Heart of Darkness Interpreted through Rousseau's Second Discourse

Andrew Valentini

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Abstract

Throughout this essay, I intend to explain Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness [1] through the lens of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men [4] (commonly referred to as his Second Discourse) and expand upon my initial interpretation of the novella, motivated by the belief that Conrad's intention in writing such a book was to explore human nature by removing the modern person from their societal structures as founded through their government, laws, and the general cultural or moral constraints whose imposition have become all too common in today's industrial society, much like William Golding has done with Lord of the Flies. Before directly analyzing Heart of Darkness, I feel it necessary for my own clarity and to the benefit of my readers to first explain what I have received from Rousseau's Second Discourse through a basic restatement of his declaration on human nature and his tracing of how the development of societal and technological progress has altered it. Only after establishing the philosophical framework that I believe to be present throughout the entirety of Heart of Darkness will I move to the argument central to this paper.

1 Introduction

As a political thinker, Rousseau understood reflection on human nature and attempting to study its historical development to be crucial to understanding our modern existence within developed government and social structures since it is central to one's thoughts about natural rights and the origin of inequality; concepts which are still subject to intense debate hundreds of years after his death. Rousseau begins the preface to his Second Discourse with a statement on the alienation our progress has brought us from this ability to understand such concepts as we continually stray further from the state of nature as given to us by evolution. In Rousseau's second note to this preface, he proclaims:

> "Whatever interest we may have to know ourselves, I am not sure whether we do not know better everything that is not ourselves. Provided by nature with

> organs destined uniquely for our own preservation, we use them only to receive foreign impressions, we seek only to extend beyond ourselves, and exist outside ourselves. Too busy multiplying the functions of our senses and augmenting the external range of our being, we rarely make use of that internal sense which reduces us to our true dimensions, and which separates from us all that is not part of us. However, it is this sense we must use if we wish to know ourselves; it is the only one by which we can judge ourselves."

In the state of nature, man was given direct contact with himself and so could understand such concepts to a degree greater than that which we are currently allowed by our modern existence. The alienation from these concepts is in direct proportion to the development of our industry, knowledge, and human society because, from these, we grow further from this state of nature. Rousseau turns to knowledge and its unnatural development as a means of explaining the most fundamental origin of inequality which now pervades our species. In the state of nature, all of its creatures clearly exhibit physical variation as a consequence of random genetic mutation and the selection of them through natural selection. From this, as observed throughout every known species, individuals are randomly granted inherent biological advantages in relation to their environment. The direction with which Rousseau would embark upon in deducing the origins of inequality initially appears to be clear to the reader from this point of biological advantages but he instead goes on to claim that this concept should rather be simply understood as natural variation as opposed to a form of inequality. He states it was not until humans developed the faculties of reasoning that concepts such as inequality were *formed* and used to judge oneself and others. Rousseau traces human history and states that these natural variations manifested as inequality by "the differences among men, developed by those of circumstances, [which became] more perceptible, more permanent in their effects, and [began] to have a proportionate influence over the fate of individuals"

For Rousseau, the moment of human history in which we began to *understand* our physical variations was also the beginning of our "natural inequality". What is meant by this is that as the unnatural quality of human knowledge was developed, we unfortunately began to garner the ability to recognize the imbalances inherent within our species and began to organize social structures around these imbalances, controlled by the most powerful in the immediate environment. In the state of nature, when a dominant animal (dominant in the sense of one who, as a result of their natural abilities granted by the random genetic variation was disproportionately fit for a specific environment) was nearby, others were able to move out of such a domain in which these individuals ruled to ensure that their survival would not be threatened and that their natural needs would continue to be met. As humans removed themselves further from the state of nature and traded autonomy for personal security granted by these dominant figures, social groups formed and these figures were given the

ability to rule over and *through* others, thereby artificially extending the reach of one's control and further preventing another's escape from it. These groups eventually required a more advanced means of communication as they developed and thus founded primitive forms of language and writing, thereby birthing the competition of industry between groups that we have come to understand well in our industrial society's isolationism. Rousseau powerfully states:

> "Let us conclude that wandering in the forests, without industry, without speech, without domicile, without war and without liaisons, with no need of his fellowmen, likewise with no desire to harm them, perhaps never even recognizing anyone individually, savage man, subject to few passions and self-sufficient, had only the sentiments and intellect suited to that state; he felt only his true needs, saw only what he believed he had an interest to see; and his intelligence made no more progress than his vanity. If by chance he made some discovery, he was less able to communicate it because he did not recognize even his children. Art perished with the inventor. There was neither education nor progress; the generations multiplied uselessly; and everyone always starting from the same point, centuries passed in all the crudeness of the first ages; the species was already old, and man remained ever a child."

To attend to this new inequality, we began separating our private lives from our public appearance to give the illusion of a being that was greater and more powerful than what is granted by nature in the pursuit of our survival and the maintenance of our pitiful ego. Rousseau identifies this to be the moment in which, among many other destructive qualities, corruption, vice, and deceit came upon our experience; the moment in which our natural virtue was corrupted by our attempt to attend to this new inequality resulting from our developing intellect. It follows from this that the further we widen this separation between the self and our public image, the further we also become from the state of nature because, for lack of better rhetoric, one can hide much easier between the buildings of our industrial society than one can between the trees in the state of nature. This duality of existence should be deemed undesirable because, as Rousseau argues, the further we are from the state of nature, the further we are from being in direct contact with human nature, and thus an understanding of it and the concepts central to the peaceful arrangement of existence as is found throughout the few remaining primitive societies on Earth today.

