Rousseau and the Problem of Human Relations

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Nowhere is Rousseau’s effort to expand human possibility through social relations more evident than in his account of romantic love, and nowhere in his oeuvre is this account better worked out than in *Emile*. In this wildly successful treatise-cum-novel Rousseau not only articulates the most comprehensive statement of his intellectual system but also provides a vision of domestic life so attractive that even one of his most codgerly critics has conceded that it “represents a profound understanding of the conditions of a happy marriage” (Orwin 1997a, 6). That “marriage,” of course, is the one between the eponymous hero and his beloved Sophie, who after an extended and very carefully managed courtship are united at the conclusion of the work. In leaving his audience to ponder the ultimate fate of his *beaux amants*, however, there is a significant sense in which Rousseau ends the work precisely where things get interesting, for it is well-known that falling in love is far easier than staying that way. This would seem to be especially true in the context of Rousseau’s own moral universe, where the traps and snares are many and the consequences of falling into them are ruinous.
In order, however, to understand the extent to which we may consider Emile and Sophie’s marriage successful, we must be able to answer a still-more-fundamental question: what would count as a success? We need to know what ends the marital relation is supposed to realize before we can know how effectively it realizes them. With this in mind, I propose that Rousseauan marriage is designed to directly instantiate the human good through the limit experience of romantic love and the creation of a comprehensive form of social incorporation. The nature of moral love is such that the union created in and through marriage is and must be an erotic fusion of souls, a joining of “two into one” (E 479). Any romantic relation that demands less disrespects the expansive character of human being by truncating the healthy growth of the passions and, thereby, compromising the experience of the human good. This argument will build in particular on the conception of moralized sexuality articulated in chapter 2 and show its pedagogic relevance in the context of Emile’s education, but it will also reintroduce and further develop the account of wholeness that was introduced in chapter 1.

In developing this account, a more detailed engagement with secondary scholarship concerning both the function of the marital relation and its role in Emile’s education is unavoidable, for though Emile has (after long neglect) become central to Rousseau interpretation there remain serious questions regarding both its basic meaning and broader significance. Judith Shklar (1969) structured what is now the most important controversy among readers of Emile by calling attention to Rousseau’s distinction between “men” and “citizens” and by arguing that the eponymous hero’s education was intended primarily to preserve his natural independence and, thereby, to create a “man.” Scholars as diverse as Okin (1979), Cassirer (1989), Melzer (1990), Todorov (2001), and Gauthier (2006) have articulated some variant of this hypothesis and consequently tend to view Emile as a detached cosmopolitan rather than a fully incorporated social subject. A second wave of research, however, has noted the deeply social character of Emile’s education, and has attended to the ways in which it prepares him for incorporation into a political community (Bloom 1979; Strong 1994; Wingrove 2000; Neuhouser 2008). Whatever their disagreements, these scholars are unanimous in their rejection of Shklar’s claim that the educations of “men” and “citizens” are incommensurable alternatives and in their insistence that Emile’s education is successful only to the degree that his experiences as human
being and political subject are compatible. In arguing thus many scholars have emphasized the political functions of marriage, holding that its significance is in its creation of an autarchic household that catalyzes allegiance to the regime. The important fact about the family is its role as an agent—the agent—of political socialization. This understanding of Emile has provided cause both for celebrating Rousseau’s teaching (e.g., Schwartz 1984) and for censuring it (e.g., Fermon 1997), but what unites these approaches is their viewing sexual union as preparation for what it is really important: citizenship.

Though such claims improve on independence-focused interpretations by calling attention to the social-sexual character of Emile’s education, they also obscure much of what is interesting in Rousseau’s treatment of marriage by viewing it as a tool of political socialization rather than a direct instantiation of the human good. My more “domestic” reading is amply substantiated by Rousseau’s strong and continued emphasis on the sexual passion, and what we will see below is that it is also confirmed by the specific way in which Jean-Jacques directs Emile and his beloved Sophie to incorporate into political society. The regime Emile chooses for his family is not and would not be the one outlined in the Social Contract, but rather one that makes far less stringent demands on his time and attention. Emile does not have the specifically civic virtue of the citizen, but the acquisition of virtue in a different and more universal form is of the first moment for his education. The development of the sexual passion, it is important to add, is central to this education in virtue: the moralization of this passion facilitates Emile’s universal benevolence and moral taste by facilitating consciousness of the beloved’s moral character. In arguing thus, I depart from Bloom (1993, 108), who neglects the moralizing dimension of love, and Reisert (2003, 80), who views sexuality as a “threat” to virtue.

It is in light of the foregoing that we may return to the question of whether the pedagogic plan laid out for Emile actually works. Does love-through-marriage obtain for Emile the comprehensive satisfaction—the natural wholeness and the social connectedness—that he so desires? Unfortunately, I believe we must answer this question in the negative. Perhaps more troublingly, we must do so because of Rousseau’s own understanding of love: he makes love a creature of the imagination, but the necessary disproportion between Emile’s imagination of Sophie and the girl herself ultimately serves to undermine their love. So, too, does the sexual act pale in
comparison with the imagination of it, with the result that the very consum-
mation of a romantic relationship initiates its decay. Thus *Emile*, which
works through a marriage’s “best case,” nonetheless enacts a tragic concep-
tion of romantic love whose ultimate consequences are spelled out in *Emile and Sophie*, an unfinished and posthumously published sequel to *Emile*.

Though this tragic interpretation of *Emile* is significant in its own right, it can be wondered what implications it has for Rousseau’s more general political theory. Though I will delay full consideration of this question until chapter 8, I shall conclude this chapter by making some suggestions about how the failure of Emile’s education might be reproduced in the political realm, and why the limits exposed within *Emile* may have consequences for the political world outside of it.

