Rousseau's Views on Teaching

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Contemporary critique of *progressive education* tends to lump Rousseau together with Pestalozzi, Froebel, and A.S. Neill who advocate a noninterventionist role for the teacher in education. This paper argues that such an interpretation of Rousseau's views on the role of a teacher is mistaken. Rousseau's views on the teacher's role in education are not compatible with the conventional laissez-faire approach of child-centered education; his views are not that simplistic. Rather, they represent a sophisticated attempt to balance the requirements of freedom with the need for control in education.

La critique contemporaine de l'éducation progressiste tend à placer Rousseau dans le même courant que Pestalozzi, Froebel et A.S Neill, porte-paroles, dans le champ éducatif, d'un rôle non-interventionniste pour l'enseignant. Cet article vise à porter en faux une telle interprétation des conceptions de Rousseau quant au rôle de l'enseignant. Les conceptions de Rousseau quant au rôle de l'enseignant ne sont pas compatibles avec l'approche conventionnelle du laisser-faire caractéristique d'une éducation centrée sur l'enfant; ses conceptions ne sont pas aussi simplistes. Plutôt, elles représentent une tentative élaborée d'équilibrer les exigences de liberté et le besoin de contrôle en éducation.

In much of contemporary critique of progressive educational theory Rousseau is frequently lumped together with Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Neill as educators who advocate a romantic noninterventionist role for the teacher in the process of education. R.F. Dearden (1968, 1972, 1976) for instance, traces the origin of what he named the European tradition of child-centered theorizing – the view that education can be likened to horticulture, the teacher to a gardener, and the pupil to a growing plant – to the writings of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel. Similarly, Denis Lawton (1977) criticizes Rousseau along with Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Neill for advocating naive progressivism in education. According to Clark (1988) Rousseau's version of *negative education* "requires us to see him as a romantic individualist" (pp. 75-88)

who sees the teacher's role as confined to removing obstacles in the path of development. Clark thinks that Rousseau regards development as a process of self-realization. Accordingly it was Rousseau's view, he thinks, that if one wants to assist a child to reach cognitive maturity, then one "should direct one's best efforts to the negative task of preventing hindrance to the development of that maturity, all the positive work being done by the child's original nature" (pp. 75-88).

My purpose in this paper is to argue first, that Rousseau's views on the teacher's role in education are not symmetrical with the romantic and noninterventionist views associated with such progressive educators as Pestalozzi, Froebel, and A.S. Neill. Rousseau does not advocate a laissez-faire theory of education. Second, Rousseau's views on teaching, far from being simplistic as some of his critics tend to portray them, in fact represent a sophisticated pedagogical theory which places a heavy responsibility on the teacher, who in order to succeed, must demonstrate a lot of wisdom and art in his or her relationship with students.

Rousseau's Negative Education

The philosophical assumption which underlies Rousseau's idea of negative education is his famous proposition that man is naturally good. Taken at its face value and understood in the context of Rousseau's (1911) belief that "all that we lack at birth, all that we need when we come to man's estate, is the gift of education," (p. 6) it seems quite logical to conclude, as some critics have done, that Rousseau's meaning is that whatever evil we find in man is due to faulty education or to the corrupting influence of society. Good education will therefore consist merely in the protection of man's natural goodness from corrupting social influences, and thus protected, the child's natural good self will be free to develop of its own accord (Dent, cited in Rousseau, 1911, pp. xiv-xv). This is the usual interpretation given to Rousseau's directives on education in the early years: "The education of the earliest years should be merely negative. It consists, not in teaching virtue or truth, but in preserving the heart from vice and from the spirit of error" (Rousseau, 1911, p. 57).

The first point we should note about Rousseau's version of negative education is that it is confined to the earliest years of a child's education. According to Rousseau we receive our education from three sources – nature, men, and things. The education from nature consists in the biological development of our organs and faculties; the use we learn to make of them is the education we receive from men, while our sense experience with our environment gives us the education from things. In Rousseau's view, a person

is well educated and happy when the teaching from these three masters are in harmony. The education we receive from men and from things should follow nature's lead since it is the only factor we cannot at all control. Not to follow nature's lead in education would be to court disaster.

