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**Reading Rousseau's *First Discourse*
through the Polemics**

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Abstract

Reading Rousseau's *First Discourse* through the Polemics

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This report analyzes Rousseau's *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* and the polemics Rousseau wrote in defense of that work, paying special attention to his rhetoric. In supplementing an interpretation of the *First Discourse* with Rousseau's polemics, several of the paradoxes of the work are resolved. I argue that the central paradox of the work, whether Rousseau is for or against science, can be resolved: Rousseau is ultimately in favor of science but highly critical of popularized science. Since virtue is the only sound basis of civil society, and science corrupts virtue, Rousseau speaks out against science. But the life dedicated science is the source of the highest flourishing for those who are capable of it. Hence, he concludes the discourse by praising a certain kind of science that is compatible with virtue. His complex position reveals a keen awareness of the distinction between the few and the many—a distinction of the utmost importance for politics, according to Rousseau. Moreover, I analyze Rousseau's distinct understanding of civic health and corruption and the causes of corruption. Rousseau does not argue that the sciences and arts are the original or sole causes of corruption; they can only come into being in an already corrupt society. However, they do tend to reinforce corruption and make the return to virtue all but impossible. I conclude with an analysis of what can be done in practice according to Rousseau given his bleak analysis of contemporary politics.

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Introduction

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is known to us as a great critic of the modern political project. For those who have come to suspect this project is in some way misguided, Rousseau offers not only a comprehensive critique but an alternative vision of healthy political life. Much of his diagnosis still finds sympathetic audience. His critique of private property, his impassioned cries that we have been alienated from our true nature, his vivid descriptions of the unhappiness of men enslaved to crass materialism and petty self-interest still resonate. Indeed, the persistence of the phenomena that Rousseau decries explains the continued popularity of the *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men*. However, the writing that preceded that work, Rousseau's *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*,¹ is read far less often. In that work, Rousseau criticizes an ideal that is still cherished and raises a question where we are inclined not to see one. He argues that a learned people cannot be truly virtuous, or that science is incompatible with genuine freedom and virtue in society.² This radical thesis makes the *First Discourse* less attractive than the *Second Discourse*. But understanding fully the power of Rousseau's critique of modernity requires grappling with the *First Discourse*.

The *First Discourse* is even generally neglected by scholars because it is held to be incoherent. Ernst Cassirer, who may be taken as representative of the dominant scholarly view, says "in many respects it has remained as a mere rhetorical display piece"

¹ I will use the common shorthand titles for the two discourses, the *First Discourse* and *Second Discourse*. "The discourse" in this paper will refer always to the *First Discourse*.

² In Rousseau's usage, the French word *science*, translated as "science," encompasses any systematic attempt at understanding: mathematics, natural science, philosophy, theology, are all sciences in this sense. I follow Rousseau's usage, so "science" will not carry the connotation of primarily natural science. *Savans*, translated as "scientists" or "learned men," are those engaged in science in this broader sense.

which does not “bear comparison in content with any of [Rousseau’s] later writings;” Rousseau was not yet able to clothe his thought “in the form of philosophical conception and argumentation” (Cassirer 1954, 48). His claim is not without evidence. The surface argument of the discourse is paradoxical, even contradictory. On the central question Rousseau’s position is ambiguous: he admires and condemns the sciences and arts. They are morally corrupting, yet Rousseau praises them.

Despite this ambiguity, Rousseau maintains that the discourse is not only consistent but presents a central part of his thought. In the *Second Letter to Malesherbes*, Rousseau says that the *First Discourse*, *Second Discourse*, and *Emile* are “inseparable and together form the same whole” (V.575).³ And he makes the same claim in *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*—that these three works *taken together* constitute his philosophic system (I.211–213). According to Rousseau, these three works are more important for understanding his thought than, for example, the *Social Contract* and *Confessions*. Those who neglect the *First Discourse*, then, assume that Rousseau was an inadequate judge of his own works. But according to his own words, we would fundamentally misunderstand his thought if we do not understand the role played by the *First Discourse*.⁴

³ Citations to Rousseau will usually be to the *Collected Writings of Rousseau* edited by Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly in the form *volume.page*.

⁴ Rousseau does sometimes criticize the *First Discourse*, most notably in the *Confessions*, Book VIII (V.295) and the Forward to the *First Discourse* (II.3). But the weight of such criticisms must be weighed against his giving the discourse such a prominent place in his system.

ROUSSEAU'S ESOTERICISM

The *First Discourse* is generally misunderstood and neglected because insufficient attention has been paid to its complex rhetoric.⁵ Inconsistencies and ambiguities confront the reader immediately—but Rousseau often calls attention to these problems, so we cannot dismiss the work because of them. By calling attention to them, Rousseau indicates his awareness that the work will appear incoherent on a first reading. Consider the very opening lines of the *First Discourse*, which are especially characteristic of his way of writing and therefore helpful for illuminating his rhetoric:

Has the Restoration of the Sciences and the Arts tended to purify or corrupt Morals? That is the subject to be examined. Which side should I take in this question? The one, Gentleman, *that suits a decent man who knows nothing* and yet does not think any the less of himself (II.4; emphasis added).

This is a strange way to begin an academic discourse. By saying that he will take the side that suits a decent man who knows nothing, Rousseau gives the impression that he too knows nothing. But if this is true, how will he be able to answer this question? Even if he knows nothing in the sense of knowing nothing uncommon or extraordinary, how would he come to a conclusion diametrically opposed to the fashionable opinion of his day—that the sciences and arts corrupt morals? This puzzle is partly solved by noticing that he says only that he will *take the side* of a decent man who knows nothing; that is, his position agrees with a decent man's position. The statement itself does not imply that Rousseau has come to his position in the same way a decent man would, nor that he holds his position for the same reasons. It is obviously false that Rousseau believes that he

⁵ For the exceptions, see Strauss 1947 and 1953, Masters 1968, Melzer 1990, Myers 1995, Orwin 1998, Campbell and Scott 2005, and Black 2009. For a general treatment of esotericism, see Melzer 2014.

knows nothing.⁶ But this puzzle remains: Why does Rousseau choose to give the impression that he is a decent man who knows nothing and that there is nothing shameful about this ignorance? At any rate, it is strange to begin an argument by stressing one's ignorance.

While the subtlety of the opening lines is easy to miss, Rousseau highlights the central contradiction of the whole work in the next paragraph. He writes,

It will be difficult, I feel, *to adapt* what I have to say to the Tribunal before which I appear. How can one dare blame the sciences before one of Europe's most learned Societies, praise ignorance in a famous Academy, and reconcile contempt for study with respect for the truly Learned? *I have seen these contradictions, and they have not rebuffed me* (II.4; emphasis added).

Here Rousseau calls attention to the fact that his argument will appear contradictory because he will both praise and blame the sciences. It is perplexing that he announces this as a contradiction, claims to have seen it, and that it has not rebuffed him. If he has seen the contradiction in his thought but continues to believe as he does, then he must mean that it is not truly a contradiction. It will only seem to be. In these lines Rousseau implicitly assigns to his able reader the task of figuring out how his position is only ostensibly contradictory.

