



RESEARCH PAPER

From Natural Freedom to Civil Inequality: The Historical Origins of Social Dependence in Rousseau's Thought

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the origins of civil society through Rousseau's historical investigation of human nature, social development, and inequality. Rousseau begins from the state of nature in which humans are independent and self-sufficient. The capacity for perfectibility allows them to adapt to changing conditions, but it also makes their departure from the original state possible. The article follows this movement through the formation of social comparison, the growth of private property, and the establishment of political institutions. It argues that Rousseau does not consider civil society a natural or predetermined fulfilment of human development. Civil society emerges through accidental historical changes and eventually protects inequalities created by property and dependence. Rousseau's critique is therefore directed towards the loss of freedom and the legal consolidation of inequality under the appearance of social order.

Key Words: Rousseau, Civil Society, Natural Freedom, Perfectibility, Social Inequality

Introduction

Rousseau lived relatively unknown until 1750, when the publication of *The First Discourse* made him famous overnight. The book was among the earliest forceful challenges to Enlightenment confidence in the moral value of progress. In that sense, Rousseau became a guide to the criticism of modernity that followed. But despite his rebellious outlook and his influence on revolutions around the world, Rousseau "was not a reactionary" (Strauss, 1953, p. 252). He had an extensive influence on intellectuals from different spheres of knowledge, from the radical left to romantic critics of politics (Orwin & Tarcov, 1997). He also gave "the decisive impetus to German Idealism" while laying the "foundations of modern liberal Protestantism" (Pangle & Burns, 2015, p. 333).

Owing to the diversity of his philosophical outlook, the character of his thought has often been described as contradictory. That contradiction stems, as Rousseau pointed out, from the condition of being human, "which is rife with tensions and contradictions" (Pangle & Burns, 2015, p. 334). It was probably this contradictory nature of his intellect that enabled him to bring forth many innovative ideas through his philosophical texts as well as fiction. His main contribution was to bring to "light radical consequences of modernity of which men were not previously aware" (Bloom, 1987, p. 559).

Rousseau's critique of civil society is extended and developed in *The Second Discourse*, formally titled *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*.

In the second discourse, he tries to understand human nature and social inequality through a philosophical analysis of the historical development of human societies. His account does not present this history as a record of events that can be verified through direct evidence. It is a conjectural investigation that separates what belongs to human nature from what has been acquired through society (Scott, 1992).

Natural Freedom and the State of Nature:

From the beginning, Rousseau explicitly states that the state of nature has never been correctly understood by his predecessors. He writes, "The philosophers who have examined the foundations of society have all felt the necessity of going back to the state of nature, but none of them has reached it" (Rousseau, 1964, p. 102). Rousseau believes that earlier philosophers placed qualities acquired in society into their descriptions of what is natural in humans. Hobbes and Locke begin with a human being who already possesses developed reason, social passions, and an understanding of property and obligation. Their accounts suggest that the person living in modern society reveals their original nature after the removal of "the artificial constraints of civil society" (Pangle & Burns, 2015, p. 348).

Hobbes also associates human life without government with conflict, fear, and insecurity. Rousseau rejects the assumption that the passions found in civil society can be taken as evidence of the original nature of human beings. Since humans survived and developed as a species for thousands of years, it is plausible to assume that adaptability and perfectibility were more characteristic of primitive humans than the selfishness and competitiveness found in developed society. In the state of nature, humans were independent and equal beings. They were "radically disconnected individuals" and did not depend on one another for the fulfilment of their needs (Pangle & Burns, 2015, p. 346). They would not have desired the dependence and attachment associated with modern societies because they had not yet experienced them.

The movement of human beings from the state of nature into civil society was never an intended or purposeful end. Rousseau strictly believes that civil society is a product of accidents. It emerged through "the chance combination of several foreign causes which might never have arisen, and without which man would have remained eternally in his primitive condition" (Rousseau, 1964, p. 140). Since civil society was produced through changes accumulated over history, it cannot be treated as natural. To understand the original nature of human beings, it is necessary to imagine a time prior to the creation of society.

But Rousseau also makes it clear that his analysis is hypothetical. There is no human being living in the pure state of nature whose life can be directly observed. Every known human community has already been transformed through some form of social association. A human being must therefore "be divested of all qualities that are connected with life in a community (society) if we are to understand him as he is by nature" (Bloom, 1987, p. 563). Rousseau's investigation asks the reader to remove acquired qualities from modern humans and identify the limited capacities that would have existed before developed social life.

