Rousseau, Jean-Jacques

Go Back to **rulesversailles**

(1712-1778)
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the least academic of modern philosophers, was in many ways the most influential. His thought marked the end of the Age of Reason and the birth of Romanticism. He propelled political and ethical thinking into new channels. His reforms revolutionized taste, first in music, then in the other arts. He had a profound impact on people's way of life; he taught parents to take a new interest in their children and to educate them differently; he furthered the expression of emotion rather than polite restraint in friendship and love. He introduced the cult of religious sentiment among people who had discarded religious dogma. He opened men's eyes to the beauties of nature, and he made liberty an object of almost universal aspiration.

Formative years

Rousseau was born in Geneva–the city of Calvin–on June 28, 1712. His mother died in childbirth and he was brought up by his father, who taught him to believe that the city of his birth was a republic as splendid as Sparta or ancient Rome. Rousseau senior had an equally glorious image of his own importance; after marrying above his modest station as a watchmaker, he got into trouble with the civil authorities by brandishing the sword that his upper-class pretentions prompted him to wear, and he had to leave Geneva to avoid imprisonment. Rousseau, the son, then lived for six years as a poor relation in his mother's family, patronized and humiliated, until he, too, at the age of 16, fled from Geneva to live the life of an adventurer and a Roman Catholic convert in the kingdoms of Sardinia and France.

Rousseau was fortunate in finding in the province of Savoy a benefactress named the Baronne de Warens, who provided him with a refuge in her home and employed him as her steward. She also furthered his education to such a degree that the boy who had arrived on her doorstep as a stammering apprentice who had never been to school developed into a philosopher, a man of letters, and a musician.

Mme de Warens, who thus transformed the adventurer into a philosopher, was herself an adventuress–a Swiss convert to Catholicism who had stripped her husband of his money before fleeing to Savoy with the gardener's son to set herself up as a Catholic missionary specializing in the conversion of young male Protestants. Her morals distressed Rousseau, even when he became her lover. But she was a woman of taste, intelligence, and energy, who brought out in Rousseau just the talents that were needed to conquer Paris at a time when Voltaire had made radical ideas fashionable.

Rousseau reached Paris when he was 30 and was lucky enough to meet another young man from the provinces seeking literary fame in the capital, Denis Diderot. The two soon became immensely successful as the centre of a group of intellectuals–or Philosophes“–who gathered round the great French Encyclop+¬die, of which Diderot was appointed editor. The Encyclop+¬die was an important organ of radical and anticlerical opinion, and its contributors were as much reforming and even iconoclastic pamphleteers as they were philosophers. Rousseau, the most original of them all in his thinking and the most forceful and eloquent in his style of writing, was soon the most conspicuous. He wrote music as well as prose, and one of his operas, Le Devin du village (1752 The Cunning-Man), attracted so much admiration from the king and the court that he might have enjoyed an easy life as

a fashionable composer, but something in his Calvinist blood rejected this type of worldly glory. Indeed, at the age of 37 Rousseau had what he called an “illumination” while walking to Vincennes to visit Diderot, who had been imprisoned there because of his irreligious writings. In the Confessions, which he wrote late in life, Rousseau says that it came to him then in a “terrible flash” that modern progress had corrupted instead of improved men. He went on to write his first important work, a prize essay for the Academy of Dijon entitled Discours sur les sciences et les arts (1750 A Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts), in which he argues that the history of man's life on earth has been a history of decay.

This Discourse is by no means Rousseau's best piece of writing, but its central theme was to inform almost everything else he wrote. Throughout his life he kept returning to the thought that man is good by nature but has been corrupted by society and civilization. He did not mean to suggest that society and civilization were inherently bad but rather that both had taken a wrong direction and become more harmful as they had become more sophisticated. This idea in itself was not unfamiliar when Rousseau published his Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts. Many Roman Catholic writers deplored the direction that European culture had taken since the Middle Ages. They shared the hostility toward progress that Rousseau had expressed. What they did not share was his belief that man was naturally good. It was, however, just this belief in man's natural goodness that Rousseau made the cornerstone of his argument.

