



The Influence of Descartes, Rousseau and Kant on Joyce's Stephen Dedalus

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APA Citation:

Ertin, S. (2020). The Influence of Descartes, Rousseau and Kant on Joyce's Stephen Dedalus. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, 8(14), 90-98

Abstract

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the transition from the Scholastic thought to modern philosophy and this detachment rendered the continental philosophical works increasingly sceptical. René Descartes attributed the notion of truth to cognitive processes; Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant critiqued the mainstream thoughts in the centuries they lived in and enhanced the destabilisation of widely accepted notions by way of questioning the transcendental notion of Truth itself. Rousseau's emphasis on individual truth and virtue and his critique of the corruptive effects of civilisation under the disguise of sciences and arts directly influenced Modernist thought and literature, besides French and American Revolutions and Romanticism. Prioritising personal truth and relative nature of values and with his conception of maturity, Kant also advocated free thinking and questioning acquired knowledge and values. The influence of these three philosophers is often underestimated in the analyses of modernist fiction. Thus, this article intends to analyse James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in reference to Descartes' "Meditations on First Philosophy", Rousseau's "Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts" and Kant's "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" to discover the changing notions of truth, value and knowledge.

Keywords: Joyce, Stephen Dedalus, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, modernism

Introduction

The beginning of modern philosophy is traditionally attributed to René Descartes and his famous dictum 'je pense, donc je suis'¹. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries philosophers in Europe broke away from the Scholastic thought and this break rendered their work increasingly sceptical. Descartes, who used the method of radical doubt to discover certainty and indubitable facts, placed subjectivity in the centre of philosophy, which was a groundbreaking and revolutionary view considering the tenets and limitations of the seventeenth century. In the

¹ Aka. 'Cogito, ergo sum' in Latin and usually translated into English as 'I think, therefore I am'.

eighteenth century Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant critiqued the mainstream thoughts of the culture and society they lived in. Although these three philosophers may appear different in many respects and belong to different schools of philosophy, they all helped the transformation of widely accepted thoughts and disempowerment of grand narratives by way of questioning the notion of transcendental Truth itself. Rousseau, with his emphasis on individual truth and virtue and his critique of the corruptive effects of civilisation, directly influenced the French and American Revolutions and Romanticism, but his influence and the implications of his challenge might be felt in Modernist thought and literature, too. Likewise, underlining personal truth and relative nature of values and with his conception of maturity, Kant also endorsed free thinking and questioning acquired knowledge and values. The rise of the Modernist fiction is ascribed to many factors and theorists and scientists; however, the likely significance and influence of these three philosophers is usually underestimated in the analyses of modernist literature. Earlier works tended to analyse Joyce's various works against the background of philosophy focusing on one single aspect most of the time. In his article "The Philosophy of James Joyce" (1963), Sharpe investigates Joyce's metaphysical beliefs encompassing theology and aesthetics in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses*. Following Sharpe, in his article "Aristotle, Berkeley, and Proteus: Joyce's Use of Philosophy" (1981), Cappio traces the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. Other studies by such scholars as Caufield (1998), Grayson (1967) and Link (1966), have traditionally been limited to the analyses of various theories of aesthetics from Aquinas to Kant in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This article, therefore, intends to address a gap and contribute to debates by analysing James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the first novel written by Joyce, who is one of the pioneers and practitioners of modernist fiction, in reference to Descartes' "Meditations on First Philosophy", Rousseau's "Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts" and Kant's "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" to discover the changing notions of religion, patriotism and nationalism.

Analysis

Since the novel is set in Dublin at the turn of the last century, Catholicism and nationalism are inevitably two dominant grand narratives. Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist, as a child does not understand the long and fervent quarrels on religion and politics. The governess Mrs. Riordan—known as Dante, is a pious Catholic and she often gets involved in religious and political debates with Simon Dedalus, Stephen's father, and his friend Mr. John Casey, both of whom are Irish nationalists and supporters of Charles Stewart Parnell, the Irish political leader. As a fervent supporter of the Catholic Church, Dante did not even let Stephen play with Eileen, simply because "Eileen was a protestant and when she was young she knew children that used to play with protestants and the protestants used to make fun of the litany of the Blessed Virgin" (Joyce, p.25). These religious issues and conflicts are beyond the understanding of a child who is unaware of religious sects and denominations. For Dante, Parnell is a traitor and an adulterer, whereas for Mr. Casey the enemy of Ireland is the clergy class and there is "[n]o God for Ireland" (Joyce, p.27-28); however, for Stephen the mutual accusations and claims make no sense at all. Stephen has not formed any personal convictions yet and he is still immature in the Kantian sense. For Kant;

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding. (p.54)

Stephen is too young to have formed his own thoughts and values, so he is immature and he is just like a spectator trying to gain knowledge and create his own truth. Thus, he cannot really understand the reason why he is not allowed to play with Eileen or why his governess quarrels with his father and Mr. Casey.

