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3: Pity and Human Weakness

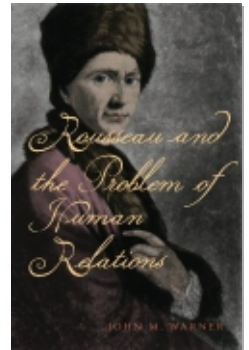
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Pity and Human Weakness

“There is, besides, another principle which Hobbes did not notice, and which—having been given to man in order to soften his vanity or the desire for self-preservation before the birth of vanity [*amour-propre*—tempers the ardor he has for his own well-being by an innate repugnance to see his fellow-man suffer” (*DI* 130).¹ In his first sustained criticism of Hobbes, Rousseau charges the great systematist with a serious error of omission. In his effort to reduce all human behavior to the mechanical promptings of rational self-interest, Hobbes had failed to notice a psychological principle that encourages human beings not to harm one another. The failure to account for this mysterious tendency had led Hobbes and his acolytes to an unduly restrictive understanding of human nature and of the social situation; by naming it Rousseau believes he can not only improve on Hobbes’s theory but also reveal the true origin of “all the rules of natural right” (96). Rousseau speaks, of course, of pity, a sentiment that produces a natural aversion to the spectacle of suffering and that is “appropriate to beings as weak and subject to as many ills as we are” (130). On Rousseau’s accounting it is neither Hobbes’s hedonistic calculus nor Aristotle’s principle of natural sociability, but rather a native sensitivity to the distress of other living beings, that lies at the basis of moral and social life. Indeed, he claims that from pity “*alone flow all the social virtues*” and that “benevo-

lence and even friendship” are best understood as “the products of a constant pity fixed on a particular object” (131–32; emphasis added). Thus pity, understood aright, is not only a restraint on the uglier expressions of unadulterated self-love; it is also the foundation of sympathetic social identification, a more or less comprehensive list of social virtues (“generosity, “clemency, [and] humanity” are the ones given by Rousseau), and a particular—and particularly important—form of association in which such virtues find expression.

Though Rousseau was hardly the only moral philosopher of the eighteenth century to insist on the importance of sympathy, his account of this central passion is distinctive for both its ambitiousness as well as its ambiguity. In the *Second Discourse* he invokes pity as a kind of moral-psychological panacea, arguing that it is operative in the earliest stages of human development and that it serves a series of important socializing functions. However, his actual argument on these points is at best suggestive and often borders on complete collapse. The sentiment itself appears more or less out of nowhere—it emerges not as the product of reasoned argument or plausible empirical observation but rather from the black box of Rousseau’s private meditations on “the first and simplest principles of the human soul”—and the account of its importance to human life falls far short of substantiating the remarkably strong claim that it *alone* is the source of *all* the social virtues (*DI* 95). What is more, the premise that pity is especially important to and appropriate for beings “subject to as many ills” as humans are appears to be in tension with what is perhaps the central argument of the entire work—that man is naturally strong and independent and that the majority of his “ills” are his own creations. If the theoretical usefulness of pity is grounded in the postulate of man’s essential frailty, then Rousseau’s famously idyllic characterization of life in the state of nature would appear to be misleadingly simple. One is hard-pressed to see how the operations of pity could be at all useful for a being as indolent and cognitively simple as Rousseau’s natural man (e.g., *DI* 105). Even by the end of the *Discourse on Inequality* it is not entirely clear how the unique situation of the human being—the environment in which he is embedded and the specific complex of capacities that express and confine his nature—creates the especial need for a sentiment like pity. It is then Rousseau’s own characterization of the natural human condition that seems to delimit the utility of pity.

Rousseau’s paradoxical characterization of the human condition as being one of both weakness and strength has important consequences for how we

understand human relations. We saw in the previous chapter that Rousseau was concerned about the self-serving sociability and lack of moral energy he believed to be characteristic of his age; we also saw that one of his principal aims as an author was to reinvigorate his readers' sense of moral and social possibility. This aim is especially evident in the *Discourse on Inequality*, which he imagined being performed in front of the entire "human race" rather than perused by pedants in the cold isolation of the ivory tower (*DI* 103).² Yet remaining mindful of both the moral transformation Rousseau sought to effect in his readers as well as the performative or public character of the *Discourse* makes the invocation of pity doubly paradoxical, for a continued emphasis on the weakness and vulnerability of human nature could have the perverse practical effect of creating in his audience a deadly moral fatalism rather than a more expansive sense of possibility. Rousseau himself indicates an awareness of this problem in the *Preface to Narcisse*, observing that "so many reflections on the weakness of our nature often serve only to turn us away from generous undertakings" and that incessant harping on "the miseries of humanity" ultimately results in moral passivity (25).³ Rousseau's own utterances thus beg an important motivational question: how can we be expected to energetically pursue our own perfectionistic impulses when the very author encouraging us to do so is also constantly reminding us of our own basic and ineliminable weakness?

This question has recently been put rather forcefully to Rousseau by Clifford Orwin (1997a, 1997b) and Richard Boyd (2004), who both worry that Rousseau's insistence on the importance of pity diminishes human possibility in politically destructive ways. Boyd (2004, 525, 529) is especially concerned about pity's tendency to induce moral passivity, arguing that it turns us into "voyeurs" who not only find ourselves unable to actively assist the needy but also take positive *delight* in their suffering. Orwin (1997a, 10–11) blames pity for lowering moral horizons and inaugurating a politics of class warfare which valorizes the blameless poor at the expense of the hard-hearted rich. Both accounts charge that pity cannot generate the moral energy necessary to inspire citizens to take action against injustice.

Such objections are not without face plausibility, but a more comprehensive look at Rousseau's understanding of the human condition, and of pity's place within it, helps to show that Rousseau never intended for pity to perform the kinds of functions that Boyd and Orwin assign to it. Indeed,

since—as we have already seen—Rousseau turns to moralized *amour-propre*, grounded in protean sexuality, in order to generate the moral energy and ambition that both critics find absent in pity, he has already addressed the motivational problems that they charge him with ignoring. In order to understand the role of pity in moral life, then, it is important to see how it works in conjunction with *other* social and ethical impulses. That is the task of this chapter. In particular, I am interested in how the “low” and more egalitarian features of pity supplement and, in certain instances, even serve to correct the “high” ambitions created by moralized *amour-propre*.

