

Heart of Darkness as Interpreted through Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Second Discourse

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Throughout this essay, I intend to explain Heart of Darkness through the lens of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men (commonly referred to as his Second Discourse) and expand upon my original interpretation of the novella; the belief being that Conrad's intention in writing such a book was to explain human nature by removing the modern man of his societal structures as founded through laws, government, and the general behavioral or moral constraints imposed upon us through the course of progress (among many others) which have become all too common in today's industrial society. Before directly analyzing Heart of Darkness, I feel it necessary for my own clarity and to the benefit of my reader's understanding to first explain what I have received from Rousseau's Second Discourse through a basic restatement of his declaration on human nature and how the development of societal/technological progress alters this. Only after establishing the philosophical framework which I believe to be present throughout the entirety of Heart of Darkness will I move to the argument central to this paper.

As a political thinker, Rousseau understood the study of and reflection on human nature to be of the greatest importance to the interactions of our now "intelligent" species within social institutions as it is central to concepts such as that of natural right and the inequality existing among us; concepts which are still subject to intense debate hundreds of years after his death. Rousseau begins the preface to his Second Discourse with this statement to warn of 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 granted to us by evolution. In Rousseau's second note, 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 granted direct contact with himself and so could understand such concepts to a degree greater than that which we are currently allowed. 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 genetics and the selection of them through competition. From this, as observed throughout every other known species, individuals are randomly granted 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 variation. He states it was not until humans developed the faculties of reasoning that concepts such as inequality were *created* and used to judge oneself and others. Rousseau follows human history and states these natural variations were manifested as inequality as

the differences among men, developed by those of circumstances, (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 initiated and later developed, we were unfortunately granted the ability to analyze the imbalance inherent within our species and began to organize social groups which satisfied the most powerful in a given region. In the state of nature, if a dominant figure (dominant in the sense of one who, as a result of their natural abilities granted by random genetic variation was disproportionately fit for a specific environment) were to exist locally, one was able to move out of such a domain in which these individuals ruled to ensure that all their natural needs be met. On the contrary, as humans removed themselves from the state of nature and traded autonomy for personal security granted by these dominant figures of a region, social groups were formed and these figures were then allowed the ability to rule through others, therefore artificially extending the reach of one's control and further preventing another's escape. With unnatural knowledge, these social groups directed by the most powerful of a given region were eventually able to communicate ideas through primitive forms of language and literature, thereby birthing the competition of industry between groups as we have come to understand very well in our industrial society's isolationism. Rousseau powerfully stated:

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 founded inequality, we began separating our private lives from our public appearance to give the illusion of a being which was greater than that granted by nature in the pursuit of survival and maintaining 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

in our attempt to attend to this developed inequality resulting from the unnatural development of knowledge. It follows that the further we widen this separation of character, the further we also become from the state of nature because, for lack of better rhetoric, in such a state, one could hide much less between the trees than we are allowed today between our excessively large walls. This duality of existence should be deemed undesirable because, as Rousseau states, the further we are from the state of nature, the further we are then from understanding human nature and the concepts central to the peaceful arrangement of our existence as is found throughout the few remaining primitive societies on the earth today.

This 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 is how Conrad adopted Rousseau’s philosophical framework, as primarily laid out in his *Second Discourse*, and used it to describe a story 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 piece of Rousseau’s argument which will directly relate to *Heart of Darkness* but one should consider reading his work in full to ensure that I have not made any misinterpretations or come to any unreasonable conclusions. I will walk through specific sections of *Heart of Darkness*, explaining quotes in the framework of Rousseau and showing how they relate to the story given as a whole. 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 initially peaceful homeland of those native to the regions surrounding the river Marlow and his crew navigate down in search of Kurtz 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 the lack 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.

