

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau

### *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men (1754)*

*We should consider what is natural not in things depraved but in those which are rightly ordered according to nature.*

-- Aristotle, Politics, Bk. i, ch. 5

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## Second Part

The first man who, having enclosed off a piece of land, got the idea of saying "*This is mine*" and found people simple enough to believe him was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, what wars, what murders, what miseries and horrors would someone have spared the human race who, pulling out the stakes or filling in the ditch, had cried out to his fellows, "Stop listening to this imposter. You are lost if you forget that the fruits belong to everyone and the earth belongs to no one." It seems very likely that by that time things had already come to the point where they could no longer continue as they had been. For this idea of property, which depends on many previous ideas which could only have arisen in succession, was not formed in the human mind all of a sudden. A good deal of progress had to take place—acquiring significant industry and enlightenment, transmitting and increasing them from one age to the next—before arriving at this last stage in the state of nature. So let us resume these matters further back in time and try to gather under a single point of view this slow succession of events and knowledge, in their most natural order.

Man's first sensation was that of his own existence, his first care his own preservation. The productions of the earth provided him all the necessary help; instinct prompted him to make use of them. Hunger and other appetites made him try in turn various ways of life. One appetite invited him to perpetuate his species, and this blind inclination, lacking all heart-felt feeling, produced only a purely animal act. Their needs satisfied, the two sexes no longer recognized each other, and even the child was nothing to the mother as soon as it could do without her.

Such was the condition of emerging man; such was the life of an animal limited at first to pure sensations and profiting with difficulty from the gifts which nature offered him, far from dreaming of extracting anything from her. But soon difficulties presented themselves which he had to learn to overcome—the height of trees which prevented him from reaching their fruits, the competition with animals who were seeking to eat these fruits, the ferocity of those who wanted to take his life—all obliged him to apply himself to exercising his body. He had to make himself agile, a fast runner, and vigorous in combat. Natural weapons, which are tree branches and stones, were soon found at hand. He learned to overcome natural obstacles, to fight the other animals when necessary, to struggle for his sustenance even with men, or to make up for what he had to surrender to the stronger.

To the extent that the human race spread out, the difficulties multiplied with the men. Differences in soil, climate, and seasons could force them to establish differences in their ways of life. Some barren years, long harsh winters, and burning summers which consume everything demanded from them a new industry. Along the sea and rivers, they invented line and hook and became fishermen and fish-eaters. In the forests they created bows and arrows and became hunters and warriors. In cold countries, they covered themselves with the hides of beasts which they had killed. The lightning, a volcano, or some fortunate accident gave them knowledge of fire, a new resource against the rigour of winter. They learned to preserve this element, then to reproduce it, and finally to prepare meat with it which before they had devoured raw.

This repeated application of various beings to himself and of some beings to others must have naturally engendered in the human mind perceptions of certain connections. Those relationships which we express by the words *large*, *small*, *strong*, *weak*, *fast*, *slow*, *fearful*, *bold*, and other similar ideas, which he compared when necessary and almost

without thinking, finally produced in him some sort of reflection or rather a mechanical prudence which indicated to him the precautions most essential to his safety.

The new enlightenment which resulted from this development increased his superiority over the other animals by making him aware of it. He practised setting traps for them, he fooled them in a thousand ways, and although several of those animals which could serve or harm him surpassed him in their fighting power or in speed at running, over time he became the master of some and the scourge of others. That's why the first time he glanced at himself produced in him the first movement of pride, and why, when he still could hardly distinguish ranks and looked at himself as pre-eminent thanks to his species, he was preparing from a long way away to claim that rank as an individual.

Although his fellow men were not for him what they are for us and he had hardly more interaction with them than with the other animals, they were not forgotten in his observations. The conformities which time could make him notice among them, his female, and himself made him judge those which he did not perceive, and seeing that they all behaved as he would have done in similar circumstances, he concluded that their way of thinking and feeling conformed entirely with his, and this important truth, firmly established in his mind, made him follow by a premonition as certain and more rapid than dialectic the best rules of conduct which were appropriate to follow for his advantage and safety with them.

Taught by experience that love of well being is the only motive of human actions, he found himself in a condition to distinguish the rare occasions when common interest should make him count on the assistance of his fellow men and the even rarer times when competition should make him distrust them. In the first case, he combined with them into a herd or at most into some sort of free association which laid no obligations on anyone and lasted only as long as the temporary need which had created it. In the second case, each man sought to secure his own advantage, whether by overt force if he believed he could, or by skill and subtlety if he felt himself the weakest.

That is how men could imperceptibly acquire some crude idea of mutual commitments and the advantage of fulfilling them, but only to the extent that present and perceptible interest could demand it. For looking ahead was nothing to them, and, far from concerning themselves with a distant future, they did not even dream about tomorrow. If it was a matter of catching a deer, each man well understood that in that case he should keep his position faithfully. But if a hare happened to go past within reach of one of them, undoubtedly he went after it without scruple and, having caught his prey, worried very little about making his companions lose theirs.

It is easy to understand that this sort of interaction did not demand a language much more sophisticated than the language of crows or monkeys, who gather in groups in almost the same manner. Some inarticulate cries, lots of gestures, and some imitative noises must have made up the universal language for a long time. Since in each country some articulated and agreed upon signs were added to this, the institution of which, as I have already said, is not very easy to explain, there were particular languages, but crude and imperfect, almost like those various savage nations still have today. Under the pressure of time passing, the abundance of things I have to say, and the almost imperceptible progress of the beginnings, I am racing through multitudes of centuries all at once, for the more slowly the events came one after the other, the more quickly they can be described.

Eventually these first advances made man capable of making more rapid ones. The more the mind was enlightened, the more industry perfected itself. Soon he ceased to sleep under the first tree or to withdraw into caverns and found some sorts of hatchets made of hard, sharp stones that would serve to cut wood, dig the earth, and make huts out of branches, which they later decided to coat with clay and mud. This was the age of a first revolution which led to the establishment and differentiation of families, which introduced a form of property, and from which perhaps arose many quarrels and fights. However, as the strongest were probably the first to make themselves lodgings they felt capable of defending, it is plausible that the weak ones found it quicker and safer to imitate them rather than to try to dislodge them. And as for those who already had huts, each one must have rarely sought to take over his neighbour's, less because it did not belong to him than because it was useless to him and he could not have seized it without exposing himself to a lively fight with the family who occupied it.

