



# Liberate from the Shackles of the “Cave” —A Comparative Study of Early Childhood Cultivation thoughts between *Emile* and *The Republic*

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## Abstract

Plato and Rousseau, two educators of different historical periods, contributed greatly to the development of Western and even world education with their theories of education. The theory of natural education, advocated by *Emile* and written by Rousseau, still has a strong reference. As an Enlightenment thinker and educator, he learned from and went beyond the educational ideas of Plato in ancient Greece. Influenced by times, individuals and other factors, they have different views on education. Starting from their representative work, this paper compares the similarities and differences between Plato’s “citizen’s education” and Rousseau’s “Nature’s education” in early childhood cultivation, dialectically views the value of Rousseau’s natural education thought in its time background, which has important reference significance for contemporary education.

## Subject Areas

Education

## Keywords

*Emile*, *The Republic*, Comparative Study, Early Childhood Cultivation

## 1. Introduction

Plato and Rousseau are two significant educators from different historical periods, and their educational theories have made notable contributions to the development of Western and global education. Despite being influenced by their

respective eras and personal factors, these two educators exhibit some differences in their educational perspectives. Plato, in *The Republic*, comprehensively presents his philosophical, political, and educational thoughts, introducing a complete concept of preschool education and establishing a systematic educational system that profoundly impacts the history of Western and global education.

Plato's educational ideas deeply influenced the 17<sup>th</sup>-century French philosopher and educator Rousseau. In his work, *Emile*, Rousseau references Plato's educational concepts from *The Republic* and simultaneously introduces a new perspective on child education in Western educational history. The educational theories of both Plato and Rousseau have had a significant impact on the educational theories and practices of their times as well as contemporary education.

A comparative reading of *The Republic* and *Emile* enables us to gain a deeper understanding of the educational perspectives of Plato and Rousseau.

*Emile* is a representative work of Rousseau's ideas of liberal education, also reflecting his ideas of romanticism, and has been considered one of the classic works of pedagogy [1].

Rousseau repeatedly emphasized the central position of *Emile* in his entire philosophical system. In a letter to his friend Malesherbes, Rousseau mentioned "Everything that I was able to retain of these crowds of great truths, namely that first discourse, the one on inequality, and the treatise on education (the book *Emile*), which three works are inseparable and together form the same whole."

Rousseau holds a significant position in the history of Western thought not only for proposing a unique and modern political philosophy but also for laying the foundation for modern romanticism.

The starting point of Rousseau's Romanticism lies in a full affirmation of the supreme value of individual life and its spirit of self-creation [2]. His portrayal of "*Emile*" in his literary works embodies this idea in a concrete form. Rousseau expresses a yearning for the innocent and pure state of the individual through this portrayal, coupled with a critique of societal systems and cultural traditions. He advocates for the freedom and authenticity of the individual in a state of nature, aligning with the Romantic emphasis on nature, sensibility, and the individual.

Besides, in Rousseau's view, the universal instruction of enlightenment neglects the fundamental incompatibility between science and society. The Enlightenment movement turned reason into a fashion, leading to widespread questioning of the social and moral foundations. The concepts of reason and nature were redefined in the context of the Enlightenment, and therefore, universal instruction in reason would only give rise to widespread selfishness and pride in the sense of political body politics [3].

Rousseau himself called it "the last work of ideological system". The deep connotations of *Emile* lead us to feel and think about the manifestations and connotations of natural education from multiple dimensions.

In it, Rousseau divides human life into five stages, the first of which corresponds to the process of education after birth and infancy. The most direct ma-

nifestation of the fetters felt by the infant is the swaddling garment. In order to resist the “shackles” imposed on the baby, Rousseau took himself as an educator creating the idealized educational figure of “*Emile*”. In the first chapter, he explains how physical education can be given to infants, and discusses the correct way of teaching infants from many points of view. Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains [4]. This quote runs through the whole course of human growth and is one of the core ideas embodied in this book.

Early education refers to organized and purposeful activities that provide a rich environment for the normal development of infants and young children, promoting their intellectual development under the patterns of early childhood intelligence [5].

The former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi A. Annan pointed out that “every child should have the best possible start in life; every child should receive a good quality basic education; and every child should have the opportunities to develop his or her full potential and contribute to society in meaningful ways” [6].

Additionally, the State of the World’s Children 2003 also highlighted that “Children seek information from the moment that they are born. The purpose of early stimulation is to encourage a child’s mind to build the mechanisms for integrating signals received from birth and to help ‘hard wire’ the ability to learn into the brain at an early age” [7].

Therefore, it can be observed that childhood education, especially early childhood education, plays a crucial role in the growth and development of children, which is worthy of in-depth exploration and study.

## 2. Content of Educational Thought in *Emile*

### 2.1. Education Should Get Rid of Physical Shackles

Physical shackles refer to the use of physical restraints or constraints to restrict a person’s freedom of movement, it can also be used metaphorically to describe situations where individuals feel constrained or restricted in their personal or professional lives, though in such cases, the restraints are not necessarily physical but may be social, economic, or psychological. It is believed that this concept is equivalent to the “physical bondage” depicted in *Emile*.

