

# Robespierre's perception and misinterpretation of "Rousseauvian Virtue": from the *Essay for Rousseau*

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**Abstract.** The attempt to realize "Republic of Virtue" by Robespierre was commonly considered to be based on Rousseau's political thoughts and theories from the conventional ideas, while controversial findings could be derived from an essay that Robespierre wrote for Rousseau. This paper is trying to argue that Robespierre had treated Rousseau in a deified and zealous way from his essay for Rousseau, causing his misinterpretation on Rousseau's virtue and the confusion between his own thoughts and those of Rousseau's. Such kind of misinterpretation and confusion could be explained with "Pygmalion" theory in Jean Starobinski's Rousseau studies as a supplement to relevant research on this issue, and also provides an innovative perspective for examining the political-psychological basis of Robespierre, Jacobins' Reign of Terror as well as comparable conditions. For Robespierre had conflated "Civic Virtue" in Rousseau's political theory with the "Personal Virtue" embodied in Rousseau's literary image, the tragedy of Reign of Terror should not be simplistically attributed to Rousseau's theories.

**Keywords:** Robespierre, misinterpretation, Rousseau, Pygmalion, virtue

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## 1. Introduction

Despite multiple theoretical controversies, Robespierre has been considered to have a close relationship with Rousseau, the indication that Robespierre's attempt to realize "Republic of Virtue" in Jacobins' Reign of Terror was based on the political ideas, especially "virtue", from Rousseau can be found in abundant speeches, documents and legislation in Terror. It is undeniable that Rousseau had a profound influence on Robespierre. However, before going into questions like "Should Rousseau be responsible for Terror?", "Why did such desirable vision ended up with a tragic ending?", the problem that Robespierre's perception of "virtue" might be totally different from that in Rousseau's thought and works needs to be addressed first.

Historians working in the mid-20th century have already come to a framework to construe this issue. Gordon H. McNeil contended that: during his lifetime, Rousseau was primarily venerated for his literary works, this constitutes a form of literary cult; following the French Revolution, public attention shifted towards his political theories, giving rise to a political cult, though this political cult diverged significantly from the actual content of Rousseau's political thought [1]. This offers a preliminary perspective to later studies.

From the late 20th century, both J. L. Talmon's heritage that blamed Rousseau for Terror as well as Totalitarianism and empirical approach that denied to interpret the French Revolution with cultural factors and values were fundamentally disapproved by many, a new approach combined political culture and literal critique to interpret how Rousseau had influenced the French revolutionaries emerged, scholars in this approach generally share the idea that the relationship between Robespierre as well as Jacobins and Rousseau's political works was superficial, or rejected to acknowledge any statements like "Robespierre was trying to realize Rousseau's political theories". From the normative political theory analyses on Robespierre and Rousseau, Andrew Levine also denied that Robespierre's political thought and practice were from Rousseau's: "it is still appropriate to ask whether Robespierre is a Rousseauian. In what follows, I shall argue that he is not" [2]. Raymond Trousson believed that Rousseau was shaped into a "god" during the French Revolution, and his influence came from the "personality cult" by the mass [3]. What this "personality cult" is and how this mechanism had formed is the core question that this paper is trying to respond.

Carol Blum have inherited and integrated this approach greatly based on the work of Joan McDonald and Bernhard Groethuysen, she went further into this "relationology" perspective, concluded that: "Robespierre called Rousseau 'divine'... [Rousseau] had become a god" [4]. But to study this kind of way that Robespierre treated Rousseau further, we need to seek back to the context in the source it was from. As in the relationship "between source and recipient" in Jean Starobinski's theory, Robespierre's understanding and interpretation of Rousseau's "virtue" is largely related to in what way did Robespierre treat Rousseau. We may start from this issue by examining original text, then take a progressive approach in the coming chapters for further normative theoretical interpretations.

## 2. How did Robespierre treat Rousseau: a textual analysis

The word "divine" comes from a short essay named *Dédicace de Maximilien Robespierre aux Manes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* which Robespierre wrote for Rousseau in April 1789, it was an literary conversation with Rousseau as his self-motivation in which Robespierre expressed his adoration and gratitude towards Rousseau in an obvious and straightforward way: "Divine man! You have made me learned about myself!... Please, accept my veneration, no matter how faint it is... I've never praised a living man" [5]. Here, from the text we can see that Robespierre's gratitude and adoration to Rousseau are effusive, and he felt inspired and indebted to Rousseau, Rousseau's impact was illuminating to him. But "saint" means that this relationship is more than taking Rousseau as a spiritual mentor: "I would like to buy these goods at the price of eternal labor, even at the cost of dying earlier" [5], "these goods" here may refer to Rousseau's intellectual heritage, which is his "virtue" that Robespierre considered, and Robespierre was willing to get them at an extreme cost.

