doniphon dies in his run-down house a forgotten man. His natural greatness could not conform to society, and society, once formed, left him behind so that he died in obscurity even in the peaceful society that he helped to establish.

Doniphon is on all accounts Rousseau's hero. He acts on pity; he is strong; he wills things; he gets what he wills; and he always wills what is right. The thought of anything, even society, robbing man of such greatness as shown in Doniphon makes the viewer sad. Because Doniphon lived in the state of nature, a state of perfect equality, he was free to be the best possible man. Once society, not a state of perfect equality, began, he was less free and no longer a great man. So has not society caused the downfall or at least adulteration of both equality and the hero? Rousseau and Tom Doniphon would both say ‘yes.’

Ransom Stoddard, the man that Doniphon saves, presents another type of hero in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Stoddard is weaker and smaller but not without courage. He relies upon the law and the reason that founds the law, rather than force. He expects men to be reasonable and abide by the law. In Shinbone, where there is no law and men like Liberty Valance are unreasonable, Ransom struggles. In town he tries to set up a law office and begins teaching people the “unnatural” act of reading. When Doniphon breaks up his school by force, we see the problem Ransom faces. Sometimes force is required to defend what is good. Sometimes force is required to preserve individuals and society; and when no established government exists to do these things, it becomes the duty of

each to execute the law of nature. Stoddard eventually realizes this, and with heroic courage, goes out into the street to face Liberty in a gunfight. Of course he will lose, and he knows that he must surely die. However, Stoddard still finds heroic courage to face Liberty, and we can still view him as heroic even while we question his ability to win such a battle. Almost miraculously, Stoddard does not die and goes on once the west becomes civilized to become a respected politician and eventually a U.S. Senator. In a reasonable, law-abiding society he becomes a great man and a hero, but he is always remembered as the man who shot Liberty Valence. While Locke might wish his hero had more physical ability than Stoddard, in Stoddard we see the fundamental quality of a Lockean hero—the man who reasons about what ought to be done, about justice, and is willing to defend it even with his life. He is reasonable and courageously defends what he reasons is right.

From the perspective of the movie, however, Stoddard seems to come up a little short of Doniphon. His courage in facing Liberty is weakened by the fact that he walks out in the street to face him wearing an apron. It appears womanish, a sign of weakness in a world where individual power is all that can enforce nature's law. Nor can the fact that Stoddard would have died at the end of Liberty's gun, were it not for Doniphon's clandestine assistance, be completely discounted. We expect heroes to win. So while Stoddard is a hero of civilization, his heroism is incomplete in the state of nature. Likewise, the movie portrays Doniphon's heroics to be worthless in civil society. John Ford, the movie's director, presents us with examples of Rousseau's ideal man—Doniphon, and Locke's ideal man—Stoddard, which shows us quite clearly the abilities and weaknesses of each. Yet even after this comparison,

something in the strong will of Doniphon seems to draw us to him more than Stoddard who needs law and order to be fully heroic.

The Hero's Principles: Reason and Pity, Equality and Scripture

This western example furthers the contrast between pity and reason, which are the causes of courage. Rousseau expects a man to be courageous because he has pity, while Locke demands courage because of reason. The Virginian exists alone as a hero, which makes comparison more difficult, but discovering whether pity or reason is his cause of courage and heroism is crucial to determining if he lives in and personifies the natural equality of Rousseau or Locke.

The heroics of the Virginian are certainly numerous. The Virginian himself only enforces nature's rule with death two times. The first occurrence, when the Virginian was hanging two men, including a former friend, caused him much pain. Reason was used by both the Virginian and the Judge to justify the hanging to others, including Molly. Everyone in the book sees the reasons for putting the thieves to death. In fact, it seems that the Virginian acted directly against pity. He pitied his friend Steve because he knew him when he was good. When talking to the narrator as they rode away from the swinging men, he changed the subject saying, "It is kind of pitiful about Shorty,"⁵⁹ referring to Shorty's joining Trampas' gang of rustlers. Pity was obviously on his mind. Throughout the book the Virginian often makes up clever parallel conversations to get information or talk about the subject at hand without revealing too much of himself. He wants to speak of pity, but does not apply it directly to Steve to hide some of his emotion. As the Virginian ends his discussion with the

⁵⁹ The Virginian, 289.

narrator about Steve and the hanging, he says to his pony, "You Monte hawss, you think you are wise, but there's a lot of things you don't savvy."⁶⁰ Here the Virginian tells his horse that he, as a man, can reason and have wisdom greater than an animal. So while the Virginian, like a horse, might feel pity, he apparently has the ability to conquer it with reason. He is not only wise like an animal; he savvies more than a beast. For Rousseau, the rejection of pity with reason is a great evil, but in this case, the Virginian uses reason to produce justice in a situation where pity would have blocked justice.

