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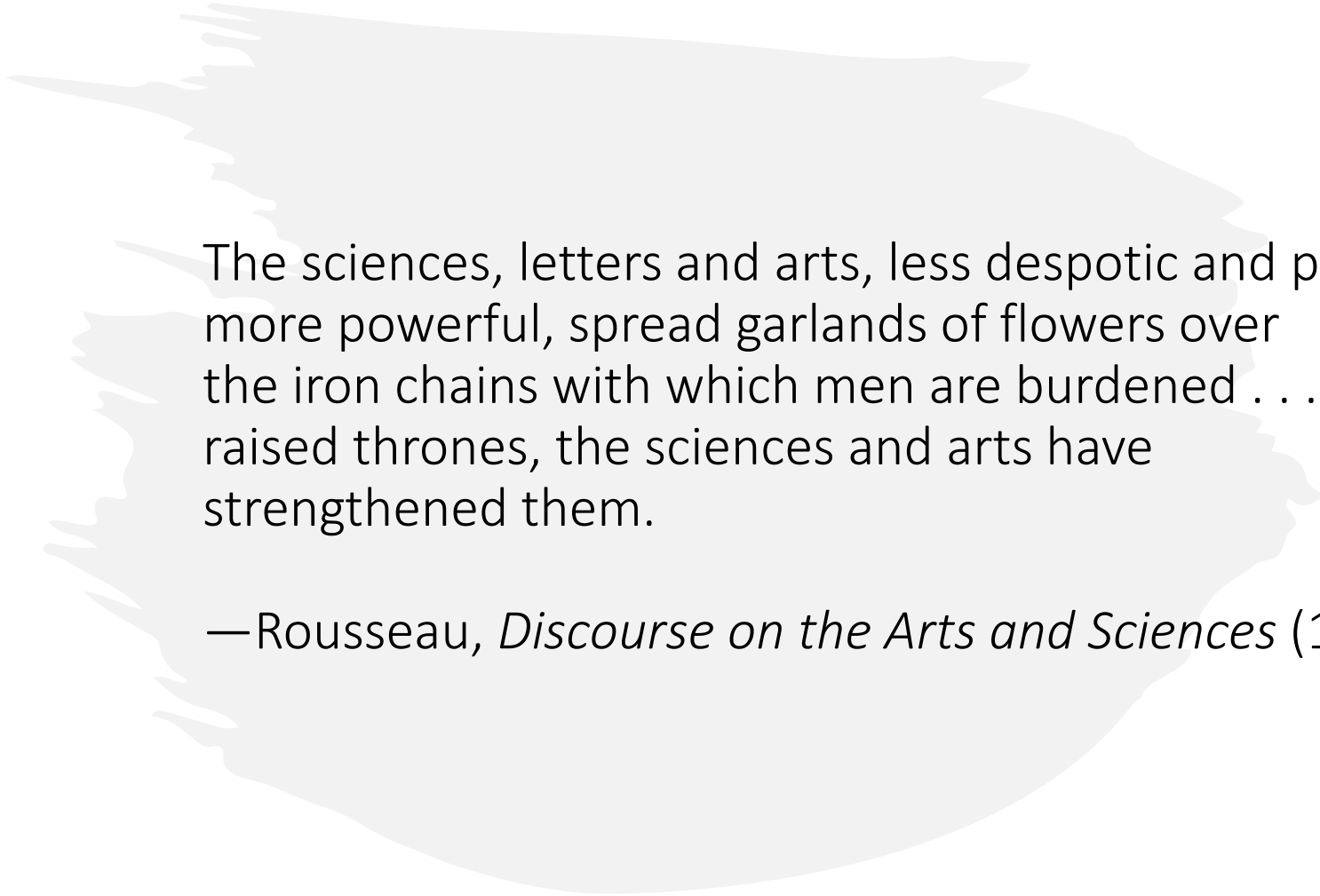
Contemplating Rousseau
Wednesday, December 4, 2024
6:45p.m. - 8:15 p.m. EDT
Professor Joseph E. Hartman
Georgetown University



