Review of *The Psychology of Inequality: Rousseau's* Amour Propre
(Michael Locke McLendon)

Forthcoming in *History of Political Thought*

Book:
McLendon, Michael Locke. *The Psychology of Inequality: Rousseau's* Amour-Propre.
Philadelphia; University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 224 pages.
Series: Haney Foundation Series
ISBN: 978-0-8122-5076-3.
LCCN: 2018017411.

Reviewer:
Sid Simpson
Perry-Williams Postdoctoral Fellow in Philosophy and Political Science
The College of Wooster

Word Count: 1887 (1924 with footnote)

There is a good case to be made that Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw most clearly the psychological bases of pathology in modern commercial democracies. On his account, vanity runs rampant, people place more value in *seeming* to be talented rather than actually being so, and citizenship falls by the wayside as men and women forfeit their virtues in the pursuit of vice. At the center of his famously radical critique of liberal democracy and its neurotic vanity is the passion *amour-propre,* or "self-love," which provides us with a rich catalog of emotions including pride, envy, desire, and self-worth. Distinct from the straightforward natural desire for survival that Rousseau terms *amour-de-soi-même*, *amour-propre* is an irreducibly social passion that compels individuals to pursue honor, glory, and distinction often to the detriment of their peers.

In *The Psychology of Inequality: Rousseau's* Amour-Propre*,* Michael Locke McLendon seeks to reestablish *amour-propre* as a framework for apprehending the dangers of inequality in modern society. McLendon has at least two broad reasons for looking to Rousseau. First, the categories of *amour-propre* and its attendant emotions have been lost to what he calls "utilitarian moral language," traceable back to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* through Jeremy Bentham's classical utilitarianism. (3) This moral framework ultimately reduces human decision making to an instrumental rationality: individuals seek only to maximize their own rational interests. Despite this utilitarian framework permeating contemporary "political, social, and economic analysis," McLendon contends that the complexities of life in commercial democracies cannot be adequately understood without taking into account the experience of pride, envy, vanity, and desire that Rousseau centers in his analysis of *amour-propre.* (5) According to McLendon, looking to Rousseau's *amour-propre* as the "classically aristocratic" urge to "be best" illuminates a startling truth about modern society that the utilitarian framework misses: it is "more classically aristocratic than is often appreciated and produces individuals who have the same desires and concerns as their counterparts from bygone ages." (7)

A second motivation for McLendon's study of *amour-propre* is his disagreement with the existing scholarly literature on this Rousseauean passion. For decades, *amour-propre* had been treated as a strictly negative passion, giving rise only to destructive and dangerous social vices. However, in recent years scholars like N. J. H. Dent, Laurence D. Cooper, David Lay Williams, and Frederick Neuhouser have argued convincingly that *amour-propre* also has a positive valence; virtue, patriotism, morality, the general will and even subjectivity itself require *amour-propre* for their development. McLendon, on the other hand, thinks that these "positive *amour-propre* theorists" go somewhat too far in trying to reconcile the protean ambiguities of *amour-propre* with liberalism, to the effect of sidelining the radical insights of Rousseau's critique of social psychology. In order to make the case for a renewed look at the passion's relevance to modern inequality, McLendon devotes the majority of the book to giving a genealogy of *amour-propre*, from its roots in Homeric honor culture, through Augustine and medieval Christianity, and continuing on after Rousseau with Tocqueville's writings on democratic vice.

