Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Re-entering Nature...

1712-1778
His mother died shortly after his birth. When Rousseau was 10 his father fled from Geneva to avoid imprisonment for a minor offense, leaving young Jean-Jacques to be raised by an aunt and uncle. Rousseau left Geneva at 16, wandering from place to place, finally moving to Paris in 1742. He earned his living during this period, working as everything from footman to assistant to an ambassador.
In 1743-44 Rousseau was a secretary to the French Ambassador Comte de Montaigu to Venice, and first came into close contact with political life and institutions. Back in Paris he was introduced through the famous philosopher Denis Diderot to the Encyclopedists. His own contributions to the collective effort were mostly on musical subjects, although he wrote one on political economy. Rousseau's new musical notation had been pronounced by the Academy of Sciences "neither useful nor original," and his opera, Les Muses galantes, had failed.
Rousseau's life changed on the road to Vincennes when he noticed an announcement in which the Dijon Academy was offering a prize for the best essay on the subject "Has the progress of the arts and sciences contributed to the purification or the corruption of morals?" "All at once," Rousseau said, "I felt myself dazzled by a thousand sparkling lights; crowds of vivid ideas thronged into my head with a force and confusion that threw me into unspeakable agitation; I felt my head whirling in a giddiness like that of intoxication."

Rousseau won the prize for his essay *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. He was 38
Around 1750 Rousseau began to promulgate the romantic conception of the noble - or innocent - savage. The theme was elaborated in Rousseau's second essay, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), where he maintained that only the uncorrupted savage is in possession of real virtue. (The most famous adaptation of the idea in literature is Edgar Rice Burroughs's hero of the jungle, Tarzan.) The cultivation of earth and invention of metallurgy led to the birth of work and property. People were divided into poor and rich, and laws solidified the state of affairs permanently. Despotism is the ultimate end of historical development - we are all equal because we are slaves of one ruler.
“The first man who, having fenced in a piece of land, said "This is mine," and found people naive enough to believe him, that man was the true founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars, and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows: Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody.”

— Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, 1754
In this early writing, Rousseau contended that man is essentially primitively good, a "noble savage" when in the "state of nature" (the state of all the other animals, and the condition man was in before the creation of civilization and society).

Good people are made unhappy and corrupted by their experiences in society. He viewed society as "artificial" and "corrupt" and that the furthering of society results in the continuing unhappiness of man.
Rousseau's essay, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750), argued that the advancement of art and science had not been beneficial to mankind.

He proposed that the progress of knowledge had made governments more powerful, and crushed individual liberty.

He concluded that material progress had actually undermined the possibility of sincere friendship, replacing it with jealousy, fear and suspicion.
In Rousseau the feeling of "discomfort with culture" became a target of serious study for the first time. The cultured man is degenerate, Rousseau thought, and the whole history of civilization a betrayal. Rousseau's naturalism was in great contrast to all that Voltaire considered the quintessence of civilization. Rousseau decided to "reform" and live the simple life. He returned in 1754 to Geneva, reverted to Protestantism, and regained citizenship. In 1756 Rousseau moved to a cottage near the forest of Montmorency.
Perhaps Rousseau's most important work is *The Social Contract* that describes the relationship of man with society. Contrary to his earlier work, Rousseau claimed that the state of nature is brutish condition without law or morality, and that there are good men only a result of society's presence. In the state of nature, man is prone to be in frequent competition with his fellow men. Because he can be more successful facing threats by joining with other men, he has the impetus to do so. He joins together with his fellow men to form the collective human presence known as "society." "The Social Contract" is the "compact" agreed to among men that sets the conditions for membership in society.
One of the primary principles of Rousseau's political philosophy is that politics and morality should not be separated. When a state fails to act in a moral fashion, it ceases to function in the proper manner and ceases to exert genuine authority over the individual. The second important principle is freedom, which the state is created to preserve.
The Social Contract (1762) starts with the declaration, "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they."

Cf 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité’
Only by surrendering to the general will, can an individual find his fullest freedom. The general will, essentially directed toward common good, Rousseau believed, is always right. The citizens of a united community exchanges their natural liberty for something better, moral liberty. In this theory political society is seen as involving the total voluntary subjection of every individual to the collective general will; this being both the sole source of legitimate sovereignty and something that cannot but be directed towards common good.
The passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a very remarkable change in man, by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct, and giving his actions the morality they had formerly lacked. Then only, when the voice of duty takes the place of physical impulses and right of appetite, does man, who so far had considered only himself, find that he is forced to act on different principles, and to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations. Although, in this state, he deprives himself of some advantages which he got from nature, he gains in return others so great, his faculties are so stimulated and developed, his ideas so extended, his feelings so ennobled, and his whole soul so uplifted, that, did not the abuses of this new condition often degrade him below that which he left, he would be bound to bless continually the happy moment which took him from it for ever, and, instead of a stupid and unimaginative animal, made him an intelligent being and a man.

*The Social Contract*, 1762
Émile paved way for the liberal modern educational experiments. It stated that experience should come not from books but from life. Rousseau's theory of education rests on two assumptions: that man is by nature good and that society and civilization corrupt the native goodness. Only through proper education in youth could the "natural man" come to being. Children should be kept from books until the age of 12 and youth should be taught "natural religion" only. Girls were to be trained solely as wives and mothers... But, then Sophie came...
Rousseau's Julie; ou la nouvelle Héloïse (1761) was an 18th-century best-seller. It was born of the aging author's dream of finding a perfect love with a kindred soul. The story depicts the passionate love of the tutor Saint Preux and his pupil Julie, their separation, and Julie's marriage to the Baron Wolmar. The theme of sexual passion is in the end transformed into an account of a social utopia on the Baron's country estate.
La Nouvelle Héloïse, 1761

The importance of feeling
The elevation of passion
The communion with Nature
Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), in which he advanced his religious views in a section called the ‘Profession of faith of a Savoyard vicar’, was formally condemned by the authorities at Geneva and publicly burned together with his political tract *Du contrat social*. The Archbishop of Paris, the Sorbonne and the high in Paris likewise condemned *Emile* to be burned. Rousseau fled to asylum in Prussian territory.
In 1762 Rousseau was condemned for religious unorthodoxy. He fled to Switzerland, first to Neuchâtel (1762-65), then to Bienne (1765). When the government of Berne ordered Rousseau out of its territory, he visited England. Rousseau's misanthropy and growing persecution mania led to quarrels with his new friends, among them David Hume, and he went to France, where he lived for a time in disguise. In 1768 he married Thérèse, and in 1770 he was officially permitted to return to Paris - if he did not write against the government.
"I have entered on an enterprise which is without precedent, and will have no imitator. I purpose to show my fellows a man as nature made him, and this man shall be myself." (from *Les Confessions*, 1781-1788)

Rousseau's later works include *The Confessions*, the first "romantic" autobiography, which was composed between 1765 and 1770. Rousseau starts with his of uniqueness. "I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different." The book was part of his immersion into self-observation, also exemplified in *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques* (1776) and the *Reveries* (1782).