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Rousseau's errors: they persist today in educational theory¹

Summary

In this essay, the author contends that the approach to education described by Rousseau in *Émile* is not only impractical but is founded on four misconceptions concerning human nature and development. These are (1) the vulnerable-child fallacy (that children must be protected from learning the wrong things); (2) the stage-of-development fallacy (that children can learn only certain kinds of things at certain ages); (3) the lone-child-in-nature fallacy (that children learn best from interacting physically with nature, not from interacting verbally with other people); and (4) the controllability fallacy (that it is possible to know a child so well as to be able to control, through subtle means, what the child learns). The author's own research indicates that the ideal environment for children's natural, self-directed learning is very different from, in many ways opposite to, that outlined by Rousseau.

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau is known as the “back-to-nature” theorist in education. He is referred to frequently in education texts as the originator of child-centered, natural means of education. If you are familiar with my work, you know that I have long been writing about children's natural means of education, so you might assume that I would be inspired by Rousseau. Well, I am inspired—inspired to point out how very wrong he was.

Rousseau's sole work on educational theory is his book *Émile*, first published in 1760, which describes the education of a fictitious boy, whose name is the title of the book. The book is partly a novel and partly a philosophical treatise on the natural goodness of human beings and how to preserve that goodness through an education that does not corrupt.

Pity poor *Émile*! He is subjected in Rousseau's work to the most extreme and restrictive form imaginable of what today would be called child-centered or progressive education. *Émile* spends the first 25 years of his life in the company of his tutor, referred to as the *master*, who is presented by Rousseau in the first person. The master is an extraordinarily intelligent, accomplished, devoted man who continuously studies *Émile*, gets to know his every motive and whim, and uses that knowledge to provide the boy with just those expe-

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riences that best impart the exact lessons that the master deems appropriate. The student-teacher ratio is one to one.

The master controls the boy constantly, not through orders but through what two centuries later Skinnerian psychologists would refer to as “behavioral engineering.” He manipulates *Émile*’s environment in such a way that the boy always chooses to do exactly what the master believes is good for him. In order for this to happen, *Émile* must, for his first 15 years, be isolated from other social forces, including other children. The master is his sole companion. The boy also has to be isolated from all literature except that made available by the master. Indeed, Rousseau prescribes that *Émile* should read just one book in his first 15 years, *Robinson Crusoe*. According to Rousseau, that book alone provides just the right story to motivate the boy’s thoughts, fantasies, and play in a healthy direction.

Émile plays and explores (all by himself, apparently), and he believes that he is acting freely, but in fact he plays and explores with just those materials, and in just those ways, and thereby learns just those lessons, that the master has chosen for him. Far from trusting the natural inclinations of the child, Rousseau’s vision is one in which every decision of the child, and every lesson learned, is cleverly controlled by the brilliant master, who gladly devotes his brilliance, full time, for most of his adult life, to the education of just one boy!

It is tempting to think that Rousseau wrote this book as a farce. I would love to believe that witty Rousseau was pulling the legs of other educational theorists by deliberately exaggerating and ridiculing their ideas. But apparently he was not. He referred to *Émile* as his most important and serious philosophical work. He recognized, of course, the impracticality of the educational plan he was proposing, but he thought that if such a plan could be followed it would be the ideal. Nor have the thousands of modern education professors who have referred to the book described it as a joke. Whether they have agreed with it or not, they have treated it seriously as if not the foundation of modern progressive and child-centered theories in education.

My own view of education has been shaped partly by my studies of how children in hunter-gatherer bands become educated and partly by my observations of the Sudbury Valley School, located in Framingham, Massachusetts, USA (Gray 2011, 2012, 2013; Gray & Chanoff 1987). In both of these settings, children educate themselves naturally, through their own self-directed play and explorations. Although adults play helpful roles, they do not direct the children’s activities, neither overtly as occurs in today’s conventional schools nor covertly in the manner prescribed by Rousseau. The children are truly free, unlike Rousseau’s *Émile*. Although I agree with Rousseau that children’s play and exploration are keys to their learning, I disagree with him on almost everything else.

Let me list here what I see to be the primary fallacies of Rousseau’s educational theory. The fallacies are important as a critique not just of Rousseau but of a whole line of educational theories following him that are very much alive today.

1. The vulnerable-child fallacy: The idea that children must be protected from learning the wrong things

Throughout the book, Rousseau is even more concerned with protecting *Émile* from learning the wrong lessons than he is with teaching Rousseau the right lessons. This concern follows from the very first line in the book: "God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil." To Rousseau, nature is good and society is evil; so if *Émile* is to develop into a good person he must be exposed to nature and isolated from society, at least until he is an adult and has acquired the strength of character to resist society's evils.

Today we hear this same idea expressed, in more particular ways, by those who wish to control what television shows children watch, what games they play, what ideas they hear, and with whom they may associate. This vulnerable-child idea is even part of the rationale for the age segregation we impose on children. We protect children from interacting with others who might, we think, be corrupting influences.

My view – consistent with the philosophy and practices of the Sudbury Valley School – is that human beings are neither fundamentally good nor bad, nor are young children necessarily more innocent and pure than are older children and adults. We are all fundamentally social beings, and to deprive children of the full range of social interactions is to deprive them of that which is essential to normal human development. Children don't just blindly mimic what they see in others. They think about what they see. They pay attention not just to others' actions, but also to the consequences of those actions. The more children can explore the realities of the world the more skilled they become at coping with those realities. In order to decide what works and what doesn't, they must see a range of models, who behave differently from one another. In order to form useful opinions, they must hear all sides and decide for themselves where the contradictions lie. To prepare for the real world, children need to grow up in that world, experiencing its warts as well as its roses.