Rousseau may well have received the inspiration for this belief from Mme de Warens; for although that unusual woman had become a communicant of the Roman Catholic Church, she retained–and transmitted to Rousseau–much of the sentimental optimism about human purity that she had herself absorbed as a child from the mystical Protestant Pietists who were her teachers in the canton of Bern. At all events, the idea of man's natural goodness, as Rousseau developed it, set him apart from both conservatives and radicals. Even so, for several years after the publication of his first Discourse, he remained a close collaborator in Diderot's essentially progressive enterprise, the Encyclop+¬die, and an active contributor to its pages. His speciality there was music, and it was in this sphere that he first established his influence as reformer.

Controversy with Rameau

The arrival of an Italian opera company in Paris in 1752 to perform works of opera buffa by Pergolesi, Scarlatti, Vinci, Leo, and other such composers suddenly divided the French music-loving public into two excited camps, supporters of the new Italian opera and supporters of the traditional French opera. The Philosophes of the Encyclop+¬die–d'Alembert, Diderot, and d'Holbach among them–entered the fray as champions of Italian music, but Rousseau, who had arranged for the publication of Pergolesi's music in Paris and who knew more about the subject than most Frenchmen after the months he had spent visiting the opera houses of Venice during his time as secretary to the French ambassador to the doge in 1743-44, emerged as the most forceful and effective combatant. He was the only one to direct his fire squarely at the leading living exponent of French operatic music, Jean-Philippe Rameau.

Rousseau and Rameau must at that time have seemed unevenly matched in a controversy about music. Rameau, already in his 70th year, was not only a prolific and successful composer but was also, as the author of the celebrated Trait+¬ de l'harmonie (1722; Treatise on Harmony) and other technical works, Europe's leading musicologist. Rousseau, by contrast, was 30 years younger, a newcomer to music, with no professional training and only one successful opera to his credit. His scheme for a new notation for music had been rejected by the Academy of Sciences, and most of his musical entries for Diderot's Encyclop+¬die were as yet unpublished. Yet the dispute was not only musical but also philosophical, and Rameau was confronted with a more formidable adversary than he

had realized. Rousseau built his case for the superiority of Italian music over French on the principle that melody must have priority over harmony, whereas Rameau based his on the assertion that harmony must have priority over melody. By pleading for melody, Rousseau introduced what later came to be recognized as a characteristic idea of Romanticism, namely, that in art the free expression of the creative spirit is more important than strict adhesion to formal rules and traditional procedures. By pleading for harmony, Rameau reaffirmed the first principle of French Classicism, namely, that conformity to rationally intelligible rules is a necessary condition of art, the aim of which is to impose order on the chaos of human experience.

In music, Rousseau was a liberator. He argued for freedom in music, and he pointed to the Italian composers as models to be followed. In doing so he had more success than Rameau; he changed people's attitudes. Gluck, who succeeded Rameau as the most important operatic composer in France, acknowledged his debt to Rousseau's teaching, and Mozart based the text for his one-act operetta Bastien und Bastienne on Rousseau's Devin du village. European music had taken a new direction. But Rousseau himself composed no more operas. Despite the success of Le Devin du village, or rather because of its success, Rousseau felt that, as a moralist who had decided to make a break with worldly values, he could not allow himself to go on working for the theatre. He decided to devote his energies henceforth to literature and philosophy.

Major works of political philosophy

As part of what Rousseau called his reform," or improvement of his own character, he began to look back at some of the austere principles that he had learned as a child in the Calvinist republic of Geneva. Indeed he decided to return to that city, repudiate his Catholicism, and seek readmission to the Protestant church. He had in the meantime acquired a mistress, an illiterate laundry maid named Th+¬r+¿se Levasseur. To the surprise of his friends, he took her with him to Geneva, presenting her as a nurse. Although her presence caused some murmurings, Rousseau was readmitted easily to the Calvinist communion, his literary fame having made him very welcome to a city that prided itself as much on its culture as on its morals.