The first developments of the heart were the result of a new situation which united husbands and wives, fathers and children in one common habitation. The habit of living together gave rise to the sweetest feelings known to men,

conjugal and paternal love. Each family became a small society, all the more united since reciprocal attachment and freedom were its only bonds. And it was then that the first difference was established in the ways of life of the two sexes, which up to this point had had only one. The women became more sedentary and grew accustomed to looking after the hut and the children, while the man went off to search for their common sustenance. In this way, through a slightly softer life, the two sexes began to lose something of their ferocity and vigour. But if each one separately became less ready to fight against savage beasts, on the other hand it was easier to gather together to resist them in common.

In this new condition, with a simple and solitary life, very limited needs, and the implements which they had invented to provide for those needs, men enjoyed a great deal of leisure and used it to gather several types of commodities unknown to their fathers. And that was the first yoke they unwittingly imposed on themselves and the first source of the evils they were preparing for their descendants. For, apart from the fact that in this manner they continued to weaken their bodies and minds, since these commodities, through habit, lost almost all their charm and, at the same time, degenerated into real needs, the lack of them became much crueler than the sweetness of possessing them, and people were unhappy to lose them without being happy to own them.

Here one glimpses a little better how the use of speech was established or was imperceptibly perfected within the bosom of each family, and it is possible to conjecture again how various particular causes could extend language and accelerate its progress by making it more necessary. Some large floods or earthquakes surrounded some inhabited regions with water or precipices. Revolutions in the earth detached portions of the continent and split them up into islands. It is conceivable that among men brought together in this way and forced to live together, there must have formed a common idiom, more so than among those who wandered freely in the forests on the mainland. Thus, it is very possible that after their first attempts at navigation, some islanders brought among us the use of speech. And it is at least very probable that society and languages derive their origin from the islands and were perfected there before being known on the continent.

Everything began to change how it looked. Men who have up to this point wandered in the woods, once they take up a more fixed situation, slowly come together and are united in various bands and finally form in each country a particular nation, unified in their customary morals and characters, not by regulations and laws but by the same way of life and diet, and by the common influence of the climate. Having permanent neighbourhood life cannot fail to engender eventually some intercourse among the various families. The young people of different sexes live in neighbouring huts, and the casual interaction demanded by nature soon leads, through time spent in each other's company, to another no less sweet and more permanent companionship. People grow accustomed to considering different objects and making comparisons: they acquire imperceptibly ideas of merit and beauty, which produce feelings of preference. By dint of seeing one another, they can no longer go without seeing each other again. A tender and sweet feeling insinuates itself in the soul and at the least opposition turns into an impetuous rage. Jealousy awakens with love, discord triumphs, and the softest of passions receives sacrifices of human blood.

To the extent that ideas and feelings follow on each other, the mind and heart are trained, the human race continues to become domesticated, relationships expand, and bonds are tightened. People got used to assembling in front of the huts or around a large tree: singing and dancing, true children of love and leisure, became the amusement or rather the occupation of idle men and women gathered together. Each one began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself, and public esteem had a value. The one who sang or danced the best, the handsomest, the strongest, the most skilful, or the most eloquent became the most highly thought of, and that was the first step towards inequality and, at the same time, toward vice. For from these first preferences were born, on the one hand, vanity and scorn and, on the other, shame and envy, and the fermentation caused by these new leavening agents eventually produced compounds fatal to happiness and innocence.

As soon as men had started mutually to appreciate one another and the idea of respect was formed in their minds, each one claimed a right to it, and it was no longer possible to fail to respect anyone with impunity. From that emerged the first obligations for civility, even among savages, and from that all voluntary wrong became an outrage, because as well as the harm resulting from the injury, the offended party often considered the contempt for his person more insupportable than the harm itself. And so, because each man punished the contempt which had been shown to him in a manner proportional to his own self-esteem, acts of vengeance became terrible, and men grew bloody and cruel. That is precisely the stage reached by the majority of savage people known to us. And because they

have not sufficiently distinguished among ideas and observed how distant these savage people already were from the first state of nature, several men have rushed to conclude that man is naturally cruel and needs civilization to moderate him, whereas nothing is as sweet as he is in his primitive condition, when, placed by nature at equal distances from the stupidity of animals and the lethal enlightenment of civil man and equally limited by instinct and reason to protecting himself from the harm which threatens him, he is restrained by natural pity from doing harm to anyone himself, since nothing gives him an inclination to do so, not even after he has been harmed. For, according to the axiom of the wise Locke, *where there is no property there is no sense of injury*.\*

But it is necessary to remark that society, once started, and the relationships already established among men demanded in them different qualities from those which they held from their primitive constitution. With morality beginning to introduce itself into human actions and, before there were laws, each man being the sole judge and avenger of the offences he had received, the kindness suitable in the pure state of nature was no longer something appropriate to emerging society. It was necessary that punishments became more severe to the extent that opportunities to offend became more frequent, and the terror of vengeance had to take the place of the restraining power of laws. Thus, although men had developed less endurance and natural pity had already suffered some change, because this period in the development of human faculties held a clear middle position between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of our self-love [*amour propre*], it must have been the happiest and most durable epoch. The more one reflects on this, the more one finds that this state was the least subject to revolutions and the best for man (16) and that he must have emerged from it by some fatal chance which for the common good ought never to have happened. The example of savages, which people have almost all found alike on this point, confirms that the human race was made to rest in this state forever, that it is the true youth of the world, and that all later progress has apparently been so many steps towards the perfection of the individual but has, in fact, been towards the decrepitude of the species.

