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The Impact of Sciences and Arts on the Corruption of Morals According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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Abstract

This article addresses the central problematic in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) related to the impact of the development of sciences and arts on the corruption of moral values. This thesis constituted a radical critique of the assumptions of the Enlightenment, which linked cognitive progress with moral elevation. The article aims to analyze the arguments on which Rousseau relied in his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* to justify his position that the luxury resulting from modern civilization has created a sharp paradox between appearance and reality, between truth and falsehood, which led to the obliteration of virtue and its replacement by artificial values based on outward show and social recognition.

The study concludes that Rousseau does not call for the absolute rejection of science or a return to ignorance; rather, he distinguishes between false sciences that nourish vices and useful sciences that serve virtue and humanity. Although Rousseau raised the issue of the impact of sciences and arts on morals in the eighteenth century, this thesis continues to gain great relevance today in light of the challenges of artificial intelligence and modern means of communication, which reproduce the relationship between sciences and ethics. This calls on researchers to re-examine that relationship in order to probe its depths and reveal its outcomes.

Keywords: Scientific progress, ethics, civilization, luxury, paradox, falsehood, perfectibility, virtue.

Introduction

The eighteenth century witnessed an exceptional scientific and intellectual boom compared to previous eras. This led the philosophers of that period, especially the Encyclopedists in France, to agree that reason and enlightenment were the only means to comprehend social and political problems and to establish the foundations of new moral values. They started from the firm conviction that intellectual progress must inevitably lead to political, moral, and cognitive progress. However, this relationship, which seemed inseparable between scientific development and moral elevation in the view of most thinkers of the time, represented for Jean-Jacques Rousseau a profound problematic that required analysis and research.

The historical contours of this problematic were defined in 1749, when Denis Diderot (1713–1784), Rousseau's friend, was imprisoned in the Château de Vincennes in Paris. Rousseau mentions in his work *Confessions* that, while on his way to visit his friend, he read the journal

Mercure de France, in which the Academy of Dijon had announced a competition on a fundamental question: "Has the restoration of the sciences and arts contributed to the refinement of morals, or to their corruption?" This question attracted Rousseau's attention, so he wrote an essay entitled *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* in response to this problematic, and with this discourse he won the Academy's prize in 1750. Rousseau concluded in his discourse that the progress achieved by humanity through the sciences did not contribute to human happiness, but rather increased human misery and distanced humanity from its original natural state filled with happiness. He went even further by considering that the progress of sciences and arts is accompanied by moral corruption.

This idea appeared strange and bold in an era in which confidence in science had reached its peak, to the extent that it was called the Age of Enlightenment in distinction from the Middle Ages, during which science was subject to the authority of the Church. From this perspective, Rousseau's discourse is not to be understood as a mere circumstantial premise, but as a critical project aimed at reconsidering the relationship between the progress of sciences and arts on the one hand, and moral values on the other. To analyze this, we raise the following problematic: How did Jean-Jacques Rousseau arrive at this conclusion? What were his justifications? More precisely, how can sciences and arts corrupt human morals? And does virtue necessarily require the rejection of science ?

First: Rousseau's Critique of the Moral Role of Sciences and Arts

In his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, Rousseau holds that contemporary civilization has allowed people to enjoy the pleasures of life, which led them to believe that civilization is the cause of their happiness. However, this civilization, in reality, is the cause of their misery and the corruption of their morals.

1-1 Sciences as a Source of Vices

The excessive reliance on luxuries produced by the sciences is, according to Rousseau, the cause of the emergence of vices that have corrupted human nature. The vice of "servility" is among the most prominent results arising from the luxury generated by the development of sciences. This vice appears in the cowardice and weakness affecting soldiers entrusted with defending their homeland. Every country needs protectors to defend it, and this can only be achieved if they possess courage. However, the luxury resulting from soldiers' reliance on means of comfort weakens in them the virtue of courage and diminishes the spirit of boldness, so that the soldier becomes cowardly and weak instead of strong and daring. Rousseau expresses this by saying: "As conveniences increase, as arts are perfected, and as luxury spreads, true courage is weakened and military virtues disappear."

