

Rousseau's Notion of the Confessional Sphere: From the Confinement of the Family and the
Catholic Church to the National Public Sphere

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Cover Letter

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Introduction

In his *Confessions*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an eighteenth-century philosopher traditionally known for advocating the idea of the “general will” in his *Social Contract* (1762), candidly disclosed that his father, Isaac, cared more about the death of his wife than Rousseau’s own birth. After reading his *Confessions*, one discovers that Jean-Jacques was an individual who was not only a man of thought but one of action as well. However, many of the actions that he confessed to in his account can be perceived as immoral. The reader, upon perusing the *Confessions*, discovers that the individuals Rousseau met throughout his life, such as M. Gâtier and Carrio, were just as self-centered as Rousseau and his father.¹ Rousseau’s actions were, at first, inspired by the generally bourgeois culture of eighteenth-century European society. However, the trajectory of his personal history indicates a shift in Jean-Jacques’ character during the latter part of his life: he becomes more morally upright after living a life of sin according to standards of eighteenth-century Christian moral philosophy. But Rousseau also wished others in European society to become more moral as well. The main argument of this paper is that

¹ Jean Jacques Rousseau, “The Social Contract,” *The Basic Political Writings*. (Indianapolis IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987), 203; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1963), 5.

Rousseau believed that the confessional sphere should not just be confined to the family and Catholic Church but also expanded to the state, or public sphere, as well.² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his *Confessions*, “overshared,” or revealed shocking and intimate details about his life to others, because he believed that humanity can function better in a social environment in which open communication of any sort in any sphere was permissible.

Rousseau’s Distrust of the Family

Rousseau had unmet emotional needs in his life because of his awareness that his father was not enthusiastic about his birth. For this reason, he enjoyed spending time outside the home. For instance, Rousseau also stated that he had a “naturally unsuspecting disposition, to which [he] had abandoned [himself] without reserve and without inconvenience.”³ One can suspect that he had this “unsuspecting devotion” because he disliked his family.⁴ Rousseau was nevertheless devoted to his mother. Upon meeting Thérèse le Vasseur, Rousseau’s lover during the latter part of his life, he openly admitted that he “needed a successor to mamma.”⁵ Although he later demonstrated love for his mother throughout the text, he expressed some ambivalence about his relationship with her. He disclosed that “[he] no longer found in her that intimacy of hearts which had always afforded the sweetest enjoyment to [his] own” later on in the text.⁶

Rousseau also had negative ideas about family life because of his understanding of others’ life-experiences. Around 1747, Rousseau discovered that Thérèse was taken advantage of by her family; she was beaten up by her siblings despite the fact that she took care of her parents. In 1751, Rousseau recommended to Thérèse, very pragmatically, that, “with so mixed a

² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 45.

³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 402.

⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 402.

⁵ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 340.

⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 275.

family,” that “she shake off a yoke so dangerous.”⁷ Five years later, Rousseau discovered that Thérèse’s mother had bad spending habits and had shifted the debts onto Thérèse’s shoulders.⁸

The Extra-Familial Sphere: Rousseau’s Solace and Enjoyment

Although Rousseau had a just suspicion of family-life due to his life-experiences, one would discover that Rousseau was not a saint if one was to read his whole *Confessions*. If one was to read the first half of Rousseau’s *Confessions*, one would also discover that there were plenty of other instances in which Rousseau enjoyed spending time outside of his household. In particular, he enjoyed spending time with women. Throughout *Confessions*, Rousseau revealed that he harbored sensual passions for the opposite sex ever since he was a child.⁹ Literary critic Kamilla Denman, for instance, claimed that Jean-Jacques Rousseau enjoyed a beating which Mlle Lambercier gave him.¹⁰

Rousseau, for instance, mentions at least two examples of girlfriends he had in his past life in Book I of his *Confessions*. In 1723, he mentions two female acquaintances. The first was Mademoiselle Goton. Rousseau declared: “She took the greatest liberties with me.”¹¹ The other was named Madameoiselle de Vulson. In a similar manner, he discloses that she was a “lover” who “caressed” him.¹² Compared to Goton, he claimed that the relationship he had with Vulson was “closer” but “less lively” (28). From reading the first Book of Rousseau’s *Confessions*, one gets the impression that he was particularly devoted to both Goton and Vulson when he was the boyfriend of each, respectively. A further reading of the book, however, suggests that he was a

⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 375.

⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 375.

⁹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 14.

¹⁰ Kamilla Denman, “Recovering Fraternité in the Works of Rousseau: Jean-Jacques’ Lost Brother.” (*Eighteenth Century Studies*. 29 (1995), 195.

¹¹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 26.

