Discours
A l'Academie
qui a remporte le Prix

De Dijon.

Par un citoyen de Geneve,

chap. II. Sur les louvois et leur influence.

Excerpt
Satyr, you do not know it; see note p. 16.
DISCOURSE

that won the prize

OF THE ACADEMY

OF DIJON

In the year 1750

On this Question proposed by the Academy:

Whether the restoration of the Sciences and the Arts has contributed to the purification of morals

By a Citizen of Geneva

Here I am the barbarian because they do not understand me. Ovid

GENEVA

Barillot & Son

3
[1] Here is one of the great and of the finest questions ever raised. This Discourse is not concerned with the metaphysical subtleties that have spread to all departments of Literature, and of which the Programs of Academies are not always free; it is concerned, rather, with one of the truths that affect the happiness of mankind.

[2] I expect I shall not easily be forgiven for the side I have dared to take. Clashing head on with all that is today admired by men, I can only expect universal blame: and it is not for having been honored by the approbation of a few Wise men, that I should expect the approbation of the Public: Thus I have chosen my side; I do not care whether I please Wits or the Fashionable. There will always be men destined to be subjugated by the opinions of their century, their Country, their Society: Some men today act the part of the Freethinker and the Philosopher who, for the same reason, would have been but fanatics at the time of the League. One ought not to write for such Readers when one wants to live beyond one’s century.

[3] One word more, and I have done. Little expecting the honor bestowed on me, I had, after sending off this Discourse, recast and expanded it to the point of making it, as it were, into another Work; I believed myself obliged to restore it today to the state in which it was awarded the prize. I have only thrown in some notes and let stand two easily recognized additions of which the Academy might perhaps not have approved. I thought that equity, respect, and gratitude required this notice of me.
Decipimur specie recti.

[4] Has the restoration of the Sciences and Arts contributed to the purification of Morals, or to their corruption? This is what has to be examined. Which side ought I to take in this question? The side, Gentlemen, which becomes an honest man who knows nothing and esteems himself no less for it.

[5] I am sensible to the difficulty of making what I have to say conform to the Tribunal before which I appear. How shall I dare to blame the Sciences before one of Europe’s most learned Associations, praise ignorance in a famous Academy, and reconcile contempt for study with respect for the truly Learned? I have seen these contradictions; and they have not deterred me. It is not, so I have told myself, Science I abuse; it is Virtue I defend before virtuous men. Probity is even dearer to Good Men than erudition is to the Learned. What, then, have I to fear? The enlightenment of the Assembly listening to me? I acknowledge it; but only with regard to the composition of the discourse, not to the Speaker’s sentiment. Equitable Sovereigns have never hesitated to pass judgment against themselves in debates of doubtful issue; and the most advantageous position in a just cause is to have to defend oneself against a Party of integrity and enlightenment judging in his own case.

[6] To this motive which emboldens me is joined another which decides me: namely that, in upholding the side of truth by my natural light; regardless of how successful I may be, there is one Prize that cannot escape me: I will find it in the depths of my heart.
PART I

[7] It is a grand and a fine spectacle to see man go forth as it were out of nothing by his own efforts; to dispel by the lights of his reason the darkness in which nature had enveloped him; to raise himself above himself; to soar by the mind to the celestial realms; like to the Sun, to traverse the vast expanse of the Universe with Giant strides; and, what is grander and more difficult still, to return into himself, there to study man and to know his nature, his duties, and his end. All these wonders have occurred anew in the past few Generations.

[8] Europe had relapsed into the Barbarism of the first ages. A few centuries ago the Peoples of this Part of the World, which is today so enlightened, lived in a state worse than ignorance. I know not what scientific jargon more contemptible still than ignorance had usurped the name of knowledge, and stood as an almost invincible obstacle in the path of its return. A revolution was required to return men to common sense; it finally came from the quarter from which it was least to be expected. The stupid Muslim, the eternal scourge of Letters, caused them to be reborn among us. The fall of the Throne of Constantine carried the wreckage of ancient Greece into Italy. France, in turn, was enriched by these precious spoils. Soon the sciences followed Letters; the Art of writing was joined by the Art of thinking; a sequence which appears strange but is perhaps only too natural; and the major advantage of commerce with the muses began to be felt, namely of rendering men more sociable by inspiring in them the desire to please one another with works worthy of their mutual approbation.

