

The First and Second Discourses: By Jean-Jacques Rousseau Study Guide

**The First and Second Discourses: By Jean-Jacques
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Plot Summary

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was among the most important philosophers of the 18th century and remains influential to this day both for his political philosophy and philosophy of education. In his day, he was widely known as an essayist, composer and a representative of Enlightenment thought. His work, following his death, went on to influence the French Revolution. His books *Emile* and *The Social Contract* were his most important philosophical works, the first setting out his philosophy of education and the second his political philosophy. He also wrote one of the first autobiographies in the modern period, along with a pre-Romantic novel, *Julie*.

Rousseau's notoriety started from his earliest work, of which the first two Discourses are a part. Rousseau composed three Discourses, writing the first two in 1750 and 1754, respectively. The First Discourse is the *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*, whereas the second is the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*. The third Discourse is the *Discourse on Political Economy*. The first two Discourses are contained within the book, while the third will not be analyzed here.

The first Discourse, the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, was a response to an essay contest which asked whether the development of the arts and sciences improved or corrupted human morality. The first Discourse won the contest and was Rousseau's first public success. In this Discourse Rousseau started his lifelong study of how civilization both corrupts and improves humanity.

Rousseau argues that the sciences and arts themselves throw virtue and enlightenment into conflict. Science contains great danger, since falsehood more often results from science than truth. Pursuing arts and sciences leaves the citizen idle and fails to teach him virtue. Enlightenment also often produces wealth and wealth always ruins morality. Wealth also destroys taste. When the arts spread, people are made to admire talent and reward people based on their public image. This produces inequality that is not tied to virtue.

The second Discourse, the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau composed for another essay contest which asked contestants to tell a story about the birth of inequality and whether inequality is allowed by natural law. Rousseau failed to win the prize but the Discourse was published nonetheless. The Discourse distinguishes between physical/natural inequality on the one hand and moral/political inequality on the other. Natural inequalities result from differing endowments of strength and talent among men.

Savage men inhabit the original state of nature, but in this period men are not much affected by their natural inequalities. However, civilization develops from the benefits of cooperation and then inequalities inevitably have great impact. The first important inequality is the inequality of wealth. The rich stand to lose their wealth if the poor attack them so they invent political power to protect themselves. However, if political power gets out of control, turning against rich and poor, it then enslaves all of its subjects and produces despotism.



Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

Jean-Jacques Rousseau has inspired extreme reactions among his readers over the last two hundred years since he published his famous *Social Contract* and the *Emile*. However, his work has had great historical and current importance and, alongside Voltaire, is probably the most read author of the eighteenth century of France.

Rousseau is born in Geneva in 1712, eventually settling in Paris. His major works are published there during his adult life and after *Emile* is condemned in 1762 by the French Parliament, Rousseau flees and returned in 1770. He dies in Ermenonville in 1778. During the 18th century, the most popular form of government in Europe is "enlightened despotism," such as that of Frederick the Great of Prussia. Traditional rulers have arbitrary and largely unlimited power, so long as they do not challenge the rights of the aristocracy. Most rulers fight a series of limited wars, which precede the cataclysmic conflicts of the Age of Democratic Revolution that is to follow.

There is no clarity within intellectual circles in the 18th century, however. Many traditions conflicted. There are three main factors that influence Rousseau's work, the first being the "Great Tradition" of Western thought best represented by St. Thomas Aquinas. The orthodox parts of French society insist on the absolute truth of Christian doctrine and divinely sanctioned monarchy. The inherently rational character of natural law outline the human's social, moral and secular duties.

However, these beliefs have begun to decline through attacks by Hobbes, Spinoza and Locke, which form the major second factor. These thinkers critique the rational basis of natural law and religion, are religiously unorthodox, and want to place social and political justice on par with human reason. They look to nature for the foundation of reason in physical nature. In this way, these philosophers try to avoid standard metaphysics disputes.

The third tradition, the Enlightenment, is best represented by the "philosophes," which are optimistic and skeptical all at once, critical of the prejudices of established power and want to "enlighten" the minds of the public. They believe that when false beliefs wither, a better society is possible. They find the age of enlightened despotism to be a contradiction in terms. Rousseau seeks to illuminate the contradiction.

