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Children of the State: Rousseau's Republican Educational Theory and Child

Abandonment

Introduction

The Swiss writer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the most widely read and influential public moralists of the eighteenth century. As such, his life and personal conduct mattered at least as much as his writings, which is part of the reason he eventually wrote his *Confessions* to publicly explain and justify himself. Rousseau preached the centrality of virtue and was severely critical of the ethical debasement that he perceived around him in modern Europe, which he accurately predicted was headed for revolution.¹ Among his many works is a large and enormously influential treatise on education of the young, *Emile* (1762), a landmark in pedagogical theory in which he claims that anyone who fails to rear his own children 'will long shed bitter tears for his offence and will never find consolation for it'.² He also called for more understanding towards children than was generally the case in his time.

It is small wonder, therefore, that many have been shocked and disappointed by the fact that Rousseau placed all five of his own children in a foundling hospital as soon as they were born. When this became widely known in 1764, he was denounced by many as a monumental hypocrite whose abandonment of his own infant children flatly contradicted his public advice in *Emile*. His attempts to defend his actions only seemed to make matters worse. They have generally been regarded as unconvincing at best, and feeble and hypocritical rationalisations by a selfish and probably deranged narcissist at worst. During his lifetime and right down to the present Rousseau's abdication of his paternal responsibilities has commonly been viewed as an

ugly stain on his character that seriously undermines his credibility as a public moralist and social critic. One of Rousseau's influential detractors has even argued that his 'iniquity as a parent was linked to his ideological offspring, the future totalitarian state'.³

In his writings Rousseau contrasted the rampant hypocrisy of eighteenth century French high society with both the natural goodness of man and his own personal integrity, as recounted in sometimes shocking detail his autobiographical works. The goal of education for him is not to impart knowledge but the cultivation of individuals who are devoid of hypocrisy and therefore suitable to serve as citizens in a politics free of it too. Therefore, his persuasiveness was judged by how he behaved personally no less than by the force of his arguments, so any discrepancy between them would likely undermine both. This is apparent in Rousseau's many 'confessional' writings—*The Confessions, Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques* and *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*—where he presents his own life as a subject for public scrutiny and debate. He understood as well as his enemies did that any discrepancy between his private conduct and his publicly-professed ethical principles would not only severely undermine, if not actually destroy, his credibility as a public moralist but damage the whole new moral sensibility that he made central to his theory of education. One of Rousseau's most profound influences on modern thought was to replace the ancient vocabulary of the virtues and vices with modern ideas of sincerity and authenticity.

The twentieth century political philosopher Hannah Arendt described hypocrisy as the 'vice of vices' because 'integrity can indeed exist under the cover of all other vices except this one'.⁴ That is why the question of Rousseau's children mattered so much to the eighteenth century,

given the centrality of integrity to his life and thought and to his status as one of the greatest moralists of the age. Hypocrisy is the one vice his reputation and status could not survive, and he knew it. And the goal of the education he prescribed was primarily to produce citizens as incapable of hypocrisy as humanly possible.

In what follows I argue that the highly critical mainstream view of Rousseau's conduct as a parent overlooks important personal and textual evidence that bears directly on his case. An assessment of his decision to place his children in a foundling hospital needs to be made in light of all of the relevant facts and circumstances at the time, which have not been well understood, and should be considered relative to his educational theory as a whole, and not just *Emile*. Seen in this light, his attempts to explain and justify his actions are more credible and reasonable than usually assumed, even if they are not ultimately convincing. However mistaken his views on the education of the young may be, and I will not be defending them here, he acted consistently with them as a parent to the limited extent that circumstances allowed at the time. This is apparent when considering not just the best-selling *Emile*, his most important and influential pedagogical treatise, but the other types of education that Rousseau advocated in different contexts, something that is rarely taken into account by his critics, who tend to measure his actions by the high standards of *Emile* alone.

The Facts of Rousseau's Fatherhood

The basic facts of Rousseau's fatherhood are well known, although some of the details are disputed. Sometime late in 1746, when he was 34 years old, Rousseau's partner, Thérèse Levasseur, a poor, semi-literate servant, gave birth to a child in Paris. Although Rousseau and

Thérèse cohabited, they were not married. While they might today be said to have had a 'common law marriage', no such concept existed in ancien régime France. Nor did Rousseau and Thérèse represent themselves to others as being married; he referred to her as his 'housekeeper' rather than his 'wife'. Two decades later, in 1767, Rousseau and Thérèse exchanged vows in a small private ceremony. He thereafter referred to her as his 'wife' and she referred to him as her 'husband', even though this 'marriage', presided over by the local mayor, had no legal or religious status in France and no marriage certificate was drawn up or signed by either party. At that time in France, they had what would today probably be called a 'domestic partnership' rather than a marriage per se.⁵

It was only with great effort that Rousseau finally managed to persuade Thérèse to have their first newborn baby placed in the L'Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés in Paris, a charitable foundling hospital which had been established as an act of charity in 1640 and later put under royal patronage by Louis XIV to care for unwanted offspring, particularly from poor families.

