THE LESSONS OF ÉMILE

Douglas W. Shrader[1]

The year was 1712. The place: Geneva, Switzerland. The event: the birth of a child. The child's father, an eccentric watchmaker, was French. His mother, who died a few days following his birth, was Swiss. For the next ten years the child lived with his father in Geneva.[2] By his own confession, Jean Jacques Rousseau was an undisciplined and difficult child — lying, stealing, and general mischief-making came easily. So too did reading. Years later, seeking to understand the person he had become, the author of Émile reflected:

> Tedium drove me at an early age to books. At six I happened to light on Plutarch; at eight I knew him by heart; I had read all the romances; they had drawn from me floods of tears before the age when the heart has awakened to an interest in romance. From this source sprang my taste for the heroic and romantic, which has never ceased growing to the present time, and has ended by blunting my taste for everything which does not resemble my day-dreams.[3]

When the dreamer was ten his father left him in the care of an aunt who enrolled him in boarding school.[4] Two years was enough for all concerned. Anyone who has ever had to work with an intelligent but uncooperative child has perhaps a taste of the experience which Rousseau later described as an attempt to teach him "Latin and all the trifling rubbish that goes with it in the name of education."[5]

Thus, at twelve, Rousseau's formal education came to an end. He was apprenticed to an engraver of watchcases, but ran away. He described the engraver as "a coarse, violent man" who "succeeded in tarnishing all the brightness of my childhood, in brutalizing my loving, vivacious character, and in reducing me, in spirit as well as in fortune, to the true condition of an apprentice."[6] By sixteen, he was

a vagabond, wandering about the countryside with neither purpose nor direction. He moved from benefactor to benefactor, experienced the lives and hardships of the peasants, developed musical skills, and continued to read and reflect about everything he encountered.

In 1741 he went to Paris where he was received well by Diderot and other leaders of the French Enlightenment. In 1746 Rousseau met Thérèse Levasseur, an uneducated servant girl who bore him five children. Twenty-two years later, in 1768, they added marriage vows to their controversial love affair.

In October 1749 this introspective romantic made the transition from reading to writing. The Dijon Academy offered a prize for the best essay on the topic, "Has the restoration of the Arts and Sciences had a purifying effect upon morals?" Rousseau answered a resounding "No!" In the prize-winning essay, Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, he argued that morals had been corrupted by sensuous art, licentious literature, and falsely conceived relationships between science and religion on the one hand and logic and feeling on the other. After thirty-eight years of near obscurity, the work launched Rousseau into the center of the European political and intellectual scene with such force that Diderot commented, "never was there an instance of a like success."[7]

Rousseau followed with an operetta (Le Devin du Village), a comedy (*Narcisse*), a discourse on The Origins of the Inequality Among Men, *Discourse on Political Economy,* a love story (Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse), Émile, The Social Contract, and posthumously, Confessions. Rousseau regarded Émile as the culmination of his life's work. The Social Contract, often regarded as a foundational document of the French Revolution, was for Rousseau little more than an appendix to this, the primary work.[8] Partially because of the views which it contained concerning religion, Émile became both popular and controversial. It was banned, condemned as the work of the Antichrist[9], and a warrant was issued for Rousseau's arrest. The celebrated author became a hunted fugitive.

But neither Rousseau nor his work were easily arrested. He left Paris and took refuge with others, including a sixteen-month stay in England with David Hume. Immanuel Kant, awakened from his dogmatic slumbers by Hume, stated that no book had ever moved him so deeply as Rousseau's Émile. Goethe called it "the teacher's gospel."[10] Mirabeau ranked it as one of the masterpieces of the age and Chateaubriand wrote: "If one could read no more that five works in the whole of literature, Émile would be one of them."[11]

Two-hundred and thirty-four years later Émile remains a controversial yet influential work. It is not difficult to reconstruct the fire and passion with which it was once read. Nor is it difficult to imagine the passion with which it was written. Like Julie, Émile is a love story. It is a story of love between parent and child, teacher and pupil, Émile and Sophia, and Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thérèse Levasseur. It is a story of love for all humankind.[12] As such it is as much a theory of human development, nature, freedom, and fulfillment as it is a prescription for education.