On the History and Influence of Ideas

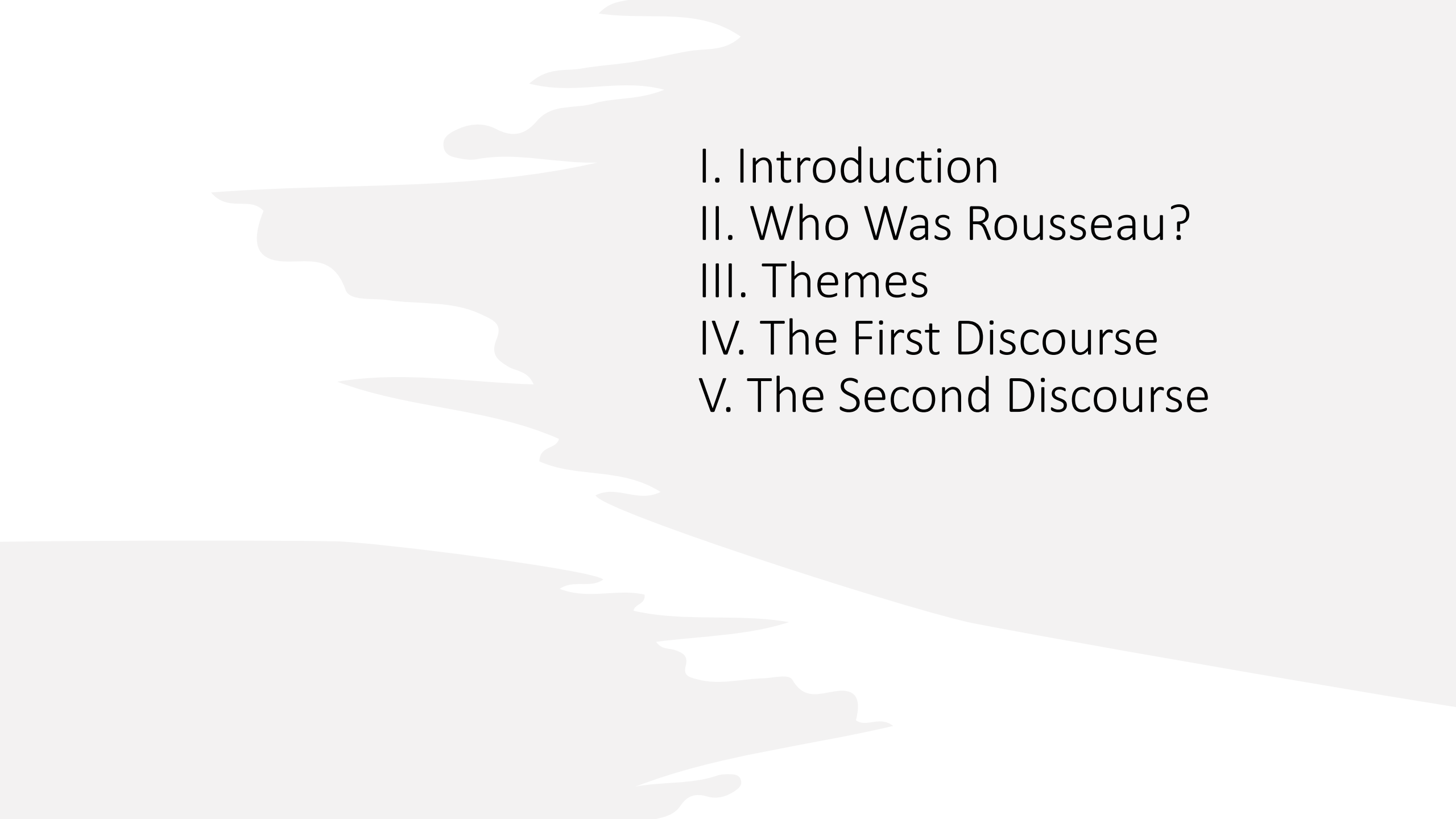
The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.

—John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936)



The sciences, letters and arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened . . . Need raised thrones, the sciences and arts have strengthened them.

—Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750)

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- I. Introduction
 - II. Who Was Rousseau?
 - III. Themes
 - IV. The First Discourse
 - V. The Second Discourse

I. Introduction

- **The Problem:** Why are we moderns lost to ourselves?
- **Solution:** Recover the natural, suspect the artificial (science and arts). Look to the heart/affections, not just to reason



