

Michelle Hoover

Dr. Polina Kroik

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Rousseau, Identity, and Status:

Amour-Propre in the 21st Century

In the world of social media, online presentation and comparison rule supreme. How one presents oneself and the image one crafts are what matter, not authenticity. The illusion of authenticity is what's desirable. Presenting a perceived inauthentic online identity is tantamount to a social death, as modern society rewards people for being their "true selves" online. But are people presenting their true selves, or merely a carefully crafted image they want others to believe, and what yardstick are they measuring their "realness" against? Jean-Jacques Rousseau diagnosed this same problem more than two centuries ago. His concept of amour-propre—the corrosive, comparative form of self-love that society itself produces—helps explain why the public images we create, namely through social media, are rarely at peace. Amour-propre, I will show, is the underlying principle of what counts as authentic online and what performances count as identity.

Humans seek social comparison and recognition as validation of their place in the world. But this need for recognition, often channeled through a screen, is coinciding with rising anxiety, depression, overall unhappiness, and, in extreme cases, even greater risk of suicide. Comparison, as the maxim goes, is the thief of joy. Understanding why requires understanding amour-propre itself.

Rousseau's idea of amour-propre is thus: through sociability and the gaze of others, idealization and mimicry arise. This engenders a sense of comparison in which men categorize each other into hierarchies that define societies. In the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, Rousseau captures this shift in the self's center of gravity, saying, "the savage lives within himself; sociable man, always outside himself, is capable of living only in the opinion of others" (Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* 66). Rousseau distinguished this condition, amour-propre, from amour de soi, a healthy, natural, and intrinsic love of the self that requires no comparison to anyone else.

As humans began to live in larger, interdependent groups, Rousseau felt that this modern society, which produced amour-propre, was the harmful yet inevitable result of the "civilizing process." Because amour-propre is fundamentally relational, Rousseau observed that it "makes comparisons" and so "is never content and never could be, because this sentiment, preferring ourselves to others, also demands others to prefer us to themselves, which is impossible" (Rousseau, *Emile* 213-14). This is the mechanism that now runs, largely unrecognized, beneath every curated feed, deciding not only how people measure themselves against others but who, online, they are permitted to become.

Rousseau places vanity and the need for recognition from others above the pursuit of material gain. As such, this relationship creates an oppressive dynamic between those crafting an identity and those they depend on for recognition and validation of that identity. According to Rousseau, this ongoing, perpetual relationship is never content, as each person is always relying on what the other person thinks of them to continually define and redefine their own image. From this, the fires of anger, hatred, and envy are forged, and amour-propre takes root (Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 22-26). As Roshnee Ossewaarde-Lowtoo notes, Rousseau argues that

the sentiment of inferiority poisons everything . . . one becomes preoccupied with what one does not have (RJ, 1:806). Those who are in the grip of egoism are constantly tormented by jealousy, discontentment, and the imagination of what they could have had. (24)

Egoism is the manifestation of a lack of conscience, of will, and of a desire to dominate. This egoism of vanity subordinates greed as the driving force behind societal woes (Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 22-23). This same dynamic, in which one's own image can never be settled because it is always waiting on someone else's verdict, is the same dynamic that now governs the construction of an online self.

If a person's very sense of existing depends on being seen by others, then the question of what is authentic, and what is true, about that existence becomes impossible to separate from the question of what is seen. One's worth, according to Rousseau, becomes dependent on the opinion of others; the "sentiment of one's existence" is intertwined not only with how people view one another and their resulting place in society, but with their very existence (Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 28). As society widens, so does amour-propre and the danger therein. This danger is reflected in today's world of social media. It has become essential to one's social standing to present "the right" sort of social media profile, one that oozes with positivity and authenticity, emblazoned with the motto "living my best life!" The gaze of others is a vital component of the social media landscape. Without numerous posts, likes, hashtags, follows, and followers, a profile ceases to maintain relevancy and withers into obscurity, taking the person and their persona with it.

Philosopher Hans-Georg Moeller and his co-author Paul J. D'Ambrosio identify this problem in their book *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity*. Here they show that

identity formation has three stages: sincerity, in which a person's worth is measured by how faithfully they perform a predetermined social role; authenticity, in which a person's worth is measured by how faithfully they express an inner "true self"; and, now, proficity, in which a person's worth is measured by how well a curated profile is seen to be seen by others (Moeller and D'Amrosio). In this sense, a profile is never a direct self-presentation; it is calibrated to a projected audience, an exercise in what Moeller and D'Ambrosio call second-order observation, watching how others watch us and adjusting the image accordingly (Moeller and D'Ambrosio min 1:15:22). Proficity gives a 21st-century form to Rousseau's idea that the self's sentiment of its own existence does not come from within, rather from an audience's anticipated gaze. What is "true" about a profile, is not whatever inner reality it might or might not express, but only whatever version of itself successfully survives being watched.

