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History of Ideas

Prof. Harvey

ROUSSEAU: BIOGRAPHY

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Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) ... writer, musician and political theorist, penned the well-known Social Contract in 1762. While his controversial writings contributed to the Romantic Movement and allegedly inspired the French Revolution, he emerged from fairly humble beginnings. . . . [He] was born in Geneva, Switzerland, 28 June, 1712, the second son of Isaac Rousseau, descendant of French Huguenots, and Susanne Bernard (who died a week after he was born). Young Jean's Calvinist father went into exile when he was charged with poaching and tried to slash his accuser.

Sent by his maternal uncle to a parsonage for basic religious schooling, Rousseau endured the severe straits of harsh discipline that would later form his basis of hatred towards authority. With school finished he attempted a few unsuccessful apprenticeships. The practically orphaned Rousseau (who felt he was responsible for his mother's death) spent much of his spare time alone exploring his first love, nature, which he escaped to in life as a vagabond in 1728. His wanderings led him out of Geneva to Sardinia then France, where he met Madame de Warens, who for the next ten years provided for him an education and much needed moral support and maternal love. At this time Rousseau converted to Catholicism.

1742 and living in Paris, Rousseau hoped to establish himself in a musical career, unsuccessfully proposing a new system of music to the Academy of Sciences. He published musical theory and wrote for the opera, attracted the attentions of King and court, but ended up concentrating on the development of his political theories towards social reform. He also met Therese le Vasseur who became his mistress with whom he had five children. They married near the end of his life.

It was not until 1750 that he won his first prize for an essay *A Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, its basis being that man (from his naive state of goodness) had become corrupted by society and civilization's progress. In 1755 he published his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, stating that original man was preferable while isolated from the corruption of social institutions; that vices develop out of a society where man starts to compare himself to others and becomes prideful. ... His next and most controversial work, *The Social Contract* (1762) while starting with the opening line "Man was born free, but he is everywhere in chains." suggested that there was still hope for mankind's future, that he is essentially good, a 'noble savage', if only he realised the importance of a state of nature and worked to disarm the constraints of society. The publication of these two works caused uproar among French Catholics and Calvinist censors who were deeply offended and publicly burnt the books. Orders for his arrest were issued. Enduring this persecution but becoming paranoid and insecure, Rousseau lived in exile in Prussia and later England, to live with Scottish philosopher David Hume for a period of time. He returned to France under a false name after accusing Hume of disloyalty.

Rousseau continued to work in secret on his *Confessions* (1764 – 1778), inspired by St. Augustine's *Confessions* as well as the *Essays* of Montaigne. His last opus proves to be a progressively more and more disquieting assay of self-justification, Rousseau seeming to need to plead his case for posterity, confess his sins.... As he says at the start of his *Confessions*, comparing himself to other men, "If I am not better, at least I am different." His writings to this day are still well-known and widely available.

PROF. NOTES ON ROUSSEAU

--Rousseau is considered an Age of Reason or Age of Enlightenment social thinker because he's rationally investigating and critiquing the status quo (of rulers/ruled, of economic and social inequality, of received tradition in general).

--But also considered a Romantic Age precursor because of his "back to nature" idea. The notion that civilization itself is the great corrupter and the concept of the "noble savage" largely come from him.

--It would be easy to call him a discontent whiner.

--However, a different way of looking at him is to ponder his reflections on how our identities (out of the state of nature) are hopelessly mediated by envy, prestige needs, and so on. Rousseau in essence says we are not ourselves once we enter into "civil" society—we are fundamentally alienated from true being.

--There is a long philosophical/social thought tradition in the "Western" world of brooding about a peculiarly Western/modern malaise. It begins with Rousseau and goes thru Sigmund Freud's "Civilization and its Discontents" (the title sums it up) and Karl Marx, whose basic point is about unsatisfactory labor pleasure for the masses of workers in a capitalist economy/culture. And there is also a whole mob of existentialists (Sartre, Camus, Heidegger) who moan and groan about modern "being" (Sartre's big philosophy treatise--800+pages--is called "Being and Nothingness," sounds fun eh!). Come to think about it: the vast bulk of 20th-century philosophy/social thinking essentially asks the question: are we happy? and if not, why not?

