Rousseau’s arguments often turn on a correct understanding of the relationship between cause and effect. We argue that the principal cause-effect argument of the Discourse is actually the opposite of the one Rousseau appears to posit in his work. Whereas he initially seems to argue that the sciences and arts corrupt morals, his ultimate argument is that the corruption of morals is the cause of the advancement of the sciences and arts and of their corrupting effects. Behind both moral corruption and the advancement of the sciences and arts lies a more remote cause: human pride and the unequal social and political conditions that result from pride and then foster it. Rousseau takes advantage of this complex causal relationship by simultaneously presenting an initial causal argument that gives his essay its paradoxical character and obscuring the ultimate causal argument of the work because of its implications as a critique of political authority and inequality.

Rousseau’s arguments often turn on a correct understanding of the relationship between cause and effect. Cause and effect are easily confounded, and he criticizes his predecessors for their errors in reasoning. “Aristotle was right, but he mistook the effect for the cause,” Rousseau says of the argument for natural slavery (Social Contract 1.2, Rousseau 1978, 48). At first glance, the causal argument of the prize essay that made its author famous, the Discourse on the Sciences and Arts, appears altogether clear: “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” (Sciences, Rousseau 1964, 39). Rousseau’s contemporaries found his work paradoxical, but they agreed about its argument, even if they did not concur with it. They were nonetheless uncertain about the specific causal connection Rousseau would establish between moral corruption and the advancement of the sciences and arts. Writing in the “Preliminary Discourse” to the Encyclopaedia (1751) shortly after the publication of the Discourse, d’Alembert challenges his fellow collaborator: “We would ask him to examine whether the majority of the evils which he attributes to the sciences and to the arts are not due to completely different causes.” Recent interpreters are similarly puzzled: “Had the advancement of culture been the cause of our corruption, then, or its effect? Rousseau . . . seems to have been unable to make up his mind” (Wokler 1995, 20). The manifest paradoxes of the work and seeming incompleteness of its argument force us to look beyond first appearances.

We argue that the principal cause-effect argument of the Discourse on the Sciences and Arts is actually the opposite of the one Rousseau initially seems to posit in his work. Whereas he first suggests that the sciences and arts themselves corrupt morals, his ultimate argument is that the corruption of morals is the cause of the advancement of the sciences and arts and of their corrupting effect. Behind both moral corruption and the advancement of the sciences and arts lies a more remote cause: human pride and the unequal social and political conditions that result from pride and then foster it. The advancement of the sciences and arts does corrupt morals, but only as the effect of a prior and more fundamental moral corruption. Rousseau takes advantage of this complex causal relationship by simultaneously offering an initial and incomplete

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ROUSSEAU'S POLITICAL ARGUMENT

The focus by both sides in this debate on detecting the philosophy of the natural goodness of man in the Discourse creates a dilemma for understanding the work and its place in Rousseau's corpus. On the one hand, those scholars who tend to dismiss the work have difficulty accounting for the fact that it not only made Rousseau famous, but that the author himself emphasized its importance from the beginning to the end of his career. On the other hand, those who seek evidence for Rousseau's mature philosophy in the Discourse have difficulty showing how his later works can plausibly be deduced from the prize essay alone. Our analysis of the causal argument of the Discourse, however, suggests Rousseau obscures not so much the philosophical basis of his essay as its political implications. Furthermore, our analysis of the Discourse and supporting evidence indicates that, if there is a relationship between his prize essay and his "system," it is less direct than has been supposed, and it is mediated by the political argument of the Discourse we uncover. Reading Rousseau's prize essay on its own terms, then, we can appreciate the centrality of the critique of political authority and inequality that most directly connects the Discourse to his later writings.

The Initial Causal Argument of the Discourse

The question posed by the Academy of Dijon for its prize essay competition does not necessarily solicit a response in the form of a cause-effect analysis: "Whether the restoration of the sciences and arts has tended to purify morals" (Sciences, 31). Indeed, the question seems designed to elicit an unhesitatingly affirmative answer. Rousseau later praised the Academy of Dijon for having even framed the subject as a question (Letter to Lecat, Rousseau 1990–, 2: 175–76). He underscores the interrogative mode by rephrasing the Academy's question: "Has the restoration of the sciences and arts tended to purify or corrupt morals?" (Sciences, 34). His revision of the question suggests his response; it also makes a causal argument more natural. Finally, he further lays the groundwork for a general causal inquiry by appealing beyond the temporal and geographic horizon suggested by the Academy's question and casting his argument in terms of a cause-effect relationship that holds in all times and places (see Preface to Narcissus, Rousseau 1990–, 2: 190–91).