As long as men were content with rustic huts, as long as they limited themselves to stitching their clothes of skin with thorns or fish bones, to deck themselves out with feathers and shells, to paint their bodies various colours, to perfect or embellish their bows and arrows, to cut with sharp stones some fishing canoes or some crude musical instruments—in a word, as long as they did not occupy themselves except with tasks which one man could do by himself and to arts which did not require the coordination of several hands, they lived free, healthy, good, and happy lives, as much as their nature enabled them to do so, and they continued to enjoy among themselves the sweetness of independent interaction. But from the moment a man had need of someone else's help, from the time they noticed that it was useful for one man alone to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property was introduced, work became necessary, and the vast forests were changed into smiling fields, which had to be watered with men's sweat and in which slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow along with the crops.

Metallurgy and agriculture were the two arts whose invention produced this great revolution. For the poet what has civilized men and ruined the human race is gold and silver, but for the philosopher it is iron and wheat. Thus, both of these were unknown to the savages of America, who therefore have always remained savage. Other people even seem to have stayed barbarians as long as they practised one of these arts without the other. And perhaps one of the best reasons why Europe has been, if not earlier, at least more constantly and better civilized than the other parts of the world, is that it has been, at one and the same time, the most abundantly supplied with iron and the most fertile in wheat.

It is very difficult to conjecture how men came to know and use iron. For it is not credible that they got the idea on their own of extracting the raw material from the mine and giving it the necessary preparations to get it to fuse, before they knew how it would turn out. On the other hand, one can even less attribute this discovery to some accidental fire, since mines are established only in dry places stripped of trees and plants, so that one could say that nature had taken precautions to conceal this fatal secret from us. So the only thing left is that an extraordinary event with some volcano which, by ejecting metallic materials in fusion, could have given the observers the idea of imitating this natural operation. Even so, it is necessary to assume they had plenty of courage and foresight to undertake such a difficult task and to see from a considerable distance the advantages which they could derive from it, something which is hardly appropriate to minds already more trained than theirs must have been.

As for agriculture, its principle was known long before its practice was established, and it is scarcely possible that men who were constantly busy taking their sustenance from trees and plants did not relatively soon get an idea of

the ways nature uses to grow plants. But their industry probably did not turn in this direction until a great deal later, either because the trees, which, along with hunting and fishing, provided their nourishment, did not need their care, or because they did not know the use of wheat or lacked the tools to cultivate it, or for lack of foresight for future needs, or finally because they lacked the means to prevent others from taking away the fruits of their labour. Once they became more industrious, it is credible that they began by using sharp stones and pointed sticks to cultivate some vegetables or roots around their huts long before they knew how to prepare wheat and had the tools necessary for large-scale cultivation. To say nothing of the fact that, in order to devote oneself to this occupation and seed the earth, one has to resolve at first to give up something in order gain a great deal later on, a precaution far removed from the mind of savage man who, as I have said, has considerable trouble thinking in the morning about his evening needs.

The invention of other arts was thus necessary to force the human race to apply itself to the art of agriculture. As soon as men were needed to melt and forge iron, other men had to feed them. The more the number of workers increased, the less the number of hands used to provide their common sustenance, without there being fewer mouths to consume it. And since some of them had to have foodstuffs in exchange for their iron, the others finally discovered the secret of using iron to increase the supply of staple goods. From that was born, on the one hand, farming and agriculture and, on the other, the art of working with metal and multiplying its uses.

From the cultivation of the land necessarily followed its division, and from property, once it became recognized, the first rules of justice. For in order to give each man what is his, it is necessary that each man can have something. In addition, men began to direct their gaze into the future and, since all of them saw that they had some goods to lose, there was no one who did not have to fear personal retaliation for the wrongs which he could do to someone else. This origin is all the more natural since it is impossible to conceive of the idea of property emerging from anything other than manual labour. For one cannot see what man can add over and above his own work in order to appropriate things which he has not made.\* It is labour alone which, by giving the farmer the right to the productions of the earth which he has worked on, gives him as a consequence a right to what produced them, at least until the harvest, and thus from year to year. Since that constitutes a continual possession, it is easily transformed into property. When the ancients, says Grotius, gave Ceres the epithet of legislator and the name Thesmophories to a festival celebrated in her name, they made it clear, by this action, that the division of the earth produced a new sort of right, that is, the right of property distinguished from the right which results from natural law.\*

Once things were in this state, they could have remained equal, if the talents had been equal, and if, for instance, the use of iron and the consumption of foodstuffs had always remained in a precise balance. But the proportion, which nothing maintained, was soon broken. The strongest man did more of the work. The most skillful was better at turning his work to his own advantage. The most ingenious found ways to shorten his labour. The farmer had a greater need for iron or the iron-worker for wheat, and, while both worked equally, one earned a great deal while the other hardly had enough to live. In this way, natural inequality manifests itself imperceptibly with inequality arising out of social groups, and the differences among men, developed out of differences in circumstances, became more perceptible and more permanent in their effects and began to influence the lot of individuals in the same proportion.

Once things had reached this point, it is easy to imagine the rest. I will not pause to describe the successive inventions of the other arts, the progress of languages, the testing and use of talents, the inequality of fortunes, the use and abuse of riches, or all those details which follow these and which everyone can easily provide. I will limit myself only to casting a glance on the human race situated in this new order of things.

