

NOTES FOR LECTURE PHILOSOPHY 166
ROUSSEAU, *DISCOURSE ON THE ORIGIN OF INEQUALITY*, PART I

Rousseau has what he takes to be a simple but decisive objection against the social contract tradition in political theory as represented by such authors as Hobbes and Locke. The tradition is anachronistic, asserts Rousseau. The social contract writers characterize men and women in the state of nature by observing the traits people display in political society and making conjectures as to how these traits would manifest themselves in the absence of political society. But Rousseau points out that this procedure incorrectly ignores the possibility that (many of) the important traits that people display in society are the result of living together with others and would not show up in a pre-social existence. For example, Rousseau criticizes Locke for imagining private property arising in a presocial existence in which individuals are assumed to have developed moral ideas and to be capable of regulating their conduct by conceptions of natural law. Why assume this?

To correct the anachronisms in the tradition, Rousseau adopts the task of trying to imagine what human life must have been like in a presocial form of existence. Before humans lived and interacted with one another, what sort of lives did they have? For Rousseau, asking about how people lived in the state of nature is asking about how people lived prior to the existence of any human society. Writing in the eighteenth century, Rousseau supposes there is no way we can gather empirical evidence to answer questions about the state of nature. We have to rely on a thought experiment. We try to figure out what traits of humans arise from living and interacting with others, subtract those traits, and imagine what human life would have been like with those traits absent. There is much that is fanciful and even ludicrous in Rousseau's account of the state of nature, but he does bring to bear an intelligent and creative imagination on the problems he addresses. The question arises whether Rousseau respects the limits of what imagination in the absence of evidence can establish with respect to the questions he is trying to answer.

Is Rousseau correctly interpreting the social contract authors he criticizes? For our purposes, consider Rousseau versus Locke. Rousseau interprets the social contract writers as regarding the social contract as an historical occurrence, not merely a hypothetical possibility. In the case of Locke, Rousseau's interpretation looks plausible. But Locke does not seem to share Rousseau's aim of discovering what human life was like prior to all social interaction. For Locke, the state of nature consists of people living together peaceably in the absence of any political society or government. The term "state of nature" for Locke does not refer to presocial existence. Given all of this, I do not see that Rousseau's anachronism charge can be made to stick against Locke. This does not gainsay the intrinsic interest of Rousseau's project of imaginative reconstruction.

Rousseau is writing before Charles Darwin reoriented our thinking about human origins in the nineteenth century and for that matter before Europeans had much anthropological knowledge about hunter-gatherer societies and about our ancestors prior to the emergence of the human species. Our ancestors were social animals and humans have always been disposed to live in groups. The questions that Rousseau investigates by an act of historical imagination in the *Discourse on Inequality* are hard to construe so that they make sense. What were humans like when we lived as solitary animals, like bears? What is the explanation of the development of these solitary animals into social beings, and what does this explanation tell us about the nature of social inequality? These are Rousseau's questions. They start from the false presumption that humans were once solitary animals, like bears.

According to Rousseau, prior to the beginning of social interaction, human beings were happy savages. We lacked language and were capable of very little forethought. We had no moral notions. The human animal living alone is conscious, has experiences, but is not self-conscious—not aware of itself as one member of a kind of creatures and lacking in second-order desires and other attitudes toward its first-order desires and beliefs. Humans in this state of nature are moved to action by simple desires for food, shelter, warmth, sleep, sexual gratification, safety against predators and other things perceived as menacing, and so on. The male's role in reproduction is limited to the act of sex, done on a whim and on the impulse to seek generic gratification. The family consists of a woman carrying about with her a young child.

Lacking second-order preferences—preferences about one's preferences—the savage in the state of nature lacks a prerequisite of having a morality. Once one has preferences about one's preferences, one wants to be a person of a certain sort, who desires some things and not others. With this self-consciousness comes the possibility of affirming an ideal for oneself and of failing to live up to that ideal image of oneself. Being self-conscious, aware of oneself as one among other similar creatures, one can wonder how to relate oneself to these other selves, and morality can grow from these thoughts. Lacking such reflective desires, the savage as described by Rousseau is not fully human, not really a person.

