

Civic Virtue in a Christian Mind:
Charles Rollin and the Jansenist Influence on the
Revival of Classical Virtue in France

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department
of History

Chapel Hill
2009

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ABSTRACT

MICHAEL UCHRIN: Civic Virtue in a Christian Mind: Charles Rollin and the Jansenist Influence on the Revival of Classical Virtue in France
(Under the Direction of Jay M. Smith)

The French Revolution, like much else in the eighteenth century, was undeniably influenced by a revival of classical Greco-Roman themes, particularly in the realm of politics. Unfortunately, classical civic virtue in the French context has generally been viewed as a largely secular affair. In fact, the turn toward classical republican thought was also markedly influenced by the Augustinian theological beliefs of the Jansenists, an austere group of Catholics. One of their number, Charles Rollin, a prominent educator and author, played an important role in revising French education, placing a great deal of emphasis on the instruction of virtue. This thesis will demonstrate the connections between the religious tenets of the Jansenists and the classical republican civic virtue that Rollin prescribes as a remedy not for the individual soul, but for the political and social health of the *patrie*.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The French Revolution has drawn the attention of academics and historians almost from the time of the Revolution itself. This is entirely understandable, considering the monumental forces that the Revolution unleashed throughout Europe and beyond. However, as a result of the Revolution's undeniable importance, historians of the eighteenth century often view the rest of the century as mere prelude to the Revolution itself, and the vision of the century's events, ideas and dynamics become clouded by the anticipation of the coming Revolution. Roger Chartier warns against this danger in historiography, for the result is “a reading of the eighteenth century that seeks to understand it only in relation to its necessary outcome—the French Revolution—and to focus only on the phenomenon seen to lead to this outcome—the Enlightenment.”¹ In writing these words, Chartier was warning specifically against placing too strong an emphasis on the Intellectual “origins” of the French Revolution, but the danger of attributing perceived causes to “necessary” outcomes applies equally to all historical pursuits. One excellent example of this sort of teleological thinking involves the revival of classical republican concepts of virtue in the early eighteenth century.

¹ Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, tr. Lydia Cochrane, (Durham: The Duke University Press, 1991), 5.

Too frequently, historians interpret the development of classical virtue during this period as purely secular in nature.² This conclusion, though erroneous, is understandable in light of the Revolution's tendency to draw the attention of historians. It is true that classical conceptions of virtue reached their apogee during the Revolution in a highly secularized, and often anti-religious, form. However, the fact that conceptions of civic virtue came to be secularized does not indicate secular origins. As this essay will demonstrate, the development of conceptions of civic virtue in France depended largely upon Augustinian theological conceptions held predominantly among a group of devout Catholics known as Jansenists. These theological conceptions involved the utter separation of God and man, the stark juxtaposition of a perfect God and irredeemably corrupt humankind, and the utter incapacity of man to act out of virtue save through the "efficacious" or transformative Grace of God. These pessimistic conceptions of man's utter corruption were significant, as Nannerl Keohane describes in great detail, for the efforts of several notable Jansenists, such as Blaise Pascal and Pierre Nicole, to reconcile man's utter concupiscence with the reality of human social life influenced several great works of political thought, including those of John Locke.³ Furthermore, these Jansenist thinkers also influenced the Jansenist and educator Charles Rollin, whose pedagogical

² There are several excellent works on the revival of classical republican thought and classical conceptions of virtue, most notably: Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2001); Keith Michael Baker, "Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France," *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 73, no. 1, 35; and Johnson Kent Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth Century France: The Political Thought of Mably*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997). Each of these works deals almost solely with political ideas of virtue, with Linton in particular drawing stark distinctions between "Christian" virtue and classical republican civic virtue.

³ Locke was very much interested in the ideas of the Jansenists of Port Royal. In fact, my first exposure to the works of Pierre Nicole were from translations of "several men of Port Royal" translated by Locke entitled *Discourses on the being of a God and the immortality of the soul; of the weakness of man; and concerning the way of preserving peace with men: being some of the essays written in French by Messieurs du Port Royal. Render'd into English by the late John Lock*, (London: J. Downing, 1712).

treatises combined these theological conceptions with aspects of classical republican conceptions of virtue and the *patrie* in a synthesis that Rollin hoped could revitalize France.

Unlike many historians of the eighteenth century, David Bell recognizes these connections between Augustinian beliefs and classical republican conceptions of virtue. In *The Cult of the Nation in France*, Bell clearly demonstrates the religious influences on concepts such as the *patrie*, as well as the Augustinian roots of the utter separateness of the divine and the human. According to Bell, it was only when the “French ceased to see themselves as part of a great hierarchy uniting heaven and earth, the two linked by an apostolic church and a divinely ordained king, that they could start to see themselves as equal members of a distinct, uniform, and sovereign nation.”⁴ In his view, the revival of concepts such as devotion to the *patrie* and the practice of civic virtue in the classical sense—the bases of what Bell refers to as Nationalism—“arose simultaneously out of, and in opposition to, Christian systems of belief.”⁵

The problem with Bell’s notions is that the perception of “a radical separation between God and the world” and the love of one’s *patrie* as an alternative focus of devotion does not equate to “opposition to Christian systems of belief.”⁶ Though Bell recognizes that the notion of the separation of God and man developed as a consequence of Augustinian theological conceptions—that God alone was sacred and that mankind was utterly corrupt—he tends to conflate the separation of the earthly and the divine with

⁴ David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

the rejection of the latter. It is here that the magnetic effect of the Revolution is most apparent in Bell's work. The rejection of the Church hierarchy and the de-sanctification of the “divinely ordained” king certainly proved a departure from the medieval conceptions of the world, but they do not equate to an opposition to religion or to Christian beliefs as a whole. In fact, many of the ideas that Bell cites in secularized form, especially the thoughts of Rousseau, had already been formulated and expressed by Charles Rollin in his *Traité des études* while Rousseau was still a child.

One of the earliest proponents of classical republican conceptions of civic virtue in France, Charles Rollin was a devoutly religious Jansenist, historian and educator, whose pedagogical and historical writings influenced people throughout Europe and even across the Atlantic. The son of a cutler, Rollin had risen to the esteemed position of rector at the University of Paris, a position he would lose in 1712 due to his adherence to the Jansenist faith.⁷ In fact, apart from his fondness for the virtues of the ancient republics, Rollin’s greatest influence was certainly his devotion to God, as religious ideals permeated his works. The way in which Rollin connected his religious beliefs to his reflections on republican political precepts reveals glimmering new facets of eighteenth-century political thought.

Jansenists and Jansenism played an important role both in the religious and the political history of France. Several historians have written seminal works on Jansenism in recent years, especially in terms of the political consequences of both the nature of their beliefs and their mere existence as an impediment to total religious conformity in

⁷ Jay M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined: The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France*, (Ithaca and London: The Cornell University Press, 2005), 50.

the Bourbon Monarchy.⁸ Though Dale Van Kley, David Bell, and others have focused most of their attention on the role of the Jansenists in the legal profession and in the Paris Parlements, this essay will look more deeply at the theological concepts of Jansenism and the social implications of their beliefs.

Unlike the dominant modes of Catholic thought in previous centuries, and especially the Molinist tradition of the Jesuits, the Augustinian thoughts embraced by the Jansenists emphasized the starker separation between God and man. God's "elect," those chosen by God to receive the gifts of Grace, were the only men capable of any virtuous action at all. The utter dissimilarity between "God's infinite goodness and the corrupt, concupiscent state of humanity" created a vast gulf insurmountable by man.⁹ According to Van Kley, the immediate social and political consequence of Jansenism lay in its tendency "to de-sanctify everything between conscience and God, to limit divinity to God alone"¹⁰ This separation and de-sanctification of all things human helped create an impression of a "hidden God" that actually could serve as a liberating force, according to Bell, one that offered men a certain autonomy to define their own terms of conception.¹¹ This point is an excellent one, however, the fact is that the earliest attempts at redefining these terms of conception were deeply religious in nature, and it was out of

⁸ See Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996); and *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France, 1757-1765*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975). Also David A. Bell, *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Regime France*, (New York and Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1994). All three of these works focus primarily on the political implications of the Jansenist movement in the eighteenth century.