Although Rousseau had 'all the trouble in the world' getting Thérèse to agree to this, as he later acknowledged in his *Confessions*, she eventually 'obeyed groaning'.⁶ Over the next six years Thérèse gave birth to four more children by Rousseau, the last in 1752, and each one was placed in a foundling hospital like the first. In a letter to the Duchesse de Luxembourg, which Rousseau wrote in 1761 when he was convinced that he was dying, he confessed his 'last secret' about the fate of his children and admitted that he had 'not even kept the dates of their births' or a record of their sex. The only clue to their present whereabouts, he told the Duchesse, was a cipher that he had put on the linen of his first-born child, 'of which I have kept the duplicate'.⁷ This was a common practice at the time in France.⁸ Rousseau then asked her to make discreet enquiries on

his behalf about the fate of this child. The investigation had led nowhere when Rousseau advised her to abandon it mainly because of his deteriorating health and his concern about Thérèse should he die soon, leaving her to support children if the search proved successful. He also frankly admitted in his *Confessions* that he would always have doubts about the paternity of any children uncovered by this search, and that ‘it would have shut my heart as a result of the uncertainty, and I would not have tasted the true feeling of nature in all its charm’.⁹ Finally, Rousseau claims that, even if he were reunited with his lost children, the ‘long separation from a child one does not yet know weakens, finally reduces paternal and maternal feelings to nothing, and one will never love the one whom one has sent out to nurse as much as the one whom one has nursed under one’s own eyes’.¹⁰ For all these reasons, Rousseau never met any of his children again, and he never learned of their fate, which is forever lost to history.

In 1764 Rousseau’s secret was exposed in spectacular fashion in a short, eight-page pamphlet published anonymously in Geneva with the title *Sentiment des citoyens* (*The Feeling of the Citizens*). In it the author of *Emile* was revealed to have placed all of his children in a foundling hospital and was even blamed for the death of his mother-in-law. Rousseau, the anonymous author declared, ‘dressed as a mountebank drags with him from village to village and from mountain to mountain the unfortunate woman whose mother he killed, and whose infants he exposed at the door of an orphanage’.¹¹ Rousseau was naturally devastated by this malicious revelation, which he initially blamed on his former Genevan friend Jacob Vernes. The actual author was likely Voltaire, who denounced the pamphlet which he had probably written.¹²

Statistically, it is likely that, at most, only one of Rousseau’s five children survived into

adulthood as a ward of the foundling hospital. Probably none did. Disease, accidents, malnutrition and neglect took an appalling toll on the young when he became a father in the mid-eighteenth century.¹³ The overall infant mortality rate in France in 1750 was 300 to 400 deaths for every 1000 live births.¹⁴ Only about 50% of children survived to the age of ten, so only two or three of Rousseau's five children would have likely survived had they been reared at home.¹⁵ However, the survival rate was even lower for foundlings. One estimate puts the mortality rate for children in foundling hospitals at the time at between 650 and 900 per 1000.¹⁶ According to another estimate, two-thirds of abandoned infants died in their first year in the foundling hospital of Paris, and only 213 survived to their eighth birthday out of 2964 children admitted in the last six months of 1781 (7%). According to a contemporary account, by Charles Leclerc de Montlinot, between 1772 and 1788 the Paris foundling hospital admitted 105,500 children, of whom only 14,430 survived, just under 14%.¹⁷ Seen in this harsh statistical light, putting five children in a foundling hospital in mid-eighteenth century France meant that none likely survived there, as opposed to perhaps 2 or 3 who would probably have lived to adulthood at home, although we will never know.

Given these grim facts, it is not surprising that even Rousseau's normally sympathetic biographer Maurice Cranston remonstrated that his subject 'overlooks the fact that an enormous proportion of children taken to the two orphanages perished from illness. In the year 1741, for example, 68 per cent of the foundlings died in infancy'.¹⁸ It may be that Rousseau didn't so much overlook these facts as choose not to find them out in the first place. While there is no way of knowing how widespread knowledge of the depressing odds against foundling survival were at the time, none of Rousseau's comments justifying his decision make any sense if we assume that he had

an accurate appreciation of the risks to his children's lives in such an institution and just didn't care.¹⁹ It is more likely that he mistakenly believed that the chances of their surviving in a foundling hospital, particularly the prestigious and newly renovated L'Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés in Paris, were roughly the same as them surviving at home, if not better. That is certainly how he wrote about the matter, both privately and publicly. Rousseau is guilty of disastrously over-estimating the life expectancy of his children in such an institution and significantly under-estimating his own longevity; he assumed that they would survive and he would not. In the end, he judged that it would be better for his children to be raised publicly rather than privately, and the only realistic option for the former, given his poverty and precarious health, was the foundling hospital. But Rousseau was suspiciously incurious about the institution into whose care he placed all of his children. He never mentions ever visiting one. It is not far-fetched to speculate, which is all we can do, that he did not want to know more than he did about them. It was not beyond his power to have found out more, but that would have made it much harder for him to put his children there, something he may have sensed. In this case, ignorance protected his conscience.

