

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ROUSSEAU, JEAN JACQUES

Jean Jacques Rousseau. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a French philosopher, essayist, composer, and political and educational theorist whose ideas were the most influential expression of the Enlightenment world view, and at the same time rich harbingers of the thought of early Romanticism.

Rousseau's Life. Rousseau was born in Geneva, in 1712, and throughout his life, which involved a tremendous amount of wandering, exile, flight, changes of residence, he was proud to consider himself a citizen of the Free Republic of Geneva. of a Genevan watchmaker and descended from a long Huguenot line, with its strong Calvinist morality. His mother was raised by an upper class family in the city, and his father was—as were all the ancestor males in Rousseau's family—a watchmaker. His father was also a romantic and impractical dreamer, who raised Rousseau—whose mother died when he was born. (At night, sometimes all through the night, the young Rousseau and his father would read to each other, sharing in the thrill of fiction and imagination.) In 1722 his father got embroiled in a dispute with a fellow citizen, and had to flee the city; Rousseau himself being sent off to school with a Calvinist minister. A couple of years later the young boy ran away from home, and began a wandering existence, blessed by some guardian angel who directed him from neighbor to friend and finally out into the large world, serving as tutor, handyman, music teacher, until eventually in 1744 he made his way to Paris. He was at that time assailed by a variety of inspirations, which enabled him to see what seemed to him the true character of human existence. He formed acquaintances, with such as Diderot, and gradually embedded himself in the turbulent intellectual milieu of Paris. It was there, and later in Geneva, to which he returned, that he began the writing life that would impose his lasting influence.

The works of Rousseau. The first work to bring widespread attention to Rousseau was his *Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts* (1750); there he developed ideas which, in more elaborated form in his *Le Contrat Social* (1762), were to make him both famous and of exceptional influence on his entire century. These ideas were rich, both n strengthening beliefs fermenting in his time—belief in the natural goodness of man, and in the potential evil of social institutions, which corrupt us—and in original directions, contrary to the mode of his time—such as a deep distrust of the power of reason, which was widely viewed at the time, by the intellectuals, as the supreme gift to man from his creator. (It was in fact Rousseau's belief in the natural goodness of man which, though moving to many, deeply alienated the authorities in Geneva who, with their Calvinist convictions that man is a degraded being, ever after made Geneva an unwelcoming home to Rousseau.) Already in his theory of education, *Emile* (1750), he had promoted a liberal view of the learning process, and stressed the importance of the experience of nature in education. In his epistolary novel, *Julie, or the Nouvelle Heloise* (1761), Rousseau writes a long sentimental love tale the evil behaviors of which he blames on society, and not on the self-enthralled lovers. In his *Confessions* (1765-1770) Rousseau surveys the first fifty three years of his life, largely defends himself against the various charges that had been leveled against him in a long and controversial career, and gives a model of the art of self-analysis, which is surpassed perhaps only by Saint Augustine in his *Confessions*.

Reading

Primary source reading

Emile, or on Education, tr. Allan Bloom, 1979.

Secondary source reading

Dent, Nicholas, *Rousseau*, 2005.

Further reading

Cranston, Maurice, *The Noble Savage*, 1991.

Original language reading

Kitsikis, Dimitri, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et les origines francaises du fascisme*, 2006.

Suggested paper topics

What was Rousseau's view of human nature? Did he believe in essential goodness, or was his viewpoint more nuanced than that? What kind of pedagogy for children did Rousseau promote? Does Rousseau remind you of Montaigne, in his general view of human nature?

Of what lasting influence on Rousseau is it, that he was so deeply rooted in Geneva, and in the Calvinist culture that flourished there? What lasting values, for his own thought, did Rousseau inherit from Calvinism?

Excerpt http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Jean-Jacques_Rousseau

An honest man nearly always thinks justly.

A country cannot subsist well without liberty, nor liberty without virtue.

Virtue is a state of war, and to live in it means one always has some battle to wage against oneself.

What good is it to possess the whole universe if one were its only survivor?

I have entered on an enterprise which is without precedent, and will have no imitator. I propose to show my fellows a man as nature made him, and this man shall be myself.

I know my heart, and have studied mankind; I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality, and whether Nature did wisely in breaking the mould with which she formed me, can only be determined after having read this work.

When the last trumpet shall sound, I will present myself before the sovereign judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I.