Rousseau and the Problem of Human Relations

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The Ecology of Justice

Everything that destroys social unity is worthless. All institutions that put man in contradiction with himself are worthless.

—ROUSSEAU, Social Contract

In the previous three chapters we have looked at romantic love and friendship and have seen that neither succeeds in preserving human wholeness. Though the failure of each is due to a combination of psychological and environmental conditions, the explanatory emphasis thus far has been on the former: the shortcomings of love and friendship are attributable to limitations inherent in the imagination and in pity, respectively. Yet it is time to acknowledge that Rousseau’s heroes and heroines do not pursue their respective goods in a social or political vacuum. Their actions and interactions are embedded in particular sociopolitical contexts which exert an inevitable and a destructive influence on the course of their lives. In Julie, the eponymous heroine and her lover take the first and most decisive steps down their tragic path in the profoundly dysfunctional social world shaped by the “gothic maxims” of her violent and despotic father. In Emile and its sequel, the happy couple must preserve their union in a city teeming with infidelity and moral corruption. In both cases Rousseau’s heroes complain of the external
world’s corrupting forces, which punish sympathy, undermine trust, and frustrate the desire for transparent human relations. Such considerations tempt us to pronounce the “domestic” healing strategy explored in *Emile* and *Julie*—namely, the effort to be in society without also being of it—a failure.

Though the socially embedded character of human action problematizes the rehabilitative possibilities explored thus far, so, too, might it allow us to explore new and more promising ones, for, though those seeking to heal themselves from within a corrupt social environment cannot reasonably expect to succeed, they might still find the satisfaction they seek in a well-ordered society. It is, then, not as lovers or friends but rather as citizens of a just political community that we may at last find the comprehensive satisfaction we seek.

In order to find this comprehensive satisfaction, however, we must answer a number of difficult questions about what Rousseau’s well-ordered society looks like and what ends it seeks to realize. I interpret Rousseau’s political works as an attempt to identify the general institutional and sociological situation in which man’s inner unity is most effectively realized and make two broad arguments in support of this general claim. The first is that the fundamental standard for assessing social institutions is not freedom—as so many interpreters have argued—but unity. The inner unity that characterizes man’s life in the state of nature is predicated on a harmonious relationship to the natural environment in which he is embedded, and it is the disruption of this harmonious relation that generates all the ruinous psychological consequences about which Rousseau complains. At its most basic level, then, Rousseau’s political philosophy is about creating a social environment in which humans might live in harmony with themselves and with one another. To the degree this is true, freedom, however conceived, cannot serve as the end either of human nature or of social institutions; it is valuable, then, because it contributes to social and psychological unity and not because it provides an evaluative standard somehow beyond it.

The second argument is about the particular type of harmony that must obtain between man and his environment. On this head, I use the metaphor of an ecology to identify the key features of the unity Rousseau seeks to effect between citizen and society. Though unavailable to Rousseau, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979) helps bring into focus how deeply one’s identity is influenced by surrounding structures and provides a useful framework for understanding how unity within is predicated on unity without. So, too, does it clarify how fragile the unity between self and environment is, for
in conceiving of political society as a set of nested social structures and of citizens as the possessors of multiple social roles, it highlights the possibility of identity conflict. As conceived here, then, citizens are not just bearers of specifically political rights and responsibilities—they are also friends, lovers, parents, producers, consumers, and the like. Yet these various social roles are not always consistent with one another, and in the absence of a principle of identity that resolves role conflicts citizens inevitably fall into the passive drift of bourgeois dividedness.

The interpretation I shall develop in this chapter and the next has at least three controversial implications. The first is its privileging of unity or harmony over freedom as the basis of Rousseau’s political thought. Though freedom in some form is widely considered to be the central concern motivating Rousseau in the *Social Contract* and perhaps beyond (e.g., Levine 1976; Cassirer 1989; Cullen 1993; Simpson 2006), I argue that freedom is only one of many characteristics of human nature, and that it deserves protection in a just regime only because it is contributory to the still more fundamental end of wholeness. Second, though I reject efforts to turn Rousseau into a liberal individualist, I will also show the “totalitarian” readings of Isaiah Berlin and Lester Crocker (among others) to be decisively flawed. Finally, and consistent with the argumentation provided in chapters 4 and 5, I emphasize the basic disjuncture between the respective educations of “men” and “citizens” and resist the temptation to read the individualistic educational program of *Emile* into the social and political context of the *Social Contract*. I do so by showing that the sociological supports necessary to the regime in the *Social Contract* are supportive of a public-spirited ethos quite at odds with the domestic individualism cultivated in *Emile*.

| To Be or Not to Be Free? Is That Rousseau’s Question? |

The literature on Rousseau’s political theory in general and on the *Social Contract* in particular is as fragmented as it is vast. Scholars have long disputed whether Rousseau’s analysis of the principles of political right is coherent or confused, classical or modern, liberal or authoritarian, progressive or conservative, nostalgic or foresighted, utopian or fatalistic. Despite such disagreements, however, many scholars do seem able to agree on the work’s central theme: freedom. This is not without reason. Indeed, it is almost indecently obvious to say that a concern for freedom figures prominently in...
Rousseau’s political and social theory. It was his treatment of this theme—by turns illuminating and obscure—that drew both the admiration and the ire of his earliest readers: Robespierre was said to have kept a dog-eared copy of the Social Contract with him at all times, but Constant—mindful of all the trouble caused by Robespierre’s love of Rousseau—famously criticized the great Genevan for misunderstanding the true character of modern liberty. Burke (RRF 270) was especially violent in his denunciation of that “insane Socrates of the National Assembly,” believing his radical conception of freedom to be utterly at odds with the demands of civilization itself.1