The kind of way of treating Rousseau resembles a fanatical personality cult when Robespierre as a believer of Rousseau, showing piety to his spiritual leader. Unlike "learning from someone" in the common sense, in this process, individual will is transformed and combined with the will of the one who inspire his follower, which means that Robespierre was not "learning" from Rousseau with his independent will preserved consciously, but to dedicate himself to Rousseau, and thus caused a confusion between his own thought and that of Rousseau's. This also corresponds the address "divine man", meaning Rousseau was conceptualized into an image of undisputable saint of virtue, a god that must not be tarnished.

Under such an approach, Robespierre's interpretation of Rousseau's "virtue" is being clear: Robespierre was totally infected by the compelling personality that Rousseau shown, which is "virtue" that Robespierre considered: "I've gazed at your traits of Augustus...Your admirable *Confessions*, this kind of frank and daring reveal of purest soul... Like the miracle of virtue" [5]. Here, Robespierre had created a vivid image of "Saint-

Rousseau" in his mind, the noble qualities and the charming character of "Rousseau" immersed himself into an illusion, and soon became his spiritual inspiration and motivation.

With such interpretation of Rousseau, Robespierre believed that the whole image "Rousseau" had shown is equal to "virtue", or what Rousseau's virtue actually is from his own thought and works was not important to Robespierre at all. Just as Carol Blum's point of view: "Thus it was not a body of information or the tenets of a political system which Robespierre absorbed from Rousseau, but a compelling vision of himself" [4]. This indicates that Robespierre's perception of Rousseau's "virtue" was actually from his own perspective, but not from Rousseau's thought and works<sup>1</sup>.

This is a highly egotistical way of understanding. Its emotional foundation is clear when looking back to the way that Robespierre treat Rousseau we've demonstrated in the previous textual analysis: though such argument is intuitive, when someone deify a thinker and treat him in a divine way, he'll most likely to confuse his own thoughts with those of the thinker's unconsciously, or at least share part of the thinker's view to be his, especially under an "enlightenment" context where the thinker is considered to be the "first teacher" of the follower. In such a scenario, when his first teacher is doubted or attacked by others, the student or believer is most likely to defend him unconsciously, and in doing so, inadvertently aligns with his teacher's stance. Such latent psychological mechanism is commonly-seen among students who idolize their teachers. The emotional authority of the thinker and the naturally-formed connection in feelings between the thinker and one's follower has been established.

There's no correspondence of Robespierre's way to attain virtue from the perspective of Rousseau's thought and works. As a deist, Rousseau insisted on the existence of god, but he rejected to treat anyone concrete in a divine way, the ideas about virtue was external to god but intrinsic to mankind. Rousseau's moral idea was more like some kind of freewill outlook: the basis of human ethics was from one's conscience. More specifically into the field of politics, Civic Virtue in other words, Rousseau believed that there was explicit human nature foundation for one's formation of Civic Virtue: "Self-love"<sup>2</sup>. Such a foundation was originated from the inherent nature of mankind, but not from adoration and deification from exterior like Robespierre. Thus, those who may claim that Robespierre was firstly influenced by Rousseau's works and theories, then formed his own way of gaining virtue might be ill-considered.

From the concept itself, "Civic Virtue" in Rousseau's body of political theory generally means: will of the individual shows obedience and complies to the General Will: "since virtue is nothing other than this conformity of particular wills to the general; every man is virtuous when his particular will conforms in all things to the general will" [6]. Yet this concept can not be discussed or utilized out of context, civic virtue here is the way to realize Rousseau's political conception on a virtuous government, it comes down to the enforcement of General Will. Obviously such consideration was ignored by Robespierre.

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<sup>1</sup> The former original text mentioned "Confession", this is indeed the work of Rousseau, but what I mean by "not from Rousseau's works" here is to emphasize that the interpreted thoughts by Robespierre are no longer those of Rousseau's, thought in Rousseau's original text are totally different from the former.

