

CHAPTER I

I Could Never Have Been an Unnatural Father

Explaining the Discarded Children (ca. 1746–1778)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the most eloquent champions of the duties and joys of family life, as well as one of the greatest theorists of educating the young. Yet he immediately consigned each of his own five children to a foundling home. This is widely recognized as the greatest paradox and scandal of his life and one of the most notorious anecdotes in the history of philosophy. Some of his supporters have been so disconcerted by it that they developed several theories—commonly asserted from the 1780s through the 1960s—that the children were not in fact his, due either to his impotence or to the infidelity of their mother, Thérèse Levasseur (1721–1801).¹ In addition to these two theories, some argued that Rousseau invented this as a fable in order to prove his sincerity,² and others that Thérèse and her mother successfully duped him about there even being children. After reviewing these four hypotheses, Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond present the decisive evidence against them, drawn from the admissions of Rousseau, the witnesses of his contemporaries, and documents discovered at the foundling home.³ Raymond Trousson has recently confirmed that the essential state of the factual question has scarcely changed since the 1959 discussion of Gagnebin and Raymond.⁴

The records are thus clear enough that Rousseau and his cohabitant had five children between approximately 1746 and 1752.⁵ What remain highly disputed are the implications for Rousseau's character, his standing as an arbiter of moral and political duties, and his basic intellectual intentions. In various discussions from 1751 to 1778, he grappled with these questions in a manner that was famously ambiguous and ambivalent. The leading biographers and editors

of the last two generations have in general been sympathetic to Rousseau, but they have not been impressed by his self-defenses here. R. A. Leigh writes that the relevant pages in the *Confessions* “are certainly the most painful and the most contradictory of his book,” and Maurice Cranston describes them as “one of the least compelling passages in that book.”⁶

Although the topic has often been sensationalized, informed and sustained discussions are rare. The exceptions are Jean Guéhenno and Lester Crocker, who cite most of the relevant sources, but, I would argue, they are one-sided philosophically. Guéhenno’s discussion is peculiar.⁷ He concedes that Rousseau shirked his duty and that Rousseau’s 1751 letter defending his actions was “base and ignoble.”⁸ Yet then, explicitly dismissing Rousseau’s arguments, Guéhenno attributes the discarding ultimately to fate and the historical necessity of Rousseau obeying his unique genius, to “become himself.”⁹ History need not respect “our petty rules and petty virtues,” and Guéhenno even chides those interested in the topic for wishing to reduce “exemplary men . . . to our own level in order to take our revenge on them for being great.”¹⁰ Crocker is nearly comprehensive in terms of the loci from which he draws, but he reveals hostile intent in the arguments he selects for presentation.¹¹ He, too, quickly dismisses Rousseau’s argumentation, explaining the discarding as a result of psychological factors, including “latent homosexuality” and the “compulsive” acts of “the introspective neurotic.”¹²

It appears, then, that no near-comprehensive discussion of Rousseau’s children exists that is either systematically organized or philosophically oriented to discern the significance of this episode for his life and work. In being the first to present the evidence comprehensively and systematically, as well as to engage seriously with the full range of Rousseau’s argumentation, this chapter is meant as a foundation for responsible discussion of this sad and bizarre chapter of intellectual history. It is otherwise restrained in its speculations, especially about possible psychological implications.

Despite the prominence of this issue in Rousseau’s history, autobiographical reflections, and reception, many scholars opt to avoid mentioning it altogether. Many others offer brief accounts of the historical facts or some of Rousseau’s arguments, without venturing further engagement.¹³ Both approaches are perfectly legitimate, and yet, as a cumulative effect, scholars have been left with either unguided curiosity or largely untested assumptions about the complex relations between life and thought here. Of the small number of sustained discussions, most have been biographically and historically oriented.¹⁴ Excellent work has been done in excavating the evidence and delineating its

context. In these works and in more philosophical ones, some of Rousseau's rationales have been subjected to strong criticism or have been provided defense (normally in a qualified form). But most of these philosophical reflections have been offered in only a few sentences or paragraphs, and the most extensive discussions have been scattered throughout longer works, as discrete comments on separate passages. Since they have not attempted to present the evidence systematically, their final judgments of Rousseau have not responded to an adequate range of countervailing evidence. Raymond Trousson has perhaps been the most balanced among those who have offered sustained reflections, but even his selection and presentation of evidence elides key difficulties.¹⁵

Whether historical or philosophical, current stances on Rousseau and his discarded¹⁶ children are tied to broader disputes about the ultimate meaning of his thought. They seem to fall into three main groups. First are those who see Rousseau as embodying extreme subjectivism, individualism, and/or narcissism, and thus appeal to his paternal delinquency as a paradigm of his reckless life and work.¹⁷ Second, some perceive a similar individualism and autonomy in his thought and life, and the discarded children are either a proper way of pursuing his freedom and genius within his context¹⁸ or a profound and consistent expression of modern political philosophy.¹⁹ Third, some argue that Rousseau should be seen as a genuine advocate of virtue and justice in terms of his overall intentions; they see the case of the children as exceptional, and they emphasize his later statements of regret.²⁰ In each approach, what is taken to be most fundamental about his thought ends up akin to what is taken to be most pertinent about his life. (A logical fourth possibility, of straightforward hypocrisy—that Rousseau fully and consistently believed his rigorous prescriptions about the family but never cared about embodying them in his personal life—does not seem to have any defenders.) Thus, although the genuine meaning of one's philosophy might in principle be separate from any questions about one's personal life, the two have been closely linked in this case. This is especially natural concerning Rousseau, since he defended his personal life on moral grounds and in terms connected (in various ways) with his overall philosophy. Unlike many later interpreters, he did not see this as a curiosity to be sidestepped but as a substantive issue touching upon his credibility as a normative thinker. In responding to it in several different ways across three decades, he provides a unique window into his moral standing in his own eyes, and therefore also his view of what humans owe each other by nature, how this may be altered or distorted by

society, and how to cope with moral failures (or apparent failures). For such reasons, carefully tracing the threads of Rousseau's discarded children is not merely for biographical interest, but also sheds light on his broader intentions and proper legacy.

I begin with a new approach—an analytical outline of each rationale Rousseau provided. Future discussions might usefully draw from that categorization, even if some details of the layout, or the implications drawn from it here, are found wanting. I also contextualize this case within eighteenth-century French family life. I then pursue our evidence more thematically than chronologically, beginning with Rousseau's strongest defenses of his decisions and working toward his most remorseful claims. (For those less familiar with the material, it may be useful first to consult the chronological recapitulation in Section 1.7 below.) The strongest defenses were offered in 1751 and 1778. The Second Part of the *Confessions* (1769–1770) is more ambiguous; in private letters of 1769–1770, this ambiguity leans toward remorse. The most complete remorse apparently develops in the period of *Emile* (ca. 1757–1762). In closing, I emphasize the complexity of Rousseau's shifts between defending, atoning for, and partially excusing his behavior, as well as the implications of this for his broader intentions and development. I offer a middle position between those who see his behavior and associated excuses as demonstrating his unchecked individualism and conventionalism and those who ultimately absolve this episode in order to find him a moralist in good standing.

1. Analytical Outline and Historical Context

The rationales may be clustered into five major categories. Specifications and variants are marked as subheadings. Headings and subheadings have been placed in the order in which an argument was first made, whether by the date of writing or—in works with multiple arguments, such as the astounding letter to Madame Dupin de Francueil of 20 April 1751²¹—by its placement within a single work. Dates in parentheses indicate each source that appeals to the argument of the subheading. Two letters from 1770 must be distinguished: to Madame de Berthier, of 17 January (as 1770a),²² and to Claude Anglancier de Saint-Germain, of 26 February (as 1770b).²³ Posthumous works are referenced by the dates of their writing: Second Part of the *Confessions* (1769–1770), *Dialogues* (1772–1776), and *Reveries* (1778). (Although the *Reveries* was written

from 1776 through 1778, this outline only draws from Walk IX, which was apparently written in 1778.)²⁴

In addition to the likely birth dates mentioned above (1746–1752), the other pivotal historical event is the public exposure of this great secret in an anonymous pamphlet—now known to be by Voltaire—called *The Sentiment of the Citizens* (December 1764).²⁵ Among many harsh claims, including some fabrications, one charge pointed to the essential truth: Rousseau's companion (Thérèse) is an “unfortunate woman . . . whose children he exposed [*exposé*] at the door of a hospital.”²⁶ The next month, Rousseau nearly published a response that evaded this charge on what seems to be a technicality: “I have never exposed [*exposé*], nor caused to be exposed [*fait exposer*] any child at the door of any hospital, or elsewhere” (cf. rationale 3.b below).²⁷ This pamphlet decisively altered Rousseau's accounts of his discarded children. Before Voltaire, we find the strangely moralistic confidence of a 1751 letter and the clear attempts to overcome a regretted past in the writings of 1760–1762. After Voltaire, we find oscillations between qualified excuse-making and typically defensive professions of remorse. The one exception to this late tendency occurs in the *Reveries* (rationale 6), where, at least on the surface, he fully affirms the original discarding. This is included as a sixth rationale to indicate this final shift, but because its content is not new I claim only five “major” rationales.

