

How is the Desire to Learn Cultivated?

Selections from Emile

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

In this text, Rousseau vigorously attempts to make the case for allowing nature to educate a child by working to help the child keep their curiosity. He also disagrees with Locke directly and indirectly. If you have not read the essay by Locke, it may be best to read it first.

GOD MAKES ALL THINGS GOOD; man meddles with them and they become evil. He forces one soil to yield the products of another, one tree to bear another's fruit. He confuses and confounds time, place, and natural conditions. He mutilates his dog, his horse, and his slave. He destroys and defaces all things; he loves all that is disformed and monstrous; he will have nothing as nature made it, not even man himself, who must learn his paces like a saddle-horse, and be shaped to his master's taste like the trees in his garden...

A father has done but a third of his task when he begets children and provides a living for them. He owes men to humanity, citizens to the state. A man who can pay this threefold debt and neglects to do so is guilty, more guilty, perhaps, if he pays it in part than when he neglects it entirely. He has no right to be a father if he cannot fulfill a father's duties. Poverty, pressure of business, mistaken social prejudices, none of these can excuse a man from his duty, which is to support and educate his own children. If a man of any natural feeling neglects these sacred duties he will repent it with bitter tears and will never be comforted...

The children's first tears are prayers, beware lest they become commands; he begins by asking for aid, he ends by demanding service. Thus from his own weakness, the source of his first consciousness of dependence, springs the later idea of rule and tyranny; but as this idea is aroused rather by his needs than by our services, we begin to see moral results whose causes are not in nature; thus we see how important it is, even at the earliest age, to discern the secret meaning of the gesture or cry...

Reflection Question

What kind of responsibility do we have to work to understand others?

Whatever you do, your actual authority can never extend beyond your own powers. As soon as you are obliged to see with another's eyes you must will what he wills. You say with pride, "My people are my subjects." Granted, but what are you? The subject of your ministers. And your ministers, what are they? The subjects of their clerks, their mistresses, the servants of their servants. Grasp all, usurp all, and then pour out your silver with both hands; set up your batteries, raise the gallows and the wheel; make laws, issue proclamations, multiply your spies, your soldiers, your hangmen, your prisons, and your chains. Poor little men, what good does it do you? You will be no better served, you will be none the less robbed and deceived, you will be no nearer absolute power. You will say continually, "It is our will," and you will continually do the will of others.

There is only one man who gets his own way--he who can get it single-handed; therefore freedom, not power, is the greatest good. That man is truly free who desires what he is able to perform, and does what he desires. This is my fundamental maxim. Apply it to childhood, and all the rules of education spring from it...

Reflection Question

Is this fundamental axiom consistent with your vision of the best means of providing an education?

These are weighty considerations, and they provide a solution for all the conflicting problems of our social system. There are two kinds of dependence: dependence on things, which is the work of nature; and dependence on men, which is the work of society. Dependence on things, being non-moral, does no injury to liberty and begets no vices; dependence on men, being out of order, gives rise to every kind of vice, and through this master and slave become mutually deprived...

Give him, not what he wants, but what he needs. Let there be no question of obedience for him or tyranny for you. Supply the strength he lacks just so far as is required for freedom, not for power, so that he may receive your services with a sort of shame, and look forward to the time when he may dispense with them and may achieve the honor of self-help...

If his words were prompted by a real need you should recognize it and satisfy it at once; but to yield to his tears is to encourage him to cry, to teach him to doubt your kindness, and to think that you are influenced more by his importunity than your own good-will. If he does not think you kind he will soon think you unkind; if he thinks you weak he will soon become obstinate; what you mean to give must be given at once. Be chary of refusing, but, having refused, do not change your mind...

Man naturally considers all that he can get as his own. In this sense Hobbes' theory is true to a certain extent: Multiply both our wishes and the means of satisfying them, and each will be master of all. Each child, who has only to ask and have, thinks himself the master of the universe; he considers all men as his slaves; and when you are at last compelled to refuse, he takes your refusal as act of rebellion, for he thinks he has only to command...

If children are not to be required to do anything as a matter of obedience, it follows that they will only learn what they perceive to be real and present value, either for use or enjoyment; what other motive could they have for learning?...

People make a great fuss about discovering the best way to teach children to read. They invent "bureaux" [a case containing letters] and cards, they turn the nursery into a printer's shop. Locke would have them taught to read by means of dice. What a fine idea! And the pity of it! There is a better way than any of these, and one which is generally overlooked-- it consists in the desire to learn. Arouse this desire to your scholar and have done with your "bureaux" and your dice-- any method will serve...

Not till his strength is in excess of what is needed for self-preservation, is the speculative faculty developed...

