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**THE CRITICAL FUNCTION OF GENEALOGY IN
THE THOUGHT OF J.J. ROUSSEAU**

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Introduction

In the opening pages of the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche offers a well known statement of the project he means to undertake in that work, a statement that is as puzzling as it is philosophically momentous:

we need a critique of moral values; the value of these values must itself be called into question — and for that is needed a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances out of which they grew, under which they evolved and changed (§6). (Nietzsche, 1967)

Several paragraphs earlier, Nietzsche concisely formulates the two questions that lie at the core of his critique of moral values:

Under what conditions did the human being devise these value judgments good and evil? *And what value do they themselves have?* (§3)

It is the presumed connection between these two questions that is most striking in Nietzsche's statement of his task: why should we think that in order to answer a *normative* question—what is the value of morality? — we must first raise an *historical* question about the origin of the phenomenon we want to evaluate? Is not this way of proceeding simply a confusion of the tasks Kant so clearly distinguished in his own critical enterprise by separating the metaphysical deduction of the categories from their transcendental deduction — by distin-

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guishing, in other words, between the questions: “where do a priori categories *come from*?” and “what *justifies* their employment?”? Nietzsche’s procedure is all the more puzzling in that later in the *Genealogy* he appears to endorse a version of the very distinction made by Kant when he insists on separating the question of a thing’s origin from its purpose:

the cause of the genesis of a thing and its ultimate utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends (II, §12).

To put the point again, this time in Nietzsche’s words: if a thing’s origin and its purpose (or meaning) lie “worlds apart”, isn’t it a mistake to think that assessing the value of some phenomenon depends on first uncovering its origin?

Although the relation between genealogy and critique is especially prominent in Nietzsche’s thought, his concern with the issue is by no means idiosyncratic or unique in modern philosophy. On the contrary, the projects of a surprisingly large number of modern philosophers — and not just those of Nietzsche’s disciples, like Foucault — depend on there being some intimate connection between genealogy, on the one hand, and critique (or normative philosophy at least), on the other. Versions of this idea are essential to Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, to Feuerbach’s critique of Christian theology, to Marx’s account of ideology, and to the *Abbau* of Western metaphysics that Heidegger proposes in *Being and Time*. Even more obviously, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is inconceivable without the idea that reconstructing the history of normative practices is essential to assessing their legitimacy. But the modern originator of the idea that critique and genealogy are intimately linked is undoubtedly Rousseau. For it is but a version of the same project sketched out by Nietzsche in the *Genealogy of Morals* that Rousseau announces as his task in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* [Second Discourse]. That there is a close connection between genealogy and critique is implicit in the very formulation of the two questions the Second Discourse seeks to answer: “what is the *origin* of human inequality?” and “is that inequality authorized by natural law?” (Rousseau, *DI*, 130/*OC* 3, 129)².

My aim in focusing on these questions is to initiate a discussion of the complex relation between genealogy and critique that stands at the core of a large part of European philosophy of the past four centuries. In this paper I will restrict myself to that relation as it appears in what I take to be the founding text of this

² “DI” refers to “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men” (Rousseau, 1997a, pp. 111222); “OC 3” refers to vol. 3 of Rousseau (1959/1969). Other abbreviations are: “E” stands for “Emile, or on Education”, (Rousseau, 1979); “LV” for “Letter to Voltaire” (Rousseau, 1997); and “SC” for “The Social Contract” (Rousseau, 1997b, pp. 39152), with “SC, I.4.vi” referring to book 1, chapter 4, paragraph 6). I have amended these translations slightly.

tradition, Rousseau's Second Discourse. The paper divides into three parts, each of which addresses a basic question concerning Rousseau's project. First, what is the source of human inequality, according to Rousseau? (Where does it come from? What is its "genealogy"?) Second, what makes inequalities legitimate or illegitimate (justified or unjustified)? (Or better: What kinds of inequalities are illegitimate, and why?) And finally, how exactly does Rousseau's answer to the genealogical question figure in his critique of inequality?

1. Where does human inequality come from?

The first thing to get clear on is that Rousseau means to be asking about the origin not of inequality in general but only of what he calls "moral" or "political" inequality. Moral inequalities are distinct from natural, or physical, inequalities in that they are established not by nature but "artificially" — that is, by "a sort of convention" that depends ultimately on human consent (*DI*, 131/*OC* 3, 131). More important, moral inequalities are social in the sense that they consist in one individual (or group) exerting a kind of power, or possessing a kind of advantage, over another. As Rousseau puts the point, moral inequality consists not in "differences of age, health, or bodily strength", but "in the different privileges some enjoy to the prejudice of others, such as being more wealthy, more honored, more powerful, or even getting themselves obeyed by them" (*DI*, 131/*OC* 3, 131).