The rationales may be categorized as follows:

1. I would not have been able to bring them up.
 - a. My illness prevented me from expecting a long life. (1751)²⁸
 - b. I was too poor and depended on precarious work for a living. (1751, 1769–1770 twice, 1770b, 1778)²⁹
 - c. This poverty is the fault of the rich. (1751)³⁰
2. Their family situation would have been unacceptable.
 - a. Their illegitimate birth would have brought shame to their mother. (1751, 1769–1770, 1770b)³¹
 - b. Their illegitimate birth would have stigmatized them, making their future prospects bleak. (1751)³²
 - c. I needed to shield them from being raised by the indecent Levasseur family. (1769–1770 twice, 1778, cf. 1751)³³
 - d. In hindsight, I thank Heaven that my children were spared knowing me in my misfortunes, especially since my enemies would surely have taught them to hate, and perhaps even to betray, their father. (1769–1770, 1770a, 1770b, 1778)³⁴

3. There were adequate public institutions for raising children.
 - a. They would be fed better and more securely there than by me. (1751)³⁵
 - b. They were appropriately deposited there, not “exposed.” (1751, cf. 1765)³⁶
 - c. They would be raised more hardily and usefully there than by me or by aristocrats. (1751, 1769–1770, 1770a, 1770b)³⁷
 - d. Their upbringing would be comparable to that of the children in the republic of Plato. (1751, 1769–1770)³⁸
4. I later came to regret these actions, and to respond appropriately.
 - a. *Emile* is an attempt to expiate my old sin (1760);³⁹ in it, with remorse, I confessed the actions almost openly (1761, 1762),⁴⁰ which should spare me the reproaches of decent people. (1769–1770, 1772–1776)⁴¹
 - b. I became increasingly abstinent largely to avoid repeating the offense. (1769–1770)⁴²
 - c. I would rather expiate my faults than excuse them (1770a, 1770b, cf. 1769);⁴³ the fault was no doubt grave, and unpardonable, but it was my only one, and I have well-atoned for it. (1770b)⁴⁴
5. If I was mistaken, I should not be fully or harshly blamed for it.
 - a. I adopted the maxims and customs of those around me. (1769–1770, 1770b)⁴⁵
 - b. It was committed through reason, not from hardness of heart; I could never have been an unnatural father. (1769–1770, cf. 1770b and 1778)⁴⁶
 - c. I was acting in good faith; I did not desire to do harm, or see any harm in it. (1769–1770)⁴⁷
 - d. It was a fault, not a crime (1769),⁴⁸ and it was incomparably less severe than betraying a friend’s confidence, as in the publicizing of my secret. (1769–1770, 1770a, 1770b, cf. 1765)⁴⁹
 - e. People should be pitied in misfortune, and much more if they are culpable; my duty was neglected through weakness. (1770a)⁵⁰
6. I would do it again, with much less doubt, too, if I had to do it again. (1778)⁵¹

All told, we find twenty-five rationales; or, counting only the specific arguments of the subheadings, nineteen. Most readers have not found them particularly convincing, despite—or, perhaps, because of—their voluminousness. As Leo

Damrosch observes after a much shorter overview, they seem to be “what a psychoanalyst would call a case of overdetermination.”⁵²

Turning from Rousseau’s shifting argumentation to the historical context mostly adds to our perplexity. Many scholars have contended that, in their setting, Rousseau’s actions were not as outrageous as they have seemed in later centuries. Around 1750, the foundling *hôpitals* (hospices or homes)⁵³ of Paris were receiving around 17 percent of the infants baptized in that region, and these numbers would more than double by 1772.⁵⁴ Scholars disagree about the primary factor behind this. Illegitimacy and abandonment rates were evidently rising throughout eighteenth-century Europe, but those rates in France were particularly high, especially in Paris.⁵⁵ For instance, in Paris in 1772, 41 percent of the children born were given up to the hospice, and only around one in seven of these children was legitimate.⁵⁶ In a recent scholarly analysis, Matthew Gerber acknowledges the roles of poverty and illegitimacy throughout the eighteenth-century French foundling crisis. However, he argues that the spike in *early* eighteenth-century rates of abandonment occurred in a time of low illegitimacy and relative prosperity, and thus should be mainly attributed to legal changes undermining the rights of unwed mothers, as well as to the unintended consequences of the availability of the foundling homes.⁵⁷ Gerber also establishes that the unusually high rates in Paris were largely artificial, since, by the second half of the eighteenth century, transporting foundlings from the provinces to Paris had become a minor industry—and a lethal one.⁵⁸

Although abandoning or depositing children was not uniformly prevalent, it was an especially common behavior of the socially marginal, including the “debutant intellectuals” of Paris. Bronisław Baczko maintains that even after “Jean-Jacques permanently acquired a higher social status, he persisted in behavior and attitudes characteristic of [social] marginality, of the vagabond as well as of the *petit intellectuel*. Obviously, we have in mind his affair with Thérèse, the semiliterate servant girl and, especially, his abandonment of their children.”⁵⁹ Baczko draws from Robert Darnton, from whom I add: “The great figures of the early Enlightenment—Fontenelle, Duclos, Voltaire, d’Alembert—remained bachelors; or, if they fell into matrimony, as in the case of Diderot and Rousseau, it was with someone of their own station—shop girls and servants.”⁶⁰

For such reasons, according to Trousson, “Jean-Jacques is a celebrated case, not an exceptional one, and he was not wrong to say that he followed the custom of his country. . . . Female honor, poverty, the absence of contraception, and the insecurity and price of clandestine abortions explain, if they do not justify, these abandonments.”⁶¹ Moreover, even Rousseau’s distinction that his

children were properly “deposited,” not “exposed” (rationale 3.b)⁶²—though apparently so empty—has significance in its historical setting. Records indicate that in 1746, less than one-third of the children collected by the foundling hospital were properly deposited; most were exposed in streets or on the steps of churches, and thus left immediately to chance.⁶³ Several contemporary writers make it clear that there was a significant moral difference between this and direct placement in the foundling home. For instance, the relevant articles in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* draw a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, “this barbaric custom” of parents exposing their children outside of their home and, on the other, the easy reception of the infant in the foundling home. More optimistic than our current records, the Enlightenment author adds that the rise of such homes has thus made the crime of exposing infants “no longer heard of in this city.”⁶⁴

Although Rousseau may have been adopting the customs of those around him (rationale 5.a), historical evidence has not been as kind to his claims that his children would be raised hardily and usefully (3.c), or like Plato’s *Republic* (3.d). In the 1751 letter to Francueil, he claims that his children would be raised, not “delicately” in “softness” but with a robust “rustic education,” as honest, obscure “peasants or workers,” in favorable contrast with their father (see [5]). The 1770 letters assume that this 1751 projection has come to pass: the children are living in “an obscure estate”;⁶⁵ they are “workers or peasants” living in “peaceful obscurity.”⁶⁶ Actually, foundling mortality rates were frighteningly high—of the infants received in 1751, 68 percent did not make it past their first year, compared to general infant mortality rates around 25 percent.⁶⁷ Looking at a longer time frame, in 1760 only around 17 percent of the infants received had lived past age five.⁶⁸ Damrosch explains why generally high infant mortality rates were much worse for foundlings: “They arrived malnourished and sickly, were crammed together in grossly unhygienic conditions, and were often badly cared for by their rural nurses if they lived long enough to get there.”⁶⁹ Even for those who did survive, few fulfilled the official charter’s promise of becoming soldiers, workers, and colonists. While the administration attempted to place them as servants or apprentices, they “were often ill-prepared for life outside the *Enfants-Trouvés*,” “forced by their poverty into lives of libertinage and vagabondage,” with tragic ends.⁷⁰

Scholars are divided on whether we might assume that Rousseau was reasonably ignorant of these cruel realities or whether he ought to have known of them. Leigh proffers the charitable assumption, whereas Trousson claims he should have known.⁷¹ Grant, who is, in general, a defender of Rousseau, argues

that his intentions here are “suspect”: “It would be easier to credit his claim that he truly intended their benefit had he troubled himself to learn (or allowed himself to acknowledge) the conditions in the Foundling Hospital. Knowing that the fate of his children was likely to be a tragic one, we are entitled to say that Rousseau’s justifications were rationalizations of a wicked deed.”⁷²

Turning to hard evidence, the most relevant contemporary document was published anonymously by Charles Arrault in the *Mercure de France* in 1746, and was thus almost certainly known to Rousseau.⁷³ In general, it is an homage to the foundling home as a humanitarian effort, established by Saint Vincent de Paul in 1640 but increasingly centralized by the king and the Parisian authorities. Arrault clearly argues that this institution offers significant moral and political advantages over the crime of exposing infants in the streets.⁷⁴ Gerber also draws from Arrault in discussing the abuses from the earlier “decentralized and disorganized” foundling system: “Children were sold in the streets to beggars who maimed them to elicit public sympathy, to wet nurses who substituted them for their deceased charges, to prominent families who falsely posed them as heirs, and to witches who used them in rituals of black magic.”⁷⁵ According to Arrault, this institution removes the pretext for this “inhumane and cruel” manner of getting rid of children whom parents believed they could not raise. Through this institution, “nature has recovered its rights in the heart[s]” of the parents, who wish to “preserve the life that they have given” their children.⁷⁶ However, Arrault also discusses the insufficiency of the ordinary revenues and the recurring difficulties for infrastructure, given the sharply increasing number of foundlings.⁷⁷ Indeed, his document closes with a call for charitable giving in order to rectify inadequacies of space and ventilation that had been responsible for the deaths of a “very great number” of foundling children through communicable sickness in 1739.⁷⁸ We might conclude that, despite Arrault’s positive stance on the institution and on the superiority of proper depositing over exposition, it seems unlikely that a contemporary reader could be naively confident, and in complete good faith, that this was truly as safe as parental or adoptive care.