You will make him stupid if you are always giving him directions, always saying come here, go there, stop, do this, don't do that. If your head always guides his hands, his own mind will become useless...

Your scholar is subject to a power which is continually giving him instruction; he acts only at the word of command; he dare not eat when he is hungry, nor laugh when he is merry, nor weep when he is sad, nor offer one hand rather than the other, nor stir a foot unless he is told to do it; before long he will not venture to breathe without orders. What would you have him think about, when you do all the thinking for him? He rests securely on your foresight, why should he think for himself? He knows you have undertaken to take care of him, to secure his welfare, and he feels himself freed from this responsibility. His judgment relies on yours...

As for my pupil, or rather Nature's pupil, he has been trained from the outset to be as self-reliant as possible, he has not formed the habit of constantly seeking help from others, still less of displaying his stores of learning. On the other hand, he exercises discrimination and forethought, he reasons about everything that concerns himself. He does not chatter, he acts. Not a word does he know of what is going on in the world at large, but he knows very thoroughly what affects himself. As he is always stirring he is compelled to notice many things, to recognize many effects; he soon acquires a good deal of experience. Nature, not man, is his schoolmaster, and he learns all the quicker because he is not aware that he has any lesson to learn...

Reflection question

Rousseau uses the previous paragraphs to set several priorities? What might be the consequences of selecting these priorities?

Young teacher, I am setting before you a difficult task, the art of controlling without precepts, and doing everything without doing anything at all...

When education is most carefully attended to, the teacher issues his orders and thinks himself master, but it is the child who is real master. He uses the tasks you set him to obtain what he wants from you, and he can always make you pay for an hour's industry by a week's complaisance. You must always be making bargains with him... The child is usually much quicker to read the master's thoughts than the master to read the child's feelings...

Our first teachers in natural philosophy are our feet, hands, and eyes. to substitute books for them does not teach us to reason, it teaches us to use the reason of others rather than our own; it teaches us to believe much and know little. Before you can practice an art you must first get your tools; and if you are to make good use of those tools, they must be fashioned sufficiently strong to stand use. To learn to think we must therefore exercise our limbs, our senses, and our bodily organs, which are the tools of the intellect; and to get the best use out of these tools, the body which supplies us with them must be strong and healthy....

Work or play are all one to him, his games are his work; he knows no difference. He brings to everything the cheerfulness of interest, the charm of freedom, and he shows the bent of his own mind and the extent of his knowledge...

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.

Reflection Question

Is there any way of creating a hierarchy of knowledge gained from different sources?

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...

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... T

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...

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...

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.

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...

Learning a trade matters less than overcoming the prejudices he despises...

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....

He must work like a peasant and think like a philosopher, if he is not to be as idle as a savage...

Self-love, which concerns itself only with ourselves, is content to satisfy our own needs; but selfishness, which is always comparing self with others, is never satisfied and never can be; for this feeling which prefers ourselves to others, requires that they should prefer us to themselves, which is impossible. Thus the tender and gentle passion spring from self-love, while the hateful and angry passions spring selfishness. Have respect then for your species; remember that it consists essentially of the people, that if all the kings and all the philosophers were removed they would scarcely be missed, and things would go on none the worse. In a word, teach your pupil to love all men, even those who fail to appreciate him; act in such a way that he is not a member of any class, but takes his place in all alike: speak in his hearing of the human race with tenderness, and even with pity, but never with scorn. You are a man; do not dishonor mankind...

Reflection Question

Is it possible to hold these kinds of feelings towards "all men"?

Above all, no vanity, no emulation, no boasting, none of those sentiments which force us to compare ourselves with others; for such comparisons are never made without arousing some measure of hatred against those who dispute our claim to the first place, were it only in our own estimation...

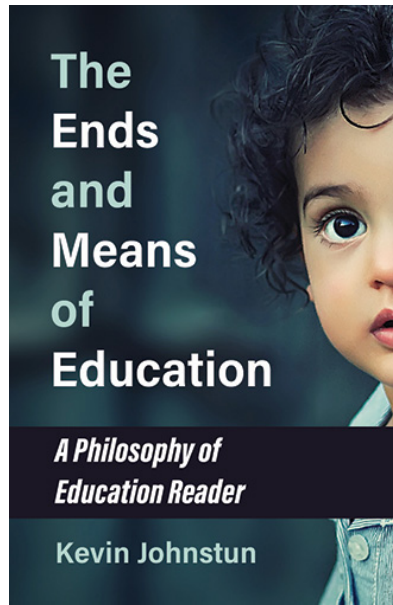
Reflection Question

What are the principle elements of Rousseau's philosophy about the ends and means of education?

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