¹² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 25.

womanizer who had an endless series of relationships. Around this time, however, he was not aware of his arguably immoral behavior.¹³

The text abounds with evidence of these superficial relationships Rousseau had with other women. One can easily deduce that he was simply looking “for a good time.” For instance, he informs the reader that “[his] heated blood incessantly filled [his] brain with girls and women.”¹⁴ After Rousseau dated Vulson, he met a Frieburg maid named Mercelet and developed a relationship with her. Around 1732, he admitted that “sempstresses, chambermaids, and shop girls had not much temptation for me” and that he “wanted young ladies.”¹⁵ After meeting a different lady named Mademoiselle de Greffenreid, he states simply that “[he] should have been quite happy to have [Greffenreid] as a mistress.”¹⁶ That very same year, he also met a teenage girl named Mademoiselle Serre and claimed that he would be engaged in a romantic relationship with her eight years later. However, she eventually married someone else named M. Geneve. During this same time-period in which Rousseau met Serre for the first time, he, in Chambéri, France, admits to have been “in contact with so many young girls” who were “charming.”¹⁷ In 1734, he continued to acknowledge a “passion” for “women” which affected him.¹⁸ Later on, he also made reference to one Madame de Larnage. Although she did not consider the woman physically attractive, he acknowledged that “[her] advances to [Jean-Jacques] had been too sudden and lively to be excusable” “during the brief and delicious period which I spent with her.”¹⁹ Similarly, Rousseau disclosed that she was “sensual and voluptuous”

¹³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 25, 26, 27, 28. One can speculate on the possibility that Rousseau continued to engage in these relationships due to a damaging memory he had of his family-life.

¹⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 90.

¹⁵ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 138.

¹⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 143.

¹⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 176-77, 288, 195.

¹⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 226.

¹⁹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 261.

and “thought more of [Rousseau’s] health than her own pleasure.”²⁰ Although Rousseau admitted that he did not love her, he did note that he had sensual passions for her. More importantly, he shamelessly stated that he “abandoned [himself] with confident joy to the satisfaction of [his] desires” with her.²¹ Rousseau also declared that “[his] sensuality, which had been roused to activity, was awakened to such a degree, that [he] remained for a whole day at the Pont du Lunel.”²² One can surmise that they probably had sex.²³

Carrio

Just as Rousseau despised his familial sphere and enjoyed the company of women outside of his household, he also had friends who were womanizers themselves. Rousseau, for instance, discloses that Carrio, a man whom Rousseau met in Italy, was a philanderer who slept with women “who belonged to others.”²⁴ Rousseau openly informs the reader that he did not try to date Mademoiselle de Catanéo because Carrio, his then-friend, was in love with her. Rousseau also did not contend with Carrio for her because he divulged to the reader that he made less money than Carrio at the time and therefore could not compete with him in the courtship-process.²⁵

However, Rousseau started to get the sense that friends of his outside the familial sphere had decadent life styles. Carrio, who already had a reputation as a womanizer, was guilty of a more grievous sin as well. Around the period of time in which Rousseau wanted to leave Venice for Paris, Rousseau boldly agreed to a suggestion made by Carrio that they keep a female

²⁰ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 261.

²¹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 262, 263.

²² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 265.

²³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 265.

²⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 331.

²⁵ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 325.

“between” them for a time.²⁶ Carrio found a mother who wanted to “sell” her twelve-year old daughter to someone.²⁷ According to the text, neither Rousseau nor Carrio made sexual advances towards the young girl. As a matter of fact, Rousseau claimed that he felt compassion for the young daughter. He considered her “fair and gentle as a lamb” and claimed that “no one would have mistaken her for an Italian.”²⁸ They decided to teach her how to play the piano. Rousseau claimed that both he and Carrio “amused themselves more agreeably than if we had possessed her, so true is it that what most attaches us to women is not so much sensuality, as a certain pleasure which is caused by living with them.”²⁹ The girl’s name was Anzoletta.³⁰

An Immoral Ring of Friends: A Sign of an Immoral Europe?

Outside the familial sphere, Rousseau met other individuals in his life who were, according to standards of Christian moral philosophy, as immoral as Carrio. However, the fact that he spent so much time outside the familial sphere with individuals such as Carrio suggests that he nevertheless was more attached to his social contacts within his extra-familial sphere than his contacts within his familial sphere. He discloses that military Commander de Nonant was a “protector of all the girls employed at the Opera” who “daily brought all the news from that haunt of vice.”³¹ A different military commander, de Graville, also provided accounts in which “no indecency ever escaped his lips which was not so witty that any woman would have pardoned it.”³² According to Rousseau’s observations of these two men, “there was no lack of stories of girls.”³³

²⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 331.

²⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 331.

²⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 332.

²⁹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 332.

³⁰ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 332.

³¹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 353.

³² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 353.

³³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 353.

