

Task 3: On private ownership and the origin of society

The first man, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself as saying "This is mine", and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of society.

-Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1754

The first reaction to Rousseau's statement from his *Discourse on the Origin of and Basis of Inequality Among Men* for most readers would be, if not disbelief, then something along the lines of disapproval of the author's pessimism towards property. The condemnation of private property Rousseau presents with this statement seems counterintuitive to our perception of civilisation. In our modern, "Western" perception, the concept of private property is intrinsic to the freedom of the individual to such a degree that the perception of this as something negative appears inherently flawed. But, as the reader starts to process the meaning of Rousseau's statement, considering it independently of its implications, he or she can start to realize that the statement is indeed correct. Private property is, at least seemingly, an imperative for civilisation. How has this come to be? Is it ethically sound to allow the appropriation of land?

Society; the organisation of a group of individuals for mutual protection and benefit, is, I believe we all can agree, the foremost basis of any civilisation. However, when there is a group of individuals working and living together, the weak are open to exploitation by the strong, as can be seen in groups of apes and monkeys. The dominant members of the groups can take anything from the weaker members without repercussions. In any advanced society, even the most basic of hunter-gatherer societies, this dynamic must be altered or removed if the group is to have any form of internal order and structure. The members of these early societies needed to differentiate between objects belonging to various members

of the group, and the group as a whole needed to acknowledge this ownership. It probably started with something simple, say arrowheads.

If we, for a second, can imagine there is a small group of early people, sleeping in a cave together. In this group there is a strong male called Ug. Meanwhile, in the same cave there is a smaller male named Ak. Now, Ug is the stronger of the two, but Ak makes better and sharper arrowheads, making him the more efficient hunter. One day, Ug comes over and takes Ak's arrowheads to use for himself. If this society did not have a concept of private property, Ak would not be able to stand up for himself, because Ug is clearly stronger. But, if the group had acknowledged the arrowheads as *property* of Ak's, the group would then come together to punish Ug, for example by banishing him from the group. This would in turn serve as an example to the other males in the group, making them realise that to get better arrowheads, they would either have to make some of their own, or trade something of theirs for Ak's arrowheads. And so the concept of property led to inception of the concepts of justice, theft and even the very beginnings of trade and specialisation. Later, when mankind settled down and began agricultural exploits, this concept of property was expanded to land and animals.

Seeing the origin of private property presented like this, it is hard to understand, or even avoid scoffing at, Rousseau's negative tone in regards to the origin of property; calling those who acknowledge the belonging "simple". But here we must consider the long-term implications. The division of *land*, not just objects, is an unnatural and artificial creation. No longer could anyone use the appropriated piece of land without permission from the owner. This was bound to eventually create inequality, as not all areas of land were equal in size or fertility. As populations increased, so did the demand for land, and so the quality of newly appropriated land deteriorated. The basis for inequality did now exist.

Let us now make another thought illustration. Thousands of years after the incident with the arrowheads, Ak's descendant Akki owns a farm with rich and fertile lands at the side of a mountain. On the other side of the mountain, Ug's descendant Ugo lives. However, Ugo's farm produces almost no grain one year. His family is starving. In desperation he turns to his neighbour, Akki. "Well," Akki says, "I have more grain than I need, but what can you offer me in return?" What can Ugo offer him? The only thing he has is his land, so he trades a piece of his land for food from Akki. The next harvest, Akki is able to grow more grain on the land that formerly belonged to Ugo. He is now richer than Ugo in terms of property. As the years go by and Ugo sells more and more of his land for food, partially because he has a smaller farm now. Within a few years he will simply work Akki's lands, his own all gone. Akki is now the wealthier of the two, and they are unequal. In a hundred years Akki's descendant may be the head of a small town, in a thousand years one of his descendants may be the king of a country. This was the very origin of inequality in society, and *this* was what Rousseau was so critical about.

