

Book review jean
jacques rousseau
discourse on
inequality philosophy
essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Summary In “ Discourse on Inequality” Rousseau seeks to explain the historical and logical reasons for the emergence of social inequality. For Rousseau, primarily the origin is a source and cause. Rousseau does not believe that a radical reorganization of society can destroy the inequality among people. The change of power is not sufficient for the transition into a society, in which there is no inequality. It occurs constantly, says the philosopher, because people never stop comparing themselves to others. Revolution can only make changes to the content of inequality, but does not eliminate it. After all, progress causes more inequality. Thus, Rousseau is interested not only in political but also in psychological and social roots of inequality. The discourse is devoted to the Republic of Geneva, in which he was born.

Rousseau argues that having the choice of the fatherland, he would choose a small country where there is a certain affinity among the citizens, and in which freedom and equality of citizens are indisputable and are addressing citizens’ needs. Rousseau believes that description to some extent is consistent with the Republic of Geneva: “ Your state system is excellent, it is dictated by the elevated mind and guaranteed by friendly and respectable powers; your state is peaceful, there are no wars, any invaders should not be afraid of you ... you are neither so rich as to be enervated by effeminacy and lose in vain luxury the taste for true felicity and solid virtue, not are you so poor as to need from foreign aid more than your own industry can furnish” (p. 61). In the preface Rousseau advances the thesis that the most useful and least-advanced of all human knowledge is knowledge about the man himself.

Rousseau is calling for a study of natural and primitive human as human was before the emergence of society. Rousseau notes that among men there are two kinds of inequality: natural (ex. physical strength) and political (social). It is difficult to talk on the first of those two because it exists originally.

However, social inequality is a serious problem.

In the opinion of Rousseau, a man confronts nature, in which he should survive. He has a powerful physical body – he hunts. He lives in harmony with the environment. He has few resources but has little needs as well. “The only good with which natural human is familiar in the world, is food, female and rest; the only kinds of evil – pain and hunger.” (p. 89) And further, the author speaks of the wild man: “His soul, agitated by nothing, follows only the sense of the present existence, without any vision of the future, no matter how close it is, and his plans are limited as his views, and hardly extend to the end of the day.” (p. 90) Rousseau argues that to master fire and to begin farming required a great time.

To anticipate and to think about the future, according to Rousseau, men had to withdraw from the natural state. This involves the development of language. A philosopher explores in detail the roots of origin of language as tools for life in society. Rousseau believed that for man’s life in his natural state only instinct was required. “But for life in society” a developed mind was needed. Thus, the natural man is not flawed and is not virtuous.

Rousseau argues with Hobbes, who argued that natural human who lacks virtues must be evil by nature. According to the author, a natural person, on the contrary, is not flawed, since he is unaware of vanity. Rousseau even

thinks that such a man has compassion by nature. Man does not like to see the suffering of his own kind, like mother loves and pities her children.

However in a civilized society a person is full of pride and knows no pity: “The mind creates pride, and contemplation strengthens it; thinking about it makes a man turn his thoughts to himself, thinking separates man from all that displeases and disappoints him. Philosophy isolates human; precisely because of philosophy he says quietly at the sight of suffering: suffer if you want, I am safe. Only the threats posed to society as to whole can disrupt peaceful sleep of the philosopher and lift him out of the bed. It is possible to kill someone with impunity passing beneath his window; he needs only to close his ears and calm himself with simple arguments to keep his rebellious nature from identifying with the person who is being killed. The wild man is completely free from this exciting talent, and from lack of prudence and intelligence; he is always without given reason follows the first impulse of humanity” (p. 101). A passion is unknown to primitive man. Sexual desire does not cause the collision among people: “The imagination, which among us creates so much trouble, says nothing to “wild” heart; each is calmly waiting for suggestions of nature, which are given to him, and once the needs are satisfied, desires vanish all at once” (p. 102)

The natural state is a state of equilibrium where there is no passion, no progress, the participation was in his actions of free will: “The wild man, who was wandering in the woods, did not have a work ethic, he did not know the speech, had no home, had no wars and had no contact, did not need his own kind, nor felt any desire to harm them, even, perhaps, did not know any of them individually, was subjected to only few passions, and, was contenting
<https://assignbuster.com/book-review-jean-jacques-rousseau-discourse-on-inequality-philosophy-essay/>

on himself; he was possessed only by those feelings and knowledge that were consistent with his actual needs, looked only at what he thought represented the interest for him, and his intelligence made no great progress compared to his vanity” (p. 104). If by chance the primitive man would make a discovery, he could not tell anyone about it because he did not even know his children. The new art would die with its inventor: “ There was no education, no progress, generation multiplied uselessly, and because each of them had been starting from the same point for centuries, they flowed in the same primitive rudeness. Humanity was old, but man was still a child” (p. 105)

