

Philosophy as a Pernicious Waste of Time

We have all had moments when we suspect that philosophy is just so much hot air and fertilizer, but few have pursued this insight with the diligence of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Nor do I know of anyone else who has won a prize from a learned society for arguing the point so persuasively. I confess there are moments when I suspect Monsieur Rousseau's tongue was firmly planted in his cheek – especially when he praises the virtues of the learned men judging his submission for setting a topic which is “calculated to arouse the love of virtue in the hearts of citizens” and for “devoting themselves to the enlightenment of mankind.” (169f) He is, after all, presenting a learned argument against the value of learning, using rhetoric to decry the use of rhetoric, and competing for a prize by lamenting the fact that “[r]ewards are lavished on wit and ingenuity.” (168) Surely he is being ironic at the outset when he describes the miraculous spectacle of man “soaring in thought even to the celestial regions,” (146) but I have decided nonetheless to take him at face value, knowing that I can fall back on the same tongue-in-cheek defense myself should I have wagered mistakenly.

While Rousseau's own later judgment that the piece is “completely lacking in logic and order” (Confessions - 329) may have some validity, his discourse nonetheless bristles with suggestive ideas and conveys the fervor with which it was written. To the question “Whether the Restoration of the arts and sciences has had the effect of purifying or corrupting morals,” Rousseau responds that “our minds have been corrupted in proportion as the arts and sciences have improved.” (150)

The broad strokes of his argument are to compare the state of virtue in a contemporary learned society to that of a primitive, “natural” one and attribute the perceived decline to the development of the arts and sciences. There are more holes in this argument than in the proverbial cheese of his mother country, but there is little point in quibbling about details.

Rousseau perceived a problem with the culture in which he was immersed and passionately sought a solution. His instincts told him that civilization must be judged by its real products—the human beings it spawns—rather than by its secondary cultural effluvia. Wealth, technology, sophistication are worth nothing if the people who possess them are not “better” people as a result.

To accompany him on his journey it is necessary first of all to get astride Rousseau’s notion of virtue. What makes one person better than another? Not surprisingly one of the central components of his idea of virtue is a sentimental notion of Christian charity. Good people care about and for others, especially those less fortunate. One ideal which he conjures up is a society in which “everybody, attentive only to the obligations of humanity and the necessities of nature, spent his whole life serving his country, obliging his friends, and relieving the unhappy.” (159) At another point he lists “magnanimity, equity, temperance, humanity and courage” (166) as moral qualities which have disappeared with the cultivation of the sciences.

Citizenship, the commitment to the welfare of all and perhaps to the strength or glory of one’s country, is also a component in Rousseau’s concept of virtue. It is easy to read some of his calls to citizenship as “knee-jerk” patriotism, but the underlying idea is the perception of man as essentially social. There can be no virtue in isolation without a commitment to social bonds. Serving one’s country need not be understood as blindly obeying the dictates of a government.

One of the principal forms of a healthy or “natural” social bond in Rousseau’s eyes is honesty. He often presents this idea via the myth of a primitive society which is devoid of pretense or competitive ambition and in which, as a result, the members have nothing to hide from one another. He seems to view a primitive culture’s lack of elaborate clothing as an indication of a basic openness to each other. Living together nakedly without shame is

possible only if people are virtuous. Virtue in turn seems almost to be defined by the ability to be open, to be directly bonded with others. Anything that interferes with this bonding is viewed as a form of corruption, whether it be an obsessive concern with others' evaluation of oneself or a desire to manipulate others by exploiting their concerns about how they are perceived. Man is "naturally" bound to his fellows; civilization has somehow corrupted this bond. Simple, everyday honesty is a recognition of this bond; and Rousseau's *Confessions*, of course, is an extreme expression of everyday, conversational candor or honesty.