The premise of the story is fairly simple. Émile is an affluent orphan "of ordinary ability" in a temperate climate.[13] The tutor, the author of the text, has no task more important than the education of this single child. In practice, Rousseau regarded himself as a failure as both father and teacher.[14] But in his literary incarnation as Émile's tutor, he exhibits calm compassionate resolve, flawless foresight, universal understanding, and single-minded dedication to the welfare of his charge.

Rousseau begins with the observation that a child is not an adult. He writes:

> Nothing is known about childhood. With our false ideas of it the more we do, the more we blunder. The wisest people are so much concerned with what grown ups should know that they never consider what children are capable of learning. They keep looking for the man in the child, not thinking of what he is before he becomes a man.[15]

The Lessons of Émile

From this simple observation, several consequences follow. First, a human is something which comes into being over time. Any adequate theory of education presupposes an empirical study of human development as well as a philosophical theory of human nature. While there is much in Rousseau's theory of development which we would now consider uninformed or naive, the judgment paradoxically confirms the extent to which we have accepted the general framework of his approach.

Second, there is no reason to presume, either from a moral or pragmatic perspective, that the goals and motivations of a child are parallel to those of an adult. For Rousseau, children operate almost entirely on the basis of self-interest (*amour de soi*): they seek pleasure and avoid pain. Any attempt to pretend otherwise only muddies the water and confuses both child and adult. Worse, it may hamper the natural moral development of the child.

Third, almost a simple corollary to the second point, the methods of instruction appropriate to an adult may be wasted on a child. Rousseau is particularly critical of books and language instruction. The man who read Plutarch at six shields Émile from books till age twelve. He writes:

> I hate books. They only teach us to talk about what we do not know. It is said that Hermes engraved the elements of science on pillars for fear his discoveries might perish in a deluge. If he had impressed them firmly on the human brain, they would have been kept safe there by tradition.[16]

Stressing natural curiosity, pragmatism, and self-reliance, he chooses *Robinson Crusoe* as the first and primary text of Émile's adolescence. Lest we miss the symbolic importance of the choice, he writes:

> . . . let us hasten to establish him on this island while he is able to find complete happiness on it, for the day draws near when he will no longer want to live alone, and when

Friday's company will not content him.[17]

For Rousseau, the stages of individual human development recapitulate those of the species as a whole. In fact, one may reasonably regard Émile as a microcosmic analogue of our collective being. We begin as innocent infants in a paradisiacal state of nature. From five to twelve we begin to develop selfconsciousness but still have no proper sense of self or power of reason. Reason and the sentiments develop from twelve to fifteen. Sexual awareness and social relations dominate the period from fifteen to twenty-two. Émile longs for a companion and is carefully introduced to the society from which he has thus far been meticulously sheltered. When the time is right, he meets Sophia and falls in love. His love for Sophia is strong, but his trust in the wisdom of the tutor is stronger. The tutor advises, "This is the age for love but not for marriage. You are too young to be the father and mother of a family."[18] Thus from twenty-two to twenty-four Émile travels broadly and develops a sense of citizenship and social order. He returns a mature adult, ready to marry Sophia and instruct his own children according to the model provided by the tutor.

Although Émile has learned several trades through apprenticeship, notably that of a carpenter, his education has not been designed to prepare him for any particular vocation.[19] Rather, the focus has been to create a physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially adjusted individual who can choose his own path, adapt to changing circumstances, and maximize his own happiness as well as that of others. In the final analysis Émile is not one self but three: a natural self which somehow persists throughout the socialization process, a private familial self, and a self which functions as a rational autonomous citizen. To deny any one of the three would be to lose a component of being which cannot be replaced or duplicated by the remaining two.[20]

The tutor's method throughout the entire educational process is simple but consistent. He determines through observation as well as knowledge of general principles Émile's readiness for a lesson of a

particular sort. He then carefully and unobtrusively arranges circumstances so that Émile may acquire through personal experience the optimal measure of learning appropriate to his needs and developmental stage. The method is one and the same, whether the topic be physics or religion, ethics or geometry.