The effects of sciences do not stop at weakening psychological courage, but also weaken bodies. Before the appearance of scientific products, individuals performed arduous manual labor that strengthened their bodies. However, with the emergence of machines replacing manual labor, individuals' bodies became frail.

Rousseau cites as evidence the ancient civilizations (such as Egypt, Greece, and Rome), whose people, before the spread of sciences, were characterized by physical strength and bravery in war, which made their countries powerful. But once sciences developed among them, their

character softened and moral decline set in, making their civilizations vulnerable to invasion and collapse. Even China, where scholars hold power, was not spared the spread of moral corruption according to Rousseau. By contrast, civilizations that sought virtue and rejected luxury (such as ancient Persia) were able to conquer countries that focused on promoting sciences rather than virtue.

Rousseau continues in the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* to analyze the impact of sciences on moral values. He sees that the corruption resulting from sciences conceals the true essence of the human being and reveals what is false. Sciences produce wealth, wealth generates extravagance and love of display. Instead of highlighting their virtues, individuals resort to displaying their adornments, and discourse in a scientifically developed society revolves around money rather than moral values. Thus, civilizational progress reinforces a "culture of appearance" and conceals the true essence embodied in virtue, which Rousseau defines as "strength of soul and steadfastness." For Rousseau, the truth of the individual does not lie in outward appearance but in inward being; thus, sciences reinforce the paradox between these two dimensions—appearance and inner reality, truth and falsehood.

To show the sharpness of the paradox produced by sciences between what is displayed and what is hidden, Rousseau mentions that the emergence of codes of conduct contributed to falsifying human truth. Through them, individuals learn public taste and thus act according to what society dictates rather than according to their own nature. These codes produced artificial politeness, deceit, and lying, because the individual began to say and do what pleases others rather than what he thinks, generating hatred, distrust, and betrayal.

Commentators on Rousseau have attempted to deepen the understanding of this paradox between appearance and reality, among them Jean Starobinski (1920–2019) in his book *Transparency and Obstruction*, where he saw that what appears in this civilized world is not the real human being but only his outward aspect. The concept of "appearance" here does not mean what is perceived by the senses in the material world, but rather the falsehood that hides human innocence and veils his true nature. Human truth, according to Rousseau, has disappeared behind a "veil," causing him to live in a state of darkness; and living in this darkness means that he is no longer transparent, but that an obstacle now stands between him and his original transparency.

Rousseau believes that the sciences taught in schools are a source of vices: astronomy originates in superstition because it imagines things never seen by humans; rhetoric teaches people to lie and embellish truth with ornate phrases instead of direct expression; geometry is born of avarice and love of possession because it divides land; history records the evils of tyrants; and the judiciary appeared only to settle unjust disputes.

1-2 Arts as a Source of Vices

If sciences are a cause of moral corruption, arts are no less influential in corrupting moral values. Arts such as poetry, sculpture, and rhetoric rely essentially on imagination rather than truth, which makes those engaged in them far from honesty. Rousseau notes that wise philosophers in Athens, such as Socrates and Plato, despised poets and orators because they were ignorant of truth. Among the vices arising from authorship and rhetoric is flattery and

praise of rulers, which has come to be regarded as a virtue; the poet attributes imaginary qualities to the ruler in order to achieve material benefits or obtain privileges.

This type of art reinforces inequality of talents; the individual becomes more concerned with surpassing others than with being honest, virtuous, and seeking truth. Moreover, people no longer take pride in their achievements as much as they seek to belittle others. Instead of searching for books with beneficial content, they seek books written in ornate language; they no longer care about the value of a thing but about its appearance. Rousseau says in this regard: "We no longer ask whether a man is honest, but whether he is talented." Thus, arts, like sciences, reinforce the paradox between appearance and reality, between falsehood and truth.

