Rousseau and Feminism

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

This assessment of Rousseau and feminism will consist of four major points. First, Rousseau’s portrayal of women in the state of nature and in the political community will be discussed. Second, whether these roles are joined or disjoined will be examined. Third, the freedom of men in the political community in comparison to women will be explored. Fourth, whether Rousseau attributes gender roles to nature will be discussed. Finally, I will offer my opinion of the role assigned to women in the political community by Rousseau.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau remains a thought-provoking theorist in the areas of political science and education. Particularly controversial are his ideas about women and their place in the political community. First to be examined are the roles played by women in the state of nature and in political society according to Rousseau. Then whether the two are joined or disjoined will be discussed. Many feminists are quick to condemn Rousseau as a misogynist and/or someone who believes that gender roles are based on a belief that the differences between the sexes are natural. Before one accuses Rousseau of being an anti-feminist, one should compare how free men are in the political community in comparison to women. Instead of arguing that Rousseau attempts to justify gender roles in the political community by attributing sexual differentiation to nature, it could be said that gender roles serve the ends of society, and are in fact not natural.

Humans in the state of nature are not inherently social, according to Rousseau. In the Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men, Rousseau states:

Whatever the origins of society and language may have been, we can at least see, from the little care that nature has taken to bring men closer by mutual needs and facilitate the use of speech for them, how little she has contributed to what they
themselves have done to establish the bonds of society. It is impossible to imagine why, in that primitive state, one man should need another any more than a monkey or wolf needs another of its kind; or, assuming such a need, what might induce the other man to satisfy it; or, if he were willing to do so, how the two of them could agree on the conditions. (1)

Thus humans in the state of nature live solitary lives and are concerned primarily with their own survival. However, humans in this natural state possess a certain degree of compassion for others which “takes the place of laws, morality, and virtue.” (2) This compassion does not, however, extend so far as actually caring for others. It is merely a way of keeping humans in check so that the species may be preserved. Says Rousseau, “. . . instead of this sublime maxim of reasoned justice, ‘do unto others as you would have others do unto you,’ compassion inspires all men with another maxim, much less perfect, but perhaps more useful: ‘Do good to yourself with as little harm to others as possible.’” (3)

As a result of the solitary lifestyle depicted in Rousseau’s state of nature, it follows that interaction between the sexes was limited. Men and women in the state of nature came together simply to fulfill their sexual desires. Rousseau says, “Males and females came together fortuitously, according to chance encounters, opportunities, and desire, with no need of words to express what they had to communicate to each other; and left each other with the same casual ease.” (4) Men and women, then, had no
one person as the focus of their desires, and most likely would never see each other again after their brief encounters.

The relationship between mothers and children was not much more of an attachment than that between men and women. When a child was born, the mother would nurse him or her “first for her own need, and later, when habit made her fond of them, she fed them for theirs.” (5) The existence of the fondness a mother developed for her child did not go beyond the period during which a child was dependent on his or her mother for survival. As soon as the child was capable of living on his or her own, mother and child parted, “and since there was no way of maintaining contact without keeping each other constantly in sight, they soon became unable even to recognize each other.” (6)

Thus women’s and men’s lives in the state of nature were virtually the same for Rousseau. The difference between the sexes lay in the fact that women bear children. However, nowhere does Rousseau say that childbearing and rearing impaired women’s ability to survive in the state of nature, as can be seen in his description of the relationship between mothers and children. Women in the state of nature, then, lived as autonomous beings.