⁹ Bell, *Cult of the Nation in France*, 28.

¹⁰ Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution*, 63.

¹¹ Bell, *Cult of the Nation in France*, 28.

his dissatisfaction with the pessimistic implications of these conceptions that Rollin reexamined the civic virtue of the ancients.

One significant development that arose from some of the earliest Jansenist thinkers, such as Blaise Pascal, involved a dilemma that I refer to here as the “Augustinian trap.” The idea that God and man are so entirely different from one another, and that man apart from God is irredeemably corrupt, led to the belief that the bulk of humanity were incapable of any virtuous action. This bleak view of human society formed the basis of several social conceptions designed to address the viability of man’s social interactions in a concupiscent state. These religious social conceptions, as well as Rollin’s deep dissatisfaction with the selfishness and corruption he saw throughout French society, pushed him toward a renewed emphasis on ancient examples of virtuous life in the education of France’s youth.

William Gribbin has characterized Rollin as an iconoclastic figure, a “desperate teacher” attempting to “forge a new order of things by molding impressionable readers into Christian rebels against their times.”¹² This assessment makes a great deal of sense, especially considering the state of France during Rollin’s lifetime. In addition to the general laxity of morals that Rollin derided, the reign of Louis XIV created many problems both for France and for Rollin personally. Costly wars and the king’s pursuit of foreign glory left the nation exhausted and weary—in fact Louis’ wars were among the few recent events Rollin actually discussed in his works.¹³ The overall extravagance of the Sun King’s reign, including the opulence and expense of Versailles, the creation of

¹² William Gribbin, “Rollin’s Histories and American Republicanism,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, vol. 29, no. 4 (Oct., 1972), 616.

¹³ Charles Rollin, *Traité des études*, 3 vols. (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1863), 2:179.

numerous crown officials, and especially the practice of selling titles of nobility also likely struck Rollin as corrupt, wasteful, and a perversion of the very concept of “nobility” as Rollin understood the term.¹⁴ Furthermore, the repeated persecution of Jansenists, which culminated in the *Unigenitus* bull of 1713, had already cost Rollin his position as head of the University of Paris.¹⁵

For his time, Rollin’s ideals were remarkably egalitarian in their tone, and these ideas influenced a number of important social, political, and pedagogical trends that flourished in the latter half of the century. Furthermore, his ideals all resonated with the religious principles held by this devoutly Christian educator, whose devotion to God did not compromise, in fact contributed to, his devotion to his *patrie* and its youth.

I believe that an understanding of the hidden interconnection between politics and religion is pertinent and significant, especially as our world shrinks and we find ourselves further enmeshed with cultures that have not gone to the great lengths we have to compartmentalize the two. As we attempt to craft nations in which religious forces are very prominent, we should not neglect the religious derivations of our own political and social ideals. Furthermore, lest we run the risk of considering the ideas of Jansenist thinkers like Rollin as “archaic” and “foreign,” we must consider the very cosmopolitan character of the age referred to as the Enlightenment. For example, my first experiences with the works of Pierre Nicole came in the form of Locke’s translations of “various men of St. Cyran.” Locke, who held such great influence on the English (and therefore “our”)

¹⁴ According to Alexis de Tocqueville, 40,000 new official posts were created from 1693 to 1709 alone, and de Tocqueville notes that as the actual power of the nobility dwindled, their jealousy over their remaining privileges only increased, yet another indication of the self-interest that Rollin held in the strongest contempt. See Alexis De Tocqueville, *L’Ancien régime et la Révolution*, ed. J.-P Mayer, (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 165-6, 171.

¹⁵ Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 50; Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution*, 73.

political thought, was a great admirer of Jansenist ideas. Furthermore, as William Gribbin points out, Rollin himself had a great influence on the ideals of early Americans, most notably Benjamin Franklin and John Adams and his family.¹⁶ Let us not forget that many of the founding fathers of our own nation were as devout in their religious beliefs as Rollin was in his.

¹⁶ Gribbin, 612-13.

CHAPTER II

JANSENISM AND ITS PRINCIPLES

Since Jansenism and Jansenist theological terms form the context in which Rollin thought, and since his religious convictions informed everything he wrote, it is important first to examine Jansenism and its basic tenets. The label Jansenist or Jansenism developed several distinct connotations throughout the final two centuries of Old Regime France. Jansenism began as a spiritual and religious movement within the Catholic Church; but through time and repeated suppression by both popes and kings, Jansenists and their sympathizers took on a more political aspect, particularly within the Parlements and the Paris Parlement especially. The direct political controversies that developed between the monarchy and the Jansenists have been discussed in great detail in other works, and also are of little consequence for the subject at hand, therefore no detailed account of these political machinations will be found here.¹⁷ Of course, the Unigenitus bull and the suppression of Jansenism influenced Rollin's political attitudes, including his understanding of despotism; however, the important aspect of Jansenism in this study is the central position that Augustinian conceptions of concupiscence and grace held within

¹⁷ See Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution*; Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*. Both of these works address the implications of the Jansenists' rejection of the Church hierarchy and the implicit threat that this posed to all social hierarchies of the French state. In addition, the unbridgeable gap between God and man also implied a "desacralization" of the French Monarchy, which both authors credit partially for the vast alterations of social and political outlook in the eighteenth century.

the Jansenist theology itself. For these conceptions formed the bases for the social dilemma that strict Augustinian doctrine created, and also influenced Rollin's thoughts on the benefits of civic virtue.

The most authoritative accounts of Jansenist belief at the dawn of the eighteenth century can be found in Pasquier Quesnel's *Moral Reflections on the New Testament* (*Le nouveau testament en française, avec des réflexions morales sur chaque verset*), the first finished edition of which was published in 1693. As its original title implies, the work was an entire translation of the New Testament, combined with Quesnel's commentaries, or reflections, on every verse. The finished product consisted of four volumes, though the reflections on the Gospels were published in 1672 under the title *Abrégé de la morale de l'évangile*. Quesnel's *Moral Reflections* were the most complete, most authoritative exposition of Jansenist theology at the dawn of the eighteenth century, and not coincidentally, the target of many attacks by the Catholic orthodoxy, including the papal bull *Unigenitus*, issued in 1713.

Within the pages of the *Moral Reflections*, one can find the scriptural basis of the many tenets of Jansenist belief. Among the distinctive traits of the faith were the predestination of God's elect; the need for "efficacious," or transformative, grace; and the notion of a "community of saints" that existed separately from the official hierarchy of the Catholic Church. None of these tenets are in any way unique to Jansenism, as they also formed the bulk of the Calvinist faith, but the combination of these particular beliefs certainly represented a departure from traditional Catholic orthodoxy—though the Jansenists remained within the Catholic Church.

First of all, Quesnel's reflections on grace and the “elect” (*les élus*) demonstrate both the scriptural derivations and general idea behind the concept of election. In his commentary on Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians, Quesnel notes that:

we are not made Christians to enjoy tangible goods, but those goods that can only be known by faith... the entire economy of the mysteries of salvation are for the elect—God prepares his glory for those who love Him; but those that do only love Him because He had prepared them for this love, so that all is due to God and all of the glory is His.¹⁸

Therefore, the love of God is a choice—but not a choice made by the believer but by God Himself. God confers His grace to those who love Him, but He determines in advance who will be capable of this love and prepares them to receive it. This is nearly precisely the same derivation and understanding of predestination claimed by John Calvin and others—that God ordains, or rather has ordained from the dawn of time, who shall receive salvation. Therefore, only those humans whom God has chosen can receive his love, grace, and blessings.

