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ROUSSEAU AND THE ATTACKS ON THE *FIRST* AND *SECOND DISCOURSES*

I. Rousseau's Vocation: The "Illumination of Vincennes" and the *First Discourse*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's emergence as one of the major thinkers of the Western tradition is impossible to dissociate from the events surrounding his first work of major importance, the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*. According to Rousseau's autobiographical writings, the fundamental principles of his "system" of thought all came to him when, while walking to see Diderot in the prison of Vincennes, he read the announcement of the Prize Competition of the Academy of Dijon:

Tout ce que j'ai pu retenir de ces foules de grandes vérités qui dans un quart d'heure m'illuminèrent sous cet arbre, a été bien faiblement éparé dans les trois principaux de mes écrits, savoir ce premier discours, celui sur l'inégalité, et le traité de l'éducation, lesquels trois ouvrages sont inséparables et forment ensemble un même tout. (Lettre à Malesherbes, 12 janvier 1762; *O.C.*, I, 1136)

Without minimizing the importance of this event — and therewith the "unity" of Rousseau's thought¹ — it is my thesis that the period following the publication of the *First Discourse* had a major impact on Rousseau. In particular, I would like to suggest the importance of the attacks on the *First* and *Second Discourses*, and Rousseau's replies to them, as steps in the formulation and articulation of his thought.

To see how the process of responding to criticism played a key role in the development of Rousseau's political theory, it is first necessary to restate his answer to the essay contest whose announcement in the *Mercure de France* triggered the "illumination." Three points are of critical importance: Rousseau's change of the question posed by the Academy of

1. Cf. Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

Dijon; his negative answer; and his broadening of the issue to a general principle of human history.

The original question announced by the Academy was rhetorical and one-sided: "Si le rétablissement des sciences et des arts a contribué à épurer les mœurs." (Launay, II, 49)² Presumably, a positive response was expected. In his reply, Rousseau boldly transformed the question: "Le rétablissement des sciences et des arts a-t-il contribué à épurer ou à corrompre les mœurs?" (*First Discourse*: Launay, II, 52) By challenging the optimistic attitude toward scientific "progress" which characterized intellectual life in mid-eighteenth century France, Rousseau knew he would invite a rebuttal.

Rousseau's negative reply to the Academy's question was thus intended to create polemics (cf. Préface d'une seconde lettre à Bordas; Launay, II, 191). Although his *Discourse* is cleverly constructed to lead the Academicians to favor his essay,³ Rousseau later claimed that he did not expect to win the Prize; hence his Preface speaks of having "refondu et augmenté ce Discours, au point d'en faire, en quelque manière, un autre Ouvrage." (Launay, II, 52)

This combative intention is underscored by Rousseau's decision to broaden the issue well beyond that necessary to answer the Academy's question — or even his own restatement of it. Whereas the Prize competition concerned the ethical consequences of the Renaissance in modern Europe, Rousseau claims that the cultivation of the sciences and arts has produced moral corruption "dans tous les temps et dans tous les lieux." (Launay, II, 55)

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that when the *First Discourse* was attacked, Rousseau responded in kind. Jean-Jacques recounts the effect of the Academy of Dijon's decision as follows:

2. For the *First Discourse* and polemics surrounding it, I will cite Michel Launay's edition of Rousseau's *Œuvres Complètes*, published in the collection "L'intégrale" (Paris: Seuil, 1971) because it includes the attacks on Rousseau as well as his replies. Other texts will be cited in the Pléiade edition.

3. Cf. *Lettre à Lecat* (Launay, II, 174), Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, pp. 210-213, and Leo Strauss, "On the Intention of Rousseau," *Social Research*, Vol. 14 (December 1947), pp. 455-87.

