

A Taste for Virtue: Refined Epicureanism in Rousseau's Political Thought

The Speaker

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The Paper

This paper is an extension of work on a book manuscript of the same name, in which attention to Rousseau's engagement with eighteenth-century Epicureanism is used to illuminate the perennial puzzle of the relationship between his moral and political thought. At the heart of Rousseau's critique of modern commercial morality was his opposition to 'vulgar' Epicureanism—the ideological justification of the immoderate pursuit of money, vanity, and distemperate sensuality. In its place, he described possible individual, domestic, and political solutions as versions of what he called in *Julie* the 'Epicureanism of reason' or 'of virtue'. The paper suggests that the solution described in *Julie* can helpfully be seen as an instantiation of refined Epicureanism: domestic happiness at Clarens is an effect of a self-sufficient political economy and Julie's temperate sensuality, rooted in aesthetic judgments of beauty and taste. In this way, Epicureanism provided a crucial conceptual resource for Rousseau's consideration of the relationship between economic imbalance, demographic crisis, and the corruption of feminine taste and domestic morals. The paper also suggests that this reading of Rousseau on the household helps to stake out a middle position between the once familiar reading of Rousseau's solutions as fundamentally opposed, and the now dominant interpretation of their reconciliation.