Eventually, though, people began to build more permanent dwellings, as opposed to “sleeping under trees or in caves.” (7) This time of invention is described by Rousseau as “the period of a first revolutionary change that established and distinguished families. . .” (8) Husband, wife, and children
came together to reside in the same hut, and it was at this time that people began to develop familial attachments to one another. Says Rousseau, “The habit of living together gave rise to the sweetest feeling known to man: conjugal love and paternal love.” (9) It was when men, women, and children began to come together as families that the differences between the sexes began to emerge. Rousseau states, “The women grew more sedentary and became accustomed to keeping the hut and the children while the men went off in search of food for all.” (10)

The family is between the state of nature and the political community in terms of their naturalness. Humans, as has been shown, are not naturally social. However, as love evolved into more than an attachment to oneself and one’s survival, and beyond a simple compassion for humans as a species, the family came about. The invention of the things necessary for a somewhat easier life rendered people less capable of surviving on their own. Thus, people began to work together in a cooperative way. Rousseau states in the Discourse on Inequality, “With their somewhat softer life, both sexes began to lose some of their ferocity and vigor; but while individuals became less capable of fighting wild beasts separately, it was easier for them to assemble to resist them in common.” (11) The family, then, retains some degree of naturalness. Political society, on the other hand, deviates drastically from the state of nature because in order for the state to run smoothly, people need to become concerned for those outside of themselves and their families.
According to Joseph Losco in his article entitled "Rousseau on the Political Role of the Family," "Whereas man's natural sentiments needed little development to incline him towards cohabitation (with the consequent emergence of the family), these sentiments alone were insufficient to insure his attachment to the state." (12) As a result, both individuals and families need to fit into political society such that it may be stable.

Women play a role subservient to men in political society. Rousseau states in *Emile*:

> The good constitution of children initially depends on that of their mothers. The first education of men depends on the care of women. Men's morals, their passions, their tastes, their very happiness also depends on women. Thus the whole education of women ought to relate to men. (13)

While a woman's role in political society is subservient to that of a man, she also plays a preeminent role. Rousseau acknowledges and explains this paradox in *Emile*:

> I expect that many readers, remembering that I ascribe to woman a natural talent for governing man, will accuse me of a contradiction here. They will, however, be mistaken. There is quite a difference between arrogating to oneself the right to command and governing him who commands. Woman's empire is an empire of gentleness, skill, and obligingness; her orders are caresses, her threats are tears. She ought to reign
in the home as a minister does in a state--by getting herself commanded to do what she wants to do. In this sense, the best households are invariably those where the woman has the most authority. But when she fails to recognize the voice of the head of the house, when she wants to usurp his rights and be in command herself, the result of this disorder is never anything but misery, scandal, and dishonor. (14)

Rousseau sees a difference between governing and actually being in charge in a direct way. He believes that women govern, but men should rule. Men are flawed creatures, and as they make political decisions they need the guidance of women, whom Rousseau sees as particularly moral creatures. However, this power women have over men must be exercised from their place in the private sphere in a covert manner. If women were to deviate from this role, it would render them unfeminine and disrupt not only the family, but the political community as well. This role needs to be taught to women from childhood. Not only must she make herself attractive to men and learn how to do her household duties, but above all, she must learn how to restrain her desires. Says Rousseau, “Amidst our senseless arrangements a decent woman’s life is a perpetual combat against herself.” (15) Rousseau’s ideal woman, portrayed as Julie in La Nouvelle Heloise is a prime example of this part of a woman’s role in society. When Julie first begins her relationship with Saint-Preux, she is fearful that her feelings for him will lead to the destruction of her
innocence. Her cousin Claire replies, “Your fear makes me less apprehensive for the present, but the future frightens me, and if you cannot conquer your passions, I foresee nothing but misfortune.” (16) Julie must forsake her love for Saint-Preux to marry Wolmar, the man whom her father has chosen, or lose the love of her parents and her status in society. Unfortunately, neither choice is desirable, as Julie writes before she forsakes Saint-Preux, “Alas, listening to love or to nature, I cannot avoid committing a crime, and whatever course I take, I am forced to die both unhappy and guilty.” (17) Ultimately, Julie succumbs to her duty to obey her father, thus fulfilling her role in the family and in society.

