

Research article

# Infinitive avoidance and splendid isolation: Rousseau and the use of conflicts in education

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## Abstract

The impact of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's educational philosophy can hardly be overestimated. In this article, I re-examine Rousseau's key text *Emile, or On Education* and discuss his concept of *conflict* and the use of conflicts in his imaginary educational philosophy. A detailed analysis suggests that Rousseau was not only an extreme avoider of conflict, by putting Emile in multiple forms of isolation, but that he also postponed any form of social conflict and carefully controlled, directed and manipulated Emile's personal and social experiences. To realise a new way of upbringing following the 'natural' development of the child, I contend that Rousseau excelled in an obsessively controlled and manipulative pedagogy. Liberation from social norms and traditions – by following the unfolding 'natural development', which was Rousseau's overall project – turned into an individual dictate ruled by an omnipresent educational governor: Rousseau. I conclude that Rousseau's philosophy of education was deliberately anti-social and might well be a fundamental barrier to regaining conflicts in education.

**Keywords** Rousseau; education; conflicts; avoiding; postponing; isolation; manipulation

## Introduction

The use of controversies or conflicts in education has a long conceptual tradition but marginal application in education. Known as *teaching controversial issues* (Chikoko et al., 2011; Cotton, 2006; Kötter, 2018; Kuş, 2015; Oulton et al., 2004; Wilkerson, 2017), it is applied in Anglo-Saxon countries – not without hesitation and reluctance – mainly in secondary or high school education, in social studies or related ‘educations’, such as peace education, environmental education, human rights education, citizenship education and democratic education (Council of Europe, 2015). Over the past two decades, particularly in democratic education, there has been an ongoing debate between those who opt for a so-called *deliberative democratic education* approach (namely, Rawls, Gutmann and Habermas) compared to an *agonistic democratic education* approach (namely, Mouffe and Laclau). Most authors seem to have a preference for the latter (Lozano Parra et al., 2021; Mårdh and Tryggvason, 2017; Ruitenbergh, 2009; Todd, 2011). However, Koutsouris et al. (2021), who recently reviewed a large number of selected papers on democratic education, concluded after many years of discussion and reflection that ‘agonism is discussed in the educational literature mainly from a theoretical point of view’ and the use of ‘agonistic principles as a tool to help teachers, school leaders, and policymakers ... is currently lacking in the literature’ (p. 1049).

In this article, I will not go into the practical teaching of controversies or conflicts over issues in higher education (for this, see Pouwels, forthcoming). Here, I will explore the theme of conflicts in education from a theoretical viewpoint. Are conflicts essential for the growth and development of a child into an adult, and for society becoming more human? In this article, I will use Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s pedagogical text *Emile, or On Education* to explore this question (Rousseau, 1921).<sup>1</sup> I concentrate my examination on the concept of *conflict* that Rousseau employs, his valuation of conflicts in education and his practical suggestions for the application of conflicts in education, teaching strategies or methods.

This landmark work in the history of education was published originally in 1762 – for this analysis I have used the 1921 English-language edition. In my analysis, I have selected those fragments that relate, explicitly or implicitly, to conflicts and dealing with conflicts in education, and while carefully reviewing these fragments, I attach certain labels to them. I had no predefined labels ready for use, and so, after selecting all the *conflict* fragments in the text, I applied open coding, which revealed unexpected elements. These labels were *avoidance*, *postponing*, *isolation*, *control* and *manipulation*. In the following, I will put these labels forward, offer text examples and propose further discussion among scholars.

### Conflicts in context: harmony needs conflicts

In general, conflicts that are undefined are regarded as disturbing an alleged harmony, whether in personal, family or social life, or politics. We human beings do not like conflicts. However, many writers have highlighted the fact that conflicts are necessary building blocks or stepping stones to achieving development and harmony, personally as well as socially.

We know that without friction there can be no shine, without voltage there can be no power. As the French say, ‘*Au choc des idées jaillit la lumière*’ (‘Only when ideas are confronted with each other, will the light shine’ – attributed to the French poet Nicolas Boileau). We need force and counter-force. Agreement or harmony comes from disagreement and contradiction – ‘He knows not his own strength that has not met adversity’ (attributed to Ben Jonson). According to Dabrowski (1967), we need conflict in our personal lives. ‘Conflicts play an extremely important role in the development of personality. Of all types of conflicts, the inner conflict is particularly significant ... Without the disturbance and disequilibrium brought about by nervousness and psychoneurosis, the process of personality development cannot be realized’ (Ackerman, 2009, p. 83).

Others also believe that we need conflicts – argument and counter-argument – to develop good policy and to make the best possible decisions (Bowman, 2001; Johnson and Johnson, 2009; Johnson et al., 2000) – ‘Harmony is like cancer to good decision making’ (Bowman, 2001, p. 62, citing Lencioni, 1998). Nevertheless, we are afraid of conflict because of its possible negative outcomes. This anxiety surrounding conflict has turned into a ‘culture of fear’ (Furedi, 2007, 2018; Slama, 2003). We have not learned – either at home or at school, in private or in public life – to deal constructively with the conflicts that we so desperately need. Dewey (1922) said that ‘Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity and sets us at noting and contriving ... Conflict is a *sine qua non* of reflection and ingenuity’ (p. 301).

