Rousseau and the Problem of Human Relations

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In the previous chapter we saw that social life is complex and comprehends multiple forms of obligation. We also saw that, in order to have the wholeness Rousseau seeks, these obligations must be in harmony with one another. Because this harmony cannot be expected to spontaneously emerge, it is the job of political institutions to create and sustain it. How and to what extent they do so is the subject of this chapter.

Among the structural social conflicts Rousseau diagnosed as damaging to human wholeness, he identified those obtaining among state, household, and church to be especially destructive and hence most in need of resolution. He believed this to be true because all three institutions make incommensurable claims on the identities of individuals and, taken together, create a social environment in which it is impossible to fulfill any of our obligations. We have, for instance, already seen that the model of the domestic society Rousseau develops in *Emile* and *Julie*, far from catalyzing citizenship, is instead developed at the cost of citizenship. Christianity, too, is ultimately inconsistent with the requirements of political freedom, both because it insists on the church being recognized as the state’s equal and because it cultivates an ethos of passivity and meekness at odds with the proactive spirit of the republican citizen. These institutional conflicts reproduce themselves in the soul and are the root
cause of the dividedness that both defines and destroys modern life. In order, then, to bring the citizen into a lasting harmony with himself and with others, these tensions must be resolved.

Setting out to create a social environment in which occasions for institutional and psychological conflict are minimized, Rousseau unifies all major social institutions and forms of association under the aegis of the one authority that is able to provide a basis for a legitimate and enduring union: the sovereign. A social union grounded on the doctrine of popular sovereignty gathers power in a single source—the people—and confers on it the authority to make authoritative and binding decrees about the basic terms of social cooperation. In its capacity as the sovereign, the people trumps the rights of fathers and of the church; it draws the boundaries between the private and public domains and is the court of final appeal. The claims that our private associations and beliefs make on our identities must therefore be consistent with the requirements of citizenship.

In arguing thus I shall show that Rousseau's solution to the problem of political unity is a kind of halfway point between the extreme collectivism of Socrates and the extreme individualism of Hobbes and Locke. Socrates, of course, seeks to resolve the political problems created by the existence of religion and the family by eliminating the private realm altogether and instituting a collectivistic program of civic education that unites all citizens through devotion to the common good. Hobbes and Locke, on the other hand, insist on the ineliminability of narrow selfishness and make it the basis for a politics of private acquisition. Rousseau rejects both the Socratic attempt to annihilate the private self and the Hobbesian effort to understand political life in terms of narrow private interest. He must chart a course between these two unacceptable alternatives and show that the claims of the individuated self can be accommodated without also being exaggerated.

Though this may sound reasonably uncontroversial as a characterization of Rousseau's political project, I believe that at least two contestable propositions follow from it. The first concerns the relationship of Rousseau's domestic theory and his political theory. If, as I will argue, the household's crucial function in the just regime is political socialization, it must differ fundamentally in its priorities and structure from the households depicted in *Emile* and *Julie*. Friendship, too, undergoes a kind of redefinition intended to cultivate good civic habits. These should hardly be unexpected results—since both love and friendship have been shown to be intrinsically unstable and generally ineffective as catalysts of civic identity—but they may nonetheless...
continue to meet with resistance from a number of quarters. The second regards the vexed question of Rousseau's relationship to Christianity. Though I shall not follow some interpreters in insisting on Rousseau's complete irreligiosity, I will argue that his analysis of civil religion in the *Social Contract* more than demonstrates his infidelity to some rather basic points of Christian doctrine.

In focusing primarily on public, domestic, and religious associations, I exclude others (e.g., economic relations) that are no less a part of the basic structure of society and about which Rousseau has much to say. However, the forms of association I have selected for analysis are both necessary to and sufficient for our limited purposes: they are necessary insofar as they are clearly central sources of human identity, and sufficient insofar as their reconciliation would provide the social conditions necessary for the preservation of psychological unity. In addition, though Rousseau clearly recognizes the importance of industry and material abundance (indeed, he praises Geneva for both) and is—despite some rhetorical posturing to the contrary—supportive of private property rights, he is also suspicious of commercial activity and does not view economic activity as directly contributory to the preservation of human wholeness. Thus, for the time being, it is enough to say that markets may operate freely in a Rousseauan society subject to the constraints imposed by those relations that *do* contribute directly to wholeness.

**Public Assemblies and Citizen Identity**

Rousseau does not believe that his much sought-after “complete return to political unity” could develop spontaneously, or that it could emerge as the unplanned result of self-interested behavior. Social equilibria are too fragile to entrust to an invisible hand. The harmonious coexistence of society's basic institutions requires a structural center that gives all social bodies specific shape and direction. This center is the locus of authority in any political society; it is the seat of power and the institutional core around which the other parts revolve. It provides citizens with the most fundamental principles they need for resolving conflicts both between and within themselves. Rousseau believes that the structural center of every political society is the office of *sovereignty*, and that society’s other institutions must fulfill their distinct purposes in ways consistent with the sovereign's requirements. These “requirements” go beyond the demand for mere lawfulness, for though *all*
political societies require that private aims be pursued within the constraints of law Rousseau demands further that the citizen’s role as a sovereign/subject take psychological precedence over his other social roles and responsibilities. The political dimension of identity must have priority in the minds of citizens, and the institutional and sociological structures in which citizens are embedded must be supportive of that priority.

The first and most important of these structures is the public institution par excellence: the sovereign assembly. Rousseau emphasizes the identity-constitutive importance of public assemblies by electing to place his discussion of them in Book III’s extended treatment of political decline and regeneration, where he seeks to identify those forces that may forestall or at least delay the inevitable death of the state. He begins his consideration of political stability by identifying the fundamental obstacle to it, namely, that the private will acts “incessantly” (sans cesse) against the general will until the former extinguishes the latter (III.10, 96). States degenerate, Rousseau claims, either when the government shrinks (e.g., from an aristocracy to a monarchy) or when the sovereign authority is usurped, either by an individual or by a group (III.10, 97–98). This process of decline is described as “natural” and “inevitable” in the following chapter, but we are not told why this is so until Rousseau essays to show how the forces of degeneration might be combated. In these chapters (III.12–15, 99–104) he emphasizes the importance of “regular, periodical” popular assemblies that are established by law and that “nothing can abolish or postpone” (III.13, 100). Such assemblies stabilize just institutions in two ways. First, they establish a mechanism of accountability that tends to restrain the prince from usurping the sovereign authority. Popular assemblies “have always terrified” the established government because its continued existence is often at stake. The existence of such assemblies, then, encourages responsible governance by providing the government with predictable and powerful reminders that it is the sovereign’s subordinate and will be unseated if it reaches beyond its trust. An agent accountable to its principal in this way is far less likely to attempt to usurp the sovereign power of lawmaking (III.14, 101).

