

C L A S S I C T H I N K E R S

Rousseau

Céline Spector



Rousseau

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Rousseau

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used:

CGP	<i>Considerations on the Government of Poland</i>
CW	<i>Collected Writings of Rousseau</i>
DOI or second Discourse	<i>(Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men)</i>
DPE	<i>Discourse on Political Economy</i>
DSA or first Discourse	<i>(Discourse on the Sciences and Arts)</i>
<i>Emile</i>	<i>Emile or Education</i>
EOL	<i>Essay on the Origin of Language</i>
GM	<i>The Geneva Manuscript</i>
LWM	<i>Letters Written from the Mountain</i>
PCC	<i>Plan for a Constitution for Corsica</i>
<i>Reveries</i>	<i>The Reveries of the Solitary Walker</i>
SC	<i>The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right</i>

Liberty without justice is a contradiction.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letters Written from the Mountain*
(CW 9, p. 261)

Introduction

Rousseau's influence on the history of modern political thought is profound. As soon as they appeared, the *Social Contract* and *Emile* aroused the most virulent criticism. These works contained, it was said, subversive propositions against the authority of kings and the Church. The defence of freedom and equality was at the time perceived as revolutionary, as dangerous for hierarchical republics as for monarchies. To be sure, before the French Revolution the *Social Contract* (SC) was less widely read than other writings of Rousseau, such as his bestseller novel, *Julie*.¹ But in any case, the diversity of Rousseau's works, from his *Dictionary on Music* to his *Confessions*, from his opera *The Village Soothsayer* to his *Letters on Botany*, sparked immense interest all over Europe where Rousseau became, along with his foe Voltaire, one of the first 'celebrities'.²

Rousseau was born in Geneva in 1712. He was the son of a well-read watchmaker, Isaac Rousseau, who had to raise him and his brother after their mother died giving birth to him. When Isaac Rousseau had to flee Geneva after a dispute with a nobleman, Rousseau was sent to a pastor's family and then became apprenticed to an engraver. As he tells us in his *Confessions*, he received no formal education but read a lot of classics – especially Plutarch. He later became a brilliant autodidact in many artistic and scientific fields, including chemistry and botany. Having to leave the small Calvinist republic at the age of sixteen when he failed to get back on time behind its locked walls at curfew, he was hosted in Annecy by Mme de Warens, whom he called *maman* and who provided him with spiritual – and erotic – guidance.³

After these happy years at Les Charmettes, Rousseau had to earn his living from tutoring and transcribing music. He decided to come to Paris and present a new system of musical notation to the Academy of Sciences (1742). His dreams of glory were unfulfilled, but he met great philosophers such as Condillac, d'Alembert and Diderot, who became his best friend. He also served as secretary to M. and Mme Dupin and took notes on Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* in order to assist them in writing their criticism of the work. Diderot's imprisonment after the *Letter on the Blind* was the occasion of what he called in his *Confessions* his 'illumination'. While walking to the Donjon of Vincennes to visit him, he read in a newspaper about an essay competition sponsored by the Academy of Dijon. In answer to the question of whether the development of the arts and sciences had improved or corrupted public morals, Rousseau wrote provocatively. His *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, which won the prize in 1750, made a case against the pathologies of modernity and scientific progress praised by the Enlightenment's *philosophes*. By now a famous figure interested in both musical issues and political theory, he was asked by Diderot to contribute most of the articles on music and the article 'Économie' to the *Encyclopédia*. This contribution appeared in 1755 and was edited again independently a few years later under the title *Discourse on Political Economy* (1758).

In 1755, the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (DOI) was published, with its new insights into the evils of private property in Europe, the division of labour and arbitrary forms of government. It was written as an entry for another essay competition run by the Academy of Dijon. Even though Rousseau did not win this prize, with this he produced his first groundbreaking work of political philosophy, which was noticed all over Europe (Adam Smith, in particular, wrote an interesting review as soon as it was published⁴). But in the ensuing years, Rousseau moved away from the Encyclopédistes, decided to abandon his former way of life and left Parisian society.⁵ His intention was to dedicate his life to the truth (*vitam impendere vero*). Once he had retreated to Montmorency, a few miles away from Paris, the *ermite* could start his new life of intense writing. In a few years (1758–1762), he published most of his masterpieces, the *Letter to d'Alembert*, *Julie*, *Emile* and the *Social Contract*. While often seizing the opportunity to sign himself 'the Citizen of Geneva', Rousseau built his intellectual system in a polemical dialogue with the French *philosophes*, whom he now attacked violently, rejecting their materialism, scientism and atheism.⁶

