

## *Original Paper*

# Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Natural Education Thought and Its Enlightenment to China's Ideological and Political Education

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Received: August 28, 2025      Accepted: October 08, 2025      Online Published: October 20, 2025

doi:10.22158/wjeh.v7n5p46

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjeh.v7n5p46>

### ***Abstract***

*Rousseau's naturalistic educational thought takes cultivating natural persons as its educational goal, adheres to educational principles such as the law of nature, the principle of utility, and the law of freedom, and selects different educational contents and methods based on the laws of physical and mental development and phased characteristics of children at different age stages. This thought not only provides guidance for cultivating natural persons but also offers profound enlightenment for the practice of modern ideological and political education. When analyzing Rousseau's natural education thought, rational reference and critical inheritance will help promote the further development of the theory of ideological and political education in China.*

### ***Keywords***

*Rousseau, Emile, Naturalistic Education, Ideological and Political Education*

## **1. Introduction**

In the 18th century, French society was deeply conflicted, and feudal education seriously constrained children's nature. Against this background, Rousseau put forward the idea of natural education based on the theory of sexual goodness. In *Emile*, he emphasised that things from the hands of the Creator are good, but they become bad as soon as they are in the hands of man. He advocated that human nature is good and equal, and that human corruption stems from the erosion of corrupt society. Rousseau advocated that everything should conform to nature and that education should be detached from society, return to nature, and cultivate natural people in the natural environment. He believes that everyone in the natural state is equal and free, and only by following the natural path can people be happy. This theory, which is based on nature and human nature, criticises the feudal education and builds a unique natural education system in the 18th century.

## 2. The Meaning of Natural Education

In the book *Emile*, the meaning of nature is explored in depth, mainly reflected in two aspects: first, the natural world; second, human innate nature. Rousseau comprehensively elaborated on these two levels of nature in the book and emphasized the necessity of respecting and conforming to both in the educational process. First, nature as the natural world refers to a vibrant and charming physical environment depicted by Rousseau. Second, nature as innate nature points to the inherent laws of physical and mental development and essential characteristics of children.

Natural education refers to education that obeys the laws of nature, conforms to the developmental process of children's innate nature, and promotes the natural physical and mental development of children. Everything that comes from the hands of the Creator is good, but once it falls into human hands, it all goes bad... He is not willing to let things remain in their natural state; even for human beings, he must train them like horses in a riding school, and twist them like trees in a garden to suit his own fancy. That is to say, the core of natural education is returning to nature—education must follow nature and conform to human beings' natural instincts. Rousseau argued that natural education is precisely this kind of education: We are educated by nature, or by things, or by men. He believed that every person is nurtured by three types of education: education from nature, education from things, and education from men. Only when these three types of education are perfectly combined can the expected goal be achieved. Education from nature refers to the inherent development of our body and intellect, influenced by the laws of nature; Education from men focuses on how we learn to use our physical functions and develop our abilities in a personalized way from others, usually conducted in a school environment; Education from things refers to the experience we gain from the surrounding environment, such as through contact with nature or interactions between humans and objects. These three aspects of education are interconnected and complementary. Rousseau emphasized that the core of education should be centered on education from nature, and the other two should be subordinated to it.

## 3. The Main Content of Natural Education

In *Emile*, he outlined the idea that children should be educated through natural education rather than formal educational methods used by school teachers. This book concentrates his thoughts on natural education, advocating that education should return to nature, follow the laws of children's physical and mental development, cultivate natural persons, and emphasize seeking knowledge through practice. Rousseau advocated following the eternal laws of nature and promoting natural education where individuals are allowed to freely develop their physical and mental abilities. Rousseau's natural education thought takes cultivating natural persons as its educational goal, adheres to educational principles such as the law of nature, the principle of utility, and the principle of freedom, and selects different educational contents and methods based on the laws of physical and mental development and phased characteristics of children at different age stages. Below is a brief discussion of the educational

goals, principles, and methods that Rousseau elaborated most incisively.