Stephen's immaturity begins to change after he is sent to boarding school at Clongowes Wood College, a Jesuit school, and he begins to question religion there. Father Arnall, the Latin teacher, one day asks the class questions but no one can answer, which makes him really mad. Stephen thinks: "Was that a sin for Father Arnall to be in a wax or was he allowed to get into a wax when the boys were idle because that made them study better or was he only letting on to be in a wax?" (p.35). If it is a sin, he ponders, who would a priest go for confession? Who would absolve him of his sin? Later his being flogged by the prefect of studies in his Latin class makes him question priesthood, justice and cruelty, too. The prefect, Father Dolan, flogged Stephen although Father Arnall explained that he had exempted Stephen from writing since he had broken his glasses (p.37). However, Father Dolan thought that the student was lazy and punished him. This undeserved punishment made Stephen question justice and religious belief. Descartes, in his first Meditation, admits: "It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis" (p.29). Stephen, likewise, questions the justness of his being flogged and concludes that "it was unfair and cruel. The prefect of studies was a priest but that was cruel and unfair" (p.39). As a result, Stephen, at the end of the first chapter, plucks up his courage and goes to the rector to complain about Father Dolan and his unjust punishment, which could be taken as a further step toward his maturity.

Stephen's awareness of injustices, particularly when caused intentionally by priests, later culminates in his alienation to religious practices. Descartes explains his method of doubt as follows: "Now for this object it is not necessary that I should show that all of these are false—I shall perhaps never arrive at this end. But inasmuch as reason already persuades me that I ought no less carefully to withhold my assent from matters which are not entirely certain and indubitable than from those which appear to me manifestly to be false, if I am able to find in each one some reason to doubt, this will suffice to justify my rejecting the whole" (p.30). This is what happens in Stephen's case; after his awareness of some unfairness at school, he criticises the behaviour of the priests and notices that they are not perfect, which leads to his alienation to religious beliefs and practices: On the way home Uncle Charles visits the chapel to pray. "Stephen knelt at his side respecting, though he did not share, his piety. He often wondered what his grand-uncle prayed for so seriously" (p.46). However, his questioning is still naive and childlike, for he is still immature. He does not share his uncle's piety yet imitates him, for Uncle Charles functions like a guardian teaching him the doctrines of the Catholic Church and supervising his acts. Kant claims that immaturity is a comfort zone for individuals and it is often hard to break out of it:

It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all. I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take the tiresome job over me. The guardians who have kindly taken upon themselves the work of supervision will soon see to it that by far the largest part of mankind (including the entire fair sex) should consider the step forward to maturity not only as difficult but also as highly dangerous. (p.54)

Being led by others is always much easier than following your own path without depending on others. That's why maturity is more difficult and painful for many. Stephen, as a child, follows

his grand-uncle here and accompanies him to the chapel, not out of his own faith, but of his immaturity.

At Belvedere, another Jesuit college in Dublin Stephen attended after he left Clongowes because his father could not afford the bills, other incidents caused further alienation for Stephen. Mr. Tate, the English master, one day, accused him of having “heresy in his essay” (p.59) only because Stephen suggested in his essay that the communion with God cannot take place and an individual cannot approach it. However, after the charge, he replaced the word ‘approach’ with ‘reach’ to soften the impact of his statement. Right after the incident, this time as a consequence of the Byron-Tennyson quarrel with his friends, he is blamed for being a heretic, just like Byron himself:

- In any case Byron was a heretic and immoral too.
 - I don't care what he was, cried Stephen hotly.
 - You don't care whether he was a heretic or not? said Nash.
 - What do you know about it? shouted Stephen. You never read a line of anything in your life except a trans, or Boland either.
 - I know that Byron was a bad man, said Boland.
 - Here, catch hold of this heretic, Heron called out.
- In a moment Stephen was a prisoner. (p.61)

