

Rousseau's State of Nature and Its Problems

Kefei Zhang

School of Humanities, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

Keywords: Rousseau, State of nature, Logic of contingency

Abstract: Unlike Hobbes or Locke, the state of nature in Rousseau's opinion has a "peaceful" attribute from beginning to end. This hypothesis helps him to criticize Hobbes and Locke's natural law theory, but it also brings about a logical contradiction: why the state of nature needs to develop into the state of society afterwards? Rousseau used the logic of "contingency" to cover up the problem, but he did not fundamentally solve the contradiction.

1. Introduction

Rousseau's political theory criticized the natural right theory proposed by Hobbes and Locke. His criticism of the modern natural legal rights theory is not an external criticism, but an internal criticism which is proposed based on the logic of the natural legal rights theory. By redefining the state of nature, Rousseau constructs a socialization process which seems consistent with the theory of natural legal rights at surface, but actually has the opposite nature. He criticized the natural legal rights theory in that way. Therefore, studying Rousseau's state of nature is of great significance for understanding his political philosophy.[1]

2. Rousseau's "State of Nature" and Problems

Rousseau's state of nature hopes to provide a primitive state which is beautified with emotions in the anthropological sense. In that state, humans, like other animals, walk leisurely in the forest. They are happy, content and enjoy animal-like happiness. They need to obtain nutrients to protect themselves; but Rousseau's view is different from Hobbes' theory, which holds that people are greedy beasts and are naturally hostile to every individual of the same kind. Human beings are irrational; they do not have rational calculation in modern sense. Therefore, they are unable to transcend immediate needs and pursue wealth for long-term interests, as Locke imagined. They are guided by two passions: keeping desires and some pity for the suffering of individuals of his own kind. Due to the latter passion, human beings would not treat others brutally, unless it is in conflict with their self-preservation. Human beings have no virtue. If there is something that can be called as virtue, it just means that they do not harm to each other. We can also say that all people are equal in nature. It seems that this kind of equality means, all the flesh exists in a certain corner, because there is almost no communication between people. Therefore, it denies the terrorist balanced equality proposed by Hobbes, in which everyone can kill others in the same way. The disputes over property rights in the Locke sense cannot exist. There is even no family. The relationship between men and women is accidental. At present, they instinctively take care of their children without any authority and responsibility in the modern sense.[2]

It can be said in Rousseau's view, the primitive state of nature in anthropological sense is the state of peace and tranquility as a whole, and the state of independence, equality, and freedom for individuals. He described the peaceful and beautiful state of nature for a retro feeling. But the more important reason is that, the state of nature he constitutes must be completely different from the view of of Hobbes and Locke. At the same time, Rousseau had to face a logical dilemma. If the original state is so peaceful and beautiful, and people do not have any sense of hostility, the history should stay in its original state. There is no need to enter the political society. But the real history developed in the direction of "degeneration" and became a political society.

3. Rousseau's Solution

In fact, at the beginning of *On Government*, Locke also defined the state of nature as the nature of peace. In order to connect theory with reality, Locke continued to modify his definition, until it contained factors of war like the view of Hobbes. According to Locke's experience, to criticize the natural rights theory and politics in reality, Rousseau must change the definition of the state of nature. The definition should contain real social contradictions and problems, and provide solutions to real political problems. That means, the scholar should recognize, his description of the state of nature is unsuccessful; the state of nature should develop towards the direction which includes the state of war.

But for Rousseau, once he took the old path of Locke, the task of criticizing the theory of natural right was doomed to fail. Therefore, in order to insist on the assumption of the primitive state of mankind and the peaceful and good nature, and explain why mankind enters the political society, we must find a different way of argumentation.

In fact, Rousseau used the logic of "contingency" to solve the problem. He regards the evolution from primitive natural state to the civilized state as an unforeseen accidental result. Specifically, he claimed that natural catastrophes forced primitive persons to maintain closer contact with each other; people had to rely on and cooperate with each other. Languages, families, the sense of contract, the sense of morality and the sense of obligation formed one after another.[3] But they still cherished the freedom: they would refuse to fulfill the contract to keep the freedom. At the same time, there were frictions among people; human beings learned to retaliate. When there were conflicts between loving oneself and sympathizing others, people tended to choose self-love. Sympathy, as the foundation of human nature in the primitive state of nature, was disappearing. The battles between humans began; people reached the edge of breaking away from the primitive state of nature and transitioning to a civilized or political society. In the end, the establishment of private property became the real reason for the formation of civil societies.

In essence, the history of primitive people after catastrophes described by Rousseau is roughly the same process from the pre-political social state to the political society described by Locke. But their comments are completely different. Locke believed that compared with the disorder state and wars before the political society, entering the political society was historical progress. Rousseau, as a critic of Hobbes and Locke, used the peaceful and good natural state before catastrophes as the standard; he believed that the transition to a political society was a historical degradation.

