



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on June 28, 2023

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Insightful and Inciting, Born This Day in 1712

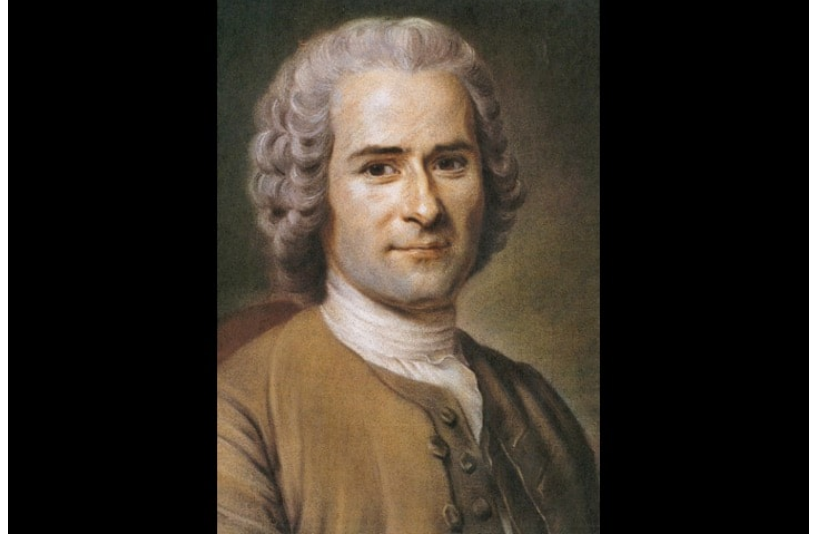
In the annals of intellectual history, few names shine more brightly than that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. A visionary philosopher, writer, and composer of the 18th century, Rousseau's ideas continue to resonate and shape our understanding of politics, education, and human nature. His life story is as captivating as his works, filled with twists and turns that reveal a complex man driven by a relentless pursuit of truth and freedom.

Born on June 28, 1712, in Geneva, Switzerland, Rousseau experienced a childhood marked by adversity. Orphaned at the tender age of 10, he was raised by his uncle, who provided a basic education. However, Rousseau's insatiable curiosity and intellectual vigor led him on a lifelong quest for knowledge, guiding him to explore a multitude of subjects.

As a young man, Rousseau found his passion in the study of government and philosophy. His earliest works, such as the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and the *Discourse on Inequality*, unveiled his sharp criticism of the injustices he witnessed in his own society. Rousseau contended that civilization, with its unnatural inequalities and artificial scheme of sovereignty, corrupted the innate goodness of humanity. These ideas challenged the prevailing orthodoxy of the time, making him a controversial figure.

Rousseau's groundbreaking work, *The Social Contract*, published in 1762, further cemented his place in the pantheon of intellectual history. In this seminal work, he proposed that a just society could only be achieved through a social contract, an agreement among individuals to form a government that operates for the collective good. If the government created by the people begins destroying rather than protecting the life, liberty, and property of the people, then it is the unalienable right of the people to dissolve that government. His ideas on popular sovereignty and the rights of citizens laid the groundwork for democratic thought, profoundly influencing the French Revolution and our own War for Independence.

Beyond his philosophical writings, Rousseau's contributions extended into the realm of education. In his acclaimed work, *Emile: Or, On Education*, he advocated for an unconventional approach to nurturing young minds. Rousseau championed the idea of education based on individual needs and natural development, emphasizing hands-on experiences and self-discovery. His emphasis on cultivating a child's autonomy and emotional well-being laid the foundation for modern pedagogical theories and is anathema to the factory-like atmosphere found in American public (and most private) schools today.





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Rousseau's intellectual pursuits were not limited to the written word; he was also a gifted composer and music enthusiast. His compositions, such as the opera "Le Devin du Village," highlighted his talent and passion for music. While his musical career didn't achieve the same level of recognition as his philosophical works, his respectable musical corpus demonstrates his multifaceted brilliance.

However, Rousseau's life was not without its controversies and personal struggles. He faced significant challenges in his personal relationships, controversies which throughout his life drew both admiration and criticism. The complexities of his personal life notwithstanding, Rousseau's ideas reverberated through the halls of power and worked to profoundly alter the intellectual landscape of his time.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's final years were marked by a sense of isolation and persecution. Fleeing from the authorities and facing public condemnation, he sought refuge in various locations, including Switzerland and England. Despite his troubles, Rousseau's unwavering commitment to truth and justice remained steadfast until his death on July 2, 1778, in Ermenonville, France.

