

1274: St. Thomas Aquinas finishes
the *Summa Theologica*

1513: Machiavelli writes *The Prince*

1689: Locke publishes *Two Treatises of Government*

1789: French Revolution

1650

1700

1750

1800

1850

1900

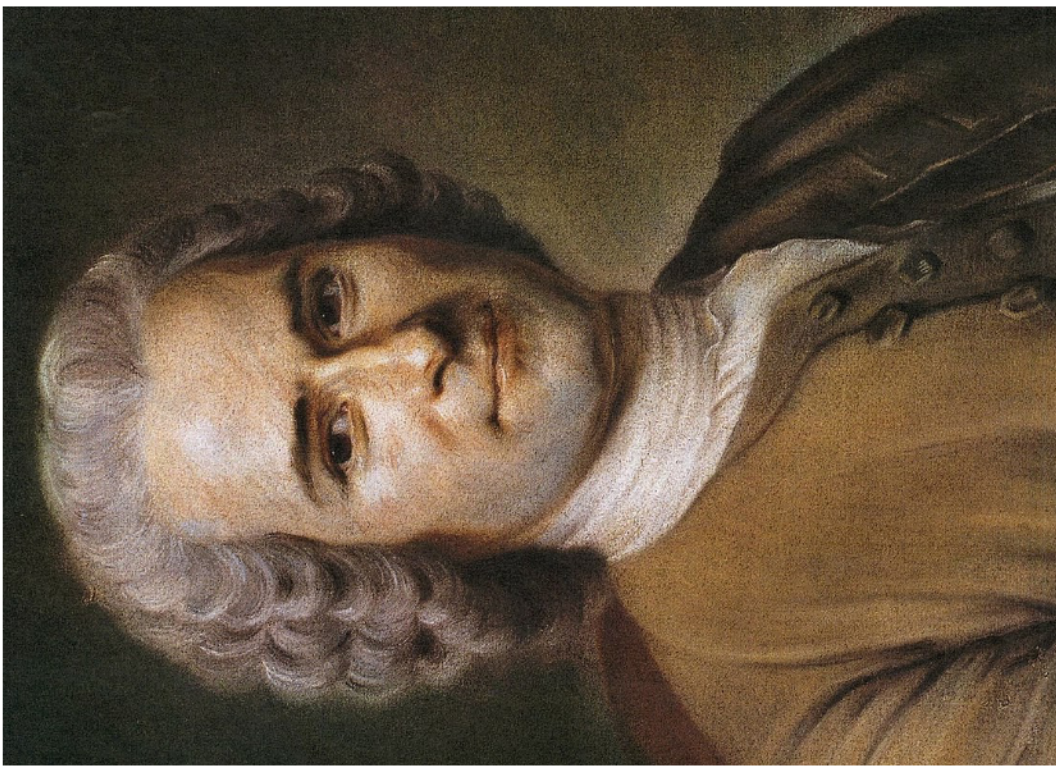
1651: Hobbes publishes *Leviathan*

1762: Rousseau publishes *The Social Contract*

Introduction

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

- French philosopher, his work *The Social Contract* (1762) has an enormous impact on the French Revolution (1789)
 - Robespierre, one of the major figures of the Revolution, would quote the *Social Contract* during his speeches with tears in his eyes
- Rousseau lives during the high tide of the Enlightenment:
 - 17th – 19th centuries: epoch with great advances in the sciences and in philosophy
 - Development of scientific method, and of critiques of religion and absolute monarchy
 - Period of great optimism and belief that knowledge and education will progressively enlighten the masses



- While England was a limited monarchy with a parliament since the English Revolution (1688), France and most countries of Europe were still absolute or quasi-absolute monarchies
- Nevertheless, the European elites of the time were increasingly critical of despotism, religious intolerance, class privileges...
- They believed that the ideas of the Enlightenment were going to bring more rationality to the masses. They wanted more education, less class privileges, more tolerance, and more equality before the law.
 - Only a few radical minority actually wanted to abolish the monarchy
 - It was wise not to oppose the monarchy since these elites all lived under monarchs...!
- Even though most of Europe still lived under monarchs, a wind of optimism in favor of rationality and of criticism of the establishment was growing among the elites

- But Rousseau was different from the other members of the Enlightenment's French elite
- He became famous overnight with an essay (that we now call the "*First Discourse*") where he criticized the ideas of the Enlightenment and where he argued, against these elites, that the ideas of the Enlightenment were actually *bad* for humanity
- He argued that the increasing interest in the arts and sciences typical of the Enlightenment was making everyone more vain and selfish, and that it was diverting everyone away from things that really mattered (e.g., friendship, love for one's country)

