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The Effects of Learning on Moral Education for Rousseau

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THE EFFECTS OF LEARNING ON MORAL EDUCATION FOR ROUSSEAU

by

PATRICK COX

Under the Direction of Eric E. Wilson

ABSTRACT

Rousseau notoriously praises ignorance and censures learning for the moral corruption that it has inflicted upon his age, yet he admits that the arts and the sciences are good in themselves. I consider the effects of learning and knowledge on moral education, in an effort to answer the following question: What is the role of ignorance in moral education for Rousseau? While some interpreters have acknowledged his sensitivity to various groups in society with regard to moral education, none has properly systematized the different types of ignorance that Rousseau praises or identified the benefits of those types of ignorance to various individuals and societies. I distinguish the savage's ignorance from that of Socrates and identify another important type of ignorance, the benefits of which stem from our natural sentiment and innate curiosity.

INDEX WORDS: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Moral education, Ignorance, Knowledge, Morality, Reason, Sentiment, Socrates

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PATRICK COX

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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2012

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To my mother and my father

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. ROUSSEAU’S ACCOUNT OF THE NATURAL GOODNESS OF HUMANITY.....	4
III. THE PRAISE OF THE SAVAGE’S IGNORANCE.....	13
IV. THE PRAISE OF SOCRATES’ IGNORANCE.....	16
V. THE PRAISE OF IGNORANCE IN MODERN MAN: OUR NATURAL CONNECTION TO THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF MORALITY.....	24
VI. THE PRAISE OF IGNORANCE IN MODERN MAN: IGNORANCE VS. FALSE CONVICTIONS.....	38
VII. THE PRAISE OF IGNORANCE IN MODERN MAN: IGNORANCE AS CONDUCTIVE TO CLARITY OF MIND.....	42
VIII. THE CONTINGENCY OF ROUSSEAU’S APPROACH TO MORAL EDUCATION UPON THE PUPIL OR SOCIETY.....	46
1. <i>A good society can only be corrupted by the arts and the sciences.....</i>	49
2. <i>A bad society can benefit from the arts and sciences.....</i>	53
3. <i>An educator should consider the effects of learning on the individual.....</i>	57
IX. CONCLUSION.....	59
REFERENCES.....	61

I. INTRODUCTION

In the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* and in the *Discourse on the Origins and Foundation of Inequality*, Rousseau praises ignorance (both that of the savage and that of Socrates) and censures learning (i.e., the sciences and the arts) for the moral corruption that it has inflicted upon his age, yet he admits that the arts and the sciences are good in themselves. Rousseau offers a less sensational account of these negative effects of learning and, perhaps more importantly, a deeper account of the benefits of ignorance in the *Emile*. In this thesis, I will consider the effects of learning and knowledge on moral education, in an effort to answer the following question: What is the role of ignorance in moral education for Rousseau?

Previous scholarship has discussed Rousseau's praise of ignorance. Even interpreters (e.g., Clifford Orwin and Jeff J.S. Black) who have been careful to point out his sensitivity to various groups in society with regard to moral education, however, have not systematically treated the different types of ignorance that Rousseau praises or the benefits of those types of ignorance to various individuals and societies. Ignorance's significance for moral education in Rousseau's thought cannot be properly understood without distinguishing between at least two sorts of ignorance. Both types of ignorance can be beneficial forms of ignorance and must be considered in any attempt to morally educate an individual or a society for Rousseau. Orwin's claim that Rousseau wishes to garner popular support in the *First Discourse* by flattering the people and avoiding criticism of them is discredited if we recognize this fundamental distinction between the types of ignorance and its upshot.

I will argue that, when Rousseau praises Socrates in the *First Discourse*, the object of his praise is Socrates' humble sort of ignorance (i.e., accepting a state of uncertainty about many important matters). Humility and awareness of one's own ignorance can be fundamental to

acting rightly and to achieving the good life. In praising Socrates' humble ignorance, Rousseau is lamenting society's contentment with its plethora of false convictions. The latter, for Rousseau, stem from vain desires to acquire knowledge before one needs it or is prepared to understand it, and Rousseau's primary effort as a moral educator is to prevent the birth of vanity, which marks the corruption of an inherently good individual and which corrupts society. As an explicit acknowledgment of one's limitations, the humble sort of ignorance serves to prevent one from extending beyond the scope of one's faculties and from engaging in other vain efforts.

Socrates' humble ignorance must be distinguished, however, from another sort of ignorance that receives Rousseau's praise and, moreover, seems to be a prerequisite for the humble sort of ignorance. Ignorance understood as the absence of both knowledge and any misconceptions in the place of the knowledge gap is also essential to moral education for Rousseau. This type of ignorance has two aspects – a) the natural proclivity of the mind to make judgments only on what is within the scope of accurate discernment, and b) the absence of knowledge itself, which is generally a product of a soul that has maintained its natural inclination to remain and to operate within the scope of its faculties. The first aspect relates to the latter by intuitively determining when the preservation of this innate absence of knowledge is merited. This natural tendency of the mind is crucial for determining what is within the mind's grasp and is important to know. This determination occurs via natural sentiment (as will be discussed) and innate curiosity, for Rousseau. Together, the two aspects of this type of ignorance appear to be the foundation from which the individual develops the humble sort of ignorance, or a conscious acceptance of one's uncertainty about many important matters.

One benefit of this sort of ignorance for Rousseau is its conduciveness to clarity of mind; Rousseau maintains that learning can be bad for decision-making, because the human mind

thinks more reasonably and clearly when it is not overburdened by a plethora of opinions. The natural savage certainly possesses this form of ignorance, but it also can be present in a modern man who lives a simple life that resembles that of our natural state (e.g., a peasant). He contends that the moral educator should limit exposure to a variety of opinions when educating individuals whose judgment would be impaired by such a burdensome range of ideas or whose souls would be corrupted by those ideas.

As man is naturally good and, in a sense, can only become worse by study, another benefit of ignorance is derived from our natural sentiment (consisting of the sentiments of self-preservation and of pity), which guides us to morally upright behavior. Rousseau believes that the principles of morality are largely known to us and that the rigorous study of them tends to corrupt more often than edify. Attempting to exceed the limitations of our natural faculties through study for which we are not ready is one way in which our *amour-propre* becomes inflamed. Born through the mental development of our reasoning faculty, *amour-propre* allows us to compare ourselves to others. While *amour-propre* derives from the naturally good sentiment of *amour de soi* and can have good manifestations, knowledge and vain learning can lead to bad passions that are corrupted forms of *amour-propre*.

As evidenced in the *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater*, Rousseau's "Replies" to critics of the *Discourses*, the Preface to 'Narcissus,' and the *Emile*, Rousseau's approach to moral education is contingent upon the individual or the society to be educated. While an uncorrupted individual or society's ignorance of the sciences and the arts should be preserved as much as possible, learning may be the only remedy to the ills of a corrupted society or individual. In addition, only individuals who can retain their goodness and humility as their knowledge increases should be educated in philosophy.

II. ROUSSEAU'S ACCOUNT OF THE NATURAL GOODNESS OF HUMANITY

A sketch of Rousseau's account of human nature, with a view to the aspects of human nature that bear on the question of ignorance's benefits to humanity, is helpful in laying the psychological foundation for the benefits of ignorance. The key terms and concepts (pertaining to human nature) that are used throughout this work are defined and expounded, respectively, in this chapter. Rousseau believes "that man is naturally good;"¹ he insists that this idea is integral to his philosophical system.² "The fundamental principle of all morality about which I have reasoned in all my Writings and developed in this last one with all the clarity of which I was capable, is that man is a naturally good being, loving justice and order," Rousseau writes, referencing the *Emile* in particular.³ Despite his deep concern with goodness, he is content to avoid creating complex ethical systems of behavior for the purpose of determining when one has done good and when one has done bad. Rather, he seeks to convince his reader that the human heart is fundamentally good.

Rousseau's insistence upon using the term "good" to summarize human nature, when unaccompanied by a convoluted definition of the term, suggests that he is appealing to a common-sense view of the term to convince us that human nature is good. However, as will be discussed, Rousseau's good man does not necessarily live up to the standards that are commonly used to evaluate whether someone is deserving of the label 'good.' While the term may elicit the thought of an altruist (e.g., Mother Teresa) who sacrifices personal indulgences to devote her

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "Second Letter of 1762 to Malesherbes" in *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*. Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters, and Peter G. Stillman, eds. Translated by Christopher Kelly. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), 575.

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Letter to Beaumont*, in *Letter to Beaumont, Letters Written from the Mountain and Related Writings*. Christopher Kelly and Eve Grace, eds. Translated by Judith R. Bush and Christopher Kelly. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), 28.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.

time, effort, and money to perform good deeds for others, Rousseau does not contend that we are all good by these standards.

To do good is to fulfill our self-interest, properly understood, and it contributes to our happiness, according to Rousseau. *Amour de soi*, a central concept in Rousseau's theory of human nature, encompasses the desire for self-preservation and "is always good."⁴ He states in Note XV to the *Second Discourse*, *amour de soi* "is a natural sentiment which moves every animal to be vigilant in its own preservation and which, directed in man by reason and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue."⁵ As Joshua Cohen argues, *amour de soi* "includes concerns to preserve ourselves and to protect the means of that preservation."⁶

Amour de soi and pity are two inherent sentiments that combine to form natural sentiment, which moves us toward our good. *Amour-propre* develops with reason and represents an array of passions in which one relates or compares oneself to others. It is the source of both good (e.g., the desire for deserved honor) and bad (e.g., vanity) passions that one can experience.⁷ The order of the soul (understood as the feeling or passion that most guides the soul) is a key factor in determining the proper educational approach for a given individual or society. To maximize on the order of the soul is to efficiently treat the soul in question according to the order of the soul, with a view to achieving good (or to preventing bad consequences) for society. Whether a soul is guided by natural sentiment, honor, or a false passion, an educator should maximize on the order of the soul to enable those who can do good

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Emile, or On Education*. Translated by Allan Bloom. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1979), 213.

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Discourse on the Origins and Foundation of Inequality, or the Second Discourse*, in *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Victor Gourevitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 106.

⁶ Joshua Cohen. *Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 101.

⁷ Both *amour de soi* and *amour-propre* will be explored further in Chapter V.

to do the most good possible and to prevent from doing bad those who have lost their capacity to do good. An educator should seek, when possible, to preserve goodness and, thus, natural sentiment, for the sake of a good, happy society. If natural sentiment and the desire for honor are absent from a society, and if one is unable to decrease or reorient the false passions, then one would need to maximize on other passions, including the fear of “appearing ridiculous”⁸ and other forms of vanity to achieve a good, happy society to the extent possible.

In what does our natural goodness consist? One significant part of this natural goodness is the inclination to yield to necessity. With regard to human behavior, necessity refers to the state of affairs that determines what can and must be performed in order to survive or to fulfill one’s needs.⁹ As Allan Bloom states in his Introduction to the *Emile*, “Against necessity he will not rebel; it is only the possibility of overcoming necessity or the notion that there is a will lurking behind it which disturbs his unclouded relation to things as they are.”¹⁰ Rousseau contends that this capacity to submit to necessity can be debilitated by the perception that a human or other will is attempting to intervene with one’s freedom to pursue one’s interests. “Rousseau says that a child who is not corrupted and wants a cookie will never rebel against the phrase, ‘There are no more,’ but only against, ‘You cannot have one,’” states Bloom.¹¹ In other words, we are not at all vain or manipulative in our natural disposition; vanity and superfluity are

⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. “Preface to ‘Narcissus,’” in *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Victor Gourevitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 103.

