

# PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

## **Session 11**

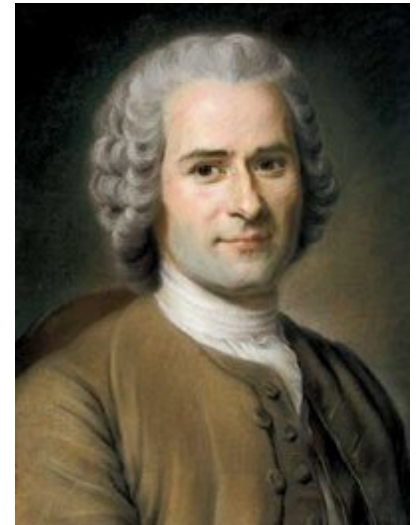
October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015



Human Nature: Rousseau

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712-1778): French, known for contributions to social, political, and moral philosophy

- Dissatisfied with aristocratic society
- Inspired French revolutionaries to overthrow the monarchy and establish a republic



In *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau answers two questions:

- *How does inequality arise among men?*
- *Is inequality a consequence of human nature, or of civilization?*

**He poses a counterargument to Hobbes,**

- providing a very different description of human nature as a premise,
  - i.e., he makes the **descriptive** claim that
    - *human beings are kind and fair-minded by nature.*
- ....and consequently deriving a very different conclusion about what type of government is most effective.
  - He makes the **normative** claim that
    - *Rule by a leader with absolute power should be avoided at all costs.*

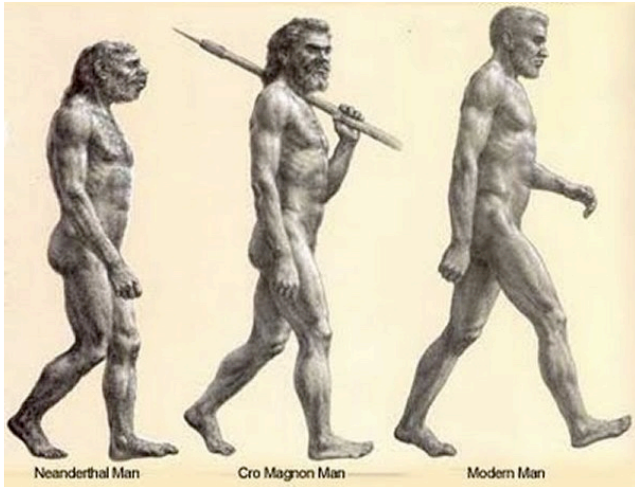
Rousseau notes **how difficult it is to make “sound judgments regarding the *natural state of man*”** – i.e., *the state of nature*, before civilization. (1)

– He says, “On this subject I could form only vague and almost imaginary conjectures.” (1)

- ...because the historical records are incomplete, preventing scientists from making definite conclusions.
- Hence, his claims about early humans are *speculative*, just as Hobbes’ were.



- Rousseau is especially concerned with **disambiguating** (*distinguishing, teasing apart*) traits of *present day* humans from those of *early* humans.



**He repeatedly criticizes Hobbes for confusing:**

- human traits that arose as a *consequence of becoming civilized*
  - with traits that *belong to our nature*.
- **Rousseau agrees that humans are selfish, competitive, obsessed with glory, etc.**
- *but thinks these aren't part of our nature, but rather developed through life in society.*



## Rousseau imagines that early humans were:

- “an animal less strong than some, less agile than others,
- but all in all, the *most advantageously organized* of all.” (1)

## He conjectures that an early human must have been *happy*,

- since “all his needs are satisfied” (1)

Unlike Hobbes, who “maintains that man is naturally intrepid and seeks only to attack and to fight,” Rousseau asserts that:

- “nothing is as timid [i.e., *fearful*] as man in the state of nature,
- and that he is always trembling and ready to take flight at the slightest sound he hears or at the slightest movement he perceives.” (1)

He also believes that **early humans would have no reason to treat one another as enemies,**

- because they did *not* have to compete with one another for resources.

Rousseau thinks we can all get along just fine in the state of nature,  
➤ since we have *natural pity* for other humans.



