

Reconsidering Dewey in a Culture of Consumerism: A Rousseauian Critique

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A starting point for a comparison of John Dewey and Jean-Jacques Rousseau can be found in chapter nine of *Democracy and Education* where Dewey addresses directly the work of his controversial predecessor. While acknowledging “elements of truth” in Rousseau’s work, Dewey faults Rousseau for conceptually separating the child’s own natural development from the child’s interactions with his social environment. When Rousseau describes education as arising out of the conjunction of “nature, man, and things,” Dewey argues, “he regards them as separate and independent operations” and erroneously “subordinates” the child’s social contacts to his natural and spontaneous development.

Rousseau was right, introducing a much-needed reform into education, in holding that the structure and activities of the [child’s physical] organs furnish the *conditions* of all teaching ... but profoundly wrong in intimating that they supply not only the conditions but also the *ends* of their development.... The office of the social medium is ... to direct growth through putting powers to the best possible use.¹

What Dewey objects to is not Rousseau’s recognition of the importance of natural development as an educational aim but his privileging of natural development *over* social aims (what Dewey terms the “social medium”) and Rousseau’s failure to see both the individual’s nature and the social context as “factors which *must* work together” in order for optimal education to occur.²

The aim of the present essay is to re-examine Dewey’s critique of Rousseau in the context of the culture of consumerism that dominates much of American social life today. A clear justification for examining the contemporary relevance of Dewey’s own educational aims appears in the paragraphs of *Democracy and Education* that directly precede his critique of Rousseau. The statement of an educational aim, Dewey writes, “is a matter of emphasis at a given time.... We tend ... to frame our statement on the basis of the defects and needs of the contemporary situation [and] in terms of some alteration to be brought about.”³

Given the “defects and needs of the contemporary situation” particularly with regard to the commercial influences on children today, is Dewey’s critique of Rousseau still valid? Or might Rousseau’s educational writings provide a more useful source than Dewey acknowledges for an “alteration” in our educational practice? In what follows, I first review Dewey’s repeated efforts to bridge the conceptual separations that he criticizes in Rousseau’s work, particularly the separation between the child’s “nature” and his or her social environment. The overview of Dewey’s attempts to get beyond the dualism he criticizes in Rousseau is followed by an acknowledgement of the pedagogical principles they share. I then briefly attend to those “defects and needs of the contemporary situation” that relate specifically to the effects of consumerism on children today. In the final sections of

the essay I use a selective reading of the early Books of Rousseau's *Emile* to suggest that Rousseau's conceptual "separations" may have more theoretical justification than Dewey allows, and that Rousseau's stoic ethic of individual resistance to social pressures may provide a useful alternative to Dewey's vision of social accommodation. In essence the essay attempts to be a twenty-first-century Rousseauian rejoinder to Dewey's twentieth century critique.

BEYOND DUALISM: DEWEY'S SYNTHETIC EDUCATIONAL VISION

Dewey's desire to go beyond the "separations and independent operations" he saw in previous philosophers' works was a lifelong preoccupation. Jim Garrison points out that as early as 1891, even before he began his work at the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, Dewey sketched an "Outline of a Critical Theory of Ethics" that included in upper case letters the following statement:

IN THE REALIZATION OF INDIVIDUALISTY THERE IS FOUND ALSO THE NEEDED REALIZATION OF SOME COMMUNITY OF PERSONS OF WHICH THE INDIVIDUAL IS A MEMBER; AND CONVERSELY, THE AGENT WHO DULY SATISFIES THE COMMUNITY IN WHICH HE SHARES, BY THAT SAME CONDUCT SATISFIES HIMSELF.⁴

Similarly, in *John Dewey and American Democracy* Robert Westbrook cites lecture notes from a political philosophy course Dewey taught in 1892 that clearly anticipate his felt need to reconcile individual and social aims in his educational theory. "Individuality cannot be opposed to association.... The theory which sets the individual over against society," Dewey wrote, perhaps with Rousseau's writings already in mind, "of necessity contradicts itself."⁵

