

*The Power and the Empowerment of Man: A Study of Human Nature in J.J. Rousseau's Political Thought*

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**Abstract**

J.J. Rousseau is known for his ardent critique of the Enlightenment. Following the First Discourse, in which he gives an analysis of how society had become corrupted by man's own doing, i.e. art and science, Rousseau offers a genealogy of human society in the Second Discourse.<sup>1</sup> According to Rousseau, man in the age of reason and progress seems to have lost the goodness endowed to him by nature, thereby turned into a creature full of vices and degenerated morals. Contrasting with such a grim view of modern man, this paper will argue that in Rousseau's thought there is an underlying idea of human power. By reexamining the nature of man in Rousseau's writings, it will be shown that, unlike any other creatures, man is equipped with a unique set of natural capabilities which enable man to create, to overcome, and most importantly to corrupt. With the power of reason and perfectibilité, man proceeded from an isolated self to a social being, and shaping the society as he goes. The paper will dissect the nature and the significance of these capabilities to man's existence both in a natural and socio-political context.

Keywords: J.J. Rousseau, human nature, power, perfectibility

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<sup>1</sup> Rousseau, J., & Gourevitch, V. (1997). *The discourses and other political writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This First Discourse and the Second Discourse will hereafter be cited in the text as *FD* and *SD*, respectively.

## Introduction

It would not be an overstatement to say that Jean-Jacques Rousseau is immortal. His thoughts, critiques, and ideas have lived through modernity. More importantly, modernity itself can also be said to have been, in many ways, shaped by Rousseau's thoughts. It is Rousseau's intellectual power to which Kant and Marx, to say the least, owe debt. His influence behind social changes, including the French Revolution—one of the world's most significant revolutions is obvious. His ardent critique of the Enlightenment, including its men and society is one of the first and the sharpest of all. In the age of the humanistic Enlightenment, man had become the central force. Through arts, science and philosophy, human reason was believed to bring equality, peace, and above all, progress to humanity. Against this backdrop, Rousseau urged us to reconsider if the age of progress is indeed beneficent. He asked that we re-examine ourselves, our being in the world, and ultimately our nature. One of the most influential and unique ideas that Rousseau has provided in this regard is the idea of natural man.

Rousseau gives an extraordinarily detailed account on natural man and the state of nature in *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755) or as known as *The Second Discourse*. Contrasting with the image of refined men of the Enlightenment, the idea of man as should be in nature, according to Rousseau, is primitive in every aspects. Rousseau stripped men off modern man-made institutions, as well as the human faculty that was reigning supreme at that time—reason. He presents us with life of savage man that is asocial, independent, without virtue, but at the same time, also a life of immediacy, natural sentiments, and goodness. The important idea here lies in the contrast and the transition between stages of the history of humanity, in which man is an active agent. Starting from an innocent savage life, man was able to have come to the current condition which Rousseau saw as ill and degenerated. The underlying idea of human power is crucial. By reexamining the nature of man in Rousseau's writings, it will be shown that unlike any other creatures, man is equipped with a unique set of natural capabilities which enable man to create, to overcome, and most importantly to corrupt.

Second literature on Rousseau is extremely vast. In Melzer's (1990) words, critical literature has deployed "every kind of interpretive technique", and tried viewing Rousseau's thought "from every imaginable angle" (p.xiii). This is also true regarding Rousseau's view on Human nature. However, the majority of works are on the state of nature and the role it plays as well as its relation to modern state and the more preferable state described in the social contract. This paper, on the other hand, will focus on the role of man, the nature and capabilities, or power which are essentially unique to man. It will be argued that although these natural capabilities seem to have lead men to an unfavourable way of living, still they can enable man to realise his potential and possibly can live well under political institutions.

## **Human Nature: Human in Nature**

The study of human nature has always been of utmost importance in Western tradition of thought, especially in political philosophy. McShea(1987) once remarks, "Human nature theory makes political philosophy possible" (p.677). This is probably true because an understanding of human nature seems to lead to a certain model of how human should live together, i.e. political models. Different understandings thereof often lead to various political models. Rousseau's complex idea of human nature serves as one of the best examples as it leads to a unique political system, which has been subjected to several interpretations, distinct to those of other philosophers who hold different views on human nature.

According to Rousseau, the knowledge of man is the most useful but seems to be the least advanced (SD, p. 124). We have progressed along the course of history. Nevertheless such progress also means becoming step by step more removed from our primitive state. This results in human gaining more and more knowledge concerning external subjects, but less and less about man. Also, the first kind of knowledge makes the latter even more unattainable. Therefore, Rousseau chooses introspection to human nature as 'the only effective means available' (SD, p. 128). The method of using thought experiment is especially helpful here because it allows us to examine capabilities that human possesses in themselves per se, i.e. removed from society or external factors as well as simulations. Only the study of human nature, i.e. the study of original man can answer questions about social and moral life, or in other words, questions of political nature. Rousseau elaborates extensively on human nature in the Second Discourse and Emile, or Education (1762). The first is mainly an account on the natural man in the state of nature; the latter is on how to educate a person to be able to retain his natural goodness in a civil society.