Rousseau, for long and in detail describes the natural state, desiring to destroy the false theories about natural state that have been made by his predecessors. Philosopher rejects the idea that the basis of social inequality is the physical differences. According to Rousseau’s theory, in natural state power has rarely been used between humans and cannot form the basis for long-term relationships: “ Man, of course, can take possession of the fruits that are gathered by other, prey which was killed by other, a cave that served as a shelter to other... But will another human be able to compel another to obey him? ... If human has trouble in one place, who would stop him to go to another place?” (p. 106) In the natural state, one person cannot compel another to serve him because no one needs anyone else to survive.

Consequently, in natural state social inequality does not exist. Subsequently, Rousseau’s classical phrase: “ First, who enclose a piece of land came up to say: “ This is mine!” And people were naive enough to believe that was the real founder of civil society” (p. 109). Then the author notes: “ From how <https://assignbuster.com/book-review-jean-jacques-rousseau-discourse-on-inequality-philosophy-essay/>

many crimes, wars, murders, miseries and horrors would the human race be protected if the man would pull out the pegs or burry the ditch, and shouted to his fellows: “ beware listening to this imposter; you will die, if you forget that the fruits of land are for all, and the land itself is for everyone!” (p. 109). However, Rousseau understands that civilization cannot be stopped. In order to meet the needs people invented fishing, hunting. They came up with clothing, learned how to hold fire.

But as the people understood their superiority over animals, it awakened their pride. The quest for prosperity has led people to realize the benefits of clustering. Several people have long lived together, and this marked the beginning of the family and marital love. People get together into the big groups, and there emerged a nation. Some of the people enjoyed the highest respect among his own kind. This has led to rivalry and competition. With the advent of the property began the exploitation of man by man. According to Rousseau, “... as soon as people noticed that it is useful for one person to have a supply of food for two people, equality disappeared – emerged private property, work has become a necessity; vast forests became fields that are pleasant to an eye. Fields had to be irrigated by human sweat and soon to be planted and yields grown together with slavery and poverty.” (p. 116) The emergence of industry and agriculture laid the foundation for this revolution. The division of labor and private property was established.

Initially, the farmer defended his land before the harvest, and then over the years has secured the permanent right to own this land. In the realm of morality, all these events led to the development of memory, imagination and self-serving ambition: “ To be and to appear – are now two completely <https://assignbuster.com/book-review-jean-jacques-rousseau-discourse-on-inequality-philosophy-essay/>

different things, and a consequence of this differences were shrewd dishonesty, and all the wickedness that make up their backup” (p. 118). The enslavement of one person by another had begun. Wealth is not needed to meet needs but to subordinate neighbor. The right of inheritance allowed creating a huge state. The rivalry of the rich has led to wars. Then, to retain the conquered states were set up public institutions.

People have agreed with institutions’ appearance, believing that it would help to avoid further wars. In fact, these institutions have kept them in slavery, in condition of dependence. People agreed to obey the laws like a wounded agrees that he cut his hand in order to preserve the entire body. The natural freedom disappeared. After the first society emerged others emerged as well. They were born all around the world. Civil law is law of life for all citizens. In the wars between nations emerged the notion of death as debt. People began to choose their leaders. “...People had put the rulers above themselves, to defend their freedom, but not to draw themselves into slaves” (p. 121). But the politicians that speak of love to freedom in fact attribute natural tendency of people to slavery and abuse people’s patience.

Rousseau emphasizes the fact that parental authority is the phenomenon of a different order than political power: “... The Father is the lord of the child only as long as his aid is necessary to child” (p. 122). After this point they become equal. The son is only required to respect the father, not to obey him. Rousseau challenges the idea that freedom can be yield by treaty, like material goods. Without freedom there is no man. It is his natural state.

Rousseau believed that the formation of the state is essentially a contract between the people and leaders, whom they chose for themselves, “ a <https://assignbuster.com/book-review-jean-jacques-rousseau-discourse-on-inequality-philosophy-essay/>

contract in which both parties undertake to respect the laws, which caused and formed bonds of their union” (p. 123). If citizens accept the obligation to respect the laws, the rulers commit themselves to use the power entrusted to them only in the interests of citizens, i. e. for the protection of citizens’ property rights.