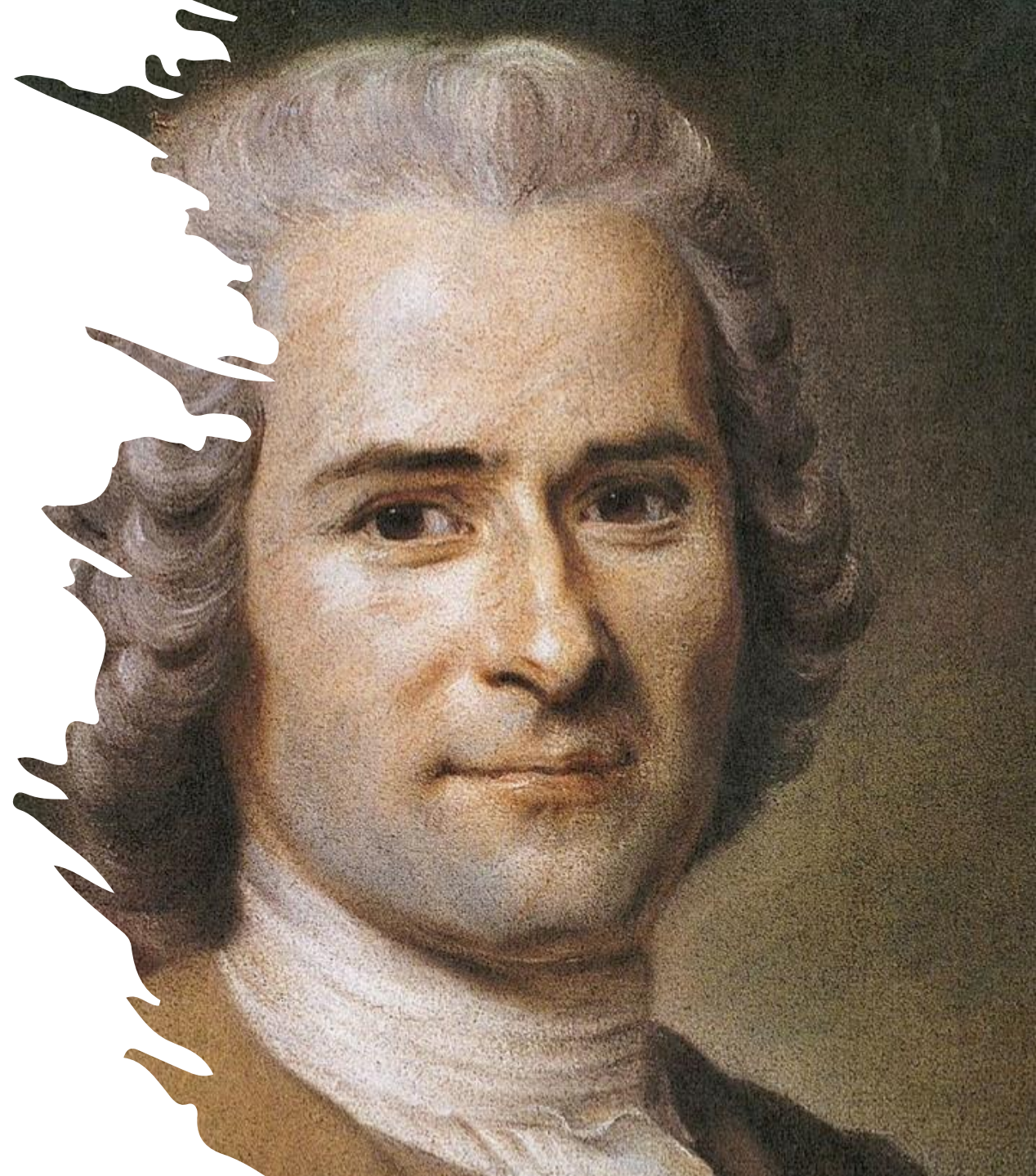
Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1788);

Biography: Genevan philosopher and writer.

Purpose: Founds the ancients/moderns debate; virtue vs. self-interest; first anti-modern tract.

Text: Essay—short, provocative, explores something dimly intimated, suggests further possibilities.

Key Works: *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences (First Discourse)* (1750), *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men (Second Discourse)* (1755), *Emile* (1762), *The Social Contract* (1762), *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782)



III. Themes

- Authenticity
- Appearance and Reality
- Physical robustness vs softness of luxury
- Virtue as strength/martial
- Progress
- Luxury vs Morality
- Ostentation vs integrity
- Can we get back to Eden?
- Athens & Sparta



The First Discourse

- FIRST PART: HISTORY
- SECOND PART: ON THE PROGRESS OF SCIENCE
AND THE ARTS

FRONTISPIECE

...Satyr you do not know it





First Part: History

First Part: History

- **Plato/Socrates:** “An honorable man who knows nothing” (34)
- **The Heart as the Seat of Judgment:** “Having upheld, according to my natural intellect, the cause of truth, whatever the outcome there is a prize which I cannot fail to receive; I will find it at the bottom of my heart.” (34-35)