Because Rousseau is especially concerned to diagnose and depict the kinds of suffering that occur when our highest and best desires are frustrated, much of pity’s usefulness as a moral sentiment is not in contradiction with, but rather depends decisively on, the existence and activity of our most ambitious moral and social aspirations. It is, after all, most especially in the wake of failure that we are in need of consolation and care. Commiseration takes some of the sting out of failing to live up to the expectations we have for ourselves and others, and it is in the act of lamenting our shared imperfections that the hope of our “frail happiness” arises (*E* 221). Far, then, from conceiving of pity and the perfectionistic drives of moralized *amour-propre* as polar opposites or uncombinable forces, Rousseau views them as dialectically interdependent and interlocking impulses which address themselves to different, though related, psychological and social needs. Pity is therefore especially appropriate for human beings not simply because we are by nature weak and frail, but also because the logic of human development requires that we learn to boldly—if sometimes unsuccessfully—aspire to large and great things. To be human is for Rousseau a difficult and frustrating thing; our grandest ambitions point to a horizon in constant retreat. The disappointments that attach to this dynamic cannot be overcome by means of historical progress or erotic transcendence; they are, rather, constituent features of our social and moral lives that we must learn to manage. It is against this backdrop that Rousseau’s insistence on pity’s especial importance must be understood.

Provided that Rousseau can appeal to the moral force of pity without undermining his commitment to elevating man’s moral and social aspirations, to what functions can he assign it in the context of his broader theory of human relations? I shall develop two major arguments on this score. First, I shall be at pains throughout to emphasize the *negative* character of pity. In

both the state of nature and the state of society, one of pity's primary functions is to soften the harsher expressions of self-love. Thus, in rounding out Rousseau's account of moral and social motivation, pity helps to ameliorate some of the dangers—most notably false pride and fanaticism—to which moralized *amour-propre* exposes us. We already know Rousseau believes it necessary to develop rather than stifle our perfectionistic moral drives because they are the source of “the most sublime virtues,” but below we shall see he is also aware that such drives require softening because they, left to their own devices, cause socially destabilizing forms of intolerance and even sanguinary violence. Pity and the set of virtues that grow out of it remind us that we share the imperfection of the afflicted (or, in many cases, the guilty) party; in so doing, it serves to moderate the harshness that often attaches to our moral assessments.

Second, pity is a positive catalyst of social togetherness, but it catalyzes associations of a necessarily attenuated kind. The form of identification embodied by pity has peculiar dynamics that simultaneously enable and limit human community: one who pities another apprehends that he is both like *and* unlike the suffering other—alike insofar as he realizes that he, too, is in principle subject to whatever misfortune the aggrieved party suffers, but different insofar as he also realizes that he does not suffer *in fact*. The dual presence of likeness and difference, of equality and superiority, characterize the psychic experience of pity and put limits on the forms of association that are actuated by it. We are forced by the apprehension of difference that is implicit in pity to recognize the discrete, individuated existence of the other being—we must recognize the other's otherness. This kind of recognition, though it can provide a genuine source of comfort and community, nonetheless cannot satisfy our need for *unity* with and through one another.

In arguing thus I understand pity as playing a coequal role with the sexual passion in structuring man's moral and associational life, and I seek to show how it both supplements the moral and social motivations that grow out of sublimated sexual desire as well as how it ameliorates some of the dangers to which those motivations give rise. If the sexualized morality of perfection speaks to the aspiring, bold, and “high” expressions of our nature, then pity keeps us connected to the vulnerable, imperfect, and “low” sides of ourselves. The extent to which we can integrate the dynamic tensions created by these two distinct but interdependent impulses is an important determinant of our ultimate happiness. In the chapters following this one, we shall

see how and why we fail at this task as well as the dislocations that result from those failures.

| The State of Nature: A State of Weakness?

Though Rousseau insists on pity's especial utility for the human species, a first glance at his picture of man in the state of nature hardly bears that insistence out. If anyone is to be pitied it is the troubled and restless "civil" man, whose self-defeating way of life is contrasted with natural man's independent and peaceable existence. Indeed, the autarchic contentment of natural man's life is consistently contrasted with the hyperactive mischievousness of the *Second Discourse's* reprehensible villain. Rousseau thematizes the stylized contrast between "natural man" and "civil man" to the advantage of the former and, in so doing, forces the reader to view himself in a new and less flattering light. Natural man is strong and free while civil man is weak and dependent; natural man is content with little while civil man is unhappy with much; natural man assists those he pities while civil man retreats to safety; natural man does not care what others think while civil man lives only in the eyes of others; natural man "hardly has need of remedies" while civil man needs the constant attention of doctors; natural man is at harmony with himself and his environment while civil man is at war with both; natural man naps peacefully under the same tree that provided his meal and sips water from a babbling brook while civil man rushes futilely toward a retreating horizon (*DI* 110, 105).

Such comparisons are a rhetorically effective way to expose the absurdity of the social situation and to inspire in readers a moralized indignance at their own condition, but they problematize Rousseau's insistence on the especial importance of pity. To the degree that human beings are naturally strong and independent in the way Rousseau's portraits of life in the state of nature suggest, it becomes very easy to wonder about the utility that a sentiment like pity could have for him: pity, as Rousseau himself notes, is appropriate for "weak" beings that are subject to "many ills," not for free and capable individuals who successfully satisfy their own needs (*DI* 130). In order to reconcile this tension it is necessary to consult both the *Second Discourse's* depiction of the state of nature and its account of pity, for they reveal that Rousseau understates the difficulties of life in the former and overstates the activity of the latter. These exaggerations are part of an anti-Hobbesian rhetorical strategy

intended to inspire in less attentive readers a moralized indignance at their own condition. More “attentive readers”—those with “the courage to begin again”—will not fail to discover that the forms of weakness and vulnerability that beset natural man, though different than those that are experienced in civil society, are nonetheless no less definitive of his basic condition (98). So, too, will they discover a conception of pity that, far from inspiring active benevolence, instead serves to restrain the uglier manifestations of pure self-love.

Close attention to the argument of the *Discourse on Inequality* shows that vulnerability and weakness are conditions of life in the state of nature as well as in civil society. Men are constantly subjected to the harsh and unrelenting necessities imposed by “infancy, old age, and illnesses of all kinds” (*DI* 108). These conditions are “sad signs” of his basic weakness: putting aside the problems posed by the “inclemencies of the weather and the rigor of the seasons” with which all animals must deal, Rousseau notes that humans have unusually long periods of gestation and infancy, thus leaving mothers and children more vulnerable to prey than other animal species (106, 108, 112). Though he attempts to lighten the weight of this specifically human burden by adding that “if infancy is longer among us, then so is life [and] everything remains approximately equal in this respect,” this qualification is transparently and even suspiciously unconvincing: because the likelihood of dying during infancy is a function of the absolute rather than the relative length of the period of dependence on the mother, and because the period of such dependence is longer for humans than for other animals, it follows that human infants are more likely to perish than are their animal counterparts (109). We are beset by still more limitations. For instance, our bipedalism, touted by Rousseau to be one of our chief advantages over other species, proves far less beneficial than initial appearances suggest. Indeed, the primary benefit of having two legs is that we can carry our children as we flee from quadrupedal predators who—precisely because they are quadrupeds—run more swiftly than we do. In addition, we do not have fur and thus are more susceptible to the ill effects of cold weather (112).

