Rousseau and the Problem of Human Relations

Warner, John M.

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This is a study of human relations as they are treated in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is animated by two very basic, but very important, questions: (1) what do we want out of our relationships? and (2) can we get what we are after? I think that if we can find good answers to these questions, we will have made some progress in understanding both ourselves and the social and political worlds we inhabit. And though I will leave to others the somewhat distasteful business of pleading for Rousseau’s relevance to this or that contemporary problem, I think that his answers to these questions are well worth considering. In fact, I am increasingly persuaded that much of his considerable value as a thinker consists in the way he confronts, enriches, and problematizes these central matters: figuring out what it is we want when we turn to other people is no simple matter, and it is, in some sense, even less so after reading Rousseau. But his writings illuminate the hidden dimensions of these mysteries with an unsurpassed power and penetration, and have resonated so strongly with so many readers for so many years that it is difficult to dismiss Rousseau’s analysis of social phenomena as the romantic fancy of an overheated imagination.

Given the importance of the questions guiding this book, it may be fairly wondered whether there is much left to say about them. Few authors are interrogated as frequently as
Rousseau is, and many, if perhaps not all, of the component parts of the argument presented here have been subjected to close, and repeated, scrutiny by other scholars. There are, for instance, many treatments of Rousseau’s understanding of romantic love (e.g., Bloom 1993; Wingrove 2000), and many, many more on his theory of politics (too many, in fact, to cite here). There are some very fine books, and piles of articles, on *amour-propre* (e.g., Dent 1988; O’Hagan 1999; Rawls 2007; Neuhouser 2008), and even a bit of research on his conception of friendship (e.g., Reisert 2003). Yet this is, to my knowledge, the first comprehensive treatment of Rousseau’s theory of human relations. That is to say, I know of no other study that presents a reasonably complete survey of the major forms of human association as they recur in Rousseau’s work, along with a theory that explains both how they are connected and the extent to which they can satisfy the desires to which they give rise. This, then, is what the present volume proposes to do.

I happily grant that it was both a pleasure and a relief to find that this particular set of questions needed more attention, for after a long graduate career spent combing through vast archives of books and articles—pausing only to convince myself that there *must* be something more to say about Rousseau, and then pausing again to worry that there wasn’t—it was a delight not only to find some space in the literature but also to find it precisely where I wanted it to be. The very questions I most wanted to ask of Rousseau, those that his oeuvre seemed to me to be so well-designed to illumine, had still not been put to him, or at least not in quite the way I thought appropriate. Eureka! My first real idea. Maybe I was right not to go to law school.

One other feature of the argument offered here deserves mention: its skeptical or “tragic” character. In my survey of romantic love, friendship, and the political or civil association, I shall be at pains to show how each form of association, whether considered individually or in sum, systematically fails to solve the problem of “dividedness” that I take to be located at the center of Rousseau’s thought (Starobinski 1988). Rousseau’s moral universe is a fragmented and unforgiving place—it is full of costly trade-offs, difficult choices, and frustrated expectations. The margin for error is razor thin, and people pay dearly for the mistakes they inevitably make. Considerations like these lead Rousseau, on my view, to conclude that social life necessarily prevents us from enjoying even a decent approximation of the unity—the feelings of oneness both within ourselves and with our environment—that we have by nature and that full satisfaction requires. This initial
characterization of the argument is very broad, and perhaps too much so, but it is intended merely as a way of fixing ideas.

In emphasizing the skeptical tenor of Rousseau’s social theory, I find myself both in and indebted to very distinguished company. I shall build in various ways on Judith Shklar’s (1969) claim that Rousseau provides two incommensurable and unrealizable utopian visions, on Arthur Melzer’s (1990, 151; 1983) belief that the coherence of Rousseau’s thought cannot be comprehended unless its pessimistic and “hardheaded” character is understood, on Clifford Orwin’s (1997a; 1997b) and Richard Boyd’s (2004) concerns about the ethical limits of compassion, and on Scott Yenor’s (2011) and Allan Bloom’s (1993, 138) worries about the stability of romantic love. The “skeptical” dimension of the interpretation developed here is thus not sui generis. It is, however, far from orthodox and may be viewed as a corrective to any number of influential accounts of Rousseau that paint him, alternatively, as an illiberal Pollyanna (Talmon 1952; Nisbet 1943; Berlin 1990; Crocker 1995), a reasonable optimist looking to effect practical political reform (Rawls 2007; Cohen 2010), or a compatibilist whose domestic and political theories are interdependent aspects of a unified vision of the good life rather than separate, and incommensurable, alternatives (Strong 1994; Fermon 1997; Neuhouser 2008).

A brief word on the structure of argument may clarify its central claims. Chapter 1 is introductory: it explains the problematic at the center of the book, articulates the broad contours of Rousseau’s solution to it, and more thoroughly situates my argument in the relevant literatures. Chapters 2 and 3 make up the first part of the argument proper. They are theoretical and psychological: in them I examine the psychic foundations of Rousseau’s project, with the broad aim of showing both the possibility and indeed the necessity of the more ambitious social and political possibilities that Rousseau sought to establish. To this end I analyze the natural bases of human relations—sexual desire and pity—and show how they (1) enable and delimit specific forms of association like romantic love and friendship, (2) perform assignably different functions within the psychic economies of human beings, and (3) interact in such a way to help correct for each other’s excesses and deficiencies. While sexual passion is the foundation for expansive moral longings, pity helps counteract the forms of antisocial anger that these longings can inspire by reminding us of our own limitations and imperfections. Likewise, we shall see that a moralized psychosexual energy constantly infuses human life with new meaning and fresh purposes, and thereby helps
to offset the resignation and indifference to which an overactive sense of pity can lead. Thus our natural unity is preserved through the proper management of a dynamic *tension* between the developed forms of our social passions.

With this psychological model in tow, I go on to derive from it the specific forms of association—sexual love, friendship, and political association—that Rousseau treats in his oeuvre and to show how each of these associational forms fails to satisfy the requirements of wholeness and are therefore most properly seen as tragic. In chapter 4 my examination of human association proper begins with an analysis of *Emile* and how it discloses the tragic dynamics of sexual love. Chapter 5 pursues the same theme and shows the same dynamics at work in Rousseau’s epistolary novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. In chapter 6 I move on to consider the role of friendship in Rousseau’s social theory and show it to be too anemic to satisfy our deepest social longings. The final two chapters turn to the political association and argue that Rousseau sought, through the creation of a “moral ecology,” to re-create between citizen and state the same harmonious relation that obtains between natural man and his environment. They also argue that even this comprehensive reconstruction of the citizen-subject’s surroundings cannot establish a stable harmony between man and his environment, for it cannot reconcile the demands of the private realm with those of the citizenship. The underlying problem in the just polity—as elsewhere—is the intransigence of natural, individuating self-love, which resists with overwhelming strength all efforts to recruit it for social and political purposes. Indeed, I take the insolubility of the problems posed by the stubborness of self-love to be perhaps the central theme of this book as a whole. Rousseau, for all his strong and persuasive criticisms of reductive modern materialism, was ultimately unable to overcome its limitations. But his ambitious failure—if it can be called a failure—is worth more to us than a modest success would have been, for his analysis of our condition both undermines our comfortable certainties while pointing to the limits of Rousseau’s own critical act.