

Rousseau: A Romantic in the Age of Reason

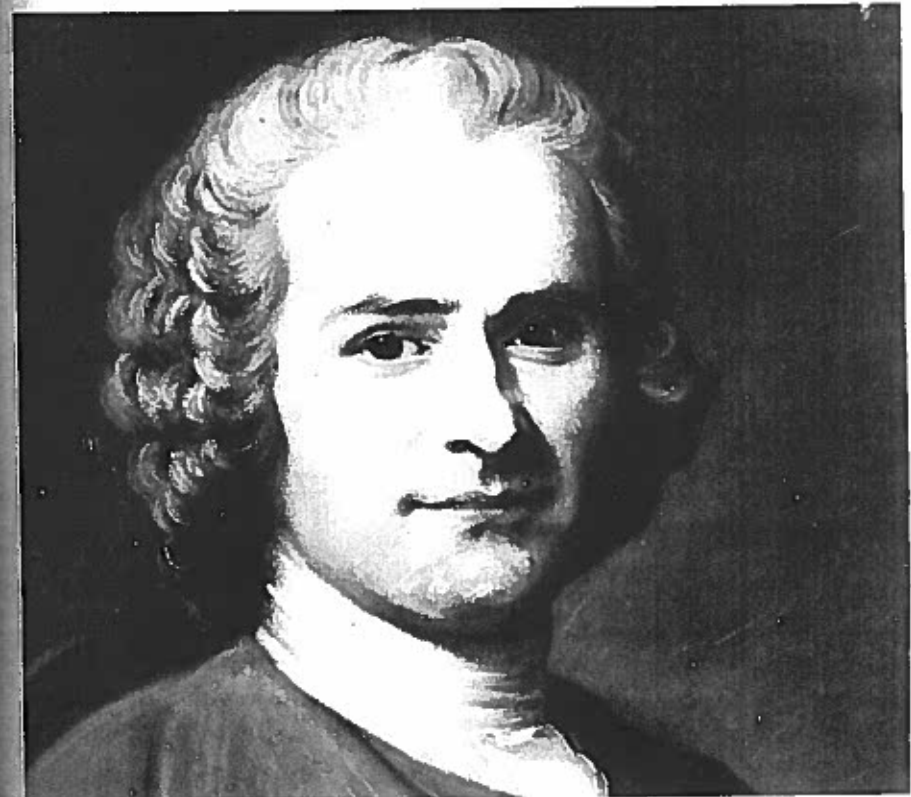
Stumpf, Samuel Enoch. Socrates
to Sautre. Toronto: McGraw-Hill
Inc, 1982.

Rousseau's career unfolded during the French Enlightenment, that Age of Reason which in eighteenth-century France was dominated by Voltaire (1694–1778), Montesquieu (1689–1755), Diderot (1713–1784), Condorcet (1743–1794) d'Holbach, and others who were known as *philosophes*. These men were, for the most part, dissident voices who challenged the traditional modes of thought concerning religion, government, and morality. Believing that human reason provides the most reliable guide to man's destiny, they held that "Reason is to the *philosophe* what grace is to the Christian." This was the theme of that remarkable *Encyclopédie* (1751–1780) which contained the distinctive ideas of the *philosophes* and which, under the editorship of Diderot and d'Alembert, consisted by 1780 of thirty-five volumes. Into this vigorous intellectual climate Rousseau entered with the most unlikely credentials. Despite little formal education, he fashioned a set of ideas about human nature with such compelling power that his thought ultimately prevailed over the most impressive thinkers of his time.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in Geneva in 1712. His mother died a few

days after his birth, and his father, a watchmaker, left him at age ten in the care of an aunt who had raised him. After two years in a boarding school where, he says in his *Confessions*, "we were to learn . . . all the insignificant trash that has obtained the name of education," he was recalled to his aunt's household and thus, at the age of twelve, his formal education came to an end. After a short apprenticeship as an engraver of watchcases, he left Geneva and wandered from place to place meeting a series of people who alternately helped him make a meager living or referred him to still other potential benefactors. Along the way he read books and developed his skills in music. Eventually he wandered into France and there came under the care of a noblewoman, Mme. de Warens, who sought to further his formal education, an attempt which failed, and to arrange for his employment. His most consistent work was copying music, though he was for a while tutor to the children of M. de Mably, who was grand provost of Lyons and later he was secretary to the French Ambassador to Venice. He was a precocious child and learned to read at an early age. In his twenties he read portions of the classic works of Plato, Virgil, Horace, Montaigne, Pascal, and

