Discourse

Decipimur specie recti.⁶

HAS THE RESTORATION of the sciences and arts tended to purify or corrupt morals?⁷ That is the subject to be examined. Which side should I take in this question? The one, gentlemen, that suits an honorable man who knows nothing and yet does not think any the less of himself.

It will be difficult, I feel, to adapt what I have to say to the tribunal before which I appear. How can one dare blame the sciences before one of Europe’s most learned Societies, praise ignorance in a famous Academy, and reconcile contempt for study with respect for the truly learned? I have seen these contradictions, and they have not rebuffed me. I am not abusing science, I told myself; I am defending virtue before virtuous men. Integrity is even dearer to good men than erudition to the scholar. What then have I to fear? The enlightenment⁸ of the assembly that listens to me? I admit such a fear; but it applies to the construction of the discourse and not to the sentiment of the orator. Equitable sovereigns have never hesitated to condemn themselves in doubtful disputes; and the position most advantageous for one with a just cause is to have to defend himself against an upright and enlightened opponent who is judge of his own case.⁹

This motive which encourages me is joined by another which determines me: having upheld, according to my natural intellect, the cause of truth, whatever the outcome there is a prize which I cannot fail to receive; I will find it at the bottom of my heart.

FIRST PART

It is a grand and beautiful sight to see man emerge from obscurity somehow by his own efforts; dissipate, by the light of his reason, the darkness in which nature had enveloped him; rise above himself; soar intellectually into celestial regions; traverse with giant steps, like the sun, the vastness of the universe; and—which is even grander and more difficult—come back to himself to study man and know his nature, his duties, and his end. All of these marvels have been revived in recent generations.

Europe had sunk back into the barbarism of the first ages. The peoples of that part of the world which is today so enlightened lived, a few centuries ago, in a condition worse than ignorance. A nondescript scientific jargon, even more despicable than ignorance, had usurped the name of knowledge, and opposed an almost invincible obstacle to its return. A revolution was needed to bring men back to common sense; it finally came from the least expected quarter. The stupid Moslem, the eternal scourge of learning, brought about its rebirth among us. The fall of the throne of Constantine brought into Italy the debris of ancient Greece.¹⁰ France in turn was enriched by these precious spoils. Soon the sciences followed letters; the art of writing was joined by the art of thinking—an order which seems strange but which is perhaps only too natural; and people began to feel the principal advantage of literary occupations, that of making men more sociable by in-
spiring in them the desire to please one another with works worthy of their mutual approval.

The mind has its needs as does the body. The needs of the body are the foundations of society, those of the mind make it pleasant. While government and laws provide for the safety and well-being of assembled men, the sciences, letters, and arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened, stifle in them the sense of that original liberty for which they seemed to have been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called civilized peoples. Need raised thrones; the sciences and arts have strengthened them. Earthly powers, love talents and protect those who cultivate them.* Civi-

lized peoples, cultivate talents: happy slaves, you owe to them that delicate and refined taste on which you pride yourselves; that softness of character and urbanity of customs which make relations among you so amiable and easy; in a word, the semblance of all the virtues without the possession of any.

By this sort of civility, the more pleasant because it is unpretentious, Athens and Rome once dis-

*Princes always view with pleasure the spread, among their subjects, of the taste for arts of amusement and superfluities which do not result in the exportation of money. For, besides fostering that spiritual pettiness so appropriate to servitude, they very well know that all needs the populace creates for itself are so many chains binding it. Alexander, desiring to keep the Ichthyophagi dependent on him, forced them to give up fishing and to eat foodstuffs common to other peoples; but the American savages who go naked and live on the yield of their hunting have never been subjugated. Indeed, what yoke could be imposed on men who need nothing?

their magnificence and splendor. It is by such civility that our century and our nation will no doubt surpass all times and all peoples. A philosophic tone without pedantry; natural yet engaging manners, equally re-

ote from Teutonic simplicity and Italian pantomime: these are the fruits of the taste acquired by good education and perfected in social intercourse.

How pleasant it would be to live among us if exterior appearance were always a reflection of the heart’s disposition; if decency were virtue; if our maxims served as our rules; if true philosophy were inseparable from the title of philosopher! But so many qualities are too rarely combined, and virtue seldom walks in such great pomp. Richness of attire may announce a wealthy man, and elegance a man of taste; the healthy, robust man is known by other signs. It is in the rustic clothes of a farmer and not beneath the gilt of a courtier that strength and vigor of the body will be found. Ornamentation is no less foreign to virtue, which is the strength and vigor of the soul. The good man is an athlete who likes to compete in the nude. He disdains all those vile ornaments which would ham-

per the use of his strength, most of which were inven-

ted only to hide some deformity.

Before art had moulded our manners and taught our passions to speak an affected language, our customs were rustic but natural, and differences of conduct announced at first glance those of character. Human nature, basically, was no better, but men found their security in the ease of seeing through each other, and that advantage, which we no longer appreciate, spared them many vices.