The question of disease deserves special attention in this context, for Rousseau’s claim that illness “belongs principally to man living in civil society” must be understood as part of his broader rhetorical strategy to highlight the way in which civil man creates many of his own problems. He begins his discussion of sickness by posing a seemingly rhetorical question whose answer is in fact anything but obvious: “I shall ask whether there is any solid observation from which one might conclude that in Countries where

this art [of medicine] is most neglected, the average life of man is shorter than in those where it is cultivated with the greatest care” (*DI* 109). Note that Rousseau proposes a testable hypothesis to settle the matter; what is needed is a scientific investigation into the utility of a particular branch of applied science. He thus appeals to the authority of science in the very act of interrogating its usefulness. Note also that the hypothesis he advances is a null: he expects medicine to have *no* effect on life expectancy, not a negative effect as his rhetoric implies. Rousseau’s critique of medicine is thus more qualified than it first appears.

But what evidence does Rousseau provide in support of this (qualified) claim? The “observations” made on this score are offered as provisional rather than definitive explanations, and they are known by Rousseau himself to be far from solid. For instance, while suggesting that natural man is generally healthy, Rousseau is in fact very careful not to deny that sickness exists in the state of nature or that the illnesses suffered there are often fatal. He claims instead that natural man has fewer *sources* of illness than does civilized man—far different from claiming that he is sick less frequently—and that he “*hardly* has need of remedies” (*DI* 110; emphasis added). These hedges suggest Rousseau’s own awareness that life in his state of nature, far from being easy, is in fact full of hardship.

Indeed, the more Rousseau appears to deny such hardships the more evident he makes them. Seeking some empirical basis for his claims regarding natural man’s health, Rousseau appeals to the experience of wild animals: he says the testimonies of hunters show that it is common to find animals that “have received extensive but very well-healed wounds,” but that it is extremely rare to discover sick ones. The implied conclusion is that humans, like animals, may be injured in nature but rarely, if ever, fall ill. Yet the empirical evidence on which this *reductio ad animalia* is based is once again curiously—indeed, almost perfectly—shoddy. The reports Rousseau cites, even if they are true, certainly do not show that illnesses are not prevalent in the state of nature, for hunters might fail to find sick animals not because there are none to find but rather because sick animals go into hiding in order to (among other reasons) protect themselves from predators. The testimonies of “hunters” would thus appear to be especially untrustworthy on this question. One might also explain the apparent absence of sick animals by hypothesizing that ill animals are less likely to be seen because they, without the aid of modern medicine, are simply quicker to die. Both explanations are compatible with the facts Rousseau reports and, far from suggesting the general health and

robustness of natural fauna, instead point up their essential vulnerability and susceptibility to nature's many dangers. Thus the conclusion that a "sick savage" has "nothing to fear except for his illness" is manifestly unwarranted, for he is at the mercy of indifferent natural forces and has "hunters" of his own from which he must protect himself (*DI* 111).

Just as Rousseau understates the difficulties of the state of nature in order to illustrate its advantages, so he overstates the activity of pity in order to show its naturalness. We can begin to see his exaggerations on this head by noting that the argument for natural goodness does not require expressions of active benevolence. In contrast to the Golden Rule, which imposes positive duties by obligating us to "*do unto others as you would have them do unto you,*" Rousseau's careful formulation of the principle of natural goodness—"do what is good for you with the least possible harm to others"—makes clear that pity modifies behavior only by *restraining* the way in which we pursue our good. The only "duties" goodness imposes are those of forbearance, and even these do not bind absolutely: pity bids us not to harm others unless we deem it necessary to do so. Thus a healthy savage refrains from "robbing a weak child or an infirm old man" only where he believes he can find his subsistence elsewhere (*DI* 133). Rousseau also emphasizes pity's negative character when he introduces the concept in the context of a critique of Hobbes, whom he chastises for "failing to notice" sentiments that—"under certain circumstances"—"*restrain* the ferocity" and "*temper* the ardor" of natural self-love (130). Having failed to notice that "salutary *restraint*" which prevents the expression of self-love's uglier and more callous manifestations, Hobbes had falsely concluded that men, left to their own devices, would savage one another over the most insignificant affairs (133; emphasis added). The role of pity in the state of nature, then, is to minimize the damage men would otherwise do to one another.

Though the argument for natural goodness requires only an economy of violence, Rousseau's rhetoric of pity provides for a seemingly limitless benevolence. He takes it to be "very certain that pity is a natural sentiment" that carries us "without reflection to the aid of those whom we see suffer," and he claims it is evident that savage man "is always seen heedlessly yielding to the first sentiment of humanity." Though pity would now seem to be inspiring men in the state of nature to actively assist one another, the evidence adduced on this score is, as with the discussion of medicine, far short of convincing. Though claiming that savage man is "always seen" following the impulses of pity with no thought of his own good, the only example of

anything like positive benevolence that Rousseau provides occurs outside the state of nature. He tells us that in “riots or street fights . . . the prudent man moves away; it is the rabble, the marketwoman, who separate the combatants and prevent honest people from murdering each other” (*DI* 132). At best, this illustration is evidence of the mediating effect of calculative reason—for the crude marketgoer who risks life and limb is contrasted with “the philosopher” who is able to ignore the sounds of murder by “argu[ing] with himself a bit”—but it pretty clearly cannot prove that *natural* pity moves men to actively assist one another.

I emphasize the defectiveness of Rousseau’s characterizations of the state of nature and the sentiment of pity not because he was unaware of them but precisely because he *was*. Both arguments are predicated on a “natural man”/“civil man” polarity, a hyper-stylized rhetorical construct intended to make readers see with new eyes the moral and social world that they themselves have built. The function of these rather bad arguments in the text, which we must remember is being *performed* in front of the entire human race, is almost entirely rhetorical: they exaggerate certain contrasts between natural and civil life in order to make those contrasts evident to the less discriminating members of Rousseau’s audience, who may lack the philosophic acumen of Plato or Xenocrates but who nonetheless require salutary moral instruction and an account of their nature that is compatible with the truth. With this in mind it should be clear that Rousseau’s illustrations are detachable from the actual theory of natural goodness—which stands or falls independently of provisional empirical hypotheses. Indeed, insofar as the theory of natural goodness requires the activity of pity so, too, does it demand an awareness of human vulnerability that, while not inconsistent with the arguments of the *Discourse on Inequality*, is nonetheless not fully accounted for within it. For this account we must turn to *Emile*.