2 On the natural goodness of man as the core of Rousseau's thought, see especially Masters 1968 and Melzer 1990.
Before stating his general argument about the relationship between the advancement of the sciences and arts and moral corruption, however, Rousseau first restricts himself to the timeframe suggested by the Academy’s question and in so doing prepares a misleading formulation of his argument. Having commenced his work with a praise of the restoration of the sciences and arts in recent generations, he denounces contemporary mores. He writes of the false “civility” that characterizes “our century and our nation,” of how pleasant it would be to live “among us” if exterior appearances always matched the heart’s true disposition. He concludes his portrait of “our morals” by returning to a more distant perspective: “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,” and other signs, “would guess our morals to be exactly the opposite of what they are” (Sciences, 35–39). The way Rousseau sets up his inquiry makes it appear that he will argue that the restoration of the sciences and arts (the cause) has led to a corruption of morals (the effect).

Rather than the expected deductive argument, his statement of the cause-effect argument of the Discourse is inductive.

Where 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. (Sciences, 39)

Rousseau treats the depravity of morals as the effect and then infers a cause. In addition, he alleges only a proportional relationship: where the sciences and arts advance there is a proportional corruption in morals. As he later explained: “I made my proposition general: I assigned this first of the decadence of morals to the first moment of the cultivation of Letters in all the countries of the world, and I found the progress of these two things was always in proportion” (Letter to Raynal, Rousseau 1990–, 2: 25; see Observations, ibid., 48). He does not allege any direct causal connection between these two phenomena. Finally, he is explicit in identifying the effect, moral depravity, and the corruption of our souls, and he confidently asserts that this effect is “certain.” He is less precise in naming the cause. Is it the sciences and arts themselves? Or their “advancement”? Or “our vain curiosity”? While he transforms the Academy’s question into a scientific investigation of a cause-effect relationship that “has been observed in all times and in all places,” the precise nature of this causal relationship is unclear.4

In order to illustrate his argument concerning the advancement of the sciences and arts and moral corruption, Rousseau employs a metaphor that actually indicates the insufficiency of the initial cause-effect argument of the work rather than reinforcing it.

The daily ebb and flow of the ocean’s waters have not been more steadily subject to the course of that 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 our horizon, and the same phenomenon has been observed in all times and in all places. (Sciences, 39–40)

Previous readers of this passage have concentrated on the paradox that Rousseau’s critique of the sciences is modeled upon a scientific inquiry (see Masters 1968; Strauss [1947] 1972), but they have not analyzed the metaphor itself. Havens remarks on “the ‘noble’ paraphrase and oratorical rhythm of Rousseau’s language” in this passage (1946, 189 n. 95). Rousseau’s trope nonetheless gets away from him, but in intentionally revealing fashion.

Closer inspection of the way in which Rousseau constructs—and purposefully misconstruits—his metaphor reveals his awareness that the argument he initially puts forward is misleading and insufficient and also hints at the ultimate argument of the work. The metaphor of the causal relationship between

4In a later work Rousseau addresses a similar problem to the limitations of inductive reasoning and its relationship to deductive reasoning in a way that also takes advantage of the illusory or incomplete findings of the inductive method. Discussing his pupil’s education in the sciences in Emile, Rousseau says that it is not always necessary to choose between analysis and synthesis and says that they can serve as reciprocal proofs. His example, as in the metaphor in the Discourse, is astronomical: “While the child studies the celestial sphere and is thus transported into the heavens, lead him back to the division of the earth and show him first his own habitat” (1979, 171). Emile’s initial education in astronomy is synthetic, or roughly inductive, beginning from the perspective of the earth. In other words, his first astronomy is Ptolemaic, and only later will he discover the deceptiveness and inadequacy of the initial method and then discover the Copernican system.
moon and the tides points to a remote cause to which he alludes but does not name, suggesting that his argument concerning the alleged influence of the sciences and arts on morals also depends upon a more remote cause. The moon is reasonably identified as the cause of the tides on the earth, yet the relationship is actually more complex since the earth’s gravity causes the revolution of the moon, which in turn causes the motion of the tides on earth. There is therefore something more like a proportional influence between the moon and the earth, analogous to the proportional relationship Rousseau posits between the advancement of the sciences and arts and moral corruption. More importantly, there is a more remote cause of both the terrestrial and lunar phenomena to which Rousseau alludes in his metaphor: the sun. He seems to indicate that the moon is not the ultimate causal force of interest when he writes that the diurnal fluctuations of the ocean’s waters are subject “to the course of that star (l’Astre) which gives us light during the night.” Since the word “astre” can refer to any supra-terrestrial body that moves and not necessarily a star, Rousseau does not necessarily misidentify the cause in this analogy, but his suggestion that the moon “gives us light” is at minimum an incomplete characterization of the phenomenon. Rousseau hints at the true source of light when he continues his metaphor—and mixes it—in the next sentence: “Virtue has fled as their light dawned on our horizon.” The rising sun replaces the waning moon as the cause. Rousseau suggests the remote influence of the sun when he attributes nocturnal light to the moon (“that star”) and when he gives the sun a place in his analogical system by mixing his metaphor. In both cases, he points to a remote cause of these phenomena: the sun. What, then, is the equivalent of the sun in his argument concerning the advancement of the sciences and arts and moral corruption? What is the actual source of light, of enlightenment?

