



Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts and Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men

JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU

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Jean Jacques Rousseau's provocative *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750) launched a vigorous assault on the most cherished beliefs of his age in a passionate indictment of civilized "progress," which, in Rousseau's eyes, has led to a debilitating corruption of human nature and morality. Four years later, Rousseau produced another such assault in the *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*. A landmark of political thought, this work argues that human beings are by nature free, happy, and independent, but that social institutions and human inventions have corrupted that condition and brought about all human misery.

Many of the details of Rousseau's account are open to dispute, but the revolutionary impact of the argument is beyond doubt: by insisting that our understanding of modern society must be placed on a historical footing, Rousseau invites us to see social injustice and evil as products of pernicious social institutions—not permanent features of an unsatisfactory or fallen condition. He offers no clear solution to the evils he diagnoses, but the implication of his argument is clear: society's most serious problems are caused, not by human nature, but by social institutions, especially property; if we wish to address these problems, we must change those institutions.

The unflagging passion, clarity, and rhetorical power of Rousseau's style have inspired many social reformers and revolutionaries. Even today, his words are still cited by those who wish to challenge just how free and happy our citizens are in a society that prides itself on economic freedoms and the pursuit of happiness.

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