Stephen is regarded as an outcast and even bullied by his friends at school simply because he does not insult Byron as the others do. However, his rejection of herd behaviour, another step to maturity, culminates in his excommunication. Rousseau, long before Nietzsche does, critiques herd psychology which, he claims, is an outcome of arts and sciences:

Today, when more subtle inquiries and a more refined taste have reduced the art of pleasing to established rules, a vile and deceitful uniformity reigns in our mores, and all minds seem to have been cast in the same mold. Without ceasing, politeness makes demands, propriety gives orders; without ceasing, common customs are followed, never one's own lights. One no longer dares to seem what one really is; and in this perpetual constraint, the men who make up this herd we call society will, if placed in the same circumstances, do all the same things unless stronger motives deter them. (p.4)

Rousseau underlines the corruptive effects of arts and sciences in his work and among these effects is the loss of spirit. As a result of dominant discourses, ideologies and values individuals lose their individuality and become alike. Moreover, they do not dare speak their own minds or truths. This is why Stephen, at school, cannot air his views on Byron because of the dominant Catholic discourses. Byron, due to his controversial views and ex-centric private life, is not tolerated at the school and even the students who do not read his works insult and loathe him.

The oppressive ideologies and metanarratives are the “intangible phantoms” for Stephen, which appear in the form of the voice of his father or masters always in his ears and urge him to be a gentleman, a good catholic, true to his country, language and traditions; however, Stephen “gave them ear only for a time but he was happy only when he was far from them, beyond their call, alone or in the company of phantasmal comrades” (p.63). For Kant, even though “God may have created us as individuals or substances, God is not the creator of our psychological and physical states. The latter are mere ways in which in which our nature as individuals must appear to us in experience” (Keller, p.135). Stephen, likewise, wants to break with what Kant called immaturity and follow his own path to discover and experience his independent psychological and physical state. He realises that the phantoms like religion and patriotism and all the other constructs indeed enslave him. Rousseau calls civilised people ‘happy slaves’ in his *Discourse* and argues that sciences, letters, and arts “spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains

with which they are burdened, stifle in them the sense of that original liberty for which they seem to have been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called civilized peoples” (p.3). Stephen has gained an awareness of his slavery and he desires to break his chains. These chains have always been veiled behind such values as religion and patriotism since his early childhood and thus they have remained invisible and appeared harmless. For instance, Catholicism is one of the dominant ideologies he has to learn like other children in the country. When he is a small kid at the very beginning of the novel, he hides under the table and his mother says he is to apologise. Dante adds:

-O, if not, the eagles will come and pull out his eyes. –
Pull out his eyes,
Apologize,
Apologize,
Pull out his eyes. (p.4)

The acquisition of obedience and norms begins at a very young age by means of discipline and punishment. Dante and other members of the family try to instill morality into his young mind by using fear. Religion, for Kant, is within the noumenal realm, and thus is a practical need only. Kant comments on the function of religion as an agent of immaturity: “I have portrayed matters of religion as the focal point of enlightenment, i.e., of man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. This is firstly because our rulers have no interest in assuming the role of guardians over their subjects so far as the arts and sciences are concerned, and secondly, because religious immaturity is the most pernicious and dishonourable variety of all” (p.59). Religious beliefs associated with fear may culminate in anxiety for children in their adulthood and Stephen suffers due to his education at Jesuit schools and upbringing.

In addition to religion, patriotism and nationalism are two other grand narratives which turn out to be agencies of subjectivation for Stephen. As a child, he has no idea about political issues, yet he remembers Dante saying “Parnell was a bad man. He wondered if they were arguing at home about that. That was called politics. There were two sides in it: Dante was on one side and his father and Mr Casey were on the other side but his mother and uncle Charles were on no side It pained him that he did not know well what politics meant” (p.10-11). He is still pure since he has not been corrupted by acquired ideologies and beliefs. Unfortunately he mistakes his purity for ignorance and envies the students in poetry and rhetoric classes, for he feels weak and small compared to them. He cannot wait to grow up to become like them and he finds shelter and relief in sleep: “It was better to go to bed to sleep,” he says, and he finds it “lovely to be tired” (p.11). Descartes, explaining how senses mislead and deceive one when awake, argues that in sleep one is deceived by similar illusions, too: “I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment” (p.31). Thus, the boundary between fact and dream is blurred and sleep will not give Stephen any comfort or free him from the anxieties he faces when he is awake.