In the next lines, Rousseau begins to reveal his reasons for presenting his argument in a contradictory fashion:

What then have I to fear? The enlightenment of the Assembly that listens to me? I admit such a fear; but *it applies to the construction of the discourse* and not to the sentiment of the Orator (II.4; emphasis added).

⁶ Rousseau claims often that the *First Discourse* is the product of long meditation. See, for example, the second paragraph of the *Preface to a Second Letter to Bordes* (II.182) and the first footnote to the *Final Reply* (II.110). See especially *Biographical Fragment*, in which Rousseau claims to have meditated about the subject matter of the *First Discourse* for almost his entire life (XII.31).

Rousseau has self-consciously and deliberately adapted his discourse to suit his audience. Why would he “fear” the “enlightenment” of his judges? If the judges were truly enlightened, their judgment would be impartial—uncontaminated by anything that might prejudice them against the truth. By saying that he fears their enlightenment, he implies that theirs is not true enlightenment, or that his judges are unawares still subject to prejudices. The Enlightenment, Rousseau here intimates, has not produced more wise men, but it has *convinced* more men that they are wise and concealed their ignorance from themselves. Rousseau is attuned to these prejudices, but his fear of their enlightenment affects only “the construction of the discourse”—that is, the pseudo-enlightenment of his audience forces him to adopt a certain rhetoric.

Rousseau reveals more completely the reasons for his esoteric rhetoric in the *Preface to a Second Letter to Bordes*. He says,

Some precautions were thus at first necessary for me, and it is in order to be able to make everything understood that I did not wish to say everything. It was only gradually and *always for a few readers* that I developed my ideas. It is not myself that I treated carefully, but the truth, *so as to get it across more surely and make it useful*. I have often taken great pains to try to put into a Sentence, a line, a word tossed off as if by chance the result of a long sequence of reflections. Often, most of my Readers must have found my discourses badly connected and almost entirely rambling, for lack of perceiving the trunk of which I showed them only the branches. But that was enough for those who know how to understand (II.184–185; emphasis added).

In this quotation, Rousseau repeats the claim that the discourse takes its complicated rhetorical form because of his awareness of the prejudices he is fighting. Because these prejudices are so deeply ingrained, he must be careful in combatting them. The success

of his rhetoric depends on disguising the more radical elements of his thought. In addition, he makes a sharp distinction in his audience. While most, he claims, will not understand him, there are a few readers who will. He speaks to these few with only vague hints. He writes for them not by clearly laying out his arguments, but by showing them only the branches—giving tantalizing clues that point beyond the paradoxical surface argument and guide these few readers to the true argument. By indicating that he writes principally for these few wise readers, Rousseau implicitly places himself among the wise: he can speak to “those who know how to understand” because he is among them.

Although only a few readers will truly understand his argument, he does not only write for them. For the majority of his readers, he tries to write something useful, or something conducive to healthy political life. Unlike Hobbes and Spinoza, whom Rousseau criticizes as engaging in politically “dangerous reveries” in the *First Discourse*, he does not openly undermine the foundations of the society in which he lives (II.20). And when he is critical of his society, he couples his destructive rhetoric with more sound doctrine. One such example of this facet of Rousseau’s rhetoric is the conclusion of the discourse. There he praises virtue as the “sublime science of simple souls”—all that is needed to be virtuous is to “listen to the voice of one’s conscience in the silence of the passions.” He encourages common men to remain in their obscurity and to limit themselves to fulfilling well their duties (II.22). That these paragraphs are an example of Rousseau’s edifying rhetoric as opposed to his complete understanding of virtue is evident from a comparison with the opening of the first part. There Rousseau says that

“to study man and know his nature, duties, and his end” is a task more difficult than the development of Newtonian physics.⁷

Rousseau’s own words thus encourage his readers to notice the paradoxes in his writing. He indicates that these paradoxes do not result from confusion in his thinking but are necessitated by the rhetorical situation in which he is writing and by the very argument of the work. To state the problem briefly, the explicit thesis of the discourse is that the sciences and arts are morally corrupting. The enlightenment of the day is merely pseudo-enlightenment, and this pseudo-enlightenment is harmful. If the attempt to enlighten men has resulted in their moral corruption, a reasonable man would not seek to remedy this with further enlightenment. Thus, in lieu of a counterargument, Rousseau presents a healthy doctrine through his effusive praises of virtue and duty. He hopes in part to rekindle the love of virtue that has been lost—which can only be done by speaking to the heart.⁸ But artfully blended with this more public teaching is his teaching for the few who are able to understand his true argument. The apparent contradictions of the discourse can be solved once we see that he has these two aims in mind, or that he speaks in two different voices, as a philosopher and as a common man.

Replies and Polemics

To read the *First Discourse* esoterically means essentially to try to solve the puzzles that Rousseau puts before us—analyzing *what* is said and to whom or for what

⁷ See also the opening lines of the preface to the *Second Discourse* in which the science of man is said to be the “least advanced” (III.12). Virtue is far more complicated than the conclusion of the *First Discourse* would suggest.

⁸ See *Preface to a Second Letter to Bordes*, II.183.

purpose it is said. To grasp fully, then, Rousseau's argument about the problem of the sciences and arts, it is necessary to state the questions that his argument raises.

1. Rousseau argues that the sciences and arts are morally corrupting, and yet he clearly does not proscribe them completely and even has considerable praise for them, so what is his view of the sciences and arts? Or, more broadly, in what ways are science and virtue compatible and in what ways are they incompatible?
2. What is meant by corruption or a corrupt society? And conversely, what is meant by virtue or a healthy society?
3. What role do the sciences and arts play in corruption? Are they the only source, and if not, what are the deeper sources of corruption?
4. How exactly do the sciences and arts corrupt morals?
5. What, according to Rousseau, are the practical conclusions of his argument?⁹

To address these questions, we will look at the defenses of the *First Discourse* Rousseau wrote in response to the many published criticisms—the polemics against Raynal, Stanislaus, Gautier, Lecat, and Bordes and the *Preface to Narcisse*. Through these defenses, Rousseau tacitly guides his reader, showing him how to resolve the paradoxes.

Rarely in the history of political philosophy do we have a work interpreted by the author

⁹ In constructing this list, I have primarily drawn from the criticisms of the discourse written by Rousseau's contemporaries: Stanislaus, Lecat, Gautier, and Bordes. While this list is not complete, each question touches close to the heart of the argument. Three omissions are noteworthy. First, I do not attempt to disentangle the critique of the sciences from that of the arts. This has already been done admirably by Gourevitch (1972). Kelly treats the question of the arts in *Rousseau and the Case Against (and For) the Arts* (1997). Following Rousseau, I focus more on the sciences than the arts. Second, I do not trace how Rousseau exaggerates and distorts the historical examples of the first part. For this theme, see Masters (1968, 218–224). Third, following Rousseau, I focus primarily on the political and intellectual virtues exemplified above all by Sparta and Socrates respectively. There are, however, other notions of virtue hinted at within the discourse. But to analyze these would require a discussion of Rousseau's later writings and would take us far away from the *First Discourse*.

himself. But the *First Discourse* is such a work. Rousseau through the polemics essentially interprets it for us. We therefore have an uncommon aid in our understanding. In these polemics, Rousseau makes explicit what was often merely implicit in the text of the discourse itself. They clarify both the argument of the discourse and why it is presented in such a complicated manner. While many interpreters of the *First Discourse* have used the polemics to support their interpretations, they have not received the sustained scholarly attention they deserve.¹⁰

The publication of the *First Discourse* in 1751 immediately elicited several replies from those who disagreed with Rousseau. He responded to some of these with defenses of the discourse, which I refer to collectively as the polemics.¹¹ The first reply was a short notice in the *Mercury of France*, to which Rousseau responded with his own polemic. Then there are the replies by King Stanislaus, Lecat, and Gautier. Rousseau responded to King Stanislaus with a work usually referred to as the *Observations*.¹² He responds to Gautier only indirectly in a letter to his friend Grimm in which he explains why Gautier's response is not worth replying to. Rousseau's friend Charles Bordes wrote a work entitled *Discourse on the Advantages of the Sciences and Arts* to which Rousseau responds with his *Final Reply*. Bordes wrote another discourse in response to the *Final*

¹⁰ Wokler 1980 is a rare exception. He, however, uses the polemics to support his claim that the *First Discourse* is the "least elegant, least consistent, least profound and...least original of all his celebrated writings" (251).

