



Rousseau's Critique of Science: A Commentary on the Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts

By Jeff J. S. Black

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Rousseau's Critique of Science argues that the *First Discourse* is an indispensable work, both for those interested in understanding Rousseau's philosophical system, and for those interested in the political consequences of the modern liberal democratic commitment to scientific progress. Through two simultaneous readings of the *Discourse*—a "naïve" reading that examines Rousseau's arguments in isolation, and a "sophisticated" reading that interprets these arguments in the light of Rousseau's later systematic works—the commentary pursues answers to four questions, about the basis of Rousseau's thesis that scientific progress contributes to moral corruption, about the origin and method of Rousseau's philosophical system, about the place of the *Discourse* in Rousseau's system, and about the consequences of Rousseau's critique of science for the future happiness of mankind.

In this pursuit, the commentary follows the order of the *Discourse* itself, and is organized into two sections and nine chapters: an introduction; seven topical chapters, each treating a theme raised by the *Discourse*; and a conclusion. In answer to its four guiding questions, it concludes that Rousseau's thesis is based on his understanding of the nature of the interaction of reason and vanity; that Rousseau's system originates in introspection and is established by a non-historical method of analysis and synthesis; that the *Discourse* is an indispensable part of Rousseau's system because it spells out the beginnings of this analysis and the conclusions of this synthesis, and through the limitations of its arguments points to the entire extent of his system; and that as a result Rousseau's critique of science has much to teach us about the dangers involved in our political commitment to scientific progress, and about the ways in which the future happiness of mankind might be secured.

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Editorial Review

Review

In *Rousseau's Critique of Science*, Jeff Black gives careful exploration to the tension created by Rousseau's ancient, pre-modern and modern sensibilities and the influence of each on his critique of the sciences and arts. Black's remarkably detailed and attentive look at one of Rousseau's less examined works is a valuable addition to the body of literature on Rousseau's First Discourse. (Sally Campbell, Concord University)

A rich and comprehensive study of Rousseau's *First Discourse*; the best introduction I know. (Susan Shell, Boston College)

[*Rousseau's Critique of Science*] makes a real and needed contribution to our understanding of Rousseau and will stimulate serious thought about some important or even defining themes of late modernity. It will be of interest to Rousseau specialists in several disciplines and to serious students of political philosophy. (Lawrence D. Cooper, Carleton College)

About the Author

Jeff J. S. Black is a tutor at St. John's College.

Users Review

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