- Hmm... Criticism of the arts and sciences as things that make people more vain and selfish? Someone that says that social progress is a bad thing?
- Was Rousseau a monarchist, someone that criticized the Enlightenment and yearned for a return to the Middle Ages?
 - On the contrary: Rousseau agreed that the Enlightenment was an improvement over the Middle Ages, but he thought that these elites were not seeing its negative effects
- As we will see, Rousseau doesn't believe in returning to a previous epoch
- He is critical of the shortcomings of Locke's and Hobbes' political thoughts, but only because he wants to *leap ahead* from liberalism
 - He is looking ahead to a society that will solve the problems that they left unsolved

- A few years after the *First Discourse*, Rousseau writes the *Second Discourse* that you read for today's class
- There, he explains why exactly human beings become more miserable when they exit the state of nature and enter into societies
- In this class, we'll look at:
 - Why he thinks Hobbes and Locke had an inaccurate picture of the state of nature
 - We'll see how his picture of the state of nature illuminates shortcomings of the liberalism that we get from Locke
 - In the next class, we'll look at the solution that he proposes to solve the problems of liberalism and how humans can join a society where they will be truly free and equal

- Rousseau's *Second Discourse* was written for a contest whose main question was: "What Is the Origin of Inequality Among Men, and Is It Authorized by the Natural Law?"
- How would have Hobbes and Locke answered this question?
- Do you think that, for Rousseau, the current social inequalities that exist are legitimate?
 - No. For Rousseau, humans currently live in societies where they are unfree, illegitimately unequal, and where they are miserable and unhappy.

- In the beginning of the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau stands pretty close to Locke and Hobbes (pp. 37-38). He clearly separates:
 - Natural inequality: the natural differences between human beings (e.g. weight, age, strength)
 - Political inequality: the differences that are established by social conventions (e.g. wealth, class, status)
- Rousseau agrees with Locke and Hobbes that there is no connection between these two forms of inequality
 - For Rousseau, Hobbes, and Locke, social inequalities are purely conventional
 - Contrary to what Aristotle said, human beings are not naturally superior to one another. One individual is not naturally more apt to rule.
 - Humans are naturally equal in the state of nature

- Then, in the next paragraph (38: “Precisely what...”), he breaks with

Locke and Hobbes:

- “the people [bought] imaginary repose at the price of real felicity”
 - The day the social contract was signed was the day humans signed up to become miserable
- What does he fault the previous social contract thinkers for not having done? (pp. 38-39)

- Rousseau proceeds to remove a lot of the rational concepts that humans only acquire once they enter societies (“government,” “property”)
- He says humans are slightly better than animals: they’re not as strong or agile, but they can more easily acquire things to eat, drink, and satisfy their needs
- Rousseau’s description of the individual in the state of nature:
- “I see an animal less strong than some, less agile than others, but all in all, the most advantageously organized of all. I see him satisfying his hunger under an oak tree, quenching his thirst at the first stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that supplied his meal; and thus all his needs are satisfied.”
- What’s a striking difference with Locke and Hobbes here?
 - “all his needs are satisfied”

- Physically speaking, humans in the state of nature are creatures whose needs are all satisfied (they eat, drink, and sleep). They are close to animals, but smarter and more resourceful.
- Now let's look at pp. 44-45 to see at how Rousseau describe the individual from a more psychological point of view:
 - Humans have free will. Animals do things automatically, while humans can decide to accept or reject things (e.g. eating some food over another)
 - Humans are capable of *self-perfection*: while animals quickly acquire the characteristics they will acquire for the rest of their lives, humans can perfect themselves (e.g. become stronger or more intelligent)
- Did you notice anything disturbing about that second one? Read p. 45 “But if the difficulties...”
 - He hints at the fact that self-perfection is what lead humans to become miserable
 - Already here he is looking ahead of his narrative and dropping hints that this will be the root of all evils

- In one striking paragraph, Rousseau synthesizes how his view of the individual in the state of nature differ from Locke and Hobbes:
“one can desire or fear things only by virtue of the ideas one can have of them, or from the simple impulse of nature; and savage man, deprived of every sort of enlightenment, feels only the passion of this latter sort. His desires do not go beyond his physical needs. The only goods he knows in the universe are nourishment, a woman and rest; the only evils he fears are pain and hunger. I say pain and not death because an animal will never know what it is to die; and knowledge of death and its terrors is one of the first acquisitions that man has made in withdrawing from the animal condition.” (p. 46)

