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Rousseau and Humankind's Decadency

For Rousseau, humankind is in a perpetual state of decay—decadency from an earlier, natural, primitive, and *perfect* state. For Rousseau, the natural man, or man in the state of beast, was of an era where humankind was unencumbered by that which is now entirely associated with society—that is, “. . . establishment of laws and of the right of property . . . the institution of magistracy . . . and the conversion of legitimate into arbitrary power.”¹ Rousseau's society, or *modernity*^{*}, began when interdependency amongst groups (e.g., extended families) gradually spread throughout humankind, leaving all humans *co-dependents* in what Rousseau terms the “state of society.”² With said interdependency, emerged inequality amongst humankind in general. That is, whereby: “. . . one man began to stand in need of the help of another,”³ and “from the moment it appeared advantageous to any one man to have enough provisions for two,”⁴ equality amongst humans associated with humankind's natural state ceased to exist, and, inequality emerged—albeit gradually. With the emergence of property rights, laws, judicial systems, and inequity amongst participants of society, came subornation of the poor by the rich, then subornation of the weak by the powerful, and thereafter subornation of the slave by the master.⁵

Rousseau's ‘natural man’ was closer to what might be called *perfected* life than any period within humankind's history since. The natural man was fit,⁶ immeasurably free of disease,⁷ free of fear of disease,⁸ and unaware of death.⁹ Further, natural man was without need of assistance from others,¹⁰ naturally compassionate,¹¹ and otherwise free from having to experience “very perilous dissensions”¹² from others. Rousseau adds that the natural man: “. . . follows solely the character nature has implanted in him, and not tastes which he could never have acquired; so that every woman equally answers his purpose”;¹³ and thus, natural man was also free of jealousy, envy, and lust. According to Rousseau, natural man: “. . . felt only his actual necessities, and disregarded everything he did not think himself immediately concerned to notice,” and thus, would have no knowledge nor need of knowing minute differences amongst himself and others.¹⁴ Humans, in the state of nature, are equal to one another;¹⁵ that is, given that natural man is solely concerned with that which nature presents to him, he is completely unconcerned with the advantages or disadvantages that others *may* have (e.g., physicality). As Rousseau puts it, “. . . every one is his own master, and the law of the strongest is of no effect.”¹⁶

When the idea of *ownership* emerges in humankind, civil society is formed.¹⁷ The emergence of civil society—life where large populations cooperate in order to: “. . . provide for the common subsistence”¹⁸—inevitably led to greater and greater cultivation of natural resources;¹⁹ the distribution of said resources inevitably led to the recognition of property;²⁰ the associated ‘division of labor’[†] arising from the cultivation of resources led to differences in skill amongst men,²¹ who seeking security in unequal *property-ownership*, establish laws and punishment for breach.²² The differences in skill amongst men, of which, having become commoditized unequally amongst

* Assuming a definition of *modernity* being the time-period whereby humankind formed societies which in turn began to operate interdependently, over vast geographical regions, and beyond.

† See Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (1776), www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/adam-smith/Wealth-Nations.pdf, *generally*. Smith attributes all advances of humankind to the ‘division of labor,’ where conditions permit: “[i]t is the great multiplication of the productions of all the different arts, in consequence of the division of labour, which occasions, in a well-governed society, that universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people.” [*Id.* at Pg. 16]

property-owners, gives rise to greater and greater inequality amongst humankind in the ‘state of society.’²³ *Unequal* humankind in the state of society proceeds with, “the rank and condition of every man assigned him,”²⁴ of which, “being the only qualities capable of commanding respect,”²⁵ become “necessary to possess or to affect.”²⁶ With differences amongst humans being assigned *greater* or *lesser* value come newer needs and desires for those with *more* and those with *less*, and thus, humans become beholden to one another for the sole purposes of maintaining or amassing *more*.²⁷ This gives rise to “[i]nsatiable ambition”²⁸, thereby inflicting humankind with envy, “rivalry,”²⁹ and “conflicting interests.”³⁰ With the establishment of the notion of property comes ever-growing inequality.³¹

With differences in wealth amongst individuals, the *wealthy* become accustomed to “the pleasure of command,”³² and embark on “subduing and enslaving,”³³ thus leading to greater inequity in society, and less morality amongst humankind. Rousseau states that what followed were: “[u]surpations by the rich, robbery by the poor, and the unbridled passions of both . . . fill[ing] men with avarice, ambition and vice.” This state of “war” inevitably leads the *wealthy*, by necessity, to seek consensus in establishing a governing authority, which thereafter:

“. . . [B]ound new fetters on the poor, and gave new powers to the rich; which irretrievably destroyed natural liberty, eternally fixed the law of property and inequality, converted clever usurpation into unalterable right, and, for the advantage of a few ambitious individuals, subjected all mankind to perpetual labour, slavery and wretchedness.”³⁴

