

Book 3

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The whole course of man's life up to adolescence is a period of weakness; yet there comes a time during these early years when the child's strength overtakes the demands upon it, when the growing creature, though absolutely weak, is relatively strong. His needs are not fully developed and his present strength is more than enough for them. He would be a very feeble man, but he is a strong child.

What is the cause of man's weakness? It is to be found in the disproportion between his strength and his needs. It is our passions that make us weak, for our natural strength is not enough for their satisfaction. To limit our desires comes to the same thing, therefore, as to increase our strength. When we can do more than we want, we have strength enough and to spare, we are really strong. This is the third stage of childhood, the stage with which I am about to deal. I still speak of childhood for want of a better word; for our scholar is approaching adolescence, though he has not yet reached the age of puberty.

About twelve or thirteen the child's strength increases far more rapidly than his needs. The strongest and fiercest of the passions is still unknown, his physical development is still imperfect and seems to await the call of the will. He is scarcely aware of extremes of heat and cold and braves them with impunity. He needs no coat, his blood is warm; no spices, hunger is his sauce, no food comes amiss at this age; if he is sleepy he stretches himself on the ground and goes to sleep; he finds all he needs within his reach; he is not tormented by any imaginary wants; he cares nothing what others think; his desires are not beyond his grasp; not only is he self-sufficing, but for the first and last time in his life he has more strength than he needs...

This interval in which the strength of the individual is in excess of his wants is, as I have said, relatively though not absolutely the time of greatest strength. It is the most precious time in his life; it comes but once; it is very short, all too short, as you will see when you consider the importance of using it aright... This is the time for work, instruction, and inquiry. And note that this is no arbitrary choice of mine, it is the way of nature herself.

Human intelligence is finite, and not only can no man know everything, he cannot even acquire all the scanty knowledge of others. Since the contrary of every false proposition is a truth, there are as many truths as falsehoods. We must, therefore, choose what to teach as well as when to teach it. Some of the information within our reach is false, some is useless, some merely serves to puff up its possessor. The small store which really contributes to our welfare alone deserves the study of a wise man, and therefore of a child whom one would have wise. He must know not merely what is, but what is useful...

Beware of the specious charms of error and the intoxicating fumes of pride. Keep this truth ever before you-- Ignorance never did any one any harm, error alone is fatal, and we do not lose our way through ignorance but through self-confidence... See how we are gradually approaching the moral

ideas which distinguish between good and evil. Hitherto we have known no law but necessity, now we are considering what is useful; we shall soon come to what is fitting and right.

Man's diverse powers are stirred by the same instinct. The bodily activity, which seeks an outlet for its energies, is succeeded by the mental activity which seeks for knowledge. Children are first restless, then curious; and this curiosity, rightly directed, is the means of development for the age with which we are dealing. Always distinguish between natural and acquired tendencies. There is a zeal for learning which has no other foundation than a wish to appear learned, and there is another which springs from man's natural curiosity about all things far or near which may affect himself... This is the first principle of curiosity; a principle natural to the human heart, though its growth is proportional to the development of our feeling and knowledge. If a man of science were left on a desert island with his books and instruments and knowing that he must spend the rest of his life there, he would scarcely trouble himself about the solar system, the laws of attraction, or the differential calculus. He might never even open a book again; but he would never rest till he had explored the furthest corner of his island, however large it might be. Let us therefore omit from our early studies such knowledge as has no natural attraction for us, and confine ourselves to such things as instinct impels us to study.

Our island is this earth... all at once we are exploring the round world and leaping to the bounds of the universe. This change is the result of our growing strength and of the natural bent of the mind. While we were weak and feeble, self-preservation concentrated our attention on ourselves; now that we are strong and powerful, the desire for a wider sphere carries us beyond ourselves as far as our eyes can reach.... Let the senses be the only guide for the first workings of reason. No book but the world, no teaching but that of fact. The child who reads ceases to think, he only reads. He is acquiring words not knowledge.

