

A Discourse on Inequality Study Guide

A Discourse on Inequality by Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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Plot Summary

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is one of history's great political philosophers of education. He was a well-known essayist and composer, represented a major strain of Enlightenment thought and went on to influence the French revolution after his death. His two most important philosophical works are *The Social Contract*, which sets out his political theory, and *Emile*, which sets out his philosophy of education. He initiated the modern autobiography with his own *Confessions* and wrote a pre-Romantic novel, known as *Julie*, which prefigured French romantic novel writing.

His fame began in some of his earliest work, which includes the *Discourses*, the subject of the present study guide. Rousseau wrote three *Discourses* in 1750, 1754 and 1755, the *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*, *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, and *Discourse on Political Economy*, respectively.

The first *Discourse*, hereafter the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, argues that the development of arts and sciences help to corrupt human morality. The *Discourse* became Rousseau's first popular success. It had been written, Rousseau notes, in response to an advertisement for an essay contest asking whether the Sciences and Arts contribute to the improvement or corruption of morals. Rousseau here begins his lifelong focus on how civilization corrupts humanity, a theme running throughout the *Discourses*.

The second *Discourse*, hereafter the *Discourse on Inequality*, was written in response to another essay contest asking about the origin of inequality and whether natural law permits it. Rousseau did not win the prize for this essay, but he published the piece anyway. In the *Discourse*, Rousseau distinguishes between physical/natural inequality and moral/political inequality. Natural inequalities are the differences in strength and talent between individuals.

In the original state of nature, savage man is not much affected by these differences. However, as civilization develops, natural inequalities begin to produce moral and political inequality that come first in the form of wealth. Since the rich stand much to gain from the attacks of the poor, they invent political power to protect themselves. Ultimately, however, political power turns against them and enslaves all, generating despotism.

The third *Discourse*, hereafter the *Discourse on Political Economy*, prefigures Rousseau's work in the *Social Contract*. The question arises of how political order should be structured in modern civil society. The problem in modern orders is the extreme oppression of the poor by the rich and the state. The poor would be better off with their savage, primitive state of equality. How can modern political order be justified to them? Ultimately, the only just laws are those that are derived from the "general will" or the will of all persons as a whole, directed to the good of the whole. And only government according to the general will on behalf of the common good can be justified to all.



Chapter 1, A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences, Part I

Chapter 1, A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences, Part I Summary and Analysis

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's earliest Discourse asks about whether morality is purified or corrupted by the 'restoration of the arts and sciences'. Rousseau worries that it is hard to treat the subject properly. He begins by noting that mankind is coming into a new period of reason after many centuries, from Europe's "barbarism." This recovery has required a revolution. Science and art collapsed. However, in the revival, the arts and sciences can exist under government and the law. However, arts and sciences become despotic, stifling man's "original liberty" and causes people to love their slavery. It is this slavery, however, that makes them a civilized people.

Prior to art, men had a rude but natural morality. Human nature was not better than now but humans were secure because they could "see through" one another. Today men lie under restraint, hiding their motives and suppressing them. Society is larger, making motives hard to discern and uncertainty conceals "a train of vices." The arts and sciences have helped us to repress our wickedness. Rousseau sees the progress of art as leading to degeneration and argues that it worked in this way in Ancient Egypt and Greece, and even Rome. The Eastern Roman Empire was another example. It looks like sciences do not improve our morals, as a result. Even Socrates praised ignorance.

Rousseau then turned to analyze the effect of the arts and sciences on France. Luxury, profligacy and slavery have all arise as a result of leaving a state of ignorance. Men should be humiliated by this. Could moral behavior only be brought about by ignorance? Virtue and learning could be contradictory? Rousseau will turn to consider the arts and sciences in themselves to see if this is true.



Chapter 2, A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences, Part II

Chapter 2, A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences, Part II Summary and Analysis

Rousseau begins the second part by arguing that many civilizations have believed that science arose from an enemy of humanity, or superstition. Pride created ethics, geometry of greed, and physics from idleness. And the evil beginning is reproduced in their objects. Arts require luxury; the law would be pointless without injustice. History would be empty if there were no tyrants, wars, etc.

The effects of the sciences are dangerous; they generate idleness and make it possible not to produce good in the world. The more we know, the more time for mischief we have. Our labors seem to matter little, but Rousseau thinks true idleness would return us to the original state of society. Wasting time today is evil. Luxury generates times wasting, which is usually produces by vanity. Rousseau then illustrates with history examples, such as the monarchy of Cyrus and the Franks being conquered by the Gauls.

Artists love applause. Being praised is the greatest compensation for the artist's labors; but what if he worked among a people who cared nothing for art? Then the artist would be sad. In this case, he will bowdlerize his genius and serve the horde. The dissolution of morality follows luxury and this in turn produces the corruption of taste. To illustrate, Rousseau suggest were imagine the morality of mankind in the simplicity of its earliest days. In this period, men lived in the same huts, proud to have the gods observe them. Men now live apart in order to hide their wickedness. Rousseau then tracks the decline of morality following the Romans and the Greeks.

