Jean Jacques Rousseau

Background:
Like Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau thinks that legitimate government is to be explained by reference to a social contract as shown in his central work, The Social Contract (1762). But his account of the ideal government does not emerge until after he diagnoses, in two earlier essays, fundamental and perhaps tragic errors in the historical development of the social and political institutions of his day. In his first essay, “Discourse on the Arts & Sciences” (1750) Rousseau claims that the development of the arts and sciences as characteristic of civilized living had in fact corrupted humankind’s nature. The arts and sciences Rousseau is criticizing in that work include not just astronomy, geometry, physics, moral philosophy, and other traditional disciplines within academics, but also things having to do with etiquette, eloquence, manners and custom; in short, he is attacking all those things associated with civilization, things which are routinely taken to signify our cultural progress. While not explicitly targeting this early short essay for this guide, there are noteworthy things to register as Rousseau his readers even here in this earliest essay glimpses of ideas and judgments that are developed and built upon in his second discourse, the “Discourse on the Origins of Inequality”, and in The Social Contract.

When Rousseau makes moral evaluative claims, he relies centrally upon the notions of virtue and vice. Yet Rousseau also refers to the notion of liberty as a crucial evaluative concept as well. Part of Rousseau’s critique of the arts and sciences involves the claim that the modern social life of 18th Western Europe encouraged a kind of basic hypocrisy in living—persons feign having virtues but in fact do not have them. Further, humans under the influence of arts and sciences do not recognize being in the grip of vices (vanity, pride, arrogance, and hypocrisy), and this results in a kind of slavery for them, but, he says, it is a slavery they love. The kinds of virtues that Rousseau holds in high regard in this early essay are physical virtues—strength and courage; he seems to disdain those character traits we would identify as intellectual virtues. In general, human reason seems not to be prized by Rousseau, and this sets the early Rousseau quite a bit apart from earlier contract theorists Hobbes & Locke. The best man, in Rousseau’s early view is not a man of letters or study, but rather a man of action. What is important is to BE VIRTUOUS, not necessarily to study virtue; knowing what is virtuous is hardly sufficient for acting virtuously. What is necessary for being virtuous is present in each person’s own heart, Rousseau thinks. Studying virtue is neither necessary nor sufficient (nor efficient) for becoming virtuous.

Another threat to man’s nature brought about by civilized social life is man’s concern with luxury, which seems to fuel the ascendancy of hypocrisy. Finally, Rousseau speculates about what causes the rise of the arts and sciences and the resulting corruption of humankind’s nature. His answer is the segue to the second discourse (“Discourse on the Origins of Inequality Among Men”, 1755). He writes: “Whence arise all those abuses, unless it be from that fatal inequality introduced among men by the distinction of talents and the cheapening of virtue?”

Finally, of interest to us is his suggestion that the state of nature is one of ignorance and, in virtue of that, the state of nature is a blessed thing, at least compared to the civilized life Rousseau comments upon. This fits with his suspicion that the development of reason had somehow gone awry in the actual history of European civilization. Rousseau writes, “Thus it is that luxury, profligacy and slavery have been in all ages, the scourge of the efforts of our pride to emerge from that happy state of ignorance, in which the wisdom of providence had placed us.” The slavery to which Rousseau is referring here is not slavery of one person by another, but rather a different kind of slavery, one associated with the pursuit of luxury.

In all, you will want to make sure you distinguish when examining Rousseau’s work his assessment of the actual historical development of civilization from what he takes to be the ideally preferred form of development, something that emerges only in Rousseau’s mature writing. Despite the fact that in his early discourses Rousseau strongly criticizes social or civilized life and its celebration of human reason as they had actually developed, he is not saying that this particular corrupt path of development was necessary. This is why his ideal view, articulated in his later work The Social Contract includes a substantial role for reason and even, perhaps, the arts and science. It is clear that Rousseau’s ideal view had a profound influence on the development of Immanuel Kant’s moral view (while his critical view surely influenced Karl Marx).
Reading Guide, Second Discourse

**Title:**

1. Look closely at the title of Rousseau’s essay, and the question set by the Academy at Dijon (France). What two distinct questions prompt Rousseau’s essay?

**Dedication:**

In the dedication, Rousseau gives voice to certain ideals he has about political society and attributes them to his native city Geneva (though it is not likely that Geneva actually possessed most of these qualities).

1. What is that Rousseau thinks will make the love of country (a desirable trait for Rousseau) a love of the citizen rather than of the soil?

2. Notice Rousseau’s preference for democratic rule on page 33, but also Rousseau’s theory about how laws are proposed by magistrates on page 35. What is the implication for referenda style elections such as are done in the states of Arizona and California (that is, where propositions voted on by the citizens directly)?

Rousseau lays it on pretty thick, doesn’t he?

**Preface:**

1. Rousseau identifies what he takes to be the most important thing to understand in order to understand the source of inequality among men as knowing human nature. In the first paragraph of the preface, he refers to the statue of Glauce—what is his point in this passage?

2. On pp. 45-6, Rousseau explains his reticence about evaluating the foundations of human society by reference to natural law or natural right. What reasons does Rousseau have for being suspicious of the references to natural law in other writers?