For Rousseau’s part, in each of his discussions of his own children, he never reveals any awareness of the link between foundling status and high mortality rates. Yet a political fragment (likely dating around 1759) suggests that, at least by that point, the link had become straightforward in his mind. The fragment polemicalizes about population and against urbanization, citing statistics on “Paris 1758”: 19,148 baptisms (indicating births), among whom were 5,082 foundlings. He reflects that “the state kills them before their birth by making

children onerous to their fathers" ("Political Fragments" IX, CW 4:53 / OC 3:528).⁷⁹ Consider also his comments, in the context of mothers who have temporarily sent their children out to the country to be nursed, crossed out from the Favre manuscript of *Emile*: "How many times in traveling through the countryside have I groaned at seeing how barbarously the nurslings from the city are treated there."⁸⁰

The intellectual context provides several markers concerning self-justification and hypocrisy. Rousseau shared the moderate Enlightenment's kindness toward human nature, as well as its Malebranchean account of a God who works only through universal laws.⁸¹ The Christian view of grace—of divine forgiveness as a pure gift for certain repentant individuals, even those with profoundly bad character or behavior—was not acceptable for these reasons, among others. But since Rousseau did not share the accommodating standards and easy conscience of many intellectuals of his time, his quest for justification proved harrowing. Perhaps his most fundamental solution is a distinction between moral "crime" (*crime*), which embodies an intention to harm, as opposed to "error," "mistake," "misdemeanor," or "fault" (*faute*), which was inseparable from the weakness of human nature, and should thus not be judged too harshly by God or man.⁸²

Since Rousseau typically argued that he was guilty only of faults, we might pause to compare him with Benjamin Franklin, who describes some of his life's foibles as "*errata*"—printer's errors. These "faults," which he would like to correct if he were to repeat his life, can apparently be distinguished from "*wilful* gross Immorality or Injustice."⁸³ Whereas Rousseau prided himself on his near-flawless avoidance of prostitutes, Franklin's "hard-to-be-govern'd Passion of Youth, had hurried me frequently into Intrigues with low Women that fell in my Way."⁸⁴ The passive voice here is worthy of our great confessor, but in general Franklin's higher underlying self-confidence helped him to actually accomplish what Rousseau only claims to: "My present conduct might be blameable, but I leave it without attempting farther to excuse it, my present purpose being to relate Facts, and not to make Apologies for them."⁸⁵ And unlike Rousseau's longing for unattainable aristocratic ladies, Franklin ended up settling in marriage for Deborah Read, a dependable but not particularly appealing woman, whom he had previously mistreated.⁸⁶ They adopted and raised Franklin's natural son, William.

As we will see, at times Rousseau gravitated toward the more Christian (even Catholic) posture of admitting a truly severe moral failure and believed he might "expiate" or "atone" (*expier*) for it through suffering or good works. But more

commonly and typically, he could not follow the model of Augustine, who could argue that he was ashamed of his youthful treatment of his concubine and had made a clean break with that past. (Biographically, Augustine compares favorably with Rousseau for raising his natural son, Adeodatus, until the death of Adeodatus at age seventeen, but he compares unfavorably in sending his concubine away in order to secure a socially and economically desirable marriage.⁸⁷ The concubine was among the issues that were being seized upon by Augustine's critics, prompting him to write his *Confessions*.⁸⁸) Rousseau often tried to reform himself, but apparently his anthropology and self-understanding precluded him from denouncing his past behavior in a similar way. Accordingly, it is not repentance but excuses—showing why one's errors (or apparent ones) are understandable or acceptable, given their context and motivations—that usually play the crucial role in his personal appeals. As Karl Barth put it, "It is scarcely possible to find in these confessions an example of a truly undialectical piece of self-accusation."⁸⁹ In practice, these appeals could be most aptly compared not with the theological categories of justification and grace in Augustine or Calvin but with the jurisprudential categories of exculpation and mitigation in Grotius or Pufendorf.

The dates in the analytical outline (Section 1.1 above) indicate when each rationale was written down, but context also involves the time when each was supposedly implemented. One major development in Rousseau's thinking is described as occurring during Thérèse's third pregnancy (ca. 1750).⁹⁰ According to the *Confessions*, it was around this time that Rousseau was newly inspired to live in accordance with the "heroism and virtue" of his fatherland and his first *Discourse* (VIII, 298/356). The pregnancy thus made him reflect more on his own duties: "to examine my children's destiny and my relationship with their mother according to the laws of nature, justice, and reason, and of that pure and holy religion which is as eternal as its Author" (299/356).⁹¹ This is in contrast with the simple complacency described in Book VII, regarding the first two pregnancies (ca. 1746–1748).⁹² This earlier Jean-Jacques was content to follow "the customs of those around me" (rationale 5.a) in order to extricate himself from the "extreme difficulty" (287/342f). He learned these customs at the inn of Madame La Selle, where his refined dinner companions offered the highest praise to the bachelor who had most populated the foundling home (see 288–89/342–44).⁹³ Regarding this context, Cranston observes, "Before his 'reform,' his scruples, like his ambitions, were those of a young man of the world."⁹⁴ Finally, Thérèse's mother played a role; she "feared a new nuisance [*embarras*] of a rabble of kids" and "came to my aid" in convincing Thérèse of this solution, despite the latter's "groaning" (VII, 289/344).⁹⁵

A concession might be made by some, that, for the first two births, insofar as Rousseau had no claim to moral standing but that of a downtrodden Parisian bohemian, our criticism of his behavior might not ultimately be directed against him so much as against the customs of his time and place. For instance, according to current philosopher Vittorio Hösle, “On the basis of an intentionalist ethics one has no choice but to recognize that someone who obeys the immoral norms of his culture bears no guilt, insofar as he had no opportunity to reflect on a possible alternative. The actions . . . must therefore be measured first of all by the norms of his own [culture’s] mores; this insight of historicism cannot be surrendered.”⁹⁶ Henry Chadwick applies similar reasoning to Augustine’s case: “For a young man it was a regular custom to take a concubine until such time as he found a suitable fiancée, marriage being understood as a property deal between the two families. The modern criticism is not of Augustine so much as of the total society in which he was a member.”⁹⁷ Granting all this as a general framework, we are still far from justifying the entire case of the discarded children, since the later ones were born after his personal reconsideration of his new principles.⁹⁸

2. Unashamed Bookends, 1751 and 1778

It is only concerning the period after his reform that Rousseau offers his best-known rationales about the discarded children (Conf. VIII, 299–301/356–59). He mentions the April 1751 letter to Francueil in this context as well, and the timing suggests that the inquiry leading to it may have been prompted by the birth of his third child.⁹⁹ As both the letter and the later reflections indicate, although his behavior did not change—at least not at this point—Rousseau’s intensified conscience required more elaborate self-defenses.¹⁰⁰ It should therefore not be surprising that, despite the historical proximity, the letter to Francueil does not mention that Rousseau was simply following the customs of those around him. Following the Parisian crowd could no longer suffice, at least not officially. In the above outline (Section 1.1), the later rationales involve the expiation (4) or mitigation (5) of acts which are admitted to be faults or that are, at least, highly questionable. By contrast, the first three rationales seek exculpation. Existing “prejudices” to the contrary notwithstanding, these utilitarian justifications grant no basis for shame or remorse (as distinguished from sadness). The decisions are said to be positively good, whether because of personal necessity in the face of economic injustice (rationale 1), an intolerable

family situation (2), or the suitability of the foundling institutions (3). Remarkably, with two exceptions related to timing,¹⁰¹ each of the justifications that are documented under the first three headings was included in Rousseau's first statement, of 1751. Thus, the self-exculpation is highly comprehensive in this letter. Alongside the lack of any regretful or ambivalent claims, this accounts for its tone, which is widely described as aggressive or cruel.¹⁰²

The 1751 letter's approaches to marriage and social injustice are especially noteworthy. Rousseau anticipates the objection: Why is he not married? "Ask your unjust laws, madame. It did not suit me to enter into an eternal commitment, and one will never prove to me that any duty obliges me to do so. What is certain is that I have done nothing of the sort and that I do not want to do anything of the sort" (LF [4]). These claims are quite surprising in view of his later defenses of marriage in works such as *Julie* and *Emile*.¹⁰³ The "eternal commitment" seems to be the issue, and yet Rousseau seems to be going further than the moderate arguments for divorce in Locke or Montesquieu.¹⁰⁴ This raises the question of whether Rousseau shared the libertinism of Diderot, at least as the latter would come to display it in works such as the *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville*—and, if so, when and in what sense the Genevan came to repudiate it.¹⁰⁵ Diderot objects to sexual stigma and to the moral requirement of an eternal commitment.¹⁰⁶ His published writings against "indissoluble" marriage begin around 1759, quite possibly in connection with his unhappy marriage.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, he and his wife had a daughter whom he loved deeply and for whom he arranged a first-rate education.¹⁰⁸ In another work of historical fiction, Diderot combines *Bougainville's* argument about sexual vice as largely a consequence of "our absurd laws," with the observation that probably fewer than two in a hundred men are "faithful to the letter" to their wives, and the corresponding plea not to get overly upset by adultery, "a fault so trivial."¹⁰⁹ In his published writings, Rousseau comes closest to this spirit in the *Discourse on Inequality*, when he discusses "countries where morals still count for something and . . . where the duty of eternal fidelity only makes for adulteries, and where even the laws of continence and of honor inevitably increase debauchery, and multiply abortions" (I, 157/159).