In his reflections on Peter’s first Epistle, Quesnel described the role of the Holy Trinity and their effects upon the elect of God:

The three divine personages work together for the salvation of the elect. The Father is the origin of their election through His eternal prescience and His entirely free gift of love; the Son serves as the sacrifice for their sins and the source of all their merits; the Holy Spirit is the spirit of Holy adoption and love, who gives them their new birth, animates them, sanctifies them, directs their actions, and guides them to glory.¹⁹

This passage again underscores the notion of election by God, but also adds the idea that God through Christ is the source of all of human merit and that the Holy Spirit provides

¹⁸ Pasquier Quesnel, *Le Nouveau Testament en français, avec des réflexions morales sur chaque verset, pour en rendre la Lecture plus utile, & la Méditation plus aisée*, 4 vols. (Paris: Chez André Pralard, 1699), 3:519.

¹⁹ Quesnel, 4:461-2.

the transformative rebirth, which guides the actions of the chosen. Without the Grace of God, through the actions of the Trinity, there is no merit, no virtue, among men.

This concept of the “elect” is of utmost importance to understand Jansenist beliefs. It is the point where Jansenism most closely resembled the Calvinist “heresy,” and among the most crucial concepts in the development of Jansenist social thought. Coupled with the belief in “efficacious” or transformative Grace, the concept of election by God created a fundamental dilemma for society. This dilemma was further complicated by the idea that not even the elect themselves can know who has been chosen by God. Neither the Church nor any group within the Church “can flatter itself that it consists entirely of the elect. All is mixed: therefore all have cause to fear, and all have cause to hope.”²⁰

In addition to the tenet of predestination, Jansenist beliefs were also informed by the belief in the utter concupiscence of man. This theme is of utmost importance in the Augustinian view of mankind, and a central theme of Jansenist thought. Apart from God, man was guided solely by his lusts and his passions. In fact, Cornelius Jansen’s *Discourse on the Reformation of the Inner Man* began with the words of St. John’s First Epistle: “There is nothing in this world but concupiscence of the flesh, concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life.”²¹ This combination of ideas—the utter concupiscence of man, the absolute need for efficacious grace for man to be virtuous, and the concept of divine election—leave little room for the bulk of humanity to act out of any interest except for pure self-interest. I refer to this situation as the “Augustinian trap,” for in this

²⁰ Quesnel, 1:369.

²¹ Cornelius Jansenius, *Traduction d’un discours de la reformation de l’homme interieur : ou sont establis les veritables fondemens des vertus chrestiennes*, (Paris : Vve J. Camusat, 1642), 3.

system of belief, man is trapped in a course that appears to be designed for catastrophe. If each member of society is capable of nothing more than looking after his own interests, there can be little cause for optimism regarding society or the human condition. Based on these premises, some Jansenist thinkers sought ways of explaining the workings of society and possible means by which peace, stability, and order could be maintained in an utterly corrupt world. The following pages will examine the thoughts and writings of two of these men, Blaise Pascal and Pierre Nicole, whose works focused on the unbridled self-love (*amour-propre*) inherent in all men. Rollin would later dismiss many of their conceptions, but it was their efforts to examine social function from an Augustinian perspective that set the stage for Rollin's reexamination of classical virtue.

CHAPTER III

PASCAL AND NICOLE

The preceding passages, which represent several fundamental principles of Jansenist belief, indicate the fundamental dilemma of not only Jansenist thought, but of Augustinian thought in general: if Grace is the sole source of all merit and virtuous actions; and Grace is only granted to a small, select number of people preordained by God to receive it; and if even the elect themselves did not know that they were so, how can the right function of societies be understood and preserved? In other words, how does a society composed largely of utterly corrupt humans avoid destroying itself through the absolute corruption and selfishness of the vast majority of its members? If self-interest and self-love were the sole motivators of the bulk of humanity, there seemed to be little hope for men to live decently and in harmony with one another. The Molinist tradition of the Jesuits, as well as other adherents to the notion of “sufficient grace,” avoided this problem through the belief that Grace was available to all and could be applied to specific situations and specific moments. But in the strict Augustinian view of the Jansenists and Calvinists, this problem could not be avoided. Because of the intractability of the Augustinian trap as it appeared in Jansenism, many Jansenist writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries attempted to resolve this dilemma by postulating the means by which *amour-propre* could be limited or ameliorated. One such

notable philosophical figure was the Jansenist mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal.

Pascal, the famed mathematician who retired from numbers to pursue the Godly life, wrote a great number of passages devoted to Augustinian theological ideals and especially the depraved state of man. His *Provincial Letters* as well as his *Pensées* reveal a markedly pessimistic view of the nature of man and his capacity for goodness. These ideas on the concupiscent nature of man were all compatible with the Augustinian notions proposed by Jansen, St. Cyran, and Quesnel. However, Pascal, mathematician and scientist at heart that he was, spent a great deal of his time attempting to work out the concrete social and political consequences of this concupiscence.

For Pascal, all of man's actions were firmly rooted in the cause of *amour-propre* and self-interest. The only possible outlet for human love outside of the self was God and only through God could man receive the *charité* that follows from His grace:

Since we cannot love that which is outside ourselves, we must try to love a being which will be in us and yet not us, and this is true of each and every man. Only the universal Being can be such. The kingdom of God is in us: the universal good is in us, is us, and yet is not us.²²

This passage makes quite clear the distinction that man can only love the self or the God within the self. There are no other options here than the narrow focus of *amour-propre*, or the love of God from whom all virtues follow.

There were only two types of people in Pascal's world: "the righteous who believe themselves sinners... and sinners who believe themselves righteous."²³ In fact, Pascal declares that lust and force are "the source of all our actions; lust causes voluntary

²² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (*d'après l'édition de M. Brunschvigg*), ed. Emile Boutroux, (Paris : J. M. Dent et Fils, 1913), 203.

²³ *Ibid.*, 217.

actions, force involuntary ones.²⁴ Thus men are compelled either by their basest inclinations or by the force of others. Even seemingly virtuous behavior is simply vice in disguise; through vice, “men have found and extracted excellent rules of policy, morality, and justice; but in reality this vile root of man, this *figmentum malum*, is only covered, it is not taken away.”²⁵ These constructions of man are of no true value whatever in terms of goodness and truly “good” living. Only in Christ is found “all our virtue and all our happiness... apart from Him there is but vice, misery, darkness, death, despair.²⁶

Since this propensity for self-interest was utterly unavoidable, save through grace, and since grace could be obtained only by those whom God has chosen, some regulatory device was required to limit the obvious negative aspects of this self-interest. For Pascal, in the absence of real virtue from men’s hearts, the proper function of society relied primarily on obedience to authority and the force upon which authority is based. Pascal believed that in order for societies to function, justice and force must be combined, for “justice without force is impotent; force without justice is tyrannical.” But, since “justice is open to dispute,” and “force is easily recognizable and indisputable,” it is necessary to declare the forceful to be just, and not the other way around.²⁷ “Unable to fortify justice, we have justified force, so that finally justice and force are brought together and we have peace, which is the sovereign good.”²⁸ This reliance upon force and custom in order to provide for social stability was firmly rooted in the belief that man, due to his incapacity

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁵ Pascal, 192.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

for true virtue, must rely upon outside forces to curtail the drives of *amour-propre* and to maintain certain standards of behavior that keep innovation, and therefore disharmony, in check.