If proficity has replaced authenticity as the standard by which an online identity is judged, then what replaces sincerity as its method is performance itself. A public identity is gained through the gaze of others, where the evaluation of the other person is internalized and becomes part of one's own identity (Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 26). A person on social media is always both a subject and an object. This is a similar process to what Jean-Paul Sartre terms the "liquification of the self." Liquification refers to the moment one becomes aware that one is both subject and object: one can reduce another to an object, just as the other can reduce oneself to an object. Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity has a place here as well. Gender, for Butler, is only becomes gender once it is performed. Public profiles on social media are only real to the extent that they are curated and performed. Moeller and D'Ambrosio would call this pretending: a mode of self-presentation in which both performer and audience know the profile is a

performance, yet the performance is still taken to say something true about the person behind it (Moeller and D'Ambrosio min 6:44:31). The profile becomes real through the gaze of the public.

Amour-propre grew out of a desire to perform (Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 23). Ellen Russo states that “the effect of amour-propre is to create a sort of bondage of the self to the opinion of the public: the self’s desire ‘to make an impression,’ to appear at its own advantage induces [it] to create an alternative self more consonant with the expectations of the public” (qtd. in Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 29). Social media profiles require a certain level of self-disclosure. This self-disclosure, however, does not need to be authentic so long as it appears to be authentic.

Performance alone, however, does not explain why the pressure to perform keeps intensifying. That escalation comes from comparison. It is useful to view this space as a public spectacle. As Y. Ibrahim observes,

this “spectacular economy” unleashes a pervasive gaze where we constantly watch others and are equally aware of others watching us. We cease to be neutral entities online.

Beyond our own agency to represent ourselves, the online economy of consumption, reciprocity and gaze play a significant role in ascribing social value to our presence and profile. The complex politics of self-identity is both bound to our self-love and equally how others rate us. (118)

This economy of spectacle was shaped by inequalities in society and the drive for comparison. Despite these ill effects, Rousseau did not view amour-propre as entirely bad, calling it a dangerous yet necessary concept. Nicholas Dent’s work reflects this, as he further categorizes amour-propre (Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 26-27). Dent described negative self-love as “enflamed amour-propre” and identified it as the destructive tendency that amour-propre can

induce. Comparison, competition, and conformity are all byproducts of enflamed amour-propre (Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 21).

As the need to have a superior profile, and by default a superior identity, on social media increases uglier behaviors begin to emerge. The jockeying for “attention dominance” in the social media world creates a culture of denigration and humiliation among users (Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 26-27). The need to stand out and differentiate oneself from the crowded marketplace, while at the same time adhering to some level of conformity, grows. Simone de Beauvoir noted that the fear of being dispossessed, a fear of not being acknowledged as unique, can lead to a form of narcissism (Cleary). To alleviate this alienation, people create unique personality traits and idiosyncrasies and then broadcast these traits very publicly (Cleary). This mirrors the current state of social media.

Dent argues that envy and spite are not an inherent part of amour-propre, as these are mere symptoms. Rather, it is the individuality and identity-formation aspect of amour-propre that is dangerous (McLendon, “Intellectual Celebrity” 514-16). Michael Locke McLendon argues that the locus of the problem in amour-propre is talent. McLendon zeros in on Rousseau’s words regarding talent, explaining that the focus on talent leads to the creation of hierarchies and dominance and the breakdown of virtue. Rousseau worried that a society which rewards talent leaves behind those who have little to no talent. Moreover, societies still need farmers, clothiers, and other laborers whose work does not require exceptional talent (McLendon, “Minimal Self” 343, 355).

Rousseau wondered how a society could square the necessity of labor with the simultaneous rewarding of talent, without creating divisions, classes, and hierarchies among men (McLendon, “Minimal Self” 355). He remarked that the greater the proximity humans had to

each other on a regular basis, the greater the rate of comparison, and thus the greater the rate of jealousy, envy, and competition, leading to amour-propre. Rousseau felt that if society structured itself around talent, the identity formation of those without talent would suffer (McLendon, “Intellectual Celebrity” 514). As McLendon states, “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” (McLendon, “Intellectual Celebrity” 514). Social media does not just make comparison easier; like Rousseau’s proximate society, it decides, through likes, followers, and an algorithm’s own preference for certain kinds of talent, who gets to have a legible identity there at all.

For Rousseau, amour-propre left unchecked would lead to an abdication of virtue. The more people become obsessed with their self-image, with the representation of the self they present to the public, the greater the risk they run of becoming disconnected from their true self. This disconnection from one’s true self is amplified by the increasing disconnection we have from each other (Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 22-23).

Rousseau believed that the self-sufficient man who needed no one’s opinion was superior to the interdependent man of modern society. This idea did not age well as we now know that humans are social creatures, and that without human contact and deep emotional bonds, we not only cannot thrive, but we also die. Amour-propre, then, is not an affliction we can simply opt out of by logging off. Social media did not invent this dependency it enflamed it. What counts as authentic is only what is seen to be authentic. What counts as a self is only what is successfully performed. What counts as worth is only what survives comparison.

Identity formation and performance, comparison and competition, have all been exacerbated by social media and the quest to “find ourselves.” Chasing these false, ephemeral

phantoms of ourselves, and who we want to be or who we think we ought to be, we are doing exactly what Rousseau predicted: a society so overtly focused on vanity and social comparison loses its virtue, its moral compass, its very essence and soul. Rousseau gave the world warning to recognize amour-propre for what it is, one we would do well to heed.

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