Rousseau (The Bettmann Archive)





Voltaire, which in their variety strongly influenced his imagination. From Lyons he went armed with letters of introduction from the Mablys to Paris where he met some of the most influential persons of this capitol city. Here he was struck by the contrast of noble wealth and sweaty artisans, the majesty of cathedrals and bishops who read the heretical ideas of Voltaire, the gaiety of the salons and the tragic themes of Racine's plays. Although he met many notables, including Diderot, and moved increasingly in the upper circles of French society, he retained his childhood shyness, especially with women, and in 1746 eventually formed a lifelong relationship with an uneducated young servant girl, Thérèse Levasseur, whom he finally married in 1768.

Rousseau's literary career began with his prize-winning essay entitled *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750). With strong emotional power he argued that morals had been corrupted by the replacement of religion by science, by sensuality in art, by licentiousness in literature, and by the emphasis upon logic at the expense of feeling. The essay made Rousseau instantly famous, leading Diderot to say that "never was there an instance of a like success." There followed in 1752 an operetta, *Le Devin du Village*, performed before the King and his court at Fontainebleau, and a comedy, *Narcisse*, played by the Comédie-Française. Two important works appeared in 1755, his *Discourse on What Is the Origin of the Inequality Among Men, and Is It Authorized by Natural Law?*, and a *Discourse on Political Economy* which appeared in the *Encyclopédie*. In 1761 Rousseau published a love story, *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, which became the most celebrated novel of the eighteenth century. His book *Émile*, published in 1762, offered an elaborate proposal for a new approach to education and contained also a provocative section, "The Confession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar," which was critical of institutional religion while advocating the importance of religion to mankind. In the same year he published his most famous work, *The Social Contract*, in which he sought to describe the passage from the "state of nature" to the civil state and to answer why it is that laws governing men are legitimate.

Rousseau's last days were unhappy as he was in failing health and suffered from profound paranoia. Moreover, his books were severely criticized by the leaders of both church and state, and word went out that "J.-J. Rousseau shall be apprehended and brought to the Concierge prison in the Palace [of Justice]." He became a fugitive, and at one point he accepted David Hume's invitation to visit him in England where he spent sixteen months. He returned to France convinced that his enemies were plotting to defame him. When he was told that Voltaire was dying, he said, "Our lives were linked to each other; I shall not survive him long." In July, 1778, Rousseau died at the age of sixty-six. His remarkably frank and detailed autobiography was published after his death in his *Confessions*.

THE PARADOX OF LEARNING

When Rousseau read the announcement by the Academy of Dijon that a prize would be given for the best essay on the question "Whether the restoration of the



arts and sciences has had the effect of purifying or corrupting morals?" he reacted with passionate excitement at the prospect of writing just such an essay. Looking back upon that moment, he said, "I felt myself dazzled by a thousand sparkling lights. Crowds of vivid ideas thronged into my mind with a force and confusion that threw me into unspeakable agitation." He was already thirty-eight years old, had read widely in classical and contemporary literature, had traveled in Switzerland, Italy, and France, had observed the ways of different cultures, and had spent enough time in the social circles of Paris to have nothing but contempt for that sophisticated society. "If ever I could have written a quarter of what I saw and felt," he continued, "with what clarity I should have brought out all the contradictions of our social system." What he did set out to show was that "man is by nature good, and that only our institutions have made him bad." This turned out to be the underlying theme of Rousseau's future writings. But in this essay, this theme lacked precision and clarity, for, as Rousseau himself admitted, "though full of force and fire, [this first *Discourse*] was absolutely wanting in logic and order . . . and it is the weakest in reasoning of all the works I ever wrote." For this reason, Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* was an easy target for his critics. It was inevitable that his readers would have difficulty with his paradoxical argument that civilization is the cause of unhappiness or that the corruption of society is caused by learning in the arts and sciences.

