

# Jean Jacques Rousseau

Swiss-French Philosopher and Political Theorist (1712-1778)

(Rousseau) ...was one of the great figures of the French ENLIGHTENMENT and probably the most significant of those who shaped the 19th-century.

ROMANTICISM, influencing such figures as KANT, GOETHE, ROBESPIERRE, TOLSTOY, and the French revolutionists. Rousseau's most celebrated theory was that of the "natural man." In his *Discourse on the Inequalities of Men* (1754) and *Social Contract* (1762), he maintained that human beings were essentially good and equal in the state of nature, but were corrupted by the introduction of property, agriculture, science, and commerce. People entered into a SOCIAL CONTRACT among themselves, establishing governments and educational systems to correct the inequalities brought about by the rise of civilization. *Emile* (1762), a didactic novel, expounds Rousseau's theory that education is not the imparting of knowledge but the drawing out of what is already in the child. From the 1760s, Rousseau was tormented by persecution mania, and he lived his later years in seclusion. His *Confessions* (1781) created a new, intensely personal style of autobiography.

Rousseau was born in Geneva, Switzerland, on June 28, 1712. His mother died in childbirth, and he was raised as a Calvinist by an aunt. In 1762 he published his best-known and most-influential works, *Emile*, a treatise on education, and *The Social Contract*, a major work of political philosophy. He died on July 2, 1778, in Paris.

**Philosophical Position:** Rousseau must be understood in terms of his relationship to both the 18th-century enlightenment and to his influence on 19th-century romanticism. To begin with, he shared the Enlightenment view that society had perverted natural man, the "noble savage" who lived harmoniously with nature, free from selfishness, want, possessiveness, and jealousy. He argued that the restoration of the arts and sciences had not contributed to the purification of humankind but to its corruption. Rousseau also believed that social relationships of all kinds were based on an inequality that resulted from an unnatural distribution of power and wealth.

**Major Works:** Rousseau's method is clearly visible in *Emile*, where the narrative of development and education is a vehicle for a theory of humans derived from reflection on moral intuitions. The most important of these intuitions is that humans are basically good



and, if proper development is fostered, the natural goodness of the individual can be protected from the corrupting influences of society. The child *Emile* must therefore be raised in a rural rather than an urban environment, so that he may develop in continuity with nature rather than in opposition to it. The earliest impulses of the child are allowed to develop but are channeled into a genuine respect for persons, a respect growing out of self-love rather than pride. Brought into community by an instinctual pity, or sympathy for those around him, *Emile* develops a moral sense, and an urge toward perfection and inner growth allows him to rise above the passions and achieve virtue. Interestingly, the only book allowed *Emile* in his education is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which in itself displays the way in which character matures in harmony with nature if natural ingenuity is allowed to work unhindered by the corruptions of society. Nevertheless, society must be dealt with, and this Rousseau does in his most influential work, *The Social Contract*. The individual, progressing in the development of a moral sense, can, for Rousseau, find genuine happiness and fulfillment only in a social situation. Thus one of the first principles of Rousseau's political philosophy is that politics and morality never be separated. The second important principle is freedom, which the state is created to preserve. The state is a unity and as such expresses the general will. This is contrasted to the will of all, which is merely the aggregate will, the accidentally mutual desires of the majority. John Locke and others had assumed that what the majority wants must be correct. Rousseau questioned this assumption, arguing that the individuals who make up the majority may, in fact, wish something that is contrary to the goals or needs of the state, to the common good. The general will is to secure freedom, equality, and justice within the state, regardless of the will of the majority, and in the social contract (for Rousseau a theoretical construct rather than a historical event, as Enlightenment thinkers had frequently assumed) individual sovereignty is given up to the state in order that these goals might be achieved. 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. An important factor in insuring the cohesion of the state and in insuring its proper functioning is a sound civil religion. It is, for Rousseau, necessary that all citizens subscribe to beliefs in (1) a supreme being, (2) personal immortality, (3) the ultimate reward of virtue and punishment of vice, and (4) the principle of toleration. The assumption should not be made, however, that Rousseau conceived of this as an external imposition of religion by the state, for to him these appeared to be clear and self-evident principles that could and should be adopted by any rational and moral agent.

