

Discourse on the  
origin of inequality –  
rousseau's  
conception of private  
property...



In the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau holds that the institution of private property has corrupted human nature and humanity, such that, man, whose incipient nature is pure and inclined to goodness and compassion, eventually degenerates to displaying traits of deceit, cunning and trickery (Rousseau, 2008, 159). However, it is this author's contention that Rousseau fails to account for any of the possible positives and advantages which arose out of the institution of private property.

Rousseau begins by discussing his view of primitive man, whose existence is defined by a state of nature prior to the development of civil society:

primitive man would have simple needs, would display a natural instinct for his own self-preservation, as well as a natural aversion toward the suffering of other men and creatures (ibid, 154). In Rousseau's view, primitive man does not associate with others, is motivated by sheer instinct, and the natural desire to perpetuate himself and his species (ibid, 154). Therefore, he engages in the sexual act devoid of all emotional or physical attraction: "Man's first sentiment was that of his existence, and his first concern was that of his own preservation" (ibid, 154). Thus, Rousseau fundamentally rejects the notion that man is savage, deceitful and violent. This is in direct opposition to Hobbes' view, in particular, who was wont to attribute these pernicious qualities to man's basic nature (ibid, 153). Rousseau contends that philosophers, such as Hobbes, imposed a distorted and negative conception of human nature as a result of the ill effects of society (ibid, 156).

The fatalistic qualities to which Hobbes alludes, in Rousseau's view, are born out of the institutions of civil society; Rousseau asserts, by contrast, that primitive man is rather one " whose heart is at peace and whose body is

health" (ibid, 152). Furthermore, primitive man has no desire to subordinate other humans. His concern is only for his own survival, which does not impose or encroach on others (ibid, 155). Without relationships that are endemic to society, man has not cultivated reason, has no knowledge of good or evil, and does not possess unfavourable faculties, behaviours and attributes of the social and civilized man (ibid, 156).

Rousseau continues to describe the incidents that caused man to become more social and therefore corrupt. As relations between individuals progressed, man developed perceptions, feelings, desires and fears toward certain objects and away from others, leading to the development of reason: " In instinct alone, man had everything he needed to live in the state of nature, and in cultivated reason, man has everything he needs to live in society" (ibid, 152). Further, Rousseau points to the discovery of competition between animals and between humans, the sudden need for tools, exercise and agility, in order to secure goods for man's own self-sustenance (ibid, 157). With these advances came the discovery of iron and wheat, the cultivation of land, the acquisition and division of property, and, finally, to the establishment of laws surrounding private property (ibid, 158). " The true founder of civil society was the first man, who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying ' This is mine,' and came across people simple enough to believe him" (ibid, 154). As man began to acquire private property and personal possessions, the necessity to protect such property arose.

Rousseau's summation of human development ultimately led to his contention that the state's primary function is the protection of private property, without which, man would have no need for the state. As Rousseau <https://assignbuster.com/discourse-on-the-origin-of-inequality-rousseau-conception-of-private-property-essay/>

remarks, “ the recognition of property led to the first rules of justice” (ibid, 158). While the proposition of “ rules of justice” may lead to one’s surmise that society was thus marked by civility, Rousseau explains his views on the insidious effects of private property on humanity.

While primitive man was independent and self sufficient, man in society was now bound to provide for himself though social obligations (ibid, 159). This led to what Rousseau describes as the slavery of all; the master depends on the servant for production and the servant depends on the master for his protection and sustenance (ibid, 159). Dependant relationships begin to emerge causing man to become more astute, crafty, and clever (ibid, 159). As man navigates through these dependant relationships, he sees the advantage of dominating others, and develops traits of deceit, trickery, dishonesty, as well as the practice of violence and domination (ibid, 159).

Further, man, having cultivated reason, seeks to garner the esteem of others through the acquisition of possessions and the cultivation of certain skills (ibid, 158). Rousseau contends that this need for the approval and recognition of others leads man to “ striking ostentation, deceitful cunning and all the vices that follow in their wake” (ibid, 159). Rousseau continues to describe man’s descent and speaks of man’s “ burning passion” to gain the advantage, exploiting as many and as much as possible (ibid, 159). Thus did man’s evil nature come about and, with it, society’s corollary: inequality: “ All these evils are the first effects of property and the inseparable escort of nascent inequality” (ibid, 159).

Inheritances exacerbated this problem by the transfer of more and more lands between the aristocratic class (ibid, 159). Rousseau explains that the common man, by simply failing to be forceful and domineering in the acquisition of land fell into a condition of poverty without having done anything at all (ibid, 159). Following this growing divide between rich and poor, humanity was correspondingly divided into two classes: masters and slaves, both of which led to violence and brutality; the masters and landowners became aggressive and hostile, while the slaves and workers engaged in theft, trickery and violence (ibid, 159). Rousseau describes in gruesome terms man's insidious and insatiable desire to enslave as many as possible: "The rich, for their part, had hardly learned the joys of domination before they disdained all other ones...they dreamed only of subjugating and enslaving their neighbours, like those ravenous wolves, that, having once tasted human flesh, reject all other nourishment and thenceforth desire only to feed on man" (ibid, 159). Rousseau concludes that both the master and slave suffered harmful character defects as a result of the acquisition of private property. Private property made humans deceitful, cunning and devious towards their fellow man and stratified humanity into disparate and unequal classes. Rousseau therefore notes how man's development of the qualities of thinking and reasoning through the acquisition of wealth and property perverted man's natural sentiments. While Rousseau emerges as a champion for mankind, decrying the inequality he witnessed around him, protesting the unequal and unjust social and economic order; nevertheless, it is this author's belief that Rousseau's views are simplistic and uncompromising with respect to the possible advantages and ennobling effects of private ownership.

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No doubt Rousseau was influenced by the historical context and social climate in which he lived, that being the industrialization of the 18th century. While, granted, private ownership and the development of capitalism had led to a highly stratified society during the industrial age, it also produced immense advancements for humankind. Private property allowed for the development of a free market system, marked by the diminution of the state's intervention on the affairs of private business. By allowing for the operation of a free market system, competition begins to push for advances in machinery, technology and the sciences, contributing to the quality and shape of modern man's ability to exercise both personal freedom and freedom in the marketplace. Technological innovations, the discovery of electricity and the use of modern machines and sciences to manipulate these new discoveries, combined with the private property system, allowed for the development of products, medicines, basic necessities, cars, furniture, all of which combined to improve modern man's lifestyle, extend his life span, and free up his time for potentially ennobling and recreational activities. All of these advances can be attributed to the division of and acquisition of private property.

It is this author's contention that private property played an integral role in the development of modern man's excellent social and economic conditions of the 21st century. While a counter argument could be made that the advances in sciences and technology have not altered the essentially stratified and disparate class system of rich and poor, a rebuttal to this response would assert that this condition does not necessarily affect man's essential human nature in the manner that Rousseau asserts. While, the

lower classes suffer through poverty, scarcity and work hard and long hours to sustain themselves, they do not necessarily develop insidious qualities because of this condition. People, rich or poor, make the choice to live with morality, decency and integrity. Therefore, even if a stratified economic system created by private property might cause suffering on the part of the poor, this does not necessarily mean that human nature has been corrupted as Rousseau asserts. In conclusion, while Rousseau's views on the pernicious effects of private ownership does contain a cautionary tale on the dangers of inequality, the encroachment of others, and the descent of civil society; nevertheless, it is this author's view that Rousseau fails to consider the benefits of private property, or the fact that honour and integrity can prevail even in the direst of conditions.