In addition to divulging shocking and personal details about military commanders, Rousseau revealed potentially embarrassing details about the lives of other people he met because he believed that relating embarrassing stories to his intended, or “ideal” audience, in his *Confessions* facilitates communication between members of any society in question.³⁴ In one instance, Rousseau confesses that his former tutor, Madame de Warens, had a number of “lovers.”³⁵ In a second example, Rousseau also divulged to the reader the fact that a man named M. d’Aubonne left Annecy because the region’s head-administrator, or intendant, discovered the fact that his wife slept with d’Aubonne. In a third example, Rousseau met an individual named M. Venture and was able to find a place for M. Venture to stay. Rousseau convinced a shoemaker friend of his to find a room for M. Venture. However, the shoemaker’s wife had a history of being unfaithful to the shoemaker. Rousseau implied that M. Venture caused the shoemaker to become even more suspicious of his wife when Rousseau implied that M. Venture probably slept with her.³⁶

Besides stories about infidelity, Rousseau also provided accounts about others which were both unusual and entertaining. Although they suggest an enjoyment Rousseau had of his time in his extra-familial sphere, they again attest to the prevalence of a decadent, bourgeois culture in eighteenth-century France. Around 1732, Rousseau met M. Simon, a midget who was a lawyer. Rousseau claimed that this man had “great success with women.”³⁷ A woman named Madame d’Épagny became ecstatic when she was allowed to kiss the midget’s knee. During the same year, a priest from Lyons approached Rousseau when the latter had no place to stay. After the priest claimed that there had been no room in his building for Rousseau to sleep in, the

³⁴ Wolf Schmid, *Narratology*. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 33, 35.

³⁵ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 50.

³⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 115, 137.

³⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 144, 146.

priest offered Rousseau the opportunity to nap in the priest's own bed. However, Jean-Jacques found himself having to fend off sexual advances the priest made to him. In a different situation, Rousseau also met a man named Claude Anet. Although generally a stoic, Claude once tried to commit suicide after a girlfriend of his said something disparaging to him. Although Claude survived his suicide attempt, the girlfriend took advantage of Claude by spending his money. In another vignette, Rousseau testified to an M. Noiret who held a witches' session in his garden.³⁸

Amour-Propre/ Amour-de-soi

Because Rousseau met individuals who were arguably selfish, he addressed the origins of immorality in his writings. In one work, he made a distinction between *amour-de-soi*, a cultural spirit prevalent in primitive societies which caused individuals to solely devote their attention to their work, and *amour-propre*, a cultural spirit which caused individuals to compare their accomplishments to one another. Rousseau claimed that *amour-propre* was more common in urbanized societies than hunter-and-gather societies.³⁹

Rousseau complained about the prevalence of an *amour-propre* affecting Europe. After completing his *Essay on the Origins of Inequality* in 1753, Rousseau also expressed grievances about individuals from Paris who were "pretentious" and possessed "a lack of candor as exhibited in their books."⁴⁰ Rousseau was also something of an anti-urbanite.⁴¹ In the text, he denounced Voltaire and claimed that he "has never really believed in anything but the Devil."⁴² Anti-urban sentiment can also be sensed when Rousseau proclaimed, "Such were the singular scruples, which led a man of intelligence to the folly of seriously making a crime of my absence

³⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 146, 147, 172, 211, 222, 221, 250.

³⁹ Steven T. Engel, "Rousseau and Imagined Communities," *The Review of Politics*. 3 (2005): 519.

⁴⁰ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 402.

⁴¹ Helena Rosenblatt, "Rousseau, the Anticosmopolitan?" *Daedalus*. 137 (2008): 59.

⁴² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 443.

from Paris, and made him attempt to prove to me, by my own example, that it was impossible for anyone to live outside the city without being wicked.”⁴³

Rousseau: A Man of Anti-Bourgeois Sentiment?

Just as Rousseau made a distinction between *amour-propre* and *amour-de-soi*, Karl Marx, a nineteenth-century German philosopher, claimed that aristocratic families encouraged the formation of class-systems throughout the course of world history. In the last stage of world history, Marx argued that there would be tension between the proletariat and bourgeois strata within these class-systems. Just as Marx despised the bourgeoisie for arrogating wealth and positions-of-power to themselves, Rousseau manifested a dislike for urbanites who showed no concern for the societal, common good.⁴⁴ In his own way, Rousseau denounced the bourgeoisie for solely being preoccupied with mercenary and materialistic concerns. Rousseau, for instance, observed that “nothing vigorous can proceed from a pen which is entirely venal.”⁴⁵ Later on in *Confessions*, he displayed a touch of realism when he proclaimed, “It is too difficult to think nobly, when one thinks only in order to live.”⁴⁶

Just as Rousseau championed the idea of the common good, he was supportive of individuals who lived simple lifestyles. The view he had of those with traditional beliefs was somewhat stereotypical of the *then-avant-garde*: “The devout, as a rule, possess a small amount of very lively sensuality, which gives a flavour of rapturous enjoyment to the innocent pleasures which are permitted to them.”⁴⁷ On the other hand, he said that worldly people “envy in others

⁴³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 475.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” *The Communist Manifesto*. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1955), 27, 45; Rousseau, *Confessions*, 336, 338; Rosenblatt, “Anticosmopolitan,” 59.