L'année suivante 1750, comme je ne songeais plus à mon discours, j'appris qu'il avait remporté le prix à Dijon. Cette nouvelle réveilla toutes les idées qui me l'avaient dicté, les anima d'une nouvelle force et acheva de mettre en fermentation dans mon cœur ce premier levain d'héroïsme et de vertu que mon père et ma patrie et Plutarque y avaient mis dans mon enfance. Je ne trouvai plus rien de grand et de beau que d'être libre et vertueux, au-dessus de la fortune et de l'opinion, et de se suffire à soi-même. Quoique la mauvaise honte et la crainte des sifflets m'empêchassent de me conduire d'abord sur ces principes et de rompre brusquement en visière aux maximes de mon siècle, j'en eus dès lors la volonté décidée, et je ne tardai à l'exécuter qu'autant de temps qu'il en fallait aux contradictions pour l'irriter et la rendre triomphante. (*Confessions*, VIII; O.C., I, 356)

As this testimony suggests, the experience of responding to the "contradictions" of his critics played a central role, not only in the personal reform of Jean-Jacques, but in "reawakening the ideas" of the illumination of Vincennes. If so, it is well worth studying in more detail the polemics surrounding the *First* and *Second Discourses* as a means of gaining greater insight into Rousseau's thought.

II. Criticisms of the *First Discourse*

According to the account in the *Confessions*, Rousseau responded to his critics in a consciously aggressive manner:

À peine mon *Discours* eut-il paru que les défenseurs des lettres fondirent sur moi comme de concert. Indigné de voir tant de petits Messieurs Josse qui n'entendaient pas même la question vouloir en décider en maîtres, je pris la plume et j'en traitai quelques-uns de manière à ne pas laisser les rieurs de leur côté. (*Confessions*, VIII; O.C., I, 365)

Who were these "second-raters" that "didn't even understand the question" — and what did Rousseau say in reply to them?

We get some idea of the nature of the intellectual debate merely by summarizing the titles and authors of the criticisms of the *First Discourse* along with Rousseau's replies. As will be evident, the authors who attacked Rousseau were not, at this stage, the leading intellectuals of the day. Rather, they were primarily provincial professors and writers, though in

one case speaking through the name of Stanislaus, the King of Poland.

The first public account of the *First Discourse* was not an open attack, though it indicated well enough the character of the debate. In the June 1751 *Mercure de France*, there appeared a short notice entitled "Observations sur le Discours qui a été couronné à Dijon" — probably written by Rousseau's friend, the Abbé Raynal; this was accompanied by a "Lettre de Jean-Jacques Rousseau à M. l'Abbé Raynal," making it clear that the thesis of the *First Discourse* was neither a joke nor a rhetorical exercise (Launay, II, 69). Hence, from the outset, Rousseau insisted that he intended to be taken seriously.

The second critical work was more formidable: in September of 1751, the *Mercure de France* published the "Réponse au discours qui a Remporté le Prix de l'Académie de Dijon," signed by "le Roi de Pologne", but probably written by a Jesuit, the Père de Menou (*Confessions*, VIII; O.C., I, 367-68). Rousseau's reply — "Observations de Jean-Jacques Rousseau de Genève" — appeared in the October 1751 number of the *Mercure*. Although a rejoinder was published ("Réfutation des Observations de Jean-Jacques Rousseau de Genève"), Rousseau did not pursue the dialogue with King Stanislaus or the Père de Menou (for the texts, see Launay, II, 72-93).

The next attack was a "Réfutation du Discours qui a Remporté le Prix de l'Académie de Dijon en 1750, lue dans une séance de la société royale de Nancy" by M. Joseph Gautier, who held the titles of "Chanoine-Regulier" and "Professeur de mathématiques et d'histoire" at the school of Cadets-Gentilshommes in Lunéville. Published in the *Mercure de France* in October 1751, this attack elicited the "Lettre de J. J. Rousseau de Genève à M. Grimm sur la Réfutation de son Discours par M. Gautier" (published as a brochure by Duchesne in November 1751). Although Gautier returned to the fray with "Observations du même M. Gautier sur la Lettre de M. Rousseau à M. Grimm," Rousseau ignored it (for the texts, see Launay, II, 93-110).

At about the same time, there appeared the "Discours de M. Le Roi, Professeur de Rhétorique au Collège du Cardinal

Le Moine, prononcé le 12 août 1751 dans les écoles de Sorbonne, en présence de Messieurs du Parlement, à l'occasion de la distribution de Prix fondés dans l'Université, Des Avantages que les Lettres Procurent à la Vertu" (Launay, II, 110-117). Although Rousseau did not directly attack Le Roi, his reply might be said to have come in the *Discours sur Cette Question: Quelle est la Vertu la Plus Nécessaire au Héros, et quels sont les Héros à qui cette Vertu a Manqué* — written as an entry in the Prize competition of the Academy of Corsica for 1751 but never submitted (Launay, II 117-125); since this piece was not published until 1768, when to Rousseau's annoyance it appeared without authorization in the *Année Littéraire*, it cannot be said to have the same status as the polemics Rousseau published in his own defense.

