

Reading Questions: Rousseau I, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*

1. Is human nature (or “essential nature”) unchanging according to Rousseau? Why or why not? How does his idea compare to other accounts of human nature we’ve seen in CC?
2. Why would it be necessary to know about man’s original state, as Rousseau claims it is in the Preface?
3. What two “principles” prior to reason does Rousseau see as sufficient to explain natural right/law? What role do these play in his account of the development of human society?
4. What question does Rousseau set out to answer in the Discourse?
5. How does the self-sufficiency or interdependence of individuals change through the historical process according to Rousseau? Does Rousseau portray this as a good or bad thing?
6. What is the original, natural state of human beings like according to Rousseau? How does this compare with other accounts of the state of nature we’ve seen?
7. What is the difference between *amour de soi-même* (translated as ‘love of oneself’) and *amour propre* (translated as ‘egocentrism’)? See especially footnote xv.
8. How do individuals come to care about the views of others? What is the role of *amour propre* in this change?
9. What causes the first inequalities? What change to human nature and conduct immediately follows the emergence of the first inequalities? What would Adam Smith think of Rousseau’s argument here?
10. According to Rousseau, what was the origin of society and laws, and who was the agent of their introduction? Does everyone benefit from it according to Rousseau?
11. What does Rousseau mean when he says that “it is inappropriate for slaves to reason about liberty?” What does Rousseau mean by liberty and what value does he put on it?
12. What is the alternative to arbitrary government Rousseau mentions?
13. What are the three great revolutions contributing to the progress of inequality according to Rousseau?
14. What is the end point of the historical process Rousseau describes? How does the state of human beings in the civil state compare with that in the original state? What does Rousseau’s assessment of this end point suggest about his attitude toward “progress?”