[9] The mind has its needs, as has the body. The latter make up the foundations of society, the former make for its being agreeable. While the Government and the Laws see to the [7] safety and the well-being of men assembled, the Sciences, Letters, and Arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which they are laden, throttle in them the sentiment of that original freedom for which they seemed born, make them love their slavery, and fashion them into what is called civilized Peoples. Need raised up Thrones; the Sciences
and Arts have consolidated them. Earthly Powers, love talents and protect those who cultivate them! Civilized peoples [peuples policiés], cultivate them! Happy slaves, you owe to them the delicate and refined taste on which you pride yourselves; the sweet character and urbane morals which make for such engaging and easy relations among you; in a word, the appearances of all the virtues without having a single one of them.

[10] This is the kind of politeness, the more endearing as it affects to show itself less, that formerly distinguished Athens and Rome in the much vaunted days of their magnificence and splendor: it is, no doubt, by it that our century and our Nation will surpass all times and all Peoples. A philosophic tone devoid of pedantry, manners natural yet engaging, as far removed from Teutonic rusticity as from Transalpine Pantomime: These are the fruits of the tastes acquired by a good education and perfected in dealings in the World.

[11] How sweet it would be to live among us if the outward countenance were always the image of the heart’s dispositions; if our maxims were our rules; if genuine Philosophy were inseparable from the title of Philosopher! But so many qualities [8] all too seldom go together, and virtue hardly goes forth with so much pomp. Rich apparel may herald a man of wealth and its elegance a man of taste; the healthy and robust man is recognized by other signs: strength and vigor of body will be found under the rustic habit of a Farmer, and not under the gilding of a Courtier. Apparel is no less alien to virtue, which is the strength and vigor of the soul. The good man is an Athlete who delights in fighting naked: he despises all those vile ornaments that would hinder his use of his strength, and most of which were invented only to conceal some deformity.

* Princes always view with pleasure the dissemination among their subjects of a taste for the agreeable Arts and for superfluities that do not entail exporting monies. For besides thus nurturing in them that pettiness of soul so suited to servitude, they well know that all the needs which a People imposes on itself are so many chains which it assumes. Alexander, wishing to keep the Ichthyophagi dependent on him, compelled them to give up fishing and to eat the foods common to other Peoples; and the Savages of America who go about altogether naked and live entirely off the products of their hunt have proved impossible to tame. Indeed, what yoke could be imposed on men who need nothing?
[12] Before art had fashioned our manners and taught our
Passions to speak in ready-made terms, our morals were rustic
but natural, and differences in conduct conveyed differences in
character at first sight. Human nature was, at bottom, no better,
but men found their security in how easily they saw through one
another, and this advantage, to the value of which we are no longer
sensitive, spared them a good many vices.

[13] Today, when more subtle inquiries and a more refined
taste have reduced the Art of pleasing to principles, a vile and
decieving uniformity prevails in our morals, all minds seem to
have been cast in the same mold: constantly civility requires,
propriety commands: constantly one follows custom, never
one’s own genius. One no longer dares to appear what one is;
under this perpetual constraint, the men who make up this herd
that is called society will, when placed in similar circumstances,
all act in similar ways unless more powerful motives incline
them differently. One will therefore never really know with
whom one is dealing: in order to know one’s friend one will
therefore have to wait for great occasions, that is, to wait until it
is too late, since it is for these very occasions that it would have
been essential to know him.

[14] What a train of vices must attend upon such uncertainty.
No more sincere friendships, no more real esteem; no more
well-founded trust. Suspicions, offenses, fears, coolness,
reserve, hatred, betrayal, will constantly hide behind this even
and deceitful veil of politeness, beneath this so much vaunted
urbanity, which we [9] owe to the enlightenment of our century.
One will no longer profane the name of the Lord of the
Universe with oaths, but insult it with blasphemies that pass
our scrupulous ears without offending them. One will not vaunt
one’s own merit, but disparage that of others. One will not
crudely offend one’s enemy, but malign him artfully. National
hatreds will die out, but so will love of Fatherland. Scorned
ignorance will be replaced by a dangerous Pyrrhonism. Some
excesses will be proscribed, some vices held in dishonor, but
others will be emblazoned with the name of virtues; one will
either have to have them or to affect them. Let those who wish
to do so, extol the sobriety of the Wise men of the age, but for
myself I see in it nothing but a refinement of intemperance as unworthy of my praise as their artful simplicity.