Rousseau's first move in determining where moral inequalities come from is unexpected, and understanding it reveals a good deal about what he takes the project of genealogy to be. Rather than launching into an historical narrative, Rousseau begins his genealogy by asking whether inequality has its source in "human nature". The short answer is 'no' (*DI*, 157, 159/*OC* 3, 160, 162), but the question is more complicated than it appears, and understanding the Second Discourse requires that we spend some time figuring out what the question is about and why Rousseau answers it negatively. The main difficulty concerns the meaning of the elusive term 'human nature'. Although the term famously has multiple meanings in Rousseau's thought, *in this context* 'human nature' refers to our "natural faculties" (*DI*, 128/*OC* 3, 127), to the basic capacities and drives that nature bestows on all human beings qua individuals — that is, independently of whatever social relations they might have to other human beings. In other words, 'human nature' here refers to the cognitive and conative faculties of human individuals, viewed in abstraction from their social existence. (This use of 'human nature' to refer to what human beings are like "in themselves", or apart from social relations, raises obvious questions about what looks to be an excessively individualistic view of human existence. Once I have said more about what Rousseau takes human nature in this sense to consist in, I will return to this issue and argue that, contrary to appearances, Rousseau is not making

the mistake he seems to be, namely: regarding everything that belongs to our social being as accidental, or external, to human existence.)

For Rousseau, human nature in this sense consists of four basic elements: 1) “love of self” (*amour de soi-même*), which is an individual’s concern for his own “well-being and preservation (*DI*, 127/*OC* 3, 126);” 2) pity, “a natural repugnance to seeing any sentient being... perish or suffer” (*DI*, 127/*OC* 3, 126); 3) a host of latent cognitive capacities — such as capacities for language, thought, and imagination — that get lumped together under the term ‘perfectibility’ (*DI*, 141/*OC* 3, 142); and 4) a capacity that Rousseau recognizes as a primitive form of free will: the ability to follow or resist — to act on or say no to — what could loosely be called “instinct”, or the promptings of nature (*DI*, 135, 140-1/*OC* 3, 135, 141-2). Although questions could be raised about each of these claims, what I am interested in here is simply this: in ascribing these four faculties to “original” human nature, Rousseau is claiming that love of self, pity, perfectibility, and free will are all features of human beings that individuals could *in principle* possess on their own, that is, even were they to exist outside all society (even though, as I will argue, he thinks real human beings never do in fact exist in that isolated state).

When Rousseau dismisses human nature, then, as the source of moral inequality, he means that moral inequalities cannot be explained by invoking only the four components of human nature just described. In other words, if all that characterized human beings were love of self, pity, perfectibility, and free will, there would be no way to account for the inequalities in power, wealth, and prestige that are so prominent in the real societies with which we are acquainted. More precisely, Rousseau’s claim is that if love of self and pity were the only “sentiments” that moved us, we would have no incentive to seek advantage over others and, so, no incentive to establish relations of inequality. If moral inequality is to be understood as *our* creation rather than nature’s, we need some way of understanding what motivates us to create it, and love of self and pity, by themselves, provide no such explanation. Here, too, objections could be raised, but the force of Rousseau’s position will be easier to appreciate once we see (a bit later) what passion he thinks must be introduced into human psychology in order to explain the pervasive inequality that characterizes social existence as we know it.

But if human nature, understood as the nature of human individuals, is not the source of moral inequalities, what is? The alternative to human nature that Rousseau seems to propose is *history* since, on the very first page of the Second Discourse, he contrasts “nature” — the ways Nature has formed us — with “the changes that the succession of times and things... has produced in [our] original constitution” (*DI*, 124/*OC* 3, 122). History — to follow up on this suggestion — is presumably a factor that human beings, given their free will, have had a hand in shaping. If history, unlike nature, is in some sense up to us, then making it the source of moral inequalities would certainly fit with Rousseau’s

claim that those inequalities are artificial — made by us (*DI*, 137/*OC* 3, 138) — rather than imposed on us by nature. Moreover, if history were the source of moral inequality, it would be easy to see why Rousseau engages in the project of genealogy: if we could trace the historical record back to the point where moral inequalities first arose, we would be able to see not only where, but also perhaps why, they came about, and maybe even whether they are justified.

