
Shackling the Imagination: Education for Virtue in Plato and Rousseau

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*Are
governments
supplanting
time-tested
role of
parents and
community in
education?*

For most of human history, parents had the primary responsibility for educating their own children, usually with help from an extended family or members of a small community. Today, governments have assumed much of the task, compelling education, and in some cases compelling attendance only at government-operated schools. Constitutional democracies recognize private schools and homeschooling as legitimate ways to meet the requirements of compulsory education laws, but the record is not always perfect.¹ Moreover, even the most liberal democracies regulate private education. To the extent that they do so, elected representatives and bureaucrats decide how to educate other people's children. This decision to compel and regulate education has the honorable purpose of producing law-abiding and productive citizens or, in old-fashioned terms, virtuous citizens. When individuals disagree on how to achieve such a goal, however, public efforts to control education can create havoc. This is especially true when a government imposes educational reforms that abandon fundamental and

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¹ For example, in the early twentieth century, Oregon attempted to require attendance at public schools only. The U.S. Supreme Court found the law unconstitutional in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 268 U.S. 510 (1925).

time-tested practices and impose radically innovative and untested ideas.

Those who dissent from such sweeping changes may have good reason. This article explores some of the implications of radical new proposals for the education of an entire society, particularly those that usurp the traditional role of parents. To this end, the article examines the proposals of Plato (427 or 428–347 BC) and Rousseau (1712–1778).

In many ways, these two thinkers sit at opposite ends of the spectrum. Plato, the idealist, wishes to rise above base emotion to the highest realm of rationality. He envisions a strong aristocratic state, and his concept of virtue requires strict discipline among citizens. Rousseau, the romantic, places emotion and wonder above reason. He calls for a democratic state with expansive individual freedom. Despite such differences, both thinkers offer grand plans that require the abandonment of traditional, time-honored practices. Both thinkers favor the transfer of responsibility for education from families to a carefully selected paragon (Rousseau) or paragons (Plato), radical measures to capture and cultivate the imagination of the pupil, censorship, and cradle-to-grave supervision. As a result, both offer support for some form of totalitarian government.

Why do such divergent thinkers choose such similar strategies for their educational recommendations? Why do both seek such a high degree of control over the education of a child? Is there, perhaps, some shared flaw in the thinking of both? Is it a flaw that could trouble educational planners today? After reviewing the proposals of both, this article offers a simple and humble answer.

Plato

Plato set forth his ideas about education in *The Republic* and in *The Laws*. In *The Republic* Socrates asks “what is justice?” and then considers the virtues needed to support a just republic and the educational program needed to achieve those virtues.² He typically avoids a definite response to the issues raised. In Plato’s last work, *The Laws*, Socrates disappears and in his place an Athenian

² I consulted several translations of Plato’s *Republic*. Most quotations are from *The Republic*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1945) or *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York & London: Basic Books, Inc., 1968). (Hereinafter cited as *Republic*, followed by the translator’s name.)

stranger delivers long monologues with answers and solutions that reflect a certainty that Socrates refused to adopt.³ Still, the recommendations for education in the two works are strikingly similar. *The Republic* provides the more imaginative and general view of the matter, while *The Laws* expands and clarifies the ideas in *The Republic*.

Many aspects of Plato's recommendations for education resemble those adopted by constitutional democracies. Education must be compulsory and free to all, with public control and public support. The state provides schools, compels attendance, and establishes ages for entry and progression. It mandates equal opportunity and standards for students and teachers. Trained professionals run the program, under the direction of lawmakers. In Plato's ideal state, what we today call preschool serves the youngest children, followed by what we would call elementary and high school. Plato favors the same education for boys and girls, although he would segregate students by gender, a practice still recommended by some in our day. We can also understand Plato's desire that the young learn eagerly and that academic learning "take the form of play," and his rejection of recital and memorization of poetry, popular in his day.⁴ While subject matter differs, Plato's curriculum reflects the priorities of his day. Thus, he would emphasize archery and other athletic skills in the early years, then literature for three years, followed by three years on the lyre. Older students take military training.⁵ In many respects, Plato appears to offer a harbinger of schools today.

However, Plato's educational scheme differs in critical ways from those of constitutional democracies. He would ban private education, whether at home, in a private school, in a library, or on the street. Parents play a subordinate role: "Children must not be allowed to attend or not attend school at the whim of their father; as far as possible, education must be compulsory for 'one and all'

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³ *The Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 2000; first published in 1970); *The Laws of Plato*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980, 1988 ed. (Hereinafter cited as *Laws*, followed by the translator's name.)

⁴ *Laws* 810e-811a, Saunders tr., 301; Pangle tr., 201.

⁵ *Laws* 794c—794d; Saunders tr., 279; Pangle tr., 182. The Socrates of *The Republic* has a somewhat different approach, and toys with the possibility of beginning with music, then introducing gymnastics. By music, he expressly includes literature, both fiction and nonfiction. *Republic* 376a, Cornford tr., 68..

... because they belong to the state first and their parents second." Neither parent nor child may delve more deeply into a subject or cut it short.⁶

For Plato, children "belong to the state first and their parents second."

Overarching state control begins before birth. Plato's ideal Republic regulates the number of marriages to keep a stable population. Only men between the ages of 25 and 55 may father children. Individuals who do well in war and other civic duties earn expanded opportunities to marry.⁷ The city maintains a crèche where nurses care for the youngest children. Mothers come there to nurse their babies, under supervision. Trained caretakers, supervised by twelve elected women, nurture the older children.⁸ Selected individuals, the Guardians, oversee this entire system. These individuals undergo the most tightly regulated training of all. For this elite group, Plato recommends abolition of the family to eliminate the distractions of intimate relationships. The Platonic Guardians must devote themselves exclusively to the contemplation of the Good, and securing the interest of the state.

Each element in Plato's curriculum serves the Republic. The emphasis on universal physical and military skills aims at the inculcation of habits that produce compliant citizens. Tight control over the play of younger children assures that they will "always play the same games under the same rules" when they become adults.⁹ Plato offers no flexibility for children with special needs or special interests. He insists that the prescribed progression from physical education to mathematics must not vary, regardless of ability or interest. At age 20 a chosen elite advance to the study of mathematics. At age 30 the crème de la crème advance to the study of philosophy. From age 35 to 50 this last group performs public service in subordinate posts. At age 50 the best devote their lives to the study of philosophy and take turns directing the state.¹⁰

Perhaps the most famous aspect of Plato's curriculum is his

⁶ To digress from the program violates the law, but the only punishment is disqualification from school prizes. *Laws* 804d, 810a, Saunders tr., 247-248, 254; Pangle tr., 194, 200.

⁷ The text at this point relies on Plato, *Republic* 457d-461b; Cornford tr., 155-161; Bloom tr., 136-140.

⁸ *Laws* 794b; Saunders tr., 279; Pangle tr., 182. The twelve women also supervise marriages.

⁹ *Laws* 797a-797b; Saunders tr., 283; Pangle tr., 185. Plato thought that "children's games affect legislation so crucially as to determine whether the laws that are passed will survive or not." *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Republic* 535a-541b; Cornford tr., 256-263; Bloom tr., 214-220.

*Plato sees
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virtue.*

treatment of poetry—a term that encompasses Greek drama, the Homeric epics, music, the plastic arts and all the creative works of his day. He would censor it all. To understand why, it helps first to examine his highest aim in education: virtue. Plato, like most serious education theorists, sees virtue as the ultimate goal of education. Plato sees poetry as a threat to virtue. So what, we must ask, is virtue for Plato, and how does poetry erode virtue?

