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Rousseau's philosophical reflection on human nature

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Abstract

Rousseau emphasized more strongly the peaceful, pleasant, idyllic condition of man in this natural state. Rousseau has emphasized the happiness which men enjoyed when everyone was free and equal and nature provided abundant nourishment for all. Rousseau then proceeded to contrast his early blissful state with the inequality, the oppression, the poverty which is common in political state. According to Rousseau by nature man scarcely thinks. With a growth of reason, the degeneration goes so far that it necessitated the constitution of civil society. And 'back to nature is his cry. This does not mean that society must be destroyed and the savage state to be resumed, but it means that nature must be the rule for men in society. When Rousseau recommends the rule of nature for men it becomes quite obvious that according to him reason and philosophy have deluded men and brought them to ruin.

Keywords: Rousseau's philosophical, human nature, peaceful, pleasant, idyllic

Introduction

For Rousseau there is the starting point of a hypothetical abstract man, existing in a hypothetical state of nature, connected to the ubiquitous interaction of recorded history by the fictive bridge of contract, and again there is a single legitimate social order based on a contract and deriving its sanction from reason. The themes of liberty and virtue are central to Rousseau's social contract. It is important to note the aim of social contract which was explicitly stated by Rousseau at the very beginning: "My purpose is to consider if, in political society, there can be any legitimate ensured principle of government, taking men as they are, and large as they might be." The *if* is crucial. Rousseau is not offering a strategy for reform, nor is he attempting to provide any historical or sociological account as he did in discourse on inequality.

Rousseau's account of human nature

Rousseau is concerned with right rather than with fact, though he does not want to ignore facts because he proposes to deal with man 'as they are'. It is for this reason that Rousseau writes in a hypothetical mood dealing with abstract problems which, in his views, emerge from any serious philosophical reflection on human nature and the possible order of laws and government. Rousseau belongs to that tradition of moral philosophers who argue that to be free is not to be left to what you are inclined to do but be enable to do what you ought to do. Rousseau's conception of freedom is inseparable from virtue and this requires a superior, higher, and exulted view of freedom which human beings can attain when they enter civil society by quitting the state of nature. Rousseau maintains that to be free means to live under a law of one's own enactment. But he is also aware that all human beings cannot be trusted to frame their own laws. Their part in the enactment of laws is limited to rational assent to those laws. Rousseau's critics are of the view that Rousseau is taking away with one hand what he had provided with the other.

There have been three major criticisms against Rousseau's account of human nature in the state of nature. To put them briefly:

- (i) Firstly, Rousseau's natural man is so defined as to preclude interaction or ratiocination (thus being a brute beast rather than an intelligent being), the possibility of society and contract emerges only when isolated self-sufficiency has gratuitously vanished, and the beings that contract are no longer natural men.
- (ii) Second, reason is not simply a natural attribute of man that can be taken for guaranteed, but a condition achieved for the contract on which men will tend to base their interaction

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is the fraudulent contract of Deuxieme Discourse, not the purified legitimate contract of Du Contract Social.

- (iii) Third, given the difficulty of achieving the latter, Rousseau's recommendations to almost all of mankind is one of resignation and withdrawal to the fringes of society, not one of revolt and resistance.

In contrast with the flat pseudo history of earlier contractarians, Rousseau substitutes a developmental model of considerable subtlety. In Rousseau's views, the geographical conditions and circumstances compelled man to make transformation from the state of nature to the civil society.

Rousseau was of the view that a vast interval separates man's departure from his primitive animal condition in the state of nature and the transition to the modern civil society. Rousseau's account of this interval may be briefly summarised as follows:

- (i) The discovery of the utility and effectiveness of the labour enabled human beings to break their isolation and recognise the value of association and collaboration.
- (ii) As a result of occasional collaborations and the creation of a degree of provisional order, human beings began to build themselves shelters and stayed together.
- (iii) By losing the idyll condition of isolation in the state of nature, human beings began to associate themselves in labour and discovered the advantages of the division of labour which enabled them to pass from a subsistence economy to an economy of productive development. By producing more than what they really needed they started aspiring for possessing the surplus, they started wanting not only to use things but also to possess things, not only good which are available but also the abstract tokens of possible and future goods.
- (iv) This resulted in the unstable situation which requires the creation of civil society with their security and aspiration threatened, human beings came together to enter into a contract. But the society arising out of the dissolution of the state of nature, under the effect of the division of labour and the emergence of private property, gave rise to a horrible state of war. Rousseau held that all the natural qualities which had remained muted and unawakened earlier now came into play. Thus, the corrupt and deceitful man of modern civil society was born. Rousseau argued that rivalry and the competition on the one hand and conflicting interests on the other hand forced men to love and hate one another at the same time. The result was the origin of society in large which gave enormous powers to the rich and bondage to the poor and stabilised the inequalities originally based on force.

