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Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

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Gottlieb. *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*. London: Routledge, 1996, 184–193.
See also: Carson, Rachael; Nobel Savage; Religious Environmentalist Paradigm; Romanticism (various); Thoreau, Henry David.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1712–1778)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a leading Enlightenment thinker, was perhaps most famous for his appeal to the “state of nature” as an ideal in whose light the general distortions of modern society could be measured and remedies proposed. Rousseau was a passionate critic of what he perceived to be the artifice, false consciousness, and inequality of modern society, and he advocated strongly the need to recover natural feeling, virtue, natural compassion, freedom, and equality. He placed such trust in “nature” because he trusted nature’s God.

Born a Calvinist, Rousseau converted to Catholicism as a young man, and later adopted deist views rejecting revealed religion in favor of “natural religion” based on the evidence of God’s existence that reason discerns in the wondrous order and harmony of the system of nature. He elaborated in detail an educational agenda aimed at protecting the natural feelings and growing virtue of young people by having them first engage the challenges and constraints posed by the natural environment, rather than the alienation, prejudice, and competitiveness thrust at them by society. During his last years of life, he turned for comfort to the study of botany and to walking in the countryside. His last book, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1782) described ecstatic periods of direct contemplation of the “great pageant” of creation. This work was widely read and gave impetus to the Romantic Movement’s general reverence of the nature and celebration of natural feeling. Rousseau was a watershed figure of the eighteenth century whose writings did much to popularize a growing sense of reverence for nature.

Rousseau followed the lead of classic Christian theologians and deist thinkers in seeing proof of God’s existence in the harmony, order and motion of the system of nature. Rousseau drew on Christian and deist views regarding God’s providential dominion over the world and on humanity’s “fall,” combining these into a powerful narrative of original goodness, societal corruption, and proposed paths of recovery and renewal. He broke with the Christian notion of original sin and located the Fall not in human nature, but in human history. Armed with these themes of creation and Fall, Rousseau could launch a harsh indictment against societal alienation and injustice and still affirm hope in humanity’s fundamental goodness and potential.

Born and raised in Geneva, Rousseau received no formal education, but his father gave him a love of nature

and of books. He was apprenticed to an engraver, but he soon left, and was taken into the home of a Swiss baroness, Madame de Warens, who became his patron and lover. Under her guidance Rousseau converted to Catholicism, enjoyed years of undisturbed study of philosophy and literature, and grew in his appreciation for the beauties of nature. At the age of thirty he moved to Paris, developed a close friendship with Denis Diderot (1713–1784), the pantheistic French philosopher, and met many other philosophers. He achieved notoriety in 1750 with the publication of his essay, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, which sparked controversy by arguing that progress in the arts and sciences distorted human life by pulling us away from the essential goodness, contentment, and virtues found in the “state of nature.” This argument clashed with a central assumption of the Enlightenment, namely, that progress in reason and science directly promotes human well-being and moral virtue. After publishing a *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) that developed his account of societal evolution, Rousseau moved out of Paris to the country home of a benefactor. There in rapid succession he wrote his masterworks: *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761); *Emile, or On Education* (1762), and *The Social Contract* (1762). The first, a novel about romance and love and their conflict with duty, became the most widely read work of fiction in France for a number of years. The second became a recognized classic of educational philosophy. *The Social Contract* became a landmark of political theory. Its stress on popular sovereignty and freedom gave voice to aspirations that anticipated the ideals of revolutionary France. Many critics, however, noted the irony that Rousseau, who could not tolerate the demands of family life and abandoned his five children to a public orphanage, could write so eloquently of love, personal duty, and the importance of children’s upbringing.

Rousseau’s fullest account of his views on religion is found in *Emile*, in a section titled the “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar.” In it the Vicar explains that when we ponder the marvelous order, harmony, and motion of the physical universe we can only conclude that there exists a rational and benevolent power who wills this universe into existence and sets things in motion. As he says: “I perceive God everywhere in His works. I sense Him in me; I see Him all around me” (Rousseau 1979a: 277). As God is good, so is all God’s creation, including humanity itself. Religious belief thus provides Rousseau with basic confidence for trusting nature’s goodness and purity. Rousseau thus affirms the essential goodness of humanity even while stressing the history of human corruption. As he put it in the opening of *Emile*: “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man” (Rousseau 1979a: 37). For Rousseau, the path out of societal “sin” lies not in some special divine grace, but rather in recovering our original goodness.