Rousseau might be the most famous thinker of the eighteenth century but he is a mixture of contemporary and ancient philosophy. He attacks many of his contemporaries' key assumptions. The *First Discourse* argues that popular enlightenment corrupts morals, making it appear that Rousseau relies on pre-modern traditions to show that modernity is mistaken. The *Second Discourse* appears to be based on the ideas of Hobbes and Locke, both moderns, however. Rousseau's

historical status matters because he sees both the potential for modernity and its ability to annihilate itself.

The First Discourse seeks to prove that "our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our sciences and arts toward perfection." He argues that his society is morally depraved and argues that enlightenment brings corruption "in all times and in all places." There is a law of history which shows that corruption follows the spread of knowledge.

Further on in the Discourse, Rousseau tries to show that the sciences and arts themselves display apparent contradictions between virtue and enlightenment. The sciences are inherently dangerous. Error is a more likely the result of speculation than truth. The pursuit of art and science wastes time for the citizen because they do not teach him to be virtuous. Enlightenment also usually produces luxury, which ruins sound morals. Further, luxury corrupts taste. The spread of the arts, forcing men to recognize talents, rewards people based on appearances. This generates inequality among men that is unrelated to virtue.

The Academies should organize society around what knowledge different classes should have in order to prevent the pernicious spread of knowledge; Rousseau thinks that the common man should avoid study and knowledge. Rousseau argues that philosophers like him can access the truth, but that it is necessarily available only to a small number of men and would be a dangerous practice for most to take up. Good politics and good philosophy do not mix well. Political virtue is good for most men. The stability of a small community is maintained by patriotic citizens. The few philosophers must not undermine them. These views, Rousseau claims, follow Plato. He prefers the ancient city-state ruled by patriotic citizens to large and modern commercial societies.

The Second Discourses exposes as an error the interpretation of Rousseau that sees him as merely restating traditional views. The Second Discourse intends to shock eighteenth century traditionalists. The Discourse has four main sections. The Dedication praises Geneva as a virtuous republic. The Preface argues that political philosophers must focus most and first on the nature of man and the status of natural law. Rousseau will focus on the nature of inequality and justice, rejecting the idea of natural law on the grounds that we do not yet know the nature of man.

Rousseau therefore turns to examine the "state of nature" which proceeds to formation of the first human societies. Men live according to natural impulses outside society and are stupid but peaceful and animal. Hobbes is wrong to see the natural state as one of war. Natural men are moved by the principle of self-preservation and not guided by innate reason, as the Great Tradition thinks. Hobbes gives natural men qualities that are the product of society. Hobbesian men lack the natural compassion of animals. Rousseau therefore sees that natural man has two drives: self-preservation and compassion. He can avoid the idea of "sociability" that is featured prominent in the Great Tradition as well.



Rousseau, in the Second Part of the Second Discourse, creates a "hypothetical history" concerning the original of political society and the inequality among persons that develops from the state of nature. Changes in the human take a very long time and this leads to creating huts, establishing families, language, craft, art, pride, deception, metallurgy and agriculture. The need to cooperate produces the need to divide land and for multiple professions.

Inequalities, particularly of possession, are created among those who are naturally equal. Men became aware of these inequalities and fight each other for the materials needed to exist. Hobbes's "war of all against all" is generated by historical progress and not the true "state of nature." When the war of all against all occurs, the institutions of civil society follow. In the state of nature, each man is his own judge, but the inevitable disagreement that follows leads to a "social contract" or a group of those who select someone to judge conflicts between persons, turning mere possession into property rights and making it possible to enforce law and order.

The Discourse also prefigures that idea, prominent in the Social Contract, of the General Will (described as the "single will"). He does not analyze the principles undergirding legitimate government in detail but wants to explain how unjust, tyrannical rule has come to be established. Society passes through stages of legitimate government but this terminates in the most extreme and indefensible inequality, where the powerful oppress the weak. This is not better than the war of all against all. The people can overthrow such a government with total justice and there is an absolute right of revolution.

This radical implication of the Second Discourse should be emphasized. When the ruler is not subordinate to democratic law, he is illegitimate and contrary to nature. Hereditary monarchy, consequently, has no rational sanction. Again Rousseau emphasizes the corrupting elements of human society. As a result, he asks whether society itself is good for humanity. Men in the state of nature are virtuous and man is by nature good, self-sufficient and compassionate.