Rousseau had by this time completed a second Discourse in response to a question set by the Academy of Dijon: What is the origin of the inequality among men and is it justified by natural law?" In response to this challenge he produced a masterpiece of speculative anthropology. The argument follows on that of his first Discourse by developing the proposition that natural man is good and then tracing the successive stages by which man has descended from primitive innocence to corrupt sophistication.

Rousseau begins his Discours sur l'origine de l'inegalit+¬ (1755; Discourse on the Origin of Inequality) by distinguishing two kinds of inequality, natural and artificial, the first arising from differences in strength, intelligence, and so forth, the second from the conventions that govern societies. It is the inequalities of the latter sort that he sets out to explain. Adopting what he thought the properly scientific" method of investigating origins, he attempts to reconstruct the earliest phases of man's experience of life on earth. He suggests that original man was not a social being but entirely solitary, and to this extent he agrees with Hobbes's account of the state of nature. But in contrast to the English pessimist's view that the life of man in such a condition must have been "poor, nasty, brutish and short," Rousseau claims that original man, while admittedly solitary, was healthy, happy, good, and free. The vices of men, he argues, date from the time when men formed societies.

Rousseau thus exonerates nature and blames society for the emergence of vices. He says that passions that generate vices hardly exist in the state of nature but begin to develop as soon as men

form societies. Rousseau goes on to suggest that societies started when men built their first huts, a development that facilitated cohabitation of males and females; this in turn produced the habit of living as a family and associating with neighbours. This nascent society," as Rousseau calls it, was good while it lasted it was indeed the "golden age" of human history. Only it did not endure. With the tender passion of love there was also born the destructive passion of jealousy. Neighbours started to compare their abilities and achievements with one another, and this "marked the first step towards inequality and at the same time towards vice." Men started to demand consideration and respect their innocent self-love turned into culpable pride, as each man wanted to be better than everyone else." The introduction of property marked a further step toward inequality since it made it necessary for men to institute law and government in order to protect property. Rousseau laments the fatal" concept of property in one of his more eloquent passages, describing the "horrors" that have resulted from men's departure from a condition in which the earth belonged to no one. These passages in his second Discourse excited later revolutionaries such as Marx and Lenin, but Rousseau himself did not think that the past could be undone in any way there was no point in men dreaming of a return to the golden age.

Civil society, as Rousseau describes it, comes into being to serve two purposes: to provide peace for everyone and to ensure the right to property for anyone lucky enough to have possessions. It is thus of some advantage to everyone, but mostly to the advantage of the rich, since it transforms their de facto ownership into rightful ownership and keeps the poor dispossessed. It is a somewhat fraudulent social contract that introduces government since the poor get so much less out of it than do the rich. Even so, the rich are no happier in civil society than are the poor because social man is never satisfied. Society leads men to hate one another to the extent that their interests conflict, and the best they are able to do is to hide their hostility behind a mask of courtesy. Thus Rousseau regards the inequality between men not as a separate problem but as one of the features of the long process by which men become alienated from nature and from innocence.

In the dedication Rousseau wrote for the Discourse, in order to present it to the republic of Geneva, he nevertheless praises that city-state for having achieved the ideal balance between the equality which nature established among men and the inequality which they have instituted among themselves." The arrangement he discerned in Geneva was one in which the best men were chosen by the citizens and put in the highest positions of authority. Like Plato, Rousseau always believed that a just society was one in which everyone was in his right place. And having written the Discourse to explain how men had lost their liberty in the past, he went on to write another book, Du Contrat social (1762 The Social Contract), to suggest how they might recover their liberty in the future. Again Geneva was the model not Geneva as it had become in 1754 when Rousseau returned there to recover his rights as a citizen, but Geneva as it had once been i.e., Geneva as Calvin had designed it.