Today, Rousseau's legacy endures as a beacon of intellectual inquiry and social reform. His ideas, driven by a deep concern for humanity, continue to provoke thought and inspire generations. From his groundbreaking philosophy on political theory to his revolutionary concepts in education, Rousseau's body of work has left an indelible mark on the fabric of Western civilization, including the United States. His life and works remind us of the power of a single individual's ideas and the right of a people to choose the government that suits them best.

Many of our Founding Fathers were among Rousseau's admirers. In a letter to his wife, Abigail, John Adams recommended reading Rousseau:

Have you ever read J. J. Rousseau. If not, read him—your Cousin Smith has him. What a Difference between him and Chesterfield, and even Voltaire? But he was too virtuous for the Age, and for Europe....

Adams was particularly fond of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. In fact, Adams is known to have owned three copies of that book, as well as a nine-volume collection of Rousseau's works. So noticeable was Rousseau's influence on Adams that many scholars have devoted entire articles to that topic.

In a letter listing the catalog of books he had donated to form the first Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson also praised Rousseau, writing: "[H]is eminence over others would entitle him to be understood of preference." A collection of Rousseau's printed works was included by Jefferson in that catalog of books to be placed in that illustrious library.

There are those who challenge Rousseau's theories, of course, but there is no dispute as to his influence on our Founding Fathers, particularly during their days as young men, a decade or so preceding the Declaration of Independence.

Finally, what follows are some quotations taken from Rousseau's *Social Contract*, as well as from *Emile*, his book on education. I've included quotations from both books because while the former is well-known and often discussed and debated, the latter is often overlooked. But to parents seeking guidance in the education of their young children, there are many worthwhile observations in *Emile* that may be of some help.

One last note: please read these quotations carefully. From *Social Contract*, there are many insightful observations regarding liberty and how it is lost; when the people are justified in altering or abolishing



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their government; how the Constitution is destroyed by despots; and how citizens are in no way obliged to obey the dictates of a tyrant.

From *Emile*, you will read of the deleterious effect on the family that Rousseau sees when parents send their children to school outside of the home all day, as well as the advantage to each member of the family that comes from children being taught inside the walls of their own home. I think many readers will be amazed at how a book written 260 years ago so accurately describes the state of public education and its effect on the family today.

Enjoy!

From *Social Contract*:

“Free people, remember this maxim: we may acquire liberty, but it is never recovered if it is once lost.”

As the particular will acts constantly in opposition to the general will, the government continually exerts itself against the sovereignty of the people. The greater this exertion becomes, the more the constitution changes; and, as there is in this case no other corporate will to create an equilibrium by resisting the will of the prince, sooner or later the prince must inevitably suppress the sovereignty of the people and break the social treaty. This is the unavoidable and inherent defect which, from the very birth of the body politic, tends ceaselessly to destroy it, as age and death end by destroying the human body.

The dissolution of the State may come about in either of two ways.

First, when the prince ceases to administer the State in accordance with the laws and usurps the Sovereign power. A remarkable change then occurs: not the government, but the State, undergoes contraction; I mean that the great State is dissolved, and another is formed within it, composed solely of the members of the government, which becomes for the rest of the people merely master and tyrant. So that the moment the government usurps the sovereign power of the people, the social compact is broken, and all private citizens recover by right their natural liberty, and are forced, but not bound, to obey.

From *Emile*:

Would you restore all men to their primal duties, begin with the mothers; the results will surprise you. Every evil follows in the train of this first sin; the whole moral order is disturbed, nature is quenched in every breast, the home becomes gloomy, the spectacle of a young family no longer stirs the husband’s love and the stranger’s reverence. The mother whose children are out of sight wins scanty esteem; there is no home life, the ties of nature are not strengthened by those of habit; fathers, mothers, children, brothers, and sisters cease to exist. They are almost strangers; how should they love one another? Each thinks of himself first. When the home is a gloomy solitude pleasure will be sought elsewhere.

The charms of home are the best antidote to vice. The noisy play of children, which we thought so trying, becomes a delight; mother and father rely more on each other and grow dearer to one another; the marriage tie is strengthened. In the cheerful home life the mother finds her sweetest duties and the father his pleasantest recreation. Thus the cure of this one evil would work a wide-spread reformation; nature would regain her rights. When



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women become good mothers, men will be good husbands and fathers.

Joyeux anniversaire, Monsieur Rousseau!



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