ROUSSEAU ON EQUALITY

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Rousseau has the reputation of being a radical egalitarian. I shall suggest that a more careful reading of his work shows him to have been hardly more egalitarian than Plato. He was undoubtedly disturbed by existing inequalities, especially as he observed them in France. He had an original and interesting theory about how inequality among men came into being; he also set out what he considered to be the connections between equality and freedom. As a champion of a certain idea of freedom, he wrote in favor of specific sorts of equality; even as Plato, as the champion of a certain idea of justice, wrote in favor of putting every man in his place. The great difference is that Plato believed that men were never equal, whereas Rousseau believed they had once been equal but no longer were.

To the proposition that all men are born equal he could be said to subscribe only in the sense that “all men were originally equal”. Rousseau argued that equality prevailed in the state of nature; but he also said it would be wrong to expect, even to desire such equality in civil society. In the final footnote to his Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (hereinafter called the Second Discourse) he wrote (in 1753): “Distributive justice would still be opposed to that rigorous equality of the state of nature, even if it were practicable in civil society.”

Commentators eager to claim Rousseau as an egalitarian, or proto-Marx, ignore this footnote; as for the opinions expressed in the Dedication to the Second Discourse, opinions no less at variance with egalitarian ideology, they tend to be dismissed as empty hyperbole, designed to ingratiate the philosopher with the authorities of Geneva at a time when he wanted to recover his rights as a citizen and burgess. But this is a myth. If Rousseau had planned to do this he would have followed protocol, and dedicated the Second Discourse to the magistrates of Geneva (as he was advised to do, and not stubbornly addressed it to the citizens.

The key sentence in Rousseau’s Dedication is this:

1 J. J. Rousseau, Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964), III, p. 222 (Hereinafter this work is referred to as O.C.; the translations are my own)
Having had the good fortune to be born among you, how could I reflect on the equality which nature established among men and the inequality which they have instituted among themselves, without thinking of the profound wisdom with which the one and the other, happily combined in this Republic, contribute in the manner closest to natural law and most favorable to society, to the maintenance of public order and the well-being of individuals. ³

Rousseau, then, goes on to congratulate the Genevans on being “that people which, among all others, seems to me to possess the greatest advantages of society and to have guarded most successfully against its abuses.”⁴

It is clear from these words that Rousseau connects equality with nature, and inequality with culture; and his claim is that a well-ordered society must have the right balance of the two. In one of his poems, Épitre à Monsieur Parisot, Rousseau wrote

"It would not be good in society
If there were less inequality between the ranks"⁵

Admittedly this verse was written in 1742, more than ten years before the Second Discourse, but Rousseau never changed his mind greatly. He did not wish to see “less inequality between the ranks,” but he had his own ideas as to who should be in the different ranks.

One thing he did change his mind about was the character of the people in the higher ranks in Geneva. What he wrote in The Social Contract of 1762 confirms the ideal conception of Geneva that he sets forth in the Second Discourse of 1753; his attack on the regime of Geneva in his Letters written from the Mountains of 1764, is not an attack on the structures of the Genevan civil society but an indictment of the magistrates for abusing the constitution and their office. Rousseau had been brought up to believe that the republic of Geneva was a model state, a city where the people were sovereign, the law was supreme, and the magistrates governed as the people’s trustees. He had also been brought up to know that Geneva was a city divided into several social classes: patricians, clergy, academics, professionals, artisans and more or less plebeian aliens; and of this arrangement Rousseau had no criticisms to offer, but was only careful to insist that his own family was one whose “manners distinguished it from the people.”⁶ He had indeed been born in an upper-class house belonging to his mother in high Geneva, but unfortu-

³ O.C. III, p. 111.
⁴ ibid.
⁵ O.C. II, p. 1136.
⁶ O.C. I, p. 61.
nately reduced in his childhood to life in low Geneva with his widowed father, a mere artisan; and he had run away from Geneva altogether at the age of sixteen rather than endure the humiliations of a _déclassé_ apprentice in an engraver’s workshop.