Rousseau confirms that arts produce vices and corrupt morals in his famous *Letter to d'Alembert* (1717–1783), in which he expresses his opposition to the establishment of a theater in Geneva. Rousseau sees that building a theater is neither necessary nor useful; its role is limited to entertainment and wasting time. Moreover, it isolates people from their social reality and makes them focus on imaginary scenes, so that they weep for the dead and laugh at the living.

He argues that the aim of theatrical performance is to "please" spectators rather than to achieve benefit; the author seeks above all the satisfaction of the audience. Instead of refining inclinations, plays reinforce them. Since the artist seeks the admiration of the public, plays are shaped according to their desires: a violent audience prefers tragedies of killing and bloodshed, a lustful audience demands shows that stimulate its instincts, and a frivolous audience prefers farcical comedy.

If the artist attempts to oppose the audience's desires and sincerely imitate virtue, people will reject him, because this confronts them with their vices and makes them despise themselves. Rousseau gives the example of a wise man controlling his emotions: such a scene brings no pleasure to the audience, whereas the scene of a ridiculous man receives applause. Thus, Rousseau concludes that theater does not change prevailing emotions and habits, but merely follows them and improves their outward appearance.

If defenders of theater argue that arousing emotions through art allows individuals to release their emotional tensions and purify themselves, Rousseau refutes this claim. He considers that artistic performances inflame vices rather than refine them. Even if a theatrical character is portrayed committing evil acts to warn the spectator, this does not change the individual's real nature. Art does not create new feelings in the soul nor does it have the power to change moral judgments to which people are accustomed. The impulse that makes a person accept or reject an act is a deep internal feeling that the artist cannot remove or replace.

1-3 The Emergence of False Artists and Scholars

One direct result of the dominance of arts in society is the sharp distinction between the virtuous artist and the talented artist. The former seeks truth and virtue, while the latter seeks personal benefit. The "false" author flatters people to please them and addresses trivial subjects to win prizes and admiration. This falsehood extends to philosophers as well. In his work *Emile*, Rousseau sees philosophers as often opportunistic, seeking self-affirmation even through erroneous ideas and refusing to acknowledge truth if it appears through others. Their primary motive is pride and the desire to appear wise and possessors of truth; they aim to oppose others

in order to distinguish themselves. Thus, Rousseau concludes that philosophers are often the source of doubt rather than truth.

In such a society, the wise person who seeks public benefit and virtue finds himself forgotten and marginalized, leading to disappointment. Recognition goes to those seeking fame, which ultimately discourages sincere efforts. Thus, Rousseau believes that contemporary society abounds in false artists and authors, while sincere ones are truly rare.

But if Rousseau concludes that sciences and arts have corrupted morals, how did this happen?

Second: Human Nature Before the Emergence of Sciences

To understand the historical process that allowed sciences and arts to corrupt morals, we must return—according to Rousseau—to the conditions of the primitive human before knowledge of sciences. In his work *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau assumes that humanity passed through two stages: the state of nature and the civil (artificial) state.

In his primitive stage, the human being wandered in nature, enjoying its raw goods like other animals. But at a certain stage, human life differed from that of other creatures. While animals are governed by instinct, which makes their actions fixed throughout life, the human being possesses the faculty of "freedom of choice" and "perfectibility" (La perfectibilité). By "perfectibility," Rousseau means the capacity that allows the human being to develop his faculties such as reason and imagination. This faculty led humanity toward progress, but it also resulted in inequality in wealth and morals. Paradoxically, perfectibility is the cause of human misery and his departure from his original simple and peaceful life.

The first signs of transformation appeared when primitive humans, through intelligence, noticed the existence of others like themselves and realized that they resembled them in behavior. This awareness led them to gather in situations requiring cooperation. In competition, the strong used force, and the weak resorted to cunning. This gathering required a language different from animal sounds. Through interaction and comparison, humans learned meanings such as big and small, strong and weak, fast and slow, fearful and bold—meanings that made them cautious in dealing with others.

