

A discourse on inequality



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Report On A Discourse On Inequality, By Jean Jacques Rousseau

In Rousseaus book A Discourse On Inequality, he looks into the question of where the general inequality amongst men came from. Inequality exists economically, structurally, amongst different generations, genders, races, and in almost all other areas of society. However, Rousseau considers that there are really two categories of inequality. The first is called Natural/Physical, it occurs as an affect of nature. It includes inequalities of age,, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind and soul. The second may be called Moral/Political inequality, this basically occurs through the consent of men. This consists of the privileges one group may have over another, such as the rich over the poor.

Rousseau came to the conclusion that the best way to examine the inequality in society is to examine the beginning of mankind itself. He tried to imagine the early state of man assuming there was ever actually a state where man existed only with the nature, in a solitary, and primitive lifestyle. He did not however revert as far back to the idea of the Neanderthal man to examine the ideas man held and where they came from. Instead, he looked at a state where man looked, and seemed to have the same physical abilities as he does today. Rousseau also concedes that a time where the ideas of government, ownership, justice, and injustice did not exist may not have ever existed. If what many religions tell us is true, then, in mans beginning, he was from the start, handed down laws from god which would influence his thinking and decisions. Through this, the only way such a period could come about would have to be through some catastrophic event, which would not only be impossible to explain, but consequently, impossible to prove.

Therefore, imagining this state could prove not only embarrassing, but would be a contradiction to the Holy Scriptures.

In the natural state, Rousseau suggests that we should strip man of all the supernatural gifts he may have been given over the course of time. He says we should consider him, in a word, just as he must have come from the hands of nature, we behold in him an animal weaker than some, and less agile than others; but, taking him all around, the most advantageously organized of any. He presumes that man's needs would be easily satisfied. His food was easily gained, as was his rest, and he was without need of shelter. Basically, all his needs were easily supplied and obtained. So, where then, can a society come about in which there can be social minorities and majorities? Essentially, this is what Rousseau wanted to know. Man must have begun with only purely animal functions. His sight and his touch must have been his primary condition. This condition is common amongst animals. What then differentiated man from the animals was to will, and not to will, to desire, and to fear. Those would be the first, and likely the only operations of his soul. This would remain so until an occasion arrived where these ideas would need to be expanded, and new ideas created. Rousseau poses an interesting question when he asks: why a person who has neither fears nor desires should give

himself the trouble of reasoning. He says it is by the activity of our passions that our reason is improved. We desire knowledge only because we wish to enjoy. We would conclude then that vanity is the source of our evolution, but it is not necessarily so according to Rousseau. Man still had nothing but basic desires, he did not know of the pleasure he might experience outside of the

act of satisfying his primary needs: Food, Sleep, and Intercourse. Man learns only what nature shows it, and nature to him becomes more indifferent, he has no deep metaphysical type inquiries, no foresight or curiosity. Therefore, although in the future, the idea of vanity is likely to be an aid, which would cause an exponential increase in the reasoning, hence growth of the mind and imagination, it could not be the beginning. Oddly enough, the recognition of death would be one of the first steps made by man in departing from the animal state. It may have come about through the association of pain with death. Pain being the only negative idea/feeling the primitive man had, the pain associated with it could inspire thought, and learning/reasoning. The same way man learns to hunt and not to be caught is the same way he could learn he does not want to die, not because of the aftermath but because of the agony in dying.

Rousseau then compares the ideas of language leading to society, or society leading to language. Language would be a necessity for passing along ideas and knowledge from one to another, if there was only a simple society composed of family (mother-child) they might have developed their own language, but surely it would not have had the longevity to grow into a standard language, and Rousseau shows that he believes in order for communication as complex as language to come about, there had to be the involvement of a higher source. However assuming that is not so, and although not needed by those persons existing at that time, language would grow from a very basic and not very useful cry of nature, it would be used in an occasion such as to call for help, but would have little use in conveying

feelings and ideas. As mans ideas grew so would his language if he wished to convey his thoughts, hence the birth of the first most primitive language.

The boiling point comes now when Rousseau tells of what is the exact point where inequality begins. This Is Mine, according to Rousseau, the moment someone got it in their head to say this and was believed by another, is the point where inequality begins. That moment was the reason for all the wars, bloodshed, crimes, and misfortunes, etc. which civil society has faced. He makes a powerful statement when he says all that could have been prevented if someone had said: Beware of listening to this imposter; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody. But where did this idea come from? Rousseau says there must have been a long and complex process for learning the steps necessary to come to the idea of ownership. Difficulties must have arisen in mans life causing him to have to learn new way to surmount them, he may have had to make tools which gave him yet another advantage over the animals. When he realized this, he would recognize himself as an individual through the pride he would gain the moment he looked at himself for he would be at the top of the food chain. As the human population grew, he would be in contact with them more often, eventually noticing that their behaviors reflected what his would be if in the same situation. He would find that in some cases it would be to the benefit of his well being to be accompanied by those of his own kind. At first, these groups would be maintained for only as long as it took to serve the desired goal. However, eventually the groups lifespan would increase significantly because in more instances remaining a part of the group was more of a benefit then not.

Now that groups were steadily together, they began to expand their knowledge, their tool making abilities had increased, they learned to make huts, and did so because they believed they were easier to defend. Others would not try and take over this hut, not because it belonged to the one who built it, but either because it served no use to them, they were weaker, they could build it themselves, or most likely, they knew that they would have to fight with the family if they did attempt to take it. Instead, this person was likely to become a neighbor, rather than an enemy for the sheer motive of convenience. Essentially, the fact that others stood by as one did something for oneself, mimicked it rather than tearing it down, allowed for the ideas of property, and ownership. Property, as it grew large in its ideology would become too big for those who would eventually try to tear it down, this would lead to laws and groups who would enforce it as being a valid concept. Thus Ownership, Property, and Law are the basis for the outbreak and ever present inequality in our lives.