After its repudiation of an eternal commitment, Rousseau's 1751 letter anticipates the objection that one should not have children if one cannot feed them. "I beg your pardon, madame: nature wishes us to have children because the earth produces enough to feed everybody, but it is the social station of the rich, it is your station that robs from my estate the bread of my children" (LF [4]).¹¹⁰ It does not seem merely coincidental that Rousseau's next major

work would be the second *Discourse* (1754–1755).¹¹¹ Not only does it powerfully condemn social injustice and stratification, but it argues that a “prodigious” population consistently emerged in a state of nature and among “barbarians” (Note IX, 202f/206f, and Note XVII, 221/222). This is contrasted with the deprivations that arise with “established property and hence society,” including the array of “shameful ways there are to prevent the birth of human beings and to cheat nature,” including homosexual acts, “secret abortions,” or “the exposure [*l'exposition*] or murder of large numbers of children, victims of their parents’ poverty or the mothers’ barbarous shame” (Note IX, 200/204).¹¹² The general sociological and victimological approach of the second *Discourse* is also clearly anticipated in the 1751 letter: “If my poverty and my illness deprive me of the power of carrying out such a dear care, it is a misfortune about which I must feel sorry, and not a crime for which I must reproach myself. . . . You take for the dishonor of vice what is only the dishonor of poverty” (LF [1, 6]).

No doubt there was grinding poverty in France at the time, and this surely contributed to the foundling problem. But was Rousseau truly so poor and oppressed that he was incapable of supporting children? He was aware of the difficulties here; earlier in the letter, he offered a trichotomy to defend his course of action. Now working with his hands (in Paris), he scarcely makes enough money to support himself, let alone a family. In order to make more, he could, first, “have recourse to the profession of author,” but “the worry [*tracas*] of children” would not leave him “the tranquility of mind necessary to do a lucrative work,” and “writings dictated by hunger hardly bring in anything and that resource is soon exhausted.” That leaves a second alternative, “to court some low employment,” which would require intrigue and infamy in order to be lucrative, forcing him to drain “the life-blood of the needy” (LF [2]).¹¹³ The implied logic is that because these alternatives are unacceptable, it was best to remain a mere copyist and send the children away. As it turns out, at various points in his life, Rousseau’s associates took issue with him for refusing to accept honest work that might have provided more securely for Thérèse and others to whom he was obliged.¹¹⁴ Given his premises about intellectual independence and the economic conditions of Paris, Rousseau would have vigorously denied the honesty of the sorts of work they had in mind. But even granting this, why, we might ask, remain in a region where luxury, population density, and the resulting cost of living make raising one’s offspring nearly impossible for the common and upright person? It seems plausible to infer that Rousseau’s personal ambitions for intellectual glory were the decisive (albeit conspicuously unspoken) factor here. Leigh, Trousson, and Cranston essentially agree that, despite all the stated

rationales, the underlying and most fundamental reason for the decisions—arrived at as a kind of reflex—was the desire to maintain his freedom, and thus his quest for glory, rather than accept the burdens and distractions of a vulgar father.¹¹⁵ According to Jean Fabre, Rousseau's masterpieces proved that he was right to avoid all personal commitments and cares.¹¹⁶ Although this may be true from an outside perspective, Rousseau's later view was quite different. We might recall the repeated lament in the *Confessions*—expressed after he attained “celebrity,” and it did him so little good—that if in his youth he had only settled in a decent place like Geneva or Fribourg and become a respectable craftsman, he could have been “a good Christian, a good citizen, a good father, a good friend, a good worker, a good man in all ways” (I, 36f/43f).¹¹⁷ Even before his persecution and the revelation of his great secret, he counseled Antoine-Jacques Roustan that, despite the talent that could allow Roustan to succeed as a man of letters, he should learn from Rousseau's experience and be content with obscurity: “Be a good father, good husband, good professor, good regent, good minister, good Citizen, simple man in everything, and nothing more, and I promise you a happy life.”¹¹⁸

All things considered, few careful scholars have been inclined to agree with Rousseau's early defense of discarding his children as necessary and proper.¹¹⁹ More generally, we might concede that there is a third-person empirical plausibility to his “sociological perspective,” and we have seen that his behavior was at least somewhat characteristic of economically marginal people during this time.¹²⁰ Nonetheless, we might infer from this paradigmatic case that, from a first-person perspective, explaining one's decisions primarily in terms of context might unduly increase reckless and inhumane actions.¹²¹

The letter to Francueil's confidence in the objective justice of Rousseau's decision appears to be reaffirmed in his last writing. The *Reveries* appeals to many of the older rationales, responding at length to what he saw as an implied slander, that Rousseau must hate children because he abandoned his own.¹²² Most pathetically, throughout the extended passage he appeals to his tenderness and not being an unnatural father (rationale 5,b; Rev. IX, 123-25/1086-88). For instance, “It would assuredly be the most unbelievable thing in the world that the *Héloïse* and the *Emile* were the work of a man who did not love children” and “I do not believe any man has ever loved to see little *bambinos* frolic and play together more than I” (125, 123/1088, 1087).¹²³ He concludes: “I would do it again, with much less doubt too, if I had to do it again; and I well know that no father is more tender than I would have been toward them, once habit had combined with nature” (124/1087, rationale 6).¹²⁴ This marks the only

clear endorsement of the discarding—as opposed to his fundamentally good character—besides the 1751 letter. And yet, following three paragraphs of a rambling discussion on how he has come to understand the human heart, and how his misfortunes and his age repel people from him, we seem to find regret and longing assert themselves: “Oh! if I still had a few moments of pure affection which comes from the heart, were it only from a babe in arms; if I could still see in some eyes the joy and contentment of being with me which I used to see so often . . . , for how many ills and sorrows would these short but sweet effusions of my heart not compensate me? Ah! I would not be obliged to seek among animals for the look of benevolence which is henceforth denied me among humans” (126/1089).¹²⁵ He then recalls a walk of two years prior, when a boy of five or six years was found “squeezing my knees with all his might while looking up at me in such a friendly and affectionate manner that I was inwardly moved, and I said to myself: ‘This is how I would have been treated by my own.’ I took the child in my arms, [and] kissed him several times in a kind of rapture” (Rev. IX, 126/1089). The memory turns out to be bittersweet in a few ways, but it is plausible to see in *Reveries* IX an oscillation of guilt, self-defense, and remorse, rather than a definitive statement of serenity or philosophical conviction.¹²⁶ Rousseau has thus not fully returned to the confident moral posture that blusters throughout the letter to Francueil. At the same time, his normative philosophy about the justifiability of his original actions is close to the 1751 account—only now, we might infer, he is even more to be pitied, since he is not only deprived of parental joys but haunted by deep loss and loneliness.¹²⁷ It is not clear how long held or stable this shift in normative philosophy was; it may have been a momentary oscillation, or an outgrowth of the more antinomian solitude that Rousseau apparently came to embrace in his final years.¹²⁸