The reason for Rousseau's criticism was his desire to promote change in society. As an Enlightenment philosopher, he was focused on improving the society man lived in. In his opinion, inequality between men (this was the 18th century, so women were not exactly mentioned often) was the source of many ills of society. He lived in France, the very epitome of inequality in Europe at the time. King Louis reigned supreme, with the nobles living secluded lives from their subjects, whom dredged in the fields and laboured in the cities. If there could be more equality, perhaps there could be more freedom? No more exploitation by the nobles, no longer would the multitude of the people work to feed and enrich a selected few, and everybody would have a voice that could be heard. Rousseau and his fellow philosophers, e.g. Montesquieu, raised quite a few eyebrows in a Europe dominated by aristocracy and absolute monarchies, to the point that their writings were actually forbidden to print in Norway in the latter quarter of the 18th century, due to fears of rebellion against the Danish crown. However, their writings would first have a significant impact in the unstable period around the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, with the American and French revolutions.

While other ideas of the Enlightenment philosophers won ground in this period, e.g. the idea of representative democracy and separation of church and state, Rousseau's criticism of private property was neatly skipped over. This was due to the simple fact that the educated bourgeoisie, who were the primary drive behind the European revolutions and constitutions, were the ones who had the most private property and would therefore suffer the most from any restrictions of that. But that does not mean the idea of the inherent problems of private property died.

The first thinker to take up this problem after the first revolution was Thomas Paine, famous for his pamphlet *Common Sense*, which was an immensely popular pamphlet supporting the American Revolution in the 1770's. In his work *Agrarian Justice*, he proposed that the citizens of the newly formed United States would be compensated for the loss of their "natural inheritance" by the government. Decades later, Karl Marx, the "father" of communism and socialism, proposed an even more radical approach; the abolition of private property, which should now belong to a collective, i.e. the state.

Would this be a practical solution? From a utilitarianistic point of view, it appears to have an immediate benefit for a large number of people, and therefore the right thing to do. Everyone would be equal, and the state would be able to effectively direct resources and create living spaces, optimising... well, society as a whole. From a communistic viewpoint, this is the ultimate evolution of society, the utopia where the proletariat is empowered and equality reigns. However, from our capitalistic, "Western" point of view, this would discourage improvement and be opposed to our concept of personal freedom and inherent rights; our right to have a private sphere where we decide ourselves where to live, and the right to open our own business and create our own fortune. In the end, the largest social experiment ever conducted, also known as the Soviet Union, turned out to be an economic failure. The People's Republic of China, another communist country, has avoided the same

fate only due to their adoption of state-controlled capitalism. The state was simply not able to effectively handle the grand scale of an entire economy all by itself. History has in this way showed us that abolishing private property might not be the best solution after all, even if it might seem like the immediately ethically sound option.

So, how can we solve the problem of inequality? For it must be solved in some way, as simply stating "Solving it is ineffective," does not negate the importance of the issue and how unethical it is to let continue unabated. Inequality begets human suffering, and human suffering is something we from a moral standpoint must at least try to limit this. Altruism remains a value intrinsic in our society, even if it lacks an evolutionary explanation.

The answer to this question lies within moderation, I believe. Even if I agree with Rousseau that private property is the basis of civilisation and that it is unfair, that does not mean we have condemn the idea of private property. The obvious solution, the one Marx and the ideology of Marxism promoted, was to take the problem at its root, private property, and remove it. As simple as removing a weed from a garden to keep it from growing up again. But it turned out that removing the weed ruined the soil of the garden. Would not the obvious solution then be to let the weed stay, and instead merely cut away the flower and leaves? In the case of inequality and property, that would mean fighting inequality instead of private property.

In our modern society, we have a wonderful tool for managing trade that early man did not have; money. People get paid in money, and they buy things they need or want with money. Inequality is not restricted to land, it also includes money. The wealthy make more money than the poor and unfortunate. Instead of removing the concept of private property that has been the basis of our civilisation, we can "remove" some of the money from the fortunate and redistribute it to the unfortunate, through the elegant concept of taxation. Earlier taxes were only used to pay for the government of the nation and the military to defend it, but

with our modern capacities in healthcare, construction and banking, we can also provide social services for the poor, and give them monetary support when they need it the most. It does not fully solve the problem of inequality that is inherent in our society, but it alleviates the problem and takes the worst “sting” off of it. Hence it is my sincere belief that the modern welfare state, despite its imperfections, is at least a partial solution to Rousseau’s observation and Paine’s and Marx’ problem.