Platonic Virtues and the Imagination

Plato identified four interdependent virtues as essential to the ideal Republic. Wisdom guides the philosopher-ruler. Courage moves the auxiliaries (the soldiers and the bureaucrats). Discipline, sometimes translated as moderation, assures that each class carries out its assigned role and that the governed obey the governors. Justice—the supreme ordering principle—ensures harmony and balance within the individual and the state.

These virtues should lead to a full understanding of the True, the Good and the Beautiful, which for Plato represent the highest reality. He sees concrete experience—that which we see, hear, or touch—to be at best a second rate guide to comprehending these ultimate realities, while poetry is the antithesis of that reality. It fails to offer even a second-hand access to reality, as it is a mere representation or imitation of experience, and so thrice removed from those ultimate abstractions. It yields only shadows. That might be tolerable if the viewer understood that he was looking at shadows. To fail to move beyond the sensual world is to remain in chains in a cave, unable to face the sun. Plato thought poetry so dangerous that he repeated incantations against it when in its presence.¹¹ It undermines our ability to recognize and choose the True, the Good and the Beautiful, without which, all four essential civic virtues will wither and the republic will fail.

Wisdom, for example, is the ability to see the truth clearly and to distinguish between good and evil. One finds wisdom, Plato believes, by leaving the world of concrete particulars through philosophy and following an ascending path that begins with the study of the abstract principles of mathematics. But poetry—So beguiling! So subversive!—clouds the understanding, appeals to base emotions, and overrides reason. It compromises our ability

¹¹ *Republic* 597a-607e; 608a.

to understand universal reality, that abstract truth underlying all things.

Courage is a single-minded loyalty to the state that endures even in the face of death. Thus, children should never know that Homer's Priam, although closely related to the gods, can "grovel in the dung and implore them all . . ." Likewise Plato would ban dramatic laments on misery and the awful realm of Hades, along with any reminder that death may sever sentimental attachments. The thought of losing a son or brother should disturb no one. Plato suggests giving Homer's lines of wailing and anguish uttered by heroes to craven men and women. No stouthearted child would want to imitate such models. Children must see and imitate only the most courageous actions of their heroes.¹²

Discipline means that each individual will exercise self-control. Plato believes a uniform religion will promote the development of discipline. The classical religion of the Greeks, reflected in and heavily influenced by Homer, places little hope in such a unifying force. The Homeric gods are imperfect and all too human. They indulge in mean, vengeful, capricious, and deceitful actions. To win favor from the gods is chancy, for they often quarrel over whom they should favor. They are bad examples.¹³ Plato must censor Homer.

Plato views the Homeric gods as bad examples, so Homer must be censored.

While *The Republic* never reaches any definitive answer to the question of the nature of justice, it persistently returns to the problem. Sometimes justice is difficult to distinguish from moderation, as the former requires control of the governed by the wise, and the latter, self-control. Justice can be a state of harmonious accord, in which everyone, literally, minds his own business: Each takes an appropriate trade or civic service and sticks to it.¹⁴ Justice assures a stable civil order. The old stories, in contrast, inspire loyalty to family, to the past, or to wrong ideas about the gods. They even call into question the decrees of wise rulers. Take, for example, the *Antigone* of Sophocles. The heroine defies the law—Creon's justice—in the name of a higher justice. Creon decrees that the body of her brother, Polyneices, remain in a field to rot, as a just

¹² He also suggests that children observe their parents in battle, sometimes assisting, usually from a safe distance. *Republic* 387a-388a; 467a-468a. The translation used for the quotation in this paragraph is by H. D. P. Lee (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955). Plato is quoting from *The Iliad*, xviii, 23.

¹³ *Republic*, 388b-391e; 430d-432a.

¹⁴ *Republic* 430d-445e.

reward for treason. Antigone disagrees:

Sorry, who made this edict? Was it God?
Isn't a man's right to burial decreed
By divine justice? I don't consider your
Pronouncements so important that they can
. . . overrule the unwritten laws of heaven.¹⁵

Sophocles provides a model for civil dissent, even for rebellion. If poets inspire such subversive ideas, then Plato's justice requires censorship of poets.

*A false sense
of security
inspires
censorship
of opposing
ideas.*

If one knows precisely what virtue is, then one has no choice other than to pursue a program that will achieve it. Laws that seek strict control over the outcome of a society's education rest upon such certainty. While Plato is willing to leave important questions unanswered at times, he often seems certain about virtue and how to promote it through education, and he prescribes a uniform educational program for all. Ideas can be picked up anywhere, not just in schools, so he calls for massive censorship of all private efforts to entertain or instruct others. This censorship begins at infancy:

Our first duty then . . . is to set a watch over the makers of stories, to select every beautiful story they make, and reject any that are not beautiful. Then we shall persuade nurses and mothers to tell those selected stories to the children. Thus will they shape their souls with stories far more than they can shape their bodies with their hands.¹⁶

*Highly
prescriptive
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competing
ideas.*

Any highly prescriptive curriculum explicitly or implicitly crowds out competing ideas. Plato was explicit: "We shall have to throw away most of the stories they tell now."¹⁷ He would ban most of Hesiod and Aeschylus and all the epic poetry and great plays of his day. Homer, especially, falls victim to his censorship, although *The Republic* often pays homage to the great Greek poet.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Antigone*, from *Sophocles*, trans. Michael Townsend, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1965).

¹⁶ *Republic* 377b. The translation used here is by A. D. Lindsay (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1957). Others translate the passage to refer to "suitable" or "fine" stories. Translation by H. D. P. Lee (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955); Bloom tr., 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Throughout *The Republic*, Homer is the one against whom Socrates fences. Often the discussion begins with some praise of Homer, which usually seems sarcastic, as in Books II and III, where the speaker admits admiration or even love of Homer, followed by a critical analysis that indicates disagreement with the source.

This censorship extends far beyond the schoolhouse walls: “No one should be allowed to show his work to any private person without first submitting it to the appointed assessors and to the Guardians of the Laws, and getting their approval.”¹⁹ Poets must not create anything that might conflict with the correct view of the True, the Beautiful and the Good. Nor may the poets disturb a proper understanding of courage, discipline, and justice that philosopher-rulers determine to be best for the Republic.

This censorship poses problems for Plato. Effective learning engages the imagination. We pay attention to and remember what excites or disturbs us. Myths emerge from uncertain origins and grow more compelling as storytellers hone their tales to enthrall listeners. They make past experiences, even experiences of those long dead, vivid to new generations. Although he must purge the old tales, Plato recognizes their power. Thus, he invents new “myths”—if that is an acceptable term for stories invented on the spot rather than emerging from the culture of a people. These new myths must inspire loyalty to the Republic and acceptance of one’s assigned duties in the Republic.²⁰

In short, Plato invented propaganda. His myth of the metals aims to persuade people to accept their place within the state. All must believe they are brothers born from the same earth, with different mixtures of gold, silver, copper and iron. The mix determines the destiny of each.²¹ The story of Er promises heavenly rewards for good behavior. Er’s death and resurrection allow a glimpse into Limbo, where souls receive punishment for earthly wrongs or contentedly choose their next earthly life if they did well in their last.²² The most famous myth—the allegory of the cave—implies that most citizens are in the dark and should trust in the decision of the philosopher-ruler.