In an 1897 article entitled "Ethical Principles Underlying Education" Dewey applies his synthesizing impulses more specifically to the process of education. As a lead-in to a discussion of the social ethics of schooling, he insists again that "The individual and society are neither opposed to each other nor separated from each other." Indeed, the individual "has no existence by himself. He lives in, for, and by society, just as society has no existence excepting in and through the individuals who constitute it."⁶ Here we are very far from Rousseau's early writings that depict a solitary "natural man" existing prior to, and independent of, social groupings.⁷

Dewey's work at the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago between 1896 and 1904 gave him an open field for actively experimenting with ways to overcome the dualisms he had perceived in the educational philosophies that had preceded his. In *The School and Society* Dewey lovingly describes classrooms in which the traditional separations of manual training and intellectual learning, of community life and school life, and of individual aims and social aims have been harmoniously transcended by creative, intelligent work. But the most succinct yet comprehensive statement of Dewey's educational thought during these years is "My Pedagogic Creed," published in 1897. The opening Article makes his differences with Rousseau very clear. "I believe that all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race," he begins, in stark contrast to the Rousseauian vision of the unique individual set apart from society that is described in *Emile*. The process of socialization, Dewey continues, "begins

unconsciously almost at birth, and is continually shaping the individual's powers, saturating his consciousness, forming his habits, training his ideas, and arousing his feelings and emotions."⁸ Dewey acknowledges that the educative process must begin with a recognition of the "psychological" side — that is, that "the child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education," but that "knowledge of social conditions, of the present state of civilization, is necessary in order properly to interpret the child's powers." "The psychological and social sides are organically related," Dewey concludes. "In sum, I believe that the individual who is to be educated is a social individual, and that society is an organic union of individuals."⁹

The theme of education as a holistic process integral to the social life of the child continues in "The Child and the Curriculum" published in 1902. In contrast to Rousseau, who as we will see counseled mothers to "build a fence" around the young child's soul at an early age to protect him "from the impact of human opinions" and who argued for the necessity of "things" rather than the authority of "men" as the source of Emile's early education, Dewey stresses the necessary importance of the social setting. "Things hardly come within his experience.... His world is a world of persons with their personal interests, rather than a realm of facts and laws."¹⁰

Dewey's craving to reconcile individual and social aims remained an underlying theme in his educational writings even after his move to the department of philosophy at Columbia University. While the middle chapters of *Democracy and Education* (first published in 1916) focus specifically on the needs for and challenges to a truly democratic and integrative education (including, as we have seen above, the challenge of getting beyond the dualisms fostered by previous educational philosophies like Rousseau's), the beginning and ending chapters bracket that discussion by reiterating the same overall goal of melding individual and social aims that was present in his essays in the 1890s.¹¹

Dewey's final educational work, *Experience and Education* (1938), was devoted to distinguishing his own educational philosophy from that of the "child-centered" theorists and practitioners who had come by then to dominate the Progressive Education Association. Reiterating his previous critique of Rousseau, Dewey attacks educational "romantics" who wanted simply to emphasize "the freedom of the learner."¹² Asserting that most children are "naturally sociable," Dewey once again stresses that "education is essentially a social process."¹³ Toward the end of the book Dewey refers to the classical distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom. Freedom from external constraints is important but "only as a means to a freedom which is power." Indeed, Dewey concludes, "the ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control."¹⁴

ROUSSEAU'S AND DEWEY'S SHARED AIMS

Interestingly, with his assertion that the ideal aim of education is "self control," Dewey comes very close to Rousseau's educational aims. Thus, before going on to discuss the contemporary social challenges that may give Rousseau a slight edge over Dewey in their century-long debate, I would like — at the risk of stating the

obvious — briefly to acknowledge some of the ways in which Dewey's and Rousseau's educational aims overlap. As background to their common purposes, it is notable that both men became educational philosophers after having failed miserably as teachers in their younger years. Robert Westbrook's biography states that Dewey had "considerable problems with classroom discipline" during a stint teaching high school as a young man in Burlington, Vermont in 1881,¹⁵ and Rousseau, in his own *Confessions*, recalls the trials and tribulations of his job tutoring the young sons of M. Jean Bonnot de Mably in Lyon in 1740.¹⁶

