

# AGAINST ABSOLUTISM: ROUSSEAU'S *DISCOURSES*

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## Part 1 – *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*

AS: Hello Colas Duflo. It would be unthinkable not to talk about Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and yet one might say that Rousseau holds an atypical place in the Enlightenment's struggle.

CD: Yes, to such an extent that we might talk about him as self-critical of the Enlightenment in the sense where he fully belongs among other enlightened thinkers; remember he read and admired Voltaire and Montesquieu, he is first a friend of Diderot and Condillac, he is an emblem of the war on anti-philosophers. In short, he is an enlightened thinker for many reasons. But on the other hand, he distances himself from other philosophers of his time and not only for personal, psychological reasons, but also for very deep philosophical reasons. This unique voice within Enlightenment discourse was heard very early on, starting with the first *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*.

AS: What is it about? Can you tell us a bit more about this discourse?

CD: In 1749, the Academy for Science and Humanities in Dijon organised an essay competition, along with a prize, with applicants responding to the question: "Has the restoration of the sciences and arts contributed to the purification of morals?"

AS: What is the meaning behind this question?

CD: Essentially, it is a commonly held view of 18<sup>th</sup> century history which comes back to us asking ourselves the question whether since breaking free from the ignorance associated with the Middle Ages, it is the restoration of the sciences and the arts, rather the progress made by science and technology that has contributed to a progression in humanity in general, but also to humanity's moral progress.

AS: And what was Rousseau's response?

CD: Well, Rousseau responds by saying that the progress made by science and technology, what we might call "progress made by Enlightenment", must be distinguished from "humanity's moral progress". His message is paradoxical. History came first, while at the same time as scientific progress was made, a degeneration in traditions occurred. One believed civilisation had progressed. One hailed sociability, civility, the famous French politeness which distinguished us from more rustic

times but in reality, says Rousseau, "one must differentiate reality from appearances." This would be one of the prominent themes of his entire career.

What we extol as progress in art and technology was, in reality, the development of wealth and materialism, which is both a sign of inequality between men and a reinforcement of its effects. We're touching on a very important point which Rousseau did not explicitly develop in his *Discourse on the sciences and the arts*, but which he discusses in his successive discourses through the publication of a strongly worded text. I quote: "The root of unhappiness is inequality".

## Part 2 – *Discourse on the Origin and the Basis of Inequality Among Men*

AS: Here we come to the famous *Discourse on the Origin and the Basis of Inequality*.

CD: In effect, in 1753, the Academy in Dijon put forward a new subject for discussion. I quote: "What is the origin of inequality among mankind, and is it justified by natural law?" That's another way of saying we're well aware that in society there are inequalities among men, there are strong and weak, rich and poor, but how do we go about explaining these inequalities? Are they of natural origin and are they legitimate? Are men naturally unequal, and natural inequality, if it exists, does it justify these social inequalities?

AS: And so, what does Rousseau say?

CD: Rousseau is rather passionate about this question. Between November 1753 and February 1754, he writes an extraordinary text which no longer takes an academic format and that is his famous *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, in which he invents a sort of reimagined history of humanity, reconstructing a hypothetical state of nature and then recounting the genesis of civil society. He does this to show, first of all, natural inequality is not the root of social inequality, as the first man, he says, was isolated, not in competition with his fellow man. Inequality only arises in a civilised society. There are only inequalities within society and therefore the source of the unequal human society we live in is private property, which is only ever a type of theft.

Of course, Rousseau acknowledges that everything is a lot more complicated than that; there wasn't a sudden change or overthrow, but rather a long history which brought about the introduction of the metalwork industry and especially agricultural practices which may have had a stabilising effect on possessions which, little by little, became private property. But something remains of this original theft in present society, the illegitimate basis of inequalities. Rousseau argues strongly that in social inequality, in the fact that there are both strong and weak, people who are extremely rich who no longer know what to do with their money while others lack the basic essentials, there is something irreducibly scandalous, which cannot be justified and therefore should not be accommodated.

AS: We sense that Rousseau has achieved posterity with this remark.

CD: It manifested itself through political policy during the French Revolution. Everyone claimed to be a follower, from Robespierre to Babeuf. But, of course, it went beyond that and much more deeply, like a reference to all the social struggles, in France and in the world, during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Let's also point out, as we conclude, that Rousseau's influence was not only relative to political thought but rather in a more general way. To give one example, remember the great ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss saw in Rousseau, and his work about the destructive influence of civilisation on human beings, one of the great founding fathers of anthropology as well as modern science.

AS: Well, we'll conclude on that point about Rousseau's reflections. Thank you, Colas, for your analysis.

CD: Thank you.