Rousseau believes that women ought to develop their minds as well as their appearances and mannerisms in order to be good companions for men. Regarding a woman’s education, he says:

Does it follow that she ought to be raised in ignorance of everything and limited to the housekeeping functions alone? Will man turn his companion into his servant? Will he deprive himself of the greatest charm of society with her? . . .Surely not. It is not thus that nature has spoken in giving women such agreeable and nimble minds. On the contrary, nature wants them to think, to judge, to love, to know, to cultivate their minds as well as their looks. . .They ought to learn things, but only those that are suitable for them to know. (18)
Women must learn to be gentle because though they exercise authority over men, it must remain subtle. Rousseau states in *Emile*:

The first and most important quality of a woman is gentleness. As she is made to obey a being who is so imperfect, often so full of vices, and always so full of defects as man, she ought to learn early to endure even injustices and to bear a husband’s wrongs without complaining. It is for his sake, not for her own, that she ought to be gentle. The bitterness and stubbornness of women never do anything but increase the ills and bad behavior of their husbands. Each sex ought to keep to its own tone. A husband who is too gentle can make a woman impertinent; but unless a man is a monster, the gentleness of a woman brings him around and triumphs over him sooner or later. (19)

Women must also learn to cultivate their beauty and their “art.” Again from *Emile*:

But beauty is not general; it is destroyed by countless accidents; it passes with the years; habit destroys its effect. Wit alone is the true resource of the fair sex—not that stupid wit which is of no use for making women’s lives happy, but the wit which suits their position and consists in an art of exploiting man’s position and putting our peculiar advantages to their use. (20)
Purity and virtue are also important for women to learn. Says Rousseau: Chastity must be a delicious virtue for a beautiful woman who has an elevated soul. While she sees the whole earth at her feet, she triumphs over all and over herself... The tender or jealous but always respectful feelings of both sexes toward her, the universal esteem she enjoys, and her own self-esteem constantly reward her with a tribute of glory for a few momentary struggles. The privations are fleeting, but the reward for them is permanent. (21)

Rousseau believes that a woman should not overstep the bounds of intellectual development appropriate to her sex. He states, "But I would still like a simple and coarsely raised girl a hundred times better than a learned and brilliant one who would come to establish in my house a tribunal of literature over which she would preside." (22) Again, a woman's education should cause her to keep her powers as a woman in check. Though this limited education may seem merely to contribute to her subservient role in the political community, it also gives women some degree of power.

The knowledge women acquire allows them to keep men on the right track, and compensates for the strength they lack. Rousseau states in Emile:

This peculiar cleverness given to the fair sex is a very equitable compensation for their lesser share of strength,
a compensation without which women would be not man's companion, but his slave. It is by means of this superiority in talent that she keeps herself his equal and that she governs him while obeying him. (23)

Julie keeps Saint-Preux's desires in check in La Nouvelle Heloise. Writes Saint-Preux, "Ah! I have said a hundred times that you are an angel from heaven, my Julie! With so much authority over my soul, yours is no doubt more divine than human." (24) It is Julie's job to use her virtue to keep Saint-Preux from giving in to his desires before the time is right. In reference to the female citizens of Geneva in his Dedication preceding the Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau says:

Could I forget that precious half of the Republic which makes the happiness of the other, and whose sweetness and wisdom maintain its peace and good morals? Gracious and virtuous women citizens, it will always be the lot of your sex to govern ours. And that is fortunate for us when your chaste power, exercised only within the conjugal union, makes its influence felt only in furthering public happiness and the glory of the state. (25)

Though men in the political community are in the public sphere, women are to be educated such that they may exercise power over (and thus influence men) from their place in the private sphere.

Women must always be aware of what opinions others have of them.
In *Emile*, Rousseau places a great deal of emphasis on adornment, which he says is loved by women from the time they are children. They begin their expression of this liking for adornment by playing with dolls. “The doll is the special entertainment of this sex. This is evidently its taste, determined by its purpose. The physical part of the art of pleasing lies in adornment. This is the only part of that art that children can cultivate.” (26) As an adult, a woman’s ability to adorn herself such that she is pleasing to others (presumably men) becomes very important. Regarding Sophie, Rousseau states, “Her adornment is very modest in appearance and very coquettish in fact. She does not display her charms; she covers them, but, in covering them, she knows how to make them imagined.” (27) The opinions of others regarding her are also important to Julie. Keeping her virtue intact also serves to avoid public talk about her relationship with Saint-Preux. Julie writes to her impatient suitor:

> In spite of our precautions, perhaps they might have known that we were together. At least they would have suspected we were, and that is enough. Our indiscreet eagerness for the present would have ruined all our expenditures for the future, and remorse for having disregarded a good deed would have tormented us all our lives. (28)

Women must both adorn themselves such that they are pleasing to men and be sure that their conduct can withstand public scrutiny.

