

# NLP and the noble nature of J.J. Rousseau

## A philosophical reflection on human nature

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### ***1. Introduction: A provocative question***

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–1778) concept of the **"noble natural being"** is one of the most influential theories in political philosophy. It postulates that humans are inherently good, free, and endowed with a fundamental sense of compassion. It is society, with its institutions and conventions, that corrupts them and alienates them from their original moral core.

For experienced practitioners of **neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)**, this raises a fundamental, even provocative question: Do NLP interventions lead to a free, compassionate being in a person corrupted by social pressure, or do they merely reinforce social conditioning? Do we need programming to become better people, or should we deprogram ourselves to rediscover our authentic, noble core?

In the context of Rousseau, who emphasizes the original freedom of human beings, the word **"programming"** sounds almost like a continuation of social conditioning. Doesn't this raise the question of whether NLP coaches are aware of their ethical responsibility, which goes beyond the mere teaching of self-optimization skills? Isn't the desire for personal development that leads many to NLP a modern manifestation of the spiritual longing for meaning and autonomy? Could the pursuit of a **"better version"** of ourselves be, at its core, the search for the authentic, unspoiled self that Rousseau described?

The following pages will explore the spiritual dimension of these questions. We will examine NLP as a potential path to restoring the Rousseauian ideal and contrast it with the technique of manipulation.

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### ***2. Rousseau's spiritual anthropology: From goodness to corruption***

In his works, Rousseau painted a picture of a primitive human being guided by two instincts: the **"instinct of self-preservation"** and **"sympathy for the suffering of others."** In the state of nature, free from social comparison, humans are at peace with themselves and their environment. However, encounters with other humans and the emergence of society lead to a new instinct, **"self-conceit,"** which is based on comparison and recognition.

According to Rousseau, this self-conceit is the real cause of human depravity. It drives us to constantly compare ourselves with others, to strive for prestige, and to make our happiness dependent on the opinions of others. Rousseau's spirituality is thus a longing for a return to the original unity of the self, free from this

harmful social influence. It is the search for what makes us truly and authentically ourselves before society forces us into a role.

What Rousseau describes as "**philosophical intuition**" is finding remarkable confirmation today in modern **developmental psychology** and neuroscience. Research shows that the free, compassionate human being is not an idealized construct, but a biological reality. Recent studies show that even infants show compassion. They comfort others who are crying or try to help them. This ability is not learned, but seems to be a fundamental human impulse. The discovery of **mirror neurons** offers a neurobiological explanation for Rousseau's concept of innate compassion. These neurons fire not only when we perform an action or experience a feeling ourselves, but also when we observe others doing so. They enable us to empathize with the emotions and intentions of others, as it were, from within—a biological foundation for empathy that is inherent in every human being.

At the same time, as children, we are dependent on the goodwill of our caregivers and cannot survive on our own. That is why we develop an artificial self in early childhood that corresponds as closely as possible to the expectations of those around us. In this way, we try to ensure that we are not rejected by our caregivers and survive. Through observation and **mirroring**, we copy not only walking and talking, but also situational behavior. Through many crises and setbacks, we learn to distance ourselves more and more from our authentic core through what is known as **affective resonance**, until we finally forget it altogether. The instinct for self-preservation drives children to seek as much recognition as possible, even if this means that their innate empathy is pushed into the background. Quite early in their development, children can thus learn that it is not empathy but competition, selfishness, and being right that are the pillars of coexistence. The society that Rousseau considered corrupt not only influences our development, but also determines it to a significant extent.

And this brings us back to NLP: this "**corruption**" manifests itself in the development of dysfunctional mental models and beliefs, which NLP attempts to correct. It is therefore not a question of creating freedom and empathy, but of freeing them from the blockages that society has built up.

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### ***3. NLP: A tool for reinforcing an illusion or for transformation?***

NLP, based on the assumption that "**the map is not the territory**," focuses on the subjective mental models we create of the world. Techniques such as **reframing** or **modeling excellence** aim to change these inner maps in order to communicate more effectively and function better.

This is where the controversy arises: when NLP guides a client to reframe a "negative" belief, is a socially imposed deficiency being corrected? Or is the original nature that may be associated with the belief being suppressed and forced into a socially accepted pattern of behavior? The assumption that "**behind every behavior there is a positive intention**" could be interpreted as an echo of Rousseau's theory—a positive

intention that has been misguided by society. According to this view, NLP would not change human nature, but rather correct the distortions caused by society.

The question of whether NLP programs or deprograms is best illustrated with concrete examples. Here we see how the same tool – in the wrong hands – can contribute to the consolidation of social corruption or, in the right hands, lead to the rediscovery of Rousseau's noble nature.

### *1. NLP as a tool of manipulation: submodal conviction*

This intervention aims to change a person's **internal representations** so that they accept a foreign idea as their own truth. It plays with the sensory perceptions (submodalities) that underlie our beliefs. A belief is neurologically anchored as a strong, multisensory representation. A **submodal change** used manipulatively could anchor a foreign idea as "true" in the neurological system through the conscious use of submodalities (such as brightness, size, proximity).