Both motivation and reward are natural and spontaneous: curiosity and need. The tutor has need of neither carrot nor stick; there are no exams, no grades, and no formal evaluations. As a child, Émile is subject to the authority of the tutor. But that authority is presented as a matter-of-fact parameter of cause and effect. It is never given as a basis for belief or acceptance of a doctrine which cannot be verified on independent experiential grounds.

Rousseau's trust in this simple method reflects a commitment to two interconnected principles. Human development is presented as a product of an ongoing dialectic between nature and nurture. All things, including humans, are naturally good. Through inappropriate conditioning they are misshapen and deformed. Book I of Émile begins:

> God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil. He forces one soil to yield the products of another, one tree to bear another's fruit. He confuses and confounds time, place, and natural conditions. He mutilates his dog, his horse, and his slave. He destroys and defaces all things; he loves all that is deformed and monstrous; he will have nothing as nature made it, not even man himself, who must learn his paces like a saddlehorse, and be shaped to his master's taste like the trees in his garden.[21]

We may long for a mythic state of nature in which socialization was neither practiced nor necessary, but such is rather like longing for a return to the cradle. There is no going back and no escaping the influence of the societies in which we live. Since we cannot escape the influence, we must control and direct it in a positive fashion.

Any hope for the future of mankind is laid squarely to rest on the shoulders of the educational process.

Education, Rousseau continues, stems from three sources: nature (innate processes of growth and development), humans (the use which we learn to make of this growth), and things (what we gain by experience of our surroundings). To achieve the optimal effect, the three sources must work together. Since we cannot control nature, it is incumbent upon us to adjust what we can so that it works in concert with, rather than contrary to, the principles of natural development.

Those who have studied Taoism will recognize strong parallels, but differences as well. According to Lao-tzu's small text commonly called Tao Te Ching, the entire universe — human and otherwise — is a complex manifestation of a unitary power or force (the *Tao*). To appreciate the complexity of the *Tao* one must recognize three complementary faces. The invisible face — the unmanifest *Tao* — cannot be seen, named, or conceptualized. It is the *Tao* as it is in and of itself. This is the face whereof Lao-tzu says, "He who speaks does not know. He who knows does not say." The second face of the *Tao*, the visible face — the manifest *Tao* — is that which is found in all nature: it directs the growing of a tree, the flowing of a stream, and the swaying of grass in a gentle breeze. It also directs the lightning which splits the tree, the disruption of the stream by a rockslide, and the intense burning of a grass fire. The third face of the *Tao*, the inner face, merits a special name: the *Te*. Like the anamnestic *eidola* of the Platonic forms, the *Te* is carried deep but forgotten within the being of each and every human.

The tree has no choice but to grow according to the *Tao*. The stream has no choice but to flow according to the *Tao*. The human is different. We can live a full satisfying life in harmony with the rest of the universe according to the *Tao*; but we can also choose to swim upstream.[22] Confused by the conflicting dictates of society, we may even find it difficult to find the *Te* within.[23] To help still the conflict,

Taoism advocates non-action (*wu wei*) and minimalist government. Ruling a large country, it is said, is like cooking a small fish: it is best not to overdo it. That government is best which governs least.

Wu wei is somewhat more difficult to explain. Some, not without warrant, translate the phrase as "effortless action." The story is told, for example, of a butcher who used the same cleaver for many years. Though he never sharpened it, it never grew dull. The secret was not in the cleaver, but in its use. He explained, "Between the bones of every joint there is some space, otherwise there could be no movement." Like the river flowing down the mountainside, the butcher simply allowed his cleaver to find those spaces and follow the path of least resistance.[24]

In the <u>Tao Te Ching</u>, the concept of *wu wei* is expressed with stark simplicity: the way to do is to be. If your life is a natural expression of the *Tao*, no action is necessary. If it is not, none is sufficient. As a result, there is no standard moral code or set of divine commandments to regulate human behavior.

