

The artistic and aesthetic dimension in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques  
Rousseau

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**Abstract:**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau considers art and literature as a direct extension of nature, or as the primal cry of humanity, akin to the expressions of his natural state. Rousseau absolutely rejects any form of art detached from virtue and nature, viewing literature not as a luxury, but as a central axis with profound social and foundational dimensions.

Through his passion and dedication to art and the novel, Rousseau reflects, to a considerable extent, the meaning of existence that he sought within himself delving deeply and purposefully into the pure essence of humanity, inseparable from its entire being and manifestations. His vision remains harmonious and aligned with both the spirit and structure of life, in a vast horizon free from psychological fragmentation and social deviation, in pursuit of the highest meanings of love, life, and beauty. By understanding philosophy through its literature, it becomes evident that Rousseau intertwined philosophy and literature, transforming philosophical texts into vivid, authentic human experiences, thereby paving the way for the emergence of Romanticism.

**Keywords:**

Philosophy of Art, Philosophy of Beauty, Beauty, Art, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Confessions.

**Introduction:**

The philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau embodies a profound intellectual and philosophical heritage, manifesting itself within the framework of naturalism as the culmination of a coherent philosophical system, shaped through a reflective and critical exploration of humanity and society. Rousseau founded his philosophical doctrine on a set of conceptual structures derived from nature, regarded as the primary origin of man and the source of moral and emotional values prior to the formation of artificial social constructs.

Within this framework, art and literature occupy a central place in Rousseau's philosophy. They are not regarded merely as aesthetic luxuries or independent cultural productions, but as authentic expressions of the original human nature and as means of reconnecting humans with themselves and their lost spontaneity. Literature, particularly in his autobiographical and

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novelistic writings, represents an extension of his ethical and educational philosophy, where the human self is manifested in its emotional and affective dimensions, free from social artificiality. Likewise, art, in his conception, constitutes a genuine human act whose value is derived from its harmony with nature and virtue, rather than adherence to artificial standards of taste or prevailing social norms.

Thus, through the interplay of philosophy, art, and literature, Rousseau charts a coherent intellectual trajectory that opens onto a broad philosophical horizon. Within this horizon, concepts of nature, freedom, the self, and beauty converge, paving the way for the emergence of Romantic sensibilities and contributing to the revaluation of emotional experience as a fundamental basis for understanding humanity and the world.

***First: Jean-Jacques Rousseau 1712–1778 through the pages of his book (Confessions):***

Before we address Jean-Jacques Rousseau the philosopher, we are speaking about the thinker, the originator of political, educational, and aesthetic theories, passionate about music. It is noteworthy that Rousseau was a composer and a musical writer, and he was one of the most prominent inspirers of his era, which spanned from the late 17th century to the late 18th century. His works had a significant impact on the French Revolution in various fields. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) was born in Geneva, the second child of Isaac Rousseau and Suzanne Bernard, who passed away on July 7.

Rousseau says in the preface presenting his life in his book *Confession* the book in which he details his autobiography over the course of 53 years that the concept of confession is clearly evident in its pages. This monumental work can be considered the foundation of the discourse of confession, and indeed, the philosopher Hegel described Rousseau as the “godfather of confession.” In doing so, Rousseau establishes modern literature of confession and undermines the authority of external moral censorship.

Rousseau says, “I was born in Geneva in the year 1712 to citizens Isaac Rousseau and Suzanne Bernard” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1968, p.7). He also states in his book *Confessions*, “...I came into the world in a condition close to death, and I carried within me the seeds of a malady that began to grow over the course of days. One of my aunts surrounded me with care that saved my life” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1968, p.7). He adds, describing a difficult condition gnawing at his being, “I was the miserable fruit of this return, born ten months later weak and frail; I had lost my mother’s life, and my birth was the first thing surrounded by misfortune and wretchedness” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1968, p.7).

A pivotal chapter in Rousseau’s life, as he recounts, was, “I remained under the care of my uncle Bernard, who at that time was working on the fortifications of Geneva. He sent me with his son, who was my age, to ‘Bossey’ so that we could meet the Latin language for education and learning. In Geneva, I loved reading and exploring” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1968, p.12). The examination of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions* reveals subtle threads of profound philosophical concerns, including the theme of the restless self in search of truth, contrasted with the natural human being constantly striving for liberation from social constraints. It also enriches a philosophical project that integrates literature, philosophy, art, aesthetics, education, and ethics. *Confessions* is not merely an autobiography; it constitutes a

philosophical discourse on modernity and the human self in all its existential dimensions, inherently aligned with freedom.

