

# Human inequality and rousseau's social contract solution



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In his discourse on inequality among men, Rousseau argued that, contrary to intuition, "savage" man living in a totally pre-social wilderness acted with more empathy and kindness towards fellow human beings than even reasoned philosophers of the modern era. Rousseau considered pity to be a natural (i. e., unaffected and unsocialized) impulse, evident even in animals, a sentiment that impelled savage man to help and not hinder any other humans he would come upon in distress. And since these humans had no property or society whatsoever, they would have no necessity of other men, and thus they would feel no impulse to commit acts of cruelty (e. g., theft) towards fellow men — they would be "subject to few passions and self-sufficient." Although natural or "physical" inequality did exist — e. g., differences in health, age, and physicality — moral or "political" inequality did not, defined by Rousseau as "different privileges enjoyed by some at the expense of others, such as being richer, more honored, more powerful," even holding others in bondage. The development of political equality began with the earliest development of society and property. First, as humans proliferated, so did challenges to survival. This necessitated the appropriation of natural things to meet such challenges, such as animal hides, weapons, fishing hooks, and fire. These developments reduced man's ability to be self-sufficient while raising the paradox of convenience, that deprivation felt worse than possession beneficial. The notion of personal superiority and esteem followed with the development of critical analysis, that things can be compared qualitatively. Most importantly, Rousseau noted that while "love of well-being is the sole motive of human actions," these humans would nevertheless cooperate for reasons of common interest, such as an organized hunt; language developed for the same purpose. After this "<https://assignbuster.com/human-inequality-and-rousseau-social-contract-solution/>

enlightenment," humans could begin to live in self-constructed homes (as opposed to caves or in the open), an important development that furthered the development of both personal property and society. Families lived together as clans, and societies composed of many families evolved from these associations (Rousseau suggested that this development came from small islands, where people were forced together and nomadism was impossible). Frequent contact among multiple people and the emergence of new interpersonal relationships led to ideas of "merit and beauty which produce feelings of preference," and the notion of love led to jealousy. Public esteem developed with public gatherings and regard went to the most talented, thus impelling inequalities and feelings of vanity and contempt, shame and envy. Rousseau argued that although esteem led to violent reprisals, this state was a happy balance between "the indolence of our primitive state and the petulant activity of our [current] egocentricism." Rousseau suggested that as long as people were devoted to individual arts, they were able to live as "free, healthy, good and happy as they could in accordance with their nature." Yet the development of arts involving multiple people, "as soon as one man realized it was useful for a single individual to have provisions for two," meant the development of property, the necessity of labor, and the death of equality. Using metallurgy and agriculture as formative examples, Rousseau wrote that primitive initiative in investment, acquisition of wealth, the development of property ownership, and the exploitation of trade imbalances created institutional inequality. Cultivation of land meant division of land, which meant rules of justice so that property "owners" could be safe. Natural inequalities, between the strong and weak or the ingenious and the poor-minded, were amplified by industry. The

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opposition of interests created by the developments of public esteem and property necessarily led to various social ills and cruelties and reduced self-reliance further, as the rich would need the services of the poor, and the poor the help of the rich. Those who lacked land would have to steal, those who were rich sought to expand their wealth through predation. From this, a perpetual opposition developed between the “right of the strongest” and the “right of the first occupant.” Rules of justice were developed by the rich in order to protect possessions and the weak, and Rousseau disdained their “specious reasons” that caused “crude, easily-seduced men” to “chain themselves, in the belief that they secured their liberty” through the creation of a political establishment, when in fact “those most capable of anticipating the abuses were precisely those who counted on profiting from them.” Natural liberty was “irretrievably destroyed,” property and inequality became law, usurpation became right, and humanity was subjected to “labor, servitude, and misery.” Rousseau’s “Social Contract” tried to address the problem of human bondage with an ideal political construct that would allow humans to retain their natural rights and freedoms while providing for the defense of these rights. Under the social contract, all people would submit their individual wills to one collective, “general” will, a body where each member would be an indivisible part who submits his entire self without reservation. In this contract, one loses his “natural freedom and an unlimited right to everything that tempts him,” but gains civil freedom and proprietorship. In this system, self-sovereignty is total — that is, the general will dominates, and there are no masters or servants. Individuals would assemble and vote, and Rousseau believed that their decisions for the general will would always be ideal, as the decisions would reflect private

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wills and private desires for happiness; since all members have submitted totally to the state, all will be benefactors of their decisions, and all will benefit equally. No judgments could be made about individual people; similarly, Rousseau thought that individual interests that threatened other individual interests would cancel each other out, leaving the ideal general will. Factionalism, the development of "partial societies" that could represent anything less than the general will, would be prevented by multiplying factions. The application of Rousseau's contract would not solve the problem of inequality, since the social contract would necessarily defend the property rights that enforce inequality. More troubling, the unequal application of taxation, and the development of social services and programs (particularly those aimed at eradicating poverty) could call into question the matter of whether individuals would share equal relationships to the state. In other words, the general will requires people to submit their total selves to the laws of the collective general will, yet if some people submit or receive more or less money, this creates a critical imbalance to Rousseau's paradigm in which, ideally, the pluses and minuses of private wills cancel each other out. Moreover, Rousseau suggests no mechanism that would prevent wealthy interests from overpowering or dominating the system through, for example, controlling the media or simply buying votes. Ultimately a nation existing under Rousseau's social contract would be a collective self-sovereign still in an unregulated world of various self-sovereigns; inequalities between nations, such as those Rousseau himself observed, and the disagreements among nations between the rights of strength and first occupancy would continue unabated.