¹¹ For a brief autobiographical account of this period, see *Confessions*, Book VIII, V.295, 298, 306–307, and 325–326. See also *Biographical Fragment*, XII.30–34.

¹² When King Stanislaus responds in September 1751, the *First Discourse* was attributed only to an anonymous "Citizen of Geneva." Accordingly, he does not refer to Rousseau by name. The authorship of Stanislaus' reply was also anonymous for some time, although Rousseau knew who had written it (see Pléiade III, p. 1257 and *Confessions*, Book VIII, V.306–307). I believe Rousseau's first public acknowledgement of his authorship is in October 1751, when Rousseau responds to Stanislaus with a writing entitled *Observations by Jean-Jacques Rousseau of Geneva On the Reply made to his Discourse*.

Reply, but Rousseau did not complete his response to Bordes' second discourse. He did, however, complete a preface to a second letter to Bordes. Finally, Rousseau sums up the entire controversy surrounding his discourse in the *Preface to Narcisse*.

In turning to the polemics as a guide for understanding the *First Discourse*, we are struck first by Rousseau's insistence that his adversaries have not properly understood him, that they have missed the heart of the question, and thus repeating the arguments of the discourse constitutes a sufficient response.¹³ Rousseau's polemics thus clarify the argument that is already implicit in the *First Discourse*: they show his readers how to read a philosophic work and demonstrate why such guidance is necessary. In effect, Rousseau interprets his discourse for us; what remains is to put together the scattered statements. To interpret each reply and polemic on its own would be repetitive since they overlap considerably. Rather, after summarizing the discourse, we will proceed thematically according to the five questions listed above.

THE COMPATIBILITY OF SCIENCE & VIRTUE

Let us begin with a summary of the *First Discourse*. Rousseau begins by praising the revival of the sciences, referring to the middle ages and the hegemony of scholasticism as "a condition worse than ignorance" (II.4). But the tone shifts suddenly in the third paragraph. There, the sciences, letters, and arts become mere garlands over the oppressive chains of society. They serve only to make bearable the slavery that is

¹³ See II.37, 38, 86, 92, and 110, among others. In an unpublished autobiographical fragment, Rousseau maintains that none of those who replied to him ever "entered the state of the question" (XII.31). Because his adversaries did not understand the core argument of the work, they could not have responded in a productive way, in Rousseau's judgment.

contemporary political life. He then states his general thesis: “our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our Sciences and Arts to perfection” (II.7). Broadening the argument beyond contemporary France, he says this phenomenon “has been observed in all times and in all places” (II.7). Rousseau gives several historical examples that he claims proves this general proportionality—contrasting corrupt and learned peoples with virtuous and ignorant peoples. There is, however, a brief pause in the condemnation. It is possible for an individual to resist the tide of corruption: Socrates was able to become virtuous and learned despite the corruption of Athens. Praises are lavished on Socrates because, much like Rousseau is doing in this work, he eulogized ignorance.¹⁴ In the second part, Rousseau turns away from historical examples and considers the sciences and arts in themselves. The tone becomes even more censorious here: the sciences and arts are born from our vices, aim at vicious objects, corrupt morals, and reinforce the other sources of corruption, like vanity, idleness, cowardice, and luxury. Pleasing talents become dearer to the people than solid virtue. But the work does not end as one would expect, with a ringing final blow to learning. Rather, Rousseau concludes by praising Bacon, Descartes, and Newton as the “preceptors of the human race” and calling for kings to allow such geniuses into their courts so that the world can finally see what “virtue, science, and authority” could do together for the happiness of mankind. If

¹⁴ Orwin (1998) analyzes Rousseau’s quotation from Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*. In short, Rousseau deliberately distorts the text of the *Apology* and the character of Socrates to fit his own argument. That these distortions are deliberate is supported by the fact that three times in his corpus Rousseau claims that Socrates would have been thought merely to be another sophist “if his noble and gentle death had not honored his life” (*Letter to Franquières*, VIII.269). See also the *Discourse on the Virtue Most Necessary for a Hero* (IV.10) and the *Allegorical Fragment on Revelation* (XII.172). The *Discourse on the Virtue Most Necessary for a Hero* was written just after the *First Discourse*.

these powerful forces do not combine, Rousseau warns, “the People will continue to be vile, corrupt, and unhappy” (II.21–22).

Perhaps the most striking feature of the argument as a whole is less his critique of the sciences and arts and more his apparent vacillation in that critique. And indeed, this vacillation did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries. If the sciences and arts are as problematic as Rousseau says they are, why does he not wholly condemn them? Can his claims about their corrupting effects be reconciled with his praise of them? In particular, how can his praise of Socrates and his claim that scientists should become advisors to kings be compatible with the claim that science is corrupting?

King Stanislaus puts the problem personally—he questions whether Rousseau’s own activity undermines his claim:

If he effectively unites science and virtue, and the one (as he attempts to prove) is incompatible with the other, how has his doctrine not corrupted his wisdom? Or how has his wisdom not convinced him to remain in ignorance? (II.28)

Rousseau answers in the *Observations* by making recourse to his sharp distinction between the few and the many:

That the cultivation of the Sciences corrupts the *morals of a nation* is what I have dared to maintain, what I dare believe I have proved. But how could I have said that in each particular Man, Science and Virtue are incompatible, I who exhorted Princes to invite the truly Learned to their Court... These truly Learned are few in number, I admit, for to make good use of Science, great talents and great Virtues must be joined. Now that can barely be hoped for in a few privileged souls, but should not be expected in an entire people. One *cannot* conclude, therefore, from my principles that a man cannot be learned and virtuous all at once (II.39–40; emphasis added).¹⁵

¹⁵ Rousseau states this point more concisely in his *Letter to Grimm*: “I said that Science is suited to a few great geniuses, but that it is always harmful to the Peoples who cultivate it” (II.88). See also *Final Reply* II.111 and 113–114.

According to Rousseau, then, science and virtue are compatible, but only in a few privileged souls, those who combine extraordinary intellectual and moral virtue. Such combination, he argues, is impossible in a people as a whole. Therefore, science, while good for a few, cannot be pursued by a society without harm to itself. To solve the ostensible paradox of the core argument, Rousseau must make recourse to the wide gulf between the few geniuses and the common run of men.

