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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.

Laurence Thomas is professor of philosophy and professor of political science in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.

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For Thomas Nagel
A Bridge Over Troubled Waters

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Acknowledgments

Caveat preemptor. 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.¹ 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

¹ Aside from this book, two essays were inspired: "Forgiving the Unforgivable," in Eve Garrard and Geoffrey Scarre (eds.) *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2003), and "Upside-Down Equality: A Response to Kantian Thought" in Michael P. Levine and Tamas Pataki (eds.), *Racism in Mind* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

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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.

Joan and Norman Poltenson, of Young Israel Shaari-Torah, have provided me not only with intellectual support, but with the spiritual support of family and community without which life has so much less meaning.

Many parts of this work were written in Paris; and in this regard, I have an enormous debt of gratitude on two accounts. One is to my good friends at the café La Fontaine Saint Michel: the husband and wife team, Carole and Pascal, along with their working partner, Didier. Whenever I would show up, they all marvelously accommodated me, my computer, and my various bits of paper, as I struggled to give form to my ideas. Likewise for the two waiters, Johann and Jean-Paul. Although no one knew much about what I was writing, save what I told them, they all took enormous pride in helping me to complete the project. Indeed, they very warmly referred to me as *their* American, an honor I accept with

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pride. Without the goodwill of the folks at La Fontaine Saint Michel it would have been impossible to finish this book. My gratitude to them knows no bounds. A l'équipe de La Fontaine Saint Michel, et surtout Carole, Pascal, et Didier: Je vous serai toujours reconnaissant d'avoir été là pour moi.

I should also like to thank the Rougemont family, which ranges over three generations. They have all been a part of my life for so very many years that I cannot imagine Paris without them. Their lives are a marvelous testimony to the richness of the family, and the moral powers that it can occasion. It is rather clear to me that my reading of Rousseau on the family owes much of its inspiration to the Rougemont family. Indeed, when I watch the son Laurent interacting with his two infants, it is almost as if Rousseau wrote about the love of a father for his children with Laurent in mind. That, of course, is a silly thought, since Laurent's very existence was quite some ways off. But I am confident that this silly thought is one that Laurent's wife cherishes. À la famille Rougement: Vous êtes un cadeau du ciel.

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

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Finally, I would like to thank several students (past and present) who worked with me on this project: First among these is Nazri Abdel-Aziz, now an instructor in mathematics for SUNY's

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College of Environment, Science, and Forestry. The idea of parental loving bestowing a sense of uniqueness without invidious comparison owes much to conversations with him. Nate Federman and Daniel Hoff each read and commented extensively on the first chapter, and helped me to give better articulation to many of my thoughts. Brian Landau has been a model – a veritable Platonic instantiation – of the ideal of gratitude that I have sought to articulate. The same holds for Rawan Jabaji. Furthermore, her wonderful work on friendship inspired me to think of the idea of parental love and fellow-feeling as non-zero-sum goods. As I worked through the edited manuscript, Michael Montgomery proved to be a bundle of energy and inspiration as I wrestled with last-minute formulations. He was invaluable. Michael McFall and Adam Schechter (both graduate students) have been an ever-present sounding board for my thoughts. Their constant presence has been a godsend.

It was Douglas MacLean who was first inclined to think that I had something to say; and it was Norrie Feinblatt who, in her role as copy editor, helped me to say it better.

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.

Syracuse, NY
February 2005