Second, and for our purposes more important, popular assemblies provide powerful reminders of the people’s sovereignty not only to overreaching magistrates but also to the people itself. After pointing to the concerns that incumbent governments have with the congress of whole peoples (SC III.14), Rousseau goes on to explain how assemblies reinforce the psychological salience of citizen identity as well as how the maintenance of that identity is

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necessary to social stability. He begins the chapter by drawing the connection between good citizens and good institutions: “As soon as public service ceases to be the main business of the citizens, and they prefer to serve with their pocketbooks rather than with their persons, the State is already close to ruin” (III.15, 101). He elaborates on this connection by explaining that the attentions of citizens in a well-constituted state must be attuned to public rather than private affairs: “The better constituted the State, the more public affairs dominate the minds of the citizens. There is even less private business, because since the sum of the common happiness furnishes a larger portion of each individual’s happiness, the individual has less to seek through private efforts” (III.15, 102; emphasis added). In order for a good state to survive, then, individuals must think of themselves preeminently as citizens and have “public rather than private affairs” at the forefronts of their minds. The associational life conducive to the construction and the maintenance of citizen identity, and the self-conception that is its consequence, is correspondingly public and political. And though Rousseau believes it impossible to formulate precise rules about exactly how often such assemblies should be called, he is clear about their identity-constitutive function. The more we gather and associate as citizens qua citizens, the more likely it is that we will place a high subjective value on the fulfillment of our public obligations and that their discharge will inform our identity in meaningful ways. Neither commerce nor contemplation nor domestic life should furnish the “larger portion of each individual’s happiness” in a just society, for good citizens live for and through one another more than for themselves. No citizen of the just regime should join Emile in saying “Give me Sophie and my field, and I shall be rich” (E 457). Rather, the opportunities they have to gather as equal citizens and act in a legislative capacity are those for which citizens qua citizens live. When the people gathers in its specifically legislative capacity, the psychological effect on each citizen ought to be profound. All should be reminded of the salience of public affairs, of the importance of subordinating the moi particulière to the moi commun. The legislative assembly, then, is not important only because it enables an institutionalized expression of a people’s corporate will but also because it is an agent of political socialization and a catalyst of citizen identity. It, above all, maintains a people as a people.

It is, of course, not the mere fact but also the purpose of the people’s congress that sustains political identity in the appropriate mode, for it is easy to imagine a people assembled under circumstances Rousseau would find distasteful (e.g., under Mussolini’s balcony). It is essential that such assemblies
reinforce each citizen’s idea of himself as a free and equal participant in the lawmaking process. The condition of political equality deserves special emphasis in this connection, both because it is the defining feature of Rousseau’s social compact and because the structure of the assemblies themselves provide much-needed reminders to citizens of their equal moral worth. On this head, Rousseau concludes Book I by emphasizing how important the equal distribution of rights and obligations is in any healthy society, claiming that the substitution of “a moral and legitimate equality for . . . physical inequality” that makes all citizens “equal through convention and right” is so crucial that it “ought to serve as the basis for the whole social system” (SC I.9, 58). By giving to each citizen the same rights and obligations, by making no one demand of another what he would not do himself, Rousseau makes mutual respect the condition of self-respect.

Equality is the essence of the social compact because it connects the individual citizen’s pride to political participation without inspiring in him the tyrannical ambitions and delusions of grandeur to which malignant amour-propre is so susceptible. All civil-social men have a fundamental interest in attaining rewarding forms of social recognition, and the political process in a Rousseauan republic gratifies this wish by indicating at every point the equal importance of all citizens. In formal public assemblies, for instance, each may justly feel he is a part (indeed, an important part) of a grand spectacle—so important, in fact, that if he and he alone is excluded from public deliberations then the results of those deliberations are not general and therefore illegitimate (SC II.4, 62). Each, then, becomes indispensable without becoming more important than anyone else.

This rather extreme case not only illustrates how an institutional commitment to equality can reinforce one’s own sense of importance and power, but also how each citizen’s sense of self-worth is predicated on and hence constrained by his profound dependence on the social body. This is important for two reasons. First, it tightens the identification between the citizen and his regime, for one is far more likely to be civic-spirited where political practices affirm his dignity by giving him equal voice. Maintaining the closeness of this identification, as we have already seen, is absolutely essential to Rousseau’s political program. Second, the institution of political equality contributes to social stability by discouraging the onset of malignant forms of amour-propre. On this head, it is important to remember that citizens ennoble and are in turn ennobled by their roles as citizens, as members of an egalitarian brotherhood. And because one’s sense of self-worth is so closely tied to
the discharge of civic duty, the individual and collective good tend to con-
 verge. Those, however, who choose to follow the misguided path of malign-
 ant *amour-propre* and seek preeminence over others also choose to leave 
 that social position from which one’s dignity and moral standing derive. 
 That form of self-destructive striving, far from winning approbation, will 
 instead be frowned on and, in extreme cases (e.g., an aspiring tyrant), will be 
 punishable by law. An egalitarian social compact thus stimulates *amour-
 propre* by making the discharge of civic duty a point of personal pride, but it 
 also delimits some of the problems to which this problematic passion gives 
 rise by encouraging citizens to view the state as the source of their equality
 and hence of their dignity. To attack the social body is to attack the ground 
of one’s own worth.


Given Rousseau’s strong emphasis on the importance of constructing a 
 robust sense of patriotism, it is hardly surprising to see him emphasize the 
 identity-constitutive effects of legislative assemblies or other specifically 
civic gatherings. However, he knows that the associational life in a political 
 community is complex and multidimensional. Citizens act and interact in 
 subpolitical as well as political capacities, and such associations have a 
 unique pull on our hearts. Indeed, it is precisely this tendency that is so 
 concerning from the “the political point of view,” for since time and emo-
tional resources are scarce, devotion to one’s family and friends often comes 
 at the expense of devotion to the common good. If the particularistic con-
cern for one’s own takes regular priority over the general concern for the 
good of the social whole, Rousseau’s moral ecology collapses. He must 
 therefore find a way to resolve the tension between the devotion to the 
 common good that public life requires with the particularistic attachments 
 that private desire necessarily seeks.

In the *Social Contract* this problem manifests itself most clearly at II.3, 
 which treats the question of whether the general will could err in its pro-
nouncements regarding a political community’s common good. In seeking 
to determine the conditions under which citizens might correctly identify 
 the common good, Rousseau notes the singularly corrupting influence of 
 “partial societies,” which lead us to identify our fundamental interests with
subpolitical groups (our “particular wills”) rather than with the political society as a whole:

But when factions, partial associations formed at the expense of the whole, are formed, the will of each of these associations becomes general with reference to its members and particular with reference to the State. One can say, then, that there are no longer as many voters as there are men, but merely as many as there are associations. The differences become less numerous and produce a result that is less general. Finally, when one of these associations is so big that it prevails over all the others, the result is no longer a sum of small differences, but a single difference. Then there is no longer a general will, and the opinion that prevails is merely a private opinion. In order for the general will to be well expressed, it is therefore important that there be no partial society in the State, and that each citizen give only his own opinion. (II.3, 61)

This passage speaks to many but says different things to each. Plamenatz (see Gildin 1983, 55) simply finds it incomprehensible; Parry (1995) sees its emphasis on “expressing one’s own opinion” as evidence of a commitment to a form of autonomy; Crocker (1995) interprets its suspicion of private groups as a manifestation of Rousseau’s authoritarian tendencies; Grofman and Feld (1988) view its misgivings about reducing the number of voters as sufficient to support a proto-Condorcetian reading.