<sup>2</sup> There has been some controversies in translating this concept for a long time. I prefer to divide this concept into three: amour-propre, amour de soi and estime de soi-même. The first one has a negative meaning, it was often related to conceit, and caused the degeneration of the primitive; the second one is generally translated into "self-love", but our self-love here is a generic category that include both amour-propre and amour de soi, and exact emotional basis for this issue might come from the former; the third one means "self-esteem", it has a positive meaning, emphasizing appreciation on one's own. It's helpful to avoid a confusion between two concepts: amour-propre and estime de soi-même when some may translating both into "self-esteem" without distinguishing.

Given these considerations, Robespierre's such kind of way to interpret Rousseau might be inappropriate. It would cause some kind of confusion between his thoughts and those of Rousseau's when interpreting and implementing "virtue". On a separate but related note, another reason for "inappropriate" is that Rousseau's intellectual heritage is complicated and some part of it is ambiguous. Different routes of interpreting Rousseau may come to totally different results. Two routes are predominant: Liberal and Republican. Robespierre took the latter, and this may lead to some potential factors that could cause deviation from the fundamental doctrines of liberalism, and even totalitarian tendencies, which speaks to the inherent tension of "Virtue and Coercion" in the "Citizenship" theory of Classical Republicanism, which we'll discuss in the later sections [7].

In the end of the essay, Robespierre wrote so to make up his mind: "The old buildings were collapsed, the porches of new buildings are standing up in ruins, all thanks to you, I brought my own stone in... I owe myself, soon I will turn over my thoughts and action to my compatriots... I will follow your noble footprints" [5]. Robespierre had been jumping back and forth in the focus of his monologue from Rousseau's thought and his, the confusion that Robespierre's perception had caused re-emerges: "my stone" here may refer to his thoughts or ambition on France, but every time he propounded his claims, he didn't realize that his thoughts, especially those on virtue, were hardly Rousseau's. This means that Robespierre failed to establish a clear distinction between Rousseau's original intent and his own interpretive projections.

However, since basis of Robespierre's way of understanding "virtue" can not be found from Rousseau's theories and works, what should be responsible for this confusion? That is to say, why this happens? Jean Starobinski's "Pygmalion" theory offers a unique explanation.

### **3. The evolution of virtue: from Rousseau to Robespierre**

There is a high possibility that Robespierre formed the "self" that is akin to the relationship between Rousseau and his works interpreted by Jean Starobinski after Robespierre was exposed to Rousseau and his theories about virtue<sup>3</sup>. In other words, Robespierre was brought into the context of "Pygmalion", in which he got stuck in the illusion that lead him to obsession and apotheosis.

"Pygmalion" was originally a name of the protagonist in a story by Ovid that tells a sculptor fell in love with his own work, the sculpture by him named Galatea. By praying piously, the sculpture was made alive by the goddess of love. Rousseau expanded it into a dramatization and made some modifications: that he changed the force which made Galatea alive from miracle to the emotional motivation derived from artist himself. Jean Starobinski imbued this story with further implications when studying Rousseau's "self".

At first, Galatea was external to Pygmalion, lifeless and cold: "It is a piece of stone, it is your work... But you still lack a soul, your shape can't be without it" [8]. Pygmalion here had a complicated feeling, both excitement and satisfaction after finishing his work, as well as frustration by the work's externality. Soon the frustration became ever more critical, and thus an intense emotional motivation and desire had formed: "I believe under delirium, that I can rush out from myself; believe that I can give her life with mine, make her alive with my own soul" [8]. Just when Pygmalion was worrying to lose his subjectivity, Galatea came into alive, touched herself and walked around in Pygmalion's shock, she came by Pygmalion and doubted her exist-

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<sup>3</sup> The inspiration for applying Starobinski's "Pygmalion" theory to Robespierre and Rousseau in this paper was illuminated by Professor Li Meng at Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies of Peking University on the 5th online lecture of the Rostrum for Ethics Maestro: "Xinxing and Order" in China and Western Ethical-political Philosophy series: "Rousseau's Self: Rousseau as Moral Philosopher" held by Department of Philosophy at Sun Yat-sen University and Guangdong Ethics Association on Sept. 9, 2022

ence. Pygmalion then tried his best to vitalize his work: "Ah! I'll have to be another 'the other' forever, so that I can feel like to be her, see her, love her and being loved by her... It's you, only you: I have given all my existence to you; unless by you, I couldn't be alive" [8]. Thereupon, Pygmalion gained his self, "I" , in this way.