Science also leads to war because it is used to produce better weapons. He worries that children are so occupied with learning science that they have no time to learn virtue. Rousseau understands, though, that idleness in children is an evil. Art sets no good example for them; few artists defend their country or have virtue. The abuse of morality is generated by the growth of inequality between men based on their talents; inequality cheapens virtue. Money is given to wit and creativity but not virtue. Wise men do not chase fortune.

Rousseau thinks that philosophers promulgate wicked doctrines; further, that printing presses ensure that they will corrupt some in each age forever. By seeking remedies for evils that do not exist, we empower these false doctrines. The progress of art and science has added little to happiness. Morality has been corrupted by it, and this corruption has destroyed taste. Textbook writers have spread knowledge to the masses, and knowledge is no longer guarded. The learning of the people is regimented and not self-guiding.



Rousseau argues that men of great talent should not reap glory and should remain obscure. They should not seek reputation and build their happiness on the opinions of others. We need not teach men their duty but instead pursue virtue. True philosophy is knowing how to act, not how to speak like the greatest and consequently most vain philosophers.



Chapter 3, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Dedication and Preface

Chapter 3, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Dedication and Preface Summary and Analysis

Rousseau begins the dedication by thanking his sovereign lords for the opportunity to reflect on the origin of inequality. He states that if he could have chosen where he was born, he would prefer a land where everyone was equal to his occupation, a state where all individuals are well-known to each other, and that has love of country. It would be a land where the interests of the sovereign and the people were one. Rousseau wants to live and die free.

Rousseau wishes to live in a community where no one is above the law and that everyone would recognize the authority of the state. He is worried about republican forms of government because the government and society can have opposing interests. He also prefers a state that is neither interested in conquest, nor is threatened by it. Yet he also wants a State where the cities have the right to make laws. Everyone would be able to propose laws freely and the state should be small enough for a direct rather than a representative democracy.

Rousseau, however, is not in such a state but he loves his fellow citizens and wants to address them. He is saddened that they have lost their freedom, but his people are still greater, given human nature anyway. He hopes they keep their democracy and obey the law, and exhorts them to not be distrust towards one another, lest the state fall apart. Rousseau again honors the magistrates and encourages them to think of the interests of their subjects. He is hopeful for the future of the republic. Let the youth seek "light" pleasures and repentance.

Rousseau then turns to the preface. The main task of the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality is to discover the origin of inequality. This question can only be answered by first figuring out the nature of the human. It is tragic that increasing knowledge moves men from their original state, making true human nature hard to uncover. We might look to current developments for the present behavior and nature of the human, but Rousseau thinks that these developments could not have altered every human at once. Rousseau argues that since we have no direct evidence, we should ask what experiments must be made to discover the nature man and how in a state of society can these experiments be made.

However, there is much disagreement on the nature of man, particularly about the nature of human law. Finding a good definition of natural law is quite difficult. Older centuries thought of natural law as beyond humanity, whereas the moderns understand the natural law as those rules that men give to themselves. Rousseau sees two natural principles in humanity prior to reason, an interest in welfare and preservation, and

another a natural repugnance of seeing others suffer pain and death. The rules of natural right derive from these.

The problem is that if we only look at humanity presently, we see violence in the powerful, and oppression of the weak. We must make a serious study of man to penetrate past present appearances.



Chapter 4, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Part One

Chapter 4, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Part One Summary and Analysis

Rousseau sees two types of inequality among humans: first, a natural or physical inequality established by nature and another which is moral or political inequality; the latter depends on convention and is established by means of social decisions. Natural inequality's source cannot be uncovered. We cannot relate the two sorts of equality to each other. Instead, the Discourse will focus on moral and political equality. Rousseau aims to see where right to the place of violence and nature came under the law. He wants to know how the strong came to serve the weak.

When imagining the state of nature, we cannot impute to men knowledge of justice. Locke's view will not do. No, the strong oppressed the weak and this led to government through a non-moral process, prior to any authority. Men simply dwelt on wants and oppressed each other. This was social man. Rousseau proposes to proceed hypothetically to understand what man is now, just as physicists use hypotheses.

Rousseau begins by supposing that men are fully developed, that they have two legs, hands, eyes, and so on. We ignore supernatural gifts and artificial faculties acquired through a long process. Men hunt and eat and their children grow up and do the same. Hobbes insists that men always fought and others hold the opposite. Rousseau focuses on the natural enemies man has, animals, disease, old age, and so on but Rousseau again imagines these conditions away, as savages do not exhibit them to the degree that moderns do.

The savage man of the state of nature is constantly focused on his self-preservation. However, Rousseau turns next to analyze man's "metaphysical and moral" side. The human animal is an ingenious machine that can make its own choices. Men have instincts that they can control but it is difficult. Men have ideas and senses and they can be combined. They are also capable of self-improvement. Human understanding is rooted in the passions and the understanding; passions allow the improvement of reason because we want knowledge in order to enjoy ourselves. Savage men, though, have difficulties discovering this ability. There is a gulf between the sensation of the savage and simple knowledge.