The Social Contract begins with the sensational opening sentence: Man was born free, but he is everywhere in chains," and proceeds to argue that men need not be in chains. If a civil society, or state, could be based on a genuine social contract, as opposed to the fraudulent social contract depicted in the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, men would receive in exchange for their independence a better kind of freedom, namely true political, or republican, liberty. Such liberty is to be found in obedience to a self-imposed law." Rousseau's definition of political liberty raises an obvious problem. For while it can be readily agreed that an individual is free if he obeys only rules he prescribes for himself, this is so because an individual is a person with a single will. A society, by contrast, is a set of persons with a set of individual wills, and conflict between separate wills is a fact of universal experience. Rousseau's response to the problem is to define his civil society as an artificial person united by a general will, or volont+¬ g+¬n+¬rale. The social contract that brings society into being is a pledge, and the society remains in being as a pledged group. Rousseau's republic is a creation of the general will–of a will that never falters in each and every member to

further the public, common, or national interest–even though it may conflict at times with personal interest.

Rousseau sounds very much like Hobbes when he says that under the pact by which men enter civil society everyone totally alienates himself and all his rights to the whole community. Rousseau, however, represents this act as a form of exchange of rights whereby men give up natural rights in return for civil rights. The bargain is a good one because what men surrender are rights of dubious value, whose realization depends solely on an individual man's own might, and what they obtain in return are rights that are both legitimate and enforced by the collective force of the community.

There is no more haunting paragraph in The Social Contract than that in which Rousseau speaks of forcing a man to be free.“ But it would be wrong to interpret these words in the manner of those critics who see Rousseau as a prophet of modern totalitarianism. He does not claim that a whole society can be forced to be free but only that an occasional individual, who is enslaved by his passions to the extent of disobeying the law, can be restored by force to obedience to the voice of the general will that exists inside of him. The man who is coerced by society for a breach of the law is, in Rousseau's view, being brought back to an awareness of his own true interests.

For Rousseau there is a radical dichotomy between true law and actual law. Actual law, which he describes in the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, simply protects the status quo. True law, as described in The Social Contract, is just law, and what ensures its being just is that it is made by the people in its collective capacity as sovereign and obeyed by the same people in their individual capacities as subjects. Rousseau is confident that such laws could not be unjust because it is inconceivable that any people would make unjust laws for itself.

Rousseau is, however, troubled by the fact that the majority of a people does not necessarily represent its most intelligent citizens. Indeed, he agrees with Plato that most people are stupid. Thus the general will, while always morally sound, is sometimes mistaken. Hence Rousseau suggests the people need a lawgiver–a great mind like Solon or Lycurgus or Calvin–to draw up a constitution and system of laws. He even suggests that such lawgivers need to claim divine inspiration in order to persuade the dim-witted multitude to accept and endorse the laws it is offered.

This suggestion echoes a similar proposal by Machiavelli, a political theorist Rousseau greatly admired and whose love of republican government he shared. An even more conspicuously Machiavellian influence can be discerned in Rousseau's chapter on civil religion, where he argues that Christianity, despite its truth, is useless as a republican religion on the grounds that it is directed to the unseen world and does nothing to teach citizens the virtues that are needed in the service of the state, namely, courage, virility, and patriotism. Rousseau does not go so far as Machiavelli in proposing a revival of pagan cults, but he does propose a civil religion with minimal theological content designed to fortify and not impede (as Christianity impedes) the cultivation of martial virtues. It is understandable that the authorities of Geneva, profoundly convinced that the national church of their little republic was at the same time a truly Christian church and a nursery of patriotism, reacted angrily against this chapter in Rousseau's Social Contract.