⁹ While the word ‘necessity’ has various technical metaphysical connotations for many in the world of philosophy, Rousseau is using the word in a more basic sense of what is necessary for existence and what necessarily cannot be avoided (in life). As will be seen, Rousseau is concerned with vain responses to one’s circumstances in life (e.g., vainly checking the same cabinet repeatedly for a can of baked beans when necessity has clearly determined that one will not have access to beans until the flooded streets no longer prevent one from leaving the house).

¹⁰ Allan Bloom. Introduction to the *Emile*. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1979), 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

in the domain of corrupted society, not of natural human beings, such as Emile. “Do not rebel against the hard law of necessity,” Rousseau advises.¹²

Insofar as necessity demands it, we naturally enhance our ability to preserve ourselves and are devoid of laziness in the face of trials, leading to our self-sufficiency. Various activities, including learning about one’s environment, are required for this preservation. “It is thus that nature, which does everything for the best, constituted him in the beginning. It gives him with immediacy only the desires necessary to his preservation and the faculties sufficient to satisfy them,” Rousseau declares.¹³ Children, of course, have the desire to play,¹⁴ and playing sports and other games is a form of exploration and of exercise, the latter having an obvious connection to our physical health and our preservation.¹⁵ Indeed, Rousseau sets up safe playing environments for Emile throughout his education’s first stages,¹⁶ in which he develops his physical strength and plays games that educate his senses.

Rousseau argues that we are also, by nature, motivated to learn; in other words, we are curious from birth. “At first children are only restless; then they are curious; and that curiosity, well directed, is the motive of the age we have now reached,” Rousseau states.¹⁷ If uncorrupted, a child will naturally develop a sense of curiosity about the world in which he lives, at least as it relates to the child’s life. However, this curiosity is distinct from the vain interests of learned men, such as philosophers, and other frivolous men who seek knowledge of trivial matters that cannot possibly contribute to the betterment of humanity or who are learning for the sake of vain

¹² Rousseau. *Emile*, 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 146-147.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

displays of their knowledge in a pedantic way. Rousseau explains, “There is an ardor to know which is founded only on the desire to be esteemed as learned.”¹⁸

“[T]here is an ardor which is born of a curiosity natural to man concerning all that might have a connection, close or distant, with his interests,” Rousseau writes regarding Emile’s type of curiosity.¹⁹ Human beings naturally possess the drive to seek knowledge of important matters, or matters that can improve one’s condition and the condition of one’s fellow beings.²⁰ We are naturally inclined to be curious about whatever interests us, and, as rational beings, we are primarily interested in what relates to our human existence, or to our needs.²¹ The desire for self-preservation, combined with the natural inclination to yield to necessity, move us to take care of ourselves and, thus, enable us to be self-sufficient by nature.

Apart from the self-sufficiency of which human beings are capable, our tendency to have pity is what makes us good.²² Pity is a sentiment, possessed innately, that gives us a natural repugnance to the suffering of others and can move us to acts of “generosity, Clemency,”²³ and “gentleness,” as Nicholas Dent points out.²⁴ By not having been corrupted, the natural sentiment of pity is preserved and, even, abstracted by reasoning to a notion of justice. The concern for others is a product of “*amour-propre*,”²⁵ herein lies what is commonly regarded as good by humanity – altruism. However, it is possible, according to Rousseau, for pity to remain alive in the human heart but not to be generalized to all of humankind.²⁶ If pity is only felt for those who

¹⁸ Ibid., 167.

¹⁹ Ibid., 167.

²⁰ Ibid., 233.

²¹ Ibid., 167.

²² Ibid., 223-226.

²³ *Second Discourse*, 153.

²⁴ Nicholas J. H. Dent. *A Rousseau Dictionary*. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 51.

²⁵ Ibid., 92.

²⁶ Ibid., 253.

are in close proximity to oneself, then pity has not been generalized.²⁷ Abstraction of one's feeling of pity to the whole of humanity requires reason; for that generalization to remain with the individual requires strength of will, according to Rousseau.²⁸

Moreover, man naturally wants to do good for those whom he loves, and he experiences affection for anyone who he perceives to be good-willed toward him.²⁹ Understood with respect to the generalization of pity, this claim merely suggests that, while one would like to relieve suffering and to achieve justice generally,³⁰ one is even more disposed toward doing the good for those whom one recognizes as disposed to doing the same for oneself out of their own free will. (This idea is the fundamental basis for the naturalness of community for a reasoning human being, which is central to most of Rousseau's educational approaches).

According to Rousseau, doing good is what enables us to be happy; doing good is in our self-interest, even if it does not lead to personal material gain. Countering the attack on morality that claims people only do what is in their self-interest, Rousseau agrees that self-interest guides us but rejects the claim that this signifies the impossibility of morality.³¹ Rousseau argues that it is nonsensical to imagine that one acts without any interest.³² Rousseau advises Monsieur d'Offreville, "Your adversary maintains that everyone, no matter what he does, acts only in relation to himself, and that even in the most sublime acts of virtue, even in the purest works of charity, everyone relates everything to himself,"³³ and he is correct. Rousseau explains, "When we act, we have to have a motive for acting, and this motive cannot be extrinsic to ourselves,

²⁷ Ibid., 253.

²⁸ Ibid., 253.

²⁹ Ibid., 213.

³⁰ Rousseau. *Letter to Beaumont*, 28.

³¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "1761 Letter to d'Offreville," in *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. Victor Gourevitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 261.

³² Ibid., 261.

³³ Ibid., 261.

since it is ourselves it sets to work.”³⁴ As our own inner motives are what spring us to action, the motive to act must come from an interest within us.

Rousseau notes, “But the word interest calls for explanation, because you might attach to it a meaning, you and your adversary, such that you agree without knowing it.”³⁵ Thus, Rousseau explicitly suggests that the word ‘interest’ can be ambiguous, and he proceeds to clarify this question, on which a demonstrable morality relies, by distinguishing among different types of interest. While this may perhaps seem trivial to the overall scheme of Rousseau’s thought, interpretation of Rousseau’s position on the matter can result in fundamentally different interpretations of Rousseau on human nature. Bertram, for example, argues, “Rousseau believes that human beings are fundamentally self-interested,”³⁶ and he concludes from Rousseau’s comments on *amour de soi*, or *self-love*, that Rousseau’s belief in human goodness merely prevents us from being in “endemic conflict with”³⁷ one another.

Describing the corrupted form of self-interest that leads us to desire excessive wealth and to consider the opinions of others, Rousseau states that “There is a sensible and tangible interest which bears solely on our material well-being, on fortune, on consideration, on the physical goods that may accrue to us from another’s good opinion.”³⁸ Rousseau admits that actions stemming from such interest “cannot be called good deeds.”³⁹ However, there is an interest “entirely unrelated to social advantages, which is relative to ourselves, to the good of our soul,” which he calls “spiritual or moral interest. It is the only interest which tends to our genuine

³⁴ Ibid., 261.

³⁵ Ibid., 261.

³⁶ Bertram, Christopher. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Rousseau and the Social Contract*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 19.

³⁷ Ibid., 20.

³⁸ Rousseau. “Letter to d’Offreville,” 261.

³⁹ Ibid., 262.

happiness, since it is intimately related to our interest.”⁴⁰ Tying such actions to the concept of virtue, for which one must struggle to do right, Rousseau states, “This is the interest which virtue pursues and ought to pursue, and in no way deprives actions of moral goodness.”⁴¹

In an example that is not being used in an effort to make us understand his diagnosis of society’s ills and is, instead, used to explain morality and to show that we derive happiness from fulfilling our self-interest, Rousseau offers the case of a juror (who is himself the criminal) who refuses to condemn an innocent man, despite an apparent and sensible interest in doing so. In this example, an Englishman was on a jury of twelve in a system that required unanimity before jurors could leave the room or eat anything. Having himself committed the crime, the juror knew that the accused was innocent, yet he was the only juror to dissent to the conviction of the accused person. Despite being an unjust man, “he had been less horrified by the prospect of death than by the prospect of causing the death of the innocent man accused of his own crime.”⁴² Rousseau writes, “he had the most real interest in condemning the accused (...), and no discernable or sensible interest had to lead him to do what he did; yet only a very powerful interest could have swayed him. What was it?”⁴³ Rousseau is arguing that the juror’s self-interest is served by acting in this way, because he is fulfilling his moral interest, which is a very powerful interest. Our moral interest, or our interest in doing what is morally right and good for both ourselves and for others, is a real interest for Rousseau, even if it is not a tangible interest.

As the above quotation regarding the happiness that we derive from fulfilling our moral interest suggests,⁴⁴ Rousseau appears to hold that doing the good is what enables us to be happy.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 262.

⁴¹ Ibid., 262.

⁴² Ibid., 263.

⁴³ Ibid., 263-264.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 262.

This does not in any way belie the claim made earlier, though, that Rousseau admits that we experience incontinence, or weakness of will. We can be too weak to do the good, but it remains that we wish that we could do the good. In other words, the strength to do the good is often required to be happy. “It is certain that to do good for the sake of good is to do it for one’s own sake, out of self-interest, since it gives the soul an internal satisfaction, a contentment with itself without which there is no true happiness,”⁴⁵ but “the wicked are all wretched,”⁴⁶ because wickedness is not what leads to our true happiness.⁴⁷ “But why would Emile ever be in a hurry? For one reason alone – to enjoy life. Shall I add another – to do good when he can? No, for that itself is to enjoy life,” Rousseau declares.⁴⁸ As Emile’s human nature has been preserved through his rare education, human nature consists in what Emile’s happiness consists in. Thus, to perform what is good when one has the capacity to do so is how one enjoys life. In other words, it is natural to be happy when one does the good that is within one’s capacity.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 264.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 264.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 264.

⁴⁸ Rousseau. *Emile*, 411.

III. THE PRAISE OF THE SAVAGE'S IGNORANCE

In describing what he believes to be 'natural,' Rousseau emphasizes the frequent occurrence of and dangers of attributing to nature the corruptions that derive from living in society. Today, very little remains of our true nature, which Rousseau describes as good. Having been fully immersed in society⁴⁹ and taught how to be polite instead of how to be virtuous,⁵⁰ we are not our true selves; worst of all, we are incessantly hiding any remnants of our true selves from on-lookers.⁵¹ Rousseau speculates about the initial state of man's existence, or about the state of nature; "these investigations so difficult to carry out, and to which so little thought has so far been devoted,"⁵² allow Rousseau to find a pre-political mode of being that is radically different from any that presently exists.

For Rousseau, "the facts [...] do not affect the question,"⁵³ because Rousseau is not attempting to describe history as it actually occurred but to explain the human mind by removing it from the corrupting forces of society. Rousseau depicts man in his most animalistic state, as a savage without political institutions, sciences, arts, and other potential corruptors.

[...] wandering in the forests without industry, without speech, without settled abode, without war and without tie, without any need of others of his kind and without any desire to harm them, perhaps without ever recognizing any one of them individually, subject to few passions and self-sufficient, Savage man had only the sentiments and the enlightenment suited to this

⁴⁹ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences*, or the *First Discourse*, in *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Victor Gourevitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵² Rousseau, Exordium to the *Second Discourse*, 125.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 132.

state, that he sensed only his true needs, looked only at what he believed it to be in his interests to see, and that his intelligence made no more progress than his vanity.⁵⁴

The savage described above represents one of our virtuous forms of ignorant man; furthermore, this form of person is common to all of us in its naturalness, as we all have sprung from this form of man. Theoretically, our earliest ancestors did not attempt to take any advantage of their capacity for speech, allowing them the pure virtue that defined them. In the *Discourses*, Rousseau frequently condemns the insincere or the deceitful use of speech. While good people know how “to act well,” the famous people of the Republic of Letters know “how to speak well,” Rousseau states.⁵⁵ Rousseau considers the potential puzzlement of the Roman general Fabricius if he were to witness Rome’s profligacy, “Do rhetoricians govern you?”⁵⁶

In our natural state, we are independent, roaming scavengers who do not engage in commerce or dialogue with our fellow beings. There is no “notion of thine and mine;”⁵⁷ Rousseau thereby avoids most conflicts occurring over property. Indeed, according to Rousseau, we may not even recognize the few people who we have encountered before and do not even know our own children. The concerns of the natural man are not wealth, family, science, art and leisure; each of these concerns makes us dependent on other people.