Humans owe many ideas to their use of speech. Grammar makes use of the understanding. Inventing language must have taken an enormous length of time. Rousseau then takes a detour to discuss the complexities and details of nature. He is not sure how language came about, but wonders if it did not originate in the interaction between parent and child. But Rousseau passes from this concern. The first language of man was undoubtedly the "simple cry of nature." Modern language was built on this.



Early language was primitive and denoted a small number of objects at first. As the words grew in number, cognition expanded. Rousseau then asks his reader to wonder which part of language was easiest to invent; Rousseau is impressed with the difficulties of the question.

Men in the state of nature could survive and had enough understanding to persist over centuries. Rousseau thinks they had no moral relations with one another, nor obligations; they were neither good or bad, virtuous or vicious. Hobbes was wrong to think that because men have no natural sense of good that they must be wicked. A principle has escaped Hobbes, that of amour-propre. Amour-propre is an extremely important idea in Rousseau's theory of the person. It is an innate repugnance at seeing fellow-creatures suffer. It is, in another way, the faculty that allows us to sympathize with others and take their perspective. Compassion is a natural virtue and even modern depravity has not destroyed it.

For Rousseau, reason removes men from amour-propre, because it allows them to cut themselves off from the world; reflection removes men from reality. Philosophy isolates the human and teaches self-interest. Amour-propre perseveres, however, and preserves the species. Nature tells the human to do good for himself and as little evil as he can to others.

Rousseau then begins to worry about a particularly disruptive passion, that, unlike war which could not motivate men to go without subsistence in the state of nature, has the power to disrupt society regularly: love. Rousseau separates the physical and moral aspects of love; in the state of nature, men focus on physical love.

Rousseau then engages in a brief summary of the foregoing features of primitive man; it is necessary to set out this nature to eradicate other errors. When men become dependent on one another due to cooperation, they can dominate one another but they are so dependent inequality does not yet arise. Rousseau will now turn to those features of man that led him both to improve his understanding and become depraved, that made him both wicked and sociable. Rousseau admits that this process could have occurred in many ways.



Chapter 5, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Part Two

Chapter 5, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Part Two Summary and Analysis

Rousseau thinks the man who invented property rights really pulled one over on his fellows but he was also the founder of civil society. Rousseau laments that someone didn't call him out on his lie because it would have saved mankind many calamities. But someone would have invented property anyway.

Rousseau reminds to note that man's first feeling was of his existence and second of self-preservation. Nature gave him what he needed and instinct helped him use it. Natural sentiment led to sex, reproduction and family. The life of man was limited to sensation. But as the number of men grew, so did men's interests. Scarcity arose and new tools were invented, like the fishing rod and the arrow. Men's interests began to conflict.

As some men acquired more than others, they became proud and distinguished between orders of animals first, then of humans. His love of well-being leads him to the idea of cooperation and increasingly fulfilling needs. Then Rousseau speeds through human history, as goods and inventions accumulate and men grow in number. As the family grew, conjugal love and paternal affection did as well. Some grew rich enough for leisure as well. And if they lost their wealth, they would have been unhappy, but to gain more gave them little joy. Rousseau thinks speech arose out of the property phenomenon.

Men start to settle down, form separation bodies and nations arise due to common character, manner, life, good and language, but not laws. But men differ in beauty and talent and this leads comparisons to be made. Jealousy and discourse arise as men learn to repress their natural emotions. Civility evolved from this need as did morality, as rules that would govern life and improve the welfare of all. Punishments follow as well. Repressed men, however, now are divided between amore-propre and primitive emotions.

Slavery and misery follow on the heels of metallurgy and agriculture. It is unclear how these practices came to be, but Rousseau speculates. When the earth was cultivated, it had to be distributed and this produced the rules of justice. Men started to think of the future and realized they had something to lose. If human talents were equal, property would have been equal. But this was not to be.

Natural inequality thus produces economic inequality. The rest of modern society follows from this. Men had to appear to be what they were not and started to produce pomp, cheating, trickery, and so on. When signs could represent riches, such as money, new



accumulation of wealth became possible. The rich became usurpers, the poor thieves, and conflict between the two grew.

The rich can claim that they produced what they produced but it is not clear what gives them standing to demand that others not interfere, particularly when they are hungry. They need the consent of humanity. So the rich man designed arguments to secure the possessions of the rich and build institutions around them to protect these riches.

Producing a supreme power could do this, and so the State was born. Everyone ran "headlong to their chains, in hopes of securing their liberty." This generated society and the law which bound the poor and gave the rich new power. Natural liberty was destroyed. The law of nature only persisted between nations. Bodies politic were formed. Rousseau defends this story of the state's origin. It is superior to explaining it in terms of war and "strong" and "weak" make more sense in terms of "rich" and "poor" until society is established, and laws. Third, the rich produced the state because they had much to lose.

