Lecture 20 – Social Contract Theory

Jean-Jacques Rousseau – *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*

(Gloss by James Delaney)
Agenda

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau
2. Discourse on the Origin of Inequality
3. State of Nature
4. The Social Contract
5. General Will
6. Criticisms
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

• Born in Geneva (1712—1778).

• Wrote Three Discourses: the Discourse on the Sciences and Arts, the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, and the Discourse on Political Economy.

• The first two discourses were written in response to essay contest conducted by the Academy of Dijon. The first discourse won the essay prize.

• Also wrote the Social Contract.

• Influenced Immanuel Kant’s work on ethics.
Discourse on the Origin of Inequality

• In contrast to classical thinkers like Aristotle, Rousseau thinks that human nature is not naturally social.
• Aristotle begins his political and moral theorizing with the civil society as the natural human state.
• Rousseau thinks that society is an artifact or an invention that can potentially corrupt human nature.
Understand human nature requires understanding humans in the **state of nature**, where they are stripped of any qualities that are a result of socialization.

Rousseau’s state of nature differs from Hobbes’ state of nature.

Hobbes thought that humans in the state of nature are selfish and in a constant state of war against each other. Life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Rousseau thought that Hobbes already and wrongly assumed certain socialization processes in the state of nature. For humans to be in a constant state of war against each other, they would already have ideas about property, calculations about the future, recognition of others as threats, and even language skills.
State of Nature

• Instead, “Rousseau describes natural man as isolated, timid, peaceful, mute, and without the foresight to worry about what the future will bring” (2).

• Human nature is:
  • Naturally **good**.
  • Governed by the principle of self-interest AND pity.
  • Capable of **reason** that can be developed once humans leave the state of nature to a state of civilized society.
The (Specious) Social Contract

• Humans who leave the state of nature are able to enjoy a higher form of goodness—moral goodness, by forming a **social contract**.

• The social contract is developed in a series of stages.
  1. Temporary groups to solve specific problems like hunting.
  2. More permanent social relationships like family. Basic conceptions of property and competition develop.
  3. Agriculture and metallurgy emerge, which creates a division of labor. This leads to distinct social classes, conflict, and inequality

• The social contract here is **specious** and is just a way for those in power to keep their power by convincing others with less power to accept the current unequal situation.
The Legitimate Social Contract

• In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau describes the origin of inequality between humans, which is a result of a specious social contract that enables those who are powerful to maintain their dominating positions.

• In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau describes what would constitute a **morally legitimate** social contract.
The Legitimate Social Contract

• The key notion of Rousseau’s legitimate social contract is the idea of the general will.

• Consider the analogy between a political society to a human body. A body is a unified entity even though it has various parts that perform different functions. Just as a body is has a will that looks after its well-being, a political state also has a (general) will that looks after its well-being.

• The general will is tied to Sovereignty, directed at the public good and abstract.
General Will

• The **general will** is distinct from the **collection of individual wills**.

• “There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will. The latter looks only to the common interest; the former considers private interest and is only a sum of private wills. But take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel each other out, and the remaining sum of the differences is the general will” (Social Contract, Vol. IV, p. 146).
“Rousseau articulates three maxims which supply the basis for a politically virtuous state:
(1) Follow the general will in every action;
(2) Ensure that every particular will is in accordance with the general will; and
(3) Public needs must be satisfied.
Citizens follow these maxims when there is a sense of equality among them, and when they develop a genuine respect for law. This again is in contrast to Hobbes, who says that laws are only followed when people fear punishment. That is, the state must make the penalty for breaking the law so severe that people do not see breaking the law to be of any advantage to them. Rousseau claims, instead, that when laws are in accordance with the general will, good citizens will respect and love both the state and their fellow citizens. Therefore, citizens will see the intrinsic value in the law, even in cases in which it may conflict with their individual wills.” (James Delaney)
Criticisms

1. What is the general will and how is it formed? Who is making the social contract?
2. Does the general will allow for individual diversity and freedom?
3. Compare Rousseau’s social contract to utilitarianism. Do both ignore the distinction between persons and allow one to be sacrificed for others?