

Discourse on the Origin of Inequality

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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If humans are benevolent by nature, how do societies become corrupt? And how do governments founded upon the defense of individual rights degenerate into tyranny? These are the questions addressed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, a strikingly original inquiry into much-explored issues of 18th-century (and subsequent) philosophy: human nature and the best form of government.

Rousseau takes an innovative approach by introducing a "hypothetical history" that presents a theoretical view of people in a pre-social condition and the ensuing effects of civilization. In his sweeping account of humanity's social and political development, the author develops a theory of human evolution that prefigures Darwinian thought and encompasses aspects of ethics, sociology, and epistemology. He concludes that people are inevitably corrupt as a result of both natural (or physical) inequalities and moral (or political) inequalities.

One of the most influential works of the Enlightenment, the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* offers a thought-provoking account of society's origins and a keen criticism of unequal modern political institutions.

Discourse on the Origin of Inequality Details


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From Reader Review Discourse on the Origin of Inequality for online ebook

Alex says

rousseau has written the first anti-civ, anarchist philosophical essay that i am aware of. it doesn't seem to be fully acknowledged as that, but it's clear what rousseau is talking about when he declares "All ran to meet their chains thinking they secured their freedom... Such was the origin of society and laws, which gave new fetters to the weak and new forces to the rich, destroyed natural freedom for all time, established forever the law of property and inequality, changed a clever usurpation into an irrevocable right, and for the profit of a few ambitious men henceforth subjected the whole human race to work, servitude and misery."

when i first read this book it was a wake up call to the highest degree, because i had never read someone who had such a similar viewpoint to my own before. it was a liberating experience, as if he was speaking my words.

rousseau takes the reader all the way back to the beginning of humanity and brings you one step at a time through the development of society (and the division of labor) until we reach our current, horrible state.

finally some realistic philosophy! beats the shit out of marx, THIS is materialism.

Siddharth says

I shall hopefully write a proper review once I have composed my thoughts, but for now I will seek to emulate the delighted and reverential tone of those critics whose choiciest lines of praise are plastered on the back-cover, front-cover and insides of books:

"A magnificent triumph of imagination, scholarship and reason!"

The discourse is divided into two parts. Part I deals with Man in the "State of Nature" (a concept used to denote the hypothetical conditions of what the lives of people might have been like before societies came into existence), i.e. Savage Man. Part II deals with how inequality originated and was perpetuated among us humans.

Part I

Rousseau basically argues in Part I that it was not possible for inequality to set in, in the State of Nature. In that pursuit, he gives us an elaborate, vivid and - most importantly - convincing portrayal of the life of Savage Man as he, Rousseau, imagines it to have been.

Let us conclude then that man in a state of nature, wandering up and down the forests, without industry, without speech, and without home, an equal stranger to war and to all ties, neither standing in need of his fellow-creatures nor having any desire to hurt them, and perhaps even not distinguishing them one from another; let us conclude that, being self-sufficient and subject to so few passions, he could have no feelings

or knowledge but such as befitted his situation; that he felt only his actual necessities, and disregarded everything he did not think himself immediately concerned to notice, and that his understanding made no greater progress than his vanity. If by accident he made any discovery, he was the less able to communicate it to others, as he did not know even his own children. Every art would necessarily perish with its inventor, where there was no kind of education among men, and generations succeeded generations without the least advance; when, all setting out from the same point, centuries must have elapsed in the barbarism of the first ages; when the race was already old, and man remained a child.

Part II

Part II begins powerfully.

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. From how many crimes, wars and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows, "Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody."

Rousseau then proceeds to begin from where he left off at the end of Part I. The life of Savage Man - a tranquil, solitary, equal one; what changed that?

In proportion as the human race grew more numerous, men's cares increased. The difference of soils, climates and seasons, must have introduced some differences into their manner of living. Barren years, long and sharp winters, scorching summers which parched the fruits of the earth, must have demanded a new industry. On the seashore and the banks of rivers, they invented the hook and line, and became fishermen and eaters of fish. In the forests they made bows and arrows, and became huntsmen and warriors. In cold countries they clothed themselves with the skins of the beasts they had slain. The lightning, a volcano, or some lucky chance acquainted them with fire, a new resource against the rigours of winter: they next learned how to preserve this element, then how to reproduce it, and finally how to prepare with it the flesh of animals which before they had eaten raw.

Rousseau traces the journey (or descent, as he would probably call it) of Man into domesticity, the idea of property, political society; a journey that sees inequality originate and entrench itself firmly in the human race. It is, again, a convincing argument, and a rewarding one for the reader (to say the very, very, infinitesimally little least).

