

The Celestial Voice: Rousseau on What Makes Civil Society Worth the Calamity

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau's influence on modernity can hardly be overstated. This is true both by virtue of his democratic political project, which took late eighteenth-century Europe by storm and precipitated the Age of Revolution, and by virtue of his broader moral project, which sought to take the liberal tradition of thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and apply their principles beyond the realm of government. It is this latter project that I find makes Rousseau most worthy of study. It seems to me that in Rousseau modernity found its full expression, ringing out for the first time onto the farthest reaches of culture, morality, and religion.

It is for this reason that Rousseau must be taken extraordinarily seriously, and that two years ago I found myself deeply unsettled by the fundamental principle underlying his thought. Although Rousseau voices this principle in different ways ("Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains", "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man", etc.) the idea remains the same: it is mankind's faculty to leave behind his natural state and progress as a species that has brought about his ruin. At face value, this is nothing but intuitive and is akin to remarking that 'John Doe was safe at home and it is only because he left home that he got hit by a car.' However, the emphasis that Rousseau places on this principle seems to suggest something more dire than a causal observation; it seems to suggest that man never should have left his home at all. Is the modern vision for humanity, as it finds expression in Rousseau, really one that is incompatible with the progression of the human species? To retain the normative goods of freedom, wholeness, authenticity, and more, which characterize our modern understanding of the good life, must we stop chasing the horizon? Even if we need not renounce progress, is there any room left in the modern project to place a normative emphasis on it as an innate good?

Rousseau anticipates this exact dilemma. Nestled into the footnotes of his *Discourse on Inequality*, following a multi-page indictment of the evils that human progress has brought us, Rousseau writes the following:

O you, to whom the celestial voice has not made itself heard and who recognize no other destiny for your species than to end this short life in peace, you, who are able to leave behind in the midst of cities your fatal acquisitions, your anxious minds, your corrupted heart, and your unbridled desires: reclaim, since it is within your power to do so, your ancient and first innocence; go into the woods to lose sight and memory of the crimes of your contemporaries, and do not fear that you are debasing your species by renouncing its enlightenment in order to renounce its vices. As for men like me...who are convinced that the divine voice called the entire human species to the enlightenment and happiness of the celestial intelligences: they will all endeavor, by practicing the virtues they obligate themselves to perform as they learn them, to deserve the eternal reward they must expect for doing so...

This passage beguiled me when I read it two years ago, and it beguiles me today. This summer I spent eight weeks reading Rousseau's works in search of exactly what this "celestial voice" is that seems to justify human progress. Over the course of my research, I read Rousseau's *First Discourse*, *Second Discourse*, *Social Contract*, and *Emile*. I also read Frederick Neuhouser's *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality*, Paul Franco's *Rousseau, Nietzsche, and the Image of the Human*, and excerpts from Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*. My final paper can best be described as an attempt to accommodate human progress into Rousseau's normative vision for mankind as a natural extension of the same modern principles that fuel the rest of his thought. It relies most heavily on a partial reconstruction of his magnum opus *Emile* but also accommodates elements from his First and Second Discourses and *Social Contract*. I do not yet know if I have successfully interpreted Rousseau, but at least in a philosophical sense the argument that I have evoked is highly persuasive to me.

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