Introduction

The aim of this book is to provide a brief but substantive philosophical introduction to one of the most influential texts in the history of European philosophy, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1755) or, as it is more commonly called, the Second Discourse. (It is the Second Discourse because it follows an earlier one, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* [1751], both of which were written in response to essay writing competitions sponsored by the Academy of Dijon.) This book is an introduction because it presupposes no previous familiarity with the text – apart from one's having read it! – and it is philosophical because rather than being a commentary in the usual sense of that term it aims at distilling and reconstructing the central *argument* of the Second Discourse, a task that turns out to be surprisingly difficult. I decided to write this book one day when, teaching the text to undergraduates for what could have been the hundredth time, I realized that neither I nor any of my students was able to give a concise reformulation of Rousseau's responses to the two apparently straightforward questions he takes himself to be answering, namely, what the source of inequality among humans is and whether it is justifiable. The text, I came to see, is filled with dazzling insights and masterly rhetorical flourishes, but it is also a tortuous maze whose argumentative thread is extremely difficult to keep track of. The consequence is that the Second Discourse is one of the most widely read texts in the Western philosophical canon – a surprisingly large number of undergraduates in the US are required to read it at some point in their studies – and at the same time one of the least philosophically understood. This is a pity – and a condition this book hopes to remedy – not only because the Second Discourse influenced a highly diverse group of philosophers in succeeding centuries (Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and

Freud, for example) but also because it contains a coherent argument that offers influential and still relevant answers to a number of questions that ought to be central to contemporary social and political philosophy. As I will argue here, Rousseau's text contains a sustained, comprehensive argument that aims to establish not only what makes social inequalities objectionable (when they are) but also why inequality is so prominent and stubborn a feature of human societies.

Perhaps one reason the Second Discourse has proved to be so difficult to comprehend is that the position it articulates is far more convoluted than its non-technical prose and the apparent simplicity of its questions lead readers to expect. For Rousseau ends up giving surprisingly complex answers to both of his guiding questions. With regard to the first, he argues both that inequality is not a direct or necessary consequence of human nature (or of nature more generally) and that the basic conditions of human social existence make pernicious forms of inequality – along with many other social ills – nearly unavoidable. With regard to the second, he argues that while most (but not all) familiar forms of social inequality are morally objectionable, they are not bad in themselves but only in virtue of certain consequences they tend to produce. Although it is difficult to read this off the surface of the text, Rousseau offers a set of criteria for distinguishing acceptable from inacceptable forms of equality and avoids the simplistic utopian view that social inequality in all its forms is to be criticized.

The contemporary relevance of this topic is difficult to overstate. In the two decades following the end of communism in Eastern Europe, social inequality in nearly every part of the world increased dramatically. (And, contrary to what those who benefit most from capitalism would like us to believe, the end of European communism has something to do with this trend, even if it does not explain it entirely.) The form of social inequality easiest to track is economic inequality, and empirical evidence abounds in support of the claim that not only in poor, developing countries but even in the richest and most technologically advanced – the US provides an especially shocking example – inequality is much greater than at any time in the recent past and that in the absence of forceful political intervention by those harmed by it the gap between rich and poor will only continue to grow wider. Statistics that prove this thesis are easy to find: in 2007 one-third of the US's wealth

was owned by just 1 percent of the country's population; in the period between 2002 and 2007 more than 65 percent of the gain in total national income went to those who were already in the wealthiest 1 percent; and in 2010 the average CEO earned 243 times as much as the typical wage earner![1]

Many more statistics could be adduced to show that economic inequality in most of the world has reached catastrophic proportions, but such statements of fact quickly dull one's sensitivity to a phenomenon that has become so obvious that virtually anyone with two eyes and a minimal ability to perceive social reality can recognize it as a cause for alarm. In general, philosophy cannot contribute much to the production of empirical data or to the explanation of particular economic trends of the sort I have just mentioned. What philosophy can attempt, however, is to understand why, very generally, inequality is so pervasive a feature of the societies we live in and to investigate when (and why) social inequalities become morally objectionable and legitimate targets of social critique. This is precisely what Rousseau undertakes in the Second Discourse, and my aim in this book is to show that his answers to both sets of questions remain compelling today. No contemporary philosophical treatment of inequality can afford, in my view, to bypass the explanation and critique of the same phenomenon given by Rousseau more than two and a half centuries ago. Although much about social life in the West has changed since then, not everything has, and we foolishly deprive ourselves of the advantages of our rich philosophical legacy when we adopt the self-flattering view that our forebears have nothing to teach us about the problems that plague contemporary societies.