These are just a few writers who have advocated the constructive power of conflicts, but there are many more. Marx, Darwin and Freud placed the concept of *conflict* – becoming and developing by struggle – at the core of their theories. It is a struggle among social classes, between species and inside the psyche of man (Achterhuis and Koning, 2014, p. 46; Blok, 2013, p. 60). Diaz (2009), for example, considers Darwin to be one of the greatest conflict thinkers, ‘his authority as conflict theorist is insuperable; the core of his work was theorizing about conflicting forces of nature’ (n.p.). Sociologists such as Simmel, Mill, Weber, Coser and Dahrendorf have pointed explicitly to the constructive power of conflicts; see, for example, Dahrendorf, quoted in Eberg (2012): ‘The social conflict is the greatest creative force driving social change’ (p. 12).

## What about conflict?

First, I am aware that there are many definitions of conflict, largely as a result of the many different fields in which conflict appears, the specific *conflict theory* that is used, as well as educational research (for example, Valente et al., 2020). In this article, the following definition of *conflict* is used: A conflict is an issue over which there are great contradictions and about which different parties struggle and fight. The noun *issue* does not need the adjective *controversial*, as is quite common in English-speaking countries. In fact, *controversial issue* is a pleonasm; there are no non-controversial issues.

Second, contradictions are perceived here not as incompatible incongruities that are irreconcilable and mutually exclusive, but as opposing parts that together form a unity, like health and illness, master and slave. A struggle and fight over issues is desperately needed (Mouffe, 2008). Consensus is not the opposite of conflict, as many believe. The opposite of conflict is apathy (Freire, 2005). Violence is not, as is often thought, a consequence of conflict; on the contrary, it is an inability to *stay in* the conflict (Novara, 2015). It is difficult to fight on your own. You are stronger in a group. People unite in parties for a valuable cause.

Let us now go to the root of *conflicts in education* – to Rousseau.

## Rousseau’s contribution to education

Rousseau’s contribution to Western educational philosophy is undisputed and is therefore an excellent starting point for a reflection on conflicts in education. The intriguing question here is: in what way did Rousseau influence how we deal with conflicts in education today? In general, Rousseau’s thoughts on conflicts in education are framed by his ideas on the nature of children and that of education.

First, and above all, Rousseau promoted the idea of the *natural development* of children. This idea, according to Rousseau, should guide all pedagogical interventions by educators – nature is the norm. Second, is the importance of *observing* the child; that is, not to look ahead to what the child could become, but to focus on how they are. It is to acknowledge the child as a child instead of as not an adult. Third, is the importance of *negative education*; that is, to wait, to sit on your hands and do as little as possible to allow the natural development to unfold itself. The teacher or governor is asked to control themselves, not to speed up development, but (as I will explain) to actively hinder it. Fourth, *no rules or demands* should be given to the child, since this will hinder natural development and create guilt and shame. Furthermore, Rousseau valued *experience* – to do and to try – over instruction. Experiences are directed mainly at the development of bodily strength and instrumental skills, to be able to *survive* in life, as Rousseau saw it, like the *natural man*, the *primitive man* and the *Indian*. Hence, his admiration for Robinson Crusoe,<sup>2</sup> the only book that Emile was allowed to read.

Other aspects of his work are also key here. One is *working with your hands*. Rousseau believed that everyone should learn a craft. Equally important is the ability to *think for yourself* and not to blindly follow today’s convictions and beliefs. Also important is *empathy* in education, especially in experiencing and valuing pity in the lives of others – Rousseau had a strong sense of the injustice in the world. Guidance by *inner feelings* became more important than rationality. Another important premise, which was connected to Rousseau’s personal life and his educational philosophy, was to *control all emerging passions* in the child and to redirect those passions, mainly by postponing immediate gratification or controlling the passions. This is a core and recurrent theme in *Emile*. Bodily desire is turned to imagination. A further and more academic point is the invention of the so-called *developmental stages* in the life of a person. It

was Piaget who made Rousseau's developmental scheme 'come true' empirically in the twentieth century (Koops, 2012, p. 49).

Concerning school education, the Philanthropinists and Pestalozzi arranged education according to Rousseau's developmental scheme (Koops, 2012, pp. 51–2), demonstrating that Rousseau's impact on the philosophy of education and school education is significant, undisputed and still evident today. But how should we judge Rousseau's impact on education from the viewpoint of social participation?<sup>3</sup> Or from the viewpoint in which conflicts play a fundamental role in the development of children (Ackerman, 2009) and the quality of democratic societies (Mouffe, 2008)? This is the perspective from which I read *Emile* – the role of conflict in upbringing and education.