Today, when subtler researches and a more refined taste have reduced the art of pleasing to set rules, a
base and deceptive uniformity prevails in our customs, and all minds seem to have been cast in the same mould. Incessantly politeness requires, propriety demands; incessantly usage is followed, never one’s own inclinations. One no longer dares to appear as he is; and in this perpetual constraint, the men who form this herd called society, placed in the same circumstances, will all do the same things unless stronger motives deter them. Therefore one will never know well those with whom he deals, for to know one’s friend thoroughly, it would be necessary to wait for emergencies—that is, to wait until it is too late, as it is for these very emergencies that it would have been essential to know him.

What a procession of vices must accompany this uncertainty! No more sincere friendships; no more real esteem; no more well-based confidence. Suspicions, offenses, fears, coldness, reserve, hate, betrayal will hide constantly under that uniform and false veil of politeness, under that much vaunted urbanity which we owe to the enlightenment of our century. The name of the Master of the Universe will no longer be profaned by swearing, but it will be insulted by blasphemies without offending our scrupulous ears. Men will not boast of their own merit, but they will disparage that of others. An enemy will not be grossly insulted, but he will be cleverly slandered. National hatreds will die out, but so will love of country. For scorned ignorance, a dangerous Pyrrhonism will be substituted. There will be some forbidden excesses, some dishonored vices, but others will be dignified with the name of virtues; one must either have them or affect them. Whoever wants to praise the sobriety of the wise men of our day may do so; as for me, I see in it only a refinement of intemper-

ance as unworthy of my praise as their cunning simplicity.*

Such is the purity our morals have acquired. Thus have we become respectable men. It is for literature, the sciences, and the arts to claim their share of such a wholesome piece of work. I will add only one thought: an inhabitant of some faraway lands who wanted to form a notion of European morals on the basis of the state of the sciences among us, the perfection of our arts, the decency of our entertainments, the politeness of our manners, the affability of our speech, our perpetual demonstrations of goodwill, and that tumultuous competition of men of all ages and conditions who seem anxious to oblige one another from dawn to dark; that foreigner, I say, would guess our morals to be exactly the opposite of what they are.

When there is no effect, there is no cause to seek. But here the effect is certain, the depravity real, and our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our sciences and arts toward perfection. Can it be said that this is a misfortune particular to our age? No, gentlemen; the evils caused by our vain curiosity are as old as the world. The daily ebb and flow of the ocean’s waters have not been more steadily subject to the course of the star which gives us light during the night than has the fate of morals and integrity been subject to the advancement of the sciences and arts. Virtue has fled as their light dawned on

*"I like," says Montaigne, "to argue and discuss, but only with a few men and for myself. For to serve as a spectacle to the great and to show off competitively one’s wit and one’s babble is, I find, a very inappropriate occupation for an honorable man." It is the occupation of all our wits, save one.
our horizon, and the same phenomenon has been observed in all times and in all places.

Consider Egypt, that first school of the universe, that climate so fertile under a bronze sky, that famous country from which Sesostris departed long ago to conquer the world.\footnote{14} Egypt became the mother of philosophy and the fine arts, and soon after, she was conquered by Cambyses,\footnote{15} then by the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, and finally the Turks.

Consider Greece, formerly populated by heroes who twice conquered Asia, once at Troy and once in their homeland. Nascent learning had not yet brought corruption into the hearts of its inhabitants, but the progress of the arts, the dissolution of morals, and the yoke of the Macedonian\footnote{16} followed each other closely; and Greece, always learned, always voluptuous, and always enslaved, no longer experienced anything in her revolutions but a change of masters. All the eloquence of Demosthenes could never revive a body enervated by luxury and the arts.\footnote{17}

It is in the time of Ennius and Terence\footnote{18} that Rome, founded by a shepherd and made famous by farmers, begins to degenerate. But after Ovid, Catullus, Martial, and that crowd of obscene authors whose names alone alarm decency, Rome, formerly the temple of virtue, becomes the theatre of crime, the shame of nations, and the plaything of barbarians. That world capital finally falls under the yoke she had imposed on so many peoples, and the day of her fall was the eve of the day one of her citizens was given the title Arbiter of Good Taste.\footnote{19}

What shall I say about that capital of the Eastern Empire which, by its position, seemed destined to be the capital of the whole world, that refuge of the sciences and arts when they were banned from the rest of Europe perhaps more through wisdom than barbarism. All that is most shameful in debauchery and corruption, most heinous in betrayals, assassinations and poisons, most atrocious in the combination of all crimes, forms the fabric of the history of Constantinople. Such is the pure source from which we received the enlightenment of which our century boasts.

But why seek in remote times proofs of a truth for which we have existing evidence before our eyes. In Asia there is an immense country where honors for learning lead to the highest offices of the State. If the sciences purified morals, if they taught men to shed their blood for their country, if they aroused courage, the peoples of China would be wise, free, and invincible. But if there is no vice that does not dominate them, no crime with which they are not familiar; if neither the enlightenment of government officials, nor the supposed wisdom of laws, nor the multitude of inhabitants of that vast empire were able to save it from the yoke of the ignorant and coarse Tartar, what purpose did all its learned men serve? What benefit has resulted from the honors bestowed on them? Could it consist in being populated by slaves and wicked men?