In Zen Buddhism, a religion strongly influenced by Taoism, the story is told of a young monk who worried that his monastic training may be a complete waste of time. "I have been here several years," he complained. "I have done all that was asked of me, but still I have not discovered the appearance of my original face. I do not even know whether I had an existence prior to this one or whether I will have another life when this one is over. Tell me, is this just a colossal waste of time? Is there any hope for me? Is there a way?" The roshi listened patiently to the monk's concerns, then asked, "Do you hear the babbling of the brook?" The monk paused, shifted his attention from his intellectual self-regarding concerns to the simple sound of the brook, then answered, "Yes." The roshi responded, in characteristic Zen fashion, "Then there may yet be a way."[25]

While it is perhaps overreaching to characterize Émile's tutor as a Zen master or Taoist sage, his techniques and goals bear striking

structural and philosophical similarity to the practices and values of both. Like them, he favors the teaching of the willow tree or the babbling brook to religious scriptures, literary classics, and the learned treatises of the intellectual elite. Like them, he teaches not by teaching, but by arranging circumstances so that inner illumination may occur. Like them, he seeks only to assist the development of a fully realized human being; occupation and social station matter only insofar as they affect attainment of this goal. And like them, he places strong emphasis on humble, ordinary things.

Asked the secret of Zen, a roshi replied, "When I am hungry, I eat. When I am tired, I sleep." The questioner pressed, "Doesn't everyone do that?" The roshi explained, "Oh no! Most people eat when they are not hungry and sleep when they are not tired. They talk with their mouths full and interrupt their sleep with regrets of the day or worries about the morrow. They attempt to do a thousand things at once, sacrificing each to the next and the one which came before. They are governed by social custom and the clock, and no longer hear the simple needs of their own being." Like the roshi, Émile will eat when he is hungry and sleep when he is tired. As a child, Émile will be free to be a child — nothing more and nothing less. As he progresses from stage to stage, the activities and expectations of the tutor will change accordingly. Because he understands the rhythms of nature (the *Tao*) he will not make the mistake of the foolish farmer who, impatient with the development of his crops, attempted to make them grow faster by pulling on their stalks at night.[26]

When the time is right, illumination will come. As helpful as the teacher may be, it is the student who must learn the lesson. My eating will not sate your hunger; my drinking will not quench your thirst. As in *satori*, insight may come suddenly and with great force. Rousseau recounted the watershed experience in his life as follows:

> I had just been to see Diderot, at that time a prisoner at Vincennes. I had in my pocket a copy of the *Mercure de France*, which I started reading as I walked. My eye fell

> on the subject set for an essay by the Dijon Academy, which was the occasion of my first attempt at writing. If anything ever resembled a sudden inspiration, it was the feelings which I experienced on reading this announcement; I felt suddenly dazzled by flashes of illumination; crowds of clear ideas came to me in a moment, with a confusing force which left me inexpressibly troubled; my brain seemed dazed, like that of a drunken man... Could I ever have written a quarter of what I then saw and felt, how clearly should I have revealed the contradictions of the social system! With what force I should have exposed the abuses of our institutions! With what ease I should have shown that man is naturally good and only becomes bad through our institutions! All that I could retain of that host of all-important truths which revealed themselves to me in that quarter of an hour has been feebly scattered through my three principle works: The First Discourse, the Discourse on Inequality, and the Treatise on Education. The three works are inseparable, and together form one whole.[27]

Rousseau's vision concerned human freedom, happiness, and the oppressive potential of social circumstances. Perhaps ironically, application of these principles in the era in which he lived produced an educational theory which presupposed the very conditions it was meant to produce, depended heavily on chance, required economic resource and social position far beyond the reach of most people, and assumed critical differences in the nature of men and women. Whereas Émile was educated to cultivate independence, Sophia was taught servility from infancy.

