

# Rousseau, *Amour Propre*, and Intellectual Celebrity

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*With the publication of the First Discourse, Rousseau initiated a famous debate over the social value of the arts and sciences. As this debate developed, however, it transformed into a question of the value of the intellectuals as a social class and touched upon questions of identity formation. While the philosophes were lobbying to become a new cultural aristocracy, Rousseau believed the ideological glorification of intellectual talent demeaned the peasants and working classes. This essay argues that amour propre, as put forth in the Second Discourse, was in part designed to address this concern and is an attempt to highlight the dangers of making talent the measure of a human.*

While *amour propre* is often associated with Rousseau, it is not unique to him. In fact, he first makes mention of it in the twilight of its popularity. It has been well-established that the psychological concept was commonplace among philosophers in the late sixteenth, seventeenth, and first half of the eighteenth century. As Arthur Lovejoy demonstrates, a variety of thinkers—“theologians of different sects, philosophers of conflicting schools, *pensée*-writers and satirists, Catholics, Protestants, and free-thinkers” (1968, 131)—who had little in common and might have even viewed one another as intellectual adversaries, were united in their conviction that *amour propre* was the defining trait of human nature. Indeed, the roster of intellectuals who adopted the psychology of *amour propre* is impressive in its diversity: the Jesuit Mariana, numerous Jansenists including Pascal and Nicole, the Protestant Jacques Abbadie, the skeptic Montaigne, *moralistes* such as La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère, and a host of Enlightenment thinkers. In addition to Rousseau, Mandeville, Voltaire, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, etc., all developed psychologies that involved *amour propre*.<sup>1</sup> Rousseau is not even the only *saloniste* to make use of the term. D’Alembert (1967c, 340–42) employs it several times in his “Essai sur la Société des Gens de Lettres et des Grands” soon after Rousseau first utters it in “Preface to Narcisse.”<sup>2</sup>

Given the widespread usage of *amour propre*, it is not surprising that it is treated and conceptualized in a variety of ways. For example, Pascal finds *amour propre* a helpful tool in his attempts to demonstrate that human nature was wholly corrupted after the Fall. Secular thinkers such as Mandeville believe it is of great economic value and facilitates human sociability. Identifying how and for what purposes Rousseau uses *amour propre* is no simple affair. It shows up in many of his writings and is used in a variety of contexts. At times, he links *amour propre* to sexual instincts and establishes how it makes sexuality social. At other times, he focuses on the ontology of the emotion and emphasizes the potentially degrading dependencies that all humans experience. As a political and social theorist, moreover, he connects *amour propre* with economic inequality and makes much of the hidden psychological effects of what is often viewed as a rational activity and sphere of life. It is central to his powerful critique of modernity and eighteenth-century democratic capitalism. Arguably, it is the problem that both the education of Emile and the general will are designed to solve. In addition, recent scholarship stresses the positive dimensions of *amour propre* in Rousseau’s thought and emphasizes that he accepts the ordinary vice as “a useful but dangerous instrument” (Rousseau 1969a, 536 [*Emile*]; cf. Dent 1988; Dent and O’Hagan 1998; O’Hagan

<sup>1</sup>Hirschman (1977, 112) and Manent (1998, 86–92) both contend that the publication of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in 1776 puts an end to the dominance of the psychology of *amour propre*.

<sup>2</sup>The essay was written in 1753.

1999, 162–179; Cooper 1998, 1999).<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, Rousseau is viewed as one of the few eighteenth-century theorists who held a consistently negative valuation of *amour propre* (Jack 1978; Lovejoy 1968). By contrast, a good number of seventeenth-century theorists and almost all of Rousseau's contemporaries in the Enlightenment are far more ambivalent about such vices. Accepting the limits of human nature, these thinkers believe vanity and other ordinary vices could be manipulated to function as virtues and benefit the community. Even some religious intellectuals, including Nicole and Pascal, accept that *amour propre* has social value in the city of man (Hirschman 1977, 16–18; Keohane 1980, 275–311). This more recent scholarship eagerly contends that Rousseau is more than willing to stand with his Enlightenment brethren and use *amour propre* to strengthen attachments to morality as well as the public good.

As helpful as all the *amour propre* scholarship is, it remains incomplete. The purpose of this essay is to identify a neglected but vitally important aspect of *amour propre* that has yet to receive thorough scholarly examination. More specifically, I argue that Rousseau believes *amour propre* to be particularly dangerous when talent is the social locus of its expression. A good many Enlightenment thinkers believe inequality is acceptable, and indeed should be rewarded, if it is predicated on talent. For the *philosophes*, it was an article of faith that the intellectually talented are of inestimable social value and should be placed at the top rung of the social ladder. Under this proposed arrangement, Rousseau maintains that natural inequalities are overemphasized and the working classes and peasants are made to feel ashamed because of their inferior cognitive abilities. When the value of a person's life is reduced to his or her intellectual talents, he argues, much of the population will experience painful existential anxiety and succumb to a sense of worthlessness. *Amour propre*, in part, is designed to pierce through and discredit the ideologies constructed to elevate natural inequalities.

<sup>3</sup>Although he wasn't the first theorist to notice a positive *amour propre*, it would be fair to argue Dent is the father of this reassessment. His general argument, that a positive form of *amour propre* encourages mutual respect and a concern for others provided that it is grounded in equality, is identifiable in *Emile*. For a nice, short summary of Dent's basic argument, see Dent and O'Hagan (1998). Cooper adds to Dent's analysis by suggesting that *amour propre* promotes familial and conjugal love, civic virtue, compassion, moral heroism, etc. It even helps *Emile* contend with bouts of self-contempt (Cooper 1998, 663–669.) All the Rousseau, d'Alembert, Diderot, and Trousson translations are my own except d'Alembert (1963 and 2004).

## Rousseau in Paris: A Quest for Fame

A brief glimpse into Rousseau's life makes clear why he viewed the elevation of the intellectual classes as a dangerous social problem. At an early age, like many ambitious boys from the provinces, Rousseau was filled with dreams of becoming a famous man of letters and had full confidence that his talents were more than sufficient to achieve any goal his imagination could supply (Damrosch 2005, 40). In *The Confessions*, he divulges that his move to Paris in 1742 is partially inspired by his adolescent dreams: "A young man who arrives in Paris with a passable appearance and who is heralded for his talents," he recounts thinking, "is always sure of being welcomed" (Rousseau 1959, 283).<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately for Rousseau, his abilities did not appear until relatively late in life, and few counted him among the talented. He was viewed as ordinary by most who knew him in his pre-Paris days and just about everyone, Parisian friends included, were shocked by the success of the *First Discourse*.<sup>5</sup> As Starobinski (1971, 26) avers, Rousseau's childhood and early adulthood is akin to the state of nature he describes in the *Second Discourse*. It is a time in which he struggled to develop his abilities. Slowly, however, he progressed thanks to a good deal of self-education and a few profitable jobs, such as being a tutor for the Mably family. By the time he arrived in Paris, he had fully bloomed and was ready to make a name for himself.