Rousseau's Second Discourse, as its title tells us, is about the *origin* and *foundations* of human inequality (where, as will become clear below, the latter term refers to the normative status of inequality). The dual focus of Rousseau's text finds expression in the two questions proposed by the Academy of Dijon as the subject matter of the competition for which the Second Discourse was composed, namely: what is the origin of human inequality, and is it authorized by – does

[1] These examples come from Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2012), 2–3. Stiglitz's exhaustive treatment and critique of contemporary inequality makes an excellent empirical companion piece to the Second Discourse.

it have its foundations in – natural law? (*DI*, 130/*OC III*, 129).[2] The greatest obstacle to comprehending the argument of the Second Discourse is the assumption that our own first take on what these questions mean accurately captures Rousseau's understanding of them. In fact, both of the central ideas here – those of "origin" and of "being authorized by natural law" – turn out to be much more intricate and idiosyncratic than they initially appear to be, and for this reason much of the interpretive work undertaken in the following pages will be devoted to figuring out how these ideas are understood in the Second Discourse.

Even before this interpretive work has begun, however, many readers are able to have some sense of the most philosophically perplexing aspect of the Second Discourse: its unexplained assumption that there is a deep connection between these two inquiries – that is, between apparently descriptive or explanatory claims about the origin of inequality and plainly normative claims about whether inequality is legitimate or justified (whether it is "authorized by" or has its "foundation in" natural law). To contemporary readers, the linking of these two questions cannot but seem to rest on a fatal confusion of normative and non-normative issues: why should determining where a thing comes from be essential to assessing whether it is good or morally permissible or valuable in some way? Normally both philosophy and common sense insist on the logical independence of these questions such that, for example, the (factual) question of under what historical conditions the Electoral College came to be established in the US is mostly irrelevant to the (normative) question of whether one should now regard it as a good procedure for electing a US President and as an institution worthy of continued support. For this reason a central aim of any reconstruction of the Second Discourse must be to give a coherent account of why these questions are as interconnected as Rousseau apparently takes them to be, and one criterion for the success of such a reconstruction must be whether the sense it attaches to the Second Discourse's two central questions allows their alleged interdependence to be comprehended.

To put these points somewhat differently: Rousseau conceives of the Second Discourse as providing a kind of *genealogy* of human inequality that is inextricably bound up with the project of evaluating – more

[2] See the conventions used for citing Rousseau's works in the List of abbreviations.

precisely, criticizing – the very phenomenon whose origins his genealogy undertakes to elucidate.[3] In this respect the Second Discourse can be seen as a founding text of a long tradition in modern European philosophy that takes some version of the project of genealogy to be essential to the normative evaluation of the object of genealogical inquiry. To mention only the most obvious example: Nietzsche in the opening pages of the *Genealogy of Morals* defines his task in that work by posing two questions whose similarity to Rousseau's is unmistakable: "*Under what conditions* did human beings devise [the] value judgments good and evil? And *what value* do they themselves possess?"[4] As it turns out, Rousseau has his own distinctive understanding of what it is to provide a genealogy of something such that uncovering its origins is essential to assessing its value. Even though Rousseau's conception of what it is to search for the origins of a social phenomenon such as human inequality – as distinct from purely natural things or processes – differs substantially from those of the philosophical genealogists who follow him, figuring out how Rousseau links the two central questions of the Second Discourse is of great relevance not only for grasping his own, independently valuable views on the legitimacy of inequality but also for understanding how later philosophers have attempted similarly structured genealogies of their own. Thus, answering these two questions and articulating their connection is the principal task I undertake in the pages that follow.

It is possible to make some progress in understanding the coupling of these two questions once one notices that, for Rousseau, seeking the origin of inequality amounts to asking whether inequality *comes from nature*. This realization helps to make some initial sense of the dual character of the Second Discourse's project because nature, even for us, often carries normative connotations. When we say, for example, "it's natural for humans to care more about their own well-being than that of

[3] Rousseau himself describes the project of the Second Discourse as a genealogy in a letter to the Archbishop of Paris (LCB, 28/*OC* IV, 936).

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1967), Preface, §3; emphases added. Other versions of this project are essential to Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, Feuerbach's critique of Christian theology, Marx's account of ideology, the *Abbau* of metaphysics proposed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, and Foucault's genealogies of various social phenomena that define Western modernity. Even more obviously, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is inconceivable without the idea that reconstructing the history of our normative practices is essential to assessing their legitimacy.