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**Men, Citizens, and Rousseau’s “Double Object”**

At the beginning of *Emile* (41), Rousseau posits a “double object” which is to serve as the end or purpose of his pupil’s education: “What will a man raised uniquely for himself be for others? If per chance the double object we set for ourselves could be joined in a single one by removing the contradictions of man, a great obstacle to his happiness would be removed.” In order for Emile’s education to be a success, he must learn to be both good for himself and for others. This means he must be (1) civilized, which is to say that he has social relations and all the moral and intellectual capacities these relations imply, and (2) natural, which is to say that his social relations have not corrupted his native goodness. Rousseau, however, stacks the deck against the realization of this dual objective by assuming a contradiction between civilization and nature. On his account, we are “swept along in contrary routes by nature and by men” and our educations reinforce rather than resolve our divided state. The consequence is that we live “in conflict and floating during the whole course of our lives” and die “without having been good for ourselves or for others” (41). Resolving the contradictions between self and other, between nature and society, is no easy task. To this end we must make an important choice: we must create a “man” or a “citizen,” because it is impossible to simultaneously create both (39, 41).

Though it is clear up front that Emile must be a man or a citizen, there is some ambiguity about which he ultimately becomes. Secondary scholar-
ship is divided on this score, with scholars interpreting Rousseau’s equivocation in two primary, but only partially adequate, ways. One interpretation pioneered by Shklar (1969) tends to make Emile a “man” whose education is designed to protect him from the scourge of personal dependence. Gauthier (2006, 33) succinctly summarizes this view: “Emile is to be raised for independence.” Okin (1979, 407) articulates a similar interpretation in the context of a feminist critique of Emile: “Rousseau’s prescribed education for Sophie is in total contrast with that prescribed for Emile, who is to be as independent . . . as possible.” Arthur Melzer joins the chorus, claiming personal dependence is the “true villain of Rousseau’s analysis” and arguing on Rousseau’s behalf that “all personal dependence, all social power . . . is self-contradictory and enslaving” (1990, 70n, 74). He goes on to explain that, once ensconced in rustic repose, the happy lovers are “protected . . . from the need to depend on others” (93). Melzer fails, however, to note not only that Emile and Sophie must incorporate into political society and are therefore not free of “the need to depend on others,” but also that they must still depend on each other in a profoundly personal way. Thus, to emphasize the dangers of personal dependence is also to obscure a very important aspect of Emile, namely, that Jean-Jacques turns to a specifically personal form of dependence—sexual or romantic love—in order to realize his double object. If this task is to be completed, Emile’s intellectual and affective capacities must find expression in a meaningful and lasting form of association.

If escaping the perils of deep interdependence were truly the aim of Emile, Rousseau would not have needed to write Books IV and V of the work. At age fifteen Emile knows how to “live free and depend little on human things,” and he possesses all the “virtue . . . that relates to himself” (E 208). Yet such independence is merely a prelude to a larger and more complex pedagogic task: “This [the onset of amour-propre] is the second birth of which I have spoken. It is now that man is truly born to life and now that nothing human in foreign to him. Up to now our care has only been a child’s game. It takes on true importance at present. This period, where ordinary education ends, is properly the one where ours ought to begin” (212). Emile’s tutelage thus does not take on “true importance” until it is time to make him part of a larger social whole. In order to call his education a success, he must be connected to others in some meaningful way.

But what form should that connectedness ultimately take? A diverse group of scholars more sensitive to both prongs of the “double object” claim
that Emile's political relationships are the ones of ultimate importance. On this view, Emile's highest and best capacities find expression in the experience of citizenship. Strong (1994, 138) explains that Emile's final perfection “requires and will generate, come what may, a political society . . . that which makes him human requires that he be a citizen.” Frederick Neuhouser (2008, 23) echoes this sentiment, arguing that Emile's education “produces individuals who in the end can assume the role of citizen . . . in a manner consistent with . . . being a man.” Bloom, too, emphasizes the political character of Emile by noting that its pedagogy serves as “the outline for a possible bridge between the particular and the general will” and thereby prepares human beings for “the most comprehensive human order, political society” (Bloom 1979, 27). Jean-Jacques's task is thus not an effort to make a man or a citizen but a man and a citizen. The most influential—and the most compelling—attempts to build this “bridge” use sexuality as the primary means of doing so. On this view, the sexual relationship is significant because it prepares individuals for full incorporation into political society. Thus we are led to view Emile's romantic relation to Sophie as preparatory for the higher calling of politics. On this score, Schwartz (1984, 97, 70) observes that because “men are sexual, they must as a consequence be political” and concludes that “romantic love is less exalted than . . . patriotism.” Wingrove (2000, 61) makes a similar claim, arguing that Emile's and Sophie's relationship discloses the endogeneity of politics and sexuality: “Emile and Sophie enact a political relationship that is not just like (or even not much like) Rousseau's democratic republicanism, but that is continuous with it.” In these accounts and others, the political is the axis on which Emile's world turns.

These “political” interpretations of Emile improve on their predecessors by acknowledging the importance of the social and political dimensions of Emile's education and pointing to the importance of the sexual passion as a catalyst of sociability. Yet in order to read the sexual teaching of Emile into the republican political program of the Social Contract, it is necessary to attribute to Rousseau understandings of politics and citizenship that he actively resists. He holds that true civic education is neither available to nor appropriate for his young charge, arguing that “public instruction” requires the exchange of one's “absolute existence” for “a relative one . . . with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole” (E 40; cf. SC II.7). Rousseau's desubjectivized citizen is defined by his social position and his rela-
tionship to political society. If he abandons his role as a citizen then “he is no longer fit for anything” (E 41).