3. Ambiguity in the Second Part of the *Confessions*, 1769–1770

The famous rationales of the *Confessions* might best be understood by juxtaposing them with the confident defenses just discussed, especially the letter to Francueil. Readers approaching this issue mainly through the *Confessions* are likely to be struck by Rousseau’s leniency with himself and the many (sometimes incompatible) rationales he provides there. By contrast, the memoir claims that he is being highly restrained in mentioning his earlier justifications, both because he does not want to lead young men astray by the reasons that “deceived” him and because his purpose is to write a confession, not to accuse

or excuse himself.¹²⁹ Remarkably, compared to the 1751 letter, he was highly restrained—at least in terms of exculpatory rationales. For the most part, exculpatory claims are either omitted or spoken of only as his beliefs at the time, not as current judgments of what was objectively moral. His poverty (rationale 1.b), the illegitimacy of the births (2.a), and the greater usefulness of their upbringing as foundlings (3.c) are mentioned only in passing as contributing to his original decision. The famous comparison with Plato's *Republic* (3.d) is also only historical: "I will content myself with saying that my reason was such that by handing over [*livrant*] my children to public education for lack of power to bring them up myself; by destining them to become workers and peasants rather than adventurers and fortune hunters, I believed I was performing an action of a Citizen and father, and I looked at myself as a member of the Republic of Plato" (Conf. VIII, 299/357).¹³⁰ In the case of Plato, Rousseau is explicitly speaking only of his beliefs during the depositing of the third child and, by implication (cf. 300/357), the following two. The argument was robustly stated in the letter to Francueil [6], surrounded by arguments that Rousseau has been deprived of "the sweetness of paternal embraces" and that "the prejudices of the world" oppose his decision: "In his republic Plato wanted all the children to be brought up in such a way that each would remain unknown to his father and all would be children of the state."¹³¹

However, two claims from the first three (exculpatory) headings make their first appearance in the *Confessions*, and they seem to be given current moral weight. The first is that the children would have been atrociously raised by the Levasseur family (rationale 2.c). He claims this was omitted from the letter to Francueil only because it would have compromised Thérèse's mother and family, even though it was the "most decisive" and strongest reason then available to him.¹³² (This personal case seems to be in mind in Rousseau's general advice that gentlemen not marry women from the class of people that does not think: "Besides, how will a woman who has no habit of reflecting raise her children? How will she incline them toward virtues she does not know, toward merit of which she has no idea?" E V, 408f/767f).¹³³ Despite all the ambiguity throughout the *Confessions*, he even seems to affirm that these judgments were prudent, as a better upbringing for the children: "I trembled at the thought of handing them over to this badly brought up family so that they might be even more badly brought up. The risks of having them educated by the foundlings were considerably fewer. . . . One may judge by the morals of [Thérèse's] wretched brother, if ever—whatever else may be said on the subject—I should have exposed my children to an upbringing like his" (Conf. IX, 349/415f).¹³⁴ This is the strongest endorsement

of the original decisions found in the *Confessions*, and this rationale remains central in the final self-affirmation of the *Reveries*, where he claims that fear for the children of “a fate a thousand times worse” than the foundling home was what “surely most determined” his decision (IX, 79/1087). However, the implications of this exculpatory argument are different from those in the letter to Francueil. According to that early account, anyone financially strained who has public foundling alternatives available would be fully justified in depositing his children. But according to this later argument, one would need to be caught within a very particular and highly corrosive set of familial circumstances. Nonetheless, paralleling what we noted in the case of the letter, even if the abstract reasoning is potentially viable, it remains unclear that Jean-Jacques was in fact so helplessly trapped, whether in terms of changing location,¹³⁵ reforming familial dynamics, or avoiding multiple pregnancies.¹³⁶

The second novel exculpatory rationale (2.d) in the *Confessions* is more peculiar, being based on hindsight. Rousseau expresses ambivalence concerning whether the children would have been brought up as decent people under Madame d'Épinay or Madame de Luxembourg, and then continues: “but I am sure that they would have been brought to hate, perhaps to betray their parents: it was a hundred times better they never knew them” (VIII, 300/357). The language is similar in the letter to Madame de Berthier: “I would prefer that they live in an obscure state without knowing me, than to see them, in my adversity, basely nourished by the treacherous generosity of my enemies, ardent to instruct them to hate, and perhaps to betray their father.”¹³⁷ In the *Reveries*, Rousseau is convinced that “what Muhammad made of Zayd is nothing compared with what [the conspirators] would have made of [my children] on my account” (IX, 124/1087). (In the historically loose account to which Rousseau probably alludes, “Voltaire’s Muhammad is an utter scoundrel who tricks Zayd into committing parricide and then kills him.”)¹³⁸

Unlike the other exculpatory rationales, this one is not meant to justify Rousseau’s decisions on their original bases. But it does alleviate his current experience of guilt, and he even expresses thanks to heaven (*le Ciel*) for his decision to send his children away, thus preserving them and himself from this fate.¹³⁹ In this and other contexts, the conspiracy also allows him to make some (rather distasteful) attacks in passing, against those friends who revealed his secret. This treachery, committed against a friend, reveals true “baseness of soul,” far worse than his mere “fault,” however “great” (5.d).¹⁴⁰ Yet, in stating his case, he finds himself at cross-purposes. For, when arguing against his treacherous friends, he needs to contrast the strong sentiments and obligations deriving

from an established friendship, with the relatively weak ones of a father who has never seen his children (Conf. VIII, 301/359). By contrast, when he is establishing that he could never have been “an unnatural father,” his sentiments toward his children are exceedingly tender, and it was only his reason that was at fault (5.b). In a long paragraph, he questions whether he might have been one of those “misbegotten individuals, deaf to nature’s sweet [*doux*] voice,” evincing mere “hardening” (*endurcissement*) and trampling “ruthlessly underfoot that sweetest of duties.” Appealing to higher sentiments in him that are incompatible with all this, he boldly concludes that this combination is impossible: “Never for a single moment in his life could Jean-Jacques have been without sentiment, without a heart [*entrailles*], an unnatural father [*pere dénaturé*]. I may have deceived myself, but I could never have hardened myself” (299/356f).¹⁴¹ In a similar difficulty, whereas here (5.b) he locates his true moral identity and fundamental goodness in his heart as opposed to his reason, when he is comforting himself with hindsight about the conspiracy (2.d), the “regrets of my heart” are overcome by “my reason,” which perceives how heaven has “protected [my children] from their father’s fate” (299/357).

But these passages are exceptions, and the predominant moral strategy of the *Confessions* regarding the children is not exculpatory but mitigative. The main discussion (VIII, 299-301/356-59) focuses in his current voice almost entirely on rationale 5, that he should not be fully or harshly blamed for his actions. This is apparently the chosen emphasis because he is uncertain whether he still believes the exculpatory rationales and whether they will be convincing to others. He must therefore be convincing at least in establishing that it was the utilitarian—even altruistic—motivation that truly prevailed within him. Thus, the focus on internal factors: his moral influences (5.a), his faulty reason (in contrast with his heart, 5.b), his lack of an intention to harm (5.c), and the difference between a fault and a crime (5.d).

For all its ambiguity, this discussion of the children should be seen as forging a middle position between the objective defense of his actions and the admission of serious guilt alongside a search to compensate. He grants that his decision was highly questionable, and (sometimes) even a great “fault,” but somewhat understandable under the circumstances and given his mental and sentimental state. Consider, for instance, the noncommittal opening to the discussion, following the announcement of the third pregnancy and the need to rethink his earlier expedient: “If I was mistaken in my conclusions, nothing is more remarkable than the security of mind with which I yielded to them” (Conf. VIII, 299/356).¹⁴²

Of the mitigative rationales, Rousseau seems the most confident when contending that the desire to harm never entered his heart or mind (rationale 5.c). In the following, he is explaining why he openly shared his secret with several friends: "I truly saw no harm [*aucun mal*] in it. Taken all in all, I chose for my children what was best for them, or what I believed to be so. I would have liked, I still would like, to have been brought up and provided for as they have been" (Conf. VIII, 300/358).¹⁴³ Another claim about harm is perhaps the closest that Book VIII comes to a thesis about the children: "My fault was great, but it was committed through error. I neglected my duty, but the desire to harm never entered my heart" (301/359).¹⁴⁴ Despite all the mitigation, he stops short of affirming that he made the right decision or that he would do the same thing again. In these ways, the *Confessions* shows far more ambivalence than the two chronological bookends, which, at least on their face and in their explicit argumentation, claim full moral confidence—the letter to Francueil and the *Reveries*.