*Plato invented
propaganda.*

Plato’s fellow Greeks continued to read Homer and did not give Plato’s myths the attention they gave Homer. Those who would read him centuries later do not seek guidance for how to live from his intentional myths, such as the myths of the metals or

At the beginning of Book X, this happens again, but the praise seems more sincere when Plato confesses that he has loved Homer since his youth. However, even here, the praise gives way to critical commentary.

¹⁹ *Laws* 801d; Saunders tr., 243. See also *Republic* 383b-383c; 386c-389d.

²⁰ *Republic* 383c.

²¹ *Republic* 414d-415d, Cornford tr., 106-107.

²² *Republic* 613a-621d.

*Plato's Socrates
teaches how
to teach.*

of Er. Academics may ponder them as keys to Plato's philosophy, but do not treat them as a guide to behavior. Still, Plato created one story that endures—call it the myth of Socrates. It began in the lived experience of Socrates and his followers. It provides a model that many try to follow, including countless teachers. Socrates teaches how to teach: by exploring and questioning. He warns us that we do not know much, especially when we ask those eternally nagging questions, such as "what is justice?" It matters little whether Plato's view of Socrates is accurate in every detail. We experience Socrates much as Plato did. He created for us the barefoot and humble teacher of Athens.

Rousseau

*Like Plato,
Rousseau
seeks total
control of
education.*

While many of those familiar with Plato recognize the tight control required by the Platonic educational system, only a few familiar with Jean Jacques Rousseau recognize that this seemingly liberal writer would require similar control.²³ Rousseau, after all, calls for a democratic state and an organic education steeped in nature. He claims to outline an education that would throw off all restraints. As will be seen, however, Rousseau also seeks total control over the child's education. All learning comes through experience, but Rousseau's tutor manipulates that experience, through control of the child's environment.

His contemporaries charged Rousseau with frequent contradictions. Rousseau argued that they did not consider context. Besides, he "would rather be a man of paradox than a man of prejudice."²⁴

²³ Among those who have exposed this difficulty with Rousseau, see Claes G. Ryn, *Democracy and the Ethical Life: A Philosophy of Politics and Community*, 2d ed. (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 138-39; Robert Nisbet, *Community and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 160-83; Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Everyman's Library, 1964), 193.

²⁴ See *Emile, or on Education* ¶271, trans. Barbara Foxley (1911), as revised by Grace Roosevelt (1998), at www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/emile.html (accessed in 2008-09). See also *Emile; or on Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1979), 93. (Hereinafter cited as *Emile*, with only a paragraph number indicating the Foxley/Roosevelt translation; and "Bloom, tr." indicating the other. The first form to appear indicates the source of a quotation.)

Rousseau adds that "I do not believe that . . . I contradict myself in my ideas; but I cannot gainsay that I often contradict myself in my expressions." *Emile*, Bloom tr., 108n [¶324, n.31]. Bloom believes that the paradox Rousseau refers to is "apparent contradiction, or contradiction of *common opinion*, not self-contradiction," following the Socratic example. *Ibid.*, 484, n.18.

He sought to debunk conventional wisdom and to escape conventional thought processes. He was, as one translator kindly put it, “a man of sentiment rather than of reason.”²⁵ He liked hyperbole. Giving Rousseau the benefit of the doubt requires searching for consistency among the paradoxes and allowing for frequent exaggeration.

Like Plato, Rousseau aims to create an ideal citizen. Unlike Plato, he wants to prepare this citizen for a democracy. This is a Rousseauist democracy, however, and it has some unusual features. It harbors no messy disputes, for everyone will receive an education that preserves their natural goodness and, thus, everyone will be agreeable. In the famous words of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, dissenters “will be forced to be free.” Apparently, Rousseau believes it possible to arrive at clear answers to what will promote the common good. Those answers will be so compelling that no sensible person can disagree. The trick is to educate children always to be good and, therefore, agreeable. As the *Social Contract* does not offer an educational plan, we must turn to other works to gain a complete picture.

Rousseau presents ideas on the state’s role in education in two short works. In *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, he indicates a preference for universal, free public schools. While recognizing that some parents prefer to educate their children at home, he recommends that the state nonetheless require them to send their children to public school for physical exercise. Much like Plato, he finds it important to control physical activity for the purpose “of accustoming them at an early age to rules, to equality, to fraternity, to competition, to living under the eyes of their fellow-citizens and to desiring public approbation.”²⁶ In *A Discourse on Political Economy* he goes further and, again echoing Plato, he gives the state priority over parents in the upbringing of a child:

Rousseau gives the state priority over parents in children’s upbringing.

[T]here ought to be laws for infancy, teaching obedience to others: and as the reason of each man is not left to be the sole arbiter of his duties, government ought the less indiscriminately to abandon to the intelligence and prejudices of fathers the education of their

²⁵ William Payne’s introductory notes to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or Treatise On Education* [1762] (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003; originally published 1896), xxvi.

²⁶ Chapter IV of *Considerations on the Government of Poland and on its Proposed Reformation*, <http://www.constitution.org/jjr/poland.htm> (accessed October 2009). (Hereinafter cited as *Government of Poland*.)

"Families dissolve but the State remains."

children, as that education is of still greater importance to the State than to the fathers: for, according to the course of nature, the death of the father often deprives him of the final fruits of education; but his country sooner or later perceives its effects. Families dissolve but the State remains.²⁷

In the *Emile* Rousseau abandons all such practical considerations and lets his romantic nature run free. Here he provides his most complete view of human nature and of the educational methods best suited to securing the best qualities in the developing child's character.²⁸ Because he begins with the premise that man is naturally good, his educational program aims to protect the child from all things that would interfere with this goodness. The child is, if one reads the *Emile* through romantic lenses, to live as a wild thing and will grow, much like a flower, into a perfect citizen, so long as he remains under the watchful eye of a tutor. This tutor presumably understands that nature is the best teacher, and allows no improper influences over the child's education. *Emile* does not tell us who selects the tutor of Emile, who is brought up outside of a society, but the two short works noted above assume state control. In the *Emile*, as in these other two works, Rousseau gives parents little or no role.

Rousseau's ideal education will preserve only natural inclinations, but association with others may endanger that goal. Although it is difficult to isolate the child from such influences, Rousseau believes that it helps to put the boy in the country. Emile must grow up "far from the rabble of valets—who are, after their masters, the lowest of men—far from the black morals of cities which are covered with a veneer seductive and contagious for children . . ." ²⁹

Rousseau appears to advocate a very free education. Allan Bloom tells us that the pupil's inclinations must yield to another's will only once, when the tutor commands Emile to leave his intended bride.³⁰ This may be true, but Bloom overlooks how the tutor manipulates Emile's environment. Rousseau warns "You

²⁷ Rousseau 1755: 148-9; <http://www.constitution.org/jjr/polecon.htm> (accessed October 2009).

²⁸ In his third dialogue, Jean-Jacques tells us he completed his major works in reverse order. His latest writings contain first principles and *Emile* provides his fundamental examination of human nature.

²⁹ *Emile*, Bloom tr., 95 (¶278).

³⁰ Bloom, in his introduction to his translation of *Emile*, 25-27.

will not be the child's master if you are not the master of all that surrounds him"³¹ The move to the country allows the tutor to orchestrate Emile's every experience. While Plato's child belongs to the state, Rousseau's tutor claims ownership: "You are my property, my child, my work. . . . If you frustrate my hopes you are robbing me of twenty years of my life and you are causing the unhappiness of my old age."³² The manipulation is no less prominent because Rousseau views the tutor as helping Emile find his natural self.