The action of the book finishes with the gunfight between the Virginian and Trampas. Something about this incident suggests a courageous action much like the courage and action inspired by Rousseau's natural instinct of pity. After riding into town with his bride-to-be, the Virginian learns that Trampas has arrived before him and has been slandering the Virginian's character. At the bar the Virginian is greeted thus by a local townsman:

"Glad to see yu've got your gun with you," continued the happy fool. "You know what Trampas claims about that affair of yours in the Tetons? He claims that if everything was known about the killing of Shorty—"⁶¹

Trampas is in town and looking for a fight, spreading the word that the Virginian murdered Shorty. After the hanging, when Trampas and Shorty got away, the Virginian and the narrator follow two tracks. The tracks became one at a point on the trail where they had find Shorty shot through the back. The Virginian and the reader know that Trampas committed the murder, but the evidence is merely circumstantial at best,

and the rumor is easily turned on the Virginian by the same circumstances. Minutes after the Virginian arrives in town Trampas barges into the bar to make the challenge official:

Trampas broke suddenly free.

"Your friends have saved your life," he rang out, with obscene epithets. "I'll give you till sundown to leave town."

There was total silence instantly.

"Trampas," spoke the Virginian, "I don't want trouble with you."

"He never has wanted it," Trampas sneered to the bystanders. "He has been dodging it five years. But I've got him corralled."⁶²

This unfortunate challenge, issued at the bar, leaves the Virginian in an awful predicament. He must first decide whether to tell Molly about the coming showdown. As the Virginian strolls the boardwalk thinking about his situation, he meets the bishop of Wyoming who has just arrived in town for tomorrow's marriage. The bishop, having heard the gossip, questioned the Virginian about the situation. The narrator explains that the good clergyman knows that Trampas is evil, that the Virginian is good and that he wants badly to side with the Virginian. However, the good Christian states, "I should run away from Trampas."⁶³ Is the minister a coward of no worth? No. The Virginian greatly respects him as a man of principle, courage, and God. The Virginian praised the bishop for his bravery saying, "I saw yu' walk unarmed into that White River excitement when those two other parsons was a-foggin' and a-fannin' for their own safety."⁶⁴ The bishop is a good man and a courageous man, but

⁶⁰ The Virginian, 289.

⁶¹ The Virginian, 333.

⁶² The Virginian, 334.

⁶³ The Virginian, 336.

⁶⁴ The Virginian, 336.

Scripture—not equality—is his principle. If the bishop would not fight for the Bible, he would nevertheless face death and die for it. In saying that he would run—and thereby attempting to persuade the Virginian to run—the bishop attempts to make the Virginian adopt the principles of the Bible. They argue as follows:

“If the Bible,” said the bishop, “which I believe to be God’s word, was anything to you--”

“It is something to me, seh. I have found fine truths in it.”⁶⁵

So here is the crux: it is the Bible against equality as understood by the Virginian. This exchange is full of understatement but contains a clear refutation of parts of the Bible. The Virginian has read the Bible; he finds good things in it, but he will not live his life based upon every verse. The Virginian lives his life based upon the laws of nature, and while the Bible can be used to further natural principles, some men interpret it in ways that contradict nature’s law. Neither convention, civilization, nor the Bible should ever abridge equality. The Virginian will not turn the other cheek when to do so would render him less than Trampas’s equal.

We know then that the Virginian turns away from certain civilized versions of Christian and Biblical teachings in his life. Why does he cling to equality even against the Bible and reason of the good minister? As the argument draws to a close the narrator observes, “The good bishop was at a standstill. Of all kicking against the pricks none is so hard as this kick of a professing Christian against the whole instinct of human man.”⁶⁶ Here the narrator lays out the battle on quite Rousseauian terms.