More generally, it is these mitigative, subjective lines of argument that have provoked some of the most serious analysts to take issue with Rousseau. According to some, he has a dangerously sharp division between supposed intention and all concrete behavior.¹⁴⁵ In addition, he almost always elides blunt criticism of himself, often by seeing fate as responsible for his actions.¹⁴⁶ This can be seen as part of his general philosophical project of positing the source of genuine evil as being entirely outside of the self,¹⁴⁷ a theme described well by Jean Starobinski: "Rousseau invariably needs to construct an external, exculpatory genealogy of evil."¹⁴⁸ Otherwise put, "Evil originates outside the self and remains external to it."¹⁴⁹

4. Vacillation Around the *Confessions*, ca. 1764–1770

If the *Confessions* primarily mitigates culpability on the basis of Jean-Jacques's internal states when he made the decisions about his children, many other claims—written around 1759 to 1770—straightforwardly admit the severity of the fault. They do not attempt to justify the objective acts or the subjective states leading to them but, rather, his life as a whole, either by expiating these faults through subsequent actions or sentiments or outweighing them through the overall moral balance of his life (rationale 4). It is this rationale alone that approximates a traditional concept of "confession," stating a condemnable act without reinterpreting it in a favorable light, while also being willing to take

decisive action to amend or compensate for it. Although this approach is not entirely absent from the *Confessions*, it is weak there. For instance, his claim that he became increasingly abstinent largely in order to avoid impregnating Thérèse again (4.b) seems to be a kind of repentance. But it is unlikely that he judged this an especially strong factor contributing to his abstinence, compared to his wish to avoid aggravating his urinary condition. The official statement of the rationale contains this ambiguity: "I feared a repetition of the same offence and, reluctant to take this risk, felt that I would rather condemn myself to abstinence than expose Thérèse to finding herself once again in the same situation. I had noticed, besides, that commerce with women aggravated my condition appreciably; this twofold reason had caused me to form resolutions I had sometimes kept badly enough, but in which I had been persisting with greater constancy for the past three or four years" (Conf. XII, 498/594f).¹⁵⁰ The physical explanation stands alone in his 1761 letter to Madame de Luxembourg: "Since my retreat to Montmorency [April 1756 or December 1757], my state of health has forced me to live with her as a sister."¹⁵¹

Similarly, there is the discussion of *Emile* in the *Confessions*, offered as a two-sentence aside within a discussion of Thérèse's character and her growing coolness toward Rousseau. Although it mentions remorse, it does so in the past tense, referring only to the time of writing *Emile*. In terms of current sentiments or judgments, it only rebukes those who would still reproach him after the kind of admission he made:

The decision I had come to with regard to my children, however well considered it had seemed to me to be, had left me with a heart that was not always easy. While contemplating my treatise on education, I had come to feel [*je sentis*] that I had neglected duties from which nothing could absolve me. My remorse finally [*enfin*] became so acute that a public admission of my error [*faute*] was almost torn from me at the beginning of *Emile*, where its application to me is so obvious that it is surprising that, after reading such a passage, anyone should have had the heart to reproach me with it further. (Conf. XII, 497/594)¹⁵²

Peter France cites this passage as an example of confession as a "preemptive strike": "When he has accused himself, no one else has the right to accuse him."¹⁵³ The authorial distance formally parallels that taken from the earlier, exculpatory rationales. But while in those cases he was explicitly breaking from

rationales he could no longer (fully) endorse, regarding *Emile* it is not clear why he does not confess—in a present voice—his culpability, his guilt feelings, or his labors in expiating that guilt.¹⁵⁴

By contrast, these more vulnerable, expiatory confessions seem to be a major approach in at least three letters written around the time the Second Part of the *Confessions* was composed, and in the next section we will see that these follow a pattern that began around 1759. In a November 1769 letter to Thérèse, Rousseau combines expiation (rationale 4.c) with the casuistic form of mitigation, that this “fault” was not a “crime” (5.d). Apparently writing to dissuade her from leaving him, he encourages her “to crown an unfortunate but innocent, honest and virtuous life by an end which will honor it and assure us a durable happiness. We have our faults [*fautes*] to lament and to expiate; but, thank heaven, we have in us neither darkness nor crimes [*crimes*] to reproach. Let us not blot out by the imprudence of our last days the sweetness and the purity of those we have passed together.”¹⁵⁵ In the January 1770 letter to Madame de Berthier, his plea for mitigation does not come from denying or qualifying the severity of his fault as a father: “Madame, pity those whom an iron fate deprives of such a happiness; pity them if they are only unfortunate; pity them much more if they are culpable” (5.e).¹⁵⁶ The same letter then insists that he would never bend his maxims in order to make them fit his conduct, thereby falsifying “the holy laws of nature and of duty in order to extenuate my faults.” He continues, “I would rather expiate [*expier*] them than excuse them;¹⁵⁷ when my reason tells me that in my situation I did what I should have done, I believe it less than my heart, which groans and contradicts it.”¹⁵⁸ These last two guilty clauses are repeated verbatim in the letter to Saint-Germain in the following month. He mentions the reasons that made him deposit his children, saying they “prevented me from myself fulfilling the first, the most holy of the laws of nature; in this, far from excusing myself, I accuse myself; and when my reason tells me that in my situation I did what I should have done, I believe it less than I believe my heart, which groans and contradicts it.”¹⁵⁹ However, he proceeds with a self-defense of unusual energy. He begins by decrying the art with which “the barbarians” have come to portray his fault: “How they painted me all the more as an unnatural father because I have groaned; how they have sought in the depths of my character a fault [*faute*] which was the work of my misfortune; as if to sin [*pécher*] was not of man and even of the just man. It was grave, no doubt, it was inexcusable; but it was also the only one, and I have well-atoned [*bien expié*] for it. Except this, and vices which have never done any harm except to me, I can expose to all eyes a life irreproachable in every secret of my heart.”¹⁶⁰ Along with the exculpatory rationale of “my

misfortune,” we find here a range of mitigative rationales about the state of his heart, his internal character, and the fallibility of humanity. In addition, we find that this was his only “fault” (4.c)—or perhaps “grave” fault—and he has expiated for it. It is not clear whether the compensation was through active moral labor, through sufferings inflicted upon him, or both. Related ideas had been developed in the First Part of the *Confessions*, even if those discussions of Marion (a fellow servant whom he blamed for his own act of theft) and of Le Maître (a friend abandoned in Lyon) seem to contradict the 1770 letter’s claim that he has only committed one serious fault.¹⁶¹ Especially in the case of Marion, he writes that his guilty conscience has avenged this act every day since (Conf. II, 71/85). But he finally expresses hope that such a crime can be “expiated,” and perhaps has been through his many misfortunes and by “forty years of uprightness and honor in difficult circumstances” (73/87). These discussions in the First Part, written from around 1764 through 1767, exemplify the more unqualified sort of confession. Therefore, they might be seen as continuing the spirit that began around 1759 and that was temporarily displaced by the more self-justifying spirit of the Second Part of the *Confessions*.

Many have criticized attempts to discern this kind of shift in Rousseau over time; in the case of his children, however, he directly authorized it. We find this in the *Reveries*, in explaining why he once publicly lied about having had children. He describes a dinner that occurred “some time ago” when he was asked whether he had had any children: “Blushing up to my eyes, I replied that I had not had this good fortune.” This lie is described as a mechanical effect of his embarrassment: “Previously, I did not have this embarrassment and I would admit my faults with more frankness than shame, because I did not doubt that people saw what re-deemed [*rachetoit*] them and what I felt inside myself. But a mischievous eye distresses and disconcerts me: in becoming more unfortunate, I have become more timid, and I have never lied except due to timidity” (IV, 54/1034f; cf. RJJ II, 190/905). Given the likely timing of this dinner, Rousseau’s loss of confidence and increased tendency to lie is portrayed as having commenced a dozen years beforehand—around the time of Voltaire’s revelation of the secret.¹⁶²

The Second Part of the *Confessions* seems closest to the more defensive elements of the letter to Saint-Germain.¹⁶³ But unlike the discussion of the children in that part of the *Confessions*, the 1769 letter to Thérèse and both 1770 letters mention expiation, while unambiguously expressing remorse. Why such a contrast, in both tone and argumentation? Although there are genuine concerns about appealing to letters in discerning an author’s intention, those do not seem pertinent here, partly because Rousseau clearly intended his copy of the letter to

Saint-Germain to be preserved for posterity and partly because the letter to Francueil undermines the possibility that Rousseau is more openly remorseful in his letters and more defensive in his published writings.¹⁶⁴ Insofar as the difference may be based on the form of the writings, it seems more plausible to suggest that he was being more sincere in these letters written to confidants, whereas in the Second Part of the *Confessions* he seems to use sincerity largely as a tool to gain his audience's approval, thus overcoming his enemies' attempts to destroy his reputation (cf. Conf. 229/273). It is at least as likely that these differences in the expression of guilt are rooted in differences across time. According to the most careful study of the manuscripts of the *Confessions*, Rousseau's January letter to Berthier was written after the section on his children in Book VIII, and the letter thus brought back memories of that recent account.¹⁶⁵ That precludes us from reading the 1770 letters as the last expressions of a pattern of higher remorse (which would thus have become more ambiguous with the Second Part of the *Confessions*, and then triumphantly overcome by the time of the *Reveries*). Rather, the *Confessions* represent a temporary oscillation—perhaps through some combination of internal lack of confidence and public defensiveness—away from overt remorse. Remorse would then resurge in the letters written only one to three months later. However, none of these differences should be pushed too far, since in each case from 1764 through 1770, a certain amount of remorse is expressed, and the author attempts to demonstrate—in one way or another—that he is fundamentally good nonetheless.

5. Evolution in *Emile*, ca. 1757–1762

During the period of *Emile* and other normative masterpieces, Rousseau's rationales about the children are exclusively expiatory—striving to compensate for a fault that is clearly acknowledged as severe (rationale 4). These arguments are also the only ones that appeal to his behavior or mental states occurring *after* the discarding, unlike the objective exculpations of the goodness of the act (1-3) or the subjective mitigation of culpability based on mental states at the time of the decisions (5).¹⁶⁶ Although the statement of this rationale in *Emile* itself is straightforward, its development and context raise questions.