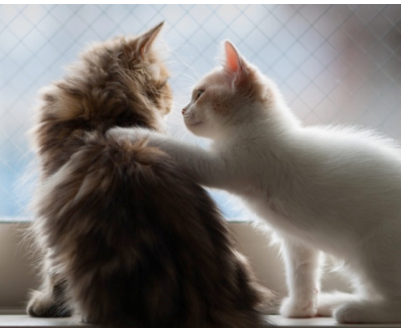
- He says we have an “innate repugnance to seeing...fellow men suffer” (6):
- *we naturally sympathize with other people.*
  - Pity is automatic (unreflective), universal, and so basic that even animals can show it.
  - We even feel pity for fictional characters.

Rousseau says “from this quality alone flow all the ***social virtues***” (6):

- Nature, in giving men tears, bears witness that she gave the human race the softest hearts.
  - ..what are *generosity, mercy, and humanity*, if not pity applied to the weak, to the guilty, or to the human species in general[?]
- *Benevolence and even friendship* are, properly understood, the products of a constant pity fixed on a particular object;
  - for is desiring that someone not suffer anything but desiring that he be happy?” (6)

Rousseau believes that ***pity enabled peace in the state of nature.***

- “It is therefore quite certain that **pity is a natural sentiment,**
- which, by moderating in each individual the activity of the love of oneself, **contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species.**
  - Pity is what carries us without reflection to the aid of those we see suffering.
  - **Pity is what, in the state of nature, takes the place of laws, mores, and virtue,**
    - with the advantage that *no one is tempted to disobey its sweet voice.*”



» Rousseau is asserting that **people *don't* need a common power to ensure that they treat each other justly.**

- Rather, our feelings supply us with an intuitive understanding of right/wrong action, without any need for laws to tell us what is and isn't just.

“...Instead of the **sublime maxim of reasoned justice,**  
*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,*

- pity inspires all men with another **maxim of natural goodness...**:
  - *Do what is good for you with as little harm as possible to others.*” (6-7) <sup>6</sup>

Rousseau thinks **the best time for humanity** was in the early stages of society – what people imagined to be the *Golden Age*.

- This “must have been the happiest and most durable epoch
- ...the least subject to upheavals and the best for man” (11)

- At that point we had:
  - Sympathy for one another
  - Cooperation
  - An equitable division of resources

**But if things were so great for us in the state of nature,**

➤ *why didn't we keep things that way?*

- Rousseau will argue that **two features unique to human nature motivated us to leave the state of nature behind** and “ceas[e] to be savage” (3):

- our **free will**,
- and our **drive for self-perfection**: specifically, our drive to *develop our reason*.



Wtawael, Joachim. (1605)  
*The Golden Age.*

In order to determine what is *unique* to *human* nature,

- Rousseau points out some **differences between humans & animals.**



He compares *animals to machines*,

- they reflexively react to things in the environment,
- and their actions are *inflexible*: they cannot be adjusted to adapt to unfamiliar situations.

» In short, **animal behavior seems to be very strongly determined by instincts & impulses.**

- “an animal cannot deviate from the rule that is prescribed to it, even when it would be advantageous to do so...
  - Thus a pigeon would die of hunger near a bowl filled with choice meats, & so would a cat perched atop a pile of fruit or grain,
  - even though both could nourish themselves quite well with the food they disdain, if they were of a mind to try some.” (2)



**Human beings act according to instinct, too,**

» **but each person also “contributes, as a free agent, to his own operations” (2):**