Rousseau begins his *Discourse* with high praise for the achievements of human reason, saying that "it is a noble and beautiful spectacle to see man raising himself . . . from nothing by his own exertions; dissipating by the light of reason all the thick clouds by which he was by nature enveloped." Only a few sentences later, his essay becomes a slashing attack upon the arts, literature and sciences which, he says, "fling garlands of flowers over the chains which weight men down" in their common life and "stifle in men's hearts that sense of original liberty for which they seem to have been born." Rousseau recognizes that human nature was not really any better in earlier times but believed that the arts and sciences produced some significant changes making men worse. Before art and literature molded our behavior and taught our passions to speak an artificial language, our morals, says Rousseau, were rude but natural. Modern manners have made everyone conform in speech, dress, and attitude, always following the laws of fashion, never the promptings of our own nature, so that we no longer dare appear to be what we really are. The herd of mankind all act exactly alike and thus we never know even among our friends with whom we are dealing. Human relationships are now full of deceptions, whereas earlier men could easily see through one another, an advantage which prevented their having many vices.

Rousseau directed his attack also against luxury and against political leaders who emphasized the economic aspects of politics. He reminded his contemporaries that "the politicians of the ancient world were always talking about morals and virtue; ours speak of nothing but commerce and money." His argument against luxury was that it could produce a brilliant but not a lasting society, for although money "buys everything else, it cannot buy morals and citizens." Artists and musicians pursuing luxury will lower their genius to the level of the times, composing mediocre works that will be immediately admired. This is the evil



consequence of learning in the arts and sciences where morals no longer have their rightful place and where taste has been corrupted. One way to confront this matter is to acknowledge the role of women for, says Rousseau, "men will always be what women choose to make them. If you wish then they should be noble and virtuous, let women be taught what greatness of soul and virtue are." But, says Rousseau, the question is no longer whether a man is honest but whether he is clever, not whether a book is useful but whether it is well-written. Rewards are lavished on ingenuity, but virtue is left unhonored.

Rousseau pointed to historical evidence for the notion that progress in the arts and sciences always leads to the corruption of morals and the decay of society. Egypt, he said not altogether correctly, was "the mother of philosophy and the fine arts; soon she was conquered by Cambyses, and then successively by the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs and finally the Turks." Similarly, Greece, once peopled by heroes, "always learned, always voluptuous, and always a slave, has experienced amid all its revolutions no more than a change of masters." It was for this reason that in Greece "not all the eloquence of Demosthenes could breathe life into a body which luxury and the arts had once enervated." Rome developed a great empire when she was a nation of barbarians and soldiers, but when she relaxed the stoic discipline and fell into epicurean indulgence, she was scorned by other nations and derided even by the barbarians. Only Sparta, where patriotism was the supreme virtue and where arts, artists, science, and scholars were not tolerated, emerged as Rousseau's ideal state.

To see Rousseau praising ignorance during the height of the Enlightenment is an astonishing spectacle. But he did not mean to say that philosophy and science had no value. He quoted approvingly the words of Socrates who also had praised ignorance. For Athens had its sophists, poets, orators, and artists who had made extravagant claims to knowledge while in fact they knew very little, whereas, says Socrates, "I am at least in no doubt of my ignorance." What Rousseau was concerned about was the danger to morals and society caused by the confusion of contending theories or points of view. If everyone is allowed to pursue his own thoughts about moral values or even about scientific truth, it is inevitable that there will be serious differences of opinion. If differences of opinion are to be found everywhere, it will not be long before a deep skepticism will spread throughout the population.

A stable society is based upon a set of opinions or values which the majority accept as the rule for their thought and behavior. Rousseau believed that these firmly held opinions can be undermined by philosophy and science for several reasons. For one thing, each society is unique and its genius is its special local set of values. But science and philosophy seek to discover universal truth. The very pursuit of such universal truth exposes the local opinion as less than the truth and thereby destroys its authority. To compound this problem, science emphasizes the requirement of proof and evidence, yet the dominant opinions about the most important subjects cannot be demonstrated beyond doubt and therefore they lose their binding force. Moreover, science requires an attitude of doubt which is contrary to the mood of ready acceptance of opinion. What keeps

society together is faith not knowledge. Both the scientist and the philosopher suspend faith during their pursuit of knowledge. So long as this suspension of faith is restricted to certain special individuals there is no great harm. What disturbed Rousseau was the damage done by the wide diffusion among the population of the spirit of doubt which culminates in skepticism. The step from skepticism to the loosening of morality in turn inevitably causes a weakening of public virtue, which Rousseau understood chiefly as the virtue of patriotism. The very spirit of science undermines patriotism since the scientist tends to be cosmopolitan, whereas the patriot has a strong attachment to his own society. To counteract these disintegrating trends in society, strong governments become necessary and this, according to Rousseau, paves the way to despotism.