First Part: History



- **What is Enlightenment?** “It is a grand and beautiful sight to see man emerge from obscurity somehow by his own efforts; dissipate, by the light of his reason, the darkness in which nature had enveloped him . . .” (35)
- **Science or Knowledge and the Recovery of Classical Thought:** “A nondescript, scientific jargon, even more despicable than ignorance, had usurped the name of knowledge” (35)

First Part: History



- **Garlanded Chains:** “The sciences, letters and arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened . . .Need raised thrones, the sciences and arts have strengthened them.” (36)
- **Appearance or Reality:** “The semblance of the all the virtues without the possession of any.” (36)

First Part: History



- **Need and Servitude:** “what yoke could be imposed on men who need nothing” (36*)
- **Exterior and Interior:** “ornamentation is no less foreign to virtue, which is the strength and vigor of the soul.” (37)
- **Sophistication Begets the Herd:** “A base and deceptive uniformity prevails in our customs, and all minds seem to have been cast in the same mould.” (38)

First Part: History



- **Progress or Decline?** “our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our sciences and arts toward perfection (39)
- **Luxury Enervates the Body:** “All the eloquence of Demosthenes could never revive a body enervated by luxury and the arts.” (40)
- **Virtue and Conquest:** “The only talent worthy of Rome is conquering the world and making virtue reign in it.” (46)




First Part: History

- **After Eden?** “Luxury, licentiousness and slavery have been punishment for the arrogant attempts we have made to emerge from the happy ignorance in which eternal wisdom had placed us . . . Nature wanted to keep you from being harmed by knowledge.” (46)




Second Part:
On the Progress of
the Sciences and
the Arts




Second Part: On the Progress of the Sciences and the Arts

- **Prometheus:** “a God who was hostile to the tranquility of mankind was the inventor of the sciences.” (47-48)
- **Pride:** “The sciences and arts owe their birth to our vices; we would be less doubtful of their advantages if they owed it to our virtues.” (48)
- **Wasting Time?** “Who would want to spend his life in sterile speculations if each of us, consulting only the duties of man and the needs of nature, had time for nothing except his fatherland, the unfortunate, and his friends.” (48)




Second Part: On the Progress of the Sciences and the Arts

- **Wide is the Path . . .** : “Falsity is susceptible of infinite combinations, truth has only one form.” (49)
- **Vain Objects, Dangerous Effects:** “If our sciences are vain in the objects they have in view, they are even more dangerous in the effects they produce.” (49)
- ***Cui Bono?*** “Had you taught us none of these things, would we consequently be fewer in number, less well governed, less formidable, less flourishing or more perverse? Reconsider then, the importance of your products . . . ” (50)




Second Part: On the Progress of the Sciences and the Arts

- **Sacred Order?** “They smile disdainfully at the old-fashioned words of fatherland and religion, and devote their talents and philosophy to destroying and debasing all that is sacred among men. . . O passion to gain distinction, o what are you not capable?” (50)
- **Luxury and Morals:** Will our philosophy still dare deny that good morals are essential to the stability of empires, and that luxury is diametrically opposed to good morals?” (50-51)




Second Part: On the Progress of the Sciences and the Arts

- **Money and Virtue:** “Ancient politicians incessantly talked about morals and virtue, those of our time only talk about business and money.” (51)
- **Citizen or Consumer?** “With money one has everything except morals and citizens.” (52)
- **Ostentation:** “Ostentatious taste is rarely combined in the same souls with the taste for honesty. No, it is not possible that minds degraded by a multitude of futile concerns could ever rise to anything great, and even if they should have the strength, the courage would be lacking.” (52).




Second Part: On the Progress of the Sciences and the Arts

- **The Aesthetics of Morals:** “Thus, the dissolution of morals, a necessary consequence of luxury, leads in turn to the corruption of taste.” (53)
- **HGTV?** “When innocent and virtuous men enjoyed having gods as witnesses of their actions, they lived together in the same huts; but soon becoming evil, they tired of their inconvenient spectators and relegated them to magnificent temples. Finally, they chased the gods out in order to live in the temples themselves, or at least the temples of the gods were no longer distinguishable from the houses of the citizens.” (54)