**Simplified example:** A salesperson wants their customer to buy an expensive, unnecessary product. The customer hesitates because they think it's a bad idea. The internal representation of their belief "I don't need this" may be dark, small, and distant to them. The salesperson begins to describe the product in bright, vibrant colors ("Imagine how shiny and new it will look in your living room!"). He uses words that suggest closeness and importance ("This is absolutely the right decision for you!"). He uses anchors that trigger positive feelings (e.g., a hand movement associated with "success"). By skillfully linking positive submodalities to the product, the salesperson can change the customer's internal representation so that they accept the foreign idea ("I want this product") as their own strong conviction. This does not happen of their own free will, but through manipulation of their internal "map." It reinforces the social pressure to own material goods instead of empowering customers to recognize their true needs.

### *2. NLP as a tool for liberation: the "re-imprinting" model*

This intervention aims to identify and dissolve the original, often painful imprint of a harmful belief system. It enables the person to free themselves from old, socially imposed beliefs that limit their authenticity. The re-imprinting model assumes that problematic behaviors and beliefs often stem from **early imprinting**. It helps the coachee revisit the original situation in order to install **resources** that enable them to make new decisions and change the imprint.

**Simplified example:** A young executive (coachee) feels that she is never good enough, even though she is very successful. She constantly struggles with self-doubt. This belief ("I have to try harder") was instilled in her by an authoritarian father who never showed her any recognition. The coach guides the coachee into a trance state and back to the original situation in which this belief was formed. The coachee recognizes the image of their father criticizing them and feels the sense of inadequacy again. The coach guides the coachee to stand next to their younger self as an adult "with all of their current resources." The adult self can comfort the child self and say, "You are as unique as you are perfect. Life needs you just the way you are." The coachee can now reevaluate the situation and feel what it is like to live without this old belief. The coachee breaks free from the harmful, socially inherited conditioning that originated with their father.

They are not "reprogrammed," but rather freed from old programming. They can now act more autonomously, self-determined, and in harmony with their authentic, noble core.

These examples show the duality of NLP: it is not good or bad, but a tool that can manipulate or liberate depending on the ethical stance of the user.

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#### ***4. The spiritual dimension of integration***

The real spiritual achievement of NLP may lie in its ability to help people rediscover their original, authentic selves. In this context, we define **spirituality** as the search for a meaning in life that goes beyond material success. It should fulfill our human existence, in the spirit of Rousseau, and enable all beings to live together in peace. The resolution of inner conflicts – often described as the restoration of communication between different "parts" of the self – can be interpreted as a return to the spiritual unity and inner coherence that Rousseau saw in the state of nature.

The goal is not to create a "perfect" human being, but a human being who is free from the constraints of self-importance and lives in harmony with their true self. NLP thus becomes a spiritual practice that aims to heal the cracks in the self caused by civilization. It is the practice that reminds us that the resources for our happiness and well-being always lie within ourselves – a thesis that is deeply rooted in both Rousseau and NLP.

An experienced NLP coach could take on the role of a spiritual mentor who does not teach how to achieve more material success, but helps to remove the "masks of society" and bring the true inner nature back to the surface.

The true art of an NLP coach lies not in mastering techniques, but in their attitude. A coach who is aware of the spiritual dimension of their work does not see themselves as a programmer, but as a companion. They help the coachee to **deprogram** themselves from **social conditioning** and find their way back to their authentic, **free, and compassionate nature**. This attitude requires a number of essential ethical and spiritual qualities:

1. An ethical NLP coach has the ability to look beyond the superficial "problems" of the coachee. They sense whether the coachee's desires truly serve their liberation or merely serve to create or improve socially "desirable" behavior.
2. The ethical coach supports the coachee in penetrating the layers of social conditioning in order to recognize their deepest, genuine desires. Through the targeted use of NLP interventions, the hidden, painful aspects of the past can also be worked through, paving the way to an authentic, free nature.

3. An ethical coach is aware of their own conditioning and prejudices, even if they are not aware of all of them. They reflect on whether their attitude and suggested interventions stem from their own social conditioning. They avoid presenting their own values as universal truths.
4. As with Rousseau, it is about respecting the natural pace of human beings. The ethical coach does not push the coachee in a certain direction, but patiently accompanies them on their path of **"deprogramming."** They understand that lasting transformation takes time and must happen in harmony with one's inner nature.

In summary, the ethical NLP coach is less a technician for quick material success and more a spiritual guide. Their task is to support the coachee in shedding the layers imposed by society and reconnecting with their **"noble nature."**

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## ***5. Conclusion and open questions***

In summary, it can be said that NLP and Rousseau's philosophy are not irreconcilable opposites. Rather, NLP can also be used as a **"path back to authentic nature"** that helps us shed the outer layer corrupted by society. NLP is a tool with the potential not to reshape our nature, but to restore it. It helps us recognize that the fulfillment of our deepest longing lies in connection with our authentic self.

However, this also raises new questions that give pause for thought: Can a person who consciously "optimizes" themselves through NLP techniques ever be truly "naive" and "noble" in Rousseau's sense again? Isn't the mere reality that NLP techniques are used unethically the ultimate proof that Rousseau's thesis of a corrupt society is correct?

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