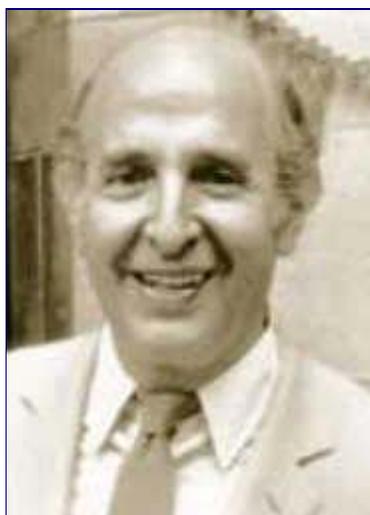


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**A READER'S JOURNAL**  
**Emile**  
**Or On Education**  
by  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau  
**[Translation and Introduction by Alan Bloom]**  
Published by Basic Books in 1979

Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©1998

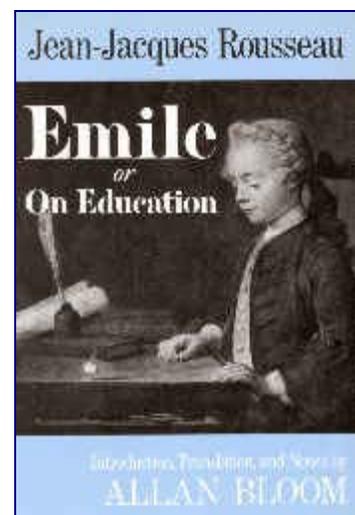
Two hundred years before Jean Piaget did a twenty year longitudinal study of his children, Rousseau did this longitudinal study of an

imaginary child. This novel is a story of how Rousseau would have raised such a child placed in his charge. As full-time governor of Emile, Rousseau begins his study, not with the intent of discovering how the boy would grow into manhood, but with the conscious intent of shaping and controlling Emile's maturation.

The story of Emile, "a savage made to live in cities", is a familiar one. It is the inverse of the story of Robinson Crusoe in which a civilized man is made to live in the wilderness of an island. Interestingly, the story of Robinson Crusoe is the only book that Rousseau allows Emile to read during his early education. He wants Emile to be able to survive in any milieu, be it the wilderness of a deserted island or the wilderness of a populated city. This perennial theme of a wild man coming to the big city appears in Tarzan stories, and most recently in a movie called *Crocodile Dundee*. An Australian crocodile hunter meets a lady from the big city and later returns with her to the city. Innocent of the wiles and intricacies of city life, Dundee manages to survive quite well as a modern day Emile, Rousseau's "noble savage", transplanted to the city.

Rousseau paints us a portrait of Emile, but it is not the portrait of a finished Emile, but rather a work in progress, a moving picture of Emile's life in five books from birth to childhood. Each book begins with a frontispiece that presages the course of Emile's education in the coming section. Book I has an engraving of Achilles's mother dipping him as a baby into the river Styx to protect him. It is Rousseau's intent to dip Emile into the cold realities of nature so that he may be invulnerable to the harshness of nature thereafter. Book II begins with an engraving of Chiron's training of Achilles as a youth in running. This signals Rousseau's intent to focus the early youth of Emile on his physical development. Book III shows Hermes engraving elements of his science on columns of a temple to preserve his teachings in case of a flood. Book IV has Orpheus teaching men the worship of gods. It is in this Book that Rousseau undertakes Emile's education on religion via the "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar." The frontispiece of Book V has Circe giving herself to Ulysses, a natural man that she is not able to transform. This leads us into the final book where Emile is to fall in love with Sophie, and Rousseau is to complete Emile's education.

In creating this movie of Emile, Rousseau is the screen writer, the director, the shaper, the sculptor, the author, the creator, and the educator of the key character Emile. And yet, Rousseau does not teach Emile — he arranges for things to happen to Emile so as to draw out of Emile the best qualities that will suit Emile as a man, in Rousseau's eyes. In doing so, Rousseau goes to the root of education — which comes from the Latin roots, *e ducere*, which means to draw out from. Rousseau arranges with Emile's parents to become the full-time governor of their son when he is a small child. As Emile grows Rousseau arranges experiences for Emile so that his educational plan is achieved.



