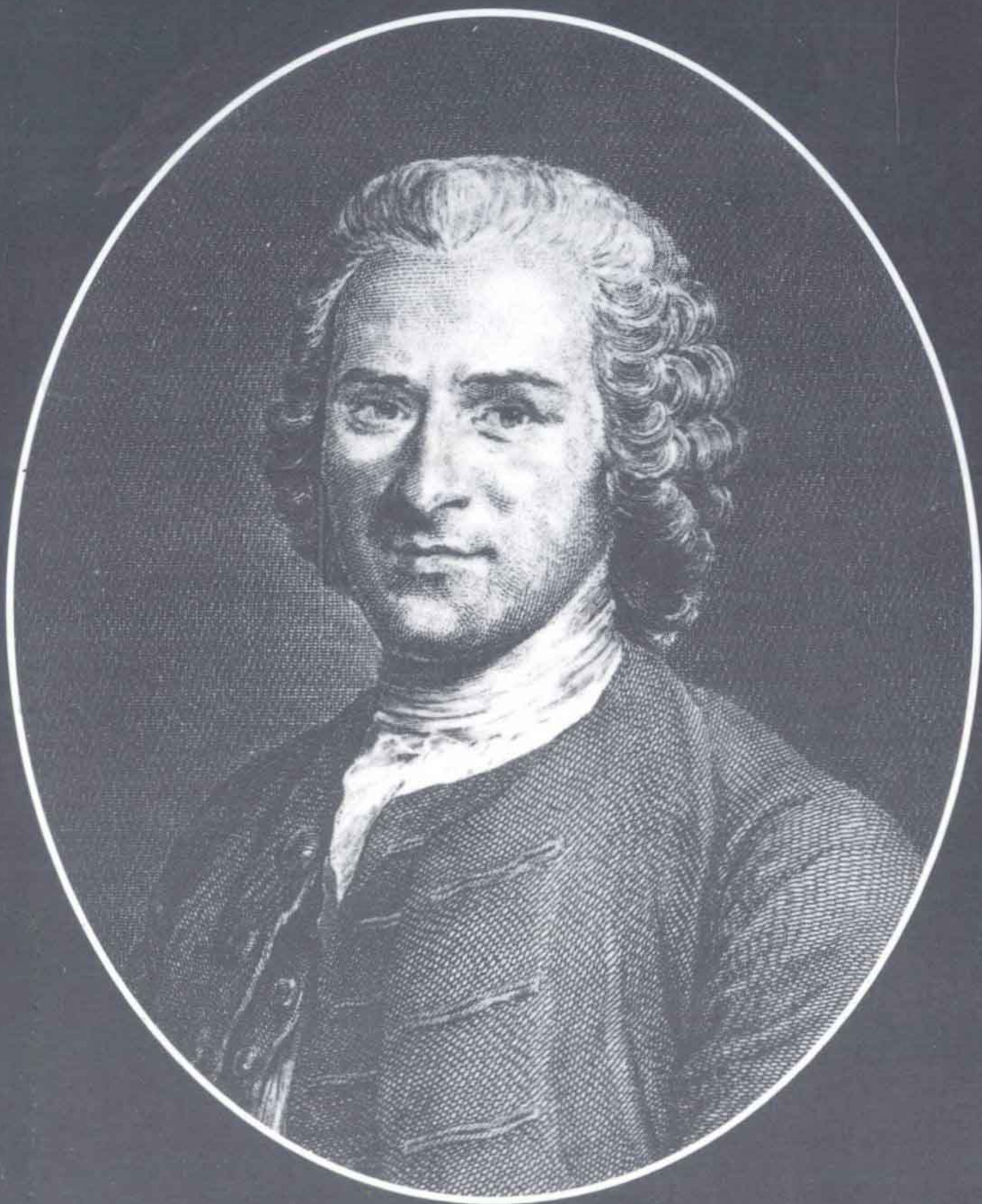


# ROUSSEAU'S POLITICAL WRITINGS

EDITED BY

ALAN RITTER AND JULIA CONAWAY BONDANELLA

TRANSLATED BY JULIA CONAWAY BONDANELLA



A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

---

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

---

ROUSSEAU'S  
POLITICAL WRITINGS

DISCOURSE ON INEQUALITY  
DISCOURSE ON POLITICAL ECONOMY  
ON SOCIAL CONTRACT

---

*Translated by Julia Conaway Bondanella*

NEW TRANSLATIONS  
INTERPRETIVE NOTES  
BACKGROUNDS  
COMMENTARIES

*Edited by* ALAN RITTER

UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT AND TRINITY COLLEGE

*and*

JULIA CONAWAY BONDANELLA

INDIANA UNIVERSITY



---

W • W • NORTON & COMPANY • *New York • London*



---

# Preface

---

Rousseau's political writings, when first encountered, dazzle and perplex. They engagingly denounce established institutions, but caution against projects for change. They paint an enticing picture of a radically new arrangement, only to lament that it will self-destruct. Most notoriously, they mount an inspiring defense of freedom, while calling for the imposition of what sounds like oppressive force. Paradoxes like these seem to set Rousseau on both sides of key issues in political theory, and for centuries have kept him at the center of debate.

This Critical Edition provides first readers with the material they need to enter this debate as informed participants. It contains the three most important of Rousseau's political writings: *Discourse on Inequality* (1755), *Discourse on Political Economy* (1755) and *On Social Contract* (1762). The reader will also find here a sketch of Rousseau's life, selections from his autobiography, and a section, "Reactions to Rousseau," that includes impressions of his work and personality from illustrious contemporaries and early critics.

The notes and commentaries in this edition focus on Rousseau's attitudes toward democracy. In what sense does he espouse democracy? What sort does he prefer? How does he account for the weakness of democratic institutions in political experience up to his time? What, in his view, are the preconditions, prospects, and procedures for establishing a legitimate democratic state? How satisfactory is his project? These questions assume that Rousseau is a kind of democrat, an assumption not shared by most students of his political thought. For the burning question in Rousseau studies, from the start, has not been what kind of democrat he is but whether he is sufficiently committed to liberty and equality to qualify as a democrat at all.<sup>1</sup> Debate on this issue has most recently taken the form of a controversy over whether Rousseau is a totalitarian. But with the thaw in the Cold War and renewed international interest in democracy the time is ripe to focus attention on the democratic aspects of Rousseau's political thought.

While the interpretive focus of this Edition is on Rousseau the democrat, readers will find material for reaching their own conclusions, not only on this issue but on many others about the meaning of Rousseau that they themselves will raise.

A. R.

1. For a convenient collection of arguments from the outset on both sides of this controversy, see Guy H. Dodge, ed., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau:*

*Authoritarian-Libertarian?* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1971).

---

# Translator's Note

---