Teach your scholar to observe the phenomena of nature; you will soon rouse his curiosity, but if you would have it grow, do not be in too great a hurry to satisfy this curiosity. Put the problems before him and let him solve them himself. Let him know nothing because you have told him, but because he has learnt it for himself. Let him not be taught science, let him discover it. If ever you substitute authority for reason he will cease to reason; he will be a plaything of other people's thoughts.

You wish to teach this child geography and you provide him with globes, spheres, and maps. What elaborate preparations! What is the use of all these symbols; why not begin by showing him the real thing so that he may at least know what you are talking about?... Never tell the child what he cannot understand: no descriptions, no eloquence, no figure of speech, no poetry. The time has not come for feeling or taste. Continue to be clear and cold; the time will come only too soon when you must adopt another tone.

Brought up in the spirit of our maxims, accustomed to make his own tools and not to appeal to others until he has tried and failed, he will examine everything he sees carefully and in silence. He thinks rather than questions. Be content, therefore, to show him things at a fit season; then, when you see that his curiosity is thoroughly aroused, put some brief question which will set him trying to discover the answer...

As a general rule-- never substitute the symbol for the thing signified, unless it is impossible to show the thing itself; for the child's attention is so taken up with the symbol that he will forget what it signifies....

We are unable to put ourselves in the child's place, we fail to enter into his thoughts, we invest him with our own ideas, and while we are following our own chain of reasoning, we merely fill his head with errors and absurdities....

His geography will begin with the town he lives in and his father's country house, then the places between them, the rivers near them, and then the sun's aspect and how to find one's way by its aid. This is the meeting place. Let him make his own map, a very simple map, at first containing only two places; others may be added from time to time, as he is able to estimate their distance and position. You see at once what a good start we have given him by making his eye his compass.

No doubt he will require some guidance in spite of this, but very little, and that little without his knowing it. If he goes wrong let him alone, do not correct his mistakes; hold your tongue till he finds them out for himself and corrects them, or at most arrange something, as opportunity offers, which may show him his mistakes. If he never makes mistakes he will never learn anything thoroughly? Moreover, what he needs is not an exact knowledge of local topography, but how to find out for himself. No matter whether he carries maps in his head provided he understands what they mean, and has a clear idea of the art of making them. See what a difference there is already between the knowledge of your scholars and the ignorance of mine. They learn maps, he makes them. Here are fresh ornaments for his room

Remember that this is the essential point in my method--Do you teach the child many things, but never to let him form inaccurate or confused ideas. I care not if he knows nothing provided he is not mistaken, and I only acquaint him with truths to guard him against the errors he might put in their place. Reason and judgment come slowly, prejudices flock to us in crowds, and from these he must be protected. But if you make science itself your object, you embark on the unfathomable and shoreless ocean, an ocean strewn with reefs from which you will never return....

Time was long during early childhood; we only tried to pass our time for fear of using it ill; now it is the other way; we have not time enough for all that would be of use. The passions, remember, are drawing near, and when they knock at the door your scholar will have no ear for anything else. The peaceful age of intelligence is so short, it flies so swiftly, there is so much to be done, that it is madness to try to make your child learned. It is not your business to teach him the various sciences, but to give him a taste for them and methods of learning them when this taste is more mature. That is assuredly a fundamental principle of all good education.

This is also the time to train him gradually to prolonged attention to a given object; but this attention should never be the result of constraint, but of interest or desire; you must be very careful that it is not too much for his strength, and that it is not carried to the point of tedium. Watch him, therefore, and whatever happens, stop before he is tired, for it matters little what he learns; it does matter that he should do nothing against his will.

If he asks questions let your answers be enough to whet his curiosity but not enough to satisfy it; above all, when you find him talking at random and overwhelming you with silly questions instead of asking for information, at once refuse to answer; for it is clear that he no longer cares about the matter in hand, but wants to make you a slave to his questions. Consider his motives rather than his words. This warning, which was scarcely needed before, becomes of supreme importance when the child begins to reason....

I dislike that array of instruments and apparatus. The scientific atmosphere destroys science. Either

the child is frightened by these instruments or his attention, which should be fixed on their effects, is distracted by their appearance.

