

Rev. Logan Gates

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Genesis and Rousseau: A Tale of Two Falls

Introduction

Behind the disparate challenges of transgenderism, critical race theory, and cancel culture, a particular story is being told. Like Genesis 1-3, it is the story of a Fall. It begins with a picture of innate goodness, interrupted by a series of events which cannot be undone. It sees these events as having brought about systems of oppression – patriarchal, racial, and neo-colonial – which are now embedded in institutions. The “middle” of the story is where humanity stands today, as protagonists with the moral duty of bringing about the happy ending, by dismantling those unjust systems and setting free the individual. How does this story compare with the Biblical one? What are the implications for the Church as it seeks to proclaim the *Gospel* story by its liturgy, witness, and charity? The aim of this essay is to compare these two stories, to draw out both commonalities and differences, and to offer by way of conclusion practical recommendations for the Church today.

To understand the Gospel story, the Church looks to Holy Scripture, but to understand the story of today’s culture, this essay will look to the eighteenth-century political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The reasons for choosing Rousseau are twofold. First, he is a pivot point in the history of philosophy, between the “early-moderns” like Hobbes and Locke and the “late-moderns” like Hegel and Marx. These later thinkers brought a new emphasis on how systems, institutions, and structures *shape* human beings, for better or for worse. By and large, Rousseau sees these systems as having shaped humans for the *worse*; he famously begins his *Social Contract* with the words, “Man is born free, and

everywhere he is in chains.”¹ Karl Marx builds on Rousseau to condemn what he sees as economic chains, embedded in the relationships of production, while Wilhelm Reich decries the chains of patriarchal, heteronormative institutions like marriage.² In short, today’s cultural story, with its focus on systems of oppression, finds one of its earliest tellers in Rousseau. The second reason this essay focuses on Rousseau is that, because he lived in a broadly Christian culture (born in post-Calvin Geneva of all places), he was forced to articulate his philosophy in explicit dialogue with the Christian faith. One of the clearest places he does this is in his *Second Discourse*, formally entitled the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1766).³ This work is an account of humanity’s origins and can be read as a retelling of Genesis 1-3, with points of commonality and departure readily apparent. This essay will compare the narrative arcs of the *Second Discourse* with Genesis 1-3, before concluding with practical recommendations for the Church as it seeks to proclaim the Gospel with love to Rousseau’s philosophical descendants today. The thesis of this essay is that a comparison between Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* and Genesis 1-3 highlights three distinctives of the contemporary narrative: human autonomy, human innocence, and political apocalypticism.

Initial Goodness: Dependence vs. Autonomy

Both Rousseau and Genesis depict man in his original state as better off than today. In the Genesis account, the goodness of this original state stems from the presence of harmonious relationships, both between human beings and between

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “The Social Contract” in *Rousseau: The Social Contract and other later political writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), I:1

² See Carl Trueman, *Strange New World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 80-88.

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men” in *Rousseau: The Discourses and other early political writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). All subsequent references to the *Second Discourse* will be from this edition and abbreviated as *SD*.

human beings and God. In the Bible, God makes human beings *social* from the beginning. He explicitly condemns the notion of man's independence, saying, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."⁴ The goodness of this arrangement is underscored by Adam's response to it, bursting into song at the creation of Eve.⁵ However, the primary relationship in Genesis 1-3 is the relationship between humanity and God. God "walks" with Adam and Eve in the garden, reflecting how they were "communing intimately" with Him.⁶ While Adam and Eve are created equally in God's image,⁷ Genesis describes the relationship between humans and God in terms of inequality. This inequality is evident through God's giving Adam and Eve commands, such as "be fruitful and multiply" and "have dominion" over the other creatures.⁸ God gives Adam and Eve a prohibitive command as well: "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'⁹ The harmony between God and man before the Fall appears to stem from man's ongoing obedience to these commands.

In contrast, Rousseau primarily frames the original goodness of humanity in a "negative" sense, that is, not in terms of the presence of harmonious relationships, but in terms of the absence of unjust systems of oppression. Rousseau uses the image of a weathered, seaside statue to describe how man's nature has decayed over time, on account of society:

Like the statue of Glaucus which time, sea, and storms had so far disfigured that it less resembled a God than a ferocious Beast, the human soul altered in

⁴ Genesis 2:18 (ESV). All subsequent quotations will be from this translation.

⁵ Genesis 2:23.

⁶ Thomas Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 98.

⁷ Genesis 1:27.