- Toward the end of the first part of his essay, Rousseau then poses the question: what could have possibly compelled us to leave the state of nature (52, 59)?
- Clearly, it's not because we wanted to trade or because we wanted more stable transactions: all of our needs were easily satisfied in the state of nature. Our needs were basic, minimal, and individuals didn't need one another.
- Maybe it's because of what Hobbes said: is it because humans lived in a state of permanent conflict with one another and needed protection?
- No: humans had no notion of property, fear of death, pride, domination... (p. 55)
Humans saw harm and pain like animals do: it's just sheer pain, there's no symbolic dimension to it. They didn't purposefully aim at attacking one another.

- What compels us to leave the state of nature? Rousseau answers this question in these crucial parts: 60-61, 63-64
- On the one hand, as centuries go by, humans increasingly acquire different characteristics: some humans became stronger than others, others become more agile, others are smaller, taller, etc.
- On the other hand, as humans start to mingle and hang out in the state nature, they start to *compare themselves to one another*

- In the state of nature, humans lived happy and simple lives: they had basic physical needs that could be easily satisfied (e.g., eating, drinking, sleeping)
- In the state of nature, what individuals wanted and what they needed coincided (e.g., if they felt hunger, they would simply eat)
- In society, individuals start to compare themselves to other people. If someone is more famous, everyone else wants more fame too. If someone has more wealth, everyone else wants to achieve that same level of wealth.
- These new desires are *relational*. You pursue more wealth and fame because of the existence of wealthier and more famous individuals.
 - There is *always* someone that is more wealthy or more famous! These desires can never be fulfilled.
- What individuals want and what they need no longer coincides. They pursue desires that are, by definition, impossible to fulfil.

- What are some examples of relational desires? Can you think of contexts, groups, or situations where people strongly pursue these sorts of relational desires?

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 - Social media culture (beauty)
 - Celebrity culture (fame)
 - Pursuit of fame and recognition in professional settings
 - Entrepreneurship culture (reputation)
 - Academia (reputation)
 - Flirt, courtship culture (beauty, dating apps)

“As soon as men had begun mutually to value one another, and the idea of esteem was formed in their minds, each one claimed to have a right to it, and it was no longer possible for anyone to be lacking it with impunity. (...) from this every voluntary wrong became an outrage, because along with the harm that resulted from the injury, the offended party saw in it contempt for his person, which often was more insufferable than the harm itself. Hence each man punished the contempt shown him in a manner proportionate to the esteem in which he held himself; acts of revenge became terrible, and men became bloodthirsty and cruel.”

- Let's look at the effects of those relational desires: pp. 67-68: "Thus we find..."
- Once human beings start to pursue these relational desires, they have to *show* that they are more beautiful, more skillful, more wealthy...
 - There's a gap between what one is and what one seems to be
 - Individuals are no longer true to themselves and become inauthentic
- While individuals were independent in the state of nature, both the rich and the poor now need one another to satisfy those relational desires
- Endless ambition and pursuit of relation needs creates all sorts of vices: jealousy, hypocrisy, rivalry...

- Furthermore, now that individuals have relational needs, they need to introduce property and labor in order to create the tools and products that they need (p. 65)
 - They develop agriculture, mining, new forms of wealth...
- Individuals enter society because the state of nature is no longer enough to satisfy their needs, and because wars and violence have made the state of nature too unstable
- A minority of wealthy individuals eventually convince the poor that society is a way to protect them against hazards and secure their needs
 - A minority of wealthy individuals end up ruling the majority
- The pursuit of relational desires creates a system that sanctions enormous and illegitimate inequalities
- In a way, Rousseau is arguing the opposite of Hobbes: while humans lived in peace in the state of nature, they start to compete and fight one another when they enter society

- What solution does he propose? This is what we will see now with *The Social Contract*.
- For Rousseau, the problem isn't the contract, having private property, or any of that. The problem is Hobbes' and Locke's specific version of the contract and the way they envision property.
 - Individuals are locked in this idea that they should pursue as much wealth and fame as possible
 - They are locked in a cycle where they become increasingly miserable
 - They are locked in institutions that sanction great inequalities
- Rousseau was a great admirer of the Greek city-state. He argued that, in these cities, things like knowledge, wealth, or fame were not pursued for their own sake. They were pursued in such a way it that made the citizens more virtuous and the political community better.