In the main text of his _Second Discourse_, Rousseau concentrates on the first part of the question posed by the Academy of Dijon: “What are the origins of inequality among men?” rather than the further part “and is it authorized by Natural Law?” He has some arresting ideas on the subject. Readers are apt to be carried away by the sensational first paragraph of the second section (and Rousseau more than once demonstrated his genius as a polemical writer by opening a chapter with a shock): “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying ‘This is mine’, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.” This eloquent utterance has prompted some readers to assume that Rousseau dates inequality between men from the institution of property, which divided men into rich and poor. But this is a mistake. Rousseau rejects the idea that men moved straight from the state of nature into civil society. He depicts an intermediate stage of “nascent society,” and that is where he says inequality originates.

Inequality, according to Rousseau, dates from the time when men first started to associate as neighbors. This is a period when the true state of nature — in which each individual lives a wholly solitary life, with no home, no mate, no regular commerce with any other person, ignorant, innocent and idle — terminates; it ends as men start to build huts or furnish caves, for as soon as men begin to live in settled dwellings, they remain with the same female for long enough to acquire an awareness of fatherhood and to found families. As other men construct their dwellings nearby, they are introduced to life as neighbors; and thus, from sheer proximity, society is born. Inequality is born at the same time. For as soon as people see each other regularly, they appraise each other.

People become accustomed to judging different objects and to making comparisons; unconsciously they acquire ideas of merit and beauty, which in turn produce feelings of preference. . . . Each began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself; and public esteem came to be prized. He who sang or danced the best; he who was the most handsome, the strongest,

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7 _O.C._ III, p. 164. Rousseau goes on to say: “How many crimes, wars, murders; how much misery and horror the human race would have been spared if someone had pulled up the stakes and filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: ‘Beware of listening to this imposter. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to everyone and that the earth itself belongs to no one.’” This is naturally a text much used by writers who see Rousseau as a proto-Marx.
the most adroit or the most eloquent became the most highly regarded, and this was the first step towards inequality . . .

At this point in his argument, Rousseau picks up the thread of his *First Discourse*: culture corrupts – moving further from the state of nature and further into society and inequality, man moves closer to vice. Nascent society was a sort of golden age; the loneliness of the state of nature had ended, and the evils of the civil state were as yet unknown. But corruption developed swiftly; frequent association between the sexes bred love, and love bred jealousy and conflict. Original self-love, *amour de soi*, which is natural and good, turned in *amour-propre*, which is cultivated and injurious.

“As soon as man learned to value one another and the idea of consideration was formed in their minds, everyone claimed a right to it, and it was no longer possible to refuse consideration to anyone with impunity.”

Such then is Rousseau’s account of the origins of inequality: there are natural differences of looks and talents in individuals; when some characteristics are esteemed more than others, these differences become inequalities; and when the idea of consideration enters men’s heads, bringing with it the demand for some esteem and the desire for more, inequality becomes part of the human condition itself.

Repeatedly, Rousseau stresses the fatal role of *amour-propre* in the life of social man; the role is not unlike that of pride in Hobbesian theory which makes men rebel against the equality of their natural condition. For both philosophers, the psychological or moral causes of human conflict are much the same; the main difference is that Hobbes regards the competitiveness of man as a product of nature, whereas Rousseau suggests that it is a product of society. Indeed, Rousseau sees this same *amour-propre* at work impelling men to their greatest achievements as well as their greatest misery.

If this were the place to go into details, I would explain how this universal desire for reputation, for honors, and for preference, in devouring us all, exercises and compares talents and powers, how it excites and multiplies passions, how it makes men competitors, rivals or rather enemies; how it everyday causes frustrations, successes and catastrophes of every kind by making so many contenders run the same race; I would show how the burning desire to have oneself talked about, the yearning for distinction, which nearly always keeps us outside ourselves, is responsible for what is best and worst among men, responsible for our virtues and our vices; for our sciences and our mistakes, for our conquerors and our philosophers; responsible, in short, for a multitude of bad things and a very few good ones.

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8 *ibid.*, p. 169.
9 *ibid.*, p. 170.
10 *ibid.*, pp. 188–189.
To sum up, Rousseau traces the origins of inequality among men to their first experience of life in a family and as neighbors in “nascent society,” and he attributes its growth to passions which tend to increase rather than diminish as society develops. What then, can exist of equality in advanced or civil society? Clearly it can only be partial or fragmentary, but even so, some sort of “natural” equality must be able to exist side-by-side with the “instituted” inequalities of man’s social condition, since Rousseau asserts in the “Dedication to the Second Discourse” that they do so co-exist in the fortunate commonwealth of his birth. And although Rousseau does not directly answer the second question posed by the Academy of Dijon – is the inequality between men authorized by natural law? – he does answer a question he sets himself: what forms of equality are necessary to freedom and what forms of inequality are inimical to it?