We shall make all our apparatus ourselves, and I would not make it beforehand, but having caught a glimpse of the experiment by chance we mean to invent step by step an instrument for its verification. I would rather our apparatus was somewhat clumsy and imperfect, but our ideas clear as to what the apparatus ought to be, and the results to be obtained by means of it... Too much apparatus, designed to guide us in our experiments and to supplement the exactness of our senses, makes us neglect to use those senses... The more ingenious our apparatus, the coarser and more unskillful are our senses. We surround ourselves with tools and fail to use those with which nature has provided every one of us.

But when we devote to the making of these instruments the skill which they did replace,...we add art to nature, we gain ingenuity without loss of skill. If instead of making a child stick to his books I employ him in a workshop, his hands work for the development of his mind. While he fancies himself a workman he is becoming a philosopher.... I cannot repeat too often that it is only objects which can be perceived by the senses which can have any interest for children, especially children whose vanity has not been stimulated nor their minds corrupted by social conventions...

Let the child do nothing because he is told; nothing is good for him but what he recognizes as good. When you are always urging him beyond his present understanding, you think you are exercising a foresight which you really lack. To provide him with useless tools which he may never require, you deprive him of man's most useful tool-- common sense... Why urge him to the studies of an age he may never reach, to the neglect of those studies which meet his present needs? "But," you ask, "will it not be too late to learn what he ought to know when the time comes to use it?" I cannot tell; but this I do know, it is impossible to teach it sooner, for our real teachers are experience and emotion, and man will never learn what befits a man except under its own conditions...

We all make it a rule never to own to the faults we really have. Now I would make it a rule to admit even the faults I have not, if I could not make my reasons clear to him; as my conduct will always be intelligible to him, he will never doubt me and I shall gain more credit by confessing my imaginary faults than those who conceal their real defects.

In the first place do not forget that it is rarely your business to suggest what he ought to learn; it is for him to want to learn, to seek and to find it. You should put it within his reach, you should skillfully awaken the desire and supply him with means for its satisfaction. So your questions should be few and well-chosen, and as he will always have more questions to put to you than you to him, you will always have the advantage and will be able to ask all the oftener, "What is the use of that question?"...

I do not like verbal explanations. Young people pay little heed to them, nor do they remember them. Things! Things! I cannot repeat it too often. We lay too much stress upon words; we teachers babble, and our scholars follow our example... He finds it pays best to pretend to listen to what he is forced to hear. This is the practical result of our fine systems of education... for once more I repeat the risk is not in what he does not know, but in what he thinks he knows...

While you are thinking what will be useful to him when he is older, talk to him of what he knows he can use now. Moreover, as soon as he begins to reason let there be no comparison with other children, no rivalry, no competition, not even in running races. I would far rather he did not learn

anything than have him learn it through jealousy or self-conceit. Year by year I shall just note the progress he had made, I shall compare the results with those of the following year, I shall say, "You have grown so much; that is the ditch you jumped, the weight you carried, the distance you flung a pebble, the race you ran without stopping to take breath, etc.; let us see what you can do now."

In this way he is stimulated to further effort without jealousy. He wants to excel himself as he ought to do; I see no reason why he should not emulate his own performances.

I hate books; they only teach us to talk about things we know nothing about... Since we must have books, there is one book which, to my thinking, supplies the best treatise on an education according to nature. This is the first book Emile will read; for a long time it will form his whole library...What is this wonderful book? Is it Aristotle? Pliny? Buffon? No; it is Robinson Crusoe... Let him think he is Robinson himself; let him see himself clad in skins, wearing a tall cap, a great cutlass, all the grotesque get-up of Robinson Crusoe, even to the umbrella which he will scarcely need. He should anxiously consider what steps to take; will this or that be wanting.

Your main object should be to keep out of your scholar's way all idea of such social relations as he cannot understand... Be yourself the apprentice that he may become a master; you may expect him to learn more in one hour's work than he would retain after a whole day's explanation.