[15] Such is the purity our morals have acquired, this is how we have become good Men. Let Letters, the Sciences, and the Arts each claim their share in such a salutary achievement. I shall add but one reflection; that if an Inhabitant of some distant lands seeking to form an idea of European morals from the state of the Sciences among us, the perfection of our Arts, the propriety of our Theater, the politeness of our manners, the affability of our discourse, our incessant professions of goodwill, and from this bustling race of men of all ages and conditions who, from early Dawn until the setting of the Sun, seem at pains to oblige one another; this Stranger, I say, would guess our morals to be precisely the opposite of what they are.

[16] Where there is no effect, no cause need be sought: but here the effect is certain, the depravity real, and our souls have been corrupted in proportion as our Sciences and our Arts have advanced toward perfection. Shall it be said that this misfortune is peculiar to our age? No, Gentlemen, the ills caused by our vain curiosity are as old [10] as the world. The daily rise and fall of the Ocean’s waters have not been more strictly subjected to the course of the Star that illumines us by night, than has the fate of morals and probity to the progress of the Sciences and Arts. Virtue has been seen to flee in proportion as their light rose on our horizon, and the same phenomenon has been observed at all times and in all places.

[17] Consider Egypt, that first school of the Universe, that fertile climate beneath a brazen sky, that famous land from which Sesostris long ago set out to conquer the World. It became the mother of Philosophy and the fine Arts, and soon thereafter was conquered by Cambyses, then by the Greeks, by the Romans, the Arabs, and finally the Turks.

[18] Consider Greece, formerly peopled by Heroes who twice vanquished Asia, once before Troy, and once in their very hearths.

*I like, says Montaigne, to argue and discuss, but only with a few men and for my own sake. For I find it to be a most unbecoming profession for a man of honor to serve as a Spectacle to the Great and wantonly to display one’s mind and one’s prattling. It is the profession of all our wits save one.
Nascent Letters had not yet carried corruption into the hearts of its Inhabitants; but the progress of the Arts, the disintegration of morals, and the Macedonian’s yoke closely followed upon one another; and Greece, ever learned, ever voluptuous, and ever enslaved, thereafter experienced nothing but a change of masters in the course of its revolutions. All of Demosthenes’s eloquence never succeeded in revivifying a body which luxury and the Arts had enervated.

[19] It is at the time of the likes of Ennius and of Terence that Rome, founded by a Shepherd and rendered illustrious by Tillers of the soil, begins to degenerate. But after the likes of Ovid, of Catullus, of Martial, and that host of obscene Writers whose very names offend modesty, Rome, formerly the Temple of Virtue, becomes the Theater of crime, the scandal of Nations, and the sport of barbarians. This Capital of the World finally succumbs to the yoke it had imposed on so many Peoples, and the day of its fall was the eve of the day on which one of its Citizens was given the title of Arbiter of good taste.

[20] What shall I say of the Capital of the Eastern Empire which, by its location, seemed destined to be that of the entire World, that refuge of the Sciences and the Arts banned from the rest of Europe perhaps more out of wisdom than of barbarism. All that is most shameful in debauchery and corruption; blackest in betrayals, assassinations and poisons; most atrocious in the combination of crimes of every kind; [11] this is what makes up the fabric of the History of Constantinople; this is the pure source from which the Enlightenment in which our century glories has come to us.

[21] But why seek in remote times proofs of a truth for which we have abiding testimony before our own eyes. There is in Asia an immense land where Letters are honored and lead to the foremost dignities of State. If the Sciences purified morals, if they taught men to shed their blood for the Fatherland, if they animated courage; the Peoples of China should be wise, free, and invincible. But if there is not a single vice that does not rule them, not a single crime that is unfamiliar to them; if neither the enlightenment of the Ministers, nor the presumed wisdom of the Laws, nor the large number of Inhabitants of that vast Empire have been able to protect it from the yoke of the ignorant and coarse Tartar, of what
use have all its Scholars been? What benefit has China derived from all the honors bestowed upon them? Is it to be peopled by slaves and evil-doers?