Always Rousseau prefers the cold hard rigors of nature to the soft, easy ways of civilization for Emile. The goddess Thetis dips baby Achilles into the cold waters of the Styx holding him by his ankle. He is thus invulnerable every place touched by the harsh waters of the river of Hades, and vulnerable on in the spot when his mother's soft hands shielded him from harshness. The soft ways of mothers Rousseau considers to be cruel:

**[page 47] Thetis, to make her son invulnerable, plunged him, according to the fable, in the water of the Styx. This allegory is a lovely one, and it is clear. The cruel mothers of whom I speak do otherwise: by dint of plunging their children in softness, they prepare them for suffering; they open their pores to ills of every sort to which they will not fail to be prey when grown.**

**[page 129-130] People raised too delicately no longer find sleep elsewhere than on down; people accustomed to sleep on boards find it everywhere. There is no hard bed for him who falls asleep as soon as he lies down.**

To avoid such soft, easy ways, Rousseau appoints himself Emile's governor, which sounds strange to modern ears that are only accustomed to the female form of the noun *governess*. His description of a governor rings true to the same ears, especially if it brings to mind a former governor of our home state:

**[page 49] We spend a lot of time trying to figure out the qualities of a good governor. The first quality I would exact of him, and this one alone presupposes many others, is that he not be a man for sale.**

Rousseau has little use for medicine in his raising of Emile, depending on the natural healthiness of a life lived close to nature:

**[page 55] The only useful part of medicine is hygiene. And hygiene is itself less a science than a virtue. Temperance and work are the two true doctors of man. Work sharpens his appetite, and temperance prevents him from abusing it.**

Rousseau would also consider temperance to be a virtue since his definition of virtue is "good with merit" — that is, a good that one receives without earning it is no virtue. The very act of holding back, as implied in temperance, is the essence of what he means by virtue.

**[page 444] The word *virtue* comes from *strength*. Strength is the foundation of all virtue. Virtue belongs only to a being that is weak by nature and strong by will. It is in this that the merit of the just man consists; and although we call God good, we do not call Him virtuous, because it requires no effort for Him to do good.**

Throughout his role as governor, Rousseau demonstrates virtue by denying himself and Emile the usual comforts of society. A horse is preferable to a carriage and walking to a horse. Thus is Emile allowed to experience the world in his first education, which given directly to him by nature. Emile learns nature with his hands, his senses, not from a book on biology. He feels the bumpy warts on the toad that would else appear as flat designs in the illustration in a book.

Nature, Rousseau argues, is the source of the first of the three educations of man, and the one that we have the least control over. Man's second education comes from things, and the things of the world we have more control over. Rousseau as Emile's governor controls the things, the man-made things that Emile encounters. Always he prefers to allow Emile to learn to build a thing for himself rather than to utilize a thing made by someone else, so that Emile may live and prosper independently of the things that are available ready-made. The third education comes from man, and this is one that the governor is the master of, and yet, as Rousseau laments, "Who can hope entirely to direct the speeches and the deeds of all those surrounding the child?"

**[page 63] When during the farewell of Andromach and Hector, the little Astyanax, frightened by the plume waving on his father's helmet, fails to recognize him, flings himself on his nurse's bosom, and extracts from his mother a smile mingled with tears . .**