The translations of *Discourse on Inequality*, *Discourse on Political Economy*, and *On Social Contract* that follow attempt to provide a close approximation of the French text in idiomatic, contemporary English. They should also provide the English reader with some sense of the brilliant clarity of Rousseau's style, the problematic aspects of his terminology, and the ambiguities of his thought.

Nowhere do these translations deviate in any significant way from the original to paraphrase in a personal poetic style what the translator thought Rousseau was trying to say, nor do they revert to archaic syntax or diction to achieve an "Enlightenment" flavor. I have tried throughout to keep in my ear the sound of Rousseau's sometimes breathless enumeration of examples. Unlike most other modern translators of Rousseau, I have avoided chopping up his sentences by inserting periods where he does not intend a full pause, and where such a pause would detract from or distort the power of his meaning. I have attempted always to balance faithfulness to the original with good stylistic practices in English.

In my work on these texts, I isolated a number of key terms and themes and attempted to translate them in a consistent fashion so that the reader can see how these key terms recur and develop within Rousseau's works. Among the key terms which I have attempted to translate in a reasonably consistent manner, those that follow recur throughout the texts in this edition: (1) *Un particulier* refers to the individual members of a community, and is translated as *private individual*, whereas the adjective *particulier* is often opposed to *général*, as in the general will and the particular will. Hence, I have normally rendered the adjective *particulier* as *particular* to contrast it with *privé* (*private*), unless the context makes useful the contrast in English between *private* and *public*. (2) The distinction between *principe* as a rule of law and *maxime* as a rule of politics is maintained by translating the former as *principle* and the latter as *maxim*. (3) The term *convention* is rendered by the term *agreements* in order to avoid the connotation of *conventional* in English when Rousseau is referring to the legitimate agreements that serve as the cornerstone of the community. It should be noted, however, that Rousseau often opposes the terms *naturel* and *conventionnel*, which are translated as *natural* and *conventional* or *civil*, since the distinction reflects the one Rousseau constantly makes between the life in the state of nature and that in civil society. (4) Although any wholly satisfactory equivalents

are difficult to discover in English, the different connotations of the terms *amour-propre* and *amour de soi* are indicated by translating them respectively as *self-love* and *self-esteem*. (5) The term *mœurs* which refers to the manners and morals of a community has been rendered as *moral habits* to avoid the clumsiness of using the two nouns and to avoid confusion with the translation of *coûtures* as *customs*. (6) The word *patrie*, which really has no equivalent in English but "native country," I have chosen to translate as *homeland*. (7) The noun *droite* is translated as either *law* or *right* depending upon the context; the adjective *droite* is usually rendered as *in the right*. (8) *Propriété* is rendered as *property* or *ownership* depending upon the context, since Rousseau's concern falls sometimes on legitimate title and sometimes on management or use.