However, the Second Discourse does not challenge men to return to live as beasts. He simply wants to give a philosophical foundation for understanding nature, society and man. However, he does radically reject accepted, traditional attempts to justify political society and natural law. Men do not have innate reason and follow natural impulses without thinking. Property rights are open for profound criticism as well.

The First Discourse can be seen as criticizing modern conceptions of politics. Only the classical philosophers understand the possibility of true virtue in the political community. However, the Second Discourse attacks the idea on which Greek and medieval Christian idea of society and justice are based. The author speculates that Rousseau is attempting to preserve the important insights of Greek philosophy by resting them on modern traditions that attempt to refute classical reviews.

However, by accepting the modern critique, he sees society as not natural and that justice is a product of society, not prior to it. Once it forms it has a general logical



progression. There are two laws of nature and natural right: physical nature and rational man. The first sort precedes civil society and the second sees it as natural. Rousseau does not see the two forms of law as necessarily inconsistent.

Rousseau wants a classical understanding of the political on a modern foundation. He wants not only political order but freedom, and seeks the preservation of civil liberty.

At the heart of Rousseau's philosophy is a struggle with the poles of politics and philosophy. Politics requires that some rule others, but rule is only legitimate if it is subordinate to impersonal laws created for the common good by a sovereign people. Men must interpret the laws, all laws, no matter how well conceived, but they are often used to abuse men. Politics is paradoxical and forces the philosopher to see injustice and immorality tied to ordinary political institutions.



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

The First Discourse begins by wondering whether morality is improved or undermined by restoring the arts and sciences. Rousseau is concerned that a fair treatment of the matter is difficult. He starts the Discourse remarking the men are coming to a new sort of reason following many centuries of European barbarism and the new kind of reason requires revolution. Science and art have fallen apart but in their resurrection, they can survive under law and government. Unfortunately, the sciences and arts have become dictatorial and restrict the original liberty of men; further, it causes men to love these restrictions. Yet, paradoxically, these restrictions make people civilized.

Before the advent of art, humanity possesses a natural but "rude" morality. The nature of man is not superior to the present day but humanity remains secure because they are able to see each other's motives. However, in the present, men can deceive others in their restraint and suppress their motives from open discernment. Society has increased in size and so it is hard to figure out the motives of others. As a result, a "train of vices" is hidden. Arts and sciences have aided in the suppression of evil.

Rousseau believes that artistic progress produces corruption, arguing that progress produced corruption in Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and later, the Eastern Roman Empire. Sciences do not improve morals either and Socrates himself attacks art and science.

Next Rousseau inquires into the way that arts and sciences have affected France. Riches, vice and oppression have increased because men have left their ignorance behind; humanity should be embarrassed by this fact. Moral behavior might result only from ignorance; virtue and education might contradict one another. Rousseau will next see whether the arts and sciences, in themselves, produce such corruption.



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

The Second Part of the First Discourse opens with the claim that civilizations have often held that science begins with superstition, a common enemy of the people. Pride generates ethics, greed generates geometry and idleness produces physics. Evils that lead to the production of sciences are reflected in the science produced. Arts need riches and injustice is needed for the law. Without tyrants and wars, history would be of no importance.

Science has alarming consequences. It produces laziness and prevents the production of worldly goods. As we increase in knowledge, we generate more time for vice. Work matters little toward producing virtue. Rousseau sees true laziness regressing men to the state of nature. Time spent doing nothing is wicked. Luxury generates free time and this in turn generates vanity. Rousseau tries to demonstrate this through history, citing the Cyprian King and the Gallic conquest of the Franks.

Artists love public praise and they find it their greatest form of pay for their work. The artist would be unhappy if he labored among those who hate art and so artists destroy their genius and serve the masses. Morality collapses with riches and thus taste is degraded. Rousseau demonstrates this by asking the reader to conceive of morality in its earliest simplicity. Men once lived in similar huts and wanted the gods to observe them. However, today men separate themselves to hide their vice. Rousseau follows the argument by tracing out the fall of morality within Roman and Greek culture.

Science produces war because it leads to new weaponry. Rousseau is concerned that children spend too much time learning science and thus have little time to acquire virtue. He knows that lazy children perform wicked deeds. Thus, art does not teach them virtue and artists are rarely patriots or good men.

