

**Phil 114, March 13, 2007**  
**Rousseau: Is Society Good for Us?**

Rousseau's "Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men," often referred to as the "Second Discourse," asks: "What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by natural law?"

*Natural inequality* is in physical and mental ability. It exists independently of convention and consent. It is generally not zero-sum. Your greater intelligence doesn't reduce mine.

*Political (or social) inequality* is in such things as wealth, honor, power, and authority. It depends on convention and consent. And it generally is zero-sum: one person's social gain is another's social loss.

Why is social inequality bad?

- (1) It does not correspond to natural inequality. This is unjust.
- (2) Those who are worse off in relative terms are also badly off in absolute terms. Their vital needs go unmet.
- (3) Social inequality causes "inflamed amour-propre." This causes a never-ending, zero-sum competition for social position. This leaves *not only* the "losers," *but also* the "winners":
  - (i) *miserable*: saddled with insatiable desires for worthless things,
  - (ii) *vicious*: towards others, by any commonsense measure: e.g., cruel, deceptive,
  - (iii) *unfree*: dependent on the wills of others, and
  - (iv) *alienated*: estranged from our true selves.

What explains social inequality and these evils? Is it due to man's nature, or particular social arrangements? What is due to man's nature we cannot change (at least not by changing society). But what is due to our social arrangements, we can change, by changing those arrangements.

Rousseau answers: "man is naturally good and that it is through these institutions alone that men become bad." Man's nature does not preclude the existence of a social world that would not be plagued by the ills that we see all around us.

- This does *not* mean that if we allow society to arise "naturally"—that is, via the uncoordinated actions of individuals without deliberate direction—then everything will turn out well.
- *Nor* does it mean that man is good so long and only so long as he does not live in society.

*Natural psychology of man*

*Amour de soi-même*

- At first, simply a desire for immediate objects: food, sex, escape from pain.
- Natural man is happy: not faced with unsatisfied desires. This is because he does not desire very much, and what he desires he can more or less reliably attain.
- Eventually, with the aid of reason, amour de soi-même takes the form of valuing oneself, involving a belief that one is worthy of being valued.
- And, when reason comes to acknowledge that others compare one with others, amour de soi-même gives rise, in one way or another, to amour propre.

*Pity:*

- A desire to prevent and relieve the immediate suffering of others. Its principal effect, at first, is to keep men from harming one another.

*Absence of amour-propre:*

- Natural man views other men as merely parts of the natural world. He does not see their actions toward him as expressing an evaluation of him.
- He is not capable of resentment. This emerges only as he comes to realize that others evaluate him. His resentment is an expression of his *amour-propre*.

*Amour-propre*

In general, a desire to be valued *relative* to others, *by* others. It takes two forms.

Natural, healthy *amour-propre*: A desire to be valued by others as *equal* to others.

- A desire to be valued as one really *is*.
- Possible for everyone to satisfy this desire.

Unnatural, “inflamed” *amour-propre*: A desire to be valued by others as *superior* to others.

- A desire to be valued as one is *not* in fact.
- Impossible for everyone to satisfy this desire. *Everyone* can’t be valued as superior to others.

Social inequality causes inflamed *amour-propre* to supplant natural *amour-propre*.

To explain why, we need to identify some psychological principle that can “go either way.”

- (1) A desire to be valued (relative to others) by others as highly *as possible* (relative to others).
- (2) A desire to be valued (relative to others) by others as highly *as one values oneself* (relative to others).

Problem with (1): It seems to suggest that the *only* form of *amour-propre* is the inflamed form.

So consider (2). Suppose that social inequality leads people to believe that they are superior to others, whereas social equality does not. Then: (2) + social inequality = (2) + the belief that one is more valuable than others = inflamed *amour-propre*; and (2) + social equality = (2) + the belief that one is equal to others = natural *amour-propre*.

Problems with this explanation:

Why should social inequality lead the socially superior to believe that they have superior value? Why should they believe that their value is determined by their social position?

Why should the socially *inferior* believe that they are inferior? Why shouldn’t it cause them instead to rate themselves as *inferior*? If so, then why should they compete with their superiors?

Why should the socially superior desire *ever greater* superiority? Why shouldn’t everyone be happy where she is? Why should we have conflict?

We need to assume some additional psychological principle. Underlying the natural and inflamed manifestations of *amour-propre* are:

- (2) A desire to be valued (relative to others) by others as highly *as one values oneself* (relative to others).
- (3) A desire to *have value* (relative to other things and people).

