The Family and the Political Self

Having children is one of the most common goals among human beings. The Family and the Political Self aims to capture the insights that can be gleaned from taking this truth seriously. One insight is that human beings may not be as self-interested as is commonly supposed. In this book, Laurence Thomas argues that the best construal of the political self reflects this conception of human beings.

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THE FAMILY AND THE
POLITICAL SELF

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For Thomas Nagel

A Bridge Over Troubled Waters
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Caveat preemtptor. Although this book is profoundly inspired by the great French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, I have not aimed to offer a reading of his political thought. However, I have always been impressed by his thought that there is a sublime excellence that comes about only when human beings interact in the right way (De L’État de Nature, sect. 8, para. 2). This claim is generally regarded as the lynchpin of his argument for the move from the State of Nature to Civil Society. If this claim is true, then it follows that human beings are quintessentially social creatures. That is, if the Good is to be attained, it is only through social interaction that we can do so. My aim in this book, then, has been simply to sketch an account of how this might be so. If there is one theme more than any other that holds sway in this work, it is that human beings are not as driven by self-interest as many, including moral and political theorists, are inclined to suppose. Indeed, as I try to show in chapter 2, a self-interested biological explanation for having children runs afoul. Kantians want to show that morality should have a hold upon our lives regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Rousseau, if I understand him correctly, saw as clearly as anyone that the kind of moral environment in which we live bears mightily upon the

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extent to which morality can obtain a secure purchase upon our lives.

The ideas for this book began germinating in 1997 when I gave the Kovler Lectures at the University of Cape Town South Africa. A subsequent trip as a visiting professor gave greater shape to my ideas. I got to witness, first hand, the evil of Apartheid bow to the majesty of goodwill, as people of all backgrounds found it more fruitful to cooperate with one another than to blame one another. Both visits were arranged by the Benatar family, to whom I am so grateful for their friendship and generosity.

The fundamental argument of chapter 1 coalesced as I reflected on the central idea advocated by Dr. Laura C. Schlessinger that children should be our first priority. Although I am well aware that (as a radio talk show host) she is a controversial figure in many respects, it has always seemed to me that the various controversies that swirled around her did not touch the point that children should be the first priority of parents. I have understood her to hold that children are not trophies to be showcased, but gems to be treasured and rendered more radiant. That idea has never ceased to resonate mightily with me. There is no greater love than that which parents have for their children. There is no greater moral gift than parental love. Thus, I concur with Schlessinger that society is as it should be only insofar as it never loses sight of this truth. In listening to her counsel callers, time and time again, not to compare their children with one another, but to affirm the uniqueness of each, I came up

with the articulation that parental love provides each child with a sense of cherished uniqueness without invidious comparison. I am very grateful to Schlessinger for her encouragement and correspondence with me regarding this matter.

By the time drafts of this book were well underway, Edward McClennen joined the philosophy faculty at Syracuse University. His seminar in social theory was crucial in helping me to formulate the argument that neither parental love nor fellow-feeling is a zero-sum good. He claimed that I am one of the reasons he joined the Syracuse University faculty. Perhaps. But while I can readily indicate what I have learned from him, I cannot begin to fathom what he has learned from me. My colleague Michael Stocker served, as he has done throughout my career, as an ever-present sounding board for my inchoate ideas. I am grateful to him for taking my work seriously over the years. He has been a pillar of my professional career.

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Monique Canto-Sperber, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Bertrand Guillarime, and Ruwen Ogien have all been a wonderful part of my intellectual life in Paris.

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For Rousseau, the moral sentiments should have center stage in our political reality. Gratitude, I argue, is one of these sentiments. The fortunate life that I have been able to live would never have been possible without the affection and goodwill of so many people. Thank you.

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