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Intro to Political Theory

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We feel the chaffing of the metal shackles upon our wrists, but should we learn to ignore the pain? Or rather find the weak link in the chain and break free. Rousseau argues the benefits of both total independence and certain forms of social obligations, wearing the chains or taking them off. However a close reading reveals that Rousseau prefers the total independence even though he works hard to find ways to make obligation seem legitimate and not detrimental to freedom. He leaves a fatal flaw, a weak link in the chain, which would allow a man to break the chain of social obligation and obtain total independence. In both *Emile* and *The Social Contract* he leaves these weak links that show his feelings towards the total independence of man. Martel once said that Rousseau “subverts his own utopias” (*The Parent as Citizen: A Democratic Dilemma*). Though he tries his best to argue for the acceptance of our chains that bind us to society, he leaves in a small flaw with which one could escape.

               In the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* we are introduced to the noble savage, a man free of chains. This is a lonely man, but one who depends on no one to continue his survival. “What kind of misery can there be for a free being whose heart is at peace and whose body is in good health?” (Discourse page 52). A man who bears no chains has no weight placed upon his shoulders but that he gives himself, in order to preserve his own life. Rousseau dares the reader to find a flaw in the freedom a man has when he is given no obligations but those he has to his survival. It is only when the noble savage moves from his nomadic independent lifestyle that he begins to weld the chain with which his freedom will be enslaved. “With their slightly softer life the two sexes also began to lose something of their ferocity and vigor” (Discourse page 63). Once the noble savage enters what Rousseau calls the “hut stage” he begins to lose his freedom, he begins to depend on others for small things. In Rousseau’s second discourse he shows his unadulterated approval of the freedom that the noble savage has and his disdain for the slavery of the modern man. If you remember this sentiment when reading Rousseau’s other works you will see the weak links in the chain he leaves in order to allow the enslaved man to return to his unbridled freedom.

As we venture on into the works of Rousseau we come to *Emile*. Rousseau wants to raise Emile in a way that he does not have any chains, “ Society has made man weaker not only in taking from him the right he had over his strength but, above all, in making his strengths insufficient for him” (Emile page 84). This is the weak link Rousseau leaves in *Emile*, this is the fatal flaw. He says that because of what society has become the noble savage has dissipated and trickled down into the watered down version of the man present in today’s society. When saying this you realize that Rousseau truly believes that man should remain as he is born, as the noble independent savage. When you continue on in *Emile* you realize that Rousseau places a chain on Emile, one of great importance and power. He gives him the bright shiny chain of Sophie. Emile is raised to only care what Sophie thinks of him, thus removing a part of his natural independence. Sophie was raised to care what society thought, if they thought she was chaste and pure, Emile was the opposite and was raised to not fall prey to the shackles of society. “Male is only male in certain moments. The female is female her whole life” (Emile page 361). Since Rousseau attempts to raise Emile in such a way that the ideas of society have no effect on him the only chain given to him is the chain of caring what Sophie thinks of him. In *Emile* he ends with Emile and Sophie in the “hut stage” less lonely but less free. However in *Emile and Sophie: The Solitary Ones* Rousseau shows an attempt of Emile to break the chains given to him. He leaves Sophie and his children and runs off into the world. He has left the hut and become free once again only to fall prey to society as he is captured by pirates, during which time he exemplifies Rousseau’s other argument of accepting our chains as he is made a slave yet rises to the top of the “slave ranks”. If we return back to *Emile* Rousseau leaves a large flaw in the chain he gives to Emile “the entire education system for women should be contrary to men’s. Virtue is a graveyard for men and for women is a throne” (Emile pages 364-365). By placing the chains of social obligation on Sophie he removes it from Emile, and this allows Emile to avoid being enslaved by others, keeping some of his natural freedom. “It seems to me that in order to make oneself free, one has to do nothing” (Emile page 472). Here we see plainly the flaw Rousseau leaves in, that we are born free as the noble savage and if we do nothing we can remain free. Dropping these subtle hints throughout *Emile* shows that though Rousseau says he wants to raise Emile to live in the good part of the “hut stage” he truly believes that man should bear no chains and live with total independence.

In his book *The Social Contract* Rousseau lays out a positive view of our slavery to society. He uses phrases such as “social order is a sacred right which serves as a basis for all other rights” (Social Contract page 50) and “It follows from what I have argued that the general will is always rightful and tends to the public good” (Social Contract page 72). When the man gives himself over entirely to the general will he becomes loaded with chains, the cold metal draped over his shoulders, shackling his wrists, and binding him to the ground. There is an infinite amount of chains when one gives themselves over to society. He must then be concerned with public opinion. When man becomes obsessed with public opinion he truly becomes a slave. He is a slave to those around him, even though they are slaves to him, his chain links to the person next to him and when that person yanks the chain he falls in the direction he was pulled in. Yet as before, Rousseau has sabotaged his own ideals, he has left a key close enough for the man to grab and free himself from his chains, he has left another fatal flaw. “Total alienation by each associate of himself and all his rights to the whole community” (Social Contract page 60). Give up your entire being and all your rights? That would not be possible. So why create a main argument with an impossible outcome? This is because Rousseau believes in the freedom of the noble savage more than he believes in the power of the general will. Giving over your entirety to something is just like deciding to pile on chains and shackles and be buried alive beneath them. “Forced to be free” (Social Contract page 64) freedom is not something that can be forced upon another. You cannot corner a man and tell him that he has to accept the chains of society because everyone else has, you cannot force him to feel free in his slavery to his social obligation. “To renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties” (Social Contract book 1 chapter 4). “Free peoples, remember this maxim: liberty can be gained but never regained” (Social Contract page 89). These two quotes perfectly exemplify Rousseau’s entire belief of wither or not we should give ourselves over to societal obligation or not. We are born with total independence and freedom, once freedom is lost it cannot be regained, once society locks its chains around a person they cannot find freedom in that. Rousseau’s line about renouncing his liberty is a key factor in understanding his views, on accepting society’s shackles versus chasing after total independence. No man should give up his liberty in order to receive the approval of society

When you open your eyes do you want to see the rusty cuffs and chains cutting into your bare unprotected skin and to hear the clank of metal? Or would you rather have the freedom to do whatever your heart so desires? Most would choose the latter, as did Rousseau. Though he tries to make these shackles seem pleasant and necessary he truly believes that they are not essential. The noble savage is who Rousseau believes the modern man should aspire to be like, that he should not only remain free but have ways to escape the chains of society even if they get placed upon him. These chains Rousseau says we create in society to make us equal, do in fact make us equal, but not in the way we would wish. We become equal as we are all slaves, when we should remain equal as free men.