➤ that is, people (seem to) have **free will.**

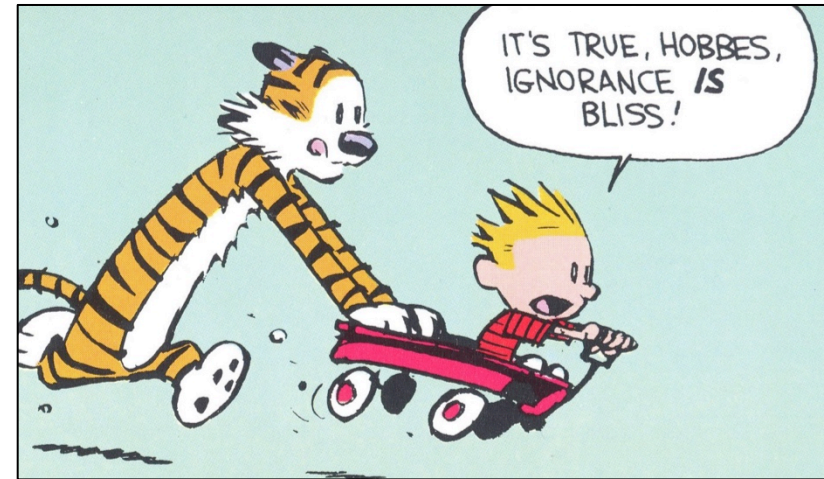


But “...there is **another very specific quality** which distinguishes [humans from animals] and about which there can be no argument:

- the faculty [power] of **self-perfection**,
  - which...resides among us as much in the species as in the individual.” (2)
- Rousseau thinks animals do not seek to improve themselves and their species in the way that humans do.

**In choosing to become civilized, we sacrificed our *happiness* in order to develop our *reason*.**

- “What progress could the human race make, scattered in the woods among the animals?”
- And to what extent could men mutually perfect and enlighten one another,
  - when, with[out] any need for one another, they would hardly encounter one another twice...,
  - without knowing or talking to one another[?]” (3-4)



Early people didn't need family or community for their *survival*,  
– but **to make intellectual progress, they had to bond together.**

» First, each person had to recognize that others had needs and wishes like his/hers.



- "...seeing that [his fellow men] all acted as he would have done under similar circumstances,
- he concluded that their way of thinking and feeling was in complete conformity with his own.
- And this important truth, well established in his mind, made him follow...the best rules of conduct that it was appropriate to observe toward them for his advantage and safety." (9)

- People gradually learned that they could accomplish more by cooperating with each other than by pursuing goals individually.
  - E.g., they could develop commerce, agriculture, education, etc.
- "This is how men could imperceptibly acquire some crude idea of mutual commitments & of the advantages to be had in fulfilling them" (ibid.)

Consequently, **people decided to create *governments***, saying to each other:

- **“Let us unite...in order to protect the weak from oppression, restrain the ambitious, and assure everyone of possessing what belongs to him.**
  - Let us institute rules of justice and peace to which all will be obliged to conform,
  - which will make special exceptions for no one,
  - and which will in some way compensate for the caprices of fortune by subjecting the strong and the weak to mutual obligations.
- **...instead of turning our forces against ourselves, let us gather them into one supreme [government] that governs us according to wise laws,**
  - that protects and defends all the members of the association,
  - repulses common enemies, and maintains us in an eternal concord.’ ” (11-12)

➤ **“They all ran to chain themselves,**  
➤ **in the belief that they secured their liberty,**  
    » for although they had enough sense to realize the advantages of a political establishment,  
    » **they did not have enough experience to foresee its *dangers*.”** (12)

- **Rousseau believes that our question for self-perfection has had many unforeseen consequences.**

He believes that the biggest dangers to humans in the state of nature were all causes of *physical* harm:

- e.g., “natural infirmities” (disability, weakness), wounds, old age

But **in modern society, one also has to contend with *social & economic* harm:**

- contagious diseases
- competition with other people
- consequences of inequality,
  - like poverty & lack of political power, ‘taxation without representation’

- He thinks ***more civilization = more problems.***

- “[W]hen one becomes aware of the fact that [men in the state of nature knew] almost no illnesses...
- one is strongly inclined to believe that someone could easily write the history of human maladies by following the history of civil societies.” (1)



Rousseau firmly believes that **we were all equal in the state of nature**,  
➤ and that ***inequality only arose as a consequence of civilization.***

– “...if one compares[:]



- the prodigious diversity of educations and lifestyles in the different orders of the **civil state**
- with the simplicity and uniformity of **animal & savage life**, where all nourish themselves from the same foods live in the same manner, and do exactly the same things,

➤ it will be understood *how much less the difference between one man & another must be in the state of nature than in that of society,*

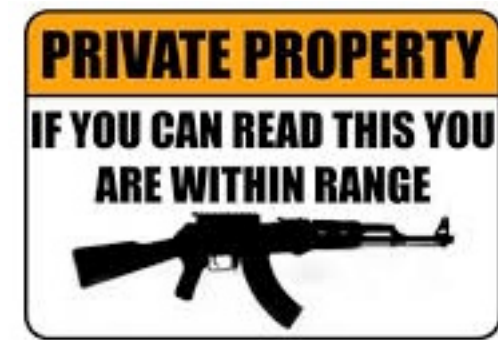


➤ and how much **natural inequality [of luck] must increase in the human species through inequality occasioned by social institutions,**” (8)

- ...especially *private property, modern industry, and slavery.*

Rousseau thinks that **private property** was especially **pivotal in producing inequality & interpersonal conflict**.