| Pitying the Fool: Sympathy, Society, and the Human Condition

Unlike the *Discourse on Inequality*, which invokes the importance of pity while concealing the conditions of life that would make it useful, *Emile* puts the human struggle front and center. Again, rhetorical considerations help explain this shift in emphasis: given that the eponymous hero of the work—unlike the asocial protagonist of the *Second Discourse*—is to become fully social and hence must assume all the difficulties socialization entails, Rous-

seau's choice to emphasize the challenges of being fully human is hardly surprising. For we see that even when all the problems human beings have created for themselves are assumed away, as they are in the pure state of nature or in Emile's education, Rousseau both characterizes the human condition as one of weakness and travail and holds that pity is an especially appropriate socializing sentiment for beings constituted as we are: "Men are not naturally kings, or lords, or courtiers, or rich men. All are born naked and poor; all are subject to the miseries of life, to sorrows, ills, needs, and pains of every kind. Finally, all are condemned to death. This is what truly belongs to man. This is what no mortal is exempt from. Begin, therefore, by studying in human nature what is most inseparable from it, what best characterizes humanity" (*E* 222). Here, as in the *Discourse on Inequality*, the contrast between natural man and civil man grabs the reader. The inequalities we experience and accept as natural—that some are kings and others are subjects—are in fact not natural at all. Yet the substance of the contrast might surprise the reader of the *Discourse*, for what is genuinely natural—what truly defines us as a species—is no longer our independence but rather our shared fragility and vulnerability to injury. It is in our common need of assistance that we are best able to see "the identity of our natures with theirs" (*E* 221). Human life and contentment are fragile things, and it is in the not uncommon circumstance that our best-laid plans go awry that we most acutely feel our weakness as well as a sense of connection with those beings who are compromised in the way we are.

If weakness is in some way definitive of the human condition tout court, then it is especially so for men in civil society, whose hearts have been sensitized by settled social relations. Thus, while the specific challenges faced by Emile and savage man are very different—the former does not have to forage for food or fight off bears, but the latter does not have to win the heart of a woman or cultivate the good opinion of others—both lives are defined by their respective challenges in ways that point up the usefulness of pity. The primary difficulties that Emile will face have more to do with his emotional and interpersonal life than with his physical subsistence or basic safety, for as we have seen his turning-toward-others is motivated primarily by a desire to love and be loved rather than an inability to meet his basic needs. Emile's "weakness," then, consists largely in his newfound need for interpersonal validation. This need, as Rousseau makes clear earlier in his analysis of the birth of social sentiment, is not perverse or destructive but rather natural to

and coextensive with social life proper: “It is man’s weakness which makes him sociable; it is our common miseries which turn our hearts to humanity; we would owe humanity nothing if we were not men. Every attachment is a sign of insufficiency. If each of us had no need of others, he would hardly think of uniting himself with them. *Thus from our very infirmity is born our frail happiness*” (*E* 221; emphasis added). To enter society is to understand and accept one’s own physical and emotional weakness. It is also to recognize and love that same weakness in others, and to draw from the disconcerting realization of shared vulnerability the chance of a “frail happiness.” Our weakness is thus a consequence and a cause of the social situation.

Such claims go a long way toward suggesting the importance of a sentiment like pity, which allows us to enter into sympathetic community with our more unfortunate fellows (and we are *all* unfortunate) and to view the weakness of others not with hostility or contempt but rather as a reflection of our own fragility. In fact, the apprehension of one’s own personal susceptibility to misfortune is essential to the proper development of pity, as Rousseau makes clear in his first “maxim” of sympathetic association: “*One pities in others only those ills from which one does not feel oneself exempt.*” The hardness of the privileged toward the poor is often a product of their failure to recognize the fragility and arbitrariness of their own good fortune. They feel secure in their social positions and regard “abasement and poverty as a condition alien” to them. Lacking an experiential or imaginative foothold in a lived reality characterized by privation, the rich are unable to enter into sympathetic association with the unfortunate. “Why,” Rousseau asks, “are kings without pity for their subjects? Because they count on never being mere men. Why are the rich so hard toward the poor? It is because they have no fear of becoming poor.” Emile, however, will be “exposed to the vicissitudes of fortune” and will “understand well that the fate of . . . unhappy men can be his, that all their ills are there in the ground beneath their feet” (*E* 224). Able to imaginatively transport himself outside himself and know that there are “beings like him who suffer what he has suffered,” Emile will expand the circumference of his own understanding and find meaning in the sympathetic identification he is able to achieve with them. It is, then, through the mechanism of pity and the related awareness of our own personal vulnerability that we are softened to the plight of the unfortunate.

The strength of our identification with the least fortunate of our species also reinforces our awareness of the limits of human nature. Rousseau frequently reminds his reader that human being, for all its expansiveness, nonetheless has boundaries that must be respected. Jean-Jacques, for example, tells his pupil to “restrain your heart within the limits of your condition,” to “study and know these limits,” and that man is “unhappy only when he forgets his human estate” (*E* 445). These limits are most commonly neglected when considerations of pride or malignant *amour-propre* compromise the honesty of our self-assessments and lead to an inflated estimate of our own importance, or when they interfere with our moral judgment and cause us to treat others disrespectfully. However, an active sense of pity counteracts these antisocial tendencies by revealing the fragility of our own happiness, by keeping us in touch with our essential vulnerability, and by reminding us that we have done less to deserve our good fortune than we are prone to believe (244–45).

Pity for the unfortunate can, however, activate false pride and thereby degenerate into contempt and hatred. The tendency to glorify oneself at the expense of others is so pervasive that even the impeccably educated Emile is not immune to it: having been shown by his tutor the madness of civil society, Jean-Jacques worries that his pupil may draw the self-congratulatory conclusion that he is “‘wise, and men are mad.’” The distortion that pride introduces into social cognition is “the error most to be feared” because it short-circuits healthy associative impulses and replaces them with false, self-serving, and hateful delusions. In order to prevent this self-destructive error from setting in, Jean-Jacques arranges for his pupil to be publicly humiliated (*E* 244–45, cf. 172–75). From such experiences Emile learns not only worldliness but also that not even he is exempt from the vicissitudes of fortune. Because the madness of the world can touch him, too, he learns to judge the unfortunate less harshly—fate may have been still crueler to others than it has to him.

| Growing the Self: Pity and the Ordered Development of *Amour-Propre*

Though cultivating the sense of pity creates certain dangers with respect to *amour-propre* and how one views himself vis-à-vis the other, Rousseau is clear that these risks can and *must* be run. In order to persuade the reader of his account of the soul’s development Rousseau employs a stylized rhetorical

device quite similar to the “natural man”/“civil man” distinction of the *Discourse on Inequality*, namely, an ongoing comparison between Emile and a conventionally raised boy—between “my pupil” and “your pupil” (Scott 2012, 448–49). This comparison is especially important at the beginning of Book IV, which marks the birth of *amour-propre* and all its attendant complications. In fact, it is at this point in the text when Rousseau invokes the specter of “your pupil” by inviting the reader to imagine “two young men, emerging from their first education and entering into society by directly opposite paths” (*E* 228). Rousseau claims that the apparent advantages enjoyed by the conventionally raised pupil are in fact the catalysts of his own corruption: “Does he wander through a palace? All his questions tell you that he is ceaselessly comparing himself with the master of the house; and that all that he finds mortifying for himself in this parallel makes his vanity rebel and thus sharpens it” (228). Exposure to pomp and magnificence reinforces rather than resolves the problem of *amour-propre*, for, far from putting us in a position to extend our self-love in healthy and productive ways, it instead inspires resentment toward the more fortunate as well as a distaste for one’s own social position. In fact, malignant *amour-propre* requires absolute validation and cannot tolerate disapproval of any kind. “Your pupil,” once exposed to “the disturbing glances of a serious man” or “the scoffing words of a caustic man,” is unable to abide their slights: “Were he despised by only a single man, that man’s contempt instantly poisons the others’ applause” (228). The way in which we compare ourselves to others leads us to resent them and to despise ourselves. This is a recipe for failure.