By the year 1762, however, when The Social Contract was published, Rousseau had given up any thought of settling in Geneva. After recovering his citizen's rights in 1754, he had returned to Paris and the company of his friends around the Encyclop+¬die. But he became increasingly ill at ease in such worldly society and began to quarrel with his fellow Philosophes. An article for the Encyclop+¬die on the subject of Geneva, written by d'Alembert at Voltaire's instigation, upset Rousseau partly by suggesting that the pastors of the city had lapsed from Calvinist severity into unitarian laxity and partly by proposing that a theatre should be erected there. Rousseau hastened into print with a defense of the Calvinist orthodoxy of the pastors and with an elaborate attack on the

theatre as an institution that could only do harm to an innocent community such as Geneva.

Years of seclusion and exile

By the time his Lettre +á d'Alembert sur les spectacles (1758; Letter to Monsieur d'Alembert on the Theatre) appeared in print, Rousseau had already left Paris to pursue a life closer to nature on the country estate of his friend Mme d'+ëpinay near Montmorency. When the hospitality of Mme d'+ëpinay proved to entail much the same social round as that of Paris, Rousseau retreated to a nearby cottage, called Montlouis, under the protection of the Mar+¬chal de Luxembourg. But even this highly placed friend could not save him in 1762 when his treatise on education, +ëmile, was published and scandalized the pious Jansenists of the French Parlements even as The Social Contract scandalized the Calvinists of Geneva. In Paris, as in Geneva, they ordered the book to be burned and the author arrested; all the Mar+¬chal de Luxembourg could do was to provide a carriage for Rousseau to escape from France. Rousseau spent the rest of his life as a fugitive moving from one refuge to another.

The years at Montmorency had been the most productive of his literary career; besides The Social Contract and +ëmile, Julie: ou, la nouvelle H+¬lo+»se (1761; Julie: or, The New Eloise) came out within 12 months, all three works of seminal importance. The New Eloise, being a novel, escaped the censorship to which the other two works were subject; indeed of all his books it proved to be the most widely read and the most universally praised in his lifetime. It develops the Romanticism that had already informed his writings on music and perhaps did more than any other single work of literature to influence the spirit of its age. It made the author at least as many friends among the reading public–and especially among educated women–as The Social Contract and +ëmile made enemies among magistrates and priests. If it did not exempt him from persecution, at least it ensured that his persecution was observed, and admiring femmes du monde intervened from time to time to help him so that Rousseau was never, unlike Voltaire and Diderot, actually imprisoned.

The theme of The New Eloise provides a striking contrast to that of The Social Contract. It is about people finding happiness in domestic as distinct from public life, in the family as opposed to the state. The central character, Saint-Preux, is a middle-class preceptor who falls in love with his upper-class pupil, Julie. She returns his love and yields to his advances, but the difference between their classes makes marriage between them impossible. Baron d'+ëtange, Julie's father, has indeed promised her to a fellow nobleman named Wolmar. As a dutiful daughter, Julie marries Wolmar and Saint-Preux goes off on a voyage around the world with an English aristocrat, Bomston, from whom he acquires a certain stoicism. Julie succeeds in forgetting her feelings for Saint-Preux and finds happiness as wife, mother, and chatelaine. Some six years later Saint-Preux returns from his travels and is engaged as tutor to the Wolmar children. All live together in harmony, and there are only faint echoes of the old affair between Saint-Preux and Julie. The little community, dominated by Julie, illustrates one of Rousseau's political principles: that while men should rule the world in public life, women should rule men in private life. At the end of The New Eloise, when Julie has made herself ill in an attempt to rescue one of her children from drowning, she comes face-to-face with a truth about herself: that her love for Saint-Preux has never died.

The novel was clearly inspired by Rousseau's own curious relationship–at once passionate and platonic–with Sophie d'Houdetot, a noblewoman who lived near him at Montmorency. He himself asserted in the Confessions (1781-88) that he was led to write the book by a desire for loving, which I had never been able to satisfy and by which I felt myself devoured.” Saint-Preux's experience of love forbidden by the laws of class reflects Rousseau's own experience and yet it cannot be said that The New Eloise is an attack on those laws, which seem, on the contrary, to be given the status almost of

laws of nature. The members of the Wolmar household are depicted as finding happiness in living according to an aristocratic ideal. They appreciate the routines of country life and enjoy the beauties of the Swiss and Savoyard Alps. But despite such an endorsement of the social order, the novel was revolutionary its very free expression of emotions and its extreme sensibility deeply moved its large readership and profoundly influenced literary developments.