From early on, however, it became clear that life as a man of letters was much harsher than he had earlier supposed. His talents were not immediately welcomed, and he was never fully comfortable making them the core of his identity. His first try at fame, which came in the form of a submission of a musical notation system to the Academy of Sciences, revealed a spiteful side to Rousseau that seems almost unimaginable in his younger self. Although the committee ultimately rejected the system, Rousseau was congratulated for a fine effort and encouraged to pursue further study in the field. Rousseau, however, saw no silver lining in the committee's decision, and his reaction was bitter. Aside from one objection from the famous composer Rameau, Rousseau dismissed the committee's criticisms as nonsense and

<sup>4</sup>It should not be forgotten, however, that he was finally motivated to go to Paris because his lover, Mme Warens, had replaced him. Still, it is significant that he chose to move to Paris. He did have other options available.

<sup>5</sup>The one exception, as Damrosch reports, was Mme Warens (cf. Damrosch 2005, 158).

remained angry at them at least until he wrote *The Confessions* some 25 years later (1959, 284–85).<sup>6</sup> Rousseau did have some positive experiences in Paris. He was accepted in the salons, where his rustic mannerisms and creativity were appreciated (Cranston 1982, 161–62). He also managed to make several friends among the *salonistes*, including Diderot, d’Alembert, Condillac, d’Holbach, and contributed several articles on music and one on political economy to Diderot and d’Alembert’s famous *Encyclopédie*. Yet he never seemed at home in Paris and eventually succumbed to severe feelings of alienation and self-loathing.

By 1749, before he had written the *First Discourse*, he had already soured on Paris. In the “Epistle to M. De L’Etang,” he blasts it as an arrogant, snobby, inauthentic city that, in revealing foreshadowing, “crushes humble talents” (Rousseau 1961, 1150). His great epiphany that the arts and sciences corrupt morals, prompted by his stumbling across the Academy of Dijon’s advertisement for an essay contest in the *Mecure de France* on his way to visit Diderot in prison, seems to be in part inspired by his disappointments in the capital of the Enlightenment. The *First Discourse* gives philosophical expression to this discontent and is a grand, if somewhat derivative, deconstruction of the values of intellectual life and the great cities that housed it. Rousseau leaves no stone unturned, exposing the petty motives that inspire the arts and sciences and developing numerous arguments discrediting their alleged social value. Far from a noble pursuit, he asserts the development of the arts and sciences is fueled by vanity and ambition. Artists and scientists are creatures of ego who are more concerned with their own glory than any social good that might result from their pursuits (Rousseau 1959, 1013 [*Reveries of a Solitary Walker*]); Rousseau 1961, 965 [“Preface to Narcisse”]; 1964, 21 [*First Discourse*]).<sup>7</sup> And society does not benefit, as Mandeville and others argue, from these ordinary vices. The growth of the arts and sciences produce unhealthy levels of wealth, which in turn sets in motion a perverse trinity of hypocrisy, effeminacy, and idleness

<sup>6</sup>He would later also turn on Rameau, who accused him of plagiarizing an opera.

<sup>7</sup>Rousseau, of course, claims he is much less affected by such vanity. As early as “Preface to Narcisse,” marking the first of many such proclamations, he asserts that he has learned to do without the esteem of others (Rousseau 1961, 959). In one of his fragments, he cites his penchant for solitude as evidence for his superior temperament: “proof that I have less *amour propre* than other men, or that mine affects me less, is that I have the capability of living alone” (1959, 1124 [*Autobiographical Fragments*]).

(Rousseau 1964, 19 [*First Discourse*]; Rousseau 1964, 74[“Last Reply”]; Rousseau 1961, 965–66 [“Preface to Narcisse”]). In the new commercial economy fueled by intellectual discovery, perception becomes all-important, and it is advantageous to appear virtuous without actually being so. Likewise, the impressive economic gains that result from the arts and sciences, Rousseau contends, only serve to make men become lazy and effete (Rousseau 1961, 966 [“Preface to Narcisse”]; Rousseau 1964, 22–23 [*First Discourse*]; Rousseau 1969a, 1089–90 [*Moral Letters*]; Rousseau 1969b, 93–94, 101–03 [*Letter to d’Alembert on the Theater*]).<sup>8</sup> In addition, Rousseau complains that the old moral system crumbled under the weight of the new arts and sciences. Religion and patriotism suffered badly: “they [the men of letters] smile disdainfully at such old-fashioned words as Fatherland and religion” (Rousseau 1964, 19 [*First Discourse*]).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Rousseau paradoxically contends that the new status accorded to the arts and sciences had deleterious effects on the writers and scientists themselves. Not only were there various unproductive rivalries amongst the intellectuals, writers (and Voltaire is mentioned by name) were forced to dumb down their works and pander to public opinion (Rousseau 1964, 21 [*First Discourse*]).<sup>10</sup> The men of letters’ desire for fame, Rousseau further claims, comes at the expense of the search for truth.<sup>11</sup> The new intellectuals were more interested in showing off their knowledge than in its actual benefit (Rousseau 1959, 1069 [*Reveries of a Solitary Walker*]). The best thing that could happen to genius, he argues, is for it to be left alone to develop apart from all the corruptions of society.

<sup>8</sup>Granted, Rousseau had to retreat slightly from this position because many artists and scientists were anything but lazy and rich. Nevertheless, this only proved for Rousseau that the arts and sciences were even more iniquitous than he previously thought. The artists and scientists who create the wealth, he argued, have no share in it and wind up supporting the lavish lifestyles of the slothful and greedy (Rousseau 1964, 50–51 [“Observations”]).

<sup>9</sup>Compare also “Preface to Narcisse,” in which Rousseau claims that “the taste for philosophy relaxes all the lines of esteem and benevolence that attach men to society” (Rousseau 1961, 967), as well as Rousseau’s comment that the intellectuals were “ardent missionaries” from the *Reveries* (Rousseau 1959, 1016). For a good discussion of Rousseau’s arguments on religion, see Kelly (2003, 148–51).

<sup>10</sup>In his own life, Rousseau thought his intellectual friends, the d’Holbach coterie, were jealous of his successes. Although they could all write, he believed none of them, save Duclos, could forgive him for the success of his opera (Rousseau 1959, 387 [*Confessions*]).

<sup>11</sup>In *The Confessions*, Rousseau similarly contends “it is too difficult to think nobly when one thinks for a living” (1959, 403).

None of this is new as is well-documented by scholars. Toward the end of the essay, however, Rousseau makes a bold and highly original claim—one that becomes increasingly important in the years leading up to the *Second Discourse* and comes to define his debate with the *philosophes*. The social esteem accorded to intellectual talent and genius, he argues, demeans the overwhelming mass of ordinary citizens. In this new world of the arts and sciences, Rousseau thinks the basis of individual identity is dramatically altered, as identities based on moral character and citizenship give way to ones based on talent. In one passage, for example, he laments that “we have Physicists, Geometricians, Chemists, Astronomers, Poets, Musicians, Painters; we no longer have citizens” (Rousseau 1964, 26 [*First Discourse*]). In another, he complains that “one no longer asks about a man if he has probity but if he has talents” (Rousseau 1964, 25 [*First Discourse*]).<sup>12</sup> For the ordinary working-class and peasant citizen, Rousseau believes this shift is catastrophic. Those “to whom Heaven has not vouchsafed such great talents and whom it does not destine for so much glory” (Rousseau 1964, 29 [*First Discourse*]) will find life frustrating and demoralizing because they will be encouraged to think they are only of value if they are engaged in the arts and sciences. They will thus be judged by traits they have no control over and cannot hope to succeed: “someone who all his long life will be a bad versifier or an inferior Geometer might perhaps have become a great clothier” (Rousseau 1964, 29 [*First Discourse*]). Outside the great urban intellectual centers, Rousseau argues that people are judged by their own good character and patriotism, which are things everyone can develop. In Paris and others cities in which talent replaces virtue as the standard for what it means to be an excellent human being, most people will come to loathe themselves and think they are of no value. In Rousseau’s own words, “men are rewarded only for qualities which do not depend on them: for we are born with our talents, only our virtues belong to us” (1961, 966 [“Preface to Narcisse”]). Societies that overvalue intellectual talent thus contain within them a bizarre and existentially troublesome contradiction. They still require farmers, clothiers, watchmakers, etc, but refuse them the social basis of self respect.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>In “Preface to Narcisse,” he continues this line: “once talents preempt the honors owed to virtue . . . everyone wants to be an agreeable man and no one cares to be a good man” (1961, 966).

