

## PITY IN ROUSSEAU'S SOCIAL CONTRACT

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**This is a working draft prepared for presentation at the Western Political Science Association (WPSA), March 29, 2013. Please contact the author prior to citing this paper. The focus and working title has been modified substantially from that included in the WPSA program.**

How are we, Rousseau's readers, to understand pity's relationship to politics? Pity receives not a mention in the *Social Contract*, which is widely believed to be Rousseau's most political text.<sup>1</sup> Several scholars have employed Rousseau to determine pity's political insufficiencies. Judith Shklar (1969), linking pity and suffering, doubts that even suffering's "equalizing" capacities are unable to provide solutions to political or social problems. Both Clifford Orwin (1997a) and Jean Bethke Elshtain (1996) worry that a compassionate politics breeds an emotion-laced exhibitionism around visions of suffering. Though the two differ in their diagnosis of and optimism for Rousseau's pity, they agree that the depiction and language of suffering in the political arena carries dangers. Pity, if it is to be used at all, requires an exacting discipline that may be too difficult for the average participant. Pity seems doomed to remain a social sentiment without political consequences.

I disagree with the diagnosis. I believe that pity is incorporated into Rousseau's general will and that we cannot achieve basic democratic principles like equality and freedom

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note at the outset that pity is Rousseau's term, and I employ it accordingly. As such it should not be read as possessing the same negative connotations as its contemporary. Throughout this paper, the following abbreviations will be used to cite Rousseau's works: **C**: *Confessions*; **DI**: *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*; **DPE**: *Discourse on Political Economy*; **E**: *Emile*; **J**: *Julie*; **LD**: *Letter to D'Alembert*; **OL**: *Origins of Language*; **SC**: *The Social Contract*.

without also having a robust pity displayed either as itself or as a root of social and political capacities like beneficence, humanity, or solidarity. Rousseau's works collectively reveal pity's political and social value and systematically encourage its cultivation. First, I argue for a finer distinction between natural and "civilized" pity, which displays itself as either "sociable" or sterile. Sociable pity moderates the self-isolating tendencies of egocentrism and reason while joining particular interests to general interests. I then propose that Rousseau's sociable pity is vital in creating and maintaining public concord as seen in *Emile*, *Julie*, and the *Letter to D'Alembert*. *Julie's* Clarens is a prime example of the kind of civic life inlaid in the *Contract* and its operations rely heavily on sociable pity to mitigate inequality and authority. Finally I briefly consider two concerns with infusing politics with pity and using a "paterfamilias" as an example of civic culture: that such a politics inhibits individual freedom and that such a politics is gendered and, ultimately, "weak." Sociable pity appears as neither the danger nor the problem to politics; quite the contrary, its cultivation and inclusion can act as a necessary critique as well as fuel activism around issues of equality and liberty.

I begin by challenging two assumptions about politics in Rousseau. First is the assumption that the *Social Contract* and like-minded treatises are political over and against Rousseau's more fictional works like the *Emile* and *Julie*. This assumption forgets that Rousseau's craft is in tailoring his message(s) to the reader, discriminately but variously, so that it has opportunity to establish itself.<sup>2</sup> Language is but one influence on human sentiments and ideas. He urges his readers to consider the preparation for and the context in which one delivers a message as much as its substance: "What one says means nothing if one has not prepared the moment for saying it," he counsels (E 319), "How can one think that the same sermon is suitable to so many auditors of such diverse dispositions, so different in

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<sup>2</sup> See Christopher Kelly (2003).

mind, humor, age, sex, station, and opinion?” The novel offers an ideal vehicle for combining particularity within generality: Rousseau can offer general guiding principles and maxims but place them in a specific context, using *this* character type or *that* kind of social encounter. In so doing, he can also adorn those encounters sensually – they come to life as the imagination reconstructs the sensations, sentiments, and psychologies of a given situation. The result is a more compelling inquiry into human nature, relationships, and society. As Rousseau reminds his readers,

One of the errors of our age is to use reason in too unadorned a form, as if men were all mind. In neglecting the language of signs that speak to the imagination, the most energetic of languages has been lost. The impression of the word is always weak, and one speaks to the heart far better through the eyes than through the ears...Reason alone is not active. It sometimes restrains, it arouses rarely, and it has never done anything great. (E 321)

Rousseau’s rhetoric and style is intentional. To discount a substantial portion of Rousseau’s work on the basis that it is not characteristically political – that is, written with an erudite tongue in an academic form – is to ignore the ways in which Rousseau deliberately blurs those categories.