Rousseau's intellectual ambitions were extremely high and he was determined not to compromise with Parisian high society. After the quarrel with France's leading composer Rameau in his *Letter on French Music* (1753) and the huge success of his own opera *Le Devin du Village*, Rousseau refused the king's pension and fled aristocratic patronage. After a short sojourn as secretary to the French Ambassador in Venice (1743–4), he decided to write a major book on political institutions (*Les Institutions politiques*). Only once in Montmorency under the protection of Mme d'Epinay could he settle to his task and start his plan for the SC – the first part of the *Political Institutions* – which was never completed. Like a modern Diogenes trying to demonstrate that civilization is regressive, Rousseau firmly believed that mankind was corrupt not because of original sin but because of social and political institutions. Having seen the excesses of luxury in Paris and the misery in the countryside, the vices hidden under the most exquisite politeness in the Republic of Letters, 'the Citizen of Geneva' intended to reveal the hypocrisy and corruption of French society and to avoid its dangerous contamination. When d'Alembert proposed bringing a theatre to his native town, he launched an attack against Enlightenment's culture and the art of stagecraft: the *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater* (1758) was the breaking point with his former companions.

After the publication of *Emile* and the SC (1762), considered as highly subversive books which provoked public fury, Rousseau had to flee France to avoid imprisonment. He came back to his home town but, having converted in his early years to Catholicism and reconverted to Calvinism in 1754, he was considered a religious heterodox. Geneva did not welcome him either. On the contrary, the authorities decided to ban his last books and to condemn the SC. Having repudiated his Genevan citizenship, Rousseau then spent the rest of his life as a fugitive. While writing several other masterpieces (the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, the 'plans' for Corsica and Poland, *The Confessions*, the *Dialogues* and the *Reveries*), he was the target of persecution and finally sank into paranoia after his eighteen-month stay in England and his quarrel with the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1766).⁷ While Hume had worked to find Rousseau a place to live in England and asked his friends at court to pursue a royal pension for him, the refugee imagined a plot and was persuaded that Hume wanted to dishonour him. Convinced that his former friends (Diderot, Grimm, d'Alembert, d'Holbach) had also turned against him and that Voltaire wanted to destroy his reputation by revealing that he had abandoned his children,

Rousseau returned incognito to France, where he married his long-time companion Thérèse Levasseur and ended his life in total despair. He died in Ermenonville in 1778 after having completed his *Confessions* (published posthumously) and tried to justify himself in the *Dialogues: Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques*. His *Reveries*, which he jotted down on playing cards while daydreaming, enjoying the company of plants and the study of botany, were left unfinished.

Rousseau's fame was to become tremendous in the ensuing years, mostly during the second period of the French Revolution when the Jacobins and Robespierre tried to apply the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity and to promote the Cult of the Supreme Being. In 1794, his remains were transferred to the Pantheon where the 'great men' of the French Republic are buried. His work was constantly discussed – either admired or deeply attacked – in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸ Beyond romanticism and republicanism, Rousseau influenced socialism and Marxism because of his attack on private property as the cornerstone of civil society. He is still considered as one of the most lucid critics of modern liberal societies which suffer the ills of individualism and social injustice.

The Coherence of Rousseau's Philosophy

Yet Rousseau's philosophy has often been misjudged. Its coherence itself has been questioned. The diversity of genres used (philosophical discourse, theoretical essay, epistolary novel, dialogues, letters, autobiography) is not the only reason that Rousseau's works are still under close scrutiny, with very different lines of interpretation. Three tensions have often been highlighted.⁹ Rousseau seems to hesitate:

- 1 between praising nature and eulogizing the benefits of civil society, between the privilege of solitude and the homage paid to the virtues of the political community. The second *Discourse*, in particular, seems to idealize the 'noble savage', while the *Social Contract* and other works lay the foundations of a well-ordered society;
- 2 between a moral philosophy using nature as a standard (in *Emile*) and a political philosophy grounded in the dismissal of modern theories of natural law (in the SC). Rousseau considers the standards of justice as being the result of a purely conventional

act – the expression of the people's 'general will', with no reference to nature. This contradiction cannot be attributed to Rousseau's change of mind, since *Emile* and the SC were published in the same year (1762);

- 3 between the defence of political freedom and the case for absolute popular sovereignty. Rousseau constantly argues in favour of liberty as non-domination, requiring not being subjected to the will of another agent, avoiding personal dependency. Yet in the SC he promotes certain measures which *force men to be free*: he invokes the lawgiver in order to enlighten the people and shape their customs, and he appeals to civil religion to fix some of the citizens' beliefs.

