Jean-Jacques Rousseau | Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Author Profile

Rousseau’s philosophical writings and novels, all of them rich in ethical content, inspired a major shift in Western thought during the eighteenth century and part of the nineteenth century. They substantially undercut the Age of Reason and inspired a new Age of Romanticism. In the process, Rousseau’s eighteenth century lifestyle and work influenced manners and morals, the reevaluation of education, conceptions of the state and of politics, and the reassertion of religious values. His philosophical genius led the way to new views of human nature, liberty, free creative expression, violence, the character of children, and the vital human and cultural importance of women.

Foundations of Rousseau’s Ethics

Rousseau’s ethics were rooted in his moral and religious perceptions about human nature, human behavior, and human society. In *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750), *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), and *Social Contract* (1762), he systematically traced his thoughts on each of these subjects. Humanity, Rousseau believed, was fundamentally good. Originally living alone, simply, and in a state of nature, humanity was free, healthy, and happy. As a result of living in society, however, humanity acquired property along with the aggressiveness required for securing and defending that property. Depraved conditions, ignoble passions, and vices soon were rampant: pride in possessions, false inequalities, affectations, greed, envy, lust, and jealousy, which were attended by insecurity, personal violence, and war. Thus, although humanity was by nature good, society itself was innately corrupt. Humanity, Rousseau concluded, had been corrupted by society. What most educated eighteenth century observers viewed as the rise of civilization, Rousseau viewed as its decline.

Rousseau’s own experiences were responsible for this assessment of society, even though the assessment itself was laced with idealism. He had begun life orphaned, poor, and vagrant. Unhappily struggling through menial posts and an apprenticeship, he subsequently rose to notoriety, thanks to the help of generous and sensitive patrons, many of them women. He became familiar with sophisticated intellectuals and with the rich, yet eventually he abandoned this level of society for a life of simplicity and honest, if irrational, emotions. His style and philosophy repudiated society’s standards, its affectations, its belief in the indefinite improvement of humanity, and its philosophical addiction to stark reason and utilitarianism.
Rousseau’s Social Contract

Rousseau believed that humanity had descended from a natural state of innocence to an artificial state of corruption—a state made worse by what he regarded as the stupidity and self-delusion of most of his contemporaries. He fully understood that any hopes of returning to humanity’s ancient innocence were chimerical. Nevertheless, the values that he cherished—freedom, simplicity, honestly expressed emotions, and individualism—were still in some measure attainable as the best of a poor bargain. In his Social Contract, he indicated how the liberty that humanity had lost in the descent to “civilization” could be recovered in the future.

Recovery could be achieved by means of humanity’s acceptance of a new and genuine social contract that would replace the false one to which Rousseau believed humanity was chained. Thus, while humanity was born free and was possessed of individual will, its freedom and will had become victims of a fraudulent society. People could, however, surrender their independent wills to a “general will”; that is, to Rousseau’s abstract conception of society as an artificial person. In doing so, people could exchange their natural independence for a new form of liberty that would be expressed through liberal, republican political institutions. The general will, a composite of individual wills, pledged people to devote themselves to advancing the common good. The integrity of their new social contract and new society would depend upon their individual self-discipline, their self-sacrifice, and an obedience imposed on them by fear of the general will.

Religious and Educational Ethics

The history of republican Geneva, Rousseau’s birthplace, imbued him with a lifelong admiration of republican virtues, but neither the eighteenth century Calvinism of Geneva nor Catholicism, Rousseau believed, fostered the kind of character that would be required for the republican life that he imagined under the “Social Contract.” In his view, Catholicism, for example, directed people’s attention to otherworldly goals, while Calvinism had succumbed to a soft and passive Christianity that was devoid of the puritanical rigor and innocence that had once characterized it and that Rousseau admired. Rousseau, on the contrary, advocated the cultivation of this-worldly civil values that were appropriate for a vigorous republican society: self-discipline, simplicity, honesty, courage, and virility. His proposed civic religion, stripped of much theological content, was intended to fortify these values as well as to enhance patriotism and a martial spirit.

Rousseau’s educational ideas, like his religious proposals, sought to inculcate republican civic virtues by directing people toward freedom, nature, and God. Small children were to be unsaddled and given physical freedom. Children from five to twelve were to be taught more by direct experience and by exposure to nature than by books. Adolescents should learn to work and should study morality and religion. Education, Rousseau argued in his classic Émile, should teach people about the good in themselves and nature, and should prepare them to live simple, republican lives.
Bibliography