Their inability to perform the roles of traditional authoritarian teachers may have prompted both Dewey and Rousseau to turn to other sources of learning besides the lecturing taskmaster. An obvious common theme in their educational writings is the use of "experience" as the main source of learning — a commonality that makes both men contenders for being the originators of the current constructivist model in educational theory and practice. Although Dewey wanted to immerse the child in social learning whereas Rousseau, as we will see, wanted to shield the child from social learning, both understood education as arising out of active engagement rather than passive "reciency" (as Dewey termed it in his early essay on *The School and Society*). Just as Dewey reveled in the busy, creative activity of cooking classes, science experiments, field trips, and art projects that he helped promote in the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, so Rousseau's prose takes flight as he imagines Emile learning about magnetism from a magician at a fair, learning geography and astronomy from a walk in the woods, and learning physics by being asked by his tutor, "Why did this stone fall?"¹⁷ Indeed, Rousseau's argument that building, creating, and problem-solving actually promote reasoning, intelligence, and judgment clearly anticipates Dewey's emphasis on the uses of experience for intellectual growth.

A second common theme shared by Dewey and Rousseau is their recognition that effective teaching begins with observation. As we have seen in the review of "My Pedagogic Creed" above, Dewey recognizes the need for the educator to understand the "psychological" side of education prior to understanding its "sociological" side, and in "Ethical Principles" he makes a similar point more concretely: "The beginning has to be made with the observation of the individual child. We find in him certain dawning powers — instincts and impulses."¹⁸ Rousseau similarly insists throughout *Emile* on the need to "observe your child" before engaging in any educational intervention.¹⁹

A third similarity, perhaps less obvious than the two I have just highlighted, is Dewey's and Rousseau's desire to use education to get beyond the "divided self" perpetrated by modernity. Robert Westbrook tells us that Dewey himself once referred to his preoccupation with overcoming dualism as "an intense emotional craving" and suggests that it may have been rooted in an early religious crisis that resulted in a sense of "isolation of self from the world, of soul from body, of nature from God."²⁰ It is interesting to note that Rousseau too was primarily concerned with developing and maintaining the unity and integrity of the individual. "To be something, to be oneself, and always at one with oneself, one must act as one

speaks,” asserts Rousseau at the beginning of Book I of *Emile* (*Emile*, online ed., para. 32). But the schools then popular in eighteenth-century France, he, says, are “only fit to turn out double men, always seeming to relate everything to others while actually relating nothing to anyone but themselves” (*Emile*, online ed., para. 32). In order to create a whole human being who is true to himself, Rousseau states, one must thus *choose* whether one is educating for selfhood or for society’s civic needs: “Forced to combat nature or the social institutions, you must choose between making a man or a citizen, for you cannot do both at the same time” (*Emile*, online ed., para. 22).

Obviously the political context is determinative here, and it becomes clear that the main difference between Dewey’s and Rousseau’s educational aims is their differing moral assessments of the social worlds that surrounded them. In Dewey’s writings the social world of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America is generally portrayed as a benign, even a promising, context for the development of meaningful selfhood; in Rousseau’s work the French monarchical society of the mid-eighteenth century is portrayed as a caldron of duplicity, phoniness, and moral decadence. With such opposing assessments of their own political contexts it is not surprising that Dewey generally hoped to unify the soul by making the self useful to society, whereas Rousseau wanted to unify the soul by making the individual resistant to social influences and true to himself.