Given the impracticality of such an endeavor and yet a need for compliance by the poor, enforcement of the government’s authority is entrusted to a judiciary—private citizens tasked with enforcing *law* on behalf of the governing authority.³⁵ The judicial authority, being beholden to those who established it, proceeds to *judge* the poor in accords with the *desires* of the governing authority, which in turn makes subjugates of those under the authority, thereby solidifying the loss of liberty through acquiescence to such an authority.³⁶

Rousseau further states that life and liberty, “[are] the essential gifts of nature . . . which every man is permitted to enjoy, and of which it is at least doubtful whether any have a right to divest themselves;”³⁷ however, in order to: “. . . establish slavery, it was necessary to do violence to nature,”³⁸ thus allowing for men to be born *not* men, but *slaves*.³⁹ Through ongoing administration of this order, an ‘elite’ emerges whereby distinctions are based on “riches, nobility or rank, power and personal merit.”⁴⁰ Rousseau adds that out of all these distinctions, “wealth is the one to which they are all reduced in the end.”⁴¹ This incentivizes the want for adoration by others, and corruption as a means to succeed.⁴² Out of said corruption, arises: “a multitude of prejudices equally contrary to reason, happiness and virtue”⁴³ in the administration of laws by the judiciary, which, “foment[s] everything . . . that might inspire the different ranks of people with mutual hatred and distrust, by setting the rights and interests of one against those of another, and so strengthen the power which comprehended them all.”⁴⁴ Out of said division emerges despotism, requiring nothing but “blind obedience”⁴⁵ It is at this point, Rousseau contends, where all private persons become: “nothing . . . subjects having no law but the will of their master, and their master no restraint but his passions, [and] all notions of good and all principles of equity again vanish.”⁴⁶

Finally, Rousseau states that all inequality: “. . . owes its strength to . . . the development of [humankind’s] faculties and the advance of the human mind, and becomes at last permanent and legitimate by the establishment of property and laws.”⁴⁷ Although Rousseau presents argument for mitigating the state of total inequality within society by requiring those with authority to wield authority in accords with the ‘contract’ by which governmental authority is vested—that being prevention of despotism, in a much broader sense, Rousseau offers a scenario in which a life unencumbered by society’s ills, i.e., inequality, corruption, or abuse of power, is currently and

entirely impossible. The spread of society as-is, and how Rousseau describes it, demolishes indigenous peoples' way-of-life entirely, and typically involves conscripting the group into a life minimized and debauched in 'civilized' society—in accords with the prevailing inequality.

It is true that inequality is not *necessarily* associated with humankind's decadency, but assuming Rousseau to be correct, and without any available opportunity to abolish the current way of life (i.e., property rights, laws, judiciary, envy, jealousy, etc.)—and in comparison to the earlier, primitive, natural way humankind first experienced nature, *naturally*—civilized humankind appears to be an inferior version of its earlier, *natural* self—a decayed version, degenerating proportionately to the spread of itself. At the point where all of humankind is 'civilized,' virtual enslavement appears inescapable. That is, if indeed all laws are set in motion by those vested with authority by the few whose amount of property far exceeds my own, and I have no other recourse but to either aspire to gain excess property, or, live in avoidance of punishment by a judiciary, then humankind is very much doomed indeed—or at least in a 'state' of decadency. It would also hold that the advancement of humankind's faculties and development of the human mind has not signified *progress*, but instead has brought about humankind's bondage (or loss of liberty).

Kant and Humankind's Purposeful Advancement

For Kant, humankind *is* in its natural state. For Kant, nature brings about conditions that continually develop and refine humankind's dispositions, purposefully setting about societies in order to facilitate a foundation within all civilized society, whereby all of humankind's goals may be achieved. All matters have their place—placed there by nature, as though with purpose. For Kant, nature intended for humankind to employ reason, to acquiesce to coercion for social cohesion, and to strive to build a society that is ever-increasingly progressing towards perfection. Nature uses humankind's dispositions, including 'antagonistic' behavior to gradually bring about a, "perfectly just civil constitution." Humankind's highest goal yet to be achieved is for that just civil constitution to emerge from trial and error (in the form of wars, revolutions, secessions, abdications), over time, ultimately providing for development of *other* dispositions within a perfect society:

"The history of mankind can be seen, in the large, as the realization of Nature's secret plan to bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed, and also bring forth that external relation among states which is perfectly adequate to this end."⁴⁸

The natural man, to Kant, is in a "purposeless condition,"⁴⁹ whereby humankind had no choice *but* to assemble into a civic structure, given that which nature required (according to Kant's reasoning).⁵⁰

There are, however, *problems* that have emerged, which have hindered or delayed humankind's progress in realizing its goals. That is, a perfect society requires *enlightened* citizens. The enlightened are those who do not obey blindly, but instead reason for themselves.[‡] The greatest of said problems is, ". . . the achievement of a civil society which administers right universally." In order for society to administer right universally, the citizens must be free—free to engage in antagonism *naturally* in order to set about the natural development of their dispositions. However, to Kant, humans require some authority to regulate freedom in order to avoid *misuse* of freedom amongst humankind. This presents the need for a "supreme authority . . . [both] just *in itself* but also