Early governments had no regular form; they changed often and government was imperfect. There were no absolute masters at first, but men gave power to some in order to prevent themselves from being at the mercy of others. Politicians then begin to think of their own power and speak only of liberty to the people. And then men unjustly obliged their children to follow the same system.

Rousseau does not buy Filmer's story that political authority originates with the father, or Pufendorf who suggests that we voluntarily divest ourselves of it. Alienating one's liberty does not preserve it and when we give up liberty we "degrade" our being. Liberty must not be transferred.

Rousseau argues that government didn't begin with arbitrary power. Instead, it was designed to stop the rule of the strongest, of the masses over the rich. Establishing a political body requires a real contract that the parties bind themselves to. This power extends to everything. This system must have appeared great to those who first thought of it, but the magistrates would grow corrupt once they had power.

Differing forms of government result from different levels of inequality that existed when the state arose. Rousseau thinks democracy came first, when inequality was the weakest. He tries to give some historical evidence for this. Following the progress of inequality, we find the establishment of law and property rights got things off the ground. However, magistracy took us further and then its conversion to arbitrary power comes last. Rich and poor characterize the first period, powerful and weak in the second, and master and slave in the third.

This progress is necessary for Rousseau. Next political distinctions generate civil distinctions. People grow unequal with respect to their leaders. Magistrates can now easily usurp power and Rousseau sees the growth of this inequality as inevitable, even if the government didn't intervene. Rewarding persons according to talent would be



enough. Reputation and achievement makes matters worse; but Rousseau resists outlining the mechanism.

Inequality of wealth and condition produces many prejudices; magistrates promote that which weakens men in society. Revolutions come and despotism devours all. Despotism is the final stage, the maturation of inequality. All private persons are equal now, but they are slaves, subject to the will of the master. The original state of equality is similar to this, but it is separated from the final stage by a great many years.

In summary, Rousseau's tracing of the origin of inequality leads to two conclusions. First, that social and political inequality is not nature to man; inequality comes from the growth and advance of the human mind and is legitimized by property and laws. Second, moral inequality derives from positive right and clashes with natural right.



Chapter 6, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Appendix

Chapter 6, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Appendix Summary and Analysis

Rousseau acknowledges that man's current state includes more pain than pleasure, but it is not natural to him, but due to the state of nature. Men have labored yet there is so much suffering. Men's interests appear to conflict and so what is truly to the benefit of all seems in no one's private interest. It looks to many that society subsists on some gaining at others' expense. Rousseau suggests as an illustration for the reader to compare the state of the savage with that of modern man. Poverty, terrible deaths, calamities of war, brutality, torture, divorce, adultery; the list hardly ends. Rousseau then continues to list tragedies.

Luxury brings liberal and mechanical arts, commerce, and letters and so on. Yet even these abilities are degraded in quality. People start to crowd into cities as land holders gain more land. The State grows rich but sometimes they depopulate themselves.

What are we to do? Do we return to savagery? We can no longer subsist on plants and acorns, or without law and magistrates. Rousseau thinks that humans are called to happiness and perfection. The people can form a more perfect union and the gods will smile on them.



Chapter 7, A Discourse on Political Economy

Chapter 7, A Discourse on Political Economy Summary and Analysis

Rousseau focuses in this discourse on the economy of the polity. Rousseau begins with a discussion of the disanalogy between the family and national economy. In the State, most members are naturally equal in terms of ability and political authority is founded only on convention through the use of law. The family and the state have other important differences as well, such as that the father ought to command in the family but government must be singular.

The chief in the state should have no natural interest in the happiness of individuals; in fact, he usually seeks their misery. The public and private economies must be distinguished in various ways. The public economy is government and its authority is sovereignty. The body politic can be understood as an organized, living body, with the sovereign at the head. Public income is the blood and the life of both aspects requires the other. The body also has a will, and the general will tends to the preservation and welfare of the whole and every part. It is the source of laws.

The general will constitutes the rules of justice and the rules of justice must be preserved. The will of the State does not extend outside of itself, however. Political societies are composed of smaller societies that have their own interests but their members are united by common interest. The will of civil associations have two relations, one to the members of the association and the other, a general will. The former is a particular will. The former should not govern the state but only the civil association. The law is not revealed by the machinations of private interest in the state.

The general will is the first principle of public economy and government. Its first principle is that the aim of the government is the common good and should follow the general will. It must know the will to follow it, however, and distinguish it from the private will. The distinction is difficult. The general will must be free and aim to preserve both public liberty and government authority, among other things.

It is truly a paradox that the government both makes men free and subject. However, this is the wonder of the law; men only own obedience to the law, as it is an organ of the will of all which establishes natural equality between men. This "celestial voice" is public reason and teaches men to act according to their own judgment and not be inconsistent with himself.

