

Rousseau's First Discourse: Nature vs. Society

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Swiss born French philosopher was born in 1712 and lived in France. He contributed largely to the intellectual thought of the 18th century French Enlightenment. He was far ahead of his times and many of the concepts we talk of today pre-figured in his musings and works. The constructs and principles penned by him such as importance of child psychology in education, sustainability of the planet, progress of civilization as deterrent to the moral values of mankind –all of these till today are our current preoccupations. The article would like to throw light on Rousseau's First Discourse which was prescriptive and original at a time the leading intellectuals were all praise for society's progress and technological and scientific growth.

His First Discourse entitled "A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences" was published in 1750. In this discourse Rousseau talks of the destructive influence of civilization on human beings. This was considered as one of his most impactful works that subsequently influenced his other works notably *Emile* where he would talk of how man meddles with things that are God-made and make them evil. Rousseau won the first prize for his essay from the Academy Of Dijon. Rousseau also got substantial recognition as a philosopher since this publication of his First Discourse. Nevertheless, he himself would consider his First Discourse a 'mediocre' work and would feel miserable at the good reception that the book got! He wrote in the Preface of the book: "What an abyss of miseries the author would have avoided if this first book had been received according to its merits!"

Rousseau's most influential political work was the *Social Contract*. Written in 1762, it promoted the creation of a more egalitarian republicanism. An original thinker, Rousseau challenged the orthodox religious and political views of the day. For his controversial criticism of established religion, his works were often banned, and also he had to seek exile in different European countries. He was also a musician and lover of nature and is considered an influential figure of the European Enlightenment and a precursor of Romanticism.

Rousseau was a self-made intellectual. His mother died soon after giving him birth. His father was a clockmaker, but when Rousseau was ten years old, his father was forced to leave the city, leaving Rousseau and his brother behind with relatives. Rousseau gained a rudimentary education before becoming an apprentice to a notary and engraver. Soon he left Geneva and got a patron in the form of Louise de Warens– a Catholic noblewoman of Protestant background. With her support Rousseau became well versed in philosophy, music, mathematics and other subjects.

In 1739, Rousseau came into an inheritance and moved to Lyon, before moving to Paris in 1742. In 1745, he met Thérèse Levasseur who became later his wife. In Paris, he became a close collaborator with Denis Diderot, and the two became leading intellectuals of the day. They published the influential magazine *Encyclopaedia*.

Rousseau was also a talented musician and a composer, and his works were appreciated by King Louis XV. He could probably have gained employment as a court composer but things took a different course. The author and the musician increasingly felt the barrenness of worldly life and was drawn to the awareness of how worldly achievements and riches could easily corrupt men. His friend Diderot was imprisoned for his anti-clerical writings, and this galvanized him further to consider philosophical questions.

In his First Discourse Rousseau would use a narrator as a literary strategy to lay out his intention of writing the essay and to lay out his tall claim that nature made man happy and good but that society made him miserable. Modern civilization is responsible for injecting into him vice and error originally unknown to the natural human being. Rousseau's famous saying: *Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains* only throws light on the evil and violent designs of the society. All this actually went against the well accepted belief of his times that science and arts or in other words, civilization contributed to the progress of mankind! Thus Rousseau became the most controversial French philosopher of the Enlightenment Era. Even his close associates like Voltaire, a staunch believer in the benefits of civilization, will now become his arch rival.

Rousseau's account about his initial encounter with the question of reverse effect of progress on Man has become well known. Rousseau's friend Denis Diderot, the great Encyclopaedist had been imprisoned at Vincennes for writing a work questioning the idea of a providential God. As he walked to the prison to visit him, Rousseau was perusing a copy of a journal namely, the *Mercury of France*, and when his eyes fell upon the question posed by the Academy of Dijon "Has the restoration of the sciences and arts contributed to the purification of morals?", he felt a sudden and overwhelming inspiration to respond to it "that man is naturally good, and that it is from these institutions alone that men become wicked". Rousseau was able to retain only some of the thoughts, the "crowd of truths", that flowed from that idea—these eventually found their way into his *Discourses* and his novel *Emile*. He would contest the intellectual consensus of the time that science and arts led to progress of mankind. Interestingly the Academy conferred upon him the first prize. The moment was noteworthy as in an otherwise mundane career as composer and playwright, among other things—Rousseau would newfound his fame as a writer and philosopher.

Notable scholar Jeff J.S. Black points out that Rousseau is one of the first thinkers within the modern democratic tradition to question the political commitment to scientific progress found in most modern societies especially in liberal democracies and examined the costs of such policies. In the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and the *Discourse on inequality* Rousseau made a scathing attack on scientific progress...an attack whose principles he never disavowed, and whose particulars he repeated, to some extent, in all his subsequent writings. As the primitive man raised the stakes he set on the appropriation and conquest of the nature by

invention of technologies until at some point humanity realised that the nature may not heal by itself. This shift of consciousness which is so contemporary actually owes to Rousseau's ideas in the eighteenth century. Besides, Rousseau was the precursor of the idea that education was a must to create a society of integrity. As the society progressed men became more corrupt morally.

