

interpretation

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Rousseau's *Contract* with and without his *Inequality*

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The overall purpose of this essay is to make sense of some hitherto unconnected problems of interpretation of Rousseau's political philosophy. The first problem is what, if any, relationship exists between Rousseau's *Discourse On Inequality* and *The Social Contract*?¹ The second is whether or not it is possible to bring into direct confrontation recent writings that either do or do not assume a relationship between *Inequality* and *Contract*. Third, the essay will consider whether there is a continuous argument between Rousseau's works. Connection of these problems requires an interpretation. To provide it, I will argue that it is self-interest which is the principal cause of inequality, that the problem of self-interest links *Inequality* and *Contract*, and that Rousseau's attempt to unite justice and self-interest provides common ground upon which the two readings can confront one another. Although favoring the interpretation that the argument is continuous, the essay will conclude by propounding a problem germane to that interpretation.

WITH AND WITHOUT

Two interpretations are given of the relationship between *Inequality* and *Contract*. The first is a "with it" interpretation according to which understanding of the *Contract* is based upon (presupposes or is, in some sense, dependent upon) *Inequality*. The second is an interpretation "without it," divided specifically into two alternatives: either the relationship between the two works is logically contradictory, and thus impossible, or the relationship is one of independence, in which case *Inequality* can, and perhaps should, be left aside.

C. E. Vaughan favoured the alternative of contradiction but his argument for it is based on an eccentric and unproved claim that Rousseau is an "individualist" in *Inequality* and a "collectivist" in the *Contract*.² What is disturbing, however, is that his conclusion, as opposed to his supporting argument, may be correct if it posits that Rousseau came to believe that the outcome of the argument of *Inequality* is comparable to the plight of the poor fellow who is sawing off the limb that he is sitting on. For, as will be shown, "the last stage" of inequality

1. All translations from Rousseau's writings are from *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Œuvres complètes, tome III, Du contrat social écrits politiques* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade). Only page numbers are given in the essay.

2. C. E. Vaughan, ed., *The Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), Vol. I, p. 21, also pp. 4-6, 14-19, 80; vol. II, p. 14.

(188–94) depicts the condition of modern men as that of crazed degenerates to whom political philosophy seems not to apply. Is Rousseau referring to these men in the preface of the *Contract* (351) when he says that he proposes to “take men as they *are*?” Does he propose to *leave* them as they are? Does Rousseau have them in mind when he says in *Contract*, Book Two, Chapter Seven (381) that human nature must be transformed by the actions of the Lawgiver? Transformation seems in order, but then how can such interference by the Lawgiver be consistent with the freedom of the moral agent and with what Andrew Levine calls the politics of autonomy?³

This line of questioning could serve also as the basis of the second alternative, that it is better to consider independently *Inequality* and the *Contract*. For one might say that whether or not the works are inconsistent, it seem apparent that if Rousseau seeks to build upon the argument of *Inequality*, and takes as his subject men who are out of control, he sets himself a hopeless task. Better then simply to forget *Inequality* or, at least, to interpret it in such a way as not to raise any serious issues. Hence, if we forgo Vaughan’s too extreme version of the “without it” alternative, we are left with two possibilities: a “with it” interpretation in which the relationship between *Inequality* and the *Contract* is significant, and a “without it” in which it is not. We are also, of course, left with a major problem in that those who write as if the two major works are independent seem never to make a sustained case for treating them independently. In consequence, there are no arguments from that quarter to which one can give a reply.

GOOD EUROPEAN MONOGRAPHS (GEMs)
AND ABLE BRITISH COMMENTARIES (ABCs)

Despite this difficulty, it is intriguing to see the extent to which equally acceptable scholarly works on Rousseau’s philosophy can be done with *and* without significant reference to *Inequality*. A survey of recent writings on Rousseau’s political philosophy suggests that there is one interpretation which is heavily dependent on *Inequality* (viewing the condition of man in *Inequality* as enslaved and alienated from his nature) and another, equally acceptable, which virtually neglects *Inequality* and certainly that reading of it suggested immediately above.

