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Michael Locke McLendon, *The Psychology of Inequality: Rousseau's Amour-Propre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 213 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0812250763.

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The concept of *amour propre*—however inscrutable, however untranslatable—remains compelling, both within Rousseau studies and in social theory more broadly. Michael McLendon has a theory as to why: regardless of how much bourgeois societies may wish to conceive of themselves as having supplanted aristocracy in favor of equality, there is an aristocratic impulse that outlives aristocratic institutions. *Amour propre* captures the way the aristocratic impulse can operate independently of the institutions of aristocracy. It supplies a vocabulary that can be used to name as vices—love of wealth, honor, and fame—dispositions that are broadly tolerated and sometimes even prized in bourgeois societies. In *The Psychology of Inequality: Rousseau's Amour-Propre*, McLendon makes the case for the universality of the aristocratic impulse by undertaking a genealogy of *amour propre* from antiquity through modernity, from classical aristocracy through feudalism and modern commercial society. The result is an important contribution to the scholarship on Rousseau, on *amour propre*, and on the history of ideas more broadly.

Before turning directly to McLendon's intervention, it is worth laying down some markers with regard to existing interpretations of *amour propre* in Rousseau. A case could be made that *amour propre* is the central organizing concept of Rousseau's political and social theory as well as his account of moral development. But as I noted at the outset of this review, the concept is difficult to define and even to translate. (Most translators opt to leave it in the original French, though some translate it as "pride" or "vanity.") Put broadly, *amour propre* is the disposition to value the esteem of others. While it is not natural, *amour propre* emerges necessarily at the moment when people begin to consider themselves in relation to others. In Rousseau's political and social theory, it emerges when human beings first form societies; in his account of moral development, it emerges during adolescence. Though readers have historically emphasized the malign effects of *amour propre*, it is important to note that the disposition to value the esteem of others is intrinsically neither malign nor benign but rather becomes so based on how it is oriented. When malign, *amour propre* leads subjects to esteem themselves on the basis of their relative superiority to others; when benign, *amour propre* describes the desire for equality, not superiority.

In the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, which is commonly read as laying out the central

problem of Rousseau's philosophical system, Rousseau brilliantly details the malign implications of *amour propre*. Given the centrality of the text, it is perhaps unsurprising that Rousseau's interpreters have tended to emphasize the treatment of *amour propre* presented there over the broader account offered in *Emile*. This form of *amour propre*, which Nicholas Dent has called "inflamed," is the drive to be perceived by others as somehow better.[1] This passage from the *Discourse on Inequality* is representative:

On s'accoutume à considérer différens objets, et à faire des comparaisons; on acquiert insensiblement des idées de mérite et de beauté qui produisent des sentimens de préférence. A force de se voir, on ne peut plus se passer de se voir encore. Un sentiment tendre et doux s'insinue dans l'ame, et par la moindre opposition devient une fureur impétueuse: la jalousie s'éveille avec l'amour; la discorde triomphe, et la plus douce des passions reçoit des sacrifices de sang humain.[2]

As civilization develops, these comparisons become increasingly invidious, culminating in "l'homme sociable," who lives "que dans l'opinion des autres," who has "un extérieur trompeur et frivole, de l'honneur sans vertu, de la raison sans sagesse et du plaisir sans bonheur." [3]

Since the publication of Dent's *Rousseau: An Introduction*, this conception of *amour propre* has come to be understood as but one manifestation of it. In *Emile*, Dent argues, there is another, broader conception of *amour propre*—one that can be the basis of fellowship and mutual well-being. On this account, which has been further developed by Laurence Cooper and Frederick Neuhaus, *amour propre* is an intrinsically neutral faculty, neither corrosive nor benign in and of itself but susceptible to becoming either based on the use to which it is put. Here, *amour propre* can represent a drive to be perceived by others not necessarily as better but rather as equal. If one's conception of oneself in relation to others is based on equal respect or mutual obligation, if one seeks equality or mutuality in relation to others rather than superiority, then *amour propre* can facilitate the development of benign attributes like morality and patriotism. In *Emile*, Rousseau writes the following at the moment of the pupil's entry into adolescence:

Mais pour décider si celles de ces passions qui domineront dans son caractère, seront humaines et douces, ou cruelles et malfaisantes, si ce seront des passions de bienfaisance et de commisération, ou d'envie et de convoitise, il faut savoir à quelle place il se sentira parmi les hommes, et quels genres d'obstacles il pourra croire avoir à vaincre, pour parvenir à celle qu'il veut occuper.[4]

Drawing on passages like this one, Dent et al. have succeeded in complicating our understanding of *amour propre*, correcting for an overemphasis on inflamed *amour propre* and an underemphasis on *amour propre's* benign manifestations. (Among other things, Dent's corrective calls into question the most common English translations of *amour propre*—"vanity" and "pride"—on the grounds that they obscure the potentially edifying power of *amour propre*.)