Such controversies were rehearsed anew in the twentieth century, with critics finding in Rousseau’s oeuvre either many of the necessary resources for combating the rise of “totalitarianism” (e.g., Kateb 1961; Shklar 1969) or, alternatively, one of its most appalling theoretical instantiations (e.g., Nisbet 1943; Talmon 1952; Crocker 1995). The broad disputes concerning Rousseau’s liberal credentials began to take more specific shape in Isaiah Berlin’s famous “Two Concepts of Liberty” essay, in which he distinguishes “negative” and “positive” forms of freedom and claims that Rousseau’s “positive” conception gives his political thought an illiberal character. Implicit in the assimilation of liberty and sovereignty, Berlin argues, is a perfectionistic moral doctrine that imposes on citizens a conception of a “higher” or “autonomous” self to be realized in and through the activity of self-governance. The understanding of freedom as “self-mastery” denies citizens the right “not to be interfered with in a defined area” and thus represents a “monstrous impersonation” of true political liberty (Berlin 1990, 133). More recently, contemporary democratic theorists like Cohen (1986, 2010) and Rawls (2007) have followed Berlin in characterizing Rousseauan freedom as “positive” but have forcefully disputed the claim that there is anything authoritarian in it. Cohen’s (2010, 11) revealingly titled “social autonomy” interpretation claims on Rousseau’s behalf that “freedom is the basis of humanity’s special worth, and is the basis of our standing as responsible, moral agents,” and Rawls (2007, 247–48) argues that the regime of the Social Contract effectively cultivates the individuality of citizens through the provision of self-respect.

Both Rawls’s and Cohen’s accounts show that the authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century have little if anything in common with Rousseau’s republican model and that the exercise of Rousseauan sovereignty is limited in ways that Berlin and others fail to grasp (see also Strong 1994, 79–88; Simpson 2006, 52–56). While they, like Berlin, emphasize the importance of Rousseau’s claim that submission to the state involves the exchange of
“natural freedom” for “moral freedom” and thus implicates the emergence of a “higher self,” they also argue that this exchange is not disrespectful to individuality but is rather the basis for its preservation. The acceptance of the terms of the social compact is nothing but the renunciation of “the right to everything that tempts [you]” and the realization that submission to the general will makes sense only because it is ultimately more empowering and possibility enhancing than the freedom of the state of nature (SC I.8, 56). Citizens deliberately realize their sense of self and the capacities that attach to that realization through the exercise of political sovereignty. And since the act of replacing natural freedom with moral freedom and its subjectivity-enhancing tendencies is “the most voluntary thing in the world”—because free and informed consent is an ongoing condition of membership in a just political society—it is inaccurate and unfair to say with Berlin that Rousseau’s positive conception of liberty produces institutional arrangements unfriendly to liberty.

Neither Cohen nor Rawls stops here, however. Both follow Ernst Cassirer (1989) in finding embodied in Rousseau’s concept of “moral freedom” an uncommonly deep commitment to and productive way of thinking about individual liberty. Rousseau defines moral freedom as “obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself” and claims that it alone “makes man truly the master of himself.” It is contrasted with “the impulse of appetite alone” (l’impulsion de seul appétit), which is characterized as a form of “slavery” that is transcended once we learn to act not just in accordance with the law but out of respect for it and it alone (SC I.8, 56). The passage clearly evokes the shade of Kant, and Rawls in particular views the form of self-legislation embodied by moral freedom as both central to Rousseau’s political project and as a prefiguration of Kantian autonomy: “The society of the social compact achieves in its basic political and social institutions both civil and moral freedom” (Rawls 2007, 235).

Though neither Rawls nor Cohen emphasizes Rousseau’s proto-Kantianism quite so much as Cassirer does, their assimilation of “civil” and “moral” freedom nonetheless generates a highly individualistic interpretation of Rousseauan citizenship, one in which the morally free citizen views himself as a self-originating source of valid claims, and the laws he authors as expressions of his individual identity. On their view, the legislative impulse emerges from the deepest recesses of the self qua self, is the unifying force in the moral personality, and is an immediate motivation for lawfulness. The law as
such requires respect because it is an articulation of one’s own deepest rational commitments and an expression of each citizen’s capacity to create—rather than be created by—his surrounding environment. To disrespect the law is therefore to disrespect oneself, and to obey it is to understand that lawfulness and moral dignity are mutually constitutive and complementary concepts. Citizens of a just regime must therefore develop their capacity for moral freedom both in order to realize their nature as free beings as well as to effectively discharge their civic duty. Connection to the state is established not at the cost of individuality, as Nisbet or Berlin would have it, but rather is premised precisely on its proper development.

Though correct to locate a kind of developmental imperative in Rousseau’s political thought and useful as a corrective to the superficial authoritarian view, the “social autonomy” interpretation exaggerates Rousseau’s concern for the development of autonomy in the civil sphere and, in so doing, misunderstands the relationship between moral freedom and the just regime. Indeed, it is clear that the privileged status given to moral freedom by Rawls and others is based on an inaccurate reading of the passage in which the concept is introduced. The first indication of this is Rousseau’s paragraphing: after contrasting “natural” and “civil” freedom in the same paragraph, Rousseau breaks his discussion off and introduces his treatment of moral freedom in a new paragraph, thus indicating its distinctness from the concepts that came before. Moreover, the way moral freedom is introduced hardly suggests that its emergence is necessary (cf. Simpson 2006, 94–100). After noting that civil freedom and property are gained only in society, Rousseau claims that “to the foregoing acquisitions could be added moral freedom, which alone makes man truly the master of himself” (SC I.8, 56; emphasis added). The distinctness of moral and civil freedom is underscored not only by the fact that the former “could be” (on pourrait)—and thus need not be—attached to the latter, but also by Rousseau’s use of the verb ajouter (to add), which suggests that civil and moral freedom are distinct but related, as icing is distinct from cake or sauce from meat. Perhaps most revealingly, after defining moral freedom in a brief two sentences Rousseau simply drops the matter entirely, claiming that he has “already said too much about this topic” and stating flatly that “the philosophical meaning of the word freedom is not my subject” (I.8, 56). The character of moral freedom is patently not the subject of the Social Contract, and Rousseau raises the topic not to show its importance but instead to point to its marginality.
If the priority that Rawls and Cohen give to moral freedom is not established on the basis of the very passage in which the concept is introduced, then it is made even more questionable when viewed in light of Rousseau’s other remarks about civic education. We have already seen *Emile* sternly insist that the education most appropriate for citizens is a form of “denaturing” in which the political subject’s sense of self, far from being the psychological ground of his love of the state, is instead compromised by it. We have also seen that the hero of that work, who supposedly establishes the historical possibility of an individualistic form of modern citizenship based on something like moral freedom—has far too attenuated a relation to his country to be called a “citizen” of any particular community. But Rousseau reiterates the basic incommensurability of the individualistic educative program of “men” and the desubjectivizing civic pedagogy of “citizens” in *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, where he claims that every Polish child, upon opening his eyes, “should see the fatherland, and see only it until his dying day” (*CGP* 189; emphasis added).³ “This love [of fatherland],” Rousseau continues, “makes up his whole existence; he sees only his fatherland, he lives only for it; when he is alone, he is nothing; when he no longer has a fatherland, he no longer is, and if he is not dead, he is worse than dead” (emphasis added). In the Polish context, incorporation into the social union comes at the cost of developing anything resembling an autonomous self. The *moi*, far from the establishing the ground of robust citizenship, is instead sacrificed to the *patrie*, which becomes the source of being. The contrast to the modern individual Emile, who can leave his home country without losing his identity, is stark: the citizen of Poland, once removed from his homeland, is not only no longer a citizen—he no longer is.