- “The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say ‘this is mine’ and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.
  - **What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared,**
  - had someone pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men:
    - *‘Do not listen to this impostor.*
    - *You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and the earth to no one!’* “ (8)
- “...according to the axiom of the wise Locke,
  - ***where there is no property, there is no injury.***” (10)

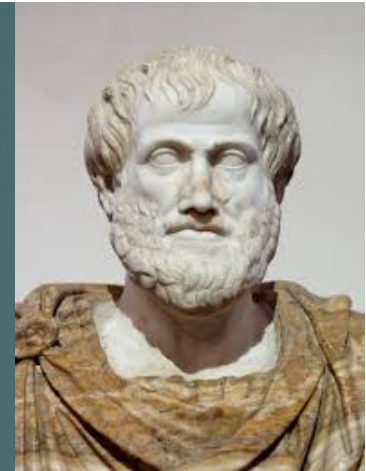


Rousseau also argues that **no one could be subordinated by anyone else until we all became *dependent* upon each other** in civil society,

- instead of self-sufficient like we were in the state of nature.
  - “...it is impossible to enslave a man without having first put him in the position of being incapable of doing without another.”
    - In other words, **there is no such thing as ‘natural slavery’**, as Aristotle believed:

For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule...

**Aristotle, Politics**



- Rather, human beings could have *only* been motivated to enslave others once private property & political power made them greedy for even *more* property & power.

Rousseau says **“the origin of society and laws” did not secure justice in civilization like it was supposed to, but rather:**

- ... gave new fetters [limitations] to the weak and new forces to the rich,
  - irretrievably destroyed natural liberty,
  - established forever the law of property and of inequality,
  - changed adroit usurpation into an irrevocable right,
  - and for the profit of a few ambitious men henceforth subjected the entire human race to labor, servitude and misery.” (12)
- “Societies, multiplying or spreading rapidly, soon covered the entire surface of the earth...
    - With civil right thus having become the common rule of citizens,
    - the law of nature no longer was operative” (ibid.)
- In other words, **civilization has:**
- **drawn us away from our kind, fair-minded nature,**
  - and **created unequal social & economic conditions** that we must now use political effort to correct.





Since *civilization has changed us significantly, and for the worse,*

- “...we must take care not to confuse savage man with the men we have before our eyes.” (1)

He draws an **analogy** between *animals becoming domesticated & human beings becoming civilized:*

- Wild animals have “a more robust constitution, more vigor, more strength, and more courage” than their domesticated counterparts.
- They “lose half of these advantages in becoming domesticated . . .
- It is the *same for man himself.*
- In becoming habituated to the ways of society and a slave, he becomes weak, fearful, and servile.” (1-2)



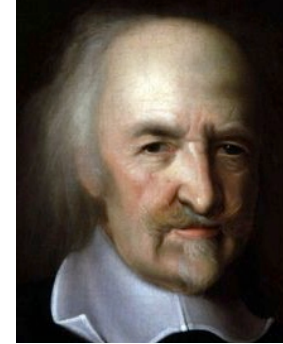
- At the same time that civilization makes us all *physically* weaker,**
- **it also *weakens the influence of pity* on our behavior towards others.**

Rousseau thinks our tendency to identify with & feel for other people “must have been *infinitely closer in the state of nature* than in the state of reasoning [i.e., the age of Enlightenment].” (6)