Both *Emile* and *The Social Contract* were condemned in Paris and Geneva by religious and political authorities who viewed the books as subversive. Rousseau fled France and lived for a number of years at the mercy of benefactors. Anxiety ridden and often paranoid, he worked on his *Confessions* and retreated into the solace of the botanical studies and countryside walks. His *Reveries*, published posthumously, describe him as feeling rejected by friends and society and yet experiencing a sense of “peace and contentment” arising from a sustained contact with nature and its simple plant life. Walks in which he observed the “great pageant of nature” gave him a sense of the “unity of all things.” Such encounters promote an “expansive soul.” “I feel transports of joy and inexpressible raptures in becoming fused as it were with the great system of beings and identifying myself with the whole of nature” (Rousseau 1979b: 108, 111, 112). Walks amidst nature gave him a pure “feeling of existence” (Rousseau 1979b: 89).

Many in Rousseau’s lifetime dismissed him as an apostle of “primitivism” and this caricature is alive and well even today. This view arises from readings of Rousseau’s *Discourses* where he fails to clarify exactly how we are to recover the “state of nature.” In places he does seem to call for a return to the practices of a primordial “golden age.” However in *Emile* Rousseau makes clear that such a return is neither possible nor desirable. He states directly that his aim in education is to protect young people’s natural feelings and virtues from premature bending under societal pressure so that when they reach adulthood they may join society with their emotional integrity and sense of moral responsibility healthy and uncorrupted. *Emile*, the boy, is to live in the countryside amidst nature, so he will grow “naturally” and be well prepared to enter marriage and society in adulthood. The “state of nature,” for Rousseau, functions less as a claim about historical origins than an assertion about fundamental human capacities to recover natural integrity, simplicity, and virtue.

Rousseau’s naturalism anticipates in important ways our ecological understanding of humanity as a part of the natural world. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss among others admired Rousseau’s insights in his attempt to understand humanity’s evolutionary history. Rousseau’s expansive sense of identification with the rest of creation anticipated a similar emphasis found in today’s deep ecology movement. Likewise, while Rousseau followed the general anthropocentrism of classic Western ethics in placing humanity as the crown of the natural world, he extended basic “natural rights” to animals and thus anticipated the core moral principle upheld by today’s animal welfare movement. Years before British utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham famously made the same point, Rousseau held that natural compassion urges us both to refrain from harming not just other humans, but also “any other sentient being” except in cases of true necessity. Humans are bound by strict duties toward ani-

mals who enjoy “the right not to be needlessly mistreated” (Rousseau 1988: 7).

In addition Rousseau’s analysis offers insight into some of the contemporary societal dynamics that increase ecological degradation. For example, his understandings of inequality and how it shapes social structures and psychological dynamics shed light on forces that promote overconsumption and ecological degradation. Similarly, his critique of education anticipated the concerns of ecologically concerned people who fear that modern advertising promotes unsustainable lifestyles. Rousseau’s suspicion of socially inflated wants and his affirmation of the simple, virtuous life are as timely now as they were in his day. For all of his eccentricities and faults, Rousseau remains a seminal figure in eighteenth-century Western philosophy and letters challenging many aspects of modernity by an appeal to nature’s goodness as it comes from the hands of the divine.

William French

Further Reading

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- See also: Deism; Philosophy of Nature; Romanticism in European History; Romanticism in European Literature.

Rubber and Religion (Belgian Congo)

The Belgian occupation and exploitation of the Congo (1885–1960) was one of the most brutal chapters in world history. At the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, European powers carved up the African continent into colonial possessions, and the King of the Belgians, Leopold II, was granted sole control of the vast Congo River Basin. A devout Catholic and self-promoting “philanthropist,” Leopold founded The Congo Free State (1885–1908) and