Rousseau has already suggested the direction to look for the cause that lies behind both the advancement of the sciences and arts and the corruption of morals. Answering his own question about how far his claim about the relationship between moral corruption and the advancement of the sciences and arts might be generalized, he writes: “the evils caused by our vain curiosity are as old as the world.” Just as he mixes his metaphor, so too does he reformulate his argument. This reformulation could simply be a restatement, with “vain curiosity” standing in for the sciences and perhaps also the arts as the cause and “the evils” they produce replacing moral corruption as the effect. Alternatively, this new formulation could indicate a separate argument. This statement concerning “our vain curiosity” is in any case Rousseau’s only explicit identification in this context of the cause of the moral corruption he investigates. Hendel glimpses the nature of Rousseau’s argument without developing the insight: “The true argument lay deeper, however, than the presentation of such regular sequences of events. The real phenomena behind the grosser ones of history were those taking place within the human heart and mind” (1934, 26–27).

The Ultimate Causal Argument of the Discourse

The shift from the initial causal argument of the Discourse to the ultimate argument comes with the transition from the First Part to the Second Part of the work, where Rousseau turns from treating the sciences and arts as a cause to considering them as an effect whose cause must be sought. The First Part follows the inductive character of his statement of the argument analyzed above by offering a series of historical examples of the concurrent advancement of the sciences and arts and corruption of morals. He signals the inadequacy of this mode of argumentation at the end of the First Part when he says that he will turn in the remainder of the essay to “consider the sciences and arts in themselves” and thereby to discover where “our reasoning” coincides with the “historical inductions” he has thus far provided (Sciences, 47). He begins to treat the sciences and arts “in themselves” in the Second Part. He suggests that we must consider more remote “sources” for their origin, progress, and corruption in order to supplement “uncertain chronicles” with “philosophical research” (Sciences, 48). This research reveals the ultimate causal argument of his work.

5The cause of the tides was much studied in the eighteenth century. Newton’s theory of the lunar effect on the tides had become the dominant theory by the time Rousseau wrote. Rousseau refers to Newton in the Discourse as one of the “preceptors of the human race” (Sciences, 63), and elsewhere speaks of studying him (Rousseau 1959–95, 2: 1128). He would also have been familiar with the Newtonian theory indirectly, either through Voltaire’s popularization of Newtonian physics, to which he appears to allude in the Discourse (Sciences, 62), or from his then-friend d’Alembert, who wrote on the question shortly before Rousseau composed his essay (see Rousseau 1964, 189 n. 95).

6The grammatical parallel between the two sentences is clearer in the French, where Rousseau breaks the two sentences into two clauses by a comma and then constructs the metaphors in parallel parts of the clauses.

7Masters suggests that the arrangement of this historical evidence points to a more controversial argument: “Rousseau’s arrangement is subtler than appears at first glance, for under the moralistic criticism of enlightenment is a related but quite different political criticism of conquest and empire” (1968, 219).
Pride as the Source of the Sciences and Arts

When he turns to the sciences and arts in themselves, Rousseau reveals that a corrupt source lies behind the sciences and arts, a source that explains their origin as well as their deleterious effect. This source is a more remote, psychological cause.

In fact, whether one leafs through the annals of the world or supplements uncertain chronicle with philosophical 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. (Sciences, 48; italics supplied)

Human pride is the source of “all” human learning, and the cause of its corruption. The moral corruption Rousseau appears to argue is caused by the advancement of the sciences and arts in actuality the cause of their birth, progress, and corrupting effects.