Two subjects in this plot, Pygmalion and Galatea, were abstracted into author and one's works. Starobinski believed that the "self" of author after one's creation is incomplete: the "self" of one's works was formed and separated from the author once being created. And as a "living mirror", works are not independent. Works are bound to response the subjectivity of their author. Starobinski analyzed: "His hope is simply the image of his desire, but as reflected in a living mirror. Hence, the work must not remain a cold object of marble, fixed in its autonomous existence" [9]. The self of the author is now inexpressible for its incompleteness, only when combination between the self of author and the self of works accomplished, the self was unified, can the self of author be interpreted: "Two parts of a single self are finally reunited. The separation between artist and work is abolished. The labor of creation was expended only to be subsumed in the unity of a loving Ego" [9].

Starobinski believed that such is the case with Rousseau's self. Only by the self of his works can Rousseau as an author's self survive. Self of his works become self of Rousseau's criteria, and also the form that the latter exists. In Rousseau's old age when he was trying to examine himself, it can be interpreted from the line of a Ovid's poem which he cited that such effect came into influence: he considered himself as a "persecuted stranger" for holding different ideas from enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire: "Here I am a barbarian, because I am not understood by them" [10]. Rousseau's self-cognition was largely influenced by his works and thought, just like Pygmalion: without his works, without him. This co-existing state had deeply influenced his daily lives and psychological status, his judges were mostly made based on the stance in his works.

It is highly probable that same thing happened on Robespierre. Blum had a similar assertion, but she didn't unfold it: "His admirers were replicating, in their relation to his myth, the very relationship that Rousseau had established with his own self-representation" [4]. When exposed to Rousseau's works and thought, Robespierre interpreted them from his own perspective that meets the needs of his own demands and desire, and considered these interpretations to be Rousseau's "virtue", this is also what "confusion" implies: he had confused his subjective perception and objective theory of virtue in Rousseau's works and thought.

The relationship between Robespierre and his distorted perception of Rousseau's virtue is exactly the case. What Robespierre's "Rousseau adoration" was depending, expecting and adoring was nothing else, neither Rousseau, but "the perfect image of his own desire", Robespierre needed to "eradicate the exteriority of the work and substitute for it the expansive interiority of narcissistic passion" [9]. In this way can Robespierre find his subjectivity, which is the "self-esteem" that Robespierre claimed to have found with the help of Rousseau: "In this way... emerged from a state of self-contempt through contact with the virtue that 'exhaled' from Rousseau and thereafter found himself able to appreciate his own dignity" [4].

To put Robespierre into this context, his perception as his works had influenced his stance and judges. Under such circumstances, it is not important anymore that whether violence and terror could be derived from Rousseau's political thought or not, for Robespierre's perception as works, its relationship with Rousseau is like that Galatea with marble: finished product and its materials.

In other words and to conclude, Robespierre projected his own longing for virtue (self) onto Rousseau's idealized image (work). Starobinski's "Pygmalion" theory here is introduced to explain the mechanism by which Robespierre projected his personal feelings onto theoretical understanding on Rousseau. Though from Robespierre's speeches and action, there are quantities of similarities with Rousseau's political thought, this does not mean that Robespierre had implemented and developed Rousseau's political thought, which aligns

with Talmon's theoretical speculations [11]. Assertions like Talmon's kind are also challenged by McNeil and Blum's new approach.

Then, what were Robespierre's rationale and intellectual basis for his action of establishing "Republic of Virtue"? Under the context of "confusion", we need to distinguish the "virtue" that Robespierre claimed from that in Rousseau's thought.

#### **4. Two kinds of virtue: Robespierre's practice**

From *The Complete Works of Robespierre*, we can hardly find any direct citations of the original text from Rousseau's political thought. Rousseau's position in Robespierre's advocacy was more like a moral model: "Jean-Jacques Rousseau, this estimable and divine name will remind you of equality in the apostle, dedication and virtue in a corrupt and degenerate era" [12]. The way that Robespierre utilize Rousseau was not concerning his political ideas, but about his personal virtue. Blum also mentioned: "Robespierre did not claim to find political inspiration in the *Social Contract* or the discourses. What was significant to him was Rousseau's 'virtue' as displayed in the *Confessions*" [4].