Emile, in contrast to the citizen, has neither a particular social station nor a fatherland (E 40, 466, 473). Even at the end of his formal political education he makes cosmopolitan pronouncements that would confuse and infuriate any decent Spartan or Roman: “Rich or poor, I shall be free. I shall not be free in this or that land, in this or that region. I shall be free everywhere on earth . . . wherever there are men, I am at the home of my brothers; wherever there are no men, I am in my own home” (472). Unlike the citizen, who is rudderless without his patrie, Emile has the intellectual and moral dexterity to occupy any number of social positions. “Let,” writes Rousseau, “my student be destined for the sword, the church, the bar. I do not care. Prior to the calling of his parents is nature’s call to human life. Living is the job I want to teach him” (41). This is not to deny that Emile could find within himself a general will, for as Rousseau (SC II.3, 61) reminds us, a will can be general with respect to one’s family while being particular with respect to his state; it is, rather, to deny that such a will must be general at the level of political society in order to call his education a success.

Indeed, by the time Emile and his tutor come to the study of politics, the proverbial heavy lifting has already been done. The crash course in politics does not add to Emile’s happiness so much as it secures the happiness he has already won. Thus, unlike “the Lacedaemonian Pedaretus”—that paragon of citizenship whose “sincere” love of patrie consoled him after losing an election—Emile knows enough not to run for office in the first place: “If we were kings and were wise, the first thing that we would want to do for ourselves and others would be to abdicate our royal position and become again what we are” (E 40, 467). Attaining a position in the government would be harmful both for the young man and for others, and thus cannot satisfy the double object in the context of Emile’s education. It is therefore unsurprising to see Jean-Jacques give his political instruction a decidedly apolitical end: “Let us consecrate the two years until your return to choosing an abode in Europe where you can live happily with your family, sheltered from all the dangers of which I have just spoken to you” (457; emphasis added). Emile’s travels, and the political education that is their fruit, are devoted to the domestic purpose of finding a regime that will leave Emile and his beloved to their conjugal bliss. He wants a regime from which he can effectively “shelter” himself, not one that demands his presence in the assembly. The best
regime absolutely is thus not the best regime for Emile. He is not committed to the regime he chooses; rather, he chooses the regime he does because it requires no commitment.

To the degree that Emile is committed to his regime, one sees through the attenuated relation he has to his political society that the basis of that commitment bears little resemblance to that of “the citizen” as Rousseau conceives him. Though Jean-Jacques tells Emile to “leave everything” if the state calls him to service, it is still true that Emile, like Plato’s philosopher-king, must be compelled by others to join in the tumults of the assembly (E 475). Because Emile knows he will not find happiness in the shadows of the just, his tutor gives him a very circumscribed conception of the common good, one that is consistent with his duties to man qua man but inconsistent with the requirements of “citizenship” as Rousseau understands the term. Emile’s political duty is to “vivify the country and reanimate the zeal of the unfortunate village folk” (474). However, his benevolent treatment of an injured peasant he encounters on the road while traveling to see Sophie shows he is satisfying these requirements well before he knows anything about politics proper. The kindness Emile shows in this instance is certainly a kind of service to the common good, but it is motivated less by the partial sentiments of citizenship than by a respect for the “rights of humanity” (441). Such cosmopolitan considerations are alien to the citizen, who is immediately motivated by his specifically civic duty. Unlike the citizen, who does good to friends and harm to enemies, Emile’s first and most important duty is to hurt no one (39, 445). Of Emile, then, it seems correct to say that he will live in a political society but will not be constituted by it, and that he will be happy despite politics rather than because of them.

Our examination of the relevant scholarly literature has left us with a puzzle of sorts. It shows that the individualistic line of interpretation pioneered by Judith Shklar is deficient in signal respects, but it also reveals that the more “social” readings of Tracy Strong and others suffer from no less serious defects. Thus the literature points to the need for connectedness, but it points in the wrong direction. In the next section I argue that Rousseau turns to romantic love in order to satisfy the double object. In doing so, he prepares his pupil not for a life of independence or republican politics but rather for a life of domestic repose, one that entails complete—and completely personal—dependence on his beloved Sophie.
Beyond Men and Citizens: Rousseau’s Sex Education

We have so far seen that Emile’s education is designed to incorporate the other in a way that is consistent with the requirements of natural self-love, and that neither independence nor citizenship gives answer to these dual requirements in a satisfactory way. So, too, have we seen in earlier chapters that Rousseau also rejects the instrumental approach of Hobbes and Locke, whose appeals to narrow self-interest generate only a mercenary virtue that “gives an egg to have a cow” (E 103). The self-serving sociability of the bourgeois clearly will not do. But what will?

Many have found in the sexual passion a way of grounding the robust and enduring associations that Rousseau sought to depict in and effect through his writing. Bloom (1993, 108), for instance, has claimed that the sexual component of Emile’s education is reminiscent of Aristophanes’s characterization of eros in Plato’s Symposium: “Rousseau presents in all seriousness what Aristophanes presents half-jokingly . . . that is, that love is the quest for one’s other half which, once found, restores the lovers to perfect wholeness.” This parallel is somewhat useful, as it both calls attention to the sexual-social character of Emile’s rearing and reveals the comprehensiveness of the communion he hoped to construct on that basis. Emile and Sophie are not seeking mere mates but—like the Rousseau of the Confessions—are looking for their “other half” (E 479, see also 377). However, Rousseau departs from Aristophanes’s amoral and nonhierarchical conception of eros-as-wholeness, arguing instead that sexuality is inherently moralizing and moralistic. Considerations of virtue, far from being irrelevant as they are for Aristophanes, are instead essential to the process of erotic recognition and attraction. Thus when Jean-Jacques puts an imaginary object of desire—“Sophie”—in Emile’s mind, his purpose is to unify the processes of sexual and moral maturation and to show how ethical criteria are necessary to identify one’s “other half.” Emile’s Sophie, whoever she is, must be physically and morally beautiful.