Scandalous though the practice of placing unwanted babies in foundling hospitals is to us today, it was very common in mid-eighteenth century France, particularly given 'the desperate situation faced by certain sections of the population attempting to raise a child', a section that included Rousseau and Thérèse when their children were born.²⁰ About one baby in three in Paris was abandoned at the time, and among the poor, like Rousseau, it was considerably higher.²¹ It was in response to the widespread practice of child abandonment that foundling hospitals were established in the first place. It had long been a common practice among poor young mothers to

leave their newborn babies on the doorsteps of churches (hence ‘foundlings’). The Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés was set up to provide for these helpless infants. That is why such institutions enjoyed ‘considerable prestige’ in Rousseau’s age.²² They were not generally regarded as death traps and the main charge against him at the time was not that he indirectly caused the deaths of his children but that he hypocritically neglected his parental duty to rear them. By the standards of the time, Rousseau’s behaviour was anything but extraordinary, although by the ideal standards of *Emile* it fell scandalously short. In his *Confessions*, he remarks rather glibly about the abandonment of his children that, ‘since it is the practice of the country, when one lives there one can follow it, here is the expedient I was looking for’.²³ While shocking to most in the contemporary West, which has a very different conception of both childhood and parenthood, it was much less so in eighteenth century France. The shock then was in Rousseau’s apparent hypocrisy, not in the act itself, which was commonplace. How could the author of *Emile* commit such a diabolical act, not once but five times?

Finally, the question of birth control is relevant when considering Rousseau’s paternity. This is perhaps too easily overlooked by modern readers. Although he and Thérèse were not married, their unconsecrated domestic partnership meant that both had a reasonable expectation of conjugal relations under the circumstances. Apart from total abstinence, the only really effective means of birth control in eighteenth century France, the prophylactic methods available to Rousseau at the time were notoriously ineffective, if not wholly useless, as means of preventing conception.²⁴ Although condoms existed, they were crude, uncomfortable and highly permeable. Rubber condoms were not widely available until the middle of the nineteenth century and a revolution in birth control had to wait until the twentieth century with the invention of the

contraceptive pill. Until then, contraception was a very imperfect science and unwanted pregnancies were, consequently, extremely common. So, even if Rousseau had taken reasonable precautions against impregnating Thérèse using the means available to him, they would likely have failed. What's more, we can confidently speculate that he knew this. Whether or not he attempted to avoid fathering children, Rousseau now faced the hard choice of what to do with them.

Rousseau's Choice in Context

Rousseau repeatedly justified his decision to disencumber himself of his offspring in both his private correspondence and in his published writings. He offered three main reasons for his choice: (1) his poverty; (2) his health; (3) his educational ideas. I will deal with the first two relatively briefly and focus mainly on the third.

(i) Poverty

In an important letter to Suzanne Dupin de Francueil Rousseau referred to his poverty as a major reason against raising his own children. 'You are acquainted with my situation,' he wrote to her in 1751, while on the cusp of fame. 'I earn my bread from day to day with difficulty enough; how would I feed a family in addition?'²⁵ It is a fair question which may not have occurred to many of Rousseau's critics such as Voltaire, who were often wealthy and in no position to really appreciate the hard choices poverty forced on the less well-off. As one leading expert on the history of childhood notes, there were 'close links between poverty and abandonment', just as there were between illegitimacy and foundlings.²⁶ Approximately 75% of abandoned babies in eighteenth century Paris were illegitimate, as all of Rousseau's children were.²⁷ He was not

exaggerating to Francueil about his poverty. He had been poor ever since he left his native Geneva as a penniless teenager in 1728. When Rousseau's first child was born in 1746, he was still poor, as he remained when his last child was born 6 years later. The already impecunious Rousseau found himself struggling to support not only Thérèse but several of her relatives as well, which he found overwhelming. His antipathy towards his in-laws was particularly strong, as he made perfectly clear in his *Confessions*.

We were two, even four, or to state more accurately seven or eight. For although Thérèse was of a disinterestedness which has few rivals, her mother was not like her. As soon as she saw herself a little replenished through my efforts, she had her whole family come to divide up the fruit. Sisters, sons, daughters, granddaughters all came... Everything I was doing for Thérèse was diverted by her mother in favor of these ravenous people.²⁸

By the time his last child was born in 1752, Rousseau had not earned any money from his publications and had little reason to think that he ever would.²⁹ Although he would make some money from his writings later, even after he became famous Rousseau struggled to make ends meet and was often forced reluctantly to rely on the support of friends and patrons. Despite later becoming one of the most famous writers in Europe and the author of a best-selling novel (*Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, 1761) and other popular works, Rousseau continued to earn money as a self-employed music copier for many years. That was his principal source of income when his children were born and he had no way of knowing then that he would become as famous as he eventually became, not that fame was a guarantee of wealth in the mid-eighteenth century, as Rousseau was to discover. In France, the publishing and bookselling guilds which held royal *privilèges* from the crown that gave them the exclusive legal right to print books typically paid

authors very little for their manuscripts.³⁰ Also, in mid-eighteenth century France the concept of intellectual property was not yet recognised and there was no copyright law that would later entitle authors to royalties from the sale of their books.³¹ Literary pirates flourished in this context, reprinting works with the author's name on them but without permission or payment. Pirated editions of all of Rousseau's major works were printed and widely circulated during his lifetime, for which he received absolutely no compensation. As the historian Robert Darnton notes, '[n]one of the great mid-century philosophers relied much on sales except for Diderot'.³² While few would regard this, in itself, as sufficient to justify Rousseau's decision to abandon his children to a foundling hospital, his pleas of poverty were not unfounded and have some bearing on the context of choice in which he made his decisions.

