

The formation of man in Rousseau's *Émile*

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Abstract

Initially approached as a chapter for a Master's Thesis, the theme of this article concerns the human dimension which Rousseau's educational project seeks to develop. While aiming at the formation of the citizen (an argument developed in the thesis), Rousseau's political and pedagogical plan attempts to include the development of natural talents as proper to the human nature. The article has as its basic source the Geneva-born philosopher's *Émile: or, on Education*. Also based on his other works compiled under his *Oeuvres Complètes*, the text seeks to recover the current importance of this theme for education, as well as the relevance of Rousseau's thought for the discussion of the objectives of the formation of modern man and of the principles underlying the formation processes. It emphasizes that the humanization project present in Rousseau's work is of a political nature and, therefore, that it contributes to rethink in our days the educational process and the modes of insertion and participation of man in the social sphere. However, the political action, as well as the pedagogical, must be carried out with the purpose of redimensioning man's natural potentials so that the human nature is not degenerated, ignored, or even "thingified". In this sense, to construct meanings for human existence and to think the best way of participation in the social sphere should be the main concerns of each and every political-educational project.

Keywords

Rousseau – *Émile* – Formation of man – Modern education.

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En efeto, rematado ya su juicio, vino a dar en el más extraño pensamiento que jamás dio loco en el mundo, y fue que le pareció conveniente y necesario, así para el aumento de su honra como para el servicio de su república, hacerse caballero andante.
Miguel de Cervantes

“But shall we make of *Émile* a knight-errant, a redresser of wrongs, a paladin?” inquires his preceptor before his opus of human formation. Like the noble knight from *La Mancha*¹, who goes beyond himself in a rambling rave and takes on the task of saving the world with his heroic courage, shall the work of art that emerges from the hands of the “knight” of Geneva “[...] thrust himself into public life, play the sage and the defender of the laws before the great, before the magistrates, before the king? Shall he lay petitions before the judges and plead in the law courts?” (Rousseau, 1973, p. 280). Or will he be a solitary Crusoe who after leaving his deserted island and traveling around the world hears from a Russian prince² that the true greatness in this world is to own oneself? Shall *Émile* try to save the world or save himself? In short, shall he be a man or a citizen?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s questioning is also the question placed by those who read his work and are confounded by the two ideals of human formation conceived by the philosopher. Besides, it is also the big question faced nowadays in view of the changes processed in the world scenario during the last quarter of the 20th century. Amply discussed in the *Jacques Delors Report*, the preoccupation for the 21st century put forward by the International Committee on Education, and by the vast majority of educators throughout the world, refers to the objectives and purposes of the educative act, faced with a reality in which we witness the true reification of man and, at the same time, the dissolution of nations boundaries and of cultural identities. Technological development, the financialization of daily life, and the possible macdonaldization³ of school

and its world turned out to operate an evanescence of man, its identities and social problems. Gadotti (2004) denounces: “This is one of the drawbacks of our civilization. We have advanced much in the plane of technologies, but very little in what concerns the government of the human” (p. 229).

Rousseau’s great educational treatise is not, in this sense, a quixotic work. The questions put forward by the Genevan master, bizarre as they may have seemed at their time, contributed markedly to the valuation of man and his psychological specificities within the sphere of modern education, and serve as an indispensable ingredient to the questions of our days, both in the educational and in the political fields. From this angle, the *Émile* is not a mere piece of fiction of pure literary abstraction. It may be a philosophical reverie or even the ramblings of someone who, like Cervantes, was not happy to just criticize or lampoon the customs and beliefs of his time, but to rethink profoundly human existence and formation.

Instead of wandering at the mercy of wild adventures, the preceptor chooses to open the path of empiricisms to create the meaning of existence and dialogue with the real, so as to establish the statute of formative action: art that subsumes a global plane of construction of identities, collective and individual, with the purpose of bringing about the happiness of the human species, that is, man’s general wellbeing. In this respect, what Rousseau’s treatise aims at is the formation of man: “When he leaves me, I grant you, he will be neither a magistrate, a soldier, nor a priest; he will be a man” (Rousseau, 1973, p. 15). And, answering his own questioning about *Émile*’s formation to be a paladin, he says: “That I cannot say”. And completes by stating that “[...] his first duty is to himself; [...]” (p. 280). A perspective that