Contrast these pictures with that of the morals of those few peoples who, preserved from this contamination of vain knowledge, have by their own virtues created their own happiness and an example for other nations. Such were the first Persians, an extraordinary nation where one learned virtue as one learns science among us, which conquered Asia with such ease, and which alone was honored by having the history of its institutions taken for a philosophic novel.\footnote{20} Such were the Scythians, about whom we have been left magnifi-
cent praises. Such were the Germans, whose simplicity, innocence, and virtues a writer—tired of tracing the crimes and foul deeds of an educated, opulent, and voluptuous people—took comfort in describing. Such had been Rome itself at the time of its poverty and ignorance. Such to this day, finally, is that rustic nation so much praised for its courage, which could not be destroyed by adversity, and for its fidelity, which could not be corrupted by bad example.*

It is not through stupidity that the latter have preferred other exercises to those of the mind. They were not unaware that in other lands idle men spent their lives debating about the greatest good, vice and virtue; and that proud reasoners, giving themselves the highest praises, lumped all other peoples together under the contemptuous name of barbarians. But they considered their morals and learned to disdain their doctrine.†

Could I forget that in the very heart of Greece rose that city as renowned for its happy ignorance as for the wisdom of its laws, that republic of demi-gods rather than men, so superior did their virtues seem to human nature? O Sparta! you eternally put to shame a vain doctrine! While the vices which accompany the fine arts entered Athens together with them, while a tyrant there so carefully collected the works of the prince of poets, you chased the arts and artists, the sciences and scientists away from your walls.

That event was evidence of the following difference. Athens became the abode of civility and good taste, the country of orators and philosophers. The elegance of buildings there corresponded to that of the language. Marble and canvas, animated by the hands of the most skillful masters, were seen everywhere. From Athens came those astonishing works that will serve as models in all corrupt ages. The picture of Lacedaemon is less brilliant. "There," said other peoples, "men are born virtuous and the very air of the country seems to instill virtue." Of its inhabitants nothing is left to us except the memory of their heroic actions. Should such monuments be worth less to us than the curious statues Athens has left us?²²

Some wise men, it is true, resisted the general torrent and kept themselves from vice while dwelling with the Muses. But listen to the judgment that the first and most unhappy of them made of the learned men and artists of his time.

"I examined the poets," he says, "and I consider them to be men whose talent deceives themselves and not say that they believed they atoned, by this one act, for all the evils they had caused those unfortunate Indians.²³
others, who claim to be wise men, who are taken to be such, and who are nothing of the kind.

"From poets," continues Socrates, "I turned to artists. No one knew less of the arts than I; no one was more convinced that artists possessed some very beautiful secrets. However, I perceived that their condition is no better than that of the poets, and that they are all under the same illusion. Because the most skillful among them excel in their specialty, they consider themselves the wisest of men. This presumption altogether tarnished their knowledge in my eyes. So it was that, putting myself in the place of the oracle and asking myself which I would rather be, what I am or what they are, to know what they have learned or to know that I know nothing, I answered myself and the god: I want to remain what I am.

"We do not know, neither the sophists, nor the poets, nor the orators, nor the artists, nor I, what is the true, the good, and the beautiful. But between us there is this difference: although those men know nothing, they all think they know something; whereas, if I know nothing, at least I am not in doubt of it. Hence all that superior wisdom attributed to me by the oracle reduces itself solely to my firm conviction that I am ignorant of what I do not know." 26

There you have the wisest of men according to the judgment of the gods and the most learned Athenian according to the opinion of all Greece, Socrates, eulogizing ignorance. Can it be believed that if he were reborn among us, our learned men and artists would make him change his mind? No, gentlemen, this just man would continue to scorn our vain sciences; he would not help to enlarge that mass of books by which we are flooded from all sides; and, as he did before, he would leave behind to his disciples and our posterity no other moral precept than the example and memory of his virtue. Thus is it noble to teach men!

What Socrates had begun in Athens, Cato the Elder 27 continued in Rome, inveighing against those cunning and subtle Greeks who seduced the virtue and enervated the courage of his fellow citizens. But the sciences, arts, and dialectic again prevailed: Rome was filled with philosophers and orators; military discipline was neglected, agriculture was scorned, sects were embraced and the fatherland forgotten. The sacred names of liberty, disinterestedness, obedience to laws were replaced by the names of Epicurus, Zeno, Arcesilaus. 28 "Since learned men have begun to appear among us," said their own philosophers, "good men have disappeared." 29 Until then, the Romans had been content to practice virtue; all was lost when they began to study it.

O Fabricius! What would your noble soul have thought if, restored to life to your own misfortune, you had seen the pompous appearance of that Rome saved by your valor and better glorified by your worthy name than by all its conquests? "Gods," you would have said, "what has become of those thatched roofs and those rustic hearths where moderation and virtue used to dwell?"

