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# Michael L. McLendon, "The Psychology of Inequality: Rousseau's 'Amour-Propre'."

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**Michael Locke McLendon.** *The Psychology of Inequality: Rousseau's "Amour-Propre."*  
University of Pennsylvania Press 2018. 224 pp. \$69.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780812250763).

Michael L. McLendon has written a book that is as timely as it is an important contribution to the scholarship on Jean-Jacques Rousseau. With the publication of books like Frederick Neuhouser's *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality* (Cambridge University Press 2014) and Robin Douglass' *Rousseau and Hobbes* (Oxford University Press 2015), McLendon's book adds to the renewed interest scholars have had in Rousseau's thought, specifically his relationship to earlier eighteenth-century French thought and his analyses of the origins and contours of self-love (or what was called '*amour-propre*'). McLendon separates himself from these scholars, however, by centering 'the embarrassing Rousseau' (2), namely, the Rousseau that was labeled a proto-totalitarian because of his critiques of modern liberal democracy. In resuscitating this Rousseau, McLendon hopes to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Rousseau's critiques of modern liberal democracy and modern commercial society—critiques that are especially salient, McLendon avers, given the pervasiveness of meritocracy as a social and political ideal. In this way, McLendon's book also complements and provides important conceptual depth to recent work on meritocracy, such as Daniel Markovits' *The Meritocracy Trap* (Penguin 2019) and Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2020), among many others.

McLendon advances three claims to justify his turn to the embarrassing Rousseau. First, he argues that his reading of Rousseau productively foregrounds the relationship between *amour-propre* and aristocracy. *Pace* interpretations of *amour-propre* which either fixate on its relational nature or the role it plays in Rousseau's criticisms of commercial society, McLendon argues that these readings reduce *amour-propre* to the 'desire for praise and recognition' rather than 'a desire to be best' (16). To elaborate this point, McLendon in chapter 1 traces the idea of the aristocratic personality back to Sophocles' *Ajax*, arguing that the distinction it presents between the aristocratic personality and the democratic personality prefigures Rousseau's understanding of the distinction between *amour-propre* and *amour de soi-meme*, where the aristocratic personality corresponds to the former and the democratic personality to the latter. On McLendon's interpretation, *Ajax* shows us how whereas aristocrats are primarily concerned with being the best, democrats are 'prudent and calculating' (18). To be sure, there very may well be instances in which the aristocratic and democratic personality intersect: to be best, someone like Odysseus—who represents the democratic personality—may have to exercise prudence and calculation. But the two personalities diverge insofar as the democratic variant lends itself to the prioritization of collective goods and ends over the self-interested desire for glory.

McLendon goes on to argue in chapter 2 that Sophocles' distinction between the aristocratic and democratic personalities is taken up by St. Augustine, the English and French neo-Augustinians, and Rousseau. The author illuminates how irrespective of whether Rousseau was himself an Augustinian, he appears to have learned from Augustine that we should be suspicious of the idea that *amour-propre* can produce public benefits. This view, which McLendon labels 'a democratic approach to *amour-propre*,' was propounded most notably by the neo-Augustinian Bernard Mandeville, but while Rousseau recognized that *amour-propre* could, in principle, be good or bad, McLendon contends that he 'tends to the more pessimistic and aristocratic expressions of *amour-propre*' (61). Rousseau's view traces back to St. Augustine's *City of God*, where Augustine asserts that self-love 'is a gateway passion that leads to a desire to rule and dominate others' or the '*libido dominandi*' (65). In other words, the content of Rousseau's criticisms of *amour-propre* as a function

of the aristocratic personality is composed of this Augustinian claim about the desire to rule and dominate others: the desire to be the best simply is the megalomaniacal desire to dominate others, to express one's *libido dominandi*.

In chapters 3 and 4, McLendon explores Rousseau's attempts at theorizing the containment of *amour-propre* and its corresponding *libido dominandi*, along with Alexis de Tocqueville's 'liberal reply' to Rousseau. With respect to the former, the author argues that the solutions Rousseau offers to diminish the negative impact of *amour-propre* stem from two, overlapping goals. 'The first,' McLendon writes, 'is to minimize the importance of individual identity or the self, and the second is to deemphasize the social value of individual excellences' (112). According to McLendon, Rousseau proposes four means of reducing the aristocratic personality. They canvass many of the defining features of Rousseau's political thought, such as the distinction between sovereignty and government, the institutionalization of the general will, the propagation of civic virtue and patriotism, and the desire of sentiments of existence. McLendon does not do much as he could to explain what we stand to learn from these proposals, but, together, they demonstrate the incomplete character of related approaches to diminishing *amour-propre*—specifically those we find in Axel Honneth and Frederick Neuhouser.

