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Sensationism and the Moral Sentiments

P.L. Roederer's reading of Smith's System of Sympathy

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1. Introduction

On 9 July 1798 the *Journal de Paris* reviewed the new translation of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* by Sophie de Grouchy. Welcoming the publication, the reviewer, Pierre-Louis Roederer (1754-1835), commented on the curious reception that Adam Smith's first great work had received in France in the nearly four decades since its first appearance. The work, he declared, belonged to a rare category '[...] in the commercial history of books, [namely ones] that sell, that are read, that run through several editions, but that elicit neither criticism, nor praise, nor citation, nor refutation in any other work' (Roederer 1853-9, vol.4: 496).¹

This assessment of the early reception of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in France was largely correct. On the one hand, the French reading public had long known Smith's book. Immediately upon the publication of the first English edition of the work in 1759 it had been favourably reviewed in the *Journal Encyclopédique*, a periodical that was widely read amongst men and women of letters in France and beyond (Ross 1995: 200). Five years later, while Smith sojourned in Toulouse, a first French translation by Marc-Antoine Eidous of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* appeared, which was reviewed in the

Année littéraire and the *Correspondance littéraire* (Chisick 2004: 242).² By the time the Scotsman reached Paris in December 1765, his fame as a moral philosopher was sufficiently large to afford him access to the most renowned literary *salons* (see Morellet 1821, I: 237). Subsequently, a second translation by the *abbé* Blavet appeared in 1774-5, accompanied by another review in the *Année littéraire*. Finally, just after Smith's death the *Journal Encyclopédique* devoted a review to the sixth English edition of 1791 (Chisick 2004: 242-3).

While one can thus hardly say that Smith's work on moral philosophy went unnoticed in pre-revolutionary France, Roederer was also correct to assert that, apart from some minor exceptions, a critical impact of the work is hard to detect amongst contemporary French authors. Why would this have been the case? Some commentators have argued that the first two translations were poor and that it was only de Grouchy's much later version that made a more faithful rendering of Smith's moral theory available in French. Up to a point the poor translations may indeed explain why before the Revolution '[...] Smith's work had created less of a sensation in France than in Britain' (Dawson 2004: 266).³ However, it is hard to believe that the lack of completely reliable translations was the sole reason for Smith's muted reception.

Indeed, other commentators have argued that a more fundamental barrier existed to the French understanding of Smith's moral theory. Instead of the finer points of his theory having been simply 'lost in translation', the lack of comprehension among readers across the Channel would have been due to a deep philosophical gulf that existed between the

French and Scottish Enlightenments. Faccarello and Steiner (2002), for example, have argued that the silence of French thinkers can be attributed to a crucial philosophical misunderstanding:

[French] commentators just did not understand a key point of Scottish philosophy: the construction of a moral theory that did not derive from reason [...] Although *Moral Sentiments* was admired in France, it was generally thought to be unfinished: according to the commentators Smithian sympathy could not in itself provide adequate foundation to his argument, but had to be derived from something else –from reason (Faccarello and Steiner 2002:72).

Essentially the same explanation for the alleged inability of French thinkers to appreciate Scottish moral philosophy had earlier been put forward by other commentators (e.g. Ando 1993), and reminds of the more general contrast Friedrich Hayek detected long ago between the ‘rationalist’ views of man and society held by French *philosophes* and the emphasis Scottish thinkers placed on non-deliberative behaviour of individuals and spontaneous order in society (see e.g. Hayek 1941: 9-13).

As far as the French reception of Scottish moral sense theory is concerned, the view that it was marred by “too rationalist” an approach of critics is perhaps too sweeping in two respects. First, there was in fact a whole range of French opinion about Scottish moral sense theory, only part of which may be said to have stressed the preponderance of ‘reason’ over ‘feeling’ in the explanation of moral action and judgment.⁴ Second, Scottish moral philosophy did of course also come in different variants and it would be wrong to assume that French readers would have been unable to distinguish between

them. Criticism directed at Hutcheson's moral sense theory, for instance, should not necessarily be understood as applying equally to Smith's system of sympathy.

This paper aims to contribute to a more balanced view of the French reception of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* by looking at the interpretation favoured by de Grouchy's reviewer, Pierre-Louis Roederer. Due to his active involvement in the early years of the Revolution, the intellectual circles in which he moved and his journalistic activities, Roederer has been called '[...] perhaps the most important propagator [in France] of Smith's ideas in the 1790s' (Whatmore 2000:7). In the first half of 1793 he delivered a series of lectures, known as the *Cours d'organisation sociale*, in which Smith's system of sympathy was discussed at some length. Perhaps the most interesting thing about Roederer's discussion is that he attempted to interpret the notion of sympathy as a sensationist principle. That is to say, he considered Smith's moral theory to be fundamentally compatible with the 'psychological' theories of prominent sensationist philosophers, like Condillac, Bonnet and indeed Helvétius. In order to achieve this reconciliation Roederer emphasised certain elements in the works of French sensationist thinkers, especially the role given to the principles of habit and imitation. By proposing those two principles as the basis for sympathy, Roederer endorsed Smith's conception of sympathy as an unreflective, immediate human capacity, while at the same time attempting to provide it with a basis in psychological hedonism and indeed human physiology.

Roederer's philosophical ideas were steeped in French sensationist thought. To allow an appreciation of his original and subtle interpretation of Smith's moral theories, this paper will therefore first provide some necessary background by reviewing various French responses to Scottish moral sense theory before the Revolution. This is done in section 2. Roederer's own novel reading of Smith's system of sympathy is discussed in section 3. Section 4 is a conclusion.

2. French responses to Scottish moral sense theory before the Revolution

In view of Roederer's own assessment that Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* had elicited little positive response in France before the Revolution, the idea that it would be possible to reconcile the latter's conception of sympathy with the basic tenets of French sensationist thought does at first appear fanciful. In the last decades of the *Ancien Régime* precisely those French commentators who were the most strongly influenced by sensationist philosophy had also been the most dismissive of the idea of the existence in the human psyche of a 'moral sense'.

Responses to Hutcheson's Moral Sense

Most of such criticism, however, was directed specifically against Francis Hutcheson's conception of a moral sense, which in contrast to Smith's system of sympathy, had frequently been discussed by French authors. It should also be noted that, far from being

universally rejected, there had existed a range of opinion among French commentators about Hutcheson's moral sense.