(ii) Health

In his 1751 letter to Francueil, Rousseau also blamed poor health for depriving him of the opportunity to provide the 'dear care' his own children deserved, for which he said he should be pitied rather than condemned.³³ A decade later, when he asked the Duchesse de Luxembourg to end her search for his abandoned children, Rousseau, then 49 years old, told her in a letter that 'I am dying' and he did not want to leave Thérèse to raise them alone, should they be found.³⁴ He was convinced that Thérèse was temperamentally ill-suited to motherhood and would not be able to cope with the demands of raising children on her own, alongside her own extended family. It would have been unfair and irresponsible of him to burden someone so ill-equipped to handle such a heavy obligation, he thought. Rousseau's children would suffer if they were raised at home after his death, he claimed. In his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, his last (and unfinished) work, he asserts that Thérèse's submissive personality and limited intelligence (as he saw it)

meant that she would have spoiled her children, and her feckless, free-loading family would have ‘made monsters of them’.³⁵ Therefore, the only realistic option, he believed, was to end the search for his children. Rousseau’s reasoning here only makes sense on the assumption that he genuinely believed that at least some of his children were still alive (‘now fully grown’, he said) a decade after being put in the foundling hospital, which implies that he did not really understand just how statistically improbable that really was.

Rousseau appears to have believed that his death was imminent for much of his relatively long life (he died at age 66), a tendency that some have attributed to hypochondria.³⁶ But his expectation that he might soon die was not unreasonable, based on what we know about him and the age in which he lived. Rousseau actually had a serious chronic medical condition and had good reason to believe that he was at significant risk of death from it when his children were born. When he wrote to Mme Franceuil in 1751 Rousseau was 39 years old. Although he actually lived for another quarter century, dying of a stroke in 1778, in 1751 he could not have known that he would live that long, well above the average life expectancy, and had good reason to expect that he would not live much longer when he fathered his children between 1746 and 1752.

Rousseau suffered his whole life from a serious bladder defect and a deformity of the urethra or penis (possibly the condition known as hypospadias) which caused chronic retention of urine.³⁷ This meant that he had to wear a urinary catheter for most of his adult life. By modern standards, these were very crude and uncomfortable devices that often left nitrogenous waste in the bladder which could cause life-threatening infections in an age before the advent of

antibiotics and medical treatments for bacterial infection.³⁸ Daily catheterisation with a metal catheter was extremely difficult, painful and carried a significant health risk. Also, Rousseau claimed he was suffering from an undiagnosed hernia which exacerbated his urinary problem and increased the risk to his health.³⁹ At that time, at his age, Rousseau's assumption that death would come to him sooner rather than later was not hypochondriacal, even though he actually lived for another quarter century. In Rousseau's eyes, he had only two realistic options: to leave Thérèse to raise their children alone by her own very limited means (certain disaster, in his mind), or to leave them to be raised in a foundling hospital (possible disaster). He did not expect to be alive for a third option, where he would raise his children himself. Whether his concerns about his mortality were well-founded or hypochondriacal, he seems genuinely to have believed he was seriously ill when his children were born, which is partly why he indignantly denied the charge of hypocrisy for choosing not to raise them himself. This belief has never been taken very seriously, as it should be, when assessing his decisions about his children, even though he claimed it was crucial. While many will dismiss his health concerns as mere self-interested rationalisation or hypochondriacal exaggerations, they were real and the strong possibility exists that he genuinely believed they would cause his death soon after his children were born.

(iii) Educational Ideas

Rousseau acknowledged to Mme Francueil in 1751 that 'I owe them [his children] sustenance, I have procured it for them better or at least more securely than I would have been able to give them myself' by placing them in a foundling hospital.⁴⁰ And in *Emile* he wrote that 'He who cannot fulfil the duties of a father has no right to become one'.⁴¹ Yet by then some doubts had crept into Rousseau's mind about whether he really had done the right thing by his children, as

he admitted in a private letter to the Duchesse de Luxembourg in 1761: 'For several years now, the self-reproach which my neglectful behavior has aroused in me has disturbed my peace of mind and I am about to die without being able to remedy it, much to the mother's and my own regret... The ideas with which my mind was filled as a result of my error were to a large extent responsible for my writing my Treatise on Education [*Emile*]'.⁴² We do not know precisely when these doubts started to fill Rousseau's mind. They have led his recent biographer, Leo Damrosch, to the conclusion that 'there is no doubt about Rousseau's later remorse... the guilt always remained, and it became a gnawing disturbance at the center of his existence'.⁴³ Yet these doubts, if they did persist in his mind, later disappeared from his private and public writing. By the time Rousseau wrote his *Confessions*, completed in 1769, he explained that 'my reason was such that by abandoning my children to public education [*l'éducation publique*] for lack of power to bring them up myself; by destining them to become workers or peasants rather than adventurers and fortune hunters, I believed I was performing an action of a Citizen and a father, and I looked upon it myself as a member of Plato's Republic'.⁴⁴ In Rousseau's last work, the *Reveries*, he appears entirely unrepentant, even defiant, about his conduct. 'I knew that the least perilous upbringing for them was that of the foundling home, so I put them there', he defiantly declares. 'I would do it again, with much less doubt too, if I had to do it again; and I well know that no father is more tender than I would have been toward them, however little habit might have aided nature'.⁴⁵ Far from accepting that his 'secret' was something about which he should feel ashamed, Rousseau appears to have died believing that, in placing his children in a foundling hospital, he had actually done his duty as both a father and a citizen, *as he saw it*. That is why he made 'no mystery of my conduct' and 'freely, frankly, without any sort of necessity' revealed it to his closest friends at the time such as Diderot, Grimm, Mme d'Epainay and the