⁴⁵ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 416.

⁴⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 417.

⁴⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 252.

the taste for simple pleasures which they have lost themselves.”⁴⁸ Because Rousseau liked the idea of simplicity, he was suspicious of individuals who were only interested in scientific progress and self-promotion. He believed that “world[ly] success” was not “compatible with virtue.”⁴⁹ When Rousseau’s mother was sick, he claimed that he had “little faith in the medicine of physicians, but a great deal in that of true friends.”⁵⁰ He observed that many people who were interested in mercenary pursuits owned property. With regards to private property, Rousseau claimed “that the proprietor and the possessor are often two very different persons.”⁵¹ In other words, he thought that individuals who owned property did not necessarily use it well.⁵² With this statement, one can surmise that he mocked a belief of John Locke, a seventeenth-century English philosopher. Locke thought that it was ultimately a private possession of property which enabled people to productively and efficiently utilize raw materials for the common good.⁵³

Rousseau not only held philosophical beliefs about property but also personal beliefs about property as well. Rousseau also bluntly asserted that he “did not even need any property at all.”⁵⁴ Rousseau, in one context, was wary of being “overcome by self-interest and curiosity” during the period in which his father and brother died.⁵⁵ Rousseau not only wanted legal verification of their deaths but also considered hiring the service of a lawyer to make a claim on their property. In the end, his moral scruples caused him to turn against the idea of claiming the property.⁵⁶

Religion

⁴⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 252.

⁴⁹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 206.

⁵⁰ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 229.

⁵¹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 233.

⁵² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 233.

⁵³ John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, (Indianapolis IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980), 19.

⁵⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 233.

⁵⁵ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 348.

⁵⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 348, 349.

Just as French society generally valued the possession of private property, it also advocated the idea that sexual intercourse, ideally, should only be performed within the confines of marriage. Rousseau, for instance, exposed the fact that he had married Thérèse after no less than “twenty-five years” of knowing her.⁵⁷ The divulgence of the fact that they lived together unmarried was an example of “oversharing” because the Catholic Church, the most influential institution in French civilization at the time, banned co-habitation. A more telling example of an individual who represented Rousseau’s perception of what the Catholic Church stood for was M. Gâtier. Rousseau, for instance, stated that Gâtier was a Catholic bishop who had sex with an innocent woman. Rousseau considered this man shallow and hypocritical because he had hitherto not experienced true romance in his life and violated his religious vow to remain chaste. Rousseau, however, said that Gâtier changed his lifestyle because the prelate acquired a newfound and sincere attachment to the woman. Rousseau acknowledged, in short, that she was the only female “[the bishop] had ever loved.”⁵⁸ Rousseau nevertheless disliked the fact that M. Gâtier took advantage of a woman who was sweet and innocent. To Rousseau, M. Gâtier’s lifestyle was representative of the reality that a bourgeois immorality had been pervasive throughout Europe and had also affected the Catholic Church, an institution which traditionally prided itself as being a bulwark of morality and correct conduct.⁵⁹

In *Confessions*, Rousseau also uttered other statements suggestive of a dislike for the Catholic Church. During a stay in Turin, Italy, he observed how “sluts” and “vagabonds” had been easily converted to the Catholic faith.⁶⁰ Interestingly, he claimed that this conversion only

⁵⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 427.

⁵⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 122-23.

⁵⁹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 123.

⁶⁰ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 61, 63.

required “abjuration” of their fallen ways rather than a true “baptism” to the Catholic Church.⁶¹ In a similar spirit, he critically observed that “education,” dominated by the Catholic Church at the time he was alive, meant only an inauthentic socialization into the tenets of Catholic dogma.⁶² Given what he saw as a forced allegiance, Rousseau acquired a growing “aversion for Catholicism.”⁶³ In actuality, Rousseau valued the Protestant faith over the Catholic faith. He did so because he perceived a real difference between Protestants, who truly valued conscience, and Catholics, who too easily accepted “submission” to a predetermined worldview.⁶⁴ Ironically, however, he converted to Catholicism in an unenthusiastic manner during his stay in Italy to adapt to the cultural environment he experienced in Turin. When reflecting upon the nature of individuals’ religious philosophies, Rousseau claimed that “believers make God like themselves; the good represent him as good, the wicked, as wicked, malicious and bilious devotees see nothing but hell, because they would like to see the whole world damned; while loving and gentle souls do not believe in the existence of such a place.”⁶⁵ Such a statement is indicative of Rousseau’s belief that people primarily rely on their conscience when they determine what they consider to be true. In practice, Rousseau also believed that most people generally do not like organized religion. For instance, he labeled the Sorbonne, an institution advocating the significance of Catholic theology in eighteenth-century France, “a lunatic asylum.”⁶⁶

Despite prioritizing conscience above all else, *Confessions* implies that Rousseau was also aware of his own narcissistic tendencies. Around 1732, he discloses that pride led him to

⁶¹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 61.