This last interpretation is of particular interest, for it draws on Condorcet’s “jury theorem” in order to identify the conditions under which the general will and the will of a legislative majority might coincide. Condorcet demonstrated that, under the right circumstances, the likelihood of a majority opinion being correct increases as a function of the number of voters. What is more, according to Grofman and Feld (1988, 570), these arguments were known to Rousseau: “It seems virtually certain that ideas similar to those later to be formally developed by Condorcet were ‘in the wind,’ and influenced both Rousseau and, later, Condorcet.” If a large pool of voters is more likely to make correct judgments than a small one is, Grofman and Feld reason, then Rousseau could well be concerned about “partial societies” because their emergence shrinks the number of voters and, thereby, decreases the likelihood that the will of the majority will be expressive the true general will: “As the effective size of the assembly is reduced—because people vote as a herd (part of a faction) and not as separately thinking and independently acting individuals—the Condorcet jury theorem tells us that group accuracy
will be reduced” (571). Grofman and Feld’s reading of Rousseau’s analysis of “partial societies” thus seems to capture at least part of what is at issue in this puzzling passage.

Though the Condorcetian interpretation helpfully shows that the emergence of bloc voting drives down average voter competence by decreasing the number of voters, it fails to explain the emergence of bloc voting itself. Why would citizens be disposed to make political decisions based on their sub-political group affiliations in the first place? One explanation is that—due to a host of psychological, pedagogic, and institutional factors—citizens identify more closely with their private affiliations than with the public good. Though Grofman and Feld are far from denying this possibility, it is clear that once we explicitly acknowledge its plausibility, the nature of the problem posed by partial societies changes from one about sustaining a sufficiently large pool of voters into one about identifying the cultural and institutional catalysts of citizen identity. If civic competence varies primarily as a function of individual citizens caring enough about public affairs to inform themselves about issues and participate in public assemblies, then the emergence of partial societies is alarming not simply because they reduce the effective size of the sovereign assembly but also because they cultivate in citizens attitudes and priorities that are inconsistent with the requirements of civic life. Without denying the usefulness of the Condorcetian interpretation of the *Social Contract*, then, we must remember both that there are many other determinants of civic competence beside the sheer number of voters and that Rousseau devoted far more time to discussing these other determinants than to formal probabilistic analysis.²

Indeed, when we read the passage concerning “partial associations” in light of others from the *Social Contract* it becomes clear that Rousseau dislikes the mediation of private groups between individual and state not simply because it decreases the effective size of the assembly but also because it substitutes a narrow and particularizing form of self-love—the *moi particulière*—for the appropriately generalized and expanded *moi commun*. We see this more traditional republican concern at work particularly in Book III’s treatment of political decline and regeneration, where Rousseau again discusses the obstacles impeding the effective expression of the general will. Here, however, his concern is not the sheer number of voters but rather that citizens give their personal interests priority over public affairs: when social conditions have reached a point when it is predictable “that the general will won’t predominate,” the reason given for this decline is that “domestic concerns absorb

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everything” rather than because the pool of voters has shrunk. Rousseau goes on to claim that good regimes depend decisively on citizens having politically centered self-conceptions, on their tendency to think of themselves first and foremost as citizens: “The better constituted the State, the more public affairs dominate the minds of citizens. There is even less private business because since the sum of common happiness furnishes a larger portion of each individual’s happiness, the individual has less to seek through private efforts. In a well-run City, everyone rushes to assemblies” (SC III.15, 102). In a good regime men can and do have both private and public obligations, but are disposed to view their public obligations as having priority. The role of citizen is and must be central to the self-conceptions of the inhabitants of a free regime.

Against this backdrop we gain a fuller sense of Rousseau’s concern about “partial societies” than the Condorcetian reading allows, for we see that the existence of factions prevents the expression of the general will not only because they shrink the pool of voters but also (and primarily) because they undermine the citizen-centered self-conceptions necessary to civic life. Those who cast votes on the basis of their private group affiliations do so because they view those affiliations as more rewarding and more central to their self-concepts than they do political life, because their identity interest in being a “citizen”—in being the kind of person who cares preeminently about the good of the city—contradicts the private identity interest they have in representing the corporate wills of their respective “partial societies.” The problem posed by factions, then, is more psychological than aggregative. They erode civic competence by eroding citizen identity.

Rousseau’s solution to this problem is a kind of halfway point between the radical collectivism of Socrates and the radical individualism of Hobbes. Like Socrates, Rousseau denies that narrow self-love can solve the political problems it creates and thus affirms the necessity of a robust, deindividualizing form of civic education. Like Hobbes, however, Rousseau makes (a certain form of) self-love the basis of the political association and rejects as both unrealistic and undesirable Socrates’s proscription of the private realm. He neither annihilates the domain of particularity nor gives it complete priority. Instead, he recruits that domain and the associations within it into the process of citizen identity formation, arguing that properly structured private associations can catalyze connection to the regime by instilling in citizens affective habits that facilitate mutual respect and fraternity.

This may sound somewhat surprising since I have heretofore emphasized the discontinuities between the domestic and political realms, but it is impor-
tant to add that the isolated households depicted in *Emile* and *Julie* are patently not the ones Rousseau has in mind when he identifies the domicile as a site of politicization. Those households, as was argued in chapters 4 and 5, remain largely independent from the tumults of the public world and do not generate the habits of mind appropriate to good citizenship. We need, then, a fully politicized conception of the household and the private realm. Rousseau’s attempt to flesh out the private lives of good citizens is seen less in *Emile* or *Julie* than in *Letter to D’Alembert*, in which the great Genevan seeks to protect his fatherland from the scourge of the theater. Rousseau’s *Letter* gives the most detailed picture of the kind of social life appropriate to a good political society and, in so doing, fills in many of the sociological details that the *Social Contract* can and must leave out. What we find there are models of marriage and friendship very different from those we examined in earlier chapters. They are different insofar as they are not direct instantiations of the human good but are instead provisional and preparatory—they ready men for the good of citizenship and for the particular kind of social connectedness that good requires.

Unsurprisingly, Rousseau emphasizes the civic unity of Genevan society, and chief among the intentions of the *Letter* is to show how the introduction of the theater will upset the complex and fragile equilibrium on which that unity is based. In arguing that the introduction of the theater is inappropriate for his homeland, Rousseau claims that the act of joint observation is intrinsically divisive and that sharing the shared spectacle of a play does not unite but rather separates viewers from one another. Rousseau’s highly interesting discussion of the effects of drama on the emotions acknowledges that the theater inevitably stirs in the audience feelings that in other circumstances might catalyze social togetherness, but it also claims that theatergoers are led to a consideration of their own troubles rather than those of others. Far, then, from being led by sympathetic feelings to the actual practice of beneficence, they instead leave the play feeling self-satisfied and emotionally exhausted.