All commentators, both sympathizers and critics, presumed the two distinguishing aspects of Hutcheson's conception of moral sense to be, on the one hand, its immediate, unreasoned operation and, on the other hand, its origin as an instinct implanted by the creator. As we will see, it is of crucial importance in relation to Roederer's later reading of Smith's theory of moral sentiments that the sensationist critique of the notion of a moral sense was primarily directed against the second aspect, *i.e.* the alleged view that it was an 'innate' faculty, and that this did *not* necessarily prevent a basic approval, at least among some writers, of the first aspect, namely the view that moral judgments and actions were 'immediate' and not dictated by 'reason'.

The mid-point, so to say, in the range of opinion about Hutcheson's moral sense theory was taken up by the entry '*Sens Moral*' in the *Encyclopédie*. Written by de chevalier Louis De Jaucourt (1704-1779), one of the most prolific contributors to this famous publication, the entry offers an uncritical discussion of the theory. It defines 'moral sense' as the '[...] name given by the learned Hutcheson to that faculty of our mind which in certain cases promptly discerns moral good and bad by a kind of sensation and by taste independently from reasoning and reflection' (De Jaucourt 1765: 28). Hutcheson's opinion that man possessed the ability to arrive at moral judgements *sans raisonnement & sans examen* was stressed as the most distinguishing characteristic of his theory. Second, the presumed origin of this moral sense was discussed. De Jaucourt,

while avoiding the term ‘innate’, affirmed that in Hutcheson’s view the ability to discern between good and bad ‘[...] comes from the author of our being, who has given us [...] a kind of [moral] instinct’ (*ibid.*). This the wise creator had done for the greater utility of society.

Where Jaucourt’s account was factual and uncommitted, a few years earlier the same two distinguishing aspects of Hutcheson’s conception had also figured prominently in the most unequivocally positive treatment of Scottish moral sense theory by a French writer, namely, Jean-Baptiste-René de Robinet’s *De la nature* of 1761.⁵ Part three of this popular work, entitled ‘*De l’instinct moral*’ (pp.335-374), was presented as a further development of the moral theories of Hutcheson and Hume.⁶ Contrasting the swift way in which moral judgments are formed with the ponderous and fallible operation of reason, Robinet eulogised instinctive perception:

The way of the instinct is prompt, easy and infallible: she presupposes neither idea, nor knowledge, nor reasoning. The Creator [...] has trusted [our conservation] to our senses, finding in the reliability of their operations a greater safeguard than in the caprices of [reason]: since reflection is rather slower than the automatic movement brought on by sentiment (Robinet 1761:341).

The term ‘moral *sense*’ was particularly well chosen, according to Robinet, because moral perceptions were in all respects analogous to the other sensual perceptions. Indeed, even though little was known as yet of the precise physiological processes by which sense impressions were conveyed to the mind, ‘[...] it is necessarily the case that [moral

perceptions] be the fruit of a sixth sense wholly similar to the others' (*ibid.* 345). He speculated that this to-be-discovered sensory organ would consist of '[...] fibrous nervous extensions' that would relay moral impressions from the external world to the nervous centre.⁷ Such an organ was the physical counterpart of the 'intrinsic disposition', or *sentiment intime*, with which the 'author of our being' had endowed the human mind, and which allowed him to approve or disapprove instinctively of the actions and moral qualities of fellow beings according to the immutable rules of morality (*ibid.* 339-40).

While Robinet pretended all this was nothing but a development of the theories of the 'English' authors (*ibid.* 4, 359), it was all too literal and unsubtle an interpretation of Hutcheson's moral sense theory. The Scottish professor had in fact been careful to avoid calling the moral sense an 'innate' ability⁸ and although appealing to the analogy between moral judgments and 'simple' perceptions of the senses, he had not gone so far as to draw the conclusion that there must be a sixth sensory organ.

Unwittingly, a heavy-handed endorsement like that of Robinet made criticism, or even ridicule, of the notion of a moral sense a whole lot easier. This can be seen, for instance, in Delisle de Sales's scathing rejection of the Scottish notion of a moral sense. Apparently responding more to Robinet's portrayal of Hutcheson's ideas, this *philosophe* demanded to know

[...] what is this physical organ of morality? [...] What is this sixth sense that the moralists add to the make up of man? There is no more a moral sense for the judgment of morality than there is a

medical sense for curing diseases or an alchemical sense for finding wisdom (Delisle de Sales 1770, I, 275-6).⁹

What critics like Delisle de Sales here objected to most strongly was the view that man would be endowed with a *pre-formed* ability to distinguish right from wrong. This, according to them, was an old-fashioned pious belief that had been discredited by Lockean epistemology. Hutcheson's moral sense, Delisle de Sales proclaimed '[...] is based on the reverie of innate ideas and since Locke it is no longer permitted to the philosopher to wield this occult quality in the world of metaphysics' (*ibid.* I, 275).¹⁰ The baron d'Holbach echoed this opinion, dismissing the 'gibberish' (*galimathias*) of moral sense talk as a commitment to the outdated '[...] supposition of *innate ideas* which the illustrious Locke has wisely relegated to the philosophical dustbin (*la poussiere de l'école*)' (Holbach 1773: 87).

Mental Faculties as Transformed Sensations

When these French authors claimed that Locke had dealt a decisive blow against any philosophical notion of innate abilities they were in fact stating their allegiance to a radicalised French version of the Englishman's epistemology. This philosophical current, known as sensationism (*sensualisme*) was pervasive, indeed perhaps '[...] the most widely accepted way of thinking among eighteenth-century French intellectuals' (O'Neal 1996:1).¹¹ The most general sensationist tenet was the principle that all cognition comes to us through the senses. Sentient beings (humans, animals, sometimes even plants) *developed* their 'faculties' in response to sensations. That is to say, due to repeated

impressions of exterior objects on the senses, sentient beings established in themselves settled ways of processing stimuli and responding to them. In a word, mental faculties were seen as ‘transformed sensations’. This was true both for ‘lower’, unreflective dispositions, observed in animals (and the ‘animal’ part of humans) and the ‘higher’ mental faculties, such as representation, memory, imagination and reflection, (almost exclusively present only in humans). To some extent, by attempting to show that the higher mental faculties, like ‘reflection’ also derived from more primitive powers of response to sensations, sensationalist philosophy challenged the Cartesian dualism of body and soul.¹² It also went beyond Locke who had maintained that ‘reflection’ was a source of understanding separate from the senses.