1. We are talking of Don Quixote, leading character of the major work by Miguel de Cervantes (1993).

2. It is Prince Galitzin (Defoe, 1947).

3. Term created by Pablo Gentili in the text “A macdonaldização da escola: a propósito de ‘Consumindo o outro’” (COSTA, 2000).

opens up a new path in the history of human formation. Until then, the formative activities and the educational principles of various peoples and civilizations had had an eminently social character, whose holistic objectivity left no room for the development of the man as an individual. The duty of those being educated was toward the immediate needs of the group, in view of the physical maintenance of its status and even of its existence. Such duty extended also to non-immediate needs, to maintain a web of myths and beliefs that strengthened the group unity, perpetuated the power game, and mystified knowledge. In all cases, positive as the preservation of cultural identity may have been, the relation established between educator and educated was no more than a hierarchical transmission of institutionalized knowledge. Even the Christian individualism was restricted to the idea of Christendom⁴, and both the moral control via conscience and the image of free man were eventually diluted in an authoritarian and dogmatic pedagogical practice that followed under the auspices of Patristics and Scholastics.

With the Renaissance, the aesthetics of human formation gains relief, and the classical ideals supply the contours that allow education to be seen as an action of liberation of the individual and realization of the human ideal. In practice, however, the Renaissance humanism did not quite reach that goal for, as Rousseau (1973) put it:

[...] Viewed as an art, the success of education is almost impossible, since the essential conditions of success are beyond our control. Our efforts may bring us within sight of the goal, but fortune must favour us if we are to reach it. (p. 11)

For the 18th century “art is any method which tends to improve and perfect a natural phenomenon, to make it more orderly, agreeable and useful” (Starobinski, 1987, p. 12). Thus, the *Émile* is an example of a work of art in which

man appears as a natural phenomenon, and is denaturalized by the social institutions without, however, killing his human nature and stifling his goodness. A piece of work that encompasses the Renaissance, Christian and even Illuminist ideals, but under its own perspective that values the real, concrete, empirical and circumstantial man. *Émile* shall not be, in this view, a marmoreal David⁵ flaunting the external perfection of its appearance or one of the mangled-featured mystical figures out of a painting by Mannerist artist El Greco (1541-1614)⁶. He shall not carry the lights of the impressionist paintings⁷, nor be the elided subject of Velázquez’s⁸ great *Las niñas*, in which both representing and represented disappear in favor of pure representation.

As for this analysis:

The men of the eighteenth century were not content simply to experience the pleasure afforded by works of art: they wanted to assess the particular characteristics of these works and situate them in the perspective of some universal plan of the development of humanity. (Starobinski, 1987, p. 9)

Analyzing this form, Jean-Jacques is entirely a product of his century, without, however, being its facsimile. The originality and difference of his thought resides in the following: man is

4. The term is used to define the whole of Latin Europe and North Africa, and give it a measure of unity, having in view that the sense of nation still did not exist in the medieval period.

5. The work of great Renaissance artist Michelangelo (1475-1564). Spanning the 15th and 16th centuries, the Renaissance was a movement initiated in Italy, founded on man as the measure of all things and on the return to Greek-Roman culture. Rejecting medieval scholastics, the philosophy of Renaissance posited an appreciation of the virtues of classical antiquity.

6. In parallel to Renaissance, an artistic movement developed in Rome approximately between 1520 and 1610 called Mannerism, whose exaggerated styling of the forms sets its works apart from classical rigor and brings them close to the Baroque. Domenikos Theotokopoulos, better known as El Greco, was one of its exponents.

7. Impressionism: a painting movement of the 19th century that expresses reality essentially as the impression of phenomena of light and color.

8. Spanish painter whose work is amply analyzed by Foucault (1999) as a testimony of representation in the classical period. In this picture, every possible image appears, but the figures of the King and Queen (King Philip IV and his wife), which are being painted; these show up only in a small mirror at the back of the room, only as a dim reflex of a taxonomic world.