Now nature has established a certain order in our education; the maturation of our biological organs and faculties comes first before any academic or moral learning can take place: "Nature would have them children before they are men. If we try to invert this order we shall produce a forced immature and flavorless fruit which will be rotten before it is ripe" (Rousseau, 1911, p. 54). Rousseau's version of negative education is therefore essentially a teaching method based on an insight into the developmental stages of children. It is like a readiness technique which an experienced and sensitive teacher employs to ensure that any new lesson is within the emotional and intellectual capacity of his or her pupils. In a reaction against the excessive and premature academic instruction young children of his day were subjected to, Rousseau, in his characteristic way urged that intellectual education should be delayed until the child is ready for it about the age of twelve. We may disagree with Rousseau's time schedule but the principle of tailoring curriculum material to suit the mental ability of pupils is one that is today generally accepted. It is this principle that Rousseau had in mind when he wrote:

> A child knows he must become a man; all the ideas he may have as to man's estate are so many opportunities for his instruction, but he should remain in complete ignorance of those ideas which are beyond his grasp. My whole book is one continued argument in support of this fundamental principle of education. (Rousseau, 1911, p. 141)

The second point to note about Rousseau's negative education is that it is not entirely negative even when restricted to early childhood education. Children are not really left alone in the sense of A.S. Neill. On the contrary, it turns out that the negative education of the early years includes a great deal of physical education. It is only the intellectual and moral education that Rousseau wishes to delay in deference to the order established by nature. Thus the tutor is advised to engage the child with lots of bodily exercise: "Exercise his body, his limbs, his senses, his strength but keep his mind idle as long as you can" (Rousseau, 1911, p. 58).

There is a historical explanation for Rousseau's emphasis on physical education. By the middle of the 18th century, most thinkers including Rousseau had rejected Descartes' doctrine of innate ideas in favor of Locke's empiricist epistemology. According to Locke all knowledge, all our ideas are acquired through sense experience. Accordingly, the development of the

senses came to be of primary importance for the whole of education, a point which Rousseau, following Locke, repeatedly stressed. Thus in Book 1 of *Emile* Rousseau writes:

> In the dawn of life, when memory and imagination have not begun to function, the child only attends to what affects its senses. His sense experiences are the raw material of thought; they should therefore be presented to him in fitting order. (1911, p. 31)

Later in Book II, Rousseau displays a similar concern: "The senses are the first of our faculties to mature" which should therefore be the first to be developed, and he regrets the fact that the sense faculties are the "most frequently overlooked or neglected" (1911, p. 97).

There is a positive side, therefore, to Rousseau's version of negative education which one does not find in other child-centered educators whose doctrines are traditionally associated with Rousseau. Rousseau's idea of negative education does not mean teaching the child nothing in its early years, neither does it entail that the teacher's role in education should be confined to merely removing obstacles in the way of a child's development which is conceived as a natural growth process. The interventionist role Rousseau envisaged for the teacher will become clearer in the next section when we consider in more detail his account of teaching.

Rousseau's Account of Teaching

In orthodox versions of child-centered education teaching is reduced to the job of making natural growth possible by removing hindrances to it. Thus Pestalozzi likens the teacher to the gardener who contributes nothing to the actual growth of the trees since "the principle of growth lies in the trees themselves. He plants and waters but God gives the increase" (cited in Green, 1912, p. 195). The gardener's role is confined to the removing of hindrances to growth:

> He only waters the dry earth that the roots may not strike it as a stone. He only drains away the standing water that the tree may not suffer .... So with the educator; he imparts no single power to man. He gives neither life nor breath. He only watches lest any external force should injure or disturb. He takes care that development runs its course in accordance with its own laws. (Pestalozzi, cited in Green, 1912, p. 195)

Some of the implications of this horticulture analogy follow.