With respect to the latter, McLendon concludes his book with an evaluation of Tocqueville's (liberal) response to Rousseau and the earlier discourse on the aristocratic and democratic personality. He shows how even though Tocqueville and Rousseau share the same 'Augustinian concern of domination and tyranny' (148), their respective moral psychologies were opposite. Whereas the *libido dominandi* was the consequence of the aristocratic personality for Rousseau, Tocqueville, on McLendon's interpretation, thought the desire to dominate was characteristic of the mass's desire for equality. Much like his treatment of Rousseau, it is not exactly clear what we are supposed to gain from this take on Tocqueville, but McLendon does well to show how Tocqueville applied the analysis of *amour-propre* to the U.S. case.

McLendon's book is a refreshing take on the well-trodden land that is Rousseau's political philosophy and the idea of *amour-propre*, but it leaves the reader with several crucial questions. First, while the book has many important things to say about early accounts of the aristocratic and democratic personalities, the concept of *amour-propre*, and Rousseau's thought, it is not clear which of these topics the book is, in fact, about. A genealogy of *amour-propre* is no doubt important for McLendon's story, but it does not seem to be the main thrust of the book. If it were, then McLendon would have to do more work to show why Rousseau in particular, rather than the many other authors he canvasses, ought to have center stage. One might suppose, then, that the book is really about Rousseau and perhaps Tocqueville, but if that is the case then it is not clear why we need the first two chapters at all—especially the first on Sophocles. As McLendon repeats throughout the book, there is no evidence Sophocles was the source of Tocqueville's conceptions of the aristocratic and democratic personalities (132). In addition, McLendon does not adduce any evidence that Rousseau admired the relevant aspects of Sophocles' *Ajax* either, if he even had thoughts on it. The same can indeed be said about the influence of Augustine on Rousseau's conception of *amour-propre*: McLendon admits that 'there is no evidence Rousseau admired this aspect of [Augustine's] theology,' namely, that Rousseau's *amour-propre* should be interpreted 'in light of Augustine's *amor sui*' (16). In sum, because it is not clear what or who the book is supposed to be about, it is not clear why we need chapters 1 and 2 to understand 3 and 4.

Indeed, it is not even clear why need chapter 4 if, in the final instance, the book is about Rousseau. McLendon seems to invoke Tocqueville's 'reply' to Rousseau to further articulate the complex relationship between the aristocratic and democratic personalities. While, on the one hand,

it is not clear why we should turn solely to Tocqueville, on the other hand, this move only lends itself to another ambiguity: what sense of democracy does McLendon mean when he describes those ‘democratic’ alternatives to the aristocratic personality and *amour-propre*? If we follow the meaning of democracy supplied by McLendon’s reading of Sophocles, then democracy has something to do with a kind of prudence and calculation about how best to satisfy one’s self-preservation (*amour de soi-meme*). McLendon notes that unlike the aristocrat, the democrat is able to understand how to work for others, which may imply that to have a democratic personality is to be other-oriented (with an added supposition that one does *not* care for others strictly for instrumental reasons) (19). Yet, if this is what McLendon means by democratic than his interpretation of Rousseau is not as distant from a Kantian reading as he appears to want. On the other hand, it is not clear how this would be democratic in any recognizably *Rousseauian* sense. As has been well-established, Rousseau was not a democrat in the eighteenth-century sense of the term (a point with which McLendon would, I think, agree), but he is at his most democratic in a loose sense when he explicates the politics and political affects which best favor the well-being of the poor. These latter concerns are what motivated the ancient democratic reforms of Solon—in contrast to Sophocles—and Marsilius of Padua—in looser contrast to Augustine. McLendon’s account of the democratic personality, and of ‘democracy,’ would have been strengthened by attending to such figures, but overall, *The Psychology of Inequality: Rousseau’s “Amour-Propre”* is well worth a read.

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