The crux of the argument:

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.

This is not something that I would have normally bothered to read. I owe this wonderful reading experience to the MOOC I am currently enrolled in, "The Modern and the Postmodern".

Link: <https://www.coursera.org/course/moder...>

The course is only three weeks in, and I would heavily recommend it to anyone who may have an interest in the subject matter.

Next up: The Communist Manifesto. Can't wait :)

Ahmed Ibrahim says

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Ro says

Estoy muy contenta de que la profesora de historia me haya mandado a leer este libro; porque no se piensen que agarraría así como así una obra de Rousseau por mi cuenta...

Antes de comenzar con *Un discurso sobre la desigualdad* (o como sea que se haya traducido en español), me esperaba un lenguaje súper complicado y unos conceptos en extremo complejos. Además, iba mentalizada con la tarea que iba a tener que hacer después, por lo que no me esperaba disfrutar demasiado de esta lectura.

Sin embargo, soy apasionada de la historia, sobre todo la que ocurre durante el período del Absolutismo y alrededores (no es que hayan sido unos tiempos bonitos en los que vivir, pero son la mar de interesantes); sé que Rousseau no habla exactamente de la situación política y social que se estaba viviendo en Europa en aquellos momentos en específico, sino que más bien hace como una mirada a las sociedades (y a la formación de éstas) en general, pero aún así siento que me ayudó a expandir mis horizontes históricos.

Si estás interesado en leer algo de Rousseau (o algún otro filósofo contemporáneo, podemos decir) te recomendaría muchísimo que lo respaldaras con cierto conocimiento histórico y/o filosófico. No es que no puedas entender nada del Discurso si no has dado la Edad Moderna en clase, pero creo que sacarás mucho de cualquiera de este tipo de lecturas con al menos una base de conocimiento previo.

Este discurso trata sobre cómo se originó la desigualdad entre los hombres, que está tan patente y naturalizada hoy en día. Rousseau intenta descubrir la raíz de las diferencias entre las personas, cómo surgió

todo desde el principio de los tiempos. Es cierto que me hubiera interesado leer algo más político o del estilo crítica social más intensa (a una sociedad en particular), pero me tocó lo que me tocó, así que no me quejaré. Tras leer este libro (o discurso, o lo que quieras llamarle), no puedo más que admirar a Rousseau. Sus pensamientos no sólo son bien planteados y justificados, sino que son... muchas veces *superiores* a lo que estamos acostumbrados. Quizá si lees este libro entre muchos otros libros publicados en el siglo XXI no quedarás tan sorprendido, pero tenemos que entender que este hombre vivió en los 1500's, que sus ideas fueron revolucionarias, que nadie jamás (o más bien sólo unos pocos) habían mirado a la humanidad de la manera en que él lo hizo. Así pues, **su pensamiento se me hizo deliciosamente moderno para su época.** La mayoría de los pensamientos expuestos no fueron nada reveladores para mí, pero sí que han ido a lugares a los que nunca se me había ocurrido explorar con mi propia mente, eso se lo debo reconocer. También plantea ciertas **preguntas filosóficas** que son muy, muy interesantes, y dejan lugar para la interpretación y reflexión del lector, cosa que aprecio mucho.

También hay mucha **crítica social**, a la humanidad, a las leyes por las que nos regimos. Ya sé que yo quería crítica a una sociedad más específica, pero los puntos que hizo Rousseau sobre el ser humano estuvieron excelentes.

Como es bastante obvio, me convenció con sus razones para el origen de la desigualdad (aunque ése nunca fue una preocupación personal o algo parecido), y sobre todo me encantaron las dos o tres líneas que le dedicó a la religión.

Si le bajo una estrella es porque sentí que se iba bastante por las ramas en algunos puntos, y que hizo demasiado incapié en el hombre en su estado natural, en vez de pasar a la civilización un poquito más rápido, como me hubiera gustado. Hay cosas que me parecen no caben dentro de este discurso, pero que están tan bien expuestas que la mayoría de las veces ni molestaban.

Dejo a Rousseau recomendadísimo, y honestamente me halagó mucho el hecho de que pensara como él, de que pude coincidir en todo lo que exponía. Ha llevado mi mente a lugares que nunca me había molestado en explorar, y me siento muy feliz con los conocimientos que he adquirido gracias a esta lectura.

Antes de leerla, no hubiera valorado saber el origen de la desigualdad, pero, hell, ahora me siento un poquito más llena sabiéndolo.

No digo que vaya a leer más del autor en el futuro por simple voluntad mía, pero es que estoy segura de que en clase me van a encomendar a otro filósofo (en Bachillerato o durante la carrera), así que aguardaré feliz y paciente a que eso ocurra (y desear que sea algo más de Rousseau, me quedaron bastantes ganas de leer *The Social Contract*).