The next of Rousseau's "contradictions" came from an old friend, Charles Bordes of Lyon. Bordes' "Discours sur les avantages des Sciences et des Arts" was presented to the Academy of Lyon on 22 June 1751 and published in the *Mercure* of April 1752. Rousseau took this challenge seriously, and replied with "Dernière Réponse de J. J. Rousseau de Genève," published in the *Mercure* of April 1752 (for the texts, see Launay, II, 134-153; for Rousseau's account, see *Confessions*, VIII; O.C., I, 366).

Rousseau's next critic was a certain M. Le Cat, who created something of a scandal in August of 1752 by publishing a brochure entitled: "Réfutation du Discours qui a Remporté le Prix à l'Académie de Dijon en 1750, par un académicien de Dijon qui lui a refusé son suffrage." A formal "Désaveu de l'Académie de Dijon" (dated June 22, 1752) informed the public that none of the Academicians of Dijon had either rejected Rousseau's essay or written this attack on it; apparently without knowing this, Rousseau himself published a rejoinder — "Lettre de Jean-Jacques Rousseau de Genève sur une Nouvelle Réfutation de son Discours, par un Académicien de Dijon" (Brochure, Lyon, 1752). Forced to justify the bald deception, Rousseau's critic wrote "observations de M. Le Cat, Secrétaire Perpétuel de l'Académie des Sciences de Rouen, sur le Désaveu de l'Académie de Dijon" (dated August 25, 1752). Again, Rousseau did not deign to

write a second reply to a persistent critic (for the texts, see Launay, II, 153-180).

Rousseau's next and last published contribution to the polemic was the *Préface de Narcisse* (December 1752). To be sure, he considered a further reply when his old friend Bordes presented a "Second Discours sur les avantages des sciences et des arts" to the Academy of Lyon (August 1 & 31, 1752; published in Avignon, 1753). But after starting to draft the "Préface d'une seconde lettre à Bordes" (late 1753), Rousseau decided not to complete or publish this answer (Launay, II, 190); instead, as we shall see, he wrote his own *Second Discourse*.

III. Themes of Criticisms of the *First Discourse* and Rousseau's Replies

The foregoing bibliographical details should give us a flavour of the character and persistence of Rousseau's critics. What were their arguments? And how did Jean-Jacques answer them? We can summarize the substance of the debate with six assertions used to attack Rousseau's thesis; for each, we gain insight into Rousseau's position by considering his replies.

First, critics rejected Rousseau's claim that Europe since the Renaissance had been morally corrupted: "M. Rousseau attribue à notre siècle des défauts et des vices qu'il n'a point, ou qu'il a de commun avec les nations qui ne sont pas policées; et il en conclut que le sort des mœurs et de la probité a été régulièrement assujetti aux progrès des sciences et des arts." (*Réfutation par M. Gautier*, Launay, II, 95) Rousseau replied that his critics failed to see either the generality of the phenomenon or the logic of his argument: "Après avoir employé la première partie de mon Discours à prouver que ces choses avaient toujours marché ensemble, j'ai destiné la seconde à montrer qu'en effet l'une tenait à l'autre." (*Lettre à Grimm*; Launay, II, 102) Hence, for Rousseau, the issue concerned the very nature of human civilisation, and not merely the specific issues of the society of his contemporaries.

