

## Changes of Perspective Introduced by Rousseau in Educational Practice

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### Abstract

*This paper is an attempt to discuss Rousseau's ideas on educational practice through his book *Emile*, arguably one of the most noteworthy books on education available today. Rousseau makes an effort to describe an approach to education based on nature, emphasizing harmony and a strong concern for the child. Such concepts are fundamental in Rousseau's ideas, which would later impact child development theories of Werner, Pestalozzi, Herbert, Piaget and Vygotsky, albeit with different results and related theories.*

**Keywords:** Rousseau, *Emile*, education, Montessori, Plato, educational theory.

Throughout time, Rousseau's ideas have influenced many generations of educational thinkers and pioneered the practice of informal education. After Plato's *The Republic*, Rousseau's book *Emile* is arguably one of the most noteworthy books on education available today, with a profound impact on educational theory and practice. In *Emile*, he proposes an educational approach that should conform to the natural development of a human being.

Rousseau makes an effort to describe an approach to education based on nature, emphasizing harmony and a strong concern for the child. For him, it is possible to preserve the "original perfect nature" of a child if his environment and education are carefully controlled and the distinct physical and psychological stages are taken into consideration as the child matures. Such concepts are fundamental in Rousseau's ideas, which would later impact child development theories of Werner, Pestalozzi, Herbert, Piaget and Vygotsky, albeit with different results and related theories.

The right timing for learning, argued Rousseau, is through the child's natural growing and maturing process, where the role of the educator should be just to facilitate such a learning experience. It is, therefore, Rousseau's belief that human beings are naturally good, as he asserts "everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things" and "...the education of man begins at his birth; before speaking, before understanding, he is already learning" (Bloom, 1979, 37, 62). Since human beings are naturally good and no one can control "the education of nature," argues Rousseau, following the path of nature is the only way to success in education. Based on this premise of natural psychological and physical development, Rousseau develops his five distinct stages for educating *Emile* from birth to marriage.

To assess the impact of the changes brought about by Rousseau's perspective in educational practice, it is important to understand his views of child development and education, because it is in it that most of his influences carry on to this day. Rousseau's five child development stages are subdivided in line with the natural development of a child. The first stage begins at birth and goes through the end of infancy (or two years of age), with the rearing of the child. In this stage, the child should not be allowed to acquire any habits.

From this point on, the child starts the second stage, dubbed the "age of Nature," which should end when he is around 12 years old. It is in this stage that the child will only receive "negative education" (ibid., 93), where Rousseau argues that the "mind should be left undisturbed until its faculties have developed" (ibid., 132). For Rousseau, a child at his second stage of life (around elementary school age) is not capable of reasoning, and therefore should spend time fortifying his physical condition, health, and all his senses (ibid., 89, 132), since he argued that "sensual reason serves as the basis for intellectual reason," as a healthy body prepares the mind for reasoning.

Here, Rousseau's theory diverges from Plato's as he does not agree that the cultivation of virtues (through music and poetry) should precede physical training, since the soul of a child is not ready for reasoning (and of understanding what virtues are) in the second stage of child development. For Rousseau, it was unnatural to teach virtues that a child could not understand, and in doing so incurring the risk of planting a seed of vices in a child's heart.

Rousseau's and Plato's theory on moral education diverge mainly with regard to human nature, where Plato believes that the soul consists of both a rational and an *appetitive* part, while Rousseau believed that human beings are naturally good, exempt from harmful appetitive desires. "There is no original perversity in the human heart. There is not a single vice to be found in it of which it cannot be said how and whence it entered" (Ibid., 92), Rousseau says. This marks a significant change from any previous educational theory, particularly when he says, "Dare I express here the greatest, the most important, the most useful rule of all education? It is not to gain time but to lose it" (ibid., 93). Since Rousseau believed in the innate goodness of the human being, he insisted that "the first education ought to be purely negative," arguing that such education should consist "not at all in teaching virtue or truth but in securing the heart from vice and mind from error" (Ibid., 93).

The third stage, pre-adolescence, starts at 12 years of age and ends at 15 years of age. At this stage, the urge for activity takes a mental form, as the child develops a greater capacity for sustained attention span. It is important for the educator to be aware of it and adjust its tutoring accordingly, especially as Rousseau argues that the real teachers are experience and emotion (ibid., 168).

The fourth stage, puberty, starts at 15 years of age and ends at 20. For Rousseau, by the time a child is fifteen his reasoning is well developed, enabling him to deal with the issues surrounding adolescence, morals, and religion. Rousseau devotes most of Book IV to the discussion of moral development.

The last stage, the fifth, is characterized by adulthood, which for Rousseau happens within 20 and 25 years of age. It is in book V that Emile, now an adult, meets Sophie, learns about love and is ready to be reinserted in society. At this stage, the final task of the teacher is to provide initial marriage counseling, instructing the young couple on rights and duties of marriage (ibid., 407).