Natural man, for Rousseau, is free in three senses of the word “freedom.” First, he has free will. This is a crucial sense for Rousseau. Hobbes and most of the Encyclopédistes were determinists, believing that man was a machine, and if more complicated than any other machine in nature, subject to the same laws of cause and effect. While Rousseau himself invokes the metaphor of the machine in describing living creatures, he insists that the “human machine” differs from the “animal machine” in being autonomous; among beasts, nature alone “operates the machine”; in the case of human beings, the individual contributes to his own operations in the capacity of a free agent: “The animal chooses and rejects by instinct; the man by an act of freedom.”11 This metaphysical freedom, or freedom of the will, is a characteristic of men as such and is possessed by men in all conditions, whether of nature or of society.

The second form of freedom which men enjoyed in the state of nature was necessarily lost on entering society. This is anarchic freedom, and it is absolute since the state of nature, by definition, is a condition where there is no government and no positive law.

The third form of freedom is one which, according to Rousseau, man need not necessarily lose on entering society: this is personal freedom, in the sense of having no master, no employer, no immediate superior. Before the introduction of the division of labor, all men possess this form of freedom. Afterwards some are independent and some are not. Afterwards, some men have this personal freedom and some do not.

In the Second Discourse, Rousseau suggests that there is not much left of freedom for most people – apart from their metaphysical freedom – once they have entered civil society. In The Social Contract (1762) he confirms this: “Man was born free, but he is everywhere in chains.”12 (Another sensational

11 ibid., p. 141.
12 ibid., p. 351.
opening sentence.) But the same book suggests that some people need not be in chains. Where a commonwealth is based on a genuine social contract (as distinct from the fraudulent social contract depicted in the Second Discourse), then men can receive in exchange for the anarchic freedom of the state of nature another and better kind of freedom, republican freedom. This fourth sense of freedom is what he is saying (in the “Dedication” to the Second Discourse) that the citizens of Geneva enjoy. In the Social Contract, Rousseau claims that this republican freedom is a wholly advantageous exchange for the anarchic freedom of the state of nature: one finds himself “transformed from a limited and stupid animal into an intelligent being and a man.”

Losing “his natural liberty and his unqualified right to lay hands on all that tempts him,” he gains “civil liberty and the rightful ownership of what belongs to him.” To this is added the moral liberty which makes a man his own master, “for subjection to appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one has prescribed for oneself is liberty.”

Republican freedom is, thus composed of civil liberty and moral liberty. The republic, as Rousseau explains, is not only a device for reconciling freedom and law, it is a structure which introduces and depends for its success upon the existence of this completely new and essentially positive form of freedom. The problem of equality is important to him as an aspect of freedom in this sense. If he is a champion of equality, it is simply as a champion of those types of equality which can be seen to be necessary to, or conducive to, republican freedom. Let us consider what these are.

First, Rousseau’s republican freedom entails equality of legislative rights; no man or group of men must be able to impose his will or laws on others, and this rules out both monarchical and aristocratic forms of government. Men must be equal as citizens. However, Rousseau makes it clear in the “Dedication” that by demanding an equal vote in legislating he is not demanding an equal voice for every citizen in government: “I would have fled from a republic, as necessarily ill governed, where the people ... foolishly kept in their own hands the administration of civil affairs and the execution of their laws.” Rousseau’s republic has to have chiefs (chefs): “I would have chosen a republic where the individuals, content with sanctioning the laws and making decisions in assemblies on proposals from the chiefs on the most important public business ... elected year by year the most capable and most upright of their fellow citizens to administer justice and govern the state.”

The point that Rousseau dwells on is that superiority of public office shall correspond to superiority of capability and rectitude.

