

Citizenship and Domination: The Relationship Between Sophie and Emile

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Within the field of education, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile: Or On Education* is a classic. It is praised for its insights into human development and the psychology of childhood. However, Book V, which follows the education of Sophie and her subsequent marriage to Emile, is often given an inadequate treatment — if not ignored altogether. What results from this neglect not only disguises Rousseau's views on the education of women, it also distorts the education of Emile and the purposes of Rousseau's project in general. Recently, more attention has been paid to Sophie, and a complete treatment of both Emile's and Sophie's education often leads to the analysis that *Emile* is more political than Rousseau makes explicit. The philosophy of education that he proposes is designed to support his ideal political structure.

However, as John Darling and Maaïke Van De Pijpekamp argue, the domination and violence that Sophie must suffer is a topic still virtually untouched by scholars.¹ As a result, we have failed to appreciate the issue of control that is present within the relationship between Sophie and Emile. Understanding this issue also sheds light on the education of each pupil, and the picture that emerges is one very different from the standard interpretation of *Emile*, which depicts Emile as a self-sufficient political actor. In the following pages, I hope to show that it is actually Sophie's education, not Emile's, that comes closer to preparation for citizenship in a democracy. Sophie is often thought to exist only for Emile's pleasure, but I believe Sophie to be much more complex than she appears on the surface. Furthermore, what stifles Sophie is not necessarily her education, but the dynamics of her marriage to Emile.

THE POLITICAL NATURE OF *EMILE*

In *Emile*, Rousseau writes, "If you wish to know what is meant by public education, read Plato's *Republic*. Those who merely judge books by their titles take this for a treatise on politics, but it is the finest treatise on education ever written."² It seems Rousseau hopes we will not be similarly fooled by the title of his own book. *Emile* was published simultaneously with *The Social Contract*, and it can be argued that Rousseau's philosophy of education is designed to support the political scheme proposed in his (explicit) political treatise. Jane Roland Martin writes, "Plato's guardians, upon whom Emile is modeled, are destined to contemplate the Good and rule the state... Emile too is destined to rule, albeit as a citizen in a democracy rather than as a philosopher king."³ The education of Emile is meant to complement the democracy that Rousseau calls for in *The Social Contract*. He believes that, under the eighteenth-century system of education, the conflict between nature and society requires that a child must be either educated to be a man or educated to be a citizen. Rousseau hopes to bring nature and society into "harmony" (*E*, 7). Thus, his pupil

will be educated for both manhood and citizenship. Rousseau appears to be successful in this endeavor — if one ignores Sophie. But what happens if we give Sophie more complete consideration? Is Emile able to be both man and citizen?

In order to ground what constitutes a citizen, I will rely upon Amy Gutmann's *Democratic Education*. Gutmann's conception is appropriate as she can be seen to be following in the footsteps of Rousseau. Gutmann, like Rousseau, aims to demonstrate how citizens of a democracy should be educated, albeit in a more modern context.⁴ In fact, Gutmann uses Rousseau to define what she means by education: "Like Rousseau, we therefore direct our concern to that portion of education most amenable to our influence: the conscious efforts of men and women to inform the intellect and to shape the character of less educated people." She further improves upon Rousseau by making explicit the possible relationships between nature and education. She explains, "Education may aim to *perfect* human nature by developing its potentialities, to *deflect* it into serving socially useful purposes, or to *defeat* it by repressing those inclinations that are socially destructive." From this foundation, Gutmann puts forward her own ideal of education for citizenship in a democracy.⁵

Gutmann's education for citizenship is derived from what she views to be the ultimate goal of a democracy: "conscious social reproduction." This means "supporting existing social ideals," but not blindly or uncritically. She explains, "Children must learn not just to *behave* in accordance with authority but to *think* critically about authority if they are to live up to the democratic ideal of sharing political sovereignty as citizens." Thus, education for citizenship is, first of all, intimately connected to a child's relationship to authority. She says, "Because being a democratic citizen entails ruling, the ideal of democratic education is being ruled, then ruling." Furthermore, parents, citizens, and professional educators should share this authority. The combination of such viewpoints will help to ensure that it is the ideals of the state, not necessarily the practices (which may be undemocratic) that are reproduced. Second, a child must have the ability to share in the democratic process. This requires a "capacity for rational deliberation to make hard choices in situations where habits and authorities do not supply clear or consistent guidance." According to Gutmann, the child who experiences this kind of education will be prepared for citizenship in a democracy.⁶

