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Jean-Jacques Rousseau



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By Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Translated by Barbara Foxley

Author's Preface

This collection of scattered thoughts and observations has little order or continuity; it was begun to give pleasure to a good mother who thinks for herself. My first idea was to write a tract a few pages long, but I was carried away by my subject, and before I knew what I was doing my tract had become a kind of book, too large indeed for the matter contained in it, but too small for the subject of which it treats. For a long time I hesitated whether to publish it or not, and I have often felt, when at work upon it, that it is one thing to publish a few pamphlets and another to write a book. After vain attempts to improve it, I have decided that it is my duty to publish it as it stands. I consider that public attention requires to be directed to this subject, and even if my own ideas are mistaken, my time will not have been wasted if I stir up others to form right ideas. A solitary who casts his writings before the public without any one to advertise them, without any party ready to defend them, one who does not even know what is thought and said about those writings, is at least free from one anxiety--if he is mistaken, no one will take his errors for gospel.

I shall say very little about the value of a good education, nor shall I stop to prove that the customary method of education is bad; this has

been done again and again, and I do not wish to fill my book with things which everyone knows. I will merely state that, go as far back as you will, you will find a continual outcry against the established method, but no attempt to suggest a better. The literature and science of our day tend rather to destroy than to build up. We find fault after the manner of a master; to suggest, we must adopt another style, a style less in accordance with the pride of the philosopher. In spite of all those books, whose only aim, so they say, is public utility, the most useful of all arts, the art of training men, is still neglected. Even after Locke's book was written the subject remained almost untouched, and I fear that my book will leave it pretty much as it found it.

We know nothing of childhood; and with our mistaken notions the further we advance the further we go astray. The wisest writers devote themselves to what a man ought to know, without asking what a child is capable of learning. They are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man. It is to this study that I have chiefly devoted myself, so that if my method is fanciful and unsound, my observations may still be of service. I may be greatly mistaken as to what ought to be done, but I think I have clearly perceived the material which is to be worked upon. Begin thus by making a more careful study of your scholars, for it is clear that you know nothing about them; yet if you read this book with that end in view, I think you will find that it is not entirely useless.

With regard to what will be called the systematic portion of the book, which is nothing more than the course of nature, it is here that the reader will probably go wrong, and no doubt I shall be attacked on

this side, and perhaps my critics may be right. You will tell me, "This is not so much a treatise on education as the visions of a dreamer with regard to education." What can I do? I have not written about other people's ideas of education, but about my own. My thoughts are not those of others; this reproach has been brought against me again and again. But is it within my power to furnish myself with other eyes, or to adopt other ideas? It is within my power to refuse to be wedded to my own opinions and to refuse to think myself wiser than others. I cannot change my mind; I can distrust myself. This is all I can do, and this I have done. If I sometimes adopt a confident tone, it is not to impress the reader, it is to make my meaning plain to him. Why should I profess to suggest as doubtful that which is not a matter of doubt to myself? I say just what I think.

When I freely express my opinion, I have so little idea of claiming authority that I always give my reasons, so that you may weigh and judge them for yourselves; but though I would not obstinately defend my ideas, I think it my duty to put them forward; for the principles with regard to which I differ from other writers are not matters of indifference; we must know whether they are true or false, for on them depends the happiness or the misery of mankind. People are always telling me to make PRACTICABLE suggestions. You might as well tell me to suggest what people are doing already, or at least to suggest improvements which may be incorporated with the wrong methods at present in use. There are matters with regard to which such a suggestion is far more chimerical than my own, for in such a connection the good is corrupted and the bad is none the better for it. I would rather follow exactly the established method than adopt a better method by halves. There would be fewer contradictions in the

man; he cannot aim at one and the same time at two different objects. Fathers and mothers, what you desire that you can do. May I count on your goodwill?

There are two things to be considered with regard to any scheme. In the first place, "Is it good in itself" In the second, "Can it be easily put into practice?"

With regard to the first of these it is enough that the scheme should be intelligible and feasible in itself, that what is good in it should be adapted to the nature of things, in this case, for example, that the proposed method of education should be suitable to man and adapted to the human heart.

The second consideration depends upon certain given conditions in particular cases; these conditions are accidental and therefore variable; they may vary indefinitely. Thus one kind of education would be possible in Switzerland and not in France; another would be adapted to the middle classes but not to the nobility. The scheme can be carried out, with more or less success, according to a multitude of circumstances, and its results can only be determined by its special application to one country or another, to this class or that. Now all these particular applications are not essential to my subject, and they form no part of my scheme. It is enough for me that, wherever men are born into the world, my suggestions with regard to them may be carried out, and when you have made them what I would have them be, you have done what is best for them and best for other people. If I fail to fulfil this promise, no doubt I am to blame; but if I fulfil my promise, it is your own fault if you ask anything more of me, for I have promised you nothing more.