As with his statement of the initial causal argument in the First Part of the work, Rousseau illustrates his argument concerning the “sources” of the sciences and arts at the outset of the Second Part with another literary device that suggests both an initial argument and an ultimate argument. Rather than drawing a metaphor from the sciences, as with the image of the moon and tides, this time he presents an allegory from a myth dating to the remotest “birth” of the sciences in Egypt. The version of the Prometheus myth he relates is depicted in the frontispiece to the Discourse, to which he refers his reader at the outset of the Second Part (Sciences, 47–48 and note). As Masters (1968, 225–26) has argued, drawing in part on Rousseau’s own explanation (Letter to Lecat, Rousseau 1990–, 2: 179), the image contains two different lessons. The initial lesson of the story buttresses the initial argument of the work concerning the corrupting effects of the sciences and arts: the Satyr is warned that Prometheus’ gift of fire will burn when touched (Sciences, 30). Masters points out that the continuation of the quotation from Plutarch Rousseau uses to introduce the allegory reveals another lesson: that fire can also be a source of light—enlightenment—if properly used. Masters uses his analysis of the allegory to illustrate his argument that Rousseau simultaneously addresses his Discourse to two audiences. He directs the apparent argument to the people, who are corrupted by the sciences and arts. The second lesson is directed to the “few men [who] must be allowed to devote themselves to the study of the sciences and arts,” those who will not be corrupted by their pursuit, for reasons Masters does not elaborate (Sciences, 63; see Kavanagh 1987, 125–29; Orwin 1998; Strauss [1947] 1972). Further analysis of the allegory points to the reason for the difference in these two audiences and also leads back to the ultimate argument of the Discourse. The reason for the abuse of the sciences and arts is suggested by the traditional use of the Satyr to represent unbridled or corrupted passions. While the corrupted passions of most people lead to the abuse of the sciences and arts and to their advancement for corrupt reasons, some individuals are not so corrupted. Rousseau’s literary device once again suggests that we need to further examine the political and social conditions under which human pride operates to advance the sciences and arts and debase morals.

Inequality and the Sciences and Arts

Rousseau’s analysis of the role of inequality as the cause of the advancement of the sciences and arts and their corrupting effects is the central argument of the Discourse. He suggests the role of political and social conditions in corrupting morals immediately after identifying pride as the source of the sciences and arts. “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?” (Sciences, 48). Luxury, injustice, and tyranny nourish the arts and sciences and turn them to the same corrupt and prideful ends. Central to Rousseau’s discussion of the arts and sciences is the issue of inequality—natural or physical as well as moral or political (see Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau 1964, 101)—and its social consequences.

While unequal social conditions and consequences are central to Rousseau’s analysis of both the sciences and arts, his analysis of each proceeds along somewhat separate lines, especially in the Second Part of the Discourse (see Kelly 1997, 1239). The underlying role of inequality in the corrupting effects of luxury is especially evident in Rousseau’s discussion of the arts in particular because of their intrinsically social character. Having condemned the idleness of men of letters, Rousseau turns to the evils of luxury: “Other evils . . . 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” (Sciences, 50; see also Observations, Rousseau 1990–, 2:
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48–51). As Gourevitch remarks: “Thus the arts are both an effect and a cause of luxury” (1972, 741). While luxury itself can be considered as the product of the sciences and arts and their goal, the desire for luxury is the cause of their advancement. Rousseau explains the relationship in a defense of the Discourse: “The vanity [vanité] and idleness that have engendered our sciences have also engendered luxury. The taste for luxury always accompanies that of letters, and the taste for letters often accompanies that for luxury. All these things are rather faithful companions, because they are all the work of the same vices” (Final Reply, Rousseau 1990–, 2: 112).

If luxury is engendered by corrupted passions and morals, Rousseau is particularly concerned with the correlates of luxury and idleness: social and ultimately political inequality. The “necessary consequence of luxury,” he asserts, is “the dissolution of morals.” As luxury spreads the arts are “perfected” and taste is therefore corrupted and virtue deteriorates (Sciences, 53–54). The perfection and corruption of the arts are almost inevitably the same, Rousseau argues, prefiguring the paradoxical argument of the Discourse on Inequality concerning perfectibility. Likewise anticipating his later work, Rousseau completes the argument by adducing the social source of corruption: inequality. “What brings about all these abuses if not the disastrous inequality introduced among men by the distinction of talents and the debasement of virtues?” (Sciences, 58). The “disastrous inequality” Rousseau identifies here pertains immediately to inequality of “talents,” of a society where reputation and reward are accorded to the artistically talented regardless of their moral virtue. “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” (Sciences, 58). What makes this inequality so “disastrous,” however, is the political authority and inequality that underlies and accompanies the inequality of talents, as we shall see more clearly when we turn to the politics of the Discourse. For now, however, we see that Rousseau has identified the cause—moral corruption stemming from pride and actuated by social and political inequality—that lies behind the effect—the advancement of the sciences and arts and their corrupting effects.

Rousseau’s analysis of the relationship of the sciences and inequality both parallels his discussion of the arts and the “inequality of talents” and departs from it in an important regard. His analysis of the advancement of the sciences parallels his discussion of the arts because, like the arts, the sciences as he encounters them in his century have been popularized and therefore suffer from the “inequality of talents” and moral corruption. Yet Rousseau also distinguishes the taste for learning from learning itself, the sciences as a “fashionable” pursuit from the sciences in themselves. This distinction enables him to treat the sciences in themselves separately from their advancement as a social phenomenon, and therefore acknowledge a legitimate form of inequality in the sciences, an inequality of mind that potentially has—or perhaps ought to have—political consequences.