NURTURING RESISTANCE: THE CRITIQUE OF CONSUMERISM IN ROUSSEAU’S *EMILE*

Recognizing the importance of the political and social contexts for Dewey’s and Rousseau’s differences prompts one to examine contemporary factors that may have a bearing on the usefulness of Rousseau’s and Dewey’s educational insights today. In her 2004 book *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*, economist Juliet Schor gives an eye-opening account of the marketing forces at work on the mental life of children at the beginning of the twenty-first century.²¹ Based on extensive surveys of and interviews with a group of representatives from the advertising industry and a group of 300 fifth and sixth graders in a Boston suburb, Schor details the corporate resources that are directed specifically at children as consumers and the resulting “cost” of such marketing in terms of children’s overall happiness and well being.

Schor’s findings in *Born to Buy* are sobering; she found clear correlations between children’s involvement in consumerism and high rates of emotional ill health. When she interprets these results and speculates about *how* consumer involvement affects psychological outcomes, Schor puts forth a hypothesis that closely aligns with a theory about human happiness that we will see was fundamental to Rousseau’s pedagogical principles in *Emile*.

People who are more envious of others, worry more about how much they have, have stronger desires to acquire money and possessions, and place more importance on financial success are more likely to be depressed and anxious.... Desiring less, rather than getting more, seems to be the key to contentment and well-being. Certainly that is one conclusion to draw from these results.²²

With Schor’s conclusion that “Desiring less, rather than getting more, seems to be the key to contentment and well-being,” I turn to those aspects of Rousseau’s

thought that may provide a twenty-first-century alternative to Dewey's twentieth-century ethic of social assimilationism. What has drawn me again and again to Rousseau's educational writings is a strand of ethical stoicism threaded through *Emile* that enables the eponymous child to resist the luxury, excess, and artificial desires of the sophisticated, self-indulgent society that surrounds him. Dewey was correct to detect "separate and independent operations" in Rousseau's educational theory; what Dewey could not have foreseen is that the "separations" in Rousseau's theory might provide a useful conceptual framework for countering the consumerism that adversely affects the education of children today.²³

Early in Book II of *Emile* Rousseau lays out a theoretical analysis of how desiring less, rather than getting more, will make Emile a happier child and a stronger human being. Working with the three concepts of happiness, desires, and powers (or "faculties," as he sometimes terms human capabilities), Rousseau demonstrates that each is a relative term, and that each involves balance or equilibrium in order for the human organism to find emotional and physical well-being. Since happiness itself is relative to our ability to satisfy our desires, true human happiness, he argues, can only be achieved by a *balance* between our desires and our powers or faculties. What is thus needed to be relatively happy is "diminishing the excess of desires over faculties and putting power and will into a perfect equilibrium. With all forces in action it is only then that the soul will nevertheless remain peaceful and that man will find himself well ordered" (*Emile*, online ed., para. 219).

Desires too, are relative and are a function of our imagination, argues Rousseau. "It is imagination which ... excites and nourishes our desires with the hope of satisfying them." But the objects of our imagination elude our grasp, and the distance that imagination creates between the real world and the imaginary world gives rise to "all the pains that make us truly unhappy." Here Rousseau's analysis suggests the controversial assumption that human happiness can be promoted by *limiting* the imagination (*Emile*, online ed., paras. 220 and 222). In direct opposition to the frenzied creation of new desires and wants that today's consumer culture fosters in children, Rousseau counsels a firm restriction of what children should be exposed to, not because such stimuli are "bad" but because they make for unhappy children.