From here, we can see that what actually was Robespierre obsessed with from Rousseau: the romantic and charming personal image that Rousseau had presented in his works. In his *Confessions*, Rousseau had lots of frank inner monologues, along with his legendary life experience, had created a strong, genuine, honest and brave persona; in the rest of his works, he showed kindness, integrity, sympathy, loyalty, being indifferent to fame and wealth... These works had presented a perfect "moral model" image for followers of Rousseau, the compelling personal charisma made readers infected by the intense attractiveness and influence by Rousseau unconsciously, even Immanuel Kant couldn't have spared, so that he put a portrait of Rousseau in his study to show his admiration to Rousseau.

Such an image of virtue had formed a upsurge for "Rousseau adoration": "Brissot conveys the flavor of the Rousseau worship that seized hold of certain individuals during the decade following of his death, a kind of intoxicated adherence not to this doctrine or that theory, but to the virtue of the man himself" [4]. Robespierre is just a member of this upsurge, considering this kind of personal virtue that Rousseau presented in his works to be "Rousseauvian Virtue", and demand these virtues of himself.

However, it is noticeable that the "virtue" which Robespierre had absorbed from Rousseau stays only on the level of individual dimension, though such virtue on individual dimension include qualities like loyalty, honesty, integrity and patriotism (relative to Geneva) that are relevant to politics, these qualities are far from "Civic Virtue" that Rousseau advocates. Civic Virtue in Rousseau's context is based on the whole theory of Rousseau's political thought, it is a part or a way to realize Rousseau's political thought, this follows the internal route of classical Republicanism. Once disengaged from Rousseau's political works and thought, misinterpretation is inevitable.

Therefore, we can assert that Rousseau left Robespierre with two kinds of virtues, both constitute the term "Rousseauvian Virtue". The first one is the noble, romantic, and charming personal image demonstrated by Rousseau in his literary and autobiographical works; The second one is the Civic Virtue interior to Rousseau's political works and thought. It is obvious that Robespierre's veneration towards "Rousseauvian Virtue" refers only to the former. Meanwhile he was not aware of the existence of the latter, thus lead to the confusion between Rousseau's Personal Virtue with Civic Virtue. Even the virtue that mentioned by Robespierre in his speeches for many times: "It is in this kind of peace that could allow Civic Virtue which makes society enjoying glory and happiness develop... Their Civic Virtue was expired when start resisting their ambitious

speculations" [12]... is nothing more than the embodiment of Rousseau's image as a "perfect model for individuals" in his Personal Virtue to meet Robespierre's political needs and expectations.

Rousseau's "Personal Virtue" is defined as virtue that could be derived and interpreted from the personal image that Rousseau demonstrated in his literal works and autobiographies. This is consistent with the "literal cult" that McNeil argued, from Rousseau's literature works a virtuous saint is bound to be discovered, and this cult culminated in 1789 [1], when is just the point when Robespierre wrote the essay we've analyzed in the former textual analysis part. Personal Virtue is fundamentally different from Civic Virtue in Rousseau's context, though sometimes two concepts show a specious resemblance via the form of a republican virtue: love of the fatherland (amour de la patrie): "It's virtue, I'm talking about the public virtue...<sup>4</sup> this kind of virtue is nothing but the love of the fatherland and its law" [13]. This is for the reason that patriotism in Personal Virtue does not lead to Rousseau's political conception and serve as a way to realize it, but is an inherent trait that derived from Rousseau's image presented in his literature and autobiographical works.

What Robespierre advocated and relied on when governing the country was exactly this kind of Personal Virtue, that he was expecting citizens of the Republican France could share the traits that Rousseau's idolized image had shown to him in all manner of ways to realize "Republic of Virtue" in the level of "ought".

But as mentioned earlier, Robespierre confused Civic Virtue with Rousseau's Personal Virtue, which means that Robespierre forcibly broke the boundary of virtue between public and private, replacing Civic Virtue with Personal Virtue. This will inevitably lead to the failure of his virtue politics. With his belief on Rousseau and "virtue", Robespierre insisted on imposing "virtue" as a scheme to transform society, using it as a standard to transform and distinguish individuals, and even using it as a justification to combat dissidents, arbitrarily dividing "friends" and "enemies", engaging in violence in the name of "virtue", these measures as an ideology was defined as "Jacobinism" by the scholars today [14].