Adding to the complexity of dividing Rousseau’s political from his non-political texts is his habit of repetition. In the *Confessions* he reveals, “Everything that is bold in *The Social Contract* was previously in the *Discourse on Inequality*; everything that was bold in *Emile* was previously in *Julie*” (342). It should be added that what is found in *The Social Contract* and the *Discourse on Political Economy* is also found in *Emile*, and, by extension, *Julie*. Book Five of the *Emile*, in which an adult Emile meets, courts, and merits his Sophie, includes a diagnosis of the “best” political system that parallels what Rousseau provides in the aforementioned “political” texts. Emile is sent to travel the world to discern the best possible political governance but discovers it closer than he imagines: Sophie’s hearth. Her parents rule their abode well; under Emile and Sophie’s direction it will flourish. “I believe I see the people

multiplying, the fields being fertilized, the earth taking on a new adornment” (E 474). Given the love with which Rousseau also describes Clarens’ management, it is not a poor conjecture to believe that Clarens and Sophie’s estate are analogous. Rousseau intends for *Julie*, and Clarens particularly, to serve as a revelation of public accord. He shares, “Aside from this object of morals and conjugal decency, which is radically connected to the whole social order, I made myself a more secret one of concord and public peace, which is perhaps a greater and more important object in itself” (J 366). Prefiguring feminism’s “the personal is political,” Rousseau claims that the novel’s intimate relations are not only bound up in but inform more public goals and considerations.<sup>3</sup> To understand the first is to gain a more developed understanding of the second.

Rousseau iterates this relationship the *Social Contract* even as he emphasizes the public over the private, and it is his focus on a government’s form that trains his voice. The *Contract* is excerpted from a larger project, “*Political Institutions*,” abandoned by Rousseau (C 339-40, 432). He writes in the least “energetic” and, subsequently, least convincing language – that of reason – in order to demonstrate what must be done: “I repeat,” he says, “cold arguments can determine our opinions, but not our actions. They make us believe and not act” (E 323).<sup>4</sup> He writes to shift opinion around political rights, the establishment of a compact, and the form of institutions and political laws, not to compel certain behaviors or political practices that are better categorized as “mores.” Mores are defined partly by their emotional, social, and moral activity: they revivify old laws, preserve institutional spirit, and determine a compact’s success. That people *do* something rather than believe something suggests that

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<sup>3</sup> The irony of this claim is not lost on me given the number of critiques he has received by feminists of note.

<sup>4</sup> The contrast of being able to believe without acting mirrors the distinction Rousseau makes between sterile and sociable pity in the *Letter to D’Alembert* (24): one can have an intellectual (even emotional) comprehension of a situation without acting upon it. Reason might persuade but it cannot compel.

mores require an emotive and imaginative language. Their omission from the *Social Contract* is less an indication of their importance than of the *Contract's* purpose. Rousseau does not fail to inform the reader that the legislator “secretly occupies himself” with mores even as he constructs the institutional forms of governance, and he categorizes them as the fourth and “most important” law in social and political formation (the others being political, civil, and criminal) (SC 172).

Second is the presumption that the *Social Contract* itself is somehow a more useful project or provides a more attainable politics than his other texts. Rousseau’s project admits its fragility. A polity’s death is inevitable – a matter of whether it occurs “naturally” or because of shifts in power – and its birth is circumstantial. Consider all of the improbable convergences that Rousseau outlines for a government’s instantiation: a legislator with a “great soul” must be found; the people, the land and its resources, and the sovereign must fit one another; a civil religion must circulate. Rousseau acknowledges the difficulty of finding the right combination of conditions (SC 170). He also likens the body politic to the human body, both of which “[begin] to die from the very moment of its birth, and carries within itself the causes of its destruction” (SC 194). Several elements can hasten its death. Interest groups and factions might arise, weakening social bonds and causing particular interests to oppose and outweigh the general will. The government may shrink, moving from an aristocracy to a monarchy. Or the state might dissolve because either the sovereign seizes more power or certain members usurp power and alter the government’s form. Increasing the likelihood of disruption and dissolution are aspects of social and political life like opinion, mores, and individual desires for power, favor, or esteem.

Setting aside these concerns, the *Social Contract* still appears to support the critics’ claim that pity’s absence is telling: if pity cannot be found here, it can be neither institutional

nor political. But this examination might be misdirected. What if, instead of asking where in the text do we find terms like pity, we look instead at what lies in-between and beneath the text? This question aims at the “great question of the best possible Government” for Rousseau, mainly: “What is the nature of Government suited to forming a people that was the most virtuous, most enlightened, most wise, in sum, the best, taking this word in its most extended sense” (C 340). Murmuring below the text are women and men, tastes, opinions, mores, sentiments, economic and social interactions, inequalities and equalities, individual interests and the “common” – in short, the lifeblood of a polity that determines whether and how well a government functions. Sociable pity, itself not a political term, is also a political practice that sustains the polity at large. I trace the development of natural pity into its civilized forms, sterile and sociable, before examining pity’s appearance and function across Rousseau’s texts. Evaluating the parallels between his “novels” and his “political” texts enables us to better understand the kind of civic society to which the *Social Contract* aspires and in which pity is circulating.

