

A Philosophical Appraisal of Rousseau's Child-Centered Education and Its Imports to Nigeria's Leadership Question

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Abstract

It is a truism that the business of educating the individual minds necessarily involves that of equipping them with the demands of life for proper development of the society. However, the major problem facing philosophers of education has been that of the right method. Rousseau in his attack on curriculum-centered theory holds the child-centered philosophy as the most appropriate in the task of progressive education because it makes room for learning by discovery and care-taking as well as educating. Thus, this paper attempts to give a philosophical appraisal of Rousseau's prescription for child-centeredness with a view to causing modern day educators to re-examine their positions with reference to Nigeria's leadership question.

Keywords: Education, Child-centeredness, Curriculum-centered theory, Care-taking and nature.

1. Introduction

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was the precursor of the romantic movement in arts (and literature). The eighteenth-century period in history commonly tagged: "*The Age of Enlightenment*" was characterized by a revolt against the established order. The period also marked a turning point in the history and identity of Europe, and, by extension, philosophy itself. It was an age that was critical of existing theories, methods, systems and practices; an age petrified with individualistic doctrine that man was free to express himself; an age in which the arts and sciences gained an extra-ordinary prominence; an age whose common trademark was the rejection of the authority (of priests and kings) and consequently anything which could be recommended by reason or common sense was accepted (John, 2009:221). Thus, *The Age of Enlightenment* was mainly rationalistic in its outlook.

It was during this period that reason gained ascendancy over faith; a period in which certainty was only possible through reason. That is, reason was seen as the only answer to man's difficulty and confusion. It was a time of individual (not political) liberty, reformation and revolution in sciences, arts and education. In describing this age, Curtis and Boulwood agree with Rogers (387-388) that the most obvious features of *The Enlightenment* were: "its practical and unimaginative character, its hatred of vague enthusiasm, and misty ideas; its determination to apply the test of a severely accurate reason to everything and reject out-rightly whatever will not stand the test of time; the constant reference in all this, as the court of final appeal to the one undoubted fact was the individual himself with his rights and his rational power of understanding" (263-264).

Though Rousseau was certainly a member of *The Age of Enlightenment*, but he was not all this about this Age as alleged by Curtis and Boulwood. He can be reckoned as a reactionary to this movement. He became a reformer who was set to reform the "reforms".

It is pertinent to posit that most outstanding thinkers of this period discovered something about self in various ways and senses. For instance, Descartes discovered the thinking-self in his *Cogito, ergo sum*; Locke discovered the experiencing-self in his empiricism; Schopenhauer discovered the diminishing-self in his pessimism; Luther discovered the believing-self in his "by faith only". Rousseau, on his part, discovered the feeling-self, the unique kind of self that feels; the self that is passionate, the self that is natural and emotional; the self that is in need of freedom and equality with all men (John, 2009:222). Speaking like Pascal, Rousseau, in this new discovery on self, holds that the heart has its reasons which the head can never understand.

Rousseau's peculiar thought is an issue in philosophical circle. Though he attended no university, and he started doing various kinds of menial jobs at the age of twelve, yet the kind of intellectualization which he displayed and lived by eventually became a challenge to the hitherto academic and philosophic status-quo of his time, and the very thing that shook the foundations of France, Russia, Britain, Germany and America in particular and the whole world in general. The entire philosophic build-up and the current of the Enlightenment pioneered by Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Voltaire, Schopenhauer, and other professional philosophers was once again forced to be re-examined in the light of Rousseau's mental paradigm. Rousseau was a prolific writer, a powerful and original thinker, whose productivity generated the flames of the French Revolution of the 18th-century and summarily compelled Tozer in the "Introduction" to his 1948 translation of *The Social Contract* to concur with Sir Henry Maime in the following words: "The world has not seen more than once or twice in all the course of history a literature which has exercised such prodigious influence over the minds of men, over every cast and shade of intellect, as Rousseau's between 1749 and 1762" (12).