There we are with all our faculties developed, memory and imagination at work, self-love [*amour propre*] acting out of selfish interests, reason activated, and the mind almost having attained the limit of the perfection of which it is capable. There we have all the natural qualities set into action, the rank and lot of each man established, not only on the basis of the quality of goods and the power of helping or harming, but on the basis of the mind, beauty, strength or skill, and merit or talents. Since these qualities were the only ones which could attract respect, it was soon necessary to have them or to pretend to have them and, for one's own advantage, to show oneself as different from what one, in fact, was. Being and appearing became two entirely different things, and from this distinction emerged impressive ostentation, deceitful cunning, and all the vices which come in their wake

On the other hand, no matter how free and independent man had been previously, there he was now, because of a multitude of new needs, subject, as it were, to all of nature and, above all, to his fellow men, to whom he has, in a sense, become a slave, even in becoming their master: if rich, he needs their services; if poor, he needs their help, and being between the two does not enable him to do without them. Thus, he must seek without pause to interest them in his lot and to make them discover a real or apparent profit for themselves in working for his. This makes him deceitful and artificial with some men, imperious and harsh with others, and requires him to abuse all those whom he needs, when he cannot make them afraid of him and does not find it in his interests to serve them usefully. Finally, consuming ambition, the desire to raise the relative size of one's fortune, less from a real need than to set oneself above others, inspires in all men a dark tendency to inflict mutual injuries on each other, a secret jealousy all the more dangerous because, in order to strike a blow in greater safety, it often assumes a mask of good will: in a word, competition and rivalry, on the one hand, and opposing interests on the other and the constant hidden desire to make one's profit at the expense of others—all these evils are the first effects of property and the inseparable procession accompanying emerging inequality.

Before people invented the signs which represent riches, wealth could scarcely have consisted of anything other than lands and animals, the only real goods men could possess. Now, when inheritances had increased in number and extent to the point of covering all the land and of creating boundaries for everyone, some could no longer grow except at the expense of others, and the superfluous ones left over, whom weakness or idleness had prevented from acquiring an inheritance in their turn, became poor without having lost anything, because, with everything changing around them, they alone had not changed and so were obliged to receive or steal their sustenance from the hands of the rich. From that began to emerge, according to the diverse characters of the rich and poor, dominion and servitude, or violence and plunder. The rich, for their part, had hardly learned about the pleasure of dominating than they soon disdained all other pleasures, and, making use of their old slaves to conquer new ones, dreamed only of subjugating and enslaving their neighbours, like those starving wolves who, having once tasted human flesh, reject all other food and no longer want to eat anything but men.

In this way, the most powerful or the most miserable used their force or their needs to create a sort of right to the goods of others, equivalent, according to them, to the right of property. Once equality was fractured, the most horrific disorder followed. In this way, the usurpations of the rich, the thievery of the poor, and the frantic passions of all snuffed out natural pity and the still feeble voice of justice and made men avaricious, ambitious, and evil. There arose a perpetual conflict between the right of the strongest and the right of the first occupant, something which ended only in fights and murders [\(17\)](#). The emerging society gave way to the most horrible state of war; the human race, debased and desolate, unable to retrace its steps or renounce the unfortunate acquisitions it had made, and working only for its shame by abusing the faculties which honour it, brought itself to the verge of its own ruin.

*Dismayed by newness of the evils,  
both rich man and poor man desire to flee from wealth,  
and he hates what he once prayed for.\**

It is not possible that men should not finally have reflected about a situation as miserable as this and about the calamities devastating them. The rich, above all, must soon have felt how much a perpetual war was disadvantageous to them, one in which they alone paid all the costs and where the risks to life were common to all, while the risk to goods was an individual matter. Moreover, however they might have been able to colour their usurpations, they knew well enough that they were established only on a precarious and abusive right and that, since their acquisitions had been attained by force, force could take them away from them without their having a reason to complain. Even those who had been enriched by their industry alone could hardly base their property on better claims. They could well say, "I'm the one who built this wall. I won this land through my labour." "Who has given you its dimensions," people could reply to them, "and by virtue of what right do you claim to be paid at our expense for labour which we did not impose on you? Do you not know that a multitude of your brothers are dying or suffering from a need for what you have in excess and that you had to have express and unanimous consent of the human race in order to arrogate to yourself from the common sustenance everything over and above your own needs?" Lacking valid reasons to justify himself and sufficient force to defend himself; easily crushing an individual, but himself crushed by gangs of bandits; alone against everyone and, because of mutual jealousy, unable to join with his equals against an enemy united by a common hope of pillage, the rich man, hard pressed by necessity, eventually conceived the most well-considered project which ever entered the human mind. That was to use in his favour the very forces

of those who were attacking him, to turn his enemies into his defenders, to inspire them with other maxims, and to give them other institutions which were as advantageous to him as natural right was against him.

With this in mind, after having shown his neighbours the horror of a situation which armed them all against each other, which made their possessions as onerous as their needs, and in which no one found his security either in poverty or in wealth, he easily came up with specious reasons for leading them to his goal. "Let us unite," he said to them, "to protect the weak from oppression, to restrain the ambitious, and to assure to each man the possession of what belongs to him. Let us set up rules of justice and peace to which everyone has a duty to conform, which do not exempt anyone, and which in some way make up for the whims of fortune by subjecting the powerful and the weak equally to mutual obligations. In a word, instead of turning our strengths against ourselves, let us collect them into one supreme power which governs us by wise laws, and which protects and defends all the members of the association, repels common enemies, and keeps us in an eternal harmony."

He required much less than the equivalent of this speech to convince crude and easily seduced men, who, in addition, had too many disputes to disentangle among themselves to be able to go without arbitrators and too much avarice and ambition to be able to do without masters for any length of time. They all ran to get into their chains, believing they were assuring their liberty. For although they had sufficient reason to sense the advantages of a political establishment, they did not have sufficient experience to anticipate its dangers. The most capable of sensing the abuses in advance were precisely the ones who counted on profiting from them, and even the wise ones saw that they had to resolve themselves to sacrifice a part of their liberty in order to preserve the other part, just as a wounded man has his arm cut off to save the rest of his body.

Such was, or must have been, the origin of society and laws, something which provided new obstacles for the weak and new power to the rich (18), destroyed natural liberty irretrievably, established forever the law of property and inequality, turned a clever usurpation into an irrevocable right, and for the profit of a few ambitious men from that time on subjected all the human race to labour, servitude, and misery. It is easy to see how the establishment of one society made the establishment of all the others indispensable and how, to made headway against united forces, people had to unite in their turn.