The value set by the general public on the various arts inverse ratio to their real utility. They are even valued directly according to their uselessness. This might be expected. The most useful arts are the worst paid, for the number of workmen is regulated by the demand, and the work which everybody requires must necessarily be paid at a rate which puts it within the reach of the poor. On the other hand, those great people who are called artists, not artisans, who labor only for the rich and idle, put a fancy price on their trifles; and as the real value of this vain labor is purely imaginary, the price itself adds to their market value, and they are valued according to their costliness. The rich think so much of these things, not because they are useful, but because they are beyond the reach of the poor...

To make a young man judge rightly, you must form his judgment rather than teach him your own... The happy child enjoys time without being a slave to it;... He will want to know all about everything he sees or does, to learn the why and the wherefore of it; from tool to tool he will go back to the first beginning, taking nothing for granted; he will decline to learn anything that requires previous knowledge which he has not acquired. If he sees a spring made he will want to know how they got the steel from the mine; if he sees the pieces of a chest put together, he will want to know how the tree was cut down; when at work he will say of each tool, "If I had not got this, how could I make one like it, or how could I get along without it?"...

The child must come first, and you must devote yourself entirely to him. Watch him, study him constantly, without his knowing it; consider his feelings beforehand, and provide against those which are undesirable, keep him occupied in such a way that he not only feels the usefulness of the thing, but takes a pleasure in understanding the purpose which his work will serve...

Let us form these ten men into a society, and let each devote himself to the trade for which he is best adapted, and let him work at it for himself and for the rest. Each will reap the advantage of the others' talents, just as if they were his own; by practice each will perfect his own talent, and thus all the ten, well provided for, will still have something to spare for others. This is the plain foundation of all institutions. It is not my aim to examine its results here; I have done so in another book (*Discours sur l'inégalité*).

According to this principle, any one who wanted to consider himself as an isolated individual, self-sufficing and independent of others, could only be utterly wretched. He could not even continue to exist, for finding the whole earth appropriated by others while he had only himself, how could he get the means of subsistence? When we leave the state of nature we compel others to do the same; no one can remain in a state of nature in spite of his fellow-creatures, and to try to remain in it when it is no longer practicable, would really be to leave it, for self-preservation is nature's first law...

Do you not see that in striving to fit him merely for one station, you are unfitting him for anything else, so that some caprice of Fortune may make your work really harmful to him? What could be more absurd than a nobleman in rags, who carries with him into his poverty the prejudices of his birth? What is more despicable than a rich man fallen into poverty, who recalls the scorn with which he himself regarded the poor, and feels that he has sunk to the lowest depth of degradation?... This haughty fool who cannot use his own hands, who prides himself on what is not really his, what will he do when he is stripped of all? In that day, happy will he be who can give up the rank which is no longer his, and be still a man in Fate's despite....

The man who eats in idleness what he has not himself earned, is a thief, and in my eyes, the man who lives on an income paid him by the state for doing nothing, differs little from a highwayman who lives on those who travel his way... Man in society is bound to work; rich or poor, weak or strong, every idler is a thief. Now of all the pursuits by which a man may earn his living, the nearest to a state of nature is manual labor; of all stations that of the artisan is least dependent on Fortune... "Learn a trade."

"A trade for my son! My son a working man! What are you thinking of, sir?" Madam, my thoughts are wiser than yours; you want to make him fit for nothing but a lord, a marquis, or a prince; and some day he may be less than nothing. I want to give him a rank which he cannot lose, a rank which will always do him honor; I want to raise him to the status of a man, and, whatever you may say, he will have fewer equals in that rank than in your own.

The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life. Learning a trade matters less than overcoming the prejudices he despises. You will never be reduced to earning your livelihood; so much the worse for you. No matter; work for honor, not for need; stoop to the position of a working man, to rise above your own. To conquer Fortune and everything else, begin by independence. To rule through public opinion, begin by ruling over it.... Emile shall learn a trade. "An honest trade,"... I would rather have him a shoemaker than a poet, I would rather he paved streets than painted flowers on china...