Rousseau's literary ability reached its peak with the publications of *The New He'loise* (a novel, in

1761), *Emile* (a seminal book on education, in 1762) and *The Social Contract* (the Bible of the French revolution, in 1762). According to Tozer, *The Social Contract* in particular is an epoch-making work in two great senses: “historically, on account of its enormous influence upon European life and thought; and philosophically, because it is the most eloquent expression of the theory of social compact” (Rousseau, 1948:2). Before Rousseau reached an apogee in his literary acumen, he had previously published *The Discourses* on socio-political and economic matters between 1750 and 1758. He also wrote the *Confessions* (an autobiography published posthumously in 1782), in addition to numerous operas, plays, novels, essays, political tracts and social discourses enough to fill forty-seven volumes.

2. Rousseau’s Educational Thought

Before one delves into Rousseau’s child-centered education, it is important to give a summary of his educational thought. This is to enable us have a background of his philosophy. Rousseau’s educational ideas came to limelight in 1761 with the publication of *Emile*, seminal work on education. The book marked the beginning of a new revolution in education. Rousseau even declares: “My thoughts are not like those of others” (1975:15). The book caused a universal outburst of indignation; the Catholic Church condemned it and ordered for its copies to be publicly burnt and the arrest of its author.

In *Emile*, Rousseau presents a tripartite discussion on education, namely: the natural or negative phase, the social or moral phase and the civic or political phase. In this paper, we shall not be concerned with the social and political dimensions. This is because Rousseau believes very strongly that the natural phase takes pre-eminence over and above the rest: the natural phase therefore becomes the anchor upon which the social and political angles rest. This stands to mean that the social and political phases are mere products of the natural phase of education (Grimsley, 264). In other words, the tailoring of education according to the natural disposition determines, to a greater extent, the social and political waves of education (Rousseau, 1975: 46, 49).

In Rusk’s (108) analysis, education according to nature leads to spontaneous maturation of the innate dispositions of the child. Though Rousseau regards education as an evil, he however sees it as a necessary evil; Thus, “things would be worse without this education” (1975:5). Furthermore, it should be noted that the term nature stands for that which is good. In this way, natural education aims at establishing in the child the process that leads to his admission into society or to reconcile the natural with the social training. Again, the concepts of “nature” should also be interpreted as a positive one. To live according to nature is to live in accordance with the rational principle of the universe (Rousseau, 1975:250).

In summary, one will discover that *Emile* is an attempt first to train the man, and then to train the citizen (Rusk, 112). The child must be thoroughly and effectively brought up to live well in his society, and not be corrupted by it. In Rousseau’s very words: “Man’s proper study is that of his relation to his environment. So long as he only knows that environment through his physical nature, he should study himself in relation to things: this is the business of childhood; when he begins to be aware of his moral nature, he should study himself in relation to his fellow men: this is the business of his whole life” (1975:175).

Rousseau is not done yet with his educational prescription via nature. He opines: “We are working in agreement with nature, and while she is shaping the physical man, we are striving to shape his moral being” (1975:278). As earlier indicated, Rousseau’s doctrine of the natural education did not go down well with the position of the classical thinkers, especially those from the traditional Christian extraction who had unambiguously subscribed to the doctrine of the original sin and the need for salvation. This new doctrine of natural education became the antithesis of the conservative view on education.

In his radicalized theory of natural education, Rousseau declares in the opening sentence of *Emile*: “God created all things perfect; but man meddles with them and they became evil” (15). This assertion by Rousseau implies that all deviation from virtue can be traced to the influence of the child’s environment and in particular to ill-advised direction by the parent or teacher. In *Emile*, he declares: “Let us lay it down as incontrovertible rule that the first impulses of nature are always right; there is no original sin in the human heart, the how and why of the entrance of every vice can be traced to environmental influence” (56). This vehement declaration was enough for the Catholics to declare him an agent of the devil and expectedly condemned his educational philosophy.