The second argument against Rousseau was that scientists and artists are not all corrupt. "Les savants n'ont ni

le goût ni le loisir d'amasser de grands biens. Ils aiment l'étude, ils vivent dans la médiocrité; et une vie laborieuse et modérée, passée dans le silence de la retraite, occupée de la lecture et du travail, n'est pas assurément une vie voluptueuse et criminelle." (*Réponse du Roi de Pologne*; Launay, II, 74) Rousseau replied that this challenge made the mistake of measuring broad social effects at the level of selected individuals: "Quand il est question d'objets aussi généraux que les mœurs et les manières d'un peuple, il faut prendre garde de ne pas rétrécir ses vues, sur des exemples particuliers . . . Pour savoir si j'ai raison d'attribuer la politesse à la culture des lettres, il ne faut pas chercher si un savant ou un autre sont des gens bien polis." (*Observations*;

Third, critics claimed that the sciences and arts are useful to society: ". . . je n'aurais qu'à rapporter ici ce que leur doit la société." (*Réponse du Roi de Pologne*; Launay, II, 72) Rousseau answered that his critics failed to see that these benefits are outweighed by the costs: "faut-il donc supprimer toutes les choses dont on abuse? Oui . . . toutes celles dont l'abus fait plus de mal que leur usage ne fait du bien." (*Observations*; Launay, II, 85)

The fourth charge of his critics was that Rousseau contradicted himself by using science to criticize science: "L'auteur que je combats est l'apologiste de l'ignorance; il paraît souhaiter qu'on brûle les bibliothèques." (*Réfutation de M. Gautier*; Launay, II, 94) Rousseau dismissed this charge by distinguishing between the genius of great scientists and the public effects of their work: "J'ai dit que la science convient à quelques grands génies; mais qu'elle est toujours nuisible aux peuples qui la cultivent." (*Lettre à Grimm*; Launay, II, 103)

Fifth, according to some, was the charge that Rousseau was joking: "N'est-ce qu'un paradoxe dont il a voulu amuser le public?" (*Réponse du Roi de Pologne*; Launay, II, 72) From the outset, Rousseau warned his adversaries of the error of failing to take truth seriously merely because it contradicts one's self-interest: "Je prévois que quand il sera question de me défendre, je suivrai sans scrupule toutes les conséquences de mes principes." (*Lettre à Raynal*; Launay, II, 71)

Perhaps as important as these issues, however, was the simple question of logic. Many of Rousseau's critics, then as now, claimed that Rousseau made the mistake of pretending that ignorance causes virtue — a causal argument that is manifestly false. This argument was particularly annoying to Jean-Jacques, since it reflected a simple logical error: the assertion that X causes Y in no way implies that *all* Y is caused by X (or that non-X causes non-Y). In technical terms, the former is an example of "necessary causation," the latter "necessary and sufficient causation."

For example, Bordes wrote "Partout je vois l'ignorance enfanter l'erreur, les préjugés, les violences, les passions, et les crimes." (*Réfutation de Bordes*; Launay, II, 140) Rousseau's answer was not to deny the existence of vice among ignorant peoples. As he put it rhetorically, "De ce que la science engendre nécessairement le vice, s'ensuit-il que l'ignorance engendre nécessairement la vertu?" (*Dernière Réponse*; Launay, II, 143)

IV. Rousseau's *Second Discourse* and the Renewed Polemics

With the announcement of the 1752 prize contest of the Academy of Dijon, Rousseau's reponse to his critics took new form. As noted above, he had begun to answer his old friend Bordes for a second time (*Préface d'une seconde lettre à Bordes*). When he saw the new topic posed by the Academicians of Dijon, in November 1752 he wrote to Mme de Créqui:

Le Discours de M. Bordes, tout bien pesé, restera sans réponse; je le trouve, quant à moi, fort au-dessous du premier, car il vaut encore mieux se montrer bon rhéteur de collègue que mauvais logicien. J'aurais peut-être occasion de mieux développer mes idées sans répondre directement. (Launay, II, 190)

The result — Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* — was indeed a deeper "development" of his ideas; as he put it later, the *Second Discourse* was one of his "principal" writings and the occasion for him to develop his ideas "completely." (*Confessions*, VIII; O.C., I, 388)

Rousseau was, of course, fully aware of the radical nature of his argument in the *Second Discourse*. While the Academicians refused to complete the reading of the text (presumably due to its theological as well as political implications), Rousseau had clearly expected this rejection; from the outset, this work was intended as a major statement challenging the prevailing attitudes of the time.