McLendon chooses Sophocles' *Ajax* as the starting point for his claim that *amour-propre* is best understood as a classically aristocratic passion. Ajax is the archetypical aristocrat; he is a warrior who cares most of all for glory and "fears nothing more than shame." (18) His essence is animated by his own superiority and urge to "be best." Indeed, for both Ajax and Rousseau life in civil society is zero sum: "one person's success is by definition another person's defeat. There is only one best." (25) Thus, Ajax's aristocratic values, "to have his superior abilities, or his *aristeia*, eternally recognized by the species and to establish his identity as a great hero," serve as a cipher for the anxious vanity of *amour-propre.* (24) On the other hand is Odysseus, whom McLendon cites as the contrasting archetype for democracy, prudence, and *amour-de-soi-même*. Despite the considerable similarity between Sophocles' juxtaposition of aristocratic Ajax and democratic Odysseus and Rousseau's own distinction between *amour-propre* and *amour-de-soi-même*, Rousseau does not merely adopt the Homeric dichotomy. He does, however, find the honor culture of Ajax an appropriate description of his contemporary philosophes, such as Diderot and Voltaire, who exacerbated belief in a deep connection between talent and social recognition entirely inaccessible to ordinary working-class and peasant citizens. (38-39) Though the honorific urges of Ajax are not yet the ambivalent passion that Rousseau is known for, there is a direct continuity between his yearning to be best and the vain posturing of which Rousseau is so critical.

The next chapter in McLendon's genealogy of *amour-propre* centers on Augustine. Despite Rousseau's strident critiques of Augustinian theology, especially given that original sin is fundamentally incompatible with his commitment to the natural goodness of humanity, McLendon contends that Rousseau's *amour-propre* is fundamentally influenced by Augustine's conception of *amor sui*. Augustine's articulation of this passion represents a crucial development from Homeric honorific culture insofar as he articulates how "the love of glory and honor often leads to domination and cruelty." (55) While the urge to be best and domination were relatively undifferentiated in Sophocles' play, Augustine is the first to bifurcate the outcomes of *amor sui*: it can be democratic and employed to the social benefit, but also has the capacity to degenerate into *libido dominandi*. McLendon surveys a host of seventeenth-century neo-Augustinians - among them Abaddie, Pascal, Nicole, and Malebranche - and concludes that while they tack

closer to a more socially beneficial reading of *amor sui*, Rousseau takes much more seriously Augustine's warning that the lust for domination is never kept entirely at bay.

At this point, McLendon devotes a chapter to exploring Rousseau's own presentation of *amour-propre,* especially in his *Second Discourse.* Whereas the well-known conjectural history in Section I of the *Second Discourse* gives an origin story for *amour-propre*, Section II holds the crucial Augustinian move central to McLendon's account. The emergence of labor markets in commercial societies provided the "classical Greek aristocratic" battlefield on which people could now become *aristos,* thereby securing their survival. (106) That is, commercial society provides the conditions under which the passion *amour-propre* is transformed into what McLendon calls "*amour-propre* interested:" a "combination of the desire for superiority and the desire for material gain. *Amour-de-soi-même* blends with *amour-propre*." (106). The competition for esteem and survival become linked in commercial society, resulting in "dangerous concentrations of wealth that open the door for coercion and abuse." (107) Having articulated Rousseau's problematic thus, McLendon turns to *The Social Contract*, *Emile,* and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* in order to articulate the "minimal self"[1] that Rousseau proposes as an antidote to *amour-propre* and *libido dominandi*. In brief, McLendon contends that for Rousseau all must be recognized equally in public, whereas honor should be enjoyed privately so as to calm the aristocratic undercurrents of *amour-propre.*

McLendon's final substantive chapter is dedicated to Alexis de Tocqueville. Writing some eighty years later, Tocqueville nevertheless invokes Rousseau's moral psychology in *Democracy in America*'s analysis of bourgeois democracy. Though he never uses the phrase *amour-propre*, Tocqueville is similarly concerned about the ways modernity nurtures the *libido dominandi*. However, Rousseau and Tocqueville differ sharply on where they think the passion originates; for Rousseau, the *aristo*cratic nature of *amour-propre* implies that vanity and vice issue from the elite in their pursuit to be best. Tocqueville, on the other hand, places the blame squarely on the *demos*. Their mediocrity, and the "intellectual habits and social mores engendered by equality" are the foremost threats to freedom. (130) Put succinctly, Rousseau sees democratic equality as the cure to *amour-propre*'s socially pernicious effects, whereas Tocqueville sees democratic equality as its fount. Given this disagreement, Tocqueville falls back on an uneasy middle way between the neo-Augustinian optimism that *libido dominandi* can be used for good and Rousseau's overbearing pessimism about the prevalence of inflamed *amour-propre*.