Instead, we aim merely at our own preservation. Without the burdens of civil society and of commerce, man lived like other animals, unaware of the extravagant lifestyles that they could lead and naturally moved by their survival instincts to acquire only food, drink, and sex.⁵⁸ Food and drink were in abundance, just as animals living in nature today are able to satisfy their

⁵⁴ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, as found in Bertram, *Rousseau and the Social Contract*, 36.

⁵⁵ *First Discourse*, 28.

⁵⁶ *First Discourse*, 13.

⁵⁷ *Second Discourse*, 154.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

hunger and thirst; institutionalized slavery and exploitation of others had yet to occur and to inhibit this felicitous state. The physical desire for sex was not yet accompanied by this desire's moral aspect, which "focuses it exclusively on one single object"⁵⁹ and which the savage does not yet have the capacity to conceive of, was easily satisfied. The conflicts that we associate with love were practically nonexistent in this state.

Thus, the savage's ignorance consists in knowing nothing about the complexities of capitalistic commerce, of civil society, of our modern array of pleasurable pursuits, or of our superfluous language systems. Yet, Rousseau's reader may still be concerned to get clearer on what the natural state of the savage *is not*. He is not referring to the "ferocious and brutal ignorance" of the wicked and deceitful who do not know their duties but to a "reasonable sort of ignorance."⁶⁰ The latter is the type of ignorance that Emile is unashamed of and that limits "one's curiosity to the scope of the faculties one has received"⁶¹ and ultimately stems from this early innocent ignorance of the savage. As long as individuals in society stay within such limits, society can remain good, because the vain consideration of others' opinions would not awake and, thus, would not motivate corrupted people to spread their corrupting influence.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid., 155.

⁶⁰ Rousseau. "Observations," in *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Victor Gourevitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 49.

⁶¹ Ibid., 49.

⁶² Ibid., 49.

IV. THE PRAISE OF SOCRATES' IGNORANCE

In the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, Rousseau praises Socrates for his humble sort of ignorance, or his awareness of his ignorance about that which he does not know.⁶³ After providing an extended quotation of Socrates in the *Apology*, he states that Socrates is “speaking in Praise of ignorance!”⁶⁴ The type of ignorance to which Rousseau refers here is humble ignorance, or humility. To be conscious of one’s own ignorance is here depicted in opposition to believing that one knows something when one does not actually have true knowledge of the matter in question.

This work argues that Rousseau offers distinct educational approaches for various members of society, as well as for various societies, and that he bases the discrepant approaches on the moral and intellectual status of the pupil or society in question. Even scholarly works that have been deliberate in distinguishing between the few and the many for Rousseau, such as Clifford Orwin’s “Rousseau’s Socratism,” have not done justice to ignorance’s role in moral education for Rousseau. While recognizing that Rousseau’s educational approach is contingent upon the pupil or society in question, Orwin is not sufficiently sensitive to the level of corruption of the pupil or society in question.

Scholarship on Rousseau with regard to ignorance’s moral significance has been muddled by a failure to adequately define the meaning(s) of ‘ignorance’ for Rousseau. Orwin, for example, discusses Rousseau’s view of ignorance but never provides a clear account of how he is interpreting ‘ignorance’ itself in those many passages of Rousseau. By failing to distinguish different types of ignorance, he misidentifies ignorance with misperceptions. This

⁶³ *First Discourse*, 12.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

misidentification results in Orwin concluding that Rousseau is seeking to preserve beneficial misperceptions, gaining favor with the people by praising them and not offending them or their leaders. The latter is evidenced for Orwin by the deliberate distortion of Plato's Socrates from a critic of popular opinion to an upholder of it. Not only is Orwin wrong about his intention here, he fails to reconcile his theory with the obvious fact that Rousseau's Socrates is introduced explicitly as praising the humble sort of ignorance, which hardly gives clout to popular opinion or misperceptions. After exploring this paradigmatic example of the misguidance that can result from not distinguishing the meanings of 'ignorance' when trying to identify its moral significance for Rousseau, this chapter will briefly attempt to situate Socrates' ignorance in its proper role in moral education.

Orwin seems to use 'ignorance' in two contradictory ways – a) awareness that one does not know, and b) thinking that one knows when one does not. At one point, Orwin states, “the ignorance of the artisans (in thinking that they know what they do not, about the noble and good) is more shameful than their knowledge (of their crafts) is resplendent.”⁶⁵ Yet, he also refers to Socrates' awareness of his lack of knowledge as “ignorance.”⁶⁶ As is argued throughout the present work, one must distinguish between a) the humble sort of ignorance that a true philosopher, such as Socrates, possesses, and b) the type of ignorance in which a person lacks knowledge and does not have any false conceptions filling those gaps in knowledge. The absence of this distinction in Orwin's work leads him into error regarding Rousseau's view of ignorance in moral education.

⁶⁵ Clifford Orwin, “Rousseau's Socratism,” in the *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 60 (1), Feb. 1998, 178.

⁶⁶ Orwin, 179.

Orwin, moreover, misidentifies ‘ignorance’ with misperceptions, while Rousseau explicitly warns against such interpretations of his work. Rousseau might reiterate his accusations towards the philosophers to us today, by saying that we “spoke of Savage Man and depicted Civil man”⁶⁷ in our attempts to interpret his theories. Orwin apparently sees no problem in speaking of today’s “popular opinion” as if it were worthy of the label “ignorance,” a conflation that is doubly emphasized in Orwin’s claim that Rousseau deliberately distorts Socrates in an effort to surreptitiously criticize Plato’s Socrates.⁶⁸ “Rousseau’s Socrates, by contrast, ‘eulogize[s] ignorance,’ that is, defends popular opinion against all pretense to knowledge superior to it,” Orwin writes.⁶⁹ Orwin argues that Rousseau wants us to believe in a Socrates whose “working motto is evidently that the examined life is not worth living.”⁷⁰ This might be accurate, if it were the examined life that contained only enough examination to accept all the bad influences and opinions of society wholeheartedly and with all the appearance of rational assent.

Orwin argues for this intention of Rousseau by appealing to Rousseau’s deliberate distortions of the Platonic Socrates.⁷¹ Orwin finds it significant that Rousseau, in discussing Socrates’ inquiries to various groups purported to be wise in society, first mentions Socrates’ turn to the poets, whom Socrates turned to after the statesmen according to the Platonic account.⁷² Orwin argues that his omission of the statesmen in the quotation is calculated to avoid any criticism of the common people, who vote for the statesmen.⁷³ However, it would be out of tune with the *First Discourse* to include an extra paragraph about the politicians. Moreover, it

⁶⁷ *Second Discourse*, 132.

⁶⁸ Orwin, 179.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 177.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 178.

would have been crass for him to have mentioned the politicians and would have detracted from the significance that Rousseau is attributing to human learning (in the *Discourse*) in the corruption of humankind. , because he is here speaking of the minds of “the Learned and the Artists,” not of the politicians.

Rousseau has no quarrels with pointing out the deceitful disposition of politicians when such is his subject matter. One finds him repeatedly warning about the injustice of and manipulative tactics of leaders. While speaking of the general will as the legitimate source of authority without any mention of the intrigues that could prevent the general will from being achieved would lend one’s writings to totalitarianism, Rousseau deliberately reminds us to doubt our leaders and points to manipulation by leaders as an impediment to the general will.

To begin with Rousseau’s conscious reminders regarding the untrustworthiness of political authorities, the chapter entitled “On Monarchy” in Book III of *On the Social Contract* warns repeatedly against corrupt rulers.⁷⁴ Rousseau states unambiguously in this chapter, “When a man has been elevated to command others, everything conspires to deprive him of justice and reason.”⁷⁵ Rousseau, invoking Plato’s idea that wise and good kings are few and far between,⁷⁶ states that “a king by nature is such a rare person,”⁷⁷ and that “a royal education necessarily corrupts those who receive it.”⁷⁸ Indeed, for Rousseau, the very problem of politics is “To find a form of government that might place the Law above man.”⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Rousseau. *On the Social Contract*, in *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. Victor Gourevitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 184-186.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁷⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. “Letter to Mirabeau,” in *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. Victor Gourevitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 270.

Rousseau also warns about political intrigues and points to manipulation by leaders as an impediment to the general will. In Chapter III of Book II, Rousseau speaks on “our politicians’ tricks.”⁸⁰ In Chapter IV of Book IV, the reader is again reminded of political intrigues.⁸¹ Another instance in which Rousseau seeks to remove external authorities and to return us to the internal guidance of natural sentiment is found in the *Discourse on Political Economy*: “it is not uncommon for [the leader] to seek his own happiness in the misery of others.”⁸² When, Rousseau adds, “the people is seduced by private interests which some few skillful men succeed by their reputation and eloquence to substitute for the people’s own interest,” “the public deliberation will be one thing, and the general will another thing entirely.”⁸³ Rousseau further states, “the general will is always for the common good; however quite often there is a secret schism, a tacit confederation, which causes the natural disposition of the assembly to be lost sight of for the sake of private purposes.”⁸⁴

It is absurd, then, to claim, as Orwin does, that Rousseau is “avoiding criticism of the people and those vested with its authority”⁸⁵ in order to somehow win them over and to avoid offending the people. Orwin might object that we must look to the *First Discourse* itself to see how Rousseau wishes to speak to the ordinary reader. However, even if Rousseau had not written any other works by means of which we could place the *First Discourse* in a broader context, Rousseau’s account of Socrates should not lead us to Orwin’s conclusion about Rousseau on ignorance. For one, Rousseau does not use language that would deceitfully suggest that Socrates spoke first to the poets and never to the statesmen. It would be unusual for us to

⁸⁰ Rousseau. *On the Social Contract*, 156.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁸² Rousseau. *Discourse on Political Economy*, 113.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁸⁵ Orwin, 178.

expect that Rousseau quote the entire *Apology of Socrates*; Rousseau quotes only the portion that is relevant to his topic.

Orwin claims that “Rousseau is guilty of distortions of...commission” as well; Rousseau’s Socrates questions the artists, whereas Plato’s Socrates questions the artisans. For Orwin, this signifies another distortion of Plato’s Socrates (i.e., the annoying gadfly who instills doubt in his interlocutors and elicits the contempt of his fellow citizens) in service of an appeal to the common man. Yet, Orwin himself admits in a footnote that “It is quite possible that [Rousseau] did not...know Greek” and “that his reinterpretation of Plato rests to this extent on an innocent error.”⁸⁶ The rendering of *cheirotechnai* as *artistes* rather than *artisans* in Diderot’s translation of the *Apology* seems more likely to be the cause of Rousseau’s use of “artists” rather than “artisans,” given that Diderot was one of Rousseau’s closest friends at the time.⁸⁷

In the process of developing reasons for Rousseau’s distortions of Plato’s Socrates, Orwin loses sight of the main point that Rousseau explicitly conveys by invoking Socrates. Rousseau tells us that Socrates is wise and virtuous for declaring that he knows that he does not know. Rousseau’s Socrates states that his wisdom consists in being “fully convinced that I am ignorant of what I do not know.”⁸⁸ Socrates displays humility, as he is aware that he does not possess knowledge of the things that he does not possess knowledge about and admits this fact. This humble sort of ignorance is quintessentially Socratic and is the overarching point of the passages that Rousseau quotes from Plato’s *Apology*.