Starobinski had implied such tragic ending: "The poet wants to wed his poetry. Successful art then results in the silence of art. If everything must end in actual pleasure, life drives out art" [9]. Under Starobinski's context of "Pygmalion", his misinterpretation and confusion on Rousseau's virtue not only blinded Robespierre's eyes, causing his incapability to recognize the situation in time, and thus frequently make wrong decisions and mistakes in governing the country, but also made him to be paranoid and extreme, ultimately he also became a victim to sacrifice for the Terror. His dictatorship is just one of the political consequences of substituting Personal Virtue for Civic Virtue. Robespierre's attempt to establish a "Republic of Virtue" didn't make "virtue" an ability of pursuing goodness, but a burden for everyone. In the end, the only person who meets Robespierre's criteria for a virtuous citizen can only be himself.

## 5. The finality of "Republic of Virtue"

From a larger scale, was Robespierre's perception of virtue also a deviation from Rousseau's? Robespierre did believe that virtue could be coerced, which is his famous assertion in the relationship between terror and virtue: "the virtue, without it the terror is disastrous; the terror, without it the virtue is impotent. The terror is nothing but the prompt, severe and inflexible justice, therefore it's the emanation of virtue" [13]. The direct result of this is the normalization of the state of exception. This constitute an inherent logic of the Terror, and

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<sup>4</sup> The original text of "public virtue" here is "vertu publique", in this context, public virtue that Robespierre referred to could be deemed equivalent to Civic Virtue.

is also the part where Robespierre's political thought is considered to be similar to some controversial parts in Rousseau's political theory. However, the theoretical pathways for this resemblance are different.

Generally speaking, Rousseau followed the route of traditional Republicanism, the way to realize his conception on a virtuous government aligns with one of the republican traditions: "In fact, at least three separate psychologies of civic virtue coexist in the classical republican tradition: one which grounds virtue in the education of desire, a second which roots it in the accommodation of interests, and a third which links it to the compulsion of duty... Rousseau, for example" [15]. Yet such effort to "make citizens" needs long-term accumulation and a relatively stable environment, which is impossible to be realized overnight under the urgent revolutionary context. Also, no matter what the standard for filtering and selection mechanism of attaining citizenship was like, classical Republicanism acknowledge that there's a threshold for attaining citizenship based on the wealth one possesses or the differences in one's talent or capabilities. Robespierre's attempt of enlarging citizenship without selection would lead to populism politics, which finds its confirmation in the political practice of the Sans-culottes.

Granted that Robespierre misinterpreted Rousseau's theories on virtue, Robespierre did inherit the idealism and romanticism trait from Rousseau's thoughts. This dangerous trait had caused Robespierre ignored the complexity of the real-life politics: he was more than an idealist but a politician, realizing "Republic of Virtue" is an attempt of trying to transform current society and institution completely and radically with absolute power, imposing certain ideas, values or schemes into real-life politics or realizing certain blueprints in theoretical conception forcibly, with highly idealism characteristics and basically impossible or hard to realize in the real-life politics. This logic coincides with utopianism and totalitarianism that cold war liberal scholars like Karl Popper, J. L. Talmon and Isaiah Berlin were criticizing [16], some also believes that Jacobinism was "Proto-totalitarianism" [17].

