Biographical Briefing on Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in Geneva in 1712. By the time he was 13 his mother had died and his father, a failed watchmaker, had been forced to leave Geneva to avoid being imprisoned for fighting a duel. Virtually abandoned, Rousseau was forced to serve as an apprentice to an engraver who brutally mistreated him. Partly to free himself from bitter servitude and partly to embark on an adventure, Rousseau fled the Swiss capital at the age of 16, and wandered about Europe. In his travels, Rousseau befriended several wealthy people who took him into their homes and provided the time and money for him to receive an excellent education in music and philosophy. At the age of 30, he moved to Paris and quickly established himself as one of the most outstanding philosophers of the eighteenth century. He died in 1778.

- **What was Rousseau's early family life like?**
- **Why did he leave Geneva?**
- **How was Rousseau educated?**

Unlike most other philosophers of his time, Rousseau believed that people are born good, independent, and compassionate. If left to their own devices in a state of nature (a society with no government or laws, like on a deserted island) people would naturally live happily and peacefully. In fact, such a society would be free and ideal, much more satisfying than the inequalities brought by modem society. Influenced by the peace and stability he saw in simple, traditional Swiss villages, Rousseau believed the luxury, corruption, and greed of modem nations harm the individual, giving too few people too much power over many others. In modem countries, for example, political control ends up in huge capital cities far away from most of the people. Further, he believed that society's institutions, like government, schools, the arts, and the media, corrupt naturally good

individuals. Rousseau thought that modem civilization, for all its progress, has made humans neither happier nor more virtuous (morally good).

- **How did Rousseau believe people would act in a state of nature?**
- **According to Rousseau, what corrupts the natural goodness of human beings? Why?**
- **Based on Rousseau's views of human nature, do you think he thought people can be trusted to govern themselves?**

Rousseau's Swiss background had an enonnous influence on the type of government he advocated (supported). Unlike its surrounding autocratic (government with unlimited power by one person over others) neighbors, Switzerland for centuries had been divided into small districts. Decisions were made locally, not far away in a royal palace in the capital city. The manner in which people in these traditional villages gathered regularly to make decisions was an example of democracy (government by the people), whereby a simple majority vote by the adult male citizens enacted a law. Each adult male voted on laws himself, without anybody representing him. This fonn of direct democracy also flourished briefly in ancient Athens and Rome. Although direct democracy was extremely rare outside of Switzerland at that time, Rousseau believed it was the ideal way for people to make decisions. He referred to how nondemocratic governments in Europe had corrupted modern people when he wrote in his book *The Social Contract,* "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains." He believed that even representative democracy (where people vote for other people to represent them)-as in England and the United States-is corrupt. "Any law which the people has not ratified in person is void; it is not law at all. The English people believes itself to be free; it is gravely mistaken; it is free only during the election of Members of Parliament; as soon as the Members are elected, the people is enslaved."

- **How were decisions made in the Swiss villages where Rousseau grew up?**
- **What did Rousseau believe is the ideal way of making laws for government?**
- **Give examples from your life where you have participated in decision making like that of a direct democracy.**

Many philosophers during Rousseau's time believed that people must choose to enter into a "contract" (agreement) with society and be ruled by a monarch, or stay outside of society and be free. They believed that only the rule of a monarch would ensure that society is stable and secure. Freedom, for many philosophers, meant chaos or anarchy (no government). In contrast, Rousseau believed that people can be both ruled and free if they rule themselves. He thought that governments should exist on the basis of a democratic "social contract," where people have direct say in the way their society is governed. Only through direct democracy, Rousseau felt, can people's freedom be preserved. While Rousseau believed that all adult males should help make the laws in assemblies, those who administer or carry out the laws (like presidents and prime ministers) can be elected as representatives of the people.

- **In Rousseau's time, what did most philosophers think about freedom?**
- **How did Rousseau's idea differ from theirs?**
  What two parts did Rousseau's ideal government consist of?