Later, the gathering of families led to interaction between the sexes, generating familiarity and the concept of beauty and preference. Excessive proximity produced love, which soon turned into jealousy and violent anger leading to bloodshed. The proximity of dwellings led to entertainment and singing; the most appreciated person became the one with physical beauty, eloquence, or singing talent, arousing envy in others.

Thus, the human being became obliged either to be esteemed or to pretend to be esteemed, because civilized humanity derives its value from others' evaluation. In this society, a separation arose between the individual's reality and his social image; everything became artificial, and "from this difference come imposing pomp, deceitful cunning, and all the vices accompanying them." Every individual sought esteem as if it were an acquired right, and if despised, felt compelled to revenge. Thus, "progress" contributed to the dissolution of morals and removed humanity from its innocence and simplicity, or what Rousseau calls the stage of "happy ignorance."

With the emergence of the idea of revenge, punitive laws became necessary to limit aggression. Thus, humanity moved to civil society, governed not by natural laws but by positive laws agreed upon to protect interests. However, between primitive society and civil society there was a stage Rousseau describes as "the happiest epoch," into which humanity entered by chance but left by contract.

However, if the sciences and the arts are a cause of the corruption of morals, should they be completely abandoned and a return made to a state of happy ignorance? And does virtue necessarily entail ignorance?

Third: The Useful Sciences and Arts According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau

3-1 Useful Sciences

Rousseau holds that truth resides within every individual, and there is no need to search for it in books. He expresses this by saying: "I carry within myself the love of truth as my only philosophy." Since the human being is a thinking being, as Rousseau states in his work Emile, he is capable of attaining the truth of things without relying on books, because truth is rooted in conscience and feeling. In the same book, Rousseau presents the ideal method through which the learner acquires knowledge; he maintains that we should not teach the child everything, but restrict ourselves to teaching only what is useful. He also believes that the true motive for learning in adolescence is the love of curiosity. Yet this curiosity is of two kinds: a false curiosity through which the learner seeks to appear knowledgeable in order to boast before his peers, and this stems from self-love (Amour-propre); and another kind, natural curiosity, toward which the human being inclines by nature, seeking whatever benefits him practically in his life. Accordingly, a person should learn what he observes with his senses in the world in a practical rather than theoretical manner; for this enables him to form his ideas on the basis of tangible reality and not drown in abstract fantasies. Contemplation of nature is what plants in the learner a love of inquiry and discovery. As for the sciences that should be learned—such as commerce, history, geography, and the laws of states—they are sciences whose principles are grasped through observing reality and through travel, not through memorization and rote instruction.

In addition to the sciences, the child learns the meaning of virtue not through theoretical indoctrination of its principles, but through practicing it practically so that he becomes aware of it and applies it properly. Rousseau says in this regard: "He who wishes to educate a child does not begin by telling him that he must practice virtue; for he will not understand, but first teaches him to be truthful, then moderate, then courageous… and finally teaches him that the sum of all these things is called virtue." Rousseau gives the example of teaching the child "faithfulness to promises"; he maintains that the teacher must not burden his pupil with promises without the child understanding his ability to fulfill them; because forcing the child into promises he does not comprehend makes him accustomed to non-commitment, thereby depriving the virtue of keeping one's word of its value in his eyes.

Proper education for Rousseau is based on direct practical experience; the child learns only what he sees and experiments with. As for education based on stuffing minds with information from books, this is what Rousseau detests most, and he expressed this by saying: "I hate books; books teach nothing but to talk about what one does not know." This position does not mean

that Rousseau rejects the sciences in themselves, but that he rejects the traditional method of imparting them. Therefore, he calls for identifying useful sciences and limiting false sciences that bring no real benefit to human beings.

3-2 The Role of the State and Scientific Societies in Encouraging Useful Knowledge

Rousseau believes that scientific societies, entrusted with preserving human knowledge, must carefully select what they encourage; they should support useful knowledge that promotes virtues, and reject the works of scholars and artists who aim only at fame and material gain. These bodies should allocate prizes to works that serve the public good, thereby motivating the authors of useful works, which contributes to spreading beneficial knowledge and consolidating moral virtues among members of society.