As in his argument concerning the arts, when considering the sciences as a social phenomenon Rousseau focuses upon the corrupt motives and conditions that lead to their advancement. He argues that moral corruption stems not so much from learning itself as from the importance that comes to be placed upon a reputation for learning. When the desire for a reputation for learning displaces true learning the sciences become fashionable and their pursuit is corrupting (Sciences, 52). In other words, he indicts the advancement of the sciences as a “fashionable” pursuit of the century of Enlightenment. In order to earn a reputation for learning, vulgar scientists prostitute their talents by popularizing the sciences and nourishing a taste for letters in the populace. Rousseau’s example is “famed Arouet”—the celebrated Voltaire, poet and popularizer of Newton—whom he accuses of sacrificing his talent to “our false delicacy” and “the spirit of gallantry” (Sciences, 53). The taste for letters “cannot be born in this way in a whole nation except from two bad sources which study maintains and increases in turn, namely idleness and the desire to distinguish oneself” (Preface to Narcissus, Rousseau 1990–, 2: 191). The emergence of true geniuses with the advancement of the sciences and arts leads to envy, competition, and false science. If the “source” of all of the sciences is “human pride” and if the condition for their advancement is the “idleness” that accompanies luxury and inequality, then their potential corruption is only exacerbated when they are pursued for the sake of social distinction.

Rousseau’s analysis of the corrupt motives and effects of the sciences as social phenomena is balanced by a separate argument about the potential benefits of the sciences themselves when in the hands of those not infected by vanity. Given the corrupting effects of a taste for letters, Rousseau argues against the popularization of the sciences. He asks what must be thought of “that crowd of elementary authors who have removed the difficulties that blocked access to the temple of the muses” and “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.” Only those worthy by their genius should pursue the sciences: “If a few men must be allowed to devote themselves to the study of the sciences and arts, it must only be those who feel the strength to walk alone” in the footsteps of individuals.
such as Verulam, Descartes, and Newton “and go beyond them” (Sciences, 62–63). His remark that such individuals must “feel the strength to walk alone” suggests that it is less their genius than their independence from popular trends and opinion that enables them to pursue the sciences without corruption. While “not insensitive to glory,” they are not actuated by mere vanity to develop “pleasing talents” (Sciences, 58). As the Promethean allegory from the frontispiece suggests, the sciences themselves may bring light when properly handled, but they burn when their advancement becomes fashionable due to corrupted passions, and above all pride. The analysis of the sciences in themselves therefore leads to a different conclusion concerning the relationship between the sciences and inequality than the treatment of the sciences as a social phenomenon. Unlike the social and political inequalities associated with vanity and luxury, the natural inequalities of the mind are not in themselves corrupting—or illegitimate (see Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau 1964, 180, 227–28 [note s]).

If the sciences in themselves are not corrupting and even beneficial when pursued by those few individuals unmotivated by vanity, Rousseau warns of another corrupting effect of the sciences on morals that stems from their other origin in the human psyche: curiosity. If all of the sciences, “even moral philosophy,” owe their birth to human pride (Sciences, 48), they also have their origin in “our vain curiosity” (Sciences, 39). The sciences investigate the causes of natural phenomena traditionally attributed to divine power, and they corrupt morals by undermining the faith and public-spiritedness upon which Rousseau suggests popular virtue rests. “Science spreads and faith vanishes” (Observations, Rousseau 1990–, 2: 47). The paradigmatic natural science in this regard is physics, which Rousseau specifically identifies as the product of “vain curiosity” (Sciences, 48; see also 49 n.; for the conflict between natural science, and especially physics, and traditional accounts of human nature and virtue, see Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau 1964, 103). After recounting some of the supposedly “sublime knowledge” uncovered by the sciences, with most of his examples coming from physics, he suggests the pernicious effects of learning on morals: “these vain and fatal 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 de- basing all that is sacred among men” (Sciences, 49–50). As he says of the introduction of philosophy into Rome: “Until then, the Romans had been content to practice virtue; all was lost when they began to study it” (Sciences, 45). Rousseau suggests that civic virtue—and especially the martial virtues he emphasizes in this context (see Shklar 1969)—is supported by a religious faith that the “vain curiosity” of the sciences tends to undermine.

In retrospect, then, the eulogy of Enlightenment with which Rousseau begins his work raises a problem concerning the relationship between the natural sciences and moral philosophy. Can human beings “soar intellectually into celestial regions” and “traverse with giant steps, like the sun, the vastness of the universe” and then come back safely “to study man and know his nature, his duties, and his end”? All of the sciences, “even moral philosophy,” are born from pride. The “vain curiosity” that inspires scientific inquiry has corrupting effects when the sciences are publicized, especially by those actuated by pride. Rousseau saves his harshest criticism for the moral philosophers, the “dangerous dreams of Hobbes and Spinoza,” which will endure because of the printing press (Sciences, 61–62). He therefore ends his Discourse with an appeal to virtue in which he insists upon the “glorious distinction” between the few wise destined for glory who can pursue the sciences without corruption and “common men” who should not chase after reputation and ought to remain content with practicing an unsophisticated virtue (Sciences, 63–64). However beautiful the spectacle of the advancement of the sciences may be, Rousseau asks his readers to consider their deleterious effect upon public morals.