<sup>13</sup>In the *Constitutional Project for Corsica*, Rousseau claims he wants his new constitution to furnish “all the means of acquiring esteem” (1964, 924).

For the son of a watchmaker raised in the working-class Saint Gervais section of Geneva, this realization must have been maddening.<sup>14</sup> Throughout his career as a writer and social commentator, Rousseau combats this bourgeois tendency by holding up the traits of the working classes—simplicity, moderation, hard work, and authenticity—as universal virtues to which everyone should aspire.<sup>15</sup> He was soon suspicious of all social hierarchies, particularly those based on talent and ability. “In a well-constituted State,” he proselytizes, “all citizens are so equal that no one is preferred to others as being neither the most learned nor even the most skillful . . .” (Rousseau 1961, 965 [“Preface to Narcisse”]).<sup>16</sup> In *Emile*, Rousseau openly flouts Parisian values by directing his student “to desire mediocrity in everything, without excepting even beauty” (1969a, 769). He saw it as his duty to protect the dignity of the average person against the new Enlightenment values that for Rousseau amounts to little more than an ideological glorification of the intellectuals. This sensibility in part inspires Rousseau’s discussion of *amour propre* in the *Second Discourse*.

## The Philosopher Response

The *philosophes* were plainly aware of Rousseau’s critique and were conflicted about how to respond.

<sup>14</sup>Rousseau lived in Saint Gervais from age five to ten (for an excellent discussion of the impact of Saint Gervais on Rousseau, see Rosenblatt 1997, 29–34). Rosenblatt challenges the traditional view that Rousseau idealized his hometown of Geneva. Rather, she argues Geneva is important for Rousseau because it introduced him to the ugly sides of class conflict.

<sup>15</sup>One need only consult *Emile*’s education to make this case. More interesting evidence comes from the *Letter to d’Alembert on the Theater*, in which Rousseau even argues that true genius resides in the provinces (and not just because most of the *philosophes* were provincials themselves): “Provincial men,” Rousseau contends, “are more individualistic, more inventive, less self-conscious, and less imitative than their Parisian counterpart” (1969b, 54–56; cf. *Emile* 1969a, 470–80).

<sup>16</sup>Rousseau never defines talent, and there is a good reason he neglects to do so. As this passage makes clear, any distinctive talent can become socially esteemed and be used to denigrate those without such talents. From his own experiences during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, it was the intellectuals who claimed for themselves special status based on their abilities. However, one can imagine a society in which the talents of the peasants, such as strength or mechanical ability, define the best and the brightest. For example, a silversmith or carpenter in certain societies may be the most esteemed while intellectuals are scorned. As such, for Rousseau, “neither the learned nor even the most skillful” ought to be entitled to claim social superiority. He does not, to my mind, imply the peasants and working classes have no talents.

At first, they did not appear to view Rousseau's essay as a threat (Trousson 1988, 277).<sup>17</sup> Diderot, in fact, took credit for the idea and claims it was nothing more than a clever attempt to give Rousseau's essay an edge in a competitive contest.<sup>18</sup> Whatever he privately thought about the quality of the essay or its central argument, he encouraged his friend to use it as a springboard to attain the fame all the *philosophes* sought. To that end, he insisted to Rousseau that the essay be published and then lavished him with praise when it grabbed Europe's collective attention: "It succeeds beyond the skies," he told Rousseau, "there is no precedent for a success like it" (Rousseau 1959, 363 [*Confessions*]).<sup>19</sup> D'Alembert likewise was congratulatory towards Rousseau and even mildly accepting of his main argument. In his celebrated *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia*, he proclaims the essay "has done much honor to its author" (1963, 103fn) and even agrees that knowledge is not always beneficial. "Letters," he asserts, "certainly contribute to making society more pleasing; it would be difficult to prove because of them men are better and virtue is more common" (d'Alembert 1967a, 82 [*Preliminary Discourse*]).<sup>20</sup> He refuses in the end, however, to concede Rousseau's argument that knowledge undermines virtue and furthermore contends that vice is much more dangerous when combined

with ignorance.<sup>21</sup> Still, if this is a rebuke of the *First Discourse*, it is not an aggressive one. Moreover, he shows sensitivity to Rousseau's concern for the working classes by making sure to include entries for the mechanical arts in the *Encyclopédie*. While their inclusion was undoubtedly the result of the d'Alembert's Baconian belief that knowledge ought to be useful and probably were not intended to mollify Rousseau, he does go out of his way to criticize the low esteem in which artisans are typically held: "but society, while justly respecting great geniuses for enlightening it, ought not to degrade the hands by which it is served" (d'Alembert 1967a, 41 [*Preliminary Discourse*]).<sup>22</sup> Diderot also showed such sensitivity, particularly in his literary works and "bourgeois tragedies" (Wilson 1972, 269–70). As this initial show of support indicates, Rousseau's divorce from both Paris and his friends lasted several years.

If d'Alembert and the *philosophes* were hesitant, at least for a while, to make a public show of their disapproval of Rousseau's *First Discourse*, they were not shy about promoting themselves as an important, if not the preeminent social class. They actively campaigned to become the new aristocracy and legitimate arbiters of social value and taste (Dieckmann 1941, 153; Goodman 1994, 35–39; Hulliung 1994, 77–78, 88–94).<sup>23</sup> As far back as 1733, in his *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1994, 112–15), Voltaire was praising the English for venerating men of merit. D'Alembert, who was particularly incensed at the paternalistic relationship between the men of letters and the intellectual aristocrats, followed his good friend Voltaire by reminding the aristocrats they were not superior to the men of letters and indeed indebted to them. In "Essai sur la Société des Gens de Lettres et

<sup>17</sup>Trousson writes that his friends "did not seem to take offense neither at the thesis of the *Discourse* nor the responses."

<sup>18</sup>Diderot's claims continue to be a source of controversy. On the Diderot side, Furbank (1992, 51–52) believes Diderot did in fact supply Rousseau with his grand idea. Wilson (1972, 114–15) is more circumspect and refuses to comment either way. The primary Anglo-Rousseau biographers—Cranston and Damrosch—deny Diderot's claim. Damrosch calls it "highly improbable" (2005, 213–14), and Cranston claims "there is no evidence among his papers to justify our believing that he made it" (1982, 229). Trousson, the most authoritative of Rousseau's French biographers, states "without a doubt, he (Diderot) did not inspire the main idea" (1988, 263). As for Diderot's attitude, Cranston thinks he did not see it as a frontal assault on the Enlightenment and may have viewed it as "an entertaining paradox."