"What disastrous splendor has succeeded Roman simplicity? What is this strange language? What are these effeminate customs? What is the meaning of these statues, these paintings, these buildings? Madmen, what have you done? Have you, the masters of nations, made yourselves slaves of the frivolous men you conquered? Are these rhetoricians who govern you? Is it to enrich
architects, painters, sculptors, and comedians that you watered Greece and Asia with your blood? Are the spoils of Carthage the booty of a flute player? 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. When Cines took our Senate for an assembly of kings, he was dazzled neither by vain pomp nor by affected elegance. He did not hear that frivolous eloquence which is the study and charm of futile men. What then did Cines see of such majesty? O citizens, he saw a sight that could never be produced by your wealth or all your arts, the most noble sight that has ever appeared beneath the heavens, the assembly of two hundred virtuous men, worthy of commanding Rome and governing the Earth.

But let us leap over the interval of space and time and see what has happened in our countries and under our own eyes; or rather, let us set aside odious pictures which would offend our delicacy, and spare ourselves the trouble of repeating the same things under different names. It was not in vain that I called up the shade of Fabricius; and what did I make that great man say that I might not have put into the mouth of Louis XII or Henry IV? Among us, it is true, Socrates would not have drunk the hemlock; but he would have drunk from an even more bitter cup: insulting ridicule and scorn a hundred times worse than death.

Behold how luxury, licentiousness, and slavery have in all periods been punishment for the arrogant attempts we have made to emerge from the happy ignorance in which eternal wisdom had placed us. The heavy veil with which she covered all her operations seemed to warn us adequately that she did not destine us for vain studies. Is there even one of her lessons from which we have known how to profit, or which we have neglected with impunity? Peoples, know once and for all that nature wanted to keep you from being harmed by knowledge just as a mother wrests a dangerous weapon from her child’s hands; that all the secrets she hides from you are so many evils from which she protects you, and that the difficulty you find in educating yourselves is not the least of her benefits. Men are perverse; they would be even worse if they had the misfortune to be born learned.

How humiliating for humanity are these reflections! How mortified our pride must be! What! could probity be the daughter of ignorance? Could knowledge and virtue be incompatible? What conclusions might not be drawn from these opinions? But to reconcile these apparent contradictions it is only necessary to examine closely the vanity and emptiness of those proud titles that dazzle us, and that we so freely give to human learning. Let us therefore consider the sciences and 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.

SECOND PART

It was an ancient tradition, passed from Egypt to Greece, that a god who was hostile to the tranquillity of mankind was the inventor of the sciences. What

*The allegory in the fable of Prometheus is easily seen; and it does not seem that the Greeks who riveted him on the Caucasus thought any more favorably of him than did the
must the Egyptians themselves, in whose country the sciences were born, have thought of them? They were able to see at first hand the sources that produced them. In fact, whether one leafs through the annals of the world or supplements uncertain chronicles with philosophic research, human learning will not be found to have an origin corresponding to the idea we like to have of it. Astronomy was born from superstition; eloquence from ambition, hate, flattery, and falsehood; geometry from avarice; physics from vain curiosity; all, even moral philosophy, from human pride. Thus the sciences and arts owe their birth to our vices; we would be less doubtful of their advantages if they owed it to our virtues.

The defect of their origin is recalled to us only too clearly in their objects. What would we do with arts without the luxury that nourishes them? Without the injustices of men, what purpose would jurisprudence serve? What would history become, if there were neither tyrants nor wars nor conspirators? In a word, who would want to spend his life in sterile speculations if each of us, consulting only the duties of man and the needs of nature, had time for nothing except his fatherland, the unfortunate, and his friends? Are we destined then to die fixed to the edge of the pit where the truth has hidden? This reflection alone should rebuff, from the outset, any man who would seriously seek to educate himself by the study of philosophy.

Egyptians of their god Thoth. "The satyr," an ancient fable relates, "wanted to kiss and embrace fire the first time he saw it; but Prometheus cried out to him: Satyr, you will mourn the beard on your chin, for fire burns when one touches it." This is the subject of the frontispiece.

What dangers there are! What false paths when investigating the sciences! How many errors, a thousand times more dangerous than the truth is useful, must be surmounted in order to reach the truth? The disadvantage is evident, for falsity is susceptible of infinite combinations, whereas truth has only one form. Besides, who seeks it sincerely? Even with the best intentions, by what signs is one certain to recognize it? In this multitude of different opinions, what will be our criterium in order to judge it properly?* And hardest of all, if by luck we finally find it, who among us will know how to make good use of the truth?

If our sciences are vain in the objects they have in view, they are even more dangerous in the effects they produce. Born in idleness, they nourish it in turn; and irreparable loss of time is the first injury they necessarily cause society. In politics as in ethics, it is a great evil to fail to do good, and every useless citizen may be considered a pernicious man. Answer me then, illustrious philosophers—you who taught us in what proportions bodies attract each other in a vacuum; what are, in the orbits of planets, the ratios of areas covered in equal time intervals; what curves have conjugate points, points of inflexion, and cusps; how man sees everything in God; how soul and body could be in harmony, like two clocks, without communicating; which stars could be inhabited; what insects breed in an extraordinary

---

*The less one knows, the more he thinks he knows. Did the Peripatetics have doubts about anything? Did Descartes not construct the universe with cubes and vortices? And even today, is there in Europe any trivial physicist who does not boldly explain the profound mystery of electricity, which will perhaps be forever the despair of true philosophers?
manner—answer me, I say, you from whom we have received so much sublime knowledge: had you taught us none of these things, would we consequently be fewer in number, less well governed, less formidable, less flourishing or more perverse? Reconsider, then, the importance of your products; and if the works of the most enlightened of our learned men and our best citizens provide us with so little that is useful, tell us what we must think of that crowd of obscure writers and idle men of letters who uselessly consume the substance of the State.

