A Critique of Progress

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

In 1751 Rousseau directly challenged the other philosophes *with his* Discourse on Arts and Sciences, *from which this selection is taken. No defense of science and learning here.*

"Has the re-establishment of arts and sciences contributed to purge or corrupt our manners?" This is the question in debate; which side shall I take, Gentlemen? That which becomes an honest man who knows nothing, and is not asham'd to own it.

I foresee the difficulty of appropriating what I have to say to the tribunal I appear before. How shall I dare to depreciate the sciences in the presence of one of the most learned Assemblies in *Europe?* Run out into the praises of ignorance in the midst of a celebrated Academy; or reconcile my disdain for study with the respect due to the truly learned? I saw these difficulties, but was not deterr'd by them. 'Tis not the Sciences, said I to myself, that I attack; 'tis the Cause of Virtue that I support before virtuous judges; honor, honesty, and probity, are dearer to good men than erudition to even the learned—What then have I to dread? The penetration of the honorable assembly, before whom I speak, I own, is to be fear'd: but it is more for the construction of the oration, than for the sentiments of the orator; equitable sovereigns never hesitate to condemn themselves in all doubtful cases; and the happiest situation for a just cause is, to be admitted to a defense where its upright and learned adversary is judge.—If to this motive, which has encouraged me, another be wanting, let it be, that after having, to the best of my skill, defended the truth, whatever my success may be, there is a prize which cannot fail me, I shall find it at the bottom of my own heart.

It is a beautiful noble prospect to view man, as it were, rising again from nothing by his own efforts; dissipating, by the light of his reason, all the thick clouds in which nature had involv'd him; mounting above himself: soaring in thought even to the celestial regions; marching like the sun, with giant strides around the vast universe; and, what is still grander and more wonderful, re-entering into himself to study man, to dive into his nature, his duties, his end. All these wonders have been renew'd within these few last generations.

Europe was relapsed into the barbarity of the first ages; the inhabitants of that part of the world, which now makes so great a figure in knowledge, were plung'd, some centuries ago, into a state which was worse than utter ignorance.

A certain school jargon, more despicable than ignorance itself, had usurp'd the name of knowledge, and opposed an almost invincible obstacle to its restoration, a revolution became necessary to lead people back into common sense: and it came at last from the corner of the world the least suspected; it was the stupid Mussulman, the sworn enemy to letters, that caus'd their revival among us. The fall of *Constantine's* throne brought the relics of ancient *Greece* into *Italy; France* in her turn was enrich'd by the precious spoils; the sciences soon follow'd letters, and the art of thinking was join'd to that of writing: this gradation seems strange, but it is perhaps but too natural; and men began to feel the principal advantage accruing from the love of the Muses, that of rendering mankind more sociable, by inspiring the thirst of pleasing each other by works worthy of mutual approbation.

There are necessaries for the mind, as well as for the body; these are the foundation of society, those its ornament. Whilst the government and laws provide for the safety and well-being of a people assembled; the sciences, letters, and arts, less arbitrary, tho' perhaps more powerful, strow garlands of flowers on their iron fetters, smother those sentiments of original liberty, with which they would seem to have been born, make them in love with their slavery, and so form, what we call, a polish'd nation. Necessity rais'd thrones; and the arts and sciences support them.—Ye powers of the earth cherish all talents, and protect those who cultivate them: go on ye polish'd nations, improve, advance and enlarge them: to them, ye happy slaves, you owe that delicacy of taste you boast of, that sweetness of character, and that urbanity of manners, which renders your civil commerce so easy, so flowing, and so engaging: in a word, the appearance of every virtue without possessing one.

'Twas by these kind of accomplishments, which become much the more amiable for their affectation of not appearing, that *Athens* and *Rome* were formerly so renown'd in those boasted days of their magnificence and glory: and it is, no doubt, for the same reason that our days and our kingdom bear the sway from all ages and all nations;—An air of philosophy without pedantry, an address that is natural and yet engaging, equally distant from northern rusticity and *Italian* mimickry: those are the fruits produced by the arts and sciences which are ripened and brought to perfection by the commerce of the world.