Reading this passage brought to mind a personal experience and helped me to better understand something about our dog. Since we got our schnauzer I've noticed that when I got excited, he would start barking and jumping as if a stranger were around. Could his reaction be similar to that of Astyanax above? Perhaps our schnauzer reacts to my astral body rising up out of me [like the plume on Hector's helmet], causing him not to recognize me and requiring me to reassure him that it's really me. This alarm response also happens every time my wife and I caress in his presence. Perhaps Astyanax, a very young child, still has embedded memories of a previous lifetime, when seeing the astral body of an angered or otherwise excited man projecting from his head was still a normal human capability. Thus, to see the plume on his father's helmet would have reminded him of such a projection and frightened him. Perhaps warriors in fierce battles project their astral bodies out of themselves that way and from our ancient memories of that, we have added plumes to our helmets to create the image of a fierce warrior in every soldier. Thus a body of soldiers, plumes waving in the breeze, would have given the appearance of a troop of fierce and angry warriors, and this alone would have brought opposing troops to a paralyzing fear and made them easier to conquer. The plumes that serve a decorative function today once had a serious role in warfare. In modern day warfare one can go back to the German helmets of World War I that had the spike sticking out the top of them. On the American continent the native American headdresses must have served a similar function as a colorful representation of the astral body of a fierce warrior going into battle.

Fighting always comes from weaklings, says Rousseau: the urge to fight finds its origin in weakness not in strength. When I worked at a nuclear power plant most of our managers came from the nuclear navy. Navy runts or little Napoleons, we called them. They were uniformly short and nasty. I'm beginning to understand that their fierce natures stemmed from the perceived weakness of their short stature.

Children can only take to heart those lessons given, not by preaching, but by example, and the most important lesson of all is "Do No Harm."

**[page 104] The only lesson of morality appropriate to childhood, and the most important for every age, is never to harm anyone. The very precept of doing good, if it is not subordinated to this one, is dangerous, false, and contradictory.**

Is your child quiet or sullen at times, especially when in the midst of a crowd of its more animated peers? Keep in mind that Rousseau uses "stupid" in the sense of slow to respond as you read his advice about such a child:

**[page 106] From giddy children come vulgar men. I know of no observation more universal and more certain than this one. Nothing is more difficult in respect of childhood than to distinguish real stupidity from that merely apparent and deceptive stupidity which is the presage of strong souls. It seems strange at first that the two extremes should have such similar signs. Nevertheless, it is properly so; for at an age when man as yet has nothing that is truly an idea, the entire difference between one who has genius and one who does not is that the latter accepts only false ideas, and the former, finding only such, accepts none. Thus the genius resembles the stupid child in that the latter is capable of nothing while nothing is suitable for the former.**

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Rousseau clearly delineates in the following passage that words may take on different meanings in different contexts because it is the idea that is being expressed that determines the meaning of the word, and not vice versa. Instead, Rousseau says that each place a word is used, the meaning of the word is to be derived from the words surrounding it in the sentence, in effect, an *in situ* definition.

**[page 108] I have a hundred times in writing made the reflection that it is impossible in a long work always to give the same meanings to the same words. There is no language rich enough to furnish as many terms, turns and phrases as our ideas can have modifications. The method of defining all the terms and constantly substituting the definition in the place of the defined is fine but impracticable, for how can a circle be avoided? Definitions could be good if words were not used to make them. In spite of that, I am persuaded that one can be clear, even in the poverty of our language, not by always giving the same meanings to the same words, but by arranging it so that as often as each word is used, the meaning given it be sufficiently determined by the ideas related to it and that each period where the word is found serves it, so to speak, as a definition. One time I say children are incapable of reasoning; another time I make them reason quite keenly. I do not believe that with that I contradict myself in my ideas; but I cannot gainsay [deny] that I often contradict myself in my expressions.**

Herbert Spencer asked "What knowledge is the most worthy? How do we teach it and how do we measure it?" In Book II Rousseau explains that "fables can instruct men, but the naked truth has to be told to children. When one starts covering the truth with a veil, they no longer make the effort to lift it." Let us look at how we adults might be instructed by La Fontaine's fable of the Fox and the Crow on page 115. The Fox flatters the Crow into singing, and when the cheese falls from the Crow's mouth, the Fox eats it. Cruel, one might think, but La Fontaine is not done yet, for the Fox has a lesson for the Crow. "My good man, learn that every flatterer lives at the expense of the one who listens to him." Some lessons are more expensive than others — this one only cost a piece of cheese. Rousseau says that children will make fun of the Crow, but like the Fox. "They will always take the advantageous role." If the fable contains a lion, they will be the lion. If a gnat were to humble the lion, however, they will be the gnat.