The theater, Rousseau explains by interrogating the emotional responses of a hypothetical theatergoer, indulges our cheapest moral instincts: “Is he not satisfied with himself? Does he not applaud his fine soul? Has he not acquitted himself of all that owes to virtue by the homage he has just rendered it? What more could one want of him? That he practice it himself? He has no role to play; he is no actor” (*LD* 25). The theater does not catalyze virtue but rather encourages moral escape; like the philosophers who love...
the Tartars in order to ignore his neighbors, we weep over the ills of fictional characters so that we may forget the unfortunate who surround us in real life. The “fleeting and vain” form of pity produced by the drama thus fails to generate virtuous action, but it also encourages a type of isolating inwardness that is anathema to a good republic. Disunited by the dramatic spectacle, citizens turn inward after seeing depicted before the world the conflicts they feel within themselves. The result for self-loving beings is predictable: they learn to pity themselves rather than to assist their fellows. Thus, those who come together to share in theatrical performances will leave all the more divided, for though each “loves virtue” as it is presented in the drama, so, too, is it loved for the least virtuous of reasons: “He wants none of [virtue] for himself because it would be costly to him. What then does he go to see at the theater? Precisely what he wants to find everywhere: lessons of virtue for the public, from which he excepts himself, and people sacrificing everything to their duty while nothing is exacted from him” (24). We scrupulously fail to practice all the virtues we preach. In observing actors we become them, and all the destructive internal and external conflicts characteristic of modernity attend this fateful development. And thus does the argument from virtue collapse: the theater does not contribute to good public morality but rather destroys it by encouraging each citizen to view himself as separate from and more unfortunate than his fellows.

Though observing spectacles inspires neither virtue nor unity, citizens of a good regime may cultivate both by enacting them. Republican performances catalyze citizen identity, and thereby allay the conflicts between the public and private world, far more effectively than does the cold isolation of a dark theater. Indeed, Rousseau concludes his Letter by recommending that Geneva eschew the theater in favor of public festivals, games, and events that would feature the citizens themselves. He makes the civic usefulness of such spectacles clear from the outset: “What! Ought there to be no entertainments in a republic? On the contrary, there ought to be many. It is in republics that they were born, it is in their bosom that they are seen to flourish with a truly festive air. To what peoples is it more fitting to assemble often and form among themselves sweet bonds of pleasure and joy than to those who have so many reasons to like one another remain forever united?” (LD 125). Republics above all regimes require shared diversions, for common pleasures help to forge the thick civic ties necessary to sustain political freedom. The politicized and politicizing character of republican divertissements becomes more explicit in the following paragraph, where Rousseau argues
that theaters are unnecessary in a city where citizens are free to “plant a stake
crowned with flowers in the middle of the square” and enjoy an impromptu
festival. The happy result, in direct contrast to the isolation of the theater, is
that “each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united”
(126). Here as elsewhere the model is Sparta, for it was there “that the citizens,
constantly assembled, consecrated the whole of life to amusements which were
the great business of the state and to games from which they relaxed only for
war” (133; emphasis added). Formal legislative assemblies are, then, not the
only way that citizens qua citizens may gather. Indeed, it would seem that citi-
zen identity is constituted best when citizens themselves do not realize that
their identities are being constituted.

Rousseau does not stop at public games and festivals in his attempt to
mold sub-political associations in a way that reinforces the salience of citi-
zen identity. He also brings friendship into accord with the demands of
civic life by vigorously defending “the circles” (cercles)—informal social
groups with no explicitly political aims or ends—from critics both within
and outside of Geneva. These nominally private associations, though per-
haps not friendships in the specific, technical sense which we gave the term
in chapter 6, nonetheless surely qualify as friendships in the broad sense,
for membership in a cercle allows men to enjoy intimate association through
the shared activities and values of the group. That some of these activities
(e.g., drinking and gambling) are rather unsavory is of less concern to
Rousseau than the crucial identity-constitutive function these institutions
serve. The cercles are a bulwark against the destructive “revolution in mor-
als [moeurs]” that the establishment of a theater would bring about in a
“simple and innocent” republic like Geneva, for they shape the associa-
tional life of citizens in ways that reinforce the public dimension of identity
(LD 100).

Rousseau begins his account of the political importance of the cercles by
announcing that he is writing to a new audience: rather than address
D’Alembert and other “philosophers”—whose interests are not implicated—
he directly addresses “the people” as the people, for it is the entire civic way
of life that is at stake in this discussion (LD 100). Despite their undesirable
consequences, the cercles ought to be preserved because they have two related
sociological effects that help preserve the civic identity of Genevans. The first
benefit is negative: by separating men and women into different social groups
the cercles prevent a too-frequent intermingling of the sexes, which in its turn
would lead to an increase in adulterous practices and would make men too
soft to fulfill their martial duties (100–104). Though inter-gender social mixing is perfectly appropriate for, even necessary to, the gentle domestic societies of Clarens or Emile and Sophie’s farmhouse, it is entirely unsuitable for a free republic that needs men to be citizen-soldiers. Such men cannot be what they must be if they are constantly among women, whose company softens and intoxicates. The cercles are therefore an excellent republican substitute for the delicate social charms of private retreat, for through them men can enjoy meaningful social companionship but in a way that reinforces rather than undermines their civic identity. The good republic is and must be gendered, and the cercles’ segregation of men and women both protects conjugal fidelity and prevents male citizen-soldiers from acquiring a politically destructive “feminine” softness.

The cercles do more than prevent the onset of social evils. Indeed, they remind both men and women of their respective social roles and thus help to reinforce the connection between personal identity and politics. On this score, Rousseau notes that the cercles have a largely political origin: they grew out of the celebrations that followed military festivals and drilling exercises and were purified by “civil discords” that led their members out of raucous taverns and into places more suited to reasoned discussion of public affairs (LD 99). It is, he says, in the cercles as much as the agora that members learned not only how to fulfill their civic duties but also how to be the kinds of people who care about such duties in the first place: “These decent and innocent institutions combine everything which can contribute to making friends, citizens, and soldiers out of the same men, and, in consequence, everything which is most appropriate for a free people” (105). Thus the cercles, though nominally private associations, nonetheless turn individuals toward their role as citizens and reinforce the salience of that role. They have been recruited into the process of citizen-craft.

With this in mind, it is easy to see that the cercles Rousseau celebrates in the Letter to D’Alembert are not the kind of private groups that would be disallowed even under ideal conditions, as they do not narrow the boundaries of the self or invite the kind of identity confusion that such narrowing inevitably involves. Indeed, they reinforce rather than weaken the subjective importance of public affairs by providing reminders of the state’s unifying power even in the context of our private associational life. The members of cercles are not defined by their association with that group; to the contrary, both the individual member and the private group to which he belongs are defined in important ways by their integration into the larger political community.
Though the *cercles* institutionalize friendship in a civically salutary way, perhaps the more serious threat to citizen identity is the household. And since Rousseau rejects the Socratic attempt to eliminate the nuclear family, he must provide a model of the household suitable for his political society. We have already seen, of course, that the models of the family life developed in *Emile* and *Julie* are inappropriate to a good political society for at least two reasons. First, they both prove entirely too unstable to serve as a basis for a sound political project. Second, they shape the identities of their inhabitants in ways that are inconsistent with the requirements of civic life. Therefore we need an alternative conception of the family, one that more effectively catalyzes good civic habits and dispositions.