The problem with this suggestion is that the genealogy Rousseau undertakes in the Second Discourse, though clearly a sort of narrative, is not in any straight forward sense *history*. Rousseau denies explicitly, and in more than one place, both that the state of nature depicted in Part I of the Discourse ever existed and that the “developments” described in Part II are to be taken as real historical events (*DI*, 125, 132/*OC* 3, 123, 132-3). Instead, he describes his genealogy as a “hypothetical history” (*DI*, 128/*OC* 3, 127) that offers “conjectures” rather than “facts” and that is “better suited to elucidating the nature of things than to showing their true origin” (*DI*, 132, 159/*OC* 3, 133, 162). At the same time, the Discourse abounds with real-life examples from historical and anthropological sources that appear to be offered as evidence for the hypothetical history that Rousseau constructs. These bewildering, apparently contradictory features of Rousseau’s account only underscore the importance of figuring out what kind of project he takes genealogy to be.

Before addressing this issue in detail, it is necessary to complicate matters further by attending to another function that the original state of nature plays in Rousseau’s project — a normative function that is directly relevant to the critique of inequality presented in the Second Discourse. It is this function that Rousseau is alluding to in various statements to the effect that the inhabitants of the original state of nature live *in accordance with nature*³. ‘Nature’ in this sense clearly has more than a merely descriptive or explanatory function; it designates a way of living that’s well-ordered, or good, and that stands in contrast with what is depraved or corrupted. To say that the inhabitants of the original state of nature live in accordance with nature is to say that they live in a way that is suitable, or appropriate, to the kind of beings they are⁴.

The content of this normative standard gets spelled out in Rousseau’s description of the savage as “a *free being* whose *heart is at peace* and whose *body is healthy*” (*DI*, 150/*OC* 3, 152). To simplify only a bit, what makes the lives of

³ Rousseau never uses exactly these words, as far as I can tell. But the idea is implicit in the original title page’s citation of Aristotle — “it is not in corrupted beings but in those who live in accordance with nature that one must seek what is natural (qui se comportent conformément à la nature/ quae bene secundum naturam se habent)” — as well as in the claims that the study of man is the “study of his true needs and the fundamental principles of his duties” (*DI*, 128/*OC* 3, 126) and that “savage man...sensed only his true needs” (*DI*, 157/*OC* 3, 160).

⁴ This raises the question of whether the normative account of human nature depends in some way on the descriptive account. I argue in detail that it does (Neuhouser, 2009).

these original beings in accordance with nature is that they are *happy* and *free*. ‘Happy’ here just means that they encounter no enduring or systematic obstacles to the satisfaction of their needs and desires; their happiness consists in the absence of frustration. And ‘free’ refers to the fact that in satisfying their needs and desires, they are compelled to obey no will other than their own. As Rousseau puts the point, there is no “subjection and domination” in the original state of nature, which is to say that no one can “succeed in getting himself obeyed by another” (*DI*, 158/*OC* 3, 161). It is worth noting to what Rousseau attributes this absence of domination: beings in the state of nature are free because “ties of servitude are formed solely by... mutual dependence” (*DI*, 159/*OC* 3, 162). In other words, as long as they are self-sufficient — as long as they are able to satisfy their needs on their own, without depending on the cooperation of others — there is no possibility of (no way of understanding) their subjecting themselves to the wills of others. Thus, the original state of nature is good, and life within it is in accordance with nature, because in it the freedom of each is compatible with the happiness (or well-being) of all.

Let us return now to the question raised above: what kind of conjectural history does Rousseau construct in order to illuminate the origin and legitimacy of moral inequalities? Here is how Rousseau formulates his task in the second half of the *Discourse*: “Having proved that inequality is scarcely perceptible in the state of nature and that its influence there is almost nil, it remains for me to show its origin and progress through the successive developments of the human mind” (*DI*, 159/*OC* 3, 162). According to this passage, the key to explaining the origin of moral inequality is to discover how *the human mind* must differ from what it is like in the original state of nature if moral inequality is to acquire a significant place in human affairs. As I have already noted, the actual historical events that have shaped human development are of little concern to Rousseau. The question that interests him instead is, what element of human psychology must be added to his picture of human nature in order to understand why humans create inequalities beyond those that nature bestows on them?

That this psychological question is Rousseau’s main concern is borne out by the story he goes on to tell in Part II. Although Rousseau notes a number of developments — the origin of leisure, of language, of families and nations (*DI*, 165/*OC* 3, 169) — what he singles out as “the first step towards inequality” (*DI*, 166/*OC* 3, 169) is a psychological phenomenon: the emergence of a new, inherently social passion: *amour propre*. Here is the important passage in which *amour propre* (without being named as such) first appears in the *Second Discourse*:

It became customary to gather in front of their huts or around a large tree; song and dance became the amusement...of idle men and women gathered together. Each one began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself, and public esteem acquired a value. The one who sang or danced the

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 towards inequality and, at the same time, towards vice. (*DI*, 166/*OC* 3, 169)

The point of this passage is to answer the first of Rousseau's two questions: it isolates *amour propre* — a passion to be regarded by others — as the source of moral inequality.

