

Rousseau's theory of education

Philosophy



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Rousseau lobbies against an educational system that tries to teach children concepts and facts before such time, as they would make use of them. He believes that a child should not neglect those studies, which meet his present needs, in order to learn that which he may acquire in later years. He claims that experience and emotion are our real teachers, thereby reinforcing the theory that a child should not be educated in matters which are not pertinent to their current station in life. He contends that a child should " remain in complete ignorance of those ideas which are beyond his grasp" (p686).

In essence, Rousseau argues that the healthy spontaneous impulses of children were being repressed by the adult demands for emotional restraint, intellectual precision and social conformity as abdicated by the social and educational practices of his time. Rousseau constructs a theory of education, starting with the influence of the child's natural environment, which should prevail over the influence of society and social institutions. Rousseau advocates allowing children to grow and develop naturally, in direct opposition to the prevailing methods of teaching. Children should be encouraged to develop their faculties through experience.

This forms the basis for his fundamental principle of education. Rousseau argues that to be of use to a child, a concept must be relevant to his age. Rousseau promotes involving the student in hands-on learning experiences, as opposed to the more traditional methods of instruction. Children pay little heed to verbal explanation, nor do they remember them in his opinion. He stresses the importance of discovery as a learning tool. Ideas that seem difficult at the onset become less daunting when introduced using a hands-

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on approach. Simply stated, he proposes to teach his pupil through "doing", using words only as a final recourse.

I don't think Rousseau's plan appealed to the peasants and urban workers in the 18th century. These people were hard workers who would have their children working to feed the family rather than wandering about the countryside learning. If their children had to be schooled, they most likely would have preferred they were subjected to the discipline provided by formal schools in towns and villages which were beginning to appear. Not only did these schools provide a more Christianity based education but kept the children busy and out of the parents way.

The people of this time were very focused on discipline and control of their children, allowing the child to explore and learn on their own was the opposite of traditional treatment of children at this time. "Spare the rod and spoil the child" was a catch phrase of the 18th century and was taken quite literally. Any indications of an independent nature in a child were beaten out of them and asking questions was often viewed as a challenge to authority and children were expected to accept all knowledge provided them on faith which was again the opposite of Rousseau's plan.

Since Rousseau's plan was focused on education based on scientific principles it would go against many of their hardened Christian beliefs about how the world worked. The enlightenment may have been a big influence to Rousseau, but the peasants and urban workers of the 18th century were not particularly interested. For Rousseau to be properly understood we must

examine his revolutionary ideas in terms of his relationship to the 18th century enlightenment.

During this time a great premium was placed on the discovery of truth through the observation of nature, rather than through the study of authoritative sources, such as Aristotle and the Bible. Rousseau shared the enlightened view that society had perverted natural man, the "noble savage" who lived harmoniously with nature, free from selfish want, possessiveness and jealousy. One main feature of the enlightenment was that nothing was accepted on faith or face value and he expected no less from his students, he would demonstrate his teachings and not expect them to accept just a verbal description.

Rousseau stressed that feeling and sentiment were two very important factors in the motivation of humankind. He emphasizes the need to live and develop in conformity with Nature. The child must be raised in a rural rather than an urban environment, so that he may develop in continuity with nature rather than in opposition to it. A child's character will mature in harmony with nature if that child's natural curiosity is allowed to develop unhindered by the corruption of society. All of Rousseau's educational theories had roots in the enlightenment of the 18th century.