These new translations of the *Discourse on Inequality*, *Discourse on Political Economy*, and *On Social Contract* are based upon the Pléiade edition of Rousseau's works, specifically upon the *Oeuvres complètes*, volume III (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1975). Rousseau's notes to the 1782 edition of *On Social Contract* have also been included, as well as notes IX, XI, XV, and XIX of those Rousseau appended to the *Discourse on Inequality*. These provide a first reader with crucial additional arguments.

I will be ever indebted to my co-editor for his endlessly patient readings of the translations in their various stages as well as his always dependable guidance in polishing the English prose. To Peter Bondanella go our thanks for his assistance in suggesting the project to us and for his support in the course of completing it. We appreciate Mark Musa's early advice on translating as well as Steve Forman's suggestions in the final stages of preparing this volume.

J. C. B.

---

# Contents

---

Preface	vii
Translator's Note	ix
Rousseau's Political Writings	1
Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men	3
Discourse on Political Economy	58
On Social Contract or Principles of Political Right	84
Backgrounds	175
Jean-Jacques Rousseau: A Biographical Sketch	177
From Rousseau's <i>Confessions</i>	182
REACTIONS TO ROUSSEAU	191
François Marie Arouet de Voltaire	191
David Hume	195
James Boswell and Samuel Johnson	199
Giacomo Casanova	203
Adam Smith	204
Thomas Paine	206
Immanuel Kant	207
Joseph de Maistre	208
John Adams	211
Benjamin Constant	213
Pierre-Joseph Proudhon	215
Leo Tolstoy	218
Commentaries	219
Jean Starobinski • The Political Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau	221
R. A. Leigh • Liberty and Authority in <i>On Social Contract</i>	232

Robert Nisbet • Rousseau & Equality	244
Judith N. Shklar • Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Equality	260
Robert Paul Wolff • Rousseau's Majoritarian Democracy	274
Simone Weil • A Note on the Complete Abolition of Political Parties	281
Benjamin R. Barber • Political Participation and the Creation of Res Publica	292
Bibliography	307
Index	309

---



---

ROUSSEAU'S POLITICAL  
WRITINGS

---



---

# Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men

---

Rousseau published the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* in 1755 as his entry in a contest sponsored by the Academy of Dijon for the best essay on the question: “What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by natural law?” Having won the first prize in a previous contest of the Academy, five years earlier, with his brilliant though discursive *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, he no longer needed to establish his reputation. Rousseau instead used the new contest as an occasion to begin a less immediately engaging but more systematic exposition of his social and political ideas. The resulting essay displeased the Academicians, who did not even read it to the end, but has since been recognized as both original and penetrating in its analysis of what causes social inequality and of how inequality poisons human life.

This *Discourse* is a work of critical diagnosis. It traces out and denounces the consequences of social, political, and economic inequality not only for our relations with others, but also for our psychological well-being. Yet the *Discourse* is no jeremiad. Though Rousseau certainly attacks social inequality, he is more concerned to explain its origin and chart its growth. His analysis of the many-staged process through which inequality develops is mainly a subtle and sometimes allusive ascription of cause. In his assessment of this process Rousseau is ambivalent. The condition of primitive equality may never have existed and cannot be regained; nor was it an unmixed good. As for the inequality and corruption of civilized life, these, truly, are abominations, though the developments that produced them also awakened the admirable human capacities to reason, create, and judge. No remedy for inequality is provided here, but the criticism and explanation which this *Discourse* presents amount to a diagnosis. The *Discourse* thus identifies the nature of the ailment for which *On Social Contract* seeks a cure.

## Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men

“Non in depravatis, sed in his quae bene secundum naturam se habent, considerandum est quid sit naturale.”

Aristotle, *Politics*, I. 5. 1254a<sup>1</sup>

1. Aristotle, *Politics*, I. 5. 1254a. “We do not seek what is natural in depraved beings, but among those

who comport themselves in conformity with nature.”