There is, however, another thread in his concept of virtue which seems a bit at odds with this sentimental ideal. One piece of evidence Rousseau repeatedly cites in depicting the decline of virtue is defeat in battle. Barbaric hordes are able to defeat civilized nations because they have not been corrupted. Virtue is associated with physical vigor or stamina. There is a classical precedence for this notion implied in the root meanings of the word "virtue," and it is tempting to suggest that Rousseau has been seduced by his own learning. Certainly viewing this concept through the prism of the 20th century makes it seem less than attractive. The idea that some of the roots of Fascism draw nourishment from this sweetly oblivious Swiss vagabond is disconcerting and cruelly ironic. It is, however, all too easy for an American to respond to the idea that a young man's time is better spent learning to play tennis than studying philosophy (167) since as Rousseau points out at least on the tennis court he is getting exercise that is good for his body.

Virtue is associated with health, which is in turn associated with the body. Corruption is associated with disease or dissipation of energy. Learning seems to be associated with bookwormishness and a lack of physical activity. Inactive and sedentary occupations "by enervating and corrupting the body diminish also the vigour of the mind." (165) The result is not only the lack of physical stamina required for a strong soldier but also a corruption of the will and a redirection of one energies into vain and useless pursuits.

One of the things Rousseau is grappling with under the covers is what happens when mankind is able to satisfy basic needs efficiently enough to have surplus time and energy. Rousseau values the “honest” work involved in the satisfaction of basic needs for food, shelter and clothing; he distrusts the uses to which men put their energy when they have time on their hands. He may be moved to this suspicion by the observation that some are free to fritter their time away in useless pursuits while others still do not have enough to satisfy their basic needs, but one suspects he would dislike “idle pursuits” even if everyone enjoyed the same high standard of living.

Rousseau’s argument leads him ultimately to a contrast between knowing how to speak and knowing how to act. His egalitarian instincts convince him that any man can know how to act properly, even if only the exceptional few can truly know how to speak properly. The principles of virtue are “graven on every heart,” (174) and accessible to anyone in moments when “the passions are silent.” (174) Genuine intellectual prowess requires talent or genius. True intellectual achievement is rare and worthy of admiration, but not envy. Those of us who are not blessed with exceptional gifts should not aspire to compete with the truly gifted nor should our educational system or culture encourage us to waste our time vainly pursuing artistic or scientific accomplishments. He even goes so far as to suggest that a genius like Newton had no need of education to spur him to his great insights, conveniently ignoring the stimulus provided by Newton’s studies at Cambridge.

Idleness is evil in itself because it represents a failure to act to relieve the suffering of ones fellow man. It is a sin of omission. There is presumably no end to the good works that can be done by a virtuous man who listens to his conscience. Idleness in Rousseau’s view is doubly dangerous because it is somehow fosters vain desires. Observing that idle children are prone to mischief, he sees mischief in all the pursuits born of leisure and luxury. Like an 18th century Tom Wolfe he sees cultural activity primarily in terms of status consciousness.

Artists, writers and philosophers crave “applause.” Certainly the image of the foppish wit competing for status in the French court is an easy target for anti-intellectual satire. If such a courtier is regarded as the inevitable end product of civilization and learning, Rousseau easily wins his case.

As much as he ridicules philosophy for spawning contradictory theories and for pulling the rug out from under morality, he cannot bring himself to disparage all of the arts and sciences. He respects the accomplishments of Bacon, Descartes and Newton. (172) Perhaps he would have appreciated Leibniz’s mathematical theories but not his philosophical system. He certainly has no use for the “pernicious reflections of Hobbes and Spinoza” which he fears are being immortalized by the printing press. (171)

It is all too easy to read Rousseau’s own reflections as a pernicious seed of Fascism and anti-intellectual propaganda suited to the exploitation of the common man by elitist capitalistic imperialism, but this aspect of his argument is completely at odds with the rhetorical and sentimental thrust of the piece. Any pretense to logic or consistency is clearly subordinated to a heartfelt call to wake up and realize that something is not right with the world. It was surely this gutsy, critical stance which moved the Academy to award him the prize. He may not have the conceptual tools or the philosophical skills to articulate clearly the cause of the problem much less a clear vision of a solution, but he does have the heart and the moral sensibility to know that mankind should be able to live together in a more suitable way. He throws down a challenge and conjures up potent metaphors which can shake his reader out of any certainty that this is the best of all possible worlds. He is a perfect example of how the conscience can still be heard amid the din of public discourse and over the tumult of private passions.