The principle of pleasure and pain played a crucial role in accounts of how the successive faculties of sentient beings were gradually established. In fact, all responses to the impressions of the senses could be seen as attempts to attain pleasure and to avoid pain. This was true for primitive responses of animals, for example to flee in the presence of perceived danger. But it was also true for deliberate human choice involving comparisons between present alternatives and remembered experiences. With the development of the higher faculties in humans all that changed to the principle of pleasure and pain was that it came to be obeyed in more refined manner and that it extended its scope to less immediate objects. This refinement came about also through the existence of society and the use of language, both of which prodigiously extended the range and communication of ideas, needs, and desires.

Importantly, an acceptance of psychological hedonism, or the ubiquitous influence of the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain on human behaviour, did not necessarily lead sensationist authors to the conclusion that humans always engage in a conscious process of calculation of advantages in all their actions. It was quite common for sensationist writers to ascribe an important role to the habitual performance of physical and mental activities of animals and humans. This amounted to an acknowledgement of a mode of behaviour that was somehow distinct from deliberate action, that is, action that was goal-directed and initiated after a process of reflection of alternative courses of action. This alternative automatic, unreflective habit-behaviour was conceived as sometimes supporting, sometimes replacing the dominant reflective mode of human behaviour.

The principal reason why the concept of habit had an important role in many sensationist accounts was that it offered an alternative to innatist explanations for the existence of apparently non-deliberated, automatic responses in humans as well as animals.¹³ One definition of 'habit' given by Condillac emphasizes this substitution as mode of explanation of *innate* for *acquired* unthinking behaviour:

Habits are regular movements that are executed apparently without our own guidance, because by force of having repeated them we execute them without having to think about them. Those habits are what one calls *natural movements, mechanical action, instinct*, which we are wrongly assumed to be born with (Condillac 1780:64).

The Swiss naturalist and philosopher Charles Bonnet gave a similarly significant role to habit in the explanation of human behaviour. In contrast to Condillac, who tended to avoid accounts of how the development of mental faculties was actually “inscribed” in the body, Bonnet provided a theory of how physiological modifications accompanied the contraction of habits. He explained how with the repetition of specific movements in specific nerve fibres lasting alterations to the nervous system were established, facilitating similar responses in the future. The tenacity and reinforcements of habits depended on frequency of repetition, receptiveness of nerve fibres (which became less malleable and more solid with age) and nutrition (which increased solidity).¹⁴

Habit and Moral Action

The implications of this sensationist thought for the theory of *moral* action and judgment were not so straightforward.¹⁵ What sensationist authors agreed upon was that the ability for moral judgment and action was an *acquired* ability to act upon complex ideas, not an innate ability to process ‘simple’ ideas analogous to sensory impressions. Any thoroughgoing sensationist thinker had to reject the idea of a preformed capacity for moral judgement. However, there remained room for a variety of opinion in sensationist accounts with regards to the question to what extent ‘reflection’ entered into the acquisition of sound moral judgment.

Some authors, Helvétius being the most significant example, did turn the general commitment to psychological hedonism into theories of predominantly reflective,

volitional action.¹⁶ By in turn closely identifying reflective, volitional action with self-interest and calculativeness, Helvétius arrived at what many considered a scandalous view of morality.¹⁷ Our deeds and our judgments of what is morally good, he argued, are always based on the perceived ‘utility’ to us. He therefore concluded:

That which is called the goodness or the *moral sense* of a man is his benevolence towards others, and this benevolence is always proportioned to the utility they have to him. [...] The wellbeing of my friend reflects on me. If he becomes richer and more powerful, I participate in his wealth and his power. Benevolence for others is therefore the effect of the love for ourselves (Helvétius 1773, V, iii; emphasis added).

Society required general moral rules and laws that derived from a reasoned understanding of how self-interested individuals could live together harmoniously:

But what is morality? *The science of the means invented by men to live together in the happiest manner possible.* [...] moral science [...] is like all others the product of experience and meditation and not of a *moral sense* (Helvétius 1773, V, iii, note b; emphases in original).

Since an understanding of this moral science did not come ‘natural’, Helvétius saw an important role for the state in adopting legislation and educational principles to bring about a social arrangement in which the exercise of enlightened self-interest could be directed towards an equality of happiness of citizens (see Gislain 1993).¹⁸

Besides this ‘rationalistic’ approach to morality, it was however also possible to argue from a sensationist perspective for the importance of unreasoned, habitual performance of moral acts. Among sensationist writers one regularly finds allusions to human virtue as a ‘habit’, as well as discussions of the importance of the inculcation of ‘virtuous habits’ in citizens, in order to foster public spirit and political stability.¹⁹ While there is indeed a tradition in Western moral philosophy of considering virtues as habits that runs through the scholastics all the way back to Aristotle,²⁰ eighteenth century sensationist philosophy may be said to be particularly suited to such an approach to morality. As Holbach noted, man’s moral competence is ‘[...] evidently acquired, it is an effect of habit, and one cannot regard it as a sentiment that is inherent to man’ (Holbach 1773: 88).²¹ The point was that an account of morality that rejected an ‘innate’ moral instinct may still allow for the possibility of an ‘acquired’ moral instinct.

Such a position was defended, for example, in the little known *Cathéchisme social* by the engineer Achilles Nicolas Isnard.²² Writing from a sensationist perspective, Isnard insisted that men ‘[...] always decide on the basis of the pleasure that they hope for and the pain that they fear’ (Isnard 1784:74). At the same time, however, he emphasised that human decisions are often not preceded by ‘cold’ interested reflection. Instead, many judgments and actions were immediate and involuntary.²³ Humans may acquire an immediate, unreflective sense of right and wrong through the exercise of ‘virtuous habits’. For this reason Isnard’s opinion of Scottish moral sense theory was rather positive, even while rejecting the possibility of an *innate* ‘moral sense’:

Hutcheson [*sic*] and the Shaftesburists [*sic*] have argued that there is in the mind a faculty to discern good and bad which is independent from any reflection; that the functions of this faculty are analogous to those of the senses and that good and bad [actions] cause involuntary sensations of pleasure and aversion. This subtle idea has not been much adopted [in France]. The habit of distinguishing between good and bad can give to the mind a finesse of tact that makes it suited to this operation prior to the exercise of reflection. But this faculty is not at all innate, and man can only distinguish between good and bad after having received instruction about the relations of good and bad (Isnard 1784:49).