Elsewhere I argue that Rousseau distinguishes a sociable pity from a sterile pity or a natural pity, and that it flourishes in *Emile* and *Julie*.<sup>5</sup> “Natural” pity refers to humans’ innate desire to remedy suffering. Rousseau details its movement in *The Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, privileging pity and self-love as the two principles guiding human action prior to reason. From pity “alone flow all the social virtues” and Rousseau specifically names humanity, benevolence,<sup>6</sup> generosity, and friendship as particular instantiations of pity (DI 54). Yet the increasing complications involved in human “perfectibility” – the development of reason; the onset of numerous passions like sexual desire, the desire to be esteemed, and

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<sup>5</sup> Brown (2012).

<sup>6</sup> “Benevolence and even friendship are, properly understood, the products of a constant pity fixed on a particular object; for is desiring that someone not suffer anything but desiring that he be happy? (DI 54).

jealousy; and more complex social and economic relations – led to a faint and itinerant natural pity. Some argue that Emile’s education retains this “natural” pity but I believe that he better shows how a “civilized” pity can be sociable and not sterile.<sup>7</sup> Emile’s pity intersects with a certain degree of cognition and imagination that is “unnatural” to its first movement as an instinctive repulsion to suffering.<sup>8</sup> “Sociable” pity identifies the self with others, coupling reason and emotion in order to actively respond to a given situation.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, “sterile” pity is a narcissistic, emotional response to suffering that concentrates on elevating one’s social value and appearance.<sup>10</sup> Sociable pity’s display and development is varied, dependent on disposition, context, and cultivation. But it conjoins a highly individualized experience to a broader understanding of human experience (E 222): we “do not become what they must be, but remain ourselves, modified” and our “rational” judgment of their situation is merely a comparison of “their *prejudices* to ours” (emphasis added, OL 49). Pity instructs by moving from the particular to the general (and back again) and it functions in relation to interests, prejudices, experiences, and opinions.

The lack of critical attention to these distinctions has led to pity’s dismissal as being apolitical, anti-political, impractical, or dangerous. Yet pity is Rousseau’s primary *social*

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<sup>7</sup> Rousseau offers three maxims that, for sake of space, will not be discussed in length: 1) “It is not in the human heart to put ourselves in the place of people who are happier than we, but only in that of those who are more pitiable” (E 223); 2) “One pities in others only those ills from which one does not feel oneself exempt” (E 224); and 3) “The pity one has for another’s misfortune is measured not by the quantity of that misfortune but by the sentiment which one attributes to those who suffer it” (E 225).

<sup>8</sup> Of the numerous passions coursing through humans, including self-love, pity is “the first *relative* sentiment which touches the human heart according to the order of nature” (emphasis added, E 223). No one is absolved from pity (E 227) just as no one can evade mortality and suffering; humans are all “born naked and poor,” Rousseau remarks (E 222). Pity’s movement is not only a reminder that humans are interconnected, consciously and unconsciously bound to each other, but that there are common elements of the human condition that are unavoidable, regardless of wealth or status. Because these references require imagination and the comprehension to find similarity between unlike people, Rousseau marks pity’s entrance at adolescence.

<sup>9</sup> I argue that Rousseau’s characters in *Julie* and *Emile* depict, at least, four different dispositional types of sociable pity, each cultivated according to their individual temperament (2012).

<sup>10</sup> See *Letter to D’Alembert*, p 24.

mechanism (as opposed to cognitive powers like imagination, reason, and judgment) for discerning commonality among diversity. It also functions as a moderating force on both over-fraught passions and self-isolating reason. Neither a riotous crowd nor a “prudent man” comes to the aid of violent brawlers; it is “women of the marketplace” who “prevent decent people from killing one another” (DI 55). Pity consistently refers a person outside of herself and, when other faculties threaten to either overtake or too strongly defend the boundaries between self and other, pity re-establishes the self by virtue of establishing new relationships more connected with common purpose. Lest we believe that because pity is “natural” to humans, it comes “naturally” in complex socio-economic and political relationships, we need only look at the differences in its appearance in *Emile* and *Letter to D’Alembert*: pity needs cultivation in order to be purposeful and spontaneous, thoughtful and intuitive; otherwise it easily becomes a blunt and egoistic force without direction or purpose.

How are we to know whether pity is sterile or sociable? Whether it contributes to dynamic social and political wellbeing or exacerbates individual fantasies of self-worth? Answering these questions is hard if we insist that pity be explicit and singular rather than implicit and active. I take seriously Rousseau’s claim that pity engenders humanity and benevolence, virtues that repeatedly appear his texts. Rousseau also places pity in self-love. Consider his definition in the attached notes to the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*:

Love of oneself is a natural sentiment which moves every animal to be vigilant in its own preservation and which, directed in man by reason and *modified by pity*, produces humanity and virtue. Egocentrism is merely a sentiment that is relative, artificial and born in society, which moves each individual to value himself more than anyone else, which inspires in men all the evils they cause one another, and which is the true source of honor. Emphasis added, DI 106.