What a happiness it would be to live amongst us, if our exterior appearance were always the true representation of our hearts; if our decency were virtue, if our maxims were the rules of our actions, if true philosophy were inseparably annex'd to the title of philosopher! But so many good qualities are not always found together, and virtue seldom appears in such pomp and state. Dress will set forth the man of fortune, and elegance the man of taste; but the wholesome robust man is known by other marks. The strength and vigor of body are found under the coarse homely coverings of the laboring peasant, not under the courtier's embroidery. So all ornaments are strangers to virtue, which is the strength and vigor of the soul: the honest man is a champion who wrestles stark naked; he disdains all those vile accoutrements which prove only incumbrances, that mar

his natural force and activity, and were only first invented to hide some defect or deformity.

Before art had new molded our behaviors, and taught our passions to talk an affected language, our manners were indeed rustic, but sincere and natural; and the difference of our behaviors in an instant distinguished our characters.—'Tis true, that human nature was not then any wise better in the main than now: but man found a security in the ease with which he could dive into the thoughts of man; and this advantage, on which we seem to set no price, exempted them from many vices.

In these our days the art of pleasing is by subtle researches, and finery of taste, reduced to certain principles; insomuch that a vile deceitful uniformity runs thro' our whole system of manners: as if all our constitutions, all our minds had been cast in one and the same mold.—Politeness constantly requires, civility commands; we always follow customs, never our particular inclinations: no one, nowadays, dares to appear what he really is; and in this perpetual constraint, the individuals who compose the congregation called society, being put into the same circumstances, will one and all act in the same manner, unless some more powerful motive intervene. Shall we then never rightly know the man we converse with? Must we, in order to distinguish the sincere friend, wait for grand occasions, I mean till it be too late; for it is for grand occasions that it were of the highest consequence to know him beforehand.

What a train of vices attend this uncertainty? Friendships are insincere, esteem is not real, and confidence is ill founded; suspicions, jealousies, fears, coolnesses, reserve, hatred, and treasons, are hid under the uniform veil of perfidious politeness, under that boasted civility which we owe to the vast discoveries of our age. 'Tis true, no one will swear by the name of the Omnipotent Master of the universe, 'tis not polite; but he shall be blasphemed in speeches and writings, without offending our scrupulous ears. No one will boast of his own merit, but he will run down that of his neighbor. No one will outrageously insult his enemy, but he will slyly calumniate him; national hatreds will be quench'd, but it will be in the love of our country. The place of despised ignorance will be occupied by a more despicable Pyrrhonism. Some excesses indeed will be proscribed, some vices dishonored; but others will be adom'd with the dress and name of virtues, which if we have not, we must affect to have. Let who will boast of the sobriety of the sages of our days; for my own part I can perceive nothing but a refinement of intemperance, as unworthy of my approbation as is their artificial simplicity.

Such is the purity which our manners have acquired. Thus we are' become great and good. Let arts, letters, and sciences now claim what belongs to them in this noble and salutary work.—I shall only add one reflection; if the inhabitant of some far distant region would form an idea of our European manners on the condition in which the sciences are amongst us, on the perfection of our arts, on the decency of our public diversions, on the politeness of our behavior, on the affability of our conversations, on our perpetual demonstrations of goodwill to each other, and on that tumultuous concourse of men of all ages, of all

conditions, who, from sunrise to sunset, seem eternally employ'd in obliging one another; would not this stranger conclude our manners to be the exact reverse of what they really are? Where we see no effect, 'tis in vain to seek for a cause; but here the effect is visible, the depravation palpable; our minds have been corrupted in proportion as our arts and sciences have made advances toward their perfection.—Shall we say that this is a misfortune particular to our times? No, gentlemen, the evils arising from our vain curiosity are as old as the world. The flow and ebb of the sea are not more regularly guided by the moon's course, than our manners and probity by that of the arts and sciences. We see virtue flying on one side, as their lights rise on the other of our horizon: and the same phenomenon has been observed in all times and in all places.

Let us view *Egypt,* the original school of the universe, that beautiful, fertile, and cloudless climate, that celebrated country, whence *Sesostris* formerly issued to conquer the world. *Egypt* becomes the mother of philosophy and arts, but soon after, the prey of *Cambyses,* and presently that of the *Greeks,* the *Romans,* the *Arabs,* and at last that of the *Turks.*

See *Greece,* formerly peopled by heroes who twice conquer'd *Asia,* once at *Troy,* and again at their own doors. Learning, in her infancy, had not yet corrupted the hearts of her inhabitants; but the progress of sciences, the dissolution of manners, and the *Macedonian* yoke, invaded her, as I may say, on the heels of one another: then poor Greece, still learned, still voluptuous, still a slave, knew no other revolutions but the frequent changes of her masters; nor could all the eloquence of *Demosthenes* revive a body, which luxury and the arts had totally enervated.