In this passage there is hint at the kind of reconciliation between Scottish moral philosophy and sensationist philosophy that was to be explored by Roederer some 10 years later. As we will see, like Isnard, Roederer (a) subscribed to the sensationist view that all affections and actions can be related to man's fundamental sensitive being (*être sensitif*) which strives to pursue pleasure and to avoid pain; (b) he accepted that man possesses moral and sociable dispositions that operate in an immediate manner largely independent from reflection; and (c) that this disposition is not innate but due to acquired 'habits'.

Where Roederer differed from Isnard however, was that he developed his ideas in direct response to Smith's theory of sympathy. As was already noted, before the Revolution there were very few French authors who felt it necessary to distinguish Smith's moral philosophy from that of his fellow Scotsmen.²⁴ It is worth noting, however, that in the rare cases that the content of the *Theory of Sentiments* was discussed in some detail, the distinction *was* made. An example is the little known *La Morale du citoyen du monde* by

the *abbé* Jean Sauri (1741-1785) published in 1777. Apparently aware of the sensationist critique of Hutcheson's conception of a moral sense, Sauri carefully noted the arguments Smith had employed in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in order to distance himself from his mentor. Somewhat simplifying the argument put forward by Smith in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, VII.iii. chapters 1 to 3, Sauri summed up his position in two points.²⁵

On the one hand,

[...] the famous Smith concludes that, although virtue be desirable by itself and vice be an object of aversion, it cannot be reason, but immediate sentiment and sensation that originally distinguishes these different qualities (Sauri 1777:64).

On the other hand, Smith had

[...] refuse[d] to admit a new faculty that was unknown to the ancients [*i.e.*, the moral sense], [and] maintain[ed] that the power of sympathy, which has since long been recognised and which the mind evidently possesses, suffices to account for all effects attributed to the *moral sense* (*ibid.* 64-50; emphasis in original).²⁶

It was a similar careful distinction between moral sense theory and Smith's theory of sympathy that Roederer was to observe.

3. Roederer's reading of TMS

Pierre-Louis Roederer has received increasing notice in recent years.²⁷ Born in Metz in 1754 he obtained the position of *avocat* at the Parliament of Metz in 1771 upon completing his law studies at Strasbourg. In the 1780s he established a name for himself as a liberal political economist, inspired by the writings of the physiocrats, Turgot and Smith.²⁸ In 1789 he was, somewhat belatedly, delegated to the Estates General as the representative of the third estate of Metz and remained a member of the National Assembly from 1789 to 1791 allying himself especially with Mirabeau and Sièyes. During these years Roederer was a very active revolutionary politician and a member of the finance and taxation committees. He also became acquainted with the most prominent intellects in revolutionary Paris.²⁹ From 1793 he was a journalist for the *Journal de Paris*, which he co-owned, and in 1795 he founded the *Journal d'économie publique, de morale et de politique*. At the end of 1795 he was elected to the Class of Moral and Political Sciences in the *Institut National*. He played a significant role in Napoleon's coup d'état in November 1799 and served in a number of government functions during the Consulate and the Empire.

Between January and June 1793 Roederer presented his social and economic views systematically in a lecture series, known as the *Cours d'organisation sociale* delivered at a private Paris institute for advanced studies, called the *Lycée*.³⁰ The *Cours* is a substantial work, consisting of ten *leçons* delivered in thirteen lectures.³¹ In it Roederer sets himself the rather ambitious intellectual task of '[...] uniting in a single science the principal notions of three sciences which until now have been distinct [...] that is morality, politics and economic science' (Roederer 1853-9, vol. 8, 131). Here we are

mainly interested in the part of Roederer's system devoted to 'the moral qualities of individuals called to the state of civil society' (*ibid.*),³² in which Smith's theory of sympathy is discussed at some length. Some of Roederer's ideas in that part are developed further in his remarkable article '*De l'imitation et de l'habitude*' published in the *Journal d'économie publique* at the beginning of 1797. This article together with a number of fragments about 'sympathy' unpublished during his lifetime will also be considered below.³³

At the beginning of the *Cours* Roederer raised the question why the 'moral qualities' of men have to be studied? His answer was that this is necessary because one should know '[...] those qualities that can ensure the activity of the social machine [and] those that may be an obstacle, in order to be able to rectify or contain the latter and to give to the former all activity of which they are capable' (*ibid.* 135). Thus Roederer recognized the 'moral qualities' of men as the crucial elements for the orderly functioning of *la machine sociale*.³⁴ The principal danger to a well-functioning society Roederer identified as the unchecked pursuit of self-interest. In society it was necessary '[...] to contain personal interest within the limits that it is always ready to transgress' (*ibid.*180). An important question, however, was whether there exists any principle of human action other than self-interest. According to Roederer, 'Puffendorff [sic.], Mandeville, Hobbes, La Rochefoucauld, and above all Helvétius have denied the existence of that principle' (*ibid.*186).³⁵ Among the opponents of this tradition Roederer singled out the Scottish moral philosophers and Adam Smith in particular. He then proposed, rather ambitiously, that Helvétius' theory according to which 'it is the sentiment of personal interest which

make us do good or bad' can be reconciled with Smith's conception of sympathy. This could be done, Roederer boldly claimed, because '[...] it seems to me that [the theories of Helvétius and Smith] are complementary, rather than contradicting each other' (*ibid.*189).

In order to understand how precisely self-interest and sympathy are related to one another it was, according to Roederer, important to acknowledge that both derive from a more fundamental principle, which he calls 'physical sensibility' (*sensibilité physique*). This term he used to indicate a general receptivity of the human body to external and internal impressions, which under the direction of the sensations of pleasure and pain allows it to build up experience. It also involved a rather typical sensationist conception of the differentiation of mental faculties through a process of "transformed sensations" (see above section 2.2). What Roederer tried to show was that '[...] sympathy and interest are but *modes* of this [physical sensibility]' (*ibid.*194; emphasis added).