For the sake of provocative argument, let me crudely separate these writings into two categories: The GEMs (Good European Monographs) and the ABCs (Able British Commentaries). The first is to be understood as that which presupposes significant reference to *Inequality* and the second as that which does not. Neither abbreviation is entirely felicitous, not all the books in the first category are monographs, and “British” indicates a philosophical style rather than a nationality. Amongst the GEMs I would include Bronislaw Baczko’s *Rous-*

3. Andrew Levine, *The Politics of Autonomy, A Kantian Reading of Rousseau’s Social Contract* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1976).

seau, solitude et communauté (Mouton, 1974), L. Coletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin* (Monthly Review Press, 1972), Victor Goldschmidt's *Anthropologie et politique, Les Principes du système de Rousseau* (Vrin, 1974) plus the inspirational *J.J. Rousseau, la transparence et l'obstacle* (Gallimard, 1971) by Jean Starobinski. Louis Althusser's stimulating essay on Rousseau in his *Politics and History* (NLB, 1972) comes under this category because its argument doesn't march well but for its implicit reliance on the argument of *Inequality*.

ABCs should include J. C. Hall's *Rousseau: An Introduction to his Political Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1973), Ramon Lemos's *Rousseau's Political Philosophy* (The University of Georgia Press, 1977) and Andrew Levine's *Rousseau and the Politics of Autonomy* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1976). There are exceptions which prove the rule. John Charvet's *The Social Problem in the Philosophy of Rousseau* (Cambridge, 1974) belongs with the GEMs as does David Gauthier's "Rousseau: The Politics of Redemption," *Trent Rousseau Papers* (University of Ottawa Press, 1980). I have produced three flawed GEMs, "The Discourse on Inequality and The Social Contract," *Philosophy*, 1972, "Rousseau's Criticism of Hobbesian Egoism" in *Trent Rousseau Papers* and "Rousseau: The Moral Dimension of Peoperty," *Theories of Property, Aristotle to the Present* (Sir Wilfred Laurier Press, 1979).

It is surprising that the ABCs neglect *Inequality*, for it is often held that *The Social Contract* is about equality and that Rousseau is the original egalitarian and democrat. Such claims appear to necessitate an understanding of the sense in which Rousseau held men to be unequal, and therefore a close study of the discourse addressed to that subject. Nonetheless, it would be mistaken to argue that the ABCs are wrong. A weaker thesis seems warranted, one by which a different interpretation of Rousseau's political philosophy follows from linking *Inequality* and the *Contract*.

To bring this thesis into view I propose to review the argument of *Inequality* in terms of certain puzzling passages concerning self-interest (or self-love) and to indicate from them a continuity of argument with the *Contract*. Happily, this work provides a common ground for the confrontation of the two interpretations, starting from Rousseau's avowal in the preface of the *Contract* to unite right and interest (351).

SELF-INTEREST IN INEQUALITY

Rousseau clearly regards Hobbes as the principal exponent of egoism and as the alternative to the reigning political philosophy of Natural Law. In the first part of *Inequality* Rousseau credits Hobbes with having seen very clearly the default of all modern definitions of Natural Law (153). Earlier Rousseau characterizes modern Natural Law as consisting of rational, prescriptive universal moral principles (124). Hence I take Rousseau to mean that prescriptive moral prin-

ciples are insufficient to govern the conduct of man motivated by self-interest. However, Rousseau also cautions: "Especially let us not conclude with Hobbes that . . . man is naturally evil. . . The wicked man, (Hobbes) says, is a robust child" (153).

A curious feature of this comment is that although Hobbes does compare the wicked man to a robust child, Hobbes denies emphatically that man is naturally evil. Indeed, Hobbes claims that such a thesis is inconsistent with his philosophical method and principles. In addition, comparison, denial and claim occur on the same page of text (in *Man and Citizen*, edited by B. Gert, Doubleday Anchor, p. 100). Either Rousseau deliberately misrepresented Hobbes, or derived the misrepresentation from a commentator. Even without the full text the comparison with the robust child suggests that evil is not natural, as one would mean if one were to say, "He is no more naturally evil than a robust child."

The curiosity suggests at least that Rousseau is as interested in the constitutive causes of moral relations as is Hobbes himself (Hobbes, p. 98). That problem is a reiteration of the purpose of *Inequality*, which is to account for moral, and not natural, unequal relations among men. One sense in which Hobbes and Rousseau differ is that Rousseau seeks to understand moral relations as part of a process of development.