Clearly some principle or creed inside the Virginian is driving him to act against the Christianity portrayed by Wister’s bishop. Yet the Good Book is not kicking against reason but instinct. Instinct is ingrained in man anterior to reason. Man, when acting in a state before reason, is wicked for Locke because it is reason that brings to us a proper understanding of nature’s law. Rousseau, however, believes that man is good and noble before reason because he still looks out for the good of others with natural pity, or “a natural repugnance to see any sensitive being perish or suffer, principally our fellow men.”⁶⁷ The Virginian is our hero, and his actions follow the instinct of human man, not the religion of society. Also when Wister uses the phrase “human man,” elements of viewing man as a species seep through. Rousseau is of course the philosopher who considers man as a species of animal. The Virginian will fight Trampas because he has stayed true to his natural pity and animal instincts. Religion, society, and reason will not hold him back from defending equality in this moment.

However, I suppose it is unclear why fighting Trampas now is good even based upon Rousseau’s natural pity and instincts. To simply say that the Virginian is the hero and, therefore, good, as I did in the previous paragraph, is incomplete. To begin with there is a clear but confusing distinction to make from Rousseau. In the *Second Discourse* he states:

Savage man, by nature committed to instinct alone, or rather compensated for the instinct he perhaps lacks by faculties capable of substituting for it at first, and then of raising him far above nature, will therefore begin with purely animal functions.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ The Virginian, 337.

⁶⁶ The Virginian, 337.

⁶⁷ Rousseau, Preface to Second Discourse, 95.

⁶⁸ Rousseau, Second Discourse, 115.

For “whereas each species has only its own proper instinct, man—perhaps having none that belongs to him—appropriates them all to himself.”⁶⁹ Man does not by nature originally have the instincts of eating certain foods or doing certain actions. He learns these things by observing animals. The faculty that allows us to surpass the natural instincts of animals is that of self-perfection. Animals lack freedom because they are enslaved to their instincts. Man has freedom because he creates his instincts using his will, which is driven by and has the ability of self-perfection. Yet as the will and self-perfection create man’s later instincts (eating, building nests, food gathering), the will and self-perfection flow from the true nature of man— self-preservation and pity. These two qualities, or instincts if you will, give rise to all else in natural man. Pity, paralleling Locke’s reason, shows man his duties toward others and gives them certain qualities and freedom not shared by other animals.

So if the Virginian is to be justified for acting nobly, we must be able to find a trail back to his natural pity to support his fighting Trampas. Pity here is not hard to find. We know that Trampas thinks he sees Shorty for an instant before the gunfight. Again the memory of Shorty’s murder flashes to the reader’s mind. Trampas is evil. He harms his fellow man. He has caused good people to suffer and die. A man who properly pities his fellow man would want to remove such a cause of harm from the world. This is what the Virginian does but cannot explain. He tells the bishop, “I can’t give her—her nor anybody in heaven or earth—I can’t give my—my—we’ll never get at it seh! There’s no good in words. Good-by.”⁷⁰ There is for almost any

philosopher a great ungraspable faculty that makes man what he is. A man, as the Virginian indicates, can more easily and justly give up his life than to separate himself from this defining faculty. The Virginian would give his life for Molly, but he cannot give her or anyone else this faculty. To do so would make him less than a man and worse than a dead man. For Locke that element is reason; Rousseau believes that faculty is pity. For the Virginian it is not always clear, but in the moments before the gunfight, instinct and pity seem to drive his actions because he seems unable to explain any reasons for his action.

The argument for reason is not without support at this time, yet it seems that in the end it gives way. Reason of course functions parallel to pity, and there are many good reasons for fighting Trampas, reasons about bad men, reasons already laid forth during the hanging earlier in the book. The just and reasonable man must enforce the law of nature, and the Virginian could act on reason. If this were the case, I think that he would be able to better explain his actions to the preacher and Molly. Of course in his discussion with Molly, the Virginian attempts to say that other men’s opinions and benefits are not at stake. This would then be an action neither based on reason or pity but a kind of self-preservation. It is an individual thing. The Virginian said, “What men say about my nature is not just merely an outside thing. For the fact that I let’em keep on sayin’ it is a proof that I don’t value my nature enough to shield it from their slander and give them their punishment.”⁷¹ Perhaps it is wholly an individual thing. If so, it would be based upon self-preservation. The Virginian can preserve himself—that is his physical nature—by fleeing town. That mere self-preservation is not what is at

⁶⁹ Rousseau, Second Discourse, 106.

⁷⁰ The Virginian, 338.