EMILE AND SOPHIE AS CITIZENS

Only by understanding the role of Sophie and her education can we fully understand the education of Emile. Therefore, it is necessary to consider them together, rather than as separate and independent. Rousseau's educational scheme is based on what he perceives to be the natural difference between men and women. He writes, "The man should be strong and active; the woman should be weak and passive; the one must have both the power and the will; it is enough that the other should offer little resistance" (*E*, 385). His explicit goal is to educate Emile for manhood and citizenship and Sophie to be Emile's wife. The tutor is to foster in Emile a reasoning ability that is unfettered by societal conventions, which Rousseau deems to be silly and corrupt (*E*, 70). Although some scholars suggest that Sophie

is educated simply to follow the reason of Emile,⁷ this is not the case. On the contrary, she develops her own reasoning ability, along with a deep understanding of morality. Rousseau tells us that “Sophie loves virtue,” and “a woman’s judgment develops sooner than a man’s; being on the defensive from her childhood up, and entrusted with a treasure so hard to keep, she is earlier acquainted with good and evil” (*E*, 431). Furthermore, marriage “produces a moral person of which woman is the eye and man the hand” (*E*, 407). Therefore, it is not Emile, but Sophie, who must make the moral decisions. Emile must only represent her decisions in the public sphere. The question then becomes, is it Sophie or Emile who is able to share in the democratic process? From this analysis, neither pupil fulfills Gutmann’s criteria of participation. However, subtle references to political participation more often involve Sophie than Emile. For example, it is Sophie who enters into a “treaty” with her parents in order to choose a husband, and it is the woman who has the ability to commit treason (*E*, 436 and 388). Emile, on the other hand, “scarcely knows what is meant by government; his business is to find the best” (*E*, 506). Even after his travels and lessons in government, Emile determines that no current form of government is better than any other. What matters is the liberty that resides “in the heart of the free man” (*E*, 524). Thus, his loyalty is not to any society, but to Sophie alone. It is Sophie, not Emile, who chooses the society in which they live and possesses the knowledge about that society’s ideals. Emile is merely concerned with the liberty “in the heart.” Therefore, Sophie’s education better develops the capacity for social reproduction.

In order to address the “conscious” part of conscious social reproduction, we must address the role of authority in the education of both Emile and Sophie. Emile’s relationship to authority can be viewed in two ways. First, it can be argued that Emile is never subjected to authority, which is the standard interpretation of his education. The tutor is merely his guide, and Sophie is Emile’s subject. Under this interpretation, Emile is never ruled but always rules. Even if this were the case (and I believe Sophie’s education proves that it is not), it fails to attain Gutmann’s ideal of being ruled and then ruling. The second view, and the one that I take to be correct, is that Emile is always, unknowingly, subjected to authority. He is manipulated by his tutor only as preparation to be manipulated by Sophie (*E*, 100). This view suggests that Emile is never given the opportunity to rule, thus, again, failing Gutmann’s criteria. Both interpretations of Emile’s relationship to authority suggest that he is not properly educated to be critical of authority. He simply does not understand its dynamics. If he has never been ruled, he will not know how to rule in a democracy. If he is always, unknowingly, ruled, he does not have the opportunity to be critical. Furthermore, since he never knows that he is being ruled, his conception of authority is faulty. On the other hand, Sophie’s education necessitates both being ruled and ruling. However, she is not ruled by Emile but by society. Rousseau believes that a woman’s reputation in society is of utmost importance, and, therefore, she must understand what is expected of her. But this is not to say that she blindly follows the authority of her society. Rousseau writes,

But how can she set about this task [of being the moral “eye”] if she is ignorant of our institutions, our customs, our notions of propriety, if she knows nothing of the source of

man's judgment, nor the passions by which it is swayed? Since she depends both on her own conscience and on public opinion, she must learn to know and reconcile these two laws, and to put her own conscience first only when the two are opposed to each other. She becomes the judge of her own judges, she decides when she should obey and when she should refuse her obedience. She weighs their prejudices before she accepts or rejects them; she learns to trace them to their source, to foresee what they will be, and to turn them in her own favour; she is careful never to give cause for blame if duty allows her to avoid it. This cannot be properly done without cultivating her mind and reason. (*E*, 414)

