

The divergent
opinions of smith and
rousseau: natural
sociability and
criticisms ...



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Although Adam Smith is considered a great defender of commercial society and Jean-Jacques Rousseau one of its prominent critics, both thinkers share certain criticisms of the division of labor. The two acknowledge that splitting tasks among people leads to the creation of social distinction and to the futile pursuit of happiness in luxury. For Rousseau, the division of labor causes moral inequality- difference established by social convention. Cooperation with others enslaves the modern man by creating the right to property, which allows for the domination of the rich over the poor. Furthermore, the division of labor gives man new needs, those for other people and for material objects, that are meaningless compared to his natural needs (Rousseau 67). For Smith, the division of labor also creates frivolous needs, giving expression to human egoism. He finds it imprudent that people pursue luxury although the poorest members of society have enough to survive (Theory 181). In addition, Smith asserts that division of labor diminishes intellectual and physical competence because of its highly specialized nature (Wealth 782). Yet, despite his misgivings, Smith regards the division of labor as a beneficial economic mechanism. Thus, it appears unusual that while Smith and Rousseau present powerful criticisms of the division of labor, these criticisms lead them to different views on its place in commercial society. The conflicting views of Smith and Rousseau stem from their different assumptions about human nature. Their beliefs on whether man is naturally solitary or social affect their definitions of inequality and the ways in which the division of labor contributes to inequality. Their assumptions also determine how the splitting of tasks affects the individual. Rousseau in Discourse on the Origin of Inequality presents man as naturally solitary- lacking an emotional or practical need of others. He asserts that <https://assignbuster.com/the-divergent-opinions-of-smith-and-rousseau-natural-sociability-and-criticisms-of-the-division-of-labor/>

man in the state of nature was happy, because he had few needs and little contact with those around him (Rousseau 57). Conversely, Smith in the Theory of Moral Sentiments and The Wealth of Nations presents man as social or as having an innate need for others. He argues that the division of labor is derived from a natural propensity to exchange goods (Wealth 25) Smith also asserts that man has natural sympathy and thus yearns for others to share in his pain and in his joy (Theory 22). Thus, the relationship between natural sociability and human satisfaction determines how Rousseau and Smith evaluate the splitting of tasks among people. Whereas Rousseau views the division of labor as antithetical to solitary happiness, Smith considers it a mostly positive result of natural sociability and proposes solutions to its ill effects. The decision to make man social or solitary by nature provides the driving force behind both writers' criticisms. Rousseau uses his assumption that man is solitary to explain his views on inequality and to show later how the division of labor contributes to inequality. He emphasizes that in the state of nature, solitude is essential to human happiness. Rousseau claims that man had few needs except those for food, rest and sex. Even sex, which requires contact with others, does not create emotional attachment in savage man. He argues that it is merely a tool to propagate the species (56). Rousseau also claims that man had no temptation to dominate others because of his natural pity- repugnance for seeing others suffer. He claims that "pity is what, in the state of nature, takes the place of laws, mores, and virtue" (55). Thus, in thinking about man before commercial society, Rousseau finds that he has a simple system of needs and has no tendency toward conflict. In Rousseau's view, the division of labor changes this situation by requiring unnecessary cooperation with others and establishing

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a new set of meaningless needs that destroy solitary happiness When man makes a part of his happiness dependent on others, social comparison begins and the first vestiges of moral inequality appear (65, 67). Although Rousseau acknowledges that social associations may have formed in response to natural obstacles such as climate, it is not until the division of labor that these associations become concrete and place restrictions on natural freedom. He claims that once humans stopped doing one-person tasks, “equality disappeared, property came into existence, and labor became necessary” (65). Thus, Rousseau views the division of labor as running counter to human nature whereas Smith takes a different view. In contrast, Smith employs his hypothesis on man’s inherent sociability to justify the division of labor. He claims in the Theory of Moral Sentiments that man is born with natural sympathy and thus has the tendency to share in the pain or joy of others (9). This concept is similar to Rousseau’s idea of natural pity. However, Smith differentiates himself from Rousseau in that he argues that man also has a natural desire to be the object of others’ sympathy. He asserts that the person primarily concerned by an event will put himself into the position of a spectator just as the spectator performs the same act of emotional substitution (Theory 22). Smith believes this desire to be so strong that the person concerned will abate his suffering so that the spectator can sympathize with him more easily. In The Wealth of Nations, Smith extends his thinking on natural sociability and provides the motivation behind the division of labor. He argues that the division of labor arises from a natural “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” (Wealth 25). Because of natural sympathy and an inclination to trade, Smith thus conceives that humans fulfill a part of their happiness through social