Following Pascal, but much less strict in tone, fellow Jansenist Pierre Nicole also expressed notions of *amour-propre* in social terms. Nicole, rather than focusing on issues such as force and custom, relied upon the notion of *amour-propre éclairé*, or enlightened self-interest, to explain the workings of human society.²⁹ In contrast to Pascal's vision of authority and force as the sole limiting factors of human concupiscence, Nicole envisioned men acting on self-limiting impulses that would accept short-term limits on self-interest in exchange for perceived long-term gains.³⁰ Rather than allowing *amour-propre*, lust, and avarice absolute free reign, men who were aware of their longer interests would avoid harming others in hope of future social benefits.

Since men are social creatures that rely on interactions with others and upon the opinions of others, “enlightened *amour-propre*, which knows its own true interests, and which tends by reason to the end it proposes for itself,” can result in the same actions as true *charité*, which comes only from God.³¹ The importance of an individual’s reputation, their appearance in the eyes of others, plays a crucial role in limiting the effects of *amour-propre*.³² Nicole asserted that human troubles and miseries come from

²⁹ Pierre Nicole, *Oeuvres philosophique et morales*, ed. Charles Jordain, (Hildesheim and New York: Verlag, 1970), 179.

³⁰ Nannerl Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1980), 297.

³¹ Nicole, 179.

³² *Ibid.*, 71.

their “indiscreet stirring of other men’s passions... and justice will make us confess that very seldom do people speak ill of us without cause.”³³ The trouble was that:

we learn the art of taming beasts and employing them to the uses of life, but never think how men may be made useful to us, or at least to render them less troublesome or hinder them from making our lives uncomfortable, though men contribute infinitely more to our happiness or misery than all the rest of creation together.³⁴

In making themselves beloved to others, to give them no offense, men would indeed be acting in their own interest, though their actions would give the impression of benevolence or charity.³⁵ Therefore, the focus in Nicole’s work was still upon the absorption in the self, but in Nicole’s view, society could benefit by the active self-seeking of each member so long as each knew to avoid short-term gain if it led to long-term harm.

It is plain to see that the Jansenist thinkers of the late 17th century all followed, to one degree or another, an attitude towards vice and virtue that seem to presage the unabashedly secular philosophy of Bernard Mandeville.³⁶ The crucial difference, of course, was that Mandeville would promote self-interest as a positive thing for a modern, commercial state; while Pascal, especially, viewed self-interest as a necessary evil at best, in the absence of God’s grace. The utter corruption of man left him incapable, without the aid of God’s efficacious Grace, of acting out of any impulse other than *amour-propre*. Therefore, the only means of assuring the function of societies was to render vice and

³³ *Ibid.*, 209.

³⁴ Nicole, 210.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

³⁶ For more on Bernard Mandeville, see E. J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment’s Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society*, (Cambridge, England: The Cambridge University Press, 1994). Mandeville’s primary contention was that in a modern commercial society, the individual pursuit of private interests would result in economic and social benefits to society as a whole.

self-interest useful, and to restrain it through the use of forceful political power.³⁷ Even Nicole, with his much softer conception of *l'amour propre éclairé*, relied upon the notion that men act only in what they perceive to be their *true* selfish interests as a restraint to anarchy.³⁸ Thus, the social implication of the concupiscence of man for these Jansenists remained the acceptance of, and the need for external restraint upon, the absolutely unavoidable depravity and self-interest of every member of society, save, of course, for the elect.

These writings, with their emphasis on the need for external constraints on behavior, also reflected many of the prevalent attitudes of the early decades of the Sun King's reign. As Nannerl Keohane argues, the series of rebellions and civil wars collectively called the Fronde fostered a reactionary tendency toward order, and not only in the young monarch himself.³⁹ "Frenchmen," she claims, "worn out by the latest round of civil war, were convinced that there was no satisfactory alternative to absolute monarchical rule in France."⁴⁰ Convinced of the dangers of corporate selfishness, the French people threw themselves behind their king and the conviction that the answer to France's problems was the authority and force of rule under their monarch. That Pascal's answer to the problem of concupiscence involved obedience to authority and restraints upon selfish interests can come as no surprise in this environment.

However, by the last decades of Louis XIV's rule, the fondness for absolutism had waned under the Sun King's expensive wars, extravagant court, and religious

³⁷ Keohane, 269-71.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 297.

³⁹ Keohane, 236-37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

intolerance. Keohane, Lionel Rothkrug, Joseph Klaits, and others have marked the Edict of Fontainebleau, which revoked the Edict of Nantes, as a pivotal moment in French history in its revival of opposition to absolutist rule.⁴¹ This attempt to finally stamp out Protestantism in France preceded the *Unigenitus* bull by nearly three decades, and had the very same intent and unintended consequences. In each case, Louis XIV hoped to eliminate dissent by fostering religious orthodoxy and conformity, and each time created greater resentment and intensified the feeling that the king was doing harm to the state by persecuting good Frenchmen.⁴² Keohane refers to the last decades of Louis XIV's reign as "the same watershed" as the Fronde, "crossed in the opposite direction."⁴³ Therefore, by the time Rollin began his writing, decades after Fontainebleau and mere years after *Unigenitus*, absolutist notions were under reexamination. The route of absolute devotion to the king and blind obedience to authority had been tried, and found lacking. Even the king, so removed from and above the rest of society as to be beyond selfish pursuits, had shown an inability to put the interests of the state above his own. The Sun King's ambitions, both at home and abroad, had proved to be a detriment.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 313. See also Joseph Klaits, *Printed Propaganda under Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy and Public Opinion*, (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1976); and Lionel Rothkrug, *Opposition to Louis XIV; the political and social origins of the French Enlightenment*, (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1965). The latter two works discuss the growing disillusionment with absolute monarchy that developed especially toward the end of the reign of Louis XIV.

⁴² Keohane, 313-14; Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution*, 12.

⁴³ Keohane, 313.

CHAPTER IV

ROLLIN'S SYNTHESIS

Rollin, while no less Augustinian in his beliefs than Pascal and Nicole, addressed the social implications of concupiscence in an entirely, almost radically, different manner. Though he did not use the term often in his writings, Rollin was clearly horrified at the way various manifestations of *amour-propre* had corrupted French society from top to bottom. Rollin termed the shocking acceptance of vice, the thirst for wealth and acclaim, and the focus on self-interest throughout French society as “the contagion of the age” which needed to be remedied rather than merely accepted.⁴⁴ “Our age, and our nation in particular, stand in need of being undeceived concerning a great number of mistakes and false prejudices, which daily prevail more and more upon... almost everything that is made the object of the contempt or admiration of mankind.”⁴⁵

As for the idea that vice could produce positive results for society, Rollin refuted it outright. Citing certain unidentified ancient writers, Rollin branded the notion that the vice of ambition could frequently lead to acts of virtue as a “bizarre contradiction” which served only “to nourish and increase the disease.”⁴⁶ For Rollin, therefore, a reliance on the “positive effects” even of *amour-propre éclairé* to promote the right function and

⁴⁴ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 1:12.

⁴⁵ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 3:164.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:31.

common good of society was a contradiction in terms. Selfish human ambition was the problem, and not the solution, and therefore Rollin refuted the entire edifice constructed by Pascal and Nicole to explain the viability of society.

In Jansenism's Augustinian theology, however, no middle ground existed between the efficacious Grace of God and utter corruption. If man can do nothing on his own that is truly good or virtuous, how then can the gap between man and virtue be bridged save through Grace? Furthermore, if self-interest cannot account for acts of virtue, how else can concupiscent man attain such a state? Rollin's solution involved a return to the ancient pre-Christian republics and their conceptions of civic-minded virtue and devotion to the *patrie*. His historical perspective enabled him to see, in the distant past, societies that thrived on civic virtues and a love of the *patrie*, a love sufficient to compel men to act in the best interest of the state rather than out of personal inclination or interest. Most importantly, however, was the fact that these societies predated Christ, and therefore had no access at all to the "efficacious Grace" sufficient for salvation. Despite this handicap, the Greeks and Romans lived in societies where civic virtue and the devotion to interests outside the narrow self were considered to be the rule. This obviously implied that even the "utterly corrupt" non-elect could gain access to a sort of virtue that could at least enable men to better function as a society than did France in the early 18th century.