Emile’s turn to sexual desire should not be at all surprising, for we have already seen in Rousseau’s distinction between “physical” and “moral” forms of love the profound psychological and moral power he gives to the phenomenon of exclusive romantic recognition. And it is precisely because amour-propre expresses itself so strongly in the romantic situation that Rousseau identifies sexual desire as both the most promising and the most dangerous
socializing force in the human soul. Though the dangers of moral love are laid bare in the *Discourse on Inequality*, these are not viewed as a reason to consign sex education to the margins of Emile’s pedagogy. To the contrary, the perils of sexuality are the best reasons imaginable for putting it front and center. Thus Emile’s healing education is distinguished by the degree and the kind of attention it gives to this most fundamental want: “We are given treatises on education consisting of useless, pedantic, bloated verbiage . . . and we are not told a word about the most important and most difficult part of the whole education—the crisis that serves as a passage from childhood to man’s estate. If I have been able to make these essays useful in some respect, it is especially by having expanded at great length on this essential part, omitted by all others” (*E* 416). Sexual education is the “most important” and “most difficult” part of human education, and Rousseau believes his *Emile* to be “especially” useful because of the priority it assigns to this neglected topic. We should thus not be surprised when the narrative expands “at great length” about the sex education that Emile receives, or when Jean-Jacques makes the search for a suitable mate the end of his pupil’s education. This quest commences in Book IV, which begins with a dramatic flourish: “How rapid is our journey on this earth! The first quarter of life has been lived before one knows the use of it” (211). The next paragraph makes it quite clear what the “use” of life really is: “We are, so to speak, born twice: once to exist and once to live; once for our species and once for our sex.” The onset of sexual passion is a “second birth” that enables the development of Emile’s social consciousness and makes him available (susceptible?) to the charms of intimacy.

Though the explosive compound of *amour-propre* and nascent sexuality threatens to unhinge him as an adult (*E* 212), these are risks that can and indeed *must* be run. If the onset of sexual passion costs Emile his childish felicity, it promises to compensate him with something far greater. Sexual desire does not just signal a transition to a new phase of life but instead constitutes the call to *life itself*: “This is the second birth of which I have spoken. It is now that man is truly born to life and now that *nothing human is truly foreign to him*” (212; emphasis added). Before he felt the pull of sexual attraction, Emile “breathed” but did not “live”; he had not yet “felt life” (42). But through exclusive romantic union with Sophie, Emile will gain access not only to the most intense happiness available to him (447) but also to knowledge of his true nature: because it is only through love that “*nothing human [can be] foreign to him,*” love is Emile’s guide in the Delphic quest
for self-knowledge. For Rousseau as for Plato, the erotic leads unawares to the point of philosophy. Rather than teach Emile to pursue philosophy as a way of life, however, Rousseau sexualizes the human good itself. The experience of romantic love therefore serves as something of a *Finis Ultimus* for Emile: through it, he might learn not only how to be good for Sophie but also how to be good for himself in a self-conscious and existentially enriched way (447). Yet Rousseau’s own conception of love problematizes the realization of these pedagogic objectives. The very intensity of the sexual passions makes them difficult to educate, and Rousseau, foreshadowing a tragic end, comments at several places that any small misstep could derail the entire education (e.g., 212, 416).

### The Dynamics of Romantic Love: An Erotic Tragedy?

Rousseau’s teaching on romantic love reflects his ambiguous position within the history of political thought. Though the seriousness with which Rousseau treats the phenomenon of human connectedness in its various forms is more redolent of classical than modern thought, the psychological assumptions he adopts are far closer to those of his modern forebears (Strauss 1953, 252–55). Thus, while Rousseau took the human desire for “intimate society” more seriously than did, say, Hobbes or Locke, his insistence on man’s natural asociability is correspondingly more trenchant. How, then, to account for our deepest social longings? The treatment of sexuality in the previous section provides part of the answer, but it remains to elaborate more fully the psychology of romantic love and to assess its robustness. On this score, the mechanism of interest is the *imagination*: love, Rousseau tells us, is a “sweet illusion” that has its basis in the imagination rather than in nature. The issue is whether love thus understood can forge a durable bond between Emile and his beloved. Though the work’s end suggests an affirmative answer, Rousseau’s own treatment of romantic love indicates otherwise (see also Bloom 1993, 137; Gauthier 2006, 44–47).

Rousseau tells us repeatedly and explicitly in *Emile* that love is imaginary rather than real. It exists only to the degree that our imaginations are active: “What is true love itself if it is not chimera, lie, and illusion?” (*E* 329). Even more pointedly, Rousseau observes that with love, “everything is only illusion. I admit it. But what is real are the sentiments for the truly beautiful with which love animates us and which it makes us love. This beauty is not...
in the object one loves; it is the work of our errors” (391). The connectedness that love makes possible is thus founded on a kind of stupidity, but it is a tremendously ennobling kind of stupidity: it “suffuses our hearts with all the virtues” that we blindly attribute to our beloved, and refines that “sensual and coarse passion” which bewilders and tortures civilized man. The prospect of loving and of being loved ennobles us by providing new and delicious inducements to self-perfection: “How many great things could be done by means of this [sexual] motive if one knew how to set it in motion!” (390). The connection between love and virtue is strong.