Let us begin with Rousseau's account on the state of nature as depicted in Part I of the Second Discourse which, according to Simpson(2006), is "the most simple, abstract, and conjectural condition of human life"(p.17). Unlike, Hobbes or Locke, other two major theorists who also purported the idea of the natural state, Rousseau does not depict the state of nature only as a state without common political authority. For Rousseau, such state is already civilised since men living therein seem to be already familiar with social and political construct that can only be a product of human and history, not nature. In Rousseau's words, "none of them has reached it.[the state of nature]"(SD, p.132).

Not only is Rousseau's state of nature pre-political, it is also supposed to be the utmost primitive state, in other words, the state in which any artificial faculties, both internal and external, have yet to be developed. This means the absence of social relations, language, awareness of other men, or even reason. Savage men lives in an animal-like fashion, solitary, isolated, and self-sufficient. Relationships in the state of nature is immediate. Rousseau perceives the first and simplest operations of human soul to be according to two principles: self-preservation, and compassion. It could be said that the first represents the immediacy to man himself and [his]

nature, and the second the immediacy among natural sentient beings (SD, p.127). Self-preservation is generally considered fundamental, although different thinkers might have different opinions regarding the extent and the consequence of self-preservation. In Hobbes, for example, self-preservation coupled with vain glory and greed could drive men to “war of all against all”. In contrast, in Rousseau, man lives timidly and peacefully in the state of nature. In solitude, he defends himself against dangers, innocently, with his primitive means. With ideas undeveloped, he also has no fear for death. According to Rousseau, man in such primitive state is good because he is in harmony with nature. Also due to the same reason, it is impossible for him to corrupt himself or others. In Rousseau’s view, natural man cannot act with ill intention; he has only natural inclination, which is in essence amoral, thus good.

Rousseau’s concept of nature can seem post-Darwinian at first for it seems disinterested and mechanistic. Moreover, Rousseau rejects Aristotelian notion of man being social as well as political by nature. However, Rousseau’s concept of nature could be seen as strikingly classical. Nature, according to Rousseau, is well-ordered and operates in harmony. Thus, it is somewhat teleological in the sense that it operates ‘as is supposed to do in nature.’ It follows that natural order means good, and what deviates from the order is evil. This study of the state of nature leads to a radical critique of civil society. The problem of civilisation is that it leads men away from nature, which only results in disorders and degeneration of society and its men. At the end of the preface to the Second Discourse, Rousseau described that his goal of investigating human society using introspective method is to learn what is wrong with human institutions and correct them so that “disorders” are to be forestalled. To simplify, the work of man should be to try to learn about nature in order to restore the natural order in civil society (SD, p. 128).

## **Human Power**

One big problem for Rousseau is to define a connection between natural man and civil man. Rousseau needs to prove that the two could be of the same nature despite their great differences. In order to connect civil man to natural man, Rousseau uses the hypothetical method to remove man-made faculties from civil man. We can, following Rousseau, easily conjecture a natural man as a civil man without the affiliation or influence from any institutions, with his reason numbed and his passions simplified. It is more difficult to picture a simple savage man having a potential to create or, more likely, to corrupt. In the previous section, we have already scrutinised man’s being in nature. This section will look into the distinctive features of natural man—the power that resides naturally in every human being. While Rousseau’s natural man differs from civil man in every aspect; is described to be living in animal-like condition, it is worth noticing that Rousseau is careful to emphasise several faculties that are distinctively human, in other words, are not shared by any other species of animals.)

In the Second Discourse, Rousseau describes several features of human nature. Present in the utmost primitive state of human are: self-love (*amour de soi*), free will, and perfectibility (*perfectibilité*).

