

The Nature of Gender Inequality in Rousseau's Second and Third Discourses

Ali Houston

In a Tortoiseshell: In the paper below, Ali Houston challenges Rousseau's ideas about the natural inferiority of women. She showcases effective **evidence and analysis** by picking selected fragments from Rousseau's overarching theories and responding to them with clear, well-implemented counterarguments.

Excerpt

Rousseau defines natural inequality as that which is established inherently in the body by nature, such as differences in physical strength and intelligence, while his definition of moral inequality depends on "convention and is established... by the consent of men".[1] He maintains that there is no connection between the two: the weak or stupid can still be wealthy or powerful in a society, as societal conventions do not depend on the natural inequalities and rather are decided upon entirely by men amongst themselves through their perceptions of one another. In nature, the stronger and more intelligent live longer than those who lack such characteristics because each relies solely upon him or herself for survival. Life is lived in isolation in the state of nature, so that meetings with other humans happen only by chance and savage man at first essentially lives as a creature of instinct.[2] Rousseau states that in nature men and women come together by chance, and women nurse their young only for as long as the child depends on them for survival. However, after the child is strong enough to fend for itself, they separate and live alone again.[3]

This immediately poses a problem of survival: women, keeping the child with them at all times during the long human infancy period, would be vastly more susceptible to attack, disease or starvation in their maternal state, as would the child. Rousseau states that this danger is common to hundreds of other species that carry their young around, and humans' longer life spans balance the increased risks of childhood.[4] Indeed, mammals with similar lifespans and

child rearing habits, such as whales, do make up for the high infant and mother danger rate of the infancy period with their long lifespans, which allow for more reproductive opportunities. However, the assumption that humans operate this way contradicts the other key assumption he makes that women, the weaker sex, naturally take a subservient role when savage humans reach the evolutionary point of living in families.[5] Assuming both that women are weaker than men and that women take sole responsibility for children naturally leads to the conclusion that there must be a smaller amount of women than men in nature, due to their pronounced relative vulnerability. Women being naturally weaker would, in the theory Rousseau presents, make them less capable of protecting either themselves or their young in periods of danger. In these circumstances the savage human population would dwindle and eventually die out for lack of women to produce the next generations.

One could counter that the family stage may have been reached before a significant population imbalance occurred, but Rousseau maintains that it would take an extremely long time for humans to reach the stage at which they were capable of building long-term shelters necessary for family life.[6] During this period, stretching many generations, it stands to reason that women would become the minority of the population if their vulnerabilities were both inherent to their bodies and a result of procreation: the species would not be able to exist if formatted this way. The argument could also be made that since Rousseau states that natural inequalities between humans are insignificant and do not affect lifespan, women would not be more vulnerable because of their inherent weaknesses. However, if this is the case, then women's subservience to men in later evolutionary stages remains unexplained. If natural inequalities of mind and body do not matter, there should be no reason for women to obey men or to be considered naturally inferior.

As Rousseau's weaker sex, in an isolated existence wherein their only contact with other humans was for reproductive purposes, women would die out much more quickly than men. Women would therefore have sought men out, not relying on occasion to provide them with a mate, as a mate promised protection and survival as well as procreation. This natural inequality between the sexes would therefore create a need for regular social interaction for the survival of the species, which Rousseau does not discuss. Instead, he states that savage man has no need for other men, and does not mention the survival needs of women. This omission prevents the solitary state of nature from being fully explained. Men can live in isolation, but women, the sex "that ought to obey,"[7] either cannot due to their inferiorities, or can, and therefore have no natural reason to be the sex that ought to obey. In an isolated existence that evolves into a social one, which Rousseau argues for, as an equal sex, which Rousseau does not entertain but which would allow for their survival in the state of nature, women would have no reason to become subservient. The inequalities between men and women would therefore start not with savage humans, as Rousseau maintains, but with early societies.

[1] Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality", 45.

[2] Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality", 49.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality", 72.

[6] Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality", 55.

[7] Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality", 65.

Editor Commentary

Sahand Keshavarz Rahbar

In this paper, written for a modern political theory course, Ali Houston picks apart the bold assertions and underlying assumptions made by Jean-Jacques Rousseau regarding women in his *Discourses*. In the excerpt above, which features Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, Ali

homes in on the weaknesses and gaps in Rousseau's argument and challenges his assertion that women, as a class, constitute a naturally inferior sex.

Ali is exact and methodical in her approach. Since her analysis hinges on a close reading of Rousseau, she begins by orienting readers to the most salient features of his text. She contrasts natural and moral inequality and details the experiences of the so-called savage men and women in nature who, according to Rousseau, live mostly in isolation. These observations, laid out in the first paragraph, serve as the evidence that Ali will poke and prod in her subsequent analysis.

Having established Rousseau's observations as her foundation, Ali quickly transitions into a critic; she drills logical holes in Rousseau's proposed argument by extending it to its natural conclusions. If women are naturally inferior and all savage humans live in isolation, then the number of women--and, by extension, humans--would be expected to dwindle to nothing over time due to external and reproductive hazards.

What is striking about Ali's analysis is the way in which she predicts potential counterarguments and addresses them. She notes, for instance, that Rousseau dismisses the dangers of childbirth and childrearing by factoring in the long lifespan of humans. Unfazed, Ali goes on to show that even this counterpoint fails to adequately explain why anyone should accept that women are inherently weaker, since they manage to survive without the aid of men.

These critiques serve as stepping stones for Ali's broader argument. Bit by bit, she questions the *natural* inferiority of women, which Rousseau favors, and proceeds to underscore the *social* inequality of the genders, something that emerges with the rise of primitive human societies, not lonesome savage humans. This slow and steady approach to analysis is emblematic of confident, assured papers. Ali does not overwhelm her reader with a massive pile of information. She teases out Rousseau's argument gradually and responds to it in kind.

Moreover, Ali does not rely on excessive quotations from Rousseau to establish her point. She summarizes when necessary, and only quotes Rousseau when his exact wording is particularly relevant or elegant. As a consequence, Ali's readers will be able to distinguish her voice and her personal claim from that of Rousseau. This is particularly important for Ali's paper because the crux of her argument hinges on the way she disagrees with Rousseau's interpretation of female inferiority.

Overall, this paper succeeds as an effective piece of scholarship because of its gradual, disciplined approach. Ali is able to isolate the problematic components of Rousseau's multi-tiered argument, counter them with unique, well-examined responses of her own, and do so without encumbering her reader with the sheer breadth of Rousseau's thoughts.