Societies multiplied or extended themselves rapidly and soon covered the entire surface of the earth. It was no longer possible to find a single corner of the universe where one could free oneself from the yoke and duck out from under the often badly wielded sword which each man saw permanently suspended above his own head. Since civil right thus became the common rule for citizens, the law of nature had no place except among the various societies, where, under the name of the law of nations, it was tempered with a few tacit conventions to make commerce possible and to take the place of natural commiseration, which by losing all the power between one society and another which it had had between man and man, no longer resides anywhere other than in some great cosmopolitan souls, who transcend the imaginary barriers separating peoples and who, following the example of the Sovereign Being who created them, embrace all the human race in their benevolence.

Since the political bodies in this way remained in a state of nature among themselves, they soon felt the inconveniences which had forced individuals to leave it, and this state became even more lethal among these great bodies than it had ever been before among the individuals of whom they were composed. From that emerged national wars, battles, murders, reprisals which make nature tremble and shock reason, and all those horrible prejudices which place the honour of shedding human blood in the ranks of virtue. The most decent people learned to reckon among their duties the slaughter of their fellow men. Finally, men were seen massacring each other by the thousands without knowing why. And more murders were committed in a single day of fighting and more horrors in the capture of a single town than had been committed in the state of nature during entire centuries over the whole face of the earth. Such are the first effects one glimpses of the division of the human race into different societies. Let us go back to their founding.

I know that several people have provided other origins for political societies, like conquests by the more powerful or the union of the weak, and the choice among these causes is irrelevant to what I want to establish. However, the one I have just laid out seems to me the most natural for the following reasons: 1. In the first case, since the right of conquest is not a right, it could not have founded any other rights. The conqueror and the vanquished people would constantly remain in a state of mutual warfare, unless the nation regained its full liberty and voluntarily chose its

conqueror as its leader. Up to that point, whatever capitulations had been made, since they were not founded on anything but violence and consequently rendered null and void, there cannot be with this hypothesis either a true society or a political body, or any law other than that of the strongest. 2. These words *strong* and *weak* are ambiguous in the second case. In the interval occurring between the establishment of the rights of property or of the first occupant and that of political governments, the meaning of these terms is better rendered by the words *poor* and *rich*, because, in fact, before the laws, a man did not have any way to subjugate his equals other than by attacking their goods or giving them some portion of his own. 3. Since the poor had nothing to lose but their freedom, it would have been very foolish for them voluntarily to give away the one benefit remaining to them without gaining anything in return. By contrast, since the rich were, so to speak, sensitive about all aspects of their goods, it was much easier to harm them, and thus they had to take more precautions to protect themselves. Finally it is reasonable to believe that something was invented by those to whom it is useful rather than by those it harms.

The newly emerging government did not have a constant and regular form. The lack of philosophy and experience enabled men to see only the present inconveniences, and they did not think of remedying others except to the extent that they arose. In spite of all the work of the wisest legislators, the political state always remained imperfect, because it was almost a work of chance and because, since it began badly, time revealed faults in it and suggested remedies but could never repair the vices in the constitution. People constantly repaired it, whereas what was required was to begin by clearing the air and rejecting all the old materials, as Lycurgus did at Sparta,\* in order to raise a good edifice later. At first, society consisted only of some general conventions which all the individuals agreed to observe, and the community pledged itself to guarantee these for each individual. Experience necessarily revealed how weak such a constitution was and how easy it was for those who broke these conventions to avoid conviction or punishment for faults **for** which the public alone was to be the witness and judge. The law must have been evaded in a thousand ways, and the inconveniences and disorders must have continually multiplied, in order for people eventually to think of conferring on particular individuals the dangerous trust of public authority and for them to commit to magistrates the care **of** enforcing the deliberations of the people. For to say that leaders were chosen before the confederation was created and that ministers of law existed before the laws themselves is a hypothesis which does not admit of serious debate.

It would be no more reasonable to believe that people were at the start thrown into the arms of an absolute master, unconditionally and irrevocably, and that that the first way of providing communal security which proud and untamed men could have imagined was to hurl themselves into slavery. In fact, why did they give themselves superiors, unless it was to defend them against oppression and to protect their goods, their liberty, and their lives, which are, so to speak, the constituent elements of their being? Now, in the relationships between man and man, since the worst which could happen to one is to see himself at the discretion of another, would it not have been against good sense to begin by handing over to the hands of a leader the only things for whose preservation he required his help? What equivalent could he have offered them for conceding such a fine right? If he dared to demand it under the pretext of defending them, would he not have immediately received the response of the old story: *What more will the enemy do to us?* It is thus incontestable and the fundamental maxim of all political right that the people gave themselves leaders to defend their liberty and not to enslave them. *If we have a prince*, said Pliny to Trajan, *it is so that he may preserve us from having a master.\**

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Without entering today into investigations which remain to be made on the nature of the fundamental compact of all governments, I am limiting myself by following common opinion in considering here the establishment of the political body a real contract between the people and the leaders which it chooses for itself, a contract through which the two parties oblige themselves to observe laws which are stipulated in it and which form the bonds of their union. Since the people have, so far as social relations are concerned, all united their wills into a single will, all the articles on which this will is explicitly clear become so many fundamental laws which oblige all members of the state without exception. One of them rules on the selection and power of the magistrates charged with looking after the execution of the others. This power extends to everything which can maintain the constitution, without going to the point of changing it. To this are added honours which make the laws and their ministers respectable, and for the latter some prerogatives which compensate them for the onerous work which a good administration demands. The magistrate, for his part, commits himself to using the power entrusted to him only according to the intention of the constituents

in order to keep each man in the peaceful enjoyment of what belongs to him and to prefer on every occasion public utility over his own interest.

Before experience had demonstrated or knowledge of the human heart had provided a preview of the inevitable abuses of such a constitution, it must have appeared all the better because those who were charged with keeping watch over its preservation were themselves the most interested in that. For since the magistracy and its rights were established only on fundamental laws, as soon as the latter were destroyed, the magistrates would cease to be legitimate, the people would no longer be bound to obey them, and, since it **was not** the magistrate but the law which constituted the essence of the state, each man would by right return to his natural liberty.

