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Morality and aspiration in *Bourgeois Dignity*

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ABSTRACT

Deirdre McCloskey's book, *Bourgeois Dignity*, sets out to refute the most reputable explanations of what she calls the Great Fact—that over the last few centuries, the wealth of industrialized nations has increased by a factor of at least sixteen. She also presents a positive thesis, namely that the Great Fact occurred when Western societies began to ascribe dignity and liberty to the bourgeoisie by changing their rhetoric. I argue that McCloskey's positive thesis can benefit from an illuminating moral psychological distinction between what Peter Strawson has called "social morality" and "individual ideal" or what I shall refer to as moral rules and personal ideals or aspirations. McCloskey's positive thesis can be mapped onto these two categories and thus separated into two distinct theses: the Imperatival Thesis and the Aspirational Thesis. The former holds that societies that stopped blaming and ostracizing the bourgeoisie for their characteristic activities were the first to develop, whereas the latter holds that societies stopped ostracizing the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie started innovating because they took on new aspirations and ideals. These twin theses help to explain how the ideas of dignity and rhetoric operate in *Bourgeois Dignity*. I also argue that the distinction connects McCloskey's positive thesis to a large field of empirical and theoretical work in evolutionary psychology and cognitive science.

Deirdre McCloskey's book, *Bourgeois Dignity*, sets out to refute the most reputable explanations of what she calls the Great Fact—that over the last few centuries, the wealth of industrialized nations has increased by a factor of at least sixteen. For McCloskey, the job of the economic historian is to provide a scientifically and historically plausible explanation of the Great Fact. Specifically, she must explain why the Industrial Revolution (the generator of the Great Fact) occurred at a particular time (starting in the 18th century) in a particular place (Holland, then England) and to a particular magnitude (sixteen). McCloskey believes that the explanations proffered by other economic historians fail to explain at least one of these three aspects of the Great Fact.

In response, McCloskey offers her own explanation of the Great Fact, namely that the cultural ascription of liberty and dignity to the bourgeoisie unleashed the creative powers of the commercial classes. McCloskey calls this event the Bourgeois Revaluation. While McCloskey's positive explanation is as of yet undeveloped, it depends upon a conception of moral psychology complex enough to raise some important questions about the plausibility of her explanation of the Great Fact. I believe that recent work in moral psychology can provide a plausible reconstruction of her thesis and provide a manner of rendering it subject to scientific evaluation.

Specifically, I argue that McCloskey's positive story can benefit from an illuminating moral psychological distinction between what Peter Strawson has called "social morality" and "individual ideal" or what I shall refer to as moral rules and personal ideals or aspirations. Moral rules are issued as imperatives: they are commands for others to conform to what morality requires whether they like it or not. Personal ideals are inherently attractive: their moral force draws the individual to certain social practices and forms of life. The interplay between rules and ideals is complex, as one pushes the individual and the other pulls. And both are tied to sources of psychological motivation conceptually distinct from the motivation of *homo economicus* (McCloskey's "Max U"). These two forms of moral motivation help to separate McCloskey's thesis into two distinct claims, what I shall call the Imperatival and Aspirational Theses. The former holds that the Great Fact is partially explained by the relaxation of rules of social morality that prohibited commercial activity and innovation. The latter holds that the relaxation of such rules was driven partly by the acceptance of new ideals and aspirations.

McCloskey eagerly builds moral motivations into her model of the economic agent. In fact, such motivations are crucial to her explanation of the Great Fact. However, while McCloskey commendably emphasizes the fact that humans have motives other than those postulated by the economist (this is arguably the message of her previous work, *The Bourgeois Virtues*), *Bourgeois Dignity* lacks an account of *deontological* motivation. *Bourgeois Dignity* explains the modern world in terms of the motives of the virtuous

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agent, but I believe McCloskey's focus on virtue obscures the normative force of actually practiced rules of social morality and the ideals whose pursuit these rules restrain. In my view, the distinction between rules and ideals aids her project. Or so I shall argue.

I develop my criticism and reconstruction of the core thesis of *Bourgeois Dignity* in six stages. Section 1 reviews the argumentative strategy of the book and its proposed explanation of the Great Fact. I worry that the blanket appeal to the changing rhetoric and human dignity is too vague to effectively explain the Great Fact. Section 2 distinguishes the Imperatival and Aspirational Theses. It also explains the idea of a social morality and employs it to distinguish between the differences in behavior, rhetoric and social evaluations that resulted in a higher social standing for the bourgeoisie. Section 3 develops the notion of individual ideals as explanations of the normative force of social morality. In Section 4, I show how distinguishing between rules and ideals clarifies and motivates McCloskey's explanation of the Great Fact by specifying the place of dignity and rhetoric and McCloskey's explanatory schema. Section 5 addresses McCloskey's virtue ethical theory of moral motivation and sketches how McCloskey might integrate rules and ideals into that theory as detailed in *The Bourgeois Virtues*. Section 6 concludes.