In the end, Rousseau's quarrel was not so much with philosophy and science as with the attempt to popularize these disciplines. He had great respect for Sir Francis Bacon, Descartes, and Sir Isaac Newton, whom he considered great teachers of mankind. But, he said, "It belongs only to a few to raise monuments to the glory of human learning," and it is proper to allow some men to apply themselves to the study of the arts and sciences. His attack was upon those who would distort knowledge by trying to make it popular, "those compilers who have indiscreetly broken open the door to the sciences and introduced into their sanctuary a populace unworthy to approach it." Men need to know, said Rousseau that "nature would have preserved them from science, as a mother snatches a dangerous weapon from the hands of her child." Ordinary men should build their happiness upon the opinions which "we can find in our own hearts." Virtue, says Rousseau, is the "sublime science of simple minds," for the true philosophy is to "listen to the voice of conscience."

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Although Rousseau compares natural man in the "state of nature" with man as a citizen of a civil society, he admits that he cannot give a specific account of how the transition from the earlier condition to the later one occurred. The purpose of his book *The Social Contract* is therefore not to describe the change from man's natural state to his subsequent membership in a political society but rather to provide an answer to the question why it is that a person ought to obey the laws of government. Thus, Rousseau begins his book with the famous phrase that "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains." "How," he continues, "did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer."

In the state of nature, man was happy, not because he was an angel but because he lived entirely for himself and therefore possessed an absolute independence. Rousseau rejected the doctrine of original sin and instead believed that the origin of evil is to be found in the later stages of man's development in society. In the state of nature, says Rousseau, man is motivated by "a natural sentiment [*amour de soi*] which inclines every animal to watch over his own



preservation, and which, directed in man by reason and pity, produces humanity and virtue." By contrast, as man develops social contacts, he also develops vices, for now he is motivated by "an artificial sentiment [*amour propre*] which is born in society and which leads every individual to make more of himself than every other," and "this inspires in men all the evils they perpetrate on each other . . ." including intense competition for the few places of honor, envy, malice, vanity, pride, and contempt. Ultimately, it was impossible to live alone, for in all probability, says Rousseau, it was the steady growth in numbers that first brought men together into society. How, then, were men to reconcile the independence into which they were born with the inevitability that they would have to live together? The problem, says Rousseau, is "to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone." The solution to this problem is "the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community." While this solution appears on the surface to be a prescription for despotism, Rousseau was convinced that it was the road to freedom.

The idea of a "social contract" seems to imply that such a contract was entered into at some point in the historic past. Rousseau did not view the contract in historical terms since he admitted that there is no way to discover evidence for such an event. For him, the social contract is a living reality which will be found to be present wherever there is a legitimate government. This living contract is the fundamental principle underlying a political association; this principle helps to overcome the lawlessness of absolute license and assures liberty, because everyone willingly adjusts his conduct to harmonize with the legitimate freedom of others. What man loses by the social contract is his "natural liberty" and an unlimited right to everything; what he gains is "civil liberty" and a property right in what he possesses. The essence of the social contract, says Rousseau, is that "each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of a whole." This contract tacitly assumes that whoever refuses to obey the *general will* shall be compelled to do so by the whole body; in short, "this means that he will be forced to be free."

What is the justification for saying that citizens can be "forced to be free"? The law is, after all, the product of the "general will." In turn, the general will is, says Rousseau, the will of the "sovereign." For Rousseau, the sovereign consists of the total number of citizens of a given society. The general will of the sovereign is therefore the single will which reflects the sum of the wills of all the individual citizens. The many wills of the citizens can be considered one general will because everyone who is a party to the social contract (as every citizen is) has agreed to direct his actions (to limit his actions) to achieving the common good. Each citizen by thinking of his own good realizes that he should refrain from any behavior that would cause others to turn upon and injure him. In this way, each citizen understands that his own good and his own freedom is connected with the common good. Ideally, therefore, each individual's will is identical with every

other individual's since they are all directed to the same purpose, namely, the common good. Because in this ideal setting all the individual wills are identical or at least consistent, it can be said that there is only one will, the general will. For this reason it can also be said that if laws are the product of the sovereign general will, each individual is really the author of those laws and in this way each person obeys only himself. The element of force or compulsion enters Rousseau's formula only when someone refuses to obey a law.

