



Giuliano

# Meditations on History in Kant and Rousseau

as inspired by  
the sculptural art  
of Michelangelo  
in the Medici Chapel  
in Florence, Italy

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Lorenzo

This essay is a response to the following assignment instruction for the coursera online course from Wesleyan University titled “The Modern and the Postmodern” by Michael S. Roth:

Compare the role of historical progress in the ideas of two of the following: Kant, Rousseau, Marx, Flaubert. In your essay, you should put the emphasis on role, not on an accounting of specific progress.

I have chosen to compare Kant and Rousseau and to interpret the instruction as relating to how historical progress has been perceived by these two writers and how that perception has been expressed in their writings. [1]

I acknowledge inspiration from fellow student John Roth (no relation to the professor) in choosing a theme that is situated within both philosophical (Greek classical) and religious (Christian) traditions. [2]

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Rousseau wrote of Socrates: "So there you have the wisest of men in the judgment of the gods and the most knowledgeable Athenian in the opinion of all of Greece, Socrates, singing the praises of ignorance! ... This just man ... [left] after him ... nothing by way of a moral precept for ... posterity other than his example and memory of his virtue. It is beautiful to teach men in this way!" [3]

Socrates was a true Spartan type or “original man” in Rousseau’s model. As a soldier, he had been known for his amazing powers of physical endurance for he could withstand better than any other the hardships of severe hunger and cold. Even in his civilian life in Athens he scorned luxuries, choosing to wear shabby old clothes and to go about barefoot. [4]

This contrast between the Spartan man of action and the effeminate Athenian man of reflection is portrayed by Michelangelo in the figures of the two Medici brothers, Guiliano and Lorenzo. The first is almost

aggressively bare-chested and barefoot, while the second seems languid and lacking in self-confidence. But the gaze of both men is on the central figure of the wall between their sepulchres, a madonna with a large child on her lap. Her gaze is wise and knowing, but accepting of the fate in store for her son. The child seems to reach for her in search of consolation.





These are pre-Hegelian times and for both Kant and Rousseau, the great narratives of history are contained and explained in the Old and New Testament Bible stories. For Rousseau especially, the Genesis story of the fall of man and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden exerts great power and influence. Before Eve ate that apple and tempted Adam to follow suit, this couple was complete in itself and uncorrupted by the later luxuries and fineries of civilisation. They simply walked with God and were not ashamed of their bodies in any way. They were the “original man” and original woman too.

The New Testament brings the Good News of a redemption from that sad fate, a salvation brought about by the sacrifice of Jesus as divine son of God. However, this new era for humanity has lasted for more than 1500 years by the time Michelangelo creates these statues. The Middle Ages have waned and science has begun to announce itself as the new salvation of humanity. A new Jesus, a new martyr, is burnt at the stake in 1600 [5] and it is now the Church of Rome that has played the role of Pontius Pilate.

When Newton published his *Principia* 87 years later, this marked the end of the Church’s credibility and it would never fully recover. The ascent of science was crucial to the Enlightenment and, with the notable exception of Rousseau, “the prophets of a new age nearly all saw Newton as one of its main builders, and science as one of its essential building blocks.” [6]

Both Kant and Rousseau were pious men and bound to be troubled by this development. Rousseau expressed that concern by harping back to the very first story, the very first fall. He knew full well that more than 1700 years of Christianity had not effected a visible repair. In his lectures, Professor Roth has pointed out that Rousseau was mainly a diagnostician, not one to provide a cure or solution.

By contrast, Kant worked mightily at finding a solution or synthesis. In his case he diagnosed through philosophical analysis, through the intellectual discernment between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds and later between “pure” and “practical” reason. It was through

the latter doorway that Kant allowed spiritual or religious issues re-entry. Later, at least one scientifically scrupulous mind was unable to forgive him for that: Bertrand Russell dismissed Kant’s moral philosophy as “maxims that he had imbibed at his mother’s knee”, [7] suggesting that Kant was still in a pre-Enlightenment “nonage”. [8]

All of the statues shown above have an uneasy tension within them: Lorenzo’s right shoulder suggests withdrawal, Giuliano’s right elbow suggests a protective shielding, mother and child express both fear and calm. Already something is breaking up in the Christian worldview. Michelangelo’s ceiling for the chapel, shown below, is austere in its abstract simplicity and might suggest a greater harmony that still lies very high up and out of reach of humanity.



## References, sources and notes

- [1] Difficulties interpreting this instruction were discussed at the class forums here:  
[https://class.coursera.org/modernpostmodern-002/forum/thread?thread\\_id=381](https://class.coursera.org/modernpostmodern-002/forum/thread?thread_id=381)
- [2] Forum topic “Hope, yes; Progress, no.”:  
[https://class.coursera.org/modernpostmodern-002/forum/thread?thread\\_id=233](https://class.coursera.org/modernpostmodern-002/forum/thread?thread_id=233)
- [3] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Arts and Sciences", University of Adelaide eBooks, 2012.
- [4] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 1946.
- [5] Giordano Bruno is burnt alive in 1600 in a market square in Rome.
- [6] Brian L. Silver, *The Ascent of Science*, 1998, p61.
- [7] [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Immanuel\\_Kant](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Immanuel_Kant)
- [8] From the Mary C. Smith translation of Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?”  
<http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>

## Credits

Photos from the Medici Chapel:

Giuliano - <http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/arts/artwork/michelangelo-sculptures18.htm>

Lorenzo - <http://www.italian-renaissance-art.com/Michelangelo-sculptures.html>

Madonna - <http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/arts/artwork/michelangelo-sculptures20.htm>

Ceiling - <http://www.lib-art.com/artgallery/53314-ceiling-of-the-medici-chapel-michelangelo-buonarroti.html>

## Word Count

title page	29	preface	130	essay alone	734	references, etc	175	total	1068
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