Such advice is not specific to the nonideal circumstances of Poland. Indeed, Rousseau anticipates the advice he gives to Count Wielhorski in his *Discourse on Political Economy*, where he avers that if citizens “are taught from sufficiently early on never to look upon their individual [self] except in its relations with the body of the State, and to perceive their own existence as, so to speak, only a part of its existence, they will at last succeed in somehow identifying with this larger whole, to feel themselves members of the fatherland” (*DPE* 20).⁴ Once again, love of the fatherland does not emerge out of selfhood but is rather purchased at the cost of selfhood. The precondition and initial purpose of public education—the task to which it sets itself “from the first moments of life”—is to replace the sense we have of ourselves as selves with the “exquisite sentiment” that attaches to love of the fatherland.
(20–21). One’s self-understanding is at its deepest level informed and even constituted by the association to the political community. Utterances like this occur far too frequently in Rousseau’s political works to simply be set to the side. If there is any interesting developmental dynamic in Rousseau’s political thought, it would not appear to have much to do with the sense of moral freedom.

Seizing on these and other arguments, a different group of scholars have rescued Rousseau from Berlin’s association of positive liberty and authoritarianism by simply denying that his conception of freedom is “positive” in any meaningful way. Shklar (1969, 165, 182) provides the classical exposition of this view, characterizing Rousseauan politics as a “politics of prevention” and claiming that sovereignty “is a condition free from personal oppression, but it is not self-determination in a politically active sense.” On her accounting, the general will is fundamentally *negative* and has as its aim not the advancement of some developmental imperative but rather the *prevention* of those forms of inequality that would systematically subject some citizens to others (185). Consistent with Shklar, Cullen (1993, 8) argues that Rousseauan “freedom consists in avoiding the domination, even the assistance, of others.” This negative interpretation corresponds more closely to Rousseau’s own language, for in his characterization of the social compact Rousseau indicates that members must remain “as free as before” but does not make any strong claims about enlarging the sphere of freedom through the development of rational autonomy (SC I.6, 53; emphasis added). Contractors need not be and indeed are not more free than they would have been in the state of nature, for all it means to be free in the political or civil sense is to remain unsubjected to the whims of another’s private will or—what amounts to the same thing—to a law that is not general in its “object” and its “essence” (II.4, 62). It is, then, to be free from the scourge of specifically personal dependence. Each citizen must will the law to which he is bound less because such activity expresses and deepens the sense he has of himself as an autonomous being than because his presence in the assembly is necessary to prevent the incursions of others. Indeed, Cullen (1993, 61–64) has decisively shown that the exchange of “natural” for “civil” and “moral” forms of freedom does not undermine but instead supports the authoritative status of the original, natural standard.

Though the more restricted or “negative” understanding of Rousseauan liberty improves on the “social autonomy” interpretation in important respects, it does so at the cost of obscuring the active, identity-constitutive

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element of Rousseau’s political thought. To say that a citizen is free in the negative sense is to say he is protected from a whole series of destructive social forces. But this is to define him by what he is not rather than by what, exactly, he is. However helpful this may be as a point of departure, it is not an adequately precise description of the end of political life or of the subject’s relation to his political community. The nonexistence of destructive social forces implies the existence of nondestructive social forces, and the effect of these latter forces on the human personality is not just negative or preservative but also positive and developmental. As a way of beginning to see how public life requires the activation and extension of human capacities, we should remember that the subject does not enter the polity as a finished moral and social product but rather “just as he currently is—both himself and all his force” (SC I.9, 56). Underneath politics, then, is a self in the possession of certain natural interests and “forces.” However, political life does quite a bit more than protect its native integrity from others. Indeed, this integrity must be taken away and reconstituted anew from the materials and forces created by human interdependence: every political community takes “away man’s own forces in order to give him forces that are foreign to him and that he cannot make use of without the help of others” (SC II.7, 68). It is important to note that the forms of power to which we gain access upon entrance into the civil state require deep interdependence for their emergence and useful application. The right kind of social cooperation assuredly prevents the onset of destructive and malignant forms of personal dependence, but it activates new psychic capacities that enrich and deepen the lives of individual citizens. What is at stake in the creation of political community, then, is not simply the avoidance of the pernicious and mutually destructive forms of interdependence described in the Discourse on Inequality but also the realization of an alternative and more salutary form of dependence—dependence on the law and all the sociological structures that make law possible.

If the new form of dependence engendered by the social compact has transformative consequences that remain unexplained by proponents of the “negative freedom” thesis but are mischaracterized by the theorists of “positive freedom,” then in light of what end or aim can we understand the Rousseauan polis? The alternative I shall argue for is already familiar to, though often deemphasized by, those who attribute to Rousseau a negative conception of liberty: it is unity or wholeness. For instance, while Cullen’s central theoretical interest is freedom he nonetheless notes (1993, 8) that its realiza-
tion “depends on a carefully structured environment, for which the pure state of nature constitutes the paradigm. By associating freedom with the natural condition, Rousseau ends up with a conception of freedom that is as stripped bare as his notion of natural man.” We should note an important gloss here, namely, that freedom is “associated” with the natural condition but is not definitive of it. To say man is naturally free is not to say that he is not also other things as well (e.g., self-loving, pitying, perfectible). Freedom is thus one among many native human traits. But it is the harmonious coexistence of all these traits—not the special importance of one in particular—that truly defines the state of nature and makes it morally and politically meaningful. Indeed, a freedom that is “stripped bare” is an existential vacuum, not an end. Thus, though Cullen’s own chief concern is freedom, his analysis here points to the still more fundamental importance of the “carefully structured environment” that makes freedom possible in the first place. Shklar, too, occasionally vacillates between freedom and unity in her characterizations of the basis of Rousseau’s political theory: though calling Rousseauan politics a “politics of prevention,” she declares that its “end” is much more than prevention—it is the establishment of “unity . . . within each man. Social peace,” she adds, “is merely the reflection of that inner harmony which had marked natural men in contrast to the civilized” (1969, 167). Once again, then, it would seem that the truly fundamental natural standard to be reproduced by good social institutions is not freedom per se but harmony within one’s soul and with one’s environment.