A first step in this demonstration was to point out a weakness in Smith's theory, namely that while 'every moral faculty belongs to one of our physical faculties', the Scotsman did not 'positively indicate' the physiological basis of sympathy (*ibid.*190). Nevertheless, one could at least credit Smith with '[...] not pretending anywhere that [sympathy] is an independent and original [*i.e.* innate] faculty' (*ibid.*).³⁶ This, for Roederer, left the way open for providing an explanation for the origin of sympathy in the human psyche. Surely Smith did not want to deny that a more fundamental basis for sympathy could be found in sensationist philosophy:

Unless he wanted to reject the demonstrations of Locke, of Condillac, of Bonnet who establish that our ideas come to us through the senses, are assembled [and] conserved through sensibility in the brain, which is its sole seat, Smith has to recognise that sensibility is the principle of sympathy, as it is of personal interest, supposing that they are two different principles. She [sympathy] necessarily descends from it in a direct line: she is its daughter perhaps, whilst interest is only a descendant in the second degree (*ibid*).

Thus the moral faculty of sympathy may be explained from sensationist principles, Smith's theory could be conciliated with those of Locke, Condillac and Bonnet. The way in which Roederer set out to do this was not without subtlety: he manages to maintain Smith's emphasis on the immediate, unreflective nature of sympathy while firmly rejecting the notion that sympathy involves a 'selfless' capacity.

To understand Roederer's position one should concentrate on the distinction indicated in the last sentence of the passage just quoted between the different ways in which 'interest' and 'sympathy' were related to 'sensibility'. Whilst the lineage from 'sensibility' to 'sympathy' were said to be "immediate", the connection between the former and 'interest' is mediated by 'reason'. Thus, as he expressed it somewhat quaintly '[...] interest is the son of self-love [*amour de soi*] and reason; [while in turn] self-love and the faculty of reasoning are sons of physical sensibility' (*ibid.* 190).³⁷ He further stressed the psychological distance between interest and sensibility by considering the etymology of 'interest':

The word *interest* seems to me to have designated originally no other thing than the *interposition* of calculation between sensation and action. Interest comes from the Latin words *inter est* which means between. [But] it does not suppose more personality, more egoism than sympathy (*ibid.*191; emphases in original).

Regardless of the etymological correctness of this statement³⁸, Roederer here said that properly speaking the aspect that distinguishes ‘interest’ from ‘sympathy’ was the presence or absence of ‘calculation’, (or ‘deliberation’, ‘reflection’)³⁹. At the same, he did *not* consider the supposed presence or absence of ‘self-seeking’ a distinguishing aspect between the two motivations, since *neither* was selfless.

Accordingly, on the one hand, Roederer fully endorsed the idea of the absence of deliberation in the exercise of sympathy. He defined the notion as follows: ‘I understand by this word [sympathy] not only the faculty of feeling in another [*sentir dans autrui*] but also to decide without deliberation, without hesitation [...]’ (*ibid.*190). On the other hand, approving of Smith’s insistence that sympathetic judgement is ultimately based not on reason, but on ‘immediate sense and feeling’⁴⁰, did not mean that it was a phenomenon that could not be explained from more fundamental principles. Sympathy, that is the ability to empathise with others, according to Roederer was an acquired social ability that arises from the two principles habit and imitation. His basic argument was that both habit and imitation work through the *repetition* of actions (habit involving the repetition of our own previous actions, imitation the repetition of the actions of others) to establish an *acquired* automatic mode of sociable feeling and response.

This basic argument is developed with considerable understanding of Smith's original notion of sympathy. This, for example, is how Roederer summed up Smith's notion of sympathy:

[Smith] believes to have found that we appreciate the affections and the actions of others by a natural principle by which we identify with the sufferings [and] the enjoyments of the other and that regulates our [affections and actions] by the general opinion adopted (according to their own sympathies) by the great number of men with whom we live and by the pleasure that we take in corresponding with them in all points of our existence: so much that it is not as useful or harmful that we love or hate the qualities or the vices of others, it is as being loved or detested by our likes and by sympathy with them (*ibid.*189).

Here Roederer highlighted what were pretty much the distinguishing characteristics of Smith's moral theory, especially its basis in the human ability for empathy. Recognising the importance of empathy, he sets himself the task of explaining how the twin concepts of habit and imitation give rise to this human ability to *identify* with the affections and actions of others (a process guided by *general opinion* and in which considerations of *utility* are not of first importance).

Imitation, in Roederer's view, was clearly a social form of habitual action. 'Moral habits or manners [...] seize man from childhood before his mind can recommend him laws or opinions; they then become more powerful than his [conscious] mind. It is especially through imitation that habits are acquired' (*ibid.*184). While habit involved one kind of recognition of similarity, namely between current impressions and previously

experienced ones (about which more in a moment), imitation involved a further kind of recognition of similarity. This was the recognition of other people's feelings as similar to one's own.

Roederer paid considerable attention to the physical endowments of humans that make them supremely suited to 'read' the feelings of the fellow members of our species. He pointed out that the flexibility of the facial muscles of humans and of their arms and fingers give 'extreme visibility' to the signs of our pains and pleasures. More even is it the transparency of the human skin, allowing blushing to be observed, that betrays our emotions:

The transparency of the human skin is certainly one of the most active principles of sociability. It allows us to recognise the most lively and secret affections by revealing the action of blood, which always follows that of affections (*ibid.*193).⁴¹

Thus humans unwittingly reveal their feelings to one another because of 'the exteriority of their signs' (*ibid.*192).

But not only do humans observe the feelings of others with great ease, they are also adept at relating those feelings to similar ones they have had themselves. Roederer gave a crucial role to the faculty of 'imagination' in his explanation of man's ability to identify with the feelings of others. In effect, he applied Condillac's notions of 'imagination' and 'memory' in a somewhat novel way. For the latter 'memory' was the accurate recording of an individual's past sensations and experiences, while 'imagination' was the mental

power to combine such past sensations and experiences in original and vivid ways. Imagination allowed humans to form ideas about things they have not actually experienced based on a combination of actual experiences.⁴² Hence, the mental faculty of ‘imagination’ enabled a somewhat flexible identification with other people’s apparent feelings. When we imitate, according to Roederer, we only do so because we involuntarily recall a past feeling that we associate (by means of imagination) with a sign of a feeling we presently observe in others:

We see somebody laugh, [or] yawn; we do not know why but nevertheless we do the same, because the laughter, [or] the yawns we witness, tell us that there is something there that made us laugh or yawn in the past, or that produced in us these different effects when we saw them. It is because our imagination is taken back to the memory of our impressions that we experience them and that we express them; we only repeat others because we repeat ourselves (*ibid.* 5, 263).