We find pity buried within self-love's movement: pity modifies self-love; reason directs it.<sup>11</sup> Without pity, self-love's degeneration to egocentrism is exacerbated by reason (DI 54). Rousseau twice defines humanity: it is pity directed towards humankind generally and it is self-love modified by pity. Self-love by itself is insufficient in producing the expansiveness associated with great souls.<sup>12</sup> Pity is a necessary condition for a fecund and transforming self-love operating in society; otherwise, self-love too tends towards artificiality and sterility, emphasizing again that the desire to be esteemed is a darker force in human behavior than pity. Pity's subterranean presence in virtues like humanity, an expansive self-love, and benevolence is helpful for understanding the kind of civic life Rousseau envisions in the *Social Contract*. These virtues flourish in the bucolic vignettes Rousseau inserts into the *Letter to D'Alembert*, *Emile*, and *Julie*, most especially.<sup>13</sup>

*Julie* offers the most detailed exploration of pity's intersection with policy. Clarens' productivity is a marked contrast to the sterile grandeur of Julie's childhood estate, Étange, and the "natural"<sup>14</sup> retreat of Julie's private garden, her Elysium.<sup>15</sup> Its placement between the two suggests that is more than an example opposing a more "natural" state (the Elysium) to social deprivation (Étange); rather Clarens showcases a buzzing populace with its own social, labor, economic, and justice systems that St. Preux intermittently compares to cities and

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<sup>11</sup> Cooper argues that pity is sublimated into amour de soi. For the sake of distributing this paper at WPSA, I reference this different interpretation but I will not engage it.

<sup>12</sup> See Kelly (2003) and Brown (2012).

<sup>13</sup> The contrast between urban and rural life as Rousseau understands it is frequently noted. While I agree that it is thematic and significant, I do not believe that Clarens acts only as an example of rural "wholesomeness" against a city's corrupting tendencies.

<sup>14</sup> Yet even this "natural" garden is the result of careful, deliberate planning and tending. The Elysium, like *Emile*, is an "artificial" product whose art consists of captivating the "natural" at its best.

<sup>15</sup> It is also compared favorably to Geneva, though the author also notes the beginnings of Geneva's cultural and political decline (J 541-45). Adding to my argument that readers are expected to conceive of *Julie* and *Emile* as outcomes of the *Contract's* recommendations is Claire's frequent interjections that, in describing social mores, she wanders into political matters. Claire is Julie's cousin and the author of this particular letter.

republics. Rousseau also details Clarens' development and structure according to his instructions on creating a good republic – care is given to the design and layout of physical space so that social and economic relations are smooth, useful, and amiable (J 363-64 & 540, LD 60, SC 187-90); labor and goods production is such that production and population are proportionately maximized (J 364-65, SC 168 & 191); the love of homeland Rousseau desires to turn into love of citizen is analogous to the love of paterfamilias that Wolmar and Julie successfully transform into workers' love of one another (DPE 120-21, DI 26, LD 135, J 366, 380, & 386); the particular interest of each person is entwined with the general interest of the estate (J 373-74 & 380-81, DPE 119, SC 157 & 163); and affection is a key bind for obligation (J 386, DPE 119-22, SC 164 & 167). His directions are effective. St. Preux describes Clarens' results:

A small number of gentle and peaceable people, united by mutual needs and reciprocal beneficence, here work together through various tasks toward a common goal...equals could have distributed among themselves the same functions without any one of them complaining of his lot. Thus no one envies someone else's; no one believes he can increase his fortune otherwise than by an increase in the common weal; the masters themselves gauge their happiness only by that of the people around them. (J 448)

Rousseau intends for Clarens to serve as a model of public concord as well as relative equality. Pity is key to Clarens' success, though locating it suffers from the same challenges as finding it in the *Social Contract*: pity itself is hardly mentioned while its manifestations, humanity and beneficence, reign.

How do Julie and Wolmar achieve such ends? Much in the same way that Emile's tutor educates Emile. They yoke physical to moral development and enhance beneficence, enkindle love of virtue, and expand mutual esteem and respect. The passions that are destructive to pity are discouraged. Consider the advice that Rousseau provides in *Emile*:

To excite and nourish this nascent sensibility [pity], to guide it or follow it in its natural inclination, what is there to do other than to offer the young man objects on which the expansive force of his heart can act – objects which swell the heart, which extend it to other beings, which make it find itself everywhere outside of itself...to say it in other terms, to excite in him goodness, humanity, commiseration, beneficence, and all the attractive and sweet passions naturally pleasing to men, and to prevent the birth of envy, covetousness, hate, and all the repulsive and cruel passions which make sensibility, so to speak, not only nothing but negative and torment the man who experiences them. (222-23)

Rousseau stimulates pity through opportunities, activities, and relationships that join a particular self, replete with its own interests and egocentric tendencies, to others and their interests. Pity takes the heart “outside of itself” and relocates it in distinctive others. “To become sensitive and pitying, the child must know that there are beings like him who suffer what he has suffered, who feel the pains he has felt, and that there are others whom he ought to conceive of as able to feel them too” (E 222). In this way, pity establishes a community of shared possibility through individual and collective remembrance. This form of relating to either strangers or loved ones fuels pro-social virtues and capacities. Rousseau again intimates that the terms pity, humanity, beneficence, or goodness are interchangeable, but he affirms that these virtues are lost without pity’s cultivation and maturation. Pity is a necessary, if insufficient, animating principle that motivates and grounds essential social and political capacities. Through sustained (and sustainable) action these capacities act as dispositions and practices.