Morality is abused by growing inequality based on the talents of men and inequality also degrades virtue. Money is assigned to the witty and creative, but not the good. The wise do not pursue riches in any event.

Rousseau sees the philosopher as spreading evil teachings. Printing presses help to guarantee that each age will be permanently corrupt. Looking to fix non-existent wickedness, the people promote false beliefs of philosophers. Thus, artistic and scientific progress has not improved happiness. Instead, morals are hurt through it and taste is destroyed. The authors of textbooks spread corrupting information to the people and it is not protected by the wise. The people's education should be controlled, for it is not self-guiding.



Rousseau thinks talented people should not receive glory; instead, they should hide themselves from fame, eschewing reputations and building their contentment on worldly opinion. Virtue should be pursued and the best philosophy teaches people to achieve it, not great oratory and philosophical vanity.



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

The Dedication opens with gratitude to Rousseau's rulers for giving him the chance to think about the origin of inequality. He argues that should he have had the choice of his birthplace, he would have chosen a place where the people are equal in their jobs, a place where the people know each other and are patriotic. He would choose a city where the interests of the ruler and the people are united. He wants to live his life and die in freedom.

Rousseau desires life in a city where the law rules all and that all people accept the state's ruling authority. He is concerned about republican government since governments and societies can sometimes have distinct and contradictory needs and goals. Rousseau advocates a state that has no desire for conquest and is threatened by no such desire in others, but he also wants a community where cities have the moral and legal authority to create their laws. Each person could freely offer up a law for ratification; further, the political authority would be small enough to have a direct democracy without representatives.

Rousseau knows that he resides in no such place, yet wishes to address his fellow citizens that he loves. Rousseau laments their loss of freedom, yet believes his countrymen are greater given their nature. He wants them to retain their democracy and submit to the law, encouraging them not to distrust each other, claiming that without trust, the state will decay. He honors again his rulers and wants them to consider their people's needs. Rousseau has high hopes for the republic of his birth, and encourages the youth of the republic to look towards the mild pleasures and the repentance of vice.

The Preface follows. Rousseau announces that the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality seeks to uncover inequality's origin. The answer can only be discerned by first discovering man's true nature. The tragedy of increasing knowledge is that it obscures the original state of men. Rousseau argues that he and his reader can look at contemporary historical events to uncover the present behavior and the nature of humanity, and he hopes that these events have not changed each person altogether. Without direct evidence, he must inquire into the experiments which have attempted to uncover man's nature and he must ask how these experiments can be continued.

However, many intelligent people disagree about human nature, especially the naturalness of human law. Defining the concept of natural law is fraught with challenges. Whereas older historical periods in the West conceive of the law of nature as beyond the human, the moderns see the law of nature as rules societies give to themselves.



Rousseau argues that humanity contains two natural principles that exist before reason, their interest in personal goods like welfare and safety and a second which resist the sight of the death and suffering of others. Natural law originates in these principles.

We cannot look merely to the present human, for we see the powerful as violent and the weak as enslaved. Moving beyond the present requires making a genuine and ardent study of men.



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 oppress the weak and this leads to government through a non-moral process, prior to any authority. Men simply dwell on wants and oppress 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. However, savage men 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 comes about, but wonders if it did not originate in the interaction between parent and child. However, Rousseau passes from this concern. The first language of man is undoubtedly the "simple cry of nature." Modern language is built on



this. Early language is primitive and denotes a small number of objects at first. As the words grow in number, cognition expands. 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 can survive and have enough understanding to persist over centuries. Rousseau thinks they have no moral relations with one another, nor obligations; they are neither good or bad, virtuous or vicious. However, Hobbes is wrong to think that because men have no natural sense of good that they must be wicked. A principle escapes 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 amore-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. Amore-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 lead him both to improve his understanding and become depraved, that make 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 invents property rights really pulls one over on his fellows but he is also the founder of civil society. Rousseau laments that someone did not call him out on his lie because it would have saved mankind many calamities. However, someone would have invented property anyway.