⁷¹ The Virginian, 341.

stake. The Virginian realizes that preserving one's self means protecting and following one's human faculty of either reason or pity. For without this element one is no longer a proper human. Therefore, the hero has discovered that the two elements of man (preservation and reason, and preservation and pity) must be inseparable. The individual and the "outside thing" are both necessary. Proper self-preservation should always be in accord with reason and/or pity. Even death should not separate the two principles of man. So while this point does not add either to reason or pity's claim upon the Virginian, it does strengthen his argument for fighting Trampas. Despite the preacher, and Molly calling off their wedding, he is determined to go through with the deed. His equality as a man, and mankind's equality are simultaneously at stake, just as self-preservation and in this case pity must be simultaneously working in man.

Molly, the civilized, educated, teacher from back east does not understand these things. She clings to law, to her conscience. She would rather the Virginian preserve himself and preserve her views of civilization than preserve himself as a natural, equal, and heroic man. Women certainly seem a reasonable and civilizing force, willing to sacrifice natural equality for the greater security of the law. Wister writes of Molly, "Thus did her New England conscience battle to the end, and, in the end, capitulate to love."⁷² Her New England conscience? Was this law; was this reason; was this religion, was this will; was this a misunderstanding of equality? What a New England conscience exactly is cannot be said, for Molly is not as developed a character as the Virginian. Suffice it to say though that elements of law, reason, religion, will, and her flawed eastern

understanding of equality are to blame. Nor would I be so daring as to contemplate the method of her conversion. It is enough again to see that the Virginian and his ways are justified. Love conquered, keeping them together. Perhaps a greater understanding of reason, pity, or equality was awakened in Molly too, but such a debate would lead to the reasonableness of love, a topic which deserves a discourse of its own which would be too long to deal with in this essay.

We see in the Virginian a heroism and understanding of equality that seems to have a base in both Rousseau and Locke. He is a hero of reason and a hero of pity. I have attempted to collapse as much as possible the differences between Rousseau and Locke. For both believe that man should by nature preserve himself, and both believe that man should offer help to others, or at least avoid harming others. The end is roughly the same. The end of government and civil society may become more complex, but for the moment, it seems that the end of natural man is quite similar if not the same. There are distinguishable differences between reason and pity, which are the two different natural faculties that make natural man good. These distinctions are what I have tried to untangle from the Virginian's character, but as we have seen, it is difficult to do because both reason and pity seem quite capable of producing the natural equality and heroic inequality that is the Virginian. From certain standpoints the Virginian seems a reasoned Lockean, while at other times he takes up the pity of Rousseau, and no matter which motivation he uses, he always does the right thing.

Religion and Equality

One major subject that needs to be addressed is the role of religion, both conventional (God as understood in civil society) and natural (God as understood in

⁷² The Virginian, 345.

the state of nature). In considering the gunfight, I have already brought up certain elements of religion to which the *Virginian* does not adhere. However, *The Virginian* spends several chapters dedicated to the more specific parts of the subject, and many other moments in the book contain religious lessons. Clearly Wister believes that the type of religion practiced by men has a great effect upon their understanding of equality. Likewise, by nature God has certain qualities that a believer in natural equality must accept. Men in such a state of nature are free to worship a God who supports their personal interpretation of nature's law. Therefore, an understanding of God is another way of examining the natural man's perception of the laws of nature, for in nature the God who creates nature cannot be separated from it.

The natural God, as understood by men in nature, and the problems with institutional religion are first brought up by the *Virginian* when he asks the narrator, "Would you be a parson?"⁷³ The *Virginian* goes on to bring up the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury and declares that he would never be either. He then moves to the subject of why there are so many "religions" within Christianity: Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists, Romanists and more, he says, "One God and fifteen religions."⁷⁴ The *Virginian*, a type of natural man, believes that by nature there is only one God. This God is good, He made man equal, and He treats people equally. A proper natural man will acknowledge this God, for in a sense, it adds to or at least deifies equality and freedom. This natural God is quite passive. He made the beautiful land and the mountains, for as the *Virginian* says, "'Somebody,' he swept an arm at the sunset and the mountains, 'must have made

all that, I know.'"⁷⁵ Aside from creating nature and nature's law, God seems fairly removed and content with letting man live, governed only by a divine law of nature, which reflects His will.