Rousseau proposes that a natural human would have possessed undeveloped reason and no established speech, since language depends on repeated social interaction. He stresses individual freedom and suggests that natural individuals would have met their needs through their own independent labour. There would have been no settled family, lasting romantic attachment, jealousy, envy, competition, or developed

morality. These qualities would emerge only after reason and social relations had developed. The limited rationality of natural man is presented positively because he lives in the present without producing unnecessary fears about the future. He has “no care for the future beyond the immediate present” (Pangle & Burns, 2015, p. 350). He seeks food, rest, and protection when these needs arise, but he does not organize his entire life around distant fears and ambitions.

Rousseau admires the idleness of the natural human, which is a product of living in the immediate present. Natural human strives to fulfil his limited needs and indulges only in activities that give him pleasure. He sleeps much and avoids unnecessary labour. He loves his physical existence and tries to avoid pain. He lives a satisfied life and therefore tries to preserve his existence. Self preservation and contentment are closely connected. And since the natural human lives without unnecessary anticipation of the future, he can experience what Gauthier (2006) calls the sentiment of existence, which is the simple joy of being alive. Natural human avoids anything that may cause pain to him and does not deliberately seek the suffering of other beings.

Here Rousseau introduces pity into the state of nature. Natural humans sympathize with suffering when they encounter it. They are not compelled by moral duties or chains of obligation. Pity exists before developed morality and prevents natural human from becoming deliberately cruel. Even though he is amoral, he remains good natured in the limited sense that he does not wish to harm others (Melzer, 1990). This depiction of the state of nature departs from earlier philosophies because Rousseau does not portray it as a place where might is right and the strong continually destroy the weak. There is equality in the state of nature because people possess similar needs and limited means. Since individuals are self-sufficient, there is no stable basis for slavery. Every person remains independent.

Perfectibility and Human Development:

A special characteristic that distinguishes humans from nonhumans in the state of nature is perfectibility. Rousseau believes that humans possessed the ability to adapt and transcend their living conditions from the beginning. Humans do not possess instincts that determine every aspect of their lives in an overwhelming way. They can observe their surroundings, learn from changing circumstances, and transform themselves in the process.

In this sense, perfectibility is a form of malleability. Humans in the state of nature were flexible, which means that they had the potential to become something different from what they originally were. Through changing circumstances, this capacity contributed to the development of social life and eventually to the formation of civil society. This is why Rousseau calls perfectibility a “misfortune,” since it draws a human “out of that original condition in which he would pass tranquil and innocent days” (Rousseau, 1964, p. 115).

But perfectibility, at the same time, is also capable of snatching away the innocence. The evolutionary progress of humans over centuries is a product of the same faculty. However, Rousseau’s longing for the state of nature does not prevent him from seeing that the transition brought “large benefits as well as perhaps worse costs” (Pangle & Burns, 2015, p. 353). Perfectibility makes knowledge, language, cooperation, and freedom possible. But, at the same time, perfectibility also introduces dependence, corruption, and inequality.

Leo Strauss explains the uncertainty contained within perfectibility. According to Strauss, "man is by nature good but he is by nature that subhuman being which is capable of becoming either good or bad." He further states that "man is by nature almost infinitely malleable" (Strauss, 1953, p. 271). Strauss, in the light of Rousseau's argument, wants to point out that humanity in its present shape was never a fixed destination. Human beings acquired their present qualities through a long process of development. Their original nature contained the capacity for change, although it did not determine the direction that change would take.

One might even say that the joy of self preservation was eventually unable to contain the effects of perfectibility. The possibility of going beyond existing conditions drew human beings away from their original idleness and tranquility. Rousseau still stresses that the movement towards civil society was an outcome of accidents. The stress on accidents come from Rousseau's belief that civil society did not begin as a rational plan because developed rationality itself emerged through the evolutionary civilizational process. This would plausibly mean that a pre-social human was prerational as well. Rousseau believes that Hobbes failed to understand this distinction because he placed developed passions and calculations into the state of nature. A social contract requires language, foresight, and the ability to recognize obligations. These capacities cannot simply be assumed at the earliest stage of human existence.

Self-Love and Social Dependence:

Perfectibility gradually led life in the state of nature into an organized social life. New emotions appeared and disrupted the pleasure and serenity associated with the state of nature. Rousseau distinguishes between the self love of the natural human and the comparative self love produced through society. Natural self love, or *amour de soi*, is connected to existence and self preservation. It encourages human beings to protect themselves without requiring them to compare their worth with the worth of others. It is not born from envy or vanity.

Comparative self love, or *amour propre*, develops through social relations. It depends on how individuals imagine themselves in the eyes of others. People begin to seek recognition and superiority. Neuhouser (2008) argues that *amour propre* becomes central to Rousseau's explanation of social dependence because individuals gradually acquire their sense of value through the opinions of other people. However, in the state of nature, humans did not experience these comparative emotions because they were not trapped in the judgment of others. This indifference towards the presence of other was another freedom that the natural human sacrificed with the development of society.