Rousseau reminds to note that man's first feeling is of his existence and second of self-preservation. Nature gives him what he needs and instinct helps him use it. Natural sentiment leads to sex, reproduction and family. The life of man is limited to sensation. But as the number of men grow, so do men's interests. Scarcity arises and new tools are invented, like the fishing rod and the arrow. Men's interests begin to conflict.

As some men acquire more than others, they become proud and distinguish 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 grows, conjugal love and paternal affection does as well. Some grow rich enough for leisure as well. If they lose their wealth, they will be unhappy, but to gain more gives them little joy. Rousseau thinks speech arises 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. However, 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 evolves from this need as does morality, as rules that will govern life and improve the welfare of all. Punishments follow as well. However, repressed men 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 come to be, but Rousseau speculates. When the earth is cultivated, it has to be distributed and this produces the rules of justice. Men start to think of the future and realize they have something to lose. If human talents are equal, property will have been equal. However, this is not to be.

Natural inequality thus produces economic inequality. The rest of modern society follows from this. Men have to appear to be what they are not and start to produce pomp, cheating, trickery, and so on. When signs can represent riches, such as money, new accumulation of wealth becomes possible. The rich become usurpers, the poor thieves, and conflict between the two grows.



The rich can claim that they produce what they produce 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 design arguments to secure the possessions of the rich and build institutions around them to protect these riches.

Producing a supreme power can do this, and so the State is born. Everyone runs "headlong to their chains, in hopes of securing their liberty." This generates society and the law which binds the poor and gives the rich new power. Natural liberty is destroyed. The law of nature only persists between nations. Bodies politic are 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 produce the state because they have much to lose.

Early governments have no regular form; they change often and government is imperfect. There are no absolute masters at first. However, men give 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. Then men unjustly oblige 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 does not begin with arbitrary power. Instead, it is 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 appear great to those who first think of it, but the magistrates will grow corrupt once they have power.

Differing forms of government result from different levels of inequality that exist when the state arises. Rousseau thinks democracy comes first, when inequality is 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 get things off the ground. However, magistracy takes us further and then its conversion to arbitrary power comes last. Rich and poor characterize the first period, powerful and weak the second, and master and slave 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 does not intervene. Rewarding persons according to talent would be enough. Reputation and achievement makes matters worse. However, Rousseau resists outlining the mechanism.



Inequality of wealth and condition produces many prejudices; magistrates promote that which weaken 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.

However, luxury brings liberal and mechanical arts, commerce, and letters and so on—but 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.



Characters

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) ranks among the French Enlightenment's most important personalities. He was a philosopher, novelist, composer and essayist whose writings profoundly impact the French Revolution and French education. His autobiography helped to generate the modern genre of autobiography and his novel, *Julie*, prefigured 19th century Romantic French writing. His most famous works, however, were his *Social Contract*, which outlines his mature political philosophy, and *Emile*, which displays his famous philosophy of education.

Rousseau had a graduate degree, and composed a dissertation during the course of his studies, yet prior to 1750 he had no fame to speak of. Rousseau came to prominence when he won an essay contest in 1750 for the *First Discourse*. He became famous in large part because of his controversial claim that arts and science corrupt and destroy public and private morality.

The *Second Discourse*, the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, was composed in 1754 for an essay contest that Rousseau would lose; however, the essay was still published. It is the more famous of the two essays. The *Second Discourse* displays a theory of Rousseau's "noble savage" and discusses the sad effect that civilization has had upon him. Rousseau then defends a theory about the evolution of the savage man through inequality to the present state of man with all his vast inequalities of wealth and power, with despots ruling the great mass of the poor. Rousseau places at the forefront of his inequality the challenges that social, economic and political equality posed for his time more so than any other political philosopher ever had.

The Noble Savage

Many in our day believe that the original humans live in a state of happiness and peace. This image is not only common to traditional religion but also to many new age forms of spirituality. Some believe that men lived in small roving bands but remained healthier than he presently is, and simply survived from what nature provided him. These ancient men respected the earth and were somewhat happy, confining their desires to their immediate needs.

Arguably the modern form of this idea is the child of 19th century Romanticism, a revolt against the emphasis the Enlightenment placed upon reason, but Rousseau contains elements of both Enlightenment and Romanticism, as he is perhaps the first major political philosopher to theorize about the "noble savage" and place him within Western thought. He also seems to view civilization as producing moral corruption, despotism and war. Primitive men are more like beasts but lack most of the evil dispositions of modern men.