⁸⁶ Orwin, p. 178, footnote #8.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 178, footnote #8.

⁸⁸ *First Discourse*, 12.

Returning to the issue at hand, then, Rousseau's purported distortion of Socrates is not an attempt to gain populist favor⁸⁹ in order to place Rousseau and other philosophers in a position to provide moral teachings to society, even if those teachings somehow reinforce the people's own opinions on virtue.⁹⁰ While ignorance can, in a sense, be a virtue for Rousseau, misperceptions are the substance of the corruption that Rousseau is truly seeking to prevent. By conflating ignorance with misperception, Orwin cannot capture one of the most important contributions of Rousseau to moral thought, that ignorance of a certain kind is good for both the true philosopher and the average person, while the benefits of ignorance of another kind are contingent upon various factors that must be considered in the individual or society.

Orwin, however, makes no systematic distinction between the uncorrupted and corrupted individual or society whatsoever. Without this distinction, upon which I will elaborate in Chapter VIII, one cannot begin to piece apart the complex system for which Rousseau only plants the seeds in the *First Discourse*. It is only for the corrupted individual or society that the wise philosopher must interfere with the moral conceptions of the average person. An uncorrupted individual who has retained natural sentiment is still in touch with the knowledge of virtue that is "engraved in all hearts"⁹¹ and is not in need of any moral instruction from the wise. As man is naturally good, man does not need guidance by the various philosophies of others to better arrive at moral action; man's inner light, his natural sentiment led by reason, is the most reliable source of guidance towards virtue. Arguing that the common person needs to be guided by wise and true philosophers is to presuppose that philosophy would benefit them in some way, but, if we are to accept my interpretation of Rousseau as claiming that there are those for whom

⁸⁹ Ibid., 178.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 183.

⁹¹ *First Discourse*, 28.

philosophy would corrupt their souls, then philosophy should be kept as far as possible from such uncorrupted individuals. Apart from Socrates and other true philosophers who are morally impervious to the potential dangers to be found in the great and difficult task of fully systematizing our morals, it is the corrupted who need philosophy. Moreover, as Socrates' humble form of ignorance is definitional of philosophy for Rousseau, this conscious acceptance of one's ignorance is to be encouraged only insofar as one is capable of retaining natural goodness, or for corrupted individuals or societies.

V. THE PRAISE OF IGNORANCE IN MODERN MAN: OUR NATURAL CONNECTION TO THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF MORALITY

Not only do Socrates and the savage possess virtuous forms of ignorance, but the moral character of a modern man (who is not one “of the few privileged souls”)⁹² can also benefit from ignorance. While Socrates’ humility is beneficial in its conscious acceptance of the fact that there are many important matters about which he does not possess knowledge, the form of ignorance that is common to all of us from birth is the actual absence of knowledge and the lack of any misconceptions in the place of this knowledge gap. This type of ignorance has two components – a) the natural tendency of the mind to attempt judgment only on what is within the scope of its faculties at any given time, and b) the actual absence of knowledge. The first component relates to the latter by serving as the means to intuitively determining what requires or deserves the preservation of this innate absence of knowledge and what is within the mind’s reach and is necessary to learn about. As will be further explored in this chapter, natural sentiment, with the aide of humanity’s innate curiosity, makes such determinations naturally until corrupted by external forces and influences. Together, the two components of this type of ignorance appear to be the foundation from which the individual develops conscious acceptance of one’s ignorance, which is the epitome of the humble sort of ignorance.

Rousseau maintains that it is preferable for an individual to remain ignorant about a matter until the individual is in a position to understand the matter properly. Ignorance that is undisturbed by premature or misconceived notions lends itself to decisions based on natural sentiment, which leads us to our good and is discussed in this chapter. Rousseau holds that the misconceptions that would likely arise from presenting ideas to a person before he is able to

⁹² Rousseau. “Preface to ‘Narcissus,’” 103.

conceive them properly can be morally corrupting, and that the individual would be better off in his naturally ignorant state until his natural curiosity and his mental development are in tune with exposure to the ideas in question, as Chapter VI explains. With regard to modern men, Rousseau praises ignorance for its conduciveness to clarity of mind, as is discussed in Chapter VII.

In his chapter entitled “Ignorance” in *Rousseau’s Critique of Science: A Commentary on the Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, Jeff J.S. Black penetrates Rousseau’s discussion of ignorance more carefully than Orwin and does attempt to distinguish Rousseau’s different meanings of the term ‘ignorance.’ Black appears to make a rigorous effort to systematize the topic of ignorance in Rousseau. He identifies two main kinds of ignorance.⁹³ However, Black’s attempt to systematically treat the topic of ignorance in Rousseau’s thought seems to go no further than to separate the two types of ignorance that Orwin conflates. One of Black’s two main kinds of ignorance is the ignorance of the wise, which is Socrates’ praise of ignorance, or knowledge of one’s own ignorance. “To be precise, Rousseau’s Socrates praises self-conscious ignorance over false claims to knowledge,” Black writes.⁹⁴ Awareness that one does not know is, of course, one way in which Orwin uses the term ‘ignorance.’

Black’s other main kind of ignorance is popular ignorance, which consists of “opinions or sentiments about the true, the good, and the beautiful that provide moral purity.”⁹⁵ The most illustrious incarnation of this type of ignorance is in the form of heroic ignorance, which is attributable to Cato, Fabricius, and others of heroic stature. Black explains, “from the perspective of wise ignorance, the aspirations of heroes like Cato and Fabricius” are “based on

⁹³ Jeff J.S. Black. *Rousseau’s Critique of Science: A Commentary on the Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 127.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

opinions that are half true at best, and ultimately self-destructive.”⁹⁶ Black takes heroic ignorance to be that which scorns the sciences and the arts specifically as an impediment to patriotism and military duties. Thus, according to Black, the most that the possessor of wise ignorance can hope for in his fellow citizens is belief in half-truths that do not even lead to the good.

In his chapter, Black explains that this form of ignorance among the populace is important for patriotism and military virtues. He writes, “Rousseau’s correction of Plato’s Socrates is better understood, then, not as a defense of a particular republic, nor even as a defense of republicanism in general, but as a general defense of the underpinnings of moral purity: the opinions, expressed by citizens and their leaders, that provide support for virtue, patriotism, and piety.”⁹⁷ Black states clearly here that the opinions of the public are the source of “moral purity,” despite Black’s own admission that Rousseau, like Socrates, would have believed the Thirty Tyrants (Socrates’ contemporary regime) to be a corrupt regime.⁹⁸ Black is suggesting that Rousseau’s refusal to put a critique of the contemporary regime into Socrates’ mouth is actually an indication that such a view would undermine “the opinions...that provide support for virtue, patriotism and piety.”⁹⁹

The praise of ignorance in modern man, then, becomes not an acknowledgement of the worth of our natural dispositions and connections to the good but a nod to the need for a courageous, patriotic citizenry. Popular ignorance, then, consists merely of opinions that are not infrequently misperceptions. It is characterized by beliefs that are not necessarily true, or, in other words, Black uses the term ‘ignorance’ here to refer to instances of thinking that one

⁹⁶ Ibid., 128.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 111.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 110-111.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 111.

knows when one does not. Having made the distinction between popular ignorance and the ignorance of the wise, Black has delivered us from Orwin's obfuscation, but we are still left without mention of the key type of ignorance that Rousseau defends throughout the *Emile* – ignorance as the absence of both knowledge and any misconceptions in the place of the knowledge gap.

Before criticizing one of the main forms of ignorance that he believes Rousseau to be praising, I will, for the sake of full disclosure, make mention of the other forms of ignorance that he identifies. Black argues that “there are two additional kinds of ignorance that may be found in the background of this argument. The first is savage ignorance,” which I have considered in Chapter III. The other kind of ignorance is “criminal ignorance,”¹⁰⁰ for which Black refers us to Rousseau's elucidating passage in the “Observations.”¹⁰¹ This is an ignorance in which falsehoods abound and feed the corrupted man's evil desires and increasingly “degrades reason” and “debases the soul.”¹⁰² For my part, I did not include this type as one of Rousseau's forms of ignorance, as he does not praise it. In fact, it is explicitly condemned and used as a contrast to the type that he praised. In the quoted passage from the “Observations,” Rousseau uses the term ignorance in response to King Stanislaus, who had himself depicted a form of ignorance that contained brutal and uncouth qualities. In his response, Rousseau seems to acknowledge that it is one way in which the word can be used, only to declare unequivocally that he is not referring to such a type of ignorance. Black inadvertently seems to verify this when he equates this “criminal ignorance” with the “condition worse than ignorance,”¹⁰³ which is mentioned at the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰¹ “Observations,” 49.

¹⁰² Ibid., 49.

¹⁰³ Black, 129.

beginning of the *First Discourse*. If the state is worse than that of ignorance, then it appears not to be the state of ignorance itself.

Thus, while the effort to make more accessible Rousseau's system as it regards the topic of ignorance is admirable, Black's picture includes a form of ignorance that (like Orwin's) contains false convictions (which will be criticized further in Chapter VI) and excludes the form of ignorance that emphasizes the goodness of our natural tendencies, which the absence of knowledge and misconceptions can keep alive and potent. I will now argue that the praise of ignorance in modern man, or man who has stepped out of the state of nature, by Rousseau is not of popular or heroic ignorance (as described by Black) but of ignorance in the sense of not knowing and also of not having any misconceptions in the place of the knowledge gap.

The combination of, or the interplay of, our two natural sentiments, *amour de soi*¹⁰⁴ and pity,¹⁰⁵ produces a natural sentiment, or feeling, that guides our beliefs and actions.¹⁰⁶ The product of the interplay of *amour de soi* and of pity, then, is natural sentiment, which leads us to our good. As reason, which also ultimately guides natural sentiment to the good, is not fully developed in childhood, incorporation of reason into Rousseau's theory of the soul will be explored after Rousseau's understanding of our nature in childhood has been presented.

While Bertram argues that there are "two natures"¹⁰⁷ in Rousseau's account, there are, in a sense, two natures in modern man alone. Children do not yet possess the faculty of reason. As should be plain by Emile's use of speech and constant contact with human beings, even the child Emile is beyond the naturalness of the savage in the state of nature. With the development of

¹⁰⁴ Rousseau. *Emile*, 212-213.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁰⁶ Rousseau. Preface to the *Second Discourse*, 35.

¹⁰⁷ Bertram, 20.

reason at the age of fifteen, the human being can arguably be said to acquire a nature that it could not previously access. In other words, reason adds a key factor to our psychology after we have passed through childhood. A key problem that Rousseau solves in the *Emile* is to avoid the assumption that children have fully acquired the nature of the second type, that of “rational creatures;”¹⁰⁸ children should only gradually be treated as adult human beings and only in proportion to the development of their reason. Thus, I will treat the case of children here first and will then incorporate the missing factors – reason and the accompanying passions – into the discussion of the adult human’s soul.

The passion of *amour de soi* is always with the child and, despite any appearances to the contrary, cannot be said to ever truly leave the human soul.¹⁰⁹ Unaided for the most part by the faculty of reason, the age of which does not arrive until around fifteen,¹¹⁰ the child’s psychological make-up is simple, because the extent of the child’s thinking is limited by his “immediate and palpable interest.”¹¹¹ As the child is only concerned with his own preservation and other interests¹¹² but lacks the ability to reason, the child lives only in the present moment and is driven by the survival instinct within the framework of what is accessible to the child’s mind in the fleeting moment.¹¹³

However, an understanding of Rousseau’s use of the term ‘reason’ is necessary for recognizing the difference between the faculty of reason and the ostensibly rational drive for self-preservation; as Rousseau himself states, “I am, however, very far from thinking that

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁹ Rousseau. *Emile*, 212-213.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 257.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 108.

¹¹² Ibid., 108.