1) Teachers are not really essential. Children do not need close professional supervision by the teacher in order to develop intellectually as well as physically.

2) The teacher is not responsible for the end-product of the educational process. This is determined by the child's innate or natural endowment. The teacher merely assists the development that takes place independently of the teachers endeavors.
3) The teacher's contribution to the child's development can only be indirect; it cannot be achieved through coercion and command.

Out of the three implications of horticulture analogy mentioned above only the third one is applicable to Rousseau's idea of education according to nature. Rousseau's views about the teacher's role in education is quite different from the views of those child-centered educators who advocate a noninterventionist role for the teacher. In Rousseau's view the teacher's role is of crucial importance. The outcome of the educational process clearly depends on the quality of the education provided by the teacher who must know how to follow nature's lead in the education of the child. If the teacher fails to follow nature's lead, the child's education will be ruined; he or she "shall produce a forced fruit ... fruit which will be rotten before it is ripe" (1911, p. 54).

Following nature's lead in education requires that the teacher perform like an artist. It implies first a practical understanding of Rousseau's maxim: "Nature would have them children before they are men" (1911, p. 43). The good teacher is one who structures lessons according to the developing abilities of children and appreciates the fact that "childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling" (p. 43). In brief, the good teacher needs to have the knowledge of child psychology. Second, following nature's lead in education means that we must respect the status of childhood. A child should be treated like a person in its own right and not like a miniature adult. Rousseau warns that it is foolish and counter productive "to make a child wretched in the present with more or less doubtful hope of making him happy at some future day" (p. 43). Lessons and activities beyond the child's present abilities must not be forced on him in the belief that he will need them later. Rousseau's teacher respects childhood and acts on the belief that "mankind has its place in the sequence of things, childhood has its place in the sequence of human life; the man must be treated as a man and the child as a child" (p. 44).

Although Rousseau argues often that children are incapable of judging and reasoning, yet he goes on to observe:

> I am far from thinking, however, that children have no sort of reason. On the contrary, I think they reason very well with regard to things that affect their actual and sensible well-being. But people are mistaken as to the extent of their information, and they attribute to them knowledge they do

> not possess and make them reason about things they cannot understand. (1911, p. 72)

Rousseau thus recognizes two kinds of reason – a reason of childhood and a reason of adulthood. To follow the lead of nature in education is to recognize and cultivate first the reason of childhood as a necessary condition for the development of adult reasoning. To expect children to reason like adults is to do violence to their nature. This is, in essence, Rousseau's conception of child-centered education. Peter Gay (1966) rightly extols Rousseau's psychological insight into the nature of childhood when he observes:

> No one before Rousseau had drawn the consequences implicit in the idea of human development. The child Rousseau forcefully argues is not an imperfect or incomplete adult; he is a full human being with his own capacities and limitations. This is why Rousseau demands that the intellect be cultivated last – not from some innate hostility to reason, but from his estimate of the place of reason in the rhythm of human growth. (p. 543)

Indirect but Effective Control

A major problem of classroom teachers is how to reconcile the need to care for and respect their students with the need to establish and maintain control. Traditionally educators have tended to swing from one end of the pendulum to the other. Before Rousseau's time the practice was to emphasize the need for control to the exclusion of any concern for respect and caring. The excesses of progressive educators on the other hand have tended to do away with any attempt by the teacher to exercise any control over students. Hence, Denis Lawton (1977) in a chapter titled "Naive Progressivism" blames Rousseau along with Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Neill for "the doctrine that children should be allowed to do anything that they wish to do – all in the name of education" (p. 61).