Duchesse de Luxembourg because he 'saw nothing evil in it'.⁴⁶

Ideally, Rousseau believed, the best education is domestic. He depicted it in his best-selling epistolary novel *Julie, or the New Heloise*, where the virtuous Julie's sons are raised in simplicity at home in the countryside, away from the sophisticated corruptions of the big city. This is consistent with his general claim that the duty to educate children to be good citizens lies with their parents. But Rousseau also believed that, in practice, few parents are able to live up to this ideal, or come anywhere close to it, including himself. An exception was the Roman Republic, where civic education was done in the home with generally positive results because citizens were still virtuous then (so Rousseau believed). So public schooling was unnecessary in ancient Rome, he thought, just as it has no place in Julie's idealised fictional world. The Roman Republic was one of the societies Rousseau most admired.

By contrast, modern European families, like modern society in general, are too corrupt to entrust to them the education of their own young. That is why Rousseau advised in his *Discourse on Political Economy* (1755) that it is inappropriate 'to abandon the education of children to the enlightenment and prejudices of their fathers'.⁴⁷ In such debased conditions it is usually best for children to be educated *away* from the corrupting influence of their parents. Emile's parents are completely absent from his education as well. And in his 1751 letter to Mme Francueil defending his decision not to raise his own children, written a decade earlier than *Emile*, Rousseau observed that Plato 'wanted in his Republic for all children to remain unknown to their fathers, that they might all be children of the state'.⁴⁸ This point is repeated many times in his reflections on education.

Not surprisingly, two of Rousseau's models for public schooling are Plato's *Republic*, the 'most beautiful educational treatise ever written',⁴⁹ and the Spartan *agōgē*, 'the example that we ought to follow'.⁵⁰ In both, the traditional role of the family in the education of children was assumed by the state. Young Spartan boys were removed from their families at the age of seven and reared publicly (as in Plato's *Republic*) in the hope that they would grow up into rugged, self-reliant and public-spirited citizens. According to the classical historian Paul Cartledge, a general feature of Spartan social organisation was 'the concerted and determined effort to minimise the importance of the family—or, to be more accurate, family life—and to emphasize rather the cardinal and overriding significance of communal ties'.⁵¹ The goal of the Spartan system of common schooling was to shape the character of their children to become tough, patriotic citizens, not to develop intellectual virtues or cultivate their minds, as in Athens. As Avi Mintz writes, the Spartans 'actively disdained Athenians' love of learning, believing that Athenian education would undermine the purpose of Spartan education; namely, cultivating discipline, courage, solidarity and patriotism'.⁵²

We know that Rousseau greatly admired this aspect of Spartan life, which clearly influenced his views on education. This is most apparent in his essay *On the Government of Poland*, his last political work, written in 1770 -71, seven years before he died. Unlike *The Social Contract*, it includes quite extensive discussion of education. It is a work that prioritises patriotic identification with the state in order to cultivate an intense public spirit, inspired by examples from ancient Greece, a situation radically different from the setting of *Emile* a decade earlier. Education in it is collective rather than individual, with the nation, not the family or the

individual, as its primary focus. The explicit goal of this kind of republican education is to turn ‘men into citizens’:

...it is education that must give the national form to souls and direct their opinions and their tasks so that they will be patriots by inclination, by passion, by necessity. Upon opening its eyes, a child ought to see the fatherland and until death ought to see nothing but it. Every true republican imbibes the love of the fatherland, that is to say, of the laws and of freedom, along with his mother’s milk. That love makes up his whole existence; he sees only the fatherland, lives only for it; as soon as he is alone, he is nothing: as soon as he has no more fatherland, he no longer is and if he is not dead, he is worse than dead. National education belongs only to free men; they are the only ones who have a common existence and they are tied together by Law. A Frenchman, an Englishman, a Spaniard, an Italian, a Russian are all just about the same man: he leaves school already completely formed for license, that is to say for servitude. At twenty years of age a Pole ought to be a different sort of man; he ought to be a Pole, not some other kind of man.⁵³