¹¹³ Ibid., 108.

children have no kind of reasoning.”¹¹⁴ The problem lies in “the poverty of our language.”¹¹⁵ “There is no language rich enough to furnish as many terms, turns, and phrases as our ideas can have modifications,” he writes.¹¹⁶ Despite this predicament, Rousseau attempts to attain clarity by “arranging it so that as often as each word is used, the meaning given it be sufficiently determined by the ideas related to it and that each period where the word is found serves it, so to speak, as a definition.”¹¹⁷ In other words, he believes that clarity can be achieved if the word in question is recognized across the related contexts in which the user employs it.

Moreover, reason must be distinguished from knowledge. In his chapter “Dare to Be Ignorant!” in *Rousseau’s Counter-Enlightenment*, Graeme Garrard conflates reason with knowledge, attributing to Rousseau the same contempt for reason that he is generally claimed to have for knowledge. “As with philosophy, in other words, reason is socially destructive,” he writes.¹¹⁸ He continues, “Rousseau thought of reason as a very weak and unreliable faculty.”¹¹⁹ Not only does Garrard provide an unedifying account of Rousseau’s quibble with knowledge, he profanes reason in the process of trying to explain Rousseau’s praise of ignorance. He offers as evidence the following passage from the *Emile*: “[r]eason alone is not active; sometimes it restrains, rarely it excites, and it never did anything noble.”¹²⁰ However, the passage is highlighting the faultiness of attempting to employ reason without any regard to sentiment. It might not be surprising to us if the attempt to silence sentiment in favor of reason results in nothing better than the moral compass of a computer. Thus, the reasoning faculty “*alone*” may

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 108.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 108.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 108.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 108.

¹¹⁸ Graeme Garrard. *Rousseau’s Counter-Enlightenment: A Republican Critique of the Philosophes*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 88.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹²⁰ Rousseau. *Emile*, as quoted in Garrard, *Rousseau’s Counter-Enlightenment*, 88.

not lead to noble deeds, but such a claim is far from condemning the use of reason in a normal human being (who would possess sentiment).

Even more boldly and forthrightly than Black, Garrard attributes to Rousseau a preference for the virtues of Cato, while now acknowledging that Rousseau is sympathetic to the reasonable virtues of Socrates. “Despite his admiration for the prototypical philosopher Socrates...Rousseau preferred Cato,” who Garrard describes as the exemplary patriot.¹²¹ Given Garrard’s earlier statements about the opposition between reason or knowledge and virtue, it is bizarre that Garrard does not take this opportunity to clarify Rousseau’s paradox in any way. To make such a sweeping statement about the superiority of the citizen and inferiority of (yet somehow admirable philosophical qualities of) Socrates seems even absurd. As this thesis argues more forcefully in Chapter VIII, whether one should be educated to pursue the virtues epitomized in Socrates or those of Cato¹²² depends on one’s capacities and tendencies, as well as one’s level of moral corruption. Rousseau does not believe that Cato is more virtuous than Socrates in some absolute sense, as Garrard upholds; rather, both are examples of virtuous character for different reasons. Additionally, reason is invoked and praised by Rousseau (even in the *First Discourse*)¹²³ and is not to be conflated with knowledge in his criticism of the latter. If he sincerely held reason to be a menace to society and a detriment to our morals, then the “reasonable sort of ignorance”¹²⁴ would be an oxymoronic statement for him.

¹²¹ Garrard, 92.

¹²² I yield to these two broad categories of character only temporarily and for the sake of simplicity in the present chapter.

¹²³ *First Discourse*, 6 & 15.

¹²⁴ “Observations,” 49.

When Rousseau speaks of the age of reason, he understands the term ‘reason’ to refer to the relations among abstract concepts and to the logic used to derive abstract rules.¹²⁵ The rules of geometry, for example, are not within the reach of children, who only learn the sense impressions of shapes and associate them with their geometrical formulas; children do not truly grasp the abstract concepts that form the basis of geometry, according to Rousseau.¹²⁶

The reasoning that occurs in childhood is, although minimal, related to our present and tangible interest.¹²⁷ Rousseau states, “I see that they reason very well in everything they know that relates to their immediate and palpable interest.”¹²⁸ This suggests that children have some reasoning abilities, but that they are able to use them properly only when they find the need to use it for their survival or other interest.

Morality develops with the development of reason.¹²⁹ Far from discrediting reason along with his critique of knowledge and learning, then, Rousseau maintains that reason gives birth to morality. Garrard, who concedes this point regarding the source of morality, might still object that the application of reason is, on the whole, more pernicious than would be the absence of reason.¹³⁰ However, Garrard misunderstands what it means for morality to be born with reason. Reason gives us the capacity for morality and is the tool that must be used to make worthy moral judgments as a human being. False knowledge, vanity, and other means of corruption are what ruin this reasoning process. Reason cannot be blamed (and is not blamed by Rousseau) for the misgivings of misperceptions. It is corruption that leads us into sophisms.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 109.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 108.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 108.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 108.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 67.

¹³⁰ Garrard, 100.

Importantly, children cannot yet conceive properly of morality.¹³¹ As a natural child will seek to preserve himself but is not yet in a position to feel capable of caring for others, the child instinctually seeks only his own good. The good of others can only be a concern once reason has provided the ability to think of oneself as a moral being¹³² and once the human being can function based on reasoning instead of solely on “the most basic drive,”¹³³ that for self-preservation. The fact that children are naturally amoral will play an important role in Emile’s education and in the prescriptions regarding education to society at large.

With the development of reason, the human being can arguably be said to acquire a part of its nature that had previously been latent. As was partly described in the earlier discussion on the goodness of man, *amour-propre* develops out of *amour de soi* due to the development of reason. Rousseau explains regarding the two natural types of love:

The sole passion natural to man is *amour de soi* or *amour-propre* taken in an extended sense. This *amour-propre* in itself or relative to us is good and useful; and since it has no necessary relation to others, it is in this respect naturally neutral. It becomes good or bad only by the application made of it and the relations given to it.¹³⁴

Amour-propre, or the source of the passions that are able to develop with the onset of reason,¹³⁵ is natural in the sense that it inevitably develops in a human being who lives in society,¹³⁶ and the use we make of it renders it either good or bad.¹³⁷

¹³¹ Ibid., 67.

¹³² Ibid., 67.

¹³³ Bertram, 21.

¹³⁴ Rousseau. *Emile*, 92.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 92.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 208 & 213.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 213-214.

Rousseau further elucidates his understanding of *amour de soi* and of *amour-propre*:

But would it be reasoning well to conclude, from the fact that it is in man's nature to have passions, that all the passions we feel in ourselves and see in others are natural? Their source is natural, it is true. But countless alien streams have swollen it.¹³⁸

Their natural source is *amour de soi*, but the external influences can cause *amour de soi* to transform into corrupted types of *amour-propre*, or passions that are unnatural. This double capacity of *amour-propre* signifies that passions can be either natural or unnatural, either good or bad. When they follow *amour de soi*, our passions are natural.¹³⁹ When passions do not relate to our true good, they are unnatural.¹⁴⁰

Joshua Cohen insightfully argues that *amour-propre* encompasses the concern for one's "standing in the eyes of others," whereas *amour de soi* only considers whether one is good or worthy of love in oneself, regardless of how one compares to other human beings.¹⁴¹ *Amour-propre* allows us to compare ourselves to others.¹⁴² When it causes us to prefer ourselves to others, it brings about "hateful and irascible passions."¹⁴³ There is a host of passions that depends upon one "preferring ourselves to others"¹⁴⁴ and upon a relative comparison that does not truly contribute to our good.¹⁴⁵ These passions seek perception of oneself not as objectively well-off but as well-off relative to other human beings,¹⁴⁶ and such a desire leads to the desire to

¹³⁸ Ibid., 212.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 212-213.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 213.

¹⁴¹ Cohen, 101.

¹⁴² Ibid., 213-214.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 214.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 214.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 214.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 214.

have others view us as better than themselves as well.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, these passions encompass pride, resentment, and vanity.¹⁴⁸

Jeff Black interprets Rousseau to be attributing to *amour-propre* only the latter, ignoble type of passions. He states that *amour-propre* is “a passion...that leads human beings to esteem themselves more highly than others, and to demand that others agree with their judgment.”¹⁴⁹ At most, Black recognizes the variation in bad types of *amour-propre*. “Rousseau...distinguishes between pride [*orgueil*] and vanity [*vanité*], understood as two types of *amour-propre*.”¹⁵⁰

However, comparisons can be derived from good passions as well, when the comparisons are not driven by the vain desire to view ourselves as better than others.¹⁵¹ While *amour-propre* includes more than just the naturally good sentiment of *amour de soi*, which does not seek any reference to one’s worth in relation to others, *amour-propre* can lead to our good when the comparisons that it sparks are not grounded in any form of vanity or any sense of superiority, as Cohen affirms.¹⁵² When one follows one’s true good, one’s *amour-propre* is in accord with one’s original *amour de soi*, and *amour-propre* in such a case makes us content “when our true needs are satisfied.”¹⁵³ Pity is the first natural passion that considers ourselves relative to others.

Another important aspect of *amour-propre*, which would be lost if the complexity of our analysis only extended as far as Black’s distinctions for bad *amour-propre*, is that the good, or noble, manifestations of *amour-propre* are good to varying degrees. Beginning his Letter to Franquieres with an explanation of why it took so long for him to reply, Rousseau states, “my

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 214.

¹⁴⁸ Bertram, 22.

¹⁴⁹ Black, 198.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 199.

¹⁵¹ Rousseau. *Emile*, 214.

¹⁵² Cohen, 102.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 213.

humbled *amour propre* made you wait such a long time, because I failed to sense that a much nobler *amour propre* should have taught me to overcome the first.”¹⁵⁴ This statement clearly implies that not all acts driven by *amour-propre* are equal, and also that it is, contingent upon the goodness of the *amour-propre* that is experienced, virtuous to act according to our *amour-propre* now that we are living in society without hope of return to our animal-human, or savage, life consisting solely of *amour de soi*. *Amour-propre*, Rousseau obviously implies, can guide us to noble actions, some more noble than others.

Other than pity, another key passion that is natural and good is the sincere desire for deserved honor. This is the most significant noble passion for Rousseau. As Rousseau states in Note XV of the *Second Discourse*, *amour-propre* “is the true source of honor.”¹⁵⁵ Rousseau consistently holds honor, when it is deserved and is bestowed guilelessly, a good and natural part of social life.¹⁵⁶ Morals and customs are often observed due to the sense of honor or of disgrace that would result if one abided by or neglected them, respectively. Similarly the practices that are not compatible with a society’s *moeurs*¹⁵⁷ are often avoided out of concern for honor and due to the uncomfortable nature of disgrace. These phenomena can be either calculating or honest; one can seek a reputation that one does not deserve in order to be preferred by the public, and this, in turn, could lead to personal gain.¹⁵⁸ This calculated concern for honor is less the passion

¹⁵⁴ Rousseau. “Letter to Franquieres,” 272.

¹⁵⁵ Rousseau. *Second Discourse*, 106.

¹⁵⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Letter to Monsieur d’Alembert on the Theatre*. Found in *Politics and the Arts: Letter to Monsieur d’Alembert on the Theatre*. Translated by Allan Bloom. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960), 59, 64, & 67.

¹⁵⁷ As the French term ‘*moeurs*’ encompasses character, mores, customs, morals, ways, and opinions, it will often not be translated here.