These questions (the problematic status of Rousseau's primitivism, naturalism and republicanism) will be partially clarified only if they are related to his system. The author of *Emile* is convinced that his philosophy will always seem contradictory as long as it is not understood as a system. His letter to the Archbishop of Paris, Christophe de Beaumont, makes it clear: 'I have written on various subjects, but always with the same principles: always the same morality, the same belief, the same maxims, and, if you will, the same opinions.'¹⁰ The seed of the system is often associated with the famous episode of the vision at Vincennes while Rousseau was walking to the dungeon where Diderot was imprisoned. It was while leafing through the *Mercure de France* that Rousseau saw the advertisement for the essay competition for which he won first prize:

If anything has ever resembled a sudden inspiration, it is the motion that was caused in me by that reading; suddenly I felt my mind dazzled by a thousand lights [...] Oh Sir, if I had ever been able to write a quarter of what I saw and felt under that tree, how clearly I would have made all the contradictions of the social system seen, with what strength I would have exposed all the abuses of our institutions, with what simplicity I would have demonstrated that man is naturally good, and that it is from these institutions alone that men become wicked.¹¹

Even if Rousseau dismisses the metaphysical 'spirit of system', he thus advocates the principles of a philosophical system grounded on observation rather than on abstract reasoning.

In this respect, his philosophy has to account for a fundamental claim. If man is naturally good, two things have made him

evil: the contradictions of the social system; and bad institutions.¹² Rousseau introduces himself as a *genealogist* of political and moral corruption:

The fundamental principle of all morality about which I have reasoned in all my Writings and developed in this last one [*Emile*] with all the clarity of which I was capable, is that man is a naturally good being, loving justice and order; that there is no original perversity in the human heart, and that the first movements of nature are always right [...] I have shown that all the vices imputed to the human heart are not natural to it; I have stated the manner in which they are born. I have followed their genealogy, so to speak, and I have shown how, through continuous deterioration of their original goodness, men finally become what they are.¹³

This book seeks to account for three aspects of Rousseau's 'system': (1) man is naturally good; (2) the contradictions of the social system corrupt him; (3) political and pedagogical art can find the 'remedy in evil' and overcome these contradictions under certain conditions. The reasons for the social contradictions are mostly related to the harmful effects of private property. For Rousseau, private property is conventional and its consequences, when not properly regulated, may be extremely noxious: the rich are also the most powerful and can manipulate the law; they can buy men and conquer public esteem, prominent positions and social prestige. Against the idea that the desire to better one's lot through labour is the most efficient motive for increasing the prosperity of all, Rousseau raises our indignation about the rich and our compassion for the poor. All his political writings unfold from a few major intuitions drawn from his early feelings about injustice and refined while he progressively became the harshest critic of the rising science of political economy: commercial society is deeply corrupted; Europe is a land of domination and oppression; social inequalities prevent an authentic moral life and are a barrier to a just political community.¹⁴ The evil of inequality permeates every aspect of social life and is fuelled by our desire for public esteem; the selfish bourgeois is always unhappy, whereas the least well-off are dying in misery and contempt. The only way out would be either to enter a well-ordered society (the SC) or to find a way to educate a child alone in the countryside in order to protect him from prejudice and moral perversion (*Emile*).