According to a 1760 letter, Rousseau's guilt about the children was a leading motivation for writing the *Emile*: "There remains an old sin [*pêché*] to expiate in print; after that the public will never hear of me again."¹⁶⁷ This is a one-sentence aside within a paragraph explaining his plan to retire from the vocation of

author. The expiation, apparently, would be that by writing *Emile*, he was extending his time in a craft he finds painful, for the sake of a higher cause. Similarly, in 1761, he believed himself to be dying, and entrusted Madame de Luxembourg with caring for Thérèse upon his death. He revealed to Luxembourg the secret about his children in order to indicate his special obligations to Thérèse, and he mentioned regret for having taken “so little precaution for ever recognizing them afterwards. For several years remorse for this negligence has disturbed my repose, and I shall die without being able to rectify it, to the great regret of the mother and myself. . . . The ideas my fault have filled my mind with have greatly contributed to making me contemplate the Treatise on Education; and you will find, in Book I, a passage which may indicate this disposition to you.”¹⁶⁸ This alludes to an indirect avowal in *Emile*, which follows an argument that personally and soundly raising one’s children fulfills a man’s “triple debt”—to the species, to society, and to the state. “He who cannot fulfill the duties of a father has no right to become one. Neither poverty nor labors nor concern for public opinion exempts him from feeding his children and from raising them himself. Readers, you can believe me. I predict to whoever has a heart [*entrailles*] and neglects such holy duties that he will long shed bitter tears for his offense and will never find consolation for it” (E I, 49/262f).¹⁶⁹ Here we find not only a deep statement of remorse but also a rejection of several rationales that had been offered in the letter to Francueil.

What led to this veiled but unqualified confession? According to the 1761 letter to Luxembourg, Rousseau’s remorse largely gave rise to *Emile*. That would trace the remorse at least to 1757, and perhaps as far back as 1754.¹⁷⁰ However, those who have most carefully studied the manuscripts, John Spink and his student Peter Jimack, have argued vigorously against this interpretation. They favor, instead, the later claim in the *Confessions*, that it was “while” writing *Emile* that Rousseau “felt” remorse—perhaps suggesting “came to feel”—and the avowal was “finally” drawn from him.¹⁷¹ Spink and Jimack find no traces of personal guilt in the earliest drafts of the manuscript. They argue that *Emile* is not the product of the remorse; rather, “It was the composition of the *Emile* which provoked the remorse.”¹⁷² Unlike the impersonal, theoretical treatise it began as, *Emile* comes to develop novelistic elements with an imaginary pupil and Jean-Jacques as the imaginary tutor, who takes up all the duties and rights of fatherhood (E I, 52f/267, cf. Favre, CW 13:16 / OC 4:71). It is apparently through increasingly identifying himself with the tutor that Rousseau began to reconsider the gap between his creation and his actual life. For Jimack, we first find the highly personal elements indicating remorse in a portion written around May 1759.¹⁷³ There, the characters refer to each other as “my father” and

“my son,” and Emile insists that “so holy and so sweet a duty” as raising his own child should be fulfilled only by himself (see E V, 446, 472, 480/820, 857, 867).¹⁷⁴ The famous indirect avowal is inserted even later, as a revision to the penultimate manuscript, thus dating well into 1760.¹⁷⁵

This argument about the evolution of the text is suggestive and, as far as it goes, convincing. And yet one might reply that it does not prove that guilt was not present prior to 1759, but only that *overt* guilt was not present.¹⁷⁶ For instance, even if it is not stated in the personal way highlighted by Jimack and Spink, the early portion of the Favre manuscript unambiguously asserts the duties of the father as “the true preceptor” of his children, obligated to raise whatever family is given to him.¹⁷⁷ It was also just prior to beginning *Emile* in earnest that Rousseau penned—in 1758—the moving portrayals of domestic education in *Julie*.¹⁷⁸ If he initially avoided sensitive formulations of the topic in the work on education, this might just as plausibly be a reflection of guilt as of true moral confidence. In any case, implications derived from composition and psychological state will always remain disputable. John T. Scott questions Jimack’s sort of reading, “which privileges the psychological state of the author and the process of composition over its content.”¹⁷⁹

More certain is that Rousseau’s stated philosophy is quite different in the final *Emile* than in the letter to Francueil, both in the sort of duties he defends and in his concessions that he has not lived up to them. Critics such as Crocker have gone to great lengths to deny the moral significance of these sorts of claims: “Although there were a few moments when emotion led him to betray his guilt feelings, the character of his overt defenses is the refusal of guilt.”¹⁸⁰ “Far more likely” than these professions being mere image boosting is that Rousseau “felt no guilt at first,” but “later, when his inner anguish grew into ever greater turmoil, when he felt himself accused by a whole world of enemies . . . , his conscience was awakened.”¹⁸¹ I would counter that the relevant social hounding cannot be said to have begun until *The Sentiment of the Citizens*, which Crocker knows was published in 1764.¹⁸² Crocker is therefore left with chronological problems about *Emile*. He contends, regarding its indirect avowal, that Rousseau “later claimed [the book] was a compensation for the abandonment.”¹⁸³ However, the most relevant claims do not come later, but in letters from 1760–1761. Crocker mentions the “great remorse” of the 1761 letter to Luxembourg but interjects that there was “no apology” and ultimately ends up insisting, “*the only act that counted was the first one*.”¹⁸⁴ It would be better to recognize that Rousseau sometimes denies guilt, sometimes mitigates it, and sometimes accepts it fairly severely. Moreover, this last stance arose internally and affected his moral self-understanding and intellectual intention.

How should we explain this development? Having become a “new man” at Vincennes in 1749, is it plausible that Rousseau was still so casual about his fatherly duties through 1759 or just a few years before that? Should we instead conclude that he was always this casual, and that his avowed shift was superficial or insincere? Demonstrable answers cannot be given, but perhaps the most plausible view is that his prolonged lack of remorse—or apparent, or overt, remorse—was linked in a surprising way to his early public philosophy. Previous scholars have considered the puzzle that Rousseau continued to discard his children for some time after his “personal reform.” Some have connected this with his early political idea that the public should raise children—and, correspondingly, that individuals have little if any responsibility for their young.¹⁸⁵ In this case, the discarding would not be an embarrassing contrast of low character with high principles but an expression of his “*civisme*.”¹⁸⁶ Insofar as he found this a satisfying reconciliation of life and thought, he would have been overlooking the chasm between his ideal of a republic’s universal public raising of children and his actual context of a monarchy’s ramshackle institutions for the destitute.¹⁸⁷ This reconciliation is unconvincing enough that he may have come to rethink his political ideal alongside his domestic obligations. After 1755, even in his politically oriented writings, he apparently no longer requires that children move out of their parents’ home in order to receive public education.¹⁸⁸

Overall, Rousseau’s paternal failures may not be as outrageous as they seem to be to current readers at first glance, given the customs of the time. And, yet, in view of the actual prospects of foundlings amid aristocratic France, the consequences of his discarding were almost certainly dire. This undermines his most ambitious, exculpatory justifications that his decisions were on balance beneficial. His fatherly contrition might reduce the gap between the principles stated in his domestic ethic and those revealed in the autobiographies. Even so, the gap remains large enough to raise serious questions about sincerity and hypocrisy, and, as we will see in the concluding section, the leading interpreters have taken very different approaches here.

6. Conclusion: The Moralist, the Apologist, and the Meaning of It All

The subtlest interpretations of the discarding in relation to Rousseau’s thought seem to fall into two major categories.¹⁸⁹ One of these, commonly maintained in the Straussian tradition, is that Rousseau’s merely physical relationship with

Thérèse—and his response to their children—is largely modeled on the natural life of the savages. Hence, this is the most extensive relationship that an independent and philosophical type like Jean-Jacques should have with a woman.¹⁹⁰ This reading is linked with a broader methodology opposed to seeing his personality as the key to his thought, or (especially) reducing his thought to supposed psychological tendencies.¹⁹¹ These scholars instead interpret his philosophical books on their own terms, but Roger Masters explores the additional possibility of reversing the biographical method by interpreting Rousseau's "autobiographical writings and personal actions in terms of his philosophy."¹⁹² His one selected example is the 1751 letter to Francueil, where Rousseau's arguments "flow directly from his radical insistence on the primacy of individual freedom and the artificiality of conventional opinion."¹⁹³ On these readings, Rousseau's philosophy is profoundly consistent over the course of his writings and is revealed in its genuine or highest form in his philosophical portrayals of his solitary life. There is no problem in reconciling this with the domestic ethic since philosophical readers could independently perceive it to be merely exoteric.

