

History 427/527: Ideas and Society in Modern Europe (McCole)

Reading questions for Rousseau,
Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts ("first discourse"),
Discourse on Inequality ("second discourse"),
and *On the Social Contract*

Note: page numbers in parentheses refer to Hackett's *second* edition of Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings*.

Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts ("first discourse")

1. Rousseau denounces the "vain and futile declaimers" who "go off in every direction, armed with their deadly paradoxes, undermining the foundations of faith and annihilating virtue." Whom does he seem to be attacking? On what grounds? What does he mean by the "fury to gain distinction?" (15)
2. "No, it is not possible for minds degraded by a multitude of futile needs ever to rise to anything great." What are these "futile needs," and where do they come from? "Futile needs," as opposed to what? (17)
3. Why is luxury "diametrically opposed to good mores?" (16)
4. What sorts of "virtue" does Rousseau prize? What are his examples? (18-19)
5. At one point, Rousseau names "citizens" as the antithesis of all the useless scientists and artists. Just who are these citizens? (21)
6. How does the relationship between men and women, or masculinity and femininity, figure in Rousseau's argument? What does he mean by the "ascendancy of women," and what is it based on? (martial virtues: 18; fn. on sexual politics: 17, n. 39)

Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Men
("second discourse")

1. Rousseau distinguishes between "natural or physical" inequality, on the one hand, and "moral or political inequality," on the other. What is the difference? (45)
2. How does Rousseau depict people in the state of nature? Are they sociable? selfish? Is he idealizing the state of nature? If so, in what sense? (47-66)
3. What is the point of his complaint that "most of our ills are of our own making?" (50)
4. What are the social causes of inequality? Are there causes other than property? Hint: the answer is yes. (73; 74-5)
5. Is the connection between increasing social ties and decadence inevitable?
6. What is the origin of government and of laws? (78-9)

On the Social Contract

1. Rousseau argues that “conventions” or “agreements” are the only basis of legitimate authority (157ff.). Why? What does he mean by “conventions” or “agreements,” anyway? Could slavery be a legitimate agreement?
2. Rousseau proposes that we think of the social contracts as involving “the total alienation of each associate together with all of his rights to the entire community” (164). What is lost and what is gained when this is done? Why isn’t this just voluntary slavery? How might this be dangerous? Why doesn’t Rousseau think it is?
3. What is the “general will?” How is it determined? Why does it require equality? (164-167)
4. “The body politic, like the human body, begins to die from the very moment of its birth and carries within itself the causes of its destruction” (214). What does this tell us about Rousseau’s sense of history? (Think back to the first discourse.)
5. Rousseau takes a dim view of government through representatives (218ff.). Why?
6. What is a civil religion? Why is it needed, and what is it good for (243ff.)?