Perhaps we are laying too much stress on the choice of a trade; as it is a manual occupation, Emile's choice is no great matter... What would you have him do? He is ready for anything. He can handle the spade and hoe, he can use the lathe, hammer, plane, or file; he is already familiar with these tools which are common to many trades. He only needs to acquire sufficient skill in the use of any one of them to rival the speed, familiarity, and the diligence of good workmen... To honor trades we are not obliged to practice every one of them, so long as we do not think them beneath us...

All things considered, the trade I should choose for my pupil, among the trades he likes, is that of a carpenter... I am convinced he will never learn anything thoroughly unless we learn it together... Once or twice a week I think we should spend the whole day at our master's; we should get up when he does, we should be at our work before him, we should take our meals with him, work under his orders, and after having had the honor of supping at his table we may if we please return to sleep upon our own hard beds. This is the way to learn several trades at once, to learn to do manual work without neglecting our apprenticeship to life...

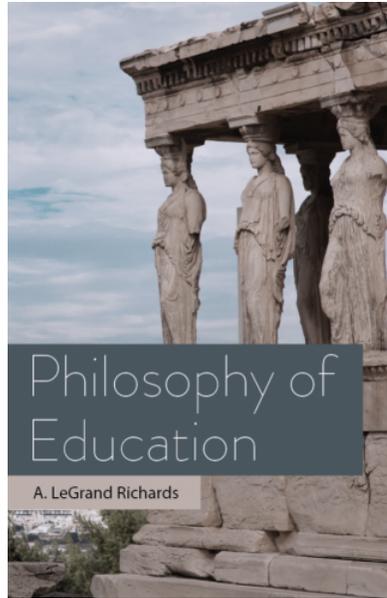
Let us keep Emile's hand from money lest he should become an ass, let him take the work but not the wages. Never let his work be judged by any standard but that of the work of a master. Let it be judged as work, not because it is his. If anything is well done, I say, "That is a good piece of work," but do not ask who did it. If he is pleased and proud and says, "I did it." answer indifferently, "No matter who did it, it is well done."...

He must work like a peasant and think like a philosopher, if he is not to be as idle as a savage. The great secret of education is to use exercise of mind and body as relaxation one to the other... Nature never deceives us; we deceive ourselves... There is all the difference in the world between a natural man living in a state of nature, and a natural man living in society. Emile is no savage to be banished to the desert, he is a savage who has to live in the town. He must know how to get his living in a town, how to use its inhabitants, and how to live among them, if not of them....

You have not got to teach him truths so much as to show him how to set about discovering them for himself. To teach him better you must not be in such a hurry to correct his mistakes... We should be more ashamed to deceive ourselves with bad reasoning, than to find no explanation at all. There is no phrase so appropriate to us, or so often on our lips, as, "I do not know;" neither of us are ashamed to use it....

Compelled to learn for himself, he uses his own reason not that of others, for there must be no submission to authority if you would have no submission to convention. Most of our errors are due to others more than ourselves.... Emile knows little, but what he knows is really his own; he has no half-knowledge... Caprice and prejudice have no part in it. He values most the things which are of use to himself, and as he never departs from this standard of values, he owes nothing to prejudice.

Emile is industrious, temperate, patient, steadfast, and full of courage. His imagination is still asleep, so he has no exaggerated ideas of danger; the few ills he feels he knows how to endure in patience, because he has not learnt to rebel against fate... He thinks not of others but of himself, and prefers that others should do the same... He has no errors, or at least only such as are inevitable; he has no vices; or only those from which no man can escape. His body is healthy; his limbs are supple, his mind is accurate and unprejudiced, his heart is free and untroubled by passion. Pride, the earliest and the most natural of passions, has scarcely shown itself. Without disturbing the peace of others, he has passed his life contented, happy, and free, so far as nature allows. Do you think that the earlier years of a child, who has reached his fifteenth year in this condition, has been wasted?



Rousseau, J. J. (2020). Book 3. In A. L. Richards (Ed.), *Philosophy of Education*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from https://edtechbooks.org/philosophy_of_education/emile_3



CC0: This work is in the public domain, which means that you may print, share, or remix its contents as you please without concern for copyright and without seeking permission.