*Rousseau's
tutor controls
Emile by
controlling his
environment.*

Rousseau bans all formal instruction. Like others before him, he knows that children learn a great deal when something interests them. Thus he declares that

. . . it is rarely up to you to suggest to him what he ought to learn. It is up to him to desire it, to seek it, to find it. It is up to you to put it within his reach, skillfully to give birth to this desire and to furnish him with the means of satisfying it. It follows, therefore, that your questions should be infrequent but well-chosen.³³

Advocates of child-directed education may find such language inspiring, but it is doubtful that they would endorse Rousseau's project if they examined it in detail. The duty "skillfully to give birth" to the child's desires leaves little room for a child's unique interests. Although Rousseau asserts that the tutor is merely helping nature along, in the final analysis, the program is tutor-directed.

In truth, Emile lives in an invisible playpen. As soon as the child can speak, the tutor takes the child from his parents and moves him to the country, where he can manage the child's every experience. The tutor avoids planned instruction until the child reaches age twelve or thirteen:

*Emile lives in
an invisible
playpen.*

The first education ought to be purely negative. It consists not at all in teaching virtue or truth but in securing the heart from vice and the mind from error. . . . [I]f you could bring your pupil healthy and robust to the age of twelve without his knowing how to distinguish his right hand from his left, . . . his understanding would open up reason.³⁴

Rousseau would ban books, those "instruments of . . . misery." They are "the plague of childhood." At age twelve, his prototypi-

³¹ *Emile*, Bloom tr., 95 [¶277].

³² *Emile*, Bloom tr., 323 [¶1133]. Bloom translates *mon bien* as my property, while Foxley chooses "my treasure."

³³ *Emile*, Bloom. tr., 179 [¶618].

³⁴ Bloom tr., 93 [¶272].

cal pupil will not know what a book is.³⁵ The ban extends to books read aloud, even if only for entertainment. The worst are the old fables, such as those of Jean de la Fontaine. "Fables can instruct men, but the naked truth has to be told to children," who do not understand such stories. They offer no useful moral lesson. The fable of the fox and the crow (through flattery, the fox swipes a tasty morsel) suffers from arcane language and distorted reality. (Animals do not speak!) Worse still, a young child will only want to imitate the fox.³⁶ The tutor avoids verbal instruction and must restrict Emile's vocabulary. Even conversation could introduce society's biases. Emile must learn *only* from experience. He must play all day, but not for the sake of spontaneous learning or experience in cooperating with other children. Play hardens the child to pain so he will learn to pick himself up and, in the judgment of the omniscient tutor, always be happy.³⁷

The tutor contrives a few lessons, keeping the child oblivious to his plans. For example, to encourage Emile to read, perhaps at age ten, those around him must pretend to be too busy to read notes arriving from Emile's parents. Emile will soon figure out how to read them, especially if they include an invitation to enjoy some treat. (Incidentally, this is the only time parents participate in Emile's education.) As a second example, when Emile digs up the gardener's melon patch to plant beans, the tutor orchestrates a tit for tat. The gardener must dig up the errant boy's bean patch. Thus Emile suffers the natural consequences of his bad actions.³⁸ That may be a good idea, but is such a manipulated scenario really a natural experience? And won't a clever child eventually figure out the tutor's machinations?

It goes without saying that Rousseau forbids moral lessons. To those who want to correct a child's "bad inclinations," he suggests stricter restrictions on outside influences. A child's misconduct always results from "ill-considered care far more than from nature."³⁹ However, in one of his most significant self-contradictions, Rousseau makes room for one moral lesson: Emile must learn "never to harm anyone." If, as Rousseau argues in the *Second Discourse*, not wanting to harm another is a man's natural, spon-

³⁵ Bloom tr., 116 [¶370].

³⁶ Bloom tr., 113, 113-115 [¶¶341, 343-369]. See also 248-249 [¶¶881-883].

³⁷ Bloom tr., 74, 92, 78 [¶¶201, 265, 209].

³⁸ Ibid., 117, 99-101 [¶¶373, 289-300].

³⁹ Bloom tr., 80 [¶215].

taneous inclination, why would Emile need to learn this lesson? Is it because he is not growing up in the state of nature but only in a simulation of it? In the *Emile*, Rousseau argues that teaching him this moral lesson requires isolation from society where, Rousseau believes, one man's good must come at the expense of others:

For Rousseau, learning goodness requires isolation from society.

The precept "Never hurt anybody," requires that one be dependent as little as possible on human society, for in the social state one man's good is another man's evil. . . . A distinguished author says that only the wicked lives alone. I say, that it is only the good who live alone. . . . If the wicked were alone, what harm could he do? It is in society that he sets up machinations to harm others.⁴⁰

Likewise, trying to teach reason too early is futile. The young child is incapable of reason, and, if imposed, reason will make him stupid. Also, reason provides the restraint needed by the strong, while a small child needs no such restraint. The child's natural goodness will save the day and, if not, the tutor's may use physical superiority to maintain order. Rousseau's tutor will be gentle and reasonable, but will not reason with Emile.⁴¹

When Emile reaches the age of reason, at around twelve or thirteen, planned lessons begin. While an outsider may see much manipulation here, Rousseau regards his strategies as merely exposure to nature's lessons in life. For example, the tutor may pretend to be lost, to teach Emile astronomy. Emile learns geography, mathematics and science through observation of his immediate surroundings. The ban on books continues: "I hate books. They only teach one to talk about what one does not know."⁴²

Book learning begins at about age sixteen, with enormous restrictions. The first and only book Emile should read for some time is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The tutor excises the *fatras*⁴³—the claptrap, referring to Defoe's moralizing and any suggestion that Crusoe's isolation was punishment for wrongdoing and his return to society a reward for the repentant. Instead, the book serves as a sort of Boy Scout manual for how to live in the wilderness.

At around age seventeen or eighteen Emile will study history, but it must be a study of facts alone, without interpretation. Alas,

⁴⁰ ¶¶314 & 314n [Bloom tr., 104-105]. The distinguished author most likely is Aristotle. See the *Politics* 1253a.

⁴¹ ¶¶254—259, 273 (Bloom tr., 89-90, 94).

⁴² Bloom tr., 180—181, 184 [¶¶621-626; 645].

⁴³ *Emile* ¶648, from the French edition found at http://projects.ilt.columbia.edu/library/Framesets/Frame_Rousseau_Emile_Fr.html (accessed October 2009).

Rousseau can find no authors who meet his standards. He complains that historical novelists mislead and that historians pass judgment. He argues that such authors distort the pupil's ability to judge. Thucydides does well enough, but he writes only of war. Herodotus might do for presentation of interesting details, if only they "did not often degenerate into puerile simplicities more fit to spoil the taste of youth than to form it." When Emile is about eighteen, Rousseau allows him to read a handful of books.⁴⁴

Rousseau does not allow the student to choose his own career.