Rousseau provides at least the beginnings of such a conception in the *Letter*, which through the proposal of a series of dances and balls for persons of marrying age specifies the conditions under which properly politicized family life is best inaugurated. These dances introduce young men and women to one another and to the mysteries of sexual experience, and do so in a way that politicizes the sexual relationship from the outset. Before descending into the particulars of Rousseau’s account of these balls, however, it is important to recall the extreme importance he places on the earliest stages of a romantic relationship: *Emile* teaches the circumstances under which young people are introduced have “distant effects whose links are not perceived in the progress of the years but do not cease to act until death” (415). We saw in chapter 4 how the specific circumstances under which Emile and Sophie met foretold their tragic end. Rousseau himself, then, gives us especially good reason to look closely at the conditions in which civically salutary marriages are inaugurated, for he has already told us that these conditions have a disproportionate impact on the development of a relationship.

With this in mind, it is clear that Rousseau has the preservation of republican freedom in mind while recommending these balls. The institution of state-sponsored dances, he holds, would forestall political corruption by combating economic inequality and would give an important assist to public festivals and legislative assemblies in the constitution of citizen identity. This argument is predicated on the assumption that they would be open to *all* marriageable young people, and on the belief that exposure to more suitors than parents might permit would allow young people to follow the dispositions of their hearts rather than the directives of their parents. Left to mingle freely with one another, Geneva’s next generation of citizens would form attachments which their fathers—often more concerned about
dowries than compatibility—could never have envisaged. Whereas arranged marriages tend to centralize economic and political influence in ways that vitiate political liberty, voluntary unions strengthen republican values: young people, Rousseau reasons, will consult their moral tastes rather than their pocketbooks, and thus would tend to form unions “less circumscribed by rank.” Chosen attachments are also said to “prevent the emergence of parties, temper excessive inequality, and maintain the body of the people better in the spirit of its constitution” (LD 131). Here, and here alone, the marriages of citizens resemble that of Emile and Sophie, for in both cases Rousseau makes the union voluntary. Political freedom is inaugurated through the choice of a spouse.

In arguing thus, Rousseau departs from rather than reiterates the conventional wisdom of his homeland, for many Genevans believed the dances Rousseau recommended would undermine the authority of fathers and give public sanction to the untoward desires of youth. Rousseau, however, answers that there is nothing untoward about sexual desire itself, and he adds that it becomes socially dangerous only when consigned to the private realm. The political recognition of emergent sexual desire does not corrupt society; rather, it purifies sexuality. It does so by transforming that most intimately private of things into a social performance, a republican spectacle that, well executed, would serve as “an important component of the training in law and order and good morals” (LD 130). Rousseau’s mise-en-scène is striking: young people dance under the proud and watchful gaze of their parents, with parent and child alike watched from above by Geneva’s oldest and most distinguished citizens, who are to be saluted by all those entering or exiting the hall. Of all the things that might be said about the observational situation and its effects on the nascent *amour-propre* of the dancers, perhaps the most important is the way in which the grand and gallant setting reinforces and even helps to constitute the political identities of the young. It is easy to imagine the effect of Rousseau’s proposed surroundings on the anxious young dancers, whose first tentative steps in the sexual realm are made under the gaze not only of parents but also of the city’s great citizens. And it should be noted that it is in a specifically political capacity that the elders seated in the panoptic spectators’ box preside over the ball. It is thus in a politically charged atmosphere, with reminders of the homeland everywhere, that young people experience their sexual awakening.

It is tempting to say that these events are structured to make young people think of everything *but* the inclinations of their own hearts, and that,
though many may leave the dance without romantic prospects, no one will go home without a fatherland. But we may certainly say that the household to be created through marriage, far from the independent retreat sought by Emile and Sophie, is from its very inception thoroughly political and politicized. Its primary function is not to instantiate the human good, for this would make the household a rival to the state and turn it into a “partial society,” but rather to serve the state—much as Roman households did—through the production of virtuous citizens. The household in a just or approximately just political community cannot itself embody the good; it must orient young citizens toward the good to be found in the public realm.

| Religion and Social Unity |

The *Letter to D’Alembert* seeks to show that the theater is a poor fit within the institutional and social framework of Genevan society, for drama requires taste that Geneva does not have and undermines the virtue that it needs. Yet, in the thorough analysis of Genevan social life that occupies him for a full third of the work, Rousseau devotes very little attention to the role of specifically religious customs and practices. He does not provide the vivid portraits of religious ceremonies that he does of state-sponsored dances and festivals, and he chooses to not discuss directly the civic effects of state-sponsored Calvinism. Thus we are left to wonder whether Genevan freedom flourishes because or in spite of its official religious doctrine.

What Rousseau does say about religion in the *Letter* redoubles rather than resolves this ambiguity, for though he thinks the question of the relationship of religion to politics so important that he begins the work by addressing it, what he says raises more questions than it answers. Before addressing the merits of D’Alembert’s case for the institution of a theater Rousseau finds it necessary to correct his adversary’s claim that many of Geneva’s religious ministers privately profess Socinianism. Reminding D’Alembert that to attribute to civil authorities a belief in an officially condemned albeit intellectually serious doctrine is quite literally to damn through faint praise, Rousseau takes the posture of a traditionalist pushing back against the foolish indiscretions of a book-learned outsider: he claims to “not know what [Socinianism] is,” that he has a “disinclination” for what he does understand of it, and that he has nothing but “love and respect” for the revealed truth of the Gospel ([LD](#) 11–13). In arguing thus he allies himself
with religious conservative opposition to the theater and indicates that the city’s traditional Calvinism needs no help from some newfangled natural religion to sustain Genevan freedom.

But this is hardly Rousseau’s last word on the matter, for though respectful of Geneva’s religious authorities and careful not to put heretical dogmas in their mouths he makes pronouncements in his own voice radical enough to suggest he may be further away from his homeland’s official religion than from D’Alembert. For instance, he steadfastly declines to follow Geneva’s church fathers in condemning the Socinian dogma, denies that reason can justify belief in an afterlife or in extra-temporal consequences, and—though claiming to “love and respect” holy scripture—refuses to affirm its inerrancy. After confessing so much he is understandably eager to drop the topic of religion altogether, and he does so satisfied he has said “nothing in general that is not honorable to the church of Geneva and useful to men in all lands” (LD n. 14).

Much more might be said about Rousseau’s extraordinary caginess in the first section of the Letter, but for our purposes it suffices to show that the analysis there is far from the philosopher’s last word on the question of the relationship of religion and politics. To the contrary, the topic figured prominently into the most important works he wrote afterward and is related directly to his analysis of modern man’s dividedness. Emile somewhat surreptitiously implicates Christianity in this analysis by claiming that political freedom and the unifying “public education” necessary to it are no longer possible in modern times: “Public instruction no longer exists and can no longer exist, because where there is no longer fatherland, there can no longer be citizens. These two words, fatherland and citizen, should be effaced from modern languages. I know well the reason why this is so, but I do not want to tell it. It has nothing to do with my subject” (E 40). Because Emile’s own education bears little resemblance to that of the “citizen” there is a limited sense in which a full treatment of public education has “nothing to do” with the specifics of the prescriptive agenda of Emile. However, to the degree that the anonymous force that had crushed the possibility of civic education had also helped create the world in which fragmented modern man and his “laughable” education emerged, then it is far from irrelevant to Rousseau’s broader philosophic enterprise to disclose “the reason” why the language of citizenship is no longer understood (40).

