

ROUSSEAU'S NOTION OF HUMAN NATURE AND THEORY OF STATE: A CRITIQUE

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Rousseau's concept of human nature and its underlying influence on his theory of State. Rousseau, unlike Hobbes, sees human nature as being inherently good, unselfish, and non-violent. He maintains that man in the state of nature was free, happy and amoral since, according to him, the concept of morality is coeval with civilization. He blames socialization and civilization for being responsible for man's fallennes, depravity and loss of freedom. Rousseau formulates a collectivistic theory of State based on the notion of General Will, which can properly legitimize the already bastardized social order. The problem that this paper confronts is that of reconciling an inherently free, good and happy man with an inherently enslaving, bad and oppressive social system as presented by Rousseau. The paper also ignites the age long controversy between proponents of atomistic individualism and totalitarian collectivistic communitarianism. Our method of study is basically textual exposition and analysis. In conclusion, the paper finds that Rousseau started abinitio as an individualist and ended as a harbinger of a totalitarian collectivistic society. Apart from highlighting the inherent complexities and contradictions in Rousseau's theory vis-a-vis contemporary realities, this paper also proposes a selective synthesis of both philosophies as the way forward.

Key words: human nature, state of nature, civilization, society, freedom

Introduction

Jean - Jacques Rousseau was born on June 28, 1712 in Geneva, Switzerland and died on July 2, 1778. He was a modern philosopher and man of letters, whose personal life was remarkably colourful, and whose radical political and social ideas profoundly influenced the French Revolution (which he did not live to witness) (Thompson 51). His major works, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), *L'Emile* (1762), and the *Social Contract* (1762) address fundamental issues of social relationship. The first work in the above arrangement contains an account of how the social conditions of men's existence create for them a fundamental problem as to their individual entities. It is the preliminary presentation and analysis of the social problem. The two other works are attempts to conceive a solution to it. Specifically, *L'Emile* provides an account of the educational and moral relations, while the *Social Contract*, the political relations, what the must be realized between men for the problem to be solved.

Rousseau believed strongly in radical individualism of what he called "natural man"; yet he also believed that man was, as Aristotle said, a political animal. How can these views be reconciled? The answer may lie in the ambiguity of a word that figures prominently in all eighteenth-century thought, - nature. For Rousseau, nature stood opposed to culture. Natural man, according to him, was original

man, as he lived in the savage state under the rule of nature alone, being healthy, happy, free and good. Significantly, nature was also a force that demanded the attention of people in the civilized state. There, its commands, he laments, were of a different order and were often unheeded, to such an extent that Rousseau could even claim that the civilized man were alienated from nature and as a result lost both happiness and freedom.

Rousseau's Conception of Human Nature

The initial concern which gave rise to Rousseau's enterprise can be expressed in terms of his well-known belief that man is by nature good and only corrupted in society. To show that this is so is what he undertakes in *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, to reveal uncorrupted human nature on the one hand, and corrupted social man on the other. The definition of both goodness and the corruption of human nature confront Rousseau with the problem which his subsequent work the *Social Contract* attempts to solve. In this work, he conceives of a society and social relations between men in which this corruption is avoided and the potentialities in human nature for virtue fully developed. Rousseau does not claim to be first to try to explain human society by contrasting it with a pre-social state of nature; he simply *argues* that *earlier* writers failed in the attempt. According to him,

All these philosophers, talking ceaselessly of need, greed, oppression, desire and pride, have transported into the state of nature concepts formed in society. They speak of savage, man and they depict civilized man (Cranston 10)

The philosopher Rousseau has in mind above is indisputably, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). The Hobbesian state of nature in contrast with that of Rousseau is represented as one of war of each individual against all individuals. Man is seen as being naturally aggressive, avaricious, proud, selfish, and fearful. Hobbes asserts that in the state of nature there is continual fear and danger of violent death. He pictures the life of man at this stage of existence as being solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short (Hobbes 113).