Roederer’s opinion that identification with other people’s feelings always involves an association with some of our own feelings experienced in the past, gave rise to some strong criticism of one important aspect of Smith’s notion of sympathy. He rejected the Scotsman’s view that it is possible to sympathize with feelings of other people without any recall to our personal past experiences. Although the somewhat flexible operation of imagination allows for the fact that our past feelings do not have to be *identical* to those we sympathize with in others, Roederer insists that we are only affected by other people’s suffering or enjoyment by recalling *similar* past sufferings or enjoyments of our own.

Our eyes [...], carrying to the brain the sensation of someone else's suffering, reveal there at least the ideas of similar sufferings and thus we suffer ourselves. Sensibility, painfully affected, searches to escape the pain; from this the desire, the will, to act. Note that what is involved here is personal sensibility, the faculty to feel one's own pain (*ibid.* 8, 193).

Thus the self is always involved, sympathy is always an 'appeal from me on me' (*un appel de moi à moi*), and therefore, even if our feeling with others is immediate and involuntary, we still feel moved to relieve someone else's suffering *for our own sake*. This however is not Smith's view. Probably referring to the Scotsman's denial of sympathy being 'a selfish principle' (see TMS VII.iii.1.4), Roederer remarked: 'Smith seems to understand by sympathy something else than suffering or enjoying through memory on the occasion of the affections of our likes' (*ibid.* 194). He rejected a 'selfless' sympathizing, as suggested by Smith, arising from an ability to imagine actually being someone else,:

In this Smith is absolutely unintelligible. He is at odds with what we know about the origin of ideas and consequently about the origin of passions. He assumes that [...] we can have a sentiment or an idea through the organs of someone else, and that without having experienced for myself some suffering, I experience it by seeing someone else suffer it, by communication, by a secret affinity. This would throw us into magnetism, into the fluids of Mesmer etc. (*ibid.*)⁴³

The reason for his strong insistence on this point appears to be that the idea of 'impartial'⁴⁴ or 'disembodied' sympathy ran against his conviction that the human ability to identify with the feelings of others must be anchored in the fundamental sensationist

principle of physical sensibility, *i.e.*, the receptivity to painful and pleasurable sensations *per se*.

In explaining this relation further, Roederer insisted on a physiological account of how imitation and habit give rise to human sociability. Not unlike other future *Idéologues*, like Cabanis, he saw a physiological account of human motivations as fundamental to the moral sciences, having declared at the beginning of the *Cours*:

Until now there has been in the moral sciences a lack of men who may unify it with the physical sciences, [who] assure, fertilise the first with the second. The physician who in matter only sees matter, the moralist who sees in the passions only spirituality, are equally removed from true and profitable results (*ibid.*182).

While this principle was clear enough, Roederer -a lawyer by training, not a physician- clearly struggled with portraying the neurological foundation of habit. He offered various descriptions of how habits were modifications in the brain established through the repetition of mental actions. In 1793, he contrasted deliberate and habitual judgment in a way that seemed to owe to Bonnet's fiber theory.⁴⁵ Whenever a deliberate judgment is made '[...] several ideas are present together, several fibers are stirred by them at the same time; attention contemplates them all in order to fix itself on a result'. In contrast, in habitual judgment '[...] there is at play only one idea, only one fiber, there is only a sensation'.⁴⁶ Dispensing with deliberation, habitual judgments are just as 'co-instantaneous' with sensations as when a skilful musician executing notes at the same time experiences the music (*ibid.* 191). In 1797 he explained in more general terms that

every sensation of pleasure or pain leaves a ‘modification’ in the brain which, when repeated, establishes a habit:

One understands that having once been modified in a certain way amounts to a disposition to being so again, and that it suffices to the organ to be triggered in order for it to take on a modification that it has already experienced. It tends, so to say, always to fall back in its creases. Habits, which give such a prodigious ease to do again and again the things one has often repeated, are for the most part only contracted by the ease of repeating what one has done before (*ibid.* 5, 262).

In order to trigger a previously experienced sensation or judgment in the brain one does not have to experience an identical impression to the one that gave rise to the original experience. We only need the expectation of it being the same. It is for this reason ‘[...] that a convulsive laughter comes over a child at the very moment you tell him that you want to tickle him’ (*ibid.* 5, 263). A similar thing held true for the imitation of emotions:

If the simple perception, or even the simple suggestion, of a cause of pain or of pleasure that has already acted on us, is enough, without its present activity, to make us experience this pain or this pleasure, of which we would perhaps not be susceptible when a new proof [would occur], one understands that the appearance of pleasure or grief in *someone else*, even at the occasion of something we do not know, must cause in us an impression of pain or enjoyment and dispose us to hate or love that which is the object of it, to seek it or to flee it. It is no more contrary to nature, or even to reason, to judge physical things according to the present sentiment of someone else than according to the sentiment that we would have had of it ourselves at some other time (*ibid.*; emphasis added).

Through the combined powers of imitation and habit, the repetition of others and of ourselves, our brain thus acquired an immediate, unreflective sensibility for sociable feeling and action. This is what accounted for ‘sympathy’.