Dividedness Revisited

Though it is now clear that freedom points beyond itself and toward unity as the end of social institutions, it remains less than obvious how Rousseau conceived of unity or why he believed it had priority over other and perhaps more familiar goods (e.g., civil liberty or material prosperity). Intuition supplies part of the answer, for when we describe others as having a “unity of purpose” or as being “centered” we generally intend to commend them, and when we call them “divided” we mean quite the opposite. Yet Rousseau does not say that dividedness is merely undesirable; he says that it is the condition to be avoided at all costs (E 38–40; SC IV.8). To understand why he says this is to take a big step toward understanding the problem that politics is intended to solve; it is also, however, to go well beyond what our intuitions
suggest. It may, then, be helpful to return to the question of dividedness and to recall why Rousseau believed that condition so singularly destructive to human well-being.

As a way of beginning this analysis, we would do well to note that the language of dividedness is Rousseau’s way of talking about a general internal condition, not the occurrence of particular psychological events. Though we might describe ourselves as “divided” if we experience the co-presence of two uncombinable desires (coffee or tea? Mexican or Thai?), or—perhaps more significantly—if we feel desire and duty pulling in different directions, Rousseau has something else in mind. What defines a life as divided for Rousseau is not isolated experiences of internal conflict, for these are inevitable, but rather the lack of a principle of identity that can resolve such conflicts when they emerge. To be a unity is to have an identity, and to have an identity is to have a principle that generates coherent patterns of thought and behavior. Human life is full of difficult choices about who and what matters most, and in order to resolve them in a psychologically tolerable and reasonably consistent way we need regulative principles that govern our choices. Such principles help us set priorities, distinguish permissible from impermissible behaviors, and select a particular plan of life; in so doing, they stabilize our moral and social lives, giving them a continuity and consistency through time they would otherwise lack. Those who exhibit such continuity can be said to have a moral identity.

Rousseau’s discussion of unity early in *Emile* is in fact about unity in the sense explained above, and the diagnosis of the modern bourgeois as the exemplar of “dividedness” does not—as the reader of the *Discourse on Inequality* might expect—emphasize his avariciousness or insatiable greed but rather his passivity, his aimlessness and basic lack of purpose. On this score, Rousseau contrasts the bourgeois with those who are “something” and “one” on the ground that, whereas the former spends his life “in conflict and floating” between unrealized possibilities, the latter follows a set of coherent impulses that give his life continuity. Unified beings make decisions “in a lofty style” and stick to them, but the bourgeois is defined by his lack of sound principles in accordance with which he can organize a rewarding life. He does not think any difficult choices have to be made, preferring instead to persist in the erroneous belief that the human good is realized most fully through the successful pursuit of narrow self-interest. He accepts in some vague way the view that all or even most goods are jointly realizable, that simply by consulting his own interest he may reconcile the perennial tensions between private
passion and public good, wealth and taste, science and virtue, liberty and equality, citizenship and cosmopolitanism. This attitude is summed up by D'Alembert's belief that Geneva could unite "the prudence of Lacedaemon" with "the urbanity of Athens" through the institution of a theater (in *LD* 4).

For Rousseau such a view is not only deluded but also destructive. Human goods are not laid out buffet-style, to be mixed and matched at the whim of the chooser, and the platitudinous belief in a unity of goods realizable by raw self-interest does not lead to comprehensive satisfaction but rather to a kind of developmental purgatory. The attempt to have everything prevents one from being anything. We exist wholly in life's interstices, and our perpetual in-betweenness—our inability to commit to the requirements of any particular plan of life—culminates in the halfhearted pursuit of a series of disjointed pleasures. The condition of dividedness is, in the precise sense, a condition of nothingness—hence Rousseau's profoundly damning characterization of the bourgeois as a *rien*. To be a bourgeois is to be a non-entity, a site of undeveloped possibility (*E* 40–41).

The costs of bourgeois dividedness are not just psychological but also social and political. The complacent selfishness, cowardly obsession with self-preservation, and blithe disregard for virtue that characterize the empty life of the modern bourgeois are damaging to the city as well as the soul. The culprit, once again, is self-interest badly understood: Rousseau notes in *Emile* that modern social institutions reduce all sentiment and social affection to a "secret egoism" that "prevents [men] from being born by . . . detaching them from their species" (312n), and in the *Social Contract* he adds that this "secret egoism" prompts us to systematically neglect our public obligations. The passive and indifferent selfishness of the bourgeois leads to free-riding, making "him view what he owes the common cause as a free contribution, the loss of which will harm others less than its payment burdens him" (I.7, 55). Thus the political evils of apathy and disengagement are a direct consequence of our internal dividedness, our inability to fully commit ourselves to the requirements of social and political life.

In order to ameliorate the internal and external tensions that define bourgeois life, it is important to recall that Rousseau views the phenomenon of dividedness not as a natural fact but an institutional consequence, a mutable product of an anemic political sociology rather than an expression of ineliminable human tendencies. How, then, to remedy the disease? If the bourgeois is divided because he cannot accept the tradeoffs that moral and social life require, then the path to unity begins, perhaps paradoxically, by
accepting the incommensurability of human goods. One must squarely face contradictions in order to avoid becoming one. Thus Rousseau’s insistence that it is possible to make a “man”—a private self who is a “numerical unity” and an “absolute whole” unto himself—or a “citizen”—who has a “relative” existence defined by his participation “within the whole” political community—but that it is impossible to make both at the same time. For, from “these necessarily opposed objects,” there emerge “two contrary forms of instruction—the one, public and common; the other, individual and domestic” (É 39–40; emphasis added). Thus, in our quest to create a healthy human type, we are faced with a difficult decision. We can make a man or a citizen, but we cannot make both at the same time. We have a choice, but not a choice of choices.

