

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "A Dissertation on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind"

PREFACE:

- "Of all human sciences the most useful and most imperfect appears to me to be that of Mankind -----". "For how shall we know the source of inequality of men, if we do not begin by knowing mankind?"
- "And how shall man hope to see himself as nature made him, across all the changes which the succession of place and time must have produced in his original constitution? How can he distinguish what is fundamental in his nature from changes and additions which his circumstances and the advances he has made have introduced to modify his primitive condition?"
- "It is easy to perceive that it is in these successive changes in the constitution of man that we must look for the origin of those differences which now distinguish men, who, it is allowed, are as equal among themselves as were the animals of every kind, before physical causes had introduced those varieties which are now observable among some of them."
- *Rousseau seems to conceive of a time when all animals were in a simple and ideal state, including equality of all. As time changed he pictures conditions growing both better and worse upon circumstance, and becoming the original sources of inequality. General speculation is easier than pointing out specific cases.*
- "For it is by no means a light undertaking to distinguish properly between what is original and what is artificial in the actual nature of man, or to form a true idea of a state which no longer exists, perhaps never did exist, -----"
- "What experiments would have to be made, to discover the nature of man? And how are those experiments to be made in a state of society?"
- *Rousseau, like many interested in empirical observations wanted to find a way to apply the new type of science proposed by Isaac Newton to humankind. But the experimental tools were simply not available at that time.*
- "The moderns, understanding, by the term law, merely a rule prescribed to a moral being, that is to say intelligent, free and considered in his relations with other beings, consequently confine the jurisdiction of natural law to man, as the only animal endowed with reason."
- "-----that it is impossible to comprehend the law of nature, and consequently to obey it, without being a subtle casuist and a profound metaphysician."

- ▪ *Both John Locke and Rousseau, and others, are trying to find an “original state of nature” which would determine “natural laws” that humans should obey. But all of the history up to now has distorted and blocked our ability to find this “natural” state.*

- “All we can know with any certainty respecting this law is that, if it is to be a law, not only the will of those it obliges must be sensible of their submission to it; but also, to be natural, it must come directly from the voice of nature.”

- “---I can perceive in it two principles prior to reason, one of them 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.”

- ▪ *Thus early humans merely followed these two laws without too much thinking, and would not hurt others except for one’s own preservation---to which he would give himself the preference. Other animals, being less intelligent, cannot follow these rules. And it is the duty of humans not to wantonly ill-treat these other sentient (with feelings of pain) creatures. He also looks at modern society of opposites: powerful and oppression of the weak, riches and poverty, and the modern institutions founded only on shifting sand.*

- “In considering what we should have become, had we been left to, ourselves, we should learn to bless Him, whose gracious hand, correcting our institutions, and giving them an immovable basis, have prevented these disorders which would ourselves have arisen from them, and caused our happiness to come from those very sources which seemed likely to involve us in misery”

A DISSERTATION ON THE ORIGIN AND FOUNDATION OF THE INEQUALITY OF MANKIND

- “I conceive that there are two kinds of inequality among the human species: one, which I call natural or physical, because it is established by nature, and consists in a difference of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind or of the soul; and another, which may be called moral or political inequality, because it depends on a kind of convention, and is established, or at least authorized by the consent of men. This latter consists of different privileges, which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others: such as that of being more rich, more honored, more powerful or even in a position to exact obedience.

- ▪ *Rousseau points out that as soon as God gave Adam and Eve rules, they were no longer in the state of nature. He then proposes to put all historical thinking aside, “but only as a mere conditional and hypothetical reasoning, rather calculated to explain the nature of things, than to ascertain their actual origin; just like the hypotheses which our physicists daily form respecting the formation of the world.”*

- “There is. I feel, an age at which the individual man would wish to stop: you are about to inquire about the age at which you would have liked your whole species to stand still. Discontented with your present state, for reasons which threaten your unfortunate descendents with still greater discontent, you will perhaps wish it were in your power to go back; and this feeling should be panegyric on your first ancestors, a criticism of your ancestors, a criticism on your contemporaries, and a terror to the unfortunates who will come after you.”