As another sign of *The Virginian's* belief in natural equality, he asks no special action or privilege from God. While he believes in a very natural God, he seems to think that such a God limits Himself to actions that fit within His own law—the law of nature. The *Virginian* believes in a Creator God, much like the one in the Declaration of Independence. He believes that this God is good, but he is either uncomfortable with asking Him for divine favor, or more likely he believes that this God has in general manifested His divine power through the nature—and the laws derived from that nature—that He created. Therefore, a man need not pray; he need not sacrifice, but he must live according to nature's and hence God's law. Once man transitions from nature to civil society, God becomes at least in part interpreted by the regime rather than nature. Men, either by government decree (Europe) or by private association (America) become subject to a new view of God. Civil society is based upon the belief that the law of nature is insufficient because it has no firm boundaries except to those who are perfectly responsible. Men, as we have discussed, are by nature equally free to interpret and enforce this law of nature as they see it to the best of their unequal abilities. For the *Virginian*, and men of nature, God is the cause and the embodiment of the law of nature. Therefore, although interpretations of God vary, the more an understanding of God comports to nature, the more accurate, pure and true it is. Once society is formed, it must govern according to the law of nature, but to do so, government must

⁷³ *The Virginian*, 159.

⁷⁴ *The Virginian*, 161.

⁷⁵ *The Virginian*, 165.

“codify” the law of nature, making it knowable and applicable to all. Wister seems to suggest that something similar happens to man’s understanding of God in civil society: formal religions must attempt to codify God’s laws—which are knowable but not clearly defined through nature—and make them as applicable to all as the law of nature. In this messy process extra rites, doctrines, hierarchies, and so on are added to God—becoming religion. This dogmatic standardization by specific “religions” seems to be what the Virginian dislikes. If religion is to fall in line with the law of civil society, it must be based on “definite” texts and/or specific church bodies. The Virginian—and I believe Wister—suggests that as a result, men place too much emphasis on texts such as the Bible and on conventional distinctions between denominations (which literally means “names”) like Catholic, Methodist, and Baptist who each offer their own Biblical interpretations. Therefore, these texts and church bodies have moved too far away from the true law of nature because once instituted in civil society, they are at best an image of natural law, distorted by the social and political demands of the regime. Wister suggests that established religion and political society are in fact inseparable because the former is necessary to perfect and supplement the laws of the latter.

With this in mind I want to examine a particular part of American religion that the Virginian and Wister find to be quite dangerous to both man and society. The preacher who spurs the Virginian’s to ask “Would you be a parson?” is coming to Judge Henry’s ranch to convert the cowboys with baptism by fire. The Rev. Dr. Alexander MacBride, makes a rather awkward and immediately bothersome entrance upon the Judge, his wife, the Virginian, Molly, the narrator, and two eastern visitors at the Sunk Creek Ranch.

And come as it must, the narrator tells us that MacBride’s sermon went as follows:

I had heard it all often before; but preached to cow-boys it took on a new glare of untimeliness, of grotesque obsolescence—as if some one should say, “Let me persuade you to admire woman,” and forthwith hold out her bleached bones to you. The cow-boys were told that not only could they do no good, but that if they did contrive to, it would not help them. Nay, more, not only honest deeds availed them nothing, but even if they accepted this especial creed which was being explained to them as necessary for salvation, still it might not save them. Their sin was indeed the cause of their damnation, yet, keeping from sin, they might nevertheless be lost. It had all been settled for them not only before they were born, but before Adam was shaped...No; wrath he spoke of, and never once of love.⁷⁶

Dr. MacBride is of course one of the strictest and plainest teachers of the complete predestination—and natural inequality—of man. Back at the bunk the cowboys laugh off the message with quips like, “Well I’m going to quit fleeing from temptation”—“That’s so! Better get it in the neck after a good time than a poor one,” and “If I happened to learn what they had predestinated me to do, I’d do the other thing, just to show’em!”⁷⁷ But the narrator notices that the newly made foreman, the Virginian, seems to have been all ears at the sermon, and had retired to his quarters without a word. This causes the narrator to wonder if the Virginian had actually “got some religion.” Off to sleep, in the room he

⁷⁶ The Virginian, 179.

⁷⁷ The Virginina, 181.

shares with the visiting preacher, narrator is wakened by the Virginian who has come to the Doctor for some spiritual counsel:

“Are you awake, seh?”

“What? What’s that? What is it?”

“Excuse me, seh. The enemy is winning on me. I’m feeling less inward opposition to sin.”