The first Discourse has Rousseau arguing that noble savages were probably like the real beings that existed eons ago and Rousseau then suggest that modern economies and political institutions corrupt him. The arts and sciences that came out of modernity make nothing better and other things worse. The Second Discourse has Rousseau claim that his story of the noble savage is a lie, but that the concept of the noble savage aids in exposing those aspects of human nature that are not the product of human society and those that are.

Thus, the noble savage is a device of analysis and Rousseau employs it to produce his theory of human nature, human emotions and in particular the crucial idea of amore-propre. Amore-proper is employed to motivate Rousseau's story of why civilization survives at all and will later be utilized to generate his famous theory of the General Will.

The Poor

In Rousseau's mind, the contemporary European poor are despotically ruled by both the rich and the magistrate, perhaps to such a terrible degree that they would be better off as savages.

The Rich

Rousseau believed that the rich had much to lose if the poor revolted. Consequently, they invented political power to protect their property, but they gave so much power to the state that it ended up ruling them too.

The Magistrate

Magistrates are bureaucrats who are only legitimate when they rule with the consent of the people.

Civil Society

Civil society is the mass of citizens as they exist prior to the body politic and employs political power to improve itself.

Citizens

The best citizen has virtue and it is only through virtue that men are free.

Children

Children must be raised in virtue since only the virtuous can maintain freedom.

The Sovereign

Sovereigns are empowered first by the rich but they are then able to centralize power so much that they become despots.

Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes was an early modern political philosopher who argued that the state of nature was a "war of all against all." Rousseau discards this view and embraces a view of the state of nature as containing familial concern, self-preservation and amore-propre.

Locke

John Locke was an early modern political philosopher who saw the state of nature as peaceful and as governed by natural rights. Rousseau argues that morality did not exist in the state of nature and developed from conventions necessitated by social development.



Objects/Places

Modern Times

The modern period has a large degree of civilization and inequality, slavery and pain. This is not a coincidence.

Ancient Times

The ancient period had little civilization and inequality, and also no slavery and little pain. This is also not a coincidence, in Rousseau's view.

The State of Nature

The state of nature is the home of the noble savage who considers only his need to survive but has a drive to seek his good and to not cause harm to others.

The Modern State

The modern state was created by the rich to protect the property they had acquired from the revolt of the poor.

The General Will

The Second Discourse argues that today all men live under tyranny but that a path to freedom is available. This idea will come to be known as the General Will but is known as the single will in earlier work.

Tyranny and Slavery

Tyranny and slavery are products of the modern state.

Private Property

Private property rights were generated when some tricked others into respecting their possessions. Property generates the goods and bads of modernity.

Bureaucracy

Magistrates run the bureaucracy of the state which dominates everyone.



Arts and Sciences

Human morality is corrupted by the arts and sciences.

Natural Inequality

Natural inequality is the product of the differing natural endowments of men with respect to strength, beauty and intelligence.

Moral Inequality

Natural inequality starts to produce ethical and political inequality when there is enough wealth that it is worth it for some men to employ their superior natural abilities to overpower others.

Law

Laws are themselves conventions required for modern society.

Oppression

Oppression is the modern condition of humanity in Europe.



Themes

Rousseau: Ancient, Enlightened and Romantic

Rousseau combines a variety of philosophical traditions that were influential in 18th century France and that are still influential in the present day. First, Rousseau displays many affinities with ancient philosophers like Aristotle and medieval philosophers like Thomas Aquinas. He believed that the best communities were small and virtuous, focusing on the common good. While he was a democrat, he still believed that the state should aim at a single end of the common good, just as the ancients and medieval did. He also is a critic of modernity, arguing that humans were happier in less technologically and economically developed times. The critique of modernity and love of virtue are prominently featured in the First and Second Discourses.

Rousseau is best known as a representative of the Enlightenment, however. The Enlightenment emphasizes the unlimited power of human reason, human political equality and the innate goodness of humanity. This powerful movement first swept European intellectual circles and then generated a series of revolutions in Europe (and arguably in the United States). Rousseau is one of the most prominent Enlightenment thinkers and was an important influence on the French Revolution, although it occurred after his death.