It is essential to avoid here too strong a focus on historical accuracy within Rollin's accounts. Rollin's histories of, and attitudes toward, the ancients were definitely oversimplified. The fact is that most of Rollin's sources of Roman history, for example, were accounts of the Republic written during the Empire, and therefore usually written

with a certain nostalgia and reverence for the principles and virtues of a lost polity. This was true, as Linton correctly points out, of nearly all of the sources from the ancient world available during this period.⁴⁷ It is not even necessarily pertinent whether Rollin understood these histories to be oversimplified and biased or not. What is important is that these oversimplified accounts based on oversimplified ancient sources enabled Rollin to find an escape from the Augustinian trap that neither compromised his religious ideals nor allowed *amour-propre* to remain the guiding light for the bulk of humanity.

Rollin's fondness for the virtue of the ancients in no way compromised his devotion to Augustinian principles. Throughout his writings, he drew a distinction between right manners and civic virtue on the one hand, and true Christian faith and Grace on the other. In the third volume of his *Treatise on Education*, Rollin, quoting Augustine, clearly made the distinction between these two states: “without true piety, that is, without knowledge and love of the true God, there can be no real virtue... [but] these [civic] virtues, though false and imperfect, do still enable those who have them to render greater service to the public than if they did not have them.”⁴⁸ It was therefore “false virtues” that Rollin attributes to the ancient Pagans, but virtues still that enabled the ancients to act in the interest of the public good, rather than out of self-interest. In describing these virtues in the manner in which he did, Rollin was not undermining the preeminence of Christianity, but proposing a set of ideals of immense social utility at a time when “mistakes and false prejudices” dominated the social fabric.

For Rollin, therefore, the proper means to restore virtue to his society, to rescue France from the “contagion of the present age,” was to present the history and the

⁴⁷ Linton, 39.

⁴⁸ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 3:228-9.

virtuous actions of the Ancients as models of behavior to the youth of the nation.⁴⁹ Due to man's natural disposition toward ill, Rollin felt it necessary to take every care to instill in youth the "love of virtue and the detestation of vice," to guard against "all the deluding enchantments" and "confused cries of dangerous opinions" to be heard in every place and in every home.⁵⁰

Rollin succinctly set out his opinions on the ideals of human behavior in a section of his *Treatise on Education* entitled "On the Taste for Solid Glory and True Greatness." In this section, he addressed the many "bad examples and vicious customs" that permeated his society and provided his views on what people should hold as valuable.⁵¹ Most emphatically, Rollin decried the love of wealth in all its forms, of sumptuous dwellings, fancy dress, indeed of luxuries of every description. Based on their material possessions, men consider themselves to be great, and "flatter themselves that they appear so in the eyes of others."⁵² But "nothing of all of this," Rollin wrote, "makes a man greater or more estimable, for none of it is truly part of his being, but is external and entirely foreign to him."⁵³ Strip men of their riches, and this illusion would vanish: "their outside is rich and fine, like the walls of their apartments; but inside there is nothing but pettiness, baseness, poverty, a frightful absence of all merit; and sometimes this fine exterior conceals the greatest of crimes and the most shameful disorders."⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:9, 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2:165.

⁵² Rollin, *Traité des études*, 2:180.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2:179.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:180.

According to Rollin, the true value of a man resided not in external things, but in his heart, the source of all “great designs, great actions, and great virtues.”⁵⁵ “Solid greatness,” he writes, “which cannot be imitated by pride, nor equaled by pomp, resides in the source of personal qualities and noble feelings.”⁵⁶ So the external trappings of man were of utterly no avail, and much of the “contagion of the present age” consisted of the focus on possessions, wealth, the illusion of reputation, and other “vicious customs” through which men sought their own satisfaction. In other words, a preoccupation with the self, and the undeserved high opinion of others, which men sought out based on their exterior being, their titles, their wealth, or reputation. Nicole made the same contentions, but postulated no human solution.

As Jay Smith has noted, Rollin’s “admiration for the classical republics came close to incorporating elements of republicanism itself.”⁵⁷ While Rollin lauded various aspects of several ancient societies (the education of Cyrus in Persia, the laws of Lycurgus in Sparta), his greatest praise seems always to fall upon the Romans of the ancient Republic. In fact, Rollin found habits and customs worthy of emulation in nearly every aspect of Roman life under the Republic, and even into the Empire. However, one common theme continuously arises, in many different forms: the Romans turned their thoughts rigorously away from the fetters of narrow self-interest. This turn from narrow self-interest to consider wider concerns resembles Nicole’s concept of *amour-propre éclairé*, but with an important distinction: for Rollin, the necessary requirement was an alternative locus of devotion. There were two main foci to which the Romans were

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:217.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:217.

⁵⁷ Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 50.

utterly devoted, and which enabled them to subsume their interests into a greater whole: their gods and their state.

Paramount to all other facets of the Roman character, Rollin cited the intense *piété* of the Roman people, especially under the Republic. This, at first glance, seems an odd characteristic for a Christian, especially an Augustinian Christian, to praise in a pagan people. However, the principle of pagan *piété* played an important role in all that follows in Rollin's histories. "The Romans...," writes Rollin, "established as a fundamental principle of their polity the fear of the Gods, and a veneration for religion."⁵⁸ In this veneration, Rollin remarks that the Romans "were mistaken in the object, but reasoned justly as to the substance."⁵⁹ Despite the fact that the Roman people worshipped gods that were not the One True God, the very fact that they devoutly believed and acted upon their beliefs served a distinct *social* purpose for the polity of the Republic.

Convinced that the Deity disposes every thing in the government of the world, and endow men, according to his good pleasure, with understanding, reason, prudence, fortitude, [and] courage... it was fitting they should implore the celestial power from which all these blessings flow, and endeavor by religious consultations to discover the divine will in order to merit its protection.⁶⁰

The Romans, therefore, though deprived of the knowledge of the true God, acted upon principles that Rollin admired; they sought guidance and direction from the divine presence and depended upon the divine for certain virtues.

⁵⁸ Charles Rollin, *L'histoire Romaine*, in *Œuvres Complètes de Rollin*, 8 vols. (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1821), 1:23. The Complete works of Rollin encompasses thirty volumes, and this is the only version of the Roman History available in the original French. Volume I of the Roman History is actually the thirteenth volume of the Complete Works. For the sake of ease, I will continue to refer to the volume from the Roman History, though this will not be the corresponding volume number in the *Œuvres Complètes*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:23.

⁶⁰ Rollin, *L'histoire Romaine*, 1:23-4.

Another important facet of Roman life to Rollin was the extent to which the religion of the Romans permeated their lives and habits. Rollin lauded the contributions of the Roman king Numa, who purportedly established the pervasive nature of the Roman religion. Numa “set down all its exercises and rites, added the utmost solemnity to its ceremonies, and made the festivals as agreeable and attractive as possible.”⁶¹ The consequence of the Roman focus on the Gods was quite evident to Rollin:

This habit of introducing religion into all their actions, influenced the people with so profound and constant a veneration for the Divinity, that from that time... they never created magistrates, declared war, gave battle, undertook anything in public or in private, made no marriages, funerals, or journeys, without some act of religion.⁶²

A Roman who had sworn an oath, furthermore, “kept it inviolably, without standing in need of any security, witnesses, or written contracts; whereas all these precautions were ineffectual among the Greeks.”⁶³

Having established the importance of religion among the pagan Romans, Rollin cited proper education as the means by which the Romans were able to maintain the importance of the Divine in their affairs. It was incredible, he wrote, that so strong an impression was made on the Roman people of “the conviction of an omnipresent and omniscient Deity, deeply engraved on the tender minds of children, by education, by instruction, by the discourses of parents, and especially by the sight of public ceremonies.”⁶⁴ This constant reinforcement of religious ideas, especially in the formative years, would play a very prominent role in Rollin’s thought and writings, for constant

⁶¹ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 2:428-9.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2:429.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2:429.