The slightest attentive reflection on this matter would confirm this with new reasons, and through the nature of the contract one would see that it could not be irrevocable. For if there were no superior power which could guarantee the fidelity of the contracting parties or force them to fulfill their reciprocal commitments, the parties would remain the only judges in their own case, and each of them would always have the right of renouncing the contract, as soon as they found that another party infringed on the conditions or that they ceased to find it agreeable. It is on this principle that it seems the right to abdicate could be founded. Now, to consider, as we are doing, only the human institution: if the magistrate who has all the power in his hands and who appropriates all the advantages of the contract for himself, nevertheless had the right to renounce his authority, there is all the stronger reason that the people who pay for all the faults of their leaders, should have the right to renounce their dependency.

But the horrible dissensions and the infinite disorders which this dangerous power would necessarily bring with it show more than anything else how much human governments needed a more solid basis than reason alone and how much it was necessary to the public peace that Divine Will intervene to give sovereign authority a sacred and inviolable character which removes from the subjects the fatal right of disposing of it. If religion had achieved only this benefit for men, that would have been enough to require them to cherish and adopt it, even with its abuses, because it spares even more blood than fanaticism causes men to shed. But let us follow the thread of our hypothesis.

The various forms of government derive their origin from the greater or lesser differences which existed among the individuals at the moment of its institution. Was one man eminent in power, virtue, riches, or credit? He was elected the only magistrate, and the state became a monarchy. If several men, more or less equal among themselves, prevailed over all the others, they were elected jointly, and people had an aristocracy. Those whose fortune or talents were less disproportionate and who were the least removed from the state of nature kept the supreme administration communal and formed a democracy. Time verified which of these forms was the most advantageous for men. Some remained solely subjected to the laws; others soon obeyed masters. Citizens wanted to preserve their freedom; subjects thought of nothing but taking that away from their neighbours, since they were incapable of enduring that others were enjoying benefits which they no longer enjoyed themselves. In a word, on one side were riches and conquests, on the other happiness and virtue.

...

If we follow the progress of inequality in these different revolutions, we will find that the establishment of law and of the right of property was its first stage, the institution of the magistracy the second, and that the third and last was the change of legitimate power into arbitrary power, so that the condition of the rich and poor was authorized by the first age, that of the powerful and the weak by the second, and that of master and slave by the third, which is the final degree of inequality and the limit to which all the others eventually lead, until new revolutions dissolve the government entirely or move it closer to a legitimate institution.

To understand the necessity of this progress we must consider, not so much the motives for the establishment of the political body, as the form which it takes as it is set up and the inconveniences which it brings with it. For the vices which make social institutions necessary are the same which make its abuse inevitable. And since, with the sole exception of Sparta, where the law watched principally over the education of the children and where Lycurgus established customs, which meant he could almost dispense with adding laws to them, laws in general, which are not as strong as passions, contain men without changing them, it would be easy to prove that every government which, without being corrupted or altered, always marched according to the purpose for which it was set up would have

been instituted unnecessarily, and that a country where no one evaded the laws and abused the magistracy would have no need either of magistrates or of laws.

Political distinctions necessarily lead to civil distinctions. Inequality, growing between the people and their leaders, soon made itself felt among individuals and was modified in a thousand ways according to passions, talents, and events. The magistrate could not usurp illegitimate power without creating some followers to whom he was forced to concede part of it. In addition, since the citizens do not let themselves be oppressed except to the extent that they are led on by blind ambition and since they look more below than above themselves, dominion becomes dearer to them than independence, and they consent to carry chains in order to be able to give them out in their turn. It is very difficult to reduce to obedience someone who does not seek to command, and the most adroit politician would not succeed in subjecting men who wished only to be free. But inequality extends itself without difficulty among ambitious and cowardly souls, who are always ready to run the risks of fortune and to dominate or serve almost indifferently, according to whether it is favourable or unfavourable to them.

This is why there had to come a time when the eyes of the people were so spellbound that their leaders only had to say to the smallest man: be great, you and all your race. Immediately he appeared great to everyone as well as in his own eyes, and his descendants were raised even more, in proportion to their distance from him. The more remote and uncertain the cause, the more the effect grew. The more lazy members one could count in one family, the more illustrious it became.

If this were the place here to go into details, I would easily explain how, even without government getting involved, inequality in prestige and authority becomes inevitable among individuals [\(19\)](#) as soon as they are united into the same society and are forced to make comparisons among themselves and to take into account the differences which they find in the continual use they have to make of one another. These differences are **of** several types, but, in general, since riches, nobility or rank, power and personal merit are the principal distinctions by which people measure themselves in society, I would prove that the harmony or the conflict of these various forces is the most certain indication of whether a state is well or badly constituted. I would reveal that among these four types of inequality, since personal qualities are the origin of all the others, wealth is the last to which they are finally reduced, because, since it is the most immediately useful for well being and the easiest to communicate, one readily makes use of it to purchase all the rest—an observation which enables one to judge fairly precisely the extent to which each people is removed from its primitive institution and how far along the road it has traveled towards the final limit of corruption. I would point out how much this universal desire for reputation, honours, and preferment, which devours us all, trains and compares talents and strengths, how much it excites and multiplies the passions, and, by turning all men into competitors, rivals, or rather enemies, and by making so many entrants run the same course, how much it causes setbacks, successes, and catastrophes of all kinds every day. I would show that it is to this passionate desire to have people talk about oneself, to this furor to distinguish oneself which keeps us almost always outside ourselves, we owe what is best and worst among men, our virtues and our vices, our sciences and our mistakes, our conquerors and our philosophers, that is, a multitude of bad things against a small number of good ones. Finally, I would prove that if one sees a handful of powerful and rich men at the pinnacle of their greatness and fortune, while the crowd grovels in obscurity and misery, it is because the former value the things which they enjoy only to the extent that others are deprived of them and because, without changing their social position, they would cease to be happy if the people ceased to be miserable.