> It is also essential that women be faithful to their husbands. Says
Judith H. McDowell in the introduction to her translation of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*:

Rousseau's moral point is implicitly but forcefully made: if she is carried away by true love, a woman may fall from innocence before she is married without leaving a stain upon her character, but after marriage such a lapse would be criminal. Fidelity between husband and wife is essential, for an honorable marriage is the true basis of society. Julie must learn to build a happy and productive domestic life on the ashes of her great love affair with Saint-Preux, and as long as she maintains the delusion that she has been cured of her passion for him she is successful. (29)

Rousseau states in *Emile* that it is important for a husband to remain faithful to his wife, but it is even more important for the reverse to be true. Though the unfaithful husband is an "unjust and barbarous man," the "unfaithful woman does more; she dissolves the family and breaks all the bonds of nature." (30) For Rousseau, one of the most horrible things that can happen to a family is for the woman to bear a child who is not her husband's because that child takes away part of the property which is due to the husband's children, and dishonors the husband. To summarize his reasoning on this matter, Rousseau states:

It is important, then, not only that a woman be faithful, but that she be judged to be faithful by her husband, by those
near her, by everyone. It is important that she be modest, attentive, reserved, and that she give evidence of her virtue to the eyes of others as well as to her own conscience. It is important that a father love his children, it is important that he esteem their mother. These are the reasons which put even appearances among the duties of women, and make honor and reputation no less dispensable to them than chastity. (31)

Related to a woman's concern for the opinions of others, then, is the idea that women must remain faithful to their husbands in order to keep the family intact.

The roles of women in the state of nature and in the political community are clearly disjoined. Women are free, independent beings in the state of nature. They are different from men in that they bear children, but this does not hinder their ability to survive on their own. Women in the political community, on the other hand, are confined to a set of rules which they must follow, and which are in terms of men. They must be taught from childhood to restrain their desires and to do their duty. Women's education should be centered around being good companions for men instead of simply their slaves. This knowledge that they acquire gives women the ability to govern the morals of men, and thus compensates for the strength they lack. This role as the governor of men's morals is followed up by the idea that women must always be aware
of others' opinions of them. Related to this is the idea that women must not only be faithful to their husbands, but must be thought to be so by their husbands and everyone else. A woman destroys the family through infidelity by planting seeds of doubt in her husband's mind about the paternity of their children. If she has indeed strayed and a child results, then the husband is dishonored, and the children who are her husband's are denied part of the property that is rightfully theirs. This is a very restricted role that women must play in order for Rousseau's political society to be stable, and it certainly appears that in the transition from the state of nature to the political community, women's freedom to be independent is unfairly taken away. Rousseau's thought regarding women, therefore, is not looked upon favorably by many feminists.

While these two roles are disjoined, Rousseau should not automatically be condemned as an anti-feminist. One should consider how free men are in the political community in comparison to women. Within society, there is a reciprocity involved in the relations between the sexes. If women did not stay in the home, then men would not have anyone to tend to the private realm, and thus would not have the freedom to exercise their power in the public realm. In her book entitled Gendered Community: Rousseau, Sex, and Politics, Penny Weiss states:

The division of labor does do away with woman's self-sufficiency, but by its very nature a division of labor means that none who partake in it are self-sufficient. Each does
only some fraction of the work which is divided, yet all are interested in access to various fruits of this divided labor. (32) Through the family, men and women become interdependent. Men make the political decisions but, as previously discussed, women exercise a more covert power over men, which extends into men’s public activities. Rousseau discusses the interdependence of the sexes in *Emile*:

> Women’s reason is practical and makes them very skillful at finding means for getting to a known end, but not at finding that end itself. The social relationship of the sexes is an admirable thing. This partnership produces a moral person of which the woman is the eye and the man is the arm, but they have such a dependence on one another that the woman learns from the man what must be seen and the man learns from the woman what must be done. (33)

The reciprocity of the roles the sexes play in the family and in society requires that both sexes give up some of their freedom. Losco states:

> Clearly, Rousseau denies women direct political rights; but he does not deny them political influence. If women are treated as less than full participants in the social order, so also are men. Each sex is required to give up some control. Men maintain political control but yield moral authority to women; women sacrifice political self-determination but gain mastery over community mores to which men must attend in their
Commentators such as Susan Moller Okin believe that Rousseau attributes sexual differentiation to nature in an attempt to justify the subordinate position of women in the political community. In *Women in Western Political Thought* she states:

> Albeit in an exaggerated way and sometimes with almost hysterical fervor, Rousseau argues all the most commonly held assertions that have, as part of our patriarchal culture, rationalized the separation and oppression of women throughout the history of the Western world. He argues, to begin with, that woman's sharply distinct position and functions are those that are natural to her sex. (35)

Instead, one could argue that "the creation of sex roles is recommended for the social and political ends they are capable of serving." (36) For Rousseau, natural freedom was lost forever when political society was founded. Says Rousseau in *The Discourse on Inequality*, "The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, took it into his head to say, 'This is mine,' and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society." (37) Even if someone had tried to stop him, it may have already been too late. Rousseau states:

> But it is highly probable that by then things had already reached a point where they could no longer continue as they had been, for this idea of property, depending on many
prior ideas which could only have arisen successively, was not formed all at once in the human mind. (38)

Because it was too late to retreat to the state of nature, where all humans, regardless of sex, were free to do as they pleased, people were forced to make the best of it. For Rousseau, this entails sexual differentiation. Writes Weiss in *Gendered Community*:

Much as Rousseau might crave to establish absolute freedom and independence, the problematic at the root of all his work is the realization that such a possibility was forever lost when life in the state of nature became impossible, and now we must do the best we can with what other choices we possess. (39)

It is because political society itself deviates so far from the state of nature that a drastic departure from natural freedom becomes necessary in Rousseau's political scheme.

For Rousseau, men and women are not naturally social creatures. All people in the state of nature live independently, as discussed previously. However, for the political community to run smoothly, men and women must cooperate with one another. The intermediate stage is the family, which resulted from the beginnings of people's sentimental attachments to one another. The political community is even more "unnatural" than the family because it calls for all people to be concerned with the welfare of everyone else, not just themselves and their families.
Losco states, "In performing these partial yet distinctive roles, each escapes the extremes of the self-sufficient individual who does not need society on the one hand, and the virtuous citizen who is single-mindedly devoted to it on the other." (40)

Sophie and Emile are educated to complement each other. Rousseau states, "Sophie ought to be a woman as Emile is a man--that is to say, she ought to have everything which suits the constitution of her sex in order to fill her place in the physical and moral order." (41) Sophie is not educated in the way that she is because she is naturally subordinate or inferior to Emile. Rather, she is trained to fit into her role in the political community. Weiss states:

Rousseau was not a simple misogynist, determined to interpret nature or history or culture in such a way as to bless male supremacy with the aura of inevitability and justifiability. The concerns that led him to support sexual differentiation, especially the concern with moving beyond self-interest to real community, are often laudable and shared by many feminists. (42)

Rousseau's promotion of community as opposed to self-interest is compatible with those versions of feminism which hold that in order for true equality to exist, the sexes must come to an understanding. In order for this to happen, men and women need to be rid of the hostile feelings that often result when the sexes encounter each other in the political
community and personal relationships, and go away without trying to resolve their fundamental differences. The way to do this would be for men and women to put their own preconceived notions of each other aside, in the interest of the good of the human race as a whole. For political society to remain stable, cooperation of all of the people needs to take place. This is a difficult task, especially for Rousseau, who believes that humans are not naturally inclined to lay aside their self-interest. As a result, men and women must be trained to be interdependent, as were Sophie and Emile. Woman’s nature does not dictate her role in the political community. Rather, gender roles are instituted to help maintain stability in political society.