⁸ Genesis 1:28.

⁹ Genesis 2:16-7.

the lap of society by a thousand forever recurring causes, by the acquisition of a mass of knowledge and errors, by the changes that have taken place in the constitution of Bodies, and by the continual impact of the passions. (*SD* Preface:1)

Because Rousseau primarily understands man's original goodness in terms of the absence of later corruption, there is little positive content as to what that original goodness entailed. One key characteristic of this state, however, is autonomy; Rousseau writes that early man "had neither harm to fear nor good to hope for from anyone" (*SD* I:34). However, while autonomous in this sense, early man was not completely solitary; Rousseau argues that man was at his happiest when he moved into family life (*SD* II:12). Humans at this early stage enjoyed social relationships but did not *depend* on others, in contrast to the Genesis account, where Adam must depend on Eve as his "helper" and on God as his creator and sustainer. The Genesis account begins with dependency, which Rousseau exchanges for autonomy. In Rousseau's Garden of Eden, God is nowhere to be found. His very existence is too great a threat to the absolute autonomy Rousseau idealized.

Irrevocable Interruption: Original Sin vs. Innocence

Both Genesis and Rousseau point to specific events in human history that have irrevocably interrupted this superior state of early humanity, but they disagree sharply as to whether man should be held responsible. In Genesis, the circumstances that brought about the Fall were a test of obedience for Adam and Eve. The first humans exercise their faculty of freedom against the explicit command of God. They go on to blame their disobedience on others – including on

God.¹⁰ That God finds Adam and Eve morally culpable is confirmed by his retributive punishment of them and the irrevocable consequences that follow. Human nature becomes sinful, and the account of Cain's city in Genesis 4 shows how that sinfulness proved capable of taking root at a *systemic* level.

For Rousseau, humanity's Fall also consisted in certain irrevocable events early in its history. Rousseau argues that these events occurred when humans employed their reason to develop crafts like "metallurgy and agriculture" (*SD* II:20). Presumably because of the complexity of these technologies, man first "needed the help of another." This ushered in a new social dynamic, which Rousseau describes as "the first duties of civility." By *depending* on the help of another, man could now be said to "owe" something to that person. From this point onward, Rousseau writes, "any intentional wrong became an affront because, together with the harm resulting from the injury, the offended party saw in it contempt for his person, often more unbearable than the harm itself" (*SD* II:17). For Rousseau, these systemic "duties" left humans vulnerable to this deeper kind of hurt, at the "psychic" level, and have since snowballed into the oppressive institutions that have come to erode man's happy, primordial state.¹¹

A crucial difference between Rousseau and Genesis 1-3 is that, for Rousseau, man is emphatically *not* to blame for crossing this threshold. Were Rousseau to condemn the man who used his reason to invent agriculture, he would also need to condemn the man who used his reason to usher humanity into the happy stage of family life. Along these lines, it's not surprising that one of the Christian doctrines Rousseau liked least was that of original sin. In the *Letter to Beaumont*, Rousseau writes, "How I hate the discouraging doctrine of our hard

¹⁰ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis – Part I: From Adam to Noah*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1961), 157; Pangle, 83.

¹¹ Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 114.

Theologians,” which depicts humanity as “this whole troop of rascals... for whom [the Christian priest] has inspired us with such horror.”¹² Rousseau’s account of the Fall finds a way to say of the world, “This is not what was meant to be,” without laying the blame on humanity as a whole. Marx builds on this very idea to divide the world into oppressors (owners of the means of production) and victims (the labouring classes). Without a doctrine of original sin applying to *everyone*, victims can be presumed to be wholly innocent, and oppressors wholly evil. A similar dynamic can be said to be at work in critical race theory, falling along racial lines, and is perhaps most clearly seen in cancel culture, where people’s membership in an oppressive hierarchy renders them irrevocably culpable in a way that non-members are not. It becomes a moral offense to “reward” oppressors with a platform. This idea finds roots in Rousseau’s exchange of original sin for original innocence.

The Fall-Out: Qualified Hope vs. Political Apocalypticism

For both Rousseau and Genesis, these irrevocable events have had lasting impact and inform what right behaviour looks like now. Whereas in Eden, Adam and Eve “walked” with God, with their expulsion came the loss of that kind of intimacy.¹³ The pains of childbirth, the toil of tilling the soil, and death itself¹⁴ now remind Adam and Eve – and their descendants – that they are experiencing the ongoing effects of God’s punishment because of their sin. Genesis 1-3 does not, however, end without hope. God speaks of a descendant of Eve who will “crush” the head of the serpent, foreshadowing Christ’s atoning death and resurrection. On the whole, Genesis 1-3 enjoins the Christian to avoid the sin of Adam and Eve by

¹² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau citoyen de Genève à Christophe de Beaumont, archevêque de Paris* in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. IV, 940n. Quoted in Melzer, 18-9.