Rousseau argues against this Hobbesian view by claiming that all the unpleasant characteristics of human conditions derive not from nature but from society. He asserts that we look far enough back in our search for the origins of society and reach the true state of nature, we shall find a being who is admittedly solitary (as Hobbes says), but otherwise healthy, happy, free and good. He is neither moral nor immoral since these concepts are coeval with civilization. In society, says Rousseau, man became "denatured". Each one's *amour de soi-meme* or self-love, and instinctive self-protective, self-regarding disposition derived from nature, is as transformed into *amour-propre*, or pride, the desire to be superior to others and be esteemed by them. In other words, *amour de soi* represents the instinctive human desire for self-preservation, combined with the human power of reason. In contrast, *amour-propre* is artificial and forces man to compare himself to others, thus creating unwarranted fear and allowing men take pleasure in the pain or weakness of others.

Essentially, the hub of Rousseau's theory is man's natural goodness and social corruption. War and strife, for him are the products of society, for man is good by nature; it is the society that corrupts him. This idea has often led to the attribution to Rousseau the idea of the 'noble savage', an expression first used by Dryden in *The Conquest of Granada* (1672).

Rousseau, however, never used the expression himself and it does not adequately render his idea of the natural goodness of man. The idea of the corruption involves a certain sort of relationship of the individual to others. While this corrupt relationship has its necessary material conditions, namely economic interdependence, it is constituted not by economic relations, but by the sort of consciousness the individual has of himself in relation to other. It is a consciousness of his individuality in which he comes to have for himself, the identity and value that he has in the eyes of others. The individual becomes for himself what Rousseau holds to be an artificial creation out of the opinion of others. (Charvet 2). This essentially other-dependent consciousness makes it necessary for men to please others

in order to be satisfied with themselves. Consequently, they lose their natural liberty to determine for themselves their own identity and value, and instead have these imposed on them by others. Hence Rousseau counsels:

O man withdraw your existence into yourself, and you will no longer be miserable.... Your liberty, your power extend no further than your natural capacities; everything else is slavery, illusion, prestige (68).

It is obvious from the foregoing assertions that the root of the social problem for Rousseau is this other-dependent consciousness which he claims is alien to human nature, an artificial product of society. He viewed society as artificial and held that the development of society, especially the growth of social interdependence is something inimical to the well-being of humanity.

Rousseau's Indictment of Human Civilization

Rousseau, in his *Discourse on the Origin of inequality* argues that the first man who having enclosed a piece of land thought of saying "this is mine" and found people simple enough to believe him was true founder of civil society (Stewart 173). Invariably man's problems, evolved from the organized society which itself originated with the acquisition of private property. Rousseau laments that:

How many crimes, wars murders, how much misery and honour the human race would have been spared if someone had pulled up the stakes and filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: 'Beware of listening to this impostor you are lost if you forget that the fruit of the earth belong to everyone and the 'earth itself belongs to no one;' (Cranston: 57)

Unfortunately, nobody took the initiative to stop him. Everybody believed him and permitted him to possess the piece of land as his own private property thus culminating in the primitive accumulation of wealth. Rousseau adds that when estate become so multiplied in number and extent as to cover the whole of the land and every state to border on another one, no estate could be enlarged except at the expense of its neighbour. Out of this situation there was born, according to the different characters of the rich and the poor, either dominion and servitude, or violence and robbery. The strongest regarded their need as giving them a right to the possessions of others. According to Rousseau, the elimination of equality was followed by the most terrible disorder. The usurpation of the rich, the brigandage of the poor and the unbridled passions of everyone, stifled natural pity, and men became greedy, ambitious and bad. There arose between the right of the stronger and the right of the first occupation of perpetual conflict, which ended only in fights and murders. Consequently, nascent society gave place to the most horrible state of war (Cranston 66).