Thus, Rousseau sees civil society essentially in moral and political terms and provides a critique of the existent inequalities. However, it is important to remember that Rousseau's egalitarianism is not a levelling egalitarianism but an egalitarianism which takes into account difference between individuals. Rousseau's ideal of equality is not in conflict with freedom. Rousseau stresses the need for social recognition of the individuals merits by holding it necessary to take individual differences into account. Society should take natural differences into account by recognising and confirming them.

When Rousseau speaks of natural freedom, he means that natural man is by no means free from the external impediments of nature, all that he is free from, in a negative sense, is the dominance of others while positively, he is free in that his desires do not exceed his powers or abilities. The word independence, Rousseau thinks, is therefore more appropriate. Natural man is not 'free' in the social sense, but he is 'independent' in only willing that he has the power to do unaided. Being free from the dominance of others does not necessarily imply self-mastery or self-sufficiency; yet this is precisely what independence in nature does imply or in fact means. "A child, for example, like man in the state of nature is not curbed by social institutions, and in this sense is free, but unlike natural man, the child lacks the powers to realize his desires: they exceed his strength, making him dependent on the power of mother", In the state of nature independence had been achieved by the individuals living a solitary existence. In the corrupt societies of Rousseau's time inequality and dependence resulted in a disguised form of slavery. Only by the equality of all in relation to the community, and the removal of personal dependence among the path, could real liberty be achieved. Thus, from an independence that is primitive to a dependence that is slavery, Rousseau moved to a position where he envisaged a transcended dependence which would bind all equally to the community and where liberty would be guaranteed internally by law and externally by independence.

According to Rousseau man's development in civil society reflects one disaster after another. In the social contract, the natural self becomes communal without ever being subject to influences generated by necessity or history. The self remains free of historical entropy because of the meditating influence of philosophy. As a critic of society Rousseau states that society is the historically developed set of values, assumptions, habits, and beliefs, that destroys human potentiality - a set of relationship having its origin in the division of labour, Necessity, and property.

Rousseau's dissatisfaction with the structure of reciprocal dependence in existing society was that it also involved social and economic inequality, thereby allowing a situation where the more powerful were corrupted by the frivolity that their leisure time allowed them, the less powerful were degraded by cringing subservience they were unable to avoid, and all were thwarted by a social structure that impaired their self-development. The two major objectives of his system were freedom and equality in pursuit of which he counselled: "Bring the two extremes as close together as possible; have neither very rich men or beggars, for these two estates are naturally inseparable, or equally fatal to the common good". According to Rousseau since extreme economic inequalities upset the balance of wants and powers. Rousseau wanted a society in which no citizen is rich enough to be able to buy another, and no one poor enough to be constrained to sell himself. Rousseau believes that by acknowledging the right of the sovereign to abolish all private property, it is more expedient to retain it while establishing policies which will prevent the development of the rich and the poor". "Since an excessive division of labour means dependence in economic as well as in politics, taxation and other measures encourage a system of largely self-sufficient farmers and artisans house-hold. Rousseau held that society is responsible for inequality and injustice prevailing in it yet he stated that only by adopting social means man can get rid of such evils. Rousseau claimed that

society alone can undo what society did. Because only social man despite his present profligacy held the privilege of moral sense.

The solution which Rousseau provided was two-fold: first, "It lay in the call of the inner voice, and second, in the reliance on the general will. The inner voice was a kind of higher instinct, and instinctive ethnicity springing poor and uncorrupted from the heart of the man" This idea is developed in Rousseau's work 'Emile', in which Rousseau says that, "Conscience is an innate principle of justice and virtue, whereby we judge our own or other men's actions good or evil."²⁷ And by listening to the commands of this spontaneous moral sense, men living in society can overcome the faults of society. By listening to the inner voice, "Man can reprieve himself from the wicked oppression of society. Nevertheless, men, as a whole cannot. Societies or atleast some societies, can only put right by acting in accordance with a collective voice of the reason, which is political and not just moral. It is this voice which writ large, and politicised, that Rousseau calls, in the social contract, the "general will". The very idea that man must be perfected by reason in accordance with his nature runs through all of Rousseau's works.

Conclusion

Throughout his writings Rousseau remained consistent on his basic idea, that man is by nature good and that the arts and institution of civilisation have produced perverted expressions of his true nature. The good can be restored among civilised men only through the institutions which gave the freest possible expression to the natural human desires which organised social restraint he is justified only in so far as it rests upon a consent given freely by all members of community. Rousseau viewed politics as response to the problem of human existence. He identified the ethical task of triumph of good over evil with the political task of the transformation of the society. Rousseau not only affirmed the unity of morals in politics but argued that a morality in itself, independent of politics, would be so narrow that it would be restricted just to inner life of man without having any impact on the civil community in and through which humanity finds itself. Morality is therefore resolved for Rousseau in politics. Unlike the received Christian tradition, for Rousseau the source of evil does not lie in the individuals but in the systems of government. Rousseau held that it is not enough to study the society in general if we wish to trace evil back to its origins. In accusing the existing social order Rousseau was denying not only man's wickedness but also the Hobbesian view that wickedness is innate to the human nature.

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