Rousseau’s refusal to name the enemy is itself a fairly strong hint about what it is. In a footnote to his translation of Emile, Allan Bloom directs the
reader to chapter 8 of Book IV of the Social Contract, believing that it identifies the cause Emile demurely elects not to name: Christianity. And indeed, Rousseau argues there that Christianity has divided man’s allegiances between heaven and earth in a way that undermined human relations both within and between political communities: the separation of “the theological system and the political system” brought about “the end of the Unity of the State, and caused internal divisions that have never ceased to stir up Christian peoples” (SC IV.8, 126). It is, of course, not obvious that Rousseau blames Christianity per se for the disunity and unsociability characteristic of modern regimes, for he distinguishes between “the religion of man”—which he associates with the religion of the Gospel or Christianity rightly understood—and “the religion of the priest,” which gives men “two legislative systems, two leaders, and two homelands” and thus “subjects them to contradictory duties” and obligations. Where the former “is the pure and simple religion of the Gospel” that is “devoted to the eternal duties of morality,” the latter is “a mixed and unsocial” doctrine that “is so manifestly bad that it is a waste of time to amuse oneself by proving it” (IV.8, 127–28). Thus Rousseau, like his republican predecessor Machiavelli, distinguishes between Christianity and its institutionalized expression, seeming to blame the latter for its grotesque interpretation of the former.

Also like Machiavelli, however, Rousseau makes a distinction between Christianity and “the priests” only in order to drain it of any real significance. After calling the Christianity of the Gospel “saintly” and “true religion,” he goes on to analyze it from a “political point of view” and finds that it does not have the salutary civil effects so many attribute to it. Viewed from the appropriate perspective, one sees that Christianity fails to catalyze allegiance to the political regime, for it has “no particular relation to the body politic” and thus “leaves laws only with their intrinsic force, without adding any force to them.” Because the true church neither derives its authority from the state nor relies on state power for enforcement of its commands, it is unable to affect the content of the laws or directly motivate citizens to love and endorse them. It would seem, then, that the neutrality of the church with respect to the polis is guaranteed by its institutional independence from it and that Christianity in its purest form has a null effect on the political identities of citizens.

This alone would be sufficient for Rousseau to reject the Christian teaching concerning the relation of church and state, since any religion that does not actively aid in cultivating civic virtue is failing in its essential function, but Rousseau goes a good deal further. In fact, the apparently null...
effect created by an institutional separation of church and state undermines the sovereign's authority in precisely the same way that the pernicious "religion of the priests" does, for its very insistence on institutional autonomy is the functional equivalent of refusing to cede its spiritual authority to the sovereign. This refusal is enough to make Christianity unworkable as a civil religion, for in seeking to establish its own independent domain of authority within a political community that must be absolute in order to be anything at all, it necessarily sets itself up in opposition to the political community: to allow the kind of independence sought by the Christian church is to restrict the sovereign's ability to act within its rightful sphere. The church becomes, in Locke's phrase, a kind of "foreign Jurisdiction" within a political community that undermines sovereignty by claiming to be exempt from it (LCT 52). If the church may claim in the name of God an exemption from political authority, what would prevent any private person from doing the same?

Though no genuine sovereign could countenance the introduction of any independent "spiritual" authority into the political community, Rousseau insists with astonishing explicitness that the substantive specifics of Christian doctrine make it a peculiarly destructive social force in a republic. All religions make claims on the moral identities of believers, and Christianity is no exception. However, Rousseau makes clear that the individualistic and transcendental vision of the good expressed in the Gospel is discontinuous with the civic sociability required by a free way of life. Indeed, he charges that "far from attaching the citizens' hearts to the State, [Christianity] detaches them from it as from all worldly things. I know of nothing more contrary to the social spirit" (SC IV.8, 128). The ultimate effect of Christianity on civic engagement is thus not null—as Rousseau initially suggested—but negative. Its otherworldliness makes it politically pernicious, for it creates a psychology of quietistic disengagement that is simply inconsistent with "the social spirit" of republicanism. The indifferent obedience the good Christian owes to the regime in which he happens to live cannot be combined with the enthusiastic partiality the citizen qua citizen has for his patrie. Christianity thus not only claims to be exempt from sovereign control but also introduces into the republic a particular conception of the good that is harmful to its continued preservation. So, too, does it sap civic engagement by orienting the identities of citizens away from the polis and toward individual salvation. In its political effects, then, there is no meaningful difference between "the religion of the priests" and "true" Christianity. Both necessarily divide the allegiances
of citizens and create all the social and psychological disorders that attach to that dividedness.

Rousseau’s concern with Christianity’s effect on “the social spirit” is telling, for the unfitness of the religion of man as a civil creed stems not only from its tendency to divide the moral allegiances of citizens but also because of its contemplative and unsocial nature. Indeed, Rousseau believes that the transcendental individualism of Christianity militates against the thick social unity needed in a republic and that reconciliation between the two will prove impossible (SC IV.8, 129). On his analysis even a “society of true Christians” existing “in all its perfection” would “be neither the strongest nor the longest lasting” because it would “lack cohesion” (IV.8, 128–29). The lack of social togetherness is a function of the true Christian’s indifference to worldly things and the preeminent care he places on the salvation of his individual soul: “Christianity is a purely spiritual religion, uniquely concerned with heavenly matters” such as one’s eternal salvation. Thus the “Christian’s homeland is not of this world” and the attachment he has to his fellows is in the final analysis a matter of “profound indifference.” The “essential thing” is to worry about the condition of one’s own soul and “to go to heaven,” not to love and glory in one’s political community, befriend one’s fellows, or enact the “sentiments of sociability” without which freedom cannot subsist (IV.8, 129). Citizens of a republic must be at home in the world, and Christians must view it as a way station.

Doubtless the contemplative individualism of the true Christian is at the individual level more salutary than the alienated selfishness of the bourgeois, but it nonetheless creates serious political and social problems that cannot be dismissed as mere inconveniences. Rousseau is especially concerned that the true Christian’s ultimate indifference to temporal authority will leave his state susceptible to the domineering impulses of tyrants: “If there is a single ambitious man, a single hypocrite . . . he will very certainly get the best of his pious neighbors” (SC IV.8, 129). He goes on to say not only that Christian societies are vulnerable to tyrannical persons but also that Christianity itself is inimical to the cause of political freedom. His discussion is shockingly candid: “Suppose that your Christian republic is face to face with Sparta or Rome. The pious Christians will be beaten, crushed, destroyed before they have had time to look around, or they will owe their salvation only to the scorn their enemies will conceive for them” (IV.8, 129).
continues: “But I am mistaken when I speak of a Christian republic; these two words are mutually exclusive. Christianity preaches nothing but servitude and dependence. Its spirit is so favorable to tyranny that tyranny always profits from it. True Christians are made to be slaves” (IV.8, 130). “The religion of man” sacrifices freedom and unity in this life for salvation in the next. No citizen can tolerate this contradiction, and no good regime would ask him to do so.