The tragic choice between making a man and a citizen is not a false dichotomy but is rather is forced on us by the incommensurability of human goods. This reading gains plausibility when we see that the choice between citizenship and cosmopolitanism is far from the only costly decision we must make in Rousseau’s moral universe, which constantly confronts us with the tough reality that the enjoyment of one good precludes the enjoyment of others. There is doubtless a rhetorical component to Rousseau’s presentations of moral conflict, which often lend seemingly cosmic significance to the everyday difficulties faced by everyday people. But the rather grandiose presentation he gives to familiar problems is not mere rhetorical posturing. Rousseau’s intellectual career is marked by his tendency to point out value conflicts and his inability to accept cheap resolutions. Where others saw complementarity and continuity, Rousseau saw contradiction and incoherence in germinal form. It is therefore not surprising that in both the private and public contexts, Rousseau’s moral exemplars are exemplary largely because of their willingness to face and resolve precisely the kinds of tragic choices the bourgeois spends his life avoiding.

In the private realm, Julie’s example springs immediately to mind, for her personal fate—indeed, the fate of all her friends and intimates—turns on her decision to obey her father rather than wed St. Preux. Her life is defined by role conflict, by the choice she must make between being a good daughter and being a good lover. This choice, it is worth adding, has social—or if one likes, “political”—effects, for it ultimately determines the shape of the social structure at Clarens. Later in the novel she must decide between honoring her marital commitment to Wolmar and following her heart back to St. Preux. Though it is perhaps fair to wonder whether Julie is perhaps too
willing to suffer, whether her eagerness on this head is as much a cautionary tale as an example to be imitated, there is no denying the intrinsic difficulty of her situation. She is caught in and crushed by the crosscutting demands of contradictory social obligations, defined and destroyed by her perpetual in-betweenness. However, she does not act as a rien. To the contrary, she is obedient to the logic of identity: she makes her choice and sticks to it in a “lofty” style. That her struggles are never rewarded with happiness is disconcerting but not fatal to the theory, for Rousseau’s claim is that maintaining unity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for attaining the happiness that is the end of human life.

Emile’s example also points up the inevitable presence of value conflicts and the importance of decisively resolving them. After learning of Sophie’s infidelity, Emile, like Julie, is faced with a difficult choice. He is a cuckolded husband but also a father; thus he must decide whether to raise his child or leave his wife. To stay with Sophie is to demean himself, but to abandon his offspring is surely to do the same, as well as to neglect his paternal and civic obligations. Emile’s obligations do not conflict as dramatically as Julie’s, but neither are they immediately continuous with each other: what he owes his child as a father is care and concern, but what he owes his unfaithful spouse is, strictly speaking, nothing at all. The choice he makes—sneaking out in the middle of the night and abandoning his family—may fairly be questioned, but only after acknowledging that he, like Julie, must choose between two decidedly imperfect options. Being a something is hard.

Rousseau’s domestic heroes are not the only figures who understand that the best and most human—that is, the most unified—life is full of conflicts that must be stared down. Indeed, the ideal of citizenship provides a very different principle for resolving the difficult choices social life forces on us. Of the many exemplars of classical citizenship that Rousseau wields in order to humble modern readers, perhaps none better points up the conflict between private and public attachments than that “tender father” Junius Brutus, who presided over the trial and execution of his own sons in order to save a fragile Roman Republic. Rousseau treats Brutus’s example at some length in his Final Reply to the critics of the First Discourse, in which he enters into dialogue with a hypothetical interlocutor who confesses to admiring Brutus but would nonetheless “admire even more a powerful and well-governed state” where “citizens would not be condemned to such cruel virtues” (123). The objection, important because characteristic of Rousseau’s century, is that Brutus’s sacrifice, however noble, was made necessary only by the
Romans’ primitive political culture and inadequate understanding of institutional design. A “powerful and well-governed state” would have kept Brutus from having to make such a terrible choice in the first place. The modern interlocutor in effect denies the necessity of tragic tradeoffs; he believes it would have been possible to reason one’s way out of Brutus’s problem and that it would not have been prejudicial to civic virtue to do so. Freedom does not require the “cruel virtues,” and it is only the ignorance of the ancients that led them to insist on their necessity.

Though Rousseau does not entirely disagree with the objection he has his interlocutor raise—the ancients were deficient in their understanding of political institutions—his initial response points up the inescapability of moral conflict and the necessity of Brutus’s actions. For Rousseau it is “certain” the Republic would not have survived long had he pardoned his sons’ crimes against the state, for such partiality would have created a very troublesome precedent and fatally undermined the idea of the rule of law. The structure of the social situation required that Brutus make a choice, and he made the choice most in keeping with his identity as a citizen. If being a good citizen is anything, it is putting the good of the polity before everything else and accepting the consequences, even and indeed especially when they are onerous. It is, then, wrong to simply assume with Rousseau’s interlocutor that Brutus’s public and private obligations could be reconciled: “There is no middle ground. Either Brutus had to be an infamous person or the heads of Titus and Tiberinus had to fall by his order to the axe of the Lictors” (123). There is no other way to slice it: Brutus had to choose between the death of the Republic and the death of his sons, and he made the choice most befitting a citizen.

Brutus’s is not the only case in which profound love of state is accompanied by astounding hardness toward one’s own offspring. In Emile, Rousseau relates from Plutarch the story of a Spartan woman who, upon being informed that her five sons were killed in war, ran to the temple to thank the gods for the military victory rather than collapsing in agony for the loss of her children. “This,” he exclaims with evident relish, “is the female citizen” (40). Though this anonymous Spartan woman was not, like Brutus, forced by an external necessity to undertake active violence against her own progeny, note that Rousseau takes her willingness to suffer almost unthinkable personal losses on behalf of the state to be exemplary of citizenship as such. The conflicts that arise in our associational lives are inevitable, requiring some form
of resolution, and what defines the citizen is a disposition to resolve them on behalf of the state. For citizens, the public good becomes internalized and serves as the unifying principle by which they organize moral and social life. The example of the anonymous Spartan woman is particularly telling when compared to Sophie, her modern counterpart and wife of the presumptive “man-citizen” Emile. Sophie, far from bearing the death of her offspring with such chilling aplomb, sinks into deep depression. Her response is that of a mother who loves her family more than anything else; the Spartan woman’s response is that of a citizen who loves the state even more than her own children. If more evidence of the enormous psychological distance between “men” and “citizens” were needed, surely this example provides it.