### *3.1 Educational Goals of Natural Education*

The educational goal of Rousseau's natural education is to cultivate natural persons—who are different from aristocrats, nobles, and princes, as well as from ineffective and impractical scholars. Instead, natural persons should possess the mind of a philosopher, the hands of a laborer, and the morality of a reformer. Because in Rousseau's view, the natural person is not the savages who live in the countryside all their lives, but rather active members of society who are sociable and integrated into the community. Cultivating natural persons with coordinated physical and mental development. Starting from the theory of respecting human innate nature and conforming to nature, Rousseau explained the definition of a natural person: one who grows up completely freely without restraint and achieves coordinated physical and mental development. Rousseau stated, Even if I intend to cultivate him into a natural person, it does not mean that I must turn him into a complete savage and drive him into the forest. The objects of Rousseau's natural education are natural persons who are: Independent and self-reliant, capable of demonstrating their unique value; Free and equal, with ethics and morality; Physically strong and mentally mature.

Cultivating qualified citizens who break free from the shackles of feudal autocracy. Emile is not born to live in solitude forever; as a member of society, he must fulfill his obligations to society. Living in society is the primary prerequisite for becoming a natural person. Furthermore, while maintaining pure innate nature in society, he must also fulfill his duties as a qualified citizen, and finally achieve the harmonious development of physical and mental freedom in the society he lives in. People living in feudal society were deprived of sovereignty and freedom, resulting in physical weakness, mediocrity, and cowardice. With the emergence of private property, people became even more decadent and corrupt, neglecting their civic duties. In short, the natural persons Rousseau intended to cultivate must first be independent individuals; second, such individuals should not be constrained by traditional concepts; finally, as natural persons, they must fulfill their due responsibilities and obligations in society.

### *3.2 Educational Principles of Natural Education*

The implementation of nature education follows three principles: the law of nature, the principle of utility and the law of freedom.

The first one is the law of nature. The law of nature emphasizes that education should respect the laws of nature and conform to children's innate nature. Children's physical and mental development has specific laws and phased characteristics; educators must fully consider these characteristics when selecting educational content. During the educational process, corresponding teaching plans and activities should be formulated according to the characteristics of children at different age stages to achieve the best educational effect.

The second principle is the principle of utility. The principle of utility emphasizes the practicality and pertinence of education. In selecting educational content, educators should fully consider students' actual needs and developmental requirements, ensuring that the knowledge and skills taught are

connected to students' lives and future development. In the use of educational methods, teachers should guide students to think about what is the use, cultivating their critical thinking and independent inquiry abilities.

The third is the law of freedom. The principle of freedom emphasizes respecting students' autonomy in the educational process and giving them the freedom to explore and learn. Differences among students should be respected, and excessive coercion and pressure on students should be avoided.

In selecting educational content, diverse learning materials and activities can be provided according to students' interests to stimulate their enthusiasm for learning. In the use of educational methods, students' subjective initiative should be fully exerted, encouraging them to actively participate in the learning process and acquire knowledge and skills through independent experience. By creating a free and open learning environment, students can better develop their individuality and cultivate abilities in independent thinking and problem-solving. Conforming to nature is the fundamental criterion of Rousseau's natural education. The entire educational process must be accurately aligned with the rhythm of children's innate nature, avoiding interference from adults' subjective assumptions. To accurately understand children's innate nature, it is necessary to deeply observe their psychological and physical characteristics, preventing the premature fading of childlike innocence and the distortion of innate nature. The transformation of the roles of parents and teachers is crucial in education: they should replace compulsory discipline with flexible guidance and the cultivation of healthy habits, creating a relaxed and free growth environment for children to protect the natural development of their innate nature. This is not laissez-faire; instead, it requires keenly capturing the signals of children's growth needs, providing accurate guidance and appropriate support, and building a safe barrier for the blooming of individual innate nature. This ensures that the educational trajectory conforms to the rhythm of nature and the inherent trend of life, avoiding the tragedy of spoilage by over-nurturing and solidly supporting the structure of healthy and sustainable individual growth.

### *3.3 Educational Methods of Natural Education*

Rousseau's natural education philosophy has established a comprehensive system at the educational method level that closely aligns with the developmental needs of children and is both scientific and practical. Its method design consistently centers around the core principle of respecting nature and serving growth. Specifically, it is implemented through three key dimensions: tailoring measures according to age groups, selecting content based on practicality, and acquiring knowledge through practical experience. The following text will elaborate in detail on these three core educational methods and their connotations.