There are several important observations here, but it may be too strong to say that with Thérèse, Rousseau was approximating the natural wholeness of the savages in accordance with a genuinely normative model.¹⁹⁴ Instead, we might infer that he often found the relationship with Thérèse emotionally and intellectually unsatisfying, and, at many points (both in life and in writing), he accordingly reduced her to merely physical uses.¹⁹⁵ These uses might be justified—or rationalized—by his paradigm of primitive humanity, developed in the *Discourse on Inequality*, which I would argue is primarily *historical* rather than normative. However, this reduction does not appear to be the whole story. Damrosch cites Rousseau's remarks that he never felt a spark of love for her and finds it a much later perspective that is "unconvincing" about their early relationship: "The reality was very different, as his words and actions on many other occasions showed."¹⁹⁶ Yet, even in the best of times, something was plainly lacking. I contend that Rousseau's contractual concubinage was a narrowly targeted exception to a more robust marital ideal in which Rousseau genuinely believed and to which he would have adhered under more favorable circumstances. In particular—as he sometimes suggested—his life would have been quite different had he been united with someone he considered suitable and worthy of himself, such as an unattached Sophie d'Houdetot or a willing Madame de Warens.¹⁹⁷

In general, here it seems that the gaps between his normative principles and his autobiographical writings are best explained through his casuistry and targeted exceptions, including many inserted plainly within his normative teachings. For instance, masturbation is discussed well by Joel Schwartz, citing the important treatments by Starobinski and Jacques Derrida, and indicating that Rousseau indulged in this vice, away from which he strenuously kept *Emile*.¹⁹⁸ However, the casuistic exception that (basically) legitimates Rousseau is already included in his public domestic ethic. He prescribes that, after the age of twenty, this sort of continence “becomes a duty of morality,” admitting of modifications and exceptions, and “human weakness” may make it the lesser of two evils, a mere “offense [*faute*]” (E IV, 334/663). Such exceptions would not need to be carved out if we were dealing with sweeping public pronouncements put forward only for common minds, and coolly recognized in private as inapplicable to the philosopher.¹⁹⁹

The issue can never be settled, but looking at the key periods of later writings on the discarded children, from 1759–1762, 1765, and 1769–1770, we have significant evidence that Rousseau was consumed by guilt for the better part of a dozen years. It is difficult to conceive how this happens if one has confidently accepted as uniquely philosophical the view that humans have no objective positive obligations toward their children, and one has only pretended to believe the contrary in order to avoid persecution or promote social utility. Even in the 1751 letter to Francueil, so contrary to conventional and classical ethics in so many ways, Rousseau does assume objective duties: “If a refuge for them did not exist, I would do my duty and resolve to die of hunger myself rather than not feed them.”²⁰⁰ Similarly, he condemns the “unworthy father who could resolve upon that barbarism” of leaving his children “in the streets exposed to perish if chance does not save them” (LF [4-5]). Although this chapter has explored much of the best evidence that Rousseau ultimately did not believe his moralistic teachings, in the end, this seems unlikely as a claim about his overall intentions. Note also that Straussians oppose interpreting philosophy in view of biography primarily because this approach militates against the serious treatment of the philosophy. But the case here is nearly the reverse: I appeal to his biography and the philosophical presentations of it in order to challenge reductive interpretations of the philosophy.²⁰¹

The Straussian approach is the most sophisticated interpretation that makes Rousseau’s discarding and later defenses into a paradigm of what is most fundamental in his thought—viewed as a kind of individualism and conventionalism. The most important alternative reverses both premises, seeing him as

a profound advocate of virtue and justice and his children as an unfortunate exception that he came to regret as he matured. This is the sort of reconciliation of life and principles pioneered by the Kantians, and, in the case of the children, its best statement might be drawn together from Trousson's biography.²⁰² Against the fantastical route of salvaging Rousseau by denying his paternity, Trousson observes that this is not only implausible but unnecessary—"as if the bohemian, the mercenary of 1747, had already become the exemplary citizen of Geneva, the virtuous mentor, the director of conscience of the years around 1760."²⁰³ Although this man became "the conscience of modern times," he did not yet exist in 1746, and he would come "to judge himself severely one day: few people have gone through as marked a rupture between the first part and the second part of their existence."²⁰⁴ Despite the outline given in the *Confessions*, in reality his great "reform" was only progressively realized and was filled with relapses over the course of three or four years.²⁰⁵ Rousseau's justifying rationales in the letter to Francueil are "curious" and leave a "painful" impression, but his untroubled conscience is revealed by the fact of encoding. In the *Reveries*, he forced himself to say he would make the same decision again, but the realities of guilt, social longing, and his "poisoned wound" soon reveal themselves.²⁰⁶

Much can be affirmed from this reading, to which we might add that no one should be expected fully to live up to her own normative ideals.²⁰⁷ And yet, something seems lost by simply allowing Rousseau to mature (with various setbacks) beyond his youthful waywardness, while seeing in his later discussions regret as the reality, and apologetics as mere appearance. We have seen that he typically precludes himself from relating to his past in the manner of Augustine. In terms of our analysis, his expiatory arguments (rationale 4) move in this direction, but they are the exclusive approach only from 1759–1762, while being appealed to elsewhere only in 1769–1770, and then almost entirely in private letters. This in itself would be no great problem for Trousson's kind of interpretation were it not for the persistent appeals to the more self-justifying rationales throughout the rest of the corpus—exculpatory in 1751 and 1778 and mitigative in the Second Part of the *Confessions* and related letters (1769–1770). Trousson's account of Rousseau's underlying psychology is not implausible—especially after 1764, the proliferation of excuses might be accounted for better through paranoia and obsessive guilt feelings than through newfound sincerity or substantive intellectual development. Moreover, one might plausibly infer that, at the time of inserting his indirect avowal in *Emile*, he may have expected this to be his only public statement on the topic of his children. Thus, the autobiographical turn after 1764–1765 is a truly unfortunate one for those who would

prefer to read Rousseau as a moralist in completely good standing. All this being said, the underlying psychology is only one side of the question, and the author's stated rationales are likely the more important side.²⁰⁸ In this case, these rationales could naturally be used to justify almost any behavior, even if at various points Rousseau offered other principles that might restrain the excessive subjectivity which may result from a focus on intentions and the heart.²⁰⁹ Overall, it is reasonable to argue that the act of discarding may be considered incidental or peripheral to his thought. Even so, his excuses for it should be considered fundamental, since they express a broad and deep philosophy of natural goodness corrupted through society, the main practical implication of which is greatly to reduce, and often to eliminate, personal responsibility for vice and moral "fault" (albeit not *usually* for moral "crime").²¹⁰

If the Veiled Antinomian reading of Masters and Kelly cannot account for the sincere moralizing phases of Rousseau's development and if the Flawed Moralist reading of Trousson cannot account for its practically demoralizing phases, what remains? We see that Rousseau's discarded children led him sometimes to acknowledge profound remorse and undertake moral labors as compensation, but, at other times, they led him to relentless apologetics and casuistry. These are comparably real aspects of his psychology and life history and are linked with comparably significant aspects of his philosophical

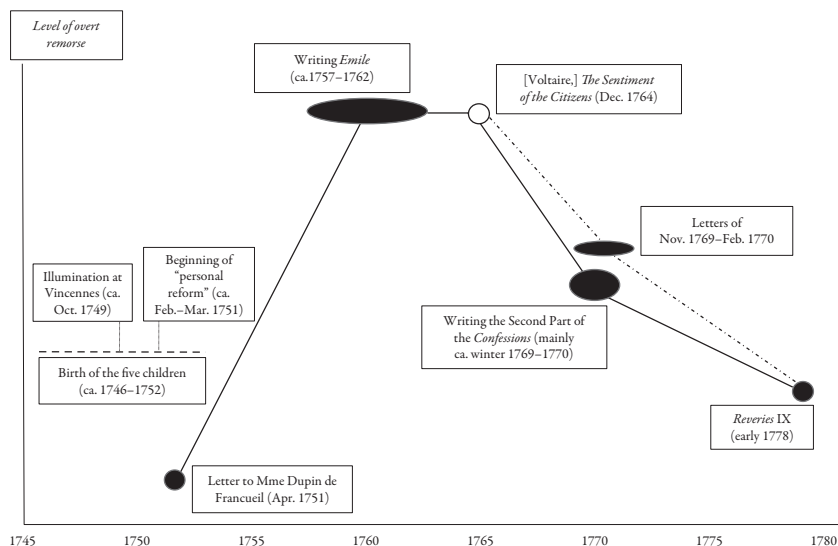


Figure 3. Chronological schematization of Rousseau's discarded children.

argumentation and cultural legacy. While this may seem intuitive as stated, the interpretive traditions have stoutly resisted this combination of theses, instead positing one side as real or fundamental and the other as appearance or peripheral.

Given the contradictory thrusts of his nineteen rationales, one can offer no simple absolution. Rousseau might be pitied for his misfortunes and even his culpability. Yet, his typical hedging of that culpability only enhances the tragedy of this case.

7. Chronological Recapitulation

The story of Rousseau's discarded children is complex, in part because of Rousseau's multiple shifts across time and in part because of his ambivalence at most times. In view of this chapter's thematic structure, a brief chronological summary may be of use. In Figure 3, determining the level of overt remorse requires judgment calls, and little weight should be placed on exact alignments in that dimension. Nonetheless, certain major turning points and shifts of emphasis are apparent. The ovals and circles represent our legitimate data points; the lines are merely placeholders, and might better be envisioned as wavy rather than straight. The dotted lines linked with the letters of 1769–1770 suggest the contrast between these private remarks and the more defensive posture taken in the overlapping period of the *Confessions*.