Ahora sólo me queda hacer el trabajo para la clase, que es el único aspecto negativo de esta lectura. Pero, ¿saben qué? no me va a pesar tanto, porque son ideas que comparto y el autor me ha dejado bastante entusiasmada por compartirlas.

Wided Nems says

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[illegible]

Anna says

the time. It is likewise fascinating how easily he sets aside god and religion from the start, obviously a radical stance at a time when people were still being burnt for heresy.

I think this point still merits repetition, given the current trend of claiming to have discovered timeless and immutable truths about human nature from behavioural economics experiments:

For it is no light enterprise to separate that which is original from that which is artificial in man's present nature, and attain a solid knowledge of a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, and which will probably never exist, yet of which it is necessary to have sound ideas if we are to judge our present state satisfactorily. Indeed it would require more philosophy than people realise in anyone who undertook to determine exactly what precautions must be taken to ensure reliable observation in this field...

I also appreciated the critique of explorers' accounts of so-called savages, which he finds unscientific (to use an anachronism) and likely inaccurate. Rousseau's feelings on environmental destruction also appear prescient. Perhaps most memorable to me, though, was this rhetorical question: 'What is one to think of a system in which the reason of each private person dictates to him maxims contrary to the maxims which the public reason preaches to the body of society, a system in which each finds his profit in the misfortunes of others?' It could probably be translated more tidily than that, but remains powerful. What indeed are we to think when compassion and co-operation are celebrated as individual virtues, but totally inimical to the wider economic system?

'A Discourse on Inequality' is only 114 pages long, including Rousseau's introduction and notes, yet the introduction by Maurice Cranston runs to 44 pages. This is frankly excessive and I don't think Rousseau's entire biography, in addition to commentary on the discourse, was necessary for context. I read the introduction last as ever and did not find it terribly enlightening. The editor's notes were very good, however, especially the grumpy interjections from Voltaire.

mohab samir says

[illegible]

However, as soon as laws were enacted, or created, to regulate human behaviour, a class of people, known in

our day and age as the lawyer, also arose to not only challenge these laws, but to look for ways, usually through fine sounding arguments, as to why this law should not apply. It is not a question of the indigenous tribe that is ruled by the wisdom of the elder, or even the dictatorship where the law is enacted by the will of a single ruler, but a sophisticated law (not necessarily a democracy) where the power to regulate the law is handed to a class of people, generally known as the bureaucracy.

Rousseau suggests that inequality arose at that point in time where one person was able to gather enough food for two people, and then to hold that food for himself. This, once again, is not necessarily a truth, since hunter-gatherers have always been able to gather more than a day's supply of food, and many of these tribes have habits of storing up food for lean years. However, it is not a question of storing food, but collecting it, making it your property, and then using it to make people do your will. This is how government is formed, because a class of people, not necessarily the strong ones, but the cunning and charismatic ones, are able to form a body that is able to administer the population for the best of the population. However, as they must dedicate their time to ruling, and need feed themselves, they must hand that duty over to others: thus a class of workers, or farmers, is formed to produce not so much enough for themselves, but for themselves and the administrative class. With that food the administrative class are able to create another class: enforcers. This class was not created so much as to keep the peace, or defend the realm, but to keep the administrators in power. As long as the administrators have control of the food supply, and are able to control who has it and who hasn't, then they are able to control the populace.

The final thing that I wish to mention has to do with enslavement. Rousseau indicates that when we hand a job over to another person to perform for us that is when we become enslaved. That is very much a truism, and indicates that even those who are in power, or live in their mansions, are really slaves. In fact, the uber-rich are probably the most powerless of them all because if you take away all of their servants they will be unable to do anything for themselves. If you don't believe me I have a simple proof: 'feed yourself'. As soon as you go down to the shop to buy food, you have demonstrated your reliance upon another human being. In fact, we are also slaves to our inanimate objects, like our cars (take us to the shop) and our television (entertain us) or even the internet (teach us, connect us).