Julie and Wolmar might have read *Emile*, so closely have they implemented a regimen that nurtures pity and its instantiations. “Choose with care their society, their occupations, their pleasures,” Emile’s tutor admonishes, “Show them only scenes which are touching but modest, which stir them without seducing them, and which nourish their sensibilities without moving their senses” (E 231). Julie and Wolmar generate occupations and recreations for their servants. Games are played in the summertime, honing individual skill and honor alongside camaraderie (E 232, J 373-74). Dances are offered in the

wintertime to keep morale and physical health lively (J 375-77, LD ). Work is rewarded fairly while also promoting loyalty and long-term commitment (J 365). Fraternization between the sexes is limited to public excursions where modesty and public esteem can check sexual desire (E 433-35, J 372-74 & 379-80, LD 64). Beneficence, temperance, and a sense of justice is encouraged through acts of kindness (often anonymous), sympathy for wrongdoing so long as only the doer is affected by his actions, and transparency in accusations (E 236 & 250, J 366 & 380-81). St. Preux remarks that Clarens' populace is "judicious, beneficent, honest," traits that Rousseau attributes to Emile after he hones his pity (E 233 & 253, J 386).

Clarens is Rousseau's best example of a community that both facilitates public concord and mitigates authority's odious effects. In part, it is not just because sociable pity flourishes among the people but also because its "rulers" employ it. Like Emile's tutor or the *Contract's* legislator, Julie and Wolmar understand that sentiment is a valuable attachment and that the best means of securing it is by embodying it. The pair are active in their estate and attentive to their community (J 364-65, 372, 384-86). "Master, make few speeches!" counsels Emile's tutor, "But learn to choose places, times, and persons. Then give all your lessons in examples, and be sure of their effect" (E 232). Sensitive, pitying, and supportive Julie is especially winsome (E 365).<sup>16</sup> Rousseau consistently refers to her ability to wed effective action with "sincere" kindness and interest; her pity is innate and strong. As St. Preux remarks of Clarens, "I have never understood better how little the force of the things we say depends upon the words we use" (J 377). Julie and Wolmar diligently attend to how their deportment and policies are perceived. They "demand nothing but what is reasonable and useful;" they dignify the person, refuse to abase her through her tasks, and respect her time and labor; they have "neither arrogance nor whim in the command" (J 386). Rousseau

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<sup>16</sup> For more on Julie's pity, please see Brown (2012).

likens Clarens' master-servant relationship to one of "reciprocal friendship," thanks to the attention to authority, obedience, and attachment (E 372). The resulting relative equality and amicability, despite differences in occupations, social standing, and authority, limits the pains of inequality and dampens negative emotions like jealousy or avarice. *Julie* and *Emile* echo Rousseau's refrain that context and relationships affect individual character and social dynamics.

Julie and Wolmar succeed in encouraging pity to not only take root but also circulate. It establishes goodness, kindness, and mutual support and tempers egocentrism and isolation. It is active and it is dynamic. Sociable pity, then, is a principle force for moderating particular interest and conjoining it to a general interest shared by each member in the estate. "I have never seen a system in which interest was more wisely channeled and where however it had less influence than here," concludes St. Preux (J 386). His finding is a goal shared by the *Social Contract*, albeit stated differently.

There is an aspect of the *Social Contract* that suggests itself for political pity: the general will. I am leery of simply equating it to sociable pity – the general will seems more a blend of natural pity, *amour de soi*, and conscience with a strong sense of justice – but it relies upon pity to achieve the common and moderate particular interests. "Pity is what, in the state of nature, takes the place of laws, mores, and virtue, with the advantage that no one is tempted to disobey its sweet voice" (DI 55). Within a more complex society and governance, sociable pity is what works in concert with laws, grounds mores, and nourishes virtues so that civic culture can thrive. Insofar as sociable pity nurtures a strong civic culture it is political. Solidarity, receptive listening, advocacy, representation, equality, justice, or care rely on a person's capacity to see another person as distinct but valuable and to imagine legal, political, or socio-economic consequences of institutional and individual action. In

Rousseau's terms, these political capacities require "transportation" outside of oneself and he is firm that pity is the vehicle, hence his incorporation of similar political and civic activities in Emile's education and in Clarens' infrastructure. Each sees oneself in the other; each sees how the general will is bound up and derived from particularity; each participates in active, sympathetic support of the other. Sociable pity is a primary social mechanism for comprehending and acting in a highly interdependent society – it restrains *amour-propre*, harnesses the passions, and stimulates good acts towards and with one's community members.<sup>17</sup>

Pity is capable of doing so, in part, because it shifts attention to the two basic, ineradicable facts of the human condition – mortality and suffering (E 227). Problematically, political structures often exacerbate or create inequalities among its members, shifting the burden of suffering and death onto the poor or the disenfranchised. The institutions' longevity and structure also makes them both more susceptible to decay and less responsive to shifting community needs. Rousseau constructs the general will as a motivating force that calls a populace to review whether and how inequalities are exacerbated in the polity. Shklar calls it a regulative, psychological power that refers people to equality (1969, 185-86). And in the context of political and social deterioration and ossification, the general will is a reflexive practice. It continually re-gathers people around the common so that they might adapt to an ever-changing socio-economic and political climate. It is both spontaneous and educable. In other words, it acts and functions like pity.