Rousseau's radical brand of indictment of the society made him stand out in bitter contrast with the rest of the eighteenth century philosophers. In fact Rousseau anticipated this when he wrote in his First Discourse "I anticipate that people will have difficulty forgiving me for the position which I have dared to take. By colliding head on with everything which wins men's admiration nowadays, I can expect only universal censure." Although both Rousseau and Voltaire were believers in remodeling the existing unjust monarchical system like the other enlightened philosophers of the time like Montesquieu, Diderot and Alembert, sharp differences of opinion soon isolated Rousseau from Voltaire, as for the latter modern civilization was progressive, in sharp contrast to the "regressive" philosophy of nature of Rousseau. However, despite differences, the relentless spirit of criticism of the monarchical order and despotism creates resemblance between these authors and consolidates the bond of fraternity among them. Each of them can be considered, in some way or the other, as the mentor and the precursor of the ensuing French Revolution.

However, Rousseau had more radical thoughts which ultimately led him to part company with the Encyclopaedists and to pursue an individual line of criticism. Whereas others criticized the society from within since they were tolerably integrated to it in spite of the manifestation of their genuine disgust for the revealed religion, for the absurdities of customs or iniquitous social set-up, Rousseau always remained an outsider. A moral criticism is discernable in Rousseau's philosophical ideology. The principles on which, in his opinion, society was founded were opposed to human liberty, dignity and happiness.

Rousseau marked a turning point in the history of the human thought and literature. He was a pioneer and precursor in many respects. "While government and laws take care of the security and the well-being of men in groups, the sciences, letters, and the arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains which weigh men down, snuffing out in them the feeling of that original liberty for which they appear to have been born, and make them love their slavery by turning them into what are called civilized people." Thus, Rousseau set an ideological precedence which would be extended into the following century.

Rousseau was a man nurtured in the classical tradition and steeped in rational classical knowledge. But his own philosophy gave priority to imagination and sensitivities. The confluence of these two opposing tendencies found expression in his writings. In an age still greatly dominated by the neo-classical literary tradition Rousseau set the tone of the ensuing Romantic age with his cult of subjectivity, with his acute sense of persecution, with his sensibilities of a distressed self left out of the social communication.

Rousseau wanted to track down the origin of the evil and calls into question the social order in its entirety. His critical effort was never dispersed and it does not assume the task of

confronting one by one the multiple manifestation of the evil. He searched for a common cause of evil instead of attacking abuse, usurpation or imposture. Rousseau observed the disharmony between man's words and action. This dichotomy between what really is and what appears to be, generated falsehood. With everyone wearing deceptive mask, the communication became impossible in the society. The society founded on falsity and falsehood turned out to be the breeding ground of other kinds of vices.

In his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* Rousseau blames the society and upholds the nature. The former has a relationship of permanent conflict with the later. Evils and vices are born out of this conflict and become the cause of sufferings of the afflicted humanity. Society negates nature. With respect to the nature Rousseau envisaged the civilization with a negative gaze. The nature gets contradicted and denied by the refinement of manners, by dubious values emanating from the so-called enlightened society. This idea was at the core of Rousseau's arguments in his philosophical, fictional, as well as autobiographical works.

The false "enlightenment" of the society does not lead to the transparency of the human mind. It obscures, instead, the natural transparency, creates isolation, demolishes every possibility of reciprocal trust and substitutes the natural communication between man and man by an artificial relationship devoid of sincerity. Thus a society is created where everyone gets isolated in his selfishness and protects himself behind the wall of falsehood.

In his two Discourses, Rousseau proclaimed man's original goodness and perfectibility. But at the same time he tried to give his response to the question why, in spite of this natural propensity for goodness corruption had engulfed him and why the society was more likely to degrade him than to contribute to his moral uplift and perfection. In his first essay *Discours sur les sciences* Rousseau argued that the corruption had its root in the genesis and the development of sciences and arts. Our soul got more and more sullied by corruption with the advancement of sciences and arts towards perfection. The virtue disappeared as the horizon of mind became intellectually brighter. Rousseau in his first essay expressed his ideological disapproval of the role played by the poets, scientists and artists in the society. In Rousseau's view, with the impressive advancement of art, architecture, literature and painting and with the progressive refinement of the society, a parallel moral, political and ethical progress did not take place. Consequentially the rift widened between nature and society. Social, moral values and human condition in general degenerated.

Rousseau called into question the effects of the Renaissance and the values which were taken for granted as marks of any civilization. He built up arguments to prove the inauthenticity of the so-called refined society although he spoke at the beginning very highly about the refinements of Greek and Roman taste. Rousseau pointed out the paradox that in the existing conditions that the more men are together the more they are alienated. The real social tie was missing because of the lack of reciprocal penetration. Artificially-created social façade erected by arts and sciences renders the reciprocal communication impossible. The social polish which, in Rousseau's view, derives from intellectual refinement, is an obstacle to true social integration. The cultural refinement end its parallel moral degeneration is not particular to any age but this

phenomenon is discernable throughout the history as regular movement like the tides of the ocean. This led Rousseau to assert the incompatibility between the knowledge and virtue.

In the context of the eighteenth century optimism and belief in progress this doctrine appears to be particularly subversive. With his denunciation of civilization, his view that material progress took a heavy toll on human goodness and morality Rousseau, compared to his contemporary thinkers, took a diametrically opposite position. Whereas his contemporary philosophers advocate a cautious reform of the social aberrations, Rousseau's indictment of the society is more radical and puritanical. By standing aside a society in which he failed to integrate himself, Rousseau remained an "outsider" throughout his life.

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