<sup>19</sup>Another *philosophe*, Grimm, was also supportive until 1754 (Trousson 1988, 278). Trousson, speculating about Rousseau's mood upon hearing he won the contest, states that "one imagines the joy in the little household on Grenelle Street, and the accolades of Diderot and Grimm" (1988, 266).

<sup>20</sup>In his reply to Rousseau's letter, furthermore, he concedes that "public esteem is the principal goal of every Writer" (d'Alembert, 2004, 357). For his part, Rousseau was flattered by d'Alembert's remarks (Trousson 1988, 278).

<sup>21</sup>Granted, in his *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater*, Rousseau somewhat mocks the contention that the arts and sciences have their uses in corrupt societies. In Paris, he sarcastically comments that the theatre ought to be maintained because it serves as a potential distraction for criminals. The two hours they spend in the theater is two hours they will be unable to do mischief, thereby reducing crime by one-twelfth (Rousseau 1969b, 54). In "Preface to *Narcisse*" (1961, 972), he similarly argues that college, libraries, spectacles, etc are not designed to promote goodness but provide distractions from doing evil.

<sup>22</sup>Naturally, the same could be said of Diderot (cf. France 1983, 85).

<sup>23</sup>Hulliung correctly notes that Rousseau's early works, and indeed his use of *amour propre* in the *Second Discourse*, are in part a response to this project to glorify the intellectuals. He does not, however, take the time to work out this useful insight. Goodman (1994, 39) also notes that the *Second Discourse* was a reply to d'Alembert, though she too confines her comments to a few sentences and does not explore her claim.

Des Grands,” d’Alembert argues that the men of letters constitutes the true aristocracy and should assume their rightful place at the top of the social and cultural ladder (though he sternly advises them to avoid politics).<sup>24</sup> “The wise man,” he boldly proclaims, “does not forget that if there is an external respect which talents owe to titles, there is another and more real one which titles owe to talents” (d’Alembert 1967c, 357). Or more gently put, “a man of letters, full of probity and talent, is without comparison more worthy than an incapable minister or a dishonored aristocrat” (d’Alembert 1967c, 354). Likewise, in the preface to volume three of the *Encyclopédie*, d’Alembert mockingly informs princes and nobles that they will only find themselves included in the *Encyclopédie* if they earn it “because the *Encyclopédie* owes everything to talents, nothing to titles, and that is the history of the human spirit and not the vanity of men” (d’Alembert 1967b, 389).<sup>25</sup> The other *philosophes* were fully on board with this project. Diderot, Rousseau’s best friend among them, similarly makes repeated calls for the elevation of the intellectuals in French society (Hullung 1994, 133). Additionally, in a famous passage of *Le Fils Naturel*, he links this glorification of the talented with civic republicanism, arguing that the talented have a unique obligation to serve society.<sup>26</sup> In the play, Constance tells Dorval: “you have received the rarest talents, and you must render them to society. Let the useless move about without object, embarrass society without serving it, and distance themselves from it. They can. But you, I dare say, cannot without it being a crime” (Diderot, 1772, 93).

This campaign to raise the social status of the intellectuals, however, would eventually reveal a different side to the *philosophes*—one not nearly as congenial to the peasants and working classes as some of the aforementioned attitudes evinced in Diderot’s plays and d’Alembert’s *Preliminary Discourse*. The belief that they were an elite class, both smarter and more virtuous than the mass of ordinary citizens, was accompanied by arrogance and contempt for provin-

cial life. Several followed Voltaire, who famously supported monarchy, in his low assessment of the *demos* and the belief that they were a threat to intellectual life. For example, d’Alembert, in contrast to his statements in the *Preliminary Discourse*, believes his battle was not only with the aristocrats, but also “with the apathy and indifference of the masses who are interested in neither toleration, freedom, nor enlightenment” (Grimsley 1963, 118).<sup>27</sup> Diderot too revealed himself at times to be no friend of the average person. “The sense of the inequality of men . . . was deeply rooted in him” (Dieckmann 1941, 159), and he would occasionally disparage the mediocrity of the peasant classes. In one of his more caustic remarks, he wryly asserts that “mediocre men live and die like brutes” (1966, 87, [*Lettres A Mme Volland*]). Tellingly, some of Diderot’s sympathizers concede that when he tries to be complimentary towards the peasants in his plays, his portrayals are less than compelling and betray “a wide gulf between observer and observed” (France 1983, 85–85). Even if the *philosophes* were of two minds about the peasants and working classes, however, Rousseau had more than enough evidence to be convinced that his *philosophe* friends were disingenuous in their praises of the peasants and working classes. Their supposed ambivalence, he assumed, was yet another instance of their hypocrisy, and, in any event, did nothing to soften the implications of d’Alembert’s call to judge people by their intellectual abilities.<sup>28</sup> Rousseau’s suspicions that the *philosophes* at heart were contemptuous of the masses must have been confirmed on Shrove Tuesday in 1754, mere months before he penned the *Second Discourse*. On that date in d’Holbach’s salon, Rousseau attended a reading of a tragedy by the Abbé Petit, a provincial from Normandy, set up by Diderot. The reading was a disaster from beginning to end, as the Abbé began spouting out numerous absurdities on the nature of tragedy and quickly revealed he had zero literary talents. Rather than politely allowing the Abbé to finish and sending

<sup>24</sup>For a good discussion, see Grimsley (1963, 125–31). D’Alembert actually was annoyed that Voltaire in his personal life was too friendly with the aristocrats and clergy. Moreover, as Goodman points out, d’Alembert’s essay is in the same spirit as Voltaire’s chapter, “On the Regard that ought to be shown to Men of Letters,” in *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1994, 35–39).

<sup>25</sup>The last clause, about the vanity of men, appears to be directed at Rousseau.

<sup>26</sup>Notably, he does not say government. The relevance of this distinction will soon become apparent.

<sup>27</sup>In his reply to Rousseau’s letter on the theater, he further demonstrates the low opinion he had of the lives of ordinary people. In defending the theater, he asks “Why begrudge men, destined by nature almost only to weep and die, some fleeting diversions that help them bear the bitterness or the insipidity of their existence” (Rousseau 2004, 354).

<sup>28</sup>Rousseau’s position seems to be that the *philosophes* could not simultaneously celebrate talent as the true measure of human worth and respect those without it, i.e., the working classes, artisans, and peasants. Their confidence that they had unique talents, Rousseau thinks, produced in them a subtle arrogance and contempt. The discussion of *amour propre* in the *Second Discourse*, as will be shown, provides solid evidence for this view.

him on his way without any unnecessary encouragement, the attending members of the d'Holbach coterie were determined to humiliate him. They put "up a mock show of admiration for the wretched author's tragedy" (Cranston 1982, 313). Rousseau was horrified by his friends' puerile behavior and not so gently informed the author of the humiliating truth of the situation. Rather than thank Rousseau for his candor, however, the clueless Abbé turned his anger on Rousseau, and the two had to be separated before things turned violent. Rousseau's Anglo biographers, while intrigued by the story, usually fail to appreciate its true significance. Typically, it is read in light of Rousseau's fraying relationship with the *philosophes*.<sup>29</sup> However, the actual content of the dispute is far more revealing and ties in with Rousseau's arguments at the end of the *First Discourse*. The poor Abbé becomes the object of ridicule for the sole reason that he lacks literary talent. The *philosophes* in the room affirm themselves on the basis of their superior talent. And, worst of all, the value of the Abbé's personality would invariably decline in his own eyes if he understood and accepted the truth of the situation. If so, he would be led to erroneously conclude that his contributions to the world as a religious leader are meaningless and that his life only has value if he is a writer. For Rousseau, this must have been a cruel case in which life imitated art, and it probably reminded him of his worry that in a culture enamored of the arts and sciences, a great clothier would be shamed into giving up his trade in order to become "a bad versifier or an inferior Geometer" (Rousseau 1964, 29 [*First Discourse*])—or, in this case, an awful playwright.