¹⁵⁸ Rousseau. *Letter to d’Alembert*, 58-59.

for honor than the recognition, through one's reasoning faculty, that honor can be materially beneficial.¹⁵⁹

Rousseau argues that the government should find in honor and in disgrace the most effective means for correcting *moeurs* in accordance with the standard of public utility.¹⁶⁰ The means to correcting customs and mores should never be found in the use of "corporeal punishment,"¹⁶¹ prisons, arrests, or armed guards.¹⁶² While honor requires, out of absolute necessity, the comparison of two or more persons, the implication appears to be that honor is good and noble when the activity for which one receives the honor is itself good, such as the modest conduct of a girl at a public ball.¹⁶³ To offer another example, Rousseau seeks the honor that can be attained from the proper perception of his views on the subject of the theater, the views that a good man should possess.¹⁶⁴ In short, the community benefits from individuals who justly seek honor for the good that they perform.

Natural sentiment, which is a product of the interactions between *amour de soi* and pity, leads to our good and is an integral argument in favor of ignorance for Rousseau. With the help of our innate curiosity, natural sentiment makes the beneficial task of remaining within the scope of our faculties a natural one. As goodness is our natural state, knowledge (or, really, the appearance of knowledge) can corrupt us. *Amour de soi*, pity, and the sincere desire for deserved honor are all beneficial to the individual and to society, and ignorance leaves these sentiments intact and enables the proper source of motivation, natural sentiment, to function as was naturally intended.

¹⁵⁹ Rousseau. "Letter to d'Offreville," 261-262.

¹⁶⁰ Rousseau. *Letter to d'Alembert*, 67-68.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

IV. THE PRAISE OF IGNORANCE IN MODERN MAN: IGNORANCE VS. FALSE CONVICTIONS

The preservation of ignorance is also crucially beneficial as a protection against the dangers of false convictions. As discussed in the previous chapter, children do not possess the faculty of reason until around the age of fifteen.¹⁶⁵ Rousseau describes the negative effects of the era's conventional practices in education, in which parents would blithely seek to reason with their children¹⁶⁶ and to have them, for example, understand the actions of figures from history.¹⁶⁷ Exempting child prodigies from his critique,¹⁶⁸ Rousseau argues that we do not reach the age of reason in childhood.¹⁶⁹ Not having sufficiently developed their reasoning abilities, children, according to Rousseau, usually either misinterpret their parents' proffered reasons as being the cloak of ill will¹⁷⁰ or misapprehend the concepts of instruction, even when they have learned words for their image-based perceptions of those concepts¹⁷¹. For Rousseau, to prematurely educate a child in reason is akin to misinforming the child,¹⁷² which is worse than leaving the child ignorant.¹⁷³

Apart from chiding parents for forcing upon their innocent children a "barbarous education which sacrifices the present to an uncertain future, which burdens a child with chains of every sort and begins by making him miserable in order to prepare him from afar for I know not what pretended happiness,"¹⁷⁴ Rousseau criticizes this education for its poor educational

¹⁶⁵ *Emile*, 257.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 106 & 109.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 106-111.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

benefit and quality; the latter criticism can be further divided into disapproval of not only the intellectual quality but the moral quality of the education. Greek and Latin, for example, are not useful to children's everyday existence, except for vain displays of erudition to people who themselves know no better,¹⁷⁵ which is itself a corrupt and corrupting practice that should be avoided. Moreover, as children hardly have the ability to comprehend a single language fully, to teach them another language is to teach them only synonyms.¹⁷⁶ As the comprehension of two different languages would presuppose the use of reason, "[Children] will never know any but one."¹⁷⁷

In the example pertaining to the study of languages, Rousseau is defining reason as the ability to compare ideas. To know two languages, the child "would have to know how to compare ideas, and how could he compare them when he is hardly in a condition to conceive them?"¹⁷⁸ To recognize the signs used to signify something is not the same as to grasp the actual concepts that those signs or symbols signify. One can know the signs without comprehension, and one also can comprehend an idea without knowing one of its particular signs (e.g. a word written in another language). A child cannot truly understand many ideas, and a child at this stage of development should not be learning their respective words in six different languages.

Children are not prepared for the study of history, either. Rousseau tells of a dinner at an aristocratic family's house in the countryside; the child, who has been instructed in ancient history and who receives praises for fine regurgitations of previous lessons, is asked to speak on the courage of Alexander the Great.¹⁷⁹ "After the dinner, suspecting, on the basis of several bits

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 110.

of evidence, that my young doctor had understood nothing at all of the story he had told so well,”¹⁸⁰ Rousseau went for a walk with the pupil and asked about Alexander’s courage.¹⁸¹ The child had believed Alexander to be courageous for “having swallowed at a single gulp a bad-tasting potion, without hesitation, without the least sign of repugnance.”¹⁸² The aftertaste of a medicine that the child had taken weeks earlier had made the child quite averse to such poisons.

Perhaps, parents might object, this inability of children to fully comprehend geometry, geology, languages, history, and heraldry is precisely the reason for beginning their education with the terminology of these fields; having spent their childhood learning these terms, children will passively grasp the abstract concepts behind these terms and will make the necessary mental connections when they come of age, while saving them great efforts to learn this wealth of terms in the future. Put another way, proponents of the traditional education might dismiss the prospect of any danger in the conceptions that children make of notions that ultimately require the faculty of reason to understand fully, arguing instead for the efficacy of their approach over that of Jean-Jacques.

Rousseau exhorts us to consider the ill effects of misconceptions.¹⁸³ He explains the ease with which we use words as if they have no meaning. “It is not the term he uses which is important to me but rather the meaning he gives to it,” Rousseau explains.¹⁸⁴ Children do not understand what ‘please’ and other “vain formulas of politeness” mean;¹⁸⁵ they only understand that using them can get them what they feel that they immediately need or want.¹⁸⁶ Acquiring an

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 111.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 111.

¹⁸² Ibid., 111.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 108.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 86.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 86.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 86.

early conception of “I please” that merely means “I order you”¹⁸⁷ prevents the child from understanding the concepts of please and of politeness. Rousseau decries, “what dangerous prejudices does one not begin to inspire in them by making them take for science words which have no sense for them?”¹⁸⁸

By forcing the intellectual world on a child before he is ready for it, “you may be sure that he will [. . .] get fantastic notions of the moral world of which you speak to him, notions that you will never in your life be able to blot out.”¹⁸⁹ Children are largely amoral, in that they cannot grasp moral notions well enough to put them into practice based on their goodness. “Before the age of reason one cannot have any idea of moral beings or of social relations,” Rousseau declares.¹⁹⁰ Thus, imposing the study of morality onto the child puts ill-conceived notions into his or her mind, whereas the child would have been able to comprehend morality quite aptly if he or she were left to develop those notions individually. This educational practice results in children becoming manipulative and vain,¹⁹¹ as well as “dissemblers, fakers, and liars.”¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 86.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 111.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 89.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 89.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 86-88.

¹⁹² Ibid., 91.

VII. THE PRAISE OF IGNORANCE IN MODERN MAN: IGNORANCE AS CONDUCTIVE TO CLARITY OF MIND

Another benefit of ignorance for Rousseau is its conduciveness to clarity of mind. In the *Emile*, Rousseau argues that “peasants generally have clearer minds than city people,”¹⁹³ because “their lexicon is less extensive. They have few ideas, but they are very good at the comparison of ideas.”¹⁹⁴ The never-ending stream of opinions that one encounters in a big city and at the theater serve to confuse the mind regarding the important things that would otherwise be clear to even a simple villager, according to Rousseau. He is suggesting that the human mind is better able to reason abstractly (i.e., to compare ideas) when it has words only for ideas that it can understand and when it has only one word for each idea. As Rousseau makes clear in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, words are used to represent ideas.¹⁹⁵ While the use of words is intended to help us access our ideas, an excess of words makes access to the idea(s) that one seeks to convey (whether to others or to oneself) more difficult. At each instance in which one has more than one word for the same idea, the human mind would have to make a decision about which word to use amongst the various synonyms.

Learning, or the sciences and the arts, can also weigh negatively on judgment, because Rousseau holds that clear and reasonable thought prevails more easily in the absence of an abundance of opinions.¹⁹⁶ When the mind is overburdened by a plethora of opinions, the important points about the matter at hand may not be able to stay afloat, rendering one’s judgment less reasonable. He writes, “the human mind, less spread out, less drowned in vulgar

¹⁹³ Rousseau. *Emile*, 74.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁹⁵ Rousseau. *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, 256-257.

¹⁹⁶ Rousseau. *Letter to d’Alembert*, 60.

opinions, elaborates itself and ferments better in tranquil solitude.”¹⁹⁷ A wealth of opinions can distract from the inner natural inclination to reason for oneself without vain considerations of others’ opinions.

Moreover, the answers to the greatest questions of life are accessed easily by a mind that does not overburden itself with complex explanations of how things work or with convoluted systems of thought. As natural sentiment guides us to the ideas and topics that are most important for us to know, and as the basic principles of morality are intuited by us all,¹⁹⁸ the more we fill our minds with nuanced material that nevertheless fails to propel us toward our good, the more we create a burden for ourselves that did not naturally exist. We were prepared to answer the important questions prior to being inundated with others’ ideas and viewpoints, yet, according to Rousseau, the path that we set ourselves on sometimes ironically takes us further and further away from the sentiment with which we initially sought to answer life’s important questions.

Rousseau gives us, as an example, the contrast between the philosopher and the plowman. The philosopher, who thinks that he knows the secrets of the world, “prescribes laws to nature and limits to the Divinity.”¹⁹⁹ In an attempt to promote his self-worth in the name of clarifying the arrangement of the world’s systems, the philosopher finds limitations or faults in the workings of the Creator. The philosopher undermines moral duty “on pretext of elucidating

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 60.

¹⁹⁸ Rousseau does not list the basic principles of morality. Rather, one can gather from the *Discourses* (and throughout his works) that he is referring generally to many common principles of morality that are accepted by most reasonable people. Providing assistance to the less fortunate, being grateful, and showing kindness towards others are examples of good behavior, whereas theft, senseless violence, murder, and greed are bad. See *Second Discourse*, 152-154.

¹⁹⁹ “Observations,” 37.

its principles.”²⁰⁰ Philosophers and scholars, in other words, destroy our natural clarity of thought and its orientation towards moral duty and moral truths.

The plowman, on the other hand, “who sees the rain and the sun by turns fertilize his field admires, praises and blesses the hand from which he receives these graces, without troubling himself about how they come to him.”²⁰¹ In other words, the plowman, who is content to disregard the forbidden fruit’s call to knowledge of God’s secrets, recognizes the obvious blessing that has been bestowed upon human beings through the incredible processes of our world, without needing to know exactly how those processes work in order to give praise to their benefactor. According to Rousseau, the praise that is due to the Creator is just one moral truth whose importance is unfathomed by the philosopher who seeks to “justify his ignorance or his vices” by committing himself to study and who increasingly loses clarity of mind.²⁰² The plowman’s clarity of mind reveals the obvious truths of the world, whereas the corrupted mind may no longer have access to such clear indications.

One might object that clarity of mind is a merely a clever way to formulate the absence of knowledge. On this account, Rousseau is discouraging us from obtaining necessary or useful knowledge via a euphemistic representation of the state of ignorance. While it may be true that Rousseau is not encouraging tutors to teach us the opinions of others in society or to fill their pupils’ minds with vain items of information, he is also not encouraging us to maintain empty minds that possess knowledge of nothing. As we have seen, Rousseau argues that it can be good to possess knowledge of our ignorance, knowledge of our political leaders and systems, and useful knowledge of math, agriculture, and other topics that Emile is taught (or self-taught).

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 37.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 37.

²⁰² Ibid., 37.

Rousseau would have given leave of all sense if he were to claim that we should be equipped with knowledge of nothing at all in life.²⁰³

By maintaining our connections to natural sentiment and to the basic principles of morality, we retain our clarity of mind. By overburdening ourselves with others' opinions and viewpoints, or by filling our minds with a host of ideas that engage us in debates on frivolous matters or that simply give us more information than we can sort out, we find difficulty in focusing on the most important matters, which are obvious to the mind that only accesses knowledge of those things and knows nothing of superfluous matters.