One of the propositions is that education should be carried out according to the age characteristics of the learners. Rousseau believed that education should formulate specific educational content based on the different developmental stages of children's ages. Based on this educational thought, he proposed in *Emile* that education should be divided into four stages: infancy, childhood, adolescence, and youth, and pointed out the corresponding educational tasks and methods for each stage. Infancy (0-2 years

old): Focus on physical education. It centers on physical care and training, laying a solid foundation for physical fitness through a comfortable environment and healthy lifestyle, and fostering the germination of sensory acuity and courage. Childhood (2-12 years old): Also known as the period of rational slumber. It focuses on sensory education and physical development. Taking sensory education as the core, it regards the environment as a treasure trove of knowledge, nurturing judgment and memory through sensory accumulation. During this stage, environmental influences are carefully screened to protect children's pure sensory world. Adolescence (12-15 years old): Focus on intellectual education and labor education. It drives the simultaneous improvement of knowledge, skills, and practical abilities through the dual wheels of knowledge acquisition (focusing on practicality) and manual labor (tempering self-reliance). In terms of intellectual education, Rousseau advocated selecting knowledge that is useful and can enhance people's intelligence. In terms of intellectual education methods, he advocated letting children learn actively. Youth (15-20 years old): Focus on moral education. It cultivates kind feelings, moral judgment abilities, and firm moral will. Taking moral cultivation as the key, it nourishes moral character through urban experience and social insight, and inspires moral consciousness through the method of natural consequences, driving young people to temper their virtues and take on responsibilities in social contexts. These stages work together to shape a complete personality.

The second point is that education should be adapted to an individual's age group. Rousseau clearly distinguished between knowledge education and moral education. The adolescence stage, which focuses on knowledge education, should involve learning natural science knowledge; the youth stage, which focuses on moral education, should involve learning social science knowledge. According to Rousseau, the arrangement of educational content should take into account students' psychological development stages: During adolescence, students' cognitive abilities gradually strengthen, and their curiosity about the world continues to increase. At this stage, education should focus on knowledge education, emphasizing the learning of scientific knowledge. Rousseau emphasized that students should acquire an understanding of natural sciences through observing natural phenomena, conducting experiments, and exploring. This learning method can not only stimulate students' interest but also cultivate their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. After entering youth, students' moral awareness and sense of social responsibility begin to gradually strengthen. At this stage, the focus of education should shift to the learning of social science knowledge. Rousseau believed that social sciences can help students understand the complexity and diversity of human society, enabling them to find their place in society and assume their due responsibilities. Through learning social sciences, students can better understand moral norms, legal systems, and interpersonal relationships, thereby cultivating a sound personality and good social adaptability.

Thirdly, it is advocated that teaching methods should be based on the pursuit of knowledge. That is, acquiring knowledge through practice and experience. Rousseau opposed the feudal education model that forced children to accept traditional prejudices and submit to teachers' authority; instead, he

advocated teaching and learning through joint activities between teachers and students. He believed that the most important thing in teaching is to inspire the consciousness of children and young people, emphasizing the importance of students' independent thinking and judgment. For this reason, he attached particular importance to the role of motivation, interest, and needs in learning. In Emile, Rousseau described his vision for the educational process in detail. In his view, students should be active explorers of knowledge rather than passive recipients. The cramming teaching method often deprives students of initiative in learning, preventing them from forming their own opinions and ways of thinking. Rousseau advocated heuristic teaching to encourage students to raise questions and conduct discussions, thereby cultivating their critical thinking and creative thinking abilities. He also argued that education should be integrated with the natural environment, and students should learn in real life. For example, he advocated letting children observe and experiment in nature to cultivate their observation and thinking abilities. This practice-based teaching method can not only stimulate students' interest in learning but also enhance their self-confidence and independent thinking abilities.

#### **4. Enlightenment of Rousseau's Natural Education to China's Ideological and Political Education**

Rousseau's natural education thought offers multifaceted enlightenment to China's ideological and political education in terms of goal-setting, principle-following, and method-selection, helping to promote its transformation toward being more scientific, humanized, and effective.