[‡] See Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment?* (1784), <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/kant-whatism.asp>. Kant's learned citizens would likely be those he might have defined as enlightened: those citizens who are free from, "self-incurred tutelage," [*Id.* at Pg. 1] of which, "nothing is required but freedom, and indeed the most harmless among all the things to which this term can properly be applied." [*Ibid.*] For, if only freedom is granted enlightenment is almost sure to follow." [*Ibid.*]

a *human being*.⁵¹ According to Kant, this is yet to be found, but is nevertheless forming, through trial and error, and via *nature*'s pressure that effectuates humankind's advancement. To this end, International Relations present a significant problem that is delaying humankind's advancement into a more perfect 'civil constitution.'⁵² However, war between nations *could* simply signify: "... attempts ... to establish new relations between states and to create new political bodies by destroying or at least breaking up old ones."⁵³ And thus, to Kant, agreeing with the 'Cosmopolitan Perspective' really comes down to whether one believes that *nature* acts with purpose—whether things to come are natural outputs of that which has naturally preceded.

If one does see *purpose*, then it is conceivable that despite very ugly truths in history (e.g., war, genocide, conventional warfare, etc.), all serves its purpose in bringing about a more perfect civil union amongst humankind, and thereby laying the foundation for acquiring *other* developments of its dispositions and goals. To Kant, the hindrances or delays to achieving humankind's fate—as established with purpose by nature—*will* be achieved; it's just a matter of how long it takes humankind to solve the above-discussed problems.⁵⁴ Based on the above, it is conceivable that *modernity*, to Kant, is a sign of progress—furthered progress taking humankind from, "[the] low level of animal nature to the highest level of humanity."⁵⁵ If the current state of affairs were presented to Kant, it is conceivable that Kant *might* see institutions of international law (e.g., International Court of Justice), increased literacy free from the domain of religion (e.g., public schooling), and 'less-criminal' political leaders in the majority—as signs of progress towards humankind's *ascension* into a more perfect society.

Kant's approach *seems* simplistic. It seems that one must assume humankind's *natural* response to nature provides for the *betterment* of humankind—that is, the formation of well-developed, tried and tested, and naturally occurring institutions of authority that provide for advances in *anything* that occurs or exists, which ultimately serves to refine humankind's existence to its 'greatest-version' of itself. Kant's thoughts are far-reaching—just as Rousseau's—in attempting to explain humankind's condition relative to its beginning and ending. As Rousseau appears to see *Modernity* as symptomatic of humankind's *fall from grace*, Kant appears to see humankind's *ascension* on an eventual but inevitable horizon, and, any 'discontents' associated with modernity are simply proverbial 'kinks to be ironed out later.'

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754), <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?id=125494&lng=en>, Pg. 43

² *Id.* at Pg. 14

³ *Id.* at Pgs. 33-34

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Id.* at Pg. 43

⁶ *Id.* at Pg. 13

⁷ *Id.* at Pg. 15

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Id.* at Pg. 17

¹⁰ *Id.* at Pg. 22

¹¹ *Id.* at Pg. 25

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Id.* at Pg. 26

¹⁴ *Id.* at Pg. 28

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Id.* at Pg. 29

¹⁸ *Id.* at Pg. 34

¹⁹ *Id.* at Pg. 35

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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- ²¹ *Ibid.*
²² *Ibid.*
²³ *Ibid.*
²⁴ *Ibid.*
²⁵ *Ibid.*
²⁶ *Ibid.*
²⁷ *Id.* at Pgs. 35-36
²⁸ *Id.* at Pg. 36
²⁹ *Ibid.*
³⁰ *Ibid.*
³¹ *Ibid.*
³² *Ibid.*
³³ *Ibid.*
³⁴ *Id.* at Pg. 37
³⁵ *Id.* at Pg. 39
³⁶ *Ibid.*
³⁷ *Id.* at Pg. 41
³⁸ *Ibid.*
³⁹ *Ibid.*
⁴⁰ *Id.* at Pg. 45
⁴¹ *Ibid.*
⁴² *Ibid.*
⁴³ *Ibid.*
⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
⁴⁶ *Id.* at Pgs. 45-46
⁴⁷ *Id.* at Pg. 47
⁴⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784), <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/kant/universal-history.htm>
⁴⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Idea for Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective* (1784), yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/excerpts/kant_perpetual.pdf , Pg. 11
⁵⁰ *Id.* at Pg. 12
⁵¹ *Id.* at Pg. 9
⁵² *Ibid.*
⁵³ *Id.* at Pgs. 10-11
⁵⁴ *Id.* at Pg. 12
⁵⁵ *Id.* at Pg. 11