Books You Might Like

Leo J. Tick

Abstract

(BOOKS & COKES, sponsored by SKETCH, presents regular weekly student-planned, student-presented book reviews in the Oak Room, Memorial Union, throughout fall and spring quarters. Supplementing that program, here is an ambitious study of the great Naturalist philosopher, regarded as ‘the father of the French Revolution, romanticism, democracy, anarchism, republicanism, communism, and fascism’; and, after 150 years, profoundly influential today...)
"Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Author of Nature; but everything degenerates in the hands of man."

With these words, Jean Jacques Rousseau, vagabond, sentimentalist, libertine began his Emile and a revolution in education.

Rousseau lived in the 18th Century, at the time of Louis XV and royal absolutism, when artificiality in court behavior was at its height, and the degraded peasants were being ground down to provide for the pleasure of the vicious upper class.

Under this oppression was arising a spirit of protest, a desire to return to simpler conditions. Rousseau became one of the leading spokesmen in this protest; no man was better fitted by nature for the task.

Born in 1712 in Geneva, the son of a watchmaker, Rousseau was reared by an indulgent aunt who failed to give him any moral principle. The careless attitude of his father aided in the formation of Rousseau's extreme emotionality and imaginative-ness; these characteristics matured early and remained for most of his life.

His physical environment cultivated an undiminishing love of nature and stimulated his theory that restraint of impulses and departure from nature corrupted and ruined humanity.

His boyhood years were spent in trade apprenticeships, vagrancy, menial service and dissoluteness. Following this, he came under the care of Madame de Warens, a woman of considerable beauty and easy morals. Her support enabled Rousseau to study music, Latin, philosophy and some science.

Later wanderings strengthened his love of nature and taught him to sympathize with the poor and oppressed. Drifting to Paris, he was forced to earn a living for himself and a stupid servant girl with whom he lived for the rest of his life.
In 1750, Rousseau's literary career began when he entered a contest sponsored by the Academy of Dejon. The theme for the prize essay: *Has the progress of the arts and science contributed to corrupt or to purify morals*, served to focus Rousseau's ideas on the corruption and oppression due to the advancement of civilization. Winning the prize, Rousseau created a tremendous furor and was lifted to fame. Later, the same academy awarded him a second prize for his famous discourse on *The Origin of Inequality Among Men*, wherein he reaffirms that oppressive distinctions arose with the advancement of civilization, especially through the institution of private property.

In 1761, his discourse on the family entitled, *La Nouvelle Heloise* was published. The climax of Rousseau's career came in 1762 with the appearance of his influential essay on political ethics known as the *Social Contract*. He realizes the ideal state, not in nature, but in a society managed by people, where simplicity and natural wants prevail. This same year brought *Emile* to the world and exile to Rousseau.

To expound his educational theories, Rousseau makes use of an imaginary pupil, Emile, who is given the prescribed type of education. This device has been much used among writers, one of the most noted being John Locke, and serves to add the interest of a narrative to an exposition.

*Emile* is divided into five books. The first four deal with Emile's education during the periods of infancy, childhood, boyhood and youth. The fifth book describes the training to be given the girl who will become Emile's wife. This division was believed proper by Rousseau, as each of these periods are marked by different desires of a child.

During the first five years of Emile's life his main desire is for physical activity, and to this end he must be given the utmost freedom. He is to be reared in the country, close to nature, given a spontaneous training; left unrestrained by swaddling clothes. "The only habit," says Rousseau, "which the child should be allowed to contract, is no habit whatsoever." Emile's playthings will be plain, and only words which express real ideas to the child are to be used by the tutor.

The childhood period from five to twelve is marked by Emile's desire to sense things. "As all that enters human understanding comes there through the senses, the first reason of man is a sensuous reason. Our first teachers of philosophy are our feet,
our hands and our eyes. In order to learn to think, we must then exercise our limbs, our senses and our organs which are the instruments of our intelligence.”

The training given is in keeping with this notion. Rousseau condemns the practice of requiring pupils to learn so much before reaching the proper years. He asks, “Shall I venture to state, at this point, the most important, the most useful rule of all education? It is not to gain time, but to lose it.”

As Emile cannot escape society, he is given some idea of property and conduct, but “until he reaches the age of reason, he can form no idea of moral beings or social relations” so Emile learns by the “natural” consequences of his acts.

Between twelve and fifteen, there comes “an interval when his faculties and powers are greater than his desires,” when Emile has an insatiable curiosity of nature and a wish for rational knowledge. It becomes for Emile “the time of labor, instruction and study.” He is to learn a trade and study the natural sciences. Rousseau’s method is to “ask questions that are within Emile’s comprehension, and leave him to resolve them. Let him know nothing because you have told him, but because he has comprehended it himself; he is not to learn science but to discover it. If you ever substitute in his mind authority for reason, he will no longer reason.”

The fourth book takes Emile from fifteen to twenty years of age. Here, says Rousseau, the sex interests appear, and they must be properly guided. “We have formed his body, his senses and his intelligence; it remains to give him a heart.” He is to become moral, affectionate and religious. To this end, appeals to Emile’s emotions are made, while he is witnessing concrete examples of wretchedness.

Emile is now a man and a life companion must be found for him. “In order to find her, we must know her.” The final book of Emile deals with the education of Sophie, the ideal woman. Rousseau insists,

“The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to make life sweet and agreeable to them—these are the duties of women at all times, and what should be taught them from infancy.”

An evaluation of Emile is a difficult task. The character of its author is such as might prejudice a critic. His emotional ap-
peals, his contradictions and rhetorical statements, are distasteful to the analytical reader. Yet, to have become the great educational classic it is, *Emile* must have possessed sufficient merit.

As a guide for the rearing of children, *Emile* is abominable. In order to make Emile a social being, Rousseau would have him live apart from society, with "nature" and his tutor as his only companions. Strangers will enter his life to perform certain educational, and often unpleasant, acts; then disappear. At the required age, this anti-social being will suddenly desire others. Upon entering society, he will feel uncomfortable at first but will soon adjust, and all will come to love him.

The inconsistencies and erraticisms in *Emile* are numerous. Emile is to have no parents, yet soon his mother comes to visit. His isolation is forgotten on occasions by attendance at fairs, parties, and competitions with his fellows. Emile is to have his individuality developed to its utmost, but Sophie's is to be trained out of her.

Through the entire work, Rousseau continually sways from optimism to pessimism, from spontaneity to authority, from liberalism to intolerance.

With all these defects, there is contained in *Emile* such insights into the child, that its greatness is justified. Rousseau was one of the first to recognize that different periods existed in the child's life, with a maturity attached to each of them. The use of a child's interest as a motivating force, which Rousseau advocated, is basic to John Dewey's philosophy of education. His plea for the study of the child as such, led to the child becoming the center of discussion in modern training, rather than the adult which is to be.

Perhaps Rousseau was too violent in his complete condemnation of the existing social order, but the times called for just such an attack. *Emile* caused a resurgent interest in education, and, as men came forward to defend the status quo, they found it faulty and began to change it.

In the years following *Emile*’s appearance, the number of educational works increased tremendously over what it had been, previously. Had this been Rousseau's only contribution, it alone renders him and *Emile* worthy of immortality. For, as gadfly, Rousseau shares the company of some of the world’s greatest men.

—Leo J. Tick, Grad.