⁶⁴ Rollin, *L’histoire Romaine*, 1:24.

repetition and the protection of youth from bad examples would become the core of Rollin's ideas for the rejuvenation of the youth of France. The possibility does exist that Rollin couched his admiration for the Romans in terms of *piété* to placate fellow Jansenists unlikely to accept human virtue, though this seems somewhat out of character. For Rollin frequently praises ancient cultures for their ability to see beyond the narrow interests of the self, regardless of the object of devotion.

It was not only in their religious duties that Rollin lauds the Romans, for in their devotion to the health and glory of the *patrie*, the Romans again showed a marked tendency to subsume their own interests into the common good. Rollin presents the Roman people as exemplary of the sense of devotion to the *bien publique*. “Love for the place of their birth is natural to all men,” writes Rollin, but this sentiment seems to have been more strong and lively in the Romans than in any other nation.⁶⁵ The Roman people “were always ready to encounter all hazards and sufferings” for the sake of the *patrie*, for “every particular person had... a personal interest in the prosperity of the state.” Such was their devotion to the *patrie*, that the Romans “felt themselves obliged to sacrifice all to it: their fortunes, lives, peace, glory itself, friends, parents, or children.”⁶⁶

Just as with the reverence for religion, Rollin credits the education of the Romans for their intense and long-standing devotion to their *patrie*. Among the Romans:

No ill treatment could stifle in their heart this love [of the *patrie*], imprinted by nature from their birth, and strongly riveted by education. It was inculcated in them from their very infancy, that a son ought never to cancel his duty to his mother, though he should be forgetful of the sentiments of nature; nor a citizen be unmindful of his country, though it

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:25.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

treat him ever so ungratefully and unjustly. Of what did such a principle not render them capable!⁶⁷

Rollin saw the Roman people as so intensely devoted to the *patrie* that not even the sharpest attacks of the state upon the individual could blunt this devotion; and that this devotion derived not merely from some inborn trait or a “natural” love for the place of one’s birth. These are traits which are, and must be, “riveted,” “inculcated,” burned into the mind of the citizen “from infancy” in order to be effective. One could almost say that the love of the *patrie* and the civic virtues that sprang from this love needed to be indoctrinated into the youth of Rome.

Here we find the greatest departure from the previous Jansenist thinkers in Rollin’s work. In the absence of God’s efficacious grace and in the rejection of self-interest as society’s glue, the love of the *patrie*, carefully and constantly reinforced, could inspire virtues which, though “false,” make a man useful to his society. This love for the *patrie* can be seen as a step beyond Pascal’s contention that man can only love that which is himself—though in Rollin’s case it is the *patrie* serving as the focus of devotion, a possibility open to all, not merely the elect. Through the examples of the ancient republics, Rollin identifies the *patrie* as an alternate higher order in which men have found, and can find, a greater good, the *bien publique*, to which they can devote themselves.

A further departure from earlier Jansenists, and another consequence of the historicism of Rollin’s ideas, was the refutation of Pascal’s insistence upon the paramount importance of authority and, especially, custom. For Pascal, custom provided universally agreed-upon practices that gave stability to a society. A society’s established

⁶⁷Rollin, *L’histoire Romaine*, 1:26.

customs should be followed, not based on their soundness, but “because they are unique, and root out disagreement.”⁶⁸ The sensibility or the practicality of custom did not matter at all; rather the simple fact of universal agreement provided the value of custom. Pascal used as an example the matter of succession to the French throne. The choice of the “eldest son of a queen to rule a state” was truly unreasonable to Pascal, but the fact that it was an indisputable characteristic made it a wise one.⁶⁹ Were the choice of ruler determined by a disputable claim, such as the wisest or most virtuous, there would be cause for dissension and strife, for many would lay claim to the requisite wisdom and virtue. Custom, therefore, and the claim that can be followed without dispute, formed the ideal model. It does not matter if the choice is a good one, provided that civil disturbance was avoided. Authority and custom were the keys to lasting peace.

As Keohane remarks, Pascal’s position on custom “makes sense only if one is convinced that a better way cannot be found—that the whole notion of a ‘better way’ has no meaning in this context.”⁷⁰ For Pascal, since custom and force were required to control the depravity of men, the disruption resulting from the assumption of new customs could produce no real benefit; in fact the only true consequence would be the instability involved in change itself.⁷¹ When force and self-interest are the only motivating factors in men’s lives, the particulars of the custom in question are almost immaterial. For Rollin, however, the corrupted, vice-ridden customs of his age

⁶⁸ Keohane, 271; Pascal, 131.

⁶⁹ Pascal, 137.

⁷⁰ Keohane, 271.

⁷¹ Keohane, 271-2; Pascal, 135.

demanded change, and his intimate familiarity with the civic virtue of the ancients provided the vehicle through which new customs could take root.

That Rollin denied the usefulness of custom is easily understood, of course, from the context in which he was writing. The current state of affairs did not represent a source of beneficial stability and order for Rollin, as it did for Pascal. Pascal lived and wrote during the high point of absolutism in France. As Keohane points out, the strong reign of Louis XIV, compared to the uncertainty and the instability of the Fronde, demonstrated the positive effects of strong authority.⁷² Obedience to authority, rigid social structure, and adherence to accepted norms all were perceived as beneficial to society. On the contrary, for Rollin, the customs and accepted social norms of his age *were* the problem that needed to be addressed and remedied. By the time Rollin had begun his writings, the absolutism of the Sun King, and especially the manner in which Louis XIV had used his power, had led Rollin and others to question the values of their society. Furthermore, the thirst for titles and offices on the part of many non-nobles, and the jealous insistence on the maintenance of privileges on the part of those that were ennobled, indicated to Rollin a society that valued little other than personal gain and aggrandizement.

For the youth “look upon as valuable that which they see everybody value; and are guided, not by reason, but by custom.”⁷³ This is not to say that custom served no utility for Rollin, but that unexamined custom poses great dangers, especially in terms of the education of youth:

⁷² Keohane, 241, 244.

⁷³ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 1:165.

Though it is ordinarily a wise and judicious course to avoid all singularity and to follow the received customs, I wonder whether in the matter we treat if this principle does not admit of some exception, and whether we should not apprehend the dangers and inconveniences of blindly following the footsteps of those who have preceded us, so as to consult custom more than reason, and rule our actions by what others do rather than what they should do... an error once established is handed down from age to age, and becomes almost an immutable law, because we believe we should act like the rest of mankind.⁷⁴

Of course, this would not be a problem if the majority of men always made the best choices, but “human nature is not so happy that the greatest number chooses the best course.”⁷⁵ Therefore, the path to follow in order to determine and to learn right living was not through custom, nor through a simple reliance upon the word of God in scriptures, but through right reason and the ability and responsibility to determine what is right. What was important in this system, however, were wise and judicious masters, presumably like Rollin himself, to guide the student in the proper use of reason in the light of examples of virtuous behavior found in antiquity.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:221.

⁷⁵ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 3:221.