When the Cause Becomes the Effect

While Rousseau initially seems to argue in the Discourse that the advancement of the sciences and arts causes the corruption of morals, we have shown that he ultimately argues that the sciences and arts only become a cause of corruption as the effect of a prior and more fundamental moral corruption. We can now reconstruct Rousseau’s argument before turning to the political implications of the work that we suggest led him to obscure it in the first place.

Human pride is the source of the sciences and arts, but Rousseau is less concerned with the arts and especially sciences themselves, which do not themselves necessarily corrupt morals, as with the corrupt motives that lead to their birth and advancement and the conditions under which these motives operate. The cause of both the sciences and arts and their potential corrupting effects, then, is human pride and the unequal social and political conditions that result from pride and then foster it. The advancement of the sciences and arts ultimately does corrupt morals, but only as the effect of a more fundamental moral corruption. The cause becomes the effect. Rousseau
has taken advantage of this complex causal structure to present an initial argument that puts forward the effect as though it were the cause and thereby obscure his ultimate argument. Understanding Rousseau’s causal argument suggests that his target in the Discourse is less the philosophes than the ancien régime as a whole, and especially the pervasive inequalities of the entire social system.

The Politics of the Discourse

The political thrust of the prize-winning essay by the “Citizen of Geneva” is hardly obscure, with its praise of ancient republics and civic virtue, but previous interpreters have failed to appreciate the systematic nature of Rousseau’s political critique in the work because they have not fully understood its complex argument. Hope Mason, for example, argues that Rousseau’s argument about moral corruption exhibits no attention to the role of political institutions central to his later writings, “taking institutions in the wider sense, to mean social organization generally” (1987, 252). Likewise, finding the argument of the Discourse poorly articulated, Starobinski (2001) suggests that the immediate impact of the essay is explained by Rousseau’s attack on luxury in language of classical republicanism. Our analysis of the causal argument of the Discourse points to a more systematic, if veiled, critique of social and political inequality central to the work as a whole.

The specific critique of political inequality and authority of the Discourse follows from Rousseau’s concluding reflections on the relationship between the legitimate natural inequality of the mind and political inequality. The critique is especially evident in the conjunction between his remarks there about how those possessing political authority should employ the sciences and arts and a passage near the beginning of the work that reveals how princes actually employ them. At the end of the work, he concludes his analysis of the sciences with a reflection upon the relationship between knowledge and power. He appeals to those who enjoy unequal political and social positions, monarchs, to respect and honor those whose exceptional minds and virtue allow them legitimately to pursue the sciences and arts. His reflection quietly poses a question about the legitimate grounds and aims of political inequality. The questioning takes the form of a series of third-person imperatives:

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 a people is more difficult than that of enlightening them. 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. (Sciences, 63–64)

While we can imagine “science, virtue, and authority” working together “for the felicity of the human race” (Sciences, 64), power and knowledge are not ordinarily united. Like Socrates’ city in speech, Rousseau’s imperatives reveal that the inequalities of virtue and wisdom do not ordinarily coincide with social and political inequalities. Pride once again leads to an illegitimate inequality that corrupts both morals and the sciences and arts.

The critical thrust of the concluding reverie of the Discourse becomes clearer when read in conjunction with a passage near the beginning of the work where Rousseau reveals how political authorities actually employ the sciences and arts to perpetuate social and political inequality. In this passage he characterizes the sciences and arts as “garlands of flowers” spread 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.” To this characterization Rousseau adds a third-person imperative addressed to those who enjoy unequal political positions, thereby foreshadowing his concluding imperative for political authorities to listen to the wise: “Earthly powers, love talents and protect those who cultivate them.” In a note in the published version of his essay added to this last sentence Rousseau reveals why political authorities actually promote the arts: “Princes always view with pleasure the spread, among their subjects, of the taste for arts of amusement and superfluities . . . 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” (Sciences, 36). The note underscores the political implications of the main passage, which are not fully evident without it.8

8This note is also evidence of Rousseau’s coyness about the political thrust of his essay. In the Preface to the published version of the work, he remarks on some changes he made from its original form as a prize essay: “I have merely jotted down some notes and left two easily recognized additions of which the Academy might not have approved” (Sciences, 33). These additions have not proved so recognizable. The passage we have quoted about the sciences and arts being “garlands of flowers” is one of Wokler’s leading candidates for an addition, and his suggestion for the other added passage likewise

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 a people is more difficult than that of enlightening them. 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. (Sciences, 63–64)

While we can imagine “science, virtue, and authority” working together “for the felicity of the human race” (Sciences, 64), power and knowledge are not ordinarily united. Like Socrates’ city in speech, Rousseau’s imperatives reveal that the inequalities of virtue and wisdom do not ordinarily coincide with social and political inequalities. Pride once again leads to an illegitimate inequality that corrupts both morals and the sciences and arts.

