

Philoo8 – Eleventh Class – Second on Rousseau

Discourse on the Origins of Inequality – Part II



Frontispiece, "He returns to his equals."

1. *Rousseau's Conjectural Story*

Jeppé draws a map.

2. *The Doctrine of Natural Goodness*

[See handout from last class.]

3. *Legitimacy, Social Contract, and Critiques of Hobbes*

- Inalienability of life and freedom. Freedom and life are “essential Gifts of Nature [...] which everyone is permitted to enjoy and which it is at least doubtful that one has the Right to divest oneself; in depriving oneself of these one [freedom], one debases one’s being; In depriving oneself of the other one annihilates it as much as in one lies; and as no temporal good can compensate for life or freedom, it would be an offense against both Nature and reason to renounce them at any price whatsoever.” (II, para 42)
- So, the Grotian / Hobbesian idea that society is constituted through the alienation of liberty is mistaken: “it is therefore incontrovertible, and it is the fundamental maxim of all Political Right, that Peoples gave themselves Chiefs to defend their freedom, and not to enslave them.” (II, para 37)

Rousseau’s three criticisms of Hobbes:

1. Natural sentiment of pity – basic action-guiding and other-regarding interests.
2. Doctrine of natural goodness
3. Different conception of freedom and inalienability of liberty.

4. *Legitimacy, Social Contract as a Double-Contract, and Critique of Locke*

Consider the following paragraph:

[T]he establishment of the Body Politic as a true Contract between the People and the Chiefs it chooses for itself; a Contract by which both Parties obligate themselves to observe the Laws stipulated in it and which form the bonds of their union. The People having, in regard to Social relations, united all their wills into a single one, all the articles about which this will pronounces become so many fundamental Laws that obligate all the members of the State without exception, and one of which regulates the selection and the power of the Magistrates charged with attending to the execution of the other Laws. ... The Magistrate, for his part, obligates himself to use the power entrusted to him only in conformity with the intention of the Constituents, to maintain everyone in the peaceful enjoyment of what belongs to him, and on all occasions to prefer public utility to his self-interest. (II, para 44)

Rousseau argues that, even if society was instituted by such a double contract and not by a Hobbesian contract of subjection, no society thus instituted could be stable if it incorporates class distinctions that underwrite distinctions of status and political power. And by instituting a system of rulers and ruled patterned on the haves and the have-nots, a third inequality results, the system of masters and slaves:

If we follow the progress of inequality through these different revolutions, we will find that the establishment of the Law and Right of property was its first term; the institution of Magistracy, the second; the conversion of legitimate into arbitrary power the third and last; so that the state of rich and poor was authorized by the first Epoch, that of powerful and weak by the second, and by the third that of Master and Slave, which is the last degree of inequality, and the state to which all the others finally lead, until new revolutions either dissolve the Government entirely, or bring it closer to legitimate institution. (II, 49)

From a system of political inequalities and competitive society, is a short step to the final stage: despotism, the law of the stronger:

Despotism, gradually rearing its hideous head and devouring everything good and wholesome it may have seen anywhere in the State ... trampling Laws and People underfoot ... [I]n the end everything would be swallowed up by the Monster; and Peoples would no longer have Chiefs or Laws, but only Tyrants. ... Here is the last stage of inequality, and the ultimate point that closes the Circle and meets the point from which we set out: Here all private individuals again become equal because they are nothing and, since the Subjects have no other Law left than the will of the Master, and the Master no other rule than his passions, the notions of the good and the principles of justice again vanish. Here everything reverts to the sole Law of the stronger and consequently to a new State of Nature, different from that with which we began in that the first was the state of Nature in its purity, whereas this last is the fruit of excess and corruption. (II,55-6)

The Hobbesian state of nature, Rousseau meanly suggests, is the natural consequence of a Lockean society.

And so, Rousseau concludes, society and social inequalities is and are the sources of all our miseries and the sad and constant experience that man is wicked. The answer, then, to the question posed by the academy, is no.