Although claiming that Emile will pursue his individual, natural interests, Rousseau does not allow the child to choose his own career. True, he tells us that the choice belongs to Emile, but he rules out most possibilities. Emile should not become an embroiderer, a gilder, a varnisher, a musician, an actor, or an author. He should not be a policeman or any kind of civil servant, for that makes him overly dependent on the government that employs him. Also low on the list are blacksmiths, locksmiths, ironsmiths, masons and shoemakers, as such work requires one to get dirty. Emile must not be a weaver, stocking maker, or stone cutter because their work is too mechanical. "Sedentary indoor employments" will weaken and feminize Emile, and should be avoided. The last thing the possessive tutor wants to see is Emile as a poet. The lad must work with his hands. Emile should learn carpentry, as a hedge against the coming revolution when "the noble become commoners" and perhaps to learn the intrinsic value of work well done.⁴⁵

Emile learns ethical behavior just as he learns other subjects, through experience. To help his healthy instinct along, the tutor chooses the young man's company carefully. He must "let him know that man is naturally good; let him feel it; let him judge his neighbor by himself." His hope is that the child will adopt Rousseau's unremitting hostility to human society. The correct selection of company will lead Emile to understand "that society corrupts and perverts men"⁴⁶

One subject is not entrusted to experience. Rousseau ropes in

⁴⁴ He recommends biography, specifically Plutarch, who provides adequate detail to allow any student of history to "know himself and to make himself wise at the expense of the dead." Bloom tr., 239-243 [¶¶853-867].

⁴⁵ Bloom tr., 194 & 194n, 197-202 [¶¶684, 693-704]. Although Rousseau finds shoemaking unsuitable, he would rather have Emile become a shoemaker than a poet. See ¶693, ¶703.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 237 [¶842].

the Savoyard Vicar to “teach” a religion of the heart that is very different from Christianity. Although Rousseau has told us that he modeled the vicar after an acquaintance, the vicar sounds exactly like Rousseau when he declares:

I shall never be able to conceive that what every man is obliged to know is confined to books . . . Always books! What a mania. Because Europe is full of books, Europeans regard them as indispensable, without thinking that in three-quarters of the earth they have never been seen. Were not all books written by men? Why, then, would man need them to know his duties . . . ?⁴⁷

The student is taught a religion of the heart that is very different from Christianity.

The vicar closes all books, Bible included. He learns to worship God only from the book of nature. Cautious skepticism prevails. The vicar does not know if God created body or soul, or anything else. The idea bewilders him, but to the extent that he can conceive it, he believes it. Likewise, “No doubt God is eternal; but can my mind grasp the idea of eternity?” He urges the pupil to seek the truth for himself and to reject doctrine.⁴⁸

As a young adult, Emile will study government. He will examine the government of his native land as well as that of others. This will allow the young man to choose to remain a citizen in his fatherland or renounce that citizenship and live elsewhere.⁴⁹ Emile must have no sentimental patriotic ties.

Although Rousseau has sought to isolate Emile for most of his childhood, he recognizes the need for companionship. As Emile matures, sex education begins, or as Rousseau delicately puts it, it is time to instruct him in the meaning of his new passions. The tutor provides simple honest explanations and monitored exposure to Sophie. While he is at it, he specifies the ideal marital relationship. He wants the husband to be active, strong and bold, and the wife to be passive, weak and timid. The Rousseauist male provides strength, while the female pleases him and produces children. His ideal female must be faithful and, even more important, she must appear to be faithful. He bluntly declares, moreover, that if a woman complains about inequality, “she is wrong. This inequality is . . . the work not of prejudice but of reason.” Rousseau explicitly rejects Plato’s recommendation that women undergo the same physical training as men, and recommends separate exercise for

In Rousseau’s ideal marital relationship, the husband should be active and strong, the wife passive and weak.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 303 (§1075).

⁴⁸ §§1087, 1021, 1050n [Bloom tr., 306-307, 285].

⁴⁹ §§1587, 1619; Bloom tr., 455.

women, designed to help them bear stronger sons.⁵⁰ Finally, the tutor must take sole responsibility for Emile's marriage:

I say [it is] my business, not his father's; for when he entrusted his son to my care, he gave up his place to me. He gave me his rights; it is I who am really Emile's father; it is I who have made a man of him. I would have refused to educate him if I were not free to marry him according to his own choice, which is mine.⁵¹

Rousseau's tutor continues to run the relationship. He selects the books that Emile and Sophie will exchange, takes up residence with the young couple, and coaches them on the most intimate details of married life.⁵²

Rousseauist Virtue and the Imagination

For Rousseau, virtue means to never harm another, which is learned through isolation of the child from others.

Like Plato, Rousseau regards virtue as the ultimate goal of education. He offers a simple rule: Emile must never harm another. To achieve this goal, the tutor isolates the child from others. Rousseau's solution will perplex anyone influenced by the classical tradition, which would center the child in a family and a community with all their strengths and weaknesses. It will puzzle anyone influenced by the Christian tradition, in which "do unto others" implies something more than "do no harm." By isolating the child, Rousseau has removed all opportunity for either doing or avoiding harm to others.

Rousseau's reasoning lies embedded in his view of *amour-propre*. *Amour-propre*, a delicious term best left untranslated, suggests vanity, conceit, love of power, self-love, selfishness, or (least satisfying of all) self-esteem.⁵³ It enjoys a rich history in French

⁵⁰ ¶¶1266-1271, 1285 [Bloom tr., 357-362; 366]. The quotation is from Bloom tr. 361 [¶1266].

⁵¹ ¶1424 [Bloom tr. 407].

⁵² Sophie will give Emile her favorite book, *Telemachus*; Emile will give her his, Addison and Steel's *The Spectator*. ¶1594. The tutor remains with the young couple following their wedding, supervising the couple's intimate life. In the final paragraph, Emile enters the tutor's room one morning to inform him of Sophie's pregnancy. ¶¶1724-1749.

⁵³ Love of self is precisely the theme
Of the French *amour propre*. It would seem
The *nuance* it displays
Is quite lost when the phrase,
In translation, becomes *self-esteem*.

The Omnificent English Dictionary In Limerick Form, Limerick #17095 by SheilaB, revised, 29 June 2006, www.oedilf.com (accessed Oct. 2009).

literature and was a well-understood term in Rousseau's day. A generation earlier, the cynical moralist, François De La Rochefoucauld, traced most human folly to *amour-propre*.⁵⁴ Rousseau's contemporary Voltaire included it in his "Dictionnaire Philosophique" (1764) and contributed an essay on it for Diderot's encyclopedia. He thought it "more vanity than crime."⁵⁵

Early in his *Emile*, Rousseau seems to follow common usage. He places *amour-propre* among the "natural vices: pride, the spirit of domination, *amour-propre*, the wickedness of man."⁵⁶ However, he must reconcile this "natural vice" with his fundamental premise that man is by nature good. Thus, he discerns a special, "naturally indifferent" form of *amour-propre*, which is "good and useful":

The only passion natural to man is amour de soi[-même]⁵⁷ or amour-propre taken in an extended sense. This amour-propre in itself or relative to ourselves is good and useful, and since it has no necessary rapport to others it is in this regard naturally indifferent: it only becomes good or evil by what it is applied to and by the relations it is given. . . . [T]he main thing is that the child should do nothing because you are watching him or listening to him; in a word, nothing because of other people, but only what nature asks of him. Then he will only do good.⁵⁸

Thus, Rousseau distinguishes between the innate, natural *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*. The latter arises only when exposed to others, and gives birth to "hateful and irascible passions." *Amour de soi* "is always good and always in conformity with order," and gives birth to "gentle and affectionate passions . . ."⁵⁹ *Amour-propre* arises when *amour de soi* loses its integrity and "becomes pride in great

⁵⁴ The first two editions of his *Moral Maxims* begins with the topic. It is "the love of self, and of all things for self. It makes men self-worshippers, and if fortune permits them, causes them to tyrannize over others." Many of the maxims focus on it, for example: "Amour-propre is the greatest of flatterers." Maxim 2. "There is more amour-propre than love in jealousy." Maxim 324. *Sentences and Moral Maxims*, translated and edited by J. W. Willis Bund, M.A. LL.B and J. Hain Friswell (1871); <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8roch10.txt>. For the French text see <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14913/14913-8.txt>.