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Rousseau had good reason to veil his full political sentiments, as he later discovered only too well, and our analysis suggests that he obscures the ultimate argument of the Discourse because of its implications as a critique of political authority and inequality. Rousseau himself implies as much in reply to his critics’ suggestions that social and political causes were the source of corruption rather than the sciences and arts. D’Alembert, in the “Preliminary Discourse” to the Encyclopedia, was perhaps coy when he asked Rousseau “whether the majority of the evils which he attributes to the sciences and to the arts are not due to completely different causes” ([1751] 1963, 103–04). But King Stanislaus of Poland was more forthright in offering an alternative causal argument for Rousseau to consider: “No, it is not from the sciences, but from the bosom of wealth that softness and luxury have always been born” (in Rousseau 1990–, 2: 33–34). Finally, also unclear about the apparent causal argument of the Discourse, another critic exclaimed: “Everywhere I see purely political causes” (in Rousseau 1990–, 2: 96–97). Responding to King Stanislaus’ suggestion, Rousseau implies that he does not disagree: “it would involve examining the very hidden but very real relationships that are found between the nature of government and the genius, morals, and knowledge of the citizens. And this would thrust me into delicate discussions which could take me too far. . . . And taking everything into consideration, these researches are good ones to undertake in Geneva and in other circumstances” (Observations, Rousseau 1990–, 2: 43). Rousseau’s critics offered perhaps unintended insight into his ultimate argument and his reasons for obscuring it.

The Discourse and Rousseau’s Mature Philosophy

Struck like Rousseau’s own contemporaries by the incompleteness of the argument of the Discourse, interpreters today continue to question whether the work has a coherent argument. Since they read a prize essay represented in the frontispiece by Prometheus with the Epimethean ben-efit of hindsight, these interpreters also raise the related question of the relationship of the Discourse to Rousseau’s later philosophical writings. Whether or not they find the points to the issues of inequality and luxury: “What brings about all these abuses if not the disastrous inequality introduced among men by the distinction of talents and the debasement of virtues” (Sciences, 58; see Wokler 1980, 253 and 273 n. 7; see also Launay 1978, 139–45). While these passages are not readily identifiable, the notes Rousseau also added to the published version are, and they may also point to the “delicate” subjects Rousseau might wish to obscure or suppress (see Launay 1978, 128).

work coherent or confused, scholars have almost unanimously focused on a single question: whether Rousseau’s prize essay manifests his mature philosophical “system” of the natural goodness of man and his corruption in society. In our analysis of the Discourse we have intentionally not concentrated on this question, and have instead tried to understand the causal argument of the work itself. Instead of finding the natural goodness of man at the veiled heart of the Discourse, we have found a critique of political authority and inequality. The implication of our argument is that scholars have been looking in the wrong place for what most directly connects Rousseau’s prize essay to his later writings and may also have overlooked a less direct connection mediated by the political argument of the work we have found.

The reason the debate over the maturity and coherence of the Discourse and its relationship to Rousseau’s later philosophical writings has remained open is precisely because the evidence of his “system” in the work is indeed ambiguous. Apart from unpersuasive evidence such as his brief remarks about “the simplicity of the earliest times” (Sciences, 54), probably the best testimony to the presence of Rousseau’s “system” in the Discourse is the role of pride that we have highlighted in our analysis of the argument of the work. On the one hand, his argument that pride (orgueil) is the dubious source of the sciences does seem broadly consistent with his later works, and we believe that in this regard our analysis of the causal argument of the work provides the least ambiguous evidence of the theoretical link between the Discourse and Rousseau’s manifestly mature philosophy. On the other hand, however, Rousseau’s discussion in the Discourse of pride as the source of corruption is undeveloped. In the Discourse he does not, for example, employ the technical distinction central to his later works between the two forms of self-love, amour de soi and amour-propre. More generally, he does not offer any clear indication of his theory of the mutability of the passions and perfectibility as the distinguishing characteristic of humans (see Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau 1964, 221–22 [note 01; Emile, Rousseau 1979, 212–13; Letter to Beaumont, Rousseau 1990–, 9: 28–29]). The direct evidence of Rousseau’s mature “system” in the Discourse is therefore at best ambiguous and inconclusive.