But these details alone would be material for a considerable work in which one weighed the advantages and the inconvenience of all governments, relative to the rights of the state of nature, and where one would unmask all the different faces behind which inequality has shown itself up to the present time and will be able to show itself in centuries to come, according to the nature of those governments and the revolutions which time will necessarily bring about in them. One would see the multitude oppressed from inside as a result of the very precautions which it had taken against what menaced it from outside. One would see oppression constantly growing without the oppressed ever being able to know what limits it would have or what legitimate means they had left to stop it. One would see the rights of citizens and national liberties extinguished little by little, and the complaints of the weak treated as seditious murmurs. One would see politics restrict the honour of defending the common cause to a mercenary section of the population. From that one would see emerge the need for taxes, the discouraged farmer leaving his fields even during peace time and abandoning the plough to gird on a sword. One would see born lethal rules and bizarre points of honour. One would see the defenders of the homeland sooner or later becoming its

enemies, constantly holding a raised dagger over their fellow citizens, and there would come a time when one would hear them saying to the oppressor of their country:

*If you order me to plunge a sword into my brother's chest or into my parent's throat or into the womb of my pregnant wife, I will do all that, even though my right hand is unwilling.\**

From the extreme inequality in conditions and fortunes, from the diversity of passions and talents, from useless arts, from pernicious arts, and from frivolous sciences emerge mobs of prejudices, equally contrary to reason, happiness, and virtue. One would see the leaders fomenting everything which could make men in groups weak and disunite them, everything which could give a society an air of apparent harmony and sow in it a seed of real division, everything which could inspire in the different orders a mutual defiance and hatred through their opposing rights and interests, and thus fortify the power which contains them all.

From the bosom of this disorder and of these revolutions despotism, lifting by degrees its hideous head and devouring everything which it had perceived as good and healthy in all sections of the state, finally would come to the point of riding roughshod over the laws and the people and establishing itself on the ruins of the republic. The time preceding this last change would be a period of troubles and calamities, but by the end everything would be swallowed up by the monster, and the people would no longer have leaders and laws, but only tyrants. From this moment on, it would also cease to be a question of morals and virtue, for wherever despotism reigns, *in which there is no hope from honesty,\** it suffers no other master. As soon as it speaks, one can consult neither probity nor duty, and the blindest obedience is the only virtue which remains for slaves.

This is the final stage of inequality and the extreme point which closes the circle and touches the point where we set out. Here all individuals become equal again because they are nothing, and since the subjects have no law other than the will of the master, and the master has no other rule than his passions, the notions of good and the principles of justice vanish once more. Here everything is led back to the single law of the strongest and, as a result, to a new state of nature different from the one with which we began, for the first one was a state of nature in its purity, and the last one is the fruit of an excess of corruption. Moreover, there is so little difference between these two states, and the contract with the government is dissolved by despotism in such a manner that the despot is master only as long as he is the strongest and that, as soon as he can be expelled, he has nothing he can invoke against the violence. The uprising which ends by strangling or dethroning a sultan is an act every bit as lawful as those by which the previous day he disposed of the lives and the goods of his subjects. Force alone preserved him, and force alone overturns him. Thus, everything occurs according to natural order, and whatever the outcome of these short and frequent revolutions may be, no one can complain of injustice from anyone, but only of his own imprudence or misfortune.

By thus discovering and following the forgotten and lost routes which must have led man from the natural state to the civil state, and by re-establishing, along with the intermediate stages which I have just noted, those which the pressures of time have made me suppress or which my imagination has not suggested to me, every attentive reader cannot but be struck by the immense gap which separates these two conditions. In this slow succession of things he will see the solution to an infinite number of problems of morality and politics which philosophers cannot resolve. He will sense that since the human race of one age is not the human race of another age, the reason Diogenes did not find an [honest] man was that he was looking among his contemporaries for someone from a time which was no longer there.\* Cato, he will say, perished with Rome and liberty, because he was displaced in his century, and the greatest of men merely astonished the world which he would have governed five hundred years earlier.

Briefly put, he will explain how the human soul and passions, imperceptibly altering, change their nature, as it were, why our needs and our pleasures change their object in the long term, why, as the original man disappears by degrees, society does not offer to the eyes of a wise man anything other than an assembly of artificial men and manufactured passions, which are the work of all these new relationships and have no real basis in nature. What reflection teaches us in this matter, observation confirms perfectly. Savage man and civilized man differ so much in the depths of their hearts and their inclinations that what constitutes supreme happiness for one would reduce the other to despair. The first man breathes nothing but peace and liberty; he wishes only to live and remain idle—even the *ataraxia* of the Stoic does not come close to his profound indifference for all other objects. By contrast, the active citizen sweats, gets agitated, and worries all the time about finding even more laborious occupations. He works himself to death; he even runs to it in order to put himself in a position to live, or he gives up his life to acquire

immortality. He courts the great, whom he hates and the wealthy, whom he despises. He spares nothing to obtain the honour of serving them. He boasts proudly of his low position and of their protection and, proud of being enslaved, he speaks with disdain of those who do not have the honour of sharing it.

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## Notes

(16) It is a very remarkable thing that during all those years that Europeans have been tormenting themselves to bring savages from various countries of the world to their way of life they have not been able to win over a single one, not even with the assistance of Christianity. For our missionaries have made some of them Christians but have never civilized men. Nothing can overcome the invincible repugnance which they have against our customs and living in our manner. If these poor savages are as miserable as people claim, by what inconceivable lack of judgment do they constantly refuse to civilize themselves by imitating us or to learn to live happily among us, whereas we read that in a thousand places French and other Europeans have voluntarily taken refuge among these nations, spent their entire lives there, without being able to leave such a strange way of life, and one even sees sensible missionaries touchingly missing the calm and innocent days which they spent among such despised people?