⁵⁵ "L'amour-propre n'est point une scélératesse, c'est naturel à tous les hommes; il est beaucoup plus voisin de la vanité que du crime."

⁵⁶ ¶¶166-169 [Bloom tr. 67-68].

⁵⁷ The translations consulted do not fully translate "de soi-même." The term appears once more, at ¶753, adding emphasis to the self.

⁵⁸ ¶267 [Bloom tr. 92-93]. See *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* for a similar conclusion.

⁵⁹ Bloom tr., 212-214 [¶¶752-756]. *Amour de soi* also induces the child to love those who are of service to him.

For Rousseau,
the wrong
kind of self-
love arises
only within
society.

minds, vanity in small ones, and in both ceaselessly feeds itself at the expense of one's neighbor."⁶⁰ The isolated child develops only a good and natural love of self. He turns prideful and full of folly only if he encounters others, to whom he compares himself.⁶¹ Isolation allows Emile to develop free of concern for what others might think of him. Emile may retain the innate drive toward self-preservation without becoming prideful, vain, or envious of others. Thus, Rousseau reconciles his view that the child is naturally good with his view that there are "natural vices." The latter are due not to nature itself but to external factors that pervert a natural and good self-regard.

In an ironic turn, the highly imaginative Rousseau worries about arousing the imagination of his pupil.⁶² He regards the imagination as "the most active of all" the faculties, but also, highly undesirable in the young pupil. He provides a multitude of reasons for curbing Emile's imagination. Among his many reasons, he thinks an overactive imagination is likely to leave one miserable.

It is imagination which extends for us the measure of what is possible either for good or for evil, and consequently which excites and nourishes our desires with the hope of satisfying them. But the object which seems at first within our grasp flies away quicker than we can follow; when we think we have grasped it, it transforms itself and is again far ahead of us.⁶³

Because the "real world" has limits and the imagination is limitless, and because one cannot enlarge on the real, he finds it best to curb the imagination. With the imagination safely kept dormant, the boy "only sees what is, rates the danger at its true worth, and always keeps his cool. Necessity weighs too often on him to make him rebel against it; he has borne its yoke all of his life and is well used to it. He is always ready for anything."⁶⁴ Unchecked imagina-

⁶⁰ ¶761 [Bloom tr., 215].

⁶¹ "Here is the point when *amour de soi* changes into *amour-propre*." ¶836 [Bloom tr., 235]. Emile cannot observe others "without . . . comparing himself with them." ¶868 [Bloom tr., 243].

⁶² For a different view, see Glenn Davis, "Irving Babbitt, the Moral Imagination and Progressive Education," *Humanitas*, XIX (2006), 50-64. Davis seems to confuse the quality of Rousseau's imagination with the quality of imagination that Rousseau plans to develop in Emile.

⁶³ Emile ¶¶220-222.

⁶⁴ ¶542. See also ¶740.

tion may make the child fearful of death or nonexistent danger,⁶⁵ induce him to become “a fanatic rather than a believer,”⁶⁶ or lead a young man to debauchery.⁶⁷ Emile must experience only a literal and objective world, even when engaged in the creative arts.⁶⁸

Rousseau’s goal is to “quench the first spark of imagination,”⁶⁹ or at least to retard its development. As nature moves more slowly than the efforts of men, he argues, it is always the best route. The “teachings of nature” allow the senses to awaken the imagination, while the teachings of men allow the imagination to awaken the senses. The educational efforts of men only lead to “a precocious activity which cannot fail to enervate, to weaken first the individual and, in the long run, the species.”⁷⁰

Rousseau’s goal to retard the development of the pupil’s imagination.

If your pupil were alone, you would have nothing to do; but everything that surrounds him enflames his imagination. A flood of prejudices sweeps him along. In order to hold him back one must push him in the opposite direction. Feeling must enchain the imagination and reason must silence the opinion of men.⁷¹

The desire to restrict the development of the imagination is just one more reason for moving the boy to the country:

Put off their dawning imagination with objects which, far from inflaming their senses, repress their activity. Keep them away from great cities, where the flaunting attire and immodesty of the women hasten and anticipate the lessons of nature, where everything presents to their view pleasures which they should know nothing of until they can choose them for themselves. Bring them back to their early home, where rural simplicity allows the passions of their age to develop less rapidly.⁷²

However, instructing Emile on his duties to the tutor is done “by rousing his imagination.”⁷³ Rousseau also gives the imagination a

⁶⁵ ¶¶220-226, ¶445 [Bloom tr., 80-82, 134].

⁶⁶ ¶919. See also ¶955.

⁶⁷ ¶786. See also ¶1123.

⁶⁸ Rousseau would train the child to stick to observed facts. For example, the child must accurately draw only what he sees. Drawing from memory could produce absurdities or poor proportions. ¶476 [Bloom tr., 144]. Recall, also that the objection to fables noted earlier was due in part to the portrayal of animals that talk.

⁶⁹ ¶772.

⁷⁰ ¶762.

⁷¹ ¶778.

⁷² ¶824.

⁷³ ¶1133.

role in learning geometry.⁷⁴ The imagination cannot be held back forever, so by the time Emile is a young married man, Rousseau finally advises: “Do not stifle his imagination but guide it.”⁷⁵

Rousseau expects “goodness, humanity, compassion, beneficence” to flow naturally from empathy.

Rousseau has some understanding of how the imagination allows one individual to comprehend the experience of another, but he limits this possibility to the sharing of pain:

To become sensitive and compassionate, the child must know that there are beings similar to him who suffer what he has suffered, who feel the pains he has felt . . . [H]ow can we let ourselves be stirred by pity unless we go beyond ourselves and identify ourselves with the suffering animal? By leaving . . . our own nature and taking his? . . . So no one becomes sensitive till his imagination is aroused and begins to carry him outside himself.⁷⁶

From this empathy Rousseau expects “goodness, humanity, compassion, [and] beneficence” to flow.⁷⁷ The tutor must manage both the quality and quantity of anything that may inspire pity:

It is by seeing so much death and suffering that priests and doctors become pitiless. Let your pupil therefore know something of the fate of man and the miseries of his fellow-beings, but let him not see them too often. A single thing, carefully selected and shown on the right day, will give him a month of tender feelings and reflection.⁷⁸

In sum, Rousseau regards the imagination as a serious threat to the safeguarding of the pupil’s virtue.

Plato and Rousseau Compared

Plato favors equal educational opportunity for all, with advancement based on merit.

Plato believes humans possess different, unequal gifts, which can be developed through education. Thus, he envisions a caste system, fitting each citizen into the carefully designed machinery of the state. There will be equal educational opportunity for all, with advancement to higher levels based on merit. All-wise philosopher-rulers make all the important decisions. Rousseau believes in the complete goodness of natural man. This person is suited for an ideal democracy—one that promises both extreme individualism and collective unity. However, only boys will advance in the academic realm. Merit, in the historical sense of the

⁷⁴ ¶480 [Bloom tr., 145].

⁷⁵ ¶1138 [Bloom tr., 325].

⁷⁶ ¶794 [Bloom tr., 222-223].

⁷⁷ ¶795 [Bloom tr., 223].