In the years right after the publication of the *First Discourse*, therefore, Rousseau found himself in a controversial debate regarding the value of arts and sciences. The debate, however, quickly evolved into a debate about the role and value of the artists and scientists themselves rather than their activities. The *philosophes*, Rousseau realized, were promoting themselves as a social class as much as the knowledge they sought to create and catalogue. Paralleling this glori-

fication of the talented was a healthy, if not always publicly expressed, contempt for average people, who according to the new value system were encouraged to view themselves through the eyes of those who looked down upon them. The psychological and existential consequences of this project, Rousseau well understood, were devastating. In the *Second Discourse*, he deftly and discreetly develops this original insight with the help of a new concept, *amour propre*.

### ***Amour Propre and Talent in the Second Discourse***

The connection between *amour propre* and talent in the *Second Discourse* is extremely subtle and easy to miss. In the beginning of the essay, in fact, Rousseau appears to dismiss talent as unimportant for his thesis. His first substantive distinction, one between natural or physical inequality and moral or political inequality, invites this conclusion. The former refers to age, physical and mental talents, and health, while the latter to inequalities based on convention established by some sort of consent (Rousseau 1964, 131 [*Second Discourse*]). After making this distinction, Rousseau asserts that inquiring into the origin of natural inequality is pointless, as no one knows why people are born with certain attributes and talents. He also believes it is useless to debate whether or not there is an "essential connection" between the two inequalities. Thus, it is tempting to interpret Rousseau here as trying to direct the reader's attention away from in-born talents and toward political and economic inequality. Put another way, it might be argued that Rousseau decouples physical from political inequality and is only concerned with the treatment of the poor and the behavior of the political and economic elite. This interpretation, however, becomes less plausible the further one moves through the text. Throughout the essay, the issue of ability and talent arises repeatedly. Rousseau, in fact, ends the discourse by making the very connection that in the beginning he appears to regard as a waste of time: "Moral [political] inequality, authorized only by positive right, is contrary to Natural Right every time it is not of the same proportion as Physical inequality" (Rousseau 1964, 193–94 [*Second Discourse*]).

The conclusion is instructive. Rousseau apparently accepts political inequality as legitimate so long as it corresponds to natural inequality. This is not the first time he makes this claim. In the *First Discourse*, he calls for the wise and the talented to counsel kings

<sup>29</sup>See Cranston (1982, 313) and Damrosch (2005, 251–52): Damrosch adds slightly to Cranston's analysis by speculating that Rousseau was projecting his own insecurities on to the Abbé. Furbank, a Diderot biographer, also has little to say about the event. His only concern is that it did not break up Diderot and Rousseau's friendship (Furbank 1992, 117–18). Wilson takes the standard line that it is a sign of souring relationships between Rousseau and the *philosophes*, although, nearer to my point, he does suggest it has much to do with Rousseau's belief that philosophy diminishes civic friendship (Wilson 1972, 181–82).

and charges them to “find honorable asylum in the courts” (1964, 29–30). In later writings such as *The Social Contract* (1964, 407) and the *Constitutional Project for Corsica* (1964, 907), he continues this line by advocating for administrative rule by an elected aristocracy. It is thus clear that Rousseau thinks it is a waste of time to debate whether or not natural inequality ought to correspond to political power. For him, it is a truism that they should and there is no profit to be had in debating something so self-evident. Likewise, he claims it is pointless from a philosophical standpoint to evaluate the current political leaders and determine whether or not they merit their authority. One of the purposes of the *Second Discourse* is to discover not if natural and political inequality ought to be proportional but why they often are not. The answer to this question, and indeed the question itself, is directly linked to Rousseau’s debate with d’Alembert and the *philosophes*’ claims that the men of letters should constitute a new cultural aristocracy and avoid political life. Thus, in concluding the *Second Discourse* in such a way, Rousseau appears to echo one of lessons from the *First Discourse*: that talent is socially harmful except when expressed through administrative political power.

In between the introduction and the conclusion, Rousseau seeks to demonstrate the catastrophic effects that would occur if talent is not confined to the state. His primary tactic is to create a genealogy of natural inequality and then identify all the psychological, cultural, economic, and eventually political damage that occurs when natural inequalities are allowed to run wild. The first step in this genealogy is his famous state of nature parable in which he imagines what humans are like at the dawn of history. The defining feature of the state of nature is that talent and ability are almost entirely absent. Rousseau’s original humans (*l’homme sauvage*) lack virtually every quality and ability by which civil or contemporary humans compare themselves. From a cognitive standpoint, they were probably no more sophisticated than the average house pet. They had no language, from which Rousseau deduces they were incapable of reason. Lacking reason, they had no imagination. And with no imagination, they had no moral life; they were, so to speak, before good and evil. *L’homme sauvage* was an entirely corporeal being. To be sure, slight physical differences did exist among these early humans. Some were stronger, faster, or more attractive than others. These differences, however, had almost no significance because original humans lived in solitude and survival was a relatively easy affair. Thus, they did not have to

compete for self-preservation. The only thing that might possibly foment conflict was sexual appetite. Again, Rousseau demonstrates that a phenomenon that causes infinite problems for modern, civilized humans was innocuous for original humans. These humans only knew lust and had no notion of the moral side of love. Bereft of reason, they had no standards of beauty and merit and as such did not compare their sexual partners with those of their counterparts (Rousseau 1964, 158 [*Second Discourse*]). It never occurred to them that a more desirable partner might be available. Savage love was a purely physical affair.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, he rejects attempts to analogize the sexual behavior of “savage” humans with other animals. He finds the comparison of human sexual competition to cockfights as especially inappropriate. Humans do not experience heat, and there was little chance of rejection because, unlike roosters and hens, there was in all probability an equal proportion of men and women (Rousseau 1964, 159 [*Second Discourse*]). Therefore, any physical differences between humans—the only ones that could exist—were imperceptible and practically meaningless. For a creature utterly lacking in self-consciousness with easily satisfied needs, who rarely saw the same person twice, inequality was utterly insignificant.

From this preliminary discussion, it is clear that *amour propre* cannot exist when humans have developed few of their capacities and live nomadic lifestyles. This would imply that *amour propre* is a social phenomenon that has lots to do with inequalities in talent.<sup>31</sup> And so it is:

It became customary to assemble in front of the Cabins or around a large Tree: song and dance, true children of leisure, became the amusement or rather the occupation of idle men and women gathered in a crowd. Everyone began to look at everyone else and to wish to be looked

<sup>30</sup>Sexual appetite later plays a meaningful part in the drama of *amour propre*. When humans develop to the point in which they live in close proximity to one another, termed “savage nation” by Rousseau, sexual appetite is identified as one cause that induces individuals to be sociable (Rousseau 1964, 169 [*Second Discourse*]). Sexuality, furthermore, is dramatically altered by *amour propre*, i.e., it makes sexuality a social phenomenon. In this modified form, it compels people and teaches them how to compare and evaluate themselves against others. Thus, it serves as a catalyst and precondition of *amour propre*. However, Rousseau’s discussion is uneven at best, and sometimes he rejects the connection between sexual rivalry and *amour propre* (O’Hagan 1999, 164–65). In *Emile*, Rousseau more tightly connects sexuality and *amour propre* (cf. Masters (1968, 40–44) for a useful discussion on the matter.)