Nature's supreme work of art, and goodness is the natural gift that allows its realization. Rousseau is not content to just admire this work of art, but wants to evaluate its characteristic features in the form it left the hands of the author of things. For that, he situates man in two perspectives: the historical, in which the process of degeneration disfigured him, just as Glaucus' statue, worn by time, sea, and the weather, was made to resemble more a fierce beast than a god. A somewhat pessimistic outlook, but one that translates the real situation of inequalities and war of the human being throughout its history. And the other, the possible one, is the more properly Rousseauian perspective, in which the author develops a universal plan for the development of mankind. A rather ideal, Platonic perspective, one whose singularity lies in the fact that it deals with the must-be through the art (educational and political) of repair, of reconciliation. Since degeneration has come by man's hands, it is he who must reconcile with his own nature, with himself, and with his neighbor. This is the most sublime moral task placed upon mankind for its own benefit and progress. It is carried out through an encompassing project of formation that includes an individual plan, for the formation of a man in all his natural dispositions, and a collective plan for the formation of the social man, that is to say, of the citizen.

There are two senses of *homme* in Rousseau's work. The first is the natural man, and the second the civilian man. Natural man means the primitive man, found in a stage previous to society and to the historical plane of humanity, just like the natural man that lives communitarianly among his peers already at an advanced stage of civility. The goodness, the sensibility and the upright character of this specimen make him an authentic man, by displaying all his potentialities as an individual and all his resourcefulness as a being in the real, concrete world. The civilian man unfolds into bourgeois and citizen. The bourgeois is the pseudo-citizen, holder of privileges resulting from the domination over his neighbor and the

usurping of property, as well demonstrated in the second *Discourse*. The citizen is the ideal man, the collective being, fractional unit and result of the social contract. What I call total man in the reunion of the authentic man with the citizen, going beyond the bourgeois and all the vices engendered in the debasement of the passions. The overcoming of the bourgeois man happens first by the rejection of the world of appearances and disguise, created by the multiplicity of representative signals whose positivation has legitimized a reality contrary to the natural order. "There is no one in the world less able to conceal his feelings than Émile (Rousseau, 1973, p. 488). Secondly, by the development of man's nature according to the natural principles after a wide ranging political project (*Social Contract*) that does not neglect a comprehensive human formation (*Émile*).

The total man is the sum of the natural dimension with the civil dimension, or yet of both Rousseauian ideals in a single person. He is, like Émile, well prepared to live in the modern world and can act as a prototype of the citizen of a possible society shaped after the *Social Contract*.

These two dimensions are referred to by Rousseau as *natural order* and *civil order*. Two planes that intercross and are both realized without the primacy of one or the other, but simultaneously. "He who would preserve the supremacy of natural feelings in social life knows not what he asks" (Rousseau, 1973, p. 13). For there must not be primacy of any of them, but the combination of both in the general organization of society, as well as in the specific formation of man. They are two dimensions present in every formative act that takes place from the birth of the child (individual plane) to its full constitution as a citizen (collective plane). One cannot form man, and only then the citizen, or vice-versa; both are formed by a political-educational project that looks out to the total man. Moreover, the formation of man is the first vocation, claimed by nature, as said by Rousseau (1973):

In the natural order men are all equal and their common calling is that of manhood, so that a well-educated man cannot fail to do well in that calling and those related to it. It matters little to me whether my pupil is intended for the army, the church, or the law. Before his parents chose a calling for him nature called him to be a man. Life is the trade I would teach him. (p. 15)

Here is thus the plan for the development of the human dimension, present in Rousseau's thought since 1740, when he was preceptor to the sons of M. Jean Bonnot de Mably, and from this experience he wrote his *Project for the Education of M. de Sainte-Marie*, in which he stated that "the objective we must propose in the education of a young man is to form his heart, judgment, and spirit." (Rousseau, 1994, p. 45)

The formation of the heart begins with the education of nature, the first master. It happens after an intense examination of oneself, with a view to self-knowledge and the self-control of all emotions, passions and abilities. To probe one's heart can also have the meaning of an investigation of natural virtues impressed into the soul by Nature to be used as a guide of human actions. The natural *self-love* (*amour de soi*), for instance, degenerates into a *love of self* (*amour-propre*) for the lack of an adequate educative action. In Rousseau's words in his *Confessions* (1964): "It is almost always the first misguided feelings that make children take their first steps into evil" (Vol. 1, p. 52). To best guide them is to act from their tender age, developing their sensibility through practical exercises, games, plays and outings. In the evening games, for example, Émile develops his sensitive abilities, reasoning, creativity, and kindness. In this case, in the races, the young winner is persuaded by his preceptor to share his prize, a candy, with those that took part in the competition and did not have the same luck. Even because "To train the senses it is not enough merely to use them; we must learn to judge by their means [...]" (Rousseau,

1973, p. 130). And so it is that the conjoint action of the other masters complements the task of well preparing the feelings, the judgments and the morality.