The same point is made in the *Preface to Narcisse*. After summarizing his argument that the pursuit of science is morally corrupting, he adds,

I admit that there are some sublime geniuses who know how to pierce through the veils in which the truth is enveloped, some privileged souls, capable of resisting the stupidity of vanity, base jealousy, and other passions that engender the taste for letters. The small number of those who have the good fortune to combine these qualities is the light and honor of the human race (II.195).

Rousseau here further explains what separates these rare few from the many. The few are characterized by their relative freedom from the passions that corrupt the pursuit of science for most. In particular, they do not pursue their studies for the sake of their own vanity. Rousseau is fully willing to praise the pursuit of science as long as it is pursued by those worthy of it. In fact, these few are the “light and honor of the human race,” the greatest of men. The apparent contradiction of the central argument—the simultaneous praise and blame of the sciences—can, in a way, be solved. The pursuit of science is morally corrupting when viewed through a political perspective; it is harmful when it becomes a social or popularized phenomenon. A society that holds science in high regard is corrupt. But the same cannot be said when we look at it from the perspective of the individual.

So the central paradox of the work would seem to be solved. Rousseau blames science as morally corrupting for society, and praises science as the highest or best way of life for those few who are capable of it. But why did Rousseau not make this distinction clearer in the discourse? As was argued above, the discourse has a two-fold rhetorical intention: to present a socially edifying or healthy teaching on the surface and to present a more complete teaching for the few who understand. To stress that the few truly capable of science are superior to ordinary men would be incompatible with his rhetorical intention. It would debase the dignity of the citizen and would be “tantamount to inviting the people to learning” (Strauss 1947, 468). Rousseau disguises this dimension of the *First Discourse* because to be open about it would be harmful to healthy political life. The argument was necessarily obscured by the rhetorical intention. Only those who are willing to patiently think through the rhetoric see the deeper teaching, but most come away with the general impression that Rousseau is altogether against the study of science.¹⁶

But this solution to the paradox—that science is harmful to society but good for certain individuals—is only the first step in unpacking the argument of the discourse. To continue pursuing the argument, we must investigate the grounds for Rousseau’s belief that the sciences, when popularized, are corrupting.

¹⁶ See also *Letter to Beaumont*, IX.52: “the development of enlightenment and of vices always occurred in the same ratio, not in individuals but in peoples, a distinction I have always carefully made and that none of those who have attacked me has ever been able to conceive.”

POLITICAL CORRUPTION & VIRTUE

The sciences corrupt the morals of nations. But in what way exactly do they corrupt? To address the question of how the sciences and arts corrupt men, we must first understand what Rousseau means by civic health and corruption.

In the *First Discourse*, republican Rome and above all Sparta are the models of virtuous civic life. They are characterized by a robust citizenry who are dedicated to the common good. True citizens spend all their time fulfilling their duties, especially caring for their fatherland, the unfortunate, and their friends (II.13).¹⁷ Rousseau says, “in politics as in morality, it is a great evil to fail to do good, and every useless citizen may be considered a pernicious man” (II.13). So a virtuous city cannot tolerate even idle citizens—all must be actively and constantly working for the common good.¹⁸ Such a city honors the noble and useful occupations, especially farming and military service (II.10 and 19). Almost no modern nations, according to Rousseau, are truly virtuous: all but one of his examples of virtuous peoples are drawn from the ancient world (II.8–9).¹⁹

Everything that deviates from this model is corrupt. Corrupt societies are marked not only by a lack of virtue in the citizens, but public scorn for such virtue. In the *Final Reply* he says, “it is when a nation has once reached this point [of ridiculing and scorning virtue] that corruption can be said to be at its peak” (II.114). When virtue is no longer esteemed, an excessive concern with luxury and wealth takes its place. Contrasting the modern and ancient worlds, Rousseau asks, “what will become of virtue when one must

¹⁷ See also *Final Reply*, II.121.

¹⁸ See also *Final Reply*, II.125: “no decent man can ever boast of having any leisure as long as there is some good to be done, a fatherland to serve, unhappy people to comfort.”

¹⁹ See also *Observations*, II.42.

get rich at any price? Ancient Political thinkers incessantly talked about morals and virtue, those of our time talk only of business and money” (II.14).²⁰ So a city dedicated to wealth is diametrically opposed to a virtuous city. In a corrupt city, citizens are more occupied by amassing private fortunes and enjoying private comforts than by fulfilling their duties and serving their fatherland. Rousseau emphatically denies the contention of modern political philosophy that commerce can replace virtue.²¹

In the *Preface to Narcisse*, Rousseau gives his most detailed account of the specific character of modern corruption. He writes,

Our Writers all regard as the masterpiece of the politics of our century the sciences, arts, luxury, commerce, laws, and the other ties which, by tightening among men the ties of society from personal interest, put them all in mutual dependence, give them reciprocal needs, and common interests, and oblige each of them to cooperate for the happiness of the others in order to be able to attain his own (II.193).

And he adds on the next page:

In Europe, government, laws, customs, self-interest, all put individuals in the necessity of deceiving each other mutually and incessantly; everything makes vice a duty; it is necessary to be wicked in order to be wise (II.194n).

The corruption, then, of all modern nations stems from the same source: the very laws and institutions that form the foundation of modern political life encourage vice. The bonds that tie virtuous citizens to their government—especially patriotism and love of

²⁰ This is a paraphrase of Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*, Book III, Chapter 3. Rousseau highlights this—the distinction between communities devoted to virtue and to wealth—as crucial in the *Letter to Raynal*, II.26. See also the *Discourse on Political Economy*, III.148–149. For a longer account of Rousseau’s impression of the ancient lawgivers, see *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, Chapter I, The Spirit of Ancient Institutions, XI.171–173. For further parallels with Montesquieu, see Strauss 1947, 458–461.

²¹ See, for example, Bordes’ *Discourse on the Advantages of the Sciences and Arts*, II.106: “Commerce and luxury have become the bonds of nations...All orders of citizens are attached to the government by the advantages that they gain from it.”

one's compatriots—are weakened in proportion to the strengthening of the “bonds from personal interest.” When attachment to society is founded on personal interest, virtue is impossible. One is constantly forced by mutual dependence, to lie, trick, deceive, and in every way try to get the better of one's fellow citizens. The one who forgoes such devices is exploited and left wretched and miserable. If this mutual dependence, which especially manifests itself in commerce, is the faulty foundation of modern politics, then the healthier foundation is a certain self-sufficiency among the citizens. Conflicting commercial interests pit all against each other. The passionate attachment to one's city that underlies Rousseau's account of civic virtue is impossible when all look upon their fellow citizens as a source of gain. In a virtuous city, the citizens are not dependent on each other for their material needs, so the healthier and more stable bonds of society can flourish.

So by corruption Rousseau means a society above all in which virtue is scorned. Men are no longer patriotic or dutiful. They are concerned more with their private good than with the common good. Instead of virtue, men are occupied by amassing wealth and enjoying pleasures. A genuine concern for the public good cannot subsist when all see their private advantage as primary and thus in competition with the good of the city as a whole.