Men and women live independently in the state of nature, only coming together to satisfy their sexual desires. Mothers and children only stay together until the children are capable of surviving on their own. As people began to live in more permanent dwellings, and to invent things to make their lives easier, families formed. The somewhat easier lives people began to lead rendered them less capable of surviving on their own, so they needed to cooperate with one another. The family falls between the state of nature and political society in terms of naturalness. Life in political society deviates even more drastically from the asocial nature of humans than does the family because it requires that people be concerned for the welfare of others outside of themselves and their families.

According to Rousseau, women in the political community must play a very
strictly defined role, which makes them subservient to men. However, he
gives them an indirect power over men, which influences their morals and
extends into their political activities. The roles played by women in the
state of nature and in political society are very much disjoined. Before
Rousseau is condemned as an anti-feminist, however, one should consider
how free men are in political society in comparison to women. Instead of
arguing that Rousseau attributes the differences between the sexes to
nature in order to justify gender roles, it could be argued that Rousseau
uses gender roles to serve political ends, and believed that women need to
be trained to accept their role in society.

I must disagree with Rousseau's use of strict gender roles to bring
primarily self-interested individuals to true community. This may be
workable for a certain length of time, but eventually both men and women
would find that their personal goals are in conflict with the political
scheme, and they would want to take some action. Chaos would result if
there were no provisions made in the societal structure for such changes.
There is no justification for usurping personal freedom to the degree that
Rousseau proposes to do in his political scheme. In the case of women,
they are kept completely behind the scenes in public life, and having to
convey their ideas indirectly makes life much more difficult than it needs
to be. It takes much more effort to manipulate someone such that she will
be told to do what she wants to do than to say, "This is what I want," and
doing it.
Also, while community may be possible when such strict gender roles are enforced, the citizens in such a community would not all feel fulfilled playing their designated roles. For instance, a woman who is a wife and mother may not feel complete. She may want a career outside the home as well as a family, or a career without a family. Conversely, a man may not want to be forced into the role of breadwinner and political actor. He may instead want to stay home to raise his children, clean, and cook. Many possible lifestyles exist, but are totally incompatible with Rousseau’s idea for a stable political community. This leaves many people unhappy. If a sense of community is intended for the public good, then Rousseau’s scheme will not work and is not justified. Granted, our male-dominated society has been very slow in changing, but the fact that women are standing up for their rights as equal citizens shows that a stable society, the cost of which is the usurpation of individual freedom is not desirable or permanent.
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(2) Ibid, 166.

(3) Ibid, 166.

(4) Ibid, 158-59.

(5) Ibid, 158.

(6) Ibid, 158.


(8) Ibid, 176.

(9) Ibid, 176.

(10) Ibid, 177.

(11) Ibid, 177.


(14) Ibid, 408.

(15) Ibid, 364.

(17) Ibid, 169.

(18) *Emile*, 364.

(19) Ibid, 370.

(20) Ibid, 372.

(21) Ibid, 391.

(22) Ibid, 409.

(23) Ibid, 371.

(24) *Nouvelle Heloise*, 103.


(26) *Emile*, 367.

(27) Ibid, 394.

(28) *Nouvelle Heloise*, 103.

(29) Ibid, 3.

(30) *Emile*, 361.

(31) Ibid, 361.


(33) *Emile*, 377.

(34) *History*, 105.


(37) *Discourse*, 173.

(38) Ibid, 38.

(39) *Gendered Community*, 121.

(40) *History*, 105.

(41) *Emile*, 357.

(42) *Gendered Community*, 7.