So, what is *amour propre*, and why is it the source of moral inequality? As its name indicates, *amour propre* is a type of self-love. 'Self-love' here just means self-interestedness: to love yourself is to care about your own good and to be disposed to pursue whatever you take that good to be. Yet clearly *amour propre* is something more specific than self-interestedness in general, for Rousseau makes a point of distinguishing it from another form of self-love, *amour de soi-même* (or, as I shall call it, "love of self").

It is important not to confuse *amour propre* and love of self, two passions very different in their nature and effects. Love of self is a natural sentiment that inclines every animal to attend to its self-preservation and that, guided by reason and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue. *Amour propre* is but a relative sentiment, artificial and born in society, that inclines each individual to think more highly of himself than of anyone else [and] inspires in men all the evils they do to one another... (*DI*, 218/*OC* 3, 219)

So, first, the two types of self-love are distinguished by the object, or good, each inclines us to seek: love of self aims at self-preservation⁵, whereas *amour propre* is concerned with how highly one is regarded. A being that possesses *amour propre*, then, is moved by the desire to be esteemed, admired, or thought valuable (in some respect).

Another feature of *amour propre* is its "relative" nature. 'Relative' here means relative to other subjects, and Rousseau's point is that the good that *amour propre* seeks requires — even consists in — certain relations to others. In fact, *amour propre* is relative in two respects, though only one of them is relevant here⁶:

⁵ Despite what Rousseau suggests here, the aims of "amour de soi" are not restricted to self-preservation. The good that "amour de soi" inclines one to seek varies with one's self-conception; to the extent that one thinks of oneself as more than a physical being, the good one seeks will extend beyond the mere necessities of life (see Dent, 1988, pp. 98-103). A more precise way of distinguishing "amour de soi" from "amour propre" would be to describe the former's good as nonrelative (in precisely the two senses in which the latter is relative).

⁶ The other sense in which "amour propre" is relative to other subjects is that the good it seeks depends on — consists in — the judgments of others. This plays an important role in Rousseau's larger theory of "amour propre" but is less relevant to my concerns here. For more detail, see Neuhaus (2008, chapter 1).

the good that *amour propre* seeks — a kind of status or esteem — is relative, or comparative, in nature; to desire esteem is to desire to have a certain standing in relation to others⁷. In other words, the esteem that *amour propre* strives for is a positional good, which implies that doing well for myself (finding the esteem I seek) consists in doing well in relation to others. This means that the extent to which I find my need for esteem satisfied depends on how well — or how badly — those around me fare with respect to theirs. It is important to note that a relative standing is not necessarily a superior or inferior one. If what my *amour propre* leads me to seek is simply the respect I deserve as a human being — a respect I am willing to grant to others in return — then the standing I seek is comparative (or relative) but not superior; in other words, equal standing is still standing relative to others. This feature of *amour propre* contrasts with the nonrelative character of love of self. If we think of the latter as directed at self-preservation, the point of contrast becomes clear: the extent to which my food, my shelter, and my sleep satisfy my bodily needs is independent of how well others fare with respect to their needs. As long as *amour propre* has not yet infected my understanding of my own good, the benefit I get from eating my porridge, say, is unaffected by how well your six-course meal satisfies you.

I emphasize this aspect of the relative character of *amour propre* here because it is what makes *amour propre* the “source” of moral inequality. Since the standing that *amour propre* seeks is always defined in relation to others’, it provides us with an incentive we would otherwise lack — an incentive not just to do well for ourselves but to do better than others. Once *amour propre* enters the picture, then, it is possible to understand how widespread inequality can be *our* creation rather than nature’s: once we take the view that an affirmation of our worth requires being recognized not merely as good but as superior to others, *amour propre* requires inequality in order to be satisfied. The range of phenomena Rousseau has in mind here is too familiar to need elaboration: the endless pursuit of wealth, ostentatious consumption, consuming ambition, keeping up with the Jones’s — all are manifestations of “the fervor”, inspired by *amour propre*, “to raise one’s relative fortune, [not] out of genuine need [but] in order to place oneself above others” (*DI*, 171/*OC* 3, 175).