²⁰³ Moreover, as will be further expounded in Chapter VIII, the extent to which superfluous knowledge can diminish clarity of mind depends partly on the cognitive abilities of the individual for whom clarity of mind is sought.

VIII. THE CONTINGENCY OF ROUSSEAU'S APPROACH TO MORAL EDUCATION UPON THE PUPIL OR SOCIETY

The *First Discourse* levels an attack against the arts and the sciences for corrupting men's morals. L'Académie de Dijon's 1750 Prize Essay Competition, which Rousseau had won, had asked "Has the Restoration of the Sciences and Arts Contributed to the Purification of Morals?"²⁰⁴ The proposed question suggested that morals had been purified within recent history, and that there was uncertainty about whether the sciences and the arts were the cause of this purification;²⁰⁵ Rousseau added an alternative proposal, namely, that the arts and the sciences had led to their corruption.²⁰⁶ While this theme recurs throughout Rousseau's works, it is most poignant in the *First Discourse* and in the *Letter to D'Alembert on the Theater*. Once one has conceded to Rousseau that the arts and sciences lead society as a whole to vanity, to profligacy, and to weak morals, Rousseau will grant that science can lead to human convenience and that philosophy can discover the truth of the world.²⁰⁷ Rousseau's intention in these harsh criticisms of philosophers and of learning, though, is to enfeeble society's corrupting forces.²⁰⁸ Moreover, a society that has preserved its natural sentiment and has not been given over to the corrupt passions would be better off without the arts,²⁰⁹ whereas a bad society can benefit from the mental distractions that the arts and the sciences provide.²¹⁰ In addition, an educator should promote philosophy, the arts, and the sciences at the individual level when the person in question would not be corrupted by their pursuit.

²⁰⁴ Victor Gourevitch. Editorial Notes in *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Victor Gourevitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 320.

²⁰⁵ Victor Gourevitch. Introduction to *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Victor Gourevitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xiii.

²⁰⁶ Rousseau. *First Discourse*, 2.

²⁰⁷ "Observations," 36-37.

²⁰⁸ Rousseau. "Letter to Philopolis," 225.

²⁰⁹ Rousseau. *Letter to d'Alembert*, 116.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65. See also Rousseau. "Preface to 'Narcissus,'" 104.

Rousseau's purpose in showing the dangers of the arts and the sciences is to slow the corruption of society. By showing their dangers, he is, in one regard, simply warning us not to pursue the arts and the sciences so eagerly. In a clear indication that he considers himself to be mitigating or slowing the corruption of society, Rousseau states, "Since the state of society thus has an ultimate limit which men have it in their power to reach either sooner or later, it is not useless to show them the danger of going so fast."²¹¹

To attain his purpose, Rousseau does not merely warn the reader; another method that Rousseau employs in the *First Discourse* in particular is to return the reader to natural sentiment by developing a disdain for vanity, affected politeness, and other forms of dissimulation, which are unnatural to us, as well as an appreciation of virtue and of service to others in the community or the state. In doing so, Rousseau is ultimately attempting to break the bad connections that we have to others while moving us toward the good connections that we could possess. Rousseau writes, "Before art had fashioned our manners and taught our passions to speak an affected language, our mores were rustic but natural."²¹² In other words, Rousseau advises us to remember the time prior to the sprouting of bad and unnatural passions. Rousseau seeks to instill repugnance to the fake society that we find ourselves in and to reorient our thinking to the true nature of humanity. Rousseau further declares, "Without ceasing, politeness makes demands, propriety gives orders; without ceasing, common customs are followed, never one's own lights. One no longer dares to seem what one really is."²¹³ Rousseau paints fake politeness and the vain concern for others' opinions as the forces that corrupt natural sentiment. In contemporary society, one does not listen to inner sentiment but to the false passions, such as vanity.

²¹¹ Rousseau. "Letter to Philopolis," 225.

²¹² Rousseau. *First Discourse*, 4.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

By concomitantly praising virtue, or service to the community and the state,²¹⁴ Rousseau circumvents encouragement of the practices of half-philosophers, who become independent-minded only by despising others, by feeding their own arrogance, and by detaching themselves from any duties to others.²¹⁵ As the final paragraph of the *First Discourse* cries, “O virtue! [. . .] Are your principles not engraved in all hearts, and is it not enough, in order to learn your laws, to commune with oneself and, in the silence of the passions, to listen to the voice of one’s conscience?”²¹⁶ Rousseau returns the reader to natural sentiment by reviving in him the confidence to believe in the moral law that he once submitted to willingly and that has not completely been erased from his heart.

To know whether such warnings and attempts to return the reader to natural sentiment are efficient or even effective, however, one must both be aware of his distinction between the few and many and grasp his understanding of the various types of ignorance. Black writes, “In this way – almost silently, as it were – Rousseau introduces a fundamental distinction into his argument.”²¹⁷ For Black, who believes he has keenly picked up on Rousseau’s distinction between the few and the many, the distinctions among different types of ignorance that receive Rousseau’s praise still remain partly elusive, as was discussed in Chapter V. However, to distinguish between the few and the many while identifying two unrevealing types of praiseworthy ignorance (i.e., wise ignorance and popular ignorance) leads to a polarizing framework in which the few are taught solely Socratic humility and the many are merely recipients of opinions that fuel patriotism. Without proper identification of Rousseau’s

²¹⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

²¹⁵ Rousseau. “Preface to ‘Narcissus,’” 99.

²¹⁶ Rousseau. *First Discourse*, 21.

²¹⁷ Black, 106.

praiseworthy forms of ignorance, one will not be led to a distinction between the uncorrupted and the corrupted, an integral distinction for determining the proper educational approach.

If a society is not yet corrupted, then it does not make sense to remind that society of a former time in which it was in touch with natural sentiment. To determine the extent to which a society or an individual has been or can be corrupted by the sciences and the arts, one must be aware that the few can withstand the dangers that threaten corruption, whereas the many cannot. One must also have an understanding of the type of ignorance that allows our natural connections to the basic moral principles to flourish, as well as Socrates' humble form of ignorance. As discussed earlier, ignorance (understood as the lack of knowledge and misperceptions and as the key to preserving natural sentiment's guidance towards the most appropriate use of our faculties) is, by default, a beneficial state to preserve, and some who generally retain this form of ignorance may develop an awareness of their ignorance (i.e., Socrates' humble ignorance). It is only when an exceptional individual or society has been determined to have sufficient moral rectitude and strength of mind and character that the individual or society should be encouraged to engage in study (of philosophy and so on), as will be discussed.

1. A Good Society Can Only Be Corrupted by the Arts and the Sciences

Rousseau also argues that a potential educational reformer should consider the effect that the arts and the sciences would have on the society in question when determining whether or not to promote the arts and the sciences. The educator has the difficult task of determining the degree of corruption, because there is a point at which a society's loss of goodness necessitates

the employment of the sciences as a tempering force on the corrupted and vicious. Rousseau explains,

But once a people is to a certain extent corrupted, should the sciences – regardless of whether they did or did not contribute to the corruption – be banished, or the people be shielded from them, either in order to be improved, or to be kept from becoming worse? This is another question about which I positively declared for the negative.²¹⁸

In other words, although Rousseau cannot precisely say what that (tipping) point is for a specific society until he has knowledge of that society's practices, morals, and customs,²¹⁹ there is undoubtedly a point at which goodness has lost enough vigor so as to require the arts and the sciences to serve a tempering function in society.

Before this degree of corruption has taken place, the sciences are not beneficial even as a distraction from more wicked deeds, according to Rousseau.²²⁰ A society that has preserved its natural sentiment and has not been given over to the corrupt passions would be better off without the arts. Such a good society is already self-sufficient. Introducing the arts and the sciences can only be corrupting on a society that has retained its goodness from nature. If a society has retained its natural goodness, then it should not pursue the arts and the sciences. Rousseau exclaims, "If the beauty of virtue were the product of art, virtue would have long since been disfigured! As for me, even if I am again to be regarded as wicked for daring to assert that man is born good, I think it and believe that I have proved it."²²¹

²¹⁸ Rousseau. "Preface to 'Narcissus,'" 103.

²¹⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Considerations on the Government of Poland*. Translated by Willmoore Kendall. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1.

²²⁰ Rousseau. "Preface to 'Narcissus,'" 103.

²²¹ Rousseau. *Letter to d'Alembert*, 23.

The sciences and the arts in a good society could only work to the detriment of the good and to the benefit of the wicked, because the artists would seek to appeal to the lowest common denominator for their own personal gain.²²² As it is easy to corrupt people's natural sentiment into bad passions, appeal to the lowest common denominator would likely result in the production of art that exploits the passions without any benefit to the good people. Rousseau states that the artist "will lower his genius to the level of his century and will prefer to compose popular works which are admired during his lifetime instead of marvels which would not be admired until long after his death."²²³

His attack against the arts and the sciences, or his praise of ignorance, is not to be confused with the ignorance of barbarism, which would be worse than the dependence upon vain pedants;²²⁴ Rousseau does not, by any means, promote a state of ignorant barbarism. In fact, he decries the Dark Ages as "a state worse than ignorance."²²⁵ Rousseau declares that "society is as natural to mankind as decrepitude is to the individual, and that Peoples need arts, Laws and Governments, as old men need crutches."²²⁶ As Rousseau believes that good societies still exist today and can continue to exist,²²⁷ he is not referring to the age of a person or of a society in his suggestion that people need the arts and sciences. Rather, he is referring to the age of our morals; morals can only go bad with age, because man begins good and becomes wicked only through the arts and society.²²⁸

²²² Ibid., 58.

²²³ Rousseau. *First Discourse*, 14.

²²⁴ Observations, 49.

²²⁵ Rousseau. *First Discourse*, 3.

²²⁶ Rousseau. "Letter to Philopolis," 224.

²²⁷ Rousseau. *Letter to d'Alembert*, 116.

²²⁸ Ibid., 23.

Rousseau appears to hold that the theater tempts us to use a type of psychological defense mechanism through which we seek to esteem ourselves as good while avoiding the virtuous tasks that one must undertake as a moral agent. Rousseau criticizes the act of paying homage to virtue at the theater in order to have a feeling of self-satisfaction with respect to virtue.²²⁹ The theater “reduces all the duties of man [. . .] to make us applaud our courage in praising that of others, our humanity in pitying the ills that we could have cured, our charity in saying to the poor, God will help you!”²³⁰ Instead of taking it upon ourselves to do good deeds, we attend the theater and applaud the good characters to show whose side we are on. However, for Rousseau, it is deplorable that people do not demonstrate their virtue in society instead of in a passive viewing of a performance.

Moreover, the theater and perhaps other arts fail to make use of the natural sentiment of pity, because these entertainments only bring about pity through fear; fear is a momentary passion that does not, for Rousseau, translate the feeling of pity (which it produces) into any acts of humanity that could be performed outside of the theater. Rousseau argues that, while “tragedy leads to pity through fear,” this type of pity is “a fleeting and vain emotion” and is only “a vestige of natural sentiment.”²³¹ Unlike the pity that a human being who is in touch with natural sentiment would feel, this pity does not drive any acts of humanity, as it is a “sterile pity.”²³² Therefore, the theater does not make use of the natural sentiment of pity, which could stem people to good action in society if they were not continually corrupted by the fear that the theater produces in them.

²²⁹ Ibid., 25.

²³⁰ Ibid., 26.

²³¹ Ibid., 24.

²³² Ibid., 24.