But the mention of development brings us to another puzzle. It is very easy to see *Inequality* as a sweeping indictment of modern civilization in the manner of the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*. It is far harder to explain how Rousseau perceives the development of inequality as a necessary condition of the development of human nature, and particularly of moral relations. If we assert, as the text requires us to do, that the history of inequality is negative in being an indictment but positive in accounting for human development, then quite plainly the cause of inequality, whatever it is, must be sufficient to explain both negative and positive aspects. Quite plainly too, the claim that property is the fundamental cause of inequality, which is the claim of every superficial interpretation of the argument, is inadequate. Property may suffice as one cause of negative inequality, although even that is exaggerated if the desire for property is itself an effect; certainly, property is even more dubious in accounting for the positive aspect.

We require then a cause sufficient to explain both indictment and development. In this connection, three other passages are noteworthy. At the end of part one, where he previews the argument to come (162) and towards the end of part two, where he reviews the entire argument (193), Rousseau identifies inequality with successive developments of the human mind. Equally noteworthy is the fact that *perfectibilité* (142) and *l'amour propre* (189) are both spoken of as causes of that which is evil and good in man. It seems from these passages that the growth of inequality and alienation among men is paralleled by stages in the development of consciousness, especially stages of conscious evaluation. At the beginning of the preface of *Inequality* (122) Rousseau takes special note of the injunction "Know thyself." As I understand him, he means that we attain

self-knowledge through stages of awareness of ourselves as beings who evaluate and are evaluated.

But if conscious evaluation is the means of self-knowledge then we need to ask: what is the place of self-interest in this process? The dominant sense of self-interest in *Inequality* is that of interest in one's self, *amour propre*, an esteem of self dependent upon the esteem of others. It is in terms of this concept, and the forms of social relations that grow with and support it, that Rousseau explains what he calls the history of inequality among men. Men judge themselves by ranking themselves in comparison to others. As the story of inequality unfolds, the interest in self, the desire for esteem, strengthens to the point that it overpowers all other interests. A critical juncture occurs when an individual lacks, or lacks to sufficient degree, the natural qualities that bring esteem. Then, appearance replaces reality and artificial qualities, natural ones. Possession of property is the prime example of an artificial quality. One is what one owns. The causal principle of the development of self-interest is: To be is to be valued.

The desire for the approval of others causes each to begin to live outside himself (193, 195), to exist only in the eyes of others (169, 193). It causes each not to seek the satisfaction of his own interests, but rather to alienate his evaluation of himself, and therefore his self as well, to the consciousness of others. The final pages of *Inequality* (190–94) are amongst the most passionate in expression in all Rousseau's writings. They show modern man as a seeker of satisfactions who is yet not satisfied, as one who is an artificial being with factitious passions who is yet becoming conscious of a lack of self-worth. The dependence that accompanies inequality in its final stage is psychological. Man does not act *from* self-interest in the sense understood by most ABCs. He acts *for* the esteem of others. He yearns, or should yearn, for recovery of himself. He may want to act from self-interest and regain independence but the way is not open to him. His appreciation of what would give him satisfaction with himself is limited to experience of what will not. And, at the end of *Inequality*, Rousseau is of no help to him.

THE QUESTION OF CONTINUITY

That Rousseau is noncommittal on the problem of human alienation leaves open the question whether or not there is continuity of argument between *Inequality* and the *Contract*. The next step in the argument concerning right and interest seems to be taken in Chapter Two of *The First* (or manuscript) *Version of the Social Contract*. Vaughan claims that Rousseau suppressed this chapter because in it, according to Vaughan, Rousseau conclusively refutes the doctrine of Natural Law.⁴ Vaughan is wrong. Rousseau condensed, but did not suppress the

4. *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 16, 17, 440–42, 444

doctrine. The argument of Chapter Two is better understood by examining the opposition between supporters of self-interest and of Natural Law. Rousseau supports self-interest against Natural Law on the Hobbesian ground that an individual would be foolish to govern his conduct by duties of Natural Law when others do not, and that the individual should be mistrustful of political systems of which he is the victim.⁵