SOURCES OF CORRUPTION

Having clarified what political corruption is, we can now unpack Rousseau's understanding of the sources of corruption. In the *First Discourse*, the sciences and arts

are attacked as sources of corruption. Many of the critics of the discourse took Rousseau to be arguing that the sciences and arts are the greatest, or even only, source of corruption. But Rousseau denies this in the polemics. He writes to Grimm, “[Gautier] everywhere has me reason as though I had said that Science is the only source of corruption among men. If he believed that in good faith, I admire his kindness in responding to me” (II.86).²² By this he means that it would have been absurd to say that science and art are the *only* sources of corruption.²³

In the first general statement of the thesis within the discourse, Rousseau states only that “our souls have been corrupted *in proportion* to the advancement of our Sciences and Arts to perfection” (II.7; emphasis added). That is, he claims there is a reciprocal relationship between the advancement of the sciences and arts and the decline of morals. The causal connection is left ambiguous. In the second part of the discourse—whose explicit purpose is to supplement the historical reasoning of the first part with a consideration of the sciences and arts in themselves—Rousseau introduces a new source of corruption:

The misuse of time is a great evil. Other evils that are even greater *accompany* Letters and Arts. Luxury, *born like them from the idleness and vanity of men*, is such an evil. Luxury rarely develops without the sciences and arts, and they never develop without it (II.14; emphasis added).

²² See also *Preface to Narcisse*, II.190n: “Among men there are a thousand sources of corruption, and while the sciences are perhaps the most abundant and the most rapid, it is hardly the case that this is the only one.”

²³ With the benefit of hindsight, we see that it took Rousseau another entire work—more than four times as long as the *First Discourse*—to explain his understanding of the deepest sources of man’s corruption, the *Second Discourse*.

So according to Rousseau, luxury is a separate source of corruption, but one that is tightly connected to the advancement of the sciences and arts. Specifically, the sciences, arts, and luxury are all born from the same sources: idleness and vanity. They are corrupting but are not the original sources of corruption in that they are born from deeper, more fundamental sources of corruption.

This indication from within the discourse is fleshed out in the polemics. Stanislaus objects to Rousseau's argument on the grounds that luxury, or wealth in general, is the truer source of corruption; he implies there is no necessary connection between luxury and scientific and artistic advancement. In response, Rousseau affirms that luxury is corrupting, but adds that it cannot be separated from the sciences and arts because they are both born from the same sources:

I had not said either that luxury was born from the Sciences, but that they were born together and that one scarcely went without the other. This is how I would arrange this genealogy. The first source of evil is inequality. From inequality came wealth...From wealth are born luxury and idleness. From luxury come the fine Arts and from idleness the Sciences (*Observations*, II.48).²⁴

And in the *Final Reply*, Rousseau gives a slightly different genealogy:

The vanity and idleness that have engendered our sciences have also engendered luxury. The taste for luxury always accompanies that of Letters, and the taste for Letters often accompanies that for luxury. All these things are rather faithful companions, because they are all the work of the same vices (II.112).²⁵

In these two quotations, Rousseau confirms that the sciences and arts are born from deeper sources of corruption, especially idleness and vanity. The specific corrupting

²⁴ By naming "inequality" as the deepest source, Rousseau seems to be hinting at the argument that he will make in the *Second Discourse*: conventional inequality—which can only be born in society and which is amplified by society to the detriment of our happiness—is the original source of corruption, the first evil from which all other evils flow. Since Rousseau does not develop this thesis in the polemics, hereafter I focus only on wealth, luxury, idleness, and vanity as the principal sources of corruption.

²⁵ See also *Preface to Narcisse*, II.191.

effects of the sciences and arts, then, will be connected to the way in which they reinforce and inflame these deeper sources.

While it is true that the sciences and arts are corrupting, they are only part of a much larger picture of our general corruption. As Rousseau says in the *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques*, he intends in the *First Discourse* not to present his complete political philosophy, but “to destroy that magical illusion which gives us a stupid admiration for the instruments of our misfortunes and to correct that deceptive assessment that makes us honor pernicious talents and scorn useful virtues” (I.213). To dive into the complex topic of corruption generally would have lessened the rhetorical power of his specific critique of the sciences and arts.²⁶ Although the sciences and arts are not the original sources of corruption, they do pose a major problem to healthy politics, both in themselves and especially insofar as they reinforce the deeper sources of corruption.

HOW THE SCIENCES AND ARTS CORRUPT

Rousseau criticizes the sciences and arts in the name of virtue—the ancient civic virtue that is martial, patriotic, dutiful, and pious. A corrupt society is one in which virtue is not respected or even scorned and men are more attached to their self-interest than the public good. Desiring prestige and comfort, they serve themselves at the expense of their fatherland. The sciences and arts can arise only in an already corrupt

²⁶ In the *Observations*, Rousseau says that the ultimate sources of corruption would have been too large a topic to discuss in the *First Discourse*. One would have to examine “the very hidden but very real relationships” between government and morals. He also indicates it would be dangerous to speak openly about such things, presumably because it might call into question the legitimacy of current governments (II.43). See Campbell and Scott 2005 for a detailed account of the politically dangerous undercurrents of the account of corruption in the *First Discourse*.

society—but they reinforce and therefore worsen the corruption. How exactly do the sciences and arts contribute to this corruption?

The best place to begin to address this question is the specific effects on morals that Rousseau attributes to the sciences and arts. He views them through the eyes of the citizen of a healthy society: because they are esteemed, they necessarily affect political life. Virtue, in Rousseau’s view, is something difficult to cultivate and maintain. In the *Final Reply*, he writes: “it costs less to distinguish oneself by babble than by good morals, *as soon as one is dispensed from being a good man provided one is a pleasant man*” (II.111; emphasis added). Man seeks to be respected by his fellows. When it is easier to become respected through talents than virtue, virtue gradually dies out. This esteem for “babble” directly corrupts the French education, which teaches the young “everything except their duties” (II.17).²⁷ French children are not taught to become decent, virtuous men, but to cultivate pleasing talents. There is a general tendency away from the difficult things.

The proliferation of men pursuing the sciences and arts tends to reinforce itself. Not only does respect for virtue wane, but it is even openly attacked:

These vain and futile declaimers go everywhere armed with their deadly paradoxes, undermining the foundations of faith, and annihilating virtue. They smile disdainfully at the old-fashioned words of Fatherland and Religion, and

²⁷ See also *First Discourse*, II.19: “in the long run, this is what must everywhere be the result of the preference given to pleasing talents rather than useful ones, and what experience since the revival of the sciences and arts has only too well confirmed. We have Physicists, Geometers, Chemists, Astronomers, Poets, Musicians, Painters; we no longer have citizens.”

devote their talents and Philosophy to destroying and debasing all that is sacred among men (II.14).²⁸

The “old-fashioned” supports of healthy communities, like Sparta, cannot withstand this public attack. Patriotism and piety are easily shaken. The public cannot respect virtue for long when it is so openly attacked. A healthy society requires great public respect and reverence for the virtues that maintain it. But when it is easier to gain respect as a scientist or artist, the respect for civic virtue consequently wanes.