Self-love has been mentioned in the earlier section. It is a natural sentiment which relates closely to self-preservation. This feature, although applies generally to all animals, but in human, it can be developed and combined with other faculties. When combined with other human faculties, namely reason and compassion, self-love can result in humanity and virtue. (SD, p.218)

The second important feature is free will. Human freedom in the state of nature according to Rousseau's depiction seems to be two-fold. Firstly, it refer to self-sufficiency and independence. Natural man satisfies his own needs. He acts according to his own instinct and simple judgement, not depending on any other's opinion. He himself does not have an opinion regarding others. Secondly, freedom is discussed as metaphysical feature of man that set him apart from other animals. While Rousseau explains man to be in the most primitive state, almost beast-like, he always gives reminders that man is naturally more capable that other animals. Every animals, including man, operates in a way that can be explained by the laws of mechanics. They sense and form ideas, and operate by instinct. However, Rousseau's natural man is not so passive. In his words, Man "contributes" to his operations; he is capable of choosing, as a free agent. Equally important here is the 'recognition' of free will. Not only can man choose one thing over another, or choose to "acquiesce or to resist", he also recognises his freedom of doing so. According to Rousseau, it is mainly in the consciousness of this freedom that shows spiritual quality of man. This recognition of freedom, although still natural, has lifted man over mere mechanistic force of nature. (SD, p.141) Rousseau give examples of animals starving to their deaths even when surrounded by food that would have saved their lives; man will certainly survive in this circumstance. With the power of will and the recognition thereof, man possesses the capacity to deliberate on courses and choose, which indicates the potentiality of human being that is far vaster than other animals.

The third feature is the concept of perfectibility, or "the faculty of perfecting oneself" (SD, p.141). It does not refer literally to perfection, or even a strife for perfection, but mainly signifies human capability to change, to adapt and to overcome when there is a need. In Rousseau's system, man and animals all live in nature and react to natural circumstances. Perfectibility makes human distinct from animals in that human actively choose the course to react to nature in order to gain for himself a more preferable result. This also imply the element of free will. Human beings are capable of learning and willing to learn. They learn to use tools, to improve the way of living. It is according to human nature that man reacting to his surroundings in a productive way. They change and are changed by what they learned, which contributes successively to further changes in human history, causing them to move further away from the animal condition.

Perfectibility is crucial because not only does it distinguish man from other animals, it also the faculty on which other human faculties, such as reason, language, use of tools, depend. With perfectibility and the aid of circumstances, man develops new faculties, skills and implements which “release powers and open up possibilities.” At this point, it can be said that Rousseau perhaps sees human power as powerful as men of letters do. In fact, the term perfectibility had been used before Rousseau, and carried a connotation of the period, i.e. of progress. What is unique in Rousseau is that while he acknowledges the concept of perfectibility as a creative side of human nature, he also stresses heavily on how unnatural, and corrupted it causes humanity to become. Rousseau refers to perfectibility as a “distinctive and almost unlimited faculty” which promptly is also “the source of all man's misery”(SD, p.141). In a successive manner over the centuries, perfectibility causes man to become enlightened, to err, to develop both vices and virtues, and eventually alienates him from nature (SD, p.141). However, this also proves that Rousseau recognises the power, or the potentiality of man along with the mechanism which realises such potential.

There is one argument regarding perfectibility that is relevant to the issue of human nature, thus should be specially considered in this occasion. It has been put forward that perfectibility is not natural in men. Plattner (1979) argues that, even though, perfectibility is man's natural faculty, it can remain inoperative in the state of nature. According to Plattner, that a faculty has to be triggered by external factors indicates that it is artificial. The faculties fall into this kind are, for examples, reason, language or social virtues. The argument accepts that perfectibility can be developed, and that its development can bring about other kinds of development.

However, the argument denies that perfectibility can be understood as a faculty inherent in man's nature. Perfectibility, according to Plattner, “does not perform a function that is intended by nature” (p. 48). Plattner seems to argue that because perfectibility leads man away from nature, which is not the way (good) nature operates, therefore it is artificial. Its development is one of mechanical causation. (Plattner, 1979, p. 50) One problem with this interpretation is that it can explain only that civilised men and human progress is not intended by nature. In Plattner's words, “man can indeed be characterised by perfectibility since he alone among species has progressed beyond his animal beginnings. But for that progress man is not beholden to nature” (p. 50). It is right to say that progress certainly is, by Rousseau's definition, unnatural, but it should also be stated here that perfectibility itself does not equate progress.

Perfectibility might not be teleologically intended to remove man from their innocent state, but it exists as a part of human nature, with a function, which is usually instinctively fulfilled when triggered. Plattner claims that perfectibility must be triggered by components of civil society. It is worth mentioning that Rousseau gives considerable attention to external force that could affect man, namely natural environment, changes, and danger. All these, not limited to artificial circumstances, can all trigger perfectibility in men. It should also be mentioned that perfectibility, in essence, cannot be counted as one of the artificial faculties that man can only

acquire by prolonged progress. That other human faculties as well as human progress itself would not be possible without perfectibility indicates its prime and fundamental status.

