Autonomy, Civilization, and Private Property in Rousseau's *Second Discourse*

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The purpose of this paper is to outline three important projects of social philosophy proposed in Rousseau's Second Discourse. The three projects can be enumerated as follows:

1. To think all the way back to man's true natural state, in order to discover the conditions of the possiblity of legitimate conventions regulating social interaction.

2. To interpret, by means of historical reasoning, the state of nature and civilized society as stages of an evolutionary development, whose consequences make necessary such things as rules of social interaction and governments to enforce them.

3. To show how the first historical convention, that of private property, turns out to be illegitimate, and how an alternative way of thinking of this convention is necessary for the successful and legitimate institution of other conventions regulating social interaction.

I shall divide the paper into sections corresponding to these projects. To help in clarifying the problems associated with each project, Rousseau's position will be compared with that of Hobbes in Sections I and II, and with that of Marx in Section III.

I.

According to Rousseau, no social thinker has ever really reached the natural condition of man. Those who have tried have carried over into nature the ideas of avarice, envy, and pride that they could have acquired only by observing men in civilized society. Hobbes' view of the state of nature epitomizes this tendency, and serves well as a reference-point for outlining

Rousseau's own view. If C.B. Macpherson's interpretation is correct, men in Hobbes' state of nature are also already in a fully developed, full-market society, where they have all-too-frequent contact with each other and seek to satisfy socially acquired desires.[1] Hobbes takes men as they currently are in civilized society, simply factors out the element of sovereign power from this society, and calls the hypothetical remainder men in the state of nature. Furthermore, Hobbes not only attributes civilized desires even to men in primitive societies, but thinks that natural men already have fully developed capacities of prudence and imagination.

Rousseau hypothesizes a very different state of nature, one that he thinks is more primary than and underlies that of Hobbes. Since social contact among Rousseau's natural men is infrequent and of short duration, and since their imagination is merely a latent capacity, their instinct of self-preservation is restricted to demanding the satisfaction of basic physical or non-socially acquired desires. Since prudence among them is at best only rudimentary, the full strength of their natural instinct of compassion is also, in relevant situations, an effective moderating force on their instinct of self-preservation. Put another way, in Rousseau's concept of the state of nature, man's physical dimension is regulated by a harmonious balance of the instinct of self-preservation, not yet inflamed by means of the imagination to demand the satisfaction of socially acquired desires, and the instinct of compassion, not yet

dimmed down by the development of prudence. In the state of nature, man is in the same condition as ~~that of~~ any other animal: all are machines with senses for self-revitalization, and each species is preserved by the same balance of the two basic instincts. Prudence and imagination are somewhat more developed in natural men than in other animals, but only in so far as men need these capacities to survive in their natural state; the difference is one of degree rather than kind.

The difference between Rousseau's vision of natural man and that of Hobbes is most critically reflected in their radically divergent conceptions of human freedom, which in turn depend on their conceptions of will. According to Rousseau, since Hobbes begins with the condition of civilized or bourgeois man as the natural condition of man, he completely misses the phenomena of freedom and will in their metaphysical and moral character. For Hobbes, the freedom of bourgeois man is a purely negative concept: one is or ought to be free from the non-legitimate coercion of others. More fundamentally, since bourgeois man is essentially a calculative, self-moving, appetitive machine, Hobbesian will is merely the last desire in a chain of deliberation.[2] Hobbesian will is essentially the slave of desires, and can at best attain a marginally negative freedom "from" them. The Hobbesian moral agent could be said to be completely heteronomous: under the guidance of reason, his will prudently pusues the satisfaction of his desires or prudently avoids the threatened coercion of others in the

state of nature or of "legitimate" authority in civil society.

For Rousseau, man's will need remain the slave of his impulses, and happily so, only in the state of nature. Yielding to the simple instincts of pity and self-preservation is actually the only adequate and possible "virtue" is Rousseau's state of nature. As we shall see in the next section, however, when man is simply driven by socially acquired desires during and after the civilizing process, the few very good consequences are negated by a multitude of bad ones. Rousseau's main point about the human will, though, is that while man feels the same impulses of nature or of "second nature" in the same way as other animals, only he is free to submit or resist in a way that goes beyond Hobbesian negative freedom. For Rousseau, the will of men can rise above their physical nature into a moral-metaphysical dimension. They are potentially capable of performing purely spiritual acts, such as forming laws which they can obey without the prospect of pleasure or the fear of pain as motivation. Men can join together to form "one will," in the sense of agreeing to regulate, in and through rational association, the development and satisfaction of all of their desires.

Hobbes' view of the state of nature is therefore not very fruitful. Hobbesian will, or the will of bourgeois, "natural" man, provides a foundation only for heteronomous social institutions. Hobbesian conventions can be established only on the basis of fear, rather than on truly free concent or "right,"

and remain obligatory on the parties only as long as they can be kept in a state of prudential obedience by a coercive power not itself legally subject to the terms of these conventions.