Did I say idle? Would God they really were! Morals would be healthier and society more peaceful. But these vain and futile declaimers go everywhere armed with their deadly paradoxes, undermining the foundations of faith, and annihilating virtue. They 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. Not that at bottom they hate either virtue or our dogmas; they are enemies of public opinion, and to bring them to the foot of altars it would suffice to send them among atheists. O passion to gain distinction, of what are you not capable?

The misuse of time is a great evil. Other evils that are even greater accompany letters and arts. Luxury, born like them from the idleness and vanity of men, is such an evil. Luxury rarely develops without the sciences and arts, and they never develop without it. I know that our philosophy, always rich in peculiar maxims, holds contrary to the experience of all centuries that luxury produces the splendor of States; but having forgotten the necessity for sumptuary laws, will our philosophy still dare deny that good morals are essential to the stability of empires, and that luxury is diametrically opposed to good morals? Granted that luxury is a sure sign of wealth; that it even serves, if you like, to increase wealth. What conclusion must be drawn from this paradox so worthy of our time; and what will become of virtue when one must get rich at any price? Ancient politicians incessantly talked about morals and virtue, those of our time talk only of business and money. One will tell you that in a given country a man is worth the price he would fetch in Algiers; another, following this calculation, will discover some countries where a man is worth nothing and others where he is worth less than nothing. They evaluate men like herds of cattle. According to them a man is worth no more to the State than the value of his domestic consumption. Thus one Sybarite would have been worth at least thirty Lacedaemonians. Guess, then, which of these two republics, Sparta or Sybaris, was subjugated by a handful of peasants and which made Asia tremble.

The Monarchy of Cyrus was conquered with thirty thousand men by a prince who was poorer than the least significant Persian satrap; and the Scyths, the most miserable of peoples, successfully resisted the world's most powerful kings. Two famous republics competed for World Empire: one of them was very rich, the other had nothing, and it was the latter which destroyed the former. The Roman Empire, in turn, after devouring all the wealth of the universe, was the prey of people who did not even know what wealth was. The Franks conquered the Gauls, and the Saxons England, with no other treasures than their bravery and poverty. A group of poor mountaineers, whose greed was limited to a
few sheepskins, after taming Austrian pride crushed
that opulent and formidable House of Burgundy which
made Europe’s potentates tremble. Finally, all the
power and wisdom of the successor of Charles V, sup-
ported by all the treasures of the Indies, were shattered
by a handful of herring-fishers. Let our politicians
deign to suspend their calculations in order to think
over these examples, and let them learn for once that
with money one has everything, except morals and
citizens.

Precisely what, then, is at issue in this question of
luxury? To know whether it is more important for
Empires to be brilliant and transitory or virtuous and
durable. I say brilliant, but with what luster? Ostenta-
tious taste is rarely combined in the same souls with the
taste for honesty. No, it is not possible that minds
degraded by a multitude of futile concerns could ever
rise to anything great, and even if they should have the
strength, the courage would be lacking.

Every artist wants to be applauded. The praises of
his contemporaries are the most precious part of his
reward. What will he do to obtain praise, therefore, if
he has the misfortune to be born among a people and
at a time when the learned, having themselves become
fashionable, have enabled frivolous youth to set the
tone; when men have sacrificed their taste to the tyrants
of their liberty;* when, because one of the sexes dares

*I am very far from thinking that this ascendency of
women is in itself an evil. It is a gift given them by nature
for the happiness of the human race. Better directed, it could
produce as much good as today it does harm. We do not
adequately suspect the advantages that would result for so-
ciety if a better education were given to that half of the
human race which governs the other. Men will always be
what is pleasing to women; therefore if you want them to be-

approve only what is suited to the weakness of the
other, masterpieces of dramatic poetry are dropped and
marvels of harmony rejected. What will an artist do,
gentlemen? He will lower his genius to the level of his
time, and will prefer to compose ordinary works which
are admired during his lifetime instead of marvels which
would not be admired until long after his death. Tell us,
famed Arouet, how many vigorous and strong beauties
have you sacrificed to our false delicacy, and how many
great things has the spirit of gallantry, so fertile in small
things, cost you?

Thus the dissolution of morals, a necessary con-
sequence of luxury, leads in turn to the corruption of
taste. And if, by chance, among the men distinguished
by their talents, there is one who has firmness in his
soul and refuses to yield to the spirit of his times and
disgrace himself by childish works, woe to him. He will
die in poverty and oblivion. Would that this were a
prediction I make and not an experience I relate! Carle,
Pierre,* the moment has come when that brush destined
to increase the majesty of our temples with sublime and
saintly paintings will fall from your hands, or will be
prostituted to ornament carriage panels with lascivious
paintings. And you, rival of Praxiteles and Phidias, you
whose chisel the ancients would have commissioned to
make gods capable of excusing their idolatry in our eyes;
inimitable Pigalle,* your hand will be reduced to sculpt-
ing the belly of an ape or it must stay idle.