The lamp was lighted, and I listened to some further exhortations.⁷⁸

Three times during the night did the Virginian call upon the powers of Dr. MacBride to ward off sin, and each time the preacher seemed more and more bothered at having his sleep interrupted. In the morning the Virginian seemed afraid to face the day without the strength of the reverend to keep him from temptation. “‘You’ll be going to breakfast and the ladies, seh, pretty soon,’ said the Virginian, with a chastened voice. ‘But I’ll worry through the day somehow without yu’. And to-night you can turn your wolf loose on me again,’”⁷⁹ indicating that the preacher would again be getting little sleep. At this, the narrator’s laughter could not be muffled in his pillow, and the joke broke across Dr. MacBride’s face, which reddened faster than the morning sky. Embarrassed and angered, the doctor abandons his mission, riding off minutes later to search for fresh victims on whom he could turn his wolf loose. The Judge and the whole ranch including the eastern visitors are nothing but relieved that MacBride’s visit has been deftly shortened by the Virginian’s wit.

Why does Wister take such obvious pains to denounce MacBride and his specific religious interpretation, which apparently the narrator has heard all too often? The soul, or rather bleached bones of

MacBride’s doctrine rests on the predestination of man. Some are chosen by God to go to heaven, and some are not chosen by God, doomed instead to Hell. This choice, not made by men, was decided upon by God before the beginning of the world, according to the preacher. Before the beginning of the world, men were separated into two groups—the saved and the damned. There is no hope of ever moving from one group to the other, so men are fundamentally unequal. A book and a hero, believing firmly in natural equality, cannot stand for any religion that believes that men are unequal under God. The Virginian’s equality demands that the value of each man be determined only by his actions. Society should not, when properly instituted, force great men to be lowly or lowly men to be great. Nor can God by any eternal decree force men to be saved or damned. Doing so would upset natural equality, just as the hereditary aristocracies of Europe which we spoke of earlier did. The best man should always win—even with God. Or as the Virginian says:

“But I know one more thing I would tell Him [God] to His face: if I can’t do nothing long enough and good enough to earn eternal happiness, I can’t do nothing long enough and bad enough to be damned. I reckon He plays a square game with us if He plays at all, and I ain’t bothering my haid about other worlds.”⁸⁰

Being good and living by the law of nature is enough for a natural man like the Virginian. And Wister hopes that when we form society, and hence institute certain more specific religions, we will not forget this lesson, preserving natural equality as

⁷⁸ *The Virginian*, 182.

⁷⁹ *The Virginian*, 183.

⁸⁰ *The Virginian*, 166.

much as possible in whatever creed we must practice.

Easterners and Other Relics of Civilization in The Virginian

There are probably no characters native to the state of nature in *The Virginian*, for all seem to have come West, leaving eastern society. Molly is of course an easterner, but she has been both examined earlier in this essay, and she is eventually transformed by the Virginian to realize natural equality. Her understanding of equality, from her native Vermont, was less than perfect. Other easterners include the narrator, Mr. and Mrs. Ogden who partake in the Dr. MacBride scene, and even the Virginian, originally from Virginia. These parts of civilization are constantly present in *The Virginian* because Wyoming and the Virginian are on the path to civil society, whether we want them to be or not.

Determining the differences and similarities between the Virginian and the civilized people and ideas that we are introduced to could help shed more light on the teachings about equality presented in *The Virginian*. The brutality of the hanging and the gunfight shocks easterners like Molly and the narrator. Yet this does not come from a different understanding of nature, for all believe the thieves and Trampas are bad, but from a smaller problem over how bad men ought to be dealt with or punished. The people from civil society are used to government enforcing the law of nature and are uncomfortable with seeing it enforced by individuals. But the deepest difference and problem with the east surfaces in the actions of both the narrator and Mr. Ogden when they meet the Virginian. Both Ogden and the narrator are aristocrats who are visiting Judge Henry's ranch for respite and enjoyment. When he first meets the Virginian at the book's

beginning, the narrator tries to be jocular with him. After his failure, the narrator thought about the Virginian like this:

This handsome, ungrammatical son of the soil had set between us the bar of his cold and perfect civility. No polished person could have done it better. What was the matter? I looked at him, and suddenly it came to me. If he had tried familiarity with me the first two minutes of our acquaintance, I should have resented it; by what right, then, had I tried it with him? It smacked of patronizing: on this occasion he had come off the better gentleman of the two.⁸¹