Though it is necessary to restrain *amour-propre*’s tendency to seek an unreasonable degree of validation, the provision of appropriate restraints is by itself insufficient to educate this naturally expansive passion. By now it should be clear that Rousseau does not wish to prevent *amour-propre* from being born but rather to allow for its healthy development and extension (*E* 214). He must therefore find a way to accommodate its demand for recognition. When he reminds us that “as soon as *amour-propre* has developed and the relative *I* is constantly in play, and the young man never observes others without returning to himself and comparing himself with them,” he does not mean to criticize but rather to simply acknowledge its relativizing tendency (243). This “useful but dangerous” instrument thus needs to be gratified as well as restrained, for it is not at all difficult to imagine those who are systematically denied the social affirmation they so crave—those, for example, who are economically and socially disadvantaged—would be at least as

susceptible to feelings of envy as the petulant young fop described above. Negotiating *amour-propre*'s demand for distinction thus requires maintaining a fragile balance between too much and too little recognition. Having been placed at the tiller, Jean-Jacques now must steer between the Charybdis of false pride and the Scylla of diffidence. Ever aware of the fragility of human things, Rousseau gravely intones that if the tutor loses sight of his course for even a moment "all is lost" (212).

How, then, to chart the rocky course between two intolerable extremes? The pedagogic trick is to stabilize the emergent moral personality *by way of* comparative activity, and pity aids in this task by accommodating the need for high relative standing while discouraging us from tyrannizing others or demanding what they are unable to give. It is for precisely this reason that Rousseau gives pride of place to pity in the context of Emile's education: he claims it is "the first relative sentiment which touches the human heart according to the order of nature," and on that basis he makes it the first passion in which Emile will receive an education (*E* 222). Pity gratifies our nascent *amour-propre* by teaching us to prefer our own station to those occupied by others. The experience of inequality is not so bitter when it works out in our favor, and the experience of pity gives us fresh reasons to focus not on the advantages we have been denied but rather on the good fortune we enjoy:

Imagination puts us in the places of the miserable man rather than in that of the happy man. We feel that one of these conditions touches us more closely than the other. Pity is sweet because, in putting ourselves in the place of the one who suffers, we nevertheless feel the pleasure of not suffering as he does. Envy is bitter because the sight of a happy man, far from putting the envious man in his place, makes the envious man regret not being there. It seems that the one exempts us from the ills he suffers, and the other takes from us the goods he enjoys. (221)

The sweetness of commiseration comes in part from the understanding that we do not suffer as severely as does the person we pity; in pitying another, we remind ourselves of our superiority over them. These pleasing confirmations of our own puissance reinforce our sense of self-worth and moral competence. This feeling of power and strength thus has a stabilizing effect on our *amour-propre*. We now enjoy both an absolute and a relative sense of our own self-worth—absolute because it is intrinsically pleasant to care for others,

and relative because we see clearly that the object of our pity is less well-off than we are. Confident in our own moral standing vis-à-vis others, we can tend to their good without worrying that our own is compromised.

Rousseau is very candid, perhaps surprisingly so, about what would seem to be a kind of perversity in the experience of pity. His candor on this score opens him to a serious objection: if pity presupposes and even finds pleasure in the suffering of others, is it not itself a subtle kind of antisociability whose internal logic, like that of malignant *amour-propre*, requires for its satisfaction the subjection of others? On this account pity is cunningly predatory, a veiled form of resentment that reinforces one's sense of superiority at the expense of others' well-being. So thought Nietzsche, who saw pity as the impulse of a soul at war with its own tyrannical drives: "Pity for all'—would be harshness and tyranny for *you*, my dear neighbor!" (*BGE* 60).⁴ I take Nietzsche to mean not only that pity is a form of self-tyranny because it unreasonably represses the self's instinctual drives, but also that it is a form of tyranny over others because it consigns them to a position of inferiority and dependence. Pity is thus nothing but war by other means, the will to power's expressing itself despite itself.

Such an objection, however, fails at the very least to meet Rousseau on his own ground, for it does not take into account that pity requires not just feelings of difference but also feelings of sameness or unity with the suffering being. We are far less likely to be cavalier in disregarding the feelings of others when those feelings are recognizable to us or when we have an experiential foothold in the lived reality of the suffering other. It also fails to see, as Jonathan Marks (2007, 730–31) has noted, that the perversity built into pity—and there is *some* perversity—is self-limiting and thus will not give rise to socially destructive attitudes and behaviors in the way that malignant *amour-propre* does. As a way of seeing this, let us recall from note I to the *Discourse on Inequality* that *amour-propre* in its corrupt form conceptualizes happiness in terms of social status and a zero-sum game: because all status gains are relative, an increase for one is necessarily a detriment to those around him (*DI* 195–96). We thus find ourselves locked in a never-ending struggle for distinction that finally issues in a tyrannical demand to be "sole master of the universe" (195). What is critical about unmoored *amour-propre* is its unsatisfied and unsatisfiable character: it *stops at nothing* to attain the recognition it so demands and, as a condition of its fulfillment, is even willing to destroy the very persons whose recognition it desires.

Rousseauian pity, however, is repelled by the sight of suffering and even more so by the idea of *causing* it. Emile's example helps to show how *amour-propre* informed by pity becomes beneficent and magnanimous rather than destructive and tyrannical, and how the psychological perversity is—unlike the tyrannical drive for total mastery—self-limiting. In the early part of his social education Emile is exposed not to the rich and powerful but rather to the poor and unfortunate (*E* 229). These spectacles pluck his heartstrings and inspire him to engage in charitable activity. The comparisons he is led to make are certainly flattering to pride, but they also teach him to feel the satisfaction that comes with providing a social service of indisputable worth (223, 229). Unlike Locke's self-serving little gentleman and Nietzsche's weepy Christian hypocrite, Emile neither insists on profiting from acts of charity nor defines his own happiness with reference to the suffering of others. He shows respect both for himself and for others by giving active expression to his sympathetic impulses. In Rousseau's moral universe, only compassion—whatever its other limitations—is capable of producing this psychological result.