*Preface*<sup>2</sup>

The most useful and least advanced of all the branches of human knowledge seems to me to be that of man, and I dare say that only the inscription<sup>3</sup> on the temple at Delphi contained a precept of greater importance and difficulty than all the great tomes of the moralists. Thus, I consider the subject of this discourse to be one of the most interesting that philosophy can propose, and, unhappily for us, one of the thorniest that philosophers can try to resolve, for how can the source of inequality among men be known, unless we begin by knowing men themselves? And how will man succeed in seeing himself as nature created him, through all the changes that the passing of time and events must have produced in his original constitution, and in separating what he owes to his own essence from what circumstances and his advances have added to or changed in his original state? Like the statue of Glaucus, which time, sea, and storms had so disfigured that it resembled less a god than a wild beast, the human soul, altered in the midst of society by a thousand constantly recurring causes, by the acquisition of a mass of knowledge and a multitude of errors, by the changes that came about in the constitution of the body, and by the continual impact of the passions, has, so to speak, changed in appearance to the point of being nearly unrecognizable; and instead of a being which always acts according to certain and invariable principles, instead of that celestial and majestic simplicity which its author imprinted on it, one no longer finds anything but the grotesque contrast between passion which thinks itself reasonable and understanding in a state of delirium.

What is even more cruel is that, since all the advances made by the human species constantly move it away from its primitive state, the more we accumulate new knowledge, the more we deprive ourselves of the means of acquiring the most important of all, and, in a sense, it is by virtue of studying man that we have become totally unfit to know him.

It is easy to see that it is in these successive changes of the human constitution that we must seek the earliest origins of the differences that distinguish men, who, by common consent, are naturally as equal among themselves as were the animals of each species before various physical causes had introduced in some of them the varieties that we now observe. In fact, it is inconceivable that these first changes, by whatever means they came about, should have, all at once and in the same manner, altered all the individuals of the species, but whereas some were improved or made worse, and acquired various qualities, good or bad, which were not inherent in their nature, others remained for a longer time in their

2. We have omitted the first prefatory section of the *Discourse on Inequality*, the *Dedication to the Republic of Geneva*, in which Rousseau depicts his native city as a homeland of freedom. As a description, the *Dedication* is very inaccurate, since eighteenth-century Geneva was an oligarchy, not the

virtuous democracy Rousseau portrays. But, if read as a vision of what Geneva might become, should it follow his principles, the *Dedication* gives substance to Rousseau's conception of a legitimate state.

3. "Know thyself."

original state; such was the first source of inequality among men, and it is thus easier to give some general indications of its origins than to determine its true causes with any precision.

Let my readers not imagine, then, that I dare flatter myself with having seen what appears to me so difficult to see. I have hazarded a few guesses, less with the hope of resolving the question than with the intention of clarifying it and reducing it to its true proportions. Others will easily be able to go farther along this route, without it being easy for anyone to reach the end. For it is no small matter to distinguish what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man, and to have a clear understanding of a state which no longer exists, which has, perhaps, never existed, and about which it is necessary to have accurate notions in order to judge our own present state properly. Anyone who undertakes to determine exactly which precautions to take in order to make solid observations on this subject would need even more philosophy than is generally thought, and a good solution to the following problem would not seem to me unworthy of the Aristotles and Plinys of our century: "What experiments would be necessary to gain some knowledge of natural man? And what are the means of carrying out these experiments in the midst of society?" Far from undertaking to resolve this problem, I believe that I have meditated sufficiently on the subject to dare respond in advance that the greatest philosophers will not be too good to direct these experiments, nor the most powerful sovereigns to carry them out; it is scarcely reasonable to expect such cooperation, especially with the perseverance or, rather, the confluence of understanding and good will necessary on every side for success.

This research, which is so difficult to carry out and which no one has really thought about until now, is, nonetheless, the only means left to us of overcoming a mass of difficulties that conceal from us the knowledge of the real foundations of human society. It is this ignorance about the nature of man which throws so much uncertainty and obscurity on the true definition of natural right, for the idea of right, says Mr. Burlamaqui, and still more that of natural right, are obviously ideas relating to the nature of man. Therefore, he continues, the principles of this science must be deduced from this very nature of man, his constitution and his condition.<sup>4</sup>

It is not without a sense of surprise or shock that we observe how little agreement prevails among the various authors who have treated this important subject. Among the most serious writers we scarcely find two who are of the same opinion on this point. Without speaking of the ancient philosophers who seem to have made it their business to contradict each other on the most fundamental principles, the Roman jurists indifferently subject man and all the other animals to the same natural law, because they take this term to mean the law that nature imposes on