If people reply that they do not have enough enlightenment to judge soundly of their own state and ours, I will answer that evaluating happiness is less a matter of reason than of feeling. In addition, this response could be turned against us with even more force. For there is a greater distance between our ideas and the mental disposition which one must have to conceive of the taste which the savages find for their way of life than between the savages' ideas and those which could make them conceive of our way of life. In fact, after a few observations it is easy for them to see that all our labours are directed at only two objectives, namely, at commodities of life for oneself and at respect from other people. But how are we to imagine the sort of pleasure which a savage takes at spending his life alone in the middle of the woods or fishing or blowing on a bad musical pipe, without ever knowing how to draw from it a single tone and without bothering to learn?

On several occasions people have brought savages to Paris, London, and other cities. They have been quick to lay out our luxuries, our riches, and all our most useful and most interesting arts. All that has never excited from them anything other than a stupid admiration, without the least reaction of covetousness. I remember among others the history of a chief of some North Americans who was brought to the English court thirty years ago. They had a thousand items paraded before his eyes in an attempt to give him a present which would please him, without finding anything which he appeared to care about. Our weapons seemed heavy and inconvenient to him, our shoes injured his feet, our clothes restricted him—he refused everything. Finally it was observed that, having taken up a woolen blanket, he seemed to get pleasure from wrapping it around his shoulders. "You will at least concede," someone said to him immediately, "the usefulness of this furnishing?" "Yes," he replied, "that seems to me almost as good as an animal skin." And he would not have even said that if he had worn them both in the rain.

Perhaps someone will say to me that it is habit which, by attaching each man to his manner of life, prevents savages from feeling what there is good in ours. On that basis it must appear at least really extraordinary that habit has more power to maintain in savages the taste for their misery than in Europeans the enjoyment of their happiness. But to frame a response to this last objection to which one cannot offer a single word in reply, and without referring to all the young savages which people have tried hard but in vain to civilize, and without talking about the Greenlanders and the inhabitants of Iceland whom they tried to raise and nourish in Denmark, all of whom were killed off by sadness and despair, whether from torpor or in the sea when they attempted to regain their native land by swimming, I will content myself with citing a single well-attested example, which I offer for admirers of European civilization to examine.

"All the efforts of the Dutch missionaries of the Cape of Good Hope have never been able to convert a single Hottentot. Van der Stel, governor of the Cape, took one of them from infancy and had him raised in the principles of the Christian religion and the practice of European habits. He was dressed richly, they had him learn several languages, and his progress responded extremely well to the cares people took for his education. The governor, having high hopes for his mind, sent him to the Indies with a commissioner general who employed him usefully in the affairs of the company. He came back to the Cape after the commissioner's death. A few days after his return, while visiting some Hottentot relatives, he took it upon himself to strip off his European finery in order to clothe himself again with sheepskin. He returned to the fort in this new outfit, carrying a package which contained his old clothes, and, while presenting them to the governor, said the following to him (see the frontispiece\*): *Have the goodness, sir, to pay attention to the fact that I am renouncing for ever this apparel. I also renounce for all my life the Christian religion. My resolution is to live and die in the religion, manners, and customs of my ancestors. The only favor ask of you is to leave me the necklace and cutlass which I am wearing. I will keep them for love of you. Immediately, without waiting for Van der Stel's response, he ran off in flight and they never saw him again at the Cape.*" *History of Voyages*, Vol. 5, p. 175. [\[Back to text\]](#)

(17) One could make an objection against me that in such a chaos, instead of willfully murdering each other, men would have scattered, if there were no boundaries to their dispersion. But, first of all, these boundaries would have to have been at least the limits of the world, and if one thinks about the excessive population which results from the state of nature, one will judge that the earth in this condition would not have taken long to become covered with men compelled in this way to remain collected together. In addition, they would have dispersed if the evil had been quick and the change something which happened from one day to the next. But they were born under the yoke. They were habituated to bear it when they felt its weight, and they were content to wait for an opportunity to shake it off. Finally, since they were already accustomed to the thousands of goods which forced them to remain together, dispersion was not as easy as in the first days, when each man, having no need of anything except himself, decided what to do without waiting for another man's consent. [\[Back to text\]](#)

(18) Marshal de Villars used to tell the story that in one of his campaigns, when the excessively corrupt dealing of one of the food contractors made the army suffer and grumble, he scolded him sharply and threatened to have him hanged. "This threat does not concern me," the scoundrel brazenly answered him, "and I am very pleased to tell you that they don't hang a man who has at his disposal a hundred thousand crowns." "I don't know how that came about," the marshal added naively, "but in fact he was not hanged, although he deserved to be strung up a hundred times." [\[Back to text\]](#)

(19) Distributive justice would still be against this rigorous equality in the state of nature, even if were practical in civil society. And as all the members of the state owe it their services in proportion to their talents and their strengths, the citizens, in their turn, should be distinguished and favoured in proportion to their services. A passage of Isocrates must be understood in this sense, the one in which he praises the first Athenians for having well understood how to distinguish which was the more advantageous of the two sorts of equality: one which consisted of dividing the same advantages equally among all the citizens, and the other of distributing them according to each man's merit. These skilful politicians, the orator adds, banned that unjust equality which establishes no difference between bad and good men and committed themselves inviolably to the one which rewards and punishes each man according to his merit. But, first of all, there has never existed a society, no matter what degree of corruption it could have reached, in which people make no distinction between good and bad men. And in the matter of morals, where the law cannot establish a measurement sufficiently precise to serve as a rule for the magistrate, the law very wisely, in order not to leave the fate or the rank of the citizens to the discretion of the magistrate, does not permit him to judge persons, allowing him to judge nothing other than actions. There are no morals so pure that they can endure censors, other than those of the ancient Romans, and similar tribunals would have soon wreaked havoc among us. It is up to public esteem to establish the difference between the evil and good men; the magistrate only judges matters of explicit rights. But the people are the true judge of morality, an honest and even enlightened judge on this point—one who is abused sometimes but never corrupted. The ranks of the citizens thus ought to be regulated, not on the basis of the personal merit, which would allow the magistrate the means to make an almost arbitrary application of the law, but on the basis of the actual services they have rendered the state, which are susceptible to a more exact assessment. [\[Back to text\]](#)

**Source:** <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~Johnstoi/rousseau/seconddiscourse.htm>