<sup>31</sup>He does, however, admit the first stirrings of human pride come from reflecting upon superiority over animals (Rousseau 1964, 166 [*Second Discourse*]).



at himself, and public esteem acquired a price. The one who sang or danced best; the handsomest, the strongest, the most skillful, or the most eloquent came to be the most highly regarded, and this was the first step at once toward inequality and vice: from these first preferences on one side were born vanity and contempt, on the other shame and envy; and the fermentation caused by these new leavens at last produced compounds fatal to happiness and innocence. (Rousseau 1964, 169–70 [*Second Discourse*])

In this passage, hereinafter referred to as the “competition for esteem,” Rousseau details the psychological transformation—the birth of *amour propre*—that occurs with the advent of organized social living. In constant contact and close proximity with one another, these newly social humans get used to seeing others and being seen by them. This increased visibility leads humans to continually compare themselves to each other. These comparisons are particularly interesting because there is some permanence to them. Whereas *l’homme sauvage* made few comparisons and probably forgot them immediately upon making them, social humans remember their comparisons because frequent contact with the same people forces them to make the same comparisons over and over again. Through such repeated comparisons, individuals begin to develop an identity and sense of individuality. They are no longer merely bundles of appetites, but become self-aware subjects.<sup>32</sup> Secondly, in the competition-for-esteem passage Rousseau identifies the locus of a person’s identity: abilities and qualities, e.g., the one who sings the best or dances the best, the handsomest, etc.<sup>33</sup> The participants in the competition for esteem, however, are not just singing and dancing. They are becoming singers and dancers. Implied in this parable, moreover, is that individuals can also develop an identity based on their deficiencies. A person, for example, can develop an identity of unusual clumsiness. Others, furthermore, may fail to develop much of an identity at all, if they have no distinguishing traits. The psychological consequences of socialization are profound. Self-consciousness develops and the emotional repertoire of humans expands beyond the basic emotions to include vanity, contempt, envy, shame, spite, etc.—a set of emotions all related to *amour propre*.

The competition, moreover, is even worse than it initially appears. First, it produces perverse inter-

personal dependencies. According to the logic of the competition, people rely on each other for favorable evaluations even though they have no incentive to provide such praise (Rousseau 1969, 493 [*Emile*]). For every time they laud one of their peers, they make themselves more ordinary by comparison. Second, most people are destined to a life of frustration because competitions by definition create winners and losers, and only a few people can gain distinction. The competition for esteem is zero-sum. Thus, the development of social life prompts a troubling revolution in human nature. Once settled in villages, humans become individuals with new existential needs, i.e., the desire to know the meaning and value of their lives, that compel them to compete with their peers for recognition—a competition that will determine their earthly fate (Rousseau 1964, 174 [*Second Discourse*]) and produce demoralizing hierarchies.<sup>34</sup> *L’homme sauvage*, conversely, did not have these problems. He or she lacked a sense of identity and cared nothing for external affirmation. He or she was “the sole judge of his [or her] own merit” (Rousseau 1964, 219 [*Second Discourse*]).<sup>35</sup>

Hidden in the depths of this powerful social ontology is a subtle and poignant attack on the *philosophes*. Importantly, Rousseau thinks this first meaningful inequality is social rather than economic or political. The personalities of the rich and poor, i.e., vanity and contempt for those judged favorably by their peers and shame and envy for those judged poorly or not at all, appear before there are actual economic classes or government. They are based, rather, on social status. Judging from the competition for esteem parable, the basis of this social inequality

<sup>34</sup>Dent and Grant are both critical of the “competition for esteem” parable because they think Rousseau provides no reasons why the ability to make comparisons results in vanity in a context in which an organized economy has yet to emerge (Dent 1988, 81–82; Grant 1994, 156.) My narrative, however, answers this question. People care about what others think of them because such evaluations determine the quality of their public life.

<sup>35</sup>Interestingly, the emotions resulting from the failure to attain external affirmation do not produce new actions or attitudes. In similar parables and analyses, such as Nietzsche’s slave revolt or Tocqueville’s portrait of democratic psychology in *Democracy in America*, the family of existential emotions (resentment, spite, envy, etc.) has great social and political impact. In Nietzsche’s slave revolt, simmering resentment leads to a revolution in the value structure. Similarly, in Tocqueville (1969, 198), democratic envy induces Americans, among other things, to ignore talent and vote for mediocre political leaders. By contrast, Rousseau’s “losers” in the competition for esteem seem to have no response to their predicament and are easily fooled into accepting a social contract that solidifies their lowly status. For a bold attempt to provide a systematic phenomenological account of the emotional processes described by Nietzsche, Tocqueville, etc. (see Sartre 1994).

<sup>32</sup>The philosopher Daniel Dennett argues that “our kind of reflective thinking is a very recent evolutionary innovation” (1996, 48) and distinguishes us from nonhuman animals.

<sup>33</sup>For a good discussion, see Charvet (1974, chap. 1).

emerges from two criteria. The first is talent, which is Rousseau's primary interest. People want to be known as the best singers and dancers, the strongest, the most skillful, and the most eloquent; all of which refers to innate physical or intellectual abilities. The second is physical appearance. Participants in the competition also strive to be the "handsomest." These two criteria suggest that the *amour propre* is in large part aimed at Parisian intellectual life and d'Alembert et al.'s call to elevate the social status of the intellectuals. Before Rousseau sets foot in Paris, he is well aware of how a young man from the provinces might climb the social ladder. To recall an earlier passage from *The Confessions*, Rousseau opines "a young man who arrives in Paris with a *passable appearance* and who is heralded for his *talents* is always sure of being welcomed" (Rousseau 1959, 283 [*Confessions*] italics mine). Not coincidentally, these two traits—appearance and talent—are the standards by which the participants in "the competition for esteem" are evaluated by their peers. Of course, in Rousseau's Paris people are doing more than singing and dancing. They are also writing, painting, composing, arguing, etc. Still, the analogy is obvious enough. People cultivate identities and earn social respect based on the demonstration of their unique abilities. Moreover, the psychological implications of the competition also seem inspired by the *philosophes*. The vanity and contempt that shows up in the winners is reminiscent of the scorn Rousseau believed that d'Alembert, Diderot, etc. felt towards the masses. Having grown up and spent much time among the peasants, Rousseau was certain they were being demeaned by the intellectuals. Finally, the idea that life is a zero-sum competition in which only few people can be special likewise is a consequence of the *philosophe* worldview that celebrates the men of letters.