Rousseau's argument can be summarized in six main points. First, the Christian account of human origins, based on the Bible, needs to be replaced by a scientific one, based on the model of Lucretius' *De rerum Natura* and suited to presentation at Aristotle's Lyceum rather than the Academy of Dijon; the appropriate judges, according to Rousseau, would be Plato and Xenocrates — i.e., heads of the original Academy in Athens, rather than the second-rate professors and writers with whom he had crossed swords hitherto. Only in this way could the question be discussed fruitfully before the entire human race, an audience that manifestly includes many who do not believe in Biblical revelation and the concept of divine creation (*Second Discourse; O.C.*, III, 133).

Part I of the *Discourse* proceeds to show that civilized society is itself unnatural, presenting Rousseau's celebrated account of the pure state of nature. Part II then treats history as a process of inevitable decline: although savage society can be "good" and some civil societies "virtuous," neither form of social life can be said to be "natural" in the teleological sense of ancient political philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Far from praising civilization, Rousseau concludes that savage society "dut être l'époque la plus heureuse, et la plus durable" and that, in such groups, humans "vécurent libres, sains, bons, et heureux autant qu'il pouvaient l'être par leur nature." (Part II; *O.C.*, III, 171)

In this view, evil is the result of human "freedom" and "perfectibility." As a result, Rousseau's *Second Discourse* can be viewed as a theodicy that places the responsibility for vice and corruption on humans themselves. To be sure, Rousseau also outlines the possibility of mitigating inequality, corruption, and slavery: while social and political inequality is morally wrong unless it coincides with natural inequalities, a "virtuous" city like Rome, the "model" of a free republic, has

existed in the past and may be approximated by the law — if not the practices — of modern Geneva.⁴

Rousseau's decision to publish the *Second Discourse* — including both the Dedication to Geneva (which was outlined before he left Paris for his native city in June 1754) and the technical footnotes — was thus based on a commitment to present his radical attack on existing political institutions as well as moral standards (cf. *O.C.*, III, 1286-1288). He thus expected to be criticized for his theoretical argument, and was well prepared to defend himself. But unlike his polemics in defence of the *First Discourse*, Rousseau now replied only to critics of a much higher standing.

V. The Criticism of the *Second Discourse* and Rousseau's Replies

Rousseau's main critics after the publication of the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* were of a different order than those whose attacks on the *First Discourse* drew replies. First was Voltaire, whose well-known letter of August 30, 1755 elicited a reply from Rousseau dated September 10, 1755. Second was the naturalist Charles Bonnet, writing under the pseudonym "philopolis." Bonnet's criticism — the "Lettre de M. Philopolis au Sujet du Discours de M. J.-J. Rousseau de Genève, sur l'Origine et les Fondements de l'Inégalité parmi les Hommes" — was published in the *Mercure de France* of October 1755. Rousseau drafted a reply, but then reconsidered and decided against making it public (Lettre à Louis de Boissy, November 29, 1755; *Mercure*, January 1756); as a result, the "Lettre de J.-J. Rousseau à Monsieur Philopolis" remained unpublished (for the texts, see Launay, II, 270-275). On reading Voltaire's poems "On the Disaster of Lisbon" and "On Natural Law,"

4. The Dedication of the *Second Discourse* is more complex than at first appears: it seems to have a different intention for the French and other non-Swiss peoples of Europe (for whom Geneva is a modern model of virtue), and for the Genevans themselves (who are exhorted to live up to the potential of their republican laws). Cf. *Observations* (Launay, II, 79), and Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, pp. 194-95.

Rousseau again replied to his rival in his letter of August 18, 1756.

As will be evident, Rousseau's first major defenses of the *Second Discourse* were of a different order than the earlier polemics: private or unpublished rejoinders to fundamental criticism by major intellectuals. Then he was attacked by his old friend Diderot — and this time Rousseau decided to reply publicly, but to do so in the theoretical works he was writing. There is no question that Jean-Jacques viewed Diderot's article on "Natural Right" (Volume V of the *Encyclopedia*, November 1755) as a direct criticism of his ideas; his answer took the form of a chapter in the First Version of the *Social Contract* ("De la Société Générale du Genre Humain," *Geneva Manuscript*, 1, 2; Launay, II, 392-95) and the article on "Political Economy" in Volume V of the *Encyclopedia*. Hence, in tracing Rousseau's reactions to criticism of the *Second Discourse* we come much closer to the elaboration of his mature political theory in its final form.