A final aspect of Roederer’s theory was that he suggested a kind of mental economising at work that explained why imitative and habitual judgment often took precedence over deliberated judgment. In the case of habit, it provided ease and expedition. However, it would be wrong to suggest it was always reliable. This is especially the case, Roederer explains, when we have to make decision in new situations, when elements of calculations are unknown and complicated, and when objects that are removed in space and time are relevant for the decision (*ibid.* 8, 191). In such situations, a more attentive, deliberate mode of decision-making would have to be resorted to.⁴⁷

As far as imitation was concerned, it ‘[...] is always recommended to us by laziness [*la paresse*], sometimes also by the anxiety [*l’inquiétude*] of deciding wrongly by making up one’s own mind’ (*ibid.* 8, 184). The mention of laziness suggests some kind of fundamental inclination to economise on conscious mental effort. Thus imitation ‘[...] is very natural since judging according to someone else saves the effort of judging for oneself’ (*ibid.* 5, 263). By naming anxiety as a factor prompting imitative behaviour, Roederer meant in the first place the fear for social disapproval. By following examples of others one finds tranquillity in conformity. The effort and anxiety involved with reaching one’s own judgments explained why ‘half of what we know’ and ‘half of our wisdom in the conduct of life’ is ‘learned through imitation, and not at all through

reasoning' (*ibid.* 5, 264). And the reliance on other people's examples is often to be recommended:

We would commit a thousand follies, or we would always be halted at the moment of action, if we would not confidently follow useful examples. Why go again through all the experiences had by our fathers, and do again, without mistakes, all the calculations of which the results are shown to us in practice by their example? (*ibid.*)

However, Roederer's endorsement of an unexamined following of received wisdom and existing manners was not unconditional. He recognised that

[i]mitation, in the end, also leads us to make some of our mistakes and therefore one needs to watch over it. But there exists in us another force that always tends to enlighten it: this is reason. It continually reviews received usage, and its efforts to improve the future leads it often to contest the authority of the past (*ibid.*)

Thus reason, the faculty to compare and review routines, remained essential as a 'mode of sensibility' watching over (*veiller sur*) the unreflective, sympathetic mode founded on habit and imitation.

4. Conclusion

During the mid-1790s there was amongst moderate French republicans a renewed preoccupation with the nature of ‘civil society’. Principally due to the recent experiences of the Terror, moderate republicans became convinced of the insufficiency of constitutional reform alone (see Staum 1996, Jainchill 2008). They therefore focused on social manners and moral education as means of fostering a civil culture within which the new republican state would be able to function. A renewed interest in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* fits into this intellectual reorientation. Sophie de Grouchy-Condorcet’s *Lettres sur la sympathie*, appended to her translation of the seventh edition of TMS, are perhaps the best-known attempt to draw lessons from Smith’s work for the moral education needed in the new republic. As recent commentators have pointed out (Forget 2001, Dawson 2004, Brown and MacClellan 2008, Bréban and Dellemotte 2017), while endorsing the crucial importance of ‘sympathy’ in society, Condorcet’s widow took issue with several aspects of Smith’s theory.

First, she felt that the Scotsman, though having admirably described the ‘principal effects’ of sympathy, had not sufficiently explained its origin, or ‘first cause’ (Grouchy 1798, letter 1, 357). Fellow-feeling, she argued, was based on a more general ‘sensibility’.⁴⁸ This was a basic faculty that had to be ‘cultivated through education and constant application’ (Dawson 2004: 270). Second, the acquisition of moral sensibility, according to de Grouchy, involved much more ‘reflection’ than Smith had been willing to admit. ‘It is reflection’, she wrote, ‘which, through the habits she gives to our sensibility, by extending its movements, makes that humanity becomes an active and permanent sentiment in our minds [...]’ (Grouchy 1798, letter 2, 371). She thus disapproved of the

‘anti-rationalist’ (Dawson 2004:278) aspect of Smith’s conception of sympathy. As such de Grouchy confirmed the view of modern scholars, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, that French commentators on Scottish moral philosophy invariably objected to its perceived separation of morality from ‘reason’.⁴⁹

In this paper Roederer’s reading of Smith’s theory of moral sentiments was presented as a counter example. Significantly, when he came to review de Grouchy’s *Lettres* Roederer chose not to highlight the main difference with his own reading of Smith, that is to say, her repeated reproach of the Scotsman for having given too little heed to the important function of ‘reflection’ in the acquisition of moral capacities.⁵⁰ Instead he concentrated on praising the first aspect of de Grouchy’s critique of Smith, that is her attempt to find a foundation for sympathetic feeling in a *sensibilité physique* (Roederer 1853-9, 4, 500). For this reason, he noted, ‘*la citoyenne* Condorcet is an enlightened intermediary between Smith and Locke, between those two men and our own [*i.e.*, French] learned moralists’ (*ibid.* 498). As we saw, it was a similar role of enlightened intermediary between Smith and sensationist thinkers that Roederer had proposed for himself in the *Cours de organisation sociale* of 1793. Unlike de Grouchy however, he had approved of the ‘unreasoned’, immediate nature of Smithian sympathy and made a conscious attempt to relate its phenomena to the sensationist principles of habit and imitation.

Of course one may wonder to what extent this proposed rapprochement was misconceived both as a reading of Smith and as an extension of sensationist thought. With regards to the first point, it seems unlikely that Adam Smith would have wholly

approved of an attempt to interpret sympathetic feelings as the sole effects of imitation and habit. Some modern students of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* may disagree. For example, Craig Smith (2006:40) has argued that in Adam Smith the notion of sympathy was based entirely on a social process in which individuals *habitually* attune their moral sensitivities to those of others.⁵¹ If this is a correct interpretation then Roederer's reading of Smith was very much in the spirit of what the latter had intended.

However, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith did in fact carefully distinguish sympathy from other forms of "interpersonal identification" such as custom and fashion. The latter, being shaped almost entirely by habit and imitation, were very variable between different societies and periods. In contrast, the sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation, Smith emphasised, might be 'somewhat warped' under the social pressure of custom and fashion, but 'cannot be entirely perverted' by them (TMS, V, 2, p. 200). One senses that the main reason for Smith's insistence on this point was his wish to safeguard his theory of moral judgment from a slide into moral relativism.⁵² Sympathy in Smith was more than a passive copying of other people's attitudes; it somehow constitutes an autonomous moral competence of individuals.

Roederer's reduction of sympathy to the effects of imitation and habit seems to downplay this autonomous aspect. Noting the Scotsman's strictures on the effects of social pressure (Roederer 1853-9, 8, 189) he appeared to disagree. Indeed, while in the *Cours* of 1793 he still largely limited his application of the principles of habit and imitation to *moral* judgement, by 1797 he had widened their application to explain equally the phenomenon

of fashion (*ibid.* 5, 266-8). This indicates a belief in the malleability of moral judgment that went well beyond that of the Scotsman.