The idea of what one deems to be a "savage" society is explored throughout Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Again, what I hope to explain in this essay is how Conrad incorporated Rousseau's philosophical framework, as primarily laid out in his Second Discourse, to describe events which Conrad had personally experienced in spending eight years within a setting similar to that of the book. I have hopefully laid the groundwork necessary

for understanding the arguments relevant to understanding Heart of Darkness through this lens but one should consider reading Rousseau's work in full to ensure that I have not made any misinterpretations or come to any unreasonable conclusions. I will walk through sections of Heart of Darkness, explaining quotes in the framework of the Second Discourse and revealing their connection to the story. I wish to advocate my belief of Conrad's intention in writing such a story; the intention being to use the late ivory trade which forcefully intruded upon the peaceful homeland of those native to the regions surrounding the river Marlow and his crew navigate as an effective method of juxtaposing a company of "civilized" Europeans with the "savage" natives to question whether a "Heart of Darkness" is developed as a result of an absence in societal structures which we in the industrial world have become accustomed to or if it is only developed in the presence of such systems which take us further from direct contact with our human nature.

Only within a few pages of the book do we receive strong evidence for this relation along with one of the most lasting images created by the story. Marlow explains that his fascination for the unexplored regions of the world has lead him to become the skipper of a ship whose objective is to rescue an intelligent man named Kurtz who is reported to have gone mad living in the depths of the Congo with a small tribe of natives which he is supposedly now rules. While Marlow wanders the first station his ship beaches on during his journey through the Congo, he encounters what is later called the "Grove of Death". In this cluster of trees, Marlow is forced to witness the dehumanizing result of the European's thirst for wealth, arguably driven by an essential nature of industrial society. He encounters the natives enslaved by the "noble" Europeans as a means of acquiring and transporting the heavily profitable ivory without concern for humane treatment for those forced to carry out this work. Marlow states "[t]hey were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea" to explain the irony present in the unethical and forced labor of the natives by the "noble" Europeans who ravaged their land and yet called *them* the savages. Conrad intentionally uses the phrase "had come to them" in this line as a means of explaining how the industrial society has taken it upon themselves to define terms such as just, civil, developed, and so on for the global order (which they wish to be the judge, jury, and executioner of) as a result of their comparative power throughout history. Marlow even describes a native village and states that "a calamity had come to it" in describing the destruction that ensued upon their community which had likely lived in peace prior to the European's imperialistic conquest of it, driven by profit and global order. In just the opening pages of Heart of Darkness, Conrad uses many examples such as these all while continuing to use the word "savages" in describing those whose lives had been destroyed and whose communities' order had been disrupted by these invading Europeans to give the readers a juxtaposition between what many today in an industrial society consider to be a "primitive" populace and one that is

considered to be admirable, forcing us to question which side of this ruination truly harbors the "Heart of Darkness" and by what societal structures its existence is founded upon.

During Marlow's experience with the Grove of Death, Conrad begins directing the reader's attention toward a concept that directly relates to Rousseau's teachings and which I believe permeates the entirety of the story. Upon Marlow's initial interactions with the Europeans, Conrad illustrates an aspect of surprise. Through many brief conversations and general observations from this initial station, Marlow seems to never be satisfied by his role and is unable to justify its "noble" attempts to civilize the African savages. In a powerful statement, Marlow declares that every white man encountered at this station was "full of it" in describing the way in which they presented themselves and how such an appearance was clearly a false image constructed in the hope of convincing others to believe they were of a greater importance or had a more powerful position than they truly were or truly had. In what I believe to be one of the most important passages in the book, a well-prepared secretary invites Marlow into his "sanctuary" where a clerk shares a drink with Marlow. The only words we are given from this interaction are delivered from the clerk who assures Marlow, "I am not such a fool as I look, quoth Plato to his disciples". To understand the implication of Conrad's intentional use of this quote and to provide further evidence for my argument, we must look at the section of Plato's Apology in which Socrates is explaining to the jury that will ultimately decide his fate why many Athenians consider him as one who corrupts the youth. Socrates explains (Apology 22 d-e) [3]:

> "Finally I went to the craftsmen, for I was conscious of knowing practically nothing, and I knew that I would find that they had knowledge of many fine things. In this I was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, men of Athens, the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance, or to have both. The answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was to my advantage to be as I am."