3. Rousseau’s Child-Centered Education

As a carry-over of his belief on natural education, Rousseau firmly contends that the education of the child ought to be in accordance with nature, that is, it should conform to his needs, powers, abilities, interests and outlook as a child (Curtis and Boulwood, 279). This view about the education of the child represents quite a new shift from the hitherto curriculum-centered concept of education which Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Voltaire, Schopenhauer and many others subscribed to. The term “child-centeredness” is a term of protest (John, 2003:84). It should also be mentioned that prior to the time of Rousseau, there had been a number of people, beginning probably with Montaigne, who had opposed the prevailing concept of education as being unsuitable for many children. But

Rousseau stands out as the one who came to champion this proposal through his impassioned attack on content-centered or curriculum-centered education. That is to say that those educational thinkers of the ancient world, medieval period and Renaissance had lofty and sympathetic ideas about the training of the child. But in their different views, they all agreed consciously or unconsciously that the child should not come first; that is, they were concerned mostly with the contents of curriculum.

Let me emphasize it again, that long before the philosophy of child-centered education of Rousseau, great minds like Plato, Quintilian, Loyola, Comenius and Locke had articulated some kinds of methods necessary in the business of education. However, Rousseau's idea of education as anchored significantly on the child-centered analysis is galvanizingly interesting and provocatively irresistible. The point here is that child-centered education as was conceived by Rousseau is a movement which emphasizes that the child is more important than the subject-matter; that all children are not alike anymore than all adults are alike. Therefore, Rousseau has successfully shown that it is foolish to believe that one can teach the same material by the same method with the same degree of effectiveness to all children (Schofield, 57). This is why Rousseau is regarded as the discoverer of the child by many educational thinkers.

The point about child-centered education is that it devotes attention to what a child is capable of learning, rather than what a man in the child ought to know. Thus, Rousseau holds that one should not be looking for the man in the child without considering what he is before he becomes a man. Rousseau is resolute in this position: "nothing is useful and good for him which is unbecoming his age" (1975:212). For Rousseau, therefore, education becomes a matter of guidance. In other words, the prime concern in education is the child and his present nature as a child. With an insight of a psychologist, Rousseau declares: "Nature wants children to be children before they are men. If we deliberately pervert this order, we shall get premature fruits which are neither ripe nor well flavored, and which will soon decay ... childhood has ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling, peculiar to itself, nothing can be more foolish than to substitute our ways for them" (1975:54).

The above quotation shows the extent to which Rousseau agrees with Locke in his fight against the narrow and barren method of the usual school curriculum. Like Locke, he vehemently rejects the all-pervading attitude to verbalism. He states: "reverse the usual practice and you will be right" (1975:58). Rousseau's disgust with the prevailing methods of education in his time ultimately led him to query: "What do they teach? Words, words, words" (1975:72). It is evident that Rousseau's educational prescription is partly Platonic. That is, it encourages education according to natural inclination – thus, it recognizes that children differ innately in their capacities to study; meaning that they should be coached accordingly. But he differs from Plato greatly as he emphasizes the child-centered education over and above the hitherto culture of curriculum-centered attitude which made the child more or less a dumping ground.

4. Evaluation

Rousseau's educational thought has been criticized from many fronts. However, we shall select few of them for treatment in this section. In this regard, we begin with the very concept "centered" as it portends some dangers in educational method and perception. The point is that child-centered education is a protest philosophy; it protests against the over-emphasis placed on the content or curriculum at the detriment of the child. So, the fear is that too much attention on the child and on methods of teaching him may lead to the neglect of "content" or may suffer the same fate as curriculum-centered education (Schofield, 1981: 58). The problem with too much concentration of anything especially in educational method is that it easily leads to rigidity or orthodoxy which may not give allowance for new ideas and changes. Rigidity at a certain time will certainly result in educational irrationality, bigotry and lack of balance.