Rousseau, by contrast, argues that no convention can be rightfully instituted by force, bribery, deception, or conquest, even if those subject to such a convention are declared to be "legally" bound by it "as if" it had been freely and with full information agreed upon. Legitimate conventions can be established only among autonomous parties, who have the capacity freely to consent to measures rationally recognized to be in the general interest. This autonomous foundation of "right" must exist in man's will prior to all contracts, or "right" cannot be instituted at all. But for Rousseau, man's faculty of will, though only a latent power in the state of nature, provides this condition for acting autonomously, or from principles of reason alone. Autonomous association is the "other foundation,"[3] on the basis of which the conventions of civilized societies can regulate the satisfaction of socially acquired desires in a way analogous to the regulation of the natural desires by the two basic instincts in the state of nature.

II.

We have seen that Hobbes' analytical method of factoring out sovereign power from bourgeois or civilized society leaves the condition of fully-developed bourgeois man as the natural

condition of man. From man's "natural" condition so interpreted, Hobbes derives principles of social interaction that seem to Rousseau to be illegitimate. Rousseau's hypothetical-historical method treats bourgeois man as the outcome or result of a process of development of humanity as a natural species. While the purpose of this section is to show how the consequences of this development make social institutions necessary, it would be well to isolate three insights made possible for the first time by Rousseau's approach. Firstly, men must move from their truly natural condition to a bourgeois or civilized condition before conventions and governments become necessary. Secondly, the true and secure foundations of conventions and governments can be derived only from a view of the natural condition of man that is not also the bourgeois condition of man. Thirdly, the bourgeois condition of man, though it has been the most fully civilized condition that man has known thus far, may not be the only possible civilized condition of man.

meaning what?

We have seen that Rousseau assumes a metaphysical-moral dimension of will in natural man as a condition of autonomous action and of legitimate social institutions. He says further that the historical development of the human species from its natural condition to civilized societies makes conventions and social institutions necessary. The main events that are thought to occur in this process need only be traced out briefly. Through the development of the faculty of prudence and early technologies, man generates a concept of pride as well as more

goods than any individual could naturally consume; through frequent and steady social contact his imagination comes fully into play, the comparisons of which generate envy, avarice, lust, jealousy, revenge, and the rest of the host of passions that can be more often socially destructive than useful; by adopting the convention of language he can dissimulate and deceive as well as communicate his new needs and discoveries; he becomes prudent with regard to the suffering of others, and all of the vices follow; and he becomes slavishly dependent on possessions and the respect of others, things that he formerly thought were luxuries.

The development of civilization, in short, produces all of the kinds of social conflict associated with a Hobbesian state of nature. For Rousseau, however, there are two basic elements driving the civilizing process along, and which need some consideration before we turn again, in the next section, to the problem of legitimate regulation of social interaction.

The first main condition of the civilizing process is the perfectibility of man's imagination, which leads to socially vicious as well as virtuous passions, and of reason, which, up to the fully civilized stage of most societies, is used prudentially and above all limits the natural instinct of compassion. His tendency to perfectibility enables man to step out of his natural condition and to assume his full, proper destiny, "for better and for worse," one might say. This destiny ultimately includes the formation of individual

wills capable of autonomous association, but at first only makes possible the acquisition of non-natural needs and passions. As man takes on the "second nature" of socially acquired desires, he finds that their satisfaction or frustration produces pleasures or pains greater in quantity and different in quality than those associated with merely natural desires. Furthermore, the transitional, heteronomous slavery of each man's will to these new desires leads to occasional great goods and frequent great evils for the general society.

The second main condition of the civilizing process is the growth of private goods or possessions. Private possessions, in particular the possession of women, initially facilitate the development of such passions as pride and envy. Whatever the short-term ill consequences of these passions may be, they stimulate further passions, inventiveness, and the production of goods that are all ultimately socially useful. However, there is a point, at the final stage of the civilizing process, at which the role of private possessions becomes on the balance destructive, rather than conducive to further progressive development. Private possessions themselves, rather than fine workmanship, physical grace, or personal style, somehow become the sole badge of honor, the one mark of distinction. The desire for private possessions then increases to the level of that of bourgeois man, so that the risk of possessing anything transferable at all becomes too great to do without some convention to regulate this area of social interaction.

III.