Second Part: On the Progress of the Sciences and the Arts

- **Courage:** “Study of the sciences is much more apt to soften and enervate courage than to strengthen and animate it.” (55)
- **Grit:** What view of hunger, thirst fatigues, dangers and death can men have if they are crushed by the smallest need and rebuffed by the least difficulty (55)
- **Marx’s Prosthesis:** “Let no one raise as an objection the renowned valor of all those modern warriors who are so scientifically disciplined. I hear their bravery on a single day of battle highly praised, but I am not told how they bear overwork, how they endure the rigor of the seasons and the bad weather.” (55)




Second Part: On the Progress of the Sciences and the Arts

- **What of Education?** “From our earliest years, a foolish education adorns our mind and corrupts our judgment. I see everywhere immense institutions where young people are brought up at great expense, learning everything except their duties.” (57)
- **Of Virtues and Values:** One no longer asks if a man is upright, but rather if he is talented; nor of a book if it is useful, but if it is well written. Rewards are showered on the witty, and virtue is left without honors.” (58)
- **Citizens or Employees?** “We have physicists, geometers, chemists, astronomers, poets, musicians, painters We no longer have citizens;” (59)




Second Part: On the Progress of the Sciences and the Arts

- **On Trades:** “It would be preferable for all who could not go far in the learned profession to be rebuffed from the outset and directed into arts useful to society. He who will be a bad versifier or a subaltern geometer all his life would have perhaps have become a great cloth maker.” (62)
- **Whatever is good, whatever is True:** “The soul gradually adapts itself to the objects that occupy it.” (63)



Second Part: On the Progress of the Sciences and the Arts

Philosopher-Kings: “So long as power is alone on the one side, intellect and wisdom alone on the other, learned men will rarely think of great things, Princes will more rarely do noble ones, and the people will continue to be vile corrupt, and unhappy.” (64)



Second Part: On the Progress of the Sciences and the Arts

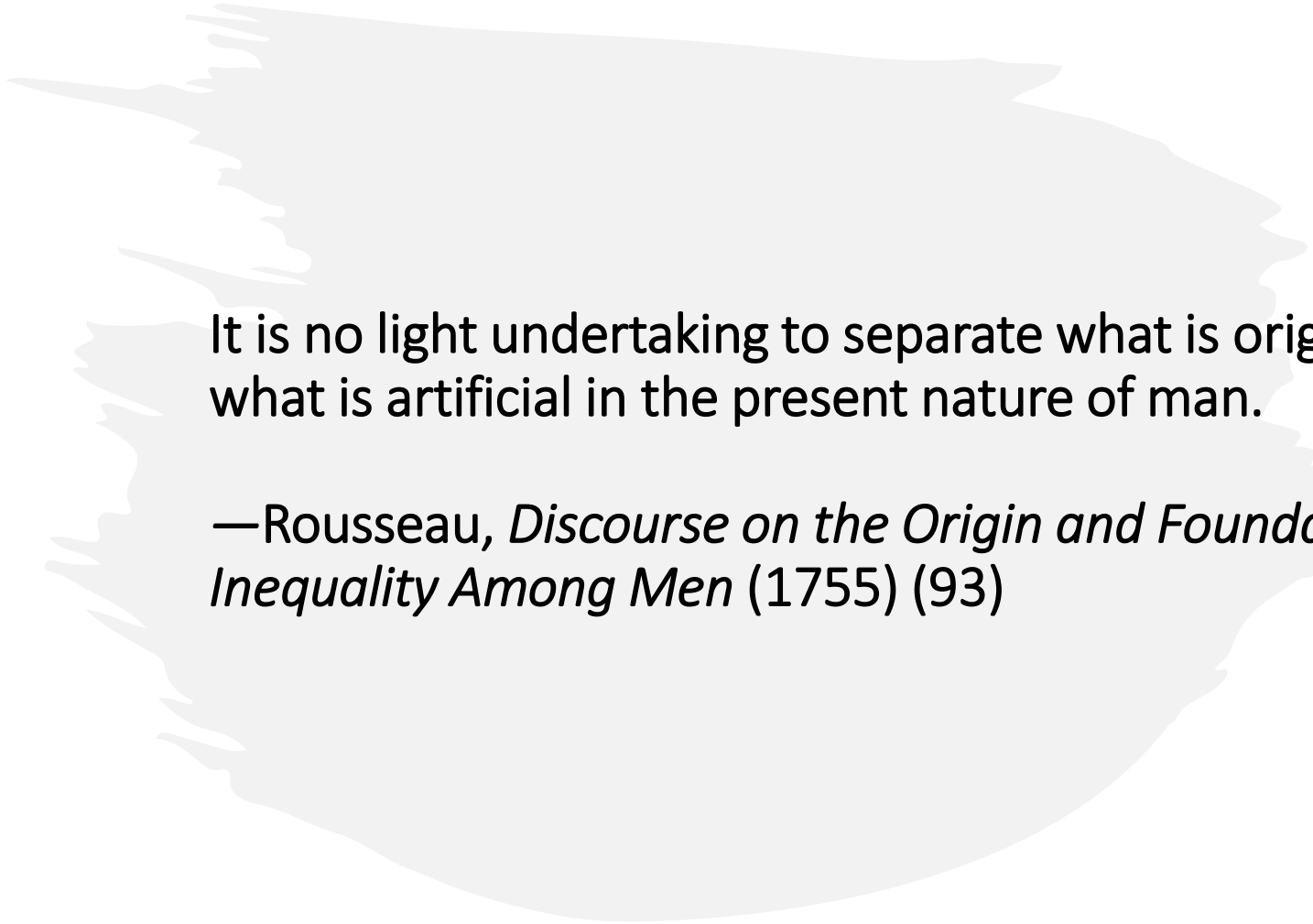
Athens v. Sparta (redux): “O virtue! Sublime science of simple souls, are so many difficulties and preparations needed to know you? Are not your principles engraved in all hearts, and is it not enough in order to learn your laws to commune with oneself and listen to the voice of one’s conscience in the silence of the passions? That is true philosophy, let us know how to be satisfied with it, and without envying the glory of those famous men who are immortalized in the republic of letters, let us try to put between them and us that glorious distinction noted between two great peoples long ago: that the one knew how to *speak* well, the other to *act* well.” (64)

Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men (1755)



Il retourne chés ses Égaux.

Voyez la Note 13. p. 259.



It is no light undertaking to separate what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man.

—Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1755) (93)



The Second Discourse

- DEDICATION
- PREFACE
- INTRODUCTION
- FIRST PART—HUMAN NATURE
- SECOND PART – HUMANS IN SOCIETY



Second Discourse: Dedication

- **Natural Equality and Conventional Inequality:** “how could I meditate upon the equality nature established among men, and upon the inequality they have instituted.” (78)



Second Discourse: Preface

- **Nature and Convention:** Rousseau raises the question of what is truly natural and what has emerged through social construction (91).
- **Information or Knowledge:** “The more new knowledge we accumulate, the more we deprive ourselves of the means of acquiring the most important knowledge of all.” (92)
- **On Natural Law:** Two elements:
 - (1) self-interest/self-preservation;
 - (2) pity



Second Discourse: Introduction

- **Two Forms of Inequality (101):**
 - (1) **Natural/Physical:** “difference of ages, health, bodily strengths, and qualities of mind or soul.”
 - (2) **Moral/Political:** “depends upon a sort of convention and is established, or at least authorized, by the consent of men
- **The Slave Revolt/Transvaluation of Values:** “And how did the people buy imaginary repose at the price of real felicity?” (102)
- **A Response to Hobbes:** “All of them . . . have carried over to the state of nature ideas they had acquired in society.” (102)
- **State of Nature as Thought Experiment (103)**



First Part— Human Nature



First Part— Human Nature

- **On Medicine (Plato Book III):**
- **Society Weakens Man:** In becoming sociable and a slave he becomes weak, fearful, servile, and his soft and effeminate way of life completes the enervation of both his strength and his courage.” (111)
- **Homo Volens?** Will, not Reason, Distinguishes Humans from Animals (114)
- **Beyond Good and Evil?** “The only goods he knows in the universe are nourishment, a female, and repose; the only evils he fears are pain and hunger.” 9116)



First Part— Human Nature

- **Knowledge of Death** and its terrors is one of the first acquisitions that man has made in moving away from the animal condition.” (116)
- **Guns, Germs and Steel?** “In general, the peoples of the North are more industrious than those of the South because they can less afford not to be, as if nature thereby wanted to equalize things, but giving to minds the fertility it refuses the earth.” (117)
- **Of Cyclical and Linear Notions of Time (Eliade):**
- **Speech – a Precondition for Civilization:**



First Part— Human Nature

- **On Natural Pity/Fellow-Feeling:** “Pity is a natural sentiment which, moderating in each individual the activity of love of oneself, contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species.” (133).
- **Difference a Result of Education, Not Nature** (138)
- **A Social Animal?** “It remains for me to consider and bring together the different accidents that were able to perfect human reason while deteriorating the species, make a being evil while making him sociable, and from such a distant origin finally bring man and the world to the point where we see them.” (140)
- **Nature is Like Sparta**



Second Part— Humans in Society



Second Part— Humans in Society

- **On Property:** “The first person who, having fenced off a plot of ground, took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.” (141) Property is “the last stage of the state of nature.” (142)
- **Commodious Living?** “The love of well-being is the sole motive of human actions.”