I once thought that perhaps this chapter marked a turning point in Rousseau's judgment of the relationship between *Inequality* and *Contract*; that it might contain signs that modern man is beyond redemption and that Rousseau was shifting to a position tantamount to never having written the *Inequality*, to ignoring the plight of that alienated man who lives only in the eyes of others. I now believe that this judgment of Chapter Two is not necessarily true. Significantly, the individual is rightly mistrustful of rulers and others who offer him principles to live by which they do not themselves obey. Alienated man, it might be said, prefers to act from self-interest because he knows no other principle of action that is more reliable. We can assume that it is someone at this stage of consciousness whom Rousseau addresses when he promises that in new associations the amiable accord of justice and happiness will be guaranteed, and that the individual can "learn to prefer to his apparent interest his interest well-understood" (288–89).

Let me now summarize the argument which seems to hold when comparing *Inequality* and *The First Version of the Social Contract*. According to *Inequality*, modern man acts from apparent self-interest, but in giving over his self-esteem to the esteeming of others, he becomes increasingly dependent and alienated. Rousseau describes him as an artificial being driven by the fervor to distinguish himself. *Inequality* offers only a causal explanation of this condition. In *The First Version* Rousseau defends someone who refuses to accept principles of Natural Law as principles of conduct, even though Natural Law is the political morality most favored by philosophers and jurists, and who clings instead to self-interest as the principle of conduct. Rousseau then promises that in this book he will provide a new and just form of association in which that person can learn to prefer his interests well-understood over his apparent interests and enjoy together justice and interests well-understood.

At this point my argument should logically continue that Rousseau merely rewords the promise of Chapter Two and, at the same time, takes the next step when he writes in the *final* version of the *Contract*:

I shall try always to unite that which right permits with what interest prescribes
(351).

Were this next step taken, then Chapter Two of *The First Version* would provide a reasonably clear line of association running from *Inequality* to *Contract*.

5. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (London: Penguin Books, 1977), Ch. 15, p. 215.

CONFRONTATION WITH ABCs

However, the majority of commentators, especially those in the British tradition, disregard the seeming continuity suggested above. Instead, they expound with admirable ingenuity Rousseau's attempt to unify justice and interest as if Rousseau were Hobbes, Bentham, Kant, J. S. Mill, Henry Sidgwick or John Rawls. That is, they argue either in the manner of Hobbes and his successors that moral duty and self-interest are not distinct, or in the manner of Kant that they are distinct.

Now I have two problems with commentaries of this sort. The first is general, philosophical and yet simple. Both the Hobbesian and Kantian could think they understood Rousseau's distinction of apparent and well-understood interests by translating this distinction into what they call being irrational and rational about one's self-interest. Concerning the relation between self-interest and morality, the Hobbesian would argue that if everyone acts morally then everyone will be better off. It is everyone's duty and in everyone's rational interest to obey natural law (*Leviathan*, 216–17). The Kantian would interpret self-interest in terms of what the individual desires for his own benefit and would contrast acting from desire with acting from moral duty. In consequence, moral philosophers rightly regard Hobbes and Kant as polar opposites on the issue of the correct relation between morality and self-interest.

I wish to argue that the important point regarding Rousseau is not what distinguishes Hobbes and Kant from one another, but what they have in common or must have in common if one is to make any sense of their arguments. This point is important because, if I am right, what they have in common is not shared with them by Rousseau. And if so, neither a Hobbesian nor a Kantian interpretation of Rousseau can explain his argument.

Hobbes and Kant have in common the simple but essential idea that the individual is entirely able to know and can best judge his own self-interest. This common ground between Hobbes and Kant seems basic to their philosophies. In Hobbes's case, the individual has to be able to recognize that morality is not contrary to his best interests. Hence, he must be able to correctly judge his interests if the argument is to succeed. For Kant, the individual must be able to know what is in his interest and what duty demands. Kant can allow that occasionally self-interest and duty coincide, as they may in giving correct change. But if something is both in one's interest and is one's duty then one must be able to distinguish between them. Hence, it is essential to the otherwise distinct philosophies of Hobbes and Kant that the individual can know and judge his own interests. More, I think that both would have to hold that one who cannot make this judgment does not qualify as a moral agent. But it seems plain from *Inequality* and from *The First Version* that Rousseau does not share this assumption. In *Inequality*, man acts from apparent interests and in *The First Version* Rousseau writes of

the man mistrustful of Natural Law, "Let him learn to prefer his interest well-understood," which must mean he does not now prefer it. In addition to showing that Rousseau does not share Kant's and Hobbes's assumption, this passage reveals a related philosophical difficulty.