Interpreting Rousseau as a *modern critic of modernity*,¹⁵ I shall clarify Rousseau's relationship with the main philosophers of his

time. Rousseau is undoubtedly modern. He is fully part of the Enlightenment in that he puts forward the claim that human nature is first and foremost a set of passions, which reason should not repress but reorder: 'I would find someone who wanted to prevent the birth of the passions almost as mad as someone who wanted to annihilate them.'¹⁶ Yet Rousseau is also a deep critic of modernity and of modern philosophy. In the field of ethics, he argues that there is a dramatic contradiction in the materialist and atheist worldview and that we should always listen to the voice of nature.¹⁷ In the field of politics, he struggles both against the previous versions of social contract theories and against the new science of political economy. Rousseau also predicted that monarchic and aristocratic Europe would soon be destroyed by a political and social revolution. Yet, as we will see, he did not optimistically plan for the expansion of republics all over the world. In his main moral and political works (the *SC*, *Emile*), his intention was to flesh out the background conditions of a legitimate state and of republican citizenship, but also to imagine how the individual who cannot live in the ancient city-state (the fatherland or *patrie*) can still achieve virtue, freedom and happiness thanks to a proper education.

In the wake of Robert Wokler's excellent introduction,¹⁸ Rousseau's moral and political writings will be studied using both a thematic and a chronological order, from the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* to the *DOI*, from the *SC* and *Emile* to the *Principles of the Right of War*. Due to lack of space, I am not able to analyse fully his groundbreaking novel, *Julie*,¹⁹ nor his main autobiographical works (*Confessions*, *Dialogues*, *Reveries*). I also leave aside Rousseau as a playwright and musician, both composer and theorist, and his activities during the Querelle des Bouffons, in which he championed Italian opera against French music.²⁰ Rather, I add to the classical analyses of the *Discourses*, the *SC* and *Emile* a study of Rousseau's writings on political economy and international relations. Finally, I present a short analysis of the most recent elements of Rousseau's legacy in contemporary political philosophy.

1

A Modern Critique of Modernity

Rousseau became a famous political theorist while criticizing the Enlightenment mainstream. The Enlightenment *philosophes* had fought a battle against despotism and fanaticism and attempted to destroy destructive prejudices. But Rousseau considered that their struggle against tradition and superstition led to new pathologies. His radical discontent was with the three pillars of Enlightenment civilization: science, progress and commerce.¹ To the essay competition sponsored in 1750 by the Academy of Dijon ('Has the restoration of the sciences and arts tended to purify morals?'), the Citizen of Geneva answered provocatively. His entry into the Republic of Letters was a *succès de scandale*.

The first *Discourse* is constructed in two parts: the first aims to establish an effect, the real depravity associated with the rise of the arts and sciences, in all times and in all places. The second seeks its causes. Rousseau intends to demonstrate a law of history: 'Our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our Sciences and Arts to perfection.'²

The Pathologies of Commercial Society

The *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (the first *Discourse*) opens with a picture of Europe since the Renaissance: the progress and dissemination of science undoubtedly had certain beneficial effects. But Rousseau considers that the price to pay is too high. The satisfaction of our minds and the well-being of our bodies accompanied

moral corruption and political servitude. Politeness and the arts tend to conceal our depravity and thus to promote it:

While Government and Laws provide for the safety and well-being of assembled men, the Sciences, Letters, and Arts, which less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened, stifle in them the sentiment of that original liberty for which they seemed to have been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called civilised peoples.³

Here, the political dimension of the *Discourse* instantly appears: the danger lies in a *soft despotism* that science, philosophy, commerce and the arts only reinforce. Rousseau argues that the Enlightenment's fetishes are incompatible not only with true wisdom and moral behaviour but with freedom itself. His 'intention' is not merely to praise ignorance in the interest of morality but also to attack the Enlightenment as a pillar of despotism.⁴

The political case against the arts is twofold. First, Rousseau argues through an evidence-based discourse relying on history that the rise of the fine arts is not associated with virtue, freedom or humanity but rather with luxury and patronage, thereby reinforcing political oppression. Second, he claims that, contrary to the common view, the sciences and the arts cannot support morality. While politeness refines our vices, artists' interest in praise (especially in the salons) makes them adapt to the bad morals of their public.⁵ To be sure, Rousseau's powerful condemnation is primarily due to the social and political context in Europe: science and techniques are not dismissed in themselves but because of their social abuses.⁶ Thereby, the Citizen of Geneva builds a war machine against the frivolity of the Enlightenment and French civilization. Drawing on ancient history, he argues that everywhere that science and the arts have prospered, societies have become weak and corrupt and citizens have forgotten their public duties. The 'rusticity' attributed to ancient peoples from republican Rome or Sparta, virtuous and free without philosophers, is used as a weapon against the vicious refinement of the Moderns.