It is important to bear in mind that, strictly speaking, Rousseau takes *amour propre* to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for moral inequality. There are two reasons for this. The first is that *amour propre*, though always a relative passion, does not necessarily — under all conditions — manifest itself as a desire for *superior* standing. As mentioned above, the quest for standing in the eyes of others can also take the form of wanting to be recognized as an

⁷ “As soon as *amour propre* has developed, the relative I is constantly in play, and the young man never observes others without returning to himself and comparing himself with them. The issue is to know what rank among his fellows he will put himself after having examined them.” (Rousseau, E, 243/*OC* 4, 534)

equal — as a human being, say, who has the same rights and dignity as every other human being. Rousseau makes this clear in the paragraph following the passage cited earlier in which *amour propre* first appears as the desire to be “the handsomest, the strongest, the most skillful, or the most eloquent.” According to this passage, at the same time that individuals began to seek recognition for their particular excellences, they also began to demand a recognition of their equal standing in relation to others:

As soon as men had begun to appreciate one another, and the idea of consideration was formed in their minds, each one claimed a right to it, and it was no longer possible to be disrespectful to anyone with impunity. From this arose the first duties of civility... (*DI*, 166/*OC* 3, 170)

This is important for Rousseau’s project as a whole because his solution to the problems caused by *amour propre* — a solution he articulates in *The Social Contract* and *Emile* — will require not the extirpation of *amour propre* but, instead, its proper cultivation (or *Bildung*) so that the quest for recognition is rendered compatible with universal freedom and happiness. To anticipate a point that lies beyond the scope of this paper: Rousseau’s view is that, despite its many dangers, *amour propre* is at the same time necessary to nearly everything that makes human existence valuable and elevates it above that of the beasts. Since to eliminate *amour propre* would be to eliminate the conditions of rationality, of love — of subjectivity itself — Rousseau’s ultimate aim is to find a way of forming *amour propre* so that it continues to motivate human beings without resulting in the evils it tends to produce in its uneducated form⁸.

The second reason *amour propre* by itself is insufficient to generate widespread inequality is that a host of other, nonpsychological conditions must be in place before the desire for superior standing can translate into the *enduring* advantages of some over others that constitutes “moral inequality.” As long as the quest for superiority is confined to the simple desire of primitive beings to be regarded as the best singer or the most handsome, significant moral inequality cannot arise. This is why Rousseau says that inequality’s gaining a foothold in human existence required a “fortuitous concatenation of several foreign causes” (*DI*, 159/*OC* 3, 162). Included among these fortuitous causes are: rudimentary technological advancements, the development of cognitive faculties, specialization occasioned by the division of labor, and the origin of private property, states, and codes of justice, all of which institutionalize and give permanence to the various inequalities that beings with *amour propre* are driven to create.

It would be too large a task to unravel here the various ways in which each of these causes contributes to moral inequality. One especially pervasive theme,

⁸ I argue for this claim at length in Neuhouser (2008).

though, is the momentous effect of the increasing interdependence among individuals that these developments bring with them. The increase in dependence occasioned by an expanding division of labor, for example, makes it possible for *amour propre* to seek new forms of satisfaction that introduce more enduring inequalities than were possible when individuals were self-sufficient (*DI*, 167/*OC* 3, 171). For alongside the old strategies of striving to be the best singer or dancer, new opportunities for achieving preeminence arise, including the possibility of exploiting others' dependence for the purpose of subjugating them. It is easy to see that a peasant who produces only one of the foods he needs to subsist is more vulnerable to exploitation than his self-sufficient counterpart. As Marx might put the point, dependence creates one of the conditions necessary for inequalities of *class*. The interesting implication of the Second Discourse is that subjugation of this kind is rarely, if ever, motivated purely by economic ends. For in addition to the economic benefits it brings, establishing oneself as the exploiter of others — especially when the roles of exploiter and exploited are sanctioned by social institutions — presents itself as an alluring strategy for finding clear and enduring confirmation of one's high standing in the eyes of others.

2. When (and why) are moral inequalities legitimate?

Having seen where moral inequalities come from — they result from *amour propre*'s drive to establish superior standing in the eyes of others, once certain basic conditions of civilization obtain — we can turn to the second of Rousseau's questions: what makes inequalities legitimate or illegitimate (and why)? The final page of the Discourse appears to give a straightforward answer to this question: "moral inequality... is contrary to natural right whenever it's not directly proportional to [natural] inequality" (*DI*, 188/*OC* 3, 1934). As illustrations of this principle, Rousseau ends his text with the rather feeble prescriptions that the young ought not to command the old and that imbeciles ought not to lead the wise. But Rousseau has more resources than this to answer the question of when, and why, moral inequalities are illegitimate. Rousseau may believe that *natural law* authorizes only those inequalities that are grounded in natural advantages, but he clearly does not believe that only nature-based inequalities can be legitimate. For, as the *Social Contract* makes clear, there is a source of right or legitimacy other than nature, namely, the "convention", or agreement, on which right in society is grounded. That Rousseau is committed to the legitimacy of certain inequalities that are not direct consequences of natural inequality becomes clear when we consider that one of the accomplishments of the *Social Contract* is to legitimize certain (though, admittedly, very limited) forms of moral inequality. For example, by establishing the right to private property, the *Social Contract* legitimizes a degree of material inequality. In saying that the goal of the state should be to