| Pity and Perfectionism: Compassion, Fanaticism, and Moral Disgust

By charting a course between the twin dangers of diffidence and false pride, Rousseau seeks to show how pity serves to correct the erroneous internal logic of corrupt *amour-propre*. But it must be remembered that even healthy expressions of this problematic passion are prone to excess and thus are in need of regulation. We saw in the previous chapter that the moralized passions loosed by the drive for recognition generate a perfectionistic impulse that is essential to human life. And yet we must follow Rousseau in recognizing that this sentiment, too, can inspire unsociable feelings and behaviors: morally serious persons—seeing the grotesque imperfections of their fellows and interpreting social life as a vulgar charade—are prone to become disdainful, haughty, and unsociable. There is, of course, more than a note of disdain in Rousseau's own work, and his own example surely suffices to show how love of one's species can lead to moral disgust with one's contemporaries. The *Letter to D'Alembert's* sympathetic treatment of Moliere's famous misanthrope Alceste points to precisely the same problem. Even the exemplary Emile may look with antipathy at the failings of his brethren after “considering his rank in the human species and seeing himself so happily placed there”

(*E* 245). Of course, the dissociative and antisocial tendencies to which all morally serious persons are susceptible need not be any more severe than the rebarbative crankiness of a Mr. Darcy, but in Rousseau they take on Swiftian tenacity and depth. In his investigation of the phenomenon of moral disgust, he commonly reasons from a most extreme and most difficult case: that of the religious fanatic (see Trachtenberg 2009).

It is on some level not surprising that Rousseau would find it necessary to address himself to the question of fanaticism, for the questions of religious toleration and persecution were never far from the eighteenth-century mind. Virtually all of Rousseau's philosophical contemporaries had weighed—or in Voltaire's case, cashed—in on the matter, with all emerging as champions of religious toleration and freedom of thought. The distinctiveness of Rousseau's account on this head is thus best glimpsed by comparing it to the entry in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopedie* on "Fanaticism," which was composed by Rousseau's friend Alexandre Deleyre and which appears to articulate the collective opinion of the philosophes as a group.⁵ Like Rousseau, Deleyre sees fanaticism as a dangerous social force with roots in superstition: it is a "blind and passionate zeal" that undermines compassion and causes people "to commit absurd, unjust, and cruel acts" without "shame or remorse" (Diderot 1967, 393). He notes that "truth makes no fanatics," punctuating his entry with a mocking prayer in which he beseeches an unnamed deity to "enlighten your zealots, so they might at least take care not to confuse holocaust with homicide" (401). If superstition is the disease, then enlightenment is the cure: fanatics attack their enemies "with a kind of joy and comfort" not because they are naturally cruel but rather because they have been blinded by absurd dogmas (393). More rational and tolerant attitudes would reduce sanguinary violence and give to men the kindly dispositions and the "tender and compassionate hearts" that enlightened social commerce requires (401).

Rousseau's complex response to Deleyre and "the philosophist party" that he viewed as an agent of intolerance itself reveals a hope of disciplining—and hence of capitalizing—on the wild *enthousiasmes* of the fanatics as well as an acknowledgment of their real social danger. He recognizes with Deleyre and the *philosophes* that the roots of moral anger are in social institutions rather than nature, agrees with Bayle that "fanaticism is more pernicious than atheism," and holds it is unsociable so far as it is "sanguinary and cruel" (*E* 312n). So, too, does he insist on the necessity of religious toleration in his treatment of civil religion in the *Social Contract*, arguing that citizens

who follow the “sentiments of sociability” prescribed by state religion cannot be punished for the private beliefs they hold about questions of doctrine (*SC* IV.8, 130). Through the intolerance of bizarre cults, religion, which ought to be a catalyst of sociability, had become quite the opposite. Rousseau, then, is in at least qualified sympathy with his colleagues about the dangers of fanatical moral energy and the intolerant attitudes it engenders.

Yet Rousseau is distinguished among his contemporaries for his willingness to subject the partisans of toleration and enlightenment—the “philosophist party”—to the same level of critical scrutiny that he applies to the Christian sect. Thus he can say that Bayle was correct as far as he went, but that he did not go far enough:

What he did not take care to say, and which is no less true, is that fanaticism, although sanguinary and cruel, is nevertheless a grand and strong passion which elevates the heart of man, makes him despise death, and gives him a prodigious energy that need only be better directed in order to produce the most sublime virtues. On the other hand, irreligion—and the reasoning and philosophic spirit in general—causes attachment to life, makes souls effeminate and degraded, concentrates all the passions in the baseness of private interest, in the abjectness of the human *I*, and thus quietly saps the true foundations of every society. (*E* 312n)

“Truth does not make any fanatics,” says Deleyre. Rousseau heartily agrees. But this, he adds, is precisely the problem with the “philosophic spirit” in its soul-shrinking modern form. The rationalizing—which is not to say rational—temper of the philosophes actually magnifies rather than ameliorates the problem posed by intolerance, for it replaces a misplaced but correctable hatred of evil with a stubborn indifference to the good. This moral indifference, motivated by the restrictive conception of self-love developed by Hobbes and Locke and endorsed by the philosophes, destroys human relations by counseling the pursuit of narrow private interest and weakening the affective bonds that would otherwise unite us. Thus, though Rousseau understood that the social and political costs of loosing strong moral passions could be high, he nonetheless held that the costs of neutralizing those same passions are higher still: moralized *amour-propre* is a “useful but dangerous instrument” that *can be* “sanguinary and cruel” but is also the source of “prodigious energy” that produces “the most sublime virtues” (*E* 244, 312n). To diffuse that energy is to destroy all higher human possibility and

to create an intolerably unstable social situation: reasoning from a narrow idea of their own interests, human beings inevitably see they have more to gain by taking advantage of others than they do by sacrificing for them and they act accordingly. To the degree this is true, instrumental rationality cannot solve its own problem and society cannot subsist without a concern for virtue: a nation of devils, however ingeniously designed, is fated to be unjust because of reason's tendency to find loopholes in its own solutions. Thus it is one thing to say, with Rousseau, that fanatical moral desiring can be injurious to society and quite another to say with Deleyre and the philosophes that society would be better off without fanaticism. Faced with two options he knows to be imperfect, Rousseau prudently chooses the one he thinks better.

If the costs of short-circuiting man's ethical impulses are prohibitively high, how does Rousseau propose to discipline moral disgust and prevent it from turning violent? In addition to more specific institutional solutions (e.g., proposing a civil religion with fewer and more sensible articles of faith), Rousseau turns to pity in order to strengthen our identification with the misguided and unfortunate and so to soften the harshness of moralized *amour-propre*. The intolerance motivated by fanaticism relies in many respects on the demonization of the other, on a visceral hatred of his grotesque and incomprehensible way of life. We should not, however, say "incomprehensible," for something unrecognizable does not register a strong emotional reaction precisely because it is not recognized. The demonized other, on the other hand, is seen as something malignant and disgusting, as not only undeserving of respect but as deserving of *disrespect*. And our hatred is only magnified when that other intransigently refuses to adopt the way of life or the manner of thinking that would enable us to view them as being like us, for now they are not simply different but *disobedient*.