According to Rousseau, man has three kinds of voice: speaking, singing, and passionate. A child may seem to speak as we do, but does not know how to blend inflections into the singing and passionate voices. This indicates to me that there are doyles [See ARJ: *The Emotional Brain*.] of intention, doyles of will, that in a young child are not stored, or if stored, are not yet activated during speaking. These physical body states modulate the voice according to the will or intention of the speaker and communicate that will or intention to us. When a recruit says, "SIR, YES, SIR!" to his drill sergeant in boot camp, there is no doubt that his will is activated. A young child may yell, but only from exuberance, never from will or intent.

The absence of a fully modulated voice with accentuations and inflections is one signal that distinguishes autistic persons from non-autistic persons. [See ARJ: *Thinking in Pictures* and *Emergence*.] With the autistic's precocious onset of cognitive memory capabilities, the doyles of intent and will are never stored for later recall during speaking, and the autistic child is left with an often too loud, unmodulated voice for the remainder of its life. Yet I have no doubt of the presence of will and intent in the autistic person — only the outward signs of will and intent are missing in their inflection, modulation, and tone. It is the non-autistic that must learn to seek other signs of will and intent in these advanced members of the human race from now on.

**[page 152] Countless things are indifferent to touch, to hearing, to sight. But there is almost nothing indifferent to taste. What is more, the activity of this sense is entirely physical and material; it is the only one which says nothing to the imagination, or at least it is the one into whose sensations the imagination enters least, whereas imitation and imagination often mix something moral with the impression of all the others.**

This conclusion by Rousseau I must disagree with. My study of food dislikes indicates that they stem from doyles that are fired off when the taste or the thought of the taste occurs. What one experiences as a dislike for a certain food disappears as soon as one traces and erases the doyle associated with the food. What may be difficult to convince the reader with words becomes very easy when the reader traces and removes a doyle and finds the formerly abominable taste of liver or sauerkraut becomes a pleasurable

sensation, as has happened to me. [See ARJ: *PANACEA!* ]

Here's what Rousseau says about smells:

**[page 157] Smell must not be very active in the first age, when imagination, as yet animated by few passions, is hardly susceptible to emotion, and when we do not have enough experience to foresee with one sense what is promised to it by another sense.**

What Rousseau has right is that in the first age, specifically under five years old as shown by the nascent science of *doyletics*, children are as yet animated by few passions or emotions. [See ARJ: [The Emotions — The Outline of a Theory](#) by Jean-Paul Sartre.] It is during this first age that passions and emotions are stored as doyles or physical body states in the child, to be recapitulated later upon the appropriate stimulus, which might be a smell. It is not the sense of smell that is inactive, but the absence of stored doyles that makes it appear so. When, as a child, I was given castor oil mixed in honey to make it more acceptable, the result was to make honey distasteful to me as an adult. The physical body states of feeling ill became attached to the taste of honey, so that, as an adult, I avoided honey thinking that I didn't like its taste.

In this next passage, Rousseau stumbles upon the key error that humankind makes in its ignoring the evolution of consciousness, up until now. My suggestion is to read it replacing "children" with "early humanity".

**[page 170] We never know how to put ourselves in the place of children; we do not enter into their ideas; we lend them ours, and, always following our own reasonings, with chains of truths we heap up only follies and error in their heads.**

In this next passage, one can imagine that Rousseau would be amazed to find that the answer to his question today is, "Yes, the Internet."

**[page 184] Is there no means of bringing together so many lessons scattered in so many books, of joining them in a common object which is easy to see and interesting to follow and can serve as a stimulant even at this age?**

In this quote, he tells us graphically of the plight of the beginning artist in any field: one must begin as a beggar. How true even today.