Rousseau imagines the first founder of civil government as a wily rich man who convinced the poor to unite with him and institute rules of justice instead of directing their forces against each other. The poor never realized that in setting up of positive laws they are transforming existing possessions into permanent legal property and so perpetuating their one poverty as well as the wealth of the rich. Here, Rousseau wants us to believe that the Social Contract so far established is a fraudulent contract. It is depicted as a devise with which the rich protected themselves from the violence of the poor thereby safeguarding their wealth and lives. The establishment of civil society, Rousseau asserts,

...bound new fetters on the poor 'and gave new powers to the rich, irretrievably destroyed natural liberty, fixed eternally the law of property and inequality, converted clever usurpation into unalterable right, and for the advantage of a few ambitious individuals, who subjected all mankind to perpetual labour, slavery and wretchedness. (Rousseau 307)

The "natural man" says Rousseau, enjoys repose and freedom, eats to live and is at peace with nature and friendly with all his fellow men. But the "civilized man", on the contrary is never satisfied. First of

all, it was a matter of providing necessities, then providing the extras; afterwards come the luxuries, then riches, then subjects, then slaves. He does not have any moment respite (Cranston 16). If the culture of civil government is responsible for all the evil that has befallen man, is not that culture is something that can be modified? Rousseau answers the question in his *Social Contract*.

Rousseau's Theory of State

In book one of his *Social Contract*, Rousseau begins with a sensational statement, thus:

Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains. Many a one believes himself the master of others, and yet he is a greater slave than they. How has this change come about? I do not know. What can render it legitimate? I believe that I can settle this question (1)

Here, Rousseau examines the question of the legitimacy of government. Beginning with the assumption that humans are born free, he tries to discover the process whereby this natural freedom can be legitimate displaced or alienated. In other words, he tries to discover the justification of the social order, an order in which one's natural ability gives way to conventional liberty. Rousseau begins his search by ruling out one possible justification of social order, justification by force. Contrary to popular opinion, he argues that might can never make right, that physical power cannot produce a moral or social obligation. Rousseau also argues that slavery can never be justified. For while we may legitimately give up our natural freedom for conventional freedom, we may cannot willingly become a slave (Hallman 405).

Having conclusively ruled out force as the justification for social order, Rousseau describes what he considers to be the legitimate origin of our obligation to society. He hypothesizes that a time rose when the natural freedom of men became inadequate to preserve them, and consequently, they realized that it is only through the power of collectivism or "assemblage of forces" they could survive (Smith & Gene Blocker 79). In essence, they recognized that it only through a social contract they could create a common force for the protecting of each individual without at the same time sacrificing their freedom.

What Rousseau attempts to do is to reconcile nature and society by conceiving of a way in which men may be related to each other in society which nevertheless excludes this freedom-destroying and corrupting dependence. What is required is the development of a new consciousness, which will enable men to conceive of themselves in their relation with other in such a way that no one is dependent but all remain unrestricted and free. In entering this kind of social contract, each individual gives up his "natural liberty" and his "unqualified right" to gain "civil liberty" and becomes part of a "moral collective body".

The way in which Rousseau initially defined the problem of dependence is in terms of a contrast between nature and society where the idea of nature is represented by the concept of a state of nature, a condition, of man in which no society exists and no social relations are experienced to society as corrupt, for in nature there is no dependence of men on each other, but only in society. However, Rousseau proposes to resolve the problem of dependence in society by referring to nature in the sense of re-founding society in nature and this project creates a paradox which lies at the centre of Rousseau's ultimate incoherence. The fact is that there is no dependence in nature because there are no social relations. In the formation of society the independence of nature must necessarily be destroyed, and yet if society is to be made tolerable for men it must recreate the independence of nature. The good society, for Rousseau, must both denature men and yet be founded upon man's nature. This position of Rousseau is quite paradoxical in that he is seeking to make a legitimate order what he is already against. His aim, however, is to show how the necessary constraints of political society can be legitimate and thereby compatible with, it not natural freedom, then an essential freedom nevertheless. This right is not a natural right, nor can it arise out of force, but must be founded on covenants. Rousseau, therefore, adumbrates the concept of "General Will", which according to him will restore individual freedom within ambit of the will of all. He defines his civil society as an "artificial person" with single will, which he calls "*La volonte generale*" or "General Will" (Cranston 22).