Pity combats the demonization of the other that fanaticism inspires, for embedded in it is a mechanism of sympathetic identification that allows us to view the imperfections of others with greater gentleness. In searching for commonality with those who think differently we are reminded of how difficult it is to discover the truth concerning religious matters—indeed, any matter—and of the shortcomings of our *own* understanding. We, of course, know that we ourselves have erred in the past but are disposed to believe the best about our own intentions and view our past mistakes as motivated by good faith efforts to discover the truth. More than any other sentiment, pity

allows us to extend to others the generosity that we naturally give to ourselves; through its operations we are able to “extend *amour-propre* to other beings” and “transform it into a virtue” instead of allowing its unsociable forms to take root (*E* 252).⁶ Far from blaming or hating those who see things differently, we see our own errors—our own fallibility and intellectual weakness—reflected in theirs, and we experience feelings not of frustration but rather of solidarity and togetherness. These feelings of sameness may not and often should not overcome the urge to persuade the other of the mistakenness of his view—friends can and do disagree—but it will make it almost impossible to hate or to seek to punish him for that mistakenness.

The way in which pity blunts the prickly exterior of virtue is best seen in Rousseau’s wildly popular novel *Julie*, and most especially in the personality of the work’s heroine. Julie takes virtue seriously and seeks to share her enthusiasm with her entire circle of associates, who affectionately tease her for her bombast and eventually take to calling her a “charming preacher” (*J* 332). Her case is instructive in this context because, were it not for her all-too-active sense of compassion, she would for at least three reasons seem to be especially susceptible to fanatical and evangelical excess. First, she is a woman and therefore (says Rousseau) generally prone to emotional excess (*E* 377–82). Second, she is distinguished even among her gender for her passionate enthusiasm and is thus extremely susceptible to very strong emotions, both positive and negative. Finally, she is highly moralistic and, as such, is disposed to feelings of ethical disgust. Taking all this into view, we might plausibly wonder why Julie is not *more* prone to evangelical excesses than she already is. However, we see she is able to restrict her tiresome homiletics to a small circle of intimates and to express her moral zeal through charitable and humane action rather than through useless and self-righteous speechifying or, worse still, through violent and hateful denunciations.

Appropriately enough, Julie’s moralistic temperament and ability to govern her own fanatical desires show up most clearly in the context of her description of her own religious awakening, which occurs during her nuptials. Recounting her illumination to her former lover St. Preux in order to discourage his hope of carrying on an adulterous affair with her, Julie claims that when she entered the church she was “seized” by a “never before experienced” emotion that was akin to “terror.” Moved by the gravity and seriousness of the marital bond, she experienced a “sudden revolution” that reminded her of her moral obligations and gave her fresh energy to discharge them. Her divination and the new self-understanding inspired by it leads

Julie to feel “scorn and indignation” for the “vain sophisms” of the “philosophers” who, through their moral laxness and encouragement of adultery, seek to “obliterate human society.” Drawing the letter to a close, Julie assumes moral authority over her former tutor and, in a fit of evangelical zeal, exhorts St. Preux to rededicate himself to Christian morality: the “best way to discover what is good is to seek it sincerely, and one cannot thus seek it for long without going back to the author of all good. It seems to me I have been doing this . . . and you will do it better than I once you decide to follow the same road.” It is difficult not to hear the tones of moral disgust in Julie’s letter. She is full of self-loathing for having failed in her duties but has plenty of spare sanctimony for the philosophers, who destabilize society in order to glorify themselves and whose specious arguments only serve to undermine sound morality. She even momentarily exalts in the penalty awaiting these vain scribblers, saying—in the heat of an angry moment—that they and their disciples will be punished “before the author of all justice” (*J* 295, 296, 298).

And yet these notes of antipathy, jarring in isolation, only serve to add necessary tension to the touching and consonant (if perhaps belabored) melody that the whole letter sounds. Julie’s address to her former lover, though steadfast in asserting the sad conclusion that “Julie de Wolmar is no longer your former Julie,” is nonetheless full of sympathy and efforts to ease the suffering the letter is sure to cause the weepy St. Preux. While she sternly lectures her former lover for his moral failures, she also shares directly in that sense of failure. She participates in his sense of loss so as to diffuse it and, while confidently reporting the results of her illumination, nonetheless intimates a subtle awareness that the improvements owing to it may prove unstable: “Yesterday one was abject and weak; today one is strong and magnanimous. By observing oneself in two such different conditions, one better appreciates the value of the condition that has been recovered, and in consequence one becomes more attentive to maintaining it” (*J* 300). In admitting that she shares—or at least shared—St. Preux’s weakness, she remains mindful of her essential likeness with him and thus of her own ongoing vulnerability. Her temporal presentation—her noting the difference between “yesterday” and “today”—further underscores this point by raising an unanswered question about *tomorrow*. If drastic transformations like Julie’s illumination can be effected so quickly, how certain can she be that she will not sink back into her former condition and again become the object of pity herself? Far, then, from viewing her old flame as worthy of contempt for his

having morally strayed, Julie creates a community of consolation with him because her active sense of compassion shows her that she is not immune from the ills St. Preux suffers.

| Attenuated Sympathies: Pity and the Mediation of Difference

The sympathetic communion Julie attempts to establish with St. Preux betokens a signal shift in the character of their relationship. Informing her old tutor that “all is changed between us” and that “Julie de Wolmar is no longer your former Julie,” Julie tries to soften the blow by telling him that all is not lost: “If you are losing a tender lover then you are gaining a faithful friend, and, whatever we may have said during our illusions, I doubt that this change is to your disadvantage” (*J* 300). The transition from love to friendship—if it is ever completed entirely—promises to be difficult, for it involves a fundamental change in the dynamics of social recognition. Shared understandings about the boundaries of relationships must be renegotiated, but such negotiations take place against a backdrop of previously established expectations and hopes that prove very difficult, perhaps impossible, to efface. It is a social manifestation of a problem Wittgenstein would later call “the dawning of an aspect,” and which he would represent with the famous “duck-rabbit” image.

The “duck-rabbit” is puzzling because, depending simply on how it is viewed by the subject, it can be plausibly described as either a duck or a rabbit. Wittgenstein, interested to understand the different ways we utilize the concept “see,” sums up the problem thus: “The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a new perception and at the same time of the perception’s being unchanged.” The change in the report of what the subject sees is due to a change in the understanding; it involves a combination of perception and cognition, a mixture of “seeing and thinking” (Wittgenstein 1958, 196–97). The image, though utterly unchanged, has for the perceiver a set of associations and meanings that it did not before.