But such a laissez-faire approach is definitely not the approach of Emile's tutor. A more careful look at Rousseau's role in the education of Emile shows an entirely different picture. For Rousseau respect for childhood, which is reflected in the modern concern with caring, does not at all mean leaving the child to do as it wishes. Although Rousseau proclaims the natural goodness of the child, he still recognizes the fact that Emile needs to undergo a closely guided educational process before he can become a grown man, a responsible citizen. And although he says on the one hand that the passions are natural to man (i.e., in their origin) he also knows that not "all the passions we feel in ourselves and behold in others are natural" in the sense of being conducive to our well-being. Rousseau writes:

> Our natural passions are few in number; they are the means to freedom, they tend to self preservation. All those which enslave and destroy us have another source; nature does not bestow them on us; we seize them in her despite. (1911, p. 173)

Rousseau recognizes therefore that as human beings we have in us natural and unnatural passions representing good and evil tendencies. A major purpose of education is to foster the development of only those passions which are "the means of our freedom" and which tend to self-preservation while at the same time we try to discourage the development of those passions which "enslave and destroy us" (p. 173) and are thus alien to our nature.

Rousseau's suggestion that teachers should follow nature's lead by respecting childhood should be understood in the context of his overall conception of education and its aims. Ultimately the purpose of Emile's education was to make him not just a grown child who enjoys his freedom, without any social and moral obligations, but also to enable him to become a grown man who must be a moral, rational, and social being. While Rousseau does not directly and forcibly impose his will on Emile, he does exercise effective control nonetheless. This is how Rousseau describes the tutor's "art of controlling without precepts, and doing everything without doing anything at all."

> Let him (the pupil) always think he is master while you are really master. There is no subjugation so complete as that which preserves the forms of freedom; it is thus that the will itself is taken captive. Is not this poor child, without knowledge, strength, or wisdom, entirely at your mercy? Are you not master of his whole environment so far as it affects him? Cannot you make him what you please? His works and play, his pleasure and pain, are they not unknown to him, under your control? No doubt he ought only to do what he wants, but he ought to want to do nothing but what you want him to do. (Rousseau, 1911, pp. 84-85)

This revealing passage which shows Rousseau relishing his pedagogical power and control over his pupil should serve as a salutary corrective to the simplistic view of Rousseau's philosophy of education as noninterventionist. There are in fact several instances of Rousseau's direct intervention in the course of Emile's education. Emile's moral and emotional development is aided and directed by his tutor. For instance, in order to foster the development of the sentiments of pity and humanity Emile is brought face to face "with some of the calamities which overtake men." He is further made "aware of the fact that the fate of these unhappy persons may one day be his own" (p. 185). To discourage Emile from indulging in vanity Rousseau makes him experience shame and humiliation through an arranged encounter with a conjuror: young Emile's attempt to replicate the tricks and thus discredit

the conjuror turns out to be an embarrassing failure (pp. 136-138). Further humiliation at the hands of card sharpers is proposed as a cure for pride and vanity. To justify his proposal, Rousseau explains:

> If, therefore, as a result of my care Emile prefers his way of living, seeing, and feeling to that of others, he is right; but if he thinks because of this that he is nobler and better born than they, he is wrong; he is deceiving himself; he must be undeceived, or rather let us prevent the mistakes, lest it be too late to correct it. (1911, p. 207)

I believe enough instances have been cited to show that Rousseau envisaged an active and interventionist role for the teacher in the process of education. As John Darling (1982) has remarked, "Rousseau's understanding of developmental stages and environmental influence is put to uses which would not be approved of at Summerhill. Emile's tutor may, to a great extent, remain in the background but his aim is to achieve and maintain total control" (pp. 173-185).

Characteristics of a Good Teacher

Here we shall ignore Rousseau's occasional distinction between tutor and teacher and understand his characterization of a tutor as applicable to a good teacher. To be able to perform the onerous duty of an educator, the teacher has to be a most versatile and wise person. The teacher in Rousseau's view is not a narrow specialist or a professional whose sphere of activity is limited to the specific requirements of a service (teaching) rendered for payment. A teacher's job according to Rousseau is so noble and comprehensive that it cannot be performed by someone whose principal motivation is financial reward. This explains Rousseau's injunction: "My first requirement, and it implies a good many more is that he should not take up his task for reward (1911, p. 17). A hireling who only works within the specific confines of his or her job description cannot cope with the complex and demanding nature of the work of an educator. A tutor's devotion to duty is likened to that of a father or a nurse.