- **He believes that early humans were moved to care for each other by *sentiment*, not by reason.**
  - They could not, like modern humans, ignore other people’s suffering.
  - They lacked the modern “talent” for tuning out other people’s concerns
  - “...for lack of wisdom and reason he is always seen thoughtlessly giving in to the first sentiment of humanity.”
- **In the modern era, *reason actually turns us against one another.***
  - “[It] is what engenders egocentrism, and reflection strengthens it.
  - ...turns man in upon himself.
  - ...what separates him from all that troubles him and afflicts him.
  - Allows people to think, “at the sight of a suffering man, ‘Perish if you will; I am safe and sound.’ ” (6)



# Rousseau vs. Hobbes



Let's take a look at the *dialectic* between Hobbes & Rousseau:

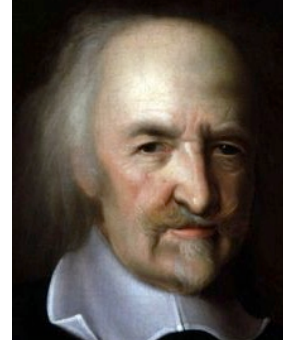
- i.e., a summary of the claims & counter-claims made on each side of this philosophical debate.

➤ **Rousseau thinks Hobbes mistook traits of civilized, modern humans for traits that belong to human nature.**

- I.e., Hobbes “wrongly injected into the savage man's concern for self-preservation the need to satisfy a multitude of passions which are the product of society” (5):
  - Rousseau thinks the traits which Hobbes ascribes to human nature were *not* present during the state of nature,
  - but rather are traits that people have only acquired as a consequence of becoming ‘civilized’.



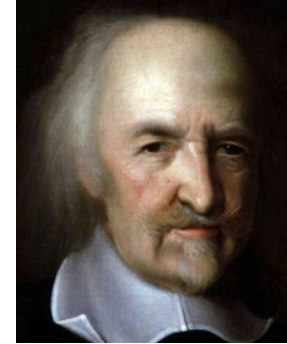
# Rousseau vs. Hobbes



- **Contra Hobbes, Rousseau thinks men are *much* more miserable today than they ever were in the state of nature.**
  - Living by “instinct alone, man had everything he needed in order to live in the state of nature.”
  - Thus, he wouldn’t have anything to complain/despair about, and no reason to fight with others for resources:
    - “In fact, it is impossible to imagine why, in that primitive state, one man would have a greater need for another man than a monkey or a wolf has for another of its respective species” (5)
  
- **Similarly, Rousseau thinks we shouldn’t jump to the conclusion that early humans were selfish & bloodthirsty.**
  - “Above all, *let us not conclude with Hobbes* that because man has no idea of goodness he is naturally evil;
  - that he is vicious because he does not know virtue” (5)
    - Rather, people understand right and wrong, thanks to ‘natural pity’.



# Rousseau vs. Hobbes



- **Rousseau thinks Hobbes' story about the origin of society,**
  - according to which people “threw themselves unconditionally and for all time into the arms of an absolute master”,
  - **...is less reasonable than his own view,**
    - where subjection to the rule of powerful monarchs comes about as an unplanned consequence of other human developments. (Rousseau 12)
  
- **On Hobbes' view, people effectively choose to *enslave themselves*:**
  - “the first means of providing for the common security dreamed up by proud and unruly men was to rush headlong into slavery” (ibid.)
  - **Rousseau thinks this is contrary to reason.**
    - “...why did they give themselves over to superiors, if not to defend themselves against oppression...?”
    - ...would it not have been contrary to good sense to begin by surrendering into the hands of a leader the only things for whose preservation they needed his help?” (12)

Rousseau asserts that:

- “It is therefore incontestable,
- and it is a *fundamental maxim of all political right*,
- that **people have given themselves leaders in order to defend their liberty and not to enslave themselves.**” (12)



- He insists that reason will *always* prevent us from submitting ourselves to the absolute power of a sovereign ruler.
- Subjecting ourselves to a monarch with unlimited power is too risky for us to choose it deliberately and rationally.
- **Absolute power is thus “illegitimate by its nature”:**
  - it *cannot* be justified as a good political strategy.
    - » After all, even the (corrupt) French monarchy has the sense to recognize that its rulers should be subject to laws just like ordinary citizens (top of p. 13).
  - **summary video:** [bit.ly/1Qq1xrV](http://bit.ly/1Qq1xrV)