Other social contract theorists such as Locke tend to think of political society and government as instruments that we devise to help us to satisfy desires that we antecedently have. Rousseau's vision is different. He thinks that with the development of society and morality individuals' wants themselves are fundamentally transformed. Nor is it the case according to Rousseau that governments and society are planned, brought into existence by the actions of people who deliberately act to create institutions and practices to satisfy their

wants., Rousseau pictures forms of society emerging and fading away as humans drift from one social state to another, not comprehending the consequences of these changes, many of which they do not intend. Social change is an effect of humans actions but not the intended effect, rather the unintended by product that results from the ensemble of human actions.

(In Part II of the *Discourse on Inequality* Rousseau inexplicably switches from this account of history as emerging as the unplanned and unintended outcome of many individual human actions taken together. Instead he treats phenomena such as the initial rise of the state as though they were plausibly regarded as the outcome of voluntary action intended to produce the result that actually ensues.)

In Rousseau's state of nature the individual is a beast, but a happy beast. The individual experiences simple desires associated with basic needs and finds that in her circumstances, her natural powers enable her to satisfy her desires. Rousseau emphasizes the physical powers of the human animal—speed, strength, manual dexterity, lack of susceptibility to disease—not the mental powers, which are limited. In the state of nature the human animal is stupid; its mental powers are undeveloped. (Page 42: "I almost dare to affirm that the state of reflection is contrary to nature and that the man who meditates is a depraved animal.") There is a harmony between nature and human nature in the state of nature. Experiencing the satisfaction of one's desires, one is happy.

In the state of nature one's desires are generic and simple. One does not desire sex in a romantic way, with a focus on a particular person as the object of desire. (See *Discourse on Inequality*, pages 55-57.) One simply wants to satisfy a physical urge, and any partner will do. Nor is there any reason to sustain companionship after the completion of the sex act, so instead of romance in the state of nature one finds the human as a solitary animal who connects with another human just to satisfy a mutual physical urge and just for as long as it takes to do so. Lacking the intense desire for the love of a particular person, one is not placed in rivalry with others who seek the love of the same person. The point generalizes: if I want strawberries in the state of nature, any will do, so I am not motivated to fight another person who is chomping on the berries I had intended to eat. Hence there is slight basis for conflict between human individuals in the state of nature as Rousseau pictures it. By the same token there is slight incentive for hard work; in the state of nature the human animal can satisfy her desires without much energetic action; indolence prevails.

Rousseau also emphasizes that there is hardly any opportunity for oppression and servitude in the state of nature and no incentives to seek to oppress or enslave. (See p. 58.) Nor do humans prior to society exhibit warlike aggression. (See p.53 and p. 55.) In the state of nature the individual has natural freedom—one's will is not subject to the will of any other individual. Prior to the

development of language and society, "it is impossible to imagine why, in that primitive state, one man would have a greater need for another man than a monkey [??] or wolf has for another of its respective species" (p. 51).

According to Rousseau the desires of the savage are dictated by two master passions, self-love and pity. Self-love is not reflective; it just consists in simple desires for our own well-being. Pity involves a sense of identification with others (humans or other animals) perceived as like oneself, together with an innate repugnance at seeing them suffer. Pity seems to involve a glimmering of self-consciousness. In pitying another individual, one identifies it as like oneself, a sentient animal or a human animal, and in this emotion there is awareness of oneself and the other.

Even though he is an animal, not fully human, the savage in the state of nature is already a somewhat unnatural element in nature, according to Rousseau. Unlike the other animals, who are described by Rousseau as sentient machines, the human has free will, the power of free choice.

DISCOURSE, PART II.

If there is a happy equilibrium between man and nature in the Rousseauian state of nature, what disturbs this equilibrium? What explains the transition from the state of nature to social existence and the rise of social inequality? Rousseau mentions the increase of population, though he is not very explicit on this point (p. 61). One might conjecture that population pressure in a local area would put pressure on the inhabitants either to cooperate, so they can survive with limited resources, to fight for those limited resources, or to retreat to another region, perhaps one with less abundant natural resources. In this way population increase eventually induces cooperation.