+ëmile is a book that seems to appeal alternately to the republican ethic of The Social Contract and the aristocratic ethic of The New Eloise. It is also halfway between a novel and a didactic essay. Described by the author as a treatise on education, it is not about schooling but about the upbringing of a rich man's son by a tutor who is given unlimited authority over him. At the same time the book sets out to explore the possibilities of an education for republican citizenship. The basic argument of the book, as Rousseau himself expressed it, is that vice and error, which are alien to a child's original nature, are introduced by external agencies, so that the work of a tutor must always be directed to counteracting those forces by manipulating pressures that will work with nature and not against it. Rousseau devotes many pages to explaining the methods the tutor must use. These methods involve a noticeable measure of deceit, and although corporal punishment is forbidden, mental cruelty is not.

Whereas The Social Contract is concerned with the problems of achieving freedom, +ëmile is concerned with achieving happiness and wisdom. In this different context religion plays a different role. Instead of a civil religion, Rousseau here outlines a personal religion, which proves to be a kind of simplified Christianity, involving neither revelation nor the familiar dogmas of the church. In the guise of La Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard (1765; The Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar) Rousseau sets out what may fairly be regarded as his own religious views, since that book confirms what he says on the subject in his private correspondence. Rousseau could never entertain doubts about God's existence or about the immortality of the soul. He felt, moreover, a strong emotional drive toward the worship of God, whose presence he felt most forcefully in nature, especially in mountains and forests untouched by the hand of man. He also attached great importance to conscience, the divine voice of the soul in man,“ opposing this both to the bloodless categories of rationalistic ethics and to the cold tablets of biblical authority.

This minimal creed put Rousseau at odds with the orthodox adherents of the churches and with the openly atheistic Philosophes of Paris, so that despite the enthusiasm that some of his writings, and especially The New Eloise, excited in the reading public, he felt himself increasingly isolated, tormented, and pursued. After he had been expelled from France, he was chased from canton to canton in Switzerland. He reacted to the suppression of The Social Contract in Geneva by indicting the regime of that city-state in a pamphlet entitled Lettres +¬crites de la montagne (1764; Letters Written from the Mountain). No longer, as in the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, was Geneva depicted as a model republic but as one that had been taken over by twenty-five despots” the subjects of the king of England were said to be free men by comparison with the victims of Genevan tryranny.

It was in England that Rousseau found refuge after he had been banished from the canton of Bern. The Scottish philosopher David Hume took him there and secured the offer of a pension from King George III; but once in England, Rousseau became aware that certain British intellectuals were making fun of him, and he suspected Hume of participating in the mockery. Various symptoms of paranoia began to manifest themselves in Rousseau, and he returned to France incognito. Believing that Th+¬r+¿se was the only person he could rely on, he finally married her in 1768, when he was 56 years old.

The last decade

In the remaining 10 years of his life Rousseau produced primarily autobiographical writings, mostly intended to justify himself against the accusations of his adversaries. The most important was his Confessions, modeled on the work of the same title by St. Augustine and achieving something of the same classic status. He also wrote Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques (1780; Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques“) to reply to specific charges by his enemies and Les R+¬veries du promeneur solitaire (1782 Reveries of the Solitary Walker), one of the most moving of his books, in which the intense passion of his earlier writings gives way to a gentle lyricism and serenity. And indeed, Rousseau does seem to have recovered his peace of mind in his last years, when he was once again afforded refuge on the estates of great French noblemen, first the Prince de Conti and then the Marquis de Girardin, in whose park at Ermenonville he died on July 2, 1778.