***Second: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and His Literary and Artistic Passion***

Rousseau, that philosopher-humanist, left behind an artistic and literary legacy that engaged the mind, pierced the heart, and brought tears to the eyes a revolutionary philosopher, a writer, an artist who followed the path of life with passion, love, and a refined sense of beauty. We come closer to him through his literature, for understanding philosophy through its literature requires engaging with Rousseau's poetic sensibility, which is undoubtedly a fundamental gateway into his thought and philosophical system.

During his time in Paris, Rousseau wrote his novel *Julie, or the New Heloise*, which became the most famous novel in France in the late eighteenth century. He partially drew inspiration for this epistolary novel, which explores the pains of frustrated love in conflict with duty, from the works of Richardson and Prevost. It contains some of the most tender lyrical passages about romantic love, pure desire, and rural simplicity.

If Voltaire's play *Candide* can be seen, to some extent, as a response to Rousseau's essay *Letter on Divine Providence*, then the preface to *The New Heloise* can be considered an appendix to his essay *Letter to Mr. d'Alembert on the Theater*, which Rousseau had in fact intended to address to Voltaire. Rousseau wrote in the second volume of *Julie, or the New Heloise*:

"The theater is important in large cities; the corrupt populace needs its plays. I have witnessed the morals of my time, and I have published these letters. I wish I could live in a century in which I could rid myself of those letters in the complete works." (Robert Wokler, 2010, p.22)

Rousseau's discourse combined the arts and sciences and attempted a synthesis between historical knowledge and poetic vision. He followed the flow of thoughts and directed appearances toward the senses, and tried to look at his beliefs with a kind of good intention. He submitted to the myth of transparency and yielded to disclosure and manifestation despite inner turmoil, a sense of isolation, and the possession of the wisdom of silence and the power of expression. It is well known that Rousseau believed in the many gains that a person derives from engaging with music and attending the theater on both the bodily and spiritual levels. Therefore, he took refuge in dreaming in *The New Heloise* and in solitude in *Reveries*. Consequently, he did not cease sending letters to his friends, relatives, and admirers, and communicating with the outside world, despite his deep immersion in his inner world and his retreat into isolation due to mistreatment, misunderstanding, and difficulty in communicating with society. Rousseau, with his innocent hand, drew a beautiful faithful image of man when he made him sensitive, good, loyal, sincere, compassionate, and loving (Zouheir Khouildi, 2016, p.67).

Rousseau paved the way for the emergence of Romanticism, a movement that dominated the arts from the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. Rousseau exemplified the spirit of Romanticism both in his writings and in his personal life by privileging feelings and emotions over reason and thought, and impulse and spontaneity over self-discipline. He introduced passionate, heartfelt love into the French novel, sought to make extensive use of

descriptive images of nature, and invented an eloquent, lyrical prose style. His Confessions contributed to a model of autobiography that contains personal secrets (World Arabic Encyclopedia, 1999, p.342).

Rousseau, with his passion and devotion to art and the novel, reflects, to a great extent, the meaning of existence that he sought within himself, investigating and purposefully pursuing the pure essence of man, inseparable, with all his being and representations, balanced and harmonious within the context of spirit and structure together, in a wide horizon, far from psychological fragmentation and social deviation, in search of the highest meanings of love, life, and beauty.

Rousseau introduced a form of ill intent into the heart of the Western conscience, content with mastery over nature and the advent of the age of industrialization, and revealed the ugliness of the scientific revolution and the misery of the political state that Europe had reached under monarchy and the barbarity of technical progress, during the era of humanity's awakening to confront its inevitable destiny and its desperate struggle to challenge its existential fate and defend its new human values.

What Rousseau accomplished, thought, and expressed is irreducible to a mere closed system of principles, elements, precepts, and tablets, due to the processual nature of his thought, the density of his genius, the fertility of his written material, the abundance of his production, the complexity of his style, the ambiguity of his expression, the subtlety of his idea, the sharpness of his irony, the originality of his vision, the rigor of his play, the compassion of his morals, the politics of his education, and the richness of his narrative, which astonishes free minds. Rousseau turned error into a path for seeking truth, illness into a means of unleashing imagination, travel into a way of intensifying desire and dream, emotion into a philosophical story, and man into a vehicle for integration. What restores confidence and reassurance to fervent hearts is his skillful ability for creativity (Zouheir Khouildi, p.62).

That urgent desire, mixed with the passion for triumph on the stage of life before the theater that established beautiful images of it, was nothing but a turning point for a revolutionary philosopher who brought forth the repressed and the unspoken in tragedies that created other features for that loving human being. The character "Julie," the heroine of the romantic epic in his emotional novel *The New Heloise*, which shed abundant tears in the French capital, Paris, was no exception, and Rousseau, the creative, excelled in reviving Romanticism in all its manifestations.