##### *4.1 Goal Remodeling: Personality Orientation and Competence Cultivation*

Currently, the goals of ideological and political education in primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions tend to be homogeneous and lack progression, which affects the effectiveness of education. Rousseau's concept of cultivating natural persons—which emphasizes respecting individual differences and unleashing potential—enlightens us that the goals of ideological and political education should value individuality and pursue diversified development. First, it is necessary to construct an educational framework for the all-round development of morality, intelligence, physical fitness, aesthetics, and labor skills, aligning with the era's demand for interdisciplinary talents. By deepening the connotation of morality, improving the quality of intellectual education, consolidating the foundation of physical education, expanding the perspective of aesthetic education, and strengthening labor skills, students' comprehensive competence can be enhanced in an all-round way. Second, drawing on Rousseau's advocacy of cultivating qualified citizens, ideological and political education should strengthen the cultivation of a sense of social responsibility. Through case studies, social surveys, and other methods, students can be guided to understand social reality, fostering a deep-seated patriotic sentiment and a sense of responsibility. Finally, it is essential to set scientific phased goals in accordance with the laws of students' physical and mental development: Primary schools should focus on habit formation and moral enlightenment; Secondary schools should concentrate on values shaping and thinking training; Universities should prioritize the cultivation of professional ethics and social mission. This will form a

spiral-upward and organically connected goal system, Enhance systemic capabilities and pertinence of ideological and political education.

#### *4.2 Principle Reconstruction: Respecting Laws and Restoring the Subject Status*

The principles proposed by Rousseau—including the law of nature, the principle of utility, and the principle of freedom—provide guidance for the reconstruction of ideological and political education principles. First, following the law of nature requires educators to be observers of students' innate nature, grasp their personality traits and developmental stages, and apply knowledge of psychology and pedagogy to teach students in accordance with their aptitude. This enables educators to address students' ideological and emotional issues in a gradual manner, thereby enhancing educational effectiveness. Second, adhering to the principle of utility promotes ideological and political education to be rooted in real life. It requires paying attention to students' real problems and interests, integrating social hot topics and current events into teaching content, and guiding students to reflect on the practical value of knowledge through questioning and inquiry. This helps improve students' sense of gain and relevance in learning. Third, implementing the principle of freedom means respecting students' status as subjects and stimulating their enthusiasm and initiative. Teachers should focus on students' interests, design teaching content that resonates with them, and provide students with sufficient space for thinking and expression through group discussions, role-playing, and other activities. This cultivates students' abilities of independent thinking and active exploration.

#### *4.3 Method Innovation: Stage Division and Practice Orientation*

The methodology of Rousseau's natural education—emphasizing stage adaptation, practice orientation, and emotional cultivation—offers insights for innovating the methods of ideological and political education. First, it is important to respect students' age characteristics and developmental stages and implement segmented education. Lower grades should focus on emotional and moral enlightenment; Higher grades should strengthen the cultivation of moral judgment and social responsibility. This makes education more in line with the laws of students' cognitive development. Second, attention should be paid to the practicality and applicability of educational content, promoting the integration of theory and practice. Through case analysis, social practice, and other approaches, students' ability to apply knowledge to solve practical problems and their critical thinking skills can be cultivated. Third, diverse and interactive teaching methods should be advocated. Moving away from one-way indoctrination, heuristic, discussion-based, and situational teaching methods should be adopted to enhance students' sense of participation and learning initiative. Fourth, emphasis should be placed on emotional education and moral consciousness. Through emotional resonance, role-modeling, and other means, students' moral emotions can be stimulated, guiding them toward self-reflection and value internalization. This helps improve their moral competence and personality development.

## **5. Conclusion**

Rousseau's *Emile* is regarded by him as his best and most important work. The core idea of this book is

the naturalistic educational thought, aiming to cultivate natural persons. The educational principles include natural laws, utility principles, and freedom laws, and the educational methods involve implementing education based on the age characteristics of the learners, applying what is learned, and seeking knowledge through practice. Rousseau's natural education philosophy is centered around respecting nature, returning to nature, and emphasizing practice. Through setting clear goals, establishing principles, and designing methods, it has formed an educational theory system that takes into account both individual development and social needs. Its respect for children's autonomy and emphasis on the regularity of education not only broke through the shackles of feudal education but also provided important ideological resources for the development of modern educational theory and practice. The natural educational thought proposed by Rousseau has significant educational significance for the growth and development of students. We should explore the essence of Rousseau's natural educational thought, combine Rousseau's naturalistic educational methods and principles with China's reality, and apply them to contemporary China's ideological and political education. We should respond to Rousseau's educational methods, clearly define educational goals in practice, optimize educational principles, and improve educational methods, constantly promoting the development of ideological and political education and enhancing its effectiveness.

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