One cannot reflect on morals without delighting in

come great and virtuous, teach women what greatness of soul
and virtue are. The reflections occasioned by this subject and
made long ago by Plato greatly deserve to be better developed
by a writer worthy of following such a master and defending
so noble a cause.
the recollection of the simplicity of the earliest times. It is a lovely shore, adorned by the hands of nature alone, toward which one incessantly turns one's eyes and from which one regretfully feels oneself moving away. When innocent and virtuous men enjoyed having gods as witnesses of their actions, they lived together in the same huts; but soon becoming evil, they tired of these inconvenient spectators and relegated them to magnificent temples. Finally, they chased the gods out in order to live in the temples themselves, or at least the temples of the gods were no longer distinguishable from the houses of the citizens. This was the height of depravity, and vices were never carried further than when they could be seen, so to speak, propped up on columns of marble, and engraved on Corinthian capitals at the entry of great men's palaces.

While living conveniences multiply, arts are perfected and luxury spreads, true courage is enervated, military virtues disappear, and this too is the work of the sciences and of all those arts which are exercised in the shade of the study. When the Goths ravaged Greece, all the libraries were saved from burning only by the opinion, spread by one among them, that they should let the enemy keep belongings so well suited to turn them away from military exercise and amuse them with idle and sedentary occupations. Charles VIII found himself master of Tuscany and the Kingdom of Naples virtually without having drawn his sword; and his whole court attributed this unhoped for ease to the fact that the Princes and nobility of Italy enjoyed themselves becoming ingenious and learned more than they exerted themselves becoming vigorous and warlike. In fact, says the sensible man who relates these two anecdotes, all examples teach us that in such military regulations, and in all regulations that resemble them, study of the sciences is much more apt to soften and enervate courage than to strengthen and animate it.

The Romans admitted that military virtue died out among them to the degree that they became connoisseurs of paintings, engravings, jeweled vessels, and began to cultivate the fine arts. And, as if that famous country were destined to serve unceasingly as an example to other peoples, the rise of the Medicis and the revival of letters brought about anew, and perhaps for always, the fall of that warlike reputation which Italy seemed to have recovered a few centuries ago.

The ancient Greek republics, with that wisdom which shone through most of their institutions, forbade their citizens the practice of those tranquil and sedentary occupations which, by weighing down and corrupting the body, soon enervate the vigor of the soul. What view of hunger, thirst, fatigues, dangers, and death can men have if they are crushed by the smallest need and rebuffed by the least difficulty? Where will soldiers find the courage to bear excessive work to which they are totally unaccustomed? With what kind of spirit will they make forced marches under officers who do not even have the strength to travel on horseback? Let no one raise as an objection the renowned valor of all those modern warriors who are so scientifically disciplined. I hear their bravery on a single day of battle highly praised, but I am not told how they bear overwork, how they endure the rigor of the seasons and the bad weather. Only a little sun or snow, or the lack of a few superfluities is necessary to dissolve and destroy the best of our armies in a few days. Intrepid warriors, ad-
mit for once the truth you so rarely hear: you are brave, I know; you would have triumphed with Hannibal at Cannae and at Trasimene; with you Caesar would have crossed the Rubicon and enslaved his country; but it is not with you that the former would have crossed the Alps and the latter conquered your ancestors.

Fighting does not always win wars, and for generals there is an art superior to that of winning battles. A man who runs intrepidly into the line of fire is nonetheless a very bad officer. Even in the soldier, a little more strength and vigor would perhaps be more necessary than such bravery, which does not preserve him from death; and what does it matter to the State whether its troops perish by fever and cold or by the enemy’s sword.

If cultivating the sciences is harmful to warlike qualities, it is even more so to moral qualities. From our earliest years a foolish education adorns our mind and corrupts our judgment. I see everywhere immense institutions where young people are brought up at great expense, learning everything except their duties. Your children will not know their own language, but they will speak others that are nowhere in use; they will know how to write verses they can barely understand; without knowing how to distinguish error from truth, they will possess the art of making them both unrecognizable to others by specious arguments. But they will not know what the words magnanimity, equity, temperance, humanity, courage are; that sweet name fatherland will never strike their ear; and if they hear of God, it will be less to be awed by him than to be afraid of him.* I would like it as well, said a wise man, if my pupil spent his time playing court tennis; at least his body would be more fit. I know children must be kept busy and that, for them, idleness is the danger most to be feared. What then should they learn? That is surely a noble question! Let them learn what they ought to do as men,* and not what they ought to forget.

* Such was the education of the Spartans according to the greatest of their kings. It is, says Montaigne, worthy of great consideration that the excellent regulations of Lycurgus, in truth monstrously perfect, were concerned with the sustenance of children as if this were their main care; and in the very homeland of the Muses, so little mention is made of doctrine that it is as if those noble youths disdained all other yokes, and, instead of our teachers of science, could only be given teachers of valor, prudence, and justice.