Second Part— Humans in Society

Emergence of Family: This was the epoch of the first revolution, which produced the establishment and differentiation of families, and which introduced a sort of property.” (146). Each family became a little society all the better united because reciprocal affection and freedom were its only bonds; and it was then that the first difference was established in the way of life of the two sexes, which until this time had had but one.” (147)



Second Part— Humans in Society

- **A City of Pigs?** “Since men enjoyed very great leisure, they used it to procure many kinds of commodities unknown to their fathers; and that was the first yoke they imposed on themselves without thinking about it; and the first source of the evils they prepared for their descendants.” (147)
- **The Endowment Effect:** “People were unhappy to lose them without being happy to possess them.” (147)



Second Part— Humans in Society

- **Public Esteem and Status:** That was the first step toward inequality and, at the same time, toward vice. From these first preferences were born on one hand vanity and contempt, on the other shame and envy; and the fermentation caused by these new leavens eventually produced compounds fatal to happiness and innocence.” (149)
- **Emergence of Violence:** “It is for want of having sufficiently distinguished between ideas and noticed how far these peoples already were from the first state of nature that many have hastened to conclude that man is naturally cruel, and that he needs civilization in order to make him gentler. On the contrary, nothing is so gentle as man in his primitive state...” (150) “Where there is no property there is no injury.”



Second Part— Humans in Society

Division of Labor is the Root of All Evil: From the moment one man needed the help of another. As soon as they observed that it was useful for a single person to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property was introduced, labor became necessary, and vast forests were changed into smiling fields which had to be watered with the sweat of men, and in which slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow with the crops.” (151)



Second Part— Humans in Society

- **Resource Wars?** Iron and wheat have civilized men and ruined the human race.” (152)
- **Locke redux:** “It is impossible to conceive of the idea of property arising from anything except manual labor; because one cannot see what man can add, other than his own labor, in order to appropriate things he has not made.” (154)



Second Part— Humans in Society

- **Is it Better to Be Just or Appear Just?** “It was soon necessary to have them or affect them; for one’s own advantage it was necessary to appear to be other than what one in fact was. To be and to seem to be became two altogether different things; and from this distinction came conspicuous ostentation, deceptive cunning, and all the vices that follow from them.” (155-56)
- **On Being and Becoming:** “The destruction of equality was followed by the most frightful disorder; thus the usurpations of the rich, the brigandage of the poor, the unbridled passions of all, stifling natural pity and the as yet weak voice of justice, made man avaricious, ambitious and evil.” (157)



Second Part— Humans in Society

Just Laws? “laws, which gave new fetters to the weak and new forces to the rich, destroyed natural freedom for all time, established forever the law of property and inequality, changed a clever usurpation into an inevitable right, and for the profit of a few ambitious men henceforth subjected the whole human race to work, servitude and misery.” (160)



Second Part— Humans in Society

The Progress of Inequality: “If we follow the progress of inequality . . . we shall find that the establishment of the law and the right of property was the first stage, the institution of the magistracy the second, and the third and last was the changing of legitimate power into arbitrary power. So that the status of the rich and poor was authorized by the first epoch, that of powerful and weak by the second, and by the third that of master and slave, which is the last degree of inequality and the limit to which all the others finally lead, until new revolutions dissolve the government altogether or bring it closer to its legitimate institution.” (172)