Rousseau's Enlightenment elements are more prominent in his later work but there are elements of it in the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality where Rousseau hedges his affinity for ancient man with the claim that men can never return to that state. He will later claim that the despotism of the state can become a form of freedom if it governs in accord with the reason of all in the form of the General Will.

Rousseau also prefigures the Romantic period of art, literature and thought in the 19th century. He wrote one of the first pre-Romantic French novels, *Julie*. He also strongly emphasized that power of emotion and the beauty of men who lived in harmony with nature. He also saw modernity as having destructive effects despite its rationality.

The Corruption of Humanity by Civilization

The main argument of the First Discourse is straightforward: humanity has been corrupted by civilization. Men once lived in an idyllic, noble, yet savage state; he lived from one day to the next trying only to acquire enough food to survive. However, in the noble, savage state, men were equal and morality did not exist. This form of life was both simple and happy. As humans became more able to survive the harsh conditions of nature, they expanded in number and civilization was born.

However, new aspects of human life grew out of this development. Enough men came to be that all men did not know one another and so they often had to restrain and hide their true feelings and their urge to attack each other. Instead, they had to allow others a



degree of freedom. Consequently, humanity became increasingly corrupt if more well-mannered in public. When humans are not policed, they will engage in many evils and develop vices.

The arts and sciences only serve to increase this evil. The arts and sciences are conceived from bad aims—selfishness, war, and laziness. They then produce these evils in greater amounts. Instead of enjoying and admiring such achievements, Rousseau encourages men to beware.

The Second Discourse has more to say about the noble savage's nature. Rousseau argues that through the growth of population and human capacities, men acquired the desire to own their own property and to exclude others from it. In the beginning, property was a kind of deception, yet was required to resolve fights. Property norms permitted natural inequalities of strength, beauty and intelligence to produce social and political inequality. Conflict resulted and this prompted the rich to bring the state into being. Eventually the state turns on the rich and the poor, enslaving everyone. In this way too, humanity is corrupted by civilization.

The Origin of Inequality

The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality is a detailed story about the beginnings of human inequality and its development to the present day. The Discourse begins by making a distinction between natural inequalities given by nature, such as those of strength, beauty and intelligence and social and political inequality, such as differences in wealth, status or political power. In the state of nature, humans lived from day-to-day, struggling to survive, but in this state natural inequalities made little difference and social and political inequalities could not arise.

As men came to cooperate with one another and enjoy the benefits that followed from it, their numbers grew and languages grew in sophistication and new tools were developed. Men became even more productive as a result but this made competition for resources necessary. Consequently, property rights needed to be invented. The benefit of property rights is that they solve fights over who should use what, but the downside is that the enable natural inequalities to become social and political inequalities. Thus, some are poor but others grow rich, and this generates social conflict, since the poor want to be rich and the rich do not want to lose what they have from, say, revolt by the poor.

Since the rich are afraid, they create the state to protect them; they then give their power to it. For a time, the state safeguards the rich against the poor but it still dominates both groups. As time progresses, members of the state discover how to centralize its power, and this produces despotism. Political and social inequalities become more severe and the state ruthlessly dominates the poor and the rich. In a somewhat ironic turn of events, all become slaves of the state, and thus all members of society are oppressed equality and return to powerful equality. Yet in this state, they are miserable.



Style

Perspective

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's perspective is the perspective of the First and Second Discourses. Rousseau was a composer, writer and political philosopher in the 18th who defended unique positions about social and human nature, along with social and human progress. He was among the most prominent members of the Enlightenment, the Continental European movement which held that men were mostly innately good and believed that human reason had unlimited power to improve upon the world.

Rousseau is not wholly an Enlightenment figure, however, for he possesses several pre-Romantic elements by emphasizing the importance of emotion, physical nature and the nobility and purpose of life that go beyond reason. His Enlightenment and Pre-Romantic views combine in the Discourses. The First Discourse focuses on the beauty of the natural and the tragedy of civilization, whereas the latter argues that the power of reason, despite corrupting man, might lead to his liberty. The Pre-Romantic Rousseau is thus most clearly presented in the First Discourse because he argues that morality and virtue are corrupted by modernity.