It may be fairly wondered why Rousseau, if his reservations concerning Christianity are this strong, might not turn away from transcendental appeal altogether and seek to found a regime on a purely rational, secular basis. We, however, have already seen at least two reasons why he rejected this alternative as impracticable. First, he believed men on the whole too credulous and prone to superstition to ever do away completely with their need for religion. We crave consolations that reason cannot provide, and the Enlightenment promise to deliver salvation through reason was based on an irrational faith in rationality itself. Second, and more centrally, religion is a singularly powerful catalyst of those expansive passions necessary to civic virtue. Only in the rarest cases does reason move men to virtue, and its simulacrum more commonly directs them to vice. Religion, properly constrained, makes virtue the object of the passions; it inspires a passionate love of the standards of morality and bids us treat others with the good faith, mutual respect, and sympathy those standards enjoins.

What, then, might religion properly constrained look like? A full answer is, I fear, a book to itself, but if Christianity’s lack of fitness as a civil religion stems from its (1) insistence on dividing the allegiances of citizens, (2) general inability to discipline the fanatical passions it foments, and (3) tendency to encourage social disengagement, then a more salutary alternative must succeed on all these scores. With regard to the first, we have already seen that Rousseau solves this problem as Hobbes did, by putting religious forms of social control under the aegis of the sovereign and making religious and political duties more or less synonymous. He believes that a salutary civil religion cannot follow Jesus’s imperative to separate the theological and political systems, and must instead combine “the divine cult and the love of the laws” (IV.8, 125–26). Success on this point will have removed one of the great sources of contradiction in human life and have taken a large step toward making men more at home in the world.

Though the idea of political control over religious belief quite justifiably conjures the specter of authoritarianism, Rousseau understands—perhaps bet-
ter than we do—how destructive the combination of religious fervor and state power can be and seeks to avoid its terrible excesses. Thus, though he argues for the union of religious and political systems, he also insists that union can reach no further than “the limits of public utility.” Consequently, the “dogmas of civil religion” that all citizens must profess are extremely limited. The positive articles of faith give divine sanction to a few simple, precise, and reasonable beliefs centered on those “sentiments of sociability without which it is impossible to be a good citizen or a faithful subject” (SC IV.8, 130). Christianity’s demand for anything more has proven both philosophically misguided and practically destructive: because reason is incapable of determining the truth or falsity of many questions of dogma, only that portion of belief that bears directly on the ability to discharge civic duty should be susceptible to social control. Everything else is left to the domain of private conscience, and since “the sovereign has no competence in the [transcendental] world” it is obliged to tolerate what it is not competent to judge (IV.8, 130).

In addition to demanding that subjects believe what their reason resists, Christianity had on Rousseau’s accounting inculcated a socially destructive ethos of disengagement that led subjects to devalue worldly things and focus on the private goal of individual salvation. Civic duty may be discharged but it is done without relish or joy, and this is much the same as saying that it is done badly. Citizens who march into battle with the enthusiasm of a child eating his broccoli are not likely to return victorious. So, although the civil religion Rousseau proposes does posit an afterlife and hence in some way calls on a realm beyond, it makes extra-temporal rewards contingent on love of country and of one’s fellows. Far from devaluing this life by comparing it to the eternal felicity that awaits in the next, it makes that eternal felicity available only to those who value their relations to and within the state above all else.

| Can the Center Hold? The Fragility of the Moi Commun |

Through the last two chapters we have sought to understand Rousseau’s political philosophy as a particular manifestation of his generalized philosophical quest for human unity. It has the character of a balancing act, one intended to reconcile the seemingly competing demands of justice and utility, of private and public, of self and other. This balancing act is indicative of Rousseau’s hybridized solution to the political problem: rather than follow Socrates in
attempting to destroy the domain of particularity altogether, Rousseau seeks
to recruit it into the process of citizen-craft, for it is through this process that
members of a political community learn to associate their own first-order
interests with the good of the state. Of course, given Rousseau’s understanding
of the human soul and his insistence on the centrality of self-love, it should
hardly be a surprise that he would reject the Socratic route and seek to strike
some kind of balance between the public and private worlds. Political life must
realize the unity it seeks without imposing a false unidimensionality on the
lives of citizens; it must respect and accommodate the existence of private
associations (e.g., marriage and friendship) without compromising the political
association.

However, the balance of forces Rousseau provides for is as fragile as it is
essential: like Machiavelli, he knows that all the things of men are in motion,
that it is one thing to persuade men to become citizens and quite another to
keep them in that persuasion. The political problem thus conceived is not—as
a social contract framework sometimes implies—static or essentially
captured in a particular moment, but rather is inherently dynamic and con-
cerned with the psychological tendencies that multiple institutions, working
in conjunction, create in and over time. Thus, in seeking to understand just
how stable Rousseau believes his own solution to the social problem to be,
we must look beyond the Social Contract and to his portrayals of political life
in action. The Letter to D’Alembert has proved helpful in this regard, as it
depicts in idealized form the daily life of Genevan citizens and, in so doing,
points to the way in which an approximately just regime might ameliorate
those tensions that affect all regimes.

Rousseau is, of course, quite explicit (SC III.11, 98) that political unions
cannot sustain themselves in perpetuity: “The body politic, like the human
body, begins to die at the moment of its birth, and carries within itself the
causes of its destruction.” The question, then, is not if but when good regimes
devolve, and Rousseau’s analysis of the Genevan case suggests that he believes
the equilibrium of forces required in a just society is intrinsically unstable.
At least three reasons gather in support of this conclusion. First, the strength
of his opposition to the institution of a theater in Geneva is telling: that he
would think the introduction of a single playhouse could have such drastic
cascading social and psychological consequences indicates just how delicate
he believed social harmony is. One might attribute Rousseau’s stern critique
of the theater to other causes (e.g., to a generalized social paranoia or his
dislike of Voltaire’s meddling with his homeland), but it seems that his sus-
picians are motivated by a more comprehensive pessimism about the stability of social unity. On this head it is instructive to note that Rousseau opposes the institution of a theater on a specifically republican basis. He might have built a very different case, for instance, arguing on the classical liberal basis that publicly funded entertainments are an illegitimate use of the state apparatus. But Rousseau prioritizes institutional and social unity over the claims of individual liberty: without forgetting the short-term fiscal consequences—a decline in industry, an increase in public expenditure, and the introduction of luxury are among the most serious—Rousseau focuses on the long-term moral and social effects a theater will have. The introduction of refined entertainments will not only empty Geneva’s treasury but also destroy the city’s institutional integrity, disrupt its social equilibria, and undermine the civic-mindedness of its citizens. Ever sensitive to the profound effects produced by the smallest changes, Rousseau claims that by the time the subterranean effects of a theater are felt, it will be too late to control them: men will have already turned into sycophants and wits, women into temptresses or worse, and all will have acquired “a soft disposition and a spirit of inaction” at odds with both the commercial industriousness and the martial discipline that characterize Geneva (LD 64–65).

Second, Rousseau points to the fragility of Genevan social order by noting it is based on a peculiar balance of martial spirit and commercial activity that relies for its continuance on the moderation of its inhabitants and the existence of sumptuary laws. Geneva is neither Sparta nor England, neither the small military republic of the classical world valorized by Rousseau nor the extended commercial republic preferred by Montesquieu. It is itself a hybrid. Its distinctiveness lies in its ability to fuse the public spirit of the former to the bustling industriousness and ingenuity of the latter. The fragility of this balance is signaled by the very existence of sumptuary laws, made necessary to temper the greediness that attends commercialism but which Rousseau recognizes in Poland as a sign not of political health but rather of corruption: “Luxury does not get rooted out with sumptuary laws,” which stimulate rather than extinguish the desire for wealth (CGP 189). Though Rousseau is conspicuously silent in the Letter on the conditions that make sumptuary laws necessary, what he says in Poland suggests that Geneva is in a more advanced state of decline than initial appearances suggest.