## Nature and primitivism

Of particular importance when examining the role of conflicts, according to Rousseau, is the idea of *natural development*. There is scholarly agreement that Rousseau's work in general, but more specifically in *The Second Discourse* (1755), *The Social Contract* (1762) and *Emile* (1762), stems from his discontentment with the society in which he lived (Beerling, 1977; Blom, 2010; Damrosch, 2011; Lemaire, 1986; Noël, 2015). Rousseau is one of many who protested against the social, economic and political construction of the *Ancien Régime*. While invited to say something about education, Rousseau philosophised about a 'new man' who should be made fit for a 'new society'. But how should such a new man look? And how could he be made?

Throughout ancient history, starting with Aristotle, the Cynics, the Epicureans and Diogenes, among others (Lemaire, 1986, p. 99), the answer necessary to remedy the ills of existing society was sought by looking back at the original, the natural, and later in history at the Indian, the wild man and the primitive man. Such a man was modest, if not simple. He restricted his needs, was honest and used nature as the norm. The background to such social criticism – known as *primitivism* – is old and has resulted in many ramifications; it was a fight between nature and culture.

Without going into too much detail about this interesting debate, primitivism can be viewed as a manner of self-definition, a way to position yourself against others (Lemaire, 1986). Primitivism is 'the desire to escape the obligations and restriction of a ruling system ... it takes its inspiration from the idea of the golden age when men were not yet corrupted by greed, selfishness, jealousy and other vices' (Beerling, 1977, p. 50). In fact, it is the Freudian idea of *Unbehagen in der Kultur* (civilisation and its discontents). The use of the *natural man* represents a piece of ideology or counter-ideology of that culture, which discovers or projects this *natural man* and his *natural development*. Rousseau was very well acquainted with the ancient literature of the Golden Age and the myth of paradise on earth. He also read extensively reports about *Indians*, the new *wild men* or *barbarians* of the New World – the Americas – mainly those in the Caribbean and New France (today's Canada) (Beerling, 1977; Lemaire, 1986). Rousseau was not the first – nor was he the only one – to use the concept of *primitivism* to attack the existing culture. However, it was the 'intensity of its tone' (Grimsley, quoted in Beerling, 1977, p. 50) that made Rousseau famous.

*Emile* was a cultural protest against a class society organised around birth and property (nobility), and absolutism. *Emile* was not so much a manual for upbringing or education, as it was 'an abstract scheme or an ideal-typical construction, deliberately unworldly' (Beerling, 1977, p. 232) to reform society through education. This is exactly what Rousseau wanted to do with the imaginary *Emile*: to give him a *natural* education, to make him a *natural* man before he becomes a citizen. Rousseau did not want to go back to the unspoiled Golden Age, but he took the most positive concepts of the natural man – *le bon sauvage* (the noble savage) – as the orientation for *Emile's* upbringing and education. However, the educational context in which *Emile's* upbringing takes place is completely artificial and staged, as I will explain later on.

## *Emile*: the role of conflicts

### *Emile*: five books

Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education* consists of five books.<sup>4</sup> The first book (37 pages) is about the baby, toddler and infant years, up to about four years old. Rousseau does not indicate the exact ages that

the books address, but the second book (65 pages) focuses on what I would term primary school age, of about 5 to 12 years old. The third book (54 pages) focuses on the life stage that we would now call puberty, from about 12 to 15 years old (Koops, 2016, p. 77). The fourth book, which is considerably larger than the foregoing books (155 pages), deals with what we would today call adolescence, 15 years old and above. Finally, the fifth book, also large (105 pages), deals with the coming of age, including contact with the opposite sex, Emile's future wife Sophie, and the independence of Emile and Sophie from their governor.

In these books, Rousseau's (1921) views on conflict are indicated by the now famous opening line: 'God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil' (p. 5). With this first sentence, Rousseau becomes prominently visible as a pioneer of the natural development of children. He believed in the natural power, energy and individuality of children and he tried to avoid or eliminate all *social factors* that could hinder their imagined natural development (the negative pedagogy). The equally famous study *The Social Contract*, published in 1763, opens with a similarly stunning line: 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains' (Rousseau, 2003, p. 1).

Rousseau, the writer, was well aware of the power of an opening line that encapsulated the entire work. From that moment, the message was clear. He believed that society was to blame and that it was corrupt in every nook and cranny. Rousseau's first rule for education, therefore, was to keep the young as far away, and for as long as possible, from corrupting society. However, as the child must be educated, the alternative to education, society or community as a parenting agency was the idea of *nature*. Rousseau consistently eliminated society from education, both large and small. He even dug a little deeper as he continued from his first crushing sentence:

He forces one soil to yield the products of another, one tree to bear another's fruit. He confuses and confounds time, place, and natural conditions. He mutilates his dog, his horse, and his slave. He destroys and defaces all things; he loves all that is deformed and monstrous; he will have nothing as nature made it, not even man himself, who must learn his paces like a saddle-horse, and be shaped to his master's taste like the trees in his garden. (Rousseau, 1921, p. 5)

The tone has been set, and for almost 500 pages. Emile will grow up away from society, away from conflict, away from differences of opinion, in an Arcadian and harmonious village populated by simple people. He will grow up without parents, without sisters, brothers or friends. Nothing from *the outside* should influence his education. Everything should come from *within*. According to one of Rousseau's biographers, 'The Enlightenment was aimed at others and attached great importance to social interaction. Rousseau was inward-looking and appreciated the freedom from social influence' (Damrosch, 2011, p. 341).