Stephan says

After reading Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 'Discourse on the origin of inequality' I could only conclude that philosophy is truly an art of speculation. I've been looking forward to reading this book, since I have been intrigued by the subject of inequality for the last two decades due to unfortunate circumstances. Undoubtedly, had I read this book in my youth, I would have been in awe of it. But as it is today I find it more in dissension due to my empirical knowledge, and personal encounters with the world outside the realm of equality. Rousseau's unsubstantial statements can be quite distasteful for someone who has been hurt by the practices and customs of the exponents of inequality. The first part of the discourse was somewhat euphoric; Rousseau was unduly ecstatic. However, it is hard for a reader to find logic without substantial evidence to support Rousseau's statements. I admit that I have had pleasure in agreeing and disagreeing with Rousseau, as he truly possess the talent to provoke the mind and stimulate the reader intellectually. If you are more into science than into philosophy, however, you might find this book quite nonsocial. Rousseau's writing, particularly in the first few pages was quite digressive and illusive. I struggled to sort out the wheat from the chaff, and was just about to give up the book. Rousseau's residues of narcissism can either amuse or vex the reader. I must admit here that I was both amused at parts and vexed at parts, thus I had to let the book rest for a while and read it in small portions. Relating to Rousseau's background, he gained my sympathy, thus after overcoming the first hurdles and obstacles of the book, I began to slowly speculate over what he was really

trying to say. Throughout the entire book Rousseau's writing was condensed and repetitive, and yet inquisitive. Particularly in the first part I had to bear with him out of curiosity. Rousseau's longing for equality is relevant to love and compassion as natural needs. Not to be harsh on Rousseau but I could see why some readers might find him delusional and pompous. Most of his arguments were presumptuous, premature pompous, euphoric, and refutable. Nevertheless Rousseau's greatness is in making his arguments interesting to debate. The themes in this book were very intriguing. The question which led to this book by the academy of Dijon was somewhat rhetoric:

'What is the origin of inequality among mankind?
And whether such inequality is authorized by the law of nature?'

Rousseau chose to write a discourse on an answer that deserves only one word. The answer is Vanity. However the second part of the question is quite tricky, because there is no clear definition of what 'The law of nature' constitutes. I found it a flaw where Rousseau and the academy of Dijon implied that the law of nature is an absolute law. The law of nature, just like the law of man is not an absolute law, therefore the second part of the question is immaterial. There are only two absolute laws that surround both man and beast in their bindings. The law of nature and the law of man are splitting between these two absolute laws, upon which I have elaborated in some of my own literature. These two laws are: (See full review in two parts on my blog)

Elie F says

The title of this marvelous essay might suggest that it is about politics, but no it's not. Rousseau tackled political problems and solutions in *The Social Contract*, and no, the social contract is not the solution to the problems of human condition he laid out in *The Discourse on Inequality*. Apparently Rousseau's radicalness goes way beyond politics; he sees inequality as stemming from material and spiritual dependence. We are materially dependent on others from the moment we collaborate to produce, and we are spiritually dependent from the moment we perceive ourselves through the eyes of another and develop vanity, envy, honor or shame. So basically inequality (due to our interdependence) is our human condition, and there is no going back to the savage state of nature. I don't think Rousseau is even suggesting that it is desirable to return to independent savageness, and this essay is simply his theory of alienation and his scorn of the vanity of our civilization. Politics aside, it is genius.

Clint says

Without Rousseau's careful reflections on "the distance from pure sensations to the simplest knowledge", Kant couldn't have applied his theory that, "Men work themselves gradually out of barbarity if only intentional artifices are not made to hold them in it." Rousseau says the distance couldn't have been bridged without communication and goes on to show how incredibly slow the process to create language must have been. Society must have been a precursor to real language, the first ideas must have been nouns and served as complete sentences, and thought as a whole must have been particular and not generalized. With the creation of language and abstract ideas comes the eventual creation of property, and property makes society the new state of nature. At the end of the discourse, Rousseau illustrates this new nature by saying, "The savage lies in himself; sociable man, who lives outside himself, is capable of living only in the opinion of

others.”

Rousseau’s philosophy on the original nature of man is predicated on two principles, a human’s interest in his self-preservation and a “natural repugnance to seeing any sentient being, especially our fellow man, perish or suffer.” Society corrupts these two principles. Rousseau doesn’t think a man in his natural state would have ever committed suicide or harmed himself intentionally in any way, but he observes that people in the midst of enlightenment, with so much free time that they have the luxury of deep thought, sometimes commit suicide or harm themselves. He develops the idea that humans have lost much of their pity and compassion even more. The formation of societies and economic classes make humans jealous or scornful of each other. The wealthy value the poor or working class only as another piece of property, and the working class feels only jealousy and animosity toward the wealthy. This separation of humanity engenders hatred and a feeling of satisfaction at the misfortune of a person in a different class. He says, “Natural inequality in the human species must increase as a result of instituted inequality.”

Bertrand says

I remember having to read Rousseau's confessions at school, a pursuit I artfully dodged being the first rate slacker that I was. Yet I did not escaped the few lessons we were taught on this character, which I somehow came to picture, based on those partial readings, as a whiny, self-loathing and moralizing character, which in those attributes seemed quite credible as the father of the democratic thought.