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associations. Furthermore, the degree of man's natural sociability affects how Smith defines inequality as it relates to the division of labor. Smith does not propose, "equality disappeared" with the splitting of tasks as Rousseau insists (Rousseau 65). Although the division of labor creates property, Smith regards the basis for social comparison and distinction to be natural. He claims that inequality arises from the natural inclination to share in the success of others: "upon this disposition of mankind... is founded the distinction of ranks and the order of society" (Theory 52). Because he views human nature as leading to inequality, Smith sees the ill effects of the division of labor in a more sympathetic light. Thus, the different assumptions of Rousseau and Smith on human nature provide the greater implication of misgivings. The magnitude of both thinkers' criticisms depends on how they define happiness in relation to man's natural state. Both Rousseau and Smith argue that the division of labor distorts natural needs. Yet, for Rousseau this ill effect presents a larger problem, because it opposes essential components of human happiness. Because the division of labor requires splitting complex tasks among people, it increases dependence on others. The shift from independent to group work creates a need for social association that is separate from the natural needs of food, rest, and sex. This makes man no longer self-sufficient and happy in his own right. Furthermore, Rousseau argues that when a man requires others to fulfill his needs, another can dominate him. The division of labor creates the means for social domination in creating property (68). Rousseau provides metallurgy and agriculture as two examples of the division of labor. He proposes that once man used tools to cultivate the land, the right to property developed (66). The desire to protect property caused the rich to devise the social contract and the poor to

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enter into it. Rousseau claims that the social contract destroyed natural freedom, fixed moral inequality, and made the fruits of labor the profit of a few. Thus, because he assumes that man is solitary and therefore happy, the division of labor violates Rousseau's concept of natural need. Whereas in the state of nature man's needs contribute to his happiness, the division of labor causes modern man to become a slave to his own passions (67). Because Smith views the false needs of commercial society as having a natural cause, he takes a more favorable attitude toward the division of labor. Like Rousseau, Smith claims that the division of labor creates imaginary needs. He asserts that the splitting of tasks allows the poorest laborers to "enjoy a greater share of the necessaries and conveniences of life than it is possible for any savage to acquire" (Wealth 10). Furthermore, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith like Rousseau criticizes the vanity of man in commercial society. He finds it somewhat illogical that people toil in the pursuit of riches when the poorest members of society can survive (50). Later in the text, Smith describes the discontent of the aspiring man in commercial society: "He serves those whom he hates.... Through the whole of his life, he pursues the idea of a certain artificial and elegant repose that he may never arrive at, for which he sacrifices a real tranquility that is at all times in his power" (181) Yet, it is the division of labor that allows man to go beyond single-person tasks and to produce goods that are unnecessary to his survival. Thus, it appears illogical that Smith condemns luxury when the division of labor is the mechanism that allows for its pursuit. This seeming contradiction arises from the fact that Smith believes that man naturally desires to be the object of sympathy. In addition, Smith argues that mankind is more apt to celebrate in another's joys than to share in his sufferings (*Theory* 51). Thus, <https://assignbuster.com/the-divergent-opinions-of-smith-and-rousseau-natural-sociability-and-criticisms-of-the-division-of-labor/>

he asserts that people pursue riches and avoid poverty to receive natural sympathy. Whereas Rousseau limits true human needs to food, rest, and sex, Smith cannot see this definition of need as permanent due to his assumptions on human nature. Because Smith argues that man has a natural desire to obtain the approbation of others, the scope of man's needs must always be expanding. Although the division of labor allows for the pursuit of luxury, Smith proposes that the false needs of man have a natural, more legitimate cause. Thus, unlike Rousseau, Smith's most important misgivings are not about the creation of false needs, but about the effects of the division of labor on physical and mental competence. Smith's assumptions on human nature cause his major criticisms to focus on the individual. Whereas Rousseau's primary concern is that the division of labor expands natural need, Smith analyzes its consequences on mental and physical ability. He argues that the simplicity of tasks, crucial to the division of labor, makes workers intellectually numbed. Because each worker has no reason to contemplate anything but his menial tasks, he loses his ability to take part in intelligent conversation and to form analytical judgments. Smith suggests that the working poor fall into this state of intellectual malaise more easily than other social classes, because they have the most simplistic jobs (Wealth 781-2). Rousseau in the Discourse also discusses how social forces may influence differences in mental abilities. He claims that "prodigious diversity of education and lifestyles" in civil society help to create disparities in mental acumen (58). While Smith recognizes the negative influences of the division of labor, he still regards it to be a useful economic mechanism. In addition, because Smith assumes the division of labor to be the consequence of human nature, he advocates ways of fixing its ill effects rather than simply