Where society is corrupt, the best we adults can do for our children's long-term wellbeing is to attack the corruption directly, not try to hide it from them and expect them magically to be able to deal with it when they are adults. In a democracy, we continually strive to improve society through means in which each person has an equal vote. Through these means we strive to create rules and procedures that are designed to reduce the conflicts between each person's self-interests and the interests of the group as a whole, and thereby we strive to reduce evil. Sudbury Valley is fundamentally a democratic community, in which children, from four years old on through the teenage years, experience firsthand the rights and responsibilities accorded by democracy (Greenberg 1987). They grow up in a social world in which they learn to use democratic procedures to make that world better.

2. The stage-of-development fallacy: The idea that children can learn only certain kinds of things at certain ages

Rousseau divides his treatise into several “books” (units), which correspond with what he sees to be separate stages of development. Each stage represents a metamorphosis from one way of being to another. Of most significance, Rousseau expresses with certainty the view that children are unable to reason logically until the age of 12 years old, a view remarkably like that expressed nearly two centuries years later by the famous Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (who contended that formal operational reasoning comes at about age 12 or 13). According to Rousseau, there is no sense in trying to reason with a young child, because the child lacks the capacity to reason. The young child can learn physical skills and can learn through experiencing the direct consequences of his actions, but cannot learn anything useful through the symbolic means of language. This premise – which is contradicted by the experience of every child and every person who ever was a child – provides a rationale for failing to listen seriously to what children have to say. It does so even today, and even by people who know, from recalling their own childhood thoughts and reasons, that the premise is false. Of course, the democratic procedures that the Sudbury Valley School has been using successfully for nearly 50 years are founded on the assumption that children can reason.

3. The lone-child-in-nature fallacy: The idea that children learn mostly or entirely from acting on natural objects in their environment

A corollary of the idea that children under 12 can’t reason is that they can learn little if anything of importance through verbal means. They learn, instead, from their direct sensory experiences and their manipulation of objects in the physical world. Rousseau claimed to believe that, and so did Piaget. But everyday experience clearly proves this view to be wrong. When children want to know something, their most frequent route to finding the answer is to ask someone who might know. Their reactions show that very often they understand what they hear. They ask appropriate follow-up questions, make reasonable (sometimes infuriatingly reasonable) objections to what they hear, and subsequently behave in ways that show that they understand. Children *do* also learn through non-social means, through direct experiences with physical objects in their environment, and that is important; but they learn even more through language. Indeed, for human beings, other people who can speak and understand have always been an essential ingredient of the natural environment. To think that young children cannot learn from the social part of their natural environment is absurd.

4. The controllability fallacy: The idea that it is possible to know a child so well as to be able to control, through subtle means, what the child learns

The most serious of Rousseau's errors is the idea that human behavior is sufficiently predictable and controllable that a teacher can ever guide a student in anything like the manner that the master guided *Émile*. At least Rousseau was willing to admit that such a teacher would have to be a sort of superhero – a person with extraordinary powers of observation and reason, who would dedicate essentially his whole life to the education of a single child. Some more recent philosophies of education seem to expect this from real teachers, who have real lives, and who have more than one child to deal with.

The usual debate between traditionalists and progressivists in education has to do with means of control. Both sides agree that the educator's job is to ensure that children learn a certain curriculum, but they differ in the means of achieving that goal. Traditionalists believe in the direct approach: you tell students what they need to learn; you use direct and open power-assertive means, with lots of drill, to try to make them learn it; you test them on it; and then you go through the whole process again if they didn't learn it the first time. Progressivists believe in the indirect approach: you know what it is that the children should learn and you feel it is your responsibility to get them to learn it, but, to the degree possible, you try to do it through means that do not involve any obvious power assertion. You try to do it by calling forth children's natural learning activities, including play and exploration, and by subtly guiding those activities so that the children will "discover," on their own, the right answers and not the wrong ones. That, of course, is the method of Rousseau. In this debate I find it hard to prefer one view over the other. I agree with neither.

Rousseau's fundamental error, and that of essentially all modern educators, is the belief that the secret to education lies in the capacities of the teacher. It does not; it lies in the capacities of the children. Children educate themselves.

The great insight of the founders of the Sudbury Valley School – an insight understood for millennia earlier by hunter-gatherers – is that you don't need a curriculum. You don't need to take responsibility for children's learning. You don't need to use either power assertion or cleverness to get children to learn. All you need to do is to provide an environment in which children (a) can explore and play to their hearts' content; (b) are free of bullying and other forms of intimidation; (c) can interact freely with others of all ages; (d) have access to the culturally valued tools for learning; and (e) can experience directly enough of the culture in which they are growing up that they can figure out what it is that they need to know to do well in that culture. This is what the Sudbury Valley School provides and what the three or four dozen schools throughout the world modeled after Sudbury Valley provide.

Unlike Rousseau's fantasy, Sudbury Valley is not a pipe dream. It has been operating successfully for nearly half a century, at a cost per student far less than that of the local public schools and at far less trouble, and more joy, for all involved. It has hundreds of

graduates, succeeding in all walks of life (Greenberg & Sadofsky 1992; Greenberg, Sadofsky, & Lempka 2005). It's high time that the education professors of the world took a serious look at it.

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