distant others," we typically mean not only to make a statement about how humans are in fact (by virtue of their nature) inclined to behave but also, perhaps implicitly, to endorse such behavior as justified or acceptable, precisely because it is "natural" and because to expect humans to act otherwise would be to place overly burdensome demands on them, given the kind of creature they are by nature. Saying "it's natural for humans to care most about their own good" normally implies: "It's (most of the time) OK, legitimate, fully in order that they do so." It is worth remembering that this tendency to imbue "nature" and "natural" with normative significance was even stronger for Rousseau and his contemporaries than it is for us. When John Locke, for example, articulated the laws of nature, he attributed to them exactly the dual significance referred to above: they both describe how humans are inclined to (and generally do) act, and at the same time they endorse that "natural" behavior as good.[5] Similarly, Adam Smith's claim that "commercial society" (capitalism) is natural is logically inseparable from his judgment that it is a *fitting* economic system for humans, given their nature.[6] Merely mentioning these examples, of course, does not yet explain or justify the mix of descriptive (or explanatory) and normative elements contained in them – a good deal regarding Rousseau's use of "nature" remains to be said in the pages that follow – but it may help to diminish the initial perplexity that the assumed connection between the Second Discourse's two main questions inevitably arouses.

As I suggested above, nature is not the only central concept of the Second Discourse in need of clarification. "Origin," too, is a potentially misleading term, and understanding what Rousseau is after when he inquires into inequality's origin is essential to appreciating the power and relevance of his argument. The most common misunderstanding is encouraged by Rousseau's own description of his text as a genealogy, as well as by the example I introduced above (the US Electoral College) in order to draw attention to the perplexing character of the presumed connection between the Second Discourse's explanatory and normative ambitions. Usually when one sets out to construct a genealogy in order

[5] John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge University Press, 1960), Chapter 2.
[6] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York: Modern Library, 2000), xxiv, 14–18, 54.

to explain a thing's origin, one means to offer a causal, historical account of a succession of actual events that led to the "birth" – the coming into existence – of the specific phenomenon in question. This, however, is *not* what Rousseau is up to when he inquires into the origin of human inequality – despite the fact that he sometimes talks as though it were (*DI*, 133, 186/*OC* III, 133, 191–2), a fact that understandably confuses many readers. Most important, he is not asking how some singular phenomenon (the US Electoral College, for example) came into being at a particular place and time (in Philadelphia in 1787). Instead, his inquiry starts from a general observation about the pervasiveness of inequality in the various human societies known to him – through his own experience, to be sure, but also from the testimony of travelers, the accounts of historians, and so on – and proceeds to ask not how inequality actually came into the world but why, once there, it persists and is so widespread. In other words, the question at the heart of Rousseau's inquiry into the origin of inequality can be formulated as follows: what accounts for the striking fact that nearly all of the human societies known to us are characterized by significant inequalities among their members in wealth, power, and prestige? What forces must be at work – not merely in a specific time and place but more generally – if inequality is so common as to appear to be an enduring feature of the human condition?[7] Much more will need to be said in the following chapters about the kind of genealogical account the Second Discourse undertakes to construct; for now it is sufficient to note that its aim is not to account for the origin of inequality in any straightforwardly historical sense of the term. As we will see below, asking about the origin of inequality need not be construed as a request for an explanation of how this or that particular instance of inequality in fact came to be.

The dual project of the Second Discourse might strike us as a bit less foreign if we see that it is a response to classical Greek treatments of the origin and foundations of social inequality. Both Plato and

[7] In this respect Rousseau's genealogy differs importantly from Nietzsche's. The latter's inquiry into the origin of good and evil is, at least to some degree, an inquiry into the actual historical events that issued in the birth of a specific mode of evaluation, alternatives to which are not only possible but have actually been realized in other times and places. And yet, something of Rousseau's project remains in Nietzsche's: insofar as *ressentiment* forms part of his answer to the question of slave morality's origin, Nietzsche, too, aspires to account for the persistence and pervasiveness of slave morality in times and places other than those in which it first came into existence.

Aristotle, for example, ask versions of the same two questions, and both respond by arguing that there is a basis in nature for human inequality. Since nature endows humans with different capacities and talents – differences that imply a natural hierarchy among humans – it qualifies as the source, or origin, of inequality. Moreover, this natural inequality is the foundation of social inequalities; it explains why there should be inequalities in the world and, very generally, who should occupy which positions. Actual social inequalities are legitimate – authorized by nature – to the extent that they reflect natural inequalities. For Aristotle there are natural masters and natural slaves, as well as natural differences, justifying inequalities, between Greeks and barbarians. For Plato there are three types of souls corresponding to three kinds of metal: gold, silver, and bronze. For Aristotle these natural differences justify many existing inequalities; for Plato they show the unnaturalness of existing political arrangements and establish the need for radical political reform if society is to be as reason (and nature) demand. For both, calling the differences "natural" implies that they are not products of human will as well as that they are unalterable; there is nothing human will could or should do to change them.