⁶² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 62.

⁶³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 63.

⁶⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 65, 70.

⁶⁵ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 70, 237.

⁶⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 237, 629. However, p. 628 indicates that he cried in joy at a Calvinist (an organized Christian Church) “Communion” service. One can speculate on the possibility that Rousseau cried not only out of devotion to the Calvinist faith but also due to guilt he may have had for past sins he committed.

convert from Catholicism to Protestantism. Before this conversion, Rousseau said that he was loyal to a Catholic bishop he once had. However, he also informs the reader that a miracle happened to him but did not specifically discuss the nature of the miraculous event. He recounts that prayer alone was responsible for the occurrence of the miracle. He also took his own ideology and belief-system seriously, arrogantly and uncritically at times. At the very end of *Confessions*, he boldly asserted that “whosoever, even without having read my writings, after examining with his own eyes my disposition, my character, my manners, my inclinations, my pleasures, and my habits, can believe me to a dishonourable man, is himself a man who deserves to be choked.”⁶⁷

A Political and Philosophical Judgment of Europe

Rousseau had a negative opinion of the family and the Catholic Church, two institutions which were a traditional part of pre-modern European society. Rousseau, however, also demonstrated an awareness of the overall, immoral state of eighteenth-century European society. He claimed that “[the] injustice and uselessness of my complaints left in my mind the seeds of indignation against our foolish civil institutions, whereby the real welfare of the public and true justice are always sacrificed to an apparent order, which is in reality subversive to all order, and of which the only effect is, to bestow the sanction of public authority upon the oppression of the weak and the injustice of the strong.”⁶⁸ In a similar manner, he claimed that “[one] would feel inclined to say, that only the dark schemes of the wicked succeed” and “that the innocent projects of the good are hardly ever fulfilled.”⁶⁹ In a similar vein but in a different social context, Rousseau declared that “[the] innate love of justice, by which my heart was always consumed, united to my secret liking for France, had inspired me with aversion for the King of

⁶⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 124, 683.

⁶⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 336.

⁶⁹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 338.

Prussia, who in his principles and conduct, appeared to me to trample underfoot all respect for natural law and human obligations.”⁷⁰ Because Rousseau disliked England as well as Germany, he believed that only France was capable of moral redemption.⁷¹

Towards a Personal Morality

Although Rousseau believed that France was capable of moral redemption, he, as I said above, had French friends who lived decadent lives. In order for his vision of a moral France to bear fruit, he thought that a moral reformation of his personal life was needed. For example, Rousseau’s passion for sensuality and sexual relations lessened when Rousseau returned to Paris from Venice. For the rest of his life, he spent his time devoting himself to only one woman. More importantly, he wanted to improve the moral state of French society by writing political and literary treatises for the French populace.⁷²

The woman who Rousseau devoted himself to was Thérèse le Vasseur, a landlady from Orleans whom he met after returning to France from Venice. Rousseau recounted that he “was struck by her modest behavior, and, still more, by her lively and gentle looks, which in [his] eyes, at that time appeared incomparable.”⁷³ He declared that he was “her champion.”⁷⁴ After studying her body language, Rousseau said that le Vasseur expressed “gratitude” for his defense of her.⁷⁵ Although a kind of “intimacy” was generated between them, he disclosed that she was pretty earthy.⁷⁶ Moreover, Rousseau asserted that his sensual passions calmed towards the end of his life. Surprisingly, Rousseau, at one point in the book, claimed that he “no more desired

⁷⁰ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 614.

⁷¹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 655.

⁷² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 427, 339, 401.

⁷³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 339.

⁷⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 339.

⁷⁵ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 339.

⁷⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 339.

[Thérèse's] possession than that of Madame de Warens, and that the sensual needs, which [he] satisfied in [Thérèse's] person, were only to [him] those of sexual impulse."⁷⁷

However, Rousseau bluntly asserted that he thought Thérèse was homely. However, he wanted to live a more stable life by the time he settled down with her. He "felt it necessary that the gentle tranquility of private and domestic life should make up to [him] for the loss of the brilliant career which [he] was renouncing."⁷⁸ He also admitted that she was not bright when he said that "[her] mind is what Nature had made it; culture and teaching are without influence upon it."⁷⁹ Rousseau also disclosed that she did not know how to read or count. He nevertheless defended her ability to offer him good advice.⁸⁰

A Dreamer?