Moral philosophers often attend to a distinction between moral knowledge and moral motivation. A complete moral theory would enable one both to know one's moral duty and to be motivated by that knowledge to do one's duty. How does such a theory relate to Rousseau's conception of man in *Inequality* and *The First Version*? Does man know his interests well-understood and those of others such that they form the basis of knowledge of moral duty? At least we seem to know that man prefers instead his apparent interests. Such a preference provides motivation but not, presumably, moral motivation; apparent interests, on the contrary, produce moral degradation. Thus, in not sharing the assumption common to Hobbes and Kant, Rousseau creates philosophical problems for those who assume he does.

The second problem is textual, having to do with passages in Chapters Six and Seven of Book Two in *The Social Contract*. They occur after the discussion of self-government by laws, when Rousseau begins to ponder what is actually necessary for such a system to work. The passages bear directly on the problem of uniting right and interest.

(1) The People submissive to the laws ought to be author of them [but] . . . how can a blind multitude which often does not know what it will execute an enterprise . . . as difficult as a system of legislation? . . . The individuals see the good that they reject: the public wills the good that it does not see (380).

(2) The one who dares to undertake the institution of a people should feel himself able to change human nature [and] to transform each individual (381).

In the last sentence of the first passage, there appear to be three alternatives: either the compound assertion is self-contradictory in that the same persons both see and do not see the good, or the public and the individuals who comprise it are distinct individuals, or the term good is used ambiguously. In the interest of sanity, let us assume that the third is correct. In that case, the meaning of the assertion is that the public in willing self-rule wills that which accords with the common good, but, through inexperience or for some other reason, do not recognize the common good in particular cases. The individuals, on the other hand, know that they ought to approve of that which accords with the common good but reject this method of decision-making out of selfishness.

However, if this analysis is correct, then as late as half way through the *Contract*, Rousseau continues to believe that individuals are not acting from their interests well-understood and are in need of help. This forestalls another potential objection by one who neglects *Inequality*. He might argue that Rousseau means that the very practice of citizen-sovereignty, of being ruled by the general will, will wean individuals from acting on their apparent interests. Hence, the opponent might urge that continuity between *Inequality* and *Contract* is of no con-

cern. Unfortunately for the opponent, the text does not support this interpretation. Rousseau replies to such an objection, albeit somewhat obscurely, when he says that for it to hold:

It is necessary that the effect [should] become the cause . . . men would have to be before the laws what they ought to be become by means of the laws (383).

That is, men would have to will the common good before they become legislators, which evidently they are not prepared to do. Rousseau seems to mean that overcoming the rule of apparent interests as the principle of action is a necessary condition of sovereignty of the general will.

Hence I interpret the second quoted passage (where Rousseau says that the Lawgiver should undertake to change human nature and transform individuals), to mean that the Lawgiver should seek to wean men from their apparent interests. To speak provocatively, we can put Rousseau's problem in the Kantian mood by asking: how is moral autonomy for men possible? Rousseau seems to answer: by transforming human nature, through the interference of the Lawgiver, from a condition of acting upon the apparent interests of *Inequality* to one of acting upon interests well-understood. This seems to mean that the necessary condition for moral autonomy is the antiautonomous action of the Lawgiver. One may not care for this conclusion, but it does suggest a continued attention to the plight of men ruled by apparent interest.

This conclusion is similar to that reached in the philosophical comment above, namely, that Rousseau does not share the assumption that the individual can know and judge his own interests. In having this assumption in common, the despot Hobbes and the liberal Kant are more democratic than Rousseau.