[22] Let us contrast these scenes with that of the morals of the small number of Peoples who, protected against this contamination of vain knowledge, have by their virtues wrought their own happiness and the model for the other Nations. Such were the first Persians, a singular Nation where virtue was learned as Science is learned among us; which subjugated Asia with such ease, and is the only Nation to enjoy the glory of having the history of its institutions mistaken for a Philosophical Romance. Such were the Scythians of whom such magnificent praise has come down to us: Such were the Germans, whose simplicity, innocence and virtues a pen weary of tracing the crimes and blackness of an educated, opulent, and voluptuous People found relief in depicting. Such had been Rome itself in the times of its poverty and ignorance. Such, finally, has shown itself to be down to our own day that rustic nation so vaunted for its courage which adversity could not subdue and for its faithfulness which example could not corrupt. 

[23] It was not owing to stupidity that they preferred other forms of exercise to those of the mind. They were not ignorant of the fact that in other lands idle men spent their lives arguing about the sovereign good, vice and virtue, or that prideful ratiocinators heaped the greatest praise upon themselves while lumping together all other Peoples under the contemptuous name of barbarians; but they considered their morals and learned to disdain their teaching. **

* I dare not speak of the happy Nations which do not know even the name of the vices we find it so difficult to repress, those savages of America whose simple and natural polity Montaigne unhesitatingly prefers not only to Plato’s Laws [12] but even to everything that philosophy could ever imagine as most perfect for the government of Peoples. He cites numerous examples striking to those who admire them. “But then,” says he, “they don’t wear breeches!”

** Honestly, I should like to be told what must have been the Athenians’ own opinion of eloquence when they so carefully excluded it from that upright Tribunal whose Judgments even the Gods did not appeal? What did the Romans think of medicine when they banished it from the Republic? And when a residue of humanity led the Spaniards to forbid their lawyers entry into America, what must have been their idea of Jurisprudence? Would it not seem that they believed that with this one Edict they could make up for all the evils they had inflicted on those wretched Indians?
[24] Can I forget that it was in the very lap of Greece that was seen to arise the City equally famed for its happy ignorance and for the wisdom of its Laws, that Republic of demi-Gods rather than of men, so much superior to humanity did their virtues appear? O Sparta! eternal shame to a vain teaching! While the vices, led by the fine Arts, together insinuated themselves into Athens, while a Tyrant was there so carefully assembling the works of the Prince of Poets, you expelled the Arts and Artists, the Sciences and Scientists from your walls.

[25] The event confirmed this difference. Athens became the home of sophistication and of taste, the country of Orators and Philosophers. The elegance of its Buildings matched that of the language. Marble and canvas enlivened by the hands of the most skillful Masters were everywhere to be seen. From Athens issued those astounding works that will stand as models in every corrupt age. The Picture of Lacedaemon is less brilliant. There, the other Peoples used to say, [13] men are born virtuous, and the very air of the Country seems to inspire virtue. All that is left us of its Inhabitants is the memory of their heroic deeds. Are such monuments worth less to us than the quaint marbles left us by Athens?

[26] Some few wise men did, it is true, withstand the general tide, and guard against vice in the midst of the Muses. But listen to the indictment of the Learned and the Artists of his time by the foremost and the most unfortunate of them.

[27] “I have,” he says, “examined the Poets, and I consider them to be people whose talent impresses themselves and others, who claim to be wise men, who are taken to be such, and are anything but that.”

[28] “From the Poets,” Socrates continues, “I went on to the Artists. No one was more ignorant of the Arts than I; no one was more convinced that the Artists possessed some very fine secrets. Yet I perceived that their condition is no better than the Poets’, and that they both labor under the same prejudice. Because the most skilled among them excel in their particular Field, they look upon themselves as the wisest of men. In my eyes this presumption has completely tarnished their knowledge: So that, putting myself in the place of the Oracle, and asking myself what I would prefer to be, what I am or what they are, to know what
they have learned or to know that I know nothing; I answered myself and the God: I want to remain what I am.

[29] “We do not know, neither the Sophists nor the Poets, nor the Orators, nor the Artists, nor I, what is the true, the good, and the beautiful: But there is this difference between us that, although these people know nothing, they all believe they know something: Whereas I, while I know nothing, am at least not in any doubt about it. So that the whole superiority in wisdom which the Oracle attributes to me, amounts to nothing more than that I am fully convinced that I am ignorant of what I do not know.”