Only within a few pages of the book do we receive strong evidence for my hypothesis along with one of the most lasting images created by the story. Marlow initially describes that his fascination for the unexplored areas of the world has brought him to become the skipper of a ship whose objective is to rescue an intelligent man named Kurtz who went mad while living in the depths of the Congo and rules a small tribe of natives. 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 the essential nature of industrial society. He encounters the natives enslaved by the "noble" Europeans as a means of acquiring and transporting the ivory without the worry of a humane treatment of those who are involved in the work required. Marlow states "They 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 observation of how it was not the natives who had ravaged the Europeans' society and yet the former were the ones defined as "savages" by the latter. Conrad intentionally uses the phrase "had come to them" in this quote 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 covertly 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 claims 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 and countless others of its kind in the name of 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 as a result of these invading Europeans to give the readers a juxtaposition between what is considered to be a "primitive" populace by the vast majority of today's industrial society and one considered to be admirable, forcing us to question which side of this ruination truly features the "Heart of Darkness" and by what societal structures such an existence is founded upon. During Marlow's experience with the Grove of Death, Conrad begins directing the reader's attention toward a concept which directly relates to Rousseau's teachings and which I believe to permeate the entirety of the story. Upon Marlow's initial interactions with the Europeans, Conrad illustrates an aspect of surprise. Throughout many brief conversations and in just the general observations of this initial station, Marlow never seems to have his preconceived notion of what a figure involved in the "noble" attempt to civilize the African savages satisfied. In a powerful statement, Marlow instead 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 those external to believe one was of a greater importance or position of power than one truly was. In

what I believe to be one of the most important passages within the book, a well-prepared secretarial 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 this quote’s intentional use and to provide a piece of evidence for my thesis, we will look at the section of Plato’s Apology in which Socrates is explaining to the jury which will ultimately decide his fate why many Athenians consider him as one who corrupts the youth. Socrates explains (Apology 22 d-e):

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 man who, taken from the state of nature, is forever in the pursuit of appearing greater than he truly is. From this understanding of what is truly meant by Marlow claiming the Europeans to be “full of it”, the reader can now easily point to the intention of Conrad who, throughout the story, makes direct descriptions of what the European characters 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 pointing to the external images our industrial society has 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 believes to be symptomatic of our abandonment of nature and its naturally instilled principles (those such as pity). The French philosopher, 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 *Of Cannibals*, he comments on the nature of those communities which 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 of 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 which brings one close to nature and to a greater foundation with which to build a small community upon is worth exploring further throughout *Heart of Darkness*.

Examples of the industrial man's immorality are given without much need for interpretation or analysis along the progression of the story due to the common experience with such concepts of the reader. Conrad presents many cases in which the former peace of the indigenous villages along the Congo was ruthlessly destroyed by the so-called "civilized" Europeans who then captured the remaining natives, forcing them into inhumane labor with only the pursuit of surrogate activities such as the acquisition of wealth and power in mind. These accounts are typical of the industrial world's story and so are of relatively little shock to the reader while envisioning the destruction. What Conrad effectively conveys throughout *Heart of Darkness* is the mental transition an imperialist within a society which lacks the basic social structures we have become accustomed to in the industrial world experiences. What is also made clear is that these figures who have been raised within a "civil" society which abides by the profession of morality, justice, and various other noble concepts as directed by an ancient document lose their fabricated foundation within societies such as those Marlow navigates in the Congo where this lynchpin has been removed completely. In these

situations, it is not the natives we experience acting as if without morals, it is rather those “noble” figures who have been raised in a society which forces one to unquestionably abide by written commandments and therefore have never taken the effort to doubt such a foundation or envision how they would function within a society absent of such standards that we experience acting as if without them. An example of this theme presents itself when Marlow overhears a conversation being held underneath himself on the boat. As we are later told, this conversation is being had by two members of the crew about the infamous 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 under 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 as evil as the false images we commonly project upon 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 untrammelled 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 and how the development of our industrial society has altered it. 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 under 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 current society, but one which rather forces us to question the foundations such a society is built upon while analyzing the few remaining primitive communities to arrive at a greater understanding of vital concepts such as human nature, international cooperation, well-being, and so on.

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