Rousseau’s point about his own children is not that the eighteenth century L’Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés, an institution run by Catholic nuns and administered by the royal court after all, was an instance of the educational ideals of Plato’s *Republic* or the Spartan *agōgē*, neither of which were options for him at the time. But the foundling hospital did share some of their features, including the education of the young away from the immediate influence of their parents and a harsh regime. The foundling hospital was at least consistent with these principles that were a central part of Rousseau’s republican educational theory, however deficient it was as an institution in other respects. This is consistent with the rearing of Emile who, he believed, would be made

strong, robust and independent by the deliberate harshness of his education. The republican Rousseau wanted his own offspring raised in Spartan severity as ‘children of the state’, something he clearly doubted they would get under Thérèse’s tutelage. He appears genuinely to have believed that this was in their best interests, as well as in society’s interest, as he told Mme Francueil:

I know that these children are not brought up delicately [in a foundling hospital], so much the better for them, they become more robust for it, they are not given anything superfluous but they have what is necessary, they are not made into gentlemen but peasants or workers, I do not see anything in that manner of bringing them up that I would not choose for my own if I were the master of doing so. I would not at all prepare them by means of softness for the maladies that fatigue and the inclemency of air give to those who are not made for them...in his republic Plato wanted all the children to be brought up in such a way that each would remain unknown to his father and all would be children of the state.⁵⁴

In mid-eighteenth century Paris, the educational options Rousseau outlined in *Julie* (domestic education in ideal conditions), *Emile* (a private tutor isolated from the corrupting influence of family and society), and *The Government of Poland* (a republican education provided by the state) were unavailable to him, as he could not afford private tutors (assuming he could find any who were suitable) and a ‘national education’ of the kind he recommended to the Poles did not then exist in France, a society he regarded as more corrupt than most. So he was forced to choose between two bad options (as he saw them): raising his children at home himself for as long as he might live (which he thought would probably not be long) or, worse, by his partner

Thérèse, and having them raised in a foundling hospital. He judged that the very demanding public education available to the poor of Paris at the time was preferable to any private education that might be provided *under the circumstances* in which his own children were unfortunately born. He did not enquire too closely what this public option entailed for the health and prospects of his children, probably because he suspected what the answer would be. Rousseau was not a stupid man. This in no way implies that he believed that the eighteenth century Parisian foundling hospital would provide his children with anything like the kind of Platonic or Spartan education he favoured (in some circumstances) or the system of republican ‘national education’ he prescribed for the Poles. It is only to say that, compared to the private option that would likely have been available to them (as Rousseau imagined it), the foundling hospital did share some of the important advantages of these ideal public education systems, according to the educational theory he propounded apart from *Emile*.

Most of Rousseau’s detractors have judged him against the high educational standards he set in his most famous book on the subject, *Emile*, and found him shockingly deficient as a parent. But he never prescribed a one-size-fits-all form of education. He was more sensitive to circumstances than most appreciate, which is why he outlined several forms of education applicable in different circumstances. Seen in this light, his personal decision to have his own children raised by the state was consistent with his own educational principles, even if it was very far from ideal. Much, if not most, of the force of the charge of hypocrisy leveled at Rousseau for his treatment of his children by his contemporaries is based on the education of *Emile*, which most would have read or at least known about. His later, little-known works that offer alternatives to *Emile*, particularly *The Government of Poland*, have never been considered

when judging him, then or since, even though they are much closer to the justification he offered, both publicly and privately, for the rearing of his children in what he optimistically called a ‘public education’.

How seriously should we take Rousseau’s ideas on education as guides to practice? This question is important when assessing their relevance to his defence of his decision to abandon his own children, since he justified his actions as consistent with his educational principles, which is why he indignantly denied the charge of hypocrisy.

It is very difficult to see how abstract works like *Emile* and *Julie* might actually apply in any practical way to the context in which they were written, or to any realistic context for that matter. David Lay Williams’ conclusion that ‘Rousseau does not seriously hold it [*Emile*] to be practicable’ is hard to resist, given how artificial and demanding the young man’s personalised education is.⁵⁵ And Rousseau’s novel *Julie* is so highly idealised that it cannot seriously be taken as a practical guide. Like the hypothetical ‘state of nature’ in his earlier *Discourse on Inequality*, these works are best seen as thought experiments designed to elucidate and justify some basic pedagogical principles and ideals rather than serve as practical plans of action.

The Government of Poland, by contrast, was commissioned for a specific situation and was meant to have some practical application in the drafting of a new constitution for Poland.

Rousseau saw admirable signs of vitality and promise in that beleaguered nation that had long since vanished from Western Europe, just as he had earlier expressed some hope for Corsica in *The Social Contract*. The relationship between his earlier ideas about education in *Emile* and his

later thoughts in *The Government of Poland* may be similar to the relationship between Plato's *Republic* and his later book *The Laws*. In both cases there is an earlier, highly abstract work of 'pure theory' and a later, more practical work intended to bring the theory 'down to earth', implying that the latter were meant to have a degree of practical applicability absent from the former.⁵⁶

While this is very plausible, the 'national education' that Rousseau urges on the Poles, even if it is more practical than the education of Emile, was not something he ever had imagined applying in eighteenth century Paris. He saw Poland and Corsica as rare exceptions to the general rule in Europe, whose states were deeply corrupt and 'hastening to their doom' in his eyes. We have already seen that Rousseau did not consider any of these options applicable to his own personal situation.