The social contract that brings civil society into being is itself a form of pledge and civil society remains in being as pledged group. Everyone makes a total alienation of himself and all his rights to the whole community. People give up natural rights in return for civil right; the total alienation is followed by a total restitution. The rights they lose are rights based on might; the rights they acquire are rights based on law. In such a state:

...the whole common strength of the community will be enlisted for the protection of the person and property of each constituent member, in such a way that each, when united with his fellows, renders obedience to his own will, and remains as free as he was before (Omoregbe 54).

While Rousseau believes that the 'General will' always reflects the common good, he equally recognizes that an individual, who is not acting in the capacity of citizen, may have a particular will that is contrary to the 'General Will'. In the event of this, Rousseau recommends that the individual must be "forced to be free". This means that such an individual must be forced to assume the duties that could be regarded as essential components of the social freedom that are connected with citizenship. For Rousseau, the advantages of social freedom greatly outweigh those of natural freedom.

A Critique of Rousseau's Theory

Having seen the essential features of Rousseau's political theory, which is based on his conceptions of human nature, it is quite germane to highlight the problems inherent in his theory. In the first place, social consciousness could not be founded upon the conception of nature that we find in Rousseau, since that nature was defined in terms of existing for oneself alone. Hence, his conceptions of human nature vis-a-vis the social problems appears misconceived and his solution, paradoxical and radically incoherent. He claims that human beings were originally solitary, but modern anthropological and biological research indicates that our earliest ancestors lived in social bands founded on kinship. He also claims that, in the state of nature, human beings were good, happy, free and equal, whereas there are historical evidences to show that primeval existence was characterized with harsh living "plagued with hunger and violence" (Arnhart 265). One also wonders why human beings failed to bring their natural goodness in the state of nature into civil society.

The absurdity and incoherence of Rousseau's theory lies precisely in the elaboration of a social idea founded on a rejection of the right of individuals to live and value each other in their particularity. Since this is the source and content of the mutual affection which alone can, without tyranny, hold both small and large groups of men together through all their conflicts, the denial of all validity to it, and its characterization as corrupt, is quite absurd. The same thing applies to its replacement, as the essential social principle, by the despotic imposition of some people's particularity on others.

There is no more haunting statement in Rousseau's social contract than that in which he speaks of forcing a man to be free. This doctrine is notoriously appealing to a totalitarian interpretation. Bertrand Russell once indicted Rousseau as a forerunner of modern totalitarianism. He claimed that its first fruits in practice were in the reign of Robes Pierre. Moreover, the dictatorships of Russia and Germany (especially the latter) are in part an outcome of the Rousseauan philosophy (Russell 674).

Another problem in Rousseau's theory is that of paradoxically. Rousseau recognizes that freedom could be realized in society yet he attempts to use the moral standards of the state of nature to judge the emerging society. He believes that the state of nature should be transcended and he still romanticizes the state nature (Irele 53).

Conclusion

There is a peculiarity in Rousseau's political theory which portrays him as a radical liberal or individualist, whose primary objective is the maximization of individual freedom and whose concern for equality is a necessary condition for this. To this end he can be seen as the great harbinger of great

possibilities for human growth and freedom. On the other- hand, he can be seen as extreme collectivist or totalitarian destroyer of individual freedom.

The whole point of the theory is the real estrangement from others that is made possible by an apparent moral recognition of and relation to them. But this is only achieved by abstracting the moral element from the real interests and real relations of men and by making it stand in opposite to them, so that it comes to deny and repress what it is meant to harmonize.

If our contemporary socio-political experiences world over should be taken into cognizance, it is obvious that the quest for freedom and the need for society are *sine qua non*. These should be harmonized in such a way as to avoid the emergence of a state of atomistic individualism or a self-alienating totalitarian communitarianism. The entrenchment of fundamental human rights in the constitutions of most contemporary societies is most welcomed, yet no society is really free when the freedom of individuals threatens overrides and enslaves the collective. A balance must be maintained.

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