The First and Second Discourses also prominently feature the noble savage, which also implies a kind of Romanticism. Yet in the Second Discourse Rousseau acknowledges that there is no return to the time for humanity has changed. Society must instead be rooted in reason, equality and freedom. Only in later work will Rousseau's Enlightenment elements predominate. Consequently, the reader may be surprised at the degree of pre-Romantic thought in the First and Second Discourses.

Tone

The tone of the Discourses mixes the dour, the righteous, the idyllic and the serious. The reader might find at first that Rousseau sees modern civilization as a total catastrophe, and he appears to in the First Discourse. From this, the reader will sense a dour and serious tone. Rousseau adamantly attacks man's evolution from the noble savage to the present horror of peasant life in Europe. Rousseau sees the arts and sciences as having far more costs to humanity than benefits.

In contrast, the Second Discourse opens with a sense for the idyllic displaying in Rousseau's depiction of the noble savage. Although, Rousseau will later say that the noble savage is merely an abstraction employed to illustrate which aspects of present-day humans are natural and which are social. So Rousseau retains a degree of seriousness and is focused on showing how inequality came to be.

The Second Discourse proceeds from a state of the idyllic beginnings of the noble savage to the present struggles of men; the dour aspects of Rousseau's tone arise within Rousseau's depictions of the rich oppressing the poor and the horrors of modern



warfare, along with the creation of the state and the institution of private property. Righteous elements are spread throughout both Discourses as well because they indicate a deep disapproval of the injustice the strong impose upon the weak. Righteousness also shines through in Rousseau's disgust with despotic governing institutions.

Structure

The first two Discourses are sometimes reproduced with the Third Discourse, the Discourse on Political Economy, but the Roger Masters version contains only the First and Second Discourses. Rousseau's first two Discourses were also published at first in response to essay contests in 1750 and 1754 respectively, but they are often tied to one another as they discuss similar matters. The Second Discourse shows a more mature Rousseau and his thought will grow increasingly sophisticated in later writings.

The Discourse on the Arts and Sciences ask if the modern arts and sciences undermine public morality. Rousseau answers the question by discussing an abstract depiction of man's idyllic origin. It then traces the downfall of humanity first to the wealth produced by social cooperation and its use, which produces idleness and vice.

The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality was written in order to show how social and political inequality arose in history. Rousseau's explanation requires the noble savage as well, but his description is more detailed. He begins by discussing the natural inequalities that men possess in strength, intelligence and beauty and how as social cooperation expands these inequalities manifest themselves as social and political inequality. The Second Discourse also focuses much more on modern institutions and sociological analysis, displaying a theory of the origination of the modern state. It also tries to show how economic forces produced the current political order.

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 book as a whole also contains a nice introduction where Rousseau's life is reviewed and the two Discourses are summarized and analyzed. It also contains a variety of helpful notes from both Rousseau and the translator, Roger Masters.



Quotes

"Thus the tension between philosophy and politics ... lies at the root of Rousseau's thought." (Introduction, 25)

"Common readers, pardon my paradoxes: they must be made when one thinks seriously; and, whatever you may say, I would rather be a man of paradoxes than a man of prejudices." (Introduction, 25)

"Lest we be 'common readers' who, in Rousseau's terms, 'ought to learn to read,' we must study his thoughts carefully and resist the temptation to accuse him of simple inconsistency. Without such effort, the failure to understand his philosophy will be our fault, not Rousseau's." (Introduction, 26)

"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, 34)

"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, 53)

"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, 79)

"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, 93)

"I conceive of two sorts of inequality in the human species: one, which I call natural or physical, because it is established by nature and consists in the difference of ages, health, bodily strengths, and equalities of mind or soul; the other, which may be called moral or political inequality, because it depends upon a sort of convention and is established, or at least authorized, by the consent of men." (Chapter 4, A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Part I, 101)

"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, 130)



"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, 141)

"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, 154)

"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, 180)



Topics for Discussion

Who is the noble savage? What is good about his life?

How do modern men differ from the noble savage?

What aspects of the state of nature generate civilization for Rousseau?

Rousseau argues that the arts and sciences destroy human morality. List three ways in which they do so.

Discuss Rousseau's account of the origin of inequality in detail.

How did the state come into being, in Rousseau's view? How did its power grow out of control?

What is amore-propre? How does Rousseau employ the idea of amore-propre in the second Discourse?