**[page 196] But you have to make your talent known. Do you think you can just start out by showing a work at the Salon? Oh, that is not the way it goes! You have to belong to the Academy. You even have to have pull in it in order to obtain some obscure place in a corner. Leave your ruler and your brush, I tell you. Take a cab and run from door to door. It is thus that celebrity is acquired.**

In this next passage, I'm reminded of the well-meaning folks who say proudly, "We never watch TV at our house!"

**[page 201] Let us be simple in doing good. Let us not go and reproduce vanity by our efforts to combat it. To pride oneself on having conquered prejudices is to be subjected to them.**

Rousseau here warns us of the danger of a "free lunch" — I would say it this way, "Something that is free is worth less than what I paid for it."

**[page 234] Ingratitude would be rarer if usurious benefactions were less common.**

**When the fisherman puts a lure in the water, the fish comes and stays around it without**

**distrust. But when caught by the hook hidden under the bait, it feels the line being pulled back and tries to flee. Is the fisherman the benefactor, and is the fish ungrateful?**

>Have you ever known someone who does what seems to be a favor for you and suddenly you discover that there is a hidden hook that is yanking you about against your will? Rousseau sums it all up for us thus: "Never did a true benefaction produce an ingrate."

Why is the news always full of things that are going wrong? Apparently it was much the same in Rousseau's day for he says, "We have a precise history of peoples who are destroying themselves; what we lack is the history of peoples who are thriving."

In this next passage Rousseau sets the stage for the Savoyard Vicar to give his profession of faith to a young refugee from society. Notice how he calls up a spiritual manifestation of the sun-washed Alps "in order to set aside low thoughts in our souls and lift us to divine contemplation." It is the voice of the young man speaking.

**[page 266] It was summer. We got up at daybreak. He took me outside of the city on a high hill beneath which ran the Po, whose course was seen along the fertile banks it washes. In the distance the immense chain of the Alps crowned the landscape. The rays of the rising sun already grazed the plains and, projecting on the fields long shadows of the trees, the vineyards, and the houses, enriched with countless irregularities of light the most beautiful scene which can strike the human eye. One would have said that nature displayed all its magnificence to our eyes in order to present them with the text for conversation.**

By such words, one suspects that Rousseau believes in a divine spiritual being. He seems to further substantiate that when he says at one point that, "Man is therefore free in his actions and as such is animated by an immaterial substance." And in the following telling argument, he has the good Vicar say:

**[page 285] That a being which I cannot conceive of gives existence to other beings is only obscure and incomprehensible; but that being and nothingness turn themselves into one another on their own is a palpable contradiction, a clear absurdity.**

Later the Vicar tells the young man how to tell a good man from a wicked one.

**[page 292] The difference is that the good man orders himself in relation to the whole, and the wicked one orders the whole in relation to himself. The latter makes himself the center of all things; the former measures his radius and keeps to the circumference. Then he is ordered in relation to the common center, which is God, and in relation to all the concentric circles, which are the creatures.**

Does the Vicar exhort the young lad to accept all that he has told him in his profession of faith? No, rather, he says to him:

**[page 295] I do not know whether I am in error. It is difficult in discussion not to adopt an assertive tone sometimes. But remember that all my assertions here are only reasons for doubt. Seek the truth yourself.**

Always Rousseau would have Emile follow the truth that grows within himself rather than the rules imposed from without by society, else by having been forced to follow blindly the rules of society all his life, he will begin outwardly to rebel from them and go forth rudderless into life. He offers him advice about his peers that would be a grand caveat for teenagers of any period of time:

**[page 331-332] But why do these young people want to persuade you? It is because they want to seduce you. They do not love you. They take no interest in you. Their whole**

**motive is a secret spite at seeing that you are better than they are. They want to bring you down to their low level, and they reproach you for letting yourself be governed only in order to govern you themselves. . . All they have done is to imitate other giddy fellows, just as they want to be imitated in their turn. To set themselves above the alleged prejudices of their fathers, they enslave themselves to those of their comrades. I do not see what they gain by that . . .**

What I see that they gain by setting themselves above the prejudices of their fathers is that they destroy the sameness, the kitsch, of their father's generation, and, in so doing, they release exciting possibilities for their own nascent generation. This is the art of the teenager in this society, and like all art, all real art, it is the process of destruction of sameness.[See my essay: *Art Is the Process of Destruction.*] It is not a process that is revered or understood until many years have passed, until the ugliness of its first artworks have been superseded by the refinements of the creations of those artisans who began with the distinct advantage of having a model to follow. This was pointed out by Picasso to someone who commented on how crude his early cubist paintings looked compared to other cubist painters who came after him.