The role of the Irish Catholic Church in bringing down Parnell and in using its influence in Irish political matters is also questioned in the novel. For Dante, priests must tell their flocks what is right and what is wrong, yet Mr Casey is a secularist and he says he does not want to hear election addresses when he goes to the house of God (p.22). They quarrel before Stephen:

-Really, Simon, you should not speak that way before Stephen. It’s not right.
-O, he’ll remember all this when he grows up, said Dante hotly –the language he heard against God and religion and priests in his own home.
-Let him remember too, cried Mr Casey to her from across the table, the language with which the priests and the priests’ pawns broke Parnell’s heart and hounded him into his grave. Let him remember that too when he grows up. (p.24)

Charles Stewart Parnell, leader of the Irish Home Rule Movement, was named in Katherine O'Shea's divorce case and thus he was denounced by the Irish Catholic clergy and abandoned by his own political party as a result of the revelation of this long adulterous love affair. Kant mentions an individual's civil obligations and moral responsibility and puts forth that one can publicly voice his views if there is something going wrong without contravening his duties;

a clergyman is bound to instruct his pupils and his congregation in accordance with the doctrines of the church he serves, for he was employed by it on that condition. But as a scholar, he is completely free as well as obliged to impart to the public all his carefully considered, well-intentioned thoughts on the mistaken aspects of those doctrines, and to offer suggestions for a better arrangement of religious and ecclesiastical affairs. (p.56)

In Parnell's case, however, the church meddled in politics to ruin the political career of the leader of the Irish Home Rule Movement. Parnell's case and the role of the church in his fall are directly related to the loss of values and morality in the so-called enlightened age and long before the modernist movement, Rousseau criticised the devastating effects of civilisation: "No more sincere friendships, no more real esteem, no more well-founded confidence. Suspicions, offenses, fears, coldness, reserve, hatred, betrayal will unceasingly hide under that uniform and deceitful veil of politeness, under that much vaunted urbanity that we owe to the enlightenment of our century" (p.4-5). The corruption is seen in the church itself because the church acts as a political party disregarding its other-worldly position and takes an active role in Parnell's fall.

Rousseau, to illustrate the evil effects of civilisation, gives various examples from history such as Egypt, Greece, Rome, Constantinople and adds "[i]f the sciences purified mores, if they taught men to shed their blood for their country, if they enlivened their courage, the peoples of China should be wise, free and invincible. But if there is not a single vice that does not have mastery over them; not a single crime that is unfamiliar to them" (p.6). In the novel, the assassination of Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra Fyodorovna during the Russian Revolution is a twentieth-century example of the evils and violence Rousseau criticises in earlier centuries. Nicholas II issued a 'Peace Rescript' in 1898 to encourage world peace and in the novel the petition signed is the one issued by Nicholas II. The students ask Stephen whether he has signed it but he replies: "The affair doesn't interest me in the least" (p.152). After his quarrel with MacCann, Davin, another pupil, has a row with Stephen and asks whether he is Irish at all. Gavin claims to be an Irish nationalist and blames Stephen for being "a born sneerer" and asks why he dropped out of Irish language classes (p.156). Stephen's friends are still immature; Kant argues that "it is difficult for each separate individual to work his way out of the immaturity which has become almost second nature to him. He has even grown fond of it and is really incapable for the time being of using his own understanding, because he was never allowed to make the attempt. Dogmas and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use (or rather misuse) of his natural endowments, are the ball and chain of his permanent immaturity" (p.54-55). Stephen is different from the others and he is on his way to maturity as seen in his confident response to his friends: "The soul is born, he said vaguely, first in those moments I told you of. It has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body. When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" (p.157). Man-made constructs such as nationality, language and religion are nothing but nets symbolising imprisonment and subjectivation in this context, which Stephen decides to avoid in his life. These values are imposed on individuals and they transform free individuals into undifferentiated subjects, which is criticised by Rousseau since it leads to the extinction of individual citizens. Beck argues that the "doctrine of autonomy was anticipated only by Rousseau, for only Rousseau saw the essential connection between law and freedom" in the eighteenth century (200).