The treatments of perfectibility in Rousseau studies varies extensively, however most of them fall in the moral aspect. Einspahr (2010) has made a simple yet quite clear and convincing summary regarding interpretations of the concept. According to Einspahr, there are two alternatives: one is to see perfectibility as the cause of all man's suffering in contrast with the good nature; another is to see perfectibility as an endowment from nature, and man is to be responsible for the consequence. Some scholars, who probably belong to the latter camp, do not give much attention to perfectibility, seeing it as a latent human faculty (Simpson, 2006, p.12). This paper tries to draw attention to perfectibility as a natural human faculty, but a very crucial and powerful one. It is a distinct feature of human nature that is responsible for changes, with can be seen as progress or regression. As can be seen from the discussion that, in Rousseau, perfectibility receives considerable treatment. Operating closely with free will, perfectibility is treated as one of the most fundamental feature of man in the most fundamental state,

### **Human Power in Socio-Political Context**

In the Discourse on Science and Arts or the First Discourse, Rousseau makes a case against the progress of the Enlightenment, arguing that the development of science and art corrupts morality. In part II of the Second Discourse, Rousseau gives a genealogy of civil society, or a detailed account of how humanity has come to the state described in the First Discourse. According to Rousseau's conjecture, humanity has removed itself from the bosom of nature. Human reason, along with several other faculty, has been developed and perfected. Their individual skills and talents started to be deployed; values were given to them. Communities have been formed. Private property and agriculture has been introduced. Man becomes aware of his own being and of others. As a result, Human actions becomes dependent on others, both for material and abstract reasons. Revolutions happens, and social contracts have been put to use. Nevertheless, according to Rousseau, these are only means to preserve the status quo, keeping artificial power in place. Rousseau's view on civilised men is grim.

Man in a civil society, especially men of the Enlightenment, are trained to be rational, calm, and disinterested. It was thought that reason would be man's guide to equality, good moral, reasonable political structure and well-ordered society. (Dunn, 2002, p.6) However, Rousseau's examination of the civil society shows that the result turns out to be otherwise. In the Second Discourse we can see the mechanism of change, through which human needs to be satisfied, while in the first discourse tell us that man's development exceeds much further than what he actually needs. Moreover, the new artifices necessitate further needs, and the consequence of them is by no mean preferable. The relations of different institutions and needs can be seen here: "Need raised up Thrones", Rousseau says, "The Science and Arts have made them strong" (FD, p.6) While civilised men are 'safe' under control of the government and the laws, Science,

Letters, and Arts confined them. In this vein, civil society deprives man of his original freedom; there exists also institutional violence from the powerful to oppress the weak.

This is the point where Rousseau's idea of the state of nature and human nature has proved to be theoretically useful. Several scholars share the same view. Dunn (2002) maintains that the state of nature furnishes Rousseau with theoretical "evidence" for contrasting the current demeaning condition with the ideal, utmost favourable state. The latter becomes a measurement for the first. Moreover, it can also be infer to that the hypothetical nature of the idea very much relieves Rousseau from having to be practical. At the same time, it also saves him the critique of advocating a utopia. Masters (1968) suggests that the emphasis on conjectural history in the Second Discourse was an attempt to avoid religious conflict. Nevertheless, it plays an exceptional role in Rousseau's political and moral system.

With both man and his surroundings simplified, man's potential is powerfully emphasised. According to Rousseau's theory, given that all human misery happens at a later stage, the corruption is a result of causation, not of human nature. Thus, it is possible for Rousseau to propose that if the features that exist in human nature, namely self-love, free will, and perfectibility are to be developed differently, man could probably change his own condition of being. This very clearly suggests a positive view of Rousseau on man, despite his pessimistic outlook on society and humanity.

## **Conclusion**

It has been discussed extensively in this paper about the nature of man according to Rousseau's view. Having followed along the imaginary road back to man's most primitive state, it has been found that these features play a crucial role in Rousseau's understanding and evaluation of man. Man's qualities, namely self-love, free-will, and perfectibility, set man apart from other animals not only because they are present only in man, but also because they are a part of man's potential. These faculties drive man to realise his capabilities, thereby cause change to nature, including external surroundings and the nature within themselves. Here arises the contention that man becomes evil only through society.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that society is also a result of man's own doing. Human, in Rousseau's view, is by no means passive. Even though they primarily were so in the state of nature, they, by nature, were not able to stay latent for long. In this vain, Rousseau repeats over and over again that the modern condition, which he refers to as human miseries, were possible and made at the hand of man. Therefore, beneath the acts of society lies the power of man. The idea of natural goodness coupled with human potential, in retrospect, represents hope for modern lives. Rousseau's alternative depiction of man, or in other words, other version of ourselves, is a radical critique to man, human society and all its most essential institutions and values. It calls upon us to reevaluate our current being, our surrounding, what we should strive for, and revisit our potentiality in order to arrive at a more preferable state of being.

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