13 ibid., p. 364.
14 ibid.
15 ibid., p. 365.
16 ibid., p. 114.
17 ibid.
In the *Social Contract*, a book I believe to have been inspired by Rousseau's vision of Geneva as a model city-state, an "elective aristocracy" is said to be "the best form of government";\(^{18}\) which is presumably to be understood as the same thing as the "democratic government, wisely tempered"\(^ {19}\) ascribed to Geneva in the *Second Discourse*. Here again we see that Rousseau does not want to banish inequality, but to have a rationally justifiable inequality. Instead of an aristocracy based on blood (characteristic of feudal regimes, and "the worst form of government"\(^ {20}\)), he looks for an aristocracy based on democratic choice coupled with moral criteria.

Besides this sort of equality of rights, Rousseau's republican freedom requires some measure of equality of condition. In the oration which he envisages addressing to his fellow citizens of Geneva, he says:

> You are neither so rich as to be enervated by effeminacy and lose in vain luxury the taste for true felicity and solid virtue, nor are you so poor as to need from foreign aid more than your own industry can furnish.\(^ {21}\)

This is one of Rousseau's many attacks on luxury. In France and in Italy he had witnessed (and perhaps even enjoyed for a fleeting moment) the lavish joys that ostentatious wealth could acquire for the privileged subjects of those advanced civilisations, but he had come to believe that it made them the effeminate and corrupt accomplices of despotism. In Geneva, there were substantial inequalities of wealth and prestige between the families who lived in the handsome houses in high Geneva and the workers who crowded into the wooden dwellings beside the lake; but the rich were not conspicuously rich; there were no theatres, ballrooms or carriages; and there were restrictions on the wearing of finery and jewelry. The rich families of Geneva invested their money instead of spending it; and Rousseau, in his *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre* explained why he attached such importance to the puritan life style of the richest of his fellow-citizens.

The equality in question here, then, is not equality of property or estates, but relative equality in the leading of a simple and austere *train de vie*. And if excessive wealth that manifests itself in luxury and effeminacy is bad, so too is excessive poverty that breeds ignorance, depravity, and dependence. In Geneva the inequality between rich and poor is judged by Rousseau to be in order. Even the working men are educated. They go to state schools, attend divine services and are drilled in the citizens' militia. They are near enough to the rich in their life style and their general culture as to be able to meet

\(^{18}\) *ibid.*, p. 406.
\(^{19}\) *ibid.*, p. 112.
\(^{21}\) *ibid.*, p. 116.
with their superiors in public assemblies and to participate as members of the same sovereign body.

Thus, the equality of condition required by Rousseau for his republican freedom is not so very different from that prescribed by Aristotle for a well-ordered state. 22

A third form of equality demanded by Rousseau as necessary to republican freedom is equality of civil duties, including universal military service and the payment of equitable taxes. An equal duty on all citizens to bear arms had long been the rule in Geneva. It did not mean that there was social equality between officers and men, only that there was an equal bearing of the burden of defence. In his Letter to M. d'Alembert, Rousseau recalls witnessing as a child the officers and men of his local parish militia eating together and “dancing together round a fountain,” 23 but this was a festivity; officers and men were at ordinary times not equals. Different men were appointed to different ranks.

But if the government is to intervene in the ranking of citizens, what are the criteria to be invoked? Rousseau does not want to see the authorities judging merit. In the final footnote to his Second Discourse, he writes:

The ranking of citizens ought therefore to be regulated, not according to their personal merit, which would leave the magistrates with the means of making an almost arbitrary application of the law, but according to the real services they render to the state, which are susceptible of being estimated more exactly. 24

One form of equality which Rousseau does not suggest is that there should be equality between the sexes. Women were not citizens in Geneva, and he did not suggest that they ought to be. Women should “command” as they did in Sparta; they should “govern our sex,” but only in the family:

“It is for you,” he said to the women of Geneva, “by your kindly and innocent domination and by your subtle influence, to perpetuate love of the laws within the state and concord among citizens . . . to be the chaste guardians of our morals and of all the gentle bonds of peace.” 25 Rousseau had once been dependent on an employer with strongly feminist opinions, Mme. Dupin, 26 and he had no patience with such ideas. He argues at length in Emile — in Book V, which is entitled ‘Sophie, or Woman’ — against “the vanity of the disputes as to the superiority or the equality of the sexes.” 27

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24 O.C. III, p. 223.
25 ibid., p. 120.
the feminist proposal that women should be educated as men are educated, Rousseau replies: “The more women are like men, the less influence they will have over men, and the men will be masters indeed.”28 He continues:

All the faculties common to both sexes are not equally shared between them, but taken as a whole they are fairly divided. Woman is worth more as a woman and less as a man: when she makes a good use of her own rights she has the best of it; when she tries to usurp our rights, she is our inferior. To cultivate the masculine virtues in women and to neglect their own is clearly to do them an injury.29

The arguments Rousseau advances on the subject of equality seem to me coherent and reasonable, despite his occasional extravagant language. If we accept his concept of freedom, we cannot easily dissent from what he says about equality. But of course we do not have to accept that concept. Benjamin Constant criticized it with arguments that I believe to be still valid.30 As an inhabitant of the neighboring pays de Vaud, Constant was familiar with Geneva and that republican ideal which Rousseau proclaimed. He detected a tendency among Genevans to compensate themselves for their exclusion from the Swiss confederation (the majority of the cantons having refused to admit Geneva because of Calvin’s persecution of Catholics), by imagining that their pocket-sized republic was somehow superior and even able to perpetuate in the modern world the values of the city-states of classical antiquity. Constant called Rousseau’s notion of freedom “ancient freedom”, and contrasted it with “modern freedom.” “Ancient freedom” was a form of liberty suited to small face-to-face communities, where it was practicable for every man to participate in person in the legislative business of the state. Geneva was equally tiny,31 and could, therefore, allow itself to entertain political theories suited to its size. But Geneva was something altogether exceptional in eighteenth-century Europe. The typical states of the modern world, whether they were Empires, Kingdoms, republics, principalities, or confederations, were large; the personal participation of everyone in the political assemblies of the nation was inconceivable. The modern world needed a modern concept of freedom such as was to be found in the philosophers of modernity. What Constant called “modern freedom” was substantially a matter of the individual being allowed to do what he chose to do, so long as he did not transgress the law or injure his neighbor. It is freedom as Locke understood it.

28 ibid., p. 327.
29 ibid.
31 In Rousseau’s lifetime the population of Geneva was about 25,000, of whom only 1,500 were adult male citizens. See L. Binz Brève histoire de Genève (Geneva: Chancellerie d’Etat, 1981).
Constant does not have much to say about equality, and living through the French Revolution he doubtless heard the word *égalité* proclaimed too often to take pleasure in thinking about it. But it is reasonable to ask, if Rousseau discerns certain forms of liberty as necessary to his type of freedom, what forms of equality, if any, are necessary to "modern freedom."

Although I am reluctant to join Sir Isaiah Berlin in speaking of "modern freedom" as "negative," it is, nevertheless, liable to make more modest demands in the matter of equality than is Rousseau's "ancient freedom" or "republican freedom." Equality of civil rights, must, I suggest, be as important to modern freedom as to ancient: since those rights – notably "life, liberty and property" as Locke expressed them are part of the concept of modern freedom.

But what about equality of civil duties? Here modern freedom will expect less: and may even be hostile to the claim. In a city-state like Geneva, universal military service may well be part of the role of the citizen-soldier; but in imperial France or Germany, the *levée en masse* becomes an instrument of a militaristic despotism. It is not illogical that the liberal philosophers of the Anglo-Saxon world should regard conscription as a limitation of people's freedom, whereas Rousseau sees it as an expression of their freedom. What "modern freedom" must entail is an equal obligation to respect the law; beyond that each individual's civil duties will vary with his civil station.

Thirdly, there is the question of equality of condition. I have pointed out that Rousseau did not advocate a radical levelling of society, however often interpreters claim he did. But his concept of republican freedom did require some diminution and some careful veiling of social inequalities. Does modern freedom demand as much? I see no reason why it should be in any way affected by differences of wealth, rank, education, and status. Since civil duties vary there is no call for uniformity.

But since modern freedom imposes an equal obligation to obey the law, some equality – even some basic uniformity – of political, social, and moral culture may well be necessary. "If laws are to be observed," wrote Machiavelli, "there is need of good customs." Good customs mean a more or less equal adherence to a code of right and wrong. Where everyone unconstrained follows the precepts of natural law, the state can afford to leave him alone. In this "modern" sense of freedom, men "cannot be forced to be free," as with Rousseau's form of "ancient freedom" they could be; I do not think "modern freedom" is any the worse for that.