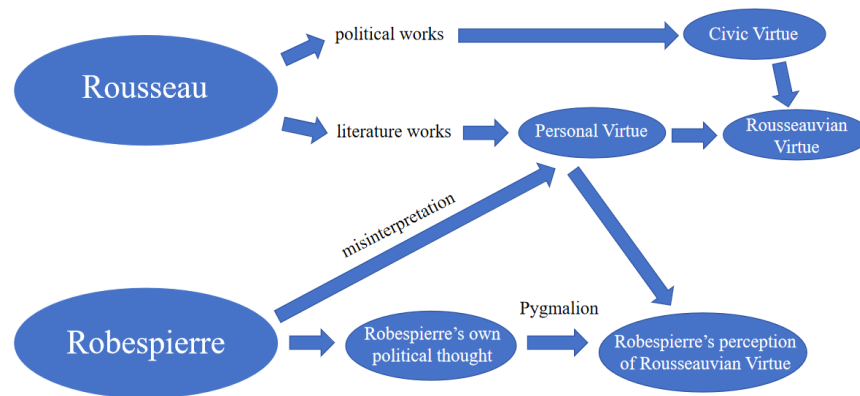
Along these lines, leave our analyses behind, even if Robespierre was actually implementing Rousseau's political thought, the failure of his attempt wouldn't have changed. But is there an appropriate way to deal with Rousseau and classical Republicanism's heritage? The answer was still unclear, what is helpful at contemporary context is by leveraging classical republicanism's emphasis on virtue to cultivate citizens' capability for political participation and civic awareness and public spirit, thereby enabling them to participate rationally and orderly in their political lives. Some scholars hold the opinion that Rousseau's heritage and French Revolution is ought to be "frozen" due to "modernity" [17], and some still wishes to improve and practice traditions from classical republicanism. Nonetheless, the inherent tension of virtue politics still needs to be addressed. Historical heritage suggests that democracy should always be vigilant to the pursuit for utopian political language without practical support. But to cope with problems like political polarization today, heritage from classical republicanism should be re-valued. The power of virtue in the classical Republicanism tradition is ought to be realized and utilized, so that people are able to become virtuous and actively participate in their own public lives.

Before coming to the conclusion, it is more adequate to address some potential concerns that readers may have. One of the counter-argument is that: it was the revolutionary political context of 1793-1794 that compelled Robespierre to appeal to the zealous worship of Rousseau's personal image of virtue, using it as a tool for political mobilization. From the external factors, Robespierre's performance during Terror could indeed be attributed to socio-political context, some also believe that Robespierre's plenty of acts are the response to severe economic and diplomatic crisis, while this kind of explanation may over focused on the external context. What's more, the evidence that this paper utilized was from 1789, this proves that Robespierre had already been into such misinterpretation and Pygmalion scenario before he came into power. One of the main efforts of this paper is just trying to argue that Robespierre misinterpreted Rousseau at an

unconscious state, rather than intentionally choose to do so after he came into power to deal with the current Revolutionary situation then. Talmon firstly interpreted Jacobins' act with term "improvisation" [11], then Fehér also used the term [17], which indicates that Robespierre's performance was but the process of hastily developing and implementing a rough and temporary framework out of necessity in response to emergencies, which was neither fully planned nor anticipated initially.

## 6. Conclusion

To disentangle the logic of our discussions so far, relationships of some key concepts mentioned in this paper can be illustrated with Figure 1 briefly:



**Figure 1.** The relationships of some key concepts mentioned in this paper

Taking everything into account, from his essay for Rousseau, Robespierre interpreted "Rousseauian Virtue" by treating Rousseau in a divine way that is different from Rousseau's original intention, in which he formed the cult of Rousseau under the enlightenment context, and such way of treating Rousseau was inappropriate for it would cause the confusion between Robespierre's own thought and those of Rousseau's. The potential mechanism for this confusion might come from the "Pygmalion" theory of Jean Starobinski, which means that Robespierre had equaled his own perception of Rousseau to Rousseau's original intention.

Meanwhile, in Robespierre's perception, "Rousseauian Virtue" was equal to the image of a perfect moral model that Rousseau had presented in his literature and autobiography works, especially the *Confessions*. But the term "Rousseauian Virtue" is a description of virtue that related to Rousseau, it covers both Civic Virtue as displayed in Rousseau's political works and thought like the *Social Contract*, and Personal Virtue as shown in his literature works like the *Confessions*. Robespierre had ignored this distinction, and tried to realize the "Republic of Virtue" only by his perception on the individual level, for the incommensurability of Civic Virtue and Personal Virtue, Robespierre's attempt to realize "Republic of Virtue" solely by his own perception was bound to lead into a tragic ending.

It is pointless here to argue whether it was some certain controversial factors that could lead to Totalitarianism in Rousseau's political thought (the utopia of Sovereign and General Will) that lead to Robespierre's failure or not, for we've demonstrated that Robespierre's perception of Rousseau's virtue was actually not from Rousseau's political works and thought, they are two independent categories, Robespierre was merely inherited the romantic trait from Rousseau and carried it with him when he came into power.

"Should Robespierre be responsible for Terror then?" The introduction of "Pygmalion" theory have already offered it an answer. In such case, the participant is also victim of certain ideas and perceptions.

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