The loss of indifference was also the beginning of dependence on the other. Part Two of *The Second Discourse* (1964) examines the causes and effects that separated humans from their earlier condition and placed them in a world in which they had to accommodate the increasing relevance of other people. Perfectibility allowed human beings to adapt to the different geographical accidents they confronted. These circumstances forced them into closer contact with one another. Consequently, many changes took place. Humans began to establish families and develop social bonds such as conjugal love.

Rousseau's account suggests that family affection, temporary cooperation, and an emerging awareness of mutual commitments developed before the establishment of law and political authority, although social comparison had already begun to produce the first forms of inequality (Bloom, 1987, p. 565; Rousseau, 1964, pp. 146-151). But

humans were still living a life of relative joy because there were “no laws, no state, no inequality” (Bloom, 1987, p. 565). There was no settled political system or permanent division between the rich and the poor. Although people had become more connected, they had not yet entered the conditions of extreme dependence found in civil society. Interdependence brought moral expectations and obligations with it. These early obligations were more or less mutually beneficial and did not yet destroy the relative freedom of social life. Rousseau’s later political thought continues to confront the question of how human beings can live together once a return to natural independence is no longer possible (Shklar, 1969).

Nascent Society and Social Comparison:

It is important to mention that while presenting his critique of civil society, Rousseau does not question every stage of human development. He questions the corrupt and unequal outcomes produced through that development. Some early changes created a sense of possession and belonging within the family. Human beings were united through marriage and developed what Rousseau calls conjugal and paternal love. The formation of families and dwellings constituted the first major revolution in human social life. These developments produced joy, and a considerable degree of freedom was still protected. Human beings lived “a simple and solitary life, with limited needs” (Rousseau, 1964, p. 147).

Since people had more leisure, they began inventing commodities and conveniences. These commodities soon became needs. What had once been optional gradually acquired control over human life. Rousseau identifies this dependence on commodities as an early source of evil. The problem does not lie simply in the existence of tools or comforts but how people gradually started to lose the ability to live without the objects they had created. Their pleasures increased, but so did their vulnerabilities. As people lived closer to one another, the emotions that had grown out of familial bonds became more complex. Love took romantic forms, and ideas of preference and jealousy were born. Emotions were shaped by standards of beauty and by comparisons with other people.

People began appreciating and ranking one another. Rousseau writes that “the handsomest, the strongest, the most adroit, or the most eloquent became the most highly regarded” (Rousseau, 1964, p. 149). Once certain qualities received public appreciation, individuals began to desire recognition for possessing them. Consideration was a logical outcome of appreciation. Everyone wanted to be appreciated, and concern for the emotions and judgments of others became a moral question. Through this process, respect, dignity, vanity, shame, and contempt entered social life. The other became increasingly important because these emotions presuppose the presence and judgment of other people.

The relatively harmless emotions of early family life gradually developed into more difficult social passions. Human sociability produced affection and cooperation, but it also produced comparison and competition. The desire for recognition made individuals increasingly dependent on their standing in the eyes of others, while its inflamed forms became a source of conflict and self estrangement (Neuhouser, 2008, pp. 57–116). However, Rousseau does not describe this stage as completely corrupt. The developing social condition maintained a balance between the idleness of the original state and the activity of developed society. Pangle and Burns argue that *The Second Discourse* “means to celebrate the state of ‘nascent society,’ the state of ‘savage peoples’ as much if not more than the ‘primitive,’ ‘true,’ original state of nature” (Pangle & Burns, 2015, p. 357).

Rousseau even calls this condition “the happiest and most durable epoch” because it supported family, communal life, and a considerable degree of personal independence (Rousseau, 1964, p. 151). Comparison and conflict had begun to appear, although law, political domination, and extreme inequalities of property had not yet become controlling forces. Rousseau understands that it would be impossible for human beings to return to the original state of nature and does not proceed to provide a practical programme for reversing history and returning humanity to primitive isolation. But nascent society serves as a measure through which the losses produced by developed civil society can be understood. It shows that social relations can exist without the extensive inequality and dependence that later come to dominate human life.

Private Property and the Origins of Inequality:

In the historical formation of civil society, the decisive transformation took place when cooperation became necessary and the division of labour expanded. Agriculture and metallurgy required people to work together and made individual survival increasingly dependent upon the labour of others. The division of land followed cultivation, and property required public recognition and protection. Natural differences in strength and skill were gradually converted into lasting social inequalities. People became dependent on one another for labour, wealth, and recognition. According to Neuhauser (2014), social inequalities in Rousseau’s account become illegitimate when they produce domination or threaten self-preservation.