Now let us see how the same author speaks of the ancient Persians. Plato relates, he says, that the eldest son of their Royal line was educated thus: after his birth he was not given to women, but to eunuchs who, because of their virtue, had the highest influence with the King. They took charge of making his body handsome and healthy, and at the age of seven taught him to ride and hunt. When he reached fourteen, they placed him in the hands of four men: the wisest, most just, most temperate, and most valiant in the nation. The first taught him religion; the second to be always truthful; the third to conquer his cupidity; the fourth to fear nothing. All, I will add, were to make him good, none to make him learned.

Astyges, in Xenophon, asks Cyrus to give an account of his last lesson. It is this, he says: in our school a big boy with a small tunic gave it to one of his smaller schoolmates, and took away the latter’s tunic, which was bigger. When our tutor made me judge of this dispute, I ruled that things should be left in this condition since both parties seemed to be better fitted in this way. Whereupon I was reproved for having done wrong, for I had stopped to consider suitability when I should first have provided for justice, which demands that no one be compelled in matters concerning his belongings.
Our gardens are adorned with statues and our galleries with paintings. What would you think these masterpieces of art, exhibited for public admiration, represent? The defenders of the country? or those even greater men who have enriched it by their virtues? No. They are pictures of all the aberrations of the heart and mind, carefully drawn from ancient mythology and presented to our children’s curiosity at an early age—doubtless so that they may have models of bad actions before their eyes even before they know how to read.

What brings about all these abuses if not the disastrous inequality introduced among men by the distinction of talents and the debasement of virtues? That is the most evident effect of all our studies and the most dangerous of all their consequences. One no longer asks if a man is upright, but rather if he is talented; nor of a book if it is useful, but if it is well written. Rewards are showered on the witty, and virtue is left without honors. There are a thousand prizes for noble discourses, none for noble actions. But let someone tell me whether the glory attached to the best of the discourses which will be crowned by this Academy is comparable to the merit of having founded the prize?

The wise man does not chase after riches, but he is not insensitive to glory, and when he sees it so poorly distributed, his virtue, which a little emulation would have animated and made useful to society, languishes and dies out in misery and oblivion. In the long run, this is what must everywhere be the result of the prefer-
will show that such love reigns among them, and will
give the people that very rare and sweet pleasure of
seeing learned societies devote themselves to disseminating
throughout the human race not merely pleasant
enlightenment but also salutary teachings.

Do not, therefore, raise an objection which for me is
only a new proof. So many precautions show only too
well the necessity of taking them, and remedies are not
sought for nonexistent evils. Why must even these, by
their inadequacy, have the character of ordinary reme-
dies? So many establishments created for the benefit of
the learned are thereby all the more able to deceive
concerning the objects of the sciences and to direct
minds toward their cultivation. It seems, to judge by
the precautions taken, that there are too many farmers
and that a lack of philosophers is feared. I do not want
to attempt here a comparison between agriculture and
philosophy; it would not be tolerated. I shall only ask:
what is philosophy? What do the writings of the best
known philosophers contain? What are the teachings of
these lovers of wisdom? To listen to them, would one
not take them for a troop of charlatans, each crying
from his own spot on a public square: Come to me, I
alone do not deceive. One holds that there are no bodies
and that everything is appearance. Another that there
is no substance other than matter, nor any God but the
world. This one suggests that there are neither virtues
nor vices and that moral good and evil are chimeras.
That one that men are wolves and can devour one
another with clear conscience. O great philosophers,
why don’t you save these profitable lessons for your
friends and children; you would soon reap the reward,
and we would have no fear of finding among ourselves
any of your followers.

Such are the marvelous men on whom the esteem of
their contemporaries was showered during their lifetime
and for whom immortality was reserved after their
death! Such are the wise maxims we have received from
them and that we will transmit from age to age to our
descendants. Has paganism, abandoned to all the aber-
rations of human reason, left posterity anything to com-
pare with the shameful monuments prepared for it by
printing under the reign of the Gospel? The impious
writings of Leucippus and Diagoras died with them.
The art of perpetuating the extravagances of the human
mind had not yet been invented. But thanks to typog-
raphy* and the use we make of it, the dangerous dreams

*Considering the awful disorders printing has already
caused in Europe, and judging the future by the progress
that this evil makes day by day, one can easily predict that
sovereigns will not delay in taking as many pains to banish
this terrible art from their States as they once took to estab-
lish it. The Sultan Achmet, bowing to the importunities of
some supposed men of taste, had consented to establish a
printing press at Constantinople. But the press had hardly
begun to operate when it had to be destroyed and the equip-
ment thrown in a well. It is said that Caliph Omar, consulted
on what should be done with the library of Alexandria, re-
plied in these terms: If the books in this library contain
things opposed to the Koran, they are bad and must be
burned. If they contain only the doctrine of the Koran, burn
them anyway—they are superfluous. Our learned men have
cited this reasoning as the height of absurdity. However,
imagine Gregory the Great in place of Omar, and the Gospel
in place of the Koran, the library would still have been
burned, and it would be perhaps the finest deed in the life
of that illustrious pontiff.
of Hobbes and Spinoza will remain forever. Go, famous writings of which the ignorance and simplicity of our forefathers would have been incapable; escort to our descendants those even more dangerous works which reek of the corruption of morals in our century, and together carry to coming centuries a faithful history of the progress and advantages of our sciences and arts. If they read you, you will not leave them any doubt about the question we discuss today; and unless they be more foolish than we, they will raise their hands to heaven and say with bitterness of heart: "Almighty God, thou who holds all spirits in thy hands, deliver us from the enlightenment and fatal arts of our forefathers, and give back to us ignorance, innocence, and poverty, the only goods that can give us happiness and are precious in thy sight."