[30] Here, then, is the Wisest of men in the Judgment of the Gods, and the most learned of Athenians according to the sense of all Greece, Socrates, speaking in Praise of ignorance! Does anyone believe that, if he were to be reborn among us, our Learned and our Artists would cause him to change his mind? No, Gentlemen, this just man would continue to despise our vain Sciences; he would not help swell the mass of books that flood in on us from all sides, and the only precept which he would leave is the precept which he did leave to his disciples and to our Descendants, the example and the memory of his virtue. It is fine thus to teach men!

[31] Socrates had begun in Athens, the elder Cato continued in Rome to inveigh against those artful and subtle Greeks who seduced virtue and enervated the courage of his fellow-citizens. But the Sciences, the Arts, and dialectics once again prevailed; Rome filled up with Philosophers and Orators; military discipline came to be neglected, agriculture despised; Sects joined, and the Fatherland forgotten. The sacred names of liberty, disinterestedness, obedience to the Laws, were replaced by the names of Epicurus, Zeno, Arcesilaus. Ever since the Learned have begun to appear among us, so their own Philosophers themselves said, good Men have been in eclipse. Until then the Romans had been content to practice virtue; all was lost when they began to study it.

[32] O Fabricius! what would your great soul have thought if, unhappily recalled to life, you had seen the pompous countenance of that Rome which your arm rescued and your good name adorned more than did all of her conquests? “Gods!” you would
have said, “what has become of the thatch roofs and the rustic hearths where moderation and virtue used to dwell? What fatal splendor has replaced Roman simplicity? What is this alien speech? What are these effeminate morals? What is the meaning of these statues, these Paintings, these buildings? Fools, what have you done? You, the Masters of Nations, made yourselves the slaves of the frivolous men you vanquished? Do Rhetoricians govern you? Was it in order to enrich Architects, Painters, Sculptors, and Thespians that you shed your blood in Greece and in Asia? Have the spoils of Carthage become the booty of a flute-player? Romans, hasten to overturn these Amphitheaters; smash these marbles; burn these paintings; drive out these slaves who [15] subjugate you and whose fatal arts corrupt you. Let other hands acquire fame for vain talents; the only talent worthy of Rome is that of conquering the world and making virtue reign in it. When Cineas took our Senate for an Assembly of Kings he was not dazzled by vain pomp or studied elegance. He did not, in that Senate, hear the frivolous eloquence that is the object of study and delight of futile men. What, then, did Cineas see that was so majestic? O Citizens! He saw a spectacle which neither your riches nor all your arts shall ever succeed in exhibiting; the finest spectacle ever to appear under heaven, the Assembly of two hundred virtuous men, worthy of ruling Rome and of governing the earth.”

[33] But let us cross the distance of place and time, and see what has occurred in our lands and before our own eyes; or rather, let us set aside repugnant depictions that would offend our delicacy, and spare ourselves the trouble of repeating the same thing with different names. My invoking Fabricius’s shade was not haphazard; and what did I have this great man say that I could not have put into the mouth of Louis XII or of Henry IV? Among us, it is true, Socrates would not have drunk the hemlock; but he would have drunk from a far more bitter cup, insulting jeers, and the scorn that is a hundred times worse than death.

[34] This is how luxury, dissoluteness and slavery have at all times been the punishment visited upon our prideful efforts to leave the happy ignorance in which eternal wisdom had placed us. The heavy veil it has drawn over all of its operations seemed sufficiently to warn us that it had not destined us for vain
inquiries. But is there even one of its lessons from which we have known how to profit, or which we have neglected with impunity? Peoples, know, then, once and for all, that nature wanted to preserve you from science as a mother snatches a dangerous weapon from the hands of her child; that all the secrets she hides from you are so many evils from which she protects you, and that the difficulty you have in learning is not the least of her favors. Men are perverse; they would be worse still if they had had the misfortune of being born learned.

[35] How humiliating to humanity such reflections are! [16] How greatly mortified our pride must be by them! What! probity the daughter of ignorance? Science and virtue incompatible? What conclusions might not be drawn from such prejudices? But in order to resolve these apparent contradictions one need only examine closely the vanity and vacuousness of the proud titles which dazzle us and which we so gratuitously bestow on human knowledge. Let us, therefore, consider the Sciences and the Arts in themselves. Let us see what must result from their progress; and let us no longer hesitate to grant all the points on which our reasoning shall be found to agree with the historical inferences.