I raise the “duck-rabbit” problem not to resolve it so much as to show its relevance for Julie and St. Preux, who are seeking to transition from love to friendship and as such must learn to “see” each other very differently despite the fact that they are *not* especially different. While age and smallpox do effect changes in the lovers’ physical appearance, their basic moral dispositions—Julie’s mysterious “conversion” notwithstanding—remain largely

the same throughout the novel. They must confront that continuity, which served as the source of their romantic union, and learn to re-cognize each other despite it; the same people must come to view each other differently. This can be, as the novel's narrative makes clear, a very difficult transition to undertake. Part of the reason for this extreme difficulty is that love and friendship are for Rousseau two very different things and, as such, awaken very different kinds of moral and social impulses.⁷ Julie signals her awareness of the great distance between these two forms of association in a letter to her "inseparable" cousin Claire, where she avers that the distinct office of friendship—as opposed to that of love—is to console others in their suffering. "Are you not aware," she asks her cousin, "that the communion of hearts imbues sadness with a sweet and touching something that contentment does not know? And *was friendship not specially given to the unhappy to relieve their woes and comfort their sorrows?*" (J 332). What lovers do *as* lovers creates a high, aspirational moral energy that arouses the hope of mutual perfection. If, or perhaps when, this hope is frustrated, lovers are often far less able to console each other in their disappointment than are their friends, for because lovers are commonly *the source of* each other's deepest frustrations they often prove to be poor shoulders on which to cry. There are, of course, a great many exceptions to this rule, but the general inability of lovers to console each other in many cases shows up most readily in the tense and resentful exchange between Julie and St. Preux immediately following their forced separation. Suicidally depressed and bitter, St. Preux lashes out angrily at his beloved: "Answer me, now, deceived or deceitful lover: what has become of those plans contrived in such secrecy? Where are those vain expectations with which you so often baited my naïve credulity? Where is that holy and desired union, the sweet object so ardently wished for, with which your pen and your mouth flattered my wishes? . . . Give me an account, ingrate, of the charge I have entrusted to you: give me an account of myself after leading my heart astray into that supreme felicity you have shown me and are now taking away" (157). Julie responds to these vehemently expressed (and not entirely unfair) charges not with sympathy but rather by accusing her lover of cruelty and lamenting her own misery. St. Preux and Julie view each other as responsible for the unhappiness they share and thus are unable to effectively sympathize with the plight of the other. Again, this is a not uncommon phenomenon among lovers, who have more occasions for conflict precisely because they seek to share everything.

The activity characteristic of friendship, on the other hand, is gentler, sweeter, and less generative of conflict because its aims are more modest. Friends qua friends do not seek wholeness through each other so much as comfort in their condition of dividedness; their special office is to “relieve [the] woes and comfort [the] sorrows” of their unfortunate fellows, to create community through the mutual apprehension of their respective imperfections. The experience of friendship and the capacity for pity are thus clearly and even intimately bound up with each other, for friendship is predicated specifically on the desire to ameliorate another’s suffering. Julie’s letter to her inseparable cousin gives us an intimation—one which will be explored in depth in chapter 6—of the meaning of Rousseau’s rather odd-sounding claim that friendship, rightly understood, is the product of pity fixed on a particular object (*DI* 130).

However, because the feelings of commonality that enable pity are also necessarily limited by it, the relation of friend to friend would also seem to be attenuated in ways that romantic associations may not be. Indeed, Rousseau’s analysis of pity in *Emile* discloses that when one pities another he does so with the recognition that the other suffers in a way that he does not. More revealing still, the disproportion between the condition of he who pities and he who is pitied is in fact a source of *pleasure* for the former: “If the first sight that strikes [Emile] is an object of sadness, the first return to himself is a sentiment of pleasure. In seeing how many ills he is exempt from, he feels himself to be happier than he thought he was” (*E* 229). And again: “Pity is sweet because, in putting ourselves in the place of the one who suffers, we nevertheless feel the pleasure of not suffering as he does” (221). To pity another is thus to simultaneously claim an equality with *and* a superiority over him: while one recognizes that he could *in principle* be subjected to the same afflictions as the aggrieved party, he nonetheless feels considerable satisfaction in the realization that he does not suffer *in fact* or *reality* (223–24).

Pity, then, is as much a consolation for he who offers as for he who receives it. It is a “resource for a rainy day” because it recognizes a *de facto* inequality between he who pities and he who suffers (*E* 223). One feels a sense of superiority over suffering beings, and if he has the strength to deliver them from their disappointments, he delights doubly in the heartening reminder of his power and potency. If pity is the “first relative sentiment that enters the human heart,” as Rousseau claims, then it follows from this that the idea of mutual attachment is formed in the context of relationships in

which we are the stronger rather than the weaker party. Our affection for others is a function of their misfortune as well as an edifying aide-mémoire of our own strength and moral competence. The pleasures that attach to sympathetic communion are motivated not only by the delight one takes in the feeling of oneness with others but also by the heartening reminders of one's own puissance. We pity because we know we are not exempt from the sufferer's ills and because we delight in the fact that we do not suffer as he does. Again, these are only intimations and are intended to anticipate arguments to come. The peculiar dynamics of pity and their associational consequences will be explored more thoroughly in chapter 6.

| **Becoming Social: Conclusions**

Having now surveyed the psychological ground on which Rousseau seeks to build social sentiment, we are now in a position to draw some preliminary conclusions about Rousseau's moral-psychological theory and the kind of relationships that grow out of it. I have been at special pains to show how *amour-propre*, the sexual passion, and pity develop and interact with one another and, in so doing, give rise to a complex of desires for various kinds of recognition. In arguing thus, I have perhaps more than most emphasized the role of sexual desire specifically, which, properly developed, is the chief source of man's social and moral energy. Indeed, it was shown that social desiring as such emerges from a largely sexual basis and that moralized sexuality catalyzes a perfectionistic impulse that draws out man's highest and best aspirations. Yet this same impulse, even developed aright, can easily degenerate into moral disgust and antisocial forms of intolerance; its sharp edges must thus be rounded off by pity, which counteracts the excesses of moralized anger by establishing a sense of connection between the judge and the judged. As pity supplements and in some ways counteracts the harmful excesses of man's perfectionistic impulse, so, too, does that perfectionistic impulse combat the moral complacency and resignation that can result from a too-active sense of pity. Though Rousseau himself took a rather circumspect view of the human condition and did not shy away from characterizing it as one of weakness and vulnerability, he was nonetheless acutely sensitive to the fact that an overemphasis on such characteristics can lead to ethical fatalism and a posture of indifference toward one's own moral growth. Thus there exists in the

properly educated mind a kind of dynamic tension between sexual passion and pity, between a belief in our capacity for growth and an awareness of our limitations.

Though *Emile* shows that the desire for recognition from and association with other human beings issues from a largely sexual source, it also shows how the development of the social passions is at one with their disaggregation. Thus, to develop socially is to understand what one wants from particular individuals in particular associational contexts. In the next chapter, I begin my survey of the various forms of association that Rousseau treats in his oeuvre and show how, whether considered individually or together, they fail to satisfy the desires to which they give rise. In making this argument I will build on what has been established and will seek to show (1) the moralized and moralizing character of sexuality as it manifests itself in *Emile* and *Julie*, and (2) that the attenuations built into pity have important and underappreciated consequences for how Rousseau theorizes friendship.