Another problem associated with Rousseau's child-centered education is the denial of original sin and his subsequent statement that all is good that comes from nature. Rousseau has failed to notice that the concept of original sin is a religious one which is context-specific and cannot be reduced to formulaic shorthand applied to any situation irrespective of logic and inner coherence. This is because the said concept cannot be subjected to scientific verification, especially in secular educational matters.

Furthermore, the assumption that all that comes from nature is good lacks real merit. This is clearly shown in an equally extreme position that Rousseau subscribes to. Let us scrutinize his example: if a child broke his bedroom window, he would have to sleep in a draughty room. According to Rousseau, the cold which naturally follows would warn him of the folly of giving way to passion. That sounds like a good argument; but Rousseau has forgotten the fact that the cold could dovetail into pneumonia so that the consequences might be out of all proportion to the offence.

Lastly, some educational thinkers have classified Rousseau's educational prescriptions as an ideal unattainable. Thus, they conclude that one should not pine for what that is not there at all. It should however be accepted that some passages in *Emile* may afford a certain amount of justification for the misconceptions leveled against Rousseau, but it is also not proper to qualify all his ideas as absurd and impracticable. After all, no idea or philosophy has ever been perfectly free from error or accepted with absolute sacrosanct.

This last point takes us to the issue of practicability as well as dynamic nature of Rousseau's educational theories. For one, Rousseau's attempt in shifting the centre of educational gravity from the curriculum to the child has been accepted as a needed parallel revolution in education (Rusk, 1979:120). And, subsequent educationists and thinkers have adopted this new revelation. This is the probable reason that even the curriculum has been redefined at some instances by modern educational thinkers to accommodate the child. At present therefore, the curriculum is effectively defined in terms of activity and experience rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored. It should also be added that the important thing about Rousseau's child-centeredness is that it is a progressive education. It strongly advocates for learning by discovery which ultimately makes room for care-taking as well as educating (John, 2009:233). This is where Rousseau is quite outstanding from all other thinkers on educational theory and practice.

In the present effort, child-centered education basically involves structure through the act of guiding. This guiding in turn involves three things: the child, the teacher and the content of the teaching. In this way, the child's up-bringing is irreversibly linked with three issues. These are: education according to nature, learning by experience or discovery and learning according to needs. This stands to show that child-centered education encourages the process of self-actualization wherein the whole person can grow intellectually and socially. The implication of this position is that education helps a person to become a self, capable of dealing effectively and efficiently with exigencies of life, both now and in the future (Morris and Pai, 1976: 365). And this is the whole resolution of humanistic education.

Finally, it must be recorded that Rousseau's child-centered education can be seen as a work on individual as well as a universal system of education. That means, the principle of Rousseau's child-centered education can be universalized. In Rousseau's estimate, education comes from nature (that is, from men or things) and then it establishes the relationship of man to his physical and social environment. Thus, emphasis can be laid on either side: the individual or social aspect of education.

5. Rousseau's Education and Nigeria's Leadership Question

Having seen the central thesis of Rousseau's child-centred education and the subsequent comments by various thinkers, it behooves one to see the link between Rousseau's prescriptions and the leadership question confronting Nigerian populace. This concern is borne out of the understanding that different nations of the world had risen and/or fallen depending on how seriously or otherwise they have perceived the role of education in the society (John, 2003:80). Thus, Nigeria's leadership crisis and the attendant problems of underdevelopment, ignorance, poverty, ethnicity, etc will remain unabated without a strong recourse to education via Rousseau's child-centred philosophy. This position is further strengthened by the awareness that certain nations of the world such as France, Britain, America, Japan, Germany, South Korea, etc, which have become strategically important in their leadership role have developed a peculiar philosophy along Rousseauian educational model. This is where I agree with John (2003:80) that the right and effective method of building and/or changing Nigeria's leadership perception is through a child-centred philosophy of education. This means, if Nigeria must be relevant in the twenty-first century and beyond, then it must not handle leadership development with levity. In the present, Nigeria is faced with different problems and she must begin to turn attention to what she want child-centred education to achieve for her. This is one of the most reliable rescue lines that might deliver Nigeria from her destruction occasioned by infantile leadership and make the country radiant. This is where Okolo (1989:13) scores a point when he describes education as "whatever one learns through experience, from self, or others to help one survives and masters one's social milieu". In this way, Okolo is simply agreeing with Rousseau that education is essentially social as well as individual enterprise.