Finally, Rousseau includes in a footnote late in the Letter an image of a “dance” that suggests the intrinsically unstable balance between the public and private realms. In it, he recalls having as a young boy witnessed “a simple
entertainment” enjoyed by a regiment of Genevan troops after drilling exercises. These troops, cheered by wine and a long supper, gathered in the town square and began playing music and dancing together. Such a spectacle struck the young Rousseau, who was moved by “the harmony of five or six hundred men in uniform, holding one another by the hand and forming a long ribbon which wound around, serpent-like, in cadence and without confusion.” The display stirred Rousseau’s passionate father, Isaac, to address his young son. “Do you see,” he intoned, “these good Genevans? They are all friends, they are all brothers; joy and concord reign in their midst” (LD 135n).

The basis of this “joy and concord” is, as Rousseau’s depiction attests, a shared vision of the human good as realized through political and martial solidarity, and the dance reflects and reinforces that solidarity through its total inclusiveness and its unity of purpose. It exists in contrast to the exclusive and romantically charged form of dancing that takes place at Rousseau’s public balls, for in this case all the soldiers were joined together in a “single ribbon” that spontaneously negotiated a series of complex maneuvers and reflected their oneness of mind. Warmed by the memory of his Genevan fellows in the town square both expressing and reproducing their unity, Rousseau exclaims, “The only pure joy is public joy.”

Like its private counterpart, however, “public joy” can and must expire, and the way in which Rousseau explains the termination of the spontaneous dance points up the ineliminable contradiction between the private and public realms. After emphasizing the unity of mind and heart with which the dancing was animated, Rousseau notes that city’s women were awoken by the noisy men and came down to join them: “The wives came to their husbands, the servants brought wine; even the children, awakened by the noise, ran half-clothed amidst their mothers and fathers.” The gathering of citizens qua citizens has now become a gathering of fathers, mothers, children, and servants; the “pure joy” of the civic association has been admixed with the particularistic pleasures of the household. The disruptive effect on the “dance” is clear, for when the men tried “to pick up the dance again” they found it “impossible; they did not know what they were doing anymore; all heads were spinning with a drunkenness sweeter than that of wine” (LD 135–36n; emphasis added). After some friendly chatting, each citizen “withdrew peaceably with his family,” retired to his home, and resumed his private domestic life. The effort to combine the rapture of citizenship with the pleasures of the household results not in successful reconciliation but in disruption.
and confusion. Even in the favorable sociological circumstances of Geneva, the roles of father, husband, and citizen are difficult to integrate and, assuming this integration achieved, even more difficult to sustain.

| Conclusions |

Rousseau’s political theory has a peculiar dynamic. It invokes as its basis a self in the possession of particular interests that require special protection. Indeed, the protection of these interests is the foundation of political legitimacy, and the theory of sovereignty for which Rousseau is so (in)famous only embodies and expresses his more fundamental concern to protect the integrity of the selves that make up the sovereign body. Yet the very self that serves as the foundation of Rousseau’s theory is simultaneously transformed by it, and transformed in such a way that the sense one has of himself as himself is obscured by the comprehensive way in which he identifies with the social institutions that constitute his personhood. The integrity of the moral person is imperiled by the very theory that claims to secure it. In the just regime, the particularized self is both coming into and falling out of being at the very same time. It is Rousseau’s belief in the necessity of circumscribing the domain of particularity that allowed him to admire regimes as institutionally and culturally diverse as commercial Geneva, expansionist Rome, and virtuous Sparta. These political societies not only were able to direct the psychic forces of individual citizens toward the good of the community, but all did so with the understanding that creating citizens comes at the cost creating individuals with robust self-conceptions. The tension between the embeddedness and the discreteness of the self is managed and controlled through a strategy of mutual accommodation, but it is never resolved at a theoretical level. This, I think, means at least two things.

First, both the radically collectivistic and radically individualistic interpretations of Rousseau are mistaken. The claims that Berlin, Talmon, Nisbet, and Crocker make concerning the “totalitarian” character of Rousseau’s thought ignore his rejection of Socratic communism, his recognition of formal limitations on the exercise of sovereign power, and his constant affirmations of the need to balance the claims of the private and public domains. This authoritarian reading shows—rightly enough—that for Rousseau individual identity must be shaped in accord with the needs of social institutions, but it neglects
to add that social institutions must be shaped in accord with the needs of individual citizens. Such interpretations exaggerate the authoritarian appearance of Rousseau’s theory not only by omitting its essentials but also by subjecting it to an impossibly exacting standard of scrutiny. Crocker is especially guilty on this score: he argues that the techniques of social control utilized by Rousseau—the greatest offenses are deliberate manipulation of the people by elites and the attempt to establish social regimentation “through inevitable punishment and reward”—reveal the authoritarian character of his political theory (Crocker 1995, 250–53). Rousseau did indeed believe that these and other techniques were necessary, but his novelty consists not in his acknowledging the utility of subterranean methods of psychological control—in this he is like virtually every political philosopher who came before and many who came after him—but rather in his discovery that such practices are embedded in all existing and all possible forms of social control. This discovery, far from being intrinsically authoritarian, has instead been very useful for liberals seeking to protect freedom, for it points up both the fragility of human liberty and the cost of sustaining it in the face of social forces that seem determined to undermine it. So, too, does it show that the question of freedom cannot be resolved by simply eliminating social control in some defined sphere of individual action, for since freedom and social power emerge coterminously the effort to eliminate social control in some defined sphere of private action will prove only to be a reassertion of it. The very creation of privacy is itself a social act. To recognize this—which Rousseau surely did—is not to be an “authoritarian,” which Rousseau surely was not.

Second, the tensions the self must face in the social and political world prevent the realization of the harmony it seeks. Rousseau’s moral universe is an eternally disjointed place full of contradictory duties, desires, and expectations. We act and interact in all different kinds of capacities, and in the final analysis there is no way to reconcile the various responsibilities to which a complex social life gives rise. The unity the self requires would in principle be satisfied by the radical collectivism of Plato’s Republic, but Rousseau’s belief in the primacy of self-love leads him to reject this way of life as unnatural and endorse a mode of social organization that has (reasonably) distinct private and public spheres.

And yet the tension that inevitably emerges between these spheres violates the unity required by the self; its need for coherence is overcome by the perplexing multiplicity of social life. If this is right, then there can be no final synthesis of civic spirit and subjectivity, as Frederick Neuhouser has
argued. There can be no stable solution to the tension between love of self and love of society, as Joshua Cohen and John Rawls have claimed. There can be no meaningful continuities between the public life of the just regime and the domestic life depicted in *Emile* and *Julie*, as Nicole Fermon and Elizabeth Wingrove have held. The tensions Rousseau thought into existence are held together not by their final complementarity but by their ultimate antagonism.