Rousseau argues that small towns or cities are much more capable of remaining good societies than are big cities.²³³ However, offering the example of a small town's uncorrupted society, Rousseau contends that the inhabitants of a mountain dwelling who live a simple, rustic lifestyle, read “useful books,” and are all industrious enough to be capable of making and using their own tools²³⁴ would be corrupted by the big city’s amusements, such as the theater. “I see, in the first place, that their labors will cease to be their amusements and that, as soon as they have a new amusement, it will undermine their taste for the old ones.”²³⁵ This also furthers Rousseau’s argument that the forms of entertainment that the arts provide can only be a corrupting influence on a society that is already good.

For Rousseau, Geneva is the paragon of the healthy-sized society that has retained its goodness. If a theater were to be established in Geneva, he would “predict unhappy effects.”²³⁶ Rousseau, it should be noted, consistently held a positive view of Genevans; “the Genevan is naturally good. [. . .] he needs only good examples to be turned entirely to the good,” Rousseau writes, in a 1755 letter to the Comte de Tressan.²³⁷

2. *A Bad Society Can Benefit from the Arts and the Sciences*

However, once Rousseau has demonstrated in the preceding pages the great deal of harmful corruption that can result from the theater, Rousseau concedes that there are some benefits to the establishment of a theater (although not in Geneva). He argues, “when the people

²³³ Rousseau. *Letter to d’Alembert*, 59.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

²³⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. “1755 Letter to the Comte de Tressan,” in *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*. Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters, and Peter G. Stillman, eds. Translated by Christopher Kelly. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), 554.

is corrupted, the theater is good for it, and bad for it when it is itself good.”²³⁸ To incorporate into this picture the sciences and arts generally, one can look at Rousseau’s statement in the “Preface to ‘Narcissus,’” “My opinion, as I have already said more than once, is therefore to preserve and even carefully to support Academies, Colleges, Universities, Libraries, Spectacles and all the other amusements that might to some extent distract men’s wickedness, and prevent them from spending their idleness in more dangerous pursuits.”²³⁹ Thus, Rousseau holds that learning and the arts are distractions that can keep people’s minds off of mischievous activities. If a society has been corrupted, in other words, then the arts and the sciences can beneficially become part of that society’s moral education.

Those who spend their lives in pursuit of harmful tasks are among those whom the arts and the sciences would distract to positive effect. “Reason dictates the encouragement of the amusements of people whose occupations are harmful, and the turning-away from the same amusements of those whose occupations are beneficial,” writes Rousseau.²⁴⁰ Whereas the members of the small mountain village that was mentioned earlier are rightly turned away from the sciences due to their participation in activities that contribute to the good of the community, many in corrupted societies would be rightly encouraged to attend the theater and to spend their time occupied by useless study.

While a small town or city is conducive to a good society, a large city is vulnerable to significant moral corruption. Rousseau declares, “in a big city, I say, the police can never increase the number of permitted pleasures too much,”²⁴¹ because this occupies people who

²³⁸ Rousseau. *Letter to d’Alembert*, 65.

²³⁹ Rousseau. “Preface to ‘Narcissus,’” 104.

²⁴⁰ Rousseau. *Letter to d’Alembert*, 58.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

might otherwise pursue pleasures that are more harmful to society.²⁴² In contrast, small cities allow for greater scrutiny by community members of one another, and such a system of living is not favorable to the big-city practice of hiding one's morals by taking advantage of the capacity to develop a reputation without having to always be in the view of the busy public.²⁴³ He is pointing to the anonymity that one experiences, and some surely seek, in big cities. One can imagine that, if one's moral character is degraded or one does not participate in community life while in a small town, then others who see one on a regular basis will notice one's altered behavior or avoidance of the community. In contrast, imagine life in a metropolis in which one can easily act immorally or crudely towards the people one encounters, many of whom one may never see again and hardly any of whom one knows by name or with whom one experiences a sense of community.

In an argument for small towns or cities stemming directly from his defense of ignorance as conducive to clarity of mind, Rousseau contends that one's inner genius develops better when afforded life in a small town. As people live more rustically and do not need to be engaged in the many activities that city life often demands, people in small towns are not distracted and have the luxury to examine things.²⁴⁴ Being able to look beyond appearances (which one might be overwhelmed with in Paris), and being presented with less of them, one puts one's own thoughts and genius into any analysis or creative endeavor. Rousseau explains that "more original spirits, more inventive industry, more really new things are found there because the people are less imitative; having few models, each draws more from himself and puts more of his own in

²⁴² Ibid., 59.

²⁴³ Of course, Rousseau lived prior to the age of mass media, the Internet, CCTV, and the camcorders of the paparazzi. Technology has indubitably transformed the phenomenon that Rousseau describes so accurately.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 59-60.

everything he does.”²⁴⁵ As one is also driven more by passionate interest and less by fortune and fame, one also finds that the genius of individuals is put to more genuine (and less exploitative) use in smaller cities than in big cities.²⁴⁶

One might wonder just how small of a town, or how large of a city, Rousseau had in mind. According to the *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland*, Geneva had approximately 20,000 inhabitants throughout the course of the 1700s.²⁴⁷ Brion de la Tour’s 1789 book on the population of Paris records several calculated estimates, ranging from 500,000 to one million. Most of these estimates hover around 500,000 to 700,000 Parisian inhabitants.²⁴⁸

Although Paris and Geneva are not absolute paragons, they might be as close as one could get, during Rousseau’s time, to a corrupt and to an upright, pure society, respectively. While Rousseau argues that a theater is not fit for Geneva,²⁴⁹ Paris and other “Great cities”²⁵⁰ typically need theaters. Given Rousseau’s opinion of Geneva, then, Rousseau’s critique of vain and wicked learned men is clearly directed at societies akin to the Paris of his time. It is in this way that Rousseau’s role as a playwright makes no contradiction with his opinions in the *First Discourse*; Rousseau’s plays were performed in Paris and not in Geneva. Rousseau’s novel *Julie*, furthermore, is a novel for corrupt people who have yet to be fully corrupted.²⁵¹ The promotion of morals in novels is one more proper way in which a corrupted society can be educated by the arts. We are perfectly self-sufficient prior to the need for arts and governments,

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 60.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 59-60.

²⁴⁷ Martine Piguet. “Genève (commune)” in *Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS)*. Retrieved from <http://www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/f/F2903.php> Version from August 18th, 2011.

²⁴⁸ Daniel Roche. *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in Paris in the 18th Century*. (Los Angeles, CA: Berg Publishers, 1987), 19.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 116.

²⁵⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Preface to *Julie, or the New Heloise*. Translated by Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 3.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 3.

but even when we do become weaker and dependent on arts and governments, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, and other decent works of art are potentially helpful in curbing or correcting the corruption of society. However, as he states in the Preface to *Julie*, Rousseau wishes that he “had lived in an age when I should have thrown [these letters] into the fire!”²⁵²

3. *An Educator Should Consider the Effects of Learning on the Individual*

At the individual level as well, an educator should promote or discourage philosophy, the arts, and the sciences based on whether the person in question would be corrupted by study. In other words, as the earlier discussions of true and false philosophers would suggest, an educator must distinguish not only between societies but within societies. As reflected in Rousseau’s correspondence with them, some intellectuals during Rousseau’s time interpreted him as a critic of “all Learned men and Artists;”²⁵³ however, Rousseau believed that he had made himself entirely clear in the *First Discourse* on the difference between, for example, the true philosopher and the abundance of false philosophers. He sarcastically replies to Monsieur Raynal, “since you insist, I agree to eliminate all the distinctions I had drawn.”²⁵⁴

There are those for whom the study of philosophy would corrupt their souls. Promoting the study of philosophy to them would have an ill effect on society, because it would produce corrupted, vain, arrogant people.²⁵⁵ If the pupil or society in question is able to withstand the threats that study poses, then that pupil or society can benefit from learning and philosophy and can be encouraged to study. If, on the other hand, the pupil or society is at risk of corruption from study, then that pupil or society should not be given to study. As Rousseau states, “Study

²⁵² Ibid., 3.

²⁵³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. “Letter to Monsieur L’Abbe Raynal,” in *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Victor Gourevitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 29.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 29.

²⁵⁵ Rousseau. *First Discourse*, 7.

corrupts his morals, affects his health, ruins his temperament, and often spoils his reason: even if it did teach him something, it would seem to me to be a poor compensation.”²⁵⁶ The pursuit of philosophy, the arts, and the sciences would not only corrupt many of those who pursue them but also would eventually create a society that is governed by deceit, hatred, and insincerity, none of which is conducive to virtue and to the sense of community at which Rousseau aims.²⁵⁷

However, the good and true philosophers, such as Socrates, are not harmed by study.²⁵⁸ Good and true philosophers pursue their studies “for the good of all”²⁵⁹ and, thus, become neither corrupted nor corrupting by study. They retain their goodness and humility as their knowledge increases.²⁶⁰ Thus, even within a given society, the promotion of the sciences and the arts should be tailored to the people in question. The arts and sciences would corrupt many good people, and, again, Rousseau’s first concern is with people who have retained their natural goodness.²⁶¹

²⁵⁶ Rousseau. “Preface to ‘Narcissus,’” 102.

²⁵⁷ Rousseau. *First Discourse*, 4.

²⁵⁸ Rousseau. “Preface to ‘Narcissus,’” 102.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁶⁰ Rousseau. *First Discourse*, 8-9.

²⁶¹ Rousseau. “Preface to ‘Narcissus,’” 104.

IX. CONCLUSION

To not only exalt ignorance but to exalt it in the broadest range of contexts, from the savage to Socrates, suggests that ignorance is, for Rousseau, a topic worthy of serious consideration. Ignorance is not, however, a simple concept for Rousseau, who discusses a number of different forms of ignorance. Orwin, Black, Garrard, and other scholars who have recognized ignorance as a significant topic in Rousseau's approach to moral education have not been sufficiently sensitive to the various meanings of ignorance. At minimum, ignorance can refer to a humble sort of ignorance, as elucidated in the example of Socrates in the *First Discourse*, or it can refer to a type of ignorance in which the natural tendencies of the mind to judge accurately but not to exceed its limits are maintained and in which knowledge and any misconceptions are absent. The latter form of ignorance is a prerequisite for consciously acknowledging one's own ignorance in an effort to achieve the good. Our human nature leads us to be curious about what is in our interest, and our natural sentiment leads us to our good.

As long as natural sentiment remains our guide, we stay near to the basic moral principles that we naturally intuit, and we are guided to morally upright behavior. Connection to our natural sentiment prevents us from vainly seeking to exceed the limitations of natural faculties, a potential danger by which men often become increasingly corrupted. Our natural state of ignorance, by presenting less danger to our good than the false convictions, vain pursuits, and muddled mind that almost inevitably are produced in the process of learning, is the condition that we should strive to maintain. When we learn to compare ourselves to others with the onset of reason, we are presented with the danger of learning to view others as competitors, as inferiors, or as the objects of our vain musings, and our *amour-propre* may become inflamed, instead of serving as a source of the desire for deserved honor or for the respect that is due to each human

being. Rousseau, who seeks first to preserve the natural goodness of those who are still good, advocates ignorance in order to provide goodness with its strongest foundation in society – the naturally good sentiments of its members prior to corruption by society or by other individuals.

Rousseau, however, is well aware that preserving this natural goodness is not always effective or a great possibility. One cannot be true to Rousseau's understanding of moral education without sensitivity to the individual or the society to be educated. The uncorrupted individual or society, along with the ignorance of the arts and the sciences that is essential to that individual or society's natural goodness, must be maintained to the extent possible. Society may benefit the most by educating the corrupted society or individual, on the other hand, in the arts and the sciences, as learning may be a necessary remedy at that stage. Moreover, for those whom learning would corrupt, Rousseau prefers that they would remain ignorant. Only Socrates and other individuals who can withstand the threats to their goodness and humility should receive education in philosophy.

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