Rousseau's message regarding theater did not dissuade a person from attending it, yet we taste his sharp literature in his aversion to dramatic art. Thus, our enjoyment is completed according to our skill in psychological analysis. We can, for instance, explain *The Social Contract* as the product of an inferiority complex, like that of Oedipus. The title of Rousseau's essay is *Letter on the Theater (Lettre sur les Spectacles)*, published by Rousseau in 1758, in which he responds to D'Alembert's invitation to establish a comedy theater in Geneva. In the letter, Rousseau argues that theatrical comedy ridicules virtue and conveys to the people a depiction of the city containing the alluring features of corruption, while even theatrical tragedies ignite the fires of passions and tempt with vice. Rousseau's views align with his belief in the virtues of the natural man, who becomes corrupt whenever he is civilized (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1990, p.39).

In Rousseau's pursuit of virtue within the context of the Renaissance and the revival of Enlightenment, he calls for the purification of artistic work. The theater, perhaps, serves as a means of purging excess and freeing oneself from the grip of vice, so that theater becomes, in the Rousseauian sense, madness—that is, transcending the constraints of reality and violence in all their features, escaping from vices, and exercising reason, saying, "Reason alone is the tool that must be used in purification." In this way, through the revival of moral and Enlightenment virtues via the arts and sciences, one can consider

Rousseau's life was shaped through some key turning points in the course of his daily and intellectual life. One of the most important of these events occurred in 1749, while he was reading a copy of a newspaper, *Mercure de France*, which contained an announcement of a competition to write an essay on the topic of whether recent developments in the arts and sciences had contributed to the purification of morals. He was apparently shocked, for the first time, that civilization, progress, and urbanization had not actually improved the reality and nature of human life and behavior; rather, they had produced a terrible destructive effect on the ethics of humans who had previously been good. Rousseau took this vision and turned it into a central thesis for what became his famous essay, a scientific inquiry into the arts and sciences, which won the first prize in the aforementioned newspaper competition. In his essay, Rousseau delivered a harsh critique of modern society that challenged the central concepts of Enlightenment thought. His argument was simple: in the past, individuals enjoyed goodness and happiness, but with humanity's departure from a state of harmony with simplicity and nature, it began to suffer from vice and descended into spiritual poverty (Musab Qasim Azawi, 2022, p.02).

In the same context, the level and content of his propositions formed the greatest challenge to modern civilization, and what he left in clarifying the effect of the tendency toward evil within the duality of virtue and vice.

His essay on the arts and sciences marked a turning point, crowning the writer according to a vision, and the profound impact it left, especially given the debates it witnessed in establishing a paradigm according to a purely Rousseauian vision. Rousseau strove earnestly to enter history; he appeared extremely passionate about music. It is noted that in 1741 or 1742, Rousseau was in Paris pursuing fame and wealth. He sought to professionalize in music, and his hope lay in establishing a new system of musical signs and symbols that he had invented and submitted the project to the Academy of Sciences, but it aroused little interest in Paris.

Rousseau contacted philosophers, a group of prominent writers and thinkers of the era, and obtained financial encouragement from prominent capitalists. Through their patronage, Rousseau served as secretary to the French ambassador in Venice during 1743 and 1744. A turning point in Rousseau's life came in 1749 when he read about a competition sponsored by the Dijon Academy, which offered a monetary prize for the best essay on the topic of whether the revival of activity in the arts and sciences contributes to the purification of moral behavior. As soon as Rousseau read about the competition, he realized the course his life would take: opposing the existing social system and spending the remainder of his life explaining the new directions for social development.

Rousseau submitted his essay to the academy under the title *A Scientific Inquiry into the Arts and Sciences* in 1751 or 1755, in which he argued that the sciences and arts corrupt humanity. He won the prize and also gained the fame he had long sought (World Arabic Encyclopedia, p.342).

Through his essay *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, Rousseau won the literary prize for which he had written the essay. Almost overnight, the stir caused by that essay transformed him from an obscure mid-aged writer into the most prominent critic directed at modern civilization. Among the main factors behind the notoriety of that essay was the way he overturned the prevailing eighteenth-century view of the epic struggle between virtue and vice. Voltaire spoke on behalf of many enlightened men of his time when he linked, in his *Philosophical Letters* and other works, virtue with the advancement of science and learning, and the gradual improvement of human behavior in light of the slow awakening of modern Europe from the swamp of the Dark Ages, characterized by superstition and ignorance. Diderot and d'Alembert followed almost the same approach in their work *Encyclopedia*.