bring the extremes of rich and poor “as close together as possible”, Rousseau acknowledges that absolute equality in “power and riches” is too severe a demand (*SC*, II.11.ii).

This raises the question of just how much moral inequality is permissible (and why), and my claim is that the Second Discourse points to an answer beyond the simplistic claim that only inequalities grounded in natural differences are legitimate. It is telling, I believe, that, consistently in Part II of the Discourse, when Rousseau deplors moral inequalities, he emphasizes not their origin but their consequences. So, immediately after tracing human development up to, roughly, its present state (*DI*, 170/*OC* 3, 174), he goes on to rail against modern inequality because of its *effects*: “as soon as... equality disappeared, ... slavery and misery... germinated and grew” (*DI*, 167/*OC* 3, 171); “competition and rivalry, conflict of interests, the hidden desire to profit at the expense of others — all these evils are...the inseparable consequence of nascent inequality” (*DI*, 171/*OC* 3, 175).

It is only a slight simplification to say that the criterion Rousseau implicitly invokes in criticizing modern inequality is the same criterion we found at work in the normative function of his account of the state of nature, namely, the possibility of universal freedom and happiness. In other words, I want to suggest, Rousseau rejects moral inequalities only to the extent that they are incompatible with the basic conditions of the freedom and happiness of every member of society. As evidence for this thesis, consider that the first half of this principle is precisely what is expressed in the *Social Contract*'s prescription that, while inequalities in power and wealth cannot be completely eliminated, “no citizen ought to be so rich that he can buy another and none so poor that he's forced to sell himself” (*SC*, II.11.ii). In simpler terms: inequalities in wealth may not extend so far that they endanger the freedom of the less well off.

Of course, Rousseau thinks of this criterion — that moral inequalities are legitimate only when compatible with the conditions of everyone's freedom and happiness — is one that rules out many of the inequalities contemporary Western society accepts as legitimate. This is because, when coupled with the extensive dependence that characterizes the civilized state, inequalities lead pretty quickly to the destruction of freedom and happiness. The conflict between inequality and freedom is the easier of the two to see. Two examples of impermissible inequalities already referred to — the exploitation of one class by another and the ability of the rich to “buy” the poor — suggest clearly how moral inequalities can translate into asymmetries in power and, so, into the loss of freedom for those in the inferior position. Rousseau's idea is that when inequality is conjoined with dependence, it is all too easy for those who are less well off to find themselves in a position where, for all practical purposes, they are compelled to follow the will of their superiors in order to satisfy their needs. When what is at issue is the satisfaction of a need, requiring the cooperation of an advantaged other gives one powerful incentives to abandon one's will in

favor of his. And that — obeying a foreign will — is precisely what Rousseau means by enslavement, or the loss of freedom.

Rousseau has much to say as well about how moral inequalities threaten our happiness. His basic idea is that a society with established inequalities offers many opportunities for *amour propre* to seek satisfaction in ways that guarantee frustration and conflict. This is especially the case when inequalities are fueled by an *amour propre* that makes the quest for recognition into a quest to be recognized as *better than* others. One problem is that when success is defined as being recognized as superior to others, the universal satisfaction of *amour propre* is made impossible. In other words, when everyone seeks *superior* status, recognition becomes a scarce good. If some are to achieve superiority, others must end up in an inferior position, and so, rather than being available to all, recognition becomes the object of endless competition, conflict, and frustrated desires.

A second difficulty is the phenomenon of “keeping up with the Jones’s.” This problem is due to the fact that superior standing, even if attained, tends to be insecure as long as it is achieved in relation to others who desire the same. In order to outdo the competitor who has just surpassed me, or to maintain the preeminence I now enjoy, I must constantly be engaged in enhancing my own current standing. In such a situation, individuals are burdened with a limitless need to better their own positions in response to, or in anticipation of, their rivals’ advances, resulting in a restless, unceasing game of one-upmanship. The problem here is not merely that the only satisfaction *amour propre* can find will be fleeting and insecure but also that needs and desires become boundless in a way that is inimical to genuine happiness.