Rousseau first defines the general will as an identification of self and other. "*Each of us places his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and as one we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole*" (SC 148). More than merely yoking

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<sup>17</sup> Brown (2012).

individuals together in a compact,<sup>18</sup> the general will establishes a psychological experience in which the self perceives discrete and distinct others as a part of one's self. One does not just replicate one's self but multiplies one's self (Strong 2000, 82). "The general will is then the expression of my common self, that is, of the self that I find, as the same self, in myself and in others," argues Strong, "Far from being the expression of a single, unitary overarching collective consciousness, the general will is in fact the expression of the multiplicity and mutability of my being" (*ibid*). Rousseau constructs a political composite where self and other find commonality outside of and beyond shared political interests. Being able to viscerally and imaginatively conceive how the self is other (and the other is self) results if the general will is rooted in sociable pity. Strong implies as much when he argues, "It is the ability *to experience as others experience* that creates the common" (emphasis added, 2000, 123). Pity transports the self, safeguards the self, and multiplies the self in and through others, so to speak, without endangering the self.

The twin aims of the general will – the common preservation and the wellbeing of "the whole and of each part" (DPE 114, SC 203) – echo the dual functions of pity and self-love in Rousseau's natural state: tempering isolation and self-sufficiency. Conceiving of the body politic as "moral," not as a "being of reason" but as an artificial body that imbues its citizens with "duties" (SC 150), Rousseau wraps the general will into a care for the polity at large and the individuals within it. He writes in the *Discourse on Political Economy*, in which the general will also figures, "Individual welfare is so closely linked to the public confederation

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<sup>18</sup> He elaborates how it functions: "The constant will of all the members of the state is the general will; through it they are citizens and free. When a law is proposed in the people's assembly, what is asked of them is not precisely whether they approve or reject, but whether or not it conforms to the general will that is theirs. Each man, in giving his vote, states his opinion on this matter, and the declaration of the general will is drawn from the counting of votes. When, therefore, the opinion contrary to mine prevails, this proves merely that I was in error, and that what I took to be the general will was not so. If my private opinion had prevailed, I would have done something other than what I had wanted. In that case I would not have been free" (SC 206).

that, were it not for the attention one should pay to human frailty, this convention would be dissolved by right if just one citizen were to perish who could have been saved” (DPE 122). The fact of its generality does not create a mass uniformity, as Arendt fears; rather, it creates a heightened interest in how abstract principles like equality or justice are *felt* by individuals precisely because its constituents are so interdependent. What affects one, affects all and vice versa. The ends of the particular and the individual are not divided from those of the general; in fact, they constitute them. Yet without an undercurrent of sociable pity to do the actual work of perceiving commonality and suffering, the overall health of the civic culture and of the general will falters.

Like the general will, sociable pity is inconstant and impermanent. Unlike the general will, sociable pity is not itself institutionalized. Rousseau’s sociable pity acts as a disposition and a practice, a potential that responds to the fact of interdependence in its ability to move a person both “against her wishes” and in accordance with her desires, choices, and habits. Whether it is because we cannot ascertain what is “right” until we are confronted (anew) with the person or the situation or because we are deliberate in judging how and when our actions and reactions are egocentric, we rely on an innate pity to imagine another’s situation. The general will is Rousseau’s way of capturing what can otherwise be an intuitive and individual synchronization with another through the fact of interdependence, modified to act generally – it cannot “render a decision on either a man or a state of affairs” (SC 157). The result is a larger view albeit with a compassionate focus. The general will looks first to the conditions underlying an incident or a policy and asks whether those conditions are equitable, sustainable, or right. Sympathy moves the people towards an institution’s roots and consequences prior to evaluating the rhetoric around its specific policies or laws.