Turning finally to the third term in the equation — human powers — Rousseau defines strength and weakness not in relation to other men but in relation to the individual's own needs. "This word weak implies a relation, a relation of the being to which it is applied.... Man is very strong when he is content to be what he is; he is very weak when he wants to elevate himself above humanity (*Emile*, online ed., para. 223). As Madeleine Ellis has written in reference to these passages from the *Emile*, "Strength is for [Rousseau] the ability to exercise our resources in order to provide for true needs without being tormented by useless cravings that ultimately lead us far beyond our reach."²⁴

The limitations on desire that Rousseau suggests can foster human happiness form a clear though often neglected theme throughout *Emile*. "Accustoming [children] from the first to limiting their desires to their strengths, they will scarcely

feel the deprivation of whatever is not in their power” (*Emile*, online ed., paras. 164 and 174). Already Rousseau is suggesting that the more self-sufficient the child senses himself to be, the less needy and dependent on others and thus the happier he will be.

In line with his stoic principles are practices that in today’s culture of material abundance might sound surprising. Parents are advised to carry the child towards desired objects, not bring the objects to him (*Emile*, online ed., para. 163). Instead of pampering the child with warm baths, Rousseau’s advice is to decrease the temperature of the water little by little so that eventually the child is able to tolerate cold baths (*Emile*, online ed., para. 132). As for toys, the care-giver should avoid expensive silver rattles and teething rings: “a little poppy flower in which one can hear the seeds shake, a stick of licorice which he may suck and chew, will amuse him as well as all those magnificent knick-knacks, and they will not have the disadvantage of accustoming him to luxury from his birth” (*Emile*, online ed., para. 182). Preventing a taste for luxury will be a constant theme throughout the book and may provide a useful stimulus for our own thinking about how teachers and parents might find ways to resist the consumerist culture that is so pervasive in American children’s lives today.

Rousseau advises allowing the young child to spend most of his time outdoors, dressed in loose and comfortable clothing; he is encouraged to run races and climb trees; his food is simple and unseasoned (*Emile*, online ed., para. 503ff). When *Emile* reaches his middle years and the curriculum focuses on “useful” scientific studies, the learning materials are equally primitive: a scale is devised by putting a stick across the back of a chair; a compass is improvised with a magnet and a piece of wax. “The more ingenious are our tools, the more clumsy and awkward our organs become,” Rousseau observes (*Emile*, online ed., para. 604). Clearly the child’s “freedom” is not desired for its own sake but rather as a means of building physical and cognitive strength, for it is only the strong child who will be able to resist the dependencies of modern life that give rise to envy and unhappiness.

CONCLUSION

In concluding the above discussion I acknowledge that neither Dewey nor Rousseau are widely read today. Neither Dewey’s compulsion to make one out of two (as evident even in the titles of his major works — *The School and Society*, *The Child and the Curriculum*, *Democracy and Education*, *Art as Experience*, *Experience and Education*, and so forth) nor Rousseau’s tendency to divide one into two (man and citizen, nature and artifice, innocence and corruption, *amour de soi* and *amour propre*) are currently in fashion given the postmodern focus on multiplicity, plurality, and difference. Nevertheless what has prompted my return to Dewey and Rousseau is the conviction that if read closely both thinkers still have useful lessons for us.

Where does the foregoing theoretical discussion lead in terms of educational practice? To apply their insights to current practice may require some “divided” thinking that neither Dewey nor Rousseau would find satisfactory.

For better or worse, the Deweyan influence on American schools is probably here to stay. Even as direct instruction for standardized test preparation dominates “indirect” pedagogical methods in many elementary school classrooms, the common Deweyan practices of beginning the school day with a morning meeting, inviting parents to “open school” night, and assigning group work on projects in a range of subjects from social studies to math remain familiar fixtures of contemporary schooling and have been reinforced by the “social learning” theories of Leo Vygotsky and others.²⁵ While not identified as Deweyan, such practices clearly suggest Dewey’s legacy and in themselves are not incompatible with efforts to counter the culture of consumerism in society at large. At the end of *Born to Buy* Juliet Schor offers some suggestions for “decommercializing childhood” that require collective action and group organizing on behalf of children.²⁶ Certainly a continuing function of public schools can and should be to nurture the social skills essential to active civic participation — an ideal that was fundamental to Dewey’s educational vision.²⁷

However, even a more “Deweyan” American public school system is unlikely to nurture habits of resistance to consumerism in individual children. Particularly now that schools themselves have been infiltrated by corporate money and advertising (vending machines, fast foods, Chanel One, and commercially sponsored educational materials),²⁸ it would be vain to hope that a Rousseauian ethic of individual integrity and self sufficiency could compete with the ethic of social accommodationism that predominates in many schools. Instead, I suggest in conclusion that while Dewey’s social vision may continue to provide important lessons for teachers, Rousseau’s focus on the dynamics of individual development may provide important lessons for *parents*.