In contrast, Rousseau praised the virtues of the barbaric golden age, from which humans had been deprived and which they had squandered due to their blind lust for learning. Thus, Rousseau did not merely give the impression of favoring barbarism over civilization; he also appeared to his enlightened contemporaries as if he had forgotten that the main source of misery and despair in the contemporary world was the Christian Church. He drew his strength almost from the same mysticism that ignorance, praised by Rousseau in the ancient world, had reinforced. Voltaire and his followers condemned this vision of our pure innocence and accused Rousseau of abandoning political and religious reform issues he ought to have supported, relapsing into a state of blatant foolishness. This assessment of his theory of human nature was, in many respects, far from correct, but it focused on one of the central principles of his philosophy, which he acknowledged as the lamp illuminating his works: while the Creator does all that is good, humans do all that is evil and base. Rousseau believed that evil is the primary consequence of human actions, if not always the aim of human intentions (Robert Wokler, p.19).

In the eighteenth century, Rousseau linked musical art with his philosophical doctrine. He argued that the idea of returning to nature necessitated considering the concept of nature in music. He said: "If opera aims to bring the language of daily life to the stage, it is clear that this language is not represented by that elaborate, artificial, and affected speech presented to us by the actors of theseventeenth and eighteenth centuries." Rousseau expressed his philosophy in music and the spirit of French enthusiasm in the opera *The Village Soothsayer*. His philosophy in music guided the great composer Gluck and also influenced the early genius of Mozart (Julius Portnoy, 2023, p.186).

Derrida returns to Rousseau's ideas about music and his preference for the vocal and melodic style, which he identified with Italian music, as opposed to harmony or musical counterpoint, which depicts weakness and corruption in French traditions. He sees that the priority of melodies in music was emphasized because of their attachment to singing, as they represent the course closest to the deep origins of the spoken word itself. Harmony enters music in the same steps of regenerating integrality that distinguished writing from the spoken word. With

the development of music, melodies, when unperceived as beautiful, lost their former power, and the calculation of the integration of pauses was replaced by the characteristic of pitch variation.

Derrida sees that what Rousseau describes is, in fact, not related to music within a historical decline; rather, music rises above the primitive silent cry. Therefore, the forgetting of the origin can be the trick orchestrated by harmony and writing to obscure the original enthusiasm of the intimate relationship with nature. Here, the text unconsciously bears witness to Rousseau's suffering and pain, which he denied. If singing is a kind of modulation of the human voice, how can absolute melodic qualities be attributed to it? Ideas are incapable of presupposing the pure, non-false origin of the spoken word or singing because evil occurs unexpectedly in the good origin, as if singing and the spoken word, which share the same role and the same pain of emergence, were not always capable of being separated from themselves (Zouheir Khweildi, p.153).

***Conclusion:***

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher-human, left an artistic and literary legacy that occupied the mind, wounded the heart, and brought tears to the eyes a revolutionary philosopher, writer, and artist who lived life with passion, love, and a refined aesthetic sensibility, combined with a fierce, all-encompassing desire for the subtle threads of the self as an existential essence, deriving the meanings of life from the standpoint of freedom and portraying a beautiful image representing the human being Rousseau envisioned in the arena of life. That urgent desire, mingled with the passion for triumph in the theater of life before the theater that established beautiful images of it, was nothing but a turning point for a revolutionary philosopher who brought forth the suppressed and unspeakable in tragedies that created new contours for that loving human being The character "Julie," the heroine of the romantic epic in his emotional novel *Julie, or the New Heloise*, moved the hearts and shed abundant tears in the French capital, Paris, and Rousseau the creator excelled in reviving Romanticism in all its manifestations.

Rousseau's message in theater did not prevent people from attending it, yet we savor his scathing literature in his disdain for the theatrical arts. Thus, our pleasure is completed in proportion to our skill in psychological analysis, and we can explain *The Social Contract* as a product of a deficiency complex, similar to that of Oedipus. The title of Rousseau's essay is: *Letter on the Theater (Lettre sur les Spectacles)*, published by Rousseau in 1758, in which he responds to D'Alembert's call to establish a comedic theater in Geneva. In the letter, Rousseau sees that comedic theater mocks virtue and conveys a picture of the city to people, depicting alluringly tempting corruptions, while the tragic theater itself ignites the flames of emotion and entices with vice. Rousseau's views

align with his doctrine regarding the virtues of the natural man, who is corrupted as soon as he becomes civilized.

Rousseau, in his enthusiasm and dedication to art and the novel, reflects, to a great extent, the meaning of existence he sought within himself investigating and aiming toward the pure essence of humanity, inseparable yet complete in its being and representations, balanced and harmonious in the context of spirit and structure together, on a broad horizon, far from

psychological fragmentation and social deviation, in pursuit of the highest meanings of love and life within the horizon of Romantic sensibility and fine art.

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