It was in the time of *Ennius,* in that of *Terence,* that Rome, which had been founded by a shepherd and made famous by Ploughmen, began to degenerate; but after, when the *Ovids,* the *Catullus's,* the *Martials,* and that crowd of obscene authors, whose names alone are enough to shock common modesty, when they appear'd, Rome, from being the temple of virtue, became the theater of wickedness, the aversion of nations, and the scoff of *Barbarians.* That great capital of the world falls herself under the same captivity which she so often impos'd on other nations; and the time of her fall was the eve of that day on which she bestow'd on one of her citizens the title of sole arbiter of *fine taste.* What shall I say of that metropolis of the eastern empire, which by its situation would seem to have had a right of command over the whole world? That refuge of arts and sciences, after they had been proscrib'd by the rest of *Europe* perhaps more through wisdom than barbarity? All that render corruption and debauchery shameful, that can blacken treasons, murders, and poisonings; all the concourse of the most atrocious crimes seem combin'd together to form the history of *Constantinople;* and yet that is the pure source whence have flow'd those floods of light and knowledge so boasted of in our days.

But what need we recur to those past ages for proofs of this truth whilst we have living evidences subsisting before our eyes? We have in *Asia* an immense track of land, where learning flourishes, and is the best qualification for filling the

first and greatest places, employments, and dignities of the state. If the sciences really better'd manners, if they taught man to spill his blood for his country, if they heighten'd his courage; the inhabitants of *China* ought to be wise, free, and invincible. —But if they are tainted with every vice, familiar with every crime; if neither the skill of their magistrates, nor the pretended wisdom of their laws, nor the vast multitude of people inhabiting that great extent of empire, could protect or defend them from the yoke of an ignorant *Barbarian Tartar,* of what use was all their art, all their skill, all their learning? What was the benefit accruing from all the respect with which they were adorn'd and honor'd? unless that *China* is peopled with slaves and cheats.—Let us set, in opposition to these frightful pictures, that of those few countries, who, having the good fortune to have been preserv'd from the contagion of vain knowledge, have procur'd, by their virtue, happiness for themselves, and have prov'd the great examples of all other nations. Such were the first Persians, a very singular nation, who made virtue their study, as we do sciences; who subdued Asia with so much ease, and who alone had the glory of having the history of their institutions pass for a philosophical romance: such were the *Scythians,* of whom we have such magnificent elogiums: such the *Germans,* whom an able writer, wearied by describing the horrid crimes of an opulent voluptuous learned people, has taken delight to celebrate for their simplicity, their innocence, their virtues.—Such was even *Rome* herself in the times of her poverty and ignorance; and such, in short, appear'd, in our own days, that rude unpolish' d nation so renown'd for courage, which no adversity could abate, and for loyalty, which example could not corrupt.

It was not through stupidity that these preferred the bodily exercises to those of the mind; they knew well enough that idlers in other countries pass'd their whole lives in disputes about the *summum bonum,* about vice and virtue, and that proud reasoners, vainly bestowing praises on themselves, jumbled all other nations under the despicable denomination of *Barbarians:* but they have duly considered their lives and manners, and thence despised their doctrines.

Can we forget that in the very bosom of Greece herself there arose a city which became famous thro' a happy ignorance, and the wisdom of her laws? A commonwealth peopled rather by demi-gods than men, so far did their virtue outshine humanity. O *Sparta!* thou proof of the folly of vain learning! whilst all manner of vice, led by the arts and sciences were introduced into *Athens,* whilst a tyrant was busy in picking up the works of the prince of poets, thou wert chasing from thy walls all sciences, all learning, together with their professors.

The success of both was thus distinguished: *Athens* became the mansion of politeness and fine taste, the seat of eloquence and philosophy; the elegance of their buildings corresponded with that of their language. On all sides were seen the marble and animated canvas fresh from the hands of the greatest masters. 'Twas from *Athens* that all those surprising works, which will for ever be models for all corrupted ages, have sprung. The picture of *Lacedaemon* is not so brilliant. *There*, said all other nations, *there men are born virtuous*, *the very air of that*

country seems to inspire virtue. Nothing remains of that people but the tradition of their heroic actions.