The narrator comes west, meets a new man, and breaks natural rules with some type of flawed social convention. The Virginian, close to and in nature, understands that men must be judged on their equality, and he resents the narrator's friendliness before the proper judgments have been made. Again when Mr. Ogden meets the Virginian, it goes like this:

Judge Henry, properly democratic, now introduced him to Ogden. The New Yorker also meant to be properly democratic. "You're the man I've been hearing such a lot about." But familiarity is not equality. "Then I expect yu' have the advantage of me, seh," said the Virginian, very politely.⁸²

Mr. Ogden suffers from the same problem that the narrator first did. When he meets a new and extraordinary man, he pretends to be familiar with him. In his mind by being familiar, he has made himself equal. This

⁸¹ *The Virginian*, 20-21.

⁸² *The Virginian*, 172-173.

false equality could come from two sources. First, as equality in nature leads to natural inequalities; for Locke, this immediate familiarity upsets proper inequalities. Mr. Ogden, perhaps overly democratic, thinks that men are a little more equal than the Virginian understands them to be. Ogden has automatically assumed that he and the Virginian are on a like level, not giving people the time to let them find their own level. Perhaps he does not understand that true democracy will lead to true aristocracy, so he does not allow time to establish the natural aristocracy of men. Mr. Ogden could be placing himself and the Virginian on the same familiar level before they have verified that they are equals.

Secondly, the narrator blames himself for patronizing the Virginian, so it could be that the easterners are using familiarity to hold themselves above the Virginian. I suppose that the quick offer of jocular familiarity when meeting a stranger is based on the arrogant assumption that one's familiarity is desired. Instead of earning a fellow's friendship with deeds, the easterners assume their greatness and value without proof. In offering this unproven friendship, or familiarity, they offend the Virginian's sense of equality. He politely shuts out such advances because they are not properly equal.

The Virginian does not ignore civil society even when he mostly lives in the state of nature. Remember the trick he played on Trampas and the mutineers to get them to return to Judge Henry's ranch? The Virginian fools them into believing that he was once a frog-rancher, shipping frogs east to fine restaurants. The Virginian, when in Omaha, had a casual conversation about the fake menu placed before him. It promised delicacies like *Frogs' legs a la Delmonico*, but in truth offered nothing but steak, hash, eggs, and other lowly staples. The Virginian began questioning the narrator about frog

legs and other eastern fineries. He listened closely to everything that the narrator told him about parts of life which he had never experienced. The Virginian never fears civilization. He is, unlike Tom Doniphan in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, capable of living in civil society. In fact the frog story is a great example of the Virginian's breadth of knowledge in both nature and society. And he uses this knowledge to defeat the ranch hands in the battle of stories. The naïve cowboys fall for his story, no doubt in part because they have no knowledge at all of the delicacies of the civilized world. In a way, the Virginian uses his greater reason and knowledge of society to control the other men. This exercise of reason, could in a Rousseauian sense, be considered bad. But the Virginian uses his greater reason and greater knowledge of civil society to bring the men back to work and back to where they ought to be. The Virginian uses both nature and society as he must to get the right result.

Neither the western state of nature nor the eastern society wholly satisfy the Virginian. He has no trouble working within certain conventions of each as long as equality is upheld. True, the Virginian refutes the false equality of the easterners like the narrator and Ogden, but we should remember also what he does not refute. He does not refute society. When he goes to Bennington, he wears a suit, not his cowboy duds. Equality exists in nature and can exist in society, properly ordered.

The Virginian in Civil Society

A few brief pages at the end of the novel continue to show the success of the Virginian—even in places like Bennington. The bland and established people of Bennington were disappointed with—shall we say—the Virginian's equality: "To see

get out of the train merely a tall man with a usual straw hat, and Scotch homespun suit of a rather better cut than most in Bennington—this was dull.”⁸³ Even at the easterners own games, the Virginian is more than their equal. He does not ride into town whooping like Bennington secretly dreamed. He seems to come to them and meet these poor aristocrats with their clothes, their manners, and on their terms. Nor could this society of well-bred stock fail for long to see the equality and superior faculties of such a great man. As Wister writes:

But most of Bennington soon began to say that Molly’s cow-boy could be invited anywhere and hold his own. The time came when they ceased to speak of him as a cow-boy, and declared that she had shown remarkable sense. But this was not quite yet.⁸⁴

The Virginian then shows Molly and Bennington that men do have a station in life, but it is not one based on birth. The Virginian and all men’s stations are based on their actions, their accomplishments, and their individual talents. These faculties are fundamentally equal to men in both nature and society, and men are free to make unequal use of them in each environment. The Virginian is such a man.