The Psychology of Inequality concludes with a renewed call to look to Rousseau's diagnosis of modern social ills. After all, contemporary scholarship indicates that "the upper classes tend to have less compassion and are more willing to cheat than the general population," vindicating Rousseau's claim that the elite are more inclined to be cruel. (160) At a moment when critiques of the rich and powerful are often written off as a form of Nietzschean *ressentiment*, Rousseau's analysis of *amour-propre* provides a critical vantage point from which to condemn those who have the most at a time of world-historical inequality. McLendon does,

[1] McLendon has written further on the "minimal self" in Rousseau elsewhere: see McLendon, Michael Locke. "Rousseau and the minimal self: A solution to the problem of *amour-propre*." *European Journal of Political Theory* 13, no. 3 (2014): 341-361.

however, admit that Rousseau's analysis has its limits; Tocqueville, for instance, reminds us that the masses also have a *libido dominandi*. Nonetheless, Mclendon is entirely right to draw our attention to how Rousseau presciently outlined the psychological bases of inequality.

The Psychology of Inequality is well-researched, well-written, and largely convincing. It will be attractive to a number of different audiences: those whose research revolves around Rousseau or more specifically around Rousseau's *amour-propre*, those interested in moral psychology as it relates to inequality, and students and scholars of political theory more generally. As a genealogy of *amour-propre*, its drawbacks are vanishingly few. However, the conclusion is quite brief and this reader would have enjoyed a longer discussion of the specific way that providing a genealogy of the passion bears on contemporary inequality. For instance, while McLendon acknowledges that both elites and the *demos* exhibit a certain *libido dominandi* today, he does not discuss whether they experience the passion in the same way and whether this variance complicates our understanding of *amour-propre*. Is the aristocratic urge to "be best" the same as the "egoïsme" that Tocqueville locates in the populace? Such a question is particularly salient against the backdrop of modern inequality, where the elite save their cruelty for the *demos*, but members of the *demos* often unleash their cruelty on one another. What's more, while it seems intuitively plausible that cruelty can spring both from elites as well as the *demos* simultaneously, it is unclear whether democracy can be palliative of *amour-propre* as in Rousseau yet inflammatory as in Tocqueville at the same time. One of the considerable strengths of McLendon's book is how he maps *amour-propre*'s odyssey through the history of political thought, yet it remains an open question whether or not the various takes on the Rousseauean passion can be reconciled in service of understanding inequality today.

A second concern has to do with the more specific academic conversation against which McLendon positions himself. If part of the motivation for the book was to provide a genealogy of *amour-propre* that responded to the "overcorrection" of the "positive *amour-propre* theorists," McLendon at times seems to overcorrect in the opposite direction. He contends that in focusing more on the positive dimensions of *amour-propre,* these theorists "blunt the critical edge of his [Rousseau's] daring political theory." (9) However, in highlighting the more pessimistic continuities between Rousseau and his peers, McLendon risks obscuring his more compelling argument that the advent of commercial society meaningfully mediates *amour-propre* in ways that make vice much more likely. Moreover, the "positive *amour-propre* theorists" may well respond: even if it is true that the emergence of commercial society profoundly structures the experience of *amour-propre* to the detriment of humanity, could not this aristocratic urge *still* be required for personal development and perhaps even freedom?

Nevertheless, *The Psychology of Inequality* is a welcome reminder looking back to Rousseau's articulation of *amour-propre* in its intellectual context can benefit us greatly today.