3. What is the relation between genealogy and critique?

We are now ready to address the final question: how does the question of inequality’s *origin* figure in Rousseau’s *critique* of it? If I am right about the basis of Rousseau’s critique — that it is their *consequences* that make inequalities legitimate or illegitimate — then it is hard to see how genealogy can have any critical function at all. If we understand genealogy as I have said we must — as the tracing back of a phenomenon (moral inequality) to its psychological source (*amour propre*) — then simply pointing out where inequality comes from seems to play no role in Rousseau’s account of what is wrong with it. (On this point Rousseau’s genealogy differs from Nietzsche’s, since the critical force of the latter depends, *in part*, on revealing the psychological source of morality to be *ressentiment*.) It’s important to see that, for Rousseau, the fact that moral inequality has its source in a passion that is artificial rather than natural does not itself constitute a critique of it. This point tends to be obscured by Rousseau’s indiscriminate use of the term ‘nature’: to put it simply, sometimes ‘unnatural’

implies ‘bad’, and sometimes it does not. So, when Rousseau calls *amour propre* artificial, he does not mean that humans would be better off without it, or that it is a merely accidental feature of human reality. As I have suggested, what he means instead is that *amour propre* is an inherently social phenomenon, not a possible feature of human individuals “in themselves” (apart from all relations to others). Contrary to popular primitivist readings of the Second Discourse, Rousseau does not envision human existence without *amour propre* any more than he envisions it without love, reason, or language — all of which are just as “artificial” as *amour propre* and no less essential to human reality.

Yet paying attention to the implications of *amour propre*’s artificiality may help to clarify how genealogy and critique work together in the Second Discourse. What exactly does Rousseau mean when he calls *amour propre* “artificial”? Why insist that *amour propre* is something human beings *make*? As is well known, Rousseau regards not just *amour propre* but society, too, as artificial. His point in calling society artificial is that, even though humans must have social relations of one kind or another, the particular forms those relations take are highly variable and dependent on human will. It is not, in general, up to human beings to live in society or not, but it is up to them how their social relations are configured. Something similar is true of *amour propre*: although humans cannot exist as such without it, the particular forms it takes are variable and dependent on many factors, including the kind of social world we inhabit. Rousseau’s claim here is that until social circumstances form it in specific ways, *amour propre* is an exceptionally plastic passion with indeterminate aims. It impels those who have it to seek some form of esteem from others, but it does not determine precisely how or where they will look to find it. If concrete expressions of *amour propre* depend on social institutions, then with respect to *how* it manifests itself in the world, *amour propre* depends just as much on human doings as the social institutions that shape it.

The malleability of *amour propre* is a thesis of great importance to Rousseau, and keeping sight of it will help us understand more clearly the role that genealogy plays for him in critique. On the view I’ve been presenting, Rousseau’s genealogy is less a *historical* enterprise than an *analytic* one; it aims to understand complex human phenomena by breaking them down into their basic components — in the case at hand, to understand moral inequality as the product of *amour propre* when it operates unconstrained within certain social conditions. As I have argued, the “developments” recounted in the Second Discourse are not a history of real events but an analytic exercise aimed at distinguishing what in human reality comes from our nature (understood in abstraction from our social being) from what derives from our social existence (and is therefore variable and, in some sense, our own doing). Locating the source of moral inequality in *amour propre* rather than in “human nature” allows us to see it as our creation rather than as a necessary consequence of our nature, and this opens up the possibility that *amour propre* might be able to assume forms different

from those we are most familiar with, producing quite different results from the degenerate society depicted in Part II.

Another way of putting this point is to say that tracing moral inequality back to an “artificial” passion rather than a natural one helps us to see where contingency enters human reality. It is important to emphasize, though: what is contingent is not the mere presence of *amour propre* in some form or other. I repeat: Rousseau does not think human existence is possible without some manifestation of *amour propre*. What is contingent, rather, is the particular forms *amour propre* takes in specific social circumstances. More precisely, Rousseau’s genealogical claim is that even though *amour propre* appears so pervasively in our society as the desire for superior standing — even though *amour propre* as we know it is the source of so much enslavement and suffering — this is a contingent and potentially corrigible fact, not a necessary feature of the human condition. (From now on, I will refer to the drive for superior standing as “inflamed” *amour propre*.) It is important to remember, however, that inflamed *amour propre* is not the only contingency that enters Rousseau’s story. As he insists again and again, many of the social developments that figure in his genealogy, including the specific rules of private property and particular forms of the division of labor, are also “fortuitous... circumstances... that could very well never have occurred” (*DI*, 139/*OC* 3, 140). This, of course, is related to the contingency of inflamed *amour propre*, since on Rousseau’s view, much of the inflammation of *amour propre* is due precisely to the influence of unfortunate social arrangements. When Rousseau ends the *Discourse* by saying, “it is enough for me to have proved that this is not man’s original state” (187), we are to understand him as asserting that the state of fallenness he has just described is not a necessary outcome of human society, in all its possible forms. Genealogy, then, is intimately related to critique because it serves to “denaturalize” a host of social conditions whose legitimacy we tend to accept unreflectively precisely because we view those arrangements as “eternal givens”, “due to the nature of things”. Genealogy disrupts our unreflective “consent” to the moral inequalities of what we take to be a “natural” social order, and, in doing so, it undermines one of the principal conditions of their continued existence.