⁷⁸ ¶824 [Bloom tr., 231].

term that implies study and practice, may be a liability. Rousseau's plan for education aims to preserve the natural goodness of the child, who in the end will always be good, and thus, will always promote the common good. In the case of a failure, the recalcitrant citizen will be "forced to be free."

For Rousseau, merit in terms of study and practice may be a liability.

Plato hopes to inculcate what might be considered old-fashioned virtues: wisdom, courage, discipline, and justice—virtues with a social dimension that have meaning only in the presence of other citizens. Rousseau, always creative, rejects traditional virtues and introduces two newfangled ones: The child must not care for what others might think of him, and the child must abstain from harming another (not to be confused with the golden rule). Plato and Rousseau clash fundamentally in their views of human nature. Plato sees man as chronically divided between higher and lower possibilities and places great emphasis on the need to control man's lower impulses. Rousseau rejects that ancient idea, which was carried forward and sharpened in some ways by Christian philosophers. Man is born good, and his goodness can be liberated from oppressive social structures.

Nonetheless, the educational recommendations of Plato and Rousseau are alike in critical ways. First, both are master planners who wish to control every aspect of education from the earliest age until adulthood and beyond. Both would isolate the child from parents, family and neighbors. Second, both wish to curtail the imagination of the pupil and to ban rival imaginative presentations. Rousseau's ban on books echoes Plato's ban on poets. Ironically, both make abundant use of the imagination in presenting their ideas, which allows them to speak to us over the centuries. When Rousseau advocates freedom from restraints, he is speaking only of the restraints that a society places on the individual. He seeks to substitute more rigorous restraints based on state power.

Despite profound philosophical differences, Plato and Rousseau both want to control every aspect of education.

Plato's impulse to exercise control springs from his desire to produce an ideal state and to minimize potentially subversive influences. Poetry (in the broad Greek sense) must obtain state approval, and most traditional works are banned outright. The Guardians are not to dabble in dramatic recitation. Plato invents propaganda to take the place of the time-honored myths. Music must be regulated, so that meter and melody fit the words and so that music is brave and inspires courage and self-control.⁷⁹ The de-

⁷⁹ *The Republic* 398c-400c; Saunders tr., 85-88. "The introduction of novel

cisions of the philosopher-rulers must be followed by all. After all, they best understand the True, the Beautiful and the Good.

*Plato's
intolerance
of dissent
plainly
incompatible
with
constitutional
democracy.*

Anyone who has thought at all about the kind of education needed in a constitutional democracy will recognize the dangers in Plato's system. Few things can be more oppressive than the True and the Good for the unlucky individual who does not agree with the ruler about their nature. Indeed, Plato inspired the first of the great dystopian novels of our time, *We* (1924). When Stalin was beginning his march toward power, the author, Evgenii Ivanovich Zamiatin, expressed his dissent by creating a world governed by Platonic rules. Admirers of Plato will of course resent any imputation that Plato's rulers might be similar to Stalin and communist party leaders, but from the point of view of dissenters, rigid enforcement of assent will be painful, however benevolent the rulers may regard their regime.

*Rousseau's
intolerance
of dissent
frequently
overlooked.*

Many fail to recognize the same problem with Rousseau. Those smitten by his romantic picture of an educational idyll overlook the extent to which he favors a prescriptive program involving censorship, elitism, and propaganda. They must overlook how the program aims at producing a citizen suitable only for an imagined democracy that is devoid of constitutional restraints on state power. They must overlook Rousseau's idea that the state may force a citizen to be free—free as defined by an allegedly good and enlightened majority. In the political society that he envisions, there is no limit to the authority and reach of the general will.

Both thinkers offer regimented cradle-to-grave education. For Plato, the child is the property of the state first, and parents second. For Rousseau the child is the property of the tutor (in *Emile*) or the state (in his works on politics). Both thinkers regulate procreation. Plato sets age limits and times for it, and Rousseau's tutor awaits Emile's firstborn and, one suspects, is ready to guide the next generation. Both remove the young child from his or her parents. Plato takes all children to a special school at the outskirts of the city while Rousseau takes Emile to the country. Both need a paragon. For Plato, Philosopher-rulers and the Guardians set the standards, define the curriculum, and select and train the teachers. For Rousseau, the philosopher-tutor takes charge. Both thinkers be-

fashions in music is a thing to beware of as endangering the whole fabric of society, whose most important conventions are unsettled by a revolution in that quarter." Saunders tr., 115.

gin their censorship in the nursery. Both seek to control the nurses and other subordinates who will instruct the child. If anything, Plato allows for greater flexibility: he would only *persuade* nurses and mothers to give up the old tales and tell the newly minted ones to the children. Rousseau requires that nurses be kept under strict control. Plato extends censorship to adult society. Rousseau's tutor arranges and runs Emile's marriage with Sophie.

Most likely, neither believes that the ideal state can exist in this world. Presumably, Plato's philosopher-rulers—if they can only get a foothold somehow—will select appropriate successors. But Plato's understanding of history suggests that they will give way to less ideal types. Socrates has his doubts that the ideal regime can ever be realized. Rousseau is even more vague about the origin of and support for the ideal tutor. Possibly parents select and subsidize the effort, without exercising supervision. One might wonder where such cooperative parents are to be found—perhaps among those who have become enamored of Rousseau's ideas. In a new political society, it is more likely, as suggested by the *Government of Poland* and *Political Economy*, that the state will take over. In both cases, one suspects that the paragon will closely resemble the author.

The Role of the Imagination

The imagination influences reason and inspires action for good or ill. The strong desire to curtail and direct the imagination, as found in both Plato's and Rousseau's writings, reflects a desire strictly to limit its role so that it can influence reason and actions only for the Good. But that raises the question, what is the Good (and what is Evil)? Plato and Rousseau assume that a clear answer is possible. Yet it is unlikely that any single human could know that answer. Given the limits of human understanding, it would seem to be desirable to gain exposure to the experiences of many minds, living, remembered, and long dead. This experience can arrive through art—meaning all efforts to communicate life's meaning to others, through poetry, story telling, music, visual arts, and technical works of science and philosophy. This collected experience holds out hope for achieving some good, even if it be good of an imperfect kind, and such good may be the best that human beings can attain.

Both thinkers would restrict the imagination's influence to conform with their own particular idea of the Good.

Stories and powerful images stick in the mind. They can pro-

foundly orient one's thought before the full meaning is clear and before one troubles with formal lessons. If they are of the right sort, they will become understood at the right time, and show the student how to live. Mothers and nurses who tell stories to their children do much more than entertain them. As Plato recognizes, "thus will they shape their souls." The ethical principles that can be derived from such stories emerge over time. To take just one example, consider the story of Priam, mourning for his son Hector. Plato would censor it as showing ignoble conduct. Yet I more than once told my young son this story of Priam, at first to beg him to be careful with his life. Later, I realized that it might be of some comfort to him if I were to die, as I hope I do, before he does. There is still more to Homer's Priam, as I have discovered from time to time when life's experiences have sent my thoughts back to his majestic grief.