It is interesting from the modern perspective, by the way, that the differences that justify inequality for Plato and Aristotle are not *deserved* by those who benefit from them; they reflect the natural merits of individuals and are not in any sense earned by those who have them. In contrast, many modern philosophers – the so-called luck egalitarians – are obsessed with the idea that inequalities can be justified only if the better off deserve what they have, where deserved advantages are usually understood as those that depend on one's own (metaphysically) free actions, as opposed to what they have obtained through good luck, for example, from rich parents or good genes.[8] (As we will see, Rousseau does not share this view.) Equally interesting is the fact that for these

[8] For a description and critique of luck egalitarianism, see Elizabeth S. Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109 (January 1999), 287–337. While I find Anderson's critique compelling (as would Rousseau), one can still ask whether non-luck egalitarians can do completely without the idea that desert plays some role in determining which inequalities are morally legitimate: is it possible, for example, to reject the practice of inheriting advantages of wealth without some appeal to the idea that the sons and daughters in question have done nothing to deserve their parents' property? For a clear example of luck egalitarianism see Robert Dworkin, "What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (10) 4, 1981, 283–345.

classical thinkers, justified inequalities in power, authority, or prestige do not necessarily translate into justified inequalities in wealth. This is most obvious in the case of Plato, who restricts the pursuit of wealth to those who occupy the lowest place in the natural hierarchy of souls. In today's world it is nearly impossible to imagine that advantages in power or prestige could be separated from great wealth, and Rousseau picks up his pen at a time when this is beginning to be true of his world, too (*DI*, 183–4/*OC* III, 189).

One of the decisive differences between the classical and the modern world is that the latter rejects the view that nature can be appealed to in order to legitimize social inequalities, a position that generally goes hand in hand with asserting the fundamental equality, from the point of view of morality, of all human beings. Just what this fundamental equality consists in and what it implies for social philosophy are vexed issues to which modern philosophers give different answers. Yet no matter how these questions are answered, asserting the fundamental moral equality of humans poses a great problem that the ancients, given their answer to the question of inequality's origin, did not have to face: how can social inequality, a seemingly permanent feature of modern society, be justified if it cannot be traced back to the way that nature (or God) set up the world and if instead there is a prima facie presumption that no individual has any claim to better treatment by society than any other? Does accepting the moral equality of all humans imply that only a society with no inequalities can be justified? And, if so, does that imply that modern societies are hopelessly corrupt?

It is worth considering how modern "common sense" tends to respond to these questions. When asked what explains the pervasiveness of inequality in human societies, the "person on the street" is likely to reply with some version of the claim that inequality is a more or less necessary consequence of basic needs and desires that motivate human behavior everywhere and at all times, which, in conjunction with certain constant features of the human condition, tend "naturally" to produce a wide variety of inequalities. Some who take this position will simply attribute inequalities to an inborn competitive urge – a drive to gain advantage over others for its own sake, merely in order to experience oneself, and to see oneself perceived by those around one, as superior to others. On such a view, inequality is a prominent feature of human societies because proving oneself superior to others satisfies a

universal and fundamental urge of human nature, and for this reason this response would count as one version of the view that inequality has – to use Rousseau's terminology – its origin in nature. (Of course, this appeal to nature – to the competitive urges of human nature – still differs fundamentally from the classical view.) Perhaps a more common response would be that, although the desire to achieve superiority for its own sake is by no means rare, it is neither universal nor intrinsic to human nature and, so, is not the most fundamental explanation of the widespread inequality we find around us. Instead – so this second response – widespread inequality is mostly an unintended but inevitable consequence of a conjunction of several factors, all of which are more or less constant features of the human condition: an unequal distribution of natural endowments, the universal desire to do as well for oneself as possible, and material scarcity. Starting out with unequal endowments, individuals who seek to maximize their well-being will inevitably end up in positions that are superior or inferior to others', even if what they desire most fundamentally is not to outdo their fellow beings but only to do as well as possible for themselves. In addition to this, material scarcity provides such individuals with an incentive actually to seek to outdo their peers, not because they desire superiority itself but because under conditions of scarcity, achieving superiority is often the only means of getting what one wants in the first place (to improve one's own non-comparative level of well-being).

If taken only this far, this second response would also locate the origin of inequality in nature, as Rousseau understands that idea. Most who begin down this path, however, are likely to go one step farther (in the direction of luck egalitarianism) and introduce a further, *non*-natural element into their account in order to explain why some individuals develop and exercise their natural endowments more than others. This additional element is individual "effort," usually understood as an effect of the individual's free will, and for that reason this new element extends the explanation of inequality beyond the realm of the purely natural. (As we will see in the following chapter, Rousseau accepts this sharp demarcation between natural phenomena and those that depend on free will without, however, appealing to desert as a source of legitimate inequalities.) On this most sophisticated commonsense view, the pervasiveness of social inequality is due mostly to natural factors that escape human control – unequal