Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712—1778): *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*

The Second Discourse, like the first, was a response to a question put forth by the academy of Dijon: “What is the origin of inequality among men; and is it authorized by the natural law?” Rousseau’s response to this question, the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, is significantly different from the First Discourse for several reasons. First, in terms of the academy’s response, the Second Discourse was not nearly as well received. It exceeded the desired length, it was four times the length of the first, and made very bold philosophical claims; unlike the First Discourse, it did not win the prize. However, as Rousseau was now a well-known and respected author, he was able to have it published independently. Secondly, if the First Discourse is indicative of Rousseau as a “counter-Enlightenment” thinker, the Second Discourse, by contrast, can rightly be considered to be representative of Enlightenment thought. This is primarily because Rousseau, like Hobbes, attacks the classical notion of human beings as naturally social. Finally, in terms of its influence, the Second Discourse is now much more widely read, and is more representative of Rousseau’s general philosophical outlook. In the Confessions, Rousseau writes that he himself sees the Second Discourse as far superior to the first.

The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality is divided into four main parts: a dedication to the Republic of Geneva, a short preface, a first part, and a second part. The scope of Rousseau’s project is not significantly different from that of Hobbes in the Leviathan or Locke in the Second Treatise on Government. Like them, Rousseau understands society to be an invention, and he attempts to explain the nature of human beings by stripping them of all of the accidental qualities brought about by socialization. Thus, understanding human nature amounts to understanding what humans are like in a pure state of nature. This is in stark contrast to the classical view, most notably that of Aristotle, which claims that the state of civil society is the natural human state. Like Hobbes and Locke, however, it is doubtful that Rousseau meant his readers to understand the pure state of nature that he describes in the Second Discourse as a literal historical account. In its opening, he says that it must be denied that men were ever in the pure state of nature, citing revelation as a source which tells us that God directly endowed the first man with understanding (a capacity that he will later say is completely undeveloped in natural man). However, it seems in other parts of the Second Discourse that Rousseau is positing an actual historical account. Some of the stages in the progression from nature to civil society, Rousseau will argue, are empirically observable in so-called primitive tribes. And so the precise historicity with which one ought to regard Rousseau’s state of nature is the matter of some debate.

Part one is Rousseau’s description of human beings in the pure state of nature, uncorrupted by civilization and the socialization process. And although this way of examining human nature is consistent with other modern thinkers, Rousseau’s picture of “man in his natural state,” is radically different. Hobbes describes each human in the state of nature as being in a constant state of war against all others; hence life in the state of nature is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. But Rousseau argues that previous accounts such as Hobbes’ have all failed to actually depict humans in the true state of nature. Instead, they have taken civilized human beings and simply removed laws, government, and technology. For humans to be in a constant state of war with one another, they would need to have complex thought processes involving
notions of property, calculations about the future, immediate recognition of all other humans as potential threats, and possibly even minimal language skills. These faculties, according to Rousseau, are not natural, but rather, they develop historically. In contrast to Hobbes, Rousseau describes natural man as isolated, timid, peaceful, mute, and without the foresight to worry about what the future will bring.

Purely natural human beings are fundamentally different from the egoistic Hobbesian view in another sense as well. Rousseau acknowledges that self-preservation is one principle of motivation for human actions, but unlike Hobbes, it is not the only principle. If it were, Rousseau claims that humans would be nothing more than monsters. Therefore, Rousseau concludes that self-preservation, or more generally self-interest, is only one of two principles of the human soul. The second principle is pity; it is “an innate repugnance to see his fellow suffer.” (Second Discourse, Vol. II, p. 36). It may seem that Rousseau’s depiction of natural human beings is one that makes them no different from other animals. However, Rousseau says that unlike all other creatures, humans are free agents. They have reason, although in the state of nature it is not yet developed. But it is this faculty that makes the long transition from the state of nature to the state of civilized society possible. He claims that if one examines any other species over the course of a thousand years, they will not have advanced significantly. Humans can develop when circumstances arise that trigger the use of reason.

Rousseau’s praise of humans in the state of nature is perhaps one of the most misunderstood ideas in his philosophy. Although the human being is naturally good and the “noble savage” is free from the vices that plague humans in civil society, Rousseau is not simply saying that humans in nature are good and humans in civil society are bad. Furthermore, he is not advocating a return to the state of nature, though some commentators, even his contemporaries such as Voltaire, have attributed such a view to him. Human beings in the state of nature are amoral creatures, neither virtuous nor vicious. After humans leave the state of nature, they can enjoy a higher form of goodness, moral goodness, which Rousseau articulates most explicitly in the Social Contract.

Having described the pure state of nature in the first part of the Second Discourse, Rousseau’s task in the second part is to explain the complex series of historical events that moved humans from this state to the state of present day civil society. Although they are not stated explicitly, Rousseau sees this development as occurring in a series of stages. From the pure state of nature, humans begin to organize into temporary groups for the purposes of specific tasks like hunting an animal. Very basic language in the form of grunts and gestures comes to be used in these groups. However, the groups last only as long as the task takes to be completed, and then they dissolve as quickly as they came together. The next stage involves more permanent social relationships including the traditional family, from which arises conjugal and paternal love. Basic conceptions of property and feelings of pride and competition develop in this stage as well. However, at this stage they are not developed to the point that they cause the pain and inequality that they do in present day society. If humans could have remained in this state, they would have been happy for the most part, primarily because the various tasks that they engaged in could all be done by each individual. The next stage in the historical development occurs when the arts of agriculture and metallurgy are discovered. Because these tasks required a division of labor, some people were better suited to certain types of physical labor, others to making tools,
and still others to governing and organizing workers. Soon, there become distinct social classes and strict notions of property, creating conflict and ultimately a state of war not unlike the one that Hobbes describes. Those who have the most to lose call on the others to come together under a social contract for the protection of all. But Rousseau claims that the contract is specious, and that it was no more than a way for those in power to keep their power by convincing those with less that it was in their interest to accept the situation. And so, Rousseau says, “All ran to meet their chains thinking they secured their freedom, for although they had enough reason to feel the advantages of political establishment, they did not have enough experience to foresee its dangers.” (Second Discourse, Vol. II, p. 54).

The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality remains one of Rousseau’s most famous works, and lays the foundation for much of his political thought as it is expressed in the Discourse on Political Economy and Social Contract. Ultimately, the work is based on the idea that by nature, humans are essentially peaceful, content, and equal. It is the socialization process that has produced inequality, competition, and the egoistic mentality.