Yet treating love as a product of the imagination ultimately circumscribes its possibilities quite narrowly, and Rousseau discloses these limits in the most telling way. Emile’s natural sexual drive is indiscriminate, so his sex education seeks less to suppress his nascent passion than to channel it upward. It is about the cultivation of taste, not the repression of desire. To this end, Jean-Jacques inflames Emile’s imagination by putting in his mind a “model of perfection” endowed with all the distinctively female virtues, and he attaches the name “Sophie” to it. This imaginary model is designed to fix Emile’s desires on a single object and to make him “disgusted” with those who do not measure up to it: “It suffices that he everywhere find comparisons which make him prefer his chimera to the real objects which strike his eye” (E 329). The immediate purpose of providing Emile with this model is to protect him from the lubricious coos of salacious Parisian ladies. Rousseau knows how dangerous a young man’s introduction into civil society is, and Emile must be made to see the lascivious but empty charms of the parlor for what they are. The solution to this problem, however, seems rather too effective: won’t the real Sophie, no matter how considerable her virtue, also suffer by comparison with Emile’s imaginary version of her?

Anticipating the objection, Rousseau claims that “it is unimportant whether the object I depict for him is imaginary” because “we love the image we make for ourselves far more than we love the object to which we apply it” (E 329). Yet he reveals the importance of the fact that Emile’s “model” is imaginary in the very act of downplaying its significance: “If we saw what we love exactly as it is, there would be no more love on earth. When we stop loving, the person we loved remains the same as before, but we no longer see her in the same way. The magic veil drops, and love disappears.” Intimacy is highly injurious to illusion, and a stubbornly imperfect reality erodes even the most powerful psychological projections. When we stop loving, it is
partially due to the disproportion between our perfect standard and our imperfect beloved.

Rousseau exposes this disproportion and its troubling implications at the moment Emile is introduced to Sophie: “At the name Sophie, you would have seen Emile shiver. Struck by so dear a name, he is wakened with a start and casts an avid glance at the girl who dares to bear it. ‘Sophie, O Sophie! Is it you whom my heart seeks? Is it you whom my heart loves?’” (E 414). In a state of deep anxiety, Emile goes on to compare Sophie’s every feature to those possessed by his imaginary beloved, concerned that “if my heart yields and I am mistaken, then I shall never recover in all my days” (415). Of course, Emile is and must be mistaken: Sophie is not and cannot be the Sophie who exists in his imagination. But he nonetheless “surrenders” as soon as he hears her speak: “It is Sophie. He no longer doubts it. If it were not she, it would be too late for him to turn back.” Emile proceeds to “swallow with deep draughts the poison with which she intoxicates him,” and in that instant he bids farewell to his naïve independence. Emile now suffers from a new kind of naïveté: he is desperately in love with a girl to whom he has not even spoken. The reader, however, has been warned. We know that the Sophie Emile sees is patently not the one he dreamed up and that it is most assuredly “too late for him to turn back.” In emphasizing the importance of Emile’s initial encounter with Sophie I follow Rousseau himself, who cautions us not to regard his detailed depiction of this event as a “frivolous game.” Those who ignore his warning fail to see “that a first impression as lively as that of love . . . has distant effects whose links are not perceived in the progress of the years but do not cease to act until death.” Read in light of Rousseau’s intimation that Emile’s first encounter with Sophie is more troublesome than initial appearances suggest, such observations give us reason to regard the apparently happy ending of the *Emile* with some suspicion: if the “effects” of first impressions can remain latent for years, then there is no good reason to believe that they have been fully disclosed at the end of the *Emile*, or that the marriage according to nature will proceed and grow as happily as it began.

In addition to the disproportion that exists between the perfect model and the imperfect beloved, we find a similar gap between anticipating consummation and the act itself. Sex pales in comparison with the imagination of it: the “supreme happiness” of consummation is “a hundred times sweeter to hope for than to obtain. One enjoys it better when one looks forward to it than when one tastes it.” Indeed, during the courting phase Emile is “as
happy as a man can be.” Unfortunately, the pleasure of imagining consummation and the pleasure of engaging in it cannot be combined: “The whole value of life is in the felicity that he tastes. What [before consummation] can be added to his happiness? Look, consider, imagine what he still needs that can accord with what he has. He enjoys all the goods that can be obtained at once. None can be added except at the expense of another.” The sexual act itself, then, can only come at the “expense” of the extraordinary felicity provided by imagining it. The consummation of a romantic relationship initiates its decay. Jean-Jacques, cognizant of all this, vows not to “shorten this happy time in your life. I shall spin out its enchantment for you. I shall prolong it as much as possible. Alas, it has to end, and end soon. But I shall make it last forever in your memory and make you never repent having tasted it” (E 419; emphasis added).

Emile and Sophie, unaware of the possibility that they would ever “repent” anything, blissfully abandon themselves to their shared illusions. Jean-Jacques does not (yet) explain the nature of love to his pupil and his beloved, allowing them to enjoy “the most charming delirium that human souls have ever experienced” (E 426). He has good reasons for withholding this lesson: though love is an illusion, to experience it as an illusion is to cheapen the experience itself. To make love an abstract phenomenon to be dissected and apprehended through reason, rather than a sentiment to be felt and enjoyed, is to prematurely decrease its appeal. We must be deceived fully in order to love fully (see Bloom 1993, 91, 113). Jean-Jacques knows that to understand love is to sacrifice it, but yet again Rousseau the author has informed the reader in ways that Jean-Jacques the tutor has not informed his pupil (E 426). He even invites us, informed in ways that Emile and Sophie are not, to let our imaginations “wander without constraint” in contemplating the fate of “two young lovers who . . . are untroubled as they yield themselves to the sweet illusion delighting them” (424). The reader who does so carefully must surely be struck that the source of their profound delight cannot endure.