Just as Rousseau narrowed his ambitions for his own life by marrying Thérèse le Vasseur, he wished to put a damper on the ambitions of other Frenchmen. He basically believed that far-reaching ambitions cause more societal individuation than societal integration.⁸¹ His views were partly influenced by a man named M. Gamier. Rousseau, for instance, believed that members of any society should have more humble ambitions. M. Gamier told Rousseau that "if every man could read the hearts of all other men, there would be more people willing to descend than to rise in life."⁸² Rousseau criticized the modern tendency to value success above all else. He also addressed the means through which one becomes successful when he argued that practical experience was more important for people than academic knowledge in the natural sciences. He said of any theoretical individual that "an exclusive but thorough knowledge of

⁷⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 410, 427.

⁷⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 341.

⁷⁹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 340, 341.

⁸⁰ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 341.

⁸¹ Peter Berger, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1973), 158.

⁸² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 93.

anything is more likely to enable him to judge of [the arts] correctly than all the learning acquired by scientific culture.”⁸³ His romantic worldview extended to everyday activities as well. Rousseau claimed that he wanted “[to] walk through a beautiful country in fine weather, without being obliged to hurry, and with a pleasant prospect at the end.”⁸⁴

Therefore, one can conclude that Rousseau did not have traditional Enlightenment values.⁸⁵ Unlike the English philosopher Francis Bacon, Rousseau wished to praise nature rather than transform it.⁸⁶ In a similar manner, Jean-Jacques later ventured into a forest and produced his conception of “natural man.”⁸⁷ He claimed that he saw his “fellow creatures [followed] blindly the path of their prejudices, their errors, their misfortunes, and crimes” and later cried, “Fools, who continually complain of Nature, learn that you bring all your misfortunes upon yourselves.”⁸⁸

Rousseau: An Advocate of the Public Sphere

Rousseau not only addressed the ambitions he thought his fellow Frenchmen should have but also addressed the arena in which they, according to his worldview, should express their talents. A telling example in his life history addresses what he thought that arena should be. By the time that Thérèse had her third child, Jean-Jacques admitted without shame that he “handed over [his] children to the State to educate, for want of means to bring them up [himself], in deciding to fit them becoming workmen and peasants rather than adventurers and fortune-hunters, [he] thought that [he] was behaving like a citizen and a father, and considered [himself]

⁸³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 292.

⁸⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 178.

⁸⁵ Robert Wokler, *The Enlightenment Hostilities of Voltaire and Rousseau*. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 82.

⁸⁶ Francis Bacon, “The Great Instauration,” *The Great Instauration and New Atlantis*. Ed. J. Weinberger. (Arlington Heights Inc., 1980), 13-14.

⁸⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 401.

⁸⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 401.

a member of Plato's Republic."⁸⁹ He declared that he supposedly knew "that they would have been brought up to hate, perhaps to betray, their parents; it is a hundred times better that they never known them."⁹⁰ He made reference to his children later on in *Confessions* when he suggested that "[the] continued absence of a child whom one does not yet know, weakens and at last utterly destroys the feelings of a parent" and that "it is impossible to love a child which has been put out to nurse as much as one which is brought up at home."⁹¹ In this passage, he confirms his view that man is not made for the family but for the State, or public sphere.⁹²

Taking this quote into consideration, Rousseau not only championed the state but also advocated visions he had for the future of France. Politically, Rousseau was more of a republican than a monarchist. In part, this had to do with the fact that he was born in Geneva, Switzerland, a place where he "gave [himself] up to republican enthusiasm."⁹³ He did synthesize his concern for religion with his concern for order. He claimed that "the Gospel was the same for every Christian" and said that "it was the right of the Sovereign alone to define the manner of worship and to settle this unintelligible dogma."⁹⁴ He said this on the grounds that "the essential part of the doctrine is only different in the attempts of different people to explain what they were able to understand."⁹⁵ Rousseau also testified to a divisive political atmosphere in Paris before the French Revolution. In 1753, he claimed that "Paris was divided into two parties, more violently opposed than if it had been a matter of religion or an affair of state."⁹⁶ He claimed that one party was comprised of rich people, whereas the other was comprised of less wealthy but

⁸⁹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 366, 367.

⁹⁰ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 368.

⁹¹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 578.

⁹² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 366-67, 368, 578.

⁹³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 404.

⁹⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 404.

⁹⁵ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 404.

⁹⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 396.

more talented individuals.⁹⁷ Denman, for instance, claimed that Rousseau had, in fact, a passion for “political equality” and a more equal “treatment” in “education.”⁹⁸ Rousseau, according to sociologist Nicole Ferman, wished to change the “public opinion” of a French “public sphere” he considered too decadent and corrupt.⁹⁹

Rousseau: An Empathetic Man Who Advocated the National Public Sphere

Rousseau, in part, was supportive of the public sphere because he saw others suffer in his life. Just as he thought that the State could take care of his children better than he did, he also believed that a wider range of communicative channels at hand can enable hurt individuals on the periphery of society to adapt to societal expectations. One need only to recall that he that he invented the concept of *pitié*, the idea that one improves the plight of another through empathy.¹⁰⁰

There were examples in Rousseau’s *Confessions* of emotionally-distraught people he wanted to help. During the 1728-1731 period in his life, he frankly admits that “the ugliest strumpet became in my eyes an object of adoration.”¹⁰¹ Another telling vignette involved a stay he had in Venice around 1743. There, he attended Vespers services in a Catholic Church and witnessed the presence of two women, Cattina and Bettina, whom he considered unattractive. The former had only one eye, and the latter was scarred by smallpox. Yet he said that their “[ugliness] did not exclude certain graces, which I found they possessed.”¹⁰² He also claimed that his “disposition towards them was so altered that [he] left the room almost in love with all

⁹⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 404, 188, 396.