This, however, is only half the argument. As even a casual reader of the Social Contract knows, Rousseau is not an unqualified admirer of the ancients nor does he simply demand that citizens sacrifice everything to the state without being compensated. Indeed, there are limits to human nature that good regimes are obliged to respect, and Rousseau would be among the first to censure a regime that exacted needless sacrifices from citizens or perpetuated itself at the expense of its inhabitants. Just societies acculturate citizens to the necessity of sacrificing for the common good, but they are organized to prevent the need for gratuitous privation: “[A] citizen owes the State all the services he can render it as soon as the sovereign requests them. But the sovereign, for its part, cannot impose on the subjects any burden that is useless to the community” (SC II.4, 62). Though even the best regime cannot eliminate all the sources of conflict and contradiction in human life—to suffer is our estate—it can at the very least be expected not to multiply them and, to the degree possible, be responsible for neutralizing them. So, while it is incumbent on the citizen to discharge his public obligations even when he finds them onerous, it is nonetheless true that such obedience is justified if and only if political institutions are basically consistent with the demands of human nature, rightly developed. All citizens have “duties . . . as subjects,” but they are only obligated to fulfill them if the environment in which they are embedded is conformable to their nature (II.5, 62). Thus conceiving of the political problem in terms of “unity,” far from authorizing states to exact limitless sacrifices from citizens, in fact provides a way of distinguishing between modes of social organization that create unnecessary burdens for citizens and those that do not.
Though Rousseau’s account of dividedness is in many ways the center of his critique of modern political thought and the impoverished human type it brought into being, he is one with other modern thinkers in believing Christianity to be an important institutional cause of that dividedness. Rousseau was concerned that the “true religion” had destroyed the psychology necessary for political freedom by encouraging a disengaged political quietism, introducing profoundly destructive contradictions into social life by insisting on a division of spiritual and temporal powers. In addressing himself to the social friction caused by institutions answering to different authorities, Rousseau follows Machiavelli, Spinoza, Locke, and many others in seeking to weaken the political influence of the church. Yet he credits Hobbes with being the sole “Christian author” to see that the only way to solve the problem of divided allegiances is to grant to the sovereign final authority on all matters of fundamental import, including and especially those concerning religion. Thus he follows his bête noire in insisting that the union of church and state—or rather the subordination of church to state—is the indispensable condition of a much-needed “return to political unity” (SC IV.8, 127).

It is in this context that Levine (1976, 54) emphasizes Rousseau’s debt to Hobbes, claiming that the Hobbesian thesis of “complete alienation” is “taken for granted” by Rousseau and that it is adopted in the Social Contract “virtually without argument.” Yet the account of human dividedness provided above shows that Rousseau has his own theoretical reasons for emphasizing the theme of unity, reasons that, far from their being a product of an uncritical acceptance of Hobbes, are instead suggestive of a deep disagreement with Hobbes’s understanding of the social problem. If Rousseau not only disagrees with Hobbes about what “dividedness” means but also believes Hobbes’s philosophy to be a primary cause of that dividedness, then it is highly unlikely that the kind of institutional unity he seeks will have much in common with Hobbes’s theory. The unity Rousseau sought was far different, and far deeper, than that posited by Hobbes. It is therefore necessary to tunnel under Levine’s claim and to articulate a more satisfying account of the theoretical features of unity.

On this head, I would like to suggest that the particular form of institutional unity Rousseau sought is best comprehended by way of naturalistic metaphor: an ecology. Ecosystems are self-sustaining and self-regulating envi-
Environments in which all living beings are embedded, and the concept has recently been applied to social and political institutions in order to understand both how those institutions fit together as well as how their fit (or lack of fit) affects the individuals within the system (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 1979). Though unavailable to Rousseau—who uses the traditional metaphor of a “body politic” in order to talk about the interdependence of social systems—ecological systems theory provides at least three considerable advantages in seeking to understand Rousseau’s political thought. The first is its emphasis on the idea of embeddedness. Individual subjects are conceived not as autonomous, free-floating units but rather as necessarily situated in a series of nested structures. Though such a conception may initially appear unpromising as a way of explaining a theory like Rousseau’s, it helps reveal the way in which the subject’s internal or psychological unity relies on the structure of the environment. Harmony within is predicated on harmony without. Second, an “ecological” interpretation allows us to attain a comprehensiveness of explanation that eludes many alternative approaches. While we shall be able to account for both Rousseau’s philosophical and sociological commitments, we have already seen that other approaches tend to explain the one at the expense of the other. The “social autonomy” interpretation, for instance, provides a sophisticated analysis of Rousseau’s philosophy of freedom but rejects as distasteful the political sociology attached to it; “totalitarian” readings, on the other hand, often focus so intently on the ugliest sociological particulars of Rousseau’s theory that one forgets “liberty” was even of interest to Rousseau. Our approach, however, is able to account for both sides of the coin. Finally, the dynamic unity exemplified by ecological systems possesses three structural features—harmoniousness, comprehensiveness, and fragility—that are reflected in and help explain Rousseau’s political thought. In what follows, I shall show how these three features map onto both the natural order depicted in the Discourse on Inequality and the social order envisioned in the Social Contract.

The unity of any system is manifested in the equilibrium it produces, and the equilibria that emerge within ecological systems have a harmonious character. This, of course, is not to say there is no conflict within the system but rather to say that the continued life of each species is predicated on the health of the system itself. An example may clarify. Let us assume a simply ecological system in which antelope (A) graze on grass (G) and lions (L) prey on antelope. These patterned interactions produce a system-level equilibrium that facilitates the continued life of all three species: (i) the presence of G
contributes to the survival of A, (2) the presence of A contributes to the survival of L, and (3) the presence of L contributes to the survival of G by thinning out the population of A, thus allowing G to replenish. The web of interdependence linking these three life forms is far from frictionless, but it can nonetheless be broadly characterized as harmonious because the emergent ecological equilibrium preserves the continued life and development of all the organisms within it. The isolated particulars may be ugly, but le tout est bien.