Rousseau's change of perspective in educational theory influenced many contemporary educational alternatives, including but not limited to home schooling and the Montessori system. The Montessori, in particular, is based on the view that children remarkably, and almost effortlessly, have the ability to absorb knowledge from their surroundings and can teach themselves. Rousseau's, however, provides an option for parents to safeguard their children from negative influences from their school peers and allow a more natural child education development. In fact, although it is hard to track a movement that remains partly underground, homeschooling advocates say that 1.5 million children nationwide are being taught at home, while independent researchers put the figure closer to one million. In any case, homeschoolers far outnumber the 400,000 students attending charter schools, a more mainstream alternative. Total public- and private-school enrollment in the U.S. is about 50 million (Fairclough, 2007).

Another main change in the new perspective introduced by Rousseau is his argument that the lessons a child learns should come not from the arbitrary attributed of the teacher, but from "experience and impotence," since the child's main educator is the environment (one of the Montessori educational system's basic pillars). For Rousseau, therefore, the child should do what he wants according to the limits of his natural environment, as long as the child's freedom is monitored.

Rousseau suggests that, to ensure this monitoring is effective, teachers should supervise an appropriate environment for the child. The teacher should be able to discern the true needs of the child and satisfy only the needs that are really necessary. A focus should be given to what is needed, and not what is wanted. For Rousseau, only by restricting the child's needs within the natural limits can the teacher prepare the child to become self-sufficient, which eventually will result in his ultimate happiness. He argues that the environment should be set in such a way that punishment "should always happen to children as a natural consequence of their bad action" (Ibid., 101), avoiding the imposition of rules or commands, which always generate opposition.

In addition, Rousseau argues, this method avoids oppressive (tyrannical) actions towards the child, which also prevents him from being inauthentic, which is a major theme for Rousseau at the second stage of the child's development, along with self-sufficiency and autonomy. He argues that authenticity, supported by self-sufficiency and autonomy, is the best way to strengthen the child against society's corruptive forces.

It is clear how Rousseau's educational ideas influenced the Montessori system, which is characterized as a place for individual learning, offering a mixture of ages, where the older child learns through teaching the younger and the younger, in turn, is inspired to do more advanced work by having the older child in the same environment. This indirect (and subtle) intervention from the teacher has support in Rousseau's book III, as he argues that teachers should "Put questions within [the child's] reach and let him solve them himself," and continues to encourage the child's autonomous learning when he advises teachers to "Let him know nothing because you have told him, but because he has learned it for himself" (ibid., 177). It is important to note that, although the idea of letting the child learn things for himself now seems a commonplace assumption in most progressive schools, it was a relatively revolutionary concept during the 18th century in France. It is clear that Dewey's pedagogical principles at least in this case, were also influenced by Rousseau's ideas.

A relevant observation of Rousseau's influence in the Montessori system is that after showing interest in an activity and receiving a lesson from the teacher, the child continues working with the material and returns it to its proper place, turning a Montessori classroom into a community of workers with freedom of movement and choice (Montessori, 1988). This conveys how Rousseau's assumption about the innate goodness of the human being is central in the Montessori theory, especially when it comes to moral education, when his educational method is "intended to create a man, rather than a citizen" (Glenn, 2005, 16). If there are any vices or wickedness in the child's heart, the responsibility is always on the side of the teacher and the society.

The Montessori method lacks the restraint of personal efforts, such as self-control or self-discipline, particularly with regards to moral endeavors, as Rousseau denies the selfish and conflicting part of our nature, suggesting that we are born as a congruous being. His assumption about human nature is also evident in the Montessori theory, since most of the class time is spent on individual or small groups, and at times spent in whole-class activities (circle-times), such as singing, storytelling, movement exercises, or large muscle activities. "The method fosters a child's discovery of his own environment and surroundings, and encourages the practice of social skills, not just academic, respecting the limits of the community, as a way to form foundations for growing independence" (ibid., 1988).

Another of Rousseau's influence in the Montessori and other education theories is the significant hands-on experience as a natural method of instruction that is carried out through activities such as role playing, games, and arts, supported in Rousseau's statements in Book IV: "It requires much art to prevent social man from becoming totally artificial" (Bloom, 1979, 231), which comes across as very paradoxical if considering much of the pedagogical program laid out in *Emile*.

A major aspect that makes Rousseau's educational theory questionable at times, however, is his view on the value and usefulness of books. He argues that reading, "is the plague of childhood and almost the only occupation we know how to give it. At twelve Emile will hardly know what a book is" (ibid., 116). In my view, it is important for a child to be engaged in mnemonic activities and book reading, as a way of enriching his or her knowledge base, particularly in the case of international students and immigrants, where the need for absorption of a new culture and language cannot fully take place without these supporting activities. This is also true for poor children and students in general, who may not have benefit from the opportunities of traveling, going to a theater, watching a movie, or visiting an art gallery or museum.

In conclusion, Rousseau's educational inheritance does not seem to promote a balanced educational curriculum. His educational theory has its roots in a particular understanding of child development, and has been a remarkable influence on education, as argued by Aeschliman, who places Rousseau as "the father of educational 'developmentalism'" and points out his influence also on "educational progressivism" (Aeschliman, 2005, 3).

It appears, however, that an educational theory will find balance not in Rousseau alone, but also in Plato, when the two are combined. The educational process would benefit from Plato's focus on harmony (music and poetry) and on educational discipline and rigor, coupled with Rousseau's position that natural goodness is innate in a child (as opposed to its being a goal, according to Plato), and the focus on the practical experience from early on in a child's education.

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