In any case, this metaphorical evidence from "the competition for esteem" passage, i.e., individual comparisons are primarily made on the basis of talent, is buttressed by several key passages in the *Second Discourse* in which Rousseau explicitly makes the argument that the social valuation of talent inflames *amour propre*. First, he suggests that equality in civil society could continue only "if talents had been equal" (Rousseau 1964, 174 [*Second Discourse*]). Second, he asserts that "here are all natural qualities put into action, every man's rank and fate is established, not only as to the amount of their goods and the power to help or harm, but also as to mind, beauty, strength or skill, as merit or talent" (Rousseau 1964, 174 [*Second Discourse*]). Finally, he bluntly states, "I would show that of these four sorts of

inequality [wealth, nobility and rank are the others] . . . personal qualities are the origin of all others" (Rousseau 1964, 189 [*Second Discourse*]). Looking back on Rousseau's state of nature, to reiterate, it is a place of equality because there is only the slightest difference in human abilities. Most human faculties had yet to develop, and the ones that did exist had no stage on which to exhibit themselves due to the isolated lifestyle of savage men. For Rousseau, the history of humanity is the slow development of talent and eventually the creation of a social stage on which inequalities in talent come to have the utmost significance, at first existentially and later economically. In one sense, it operates along the same lines as wealth. When it becomes noticeable, it only serves to remind most people that they do not have it and thus makes them miserable (Rousseau 1969a, 1089 [*Moral Letters*]).

None of this is meant to suggest that Rousseau is unconcerned with class conflict and economics or political oppression.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, Rousseau spends a good deal of part two in the *Second Discourse* exposing the devious ideological and political machinations of the moneyed classes and arguing that certain economic arrangements are necessary conditions for the inflammation of *amour propre*. Specifically, he believes *amour propre* only becomes dangerous with the advent of the division of labor after metallurgy and agriculture make their way on to the historical scene. He in fact describes the nascent villages in the "competition for esteem passage" in which *amour propre* first emerges as the golden age for humanity. The participants in the competition, after all, are still singing and dancing, and the impending class warfare Rousseau spends much of part two of the essay describing had yet to emerge. With the advent of division of labor, however, *amour propre* begins to overwhelm the human personality. Rousseau thinks this inflammation happens for two reasons. The first is that division of labor promotes social integration and visibility. That is, an economy based on division of labor compels society-wide cooperation in which there is no way to avoid seeing and being seen. Individuals are forced to interact with one another because they assume a specialized role in the economy and rely on others to take care of a good deal of their needs. As such, they cannot help but come into contact with one another. Before the division of labor, individuals were self-sufficient

<sup>36</sup>Starobinski (1971b), Jack (1989, chap. 3), and Rosenblatt (1997) are particularly helpful on the intersection between *amour propre* and economics.

and could labor mostly in solitude. Interpersonal comparisons, therefore, were made sparingly and had little connection to self-preservation. Second, division of labor demands differentiation, which makes social and economic equality impossible. In a diverse economy that sustains numerous professions, it is reasonable to conclude that the talented assume the most demanding jobs and reap the lion's share of the economic rewards and social prestige. Natural qualities and abilities, as a result, come to have significant social meaning. So, thanks to economic developments, *amour propre* comes to be the dominant trait in human nature, slowly supplanting natural compassion. In turn, moreover, it drives the economy à la Mandeville. Hungry for approval, people become more and more productive so that they can stand above their peers by being more "successful." To show off their success, they increase their consumption habits, i.e., conspicuous consumption, which leads to more and more production (Rousseau 1964, 937 [*Constitutional Project for Corsica*]).<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the crucial role economic forces such as division of labor play in this drama, it would be a mistake to interpret *amour propre* primarily as a device to discredit capitalism or highlight economic exploitation and excessive consumption. The problem of division of labor is not that it creates *amour propre* but that it intensifies it. As Rousseau puts it, division of labor is a "leaven," not a cause. In terms of *amour propre*, division of labor is a problem because it highlights natural inequalities and not simply because it produces excess wealth (which also bothered Rousseau). Excessive consumption likewise is only a consequence of *amour propre*, not its essence. At its foundation, *amour propre* is about natural inequalities in talents and the ranking of people by those talents. While there may be considerable overlap between social and economic inequality, it would be a mistake to confuse the two. There are social inequalities that have little or no connection to wealth. Voltaire was offensive to Rousseau because he demanded social prestige for his literary talents and not simply because he was wealthy. Likewise, many of the first inequalities described in

the "competition for esteem" passage—the ones revealed in "leisurely" activities such as singing and dancing—cannot meaningfully be connected to economic productivity. People did not become wealthy in Paris, or for that matter Geneva, by being the best singer or dancer.<sup>38</sup> So, as with the *First Discourse*, economic inequality is a consequence of the arts and sciences and worsens an already dangerous situation.

## Well-Used Talent

In addition to identifying when talent is corrosive, Rousseau is sure to provide in his *oeuvres* a few instances of what might be termed, to twist Machiavelli's famous epigram of "well-used cruelty," well-used talent. First, as previously argued, talent is well used when it expresses itself in government administration. There, it is safely hidden in the bowels of government away from public view. As such, it can help the polity prosper without drawing undue attention to itself and reminding the masses of their ordinariness. In the *Social Contract* and other later writings, Rousseau makes a distinction between sovereignty and administration. Everyone is to be sovereign and equally govern society, which provides a healthy measure of dignity. In this arrangement, public identities are equal, for everyone is a citizen. However, administration, the actual business of politics, is to be performed by a few excellent men. In *Letters from a Mountain*, reiterating his thesis, Rousseau claims that "the best government is aristocratic, the worst sovereign is aristocratic" (Rousseau 1964, 809 [*Letters Written from the Mountain*]). The problem with d'Alembert and the *philosophes*, Rousseau contends, is that they argue the opposite. According to d'Alembert, the intellectually talented should be sovereign and should guide society's values, but should avoid administration and political power whenever possible (d'Alembert 1967c, 356 ["*Essai sur la Société des Gens de Lettres et des Grands*"]; Hulliung 1994, 91–92).<sup>39</sup> He wants the gifted not

<sup>37</sup>It is worth noting that in a footnote in "Preface to Narcisse" (1961, 969–70), Rousseau argues that not all societies suffer from *amour propre* to the same degree. Anticipating the argument from the Second Discourse, he claims savage societies do not suffer from *amour propre* and European ones do. If his insight is pushed a little further, the case can be made that not all European societies and cities contain equal amounts of *amour propre*. Citizens living in cities and nations with thriving economies and intellectual cultures in which certain talents are regularly rewarded will be more prone to *amour propre*.

<sup>38</sup>This is especially true of Geneva. Since the days of Calvin, Geneva had banned the theatre. It bothered Rousseau to no end that Voltaire, d'Alembert, etc., were trying to reintroduce theatre to his birthplace. Even in Paris, however, intellectuals were in a position of financial dependence. Voltaire (1994, 112) loudly complains, though wealthy himself, that the men of letters had to rely on wealthy women for monetary support.

<sup>39</sup>Moreover, to recall an earlier cited passage from Diderot's *Le Fils Naturel*, Constance tells Dorvel he must use his talents to serve society in general, not the government.

only in plain view of the masses, but celebrated as the finest the species has to offer.