This point may also shed light on why real history is not completely irrelevant to Rousseau’s genealogy: if one of genealogy’s aims is to demonstrate the contingency of our own social arrangements — if one of its goals is to show that there are alternatives to private property, the drive for wealth, and the division of labor as *we* know them — then empirical evidence illustrating the rich diversity of forms that human life has in fact taken is surely to the point.

⁹ Rousseau uses “inflamed” and its variations only once to modify *amour propre* (Rousseau, *E*, 247/*OC* 4, 537), but, following Dent (1988), it has become standard practice to use the term, as I do here, to refer to *amour propre* in any of its pernicious manifestations.

The examples of the Hottentots, who can see as far with the naked eye as the Dutch can with telescopes (*DI*, 140/*OC* 3, 141), and the Caribs, who have no notion of stocking up for tomorrow (*DI*, 143/*OC* 3, 144), reinforce the claim that previous philosophers attributed far too many contingent features of their own society to a statically conceived human nature (*DI*, 132/*OC* 3, 132).

Although I believe these interpretive claims are in substance correct, there is also something misleading in characterizing the developments the Second Discourse depicts as merely accidental. For Rousseau holds, I believe, that the degeneration of *amour propre* into the unconstrained quest for superior standing, while not *necessary*, is the most likely outcome of the social developments he describes. For complicated reasons I cannot go into here¹⁰, I think Rousseau regards the “inflamed” search for superior standing as the manifestation of *amour propre* that is by far the most likely to develop in the absence of “artificial” intervention into the social world directed at insuring that *amour propre* assume a benign rather than a destructive form.

But even if fallenness is the most likely result of civilization, there is still a point to seeing it as contingent (not necessary). The point is that what is not necessary can in principle be transformed into something different, and working out how this is possible is precisely the aim of the *Social Contract* and *Emile*. This means that genealogy is relevant not only to critique but also to social transformation. Rousseau points to this aspect of genealogy when, in a letter to Voltaire recounting the accomplishments of the Second Discourse, he says, “I showed men how they bring their miseries upon themselves, and hence *how they might avoid them*” (*LV*, 234/*OC* 3, 1062). The part of Rousseau’s story that is most relevant to this function of genealogy is one I have mentioned but spent too little time explaining. It is found in the Discourse’s account of the various nonpsychological conditions that must be in place if *amour propre* is to generate enduring and pernicious forms of inequality. For now, I will have to be content with the following simple illustration of how genealogy is relevant to social reform: if I have understood Rousseau correctly, the tools of genealogy enable us to discover how particular contingent forms of private property — the private ownership of land (or means of production), for example — create new, destructive opportunities for seeking social esteem and so exacerbate and give free rein to the harmful potential of *amour propre*. But understanding these connections is essential to systematic reflection on how the social world would have to be reconfigured if *amour propre* and the inequalities it tends to produce are to be kept within limits that make freedom and happiness possible for all, without eliminating moral inequality entirely. This suggests that genealogy has a further, analytic function, namely, the disentangling of the various strands, or elements, that have come together (contingently) to form the particular

¹⁰ See Neuhouser (2008, chapter 4).

complex phenomenon under investigation (morality, in the case of Nietzsche; moral inequalities, in the case of Rousseau). Genealogy asks: which in principle *separable* developments and events have in fact joined together to produce this contingent phenomenon? By disentangling a complex historical phenomenon into its component elements and recognizing where contingency enters into its formation, genealogy enables us to think productively about how the elements of that phenomenon might be “put back together again” in ways that enable us to avoid some of the dangers and disadvantages of the ones we know. This aspect of Rousseau’s genealogy has its counterpart, too, in Nietzsche’s (II, §24), but I will have to reserve discussion of that for another occasion.

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