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JEAN-
JACQUES
ROUSSEAU

1712 - 1778

The famous philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in 1712, in Geneva, Switzerland. His mother died shortly after his birth, and when Rousseau was ten years old, his father was exiled and left Geneva, leaving Rousseau behind. Rousseau himself left Geneva in 1728, when he was sixteen years old. For many years Rousseau was an unknown, wandering from one place to another, and from one temporary position to another. He had several love affairs, including one with Thérèse Levasseur, by whom he had five illegitimate children. He placed all five children in a foundling home. (Eventually, when he was fifty-six years old, he married Thérèse.)

In 1750, at the age of thirty-eight, Rousseau leaped to sudden fame. The Academy of Dijon had offered a prize for the best

essay on the subject of whether or not the arts and sciences were beneficial to human society and morals. Rousseau's essay, in which he concluded that the net result of the advancement of the sciences and arts was *not* beneficial to mankind, won first prize and promptly made him a famous man. Many other writings followed, including the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755); *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761); *Émile* (1762); *The Social Contract* (1762); and his *Confessions* (1770), and they all contributed to his prestige. In addition, Rousseau, who had always had a strong interest in music, wrote two operas, *Les muses galantes* and *Le devin du village*.

Although at first Rousseau was a friend of several of the liberal writers of the French Enlightenment, including Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert, his ideas soon began to diverge seriously from the others. By opposing Voltaire's plan for the formation of a theater in Geneva (Rousseau asserted that a theater was a school for immorality), Rousseau earned Voltaire's lasting enmity. Aside from that, Rousseau's general emotionalism contrasted sharply with the rationalism of Voltaire and the Encyclopedists. From 1762 on, Rousseau had serious trouble with the authorities because of his political writings. Some of his associates had become estranged from him, and about this time Rousseau started to become distinctly paranoid. Although a number of people befriended him, Rousseau, who was suspicious and hostile, quarreled with virtually all of them. For the last twenty years of his life, he was generally an embittered and miserably unhappy man. He died in 1778, in Ermenonville, France.

Rousseau's writings are said to have been a significant factor in the rise of socialism, nationalism, romanticism, totalitarianism, and anti-rationalism, as well as having paved the way for the French Revolution and contributed substantially to modern ideals of democracy and equality. He is credited with having had a major influence on educational theory. It has been contended that the theory that human beings are almost exclusively the product of their environment (and therefore completely malleable)

is derived from his writings. And, of course, he is associated with the idea that modern technology and society are bad, and with originating the ideal of the "noble savage." If he were indeed responsible for all these concepts, he would be entitled to a much higher place on this list. It seems to me, however, that many of these claims are incorrect or badly exaggerated.

Consider, for example, the concept of the noble savage. In the first place, Rousseau never used that phrase, nor was he an admirer of the natives of the South Sea Islands, or of the American Indians. The idea of the noble savage had, moreover, been common long before Rousseau's time, and the well-known English poet John Dryden had used those exact words more than a century before Rousseau was born. Nor did Rousseau take the attitude that society was necessarily bad. Quite the contrary, he always insisted that society was necessary for man.

That Rousseau originated the idea of the "social contract" is completely false. The idea was discussed at length by John Locke, whose works were published before Rousseau was born. In fact, the famous English philosopher Thomas Hobbes had discussed the idea of the social contract even before Locke.

What about Rousseau's opposition to technology? It is quite obvious that the two centuries since Rousseau's death have seen unprecedented growth in technology. To the extent that Rousseau opposed technology, he was obviously completely ineffectual. Furthermore, the anti-technological bias existing today is derived not from Rousseau's writings, but is rather a response to the undesirable effects which the unrestrained applications of technology have produced during the last century.

Many other thinkers have suggested that environmental factors are of overwhelming importance in the formation of human character, and I think it unreasonable to credit Rousseau for this rather common idea. Similarly, nationalism was an important force long before the French philosopher lived, and he had little to do with its rise.

Did Rousseau's writings help pave the way for the French Revolution? To some extent they undoubtedly did, and probably



An etching of Rousseau by Naudet.

significantly more so than those of Diderot or d'Alembert. However, the influence of Voltaire, whose writings were earlier, more numerous, and more clearly written, was a good deal greater in this regard.

It is quite true that Rousseau was anti-rationalist by temperament, particularly in contrast with the other famous French writers of his day. But anti-rationalism was not new: our political and social beliefs are usually grounded in emotions and prejudices, although we frequently concoct seemingly rational arguments to justify them.

But if Rousseau's influence is not as great as some of his admirers (or opponents) have claimed, it is nevertheless very large. It is perfectly true that he was an important factor in the rise of Romanticism in literature, and his influence on educational theory and practice has proven even more important. Rousseau minimized the importance of book learning in a child's education, recommended that a child's emotions should be educated

before his reason, and emphasized the importance of a child's learning through experience. (Incidentally, Rousseau was an early advocate of the advantages of breast feeding.) It may sound astonishing that a man who abandoned his own children should have had the audacity to lecture other people on how to raise theirs, but there is no question that Rousseau's ideas have profoundly influenced modern educational theory.

There are many interesting and original ideas in Rousseau's political writings. But dominating them all is a passionate desire for equality, and an equally passionate feeling that the existing structure of society is unbearably unjust. ("Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.") Rousseau may not himself have called for violence, but he surely inspired others to prefer violent revolution to gradual reform.

Rousseau's views on private property (as well as on many other points) frequently contradicted each other. He once described property as "the most sacred of all the rights of citizens." However, it seems safe to say that his attacks on private property had a greater effect on the attitudes of his readers than did his laudatory comments. Rousseau was one of the first modern writers of importance to seriously attack the institution of private property, and he can therefore be considered one of the forebears of modern socialism and Communism.

Lastly, one must not ignore Rousseau's constitutional theories. The central idea of *The Social Contract* is, in Rousseau's words, "the total alienation of each associate, and all his rights, to the whole community." Such a phrase leaves little room for civil liberties or for a bill of rights. Rousseau was himself a rebel against authority, but a major effect of his book has been to justify later totalitarian regimes.

Rousseau has been criticized as an extremely neurotic (not to say paranoid) personality, as a male chauvinist, and as a muddled thinker whose ideas are impractical. Such criticisms are largely justified. But far more important than his shortcomings are his flashes of insight and brilliant originality, which have continued to influence modern thought for over two centuries.