This is a particularly important idea for Rousseau: the general will is composed and higher than an individual's reason, but it renders all citizens' reasons whole such that in the end, when they follow the law as dictated by the general will, they follow only their



own wills. They are obliged to obey only a law which they give to themselves and therefore lose no freedom in doing so.

The ruler must watch over the observation of the laws; his authority is built on this. Social engagements must be mutual in nature and no one is above the law without renouncing its advantages. No one is bound to any obligation to one who says he is under no obligations. The first duty of the Legislator is to conform law to the general will. In conflict, the spirit of the law should decide particular cases and the general will should be consulted when the law fails. Rousseau then transitions to illustrate these principles in history.

Ultimately political authority derives from the will of each man. People will become what their governments make them, in the end, and so a just government lets a man shape himself.

The second rule of public economy states that if the general will is to be accomplished, particular wills must be conformed to it; virtue is conformity of particular will to the general will. Thus, the citizen acts in accord with the general will and the common good. Virtue cannot be enforced by laws, as laws must be multiplied. Instead, civic virtue must be created. When citizens love their duty, the general will can be brought into practice. Government becomes easy. Citizens can not merely be good but be taught to be so. Patriotism helps in this. Ultimately, if citizens are restrained merely by force, there is no civil society; civil society only exists if it is rooted in the free will of all.

The welfare of a single citizen is not more important than any other in the whole State. Instead, the will of all, the general will, frees men from being enslaved to one another. Rights belong to all men but bad rulers can reduce their effect. The law today only applies to the middle class, with the rich circumvented and the poor oppressed. The poor must be protected against the tyranny of the rich. And therefore, the government must prevent extreme inequality of fortune, but only by depriving men of the means to accumulating it, not redistribution. They must secure citizens against becoming poor. All the people must be citizens for there is no virtue without citizens, no liberty without virtue and no patriotism without liberty.

Without citizens, the state is composed of "debased slaves," including the rulers of the state. Men must be taught to be citizens and history shows how this can be done. Patriotism must come from restrained passions which unrestrained would destroy it. So from birth, men should begin learning to deserve to live. Public education under government regulation is a fundamental rule of popular, legitimate government. Children must be raised "in common in the bosom of equality." Then they will come to cherish each other as brothers and will nothing contrary to the social will. Rousseau then speaks of examples of public education in history.

Citizens protected are not enough. Their subsistence must be considered. The general will must provide for public wants; this is the third essential duty of government. The duty is not to fill granaries but to allow plenty to be within their reach such that labor can always achieve it. The law must keep property from being arbitrarily taken away, for



property is the foundation of civil society. However, people must contribute some property to keep the state going.

Civil societies are usually large, however; the people cannot administer justice directly. Thus public money must pass through the hands of rulers that have their individual interest. The rulers therefore engage in ridiculous expenditure. This must be stopped because the state will perish and the "sacred right" of property lies at its root.

A good ruler of a republic will establish laws and then settle a fund sufficient to pay Magistrates. This fund will consist of money or land. Next, the State rulers administer the money. Then the next rule of finance is to guard against needs rather than increasing revenues. Rulers have many resources to bring this about. For instance, to avoid high taxes during times of short food supply, public granaries might be established. The state must avoid enriching the idle at the expense of the industrious.

Rousseau next turns to consider sources of instability. He first speaks of conquered nations. Production in these cases ceases to balance consumption. Public wants increase as well, which can cause instability in another way. Rousseau remarks on the increase of military technology, often using massive numbers of troops to oppress those in other countries.

Taxes must be decided by a majority on the basis of a proportion rating that reflects the interest of all. Taxes are only legitimate with the consent of the people or their representative. All great thinkers admit this. Rousseau then gives examples. He argues that the social confederacy brings benefits to all, protecting the possessions of the rich, but preventing the poor from being oppressed. There is reason to consent to these arrangements.

However, the poor need the rich and this allows the rich to dictate the terms of their agreement. To rectify this, a progressive tax should be implemented. However, personal taxes can often be too severe. Land taxation is best; industry should not be taxed, as it is destructive, so are food taxes. Rousseau then remarks on the role money plays in the system and remarks on the balance of power between city and country. Various other problems arise from the appearance of advantage, even if it is illusory, such as the advantages generated by speculation.

Rousseau rounds out the Discourse with an extended discussion of how best to manage the state. He also discusses how to understand the value of commodities and tax them. Both are understood in terms of his principles of justice. He illustrates his principles with historical examples and he singles out some goods for heavy taxation. Ultimately, agriculture is too often sacrificed in ways destructive to everyone, even industrialists. Rousseau notes at the very end that if society followed the principles he laid out, everyone would be happy.



Characters

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a famous figure of the French Enlightenment. An essayist, composer, novelist and philosopher, Rousseau's work influenced the French Revolution, French education and helped to produce the genre of modern autobiography and the French romantic novel. Rousseau's autobiography, his *Confessions*, became well-known, as did his novel, *Julie*. However, the two works which made him most famous were *The Social Contract* and *Emile*, the former of which contains his most mature political theory and the second his most developed philosophy of education.