More recently I have come across a variety of texts addressing a very different Rousseau - understand very different from the image I formed of him, but also very different I suppose, from the image I was taught of him. The only flaw I knew him was his rather 'complex' childhood sexuality as revealed in his autobiography, but I came to discover other peculiar traits that gave his thought more depth as well as his character: his originating the "collectivist methodology" or his (unhealthy) obsession with Sparta shine a very different light on the concept of the noble savage, one much less self-evident and politically correct. It was in this particular mindset I was when I started this reading. I was not disappointed, indeed Rousseau is far from the poor cliché I had stuck in my mind: first of all, not unlike Locke, he is a great writer, witty and confrontational, which always make for an easier lecture. Second his work if it happens to inscribe itself with earlier modern political theory, in the tradition of 'conjectural history', also provide a particular reflection on this theme, which it is as far as I know, the first to do. Also his work is strikingly secular: if he happily acknowledges Locke or Hobbes, his relationship to religion -if any- is closer to Machiavelli's. Last, assertions I have read that he was often regarded as the forefather of romanticism, left me until reading this text, skeptic at best. I am not knowledgeable enough about this movement to make my own mind but I now definitely see where this genealogy comes from: not the sentimentalism, nor the aesthetic primacy, but a sense of modernity as a right scourge grants him this awkward position, as both the paragon of humanism, and the omen of reactionary, anti-enlightenment and nationalist thought.

Scot says

I had a much harder time diving into this discourse compared to his previous on art and science which I thoroughly enjoyed. Once I got through his ramblings, which was about half of the book, I was thoroughly captivated though which salvaged my rating and of course overall enjoyment. It seems to be an imperative to remember the timing of its release and not apply modern filters, otherwise you can easily groan and guffaw

at his treatise on the "noble savages" in the first half of the book. If you can achieve this very difficult task you can begin to see between the lines and get at his deeper point which is that the more we develop and have the less happy we are and the greater the level of inequality between the haves and have-nots. The second half of this work was much more palatable as there were many juicy quotes and nuggets related to the rise and decline of all forms of government from monarchy to aristocracy to democracy. Some of his writing was incredibly eerie when you used it a lens for analysis of the current state of world affairs and global democracy. For the casual reader, I would personally recommend skipping to part II, though if you can again remove your filters, you may enjoy Part I as well.

Justin Evans says

I'm occasionally struck by how bad the great classics of political philosophy are. Consider that, when teaching philosophy, we spend an awful lot of energy convincing students that their arguments have to be tight, they have to avoid fallacies, they have to back up their reasoning, and they have to avoid special pleading. Then we give them Locke's treatises, or *The Prince*, or this great turd of philosophical unreason.

That said, once you decide this isn't a work of philosophy, it gets much better; it's not. It's pretty clearly a work of rhetoric, seeking to persuade rather than to reason. The first part, in particular, is utterly ridiculous taken as an argument of any kind: we have no reason to think that human beings outside of society are happy vegetables, but that's how Rousseau presents them. His 'argument' is entirely inconsistent; one minute he says these 'savages' have no need of tools or weapons, since they can just eat acorns, the next minute he's happily supplying them with spears to fight off wild beasts. Taken as a rhetorical attack on previous state-of-nature theories, however, and on the idea that civilization is always all good, it's okay. It's too silly to be anything other than okay, but that's fine. Read it ironically, and it makes sense: Rousseau's picture is no sillier than Hobbes', or Locke's, and his name is a lot less silly than Pufendorf's.

Part II is a bit more serious. Here Rousseau takes a lot from Hobbes (one of the few philosophically solid classics of political philosophy), his analysis tightens up, and we're suddenly faced with a whole bunch of fascinating questions: how did it happen that humans became social? how did it happen that some people get the power and wealth, while others get nothing? can that be justified?

His answers aren't particularly good, but as a way of showing us how difficult and important these questions are--and, pace Hobbes/Locke/et al., how difficult they are to solve--Rousseau's book works very nicely. It's much harder to justify inequality than previous philosophers had argued (some philosophers still argue), it's much harder to provide a rational basis for human society than most of us like to think, and it's very hard indeed to imagine how human institutions came into being.

Sadly, Rousseau seems to have led more people towards naturalism than away from it, even though you can easily read this book as an attempt to do the latter. The point about the 'state of nature' is that it probably never happened, not that we should return to it; if we can get out of the habit of thinking that there's some nature we can get back to, we can also get out of the habit of thinking we can justify our institutions and actions based on the 'fact' that they're 'natural.'