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criticizing it. Smith thus proposes a system of public education to combat its deleterious effects on the abilities of the common people (Wealth 785). Smith argues that the division of labor has a similar degenerating effect on physical ability. Due to the inactivity of the workplace, the division of labor reduces the physical strength of the common people. Smith asserts that this sedentary lifestyle threatens the security of the state, because the population cannot meet the physical demands of defending itself (Wealth 782). Rousseau also discusses the physical weakness of man in civil society. Because savage man needed to do all that was necessary for his survival, Rousseau asserts that he was of robust constitution. A division of labor that teaches workers to focus on one specialized tasks makes civilized man “effeminate” in Rousseau’s terms (40, 43). Again, whereas Rousseau praises a time before the division of labor, Smith searches for a way to remedy its negative consequences. He suggests that government should maintain the physical strength of the common people by physical education. To provide a useful example, Smith praises the physical education programs of ancient Greece and Rome and their role in fostering a “martial spirit” in the general populace. Smith claims that by bolstering the physical and mental abilities of the common people, the state becomes more stable. He argues that a nation comprised of informed and capable people is less prone to upheaval and the divisiveness of factions (Theory 781, 786-8). Thus, because Smith believes that division of labor is a mostly beneficial consequence of human sociability, he argues that government should take a role in mitigating its negative side effects. While natural sociability explains the divergence of Rousseau and Smith on the division of labor, it is important to consider their other views on human nature. Although the two have contrasting views on whether man is

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social, in particular moments they take similar positions on whether the division of labor is a natural occurrence. In the *Discourse*, Rousseau asserts that man has perfectibility, a natural inclination to improve over time. He proposes that perfectibility causes man to leave his original condition and “ makes him a tyrant over himself and nature” (45). Thus, because the division of labor improves the productive powers of man, it may be the effect of human perfectibility. Whereas Smith views sympathy for others and the propensity to exchange goods as the natural causes of the division of labor, Rousseau may find its source in a natural desire to improve oneself. Thus, their contrasting views on commercial society may not depend on whether they believe the division of labor runs counter to human nature. Although Rousseau may account for the division of labor in his idea of perfectibility, his thoughts on natural sociability provide a stronger motivation for his criticisms. First, if perfectibility were the ultimate cause of false needs, then Rousseau would weaken his own criticism of the division of labor. The problem would not be that the division of labor separates man from solitary happiness, but that humans are incapable of finding happiness in the long run. Second, Rousseau asserts that the moment “ equality disappeared” was when people started to divide tasks (65). Thus, his discomfort with the division of labor focuses on the individual going beyond himself and associating with others. The assumption of whether man is solitary or social not only determines how Smith and Rousseau form their criticisms, but also how they react to them. In the *Discourse*, Rousseau spends time criticizing the effects of the division of labor, but does not provide a viable remedy to this situation. It would appear that the only way to recapture true human happiness would be to regress and to dismantle commercial society, but <https://assignbuster.com/the-divergent-opinions-of-smith-and-rousseau-natural-sociability-and-criticisms-of-the-division-of-labor/>

Rousseau asserts the impossibility of doing so (39). Thus, for Rousseau the division of labor was the step that cemented human need for others and forever separated man from his true sources of happiness. Rousseau then views commercial society as having an irremovable flaw, because its foundation rests on imaginary needs and inequality. Because Smith accepts the ill effects of the division of labor as developing from natural sociability, he devises methods such as education and government programs to fix its ill effects. Furthermore, Smith does not lay out a progression of human history from the state of nature to the present as Rousseau does. As a consequence, he does not provide a description of happiness in the state of nature to compare to the situation after the division of labor. Whereas Rousseau defines happiness in relation to a primitive isolated state, Smith can only conceive of happiness as it relates to other people. It thus becomes difficult for him to criticize the division of labor and commercial society to the extent of Rousseau. Works Cited Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Donald Cress (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987). Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981). Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982)