This type of education allows Sophie to both obey and criticize authority. Although it is Emile who expresses either her obedience to or criticism of authority, it is Sophie who makes the judgment. Finally, the culmination of Sophie's education is her replacement of Emile's tutor. The tutor says to Emile,

Dear Emile, all his life through a man needs a guide and counselor. So far I have done my best to fulfill that duty; my lengthy task is now ended, and another will undertake this duty. To-day I abdicate the authority which you gave me; henceforward Sophie is your guardian. (*E*, 532)

Thus, while Sophie has been ruled by society and her conscience, she now rules over Emile. In fact, Emile becomes "her slave" (*E*, 464). One finds it hard to believe that a man enslaved, even by a woman, can truly be a citizen. Yet, by ruling Emile, Sophie is able to share in the politics of her society, thus more nearly fulfilling Gutmann's conception of a citizen.

THE DOMINATION OF SOPHIE

If my analysis is correct, it is the education of Sophie, rather than Emile, that comes closer to preparation for citizenship. One wonders if Rousseau truly has the faith in nature that he suggests. After all, if Emile is educated according to nature, why is Sophie required as a check on his behavior? If Sophie is the "eye" and Emile merely the "hand" of politically moral behavior, why is Sophie not given the status of full citizen? The answer to this question has nothing to do with nature and everything to do with societal conventions. As Martin observes, "Rousseau appeals to nature, but he does not trust it."⁸ Rousseau is not ready to trust the individual man, but he is even more hesitant to subvert patriarchal society. However, he admits that a patriarchy is not "natural." For example, Sophie must understand "the mind of those men who have authority over her, either by law or custom" (*E*, 419). This authority is granted by convention — not nature. Still, he feels the need to maintain the status quo through an appeal to nature. He does not trust Emile, so he must entrust Sophie with the responsibility of citizenship. Yet, he must then find a way to put Sophie "in her place." He does so with so-called natural physical domination and control. Darling and Van De Pijpekamp argue, "Rousseau's analysis of the relationship between the sexes is conceived primarily in terms of control."⁹ Moreover, they argue, "Much of the argument about the 'natural' way for the sexes to relate to each other derives from a particular view of the sex act."¹⁰ As mentioned earlier, this view entails an aggressive man and a passive woman (*E*, 385). This is made clear when the tutor says to Sophie, "When the wife is like Sophie, it is, however, good for the man to be led by her; that is another of nature's laws, and it is to give you as much authority over his heart, as his sex gives him over your person, that I have made you the arbiter of his pleasure" (*E*, 531). Although Sophie may rule over Emile's

emotions, Emile retains physical control over Sophie's body. This results in what can only be called, in light of contemporary understandings, a justification for rape. Rousseau writes,

Why do you consult their [women's] words when it is not their mouths that speak? Consult their eyes, their colour, their breathing, their timid manner, their slight resistance, that is the language nature gave them for your answer. The lips always say "No," and rightly so; but the tone is not always the same, and that cannot lie. (*E*, 417)

Thus, even when a woman says "no," she must still be cautious of the aggressive man. She must carry the burden of constant vulnerability. Rousseau further victimizes a woman by advising her to keep quiet about such violent acts, since a civilized society would not believe her anyway (*E*, 387). As a result, Sophie lives in constant fear. Thus, while she is the "brains behind the brawn," any overt attempt to use her intelligence to right the wrongs done against her would be to put herself at further risk.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that Rousseau deserves much of the praise he receives for his insights into childhood. However, to ignore Sophie and the injustices done to her is to give *Emile* a superficial and uncritical treatment. More than that, it is to misunderstand Rousseau's political position. To return to a point made previously, Rousseau hopes to harmonize nature and society. This is done, not through *Emile's* education, but through *Sophie's*. Emile is educated to be a man, Sophie is educated to be a citizen, and their marriage produces a harmony of nature and society. Rousseau maintains a political structure that is dependent upon convention. *The Social Contract* makes a crucial point:

To these three kinds of laws is added a fourth, the most important of all, which is engraved neither on marble nor on bronze, but in the hearts of the citizens; a law which creates the real constitution of the State, which acquires new strength daily, which, when other laws grow obsolete or pass away, revives them or reinforces them, preserves a people in the spirit of their institutions, and imperceptibly substitutes the force of habit for that of authority. I speak of manners, customs, and above all of opinion — a province unknown to our politicians, but one on which the success of all the rest depends.¹¹

Indeed, opinion is the foundation of Sophie's education. Rousseau writes, "'What will people think' is the grave of a man's virtue and the throne of a woman's" (*E*, 393). It is Sophie who must become dependent upon the General Will, while "a man has no one but himself to consider" (*E*, 392). Since the basis of the General Will is the common good, a free man such as Emile cannot truly embrace that good.¹² Rousseau's own disdain for his contemporary society is clear. Neither the education of man nor a new political structure will allow a man to reclaim his natural freedom. This freedom is simply irreconcilable with civil society. Rather, the wife must sacrifice her own freedom in order to bring her husband under the control of even the best society and to convert his natural freedom to civil liberty. Although Sophie is Rousseau's only solution to harmonizing nature and society, he fears the potential consequences of granting Sophie citizenship. He is afraid that the tradition of elevating politics over the individual man — the only tradition with which he hopes to break — will ensue. Therefore, it is again the woman that must be sacrificed.

She must live in fear in order to allow Emile the illusion of his superiority as the natural man.

Historically, the U.S. system of public education has also tried to make the natural individual compatible with society. While the means may change, the political ends remain the same. If we accept Rousseau's position that nature and society are incompatible without the sacrifice of some intermediary, is this system of education destined to fail? Or, have we, in fact, been sacrificing an intermediary to accomplish the desired harmony? Arguments could be made for both positions, and some may even insist that women have continued to be the sacrificial intermediaries who allow men to retain the illusion of their freedom despite social control. On a societal level, gender role expectations are still quite similar to those laid out by Rousseau. In fact, a description of Sophie may sound eerily familiar to many contemporary women: "Since she depends both on her own conscience and on public opinion, she must learn to know and reconcile these two laws, and to put her own conscience first only when the two are opposed to each other" (*E*, 414).

In other words, a woman must always balance her own individuality with the expectations of society. Like Sophie, this ability may better prepare her for citizenship in a democracy. Her advantage over Sophie is that, while violence against women is still prevalent, it is no longer the norm in this country. Moreover, it is true that women have increasingly obtained possession of both the moral "eye" and "hand," as their presence in the public sphere has increased. Nevertheless, this hand is often tied. The expectation that women should engage in the reproductive processes (to use Martin's term) remains, but support for these processes is minimal. In a marriage between a man and a woman, although both may be breadwinners, it is the woman, because of her gender, who is expected to prepare the bread.¹³ Therefore, while she may be better prepared for democratic citizenship, she still lacks the support to fully realize this participation. However subtly or explicitly, she is often expected to sacrifice her own voice for the sake of others and for the sake of harmony.

Our political ideals and expectations are most often and efficiently transmitted through our educational processes. However, Rousseau's and contemporary U.S. political ideals are unsatisfactory if they imply either the failure of the educational system or the sacrifice of some significant portion of the population. Consequently, what Rousseau may really teach us is that those ideals must be reconstructed to enable the success of society's educational enterprise.

1. John Darling and Maaïke Van De Pijpekamp, "Rousseau on the Education, Domination and Violation of Women," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 42, no. 2 (1994): 115–132.

2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Everyman, 1993), 8. This work will be cited as *E* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 38.

4. Some may argue that analyzing Rousseau through the lens of a modern author distorts his meaning. I find such an argument to belittle the importance of classical texts such as *Emile*. It is possible to

understand Rousseau within his context but also apply it to our own. Without this application, what is the purpose of studying classical works?

5. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 19 and 22 (emphasis in original).

6. *Ibid.*, 42, 20, 51 (emphasis in original), 3, 42, 19, and 41.

7. Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation*, 54.

8. *Ibid.*, 41.

9. Darling and Van De Pijpekamp, "Rousseau on the Education, Domination and Violation of Women," 125.

10. *Ibid.*, 118.

11. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Susan Dunn (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), 191.

12. *Ibid.*, 170.

13. Martin names the "reproductive processes" to be "the rearing of children," "tending the sick, taking care of family needs, and running a household." This is in contrast to "productive processes" that include political, cultural, and economic activities. Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation*.