Stephen's questioning the values imposed on him resembles Descartes' radical doubt: "All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to any thing by which we have once been deceived" (30). Descartes claims we can never prove at any chosen moment that we are not in a dream and he further claims that we can never trust our sense by which we have been fooled before. Similarly, Stephen rejects all his ties towards the end of the novel. He quarrels with his mother about his Easter duty, which he does not want to perform (p.184). His friend Cranley asks whether he disbelieves in the Eucharist:

-I neither believe in it nor disbelieve in it, Stephen answered.

-Many persons have doubts, even religious persons, yet they overcome them or put them aside, Cranley said. Are your doubts on that point too strong?

-I do not wish to overcome them, Stephen answered. (p.185)

Descartes claims that even the statement '2+2=4' must be questioned because one can never know that he is not deceived. He argues;

I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity. (p.33)

Descartes asks whether everything could be a part of the evil genius' plot. Therefore, he questions validity of everything except one, i.e., his existence. Stephen also questions all his ties with his family, country and religion, which proves to be his endeavour toward what Kant calls 'maturity'. Unlike Rousseau, Kant deepened the question of freedom and autonomy "into a moral and metaphysical doctrine" (200). In this respect, Stephen's questioning all his ties resembles another 'modern' character, Ford's John Dowell in *The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion* since "Dowell's unexpected philosophical, emotive or subjective comments and reactions, and his back and forth narrative movements, while creating digressions also raise uncertainty about the nature of narrative truth" (Okuroğlu Özün, p.228) and in that novel, too, "truth is always incomplete, leading to endless relations of questioning and a continuing liberalization process both for the narrator and reader" (Okuroğlu Özün, p.231). Obviously, questioning so far taken-for-granted presuppositions is a characteristic of modernist fiction.

Descartes thought it was "important to challenge all previous beliefs. In the Seventh Replies, he compared the process to removing the bad apples from a full basket by overturning the basket to survey its contents" instead of trying to pick the bad ones out of a full basket (Hatfield, p.73). Towards the end of the novel, Stephen tells Cranley: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can" (p.191). Stephen makes up his mind to leave all the chains weighing him down behind and take the risk. Kant claimed he lived in an age of enlightenment, yet not an enlightened age, he complained: "As things are at present, we still have a long way to go before men as a whole can be in a position (or can even be put into a position) of using their own understanding confidently and well in religious matters, without outside guidance" (p.58). However, Stephen is determined to become mature in the Kantian sense and welcomes his new life.

Conclusion

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mark the end of the Scholastic philosophy and the beginning of modern philosophy and this radical breakup results in a more sceptical continental

philosophy which often questions even the most fundamental facts which have been taken for granted so far. After so many centuries full of philosophers each attributing reality to various external sources and seeking ultimate truth elsewhere, either in this world or in the transcendent realm, René Descartes ended the long-lasting debate by attributing the notion of truth to cognitive processes. In other words, he answered the long-waiting ontological and epistemological questions by foregrounding human mind instead of some external ultimate stuff. The influence of the central positioning of mind in Descartes' philosophy can be seen on the stream-of-consciousness technique employed in the novel. From the beginning to the end, the novel is actually the continuous flow of Stephen's thoughts, feelings, fears, fantasies and hesitations only interrupted with dialogues. In the eighteenth century Jean-Jacques Rousseau's emphasis on personal truth and virtue and his critique of the corruptive effects of civilisation directly influenced Modernist thought and literature, besides French and American Revolutions and Romanticism. Rousseau dethroned many neoclassical merits such as unity, harmony, order, politeness and uniformity; instead he advocated simplicity and praised common people, real citizens for him, who have not lost their individualism and still have not become alike. In the novel, Stephen Dedalus is the one who struggles to achieve to be an individual despite all the pressure he feels at home and school. "With Rousseau, Kant can then say that obedience to a law that one has himself prescribed is the only real freedom" (Beck, p.200). Immanuel Kant rejected the prevalent beliefs in the eighteenth century and contributed to the destabilisation of well-established notions by way of destabilising the notion of truth itself. Advocating individual truth and believing in the relative nature of values, in addition to his conception of maturity, Kant supported freedom of thought and questioning acquired knowledge and values. The influence of Kant's philosophy and concept of maturity is also felt clearly in the novel since from the opening to the last lines the novel is not only the development of an artist from child to a rebellious young man but indeed Stephen's metaphorical journey from immaturity to maturity in the Kantian sense.

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