For Rousseau, social conflict increases to the extent that men acquire non-natural desires by the civilizing process, and makes necessary some legitimate conventions for regulating the current and further development and satisfaction of these desires. We have also seen that the function of private possessions - as the sole badges of honor or means of acquiring honorable characteristics - becomes the main spur of social conflict at the final stage of pre-political, bourgeois society. To give a more precise idea of Rousseau's view of the role of private possessions at the time of the first historical contract, I quote a much-ignored passage from the Second Discourse:

> ...wealth, nobility, rank, power, and personal merit being the principal distinctions by which one is measured in society, I would prove that the agreement or conflict of these various forces is the surest indication of a well- or ill-constituted state... of these four types of inequality, as personal qualities are the origin of all the others, wealth is the last to which they are reduced in the end because, being the most immediately useful to well-being and the easiest to communicate, it is easily used to buy all the rest: an observation which can permit a rather exact judgment of the extent to which each people is removed from its primitive institution, and of the distance it has traveled toward the extreme limit of corruption.[4]

In general, the aim of Rousseau's thought is not to return

men to their primitive, uncorrupted condition, but to lay out the conditions on which personal inequalities, physical and moral, could genuinely count for something in a legitimately regulated society.[5] Rousseau's conditions ultimately include legitimate conventions to regulate social conflicts arising from the inequality of authentically personal powers. But personal powers first have to count for something in themselves; and in so far as men during the civilizing process have acquired the wealth to purchase these powers on the market, they count for almost nothing authentic at the highest stage of bourgeois civilization.

Appropriately enough, private property is the subject of the first social contract in civilized society. However, this convention not only does not meet Rousseau's conditions of legitimacy, but simply takes over and "reifies" the given, inappropriate function that private possessions have had from the point at which they began to be sources of social conflict. These inadequacies of the convention of private property need to be considered in turn, before we look at Marx's assumption of the same problematic.

We have seen that a convention is legitimate when the individuals instituting it are capable of autonomy and can remain autonomous for the duration of its terms. This in turn means that the parties to the contract freely and with full information consent to abide by its terms, and have full access to the governing body enforcing them. On the face of it, the

logic of the convention of private property is impeccable. The poor as well as the rich consent to abide by rules guaranteeing to each the enjoyment of his own possessions. However, is the consent of the poor fully informed? Had the poor known that the rich devised the first contract with the intention of legitimizing the existing inequality of wealth, and thereby "...changed a clever usurpation into an irrevocable right,"[6] no universal consent would have been reached. Certain to vote against this convention would have been those whose fine personal qualities gave them no need to purchase any, or those without them who also lacked the cleverness necessary for success at legalized plunder.

The second problem with the convention of private property runs deeper than its formal illegitimacy. We have seen that private possessions serve a progressive function in the first stages of the development of civilized society. Private possessions at first stimulate pride and envy, and bring out socially productive inequality among men. However, by the time that the institution of proerty becomes necessary to secure each man's possession of goods, they no longer have their originally progressive function. Rather than remaining a stimulus to the honorable activity of socially useful, if unequal, individuals, possessions at the final stage of civilized development have themselves become badges of honor and marks of inequality. It is the latter, "reified" function ~~of~~ of possessions that the first contract "legitimizes" as

private property.

Rousseau, whatever one may think about the "petit-bourgeois" tendencies of the rest of his thought, seems already to stand with one foot on the same ground as Marx with the analysis of private property in the Second Discourse. The similarity between the two thinkers on this topic is striking, though not well known. For Marx, there are two ways in which property can serve as a condition of human perfectibility. One way prevents the majority from perfecting their powers, and allows the minority to perfect themselves only in a perverted, distorted manner. This kind of property, the "bourgeois form," is "legitimate" as a means of acquiring personal powers as market commodities. The other way does not give everyone an equal share of the bourgeois form of property (or an "equal opportunity" to perfect oneself in the same distorted manner), but changes the function of bourgeois property itself. The socially produced wealth is put at the disposal of all individuals, in such a way that each is stimulated to develop all of his powers. The first power to be developed in each man, of course, is autonomy, which in turn makes possible the institution of legitimate conventions to regulate the conflicts arising from the newly liberated, truly authentic, social inequalities.

It would surely be outrageous to claim that Marx's profound insights into the nature of private property had all been worked out or even prefigured in Rousseau's thought

on the subject. Rousseau could not have anticipated the precise nature of private property as an essential feature, tending toward its own abolition, of the structure of capitalist economies. But Rousseau and Marx would agree on a general point about both property and autonomy: that some form of autonomous association and a form of property different from the existing bourgeois form are necessary for the successful and legitimate perfection of the powers of each individual in a society. In sum, they would agree that property must first be restricted to a function not only legitimate in form, but conducive to the authentic perfecting of the powers of each person, before conflicts arising from socially destructive passions can be legitimately and effectively regulated.

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Ken - Sorry this isn't typed for me to write lots of comments. I'd like to talk about the paper with you sometime -

Course A

Notes

1. Macpherson, C.B., The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 46-70.

2. Hobbes, Thomas, Leviathan, Chapter 6.

3. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, The First and Second Discourses, edited by Roger D. Masters and translated by Roger D. and Judith R. Masters, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964, p. 96.

4. Ibid., p. 174.

5. I take this to be the meaning of Rousseau's claim, at the inspiring end of the Second Discourse, that the only legitimate foundation of moral inequality is physical inequality. Ibid., pp. 180-181.

6. Ibid., p. 160.