Moreover, the political ramifications of elevating the talented, above and beyond the bogus social contract the rich trick the poor into joining, are significant. For a couple of reasons, Rousseau's insistence that government be administered by the wise will be jeopardized. First, as just argued with the *philosophes*, the talented will be unsatisfied with the mundane life of an administrator and will seek fame and fortune rather than do their civic duties. They will convince themselves they are too important for political life and leave it to lesser men. Second, when talent is the means by which someone climbs the social ladder, individuals will realize dissimulation is the ticket to a better life, i.e., they can gain from pretending to be something they are not (Rousseau 1964, 174 [*Second Discourse*]).<sup>40</sup> This hypocrisy will eventually work its way into the political sphere. Even if the talented wanted to rule, political power invariably will be hijacked by clever charlatans utterly lacking in virtue and true merit who wish to improve upon their mediocre lot in life by pretending they have great minds. In either case, natural and moral inequality will become disproportionate and political corruption inevitable. Despite Rousseau's profound commitment to equality, he plainly understands that for certain institutions and practices merit is the only standard of justice that does not result in utter absurdity. Otherwise, children might rule over adults and imbeciles over wise men (Rousseau 1964, 194 [*Second Discourse*]). By celebrating talent, however, excellent men are discouraged from entering government, mediocre men are enticed, and the natural order of things is thrown into disarray.

Second, in *Emile* and the *Government of Poland*, Rousseau encourages competitions based on physical talent. In *Emile* (1969a, 393–96), he holds running races for young boys in which the winner is to receive cake and be lavished with praise. The point, however, is to teach Emile the value of running well and not to feed his *amour propre*. Since the great vice of children is gluttony and not vanity, Rousseau sees no harm in such races (Rousseau 1969a, 409–10 [*Emile*]). Once the age of reason begins, however, such contests end: “Let there never be any comparisons with other

children, no rivals, no competitors, not even in running, once he [Emile] has begun to be able to reason” (Rousseau 1969a, 453–54 [*Emile*]). In *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, moreover, he argues in favor of festive public competitions in which the participants are motivated by the desire to increase “their pride and self esteem” (1964, 958–59). However, the goal of these contests is not individual glory but to make the participants more patriotic and physically vigorous. Rather than encourage people to think of themselves as talented, they were supposed to promote the identity of citizen. So, as with young Emile's running races, the competitions advocated for in *Poland* are meant to serve some higher value and are not designed to create some sort of hero worship for the most capable. Rousseau, therefore, does not want to deny completely the social value of talent. He merely wants to prevent it from becoming the source of a person's identity and the standard by which individual worth is measured.<sup>41</sup> Used in such a manner, it is dangerous and creates far more harm than good.

## Conclusion

Hullung, one of the few Rousseau scholars who appreciates the depth of Rousseau's concerns about the Enlightenment glorification of talent, remarks in passing that “Rousseau rejected their [the *philosophes*] yearnings for a social order dedicated to fostering the development of individual talent, which to him would be nothing better than the triumph of *amour propre* in its most virulent form” (1994, 133). While Hullung's statement is technically true, it is too general to capture the precise nature of Rousseau's critique. Rousseau is deeply ambivalent about talent. While he worries about it, he also believes it has its uses. In the *First Discourse*, he is content to let genius develop, though he thinks the intellectually gifted need no societal encouragement and can do so on their own, and even provides a place for them, i.e., government, to thrive and benefit society at the same time. What Rousseau ultimately objects to is the attempt by the *philosophes* to make intellectual talent the measure of a human. They are interested in social and cultural power and have little desire to perform

<sup>40</sup>The *Confessions* is replete with examples of dissimulation and play-acting in Parisian life, including offenses committed by Rousseau himself. He even admits his misanthropy was an act to hide his ignorance of Parisian mannerisms (Rousseau 1959, 368–69 [*The Confessions*]).

<sup>41</sup>Rousseau's ambivalence shows up most prominently in his *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre*. In that essay, he admits to being an avid fan of Moliere's plays (Rousseau 1969b, 131fn.)

the political role of administrator that Rousseau sets out for them. They want something much more: to determine social value and reinvent the basis on which a person's public identity is determined. For Rousseau, this amounts to little more than an ideological glorification of the *philosophes* themselves, the self-proclaimed geniuses of Paris. Their endorsement of political equality is premised on a dangerous new social inequality. Rousseau uses *amour propre* to deconstruct the claims of people who seek to define themselves as society's most valuable members.

Unfortunately for Rousseau, he lost the debate with the *philosophes*, and they succeeded in revolutionizing modern consciousness. By the end of the eighteenth century, their claims were quite common. The champions of the emerging bourgeois society argued talent is a far more suitable standard for distributive justice than blood lineage. For example, Thomas Paine, an unabashed partisan of Enlightenment ideals, sarcastically "equates 'nobility' with 'no ability'" (Kramnick 1977, 7). In the culture at large, moreover, the elevation of talent as a standard for merit became the order of the day. Among the French revolutionaries, it became an article of faith that careers ought to be open to the talented. Today, one would be hard-pressed to find someone willing to endorse Rousseau's argument in a public forum.

To be sure, Rousseau was not alone in decrying the new social inequality. His argument gets picked up by at least two eighteenth-century thinkers. Adam Ferguson and John Adams, both of whom read Rousseau, echo his concerns about the elevation of a talented few. Ferguson straightforwardly applies Rousseau's theory to the emerging capitalism. In his *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Ferguson contends that capitalism and its attendant division of labor inspires the creation of all sorts of diverse and interesting occupations. An individual can become a banker, lawyer, etc. in addition to the older professions of farmer, baker, fisherman, smith, artisan, etc. While he believes this development is appropriately recognized as progress, he does concede the division of labor has some negative existential implications. In the new economy, he contends, profession becomes the most important source of individual identity as "each individual is defined by his calling" (Ferguson 1995, 173). However, given that different employments require different talents, Ferguson thinks those in the simpler mechanical arts will be demeaned by such evaluations and come to loathe their identities. Furthermore, individuals in more elevated professions—ones that require study and skill—will look down on them and view them as men did slaves and women in

the "Rude Ages," just as the winners in Rousseau's competition for esteem become contemptuous of the losers (Ferguson 1995, 176). Ferguson ends his discussion with a most Rousseauian conclusion: "Notwithstanding any pretension to equal rights, the exaltation of the few must depress the many" (1995, 177). John Adams departs slightly from Rousseau in his "Discourses on Davila," but nevertheless offers an argument easily traceable to the citizen of Geneva. He agrees that the new bourgeois social distinctions degrade those at the bottom of the social ladder. Unlike Rousseau, he identifies a novel way in which the upper classes express their contempt toward the lower classes: by ignoring them. Using the metaphor of "invisibility," later made famous by Ralph Ellison as applied to American racism, Adams claims members of the lower classes are "not disapproved, censured, or reproached; . . . only not seen" (1954, 183).

Rousseau, however, was far more impressed by the dangers of the elevation of the talented than either Ferguson or Adams, both of whom were good, if somewhat cautious, Enlightenment liberals favorable to talent based meritocracy and similar notions such as natural aristocracies. Unlike them, he wants to stop this tenet of the Enlightenment dead in its tracks and stood almost alone in his defiance. He also knew that his was a tall order, and he had no illusions about the nature of his enemy. While the Enlightenment preaches truth and openness, the reality was that it establishes itself through all sorts of hypocrisies and self-deceptions that blinds the populace towards society's new pathologies. Rousseau was intent on puncturing these hypocrisies and forcing us to see the ugly side of bourgeois life. If nothing else, he wants his contemporaries to know that the Enlightenment promise to promote the dignity of the common man is a lie. When talent is the measure of a man, the mass of humanity will invariably be demeaned. Rousseau's lesson, if anything, is even more relevant today. At the very least, he has taught us that social inequalities are every bit as powerful as political and economic ones.

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