Locke praised property rights, since it could increase social wealth and natural productivity. But Rousseau regarded it as the origin of inequality, and believed that it was the greatest evil that caused the collapse and degeneration of the primitive natural state. The founder of the political society is the person who completely freed human beings from the beautiful state of nature, and the person who first said "this land is mine". In the primitive natural society, humans did not consider the future. However, with the establishment of property, mankind began to regard things that they created by their efforts as their own. Mankind started to have anticipation, and tried their best to increase and protect their property. This desire continuously stimulates their desire for power. Since different people had different skills and talents, during that enclosure movement, some people accumulated more lands than they needed, while others became extremely poor, which was beyond the scope of coordination in the natural state. Without the adjustment of judges, possessors and non-possessors will enter a state of war inevitably. Finally, the establishment of the state is a complete scam. Rich men proposed to establish a state in the form of contract to protect private property, while the poor kept silent due to their fear of terror. So far, mankind entered the political society, and established the inequality of power and status legally and peacefully. Rousseau signed in the preface to the book, *A Discourse upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind*. [4]

"... by the continual jarring of the passions, has, so to speak, changed in appearance, so as to be hardly recognisable. Instead of a being, acting constantly from fixed and invariable principles, instead of that celestial and majestic simplicity, impressed on it by its divine Author, we find in it only the frightful contrast of passion mistaking itself for reason, and of understanding grown

delirious. It is still more cruel that, as every advance made by the human species removes it still farther from its primitive state, the more discoveries we make, the more we deprive ourselves of the means of making the most important of all. Thus it is, in one sense, by our very study of man, that the knowledge of him is put out of our power.”

Starting from the state of nature, Rousseau deduced that the entry into a civil society from the state of nature and the establishment of people's property rights in that process originated from the scam of the rich, which is the biggest depravity in human history. In this way, Rousseau went deep into the internal logic of the theory of natural rights and criticized that theory.

4. Further Reflection on Rousseau's Plan

As mentioned above, starting from a primitive state of peace, tranquility, without hostility and full of compassion, Rousseau explained the evolution from this natural state to the political society; he also used the peaceful and beautiful state he originally assumed to criticize this evolutionary process. The key is that he concealed all logical omissions by the concept of “contingency”.

The accidental catastrophe theory divides Rousseau's natural state into two parts, namely, the peaceful, beautiful and simple natural state before catastrophes (hereinafter referred to as the “pre-disaster natural state”) and the state of nature that is disputed and permanently marked by the degenerate nature after catastrophes (hereinafter referred to as the “state of nature after the disaster”). The latter one was more closely connected, and had more disputes. He used the post-disaster natural state to open up the evolutionary path of political society, and used the pre-disaster natural state as an ethical standard, criticizing this process as the degeneration of civilization. But the question is, for these two different natural states, is it reasonable for him to use the former one as the standard to criticize the process of political society triggered by the post-natural state?[5]

The key lies in the understanding of “contingency” in “accidental catastrophes”. Rousseau emphasized that it was a kind of contingency; he wanted to distinguish the relationship between the natural states before and after the disaster. In particular, he wanted to emphasize that the natural state after the disaster was not inevitable result of the natural state before the disaster. The factors such as unfriendliness, strife and hostility between people are caused in the natural state after the disaster, and have nothing to do with the peaceful and perfect natural state before the disaster. We can use an analogy to explain this opinion. There is a group of white sheep and a group of black pigs (black pigs are not born from white sheep). It will be definitely be a joke if the white sheep uses its own standards to question and criticize black pigs, why your descendants are so black? If the white sheep engages in animal racism and laugh at the original group of black pigs for being too black, it is forgivable; but if they laugh because black pigs give birth to black piglets instead of white lambs, there must be something wrong with their cognition levels. Similarly, if there is no relationship between the natural states before and after the disaster, then the two sections of the natural state should be evolved from different origins; they have the parallel relationship. Their values and development paths should be independent. It is ridiculous to criticize the post-disaster natural state and the way of political civilization with values in the natural state before the disaster. It is unreasonable for Rousseau to criticize the post-disaster natural state, or to criticize the development path of the post-disaster natural state in the direction of necessity according to its own logic. He should probably say that catastrophe is the culprit, but catastrophe is an “accidental” event for him. We can say that the original state of nature is unfortunate, but it is unreasonable to criticize and condemn “contingency”.

Of course, Rousseau could insist that it was reasonable to criticize the development logic of the natural state after disasters with the performance of the “pre-disaster natural state”, but the only reason he can provide was, both the natural states before and after catastrophes are states of nature. But in this case, the two natural states could not be regarded as two different things in nature; they are only different stages of the same history. In this case, the logic of “contingency” of catastrophes is not suitable. It should be said that no matter what happened, the natural state after the disaster is the inevitable consequence of the natural state before the disaster. In this case, the “war

consciousness” and the “war state” contained in the natural state after the disaster cannot come from elsewhere; they must be included or nurtured in the natural state before the disaster. Under that situation, Rousseau’s assumption that the original primitive state has no elements of war is problematic.

5. Conclusion

The root of this problem is that, the assumption of the state of nature cannot violate the “logic of history”. If the state of nature is fully completed, and it only has the tendency of peace rather than the tendency of wars, there will be no need for subsequent development. Locke made this mistake at the beginning, but he quickly revised it in subsequent theories. Rousseau, out of the need to criticize Hobbes and Locke, was unwilling to modify his description of the state of nature. (Once he modified, he supported Locke's ideological line, and the criticism would fail). If Rousseau did not use the “ambiguous contingency” to cover up his logical flaws, his theory would not be established from the beginning.

This also shows that as long as some people want to set a state of nature theoretically, they can not completely skirt the issue, “the state of nature is the definition of the state of war” proposed by Hobbes. The state of nature must include the state of war; that is the intended meaning of the state of nature.

References

- [1] Rousseau, *On the Origin of Human Inequality*, Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2009.
- [2] Rousseau, *Walking and Reverie*, Beijing: October Literature and Art Publishing House, 2005.
- [3] John T. Scott, *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012
- [4] Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts (First Discourse) and Polemics*, Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 1992.
- [5] Rousseau, *The Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. I-II, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915.