Rousseau believed that infants should not be physically bound by swaddling clothes, which tended to take a child’s growth to extremes. In our fear lest the body should become deformed by free movement, we hasten to deform it by putting it in a press.

Is not such cruel bondage certain to affect both health and temper [8]? Physical bondage cuts off the infant from direct contact with nature, weakening the power of nature to shape it and thus affecting its lifelong development. He, therefore, advocates a complete improvement in the physical qualities of the infant during this period. Rousseau also placed a high value on the physical qualities of his students, which is reflected in his extensive descriptions of the materi-

al conditions needed to raise infants, such as food, environment, and urban and rural areas. “I do not want a student who is of no use to himself or to others, because all he cares about is the preservation of himself, and his body compromises his spiritual cultivation.” The body is the capital of the revolution. This educational concept is advocated by both ancient and modern countries, such as the requirements of Archery and charioteering in the “Six Arts” in ancient China and the advocacy of sports in ancient Greece.

Rousseau’s high demand for material and physical qualities reflects his desire to bring children closer to nature. As for how to close the distance between the two, Rousseau proposed “do not confine it in tight wrappings”. If you look at it from the perspective of modern education, this is borne out by the continued emphasis on physical education in today’s education system.

## 2.2. Education Should Get Rid of Mental Shackles

It is not the twinges of gout that make a man kill himself, it is mental suffering that leads to despair [8]. This sentence expresses the great effect of spirit on children’s growth and even individual development. Rousseau discusses the importance of spiritual freedom from various perspectives, emphasizing the need to avoid imposing the desires of adults onto infants. For example, in the matter of learning to speak, children have the ability to “purify” their original language, and forced intervention of adults will only bind children. Children are so hastily taught to speak that they lose the opportunity to express their natural thoughts in what we call “unstructured” language, and adults lose the opportunity to interact with the child’s “ID”. It is worth emphasizing that Rousseau believed that man’s education begins at birth; before he can speak or understand he is learning [8]. He opposes excessively imposing educational influences on children and advocates against allowing them to develop habits, in order to preserve their initial “pure feelings”. Rousseau regarded the ability of rational thinking as an inherent ability in the human mind, and tried to explain the connection and difference between sensibility and reason, emphasizing the role of reason in the acquisition of ideas and knowledge... [9].

Compared with material constraints, the mental shackles during the developmental stages have a more severe negative effect on a child’s lifelong development and character formation. At present, however, with population expansion and increasing difficulty in accessing societal resources, our children are also facing the mental shackles of the involution. Increasingly, children are spending their free time immersed in courses of complex interest. The opportunities for truly nurturing children’s ability to get close to nature are greatly reduced. The idea behind ease the burden of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring for students undergoing compulsory education is to partly free children from a system that deprives them of the opportunity to develop their individuality and to give them the time and opportunity to return to nature and grow into real people.

### 2.3. Education Should Take the Responsibility of the Family

In the first chapter, Rousseau also explains the importance of family ethics for the education of children, and imposes corresponding restrictions on parental duties and the family atmosphere. The charms of home are the best antidote to vice. Home education is a lifetime of instruction in developing character and dealing with things. It has far-reaching and long-lasting effects on children and is hardly a substitute for group education. Family education starts from the standpoint of “self”, so family education has the fundamental nature of being first in the whole field of education [3]. The absence of home-schooling is largely responsible for the child’s personality problems and even deficiencies. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, human needs can be divided into five categories, of which the third, the need for love and belonging, is directly related to the environment in which one was raised. The absence of such needs will in large part lead to a lack of security and enhanced psychological uncertainty after the child grows up.

At the same time, Rousseau pointed out that children should not be over-coddled, and that acts of unreasonable coddling should be stopped. Refuse everything they demand from mere caprice or love of power [8]. Leniency and strictness run through his educational philosophy. Even though Rousseau sets the theme of education as natural education, he also emphasizes that the right instruction in nurture should not be absent.

## 3. The Comparative Study between *Emile* and *The Republic*

As an Enlightenment thinker, Rousseau also drew inspiration from the intellectual essence of the Renaissance and even Greek philosophers. Any historical phenomenon occurs within specific, concrete time and space conditions. Historical figures have vertical connections, and there are common ideas among educational thinkers of different periods. At the same time, a horizontal comparison of similar historical figures is one of the methods used to study educational thought. A horizontal comparison between Plato’s *The Republic* and *Emile* also reveals similarities and differences.

### 3.1. The Similarities and Differences in the Origin of Human Nature

As to the origin of human nature, there is a parallel between the two. Rousseau pointed out that everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Maker of the world, but degenerates once it gets into the hands of man [8]. Thus, it is found that Rousseau absorbed Plato’s explanation of the essence of the soul in *The Republic*: it seems that it really is made of something more divine, which never loses its power [10]. At the same time, he emphasized, I said, “there might be an art, 9 an art of the speediest and most effective shifting or conversion of the soul, not an art of producing vision in it, but on the assumption that it possesses vision but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should, an

art of bringing this about [10].” Thus both Plato and Rousseau believed that man was inherently good. But Plato’s definition of human nature is more neutral. Human nature, like clear water, may be led to rivers, lakes, and seas, and may also be led into ditches [11]. Rousseau, on the other hand, is more steadfast in his belief in the inherent goodness of human nature. However, both philosophers acknowledge that talent, when interfered with by external factors, can adversely affect individuals and society.