Accordingly, Rousseau sees no need for this vast number of books; for history shows that the authors of great works were not taught by masters and did not rely on books, but were led by their own genius to discover truths. Among these are Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and Isaac Newton. Such scholars need encouragement from the state, which should provide them with opportunities to demonstrate their abilities by granting them advisory positions so that the state may benefit from their counsel and from their writings that call for the spread of wisdom and virtuous morals. Thus, when power is united with knowledge, scholars who spread virtues become the possessors of authority and counsel, which leads to human happiness. But if power is not united with knowledge, and scholars are separated from rulers, scholars will compete only for personal interests, and corruption will spread in the state.

In his book Discourse on the Sciences and Arts, Rousseau calls upon the public to cease seeking happiness in books and to seek it within themselves; it exists in every person's conscience and is an innate knowledge whose principles each individual can grasp. There is no point in envying those scholars who attained glory; human nature divides them into one group skilled in manual work and another skilled in thought and good governance.

From the foregoing, we conclude that Rousseau affirms the possibility of combining knowledge and virtue, and that their union leads to what he calls "the happiness of the human race." However, those who combine true knowledge and virtue represent a small and distinguished group, which Rousseau called upon rulers to support. Thus, Rousseau clearly distinguishes between true and false education, and between genuine and pretentious scholars.

3-3 Useful Arts

With regard to art, Rousseau believes that true art is natural art that allows individuals to enjoy themselves according to their nature. Instead of establishing a theater in Geneva as advocated by "d'Alembert," Rousseau considers it more pleasant for people to gather in circles or what are known as "Les Cercles," or in public parks to practice sports and walking. Women, meanwhile, gather in private meetings to exchange conversations and amusements. These simple and innocent pleasures are what suit the people, as was the case in Geneva before the call for the theater.

In these circles, individuals preserve their values, discussing serious topics in a natural manner without fear of others' judgments or the need for artificiality imposed by mixed gatherings, which distances them from flattery and embellished speech. The presence of strong opponents in discussion compels the speaker to use strong arguments, refining rational and logical

analysis; thus this system represents the most suitable way of life for human inclinations and the most harmonious with them.

Rousseau does not call for abolishing celebrations or artistic performances, but seeks spectacles in which individuals gather in the open air where happiness envelops them, which he considers more beneficial than withdrawing into dark rooms to watch sad performances. In these spontaneous festivities, there is no prior arrangement or utilitarian interest; it suffices that people gather in public squares amid beautiful nature to appear in their innocent spontaneity. Thus, those assembled become true actors and performers, which Rousseau expresses by saying: "Make the spectators themselves the spectacle; make them the actors; let each person see himself and love himself in others, so that all may thereby be more united."

Rousseau concludes that the existence of knowledge does not necessarily mean the absence of virtue, just as ignorance does not necessarily guarantee its presence. In his reply to the King of Poland, he shows that history presents primitive and ignorant peoples who were nonetheless virtuous, characterized by courage and justice; which means that virtue does not conflict with ignorance. But this does not imply a conditional correlation whereby wherever ignorance exists, virtue necessarily exists; for there have been ignorant peoples at the height of corruption. Yet Rousseau's predominant historical observation is that the more knowledge rises in society and philosophers multiply, the less integrity there is and morals become corrupted.