THE FIRST PART

- *Rousseau states that he does not want to consider how the human body - internal and external - changed over time, but to confine himself to the "state of nature" in which humans lived and how that changed over time. He simply proposes that "—he walked on two legs, made use of his hands as we do, directed his looks over all nature, and measured with his eyes the vast expanse of Heaven."*
- *Thus in the "natural state" Rousseau conceived humans as "—an animal weaker than some. And less agile than others; but taking him all around, the most advantageously organized of any. I see him satisfying his hunger at the first oak, and slacking his thirst at the first brook; finding his bed at the foot of a tree which afforded him a repast; with that all his wants supplied."*
- *Being naked and subjected to extremes weather and seasons, having to defend against predators unarmed, they would be robust and tough like the Spartans (**not like city people**). "Give civilized man time to gather all his machines about him, and he would no doubt easily beat the savage; but if you would see a more unequal contest set them together naked and unarmed, and you will see the advantage of having all the forces constantly at our disposal, of being always prepared for every event, and carrying one's self, as if it were, perpetually whole and entire about one."*
- *At this point he disagrees with the view of Hobbes that man is naturally intrepid, and is intent only on attacking and fighting. But Rousseau claims that such circumstances are only promoted when humans live in large numbers together, and do NOT occur in the "state of nature." He even believed that there is not violence with other animals because they come to respect the strength of humans. Also, due to his intelligence, he can fight or fly as he chooses.*
- *But man has enemies more formidable, for which is not provided with such means of defense; these are natural infirmities of infancy, old age, and illness of every kind, melancholy **proofs of our weakness, of which the two first are common to all animals, and the last belongs chiefly to man in the state of society.**" He claims that many diseases in society are due to the great inequality of manner of living: some people living in a state of idleness and others under excessive labor. Excessive eating by the wealthy. Poor quality food of the poor. Thus society has taken humans from the state of nature where all are equal.*
- *Rousseau then propose the strange idea that animals in the state of nature do not need medicines or physicians!! Animals in nature heal naturally??!! But is correct when he states that animals in nature are more robust and healthy than in captivity under human control.*
- *"It is thus with man also: as he becomes sociable and a slave, he grows weak, timid and servile; his effeminate way of life totally enervates his strength and courage."*
- *Rousseau now looks at the metaphysical side of natural humans: "I see nothing in any animal but an ingenious machine, to which nature hath given senses to wind itself up, and to guard itself, to a certain degree, against anything that might tend to disorder or destroy it. I perceive exactly the same things in the human machine, with this difference,*

that in the operations of the brute, nature is the sole agent, whereas man has some share in its own operations, **in his character as a free agent.**”

- “Some philosophers have even maintained that there is a greater difference between one man and another than between some men and some beasts. Nature lays her command on every animal, and the brute obeys her voice. Man receives the same impulsion, but at the same time knows himself at liberty to acquiesce or resist, -----“
- *Rousseau also points out another interesting character of humans: they can learn and produce new ideas and technologies; they can also lose their human capabilities and descend to states even lower than that of the brute!! Can be drawn out of the original state of nature.*
- *Rousseau then assumes early humans to be “savage man”, “being destitute of every species of intelligence, can have no passions save those of the latter kind: his desires never go beyond his physical wants. The only goods he recognizes in the universe are food, a female, and sleep: the only evils he fears are pain and hunger.” The knowledge of death made man different from the brutes.*
- *But somehow “passions” arose for the desire of knowledge. He then goes on to talk about much time being needed for humans to find and then control fire, and the agriculture (needs this because too many people had emerged), and language, and of all its benefits (long, useless story). But eventually he gets to:*
- “---For myself, I am so aghast at the increasing difficulties which present themselves, and so well convinced of the almost demonstrable impossibility that languages show owe their original institution to merely human means, that I leave, to anyone who will undertake it, the discussion of the difficult problem, which was most necessary, the existence of society to the invention of language, or the invention of language to the establishment of society.
- *Rousseau then asks: “But as I understand the word miserable, it either has no meaning at all, or else signifies only a painful privation of something, or a state of suffering either in body or soul. I should be glad to have explained to me, what kind of misery a free being, whose heart is at ease and whose body is in health, can possibly suffer. I would ask also, whether a social or a natural life is most likely to become insupportable to those who enjoy it. We see around us hardly a creature in civil society, who does not lament his existence; we even see many deprive themselves of as much of it as they can, and laws human and Devine together can hardly put a stop to the disorder-----.” He goes on to say, “In instinct alone, he had all he required for living in a state of nature; and with a developed understanding he has only just enough to support life in society.”*
- “It appears, at first view, that men in the state of nature, having no moral relations or determinate obligations one with another, could not be either good or bad, virtuous or vicious.
- Rousseau then suggests that we need to look more closely when comparing the advantages of science and technology in modern times compared to that in the natural state, But he insists, **“Above all, let is not conclude, with Hobbes, that because man has no idea of goodness, he must be naturally wicked: that he is viscous**

because he does not know virtue; that he always refuses to do his fellow creatures service s which he does not think they have a right to demand; etc

- THE SECOND PART

Since I grew very weary of continuing the SECOND PART, the following is taken completely from Wikipedia:

- As humans were forced to associate together more closely by the pressure of population growth, they underwent a psychological transformation and came to value the good opinion of others as an essential component of their own well-being. Rousseau associated this new self-awareness with a golden age of human flourishing. However, the development of agriculture, metallurgy, private property, and the division of labor led to humans becoming increasingly dependent on one another, and led to inequality. The resulting state of conflict led Rousseau to suggest that the first state was invented as a kind of social contract made at the suggestion of the rich and powerful. This original contract was deeply flawed as the wealthiest and most powerful members of society tricked the general population, and thus instituted inequality as a fundamental feature of human society. Rousseau's own conception of the social contract can be understood as an alternative to this fraudulent form of association. At the end of the Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau explains how the desire to have value in the eyes of others, which originated in the golden age, comes to undermine personal integrity and authenticity in a society marked by interdependence, hierarchy, and inequality.

(The above paragraph is from Wikipedia.)