In this respect, Rousseau's demonstration rests on a strong claim: his definition of virtue is related to military discipline, close to the Roman definition of *virtù*. It is a martial virtue associated with courage, which may resist conquest and corruption and thus preserve freedom. Hence Sparta is preferred to Athens, Cato to Socrates, military discipline to philosophy. In a famous passage, Rousseau

even reconstructs the speech of Fabricius, a Roman consul of the third century BC, famous for his resistance to bribery and his austerity, whose life was praised by Plutarch. Thanks to a rhetorical device called a *prosopopoeia*, in which the writer communicates to the audience by speaking as another person (here the Roman consul), Rousseau pushes the argument to its limit: 'Romans, hasten to tear down these Amphitheatres, break these marble statues, burn these paintings, chase out these slaves who subjugate you and whose fatal arts corrupt you. Let other hands win fame by vain talents. The only talent worthy of Rome is that of conquering the world and making virtue reign in it.'⁷ The case against science and the arts is carried out in the name of a martial account of civic virtue, modelled on Sparta or republican Rome.

But can Rousseau endorse this argument in his own name? Most of the critics of the *Discourse* will underline that Rousseau's nostalgic discourse fantasizes a mythic golden age. In his reply to the Polish king in exile, Stanislaw, who sponsored an academy and claimed the title of 'beneficent' and 'philosopher' king, Rousseau himself qualifies Fabricius's iconoclasm: 'What! Must everything that is abused therefore be suppressed? Yes, without any doubt, I will reply without hesitation. All those that are useless. All those the abuse of which does more harm than their use does good.'⁸ Rousseau is committed to a radical view, but not to the point of engendering Fabricius's hatred since he immediately adds: 'Let's stop a moment on that last consequence and take care not to conclude that today we must burn all Libraries and destroy the Universities and Academies. We would only plunge Europe back into Barbarism, and morals would gain nothing from it.'⁹

The *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* should thus be read with caution: Rousseau nuanced some of his most far-fetched claims in the controversy which followed its publication. For sure, civil societies cannot regress nor set corrupt peoples back on the path of ignorance and innocence. Nations sometimes have the choice of switching either to the side of civilization or to the side of freedom and virtue. But once the choice has been made, it is impossible to turn back. It would be impossible to destroy the sources of evil and to prevent the birth of vanity, idleness and luxury. Once spoiled, men will remain so forever. The only remedy left would be '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.'¹⁰

Finally, Rousseau's answer to his detractors is moderate: 'Then let's allow the Sciences and Arts to soften, in a way, the ferocity of the men they have corrupted. Let's seek to make a wise diversion and try to deceive their passions. Let's offer some food to these tigers so that they do not devour our children.'¹¹ Even if the author always prefers to be a 'man of paradoxes'¹² rather than a man of prejudices, Voltaire's famous witticism, suggesting that Rousseau wanted us to *get back on all fours*, reveals a serious misunderstanding.

Against Luxury

The second part of the *Discourse* no longer seeks the proof of the incompatibility between science and virtue in history. Rather, it considers science and the arts in themselves: 'Let us see what must result from their progress; and let us no longer hesitate to agree on all points where our reasoning will be found to coincide with historical inductions.'¹³

Rousseau traces science and the arts back to human passions, mostly the desire for distinction and domination. The utility of sciences lies in the fact that they satisfy our vices. What is at stake is the bad use of science: 'If our sciences are vain in the object they have in view, they are even more dangerous in the effects they produce.'¹⁴ Not only are the sciences vain but they undermine the very foundations of religious faith and of the love of homeland: the crowd of obscure writers and 'vain and futile declaimers' 'smile disdainfully at the old-fashioned words of Fatherland and Religion, and devote their talents and Philosophy to destroying and debasing all that is sacred among men'.¹⁵ Ambition leads authors to distinguish themselves at all costs, even as far as sacrificing noble sentiments to their own glory. The evils created by civilization are both political and moral. Public opinion favours vain talents more than a sense of duty: 'If cultivating the Sciences is harmful to warlike qualities, it is even more so to moral qualities.'¹⁶

Against the Enlightenment's mainstream, Rousseau is convinced that commercial society should not give us any sense of pride. He rejects the claim held by Mandeville, Melon, Hume, Montesquieu or Voltaire, according to which luxury allows the circulation of wealth, feeds the poor and leads to the prosperity and refinement of large states. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu had contended that political virtue, understood as love of country (*amour de la patrie*), is the 'principle', namely the ruling passion, of democracies.