Yet there are some troubling elements to both the general will and pity, most especially around freedom. Like Emile's tutor, Julie and Wolmar are involved heavily in the operation of their estate and in the personal and social lives of their servants. Their servants' life appears tightly scripted, with unemployment resulting from non-compliance (J 368, 374). Rousseau does not hesitate to refer to their employees as Julie's "children" or to the unit as a kind of family, a *paterfamilias* (J 365, 380). The majority of the employees are actually retained while they are children so that they might be groomed into Clarens' overriding philosophy and dynamic (J 366-67). They are vetted in terms of compatibility with their peers and released from service if they are too disagreeable, disruptive, or corruptive. How is Clarens reflective of any politics wherein individual agency is fostered, creativity and diversity is rewarded, and agonistic deliberation or contestation is encouraged? On its surface, it is not.<sup>19</sup>

Clarens does not mirror the dynamism and diversity of contemporary society or politics. Rousseau encourages similitude because he believes that it better encourages amity as well as his peculiar sense of individual freedom. And his careful dictation of individual action, occupation, and habits, nestled into a controlled (and controlling) environment, generates congruence rather than variance.<sup>20</sup> Yet similitude is not sameness and congruence is not conformity. A generous reading of his politics likens his political and social machinations to the work undergone by a choir conductor: he seeks consonance – a blending of discrete voices into a unified voice that pleases the ear by virtue of its

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<sup>19</sup> Rousseau's description of Neufchatel offers another example of how certain constraints – a lack of central entertainment, a fairly rural and isolated existence, and long winters, for example – actually fuel individual development and artful activity (LD 59-62).

<sup>20</sup> See *Social Contract*, Chapters VIII-X, Book II.

combination.<sup>21</sup> His general goal is to create public and private arenas in which an individual's strength is balanced with her means, or freedom. His sense of what constitutes freedom, then, is different (perhaps radically) than what is taught in U.S. civics courses. The presumption governing a contemporary democracy is that increases in freedom to speech and congress, for example, will counter-balance any (capitalist) economic inequities. Relative economic parity is uncoupled from other social and political relationships. Not so for Rousseau (SC 175); absolute freedom, divorced from care for another and the political body's overall health, can turn anarchic, creating staggering gaps of economic inequality with its off-shoots of inequalities of power, of access to power or socio-economic mobility, of the quality of education, and of treatment within judicial systems, for instance. In this scenario an individual's means disagrees with her strengths, and she is left in a state of constant striving and desiring. She is physically, emotionally, and psychically depleted. She *feels* the strain of her existence. She *feels* enchained. *De facto* liberty is illusory for both Rousseau and the United States; in the former, however, it is not as burdensome. Admittedly, my reading is generous of Rousseau and critical of contemporary democracy. Yet I believe that Rousseau's work, particularly his sense of sociable pity, can be used critically in order to advocate a politics in which diversity flourishes and visions of freedom undergird political strivings for greater justice and equality.

A second difficulty with using Clarens lies in reconciling a "paterfamilias" with a nation-state. Governance by peers is incompatible with the ties of obligation, relationships, and modes of governance that circulates in a family. Modern democracy began by rooting out monarchy's "fatherly" authority: peers are equal to one another and their representatives and power and leadership are best when they are temporary and checked. Rousseau seems to

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<sup>21</sup> Rousseau actually argues for this style of music as compared to complex harmonies. This citation, along with the aforementioned definition of freedom, will be provided in a later draft.

agree in the *Discourse on Political Economy*, “Although the functions of the father of a family and those of a chief magistrate ought to tend toward the same goal, their paths are so different, their duty and rights so unlike, that one cannot confound them without forming false ideas about the fundamental laws of society and without falling into errors that are fatal to the human race” (113). He also cautions against leaders who consult “his heart,” worrying that laws should provide the only rules to him because “it is doubtful that, since the beginning of the world, human wisdom has ever produced ten men capable of governing their peers” (*ibid*). What do such cautions imply about sociable pity, implicitly connected more to “hearts” than reason? What does this mean for my argument that Clarens exemplifies one kind of peaceable and equitable society that the *Social Contract* begets?

Putting sociable pity and Clarens into context is helpful. Rousseau appears to contradict himself in the *Social Contract* when he asserts, “The family therefore is, so to speak, the prototype of political societies: the leader is the image of the father, the populace is the image of the children, and, since all are born equal and free, none give up their liberty except for their utility” (SC 142). Again, as we found with Clarens, the populace is likened to “children” with an important clarification: they are equal and free, choosing to give up their absolute liberty in order to maximize their utility. Rousseau is not discussing governance, either the establishment or adjudication of law, and he is not creating a firm analogy. The family offers an “image” by which to understand societal dynamics, implying that interdependence is unavoidable and affection among the people is helpful. The aforementioned scenario in *Discourse on Political Economy* is worrisome because sociable pity is conspicuously absent, because personal interest exceeds and blocks general interest. It depicts the world as Rousseau finds it: egocentric; arrogant; self-interested; hungry for esteem, power, and wealth, even at the expense of others’ basic needs. It does not mean that

pity's absence is a good thing or that pity ought not influence action and deliberation. The social bonds, or affection, between members of the state is as critical to its functioning as its laws (SC 167). Insofar as sociable pity grounds and instantiates certain other-centric affections, cultivating pro-social behaviors and virtues like beneficence, kindness, and mutual support, then its absence spells out the eventual demise of political society and the body politic generally. Clarendon might govern itself more like a traditional family than a modern democratic state, but its success is linked to its ability to establish reciprocal affection and kinship among strangers who join together for their individual utility. Sociable pity curbs egocentrism and joins particular interests to the estate's general interest, operating much like the general will.