The introduction of private property forced individuals to consider the formation of civil society with a legal code and political order. The moment when the first person claimed land is the symbolic beginning of developed inequality in *The Second Discourse*. With the arrival of property, human beings acquired interests that could not be protected through their individual strength alone. Conflict developed between those who possessed property and those who did not. Rousseau (1964) accepts that it might be very likely that after property and the ensuing conflicts were introduced, things had already come to the point where they could no longer remain as they were. Some form of political settlement had become increasingly likely because social conflict had made the earlier condition unstable.

The social contract presented in *The Second Discourse* was proposed by the rich for the protection of their property. Law was introduced in the language of peace and equality, although it served the interests of those who already possessed wealth. The contract did not secure equality among human beings, and its foremost purpose was to give legal stability to existing differences. This widened the separation between those who possessed property and those who depended on those who did. The separation of humans from nature therefore led to forms of discrimination between human beings that were protected by law. The social order appeared to offer protection to everyone, but it transformed possession into a recognized right and made existing inequalities more difficult to challenge.

Civil Society and the Loss of Freedom:

With the advent of civil society, humans had to change their behaviour and the way they had lived during earlier stages of development. Developed civil society marks the culmination of the movement away from natural independence because it is full of artifice and corruption. For Rousseau, corruption means that human beings have been forced to withdraw their original nature and have added performance to their way of life. Allan Bloom explains this transformation in the following words:

"The greatest change in his nature is that formerly he lived entirely for himself within himself. Now he lives for others, not only because he is physically dependent on them but because he has learned to compare himself with them. His soul has become enslaved to other men" (Bloom, 1987, p. 566).

Apart from physical dependence, this change also transforms the way humans understand themselves. The distinction between appearance and reality becomes increasingly important in civil society. Individuals begin to seek consideration and respect through the way they appear to others, even when this appearance no longer corresponds with what they are. Starobinski (1988, pp. 27-29) identifies this growing separation between appearance and inner nature as a central tension in Rousseau's critique of society.

The widening gap between humans and their original nature is also evident in the laws imposed by civil society. Rousseau refuses to accept the laws and conventions of existing society as direct representations of human nature. Independence from the control of others was a defining characteristic of the humans living in the state of nature. A social order that places one person under the arbitrary control of another cannot claim that such dependence is natural. Civil society, nevertheless, produces laws that make unequal relations binding. Rousseau, therefore, distinguishes between natural capacities and conventional laws. Convention is produced through social history and should not be presented as an essential feature of human nature. Morality that grows out of conventions also belongs to social development.

The obligations created by an unequal contract do not become natural simply because they have been placed into law. A legal arrangement can possess authority while continuing to serve the interests of a particular group. Rousseau's critique therefore examines why certain freedoms are protected while others are ignored in modern political orders. This criticism does not mean that every possible political association must be rejected. Rousseau's later political thought asks whether a form of association can be created in which people remain free while living under shared laws. Shklar (1969) and Cohen (2010) argue that the preservation of freedom within social life remains one of Rousseau's central concerns.

The figure of nascent society provides a measure of the distance between natural independence and developed civil society. Rousseau (1964) finds a valuable balance in that earlier condition because affection and communal life exist without extreme inequality and political domination. His argument in favor of nascent society is not an emotional complaint produced by anger towards failed Enlightenment dreams. He believes that familial love and a simpler form of independence reveal possibilities that civil society has buried. The burden of being other than who one is develops from the demands that modern society places on its citizens. Civil society's preference for appearance produces individuals who possess "honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness" (Rousseau, 1964, p. 180).

Conclusion

Rousseau is not suggesting that humanity can or should return to the original state of nature. His investigation exposes the historical origins of existing institutions and questions the assumption of a fixed human nature. Since civil society was historically produced, its laws and inequalities can be examined and judged. Rousseau's lasting contribution lies in showing that freedom can be lost through forms of dependence that appear lawful and socially necessary. His account of natural freedom allows him to reveal the costs of a society in which people live through the judgment of

others and where law protects inequalities produced through property. The critique of civil society, therefore, remains connected to the search for social and political arrangements capable of preserving freedom and equality.

Rousseau's study of the state of nature remains one of the most sustained conjectural investigations of human development produced during the eighteenth century (Scott, 1992). He was writing before the later development of anthropology and modern social science. His account relied on philosophical conjecture, observations of human behaviour, and an attempt to distinguish acquired qualities from original human capacities.

His influence can be seen in many of the major intellectual traditions that followed. Rousseau's reflections on freedom, inequality, education, authenticity, and political association continued to shape philosophy and political thought long after his death (Orwin & Tarcov, 1997). A critic of bourgeois society, a literary writer, and a thinker willing to question the accepted truths of his time, Rousseau's intellectual interests were varied. His place among the most important thinkers of modernity remains indisputable.

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