But he had argued that the Moderns, for the most part, are no longer capable of republican virtue. The expansion of commerce and luxury is detrimental to the love of equality and frugality which sustains the love of our fatherland: 'The political men of Greece who lived under popular government recognized no other force to sustain it than virtue. Those of today speak to us only of manufacturing, commerce, finance, wealth, and even luxury.'¹⁷ Taking this claim literally, Rousseau draws up an argument to condemn trade and luxury, thereby producing a violent critique of modernity.¹⁸ The historical argument sustains his ideas: virtue, courage, strength and martial discipline were born in frugal people and they disappeared with the introduction of luxury. It is not by chance that the concept of 'civilization' appeared in its modern sense only a few years after the publication of the first *Discourse*, in a text authored by the Marquis de Mirabeau and inspired by Rousseau (*L'Ami des hommes*, 1756). Rousseau is indeed the first in the western world to expose so forcefully the problem of civilization. The issue is the *ratio* between the anticipated costs and the alleged benefits of modern urban life, whether aristocratic or bourgeois.

According to Louis Althusser, Rousseau could therefore be called the *enemy from within the Enlightenment*,¹⁹ enemy because the Citizen of Geneva offered the strong 'counter-Enlightenment' claim that progress of the arts and science does not lead to the refinement of morals; but *enemy from within* since he finally praised the Academies and even acknowledged the need for science and the arts in a partly corrupt society. Rousseau was not a straightforward primitivist. He called Bacon, Descartes and Newton the preceptors of humankind and considered that science and philosophy were high ideals. His goal was by no means to return to an earlier state of nature before the evils of civilization occurred but to measure the price we have to pay for it.

However, Rousseau could only hold such a polemical position at the cost of various confusions which he would later dispel. First, the *Discourse* drew no clear-cut distinction between natural goodness (*bonté*) and virtue (*vertu*), nor between moral and political virtue. Second, its account of the relationship between virtue and ignorance was not as clear as it first seemed. King Stanislaw, in particular, challenged Rousseau's paradoxical claim and argued that uncultured men were often violent, obliging him to acknowledge that a distinction should be made between various forms of ignorance, one being odious and the other leading to pure public morality. But this strategic retreat was quite unconvincing. In his

answer to Charles Bordes, Rousseau hence attempted to clarify his account of sciences ('The sciences are the masterpiece of genius and reason', yet 'all learned people have been corrupt'²⁰). Moreover, he also set forth a claim that would prove decisive. To the philosophers who maintained that men were naturally wicked and that civilization moralized them, Rousseau replied that man was not naturally evil. Instead, only a founding event – the invention of private property – could account for our moral corruption:

Before those dreadful words *thine* and *mine* were invented, before there were any of that cruel and brutal species of man called *masters* and of that other species of roguish and lying men called *slaves*; before there were men abominable enough to dare have superfluities while other men die of hunger; before mutual dependence forced them all to become impostors, jealous, and traitors; I very much wish someone would explain to me what those vices, those crimes could have been with which they are reproached so emphatically.²¹

In this last answer to Bordes (1752), and in his preface to *Narcissus* (added in 1753), Rousseau introduced the idea that moral depravity was mainly due to material and political factors. Among them was the class divide between the rich and the poor, which fostered greed, envy and the desire for domination. Inequality in the distribution of wealth, along with vanity, then gave rise to luxury and to science and the arts. Here is the movement which leads to the second *Discourse*: the birth of private property is now considered as the first act in the genealogy of vices.

From Nature to Civil Society: Rousseau's Philosophy of History

The second *Discourse* answers another question asked by the Academy of Dijon: 'What is the origin of inequality among men, and is it authorized by natural law?' Far from winning the prize, this time Rousseau was declared out of the competition because the length of his speech far exceeded the three-quarters of an hour's reading imposed by the Academy. More importantly, the second *Discourse* dared to dismiss the terms of the question: Rousseau did not consider natural law as the right standard to assess inequalities. On his account, nature provided no moral standard; it remained as such beyond good and evil. For the same reason, nature could not