3. What two principles, according to Rousseau, exist in human nature prior to the existence of reason (recall that reason is the source of and mechanism by which we come to know of natural law for theorists like Hobbes and Locke)? What principle of human nature is NOT needed to derive the rules of natural right/law, according to Rousseau?

**Introduction (pp. 49-51) & Part One (pp. 52-83):**

1. What is the distinction between the two kinds of inequality that Rousseau conceives of as existing among humans?

2. How does Rousseau characterize the “subject of the present discourse”?

3. What does Rousseau mean when he remarks that philosophers who attempt to explain the foundations of society by going back to a state of nature never in fact get there?

On p. 51 we see some remarks that led many early readers of Rousseau to interpret him as saying that we who live in civil society ought to give up society to return to the state of nature. Subsequent remarks make it pretty clear that he doesn't think this is even possible, let alone desirable.

4. What are the wants or needs of man as he “must have come from the hand of nature”?
5. How does natural man stack up against animals in state of nature? What is natural man's physical condition? What special advantage does Rousseau attribute to man compared to other animals? Is this plausible?

6. What is Rousseau's observation about sickness and disease? Is this plausible today? (You might consider that Rousseau's impression of medicine comes when medicine typically had not much better than a 50-50 chance of improving a person's condition over getting no treatment at all.)

7. Is Rousseau's analogy (57) between animals domesticated and wild an apt one for natural and social man?

8. When Rousseau transitions from considering natural man's physical condition to his 'metaphysical or moral side', he says that there is only one difference between animals which are entirely mechanistic (a claim with which Hobbes would agree) and humans. What is the difference?

9. What is 'perfectability'? How does it serve to distinguish man from beast? What have been the effects of man's possession of this capacity?

10. How does our capacity for reason (what Rousseau refers to as 'the understanding' come about? What is the understanding of primitive man, given his wants which ground his passions?

11. What are the prerequisites for the invention of agriculture?

12. How does our commonly heard phrase 'necessity is the mother of invention' relate to Rousseau's remarks on language?

13. Are Rousseau's ideas about the family plausible?

14. What puzzle does Rousseau propose regarding the relation between reason and language? What precipitates the growth of a language's vocabulary and flexibility?

15. Is Rousseau's remark about suicide forceful and in his favor?

16. Consider Rousseau's remark comparing the adequacy of instinct for life in the state of nature and the adequacy of reasoning/understanding for life in society. Is this plausible?

17. What is man's MORAL nature in the state of nature?


19. Besides love of self or self-preservation (in French amour de soi, not what Rousseau calls amour-propre) what other facet of human nature does Rousseau identify as present in natural man? What is the significance of this element?

20. What is Rousseau's attitude toward the Golden Rule, "Do to others as you would have them do unto you"?

21. Why do persons in the state of nature possess no conception of justice?

22. Rousseau considers the possibility that love or sex might be the source of faction or strife. What is his analysis of this? Is it plausible? Pay special attention here, since this is the first example of much substance of social institutions being the source of inequality.
23. What is Rousseau's conclusion then about the significance of natural inequalities among persons?

24. What is the significance of possessions and dependence? What is that might reduce a person to become a slave (as he thinks of persons living in civil society)?
Part One's main point is expressed in the final pages of the section: Man is self-sufficient, living a solitary life, needs not to work much, has few long-term concerns, has a natural desire for self-preservation and a natural aversion to seeing others with whom he may identify in pain. Not being dependent upon others and having no need to threaten others, he is happy in his natural liberty. There can be no oppression or slavery, the chief forms of inequality, in the state of nature. Original man has no impetus or incentive to establish it.

**Part Two:**

1. What is the decisive turning point in the transition from the state of nature to civil society? What response ought to have been made to the first assertion of a private (individual) right to property?

2. What is the basis for the first stirrings of pride among persons?

3. How does primitive or original man come to have an appreciation for the benefits of mutual commitments (reciprocity)? Are there any limitations or qualifications on the reliability of performing one's part in these instances?

4. What is the first revolution on the road to civil society?

5. Life in the settled familial setting is the context for the first self-imposed yolk of social life, according to Rousseau? What does Rousseau mean by this?

6. What is the basis of nationhood, in Rousseau's view?

7. When families begin to collect themselves together, there arises the first steps toward inequalities and vice. What is the basis of this progression?

8. The first duties of civility arise out of what?

9. When are humans, as a species or a group, most happy?

10. How does the arrival of agriculture and metallurgy further revolutionize human life?

11. What is Rousseau's basic conception of justice and how does early social man conceive of acquiring property? (How does this compare with Locke's view of property?)

12. How do natural inequalities (i.e., physical inequalities) among original man generate (and perpetuate) inequalities in rank and property?

13. What is the significance of the distinction between appearance and reality? (Cf. Rousseau's answer here to what he says in Part One of the Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, pp. 3-14 of our text.) How does this introduce vice into human character?

14. How do BOTH the rich and the poor react to material inequality? What is life like when the rich and the poor both assert a right to a share of wealth? (How does this compare with Hobbes's view?)

15. Why (and how) do the rich attempt to end the war of all against all?