CHAPTER V

ROLLIN AND FRENCH SOCIETY

Rollin's response to the “contagion of the age” was a renewed emphasis on virtuous education on the model of the ancient republics. Furthermore, unlike previous works that discussed virtuous education, like Fénelon's *Télémaque*, Bossuet's *Lettres sur l'éducation du Dauphin*, or even fellow Jansenist Duguet's *Institution d'un Prince*, Rollin's proposals for the education in virtue were intended not for sovereigns and their heirs, but for the general youth of the state. In fact, *Télémaque*, despite its huge popularity, was not even published with the author's permission—Fénelon had composed it solely for the education of the Duc de Bourgogne. Contrast this with Rollin, who excused himself for the wealth of examples in the Treatise on Education by reminding the reader that “this work is not designed for the learned... but that my design is principally to instruct young students, who will often have scarce any other notion of history than what I shall give them in this book.”⁷⁶ And this instruction, furthermore, was designed to demonstrate the value of virtuous living through the examples of antiquity.⁷⁷ In other

⁷⁶ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 1:167.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:8-9.

words, Rollin's work was a direct reflection of the idea that virtue belonged not just to kings, but to all members of the state, or at least all who acquire an education.⁷⁸

In presenting his conceptions of society in these terms of classical republican, civic-minded virtue, Rollin called into question the practices of many institutions, though not necessarily the institutions themselves, that composed the French state. Though Rollin did not display any real distaste for the nobility as an institution, he certainly felt strongly that the attitudes of some nobles did not serve to better the state.⁷⁹ Hereditary titles of nobility (*la noblesse d'extraction*), for Rollin, were society's way of showing gratitude for services rendered that could not be fully repaid during the lifetime of the benefactor.⁸⁰ However, these honors were not an end in themselves, nor were they simply to benefit the future bearers of these titles, for:

the public interest demands that we must pay this tribute of honor and consideration to their descendants, as it is an engagement to them to support and perpetuate in their family the reputation of their ancestors, by perpetuating as well the same virtues which made their ancestors so illustrious.⁸¹

The institution of nobility served a public utility in conferring honor upon the descendants of great men, while simultaneously bestowing an obligation to continue to serve the state in the manner of their forebears.

However, in the absence of continued service, or in the expectation of special treatment and consideration based on ancient title, nobility of birth became hollow.

⁷⁸ See Dena Goodman, *Criticism in Action: Enlightenment Experiments in Political Writing*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) for more information on the critical literature of the latter years of the reign of Louis XIV, a period she refers to as the time when the “mirror-for-princes tradition reached its highest literary expression in France,” 8.

⁷⁹ Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 52-3.

⁸⁰ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 2:203.

⁸¹ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 2:203.

When this homage is “claimed as a debt, or demanded by force, the right to it is lost, and it changes into hatred and contempt.”⁸² The pride of those who feel that “all is owed them due to their birth and look down upon the rest of mankind from their high station” cannot help but inspire the contempt of all around them.⁸³ There is nothing to gain in such a situation, nor any benefit to the state to be found. An illustrious ancestor does not make a man worthy of respect:

Nobles have been seen to dishonor their name by low and wretched vices, while commoners have ennobled and gained renown for their family by their great qualities. It is right to maintain the glory of one’s ancestors by actions... but it is also glorious to leave to one’s descendants a title which is not borrowed from ancestors to become the chief and author of one’s own nobility.⁸⁴

For nobility and the honors it confers is not the end in itself, but simply the means by which society repays its own, and therefore “the only source of true nobility... is merit and virtue.”⁸⁵ In this context, obviously, virtue can only be that which is of benefit to the *patrie*, rather than the individual.

Rollin’s views on nobility strike a surprisingly egalitarian tone. Certainly, the courtier seeking favors from the king does not fit well with Rollin’s conceptions of the “nobility of merit and virtue.” In fact, the value of the social hierarchy itself loses importance when all honors paid to the nobility are considered strictly voluntary. This begs the question of whether Rollin actually believed that the entire social hierarchy of the monarchy needed to be done away with or altered. Certainly many of his later

⁸² *Ibid.*, 2:203.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:204.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

readers may have agreed. But many of his readers were also nobles and, as Smith points out, a number of nobles adopted many of Rollin's ideas on education.⁸⁶

A final aspect of Rollin's views on education further underscores the extent to which the principles of the ancient republics informed his thinking, as well as the extent to which his ideals presaged the revolutionary generation, for Rollin's ideals reflected the idea that children belonged less to their parents than to the state. Though he equivocates somewhat over whether public or private education were preferable, on the basis of his often-repeated examples it is quite clear that Rollin himself would chose public education modeled on the ancient republics.

Rollin lauded the ancient forms of public education for many reasons, most importantly demonstrating the utility to the state and the effectiveness of instilling the virtues of courage, honesty, and merit in the student. The ancients, Rollin wrote, believed:

that children are more the property of the republic than their parents; and that therefore their education should not be given up to their fancies, but be entrusted to the care of the republic; that for this reason children ought to be brought up, not in private in their fathers' houses, but in public, by common masters and under the same discipline, that they may be early inspired with a love of their *patrie*, respect for the laws of their country, and relish for the principles and maxims of the state in which they live.⁸⁷

Thus, the importance of service to the state extended back to childhood, where the desire to love and serve the *patrie* would be instilled. This important theme would, of course, inform all of Rollin's writings on education. Furthermore, as Smith points out, the theme of "children belonging to the *patrie*" would grow in prominence both in political and

⁸⁶ Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 55.

⁸⁷ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 3:210.

pedagogical thought through the remainder of the century.⁸⁸ However, it is important to note that, while the terms of virtuous education would become progressively secularized, Rollin's emphasis on educating students outside the home also served the purpose of instructing students in the precepts of the Christian faith.⁸⁹

In a very great measure, part of protecting children from the “contagion of the age” involved protecting children from the failings of their own parents. Quoting Quintillian, Rollin echoes the idea that when children learn bad habits:

The evil usually springs from the parents themselves, by the bad examples they set before their children. In their own homes, they hear and see such things that they ought to be ignorant of their whole lives. All this passes into habit and soon after into nature. The poor children find themselves vicious before they know what vice is. Thus breathing nothing but luxury and pleasure, they do not take their disorder from their schools, but bring it to them.⁹⁰

For Rollin, the public schools provide an atmosphere that fosters the learning of valuable virtues suitable to render service to the *patrie*.

In these passages we see again the intense pessimism of the Jansenists regarding the corruption and corruptibility of the human condition. Though the notion that children can be imprinted with either positive or negative traits is reminiscent of Locke's *tabula rasa*, in the Augustinian Jansenist view, virtuous traits were very difficult to maintain.⁹¹ Very little in the way of bad examples was required to deflect youth from the right

⁸⁸ Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 55.

⁸⁹ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 3:218.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:215.

⁹¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (Kitchener, Ont.: Batoche, 2001), 24-28. Locke's contention that humans may be imprinted with virtue is, in itself, optimistic in its tone. It is the same principles perceived through Rollin's contention that virtue is easily supplanted by vice in the hearts of men that produces the pessimism of which I speak. Again, it is interesting to note Locke's interest in Jansenist thought, and the similarities as well as the differences between the ideas of Locke and those of Jansenists such as Nicole and Rollin.

education that Rollin deemed necessary for the development of good morals and good citizenship. Parents generally could not be trusted with the moral health of their own children, and a single bad example was sufficient to instill students with the love of vice against which the virtuous education was posed. This pessimism provided the root for Rollin's belief that children were best to be raised from a very young age by masters of worth, and therefore emphasized the idea, later echoed by Rousseau, that children belonged more to the state than to their parents.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The writings of Charles Rollin make clear that religious thought and Christian systems of belief did indeed have positive influence on the revival of classical republican civic virtue in France. It is clear that several important notions about civic virtues and the manner of instilling these virtues in society developed not only in the works of men such as Montesquieu and Rousseau, but also through the thought of this devoutly religious educator of young minds. In fact, Rousseau and Montesquieu would both later revisit themes contained in Rollin's work, albeit in slightly altered form.