Jean-Jacques does eventually inform Emile that his delirium cannot last. Before they leave Sophie and begin their extended travels, Jean-Jacques speaks forcefully to him about the nature and scope of love: “Before tasting the pleasure of life, you have exhausted its happiness. There is nothing beyond what you have felt. . . . You have enjoyed more from hope than you will ever enjoy in reality. Imagination adorns what one desires but abandons it when it is in one’s possession . . . if nothing changes from without, the heart changes.
Happiness leaves us, or we leave it” (*E* 447). Rousseau finally tells Emile what the reader has long known. Romantic love begins to decay the moment it is consummated, and nothing can reverse this process once it has begun. Jean-Jacques’s impassioned discourse does not take hold, however, and he finds it necessary to again inform Emile—this time very unceremoniously—of the unsustainability of his love for Sophie. He reminds the lovers on their wedding day that their bond “can only become weaker,” and he adds that the only way to extend their mutual attraction over the whole course of life is to disjoin obligation and love (475–76). Unfairly but unavoidably, the responsibility of managing love’s first fires falls to Sophie, who is informed (in confidence) that shared pleasure is necessary but not sufficient to make the marriage endure: since “enjoyment wears out pleasure,” the only way to extend the marriage is to “make her favors rare and precious.” However, not even the most artful coquetry can prevent the inevitable decay of love, and the resulting void must be filled with the consolations—however partial—provided by friendship and the “sweet habit” of conjugal solicitude (479).

Because Rousseau never enters into the psychological particulars of how the transition from love to friendship occurs, it is difficult to know whether these compensations will be sufficient to console the young lovers in their loss. Yet Rousseau’s own moral psychology suggests that such a transition will be more difficult than Jean-Jacques lets on. Rousseau grounds his conception of friendship in pity (*DI* 131; cf. Reisert 2003, 78–85), but Rousseauan pity possesses conceptual features that ultimately tend to work against the kind of connectedness that Jean-Jacques seeks to effect. Though his ultimate aim is to fuse Emile and Sophie into a single organic unity (*E* 479), Rousseauan pity requires the existence of two discrete persons. We pity others both because we know we are not exempt from the sufferer’s ills but also because we delight in the fact that we do not suffer (223–24). Pity thus unites us with others while recognizing the imperfect and attenuated nature of that union. Pity, and by extension friendship, would thus seem ill suited to sustain Jean-Jacques’s hope of uniting Emile and Sophie into a single “moral person” (377), for the individuation required by pity violates Rousseau’s own conception of a healthy gendered relationship. The transition from love to friendship—a journey Emile and Sophie must make in order to stay together—thus appears to be more difficult than initial appearances suggest.

The work concludes with Emile informing Jean-Jacques that Sophie is pregnant and requesting that he be involved in the rearing of their child: “My master, congratulate your child. He hopes soon to have the honor of
being a father. . . . But remain the master of young masters. As long as I live I shall need you. I need you more than ever now that my functions as a man begin. You have fulfilled yours. Guide me so that I can imitate you. And take your rest. It is time” (E 480). Emile’s curious request recalls the creation language in Genesis 2:2: both God and Jean-Jacques “take their rest” while remaining intimately involved with their respective creations. When read in light of Rousseau’s previous remarks about the sustainability of romantic love, the biblical analogy seems to hold: Rousseau’s creation story, like the Bible’s, suggests that a fall is imminent.

Fallen Man (and Citizen): The Perils of Social Incorporation

Provided that the end of Emile does not augur well, we should not be surprised that Rousseau provides an account of “the fall” consistent with his belief in man’s natural goodness in Emile and Sophie, the unfinished and posthumously published sequel to Emile. In this work Emile and his beloved move to Paris following the deaths of their child and her parents, and Sophie, coaxed by Emile’s flagging romantic attentions, has an affair with another man and becomes pregnant with his child. Driven to hysteria by the news, Emile abandons his family and, following a series of bizarre, almost picaresque adventures, finds himself alone in the world. This tragic end was foreshadowed in Emile, for it was brought on by precisely what Jean-Jacques warned of: the waning of Emile’s sexual passions. Indeed, we find in the sequel that not even Sophie’s virtuous coquetry could stoke the flames of imagination: “This was no longer the time when my heated imagination was looking for Sophie, and rejected everything else. I was no longer looking for her, I possessed her, and her charm now served to embellish these objects of affect, as much as it had disfigured them in early youth. But soon these same objects dulled my desires by diffusing them. Worn out little by little by all these frivolous pursuits, my heart was imperceptibly losing its early resilience and was becoming incapable of warmth and vigor” (ES 202). The cooling of Emile’s passions leads, inevitably and necessarily, to a process of decline that reaches its nadir in Sophie’s dramatic confession of her unfaithfulness.

This tragic decline was undoubtedly accelerated by the questionable choice to move to Paris, a decision that not only sped up the process of decay but also magnified the severity of its effects. In explaining his strange choice to move his family to the seventh circle of Rousseau’s moral universe, Emile
refers vaguely to “business” he had in the capital but adds that his primary motive was to provide a change of scenery that might help Sophie recover. This explanation is manifestly unpersuasive, for one does not rehabilitate an ailing spouse by moving to Gomorrah. A more compelling alternative—one that explains both Emile’s decision to move to Paris as well as his diminished desire for Sophie—is boredom. Though he was under no obligation to go to Paris and knew from experience to stay away, he moved there anyway and, once there, wasted no time in making the acquaintances of “too attractive liaisons” that isolated him from his wife and encouraged her infidelity (ES 202–3). Emile, it would seem, was unhappy in the country and needed sexual and social stimulation that his wife could no longer provide. We may blame Paris, but only for accelerating a process that was already well under way.

This interpretation of the decision to move to Paris helps point up the broader problems with both of the strategies of social incorporation that are available to Emile and Sophie. The strategy of isolation proves ineffective: left to each other in rustic repose, life becomes intolerably boring after romantic illusions are undermined by the harsh realities of running a domicile. However, integration into a larger political community also poses decisive problems. In Paris, indeed in any large political society, the problems come both from within and from without: couples must worry not only about sustaining the fragile illusions that enable their collective happiness but also about protecting themselves from the chaotic swirl of social forces that threaten their bond. We know, of course, that the City of Light is especially deadly to good morals, but it is distinguished from other communities not by the fact that it corrupts but rather by the speed with which it does so. The move to Paris thus leads us to the melancholy insight that neither the isolated nor the integrated household can endure. One cannot be a part or apart.