Embeddedness in an environment ordered to be broadly conducive to the requirements of self-preservation is an essential element in Rousseau’s argument for natural goodness. Indeed, though man in the state of nature is said to be good because his two most basic passions—self-love and pity—are organized in a salutary way, it is clear that this salutary organization owes much to the environment in which the passions express themselves. We see this with especial clarity in the Discourse on Inequality’s famous depiction of natural man, whom Rousseau sees “satisfying his hunger under an oak, quenching his thirst at the first stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that furnished his meal; and therewith his needs are satisfied” (DI 105). The autarchic contentment described here is predicated on both psychological and environmental factors. The psychological claim is that human beings have very limited natural needs and that nothing could disturb the equilibrium between power and desire so long as food, shelter, protection, and sexual partners are sufficiently plentiful. But what if the environment in which we were embedded were less hospitable to us? What if food were scare? It is when the environment ceases to meet our natural needs that we begin to have to reflect on how to meet those needs ourselves (116). No longer able to thoughtlessly rely for our subsistence on our surroundings, we find it necessary to attempt to shape those surroundings in accordance with our needs. In so doing, however, we acquire new needs, and once this happens the spontaneous and prediscursive harmony between self and environment that characterized life in the pure state of nature is gone forever. When the environment changes, our passions follow.

This becomes still more clear once Rousseau sets himself to explaining why human beings would have ever left a condition so hospitable as the state of nature for one so deplorable as civil society. At a early but important juncture in Rousseau’s account man finds himself back under a tree—perhaps the very one under which he had contentedly lived for so long—but suddenly finds it too tall to reach its fruit. The scarcity this new condition imposes—in conjunction with droughts, floods, and other natural disasters
Rousseau imagines to have been inevitable—brings natural man into competition with other animals and quickly teaches him the use of tools, which in turn produce in him “the first stirrings of pride” (DI 143–44). Man’s environment, then, is decisive in determining both what passions he has and how they are able to express themselves. Thus the unity that characterizes his life in the state of nature owes as much to the broadly hospitable environment in which he is embedded as to his native disposition.

Though the type of dependence required by the civil association is “moral” as well as “physical,” and is thus different from that which exists in an actual ecological system, citizens of the just regime must nonetheless be embedded in a harmonious and self-sustaining environment that allows for the preservation and extension of being. Good social institutions are like laws of nature insofar as they do not work at cross-purposes or embody uncombinable visions of the good, since to do so would be to disrupt the equilibrium of the moral and social environment and thus to undermine the health of those who exist within it. We have already glimpsed the importance Rousseau places on inducing through institutional design the harmony inherent in the state of nature—of rendering harmonious and hospitable the environment in which citizens act and interact—in his praise of Hobbes’s effort to eliminate the conflict between church and state.

But church and state are not the only social institutions that must exist harmoniously, and if we wish to understand the harmony Rousseau sought for each citizen it is perhaps best to consider things from the citizen’s point of view. In so doing we immediately see that citizens in the context of Rousseau’s political project are sovereign-subjects, bearers of particular entitlements and obligations that attach to the “citizen” role. But the citizen is and must be more than that. He occupies other roles and serves other functions: in addition to being a citizen he is also a parent, a friend, a lover, a spouse, a churchgoer, a consumer, a producer, and so on. He is embedded in a complex of nested social structures. This is his inescapable condition. The problem that emerges from this multiplicity is that these structures are in an ongoing struggle for his scarce psychological and emotional resources, and when they make different and contradictory claims on his identity he falls into identity conflict and all the trappings of dividedness. In order to create a social environment in which psychic unity can be achieved and maintained, the citizen’s various conflicting social obligations must be somehow reconciled. His needs are more numerous and more complex than are natural man’s; their reconciliation is therefore a more difficult problem.
Second, Rousseauan social institutions mimic ecosystems in their identity-constitutive character. In ecosystems, the interdependence of one species on another, and of every species on the shared environment, is complete and comprehensive. Strict ecologists like Charles Darwin maintain that everything about the natures of living beings—their physical appearances, needs, habits, instincts, and drives—is ultimately explicable in terms of the physical environment in which they act and interact. While Rousseau at least seems to reject this radical view in his disavowal of the proto-evolutionary notion that “man’s elongated nails were at first hooked claws”—a thesis he rather strangely attributes to Aristotle—he is quite clear that the change in man’s environment had produced fundamental changes in the nature of his being (DI 104).

These changes, as every reader of Rousseau knows, had been ruinous, and the Social Contract is Rousseau’s attempt to set things aright by specifying the social and moral conditions in which human beings can through self-conscious rational reflection recapture the harmony they had with the natural world. The Rousseauan citizen’s dependence on the moral environment of the just regime mirrors the comprehensive dependence that living beings in an ecological system have on their physical environment: in order to be protected from the alienating and mutually destructive forms of personal dependence embodied by the bourgeois, the citizen must divest himself of all his natural rights and give his entire self to the political community as a whole. Indeed, the complete identification with and dependence on the state is underscored by Rousseau’s description of the social compact, which involves “the total alienation of each associate, with all his rights, to the whole community.” Only a complete divestiture of rights—a giving of one’s “entire self”—will suffice, since “if some rights were left to private individuals, there would be no common superior who could judge between them and the public,” and thus “the association would necessarily become tyrannical or ineffectual” (SC I.6, 53; emphasis added). Human identity is utterly transformed by the new moral and social environment in which it is embedded. The political subject must adapt to the logic of his new environment, and this adaptation requires a reconception of his fundamental interests and, hence, his basic identity.

The comprehensive dependence of the citizen on his environment is reflected again, and with especial clarity, in the Social Contract (II.4), where Rousseau treats the vexed question of the limits of sovereign power. In this chapter he stakes out a radicalized version of the Hobbesian view that the
establishment of genuine sovereignty requires a divestiture of all the subject’s rights, save the “right of nature,” which allows subjects to resist in the event that they are sentenced to death (Lev. XIV, 79–80). The crucial point about the Hobbesian covenant is that no transformation of moral identity or fundamental reinterpretation of self-interest is required; contracting agents will seek within the context of the association the same goods they sought outside of it. Thus, because individuals consent to social order primarily in order to enhance the likelihood of preserving themselves, and because the sovereign can do nothing to make them divest themselves of this overriding natural imperative, they may fairly resist the sovereign if it seeks to destroy them. Even the “absolutist” Hobbes allows the political subject to carry into civil society a portion of his natural powers.