## Rousseau and conflicts in education

During the first few years of education, however, Rousseau could not do without community in its smallest form: the family. In the first pages of Book I, he praises mothers and the act of breastfeeding. But at the same time, while he is revealing this sensitivity, he calls on the mother to 'raise a wall around the soul of the child' to avoid any beaten path and to protect the 'young tree<sup>5</sup> from collisions with human opinion' (Rousseau, 1921, pp. 5–6).<sup>6</sup> In our analytic scheme, this sentence is labelled in three categories: *avoiding* (contact with other people); *postponing* (avoiding collisions); and *isolating* the child (building a wall). Although Rousseau displayed an extremely difficult character in his personal life and got into quarrels with almost everyone (Blom, 2010; Damrosch, 2011; Doorman, 2013; Noël, 2015), in *Emile* he almost always tried to avoid or postpone social conflict, making him the forefather of *adolescence* (Koops, 2016; van den Berg, 1956). The wish to avoid and endlessly delay social conflict led to a desire to flee or retreat – as Rousseau himself did many times in his personal life – voluntarily and involuntarily,<sup>7</sup> and to isolate Emile on an island. Noël (2015) has spoken of the education of a 'citizen without society' (p. 40). Surrounded by palisades and fences to avoid all harmful influences from society, Rousseau (1921) decides:

strictly who is allowed to enter, what words and gestures are allowed, he organizes all the trials a child has to endure, puts everything in scene, including 'accidental' encounters ... Emile who lives in quarantine until the age of twenty-five ... will not be exposed to the diseases of the

world until the master feels he has sufficient resistance to diagnose evil without being infected with it. (p. 44)

I will aim to show that Rousseau, from the point of conflict, isolates Emile's education from human society to the utmost and in his pedagogical and didactical practice is meticulously controlling and manipulative. Emile lives deliberately in a *bubble*. It is not freedom and natural development that characterise Rousseau's pedagogical approach, but control and manipulation.

As a governor, after the twelfth year, when it is *reasonable* to speak with Emile, Rousseau turns out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing. Doorman (2013, pp. 94–5) recognised this manipulation and discipline in the guidance and teaching of Emile. All education in *Emile* is 'arranged and not very spontaneous' (Doorman, 2013, p. 61). Life in the countryside is artificial.

Learning something in a natural way hides a cunning trick of the educator – for example, allowing Emile to become lost in the forest of Montmorency, which suddenly sparks an interest in astronomy and geography. I would like to call this the *didactisation of reality*; that is, the transformation of a possibly uncertain, open and conflicting reality into a strongly reduced and controlled learning process reality. I consider procrastination, isolation and *didactisation* as sub-forms of avoiding reality.<sup>8</sup>

## Educating nobody

Despite his dubious accomplishments in the field of practical upbringing and education (Blom, 2010; Noël, 2015), Rousseau believed that he had something to say about the education of children at a more general theoretical level. *Emile* contains a fictional pupil and a fictional governor, in whom we recognise Rousseau. Emile has no father or mother, consequently has no family name. He has neither sisters nor brothers, friends nor acquaintances. He has no one. Not only is the governor chosen with care, but so is the fictional apprentice, who has a mediocre mind. Emile is an orphan and has only one master.

His master does not have to take into account 'the values prevailing in the family, the social situation of the pupil or the parental character' (Noël, 2015, p. 44). Emile does not have a biologically or socially related identity. The reader looks in vain for the intimate parent–child relationship and interaction, or the struggle and love in the family between siblings or between friends. About this in particular, according to Rousseau, people in the natural order are all equal. Rousseau does not want to educate Emile as a worker who will be useful for society, nor as a Frenchman, an Englishman or a citizen, but as a person. Emile is not a 'real' person, but an abstract person. He will not be like today's citizen, whom Rousseau criticises extensively; he will be nobody, and he will be a 'real' man. *Emile*, therefore, is a book about the education of a fictional person, outside time and place, with no social or biological identity (Book I).

## Damn society and no-man's-land

Because Rousseau hates society and all its influences on development, he must educate Emile in a no-man's-land. This no-man's-land inevitably has a shape. It has more the character of a village than of a city. Rousseau idealises the countryside and the villages in a bucolic narrative, in which women are good mothers and live healthy lives and the fathers are skilled and calm craftsmen, preferably illiterate. Cities should be avoided at all costs:

Men are devoured by our towns. In a few generations, the race dies out or becomes degenerate; it needs renewal, and it is always renewed from the country. Send your children to renew themselves, so to speak, send them to regain in the open fields the strength lost in the foul air of our crowded cities. (Rousseau, 1921, p. 26)

Avoidance, isolation and procrastination are Rousseau's teaching strategies – sit on your hands and do nothing. But that will turn out to be a real diversion:

Therefore the education of the earliest years should be merely negative. It consists, not in teaching virtue or truth, but in preserving the heart from vice and from the spirit of error. If only you could let well alone, and get others to follow your example; if you could bring your scholar to the age of twelve strong and healthy, but unable to tell his right hand from his left, the eyes of his understanding would be open to reason as soon as you began to teach him. Free from prejudices and free from habits, there would be nothing in him to counteract

the effects of your labours ... Reverse the usual practice and you will almost always do right. (Rousseau, 1921, pp. 57–8)

### Isolation and procrastination as essential conditions

Rousseau goes far beyond bastions, palisades and walls to protect the child from social education. He even wants to put Emile on a deserted island. In Book III, Rousseau pulls out all the stops to curb Emile's longing to go out and to suppress his growing passions. He therefore comes up with Robinson Crusoe: 'Make haste, therefore, to establish him on his island while this is all he needs to make him happy; for the day is at hand, when, if he must still live on his island, he will not be content to live alone' (Rousseau, 1921, p. 148). This state of being – of living alone – is, according to Rousseau (1921):

The surest way to raise him above prejudice and to base his judgments on the true relations of things, (that is) to put him in the place of a solitary man, and to judge all things as they would be judged by such a man in relation to their own utility. (p. 147)

In Book IV – where Emile is between 15 and 20 years old – Rousseau is obsessed with keeping Emile's passions under control. It is in this chapter that the holding back (development), or delaying and controlling passions (natural growth), takes monstrous forms:

Do you wish to establish law and order among the rising passions, and *prolong the period of their development*, so that they may have time to find their proper place as they arise? Then they are controlled by nature herself, not by man; your task is merely to leave it in her hands. If your pupil were alone, you would have nothing to do; but everything about him enflames his imagination. He is swept along on the torrent of conventional ideas; to rescue him you must *urge him in the opposite direction*. (Rousseau, 1921, p. 180, my emphasis)

Sitting on your hands and following nature is not a genuine philosophical or pedagogical conviction, but a banal fear of life itself. This fear becomes acutely visible because Rousseau advises us not only to do nothing, but also to push back certain natural developments to maintain and preserve the child's innocence. Rousseau had previously warned us that 'in a natural course of development an opposite education is required' (1921, p. 57). The new education, therefore, is not 'following' the unfolding natural development, but consciously stopping it, consciously frustrating and stretching it.

### Controlling and manipulating: 'natural' development in education

Rousseau is very manipulative. In Book II he assures the reader that the governor's task is to choose areas of experience and to allow full freedom within such a delimited space. But that is surely not enough:

Take the opposite course with your pupil; let him always think he is master while you are really master ... His work and play, his pleasure and pain, are they not, unknown to him, under your control? No doubt he ought only to do what he wants, but he ought to want to do nothing but what you want him to do. *He should never take a step you have not foreseen, nor utter a word you could not foretell*. (Rousseau, 1921, p. 84, my emphasis)

We tend to think that Rousseau is the master in taking into account the nature of the child Emile, but it is quite the opposite, as is shown in a revealing passage in Book V:

Instead of providing a wife for Emile in childhood, I have waited till *I knew* what would suit him. It is not for me to decide, but for *nature*; my task is to discover the choice she has made. *My business, mine I repeat*, not his father's; for when he entrusted his son to my care, he gave up his place to me. He gave me his rights; *it is I* who am really Emile's father; *it is I* who have made a man of him. (Rousseau, 1921, p. 369, my emphasis)

It is not Emile who decides about his future spouse, but nature. But in nature, Rousseau is in charge. Masked as nature, after careful observation, listening and long waiting, Rousseau decides which woman suits Emile best. Emile himself is absent and at the mercy of 'nature'. Rousseau, after all, is the skilled scribe – not of the Bible, but of 'nature' – and he decides.

## Nature: good or bad?

Already, in Books I–IV, the embrace of nature, or the escape to nature through a fundamental rejection of culture, has been addressed several times. In Book V, when Rousseau speaks – at length and until boredom sets in – about Sophie, the virtuous, chaste, reticent and honest girl raised to be a woman, he concludes ‘that there is nothing which, under nature’s guidance, cannot be obtained from them as well as from us’ (Rousseau, 1921, p. 368). And to reassert the point, ‘Now, all that is not from nature is contrary to nature, as I have proved again and again’ (Rousseau, 1921, p. 368). While on the next page, finally, ‘If you would guard against these abuses, and secure happy marriages, you must stifle your prejudices, forget human institutions, and consult nature’ (Rousseau, 1921, p. 369). These are not just examples of expressions representing a naive faith in ‘good’ nature as a principal guide for education, but also of faith in education that makes virtually anything possible if it consults nature.