As Wyoming became a state, the Virginian and Molly were back out west—this time in civil society. Law, order, politics, and technology were changing the state of nature that the Virginian had dominated a few years past. Up to every challenge, the book ends thus:

But the railroad came, and built a branch to that land of the Virginian’s

where the coal was. By that time he was an important man, with a strong grip on many various enterprises, and able to give his wife all and more than she asked or desired. Sometimes she missed the Bear Creek days, when she and he had ridden together, and sometimes she declared that his work would kill him. But it does not seem to have done so. Their eldest boy rides the horse Monte; and, strictly between ourselves, I think his father is going to live a long while.⁸⁵

The Virginian has in the end completed the transition from nature, when he roped and rode the range with strength of body. He has, in civil society, become a great man in business and many enterprises exercising his strength of mind and reason. Nothing is capable of taking away from him his strength, virtue, and equality. He has done what neither Tom Doniphan or Ransom Stoddard could do—that is succeed in both a state of nature and a state of civil society. He is a hero in each, properly combining the faculty of reason with the sentiment of pity to always correctly interpret, judge, enforce, and at times simply act upon the law of nature, even when such laws are codified by civil laws rather than interpreted by individual men. Nature may eventually yield to society, but the proper man and the proper society will never notice much difference.

CONCLUSION

Justification of the Virginian’s Equal use of Reason and Pity

As I look back at *The Virginian* and the other works considered in this thesis, the greatness of man—particularly men like the

⁸³ The Virginian, 356.

⁸⁴ The Virginian, 356.

⁸⁵ The Virginian, 359.

Virginian—is stunning. A great man is capable of using both his faculties and his sentiments to do good. Wister uses the Virginian to show us that Locke and Rousseau need not be set against each other. The Virginian uses both reason and pity, constantly preserving his own equal right to freely preserve himself while protecting the interests of others as much as possible. Both Locke and Rousseau believe that man is free; that man is equal; that man has basic virtues in the state of nature. Unfortunately both of these philosophers and *The Virginian* present us with men like Trampas, Shorty, and other problems that make the state of nature less than perfect. Therefore, men create civil society an attempt to use law to rekindle the virtues of nature without the dangers that exist in a lawless state.

This rekindling of natural virtue—the fruit of a right understanding of natural equality—lies at the heart of *The Virginian*. Wister was an eastern aristocrat, often depressed, and without a clear understanding of life. To rejuvenate his body and mind he was sent west by doctors into the wild lands of Wyoming. He experiences the lack of understanding in society and captures the idea of using the Wyoming state of nature to refocus society on its proper end—namely the greater protection of the natural equality than exists in the state of nature. To refocus the aim of society, Wister first lays out the principle of nature—natural equality—its result—which is natural inequality—and the philosophic basis of equality—which is both reason and pity. For Wister, a proper natural man will use reason and pity to recognize his duties toward mankind and respect the natural equality of his fellow man. Too much reliance on either reason or pity might unbalance the soul, leading to the abuses that men like Trampas, Shorty, Scipio, and others portray. These lesser men, unlike the Virginian, have not struck the proper balance between Locke and Rousseau—

reason and pity—and therefore, they lack a whole understanding of man, specifically man's natural equality. Wister defines—some might say redefines—the roots of proper American equality to run equally deep into both the faculty of reason and the unreasonable sentiment of pity. We need a society where each man can find his own level, his proper and just reward for the unequal results of each man's equal use of freedom. Imperfections in both the state of nature and civil society waste virtue and multiply vice by not properly understanding man's natural equality. We must frame society to prevent the problem explained by the Virginian thus when discussing the fate of Bazarov in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*: "I pretty near cried when that young come-outer was dyin', and said about himself, 'I was a giant.' Life made him broad gauge, yu' see, and then took his chance away." The narrator then continues, "[H]e, [the Virginian] like the dying hero in the novel, felt himself to be a giant whom life had mane "broad gauge," and denied opportunity. Fecund nature begets and squanders thousands of these rich seeds in the wilderness of life."⁸⁶

⁸⁶ *The Virginian*, 109-110.