Rousseau distinguishes between the "general will" and the "will of all," saying that "there is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will." What differentiates these two forms of the collective wills is the purpose each attempts to achieve. If the "will of all" had the same purpose as the "general will," namely, the common good or justice, there would be no difference between them. But, says Rousseau, there is often a different purpose pursued by the "will of all," where "all" refers to the voters of a group, even if by chance they are in the majority. Such a deviant purpose reflects special or private interests as opposed to the common good. When this happens, society no longer has a general will; it now has as many wills as there are groups or "factions." If therefore, the general will is to be able to express itself, there must not be factions or partial societies within the state. Rousseau was convinced that if the people were given adequate information and had the opportunity to deliberate and even if the citizens had no communication with one another and simply thought their own thoughts, they would arrive at the general will. They would choose the path leading to the common good or justice. Only the common good would provide the setting for the greatest possible freedom for each citizen.

At this point there could be someone who chooses not to obey the law. If the law was made with the common good or justice in mind, as opposed to special interests, then the law truly expresses the general will. The person who votes against this law or chooses to disobey it is in error: "When therefore the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less than that I was mistaken, and that what I thought to be the general will was no so." When a law is proposed, the citizens are not asked to approve or reject the proposal: they are asked to decide whether it is in conformity with the general will, that is, with the common good or justice. Only when the question is put this way can it be said that "the general will is found by counting the votes." Only under these circumstances is there any justification for forcing someone to obey the law. In effect he is then being forced to behave in accordance with a law he would have been willing to obey if he had accurately understood the requirements of the common good which alone provides him with the greatest amount of freedom. Only under these circumstances, says Rousseau, is it legitimate to say that "he will be forced to be free."

Rousseau was under no illusion that it would be easy to establish all the conditions for making just laws in the modern world. For one thing, much of his thought reflected the conditions in his small native Geneva where participation by the citizens could be more direct. In addition, his vision included certain assumptions that would require considerable human virtue. If everyone were



required to obey the laws, then everyone would be entitled to participate in deciding upon those laws. When making the laws, those persons involved in the decisions would have to overcome special interests or the concerns of factions and self-consciously think of the common good. Rousseau also believed that all the citizens should be equally involved in the making of the laws, that the laws should not be made even by representatives, for "the people cannot, even if it wishes, deprive itself of this incommunicable right. . . ." But as the modern state has continued to grow in size and complexity, a development that Rousseau had already seen happening in his own day, his assumptions and conditions for achieving the just society appeared to be more of an ideal than an immediate possibility.

Taken as a whole, Rousseau's writings represented an attack on the Age of Reason, gave impetus to the Romantic movement by emphasizing feeling (leading Goethe to say that "feeling is all"), revived religion even though he had doubts about some traditional teachings, provided a new direction for education (his book *Émile* was considered by some the best work on education since Plato's *Republic*), inspired the French Revolution, made a unique impact upon political philosophy, and, more than any of his contemporaries, he influenced several subsequent philosophers, especially Immanuel Kant. On one occasion Kant was so absorbed in reading Rousseau's *Émile* that he forgot to take his celebrated daily walk. While Kant admitted that it was David Hume who awakened him from his dogmatic slumbers regarding the theory of knowledge, it was Rousseau who showed him the way to a new theory of morality. So impressed was Kant by the insights of Rousseau that he hung a picture of him on the wall of his study, convinced that Rousseau was the Newton of the moral world.

Kant: Critical Mediator Between Dogmatism and Skepticism

Immanuel Kant lived all of his eighty years (1724–1804) in the small provincial town of Königsberg in East Prussia. His parents were of modest means, and their religious spirit, nurtured by a sect known as Pietists, was to have permanent influence upon Kant's thought and personal life. His education began at the local Collegium Fredericianum, whose director was also a Pietist, and in 1740 Kant entered the University of Königsberg. At the university he studied the classics, physics, and philosophy. The German universities of this time were dominated by the philosopher Christian von Wolff (1679–1754), who was neither a great nor an original thinker but whose achievement was that he stimulated philosophic activity by developing a comprehensive system of philosophy along the lines of Leibniz's rationalism and metaphysics. Kant's professor at Königsberg, Martin Knutzen, had come under the influence of this Wolff-Leibnizian approach to philosophy, and inevitably Kant's university training placed much emphasis upon the power of human reason to move with certainty in the realm of metaphysics. Although Martin Knutzen had thus slanted Kant's education toward the tradition of Continental rationalism, it was also Knutzen's