All of this is well and good on McLendon's account. *The Psychology of Inequality* comes neither to praise nor to bury the revisionist reading. It is undeniable, McLendon writes, that "Rousseau's analysis of *amour propre* goes well beyond noxious vanity" (p. 8). But McLendon suspects that the revisionist scholarship on *amour propre* has gone too far, that it has overcorrected for the initial emphasis on malign *amour propre*, and that it is time to consider once again—through a novel prism—the malign effects of *amour propre*. Although McLendon

concedes that the revisionist interpretation is “well researched” and “backed up with an impressive amount of textual evidence” (p. 8), he argues that it ultimately overreads one strain in Rousseau’s thought at the expense of others. It shoehorns Rousseau into a Kantian conceptual framework by arguing that equal social standing can satiate the drive to distinguish oneself. (Note that, of the revisionists McLendon cites, only Neuhouser explicitly situates his reading in a Kantian context.) These interpretations, in McLendon’s words, “blunt the critical edge of Rousseau’s daring political theory” (p. 9). They write out of the story the aristocratic element of *amour propre* by which individuals seek to distinguish themselves from others and, ultimately, to dominate. Even if *amour propre* can theoretically be benign, McLendon argues, the way it actually manifests itself in modern liberal societies is overwhelmingly corrosive.

McLendon is interested in *amour propre* because he believes it can help us understand how an aristocratic element persists in societies that imagine themselves to have left it behind. This persistent aristocratic element is *not* the institutions of feudal aristocracy—high birth, hereditary titles, taxing and hunting privileges, special political dispensations, refined mannerisms, and so forth (p. 35). Rather, McLendon understands aristocracy as a cultural or psychological impulse to be “best in terms of merit and excellence” (pp. 16–17). For McLendon, commercial society doesn’t so much transcend aristocratic desire as re-channel it. While modern liberals praise equality and the dignity of all people, they also “fiercely compete for socioeconomic status and believe social hierarchies reflect individual merit” (p. 7). McLendon is conceptualizing *amour propre* broadly, such that it includes “honor loving, glory seeking,” and “an obsess[ion] with superiority” (p. 2). We should think of this incarnation of *amour propre*, he argues, more as a revival of classical than of feudal aristocracy.

I mentioned above that this book looks at *amour propre* through a novel prism. Herein lies the primary contribution of the book. Unlike the other recent treatments of *amour propre*, which emphasize the function of *amour propre* in Rousseau’s moral and political theory, McLendon undertakes a conceptual history, tracing the disposition that *amour propre* names back to the classical literature on aristocracy, especially Augustine’s idea of the *libido dominandi*. A reader looking for a direct, sustained engagement with Dent, Neuhouser, or Cooper will have come to the wrong place, because McLendon is asking a different kind of question. He is interested less in how *amour propre* functions in Rousseau’s moral and political theory and more how the impulse that *amour propre* names—the drive for distinction—had been conceptualized prior to Rousseau’s engagement with it and, to some extent, how it has been conceptualized since.

The book is organized into four main chapters, which together comprise an intellectual history of *amour propre*. The first chapter treats a classical notion of aristocracy as a source for the modern conception of *amour propre*. Here, McLendon draws on Sophocles’s *Ajax* to excavate the conceptual origins of *amour de soi* (which McLendon associates with Odysseus) and *amour propre* (which McLendon associates with Ajax). Although Sophocles never mentions *amour propre* in conjunction with *Ajax*, McLendon justifies the comparison on the basis of Rousseau’s general familiarity with Sophocles as well as the “conceptual similarities” between Sophocles’s distinction between democratic and aristocratic personalities and Rousseau’s distinction between *amour de soi* and *amour propre*. This chapter includes—by way of developing Rousseau’s aversion to the aristocratic impulse—a new and interesting perspective on his break with the *philosophes*, which McLendon attributes to Rousseau’s perception that the *philosophes* were invested in creating a new aristocracy of talent to replace the old hereditary aristocracy of high birth.