In this section, Socrates emphasizes the importance of one's recognition and acceptance of those aspects of life which one is unfamiliar to and so finds much more respect for those who are humble with their limited knowledge as opposed to those who wish to appear as more knowledgeable than they truly are. This postulation was clearly developmental in Rousseau's analysis of humans who, taken from the state of nature, are forever pursuing an appearance that is greater than they truly are. From this understanding of what is meant by Marlow claiming the Europeans to be "full of it", the reader can now identify

Conrad's intentions who, throughout the story, continues to make detailed descriptions of what the Europeans are wearing and how their general impressions strike Marlow. I count close to ten prominent instances throughout the story in which the appearance of a white man is described with the utmost detail while that of the natives is rarely ever mentioned, as a means of emphasizing the external images members our industrial society have built in the pursuit of maintaining a false identity in the presence of others. The reader should be reminded that this separation of one's private and public life exhibited throughout the industrial world is what Rousseau believed to be symptomatic of our abandonment of nature and its naturally instilled principles. The French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, was also influential in Rousseau's philosophy on the origins of inequality and how our civilized lives have brought us to a state of discontent and immorality. In his essay Of Cannibals [2], he comments on the nature of those communities that are deemed to be technologically deficient while clearly exhibiting a civil foundation of society. He wrote:

> "I should tell Plato that it is a nation wherein there is no manner of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science if numbers, no name of magistrate or political superiority; no use of services, riches, or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no dividends, no properties, no employments, but those of leisure, no respect of kindred, but common, no clothing, no agriculture, not metal, no use of corn or wine; the very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, detraction, pardon, never heard of."

This idea of a primitive life as one that brings us closer to nature and to a greater foundation on which to build a small community upon is worth exploring further throughout Heart of Darkness.

Further examples of the industrial man's immorality are given without much need for additional interpretation or analysis along the progression of the story due to their connection to the framework that has already been detailed here and due to the reader's common experience with such concepts. Conrad presents many cases in which the former peace of the indigenous villages along the Congo was ruthlessly destroyed by the so-called civilized and noble Europeans who then captured the surviving natives and force them into inhumane labor, driven by the pursuit of the acquisition of wealth and power. These accounts are typical of the industrial world so are of relatively little shock to the reader while envisioning the unfolding destruction. What Conrad effectively conveys throughout Heart of Darkness is the mental transition the Europeans undergo when the basic social structures they had become accustomed to in the industrial world are pulled from under them in the Congo. What is made clear is that these figures who have been raised by a "civil" society that abides by the professed standards of morality, justice, and various other noble concepts directed by ancient documents lose their fabricated foundation and become monsters within these

primitive societies where one has to turn inward to find guiding moral principles instead of relying on these standards mandated by industrial society.

Throughout Heart of Darkness, it is not the natives we read acting as if without morals, but it is rather those "noble" Europeans, raised in a societies that force its members to unquestionably abide by its moral standards, that we read acting as immoral monsters. This is not meant to be a critique of the moral standards present in our industrial societies but a depiction of what members of such societies, who have never needed to doubt such foundations or envision how they would even function in a society absent of them, experience in an environment that lacks such foundations as a result of of their thoughtlessness. An example of this theme presents itself when Marlow overhears a conversation being had underneath himself on the boat. As we are later told, this conversation is being had by two members of the crew about the mysterious figure of Kurtz. One voice tells the other to "get him hanged" or whatever is within the range of possibilities to kill Kurtz because "anything can be done in this country", showing that by just the nature of Kurtz's continued existence and marketable prosperity within the jungle, he endangers the well-being of these crew mates who, as a result of the industrial society's framework, have come to value wealth and power over the lives of others. Examples such as these emphasize the point that we, living in industrial society, have become habituated to its obligatory laws and are therefore unable to ground our morality upon *any other basis* than that of the state so when such a foundation is pulled from under us in an environment such as that described in the Congo, we become more evil than the false images we project on to the primitive peoples which peacefully inhabit such regions. Conrad forces his readers to recognize this through one of Marlow's internal analyses of Kurtz's character upon observing him, creating what is my favorite quote from the book and possibly from any nonfiction story:

> "'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my–' everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their place. Everything belonged to him–but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible–it was not good for one either–trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land–I mean literally. You can't understand. How could you? With solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbors ready to cheer you or fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums–how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammeled feet may take him into by the way of solitude–utter solitude without a policeman–by the way of silence–utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard

whispering of public opinion? These things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness."

Reading Heart of Darkness from the perspective of Rousseau's Second Discourse offers the reader a challenging examination of human nature, our moral foundations, and the result of our industrial society's alienation from these concepts and from the state of nature, where each is in much greater contact with oneself and is forced to create their own moral framework. I have hopefully provided the reader with a sufficient understanding of Rousseau's work to follow my interpretation throughout the most prominent examples found within Heart of Darkness. Read with this lens, which I believe to be an accurate representation of Conrad's intention in writing such a story, I believe Heart of Darkness not to be something of an anarcho-primitivist text; one calling us toward the rejection and destruction of our industrial societies, but one that forces us to question the foundations such a societies are built upon while analyzing the few remaining primitive communities to arrive at a greater understanding of concepts such as human nature, international cooperation, well-being and morality, which are crucial to the operation of any society.

"Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains"
– Jean-Jacques Rousseau

References

[1] Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*. Dover Publications Inc., 1902.

[2] Michel de Montaigne. *Of Cannibals*. 1580.

[3] Plato. *Apology*. 399 BC.

[4] Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*. 1755.