The reconciliation between self and society that Rousseau seeks is far deeper than that sought by Hobbes, and this is reflected in his insistence that a citizen may not reasonably resist the sovereign even when his individual preservation is threatened. Consenting to the terms of the social compact means handing control over everything—even a right as deeply particularized as that to self-preservation—to the sovereign: “When the prince has said to him, ‘It is expedient to the State that you should die,’ he ought to die. Because it is only under this condition that he has lived in safety up to that point, and because his life is no longer only a favor of nature, but a conditional gift of the State” (SC II.V, 64). Here as elsewhere, Rousseau has radicalized the already radical Hobbesian view: rather than follow Locke in expanding the set of rights that subjects bring with them into political life and thereby circumscribing the sphere of sovereign action, Rousseau responds to Hobbes by insisting even more sternly on the discontinuity of the natural and civil states and by requiring an even more complete divestiture of the contracting agent’s natural powers. This utter divestiture is necessary because in order to harmonize man’s relation to his environment, he must be fundamentally reshaped to exist entirely within and depend entirely on an environment for which he is not naturally suited. This harmonization requires an exchange of “natural freedom” for “civil freedom,” which in its turn requires the “total alienation” of all one’s natural rights and the attendant reorientation of the motivational field: politicized man is “forced to act upon other principles [than private desire] and to consult his reason before heeding his inclinations” (I.8, 55–56; I.6, 53). Thus are the moral identities and interests of citizens made and remade in the polity in the same way that the habits, drives, and instincts of living organisms are shaped by their ecological systems.
From a moral point of view, the citizen’s identity is solely a function of his environment.

Finally, ecological equilibria—like so many of the goods Rousseau describes—are often characterized by their fragility. Though the emergent balance of forces in ecological systems have self-regulating and self-correcting mechanisms that can absorb some degree of disruption, they can be thrown into disequilibrium by even slight alterations. Scientists have, for instance, called attention to how the introduction of even a single non-native species into an ecosystem—for example, kudzu in the American South or Asian carp in the Mississippi River—can have drastic and destructive effects on the habitats of hundreds of other life forms and on the stability of the system as a whole (e.g., Hickman et al. 2010; Freedman, Butler, and Wahl 2012). What is more, the effects of these environmental disturbances are often irreversible; once done, they cannot be undone. We have in the previous chapters seen just how fragile human happiness is for Rousseau, how difficult it is to establish and maintain the delicate balance of environmental forces necessary for its realization. To see the significance of this in the present context we need only recall what Julie tells St. Preux when reflecting on their star-crossed relationship. “One strays for a single moment in life, deviates by a single step from the straight path,” she tells her lover. “At once an ineluctable slope drags him down to his ruin” ($J$ 291). The unanticipated consequences of even the most seemingly insignificant mistakes can have ruinous psychological and social consequences. Goodness and happiness are delicate; their enabling conditions are nearly impossible to create and even more difficult to sustain. This is evinced by the fact that even Wolmar and Jean-Jacques—the most authoritative remedial figures that could be imagined—had in their remedial endeavors only a partial and limited form of success.

The fragility of human things makes the presence of authoritative moral teachers as necessary in the political realm as in the domestic. Thus we should not be surprised to see Rousseau introduce Wolmar’s and Jean-Jacques’ political equivalent—the “Legislator”—who is charged with the task of creating a people by persuading them to accept good social institutions (SC II.7, 67–70). It is at present impossible to say whether his institutional creation will endure longer or meet with any more success than Wolmar’s or Jean-Jacques’ pedagogic projects, but the crucial role he plays at the founding points up the extreme delicacy of the social enterprise by revealing a people’s incapacity to assemble and constitute itself. Rousseau
took it for granted that common people were unable to independently fashion their own environment or provide the institutional conditions for their own happiness. He asked not whether a people may raise itself up through a process of organic historical development, but rather whether it was capable of operating with tolerable effectiveness the machine constructed by a benevolent wise man. The present purpose is not to answer the question so much as to show that we cannot answer it in a serious way without remembering Julie’s warning about the tenuous position of virtue or Rousseau’s belief in the fragility of even the best human institutions. This fragility is glimpsed yet again in Rousseau’s formulation of the social compact, whose terms are “so completely determined by the nature of the act” of consenting to be governed that even “the slightest modification” would destabilize the civil association to the point of nullifying the original agreement (SC I.6, 53). Even the slightest deviation from the strictest terms of justice would seem to explode the entire social and political enterprise. Here and everywhere in Rousseau’s moral universe, the margin for error is razor thin.

| Conclusions |

Rousseauan man requires unity, and unity of a particular—and particularly deep—kind with his environment. Yet life in political society is necessarily something complex and differentiated; it forces us into roles that can and do conflict and, thereby, exerts a centrifugal, decentering effect on the human personality. Modern social institutions unnecessarily magnify this destructive tendency by imposing on men obligations that are not only different but inconsistent: by instantiating in the soul conflicts between public and private forms of life and between spiritual and temporal forms of power, modernity had put us at odds with ourselves and one another. So long as we live within an institutional order at odds with itself, we are doomed to dividedness and its aimless, disempowered drift. Rousseau seeks to correct this situation by organizing social institutions in such a way as to mimic the ordered harmony of the state of nature and, in so doing, to mitigate the destructive effects of the conflicts that characterize social life.

But what, practically speaking, does this solution look like? This preceding discussion has tried to identify the broad contours of the problem Rousseau seeks to solve through politics, but it has not given us a sense of how or to what extent Rousseau believed that problem could be resolved. We need,
then, to look more closely at what life looks like in a Rousseauan regime, at how society’s basic institutions ought to fit together and how living within a coherent institutional order empowers the human soul. After having done so, we will be in a better position to see whether the political path to wholeness is any more satisfactory than the domestic alternatives we have examined in previous chapters. If Rousseau is critical of modernity for imposing contradictory obligations on men, then his constructive alternative ought to prove successful where modernity failed. It is therefore necessary to look more closely at Rousseau’s analysis of society’s basic institutions and the way they ought to fit with one another.