Rousseau expands on this account of the direct effects of the sciences—especially the study of philosophy—in the *Preface to Narcisse*. “The most dangerous of the ills” engendered by philosophy, he writes, is that it “loosens in us all the bonds of esteem and benevolence that attach men to society” (II.192). The student of man soon becomes disdainful of him. Such study destroys the necessary bonds that tie man to society. “For him, family, fatherland become words void of meaning: he is neither parent, nor citizen, nor man; he is a philosopher” (II.192). But, at the same time that the learned man becomes less attached to his family and compatriots, that is, other particular human beings, he becomes more attached to human beings in general through his newly enflamed vanity. In an amusing remark, Rousseau says, “I would say that [the man of letters] does everything to obtain [public applause] if he did not do still more to deprive his rivals of it” (II.193). He is primarily motivated by winning public esteem or to become pleasing rather than good. So philosophy in particular, by making human things

²⁸ See also *Preface to Narcisse*, II.195: “every people which has morals...ought to secure itself against the sciences, and above all against the learned, whose sententious and dogmatic maxims would soon teach it to despise its practices and laws; which a nation can never do without being corrupted.”

an object not of reverence but of study, renders them less respectable. Such disdain for human things is incompatible with the passionate attachment that civic virtue requires.

Moreover, the pursuit of the sciences and arts reinforces idleness and vanity. The sciences and arts inflame vanity in that they encourage men to pursue activities that contribute only to their personal honor and prestige. They work not for their fellows but for themselves—and accordingly they become more concerned with their reputation as a scientist or artist than their reputation for virtue. And these scientific and artistic pursuits are “idle” from the perspective of the true citizen: everything that does not contribute to the common good is useless. The products of the sciences and arts do not materially benefit the community. Paintings and sculptures, for example, are pleasant but useless distractions (II.13 and 20). The community would be better off if instead the citizens spent their time serving the common good. The learned man does not respect virtue. He publicly undermines it. He labors uselessly. He thinks only of his own reputation.

In addition to these directly corrupting effects, the sciences and arts also contribute indirectly to moral corruption. Rousseau emphasizes especially the corruption of military virtues. He says, “true courage is enervated” and “military virtues disappear” because of the proliferation of those pursuits “which are exercised in the shade of the study” (II.16). Hunched over the desk, the body loses its vigor. In connecting the sciences and arts to the corruption of martial virtue, Rousseau is not only concerned with the immediate consequence that the military itself becomes weaker. Rather, the general weakening of the body has a pernicious political effect: the souls of the citizens are weakened as their bodies are weakened. He says the “tranquil and sedentary occupations,

which, by weighing down and corrupting the body, soon enervate the vigor of the soul” (II.17).²⁹ The habitual exercise and consequent awareness of one’s physical strength encourage the psychic habits conducive to citizenship.

Rousseau elaborates on this point in the *Final Reply*. Bordes argues that the advancement of the sciences and arts has made men gentler and that this gentleness is superior to the “cruel virtues” that characterized the ancient world (II.107). Also, the barbaric *vices* of ancient peoples like the Spartans “no longer exist since our morals have been softened by the knowledge with which all minds have been occupied or amused” (II.98). The moderation and courage of ancient times “could not be true virtues because they were only forced qualities” (II.100). The general prosperity of the modern world, argues Bordes, has allowed us to live more peacefully and develop true virtues.

Rousseau agrees that the modern world softens morals—and this in part is due to the advancement of the sciences and arts.³⁰ But he does not draw the same conclusion as Bordes, that this softness is the mark of moral progress. Rather, it is a most pernicious development. Quoting Plutarch, he says, “knowledge makes men gentle” and with these words Plutarch “wrote the most solid statement ever made in favor of letters.” But

Gentleness...is sometimes also a weakness of soul. Virtue is not always gentle. It knows how to arm itself appropriately with severity against vice; it is inflamed with indignation against crime...There are cowardly and pusillanimous souls that have neither fire nor warmth, and that are gentle only through indifference about

²⁹ See *Preface to Narcisse*, II.192. See also *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, XI.177–178: “It is above all because of the soul that the body must be exercised, and that is what our petty wise men are far from seeing.” The same thought is expressed in the letter to the Republic of Geneva that prefaces the *Second Discourse* (III.5). The idealized Geneva is neither threatened nor desires empire, but the citizens are still trained in arms because such training conduces to warlike ardor, pride of courage, and freedom.

³⁰ In the *First Discourse*, Rousseau goes as far as saying that the “principal advantage” of the revival of the sciences and arts is that they make men more sociable and desirous to please each other (II.5).

good and evil. Such is the gentleness that is inspired in Peoples by the taste for Letters (*Final Reply*, II.111).³¹

So the gentleness characteristic of learned societies does not prove their moral goodness—it evinces an indifference to good and evil rather than a concern with justice. The virtues of the day are not true virtues. Moral laxness is incompatible with true virtue. In a truly virtuous society, men are concerned with serving the fatherland, helping the unfortunate, and in every way living according to duty, which sometimes requires harshness.

Rousseau’s argument, then, is that the sciences and arts are politically corrupting, or that they make citizens less virtuous. In a healthy society, men are attached to their community by the bonds of mutual esteem: they are dedicated to their fellows, their family, and the common good. They think of themselves not so much as individuals, but as members of a collective whose good depends on the dedication of every member. Such a society is possible only when the citizens are strong and self-sufficient because mutual dependence puts them at odds. If the citizens see themselves as vying with their fellows for commercial gain, the healthier bonds that tie them together cannot subsist. Competition—intellectual, artistic, commercial—breeds strife. Only when the citizens do not depend on each other for their physical needs can the healthier bonds flourish.

The proliferation of the sciences and arts conflicts with this understanding of a healthy society in almost every way. Talent becomes more respectable than virtue. Men,

³¹ See also *Final Reply*, II.116: “We have proscribed several vices. I don’t disagree about that. I don’t accuse the men of this century of having all the vices. They have only those of cowardly souls. They are merely imposters and rascals. As for the vices that presuppose courage and firmness, I think they are incapable of them.”

working in useless pursuits, become more concerned with their reputation than the common good. There arises a class of learned men who openly undermine virtue. Moreover, those who study philosophy lose reverence for other human beings and become consumed with winning public praise. Looking to their more remote effects, Rousseau argues that the sciences and arts soften morals. To some, like Bordes, this appears to be an improvement. But Rousseau argues that this softness is in truth a weakness—an indifference to morality, which is incompatible with virtue. This bodily and psychic weakness in turn only reinforces individual rather than communal concerns. Overall, political life becomes dominated by the weak, idle, vain, and narrowly self-interested.

PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS

In the first response to the *First Discourse*, Raynal emphasizes that many readers wondered what practical advice could be learned from the *First Discourse* (II.23). Rousseau seems to have irked his audience by criticizing the sciences without, according to them, offering any solutions. His response to this objection is surprising. He claims first that he had anticipated this objection, and having anticipated it, he placed his practical conclusions on “the last five or six pages” of the discourse (II.26).³² But he then follows that statement by saying that further practical conclusions are “very clearly spelled out in my first reply,” that is, the *Observations* (II.26). But when reading these

³² Corresponding to II.21–22 (i.e., Havens 61 or 62–66).

two accounts—both of which are called “practical” by Rousseau—we are surprised to find that they are not only different from each other but incompatible.