⁹⁸ Denman, “Fraternité,” 207.

⁹⁹ Nicole Ferman, “Domesticating Women, Civilizing Men: Rousseau’s Political Program,” *The Sociological Quarterly*. 35 (1994): 432, 434.

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” *The Basic Political Writings*. (Indianapolis IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987), 53; Engel, “Imagined,” 253.

¹⁰¹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 70.

¹⁰² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 324.

these ugly creatures.”¹⁰³ Thérèse le Vasseur, upon meeting Rousseau for the first time, confessed to him that “she had once misconducted herself in the early years of her womanhood, when a cunning seducer had taken advantage of her innocence.”¹⁰⁴ Rousseau also divulged to the reader the fact that Madame de Francueil’s husband did not love her.¹⁰⁵

Just as Rousseau communicated to the reader instances in which other people were hurt, Rousseau himself had experienced a failed romance. He communicated this experience in his book because Rousseau wanted to let others know that he himself experienced emotional pain. For instance, he met an Italian woman named Zuletta who kissed Rousseau on the lips after mistaking Rousseau for an old lover of hers named M. de Brémond. Because of this accidental encounter, however, Rousseau got to know her better. He extolled her beauty and personality. Because he was starting to fall in love with her, he tried in vain, and as a precaution, to find a defect in her personality. Although he could not find a personality defect, he did note that she had a physical abnormality. Resting his head on her bosom, he saw that she had only one nipple. At first, they talked in a jocular manner about this defect. However, Rousseau openly confessed to her that he felt uneasy about this minor imperfection. This comment hurt Zuletta, and Zuletta got up and bluntly blurted to Rousseau in Italian to “[give] up the ladies, and study mathematics.”¹⁰⁶

Because Rousseau was somewhat bitter when Zuletta dumped him, he developed an interesting philosophical worldview pertaining to the nature of human happiness. Rousseau basically did not think that a general state of happiness was possible. He said that humans “are so little formed for happiness in this world, that of necessity the soul or the body must suffer,

¹⁰³ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 324.

¹⁰⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 340.

¹⁰⁵ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 355.

¹⁰⁶ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 328, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331.

when they do not suffer together, and a happy condition of the one nearly always injures the other.”¹⁰⁷ Due to his belief that happiness was difficult to achieve and that relationships between people were not permanent, he condoned open communication as a means through which one survives in a changing society. Because relationships were not permanent according to Rousseau’s worldview, he told stories about hurt individuals because he wanted to strengthen the French nation by advocating the idea that their voices should also be heard in the French public sphere as well.¹⁰⁸

Rousseau: An Advocate of Candid Communication

Thérèse le Vasseur was an example of one of these hurt individuals. Just as Rousseau candidly told Thérèse to abandon her family, some authors claim that Rousseau not only valued open communication but also candid and ruthlessly frank communication as well.¹⁰⁹ Rousseau, for instance, believed in candidly presenting the facts of his life to an audience for an important reason. To illustrate, Rousseau cites two passages at the beginning of his *Confessions*. In one passage, Rousseau noticed how young men in the town of Bossey were more afraid of getting caught after committing a heinous act than of committing the act in the first place. In that passage, he seemed to condemn a culture which enabled individuals to not feel guilty about committing heinous deeds. On the other hand and in another passage, he claimed to feel no guilt about stealing asparagus from an older lady. From this passage, one can not only sense a selfish egocentrism but also a tolerance he had for not feeling guilt after committing wrongdoings. Both of these respective statements from Rousseau have messages that contradict one another. What accounts for this inconsistency in Rousseau’s philosophy? The answer to this question lies in the

¹⁰⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 256.

¹⁰⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 256, 367.