4. Jean Jacques Burlamaqui, *Principes du droit naturel*, 1747, I. i. 2.

itself, rather than the law that nature prescribes; or rather, because of the particular sense in which those jurists understand the term "law," which they seem to have taken only as the expression of the general relations established by nature among all living beings for their common preservation. The moderns acknowledge as a law only a rule prescribed to a moral being, that is, a being intelligent, free, and prudent in his relations with others, and, consequently, they limit the jurisdiction of natural law to the only animal endowed with reason, that is, man. But with each one defining this law in his own fashion, they all establish it on such abstract principles that even among us there are very few people in a position to understand these principles, let alone able to discover them on their own, so that all the definitions of these learned men, who otherwise perpetually contradict each other, agree on this alone, that it is impossible to understand the law of nature and, consequently, to obey it, without being skilled in reasoning and a profound metaphysician, which only means that for the establishment of society, men must have made use of the kind of understanding that is developed only with great difficulty and by very few people within society itself.

With so little knowledge of nature and such dissension over the meaning of the word *law*, it would be very difficult to come to any agreement on a good definition of natural law. Thus all those definitions found in books, aside from a lack of uniformity, also have the fault of being drawn from several areas of knowledge that men do not naturally possess, and from advantages they cannot even imagine until after having left the state of nature. Writers begin by searching for rules which men would appropriately agree upon among themselves for the common welfare, and then they give the name of natural law to this collection of rules, without any other proof than the good which would presumably result from their universal application. Surely that is a very convenient way to compose definitions and to explain the nature of things by virtually arbitrary conventions.

But insofar as we are ignorant of natural man, it will be useless for us to try to determine the law that he received or the one which is best suited to his constitution. All that we can very clearly see with regard to this law is that for it to be a law, the will of anyone who is bound by it must be capable of submitting to it knowingly, and that, furthermore, for it to be natural, it must speak directly by the voice of nature.

Leaving aside, therefore, all the scientific books which teach us only to see men as they have made themselves, and pondering the first and simplest operations of the human soul, I believe I perceive in it two principles that are prior to reason, of which one makes us ardently interested in our well-being and our self-preservation, and the other inspires in us a natural repugnance to seeing any sentient being, and principally our fellow men, perish or suffer. It appears to me that the ability of our mind to coordinate and combine these two principles, without the need for introducing that of sociability here, gives rise to all the rules of nat-

ural right, rules that reason is then forced to reestablish on other foundations, when, by its successive developments, it has succeeded in smothering nature.

In this way, we are not obliged to make man a philosopher before making him a man; his duties towards others are not dictated to him solely by the belated lessons of wisdom, and as long as he does not resist the inner impulse of compassion, he will never do harm to another man, or even to any other sentient being, except in those legitimate cases where, since his own preservation is involved, he is obliged to give preference to himself. By this means, the old debate concerning the applicability to animals of natural law can be put to an end, for it is clear that, bereft of understanding and liberty, they cannot recognize this law, but since they share to some extent in our nature by virtue of the sensibility with which they are endowed, it will be thought that they must also participate in natural right, and that man is bound by some kind of duty towards them. It seems, in fact, that if I am obliged to do no harm to my fellow man, it is less because he is a rational being than because he is a sensitive being, since sensitivity is a quality which is common to man and beast and should at least give the beast the right not to be needlessly mistreated by the man.

This same study of original man, his true needs, and the fundamental principles of his duties, is also the only effective means of overcoming the host of difficulties that present themselves concerning the origin of moral inequality, the true foundations of the body politic, the reciprocal rights of its members, and a thousand other similar questions that are as important as they are obscure.

When human society is considered with a serene and dispassionate eye, it seems, at first, to display only the violence of powerful men and the oppression of the weak; the mind rebels against the harshness of the former; it is inclined to lament the blindness of the latter; and as nothing is less stable among men than those external relations, more often produced by chance than by wisdom, which are called either weakness or power, or wealth or poverty, human institutions appear at first glance to be founded on shifting sands; it is only by examining them closely, only after having cleared away the dust and sand surrounding the edifice, that we perceive the unshakable base on which it has been raised, and that we learn to respect its foundations. Now, without a serious study of man, his natural faculties, and their successive developments, we shall never succeed in making these distinctions, and in distinguishing, in the present constitution of things, what the divine will has done from what human art has claimed to do. The political and moral inquiries inspired by the important question I am examining are therefore useful in every way, and the hypothetical history of governments is, in every respect, an instructive lesson for man. In considering what would have become of us, left to ourselves, we should learn to bless Him whose benevolent hand, by correcting our institutions and giving them an unshakable

foundation, has prevented the disorders that would otherwise result from them, and has brought forth our happiness from means that seemed apt to redouble our misery.