Clifford Orwin frames the worrisome relationship between the "paterfamilias" and the state more as an issue of gender than freedom. Orwin finds compassion to be a feminine trait,<sup>22</sup> and he argues that Emile's pity entails a radical shift in what comprises masculinity. Gone is "male excellence," replaced is a "feminine notion of masculinity," and the result is a poor androgyny (1997a, 7-8). Politicized compassion is "[a]lmost always way too much or too little, too intense or too sporadic" for policy (Orwin 1997a, 20). When it is legislated it creates a "Nanny state" with "state-financed bureaucracies of caring" (Orwin 2000, 143). The paternal, "compassionate" state threatens liberty and effectively dissolves citizenship. Given the overall tone of his argument, it is tempting to reconsider Orwin's critique of paternalism via a "nanny state" as a critique of "maternalism" (2000). The feminine, he implies in both articles, is not only weak itself but it weakens those who participate in stereotypically "feminine" enterprises and virtues. And coupling it with "masculine" traits does not create a complement but, rather, distorts the latter.

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<sup>22</sup> Clark's (1997) research suggests a similar trend – compassion is seen as "feminine" – but Clark believes this characterization is due to socialization around gender stereotypes.

Rousseau does not allocate pity to a single sex. He establishes its universality in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* and cultivates it equally within his characters, accounting for their particular temperaments. It is true that Julie is the only one characterized as “naturally” compassionate and that Sophie also displays sympathy. However, these assets emerge alongside what Rousseau does ascribe to women – gentleness and the arbitration of mores, taste, and opinions.<sup>23</sup> Given his careful attention to pity with Emile, St. Preux, and Wolmar – to men of differing talents and perspectives, each with a different relationship to sentiments – and to assigning and segregating the genders to different activities, inclinations, and powers, it is unlikely that Rousseau finds pity to be solely “feminine” or a capacity that limits individual aspirations to “excellence.”

Were we to categorize pity as a feminine and gendered practice, counter to Rousseau (though, admittedly, as often practiced and socialized), then it still offers more to contemporary society than either a bland feebleness or a muddled androgyny. Rousseau is clear that the feminine and the masculine are complementary, establishing a partnership that “produces a moral person of which the woman is the eye and the man is the arm...Each follows the prompting of the other; each obeys, and both are masters” (E 377). A self-containment of the dual natures of genders as they are stereotypically portrayed and socialized – finding a balance between sensitivity and rationality, if I can refer to Rousseau’s traditional formulation – offers an interesting political practice that better accords to the legislator’s own “great soul.” This latter possibility is taking Rousseau beyond himself since he urges for each gender to flourish in what is “naturally” theirs, but it is not beyond the potential of a political sociable pity that, instead of focusing on socialized gender

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<sup>23</sup> See Book Five in *Emile*, pp. 377-90, for example.

expectations, considers an individual's own propensities and potential in order to encourage self-“perfectibility.”

Admitting sociable pity into contemporary politics through an emphasis on individual practice could do one of two things: first, it offers a means of critiquing political practices that entrench oppressive power dynamics around gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality and, second, it could mellow an increasingly contentious partisan politics. Sociable pity's power to yoke particular and general interests provides a means of bridging difference. Perspective shifts, providing more information by which to individually judge a given situation. Insofar as it encourages more people to consider the lived repercussions of an action or a policy or to act on behalf of justice or equality, then sociable pity resists re-entrenchment of social and political oppressions. It might also help citizens probe beneath political rhetoric to either make visible or dismantle an ideologue whose purposes are contrary to the public weal. Given the current state of partisan bickering in the United States, the failures in bipartisan communication seem the result of blustery rhetorical, a refusal to compromise, or a failure to listen. These failures occur when empathetic imagination, or sociable pity, for either one's peers or the populace at large is defunct. Reason is essential to public dialogue but so is pity. Pity tempers reason's isolating tendency and relocates people to other positions and possibilities.

As of yet we do not have anything like the general will functioning in the polity, and I am uncertain that we ever will without a careful cultivation of sociable pity both within individuals and throughout the body politic. Whether we can agree easily with Rousseau that the general will is feasible and desirable or that a society like Clarendon offers more freedom than its contemporaries is a judgment separate from sociable pity's role in politics and society. The choice seems clear. Without pity there is no means of moderating reason and

egocentrism, which tend to elevate self-interest and isolate individuals within the hard shell of “rugged individualism.” Without pity there is little chance for social virtues like beneficence to either take root or to unfold. Without pity lauded political capacities like solidarity or care will likely falter. Pity is enfolded into numerous contemporary political practices, most especially those that link individuals to one another despite differences of location, class, gender, race, or sexuality and that fuel activism around issues of justice, equality, and liberty. So why are we hesitant to acknowledge and embrace it? In what and from what is our discomfort with the term rooted? More significantly, what would it mean to fully eradicate pity from politics? These questions are valuable, and our answers to them might begin to resolve both our complacency and our ambivalence around it.

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