According to Paglia, who compares Rousseau to his opposite, the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814), Rousseau worshipping nature is the same as worshipping women, with a particularly masochistic and passive attitude: ‘Falling on my knees before a mistress, obeying her, begging her forgiveness is the utmost pleasure for me’ (Paglia, 1992, p. 261; Rousseau, 2008, p. 26–27). In love, he is passive: women must take the first step. This attitude might, to some extent, explain his constant call for avoiding, controlling and curbing desires and passions for as long as possible. Just follow nature, Rousseau would say. And a smiling Sade shows what that could mean – it is not goodness, but cruelty that is nature’s face (Paglia, 1992, p. 264). The famous and notorious novel *Juliette* is Sade’s answer to the sweet-voiced *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau’s sentimental novel about delayed desire. *Juliette* shows the downside of Rousseau’s arcadian unspoiled nature, ‘Violence is the true nature of Mother Nature’ (Paglia, 1992, p. 264).

Rousseau’s ‘nature as law’ precedes opinion and is ultimately directed and shaped by inner feeling or connection: ‘For all mankind, there is a law anterior to that of public opinion’ (1921, p. 345). Here Rousseau states that a woman is torn between public opinion and her conscience. The tool necessary to deal with this clash is reason, writes Rousseau. But he hardly believes that women are capable of solid reasoning and so he turns, as expected, to ‘nature’. Over many pages, he writes how clever, delicate and passionate women are ‘from nature’ to deal with this conflict. In the end, the ‘inner feeling’ turns out to be superior to both social opinion and reasoning. In his *Confessions*, Rousseau goes even further and writes the infamous phrase, ‘The state of reflection is a state contrary to nature, and the man who thinks is a corrupted animal’ (Damrosch, 2011, p. 277). Understandably, his Enlightenment friends perceived these thoughts and statements as a violent assault on rational discourse and believed that Rousseau had completely lost his mind. ‘The most ungrateful dog in the world’ is the heading of a paragraph that Blom (2010, pp. 309–24) devotes to the growing tension between Rousseau and his Enlightenment peers. After all, it is no longer possible to argue against an ‘inner feeling’ as the ultimate justification. It is not thinking but subjective feeling<sup>9</sup> that becomes the law. Diderot (quoted in Damrosch, 2011) is clear about this: ‘anyone who does not want to use his mind renounces his humanity and should be treated as unnatural’ (p. 281).

## Results

Below I summarise the results of my research on Rousseau and the role of conflicts in education by looking at (1) the concept of *conflict*; (2) the appreciation of conflict in upbringing and education; and (3) whether practical applications were suggested.

### Concept of conflict

Reading *Emile* is not only an agony of genuine astonishment and great dismay, in many places the modern reader may experience considerable sympathy with Rousseau’s eloquently formulated sentences, which take into account the uniqueness of the child and call for autonomy and independence, freed from constricting conventions, traditions and regulations on how to live. The plea for natural development is recognisable, and it is desirable to allow a person’s individuality or identity to develop in an authentic way (Doorman, 2013). But, unfortunately, appearances can be deceptive. The intended freedom and autonomy, via dislocation to the countryside, are minutely controlled by the all-controlling governor, who – in his theoretical experiment – has systematically eliminated all possible social and



emotional experiences that could influence Emile – his parents, brother, sisters and friends; his desires, wants, imagination and sexuality – to maintain totalitarian control over the process of growth of his pupil using highly imaginative ideas about *nature* and *natural development*. A nearly ‘Skinnerian’ education in a laboratory called *nature*. As we have seen, it is not only the environment that is controlled, but also Emile’s experiences, thinking and feelings. There is no question of the free development of the individual, contrary to what one would expect. The accursed and corrupted society has been replaced by an idealised idea of nature by Rousseau as dictator, equally unfree. In *Emile* I found no explicit description of the concept of conflict or the value of conflict, but I did find a continuous evasion of social conflict through isolation, postponement, active restraint and the controlled and manipulated bringing in of organised conflicts, which I have labelled the *didactisation of reality*.

## The pedagogical value of conflict

It is challenging to discover the pedagogical value of conflict in *Emile*. Rousseau avoids conflicts in education, he pushes it forward to the extreme and isolates the child from adult society. He can be rightly seen as the father of the infantilisation thesis<sup>10</sup> (Koops, 2016; van den Berg, 1956), who situated upbringing and education in a closed space – walled in, far from the lively and exciting human society – within which not only the socio-economic aspects but also the personal and intimate aspects of being human in relation to others were concealed. Take sexual development, for instance. Rousseau is continuously redirecting, denying, postponing and forwarding all passions. Rousseau had major problems with sexuality in education. A fear that can be easily linked to Rousseau’s personal life, as experts on Rousseau do, and as Rousseau himself did in his *Confessions*. Rousseau found it extremely difficult to function in a social and competitive environment. He felt extremely uncomfortable and ashamed of being so, partly through his physical disabilities. Rousseau had a natural aversion to strife and parties (Rousseau, 2008, p. 437) and his associations with the Enlightenment philosophers strengthened rather than weakened his faith in God and the king. Quiet and secluded writing were his salvation. It was not that writing was easy for him. He struggled for days and nights with a few sentences, which would later become world famous. ‘The decision I have made to write and withdraw is exactly what suits me best’, says Rousseau in his *Confessions* (2008, p. 136). The withdrawal and isolation thus concerns not only his pedagogical *métier* but also his personal *habitus*. However, Dasberg (1993) reminds us that:

The eighteenth-century educator Herbart fiercely opposed the Philanthropinists and Rousseau’s recommendations for uninterrupted supervision of the child and the removal from its environment of anything that could lead to undesirable acts ... That is why the educator should dare to explore the free exploration of children, with all the risk that entails, but he must also be willing to take the unpopular act of intervention and punishment. (p. 12)

## Practical use of conflicts in education

*Emile* is not meant as a practical guide for education. Education, as we understand it today in schools and higher education, did not exist in Rousseau’s time. *Emile* is a book about pedagogical ideas. But looking at the text and its spirit, there is no sign of any kind of collaborative, interactive, competitive or group style of learning with peers. There is no emotional or social learning with male peers and certainly not with female peers. Rousseau’s implicit teaching practice can be seen as a form of independent, individual learning, mainly from within, under the continuous guidance of an ‘expert’ supervisor who decides when the child is ready to learn and what the child will have to learn. It can be seen as a plea, a beginning of *professionalism* in education. The educational interaction concerns almost exclusively the interaction between supervisor and pupil. There seems to be no ‘other’s’ world. Rousseau (1921, II) asks the reader not to view childhood as a phase, a hurdle to be overcome, but rather to consider that time as extremely valuable in and of itself: ‘Love childhood, indulge its sports, its pleasures, its delightful instincts’ (p. 43). From this, he concludes that the most important rule of upbringing and education is to ‘lose time’ instead of gaining time, to give the child ‘childhood’, because ‘The most dangerous life span is that from birth to the twelfth year. That is the time when all errors and vices sprout, while the instrument to eradicate them does not yet exist’ (Rousseau, 1921, p. 57). In the introduction to another American translation of *Emile*, Jules Steeg (in Rousseau, 1889) admires Rousseau for his contribution to pedagogy, that is, to Rousseau’s plea:

To unfold the powers of children in due proportion to their age; not to transcend their ability; to arouse in them the sense of the observer and of the pioneer; to make them discoverers rather than imitators; to teach them accountability to themselves and not slavish dependence upon the words of others. (p. 6)

Nevertheless, Steeg (in Rousseau, 1889) summarises his reading of *Emile* in line with my research results:

There is absolutely nothing practicable in his system. It consists in isolating a child from the rest of the world; in creating expressly for him a tutor, who is a phoenix among his kind; in depriving him of father, mother, brothers, and sisters, his companions in study; in surrounding him with a perpetual charlatanism, under the pretext of following nature; and in showing him only through the veil of a factitious atmosphere the society in which he is to live. (p. 6)

## Conclusion

Reading *Emile* from the perspective of conflict raises several questions that I did not research. I will therefore merely pose them and offer suggestions for further thinking and research. First, I wonder if and how the legacy of Rousseau can or must be related to the so-called *culture of fear* that seems to run through our societies (Furedi, 2007, 2018; Slama, 2003). Or, more precisely, to an overwhelming call for prevention and safety in society, known as the *surveillance and preventive state*, with negative consequences, such as the increase of surveillance, monitoring and screening; the early diagnosis and intervention; the intervention by risk instead of crime and the irreversibility of established rules and laws; and the loss of freedom (Peeters, 2013).

Can this desire, this call, be traced to the way that Rousseau conceptualised or even demonised society as opposed to *nature*? The desire for public safety, protection and trigger warnings for almost every hurdle that we might face in life and for avoiding any kind of struggle or conflict often brings more misery than engaging in proper confrontation (Achterhuis and Koning, 2014, p. 44). Strossen (2018, p. 139) is convinced that practising *robust counterspeech* instead of *censorship* (law making) is a much better way to empower disparaged people than censoring *hate speech*, which is ineffective at best and counter-productive at worst. In education, Biesta criticises the increased emphasis on certainty and control in contemporary educational legislation. 'They [the policy makers, politicians, popular press, public and international organisations] want education to be strong, secure and predictable, and want it to be risk-free at all levels' (Biesta, 2014, p. 1). This may result in the education of 'snowflakes',<sup>11</sup> who call for trigger warnings, unable to endure even the slightest push without going completely off track (Essig, 2014). This fear of conflict might also explain 'the often tame quality of so many textbooks and curricula in the United States' (Steiner, 2017, p. 79). Is this strong, cultural and educational fear of conflicts – if I am right – inhibiting learning and growing, both alone and together? And are we witnessing the result of a deep heritage that can be traced to Rousseau? I would like to take a stand here and contend that Rousseau's philosophy of education could be regarded as the root of our fear of dealing with conflicts in life and in education.