However, some of the educational principles he embodied in both *Emile* and *The Government of Poland* could still have some practical applicability, even in as unpromising an environment as an eighteenth-century foundling hospital. I have already mentioned two of these that Rousseau specifically invokes: a common education away from the corrupting influence of children's own parents and a severe spartan regimen conducive to the development of hard and independent citizens. These are ideas that Rousseau mentions often and are consistent in all of his writings. He wanted his children to have a very hard upbringing like the boys of Sparta, *The Republic* of Plato and Emile himself. While he may have been a naïve fool to believe this, that does not necessarily make him a hypocrite.

Conclusion

An appreciation of the personal and historical context in which Rousseau made decisions about his children's upbringing is essential when judging him, as is a proper understanding of his own educational theory, which cannot be fully comprehended by *Emile* alone. His genuine poverty and precarious health are important mitigations that apply when assessing his decision not to raise his own children, although today we would not find them sufficient to justify his actions. It has not been my purpose here to justify them, but to make a case that Rousseau should not automatically be assumed to have been a hypocrite for acting as he did. His belief that he would not be long for this world appears genuine and reasonable, given all we know about the matter. And the evidence, although far from conclusive, points to him not really understanding the risks to which he was exposing his infant children when he put them in the L'Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés, although he bears some responsibility for not understanding. He (naively) saw the institution as the least bad solution to his personal dilemma by offering a public education that was preferable to the only available private option, which was the rearing of his children by his impoverished, semi-literate wife in his probable absence. Rousseau believed that, while parents have an obligation to provide for the education of their children, it only requires them to perform this role themselves under exceptional circumstances, which did not apply in his own case, as he saw it. Most of the educational models that he outlines in various works, including *Emile*, deliberately exclude parents in principle from childrearing. In most cases he considered this an advantage for the young for reasons that he spelled out in considerable detail. A harsh and demanding public education is good for most children most of the time, including his own, he thought. His denial that there was anything hypocritical in his decision to place his own children in a foundling hospital, which he considered consistent with his own educational principles, is

more reasonable that it at first appears when put in its appropriate context and is less damaging to the credibility of his life and work. But all these mitigating circumstances cannot excuse Rousseau's choice not to probe too much into just how potentially lethal the foundling hospital would be for his young children. It is likely that willful ignorance of this brutal reality eased the burden on his own conscience, for which at least some of his children probably paid the ultimate price.

Notes

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 13, ed. and trans. C. Kelly and A. Bloom (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2010), 343, and *Œuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 4, ed. B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond (Paris: Pléiade, 1959 – 1995), 468. Hereafter, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* will be abbreviated as *CWR* and the Pléiade edition of his *Œuvres complètes* abbreviated as *OC*, followed by the volume number.

² Rousseau, *Emile*, 175 (*OC* 4, 263).

³ Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 23.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Westport, Connecticut : Greenwood Press, 1963), 99.

⁵ Some scholars have alleged that Rousseau ‘invented his abandoned children’ (Paule Adamy Fernandez, ‘Les enfants de Rousseau, réalité ou fiction?’ in *Autobiographie et fiction romanesque autour des Confessions de J. J. Rousseau, actes du Colloque international organisé par J. Domenech, Nice 11-13 janvier 1966* (Nice: CRLP, 1966), 83-98. For a summary of the case against Rousseau’s fatherhood, see Raymond Trousson, ‘Enfants de Rousseau’, in *Dictionnaire de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris: Champion, 1996), 297 – 98.

⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 289 (*OC* 1, 344 – 45).

⁷ Rousseau to Duchesse de Luxembourg, 12 June 1761, in *Correspondance complète de Rousseau*, vol. 9, ed. R. A. Leigh (Geneva and Madison, Wisconsin: Institut et Musée Voltaire and University of Wisconsin, 1969), 14 – 15. Hereafter abbreviated in notes as *CC*. Rousseau also mentions this fact in his *Confessions*, 289 (*OC* 1, 345).

⁸ Catriona Seth, *Nobody’s Children? Enlightenment Foundlings, Identity and Individual Rights* (Amsterdam: Werkgroep 18e Eeuw and the Dutch-Belgian Society for Eighteenth Century Studies, 2012).

⁹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 467 (*OC* 1, 558).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Voltaire, *Sentiment des Citoyens*, ed. F. Eigeldinger (Geneva : Slatkine, Paris: Champion, 1997), 62 – 3.

¹² Voltaire regularly published works anonymously and then denied his authorship (Christopher

Kelly, *Rousseau as Author: Consecrating One's Life to the Truth* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], 9).

¹³ Yves Blayo, 'Mortality in France from 1740 to 1829,' *Population* 30 (1975), 123 – 42.

¹⁴ Colin Heywood, *Growing Up in France: From the Ancien Regime to the Third Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 177. This figure is broadly consistent with Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (Edinburgh: Pearson Longman.Cunningham, 1995), 90.

¹⁵ Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, 90. Also, see Blayo, 'Mortality in France from 1740 to 1829,' and Jacques Vallin, 'Mortality in Europe from 1720 to 1914: Long-Term Trends and Changes in Patterns by Age and Sex', in *The Decline of Mortality in Europe*, ed. R. Schofield, D. Reher, and A. Bideau (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Heywood, *Growing Up in France: From the Ancien Regime to the Third Republic*, 129. Also, see Catherine Rollet and Patrice Bourdelais, 'Infant Mortality in France, 1750 – 1950: Evaluation and Perspectives,' in *The Decline of Infant Mortality in Europe, 1800 – 1950: Four National Case Studies*, ed. Carlo A. Corsini and Pier Paolo Viazzo (Florence: UNICEF, 1993), 51 – 70.