Quem te Deus esse  
Jussit, et humana qua parte locatus es in re,  
Disce.<sup>5</sup>

### *Notice on the Notes*

I have added a few notes to this work, according to my lazy habit of working in fits and starts. Sometimes these notes stray so far from the subject that it is not appropriate to read them with the text. I have therefore relegated them to the end of the *Discourse*, in which I have tried my best to follow the straightest path. Those who have the courage to begin again will be able to amuse themselves a second time by beating the bushes and attempting to run through the notes; there will be little harm done if others do not read them at all.<sup>6</sup>

### *Question*

Proposed by the Academy of Dijon.

What is the origin of inequality among  
men, and is it authorized  
by natural law.

## Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men

It is man that I am to discuss, and the issue I am examining tells me that I am going to speak to men, for such questions are not proposed by those who are afraid of honoring the truth. I shall, therefore, defend the cause of humanity with confidence before the wise men who invite me to do so, and I shall not be displeased with myself if I prove worthy of my subject and my judges.

I conceive of two kinds of inequality among the human species; one I call natural or physical, because it is established by nature and consists of differences in age, health, physical strength, and qualities of mind or soul; the other may be called moral or political inequality, because it depends upon a kind of agreement and is established or at least author-

5. Persius, *Satires*, III. 73–71. “Learn what divinity has ordered you to be, and what your place is in human affairs.”

6. Only Rousseau’s most significant notes—IX, XI,

XV, and XIX—have been included. Also found among the footnotes are the additions to the *Discourse* made by Rousseau in the 1782 edition.

ized by the consent of men. The latter consists of the different privileges that some enjoy to the detriment of others, such as being more wealthy, more honored, more powerful than they, or even making themselves obeyed by them.

It is impossible to ask what the source of natural inequality is, because the answer is given in the simple definition of the word; it is even more impossible to find out if there is some essential connection between the two kinds of inequality, for that would amount to asking, in other words, if those who command are necessarily more worthy than those who obey, and if strength of body or mind, wisdom or virtue, are always found in the same individuals in proportion to power or wealth, a good question to be debated among slaves within hearing distance of their masters, perhaps, but unfitting for rational and free men seeking the truth.

What precisely is, then, the point of this discourse? To indicate in the progression of events the moment at which right replaced violence and nature was subjected to law; to explain the chain of miracles by which the strong could resolve to serve the weak and the people could purchase the semblance of peace at the price of true felicity.

Philosophers who have examined the foundations of society have all felt the need to go back to the state of nature, but none of them has reached it. Some have not hesitated to attribute the notion of the just and unjust to man in that state, without bothering to demonstrate that he had to have this notion or even that it was useful to him; others have spoken of the natural right of each to preserve what belongs to him, without explaining what they meant by the word *belong*; still others, who begin by granting the strongest authority over the weakest, have immediately gone on to discuss how governments arise, without considering the time which must have elapsed before the meaning of the words authority and government could have existed among men. All of them, in short, constantly speaking of need, greed, oppression, desires, and pride, have transferred to the state of nature ideas they have acquired in society; they speak of savage man and they depict civil man. It has not even entered the minds of most of our philosophers to doubt that the state of nature ever existed, whereas it is evident from reading the Holy Scriptures that the first man, having received his understanding and commandments directly from God, was not himself in that state, and that in giving Moses' writings the credence that every Christian philosopher owes them, it must be denied that men were ever in the pure state of nature, even before the deluge, unless they fell back into it through some extraordinary circumstance: a paradox which is highly embarrassing to defend and quite impossible to prove.

Let us begin, therefore, by setting all the facts aside, for they have no bearing on the question.<sup>7</sup> The research which can be conducted on this

7. What are the facts that Rousseau here vows to ignore? Some have thought they are the facts about man's early history as depicted in the Bible; others believe the facts referred to concern the effects of social living on personality. Rousseau may mean

to ignore both sorts of facts, since neither sort sheds light on the character of people who live in social isolation. Notice later in this *Discourse* that he uses facts about extant primitive peoples to back up some of his conjectures.