At first, honest rulers respect the contract. But soon they begin to abuse it. Rousseau lists various possible forms of government. The philosopher explains them through the circumstances that existed at the time of their establishment. When people wanted to have as their leader sole authority, the monarchy was formed, etc. When people became so accustomed to it, depending on the monarch, people did not even dream of getting free from it.

The disparity between the rulers and the ruled creates new distinctions between people: “ The inequality easily gains ground among base and ambitious souls, ever ready to run the risks of fortune, and almost indifferent whether they command or obey, as she proves either favorable or adverse to them” (p. 126-7).

On these individual weaknesses of people the tyranny is built – the last stage of inequality. The paradox of tyranny is that all people are equal in the sense that all become slaves of one individual. And then the man completely forgets about the state of nature. What a great distance between these two states! In despotism to the eyes of Wiseman appears no more than a bunch of fake people with pretended passions. It is the result of all these new relationships without any further justification in nature.

The natural man wants just to have rest and peace. Civilized man, on the contrary, is always active, always concerned about something. “ He works until his death; he even goes to die, in order to be able to live” (p. 136) Thus, according to Rousseau, the notions of power and reputation do not make sense to the natural man. The natural man lives by himself. Human in society lives only in the opinion of others. Only on their judgments, he builds his existence. Inequality is virtually absent in the natural state. Inequality reaches its extreme in an advanced society.

Rousseau concludes that moral inequality justified by the existing law is contrary to natural law: “... since it is evidently against the law of nature that infancy should command old age, folly conduct wisdom, and a handful of men should be ready to choke with superfluities, while the famished multitude want the commonest necessities of life” (p. 137). The great merit of this discourse of Rousseau is the creation of the theory of the price paid by society for social progress.

Critique

Rousseau wants to destroy all the cultural achievements of mankind. His “ Discourse of Inequality” is an eloquent rejection of science, arts, civilization. Rousseau is even trying to ruin the entire system of enslavement and oppression of man by man. He is infuriated by one half of humanity because it inevitably makes the other half miserable. Such feelings are usually the result of a very kind heart and small practices.

Rousseau – where he had wanted to go back. Rousseau is the first man of modern type, an idealist who needed moral “dignity” in order not to recoil in horror from his own kind.

Furthermore, man cannot be savage and noble at the same time because he is brutal, irrational, weak and dumb. Savage man cannot make objective and rational decisions. And an idea of making a social institution of such men is doomed to failure.

Rousseau is “naive” to think that all the imperfections and disorganization of life stem from the anger and mistakes of individuals. Earthly Paradise is in reach of a hand; you must remove the violence of tyrants and “enlighten” the oppressed majority.

The doctrine of equality! There is nothing more poisonous than this doctrine: to all appearances – the preaching of justice is essentially the same as the end of justice... Equality to equal and inequality to unequal – that is what should proclaim the true justice. It follows: never equate unequal people. How much blood has been shed, how many terrible events broke out because of the doctrine of equality.

The resolution to this awful conflict is a social contract, proposed by the rich, to form political-social order. This social contract is a surreal trick played by the rich on the poor. The poor are made to believe that, by agreeing to the creation of political society, they will be made safe and preserve their freedom. In fact, it is a device that legitimates property and inequality at the expense of the poor.

There are political and social fantasies, which ardently and eloquently urged to overturn the entire social order based on the belief that at once will raise a magnificent temple of beautiful humanity. In this dangerous dream hear the echo of Rousseau's superstition, which believes in a wonderful natural state, covered with polluted goodness of human nature and ascribes all the blame to the cultural institutions – society, state and education.

Unfortunately, because of historical experience, we know that every such revolution once again raises the wildest energies – long-buried horrors and uncontrolled forces of remotest ages; consequently, the revolution although it may be a source of strength in weakened mankind but never a harmonizer, a builder, a painter who perfects human nature.

Discourse on Inequality leaves us, to be sure, with a paradox. The progress of civilization is responsible for all of our miseries. Yes, it is society's fault. It is not your fault. It is societies, he wants to tell us, and yet he also leaves us with no real apparent way out. He denies that we can, as a practical solution, return to simpler, more natural forms of political association but how then do we resolve the problem that he leaves us with?