Perhaps scholars have been digging in the wrong place for what most directly connects the Discourse and Rousseau’s later writings, however, because they have misread the map Rousseau left for them by conflating two separate claims he made. First, acknowledging the incompleteness of the argument of the prize essay, he claimed in a defense of the Discourse that he purposely obscured its argument, taking necessary “precautions” by letting
his readers perceive only the “branches” of his argument but not its “trunk.” (Preface to a Second Letter to Bordes, Rousseau 1990–, 2: 183–85; see also Confessions, ibid., 5: 325–26). Second, Rousseau later claimed that the Discourse was based on the same “system” of the natural goodness of man and his corruption in society as his later works (Letters to Malesherbes, ibid., 5: 575; Dialogues, ibid., 1: 212–14). In trying to discern the “trunk” of Rousseau’s argument in the Discourse, scholars have taken their cue from this second claim, assuming that it was his “system” that Rousseau obscured in the work and then trying to detect its traces in the Discourse. But what if he was more concerned, at least more immediately, with concealing something else?

Rereading Rousseau’s later statements about the Discourse from the perspective of our analysis of the causal argument of the work suggests that he was concerned foremost with concealing the very political implications of his argument that we have suggested led him to obscure it in the first place. This intention is suggested in the very defense of the Discourse where he claims to have concealed the “trunk” of his argument, for he states there that had he not done so he would “at the very least have passed for the enemy of public tranquility” (Preface to a Second Letter to Bordes, Rousseau 1990–, 2: 183–85). This explanation suggests he was concerned about the work’s political effects. Likewise, we have already quoted his effective acknowledgment of the veiled political critique of his essay when he replies to King Stanislaus by saying that the political causes of moral corruption that his critic would have him pursue “are good ones to undertake in Geneva and in other circumstances” (Observations, Rousseau 1990–, 2: 43). Finally, the primacy of political concerns is evident in his most extensive discussion of his reticence in the Discourse and his growing boldness in subsequent works. This is in the Confessions, where he explains that he became increasingly open in revealing his ideas after the success of the Discourse. As an example of his growing boldness, he points in particular to the “Preface” to Narcissus where he underscored the political implications of his prize essay by explaining, “above all I have shown a very consoling and useful thing by showing that all these vices do not so much belong to man as to man poorly governed” (Rousseau 1990–, 3: 194). He then goes on in the Confessions to say that he soon had occasion “to develop my ideas completely” with another prize competition by the Academy of Dijon on the origin of inequality. “I was surprised that this Academy dared to propose it, but since it had this courage, I could certainly have the courage to tackle it, and I undertook to do so” (Rousseau 1990–, 5: 325–26). Once again, interested in the question of the philosophical maturity of his prize essay, interpreters who cite this passage have ignored Rousseau’s attention to the specifically political issues at stake in the two Discourses and to his explanation of the dangers of addressing them too forthrightly. Read from the perspective of the causal argument of the Discourse, these later statements provide further evidence that Rousseau was concealing the critique of political authority and inequality at the heart of the essay.

What, then, about Rousseau’s claim that the Discourse is based on his philosophy of the natural goodness of man? If it remains a mistake to seek direct evidence of Rousseau’s mature philosophy in the Discourse, our analysis of the causal argument of the work suggests that there may be a more indirect relationship between the essay and Rousseau’s later writings and that the question of this relationship must be approached through the veiled political argument of the work. In this regard, we chart a middle course between those interpreters who rightly point out the weakness of the evidence for Rousseau’s “system” in the Discourse and those who, following Rousseau’s own testimony, try to understand how the work might be based on his mature philosophy.

This less direct route is indicated by what Rousseau says of the Discourse in a passage from the “Preface” to Narcissus quoted just above: “above all I have shown a very consoling and useful thing by showing that all these vices do not so much belong to man as to man poorly governed.” By unveiling Rousseau’s critique in the Discourse of political authority and inequality, we have shown that he does indeed suggest there that moral corruption is due to “man poorly governed.” The next step in his claim in the “Preface” to Narcissus is much less certain, however, and we do not claim to have shown through our analysis of the Discourse that he argued that “all these vices do not so much belong to man,” or something akin to the premise of the natural goodness of man. Yet this step is not inconsistent with Rousseau’s causal argument in the Discourse either. While his claim in the “Preface” to Narcissus provides no direct evidence that the Discourse is based on Rousseau’s “system,” it does suggest that, if there is such a relationship, it is less direct than has been supposed and it is mediated by the political argument of the Discourse we have uncovered.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the complex causal argument of the Discourse has revealed the coherence of a pivotal work in the history of political thought, a work that has nonetheless rarely been explored in detail precisely because Rousseau obscured its political implications beneath a misleading and seemingly incomplete argument. Through this
analysis, we can more clearly see the centrality of the critique of political authority and institutions that connects the *Discourse* most directly to Rousseau’s later works, beginning most importantly with the *Discourse on Inequality*. It was this questioning begun by the Citizen of Geneva in his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* that eventually brought him such unhappy celebrity.

References