The common fear of conflict in private and social life is of course understandable, but Rousseau's educational philosophy may have cast the preoccupation with the avoidance, isolation and postponing of conflict, making both society and education extremely sensitive and afraid of interesting intellectual disagreements between opponents. The Flemish political philosopher Chantal Mouffe in her book *On the Political* (2008) has tried to revalue the idea of the struggle and fight over competing ideas and practices in what is called the *agonistic democratic* model – 'the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, but to mobilize these passions towards democratic designs' (quoted in Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 272). Quite the opposite of Rousseau, who according to my analysis, practised an infinite avoidance in splendid isolation, to avoid, postpone or control passions.

Therefore I conclude – perhaps somewhat boldly – that Rousseau's pedagogy is a deliberate anti-social pedagogy, and its features might be fundamental to the way we look at society. In a way that we are denying its dynamic and thriving nature, by keeping up – at least in education and schools and maybe also in society – a Rousseauian illusion of a harmonious Arcadian idyll, where everyone agrees with everyone. But, quoting Savater (1998), 'a society without conflicts would not be a society, but a wax museum or a cemetery' (p. 15).

But how can we regain the conflicts in education? And how do we acknowledge that ‘The expression of contrasting opinions in learning groups was the single most important predictor of learning gain’ (Johnson, 2015, pp. 88–9)?

The first step would be to recognise and acknowledge the *power of conflicts* for the vitality of our democracy and democratic education. Mouffe (2008), known for her *agonistic pluralism*, advocates an agonistic democratic education, mainly because the central ideas of neutrality, rationally and especially consensus do not resonate with the idea of facing conflicts. The current deliberative models (Rawls, Guttman and Habermas) *work too well*, Ruitenberg (2009) claims, since ‘the desire by deliberative approaches to eliminate conflict ... leads to more destructive antagonistic conflict’ and ‘the suppression of fundamental desires and emotions will not make those desires and emotions disappear but only defer their manifestation’ (p. 272). More fundamentally, Ruitenberg (2009) together with Mouffe criticise the liberal democratic models with their emphasis on individuality and rationality, failing to appreciate emotions and the social ‘need for collective identifications which will never disappear since it is constitutive of the mode of existence of human beings ... The prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public but to mobilize these passions towards democratic designs’ (p. 272).<sup>12</sup>

The second step should be to make such *democratic designs in education*, which I call *conflict education*. That is, a curriculum, a teaching method and a risk-accommodating environment where leadership against the grain can be exercised (see Pouwels, forthcoming). And yes, we need skilled teachers for that. Schools and higher education environments are excellent places, if well organised, to use contrasting opinions about life and to learn and deal with all the competing and conflicting ideas that we encounter in relation to the natural, social and emotional world (Baker et al., 2013; Moïsi, 2009; Nussbaum, 2014). I believe Rousseau would be horrified by this final statement.

## Notes

- 1 Similarly, I researched John Dewey and Paulo Freire (Pouwels and Biesta, 2017; Pouwels, 2019). A paper on Rabindranath Tagore and conflicts is under review (Pouwels, forthcoming).
- 2 Rousseau is very explicit about Defoe’s book from 1719. For the specific interpretation of the story, see Bellhouse (1982).
- 3 The 1989 Convention of the Rights of the Child explicitly introduced five important participation rights for children: (1) the right to form your own view; (2) the right to freedom of expression; (3) the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; (4) the right to freedom of association and of peaceful assembly; and (5) the right to access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources.
- 4 We used the Dutch translation from the *Émile* (2012). For application in this article we used the free available English/American translation of 1921.
- 5 Rousseau uses hundreds of images based on nature (*horticultural metaphors*). This was his source of education, but educating is different from gardening (Van Crombrugge, 2018).
- 6 ‘You can remove this young tree from the highway and shield it from the crushing force of social conventions. Tend and water it ere it dies. One day its fruit will reward your care. From the outset raise a wall around your child’s soul; another may sketch the plan, you alone should carry it into execution’ (Rousseau, 1921, p. 5).
- 7 Rousseau’s private life can be characterised as one long flight (Damrosch, 2011).
- 8 The famous ‘doubt’ in Western culture, attributed to Descartes’s ‘*Dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum*’ and, given with the Enlightenment, is a way of acknowledging the conflict and making it discussable. Rousseau ostentatiously and fanatically removed himself from all his Enlightenment friends, with all the ensuing consequences (Blom, 2010).
- 9 The (pre-)Romantic character is described as showing ‘an isolated subjectivity’ (Wolf, 2015, p. 10).
- 10 The increase in the duration of the childhood stage and, associated with this, the growing distance between children and adults. Also referred to as ‘the artificial extension of childhood’ (Koops, 2016, p. 220).
- 11 ‘We organize every minute of our children’s day so that they never, ever face risks of any kind ... carefully sweeping all the snow out of the way, we remove all obstacles so the precious little child can go through life without even a bump ... Yet all of this over protective parenting has produced a lot of young adults who are unable to endure even the slightest push without going completely off track ... it is the same impulse that leads students to demand trigger warnings in classes for any material that might upset them’ (Essig, 2014, n.p.).

- <sup>12</sup> It is encouraging to see that Ruitenberg, after all her considerations, also realises that everything begins with the education of teachers and the politics of schools. Teachers are not educated in these matters and generally take a neutral position.

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## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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