EXCERPT FROM ROUSSEAU

from A DISCOURSE ON ... THE ORIGIN OF INEQUALITY (1754)

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. . . . If we strip this being . . . of all . . . the artificial faculties he can have acquired only by a long process; if we consider him, in a word, just as he must have come from the hands of nature, we behold in him an animal weaker than some, and less agile than others; but, taking him all round, the most advantageously organised of any. I see him satisfying his hunger at the first oak, and slaking his thirst at the first brook; finding his bed at the foot of the tree which afforded him a repast; and, with that, all his wants supplied. . . . The body of a savage man being the only instrument he understands, he uses it for various purposes, of which ours, for want of practice, are incapable. . . . Give civilised man time to gather all his machines about him, and he will no doubt easily beat the savage; but if you would see a still more unequal contest, set them together naked and unarmed, and you will soon see the advantage of having all our forces constantly at our disposal, of being always prepared for every event, and of carrying one's self, as it were, perpetually whole and entire about one.

With respect to sickness, I shall not repeat the vain and false declamations which most healthy people pronounce against medicine; but I shall ask if any solid observations have been made from which it may be justly concluded that, in the countries where the art of medicine is most neglected, the mean duration of man's life is less than in those where it is most cultivated. How indeed can this be the case, if we

bring on ourselves more diseases than medicine can furnish remedies? The great inequality in manner of living, the extreme idleness of some, and the excessive labour of others, the easiness of exciting and gratifying our sensual appetites, the too exquisite foods of the wealthy which overheat and fill them with indigestion, and, on the other hand, the unwholesome food of the poor, often, bad as it is, insufficient for their needs, which induces them, when opportunity offers, to eat voraciously and overcharge their stomachs; all these, together with sitting up late, and excesses of every kind, immoderate transports of every passion, fatigue, mental exhaustion, the innumerable pains and anxieties inseparable from every condition of life, by which the mind of man is incessantly tormented; these are too fatal proofs that the greater part of our ills are of our own making, and that we might have avoided them nearly all by adhering to that simple, uniform and solitary manner of life which nature prescribed. If she destined man to be healthy, I venture to declare that a state of reflection is a state contrary to nature, and that a thinking man is a depraved animal. . . .

So long as men remained content with their rustic huts, so long as they were satisfied with clothes made of the skins of animals and sewn together with thorns and fish-bones, adorned themselves only with feathers and shells, and continued to paint their bodies different colours, to improve and beautify their bows and arrows and to make with sharp-edged stones fishing boats or clumsy musical instruments; in a word, so long as they undertook only what a single person could accomplish, and confined themselves to such arts as did not require the joint labour of several hands, they lived free, healthy, honest and happy lives, so long as their nature allowed, and as they continued to enjoy the pleasures of mutual and independent intercourse. But from the moment one man began to stand in need of the help of another; from the moment it appeared advantageous to any one man to have enough provisions for two, equality disappeared, property was introduced, work became indispensable, and vast forests became smiling fields, which man had to water with the sweat of his brow, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow up with the crops. . . .

. . . The savage and the civilised man differ so much in the bottom of their hearts and in their inclinations, that what constitutes the supreme happiness of one would reduce the other to despair. The former breathes only peace and liberty; he desires only to live and be free from labour; Civilised man, on the other hand, is always moving, sweating, toiling and racking his brains to find still more laborious occupations: he goes on in drudgery to his last moment, and even seeks death to put himself in a position to live, or renounces life to acquire immortality. He pays his court to men in power, whom he hates, and to the wealthy, whom he despises; he stops at nothing to have the honour of serving them; he is not ashamed to value himself on his own meanness and their

protection; and, proud of his slavery, he speaks with disdain of those, who have not the honour of sharing it. What a sight would the perplexing and envied labours of a European minister of State present to the eyes of a Caribbean! How many cruel deaths would not this indolent savage prefer to the horrors of such a life, which is seldom even sweetened by the pleasure of doing good! But, for him to see into the motives of all this solicitude, the words power and reputation, would have to bear some meaning in his mind; he would have to know that there are men who set a value on the opinion of the rest of the world; who can be made happy and satisfied with themselves rather on the testimony of other people than on their own. In reality, the source of all these differences is, that the savage lives within himself, while social man lives constantly outside himself, and only knows how to live in the opinion of others, so that he seems to receive the consciousness of his own existence merely from the judgment of others concerning him. . . .