¹⁷ Matthew Gerber, *Bastards: Politics, Family and Law in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 145 – 46.

¹⁸ Maurice Cranston, *Jean-Jacques: The Early Life and Work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712 - 1754* (London: Penguin, 1983), 245note.

¹⁹ An article in the *New York Times* (3 March 1912) claims that descendants of Rousseau were 'living in great obscurity and poverty at the small country town of Beja' in Portugal at the time. It further claims that 'a grandson of the philosopher named Victor Rousseau' moved from France to Portugal, where one of his sons (Duarte Rousseau) and grandsons (Victor-Hugo Rousseau) were then still living. Since the identity of Rousseau's children is lost to posterity, it is highly doubtful (and unprovable) that Victor Rousseau was his grandson. The British oriental scholar and printer Samuel Rousseau (1763 – 1820) is thought to be descended from Jean-Jacques's great uncle Jacob Rousseau, who moved to London from Geneva. Finally, the contemporary English model and musician James Rousseau (born 1980) claims to be descended from Rousseau.

²⁰ Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 80.

²¹ Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Les Enfants du secret: Enfants Trouvés du XVIIe siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Magellan et Musée Flaubert et d'histoire de la médecine, 2008), 6.

²² *Ibid*, 81.

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- ²³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 289 (OC 1, 345).
- ²⁴ Christine Théré, 'Women and Birth Control in Eighteenth-Century France', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, no. 4 (1999), 552 – 564.
- ²⁵ Rousseau to Mme Francueil, 20 April 1751, in *CWR*, 5, 551 (CC 2, 142).
- ²⁶ Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 80.
- ²⁷ Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, 93.
- ²⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 285 (OC 1, 340).
- ²⁹ Leo Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius* (Boston and New York: Houghton and Mifflin, 2005), 223.
- ³⁰ Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books*, trans. L. G. Cochrane (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), 32.
- ³¹ Carla Hesse, 'Literary and Intellectual Property', in *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, vol. 2, ed. A. C. Kors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 418. On the history of copyright laws, see Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- ³² Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), 19 – 20.
- ³³ Rousseau to Mme Francueil, 20 April 1751, 551 (CC 2, 142 – 46).
- ³⁴ Rousseau to Duchesse de Luxembourg, 12 June 1761 (CC 9, 15).
- ³⁵ Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 79 (OC 1, 1087).
- ³⁶ Johnson, *Intellectuals*, 9.
- ³⁷ See Crocker, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 16.
- ³⁸ John Nacey and Brett Delahunt, 'The evolution and development of the urinary catheter', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Surgery* 63, no 10 (1993), 815 – 819. Also, see J. J. Mattelaer and I. Billiet, 'Catheters and sounds: the history of bladder catheterization', *Paraplegia* 33, no 8 (1995), 429 – 433.
- ³⁹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 410 (OC 1, 489).
- ⁴⁰ Rousseau to Mme Francueil, 20 April 1751, 551 (CC 2, 142).

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- ⁴¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 175 (OC 4, 262- 63).
- ⁴² Rousseau to Duchesse de Luxembourg, 12 June 1761 (CC 9, 15).
- ⁴³ Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 195.
- ⁴⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 299 (OC 1, 357).
- ⁴⁵ Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, 78 (OC 1, 1087).
- ⁴⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 300 (OC 1, 358).
- ⁴⁷ Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy*, in *CWR*, vol. 3, ed. by R. D. Masters and C. Kelly, trans. J. R. Bush, R. D. Masters, C. Kelly, T. Marshall (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1992), 155 (OC 3, 260).
- ⁴⁸ Rousseau to Mme Francueil, 20 April 1751, 551 (CC 2, 144).
- ⁴⁹ Rousseau, *Emile (Fauvre manuscript)*, 6 (OC 4, 59).
- ⁵⁰ Rousseau, *Letter to d'Alembert and Writings for the Theater*, in *CWR*, vol. 10, ed. and trans. A. Bloom, C. Butterworth, C. Kelly (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2004), 349 (OC 5, 122).
- ⁵¹ Paul Cartledge, *Spartan Reflections* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 84.
- ⁵² Avi Mintz, 'Sparta, Athens and the Surprising Roots of Common Schooling', *Philosophy of Education Society*, March 2018, 111.
- ⁵³ Rousseau, *On the Government of Poland*, in *CWR*, vol. 11, ed. R. D. Masters and C. Kelly, trans. C. Kelly and J. Bush (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2005), 179 – 80 (OC 3, 966).
- ⁵⁴ Rousseau to Mme Francueil, 20 April 1751, 551 (CC 2, 143 – 44).
- ⁵⁵ David Lay Williams, *Rousseau's Platonic Enlightenment* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 144.
- ⁵⁶ This parallel between Rousseau and Plato is proposed by Willmore Kendall in his introduction to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Government of Poland* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), xvi