Rousseau describes several stages in the development of social cooperation and political society. First comes a stage of casual association, then primitive society without extensive division of labor or property, then the rise of agriculture and metallurgy and with them the rise of property and unequal ownership accompanied by other social inequalities, then political society, which evolves to despotism. The story of social progress does not have a happy ending.

Casual association. At this stage there is temporary cooperation among humans for a limited purpose. Rousseau gives the example of hunting for deer. If several people hunt together, they can likely kill a deer and eat well. If they hunt alone, each catches rabbits and eats, on the average, less well. But cooperation according to Rousseau is fragile: if a rabbit bounds across the path of a hunter engaged in the cooperative hunt, he forgets his fellows and goes after the rabbit without attending to the cost to his fellow hunters imposed on them by his defection from the cooperative scheme. At about this same time

humans invent fishing and hunting and develop the beginning of prudent calculation. This "mechanical prudence" "increased his superiority over the other animals by making him aware of it" (p. 61). With this success in outsmarting animals comes the first stirring of pride. The human prides herself on being more clever than other animals. Language develops, though at first one not "much more refined than that of crows or monkeys" (p. 62).

Primitive society. The first revolution in the emergence of society according to Rousseau is the building of huts. Here one also has the beginnings of property. Extended proximity to other humans living nearby gradually engenders an alteration in the character of sexuality: we develop romantic attraction to particular persons, longer unions of mates, and family life with a man and woman cohabiting. At this stage humans use leisure to procure conveniences and luxuries, these being "the first yoke they imposed on themselves without realizing it" (p. 63). Why are luxuries a constraining burden? According to Rousseau, luxuries are addictive. In initial stages of consumption one gets pleasure from the luxury good and does not much mind its absence, but as consumption becomes habitual "being deprived of them became much more cruel than possessing them was sweet; and they were unhappy about losing them without being happy about possessing them." In the long run these "goods" foster unhappiness. Conveniences also soften the body and mind, so one becomes less able to satisfy one's own desires by one's own efforts. (Compare the use of an electric golf cart to walking the fairways.)

When humans live together in society, they "acquire the ideas of merit and beauty which produce feelings of preference" (p. 63). Already one has a transformation of desire. Humans come to have attitudes and attachments toward others and desire for the regard of others. One wants to be esteemed and regarded more highly than others. One also acquires ideas about how one ought to behave toward others; morality is born. With ideas of virtue one also gets the possibility of vice. We find competitions for status and status rankings. We have a status ranking when a number of individuals are rated according to their possession of some trait or accomplishment deemed valuable (being the fastest runner, the best dancer, etc.), so there is an ordering from best to second-best down to worst. The winners in status competitions develop vanity and contempt, the losers shame and envy (p. 64). Romance leads to romantic rivalry, jealousy, and cruel deeds of jealousy and revenge. Still, all things considered, this primitive society, where humans have become human persons capable of moral feelings and of virtue and vice, but before significant property inequality emerges, must have been "the happiest and most durable epoch" and the one "least subject to upheavals and the best for man" (p. 65).

Agriculture and metallurgy. The next revolution in the development of human society is the emergence of agriculture and metallurgy, and with them,

significant social inequality and more complex division of labor. Already with the beginning of family life there was according to Rousseau a rudimentary division of labor, with men doing foraging for food and women tending the hut. But complex schemes of cooperation involving the dependence of each person on the different labor of others in a cooperative enterprise emerge only at this stage. With division of labor and dependence on the work of others one finds servitude and subjection to the will of others. Metal-working and agriculture bring in their train increased property beyond subsistence and eventually unequal property. Human desires and needs multiply, luxuries become needs, and people become dependent on those who can supply them. Significant property inequality magnifies status competitions and to some extent alters their character, since more is at stake. Only some traits elicit the high regard of others and superior status, so the individual "was soon forced to have them or affect them. It was necessary, for his advantage, to show himself to be something other than in fact he was. Being something and appearing to be something became two completely different things; and from this distinction there arose grand ostentation, deceptive cunning, and all the vices that follow in their wake" (p. 67). We are off and running in the progress of civilization toward cosmopolitan, hierarchical, despotical Paris.