But if the development of the sciences and arts has added nothing to our true felicity, if it has corrupted our morals, and if the corruption of morals has impaired purity of taste, what shall we think of that crowd of elementary authors who have removed the difficulties that blocked access to the temple of the muses and that nature put there as a test of strength for those who might be tempted to learn? What shall we think of those compilers of works who have indiscreetly broken down the door of the sciences and let into their sanctuary a populace unworthy of approaching it; whereas it would be preferable for all who could not go far in the learned profession to be rebuffed from the outset and directed into arts useful to society. He who will be a bad versifier or a subaltern geometr all his life would perhaps have become a great cloth maker. Those whom nature destined to be her disciples needed no teachers. Verulam, Descartes, Newton, these preceptors of the human race had none themselves; indeed, what guides would have led them as far as their vast genius carried them? Ordinary teachers would only have restricted their understanding by confining it within the narrow capacity of their own. The first obstacles taught them to exert themselves, and they did their utmost to traverse the immense space they covered. If a few men must be allowed to devote themselves to the study of the sciences and arts, it must be only those who feel the strength to walk alone in their footsteps and go beyond them. It is for these few to raise monuments to the glory of human intellect. But if we wish nothing to be beyond their genius, nothing must be beyond their hopes. That is the only encouragement they need. The soul gradually adapts itself to the objects that occupy it, and it is great events that make great men. The prince of eloquence was Consul of Rome, and the greatest, perhaps, of philosophers Chancellor of England. If the one had held only a chair in some university and the other obtained only a modest pension from an Academy, can it be believed, I say, that their work would not have reflected their status? Therefore may Kings not disdain to allow into their councils the men most capable of advising them well; may they renounce the old prejudice, invented by the pride of the great, that the art of leading people is more difficult than that of enlightening them, as if it were easier to engage men to do good willingly than to constrain them to do it by force. May learned men of the first rank find honorable asylum in their courts. May they obtain there the only recompense worthy of them: that of contributing by their influence to the
happiness of the people to whom they will have taught wisdom. Only then will one see what can be done by virtue, science, and authority, animated by noble emulation and working together for the felicity of the human race. But so long as power is alone on the one side, intellect and wisdom alone on the other, learned men will rarely think of great things, Princes will more rarely do noble ones, and the people will continue to be vile, corrupt, and unhappy.

As for us, common men not endowed by heaven with such great talents and not destined for so much glory, let us remain in our obscurity. Let us not chase after a reputation which would escape us, and which in the present state of things would never be worth what it cost, even if we had all the qualifications to obtain it. What good is it to seek our happiness in the opinion of another if we can find it within ourselves? Let us leave to others the care of informing peoples of their duties, and limit ourselves to fulfilling well our own. We do not need to know more than this.

O virtue! sublime science of simple souls, are so many difficulties and preparations needed to know you? Are not your principles engraved in all hearts, and is it not enough in order to learn your laws to commune with oneself and listen to the voice of one’s conscience in the silence of the passions? That is true philosophy, let us know how to be satisfied with it; and without envying the glory of those famous men who are immortalised in the republic of letters, let us try to put between them and us that glorious distinction noted between two great peoples long ago: that the one knew how to speak well, the other to act well.53

Editor's Notes to the First Discourse

1. From Ovid's Tristia, Book V, Elegy X.37: "Here I am the barbarian, because no one understands me." Since Rousseau considered the epigraph the clue to an entire work (see Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques, Dialogue III [Pléiade, I, 941]), it is wise to look up the source of his preliminary quotations and compare them to the works they introduce. This quotation apparently symbolizes Rousseau's expectation that few men of his time will understand the thesis proposed in the First Discourse. The epigraph is, however, subtler than that: even though the arts and sciences appear to be generally condemned in the First Discourse, Rousseau identifies himself with Ovid, the poet, from the very outset.

2. This Foreword was added by Rousseau in 1763, when he was preparing a collected edition of his writings. It is not certain which works Rousseau includes in this unfavorable comparison—see Havens, Rousseau: Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts, pp. 169-70. Although Rousseau admitted elsewhere that the First Discourse was poorly written (Confessions, Book viii [Pléiade, I, 352]),, he included it, together with the Second Discourse, among his "principal writings" (Letter to Malesherbes, Jan. 12, 1762, Correspondance Générale de J. J. Rousseau, ed. Théophile Dufour [20 vols.; Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1924-34], VII, 51).

3. When the Parlement of Paris, on June 9, 1762, condemned Rousseau's Émile and ordered him seized, Rousseau was forced to flee the French capital. Later that month, both the Émile and the Social Contract were condemned and burned in Geneva, where Rousseau's arrest was also ordered. Having taken refuge at Yverdon, he was forced to move early in July by a decree of the government.