Fourth: Rousseau in Confrontation with the Philosophers of the Enlightenment

Upon its publication, "Discourse on the Sciences and Arts" received many criticisms from Rousseau's friends and contemporaries alike. Rousseau was a friend of the encyclopedist philosophers and contributed to the Encyclopédie with an article on music, as stated by d'Alembert thanking him. D'Alembert initially praised Rousseau's essay submitted to the Dijon Academy competition, considering it a source of pride for its author; however, he asked him to reconsider the idea that the sciences and arts are the cause of moral corruption, suggesting other causes and affirming that the arts are what make society better. Rousseau mentions in Confessions that Diderot encouraged him to send the discourse to the Academy after proposing certain corrections. As for Voltaire, he mocked Rousseau's praise of the primitive stage, considering that he wanted to make humans walk on four feet like beasts. In the same context, Joseph Gautier (1714–1776) held that Rousseau longed to return humans to ignorance, which in his view would require burning books and libraries. Likewise, Charles Bordes (1711–1781), in his article "Advantages of the Sciences and Arts" (1751), criticized Rousseau's ideas, considering that he yearned for a period that existed only in myths and poetry, and that Rousseau never understood reality, affirming that wealth—not knowledge—is the true cause of moral corruption.

Nevertheless, this attack was not surprising to Rousseau; nor did he deny the existence of shortcomings in his first essay, as he admitted in the Confessions that his discourse was charged with enthusiasm that deprived it of order and harmony. Thus, Rousseau undertook to clarify his ideas through two paths: first, through his direct replies to the early critics; and second, through deepening his theory in his later works.

Regarding the accusation of hostility to science, Rousseau had anticipated this in the introduction to the discourse, affirming: "What I am doing is not attacking science, but defending virtue." When the King of Poland saw wealth as the cause of corruption, Rousseau responded by clarifying the causal sequence: wealth generated luxury, from luxury emerged the arts, and from idleness arose the sciences. Through this clarification, Rousseau placed the sciences and arts as the last link in the chain of corruption, as "a new version of his argument appeared, in which the sciences and arts came last, not first as his critics believed."

As for the idea of a "return to primitive life," which aroused the mockery of opponents, Rousseau clarified in Discourse on the Origin of Inequality that the state of nature is not a project for historical return, but merely a methodological hypothesis necessary to understand human nature; he affirms that "it is not easy to know a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, and which probably never will exist." Although the book Discourse on the Origin of Inequality prompted Voltaire later to launch his famous sarcasm about "walking on four feet," Rousseau's analysis refuted the accusation that he desired a return to the primitive state.

On the basis of these replies and debates, we can offer an interpretive reading of Rousseau's position. We believe that the first pages of the "Discourse on the Sciences and Arts" represented a shock to readers, leading them to focus on a superficial idea that ignorance is the foundation of virtue and that Rousseau calls for a return to it. Yet whoever examines the conclusion of the first part of the discourse finds an ironic question that refutes this mistaken inference: "Is integrity the daughter of ignorance? Is there incompatibility between knowledge and virtue?" Although Rousseau did not elaborate extensively in this discourse on clarifying the absence of contradiction between true knowledge and virtue, he later showed in his subsequent writings that the sciences and arts are not corrupt in themselves; rather, corruption lies in the way they are presented. Accordingly, his aim was not to call for ignorance, but to free humans from vices and lead them toward happiness, which he expressed by saying: "It is pure love for humanity and virtue that compelled me to break my silence… and my ardent desire is only to see humans happier, and especially more deserving of it."

Conclusion

In this article, we attempted to analyze Rousseau's answer to the problem posed by the Dijon Academy: "Has the restoration of the sciences and arts contributed to the refinement of morals or to their corruption?" It can be said that this problem, posed in 1749, still asserts itself strongly in our twenty-first century; for contemporary science no longer merely provides comfort and leisure time that may be spent in diversions, but has come to intervene directly in shaping the moral system of human beings.

Artificial intelligence has become capable of directing individuals' choices, thereby contributing to the formation of values according to the logic of automated algorithms. Social media have also created a "digital mask" behind which natural transparency retreats in favor of false appearances, bringing back to the forefront the concerns expressed by Rousseau regarding the loss of essence behind appearance. As for genetic modification, it now touches human nature itself, transforming the human being into a manufactured entity.

These challenges compel us to raise anew the question of the Dijon Academy, to affirm that it is among the tasks of the contemporary philosopher to place the achievements of science on the scale of ethics, warning that scientific progress is not necessarily accompanied by moral development; rather, science may negatively affect morals when it is separated from them.

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