The conclusion of the *First Discourse* proceeds as follows. Rousseau criticizes the “Compilers of works who have indiscreetly broken down the door of the Sciences and let into their Sanctuary a populace unworthy of approaching it.” The sciences should be the preserve of a rare few—those who can “raise monuments to the glory of the human mind.” He then calls on kings to allow these “learned men of the first rank” into their courts. Only then will one see what can be accomplished “by virtue, science, and authority, animated by noble emulation and working together for the felicity of the human Race.” If power remains separated from “intellect and wisdom,” as it is now, “the People will continue to be vile, corrupt, and unhappy” (II.21–22). In the final two paragraphs, addressing for the first time “common men” and including himself among them, Rousseau says, “let us remain in our obscurity...let us leave to others the care of informing Peoples of their duties, and limit ourselves to fulfilling well our own” (II.22). He concludes by eulogizing virtue: “O virtue! Sublime science of simple souls;” in order to know virtue, it is necessary merely to “listen to the voice of one’s conscience in the silence of the passions” (II.22).

Rousseau here seems to endorse a radical policy: heavily regulate science by limiting it only to the capitals and compel all scientists to become political advisors. Some adversaries of Rousseau understood him even to be in favor of burning libraries

and academies.³³ There is certainly evidence for their assessment: insofar as Rousseau describes any solution in the *First Discourse*, it is this extreme restriction of science. However, in the *Observations*, where Rousseau promised further practical conclusions, he endorses a different, rather conservative policy.

In the *Observations*, Rousseau writes that we *today* should not “burn all Libraries and destroy Universities and Academies” because that “would only plunge Europe back into Barbarism, and morals would gain nothing from it.” A corrupt people cannot return to virtue.³⁴ Contrary to the conclusion of the discourse, he here proposes to “allow the Sciences and Arts to soften, in a way, the ferocity of the men they have corrupted” (II.53). To our surprise, Rousseau unambiguously endorses allowing the sciences to continue as they are, since getting rid of them cannot benefit those who are already corrupt.³⁵ In the next paragraph Rousseau writes in no uncertain terms about what is politically feasible today:

I have praised the Academies and their illustrious founders, and I will gladly repeat the eulogy. *When the ill is incurable*, the Doctor applies palliatives and proportions remedies less to the needs than to the temperament of the sick person. Wise legislators should imitate his prudence. And, no longer able to apply the most excellent policy to sick Peoples, they should give them at least, as Solon did, the best they can handle (II.53; emphasis added).³⁶

³³ See, e.g., II.70, where Gautier says Rousseau “is the apologist of ignorance. He appears to wish to have the libraries burn.” See also II.131.

³⁴ See also *Letter to D’Alembert on the Theater*, 67 (Bloom trans.): “But let us not flatter ourselves that we shall see Sparta reborn in the lap of commerce and the love of gain.” Cf. *Preface to Narcisse*, II.195n.

³⁵ See *Letter to D’Alembert on the Theater* (65) where Rousseau makes the same argument but restricted only to the theater.

³⁶ See also the Letter to Voltaire of 10 September 1755, III.106: “But a time comes when the evil is such that the very causes that gave birth to it are necessary to prevent it from becoming larger. [The progress of the mind and of knowledge] is the sword that must be left in the wound for fear that the wounded person will die when it is removed.”

In the *Observations*, then, Rousseau adds a layer of complexity to the argument. Since today man is corrupt, and since (for an individual people) corruption cannot be reversed, the best policy is to maintain the status quo. He qualifies his earlier condemnation of gentleness. While incompatible with virtue, gentleness is preferable to the open display of vice. Better to live among flatterers than thieves (II.196).

Moreover, and again in contrast to the conclusion of the discourse, Rousseau here addresses the possibility of positive political change. In an especially revealing line, he writes, “there is no remedy *short of some great revolution*—almost as much to be feared as the evil it might cure—and which is blameworthy to desire and impossible to foresee” (II.53; emphasis added). By this he suggests that, while a great revolution might cure the ills that modern society has created and the sciences and arts have reinforced, it is just as likely, or perhaps more likely, that a revolution will result in greater harm than good.³⁷ So not only is Europe sick, but any attempted cure will probably do further harm.

It is then no surprise that Rousseau’s critics were confused. By suggesting in the *Observations* that the sciences are useful for a corrupt society, he appears to contradict his claim at the end of the discourse. There, he seemed to imply that most libraries and academies should be closed down. But in the *Observations* Rousseau endorses the opposite policy: keep the learned institutions open because getting rid of them would do more harm than good. However, the account of the *Observations*, much more than that of the *First Discourse*, reads as actual practical advice. Only there does Rousseau

³⁷ Rousseau repeats this politically conservative sentiment often throughout his writings. See, e.g., *Judgment of the Plan for Perpetual Peace*, XI.60 (final paragraph). For a general overview of Rousseau’s pessimism concerning positive political change, see Melzer 1990, Chapter 13.

explicitly speak about what could be done today. Rousseau leads his reader to see that it is a misunderstanding to suppose the end of the discourse was meant as a practical policy suggestion.³⁸

There is also evidence within the *First Discourse* itself that suggests that the concluding paragraphs are not meant as advice that might be implemented by contemporary governments. Rousseau indicates that rulers would not willingly proscribe the taste for the sciences and arts among their people: they “always view with pleasure” the spread of the sciences and arts because these things foster a pettiness of soul that makes the subjects easier to rule. They are chains on the people, making them complacent in their subjugation (II.5 and note).³⁹ This statement suggests that the combination of wisdom and political power proposed in the conclusion of the discourse is all but impossible to bring about in the current circumstances.⁴⁰ Sovereigns would resist anything that makes their people more difficult to rule over. So if his truly practical advice is to keep things as they are, why does Rousseau conclude with a solution that could not be realized?

The so-called solution in the conclusion of the discourse must be understood in the context of the discourse as a whole. Rousseau does not propose a practicable solution

³⁸ See *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques*, I.213, where Rousseau says that it was a misunderstanding of the *First Discourse* that led his critics to believe he was a “promoter of upheavals and disturbances.” “On the contrary,” he writes, he “always insisted on the preservation of existing institutions, holding that their destruction would only remove the palliatives while leaving the vices and substituting brigandage for corruption.”

³⁹ See also *Preface to Narcisse*, II.192 where the establishment of an academy is used by the Republic of Genoa to subjugate the Corsicans, according to Rousseau’s telling of the incident.

⁴⁰ For further evidence that Rousseau would not have thought the combination of political power and wisdom to be likely, consider the preface to the *Second Discourse*, III.13, where Rousseau says it is “hardly reasonable to expect” cooperation between sovereigns and philosophers. See also *Judgment on the Polysynody*, XI.94.

to the problem of the sciences and arts. Rather, he outlines a solution to indicate the complexity of the problem and therefore the necessary complexity of any solution. The imaginative thought experiment of the conclusion clarifies and deepens several key dimensions of the argument. It is only a *theoretical* solution; it could not be, and is not intended to be, realized in the here and now. So let us unpack what it contributes to the overall argument.