Rousseau had written a dissertation but before 1750 he was relatively unknown. When Rousseau responded to an essay contest which his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, he quickly rose to prominence, particularly due to his seemingly outrageous thesis that the arts and sciences have corrupted human morality.

The Second Discourse, the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, was also written in response to an essay contest. In it, Rousseau develops a theory of the "noble savage" and the tragic impact of civilization on ancient man, and the evolution of the poor from a state of savage inequality to their present miserable servitude. Rousseau brings to prominence the problems of social, economic and political equality, more so than any other political theorist up to that time.

The third Discourse, the *Discourse on Political Economy*, focuses primarily on the duties of government and prefigures Rousseau's important political theory in *The Social Contract*. The Third Discourse contains some development of Rousseau's famous concept of the General Will.

The Noble Savage

Even today, many have an ideal of primitive man as living in an idyllic state. Living in small tribes, ancient man is thought to have been healthier than at present, to have lived only off the land, to treat the earth well and achieve a modest degree of happiness with no want beyond his immediate needs.

Rousseau is among the first to introduce this ideal into human consciousness, seeing civilization as the cause of human downfall, slavery, and death. This image is unlike the theological image of the Fall, which begins with thoughtful developed men with a disposition to bring about their own destruction. Rather, primitive man is more like a beast, and in some ways superior.

In the First Discourse, Rousseau seems to imagine that the noble savage was at least likely a real being and supposes that modern society has corrupted him and that the



arts and sciences of modernity have only made matters worse. However, in the Second Discourse, Rousseau freely admits that the story of the noble savage may be entirely fictitious. Instead, the idea of the noble savage helps to boil down human nature apart from the social effects of society so that the reader might understand what human nature consists in.

The analytical device helps to generate Rousseau's theory of political man and his passions, particularly Rousseau's crucial conception of *amour-propre*. The idea of *amour-propre* is then used to substantiate and motivate the idea of the General Will. In the Third Discourse, as a result, Rousseau is able to use the idea of *amour-propre* and the General Will to generate a theory of justice.

The Poor

Rousseau sees the modern poor of Europe as ruthlessly oppressed by the rich and the state, so much so that they were better off as savages.

The Rich

The rich have much to lose from the potential revolt of the poor; they need the state to protect their property, but the state ultimately rules them instead.

The Magistrate

The bureaucratic official that is only legitimate when he rules according to the General Will.

Civil Society

The society of citizens prior to political order that uses political order to improve its condition.

Citizens

True citizens must have virtue; only if they have virtue can they be free.

Children

Children must be educated to be virtuous citizens; only virtuous citizens can preserve freedom.

The Sovereign

The Sovereign is placed in power by the rich but draws so much power to himself that he creates despotism.

Hobbes

The early modern philosopher who believed that the state of nature was a state of war; Rousseau rejects this picture, focusing instead on a state of nature concern with family, man's need to survive and master nature, and the passion of amore-propre.

Locke

The early modern philosopher who argued that the state of nature was largely peaceful and already contained natural rights. Rousseau denied that morality existed originally in the state of nature but developed as a consequence of convention and society.



Objects/Places

Modern Times

Modern times are characterized by a high level of civilization and a high level of inequality, slavery and pain.

Ancient Times

Ancient times are characterized by a low level of civilization and a low level of inequality, no slavery and little pain.

The State of Nature

The state of nature contains the noble savage who thinks only of his present survival but has a natural tendency to seek his own good and avoid causing pain to others.

The Modern State

The modern state is the invention of the rich to protect their property from the poor.

The General Will

The general will is the will of all persons considering the good of all; the natural law is defined in terms of the general will and all legitimate laws must conform to it.

Tyranny and Slavery

Tyranny and slavery arise from the modern state.

Private Property

The creation of private property involved tricking some to respect the possessions of others; property brought all the goods and ills of modern civilization.

Bureaucracy

Magistrates run the bureaucracy of the state which must conform itself to the general will but private interests often get in the way.



Arts and Sciences

The arts and sciences have only added to the corruption brought by civilization.

Natural Inequality

Natural inequality is the inequality inborn in man, between, say, physical strength and weakness, beauty and ugliness, intelligence and stupidity, etc.

Moral Inequality

Moral inequality arises slowly from natural inequality and arises when some men exert power over others.

Law

Laws are only just when they conform to the General Will, or when they are laws that men give to themselves.

Oppression

Oppression occurs when force is used outside the General Will.



Themes

The Corruption of Humanity by Civilization

The First Discourse has a simple theme: civilization has corrupted humanity. Man was once a noble savage, living day-to-day trying to secure means of subsistence. But this state was one of equality, and an absence of morality; it was a simple existence but a happy one. However, since man was moderately successful in his attempts to survive the savage life, he began to grow in number and eventually civilization bloomed.