Bad luck also clearly affected Emile and Sophie’s prospects for a happy life, but the decisive role accorded to accident speaks directly to the fragility of Emile’s pedagogic project. In order to endure, love must descend from the “celestial regions” to terra firma, it must survive the journey from the perfect imagination to the imperfect real world. Surviving such a descent requires a robustness and solidity that Emile and Sophie possess individually without sharing in tandem. Their misfortunes—even those not directly related to Emile’s dwindling desires—serve to underscore the fragility of their union. Human love is simply too frail to survive sustained exposure to the vicissitudes of fortune. Its maintenance requires either extreme good luck or the
perpetual interventions of an omniscient tutor. The happiness enjoyed by men of goodwill but of average abilities is never secure; the world is too great, too strong, and too complex formiddling natures. They, or rather we, require a kind of assistance that cannot be reasonably expected and that, even when obtained, proves insufficient. This is the teaching of Emile.

Why Cast the Tragic Veil?

The disquieting conclusion I have just found in Emile is, while discernible from the surface teaching, nonetheless not the work’s surface teaching and even appears to contradict its surface teaching. Thus it is necessary to ask what reasons Rousseau would have for veiling the tragic character of his great bildungsroman. At least part of the answer is contained in his very choice of literary form: in choosing to write an educational novel Rousseau not only describes but enacts the educational process depicted in the work (Scott 2012). Insofar as readers are provided with an account of the development of their own passions that reveals their own natural goodness and are given “models of perfection” to which they may compare themselves and one another, they are themselves treated to a Rousseauan education no less than Emile and Sophie are. The imaginary pupils Rousseau presents to our understanding do much to expose the emptiness of bourgeois social life and to enlarge our sense of social possibility, and in so doing they seize control of the reader’s moral imagination in the same way that the idea “Sophie” did for Emile and the fictional Telemachus did for Sophie.

The fact that such images ultimately prove problematic for both of the happy lovers is doubtless worrisome for the careful reader, but not decisively so, for he knows that the noble failure embodied by Emile and Sophie’s imaginary romance is more meaningful than the hollow success achieved by more conventional understandings of love and marriage. It is nobler because it points corrupt readers—and all of us are corrupt—in the direction of virtue and away from the morally destructive individualism of Hobbes. To this end Rousseau simultaneously flatters and elevates our romantic hopes. His romance shows us how the desire for love arouses the desire to be lovable and hence the desire to be virtuous. Emile and Sophie find what is best in themselves through each other, and their touching example—even if it fails to endure—is for that reason worthy of genuine admiration. They are not a perfect template for the reformation of domestic life, but they remind us all
of what is highest and best in us and in so doing provide a much-needed form of moral guidance.

Yet after all this has been said, we must acknowledge that this is something of a consolation prize. More attentive readers—ones with “the courage to begin again”—also see Rousseau's quiet confirmation of the very individualism he is criticizing (DI 98). While the experience of love is salutary because it is conducive to the development of individual virtue, it nonetheless fails to establish the affective basis for lasting human community; to make virtue the final reward of love is to replace a public or shared good with a private one. *Emile* sought to establish a kind of reciprocal governance between persons but in the end established it within them. Neither Emile nor Sophie ever became fully sociable in the way that the double object required; they loved their perfect images, not the imperfect other. In loving thus they became unwitting instruments of each other's private moral improvement, but they failed to ever love each other as others. Love thus emerges from *Emile* both as a futile aspiration and as our “last best hope” in the quest to preserve our natural wholeness. It shows that there is no going back to the state of nature, but also that there can be no final reconciliation of the natural and the social. The decisive and even tragic difficulties to which romantic love is subject would thus appear to have serious consequences for how we understand Rousseau's broader social and political theory. Though it will not be until chapter 8 that I articulate a model of domestic life that would be appropriate for Rousseau's political vision, I shall anticipate the analysis to come—and sum up the analysis already finished—by considering the question of political obligation in the context of Emile's education.

### The Household and the Polity: Conclusions

*Emile* teaches not only that Emile's love for Sophie is unsustainably fragile but also that the romantic-marital relation is the ground of Emile's attachment to his country. Taken together, these findings suggest something very unsettling about the extent and the robustness of Emile's sense of civic duty: if affection for one's regime is derived from the affection he has for his family and if affection for one's family is bound to decline, then it would seem that connection to the state would inevitably disintegrate as well. This, however, is too quick, for since Emile's affection for his family is itself the product of his appreciation for the good and the decent in their universal forms, then
perhaps these same cosmopolitan moral sensibilities should, even in the absence of strong family ties, connect him to his fellow countrymen and dispose him to take sympathetic and beneficent action toward them. Thus, before concluding our discussion of Emile and his relation to political society, it is necessary to see whether the universalistic moral commitments to which he subscribes are sufficiently strong to connect him to his political regime and his fellow countrymen even in the absence of domestic ties (Neuhouser 2008).

We can begin to see our answer by noting that the very cosmopolitanism that connects Emile to his countrymen also prevents his having any especially strong regard for them. His concern for them is a particular expression of a universal concern for the species and is emblematic of the equal moral respect to which men qua men are entitled, but neither one’s fellow citizens nor his particular state deserves special preference. The regime as the regime means nothing to Emile. His universal morality makes him as bad a patriot as he is a good neighbor.