### 3.2. The Similarities and Differences in the Role of Education

The two men expressed similar views on the role of education. *Emile* stressed the important role of teachers in the development of children. The teacher’s responsibility, he argued, is not to teach children rules of conduct, but to make them discover them. Because the education of men is the only one controlled by us [8]. At the same time, he summed up four principles in regard to the education of infants, showing that there are limits to the aid of infants. What we need to do is to distinguish whether babies cry because of “I can’t do” or “I don’t want to do”, and then guide them to further realize the “soul turning and sublimation” of infants’ already beautiful character. This is similar to Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” in *The Republic*, where they both see education as the path to soul-turning and freedom. Both the teacher’s instruction to *Emile* to free himself from bondage and Plato’s statement that there is a consistency in truth, and that one can only see nature by breaking the chain and walking out of the cave, express the quest for freedom of the soul.

### 3.3. The Similarities and Differences in the Form of Education

There is also a similarity in terms of the selection of the objects to be cultivated. Plato believes in “forcing the best soul to reach what we have said is the highest knowledge, to see the good, and to ascend to that height.” Plato had strict criteria for the selection of object for education. In *The Republic*, those freed from the shackles of the cave are philosophers, while in *Emile*, it is an infant. On the surface, there is a distinction between the two. But a close reading of Rousseau’s argument reveals that he defines *Emile* as a child of exceptional intelligence, and also makes it clear that he would later become an extraordinary man. As a result, their educational choices are characterized by elitist education.

In the form of education, Plato proposed that children should be shaped, while Rousseau showed in more detail how infants could be taught on multiple levels. Plato sort of set the tone, and Rousseau further refined this concept into a systematic approach. Similarly, in his view of the discipline, Plato inherited the wisdom that virtue is knowledge, and stressed that children should develop their minds and virtues. Rousseau, on the other hand, wishes to perfect the child’s reason, and emphasizes a continuous process that approaches a state of perfection. Both seek to balance a negative heteronomy measure with a positive coordination measure.

### 3.4. The Differences in the Form of Relationship between Politics and Education

However, there are some differences between the two conclusions regarding the inherent connection between educational purpose and political domination. Rousseau divided mankind into natural and social beings, according to if they were taught. It is clear from the first chapter that Rousseau also considered the balance between the individual-standard theory and the social-standard theory. He divided education into “public and common” and “special and familial”. Even the advocacy of nature education will eventually bring children back into society. Rousseau’s “*Emile*” of nature under ideal conditions is his retrospective hypothesis to demonstrate that traditional society makes people bad and degenerate [12]. In *The Republic*, Plato places the fruits of education on “philosophers”. If the educational purpose of the two men is separated into a general model, it can be concluded that Plato is more inclined to “elite politics” and “oligarchy”, while Rousseau is more inclined to “civic politics”. In other words, we can think that Plato is inclined to use educational tools to cultivate “philosophical Kings with superior knowledge” and Rousseau is inclined to cultivate “equal and independent citizens like *Emile*” [13]. This bias is a prominent feature of the Enlightenment period, which emphasizes that “sovereignty lies in the people”, and the expression and application of power must reflect the will of the people. Rousseau’s educational purpose is similar to our current educational political function, that is, cultivate political talents to supplement the management class of society and give political education to the youth and promote their political socialization.

### 4. An Analysis of Rousseau’s Educational Thought

Indeed, as an Enlightenment thinker, Rousseau’s ideas of education can still be used as a reference. It must be admitted, however, that the educational requirements alluded to in Rousseau are too ideal and exacting. He believes that to find an excellent teacher to teach only one student forever, this “family education” model is impossible to achieve under the realistic environment of the great gap between the number of students and teacher resources. At the same time, the hierarchical education system of preschool, primary, secondary and higher education has also hindered its realization [14].

Rousseau’s assertion that “the poor need not be educated” also has class limitations. As a way to maintain social equity and promote class mobility, education plays a role in “maintaining social stability, improving the level of social and political civilization, promoting social and political reform and cultivating social and political talents”. In the context of universal education, the cultivation of idealism is not for every individual. The vision he describes, which can only be partially realized by the offspring of the elite for the time being, is at odds with China’s national conditions.

At the same time, it is also worth discussing whether the final educational re-

sult of the proposed “utopian educational goal” can be as ideal as Rousseau outlined. At the end of the book, *Emile* and Sophie choose to elope and escape to live on an island. The results of Rousseau’s natural education seem at odds with conventional mainstream standards of educational success. It also prompts us to think about what kind of students and qualified citizens does educational pursuit ultimately requires us to develop.

The evaluation and application of educational concepts are two distinct processes. Rousseau’s conception of education was based on the times, and the times are changing, so the conception should be improved. The idea of “liberating children from the shackles of the cave and returning them to nature” advocated by Rousseau has both the essence and the dross at present, which should be treated dialectically and applied.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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