The tutor is a guide and source of reference for the entire business of education which is human development. He or she is not just a teacher of vocational skills or the professions, important though these may be. The tutor is primarily a moral person who has learned to live with "the necessity of things," one who has come to terms with the limitations of the human condition. Only one who is well adjusted to the realities of social life, one who is a man in Rousseau's sense is able to guide others to live as human beings should. Rousseau says about Emile: "Life is the trade I would teach

him. When he leaves me, I grant you he will be neither a magistrate, a soldier, nor a priest; he will be a man" (1911, p. 9).

The tutor, Rousseau contends must be a master of the *science of humanity*. By this Rousseau apparently does not mean the intellectual mastery of any particular subject. By science of humanity, Rousseau seems to refer to an understanding of human nature – its process of development, its passions, inclinations, and potentialities, and conducting one's self and one's social relations in the light of such an understanding. A tall order indeed for anyone. This is why Rousseau considered himself unfit to assume the work of a tutor and preferred rather to write about the job than to undertake it himself (1911, p. 18).

In his relationship with students, the teacher must not play the pedant or the dispenser of wisdom even though he is a master of the science of humanity. This I believe is the idea behind Rousseau's suggestion: the tutor "must not give precepts, he must let the scholar find them out himself (1911, p. 19). It does not mean that the tutor may not *teach* if by teaching we understand more than verbal instruction and include a variety of activities like explaining, demonstrating, questioning and answering, and even *guiding* all of which activities are engaged in by Emile's tutor. As Claydon has rightly observed:

> We can understand Rousseau to be saying not that the tutor may not teach, but that he may not teach in certain ways. Today we may learn from Rousseau the valuable insight that the 'role of the teacher' is inclusive of more things than the activity of teaching and that these things may exercise a considerable influence upon the manner of teaching. (1969, p. 23)

The teacher's considerable influence on students' development depends more on the sort of relationship which exists between them than on the precepts given by the teacher. Rousseau's demand that we should hold childhood in reverence and his recognition of the value of childhood reasoning as well as adult reasoning reflect contemporary concern with respect for persons in teacher-pupil relationships. As Clark has observed "the principle of respect for persons can be used to characterize the central tenet of child-centered education concealed in growth theory" (1969, p. 85).

Some critics, however, think that Rousseau's conduct in the process of educating Emile does not, in fact, exhibit respect or reverence. Darling, for example, believes that Emile is manipulated, and that the tutor is the manipulator. In Rousseau, he writes, there is an absence of any sense of the teacher and taught being equals. In his view, "Rousseau's approach to the growing child is crucially defective" (Darling, 1982, p. 182) with regard to

the requirement of reverence. Similarly, Robin Barrow (1978) thinks that "despite the reference to a father-son relationship" between Rousseau and Emile it is a mistake to see their relationship in terms of "a duo with mutual admiration and respect." And he goes on to say that Rousseau's tutor is a detached and manipulative figure and concludes that "there is little warrant for seeing Rousseau as the precursor of those who see a loving relationship or even respect for persons as crucial to the business of education" (pp. 37-38).

I believe, however, that the charge of manipulation which stems from Rousseau's practice of prearranging learning situations is inaccurate and unfair. First, the beneficiary of the learning experience is not Rousseau but Emile. Rousseau was not simply practicing his art at the expense of Emile. In the usual cases of manipulation the manipulator is the beneficiary of the strategy while the person manipulated is often the victim of the deception involved. But in the case of Emile, the educational experiences provided by his tutor have enabled him to rise above the total dependence of childhood to the freedom of an adult, one who is free from the burden of arbitrary and capricious will of others and recognizes only the bonds of necessity. And for this, Emile is rightly grateful to his tutor: "My master, you have made me free by teaching me to yield to necessity .... Rich or poor, I shall be free .... All the claims of prejudice are broken; as far as I am concerned I know only the bonds of necessity" (Rousseau, 1911, p. 436).