To flesh out these conclusions, we need to recur to the above analysis of Jean-Jacques’s explanation of Emile’s political duties as well as to look briefly at Emile and Sophie. On this score, recall that Emile chooses at his tutor’s behest to remain in his homeland not because his presence will be demanded in the assembly but rather because it almost certainly will not be. He subjects himself to the laws of his country because the “simulacra of laws” found there best approximates his initial wish to “live in independence” with his beloved Sophie. Thus the political education Emile receives does not transform his affective field or reorient his relation to the political community in the same way that the education of the classical citizen does. Rather, his cosmopolitan moral outlook leads him to view his obligations to his state as deriving from his obligations to humanity as a whole. And even though Jean-Jacques finds it necessary to correct the “extravagant disinterestedness” with which Emile initially views those obligations, he approves the cosmopolitan attitude underneath it and encourages his pupil never to forget that all men—fellow countrymen or not—deserve equal moral respect.

But the universal duty of moral respect is not enough to keep Emile connected to his homeland, or indeed to anyone in particular, and the second letter of Emile and Sophie shows why. Writing his tutor from a remote, isolated location, Emile explains why he chose to leave his homeland and family following his wife’s infidelity. Characterizing his feelings of isolation and betrayal, Emile writes, “I have drunk the waters of oblivion. The past is
fading from my memory, and the universe opens before me. That is what I said to myself when leaving my fatherland. I was ashamed of it, and I owed it only contempt and hatred. Happy and worthy of honor in my own right, my country and its vile inhabitants victimized me and plunged me into disgrace. By breaking the bonds that attached me to my country, my patriotism extended over the whole earth, and I became more of a man by ceasing to be a citizen” (ES 221–22). Emile reveals here how fragile his connection to the state is, acknowledging the derivative character of his political identity by blaming his “fatherland” for rupturing the relation he had to it. He had no other motive to remain where he was once the possibility of happy marriage had passed, and even goes so far as to blame his homeland and its “vile inhabitants” for Sophie’s infidelity. He left his country not indifferently, but with strong feelings of victimization and indignance, in order to spread his patriotism “over the whole earth.” Tracy Strong (1994), eager to find Emile’s inner citizen, claims the young man is simply deceived about his own feelings, but this is precisely the conclusion his education would have led him to draw. Incorporation into a particular political community—even the one his tutor had recommended for its relative justice—had contributed to the undoing of the romantic relation on which happiness depended, confirming Emile’s initial suspicions about subjecting himself to the chaotic swirl of social forces that constitute political life. Far from being compensated for the sacrifice of independence that comes with settling down in a particular place, Emile is punished for it; his experience shows him that the costs of incorporation outweigh the benefits. He thus decides to extend his patriotism “over the whole earth” and becomes a roving, itinerant traveler—one without roots or settled social relations, one who treats his fellow men with disengaged beneficence without being emotionally or psychologically invested in any of them. Emile is benevolent in order to remain independent, and if he extends his hand to his fellows it is only in order to keep them at arm’s length.

By the end of Emile and Sophie it is clear that Emile’s own self-understanding far more closely resembles the disengaged and asocial pose that Rousseau himself strikes in the Reveries than it does the robust social sensibility of the classical citizen. The quasi-Stoic posture he assumes is a function not just of the breakdown of his romantic relation—though this breakdown defines Emile’s life in much the same way that, as we shall soon see, St. Preux’s frustrated love for Julie defines his—but of the recognition of the irreconcilable tension between his own cosmopolitanism and the

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comprehensive embeddedness of the true citizen. Emile’s universal morality reveals the arbitrariness of the partiality that citizens show for one another, and in so doing it undermines the strong identification that a good political society requires. Citizens love those within the city’s walls and regard outsiders with suspicion and contempt (E 39). Cosmopolitan universalism does not lead to citizenship but to disengagement, social isolation, and relative independence. It is not the answer to the question posed by Emile.

What, then, does the failure of the social and political component of Emile’s education tell us about the more general question of the relationship between the household and the polity? We must begin to answer this question by acknowledging that Emile appears to assert their complementarity. Criticizing Socrates’s attempt to eliminate the nuclear family, Rousseau holds that the philosopher’s error was to reason “as though it were not by means of the small fatherland which is the family that the heart attaches itself to the large one; as though it were not the good son, the good husband, and the good father who make the good citizen!” (E 363). Though this passage is often taken to reveal the ultimate compatibility of Rousseau’s domestic and political visions (Fermon 1997; Schwartz 1984, 51), it is clear that Rousseau is defending the general idea of the household per se and not any specific set of domestic arrangements. He says that a private household of some kind is necessary to the possibility of good citizenship; he does not say that a household like Emile’s is the one necessary to the realization of that possibility.

In fact, Rousseau’s other writings strongly suggest that a home like Emile and Sophie’s is patently not what he has in mind for the society of the Social Contract. In the Discourse on Political Economy, for instance, Rousseau praises the households of the classical world, and of ancient Rome in particular, for their politicizing capacity: in serving as “so many schools of citizens” they managed to underwrite rather than undermine civic virtue. But he quickly adds that the complementarity Rome established between the household and the polity was a “continual miracle” that “the world should not hope to see again” (DPE 21–22). One reason Rousseau is pessimistic about rediscovering the civic potential of the household is that the ascendance of Christianity (among other developments) has decisively undermined the ideal of citizenship (e.g., E 38–40; SC IV.8). Perhaps more important, however, is that the idea of the household itself has changed in ways that affect its ability to serve as a site of civic education: the classical household did not contain within itself a conception of the best human life but was rather the “realm of necessity” (e.g., Arendt 1998, 28–31). As such, its function was not
to instantiate the good but rather to provide the material preconditions requisite to its realization in the *public* realm. The household thus existed for the sake of the city—not vice versa. We, however, have seen that Emile and Sophie’s domestic retreat embodies a compelling—albeit not unproblematic—vision of the good that does not require for its fulfillment an experience of citizenship in a just polity. His household is a substitute for meaningful political life, not a basis for it.