VI. Themes of Criticism of the *Second Discourse* and Rousseau's Replies

Because the attacks on the *Second Discourse* are better known than those on the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, they can be described in more summary fashion. At the risk of anachronism, the first main topic of debate can be called the problem of evolution.⁵ "Philopolis" (Bonnet) attacked Rousseau on the grounds that human history has been "progress." Rousseau's reply was to restate his claim that all change after primitive society has been "autant de pas vers la perfection de l'individu, et en effet vers la décrépitude de l'espèce." (*Second Discourse*, Part II; O.C., III, 171) Even if the

5. Although biologists stress the importance of Charles Bonnet in the development of modern evolutionary thought prior to Darwin, the role of Rousseau's *Second Discourse* in stimulating Bonnet's approach to human history is almost never emphasized. Cf. Roger Masters, "Evolution and History in Political Thought from Aristotle to Marx," paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1984. Note also that, among Rousseau's papers was a folio sheet with an unnamed naturalist's criticisms of notes d, h, and l of the *Second Discourse*, along with Rousseau's brief reply to two of these technical criticisms. For the full text, see C. E. Vaughan, *The Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), Vol. I, pp. 512-13.

historical developments leading to civil society could be called inevitable, this inevitability "découle de la nature du genre humain, non pas immédiatement comme vous le dites, mais seulement, comme je l'ai prouvé, à l'aide de certaines circonstances extérieures qui pouvaient être ou n'être pas, ou du moins arriver plus tôt ou plus tard, et par conséquent accélérer ou ralentir le progrès." (O.C., III, 232) For Rousseau, it is particularly important to remember that many of the causes of historical change "dépendent de la volonté des hommes" (*ibid.*) : humans — not nature, and certainly not God — are responsible for the corruption associated with civilization.

Rousseau's answers to Voltaire must be seen in the context of this view of history. Voltaire had focused on the problem of evil, arguing against Rousseau that nature is not "good"; from Voltaire's perspective, Rousseau is a naive "optimist" in speaking of savage man as "good." Rousseau's reply is to reassert that vice and injustice are the fault of human action and human civilization; for Rousseau, evil can only be explained as the consequence of "l'homme libre, perfectionné, partant corrompu." (Letter to Voltaire, 18 August 1756; Launay, II, 317)

Diderot's criticism is less theological and more social; it concerns the problem of human morality. According to Diderot's "Natural Rights," Rousseau's political solution amounts to Hobbes' war of all, and denies the rationality of a natural law foundation of morality. Rousseau's answer, in the ultimately suppressed Chapter 2 of Book I in the *Geneva Manuscript*, was to accept the charge that his concept of a social contract arose out of a Hobbesian perspective: for Rousseau, as for Hobbes, morality is a human construction based on political experience and there is no "general will of the human species" — to use Diderot's formula for a natural law like that of the traditional jurists.

VII. The Consequences of the Criticism of the *First* and *Second* Discourses

It is impossible, in the compass of this essay, to do more than outline some of the main results of the controversies

surrounding Rousseau's *First* and *Second Discourses*. Confronted with the charge that his critique of the sciences and arts was contradictory, he became ever more aware of the duality of his responsibility, symbolized by the motto "vertu et vérité." (Lettre à Raynal; Launay, II, 71; Préface d'une seconde lettre à Bordes; Launay, II, 192) On the one hand, Rousseau was convinced that the "illumination of Vincennes" had revealed to him the underlying truth of human history and morality; on the other hand, Jean-Jacques was committed to the primacy of virtue — and therewith his obligation to write and live in ways that did not flagrantly contradict the principles he espoused.

Paradoxically enough, the earliest major fruits of this dual commitment were two works addressed to the general public. Rousseau presumably felt that he had discharged his obligation to tell the "truth" of the matter, having challenged the absence of morality among his contemporaries (*First Discourse*) as well as the illegitimacy of the political regime of virtually every civilized society (*Second Discourse*). By this time, as far as serious readers were concerned, Rousseau insisted that he had "proved" the unnatural status of the political and social life of his own day (*Second Discourse*, note IX; *O.C.*, III, 202; *Lettre à Philopolis*, cited above). Jean-Jacques thus turned from scholarly defenses of his vision of the truth to the encouragement of virtue for popular audiences.