Rousseau notes similarities as well as differences between the genders, speaks of each as perfect according to their own nature, and thus eschews any talk of superiority or inequality. That said, he speaks of:

> ...the *first* difference which has to be noted in their per-

> sonal relations. It is the part of the one to be active and strong, and of the other to be passive and weak. Accept this principle and it follows in the *second* place that woman is intended to please man. If the man requires to please the woman in turn the necessity is less direct. Masterfulness is his special attribute. He pleases her by the very fact that he is strong.[28]

If perchance our contemporary feminist is not offended by this passage, she need only read on. Because men and women play different domestic roles, Rousseau prescribes a different education:

> On the good constitution of the mothers depends that of the children and the early education of men is in their hands. On women too depend the morals, the passions, the tastes, the pleasures, aye and the happiness of men. For this reason their education must be wholly directed to their relations with men. To give them pleasure, to be useful to them, to win their love and esteem, to train them in their childhood, to care for them when they grow up, to give them counsel and consolation, to make life sweet and agreeable for them: these are the tasks of women in all times for which they should be trained from childhood.[29]

As narrow and self-serving as these remarks may be, Rousseau is not through. To help Émile develop religious convictions which are truly his own, formed on the basis of personal experience and the natural exercise of reason, the tutor delays instruction as long as possible:

> At fifteen he was not aware that he had a soul, and perhaps at eighteen it is not yet time for him to learn. For if he learns sooner than is necessary he runs the risk of never knowing.[30]

Training, before the child is ready, introduces mere repetition of words and phrases as sanctioned substitutes for spiritual insight

and personal commitment. It closes the mind and nurtures narrow, idolatrous concepts. Rousseau cautions:

> Let us be on guard against presenting the truth to those unable to comprehend it. The effect of that is to substitute error for truth. It would be better to have no idea of the Divine Being than to have ideas that are mean, fantastic and unworthy...
>
> The worst thing about the distorted images of the Deity imprinted on children's minds, is that they endure all their lives, so that even when they grow up their God is still the God of their childhood.[31]

How strange these words, written to guide the education of Émile, seem when set against the following advice concerning Sophia's training:

> It is obvious that if male children cannot form any true idea of religion it is still more beyond the comprehension of girls. For that very reason I would speak to them about it at an earlier age, for if it were necessary to wait till they were able to discuss these profound questions the chances are that they would never be mentioned at all. Just as a women's conduct is subject to public opinion, so is her faith subject to authority. Every girl should have her mother's religion, and every women her husband's. Not being able to judge for themselves in such matters, they should accept the conviction of fathers and husbands as they accept that of the church.[32]

While the heresy differs, Rousseau's views are no more politically correct in late twentieth century America than they were in eighteenth century Europe. Paradoxically, for that very reason, they retain the power to challenge and expand our understanding of self, society, and education. Now, as then, Émile evokes and elicits as much as it instructs. Do we truly understand the development of a

child or the workings of the human mind? Do we push certain subjects too soon or introduce others too late? Have we lost the individual in an unfeeling bureaucratic system or misguided quest for social uniformity? Have we sacrificed our children on the altars of false gods or politically fashionable ideals?

There are many ways to read Émile. We can agree or disagree, affirm or deny, cherish or criticize. Whatever stance we take, the text provides a vivid reminder that our educational views and practices are never far from our philosophical, political, and social commitments. Some sections will produce a nod of the head or flash of recognition. Others are more likely to be dismissed as naive or uninformed. Along the way we gather not only an understanding of Rousseau's views, but a new perspective concerning our own. Like a Taoist parable or Zen *koan*, Émile is a simple story which touches us at a level just below the threshold of conventional wisdom. We lose sight of Émile and see ourselves.

Émile still issues a wake-up call. It still serves as a potent antidote to complacent opinion and unquestioning certitude. It still ignites the passions and initiates a process of challenge, response, recognition, and growth. Rousseau would perhaps envy our position, for we can learn from his errors as well as his insight. In true Socratic fashion, we can use his text to loosen the fetters of contemporary opinion and open our minds to new, creative options.[33] In the ensuing dialectic, we may find ways to elevate both the Émiles and Sophias of tomorrow to levels of awareness, freedom, and being of which Rousseau could only dream.