A POLITICAL MORALITY OF SELF-REALIZATION

Perhaps the two difficulties I have exposed provide sufficient grounds to suggest a political morality which is neither Hobbesian nor Kantian. A desirable moral theory is one which: first, enables one to cope with the distinction between apparent and well-understood interests; second, does not collapse either into Hobbesian or Kantian ethics; and, third, permits a continuity of argument between *Inequality* and the *Contract*. At present some version of the self-realization theory of morality seems most appropriate.

I am content to begin by admitting agreement with Andrew Levine when he characterizes Rousseau's morality in the following words:

[Liberty] is the essential characteristic of humanity, without which the ends of man cannot be fulfilled . . . The end of man, his destination, is to be a moral agent (*The Politics of Autonomy*, p. 14).

6. As, in effect, H. Cell argues in "A Bridge of GEMs," Newsletter No. 5, *Society for Rousseau Studies*, September 1980.

In holding this view, Levine compares Rousseau to Kant. We disagree in that whereas Levine presumes that man has already realized his end, Rousseau and I demur that he has not. Self-realization, like freedom (356), is both a right and a duty. We can suppose that the chief moral principle of Rousseauist morality is to respect those rights and duties that realize moral nature in oneself and others. One has a right to realize one's nature as a moral agent, and one has moral duties to oneself and others to enable this realization. Other political moralities, in denying citizen-sovereignty, are blind to these rights and duties. They condemn humans to moral passivity and do not treat them as moral agents.

My suggestion, therefore, is that the arguments of *Inequality* and *The First Version* jointly dictate a morality of self-realization, based on the distinction between apparent and well-understood interests, to which Rousseau addresses himself in the *Contract*. The man who lives according to his apparent interests is one who does not fulfill his natural capacity to govern himself as a moral agent. One who treats himself and others in an attempt to satisfy the apparent interests of *Inequality* debases and degrades human nature. Man is capable of understanding that moral liberty, the freedom and obedience of moral self-government, best expresses his essential nature and his interests well-understood.

A GEM PROBLEM

Could a Rousseauist morality of self-realization overcome the problem of the alienated man of *Inequality*? If the overcoming of alienation is dependent on retention of apparent interests then it is not clear that the problem could be conquered.

As I understand it, the general problem of alienation in *Inequality* is one of alienation of self. Man has lost his sense of self-identity and self-worth. He is nothing other than what others value him as being. This suggests that in regaining his self, he will recover a sense of being which enables personal development and self-fulfillment. He will be himself and not another, or the possession of another.

The residual problem here is that apparent interests seem to be both what individuates or distinguishes individuals as well as being the dominant cause of alienation in the first instance. In other words, Rousseau identified interests well-understood with the development of one's moral nature. But if the realized self is one's moral self (or oneself as a moral agent) then this self is universal to the species and is shared by all members of it. It is not that self which is personal, distinctive or unique in some way or other. What serves to distinguish me as an individual, and to enable the realization of self which is myself, is my apparent interests. But, according to Rousseau's argument, it is apparent interests that alienate and degrade. They cannot be included, even to save individuality.

Now, it could be argued that not all apparent interests need be excluded, that

some can complement well-understood interests, and thereby save individuality.⁶ However, according to *Inequality* the desire for the esteem of others, causally supported by the system of social relations, is so strong as to govern all preferences and hence all apparent interests. It is the overcoming of this causal nexus, to use a Marxist term, which may ultimately justify the antiautonomous action of the Lawgiver. In any case, *Inequality* doesn't distinguish any apparent interests that are benign.

Friends on the left may urge that there is an alternative which can solve the problem of uniting justice and interest in a way different from that of the ABCs and yet consistent with the GEMs. They may point to the significance of the work of the Lawgiver, which is that of transforming the individual from one who is himself a perfect and solitary whole into a being who is part of a whole from which he receives his life and being (381). Here, it may be argued, we have the sacred text for the overcoming of alienation of self. The self simply disappears into the communal whole. However, if apparent interests do account for individuality, then by dissolving them individuality is lost. What is more, the first alternative at least retained apparent interests while excluding them from self-realization. But, as I have argued, it is only the presence of apparent self-interests that causes the problem of right versus interest. If interests well-understood, according to the leftist guide, are identified with communal right and with right *per se*, then the disappearance of apparent interests entails also the disappearance of right and hence that of Rousseau as the political moralist *sans-égal*.