In a sense, therefore, one could read the *Nouvelle Héloïse* as a consequence of the polemics arising from the *Discourses*. Rousseau's novel portrayed the possibility of virtue in private or domestic affairs, even in the context of a corrupted society — or rather, especially in such a context. The very "romantic" devices he used, by making virtue palpable in the persons of Julie and St. Preux, was thus in the service of his insight on the road to Vincennes.

In much the same way, the *Letter to d'Alembert* represents a popular defense of virtue in the public or civil arena. Here, however, Rousseau's task is more of a rearguard action against the inevitable but lamentable pattern of decline in human history. Picking up a theme developed in such early polemics as the *Dernière Réponse* and the *Lettre à Philopolis*, Rousseau counsels against any change or "modernization"

that would hasten the further progress of civilization and therewith of moral corruption.

The third major theme that can be traced to Rousseau's replies to his critics is, by contrast, more theoretical. In his criticism of the *Second Discourse*, Diderot had used Malebranche's theological concept of the "volonté générale" in order to solve the problem of morality, speaking of "natural law" as the "general will of the human species." Denying such a construct, Rousseau based his political teaching on a narrower "general will" of each individual political society ("Political Economy"; *Social Contract*). In so doing, Rousseau left us with one of the most vivid and controversial political teachings in the Western intellectual tradition; by stressing freedom and equality as the principles on which any legitimate community must rest, Rousseau criticized the large-scale, commercial state of modern times with a theory that, paradoxically, was later used to justify the French revolution.

Fourth, Rousseau's concept of a virtuous private education — as developed in the *Émile* — provides the theoretical foundation for the popular teaching of the *Nouvelle Héloïse*. If reasoning is unnatural, the virtuous individual cannot be trained by an appeal to intellectual virtue or wisdom, as was the case in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle. In its place, feeling and experience had to become the foundation of proper education. To this end, Rousseau had to develop the model of a total restructuring of child-rearing, based on close observation of the natural stages of growth and a careful nurturance of the dual principles of self-preservation and pity, whose primary status was the basis of the argument of the *Second Discourse*. As a result, Rousseau's *Émile* could become the inspiration of generations of educational reformers.

Finally, but perhaps most important of all, was the quest for a natural religion. Evident in both the "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" (*Émile*, Book IV) and the civil religion (*Social Contract*, IV, 8), the importance of Rousseau's quest for a new religious foundation for popular virtue is often underestimated. For Jean-Jacques, the atheism of the rationalistic philosophers of his own day was as much a source of vice as the fanaticism of the faithful believers in established creeds (e.g. *First Discourse*, Préface); it was no

accident that the *Second Discourse* can be read as a theodicy consistent with both a scientific account of human origins (*vérité*) and the needs of public morality (*vertu*).

While Rousseau's natural religion did not have as much effect on Western intellectual history as his political or educational doctrines, it was an integral part of his "triste et grand système" (to use the phrase of the *Préface d'une seconde lettre à Bordes*; Launay, II, 191). That Rousseau's doctrine of a legitimate political order rests on a transformation of Malebranche's theological term of the justice of God's will, which Diderot had already reconceptualized as a natural law doctrine of morality, is more than a trivial historical footnote. The curious way in which Rousseau integrated scientific, moral, and theological concerns is thus illuminated by Rousseau's replies to the *First* and *Second Discourses*.⁶

Although the above comments can be no more than suggestive, hopefully they will indicate the importance of the period from the publication of the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* to the drafting of the *Geneva Manuscript*. As Rousseau replied to the critics of his *Discourses*, if the foregoing interpretation is correct, his vision — while ultimately consistent with the "illumination of Vincennes" — took more precise shape and solidity. In this sense, a careful consideration of the long-neglected polemics between 1750 and 1756 provides valuable insights into the goals and meaning of Rousseau's political philosophy.

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6. These links are particularly evident in the *Letter to Voltaire* of 18 August 1756 (Launay, II, 316-23). I am greatly indebted to an unpublished manuscript by M. Brint for the insightful demonstration of the link between the use of the concept of "volonté générale" by Malebranche and by Rousseau, and to an undergraduate honors thesis by John Scott, "Religion in the Political Thought of Rousseau" (Dartmouth College, 1985) for an overall interpretation of the role of religion in Rousseau's thought.