¹³ Pangle, 98.

¹⁴ Genesis 3:17-19.

submitting to God with humility and dependence, trusting in His provision of a Saviour, and, by the Spirit, being “conformed to the image of his Son,”¹⁵ joining in His work of undoing the effects of the Fall. Such work must include recognizing and responding to ways sin becomes embedded in systems and institutions. Genesis leaves Christians with a qualified hope; they have a task to do, but ultimately only God can bring us back to Eden – and in His second coming, He will do it.

Rousseau argues that humans have two options for responding to the corruption of society. The first is the hermit’s life. For those exceptional enough to bear it, Rousseau advises them to “leave behind in the Cities your fatal acquisitions, your restless minds, your corrupted hearts, and your unbridled desires” and to “go into the woods to lose the sight and memory of your contemporaries’ crimes”. (*SD* Note IX: 14). Nevertheless, because Rousseau realized living this way would be like learning to live again on “grass and acorns,” he offers another option. If man cannot totally abandon those relationships of dependence, he should *channel* them in a new direction, by reforging systems, institutions, and structures “to forestall, cure, and palliate the host of abuses and of evils that are forever ready to overwhelm us” and to thereby restore man to his original “psychic unity” (*SD* Note IX: 14).

Rousseau wasn’t sure that the right systems could be developed to undo fully the harm that had been done. Marx and Reich brought an optimism in this regard that Rousseau lacked, holding that society *could* be put to rights if only the old systems were completely torn down. Optimism is often good, but in this case, it rose the stakes of political action to an apocalyptic level. To not confront the old, oppressive systems – from meritocracy to gender binaries – is to perpetuate them

¹⁵ Romans 8:29.

and thereby to inflict a kind of hurt on others beyond physical wounds, at the psychic level. While Rousseau perhaps did not intend it, the narrative he inspired replaced the qualified hope of Biblical social engagement with a political apocalypticism that justifies a scorched-earth approach, destroying social institutions and whomever stands by them.

Conclusion: Recommendations for the Church today

In light of Rousseau's emphases on human autonomy (instead of dependence), human innocence (instead of original sin), and political apocalypticism (instead of qualified hope), this essay concludes with four practical recommendations for the Church:

1) *Tell a better story.* Rousseau found that the Gospel's starting point, the need to see oneself as a "rascal," rendered the Christian story irredeemably harsh. But even in God's punishment of Adam and Eve, He made "garments of skins and clothed them."¹⁶ This is the Gospel story that the Church proclaims: God's concern for the "rascals" stems not from *their* goodness, but from *His*. The cultural story says, in effect, "you are good" and "you are oppressed," whereas the Gospel says, "He is good," but "He was oppressed" for you. Through repentance and faith He offers true "psychic unity," but in restored relationship with Him, which no circumstance or even oppression can shake.

2) *Present a fuller vision of goodness.* Rousseau's account of man's original goodness is largely *negative* – marked by the absence of social ills. The Church can offer a fuller, *positive* vision of goodness. The Bible teaches a teleology – that humans were made *for* God, for relationship with Him and to be conformed to Christ's image. Today's culture speaks about meaning, but only of a kind that is

¹⁶ Genesis 3:21.

autonomously “created” for oneself, against the backdrop of ultimate meaninglessness. The Gospel presents meaning as something not created but “discovered.” For the Christian, the good is not autonomous but *personal*, grounded in the One who loves and has pursued humanity across heaven and earth, onto the cross, out of the grave, and up to the Father’s side to intercede for His children.

3) *Refuse to demonize.* The Church must not so condemn the culture as to forget her own sinfulness, lest Christians follow Rousseau and not Genesis in forgetting original sin. The Christian has no need for the ego-boost of feeling superior over others; Gospel humility tears down but also builds up.

4) *Pursue justice shrewdly, with hope.* The Christian ought not to underestimate the power of sin, reaching even the systemic level. Only Christianity offers Gospel-dignity for victims now, a promise of ultimate restoration through Him, and a Gospel motivation for the Church to go to where brokenness is, in response to Christ meeting the brokenness in us.