First of all, Rousseau's ideas on pedagogy and the construction of a polity echo some of Rollin's conceptions both in terms of civic virtue and in terms of fostering a focus for devotion outside the individual. Rousseau's emphasis on the importance of ritual and ceremony in fostering a love for the *patrie* is unmistakably present in Rollin's writings; in fact their ideas emerge from the same source—Numa. Rousseau would echo many of Rollin's sentiments on the importance of the second Roman king, as Bell points out in *Cult of the Nation*. For example, Rousseau credits Numa, rather than Romulus, as the true founder of the Roman state.⁹² According to Rousseau, Numa made the Romans into citizens “by gentle instruction which attached them to each other, and to their land, by making their city sacred to them through these *apparently frivolous and superstitious rites*” [italics mine]. Rousseau stressed the importance of public festivals and ceremonies

⁹² Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France*, 39.

in fostering a love of the *patrie*, basically in imitation of Numa's ideas, but denies the importance of the rituals in and of themselves. While Rollin credited Numa with founding the Roman religion upon which their virtues were grounded, Rousseau emphasized his importance in creating the rites through which the unity of the Roman state was grounded. Again, the difference between the two is the emphasis and importance of religion in their respective views.

Bell therefore uses these passages to again demonstrate the idea that nationhood developed "out of and against a religious system of belief."⁹³ However, it is quite apparent that the ideas of Numa were recognized in France decades before Rousseau cynically dismissed the religious ideas of Numa as a social tool. In other words, Rollin and Rousseau understood Numa differently; and that for Rollin, the religious elements of Numa's actions were no less important than the social elements. For Rollin, the religious and the civic aspects of the Roman world were both important, and the "frivolous and superstitious" rites played an important role in the development of virtue, not merely in the foundation of the state.

Montesquieu would also revisit an important theme of Rollin's work, the distinction between Christian and political virtue. For Rollin, the civic virtue of the ancients represented a "false virtue" which could allow men to act in the interests of their society—to be virtuous—despite the inability of the non-elect to receive the efficacious Grace of God from which all true virtue flowed. Montesquieu, in his 1757 revision of *De l'esprit des lois*, would make the same distinction in reverse. Montesquieu had claimed in his original version of the work that the *vertu* of the ancients was unobtainable by

⁹³ *Ibid.*

modern men. In the revision he makes clear that he was speaking only of political virtue, and not religious virtue:

That which I call virtue in a republic is the love of the *patrie*, that is to say, the love of equality. This is not a moral virtue, nor is it a Christian virtue—it is *political* virtue; it is the energy which moves republican government, just as honor is the energy which moves a monarchy.⁹⁴

This distinction, which Montesquieu emphasized to placate religious-minded readers, was the same distinction Rollin used to provide an avenue through which a concupiscent society could regenerate itself through the application of republican forms of civic virtue.

Another marked similarity between Montesquieu and Rollin was their ambiguity. Smith credits Montesquieu's appeal in large part to the "rich ambiguity" of his work.⁹⁵ Rollin, too, produced writings open to a variety of interpretations, a fact which helps explain his appeal not only within the French educational system, but also within the salon culture, as well as in England and among the founders of the American republic. Though much of his writings emphasized the virtues of ancient republics, Rollin stressed his preference for the monarchical form of government. Though he made strong arguments for the benefits of public education, he underscored his aversion to expressing a preference for others to follow.⁹⁶ Though he stressed a degree of egalitarianism and the "voluntary" expression of deference to nobles and a nobility based on merit, he made no outright statements against the institution of the nobility itself. Despite his own intense piety and devotion to Augustinian religious principles, he expressed no sentiments that fell outside of the mainstream of Christian thought.

⁹⁴ Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, ed. Laurent Versini, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 1:79.

⁹⁵ Jay M. Smith, "Social Categories, the Language of Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution: The Debate over *noblesse commerçante*," *The Journal of Modern History* 72 (June 2000), 356.

⁹⁶ Rollin, *Traité des études*, 3:214.

In spite of these ambiguities, on several counts Rollin made his beliefs abundantly clear. France was in need of a regenerative force, something to free her from the “contagion of the age,” and he found this force in a return to the civic virtues of the ancients. The proper method of instilling these virtues was through rigorous education, which would instill in the youth of France a love of the *patrie* and an intense devotion to “solid glory and true greatness” which would provide maximum benefit to the French state. All of these ideas played a significant role in the latter half of the eighteenth century, even into the Revolution, and did not originate in “opposition to Christian systems of belief,” but through the writings of an intensely devout Christian educator.

Among his contemporaries, Rollin was admired for “his generous and exalted sentiments, his zeal for everything that regards the good of human society, his love of virtue, [and] his reverence for Divine Providence.”⁹⁷ In a preface to Rollin’s compiled works, published in 1821, Saint-Albin Berville wrote:

Rollin’s true aim in the instruction of history is the love of religion, and it is by philosophy that he wants to lead us to it; for to him true religion is the sister of true philosophy. Rollin does not want to base the reign of faith on the ruins of reason; he despises both the superstition which degrades it, and the fanaticism which dishonors it. Christianity is in his eyes the perfection of morals, and, when he evokes the virtues of paganism, it is not to insult, but to instruct the Christian whose duty is to exceed these virtues.⁹⁸

From these expressions, it is evident that Rollin was recognized specifically for his piety and commitment to religious values.

⁹⁷ Jean-Baptiste Louis Crevier, in Charles Rollin, *L’histoire Romaine*, 8:v.

⁹⁸ Saint-Albin Berville, in Charles Rollin, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:xxi. These quotes are taken from a preface to the first edition of Rollin’s complete works. Berville, who wrote this preface, was a lawyer in the Paris Royal Court at the time of its writing. Berville would also go on to co-edit a work entitled *Collected Memories Related to the French Revolution*, a set in 65 volumes, published in increments from 1821-1839.

However, Rollin's combination of deep religious piety and admiration for classical republican ideals of civic virtue and devotion to the *patrie* place him outside the expected norms of eighteenth century thought. Perhaps it is the anticipation of a secular, or at least, secularized, development of civic virtue, informed by the expectation of the Revolution on the historical horizon, that has caused his writings to be largely overlooked by the historical record. Even David Bell, whose work is in large measure devoted to the Christian roots of a secularized virtue, mentions Rollin only in a list of sculptures commissioned for salons by the Marquis D'Angiviller.⁹⁹ Rollin's writings do not appear in any of Bell's work. Dale Van Kley, noted scholar of Jansenism, devotes only a single sentence to Rollin in *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution*, the only work in which Van Kley mentions him. In other words, Rollin, despite his remarkable synthesis of Augustinian theology, classical republican virtue, social utility, and pedagogical foresight, remains largely absent from the historiography of his time.

This is unfortunate, for in Rollin's work, we find not only a remarkable synthesis of Christian piety and classical republican virtue, but also the antecedents of the giants of the age, such as Montesquieu and Rousseau. The clear interconnections between religious beliefs and the revival of conceptions of civic virtue are clear throughout Rollin's writings. Finally, Rollin's work accentuates the intense ambiguities of his age. The eighteenth century was a time when a devout Jansenist educator could write educational treatises filled with ideas of great political consequence for future decades. Rollin's writings on classical virtue were of such richness and depth, intensity and ambiguity, that both commoner and nobleman, monarchist and republican, Frenchman

⁹⁹ Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France*, 111.

and American, could look upon them in a favorable light and find value and insight in their pages.

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