State University of New York, Oneonta

ENDNOTES

1. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the New York State Foundations of Education Association Annual Conference, SUNY-Cortland, April 1995. Sincere appreciation is expressed to both conference organizers and fellow participants, especially Norman Bauer, Edwin

Cook, Michael Green, Achim Köddermann, and Anthony Roda.

2. Boyd (1911), p. 3. Stumpf, pp. 290-291.
3. Letter to M. de Malesherbes (January 12, 1762). Included in Archer, p. 21. Regarding the influence of Plutarch, note Les Rêveries du Promeneur solitaire: Quatrième Promenade and Rousseau's 1756 letter to Madame d'Epinay. He and his father would sometimes sit throughout the night, reading romantic and sensational stories to one another (Boyd [1911], pp. 3-4 and Davidson, pp. 27-28)
4. Boyd (1911), pp. 7-9. Davidson dates their parting to 1720, when Rousseau was but eight (pp. 26-32).
5. Confessions: Davidson, p. 29. Cf. Boyd (1911), p. 7 and Stumpf, p. 291.
6. Davidson, p. 32.
7. Stumpf, p. 292.
8. Thus he wrote to Duchesne: "My treatise on the Social Contract...being cited several times and even summarized in the educational treatise must pass as a sort of appendix to it, and the two together make a complete whole." Ellis, p. 1. cf. p. 4.
9. Ellis, p. 9.
10. Lawrence A. Cremin, preface to Boyd, The Émile of Jean Jacques Rousseau.
11. 1797. André Boutet de Monvel, p. ix.
12. Rousseau is clear in this regard. He writes: "The story of human nature is a fair romance. Am I to blame if it is to be found only in this book? It ought to be the story of mankind." (Émile—Ellis, p. 1). Cf. Boyd (1956), pp. 155-156.
13. Boyd (1956), p. 20.
14. *Ibid*, pp. 19-20. André Boutet de Monvel, p. vii.
15. Rousseau's preface to Émile. Boyd (1956), pp. 5-6.
16. *Ibid*, p. 83. Compare Plato's misgivings re writing in Phaedrus [275-278]: Shrader, "Words of Love: Eros and Rhetoric in Plato's Phaedrus".
17. *Ibid*, p. 85.
18. Boyd (1956), p. 160. For comparison, Sophia is eighteen.
19. Early in Book I, Rousseau writes: "In the natural order where all men are equal, manhood is the common vocation. One who is well educated for that will not do badly in the duties that pertain to it. The fact that my pupil is intended for the army, the church or the bar, does not greatly concern me. Before the vocation determined by his parents comes the call of nature to the life of human kind. Life is the business

I would have him learn. When he leaves my hands, I admit he will not be a magistrate, or a soldier, or a priest. First and foremost, he will be a man. All that a man must be he will be when the need arises, as well as anyone else. Whatever the changes of fortune he will always be able to find a place for himself." Boyd (1956), pp. 14-15. David Hume, in An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, expressed the principle as a personal maxim: "Be a philosopher; but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man."

20. Rorty, p. 52.
21. Foxley, p. 5.
22. It is interesting and instructive to compare this notion with Jewish, Christian, and Islamic concepts of free will and original sin.
23. It is also interesting and instructive to compare this idea to the Socratic method of dialectical questioning and his practice of intellectual midwifery. The dross of *doxa*, even if correct, may obscure the *episteme* hidden within.
24. Adapted from Smith, p. 205.
25. Adapted from D.T. Suzuki, Zen Buddhism.
26. The story is one told by Mencius, reported in Smith, p. 203.
27. Letter to M. de Malesherbes (January 12, 1762). Archer, p. 23.
28. Boyd (1956), p. 131.
29. *Ibid*, p. 135.
30. *Ibid*, p. 114.
31. *Ibid*, p. 114.
32. *Ibid*, p. 144.
33. Note note 22..

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