¹⁰⁹ Margaret J. Bullitt. “Rousseau and Tolstoy: Childhood and Confession.” (*Comparative Literature Studies*. 16 (1979), 15.

fact that he believed, above all else, in candid communication with others. The following statement is reflective of Rousseau's worldview: If each person can honestly communicate her life experience to others, connections, instead of isolation, can be established between members of any conceivable society.¹¹⁰

In one passage, Rousseau clearly states the value of social connections: "When we truly feel that the heart speaks, our own opens to receive its confidences, and all the morality of a pedagogue will never be worth the tender and loving chatter of a clever woman, who has gained our affection."¹¹¹ More relevantly, he boldly said to the reader: "Ah! How your amiable and gentle character, your inexhaustible goodness of heart, your frankness, and all you admirable qualities atone for your weaknesses, if simple errors of judgment deserve that name! You erred, but you were free from vice; your conduct was blameworthy, but your heart was always pure."¹¹²

Reception of Rousseau's *Confessions*

As I have noted above, Rousseau revealed many personal beliefs and detailed incidents in his life which were potentially controversial. How have scholars and other individuals reacted to *Confessions*? Surprisingly, the reactions to his work have not been as negative as one would think. For instance, Kemilla Denman claimed that Rousseau engaged in questionable behavior due to an anxiety engendered by a lack of knowledge of his brother's whereabouts. Denman labeled Rousseau's brother a "wastrel."¹¹³ In general, Rousseau was disturbed by painful memories of his childhood. Because his past caused him to have negative attitudes and feelings about family life, Rousseau believed that the State defended the interests of the individual better

¹¹⁰ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 19, 32.

¹¹¹ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 206.

¹¹² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 271.

¹¹³ Denman, "Fraternité ", 192, 205.

than the familial unit.¹¹⁴ Although some may be critical of this belief, Rousseau nevertheless influenced the thought of Russian author Leo Tolstoy, a thinker some consider to be utopian. Tolstoy apparently praised Rousseau's "sincerity" and "interest in the formative process of childhood."¹¹⁵

However, some readers also had negative reactions towards Rousseau's *Confessions*. Some critics claim that Rousseau's worldview was based on emotion.¹¹⁶ Scholar Gordon McNeil, for instance, claimed that "[the] frankness of [*Confessions*] provided fine ammunition for [Rousseau's] enemies, but it only [increased] the loyalty and admiration of his disciples."¹¹⁷ One can presume that Rousseau's "enemies" were relatively more conservative than his "disciples."¹¹⁸ Although individuals such as Gracchus Babeuf and Madame Roland may have been supportive of Rousseau, Madame de Staël was an example of someone who, although sympathetic with Rousseau's worldview at first, later turned against him.¹¹⁹ Denman similarly claimed that there was a parallel between the violence of the French Revolution and the violence of Rousseau's family history. She further expands on this observation by noting that there *was* a connection given that Rousseau intellectually influenced the French Revolution which took place in the 1790's.¹²⁰ As a matter of fact, King Louis XVI was fortunate that the attention of the Parisian populace, enamored with a growing love of Rousseau's *Oeuvres* during the 1770's, was

¹¹⁴ Kamilla Denman, "Fraternité," 192, 205, 191, 194.

¹¹⁵ Bullitt, "Tolstoy," 12, 13.

¹¹⁶ Judith Still, "Review," 85 (1990,) 188; George R. Havens, "The Theory of "Natural Goodness" in Rousseau's *Confessions*," *Modern Language Notes*. 38 (1923), 260; Robert H. Bell, "Rousseau: The Prophet of Sincerity," *Biography*. 4 (1980), 302.

¹¹⁷ Gordon H. McNeil, "The Cult of Rousseau and the French Revolution." *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 6 (1945), 199.

¹¹⁸ McNeil, "Cult," 199.

¹¹⁹ McNeil, "Cult," 205, 200, 205.

¹²⁰ Denman, "Fraternité," 197.

not instead focused on the return of the Parisian Parlementaires who refused to raise taxes to alleviate the plight of the French poor. The Revolution was thus delayed for a while.¹²¹

Conclusion

Rousseau is a man who had an interesting worldview. In one part of his *Confessions*, he castigates the institution of marriage and the expectations foisted upon married, European couples. Paradoxically, he also chides women who are unfaithful to their husbands. He apparently believed that marriage constrains people. Rousseau also thought that cuckolds must find social outlets to divert their attention from the suffering they experience in the domestic sphere. In particular, he believed that traditional institutions such as the Church and the family did not have enough potency to morally liberate people. Instead, he thought that a plethora of communicative channels should be at one's disposal. According to Rousseau, there had been a social world beyond the traditional town church. Rousseau likewise distrusted the household because he thought it was an arena fraught with potential domestic strife and a limited amount of social bonds. Instead, the public sphere, or the collectivity, had the ability to make men more complete than traditional institutions which engender a deadening cultural aura. In the public sphere, human beings can find themselves and attain an ability to reach out and establish social connections with others they never thought they could before in their lives. According to Rousseau, a broadening of the traditional confessional sphere in eighteenth-century France was thus necessary.¹²²

¹²¹ Wokler, *Hostilities*, 83; William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution: Second Edition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 129; Durand Echeverria, *The Maupeou Revolution, A Study of the History of Libertarianism: France, 1770-1774*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 297.

¹²² Rousseau, *Confessions*, 204, 450.

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