The second chapter traces *amour propre* to Augustine, whom McLendon identifies as the father of the concept. Augustine was the first to give a specific name (*amor sui*) to attributes that had been present but not specifically named in Homeric honor culture (p. 55). In this chapter, McLendon is concerned to rescue Rousseau from the interpretation of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century neo-Augustinians—Pascal, Abbadie, Malebranche, Sénault, and Nicole—who were overly impressed by the potentially beneficial effects of *amour propre*. (Bayle, Mandeville, and Nicole come in for similar criticism on similar grounds.) While Augustine did not rule out the possibility that some vices could be directed against even worse ones, McLendon insists that his most fundamental philosophical concern was for the various ways in which love of oneself could subvert the imperative to love God. McLendon locates in this idea the inspiration for the account of inflamed *amour propre* given in Rousseau. Rousseau, McLendon concludes, can be read not only as “a Platonist, a cynic, a neo-Epicurean, and a Stoic,” but, just as compellingly, as an Augustinian (p. 119).

Whereas chapter two presents and critiques the neo-Augustinian origins of *amour propre* as a source of “political, economic, and social well-being” (p. 94), chapter three interprets *amour propre* as a recrudescence of Augustine’s *libido dominandi*. Here, McLendon reads Rousseau against Mandeville, specifically Mandeville’s optimism about the synergy between self-interest and the demands of commercial society. While Rousseau found some social and moral value in *amour propre*, he did not accept the view common in the eighteenth century that a healthy society can accommodate pursuit of selfishness and honor. Unlike Mandeville and, later, Adam Smith, who McLendon associates with the same argument, Rousseau did not see commercial society as a safe harbor for humanity’s restless ambition.

Chapter four considers *amour propre* after Rousseau, particularly as theorized by Alexis de Tocqueville. McLendon characterizes Tocqueville’s “self-interest rightly understood” as a version of *amour propre* rehabilitated for democratic times, more specifically a synthesis of *amour de soi* and *amour propre* that uses the former to temper the socially corrosive elements of the latter. In this chapter, McLendon must once again wrestle with the inconvenient fact that Tocqueville never used the term *amour propre*. (McLendon speculates—following Allan Bloom—that Tocqueville may have avoided the term for fear of alienating readers who would be put off by references to Rousseau in the context of a defense of democracy.) McLendon, however, sees Tocqueville’s conception of “egoism” as a cousin to neo-Augustinian—as well as the Rousseauian—interpretations of *amour propre*.

There are two valences to Tocquevillian egoism, one (captured by the idea of “self-interest rightly understood”) that describes democracy’s capacity to channel self-interest into a concern for the common good, and another that associates democratic citizens’ zeal for equality with an impulse to attack excellence and elevate mediocrity. McLendon emphasizes the latter phenomenon, describing it as a manifestation of the *libido dominandi*, by which the drive for distinction is reoriented into a drive to tear down standards of excellence and virtue. The old aristocratic drive to elevate oneself becomes, in democracies, the drive to reduce everything to the lowest common denominator.

On McLendon’s reading, Tocqueville reconceptualizes the problem of inflamed *amour propre* by attributing to democratic society a problem for which Rousseau believed democratic society to be the solution (p. 54). I will close my review with the suggestion that Rousseau has a good

answer to Tocqueville's challenge, a better answer, I suspect, than McLendon allows. But, before I do that, I want to say that I learned a lot from this book--both about *amour propre* and about the importance of understanding the genealogy of concepts we wish to put to philosophical use. The book is a valuable addition to the literature on *amour propre*, on Rousseau, and on the history of ideas more broadly. It offers a fresh perspective on an old idea and will be necessary reading for anyone interested in *amour propre* or the intellectual history by which the term came to describe our unabating drive toward distinction.

Now, by way of closing, I would propose a Rousseauian solution to the Tocquevillian challenge and to the problem of *amour propre* itself. It is important to note that Rousseau was hostile neither to distinction in and of itself nor to the drive for distinction. (In the *Government of Poland*, for example, he recommends institutionalizing a system of rewards for patriots.) Rousseau understood that people would strive to distinguish themselves in society; and however dangerous that impulse could become, he believed healthy societies could accommodate it, so long as people sought approval for actions and attributes that benefitted their fellow citizens. Rousseau believed that democracy--which he understood as self-government combined with an emphasis on republican virtue--could solve the problem of inflamed *amour propre* by generalizing it such that love of self becomes interchangeable with love of one's fellows. So, to the various incarnations of *amour propre* McLendon identifies--*aristos*, *amor sui*, *libido dominandi*, egoism--I would add one more: *amour de la patrie* (love of the fatherland), which Rousseau envisioned as a way of reorienting *amour propre* toward the common interest.

NOTES

[1] N. J. Dent, *Rousseau: An Introduction to His Psychological, Social, and Political Theory*. (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

[2] Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, in *Œuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 3 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964), p. 169.

[3] Rousseau, *Discours*, p. 193.

[4] Rousseau, *Emile ou de l'éducation*, in *Œuvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 4 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969), pp. 523-524.

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