Various new features of human life developed but men ultimately had to repress their true instincts not to attack one another and to let others do as they saw fit. For this reason, men became more corrupt inside if more civil on the outside. When men are not watched, they will perform all manner of evil. The arts and sciences only make matters worse. They are developed for bad purposes, for vanity, war or from idleness and they in turn promote these same evils. Rather than basking in the glory of these human achievements we should be wary of them.

In the Second Discourse Rousseau expands much more on the nature of the noble savage and shows how through the growth of his numbers and the increase in his abilities he developed the need to section off property for himself and excludes others. This started off as a trick but was necessary to solve problems of conflict. However, property norms allowed the natural inequalities of men to generate social and economic inequalities. Conflicts arose from this inequality which made it necessary for the rich to invent the state which would eventually enslave all but the rulers. Again, humanity is corrupted by civilization.

The Origin of Inequality

The Second Discourse concerns the origin of inequality. Rousseau begins his explanation by distinguishing between natural inequality, the inequalities given by nature between, say, strength and weakness, or intelligence and stupidity. In the state of nature, men have to struggle to survive and live day-to-day subsisting on what they can find. Natural inequalities do not affect them too much as they have enough to struggle with in dealing with nature.

However, eventually men become successful enough to grow in number and develop language, along with new tools. This makes men more productive and also puts them in competition for resources with one another. As a result, they must invent property. Property norms allow natural inequalities to become social and economic inequalities. Some remain poor and others grow rich. This creates a social conflict, because the poor want what the rich have and the rich stand to lose a lot if the poor revolt.

Thus, the rich create the state to protect them and yield much of their power to it. The state protects the rich against the poor but in return it dominates everyone. Over time,



the state finds ways to consolidate its power and inevitably becomes despotism. This ensconces political and social inequality, with the state ruthlessly oppressing the poor but oppressing the rich as well. Ironically, everyone becomes the slave of the despot, and all in society but one are reduced to their original powerless equality. Now, however, they are miserable.

The Nature of Just Government

The Discourse on Political Economy seems to pick up where the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality left off. The essay begins with men already combined in civil society. Rousseau sees government as having necessarily arisen through unjust processes and then producing further injustice by oppressing the poor. He then asks how this situation might be rectified. In order to do so, Rousseau must advance a theory of political legitimacy.

Rousseau believes that liberty is inalienable, for otherwise the dignity of man is degraded. As a result, traditional social contract theories fail. Political order must not only restrain individuals but not deny them liberty. At first this seems impossible, but Rousseau defends an ingenious solution. The idea of the General Will is the rational will of all combined and aimed at promoting the common good. The individual is rationally committed to the common good by his natural disposition of amour-propre, which gives him reason to think from the perspective of others and care about their well-being. Thus, if coercion is in line with the General Will, then all persons can freely will the coercion, thereby rendering restraint compatible with their freedom.

Only if the coercive law is in conformity with the General Will can it be just and this is the first rule of just government. The second rule is that if the General Will is to be accomplished and private wills conform to it, then the people must be virtuous. If they are not virtuous, they will not act on amour-propre but instead on their private interests. They will then have to be coerced by the law and the legitimacy of civil society will break down. Finally the General Will requires promoting the common good and so the government has an essential duty to provide for public wants. Only if these three rules are followed, can the inevitable concentrations of power in modernity be justified to all.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of the Discourses is that of its author, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau was an 18th century philosopher, writer and composer with strong views about the nature of society and human progress. He was a major figure in the Enlightenment, a movement in Continental Europe that emphasized the innate goodness of the human being and the unlimited power of human reason to make the world a better place.

Rousseau, however, also has pre-Romantic elements, with an emphasis on emotion, nature and the nobility and meaning of life beyond pure reason. These two emphases come together in the Discourses, the one on the beauty of the natural and original and the other on the power of reason and hope for human progress. Rousseau's pre-Romantic element is strongest in the Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, where he argues that modern morality has been corrupted by these products of human reason, that is, art and science.

In the first two Discourses, Rousseau focuses on the ideal of the noble savage, which seems more romantic in its way, but in the Second Discourse, Rousseau admits that to go back to that ancient period is impossible, given what we are like now. Instead, society must now be based on reason and equality and freedom. The Enlightenment emphasis is strongest in the Third Discourse, where Rousseau sets out his conditions for political legitimacy which rely largely on state coercion being used in and only within line with the general will or "public reason" of a society.

Tone

Rousseau's tone in the Discourses is dour, righteous, idyllic and serious. Initially, one may get the impression that Rousseau thinks that modern civilization is a complete disaster. He certainly seems to believe this in the First Discourse. Thus, his tone in this work is largely dour, and serious. He decries the evolution of man from noble savagery to his present miserable state. He seems to think that arts and sciences are far from worth the cost that they have brought on civilization.