As put by Streck (2003), "Rousseau speaks of compassion as the basic feeling to be cultivated by Émile as he knows the world, and the inequalities created by men" (p. 151). Compassion can be understood in several ways, but ontologically speaking the term evokes a profound respect for oneself and for the other in the daily relations with one's neighbors and with the things (conjoint action of the three masters). It also evokes what Paulo Freire (200) calls "the universal ethics of the human being" (129-130) in the construction of a more just and egalitarian world. Thus, in the ideal chain of human actions, compassion can engender solidarity, and the latter, love. In this sense, and according to Gadotti (2004) proposition that solidarity is an ontological necessity, such reflection agrees with Rousseau's statement that "the love of the human race is nothing but the love of justice within us." (Rousseau, 1973, p. 283)

Influenced by the Renaissance, the philosophical thinking of the 18th century brought forth a scientific concept of art that is more inclined to the rational artifice that to a pure emanation from nature. That is, they saw art

[...] as that product of human activity which, obeying to certain principles, has as its purpose to produce artificially the multiple aspects of a single universal beauty, privilege of natural things. (Nunes, 2000, p. 10)

In Rousseau's writings the human race can be seen as Nature's most beautiful work of art, for it exhibits the universal signs of the Beautiful. All formative action should aim at highlighting these signs and working against their deterioration:

My main object in teaching him to feel and love beauty of every kind is to fix his affections and his taste on these, to prevent

the corruption of his natural appetites, lest he should have to seek some day in the midst of his wealth for the means of happiness which should be found close at hand. (Rousseau, 1973, p. 400)

If we are born sensitive and are soon influenced (*affectés*) by everything around us (Rousseau, 1973, p. 12), the task of cultivating natural order and forming man according to nature attributes starts with birth as is prolonged for the whole life. Family, especially parents, have the responsibility to conduct well this initial relationship with the environment. For that, it is enough to observe nature's rule and the path it shows. After all, pain, teething, the strengthening of the muscles, the vital needs, the intemperate weather and the various other natural resources foster the development of sensation as the first material of knowledge.

Would you keep him as nature made him? Watch over him from his birth. Take possession of him as soon as he comes into the world and keep him till he is a man; you will never succeed otherwise. The real nurse is the mother and the real teacher is the father. (Rousseau, 1973, p. 24)

This and other excerpts reveal a concept of education as a social act that should not be overlooked by anyone. The realization of this act is in life itself, whose symbolic exchanges operate the insertion of the individual in the collectivity. Both in family education (informal) and in the action of a preceptor (formal) or of a school (institutional) affectivity attenuates the aggression of cultural symbols and promotes a bond between people, thereby affording an atmosphere of pleasure and amusement:

I will only remark that, contrary to the received opinion, a child's tutor should be young, as young indeed as a man may well be who is also wise. Were it possible, he should become a child himself, that he may

be the companion of his pupil and win his confidence by sharing his games. (Rousseau, 1973, p. 28)

Contrary to the pedagogical imposition of the Jesuits and other educational methods, Rousseau's work suggests that an interactive, spontaneous, amusing, practical, and contextualized education perfects human nature and promotes happiness. Rousseau (1973) warns that "Plato, in his Republic, which is considered so stern, teaches the children only through festivals, games, songs, and amusements. It seems as if he had accomplished his purpose when he had taught them to be happy [...]" (p. 97).

Without institutional imposition, the formative action initiated by the parents and possible preceptors extends to the whole community insofar as the dynamics of social life imprints upon the educated the simplicity, respect, love, and the art living together. Rousseau selects the country life as the best place for the development of these qualities, considering the proximity to nature and to the rural world, well away from the corruption of city life. He says: "My pupil Émile, who is brought up in the country, shall have a room just like a peasant's. (Rousseau, 1973, p. 79)

Besides the simplicity characteristic of rural life, the countryside, with its spatial-temporal reality quite distinct from the frantic urban life, is conducive to the development of the highest aspect of human formation: the liberty. In his educational treatise, Rousseau (1973) says:

Prepare the way for his control of his liberty and the use of his strength by leaving his body its natural habit, by making him capable of lasting self-control, of doing all that he wills when his will is formed. (p. 43)

And, further on, he adds:

As for my pupil, or rather Nature's pupil, he has been trained from the outset to be as

self-reliant as possible, he has not formed the habit of constantly seeking help from others, still less of displaying his stores of learning. On the other hand, he exercises discrimination and forethought, he reasons about everything that concerns himself. He does not chatter, he acts. Not a word does he know of what is going on in the world at large, but he knows very thoroughly what affects himself. As he is always stirring he is compelled to notice many things, to recognise many effects; he soon acquires a good deal of experience. Nature, not man, is his schoolmaster, and he learns all the quicker because he is not aware that he has any lesson to learn. So mind and body work together. He is always carrying out his own ideas, not those of other people, and thus he unites thought and action; as he grows in health and strength he grows in wisdom and discernment. This is the way to attain later on to what is generally considered incompatible, though most great men have achieved it, strength of body and strength of mind, the reason of the philosopher and the vigour of the athlete. (p. 113)

This programmed and gradual de-naturalization springing from the countryside takes place through a semiotics of the ordinary and quotidian. From the domestic chore to the arduous tasks of harvesting, from the casual meetings to the community feasts, everything serves as an instrument to understand the real content of the human phenomenon and the dynamics of its symbolic exchanges. It is through the peasants' feasts, for example, that a favorable space is formed for the really affective, sincere and just, relationships, where the sensibility can be honed. Whereas in the theatre somebody else lives in our place and performs on a stage above everybody else, and towards whom all attentions must turn, in the popular feast everyone participates equally and have fun in collective dancing, in a complete merging of colors, gestures, faces, figures and

material conditions, converging all attentions to themselves. In it, man comes to direct contact with his neighbor without the need of a mask. In simplicity, without luxury or ostentation of wealth, man is more of a man because he is free from the narcissistic ego and the tyranny of love of self. As well put by Freitas (2003):

The collective creation represented by the popular feast, being grounded on common participation, allows the individual to experiment through the sensations that which cannot be lived in daily life. At the same time, it helps to create an image of the human person that defines, if not the values and ideals of the group or civilization, at least the individualized representation of the conflicts that concern man as such. The feast thus contributes to outline the profile of a personality that is opposed to that emerged from daily life. In it, the properly political ideal acquires a live and concrete disposition, in which the pleasure of shared living is heightened to its maximum. It operates an inversion in the way to position oneself in the world, and reminds us that there are other points of view, that it is possible to project our existence since other positions. Here, collective praxis acquires a new meaning. (p. 45)

A profile that is opposed to the deteriorated daily life, especially that experienced by Rousseau in Paris and other urban centers, is certainly one that results from an education of the escape, education of the negation of the negation. In terms of childhood, it is the negative education through which we prevent children from falling into this deterioration: "The only habit the child should be allowed to contract is that of having no habits [...]" (Rousseau, 1973, p. 43). In the general plane of the formation of man, it is the education of needs. And both for vital needs and for the cultural ones, the countryside is the best place to establish a continued contact with nature and to come closer to its original purity.

Being, therefore, the basis of the Rousseauian morals and the grounding of all education, this purity gives support for the development of virtue and of the link between reason and sensibility.

Derathé (1949) makes it clear that goodness and virtue are different things, for while the former is a gift of nature, the latter must be an achievement of man in well conducting his will and reason. "What is meant by a virtuous man?" asks Rousseau (1973). And he answers: "He who can conquer his affections; for then he follows his reason, his conscience; he does his duty; he is his own master and nothing can turn him from the right way." (p. 525)

After these considerations and the ideas contained in the Savoyard Vicar's discourse, we can infer that virtue results from the exercise of reason, guided by moral conscience and substantiated in sensibility, whose basis is no other than natural goodness. A chain that combines the action of nature and the action of man, beginning by the contemplation of a supreme being. If the Vicar's spiritualism apparently subjects moral to metaphysics, it actually does the opposite. According to Derathé (1949), "the solidarity established by Rousseau between moral and religion eventually impinges upon religion, for Rousseau eliminates from religion everything that is not indispensable to moral life" (p. 172). Indeed, his precepts can be understood as the creed of a natural, almost animistic, religion whose essence resides in a universal harmony of men with themselves and with the non-material order that moves the universe, regardless of the fact that the latter is a personal being or a creative cosmic force. Rousseau's God is more akin to a guide of conscience, an inner voice whispering the rules and designs of Nature.