What are some the lessons that parents today might draw from Rousseau’s model? Rousseau’s basic advice is simple: let children have plenty of exercise, give them wholesome, uncomplicated foods, and limit their access to stimuli that could needlessly “enflame” their imaginations, for it is the difference between powers and desires that is the cause of their unhappiness. In all these efforts be firm and above all avoid manipulation: let your “no,” Rousseau advises, “be a wall of bronze” that the child cannot overturn (*Emile*, online ed., para. 261).

In the very beginning of the Book I of *Emile* Rousseau uses another wall-like metaphor with reference to the educative process:

It is you whom I address myself, tender and foresighted mother ... who know how to stay away from the busy highway and protect the growing seedling from the impact of human opinion! Cultivate and water the young plant before it dies; its fruit will one day be your delight. Early on form an enclosure around your child’s soul. Someone else can mark its circumference, but you alone must build the fence. (*Emile*, online ed., para. 12)

While walls and enclosures would be anathema to Dewey’s inclusive and assimilationist educational ideals, in the consumerist culture that surrounds us today parents may need to heed Rousseau’s advice and build a fence.

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1944), 113–14 (original emphasis).

2. *Ibid.*, 113 (original emphasis).
3. *Ibid.*, 111.
4. Quoted in Jim Garrison, "John Dewey," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Education*, eds. Michael A. Peters et al, http://www.ffst.hr/ENCYCLOPAEDIA/doku.php?id=dewey_john.
5. Quoted in Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 44.
6. John Dewey, "Ethical Principles Underlying Education," in *John Dewey on Education: Selected Writings*, ed. Reginald D. Archambault (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 109.
7. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, trans. Judith R. Bush and Roger D. Masters (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1992), 25.
8. John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," in *John Dewey on Education*, ed. Archambault, 427.
9. *Ibid.*, 427–28.
10. John Dewey, "The Child and the Curriculum," in *John Dewey on Education*, ed. Archambault, 340.
11. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 30 and 302.
12. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1974), 22.
13. *Ibid.*, 56–58.
14. *Ibid.*, 63–64.
15. Westbrook, *Dewey and American Democracy*, 8.
16. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans Christopher Kelly (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1995), 223–24.
17. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, online ed., www.ilt.columbia.edu/pedagogies/rousseau/, paragraphs 586, 620, and 607. This work will be cited in the text as *Emile* for all subsequent references.
18. Dewey, "Ethical Principles Underlying Education," 131.
19. See Rousseau, *Emile*, paras. 3, 274, 644, 661–62, and 672.
20. Westbrook, *Dewey and Democracy*, 14 and 4.
21. Juliet B. Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 1–2.
22. *Ibid.*, 172.
23. The discussion that follows draws on a more extensive analysis in Grace Roosevelt, "The Critique of Consumerism in Rousseau's *Emile*," *Environmental Ethics* 33 (Spring 2011), forthcoming.
24. Madeleine B. Ellis, *Rousseau's Socratic Aemilian Myths: A Literary Collation of Emile and the Social Contract* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), 84.
25. See Michael Glassman, "Dewey and Vygotsky: Society, Experience, and Inquiry in Educational Practice," *Educational Researcher* 30, no. 4 (2001): 4.
26. Schor, *Born to Buy*, chap. 10.
27. See Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 87–88.
28. See Schor, *Born to Buy*, chap. 5.