The Second Discourse begins with an idyllic tone in Rousseau's attempt to describe the noble savage. However, Rousseau admits that the savage is an idealization meant to strip humanity down to its nature. Thus, he remains serious, intent on answering the sociological question about the origin of inequality. Rousseau then traces man's hypothetical idyllic origin to his current dark state, and the dour tone comes again in Rousseau's descriptions of modern war, oppression of the poor by the rich, the rise of political order and the deceptive nature of private property. A tone of righteousness



arises as well, as Rousseau seems to express a strong disapprobation for human injustice perpetrated upon the weak.

The Third Discourse is the least idyllic. It begins in modern society and is concerned with the theory of the justice society and economy. There is not as much lament for man's modern state but the Third Discourse is even more serious because it is focused on getting clear about the principles of justice.

Structure

Rousseau's Discourses are often printed together but sometimes separately. They were published as separate documents originally and are typically bound together because they range over similar topics. However, the First and Third Discourses by themselves seem to have little in common, since they focus on different topics. Instead, the Second Discourse connects them.

The First Discourse concerns the question of whether the modern arts and sciences have corrupted morality, but this involves appealing to the original, idyllic state of man. The Second Discourse tries to explain where human social and political inequality came from. This also involves theorizing about the original state of man, and Rousseau engages in such theorizing in more detail than in the First Discourse. However, the Second Discourse spends much more time on modern institutional and sociological analysis, and tries to show where the modern state originated. Further, it explains the economic mechanisms by which this order arises.

The Third Discourse picks up where the Second Discourse leaves off. We find ourselves in a modern political economy; what are to make of ourselves, Rousseau wonders? Our society was founded on injustice but perhaps we can make it just by bringing our institutions in line with the General Will and enacting various economic policies conducive to it.

In general, the Discourses have some separate parts. The First Discourse is divided in half. The Second Discourse contains a dedication, a preface, two parts and an appendix. The Third Discourse, however, is simply a single essay.

Quotes

"The question before me is: 'Whether the Restoration of the arts and sciences has had the effect of purifying or corrupting morals.'" (Chapter 1, A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences, Part I, 3)

"It is thus the dissolution of morals, the necessary consequence of luxury, brings with it in its turn the corruption of taste." (Chapter 2, A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences, Part II, 19)

"I should have wished to live and die free: that is, so far subject to the laws that neither I, nor anybody else, should be able to cast off their honorable yoke: the easy and salutary yoke which the haughtiest necks bear with the greater docility." (Chapter 3, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Dedication and Preface, 33)

"What experiments would have to be made, to discover the natural man? And how are those experiments to be made in a state of society?" (Chapter 3, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Dedication and Preface, 44-5)

"How many ages may have elapsed before mankind was in a position to behold any other fire than that of the heavens!" (Chapter 4, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Part I, 62)

"There is another principle which has escaped Hobbes; which, having been bestowed on mankind, to moderate, on certain occasions, the impetuosity of amour-propre, or, before its birth, the desire of self-preservation, tempers the ardor with which he pursues his own welfare, by an innate repugnance at seeing a fellow-creature suffer." (Chapter 4, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Part I, 73)

"The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying 'This is mine', and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society." (Chapter 5, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Part II, 84)

"The cultivation of the earth necessarily brought about its distribution; and property, once recognized, gave rise to the first rules of justice; for, to secure each man his own, it had to be possible for each to have something." (Chapter 5, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Part II, 94)

"It follows from this survey that, as there is hardly any inequality in the state of nature, all the inequality which now prevails owes its strength and growth to the development of our faculties and the advance of the human mind, and becomes at last permanent and legitimate by the establishment of property and laws." (Chapter 5, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Part II, 116)



"What, then, is to be done? Must we destroy society, abolish mine and yours and go back to living in the forests with the bears?" (Chapter 6, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Appendix, 125)

"The body politics, therefore, is also a corporate being possessed of a will; and this general will, which tends always to the preservation and welfare of the whole and of every part, and is the source of the laws, constitutes for all the members of the State, in their relations to one another and to it, the rule of what is just or unjust." (Chapter 7, A Discourse on Political Economy, 132)

"The first and most important rule of legitimate or popular government, that is to say, of government whose object is the good of the people, is therefore, as I have observed, to follow in everything the general will." (Chapter 7, A Discourse on Political Economy, 135)

"There can be no patriotism without liberty, no liberty without virtue, no virtue without citizens; create citizens, and you have everything you need; without them, you will have nothing but debased slaves, from the rulers of the State downwards." (Chapter 7, A Discourse on Political Economy, 147)



Topics for Discussion

What sort of being is Rousseau's noble savage? What is good about his life?

What features of early human life led to the development of civilization, on Rousseau's view?

How do the arts and sciences corrupt human morality, for Rousseau?

Explain Rousseau's account of the origin of inequality.

Where does Rousseau think the state originated?

What is *amour propre*? How does it fit into Rousseau's political philosophy in the second two Discourses?

What are the three duties of government in the Discourse on Political Economy?

What are three of the political solutions to oppression and inequality in the Third Discourse?