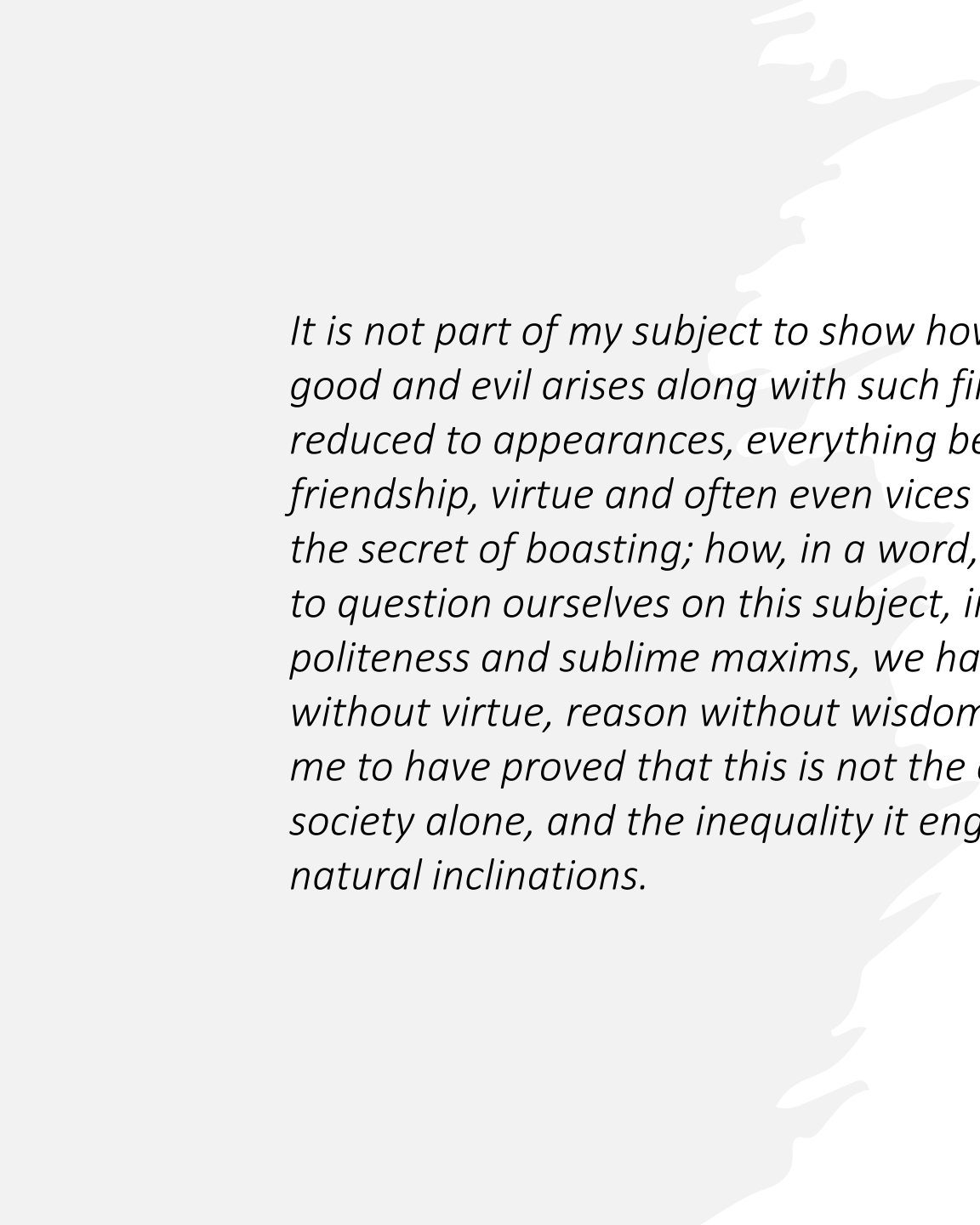
Second Part— Humans in Society

- **Wealth and the “extreme limit of corruption.”**
(174)
- **Equality in Servitude?** “Here is the ultimate stage of inequality, and the extreme point which closes the circle and touches the point from which we started. Here all individuals become equal again because they are nothing; and subjects no longer having any law except the will of the master, nor the master any other rule except his passions, the notions of good and the principles of justice vanish once again.”
(177)



Second Part— Humans in Society

- **The Decline of the Soul:** “The soul and human passions, altering imperceptibly, change their nature so to speak; why our needs and our pleasures change their objects in the long run; why, original man vanishing by degrees, society no longer offers to the eyes of the wise man anything except an assemblage of artificial men and factitious passions which are the work of all these new relationships and have no true foundation in nature.” (178)
- **On Being a Savage?** The savage lives within himself; the sociable man, always outside of himself, knows how to live only in the opinion of others.” (179)



It is not part of my subject to show how, from such a disposition, so much indifference for good and evil arises along with such fine discourses on ethics; how, everything being reduced to appearances, everything becomes factitious and deceptive: honor, friendship, virtue and often even vices themselves, about which men finally discover the secret of boasting; how, in a word, always asking others what we are and never daring to question ourselves on this subject, in the midst of so much philosophy, humanity, politeness and sublime maxims, we have only a deceitful and frivolous exterior, honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness. It is sufficient for me to have proved that this is not the original state of man; and that it is the spirit of society alone, and the inequality it engenders, which thus change and alter all our natural inclinations.



Closing Thoughts . . .

And Questions?