BOOK I

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 deformed 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. Yet things would be worse without this education, and mankind cannot be made by halves. Under existing conditions a man left to himself from birth would be more of a monster than the rest. Prejudice, authority, necessity, example, all the social conditions into which we are plunged, would stifle nature in him and put nothing in her place. She would be like a sapling chance sown in the midst of the highway, bent hither and thither and soon crushed by the passers-by.

Tender, anxious mother, [Footnote: The earliest education is most important and it undoubtedly is woman's work. If the author of nature had meant to assign it to men he would have given them milk to feed the child. Address your treatises on education to the women, for not only are they able to watch over it more closely than men, not only is their influence always predominant in education, its success concerns them more nearly, for most widows are at the mercy of their children, who show them very plainly whether their education was good or bad. The laws, always more concerned about property than about people, since their object is not virtue but peace, the laws give too little authority to the mother. Yet her position is more certain than

that of the father, her duties are more trying; the right ordering of the family depends more upon her, and she is usually fonder of her children. There are occasions when a son may be excused for lack of respect for his father, but if a child could be so unnatural as to fail in respect for the mother who bore him and nursed him at her breast, who for so many years devoted herself to his care, such a monstrous wretch should be smothered at once as unworthy to live. You say mothers spoil their children, and no doubt that is wrong, but it is worse to deprave them as you do. The mother wants her child to be happy now. She is right, and if her method is wrong, she must be taught a better. Ambition, avarice, tyranny, the mistaken foresight of fathers, their neglect, their harshness, are a hundredfold more harmful to the child than the blind affection of the mother. Moreover, I must explain what I mean by a mother and that explanation follows.] I appeal to you. You can remove this young tree from the highway and shield it from the crushing force of social conventions. Tend and water it ere it dies. One day its fruit will reward your care. From the outset raise a wall round your child's soul; another may sketch the plan, you alone should carry it into execution.

Plants are fashioned by cultivation, man by education. If a man were born tall and strong, his size and strength would be of no good to him till he had learnt to use them; they would even harm him by preventing others from coming to his aid; [Footnote: Like them in externals, but without speech and without the ideas which are expressed by speech, he would be unable to make his wants known, while there would be nothing in his appearance to suggest that he needed their help.] left to himself he would die of want before he knew his needs. We lament the helplessness of infancy; we fail to

perceive that the race would have perished had not man begun by being a child.

We are born weak, we need strength; helpless, we need aid; foolish, we need reason. All that we lack at birth, all that we need when we come to man's estate, is the gift of education.

This education comes to us from nature, from men, or from things. The inner growth of our organs and faculties is the education of nature, the use we learn to make of this growth is the education of men, what we gain by our experience of our surroundings is the education of things.

Thus we are each taught by three masters. If their teaching conflicts, the scholar is ill-educated and will never be at peace with himself; if their teaching agrees, he goes straight to his goal, he lives at peace with himself, he is well-educated.

Now of these three factors in education nature is wholly beyond our control, things are only partly in our power; the education of men is the only one controlled by us; and even here our power is largely illusory, for who can hope to direct every word and deed of all with whom the child has to do.

Viewed as an art, the success of education is almost impossible, since the essential conditions of success are beyond our control. Our efforts may bring us within sight of the goal, but fortune must favour us if we are to reach it.

What is this goal? As we have just shown, it is the goal of nature. Since all three modes of education must work together, the two that we can control must follow the lead of that which is beyond our

control. Perhaps this word Nature has too vague a meaning. Let us try to define it.

Nature, we are told, is merely habit. What does that mean? Are there not habits formed under compulsion, habits which never stifle nature? Such, for example, are the habits of plants trained horizontally. The plant keeps its artificial shape, but the sap has not changed its course, and any new growth the plant may make will be vertical. It is the same with a man's disposition; while the conditions remain the same, habits, even the least natural of them, hold good; but change the conditions, habits vanish, nature reasserts herself. Education itself is but habit, for are there not people who forget or lose their education and others who keep it? Whence comes this difference? If the term nature is to be restricted to habits conformable to nature we need say no more.

We are born sensitive and from our birth onwards we are affected in various ways by our environment. As soon as we become conscious of our sensations we tend to seek or shun the things that cause them, at first because they are pleasant or unpleasant, then because they suit us or not, and at last because of judgments formed by means of the ideas of happiness and goodness which reason gives us. These tendencies gain strength and permanence with the growth of reason, but hindered by our habits they are more or less warped by our prejudices. Before this change they are what I call Nature within us.

Everything should therefore be brought into harmony with these natural tendencies, and that might well be if our three modes of education merely differed from one another; but what can be done when they conflict, when instead of training man for himself you try

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