Consider those who believe that value is determined by their *natural value*:

- They recognize that this value is that of rough equality with others. So desire (2) takes the form of a desire to be valued as equal.

- They also recognize that there isn't much that they can do to increase this value. What they can do is to develop their own character and faculties. So desire (3) is limited to a desire to develop one's own character and faculties. This desire doesn't harm others and may in fact work to their good.
- So, in sum, they desire to be valued as equal: i.e, they have *natural amour-propre*.

Consider those who believe that their value is determined by their *appraised value*—how others value them—in *circumstances in which appraised value floats free of natural value*:

- If people believe that others value them as superior, then they will believe that they are superior. Thus, desire (3) will lead them to desire that others value them as superior. But desire (3) won't lead the appraised superiors to desire that others value them *even more* highly, and it won't lead the appraised *inferiors* to desire that others value them as superior.
- If people believe that their value is determined by their appraised value, in circumstances in which appraised value is not fixed by natural value, then they will believe that that they can increase their value by increasing their appraised value. So desire (2) becomes a desire that others value them as superior.
- So, putting this all together, we get a desire to be valued as superior: i.e., *inflamed amour-propre*.

Why should people believe that their value is determined by their appraised value?

- Because they trust others' judgment about what is valuable.

Why should social inequality cause appraised value to become detached from natural value?

- Rousseau's hypothetical history: Social inequality separates social position from natural value,
- and leads people to appraise others on the basis of their social position, not their natural value.

In the happiest and most lasting epoch, proximity and comparison leads to appraisals of persons. But since these appraisals are based on natural value, *amour-propre* is natural. Why are these appraisals based on natural value? There isn't any alternative. Social position more or less tracks natural value.

With metallurgy and agriculture, small differences in natural value lead to vast differences in social value: which is, at this point, simply wealth. For the first time, social position presents a real alternative to natural value.

But why should people start to appraise others on the basis of their social value, rather than on their natural value? One possibility: motivated by their natural, material interests, people will defer to and be more concerned about those with greater wealth. This self-interested deference is a kind of appraisal.

*How does this account of inflamed amour-propre explain its ills?*

With inflamed *amour-propre*, we are:

*miserable*: saddled with desires we can never satisfy, for things that have no real worth,

- Why do the socially superior have desires that they cannot satisfy? Because the desire for superiority has no natural limit: one can always push others further down.
- The desire for social advantage is worthless: we desire it only because of our false belief that our social value is our actual value.

*vicious*: towards others, by any commonsense measure:

- Vices of hostility, due to zero-sum competition.
- Vices of falseness, due to the fact that what matters is simply what others believe.

*unfree*: dependent on the will of others,

- The socially superior crave something that only others can give them: appraisal.

*alienated*: estranged from our true selves.

- We lack any sense of our true worth.

*How can we avoid inflamed amour-propre?*

*First*, lead people to see their value as resting on their natural value, rather than on their appraised value or social value.

- In the education of individuals: *Emile* aims to show how a child can be brought up to esteem himself on the basis of his natural traits and not to give others' appraisals of him independent weight.
- In social institutions: A public affirmation of the equal value of persons: the status of citizenship.

*Second*, tether social value to natural value: prevent social value from offering a real alternative. In particular, ensure strictly equal (ultimate) political power, rough economic equality, and assign any honorific distinctions on the basis of personal merit alone.

*The political contract*

Of course, Rousseau thinks that hitherto political institutions have failed to do this. They have been fueled by inflamed *amour-propre*, and they have only made it worse.

Return to the hypothetical history: All land becomes owned in a few hands. The rest become dependent on the landowners. Domination and servitude are introduced. The rich assert their strength, while the poor seek to satisfy their needs. This leads to the threat of violent conflict.

The rich stand to lose their life and goods. So they make the poor an offer: "Let us unite... to protect the weak from oppression, restrain the ambitious, and secure for everyone the possession of what belongs to him."

The poor accept the offer, either because they don't see the consequences, or because think that they have no other choice.

This fixes the economic inequalities and adds to them political inequalities. Now social value is not simply property, but political power.

Political differences give rise to civil differences, such as nobility and rank. This adds a further dimension of social value.

Rousseau believes that government did not begin with arbitrary power. Arbitrary power is instead the *corruption* of government.

Why? Perhaps Rousseau's thought here is (i) that people never would have come to accept the idea that someone had political *authority* or *right* over them without first consenting to it and (ii) that people would never have consented to *arbitrary* authority or right. Once the idea of political authority achieves currency, however, it can then take an arbitrary form.