In view of the fact that conscience is, for Rousseau, the voice of the soul, and the passions the voice of the body, the existence of religion is indispensable in the content of man's formation. Considering its etymology from the Latin *re ligare*, the term serves well for Rousseau's purpose of

reuniting man with his lost unity, with his deteriorated dimension and original nature. Religion is, therefore, seen as an institution of great help in the process of de-naturalization, developing in man the goodness, mercy, respect, love, and, as a reward, supreme happiness.

Rousseau's metaphysics is, at the same time, a refusal of atheistic materialism, and of religious fanaticism. His medial position tries to avoid the extremism of both sides and seeks the truth in the sense relations of the empirical world and in the moral commitment among men. It is an attempt to orient human perfecting by reconciling nature and culture in a kind of return to paradise lost, without refusing the attributes of science and reflection. Still in his pedagogical tone, the Savoyard Vicar concludes his speech by addressing his listener:

Dare to confess God before the philosophers; dare to preach humanity to the intolerant. It may be you will stand alone, but you will bear within you a witness which will make the witness of men of no account with you. Let them love or hate, let them read your writings or despise them; no matter. Speak the truth and do the right; the one thing that really matters is to do one's duty in this world; and when we forget ourselves we are really working for ourselves. My child, self-interest misleads us; the hope of the just is the only sure guide. (Rousseau, 1973, p. 361; our emphasis)

The mystic personage in the *Émile* is, so to speak, an apostle of the religion of man. A universal creed exempt from revelations, dogmas, the ceremonial apparatus, and all pretense, intent on defending the individual communication of the human being with the Deity through the inner feeling. Conscience tends to follow Nature's ordering, and there is no better guide in subjects of real and immediate interest, even because it speaks directly to the heart. It speaks of the eternal truths that are summarized in love to humanity,

to liberty, to justice, and to the morally beautiful (Rousseau, 1973).

Education cannot neglect the fact that to honor and love the author of the species and the being that protects it is a natural consequence of the self-love, and neither should it forget that liberty needs to be guided so that there is no abuse of free will and that its faculties are channeled to the use of good actions: "Keep your pupil busy with the good deeds that are within his power" (Rousseau, 1973, p. 280).

The Rousseauvian sermon rejects absolute and abstract ideas in favor of the natural lights that are manifested in the human inner world, and guide that the establishment of maxims of good conduct on earth. The sources are not philosophic or sacred books, but the heart itself that possesses the rules "traced by nature in characters which nothing can efface" (Rousseau, 1973, p. 325), which serve as liturgical elements for this cult of the inner man, of natural man, being, therefore, morals maxims for the realization of the human being in its fullness, in its totality. And so, if well prepared in the human affairs, full of natural feelings, he shall be inoculated against the vicissitudes of the *amour propre* and of the empire of deteriorated passions.

Analyzing all this, we may have the feeling that Rousseau espouses some form of pedagogy of the ignorance or of the lack of knowledge. His perspective is not, however, one of regress into a primitive and uncouth state that bounds man to the actions of the instinct. His emphatic and euphoric style attacks books and all instituted knowledge but, deep inside, he knows that the process has to be conducted by an essentially rational and intellectual

exercise: "Reason alone teaches us to know good and evil. Therefore conscience, which makes us love the one and hate the other, though it is independent of reason, cannot develop without it. (Rousseau, 1973, p. 48)

In the singularity of his discourse, neither the *ratio* nor the *divinatio* should be placed above man. It is he who is positioned above all things, and towards whom all must converge. The physical and metaphysical dispositions are instrumental. Culture and artifice must aim at the full realization of human nature. This is the main lesson that the *Émile* left as a counterpoint to the old solo cantilena of scholastics, and to the polyphony of the modern world. A paradoxical lesson, not just to the *darkness* and to the *lights*, but to the whole of today's modernity, whose art still clings to appearance, to dissimulation and, what is worse, to the objectification and *thingification* of the being. The formation of man such as envisaged by Rousseau in his *Émile* has much to do with the aspirations of UNESCO in its educational project for the 21st century.

Obviously, we deal today with a world far more complex than the one experienced by Rousseau. However, his approach remains current and rich in meanings to rethink the processes of formation not as formal and mechanical acts that must be carried out by an institutional requirement. Educating is constructing meanings for human existence. Thus, eliciting the natural dimension of human being from the web and weavings of learning and teaching (Brandão, 2001) is the challenge and, simultaneously, the incentive placed before the education of these days. And for that, the *Émile* is a virtually inexhaustible source for our reflections and actions.

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