1. Dignity and liberty for the Bourgeoisie

Let us begin by reviewing McCloskey's statement of the thesis of *Bourgeois Dignity*:

> The present book . . . look[s] at a representative sample of apparently promising materialist and antirhetorical explanations of the Industrial Revolution and the modern world—explanations such as investment or exploitation or geography or foreign trade or imperialism or genetics or property rights. It finds them to be surprisingly weak. It concludes therefore (I admit the inferential gap) that the remaining explanations, such as ideas and rhetoric, must be strong. (The two books to follow will offer more positive evidence for the change in rhetoric.)[1]

The book is part of McCloskey's explanation of the Great Fact: "Real income per head nowadays exceeds that around 1700 or 1800 in, say, Britain and in other countries that have experienced modern economic growth by such a large factor as sixteen, at least."[2] I think the book has two theses. What I shall call the *Negative Thesis* is that "apparently promising materialist and anti-rhetorical explanations of the Industrial Revolution and the modern world . . . [are] surprisingly weak." In lieu of a materialist explanation, McCloskey suggests that new ideas and rhetoric made the Great Fact true. This is the *Positive Thesis*, that the Great Fact was the result of "a rhetorical change around 1700 concerning markets and innovations and the bourgeoisie, a rhetoric spreading after 1800. It was merely a change in talking and thinking about dignity and liberty."[3]

The primary aim of *Bourgeois Dignity* is to establish the Negative Thesis, which we should briefly review. The reason that economics cannot explain the modern world is because none of the purely economic explanations of the Great Fact are successful. McCloskey develops a rogue's gallery of theories of modern economic growth. One of her first targets is "capital fundamentalism" or the view, defended by Charles Feinstein, that all innovation must be based on the accumulation of equipment or capital.[4] First, McCloskey argues, the possibility of capital accumulation was always a live option for various nations, but that their capital stocks always returned to the historical mean. Further, Britain had a relatively low rate of saving and investment during the Industrial Revolution, which cuts against Feinstein's view.[5] McCloskey also argues, contra Max Weber and more recently, J. Bradford DeLong, that Protestant cultures cannot explain the modern Industrial Revolution because their growth rates are not unique. Instead, she argues that heavily Roman Catholic countries have proven to be economic miracles over the last several decades.[6] She is especially critical of what she terms "eugenic materialist" explanations of the Great Fact recently defended by Gregory Clark. Clark argues that while bourgeois values are a proximate cause of economic development, the embedding of such values in British culture required genetic development that resulted from the unusual fecundity of the British upper classes.[7] McCloskey counters that genetic developments, even if they occurred, are a poor place to end the explanatory chain, as there is no inherent connection between the changes in ideology Clark thinks crucial for development and the genetic hypothesis he defends.[8] These arguments, along with many others, comprise the Negative Thesis. We may now focus on the Positive Thesis.

The Positive Thesis, has four conceptual components: the bourgeoisie, liberty, dignity and rhetoric. How does McCloskey understand these ideas? The bourgeoisie, as McCloskey puts it in *The Bourgeois Virtues*, are social classes that are in the business of "honoring . . . work apart from manual drudgery or heroic daring."[9] They are shopkeepers, craftsmen, grocery store managers and small-time investors, those middle-class individuals who live the ordinary lives characteristic of Western, developed nations.[10] The idea of the bourgeoisie is a reasonably clear sociological concept, but McCloskey's conception of liberty could benefit from clarification. She often speaks of "liberty to innovate" or a "liberty for innovators"[11] but in other places she speaks of a more general form of liberty for the bourgeoisie. In fact, she claims to defend Adam Smith's "system of natural liberty" which includes far more than merely the liberty to innovate.[12] If we are to move forward, we must assume that liberty means something like the permission to engage in economic experimentation and to pursue the means towards those aims. While McCloskey decries as incomplete the traditional liberal idea of negative freedom that "looks only at the actually exercised external impediments to action by solely self-interested agents, such as a prohibition on slave marriage or the demand by a landlord to vote for him in parliament" this form of liberty seems crucial. In fact, "without the negative liberty to innovate, no amount of new social prestige for the previously scorned bourgeoisie would have done the trick."[13] For now, I will confine my discussion of the book's major thesis to the liberty to innovate which I take to include several distinct freedoms, such as protections against arbitrary invasion in one's projects and plans,

[1] McCloskey, D., 2010. Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 33.
[2] Ibid., p. 48.
[3] Ibid., p. 33.
[4] Feinstein, C., 2003. National Income Accounts: Investments and Savings, in: Mokyr, J. (Ed.), The Oxford Encyclopedia of Economic History. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
[5] McCloskey, D., 2010. Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 133–136.
[6] Ibid., p. 144.
[7] Clark, G., 2007. A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World. Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp. 7–8.
[8] McCloskey, D., 2010. Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 266–277.
[9] McCloskey, D., 2006. The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 75.
[10] In *The Bourgeois Virtues*, McCloskey divides the bourgeoisie into three distinct classes according to their degree of wealth, occupation and capital ownership.
[11] McCloskey, D., 2010. Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 35.
[12] Smith, A., 1981. An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Vol. I and II. Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, p. 109.
[13] McCloskey, D., 2010. Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 395.