Nigeria must perceive education in line with Rousseau as the process of making man fit at all time, that is, during war and in time of peace. The clarification here is that education is a matter for life and its realities. Okolo (1989:62-72) and Sharma and Hyland (1991:8) and many other thinkers have acknowledged the link between child-centred education, leadership development and/or the society. It is pertinent to say that Nigeria must make deliberate systematic and sustained effort to transmit, evolve or acquire leadership knowledge, values, attitude, skill and sensibilities through Rousseau's child-centred education or training (Cremin, 1977:viii). This assertion reminds us of Plato (1974:16), who sought a cure for the ills of the society not in politics but in a well-conceived philosophy of education. He (Plato) accordingly arrived at his fundamental and lasting conviction that those ills would never cease until either real philosophers of education gain political power or politicians by some circumstances become philosophers of education. This declaration is very relevant to Nigeria's leadership situation. Nigeria must, as a matter of priority, passionately train the man in the child who will provide the needed leadership. Nigeria must stop deceiving herself with curriculum-satisfying graduates that lack the wherewithal to stand and lead others.

The above observations may be the probable reason that Igwe (1999:4) submits that "Genuine development is fundamentally of human beings in terms of idea, which imbue in them the capacity to think qualitatively and tackle the problems that emerge out of their living conditions". The understating here is that

philosophers of education and well-meaning Nigerians, as part of their contributions to the development of the country, must think primarily in terms of the development of the individual minds, and of equipping the individuals with the demands of life.

One of the best English thinkers, Bertrand Russell, in his *Basic Writings ...* (1961:418) declares that “education is they key to rear up the new man of excellence”. This means, everyone is a being whose activities can be articulated and consciously directed through child-centred education to meet the needs and aspirations of his or her social existence. This also implies that the issue of the right articulation and proper direction of leadership education is the task of the philosophy of education. This will certainly make child-centred education to be seen as the vehicle that makes man and the society meaningful. Through the practical, physical, emotional and intellectual training of respective individuals, education through Rousseauian model becomes the process of making every Nigerian fit to live and lead a critical, active and rational life (Okolo, 1999:34).

Again, this is why Russell in his *Education and the Social Order* (1961:48), opines that “we must have some conception of the kind of person we wish to produce ... before we can have any definite opinion as to the education which we consider best”. In concluding this section, it must be mentioned that Nigeria’s leadership crisis does not start today; it has been there since inception, especially soon after independence in 1960. Achebe (1998:13) captures this false start occasioned by inept leadership in Nigeria thus: “In spite of the conventional opinion, Nigeria has been less than fortunate in its leadership. A basic element of this misfortunate is the seminal absence of intellectual rigour in the political thought of our founding fathers - a tendency to pious materialistic wooliness and self-centred pedestrianism”. But Nigeria can overcome this regrettable situation by proper understanding and application of Rousseau’s philosophy of education. That is, Nigeria must accept and implement education that affects the mind, heart and head.

6. Conclusion

Emile was not only an influence on Rousseau’s time and country, but also on the revolutionary need of education. Though given to some sentimentality and excessive unorthodoxy, Rousseau will be remembered as a fearless writer who rushed in where his contemporaries walked reluctantly. Rousseau has established himself as a discoverer of the child and a compelling influence in matters of education through his child-centeredness. His educational propositions present a challenge to the contemporary educational methods in which the non-essentials are given prominence.

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