To the Greeks, and to us, poets are teachers. Drama, novels, and all well executed creative endeavors have a power that technical philosophical discourse will never achieve. The images, the human context, the dramatic flow of a story—these things hold the attention of those caught within the listener's circle more surely and more completely. In the end this shapes the will. As Claes Ryn has observed:

For arguments to make any real difference, the individual's imagination and character must be such that new ideas are permitted entrance into that innermost sphere of the personality where our view of reality is formed. Conceptual thought rests on pre-rational, intuitive experience. Intuition in its turn is intimately related to an underlying orientation of the will. If humanistic scholarship is to formulate realistic ideas, it must build upon realistic intuition, and such intuition presupposes a will that does not allow escape from uncomfortable parts of reality.⁸⁰

Plato's awareness of the power of imagination led him to invent propaganda, to induce citizens in his ideal Republic to support Justice. Still, his myths seem lifeless compared to the time-tested experience reflected in myths that endure. Moreover, if achieved, Plato's Republic must remain virtually static. It holds no hope for surprises that might make people happier and livelier. Ironically, it would even lack a Socrates, always questioning assumptions. Is there something questionable about this notion of order? If a state

⁸⁰ Claes G. Ryn, "The Humanities and Moral Reality," in Joseph Baldacchino, ed., *Educating for Virtue* (Washington D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1988), 18.

censors poets, has the state paid too high a price for order?

Rousseau does not create myths in quite the conscious, deliberate way that Plato does. But he, like Plato, seeks to capture the reader's imagination. He creates the characters of Emile, the tutor, the Savoyard Vicar, Sophie, and others, to comment on human nature and the human condition and to demonstrate how best to educate. He conjures up a delightful Eden for teacher and student and declares it free of restraints, educational standards, or prescribed curricula. In the end, the pupil turns out well, and the teacher is greatly honored. This romantic vision still seduces large numbers of educators. A part of Rousseau's power stems from eloquence married to verbosity. The *Emile* covers so much territory that one may also read it selectively to piece together a pleasing and more moderate lesson.

Like Plato, the highly imaginative Rousseau aims to restrict the imagination of the future citizen. He sterilizes Emile's world through a ban on books and fables, and the insistence on learning based on observable events only. The future Rousseauist State will presumably lack poets. In practice, it would most likely be peopled by literal-minded self-centered twits who care nothing for what others think of them and who will do nothing of interest to others. Lest one doubt that official mandates to curb the imagination could creep into the official policy of contemporary liberal democracies, consider the words of an official Swedish teaching guide: Teachers should "avoid the encouragement of young people's imagination."⁸¹

Plato's Republic would have no room for a Socrates.

Rousseau seeks to restrict the imagination of the future citizen.

The Central Question

Why should two thinkers with seemingly opposing temperaments and opposing beliefs about human nature design educational systems that require over-arching control? Why are Plato and Rousseau so intent on rejecting their respective poetic traditions? Why do they both leave no place for the traditional role of parents in a child's education? The answer may lie in the certitude that they have about virtue. For those who fear the kind of control that they propose, it is instructive to ask whether they got it right.

Plato's four cardinal virtues—wisdom, courage, discipline and

Desire for total control of education stems from unwarranted certitude about virtue.

⁸¹ As quoted in Roland Huntford, *The New Totalitarians* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972, c. 1971), 233. Huntford observes that officials "see fantasy as subversive."

*Importance
of humility
and prudence
neglected
in Plato's
thought.*

justice—have much to recommend them. They would strengthen his Republic, for all the reasons that Plato provides. If these virtues are present in those who should have them, the state might have a good chance of surviving. If these virtues are lacking, the good regime would have great difficulty coming into being. If by chance it were to make it, it would soon degenerate into anarchy. But something seems missing in Plato's Republic. What about those two closely related virtues: humility and prudence?⁸² These were not yet on the lips of the Greeks, but hubris was considered the greatest human failing. Avoiding hubris while pursuing moderation in action, virtues that the Greeks understood, moved them close to what would later be called humility and prudence. If these virtues are important, Plato's censorship of the poets may have serious consequences. Homer and Sophocles were masters at presenting the dangers of hubris and imprudent action. Exposure to their works might disturb civil order, but it seems more likely to nurture the important virtues missing in Plato's plan.

Is it possible that Plato overlooked humility as a virtue because he himself lacked it? He tells us that Socrates said that wisdom means knowing how little we know, but Plato's proposals are hardly modest. Plato, after looking over his own collected works, expresses immense satisfaction and recommends that his works be the textbook for the next generation. He concedes that perhaps other material could be included, if anything as good could be found.⁸³ One suspects that Plato counted himself among the very few qualified to be a philosopher-ruler.

*Rousseau's
command to
do no harm
to others is
passive and
self-centered.*

Rousseau's simple virtue—to do no harm—weakly echoes the Golden Rule of the Christian tradition, but fails to include love for one's neighbor. Rousseau's more complex virtue—the taming of *amour-propre*—seems to echo many traditions that would have individuals suppress selfish egoism, but, as Rousseau defines this virtue, it is merely passive and self-centered: The child must not

⁸² Russell Kirk defines a prudent person as judicious, cautious, and wise. In politics, the prudent individual is willing to compromise. The opposite type would like to use politics as a "revolutionary instrument for transforming society and even transforming human nature." Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1993), 1-10. Humility is the recognition that one lacks perfect knowledge of the Good, the True, or the Beautiful. In politics, humility should lead one to consult with others in the community and, as is the case with prudence, to accept compromises. See Lines, "Antigone's Flaw," *Humanitas* 12:1 (1999): 4-15.

⁸³ *The Laws*, Saunders tr., 302.

consider, much less react to, what others think of him. To avoid doing harm to another, and to avoid falling prey to *amour-propre*, Rousseau would isolate the child from family, from society, and from tradition.

Rousseau has, in effect, turned vice into virtue. To promote a disregard of others flouts both the Greek and Christian traditions. According to Rousseau, the taming of *amour-propre* requires lonely individualism and independence. It requires disdain for existing society, for precedent, and for the thought of others. Rousseau proudly sets this goal for himself and his pupil. A large ego drives his work. For example, Rousseau credits himself with inventing childhood and discerning its significance. Many of his admirers accept this claim, although, as early as Plato, one finds an appreciation for the importance of childhood and advice that learning should take the form of play. One suspects that Rousseau imagines himself the perfect tutor for Emile. Clearly, nurturing humility is not a part of Rousseau's plan.

Rousseau has turned vice into virtue.

Both Plato and Rousseau offer a limited view of virtue. Still, both reveal a certainty that they fully understand and know how to encourage the right virtues. Both apparently believe in the possibility of a perfectly wise ruler or tutor who can appropriately direct others. The certitude that drives them leads them to seek total control of education. People with such certitude know what they are doing, and nothing must be left to chance or to the discretion of others. The danger, of course, is that one might miss something essential to the peace and happiness of citizens, perhaps even something essential to the survival of society.

Stemming from false certitude about virtue, total control of education can endanger the survival of society.

While it is beyond the scope of this article, one should note that there are approaches to education and politics that do take the need for humility and prudence into account. If a society believes virtue is critical to its survival, citizens must ask, "what is virtue?" No answer enjoys complete consensus. No definition is beyond dispute. Those who proceed with humility, moderation, and prudence will not seek too much control over education. They may wish to support education in general, even favor a definite curriculum based on the experience of many generations, but they will allow a diversity of approaches. Grand educational schemes, especially ones without any substantial historical support, will seem suspect. They will question the overly wide reach, the narrowing of rules, and the centralizing of control. They will resist standardization and curric-

ulum mandates that wipe out opportunities to pursue the special needs and interests of individuals. They will resist such policies, even those that slip through with the overuse of otherwise useful measures, such as standardized testing requirements. They will respect and encourage private education. They will encourage the broader-based educational efforts of family and community. They will encourage the independent reading of books. They will honor an ancient tradition that recognizes parents as the most sacred guardians of the educational wellbeing of their own children.