In Emile, I recognize many attributes that I find in myself and such attributes that I have at times been faulted by others for exhibiting. Here is a brief collection of Emile's attributes to that point:

**[page 336] He does not like to see anyone suffer. He will not offer his place to someone else out of affectation, but he will gladly yield it out of goodness if he sees that someone else is forgotten and judges that the man is mortified by this neglect.**

**Unable to give them the taste for things that are really good, he leaves them with the things that are good according to popular opinion, with which they are contented.**

**He speaks little because he hardly cares whether any attention is paid to him. For the same reason he says only useful things; otherwise, who would engage him in conversation? Emile is too well informed ever to be talkative. . . Generally people who know little speak a great deal, and people who know a great deal speak little.**

**Far from shocking others, Emile is quite willing to conform to their ways — not to appear knowledgeable about social practice or to affect the airs of an elegant man; but, on the contrary, he does so for fear of being singled out, in order to avoid being noticed. And he is never more at ease than when no attention is paid to him.**

In the lobby of the Monteleone Hotel is my grandfather clock, and what a clock it is, over ten feet tall and covered in exquisite carvings of black walnut. It is my most wonderful possession because it comes with an entire hotel devoted to its preservation. The owner of the hotel has said that its price is twelve million dollars, because to buy it, one would have to buy the entire hotel. They charge me nothing for the upkeep of the clock and allow me to look at it as much as I want whenever I visit the lobby of the hotel. This way of owning something I came up with years ago, and here in Rousseau, I find a description of the process.

**[page 354] I am richer now with the property of others than I shall ever be with my own — I lay hold of all that suits me in my vicinity. There is no conqueror more determined than I am. I usurp even from princes. I make myself at home on any open pieces of land that please me. I give them names. I make one my park, another my terrace, and so I am their master. From then on, I walk about on them with impunity. I return often to maintain possession. By dint of walking on them, I use their soil as much as I want; and I shall never be persuaded that the man who holds the title to the property I appropriate draws more use from the money it yields for him, than I draw from his land.**

In Book V Rousseau paints a portrait of Sophie as assiduously as he painted Emile. He says of her that, "She ought to reign in the home as a minister does in a state — by getting herself commanded to do what she wants to do."

This is a marvelous book, one that should be required reading for all new parents. Surely it wouldn't take much more time than the natural childbirth classes that usually end up with a last minute saddle-block anesthetic anyway. Here, to end this review I have assembled a miscellany of Rousseau quotes that didn't fit anywhere else, but are too delicious to hide from the eyes of those readers, who like mothers-to-be in the throes of labor, would opt for anything that permits an escape from undergoing the full experience of childbirth, or the reading of *Emile*.

***The letter kills, and the spirit enlivens.***

***In order to subject fortune and things to yourself, begin by making yourself independent of them. To reign by opinion, begin by reigning over it.***

***In giving himself the need to hurt me, this man has made his fate dependent on mine.***

***Volenti nihil difficile.* [Nothing is difficult to him who wills.]**

***The most unfortunate effect of formal politeness is to teach the art of getting along without the virtues it imitates.***

***If you have a spark of genius, go and spend a year in Paris. Soon you will be all that you can be, or you will never be anything.***

***Ubi bene, ibi patria.* [Where there is good, there is the land I am father of.]**

***A person is never ridiculous except when he follows fixed practices.***

***The small fatherland which is the heart.***

***Freedom is found in no form of government; it is in the heart of the free man. He takes it with him everywhere.***

***If there is happiness on earth, it must be sought in the abode where we live.***