That the conclusion praises the sciences forces the reader to confront again the central paradox of the argument—that Rousseau appears to be both for and against the sciences. Indeed, by concluding with praise, Rousseau gives the whole work a ring structure. There are three sections where Rousseau praises science: the opening paragraph of the first part, the encomium of Socrates, and the conclusion (II.4–5, 9–10, 21–22). And these are separated by two sections of blame: the historical criticism, and the criticism of the sciences and arts in themselves (II.5–9 and II.11–21). In forcing the reader to confront this strange vacillation, he pushes him to try to understand his true position. The underlying argument, as the conclusion reveals, is that science is good for a few but harmful to the people. Not science simply, but popularized science, or science when it becomes a widespread phenomenon, has been Rousseau’s target. But the true scientists are the “preceptors of the human race,” that is, they are the greatest of men.⁴¹ Science harms the people, but the life dedicated to theoretical investigation is the highest flourishing for the few. This animating tension finally bursts to the surface only in the conclusion.

⁴¹ See also *Preface to Narcisse*, II.195, quoted above on 13.

Rousseau envisions an arrangement that would allow scientists some freedom for study while protecting the people from the corrupting effects of science. He limits science only to the capitals and compels scientists to become advisors to the kings. The people are thus insulated from the corrupting example of idle men working on useless things. In this arrangement the scientists are, like the citizens, working for the common good. The people are also protected from those “vain and futile declaimers” who publicly debase virtue (II.14). The scientists in the proposed arrangement will support virtue. In fact, the final two paragraphs seem to be a model for the proper way these scientist-advisors will engage with the public. They will publish easily understood public doctrines that redound to civic health. That is, they will imitate Rousseau’s rhetoric of the *First Discourse*: reminding peoples of their duties. And even if the presence of science is still in some way corrupting, the potential for corruption is greatly limited in that there are few scientists, contained only in the capitals.

Regarding the few, Rousseau first of all allows them leisure to pursue their theoretical inquiry in relative freedom. The tax, so to speak, they must pay is that they are forced to advise rulers. Since their presence is so likely to corrupt, the scientists seem to justify their place by working to promote healthy politics. Their genius must be harnessed for the good of society; otherwise, they would be only parasites. Moreover, science itself is purified in the proposed arrangement. There will be no popularizers of science whose labor is born from a passion to distinguish themselves.

Finally, Rousseau reveals in the conclusion that science is not only good for the few. It is indispensable for good government.⁴² He says the people will remain “vile, corrupt, and unhappy” if wisdom and power remain separated (II.22). In saying this, he further complicates the question: not only is there a tension between what is good for the few and for the people, but the happiness of the people *depends on* wise guidance. To proscribe science completely, then, would harm all.

Conclusion

Rousseau’s polemics, in which he responds to the criticisms of his *First Discourse*, provide a unique opportunity in the history of political thought: through them, Rousseau reveals the often obscure argument of the discourse and indicates the reasons for its obscurity. Rousseau teaches how to understand his thought.

The question posed by the Academy of Dijon was whether the restoration of the sciences and arts improved morals. Rousseau saw that to address this question properly required reflection not only on the sciences and arts themselves but on the nature of politics, civic health and corruption, and the veiled relationships between politics, morals, and the sciences and arts.⁴³ His reflection led him to the view that virtue is the only sound basis of society. So the question for Rousseau became whether science and virtue are compatible. And—as the discourse and polemics show—his answer is complicated.

Rousseau distinguishes between a virtuous and corrupt society. In a virtuous or good society, each member sees himself not as an individual but as part of a whole. The

⁴² See also *Final Reply*, II.115 (#4) and 117.

⁴³ See *Preface to Narcisse*, II.190: the Academy’s question “contained another more general and more important question about the influence that the cultivation of the sciences must have on the morals of peoples on all occasions. It is this question, of which [the Academy’s question] is only a consequence, that I proposed to examine carefully” in the *First Discourse*.

virtuous citizen is fiercely patriotic—he loves his fellow citizens and is dedicated above all to the common good. To fulfill his duties is his principal concern. In contrast, those in a corrupt society disdain virtue and look upon their compatriots as competitors rather than friends. No longer yoked by the harsh demands of virtue, the members of a corrupt society seek wealth and comfort, and some, public applause for their scientific or artistic achievements. From statements in the polemics, we saw that Rousseau argues that the sciences and arts are neither the first nor only causes of corruption, but they do contribute—especially insofar as they tend to reinforce the deeper sources of corruption: vanity, idleness, concern with wealth and comfort, and physical and psychic interdependence (II.48, 190, 112, 194–195). For the corrupt, one’s neighbor is a fool he might dupe or a competitor for esteem. The bonds that tie together virtuous societies require bodily and spiritual independence. Love of one’s compatriots can flourish only when the self can be forgotten.

The sciences and arts could arise only in an already corrupt society. Those who labor in them are idle; their products at best are amusements or curiosities. The Spartans had neither science nor art yet lived freely and virtuously for centuries (*Final Reply*, II.119). What is worse, the sciences especially promote vanity, a self-obsession, which only further divides men. Seeking to win public applause, an easy way for learned men to become well-known is to criticize common opinion. In their “passion for distinction,” they become “vain and futile declaimers” (II.14 and 191). As Rousseau revealed in the *Preface to Narcisse*, it is not only the public activity of learned men that corrodes virtue. The philosophic study of man weakens respect for man and therefore his attachment to virtue (II.192–193). The problem, in Rousseau’s analysis, is grave indeed: in every way science undermines the foundations of healthy civic life.

But despite its corrupting effects, Rousseau is not altogether against science. In the conclusion of the discourse and *Preface to Narcisse*, he makes clear that the life dedicated to science is the best way of life for the few suited for it. Rousseau thus revives a claim first found in ancient Greek philosophy: the requirements of the few conflict with the requirements of the many.⁴⁴ This problem is the animating tension of the discourse. The flourishing of the people requires virtue. The few, however, find their fulfillment only through science. Making the problem even more complicated, Rousseau indicates in the conclusion that the only way to maintain a virtuous people is through wise leaders—and this wisdom is only available through science.

In the discourse, Rousseau takes on the role both of the citizen and of the philosopher. As a philosopher, he illuminates the proper theoretical understanding of the Academy's question, showing why there is no simple answer. But he obscures his argument, leaving it up to his dedicated reader to put the pieces together. He does so because he is attuned to his civic responsibility.⁴⁵ To stress that the theoretical life is superior to the life of the citizen would have contradicted his intention to write something useful, to revive the love of virtue.

Given this understanding of the *First Discourse*, two major themes still require further elaboration. On one hand, we would have to turn to the *Second Discourse* to understand the grounds for Rousseau's view that the ancient civic virtue—exemplified by Sparta—is the only possible foundation for healthy politics, or in other words, why modern political institutions, with their foundation in commerce, lead only to misery.

⁴⁴ See Strauss 1947, 484: "Rousseau maintained then, to the last, the thesis that he had set forth most impressively at the beginning of his career. That thesis, to repeat, is to the effect that there is a fundamental disproportion between the requirements of society and those of philosophy or science. It is opposed to the thesis of the Enlightenment, according to which the diffusion of philosophic or scientific knowledge is unqualifiedly salutary to society, or more generally expressed, there is a natural harmony between the requirements of society and those of science."

⁴⁵ See *Final Reply*, II.129 and *Preface to a Second Letter to Bordes*, II.183.

And, on the other hand, we would have to turn above all to the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* to flesh out Rousseau's conception of the life dedicated to science—both why it is superior to the life of the citizen and why it is limited only to a few privileged souls.

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