Second, to describe Rousseau's pedagogical strategy as one of manipulation is to fail to appreciate the delicate balancing exercise that is required between respecting the freedom of a child and the need to exercise a reasonable measure of control in the process of education. A major part of the art of teaching, of course consists precisely in the judicious balancing of the requirements of freedom and control. One may argue about the extent of Rousseau's success in the practice of this art, but one cannot really claim that he did not practice it or that he was unaware of the need for teachers to be sensitive to the issues of freedom and control in education.

Finally, the critique by Darling (1982 and Barrow (1978) of Rousseau's pedagogical philosophy in this respect fails to take into account Rousseau's explicit statements of his purpose in educating Emile. Rousseau tells us that in assuming the difficult task of educating Emile, his purpose was to "guide him from birth to manhood, when he needs no guide but himself" (Rousseau, 1911, p. 18). Clearly then, Emile's education was intended ultimately to make him independent of his tutor, Contrary to Darling's contention, Rousseau did envisage the gradual transformation of the teacher-pupil relationship towards true parity? After the engineered encounter with a conjuror, (one of the

episodes Darling cites as an instance of manipulation) Rousseau assures the conjuror that in future he would warn Emile in advance against faults because "the time is coming when our relations will be changed, when the severity of the master must give way to the friendliness of the comrade; this change must come gradually" (1911, p. 138).

It is not therefore entirely correct to say as Darling has said that Rousseau's aim in Emile's education was "to achieve and maintain total control" if that is understood as control externally imposed by Rousseau. The source of the control imposed on Emile is not really Rousseau himself; it is rather the facts of Emile's own experience or what Rousseau calls "the bonds of necessity." We need to remind ourselves that Rousseau distinguishes between two kinds of dependence – dependence on things and dependence on men. Dependence on things "does no injury to liberty and begets no vices" (1911, p. 69); it is dependence on men, that is, dependence on the will of other people, that restricts our freedom. According to Rousseau the child should be educated to be dependent only on things by making his unreasonable wishes meet with physical obstacles only. The restrictions imposed by nature or our physical environment are the bonds of necessity from which we cannot escape and against which it is useless and foolish to rebel. The question then is not whether Emile will be subjected to any control or not but rather what kind of control will he be subject to. It is dependence on the will of others according to Rousseau, that leads to arbitrary control and denial of freedom. But to learn to subject ourselves to the bonds of necessity or to the necessity of things is to become both wise and free.

This is what Emile's education ultimately achieved. Near the end of the book the young man now about to get married says to his tutor:

> You have made me free by teaching me to yield to necessity. Let her come when she will, I follow her without compulsion .... Rich or poor I shall be free. I shall be free not merely in this country or in that; I shall be free in any part of the world. All the chains of prejudice are broken; as far as I am concerned I know only the bonds of necessity. I have been trained to endure them from my childhood, and I shall endure them until death, for I am a man. (Rousseau, 1911, p. 436)

Here we see that Emile's education has done two things for him in his quest for freedom and independence. He has learned to submit to the external control imposed by the necessity of things and he has thereby acquired self-control. Emile has now reached the age of reason and it is now his reason that controls him and not his tutor. Now what Emile wants to do is what his reason tells him is what he must do. The grown child has become a grown man.

The teacher's difficult and delicate task in education is to transform the child into the man, to transform childhood reasoning into adult reasoning. To do this, Rousseau shows us, the teacher must be able to create the conditions which respect the wisdom of children, their own ways of seeing, feeling, and reasoning and then go on to create further conditions which enable that wisdom to grow into the wisdom of adults. And this, as Rousseau has dramatized for us, is a work of art par excellence.

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