One may be tempted to attribute this greater belief in the malleability of attitudes to the influence on Roederer of the sensationist authors of the *Ancien Regime*. As Goldstein (2005) has argued, in the early nineteenth century the dominant view in France became that of Victor Cousin and his followers. To these revisionist authors, the sensationism of Condillac and other philosophes of the *ancien régime*, as well as their revolutionary offspring, presented an entirely passive view of the human mind, being formed exclusively by external impressions and lacking a 'self'. In this light Roederer's emphasis on the principles of habit and imitation in the moral formation of citizens could be given a somewhat unpalatable interpretation. The term 'habit' is sometimes understood as a mere mechanical, automaton-like disposition and it has been suggested that in authors like d'Holbach it referred to no more than unquestioning compliance to moral imperatives prescribed and inculcated by moral authorities, such as enlightened educators or the state (see Carrithers 1995: 252).

It cannot be denied that there are some passages in Roederer's discussions of the importance of habits in social life that lend themselves to a similar reading. Towards the end of the article 'Of Imitation and Habit' of 1797, for example, Roederer names the habit of obeying the civil authorities as one of the most important social habits (Roederer 1853-9, 5, 270). This habit is what, according to him, the new Directory regime still needed to cultivate:

Once the habit of obeying is well established, the governed only have to look [up] to the magistrate; he represents the law to him. In a new government, this habit of men in the conduct of affairs [of state] and this habit amongst men can only be substituted imperfectly by study, attention, reflection, each of them efforts the spirits tries to escape from; but the well-managed accustomisation of citizens and that of governments to the new regime can soon dispense with reflection, attention and study (*ibid.*).⁵³

The phrase ‘well-managed accustomisation of citizens’ [*l’assuéfaction bien ménagée des citoyens*] does indeed sound more than a little sinister.⁵⁴ If Roederer ended up turning his ideas about habit and imitation towards considerations of their potential for manipulation of citizens by the state, then he did indeed move well away from, what by any reasonable reading were, the intentions of the author of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. However, this does not take away the fact that Roederer had first developed his ideas about social morality in the *Cours d’organisation sociale* as his interpretation of Smithian sympathy. The main significance of that earlier reading was not the subversion of Smith’s ideas to serve as tools for political manipulation. Instead Roederer’s reflections are perhaps more properly described as a sophisticated attempt to link human physiology and sociability. More than any other author of that period he developed the suggestion that the simple principles of imitation and habit may explain the complex human aptitude for empathy, crucial for social interaction.

¹ This review is included in the 8-volume collected works that were published between 1853 and 1859 by Roederer's son. The Archives Nationales hold an extensive collection of Roederer's manuscripts, correspondence and other papers (Series AP Archives privées, 29 AP 1-120), which have not been consulted in preparation of this paper. All translations from French sources are my own.

² This translation was published in Paris by Briasson under the title *Métaphysique de l'âme, ou Théorie des sentiments moraux* (see Raphael and Macfie in Smith 1976: 30 and Faccarello and Steiner 2002: 64, 70 n.2). The second translation, published as *Théorie des sentiments moreaux*, was by the abbé Jean-Louis Blavet. A further translation was commenced in 1774 by Louis-Alexandre de la Rochfoucauld, but this remained incomplete and unpublished.

³ Indeed, Roederer (1853-9, 4, 497) already suggested that the poor translations had 'probably contributed to the coldness of men of learning towards the theory of moral sentiments'.

⁴Ando (1993) apparently regarded Helvétius's response to Scottish moral sense theory as typical for the French reaction. On the basis of this *philosophe's* rejection of moral sense theory he concludes that French *philosophes* generally were more interested in the role of legislation, than that of morality, in curbing the self-interest of individual citizens. He even suggests that '[i]t may be no exaggeration to say that the French at that time [*i.e.*, in the decades before the Revolution] had no moral philosophy of their own' (*ibid.* 204). However, instead of being typical, Helvétius's views were highly contentious in France, coming in for (divergent) critiques of leading thinkers like Diderot and Rousseau. On this see e.g. Schøsler (1997: 116-24), O'Neal (1996, ch. 7), Goldstein (2005: 122). The recent interest in perceived similarities between the moral theories of Smith and Rousseau also attests to the fact that the view that French thinkers were "too rationalist" to understand Scottish moral philosophy is an oversimplification (for an overview of this literature see Rasmussen 2014, also see Pignol and Walraevens 2017).

⁵ Apart from an account of the moral sense, *De la nature* is notable for containing some early thoughts on the evolution of species and for using the phrase 'invisible hand'. On the last aspect see Force (2003: 72) who points out that Adam Smith owned a copy of the work.

⁶ See Robinet (1761: 342-4). Robinet (1735-1820) was well acquainted with Scottish philosophy through his translation into French, in collaboration with J.B. Merian, of part of Hume's works, the five volume *Œuvres philosophiques de Mr. D. Hume*. Amsterdam: J.H. Schneider (1758-60). The final volume, published in 1760, was entitled *Essais de morale ou Recherches sur les principes de la morale*. This was Robinet's translation of the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. See Beauchamp (2000: lviii). Although Hume had in the *Enquiry* reworked material from book three of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, this earlier seminal work remained untranslated and largely unknown in France.

⁷ See Robinet (1761: 355) where this *organe moral* is speculatively described as '[...] une extension nerveuse fibrillaire qui partant du Sensorium commune, s'étende jusques vers certains points de l'économie interne, lesquels communiquent avec d'autres filamens extérieure analogues [...]'].

⁸ Carey (2000: 110) argues that Hutcheson by choosing his words carefully attempted to protect his conception of moral sense '[...] from the charge of innateness, at least ostensibly, [in order to make] his claims palatable to a readership that might otherwise have rejected them under Locke's pervasive tutelage'. This extreme circumspection explains the fact that modern commentators are still divided about the question whether Hutcheson's moral sense must be seen as an innate ability and if so in what sense (*ibid.* 104).

⁹ Similarly Helvétius (1773, V, III, note b) scoffed at the idea of a sixth sense: 'Does one want to admit a moral sense? Why not an algebraic sense or a chemical sense? Why create a sixth human sense?'

¹⁰ The reference to 'occult qualities' is reminiscent of the much earlier criticism by the English Locke expert John Gay (1699-1745). As early as 1731 Gay wrote of Hutcheson's notions of moral sense and public affection as being supposed '[...] to be implanted in us like Instincts, independent of Reason and previous to any instruction'. If this account was '[...] not akin to the Doctrine of Innate Ideas, [...] it relishes too much of that of Occult Qualities' (Gay 1731: xiii-xiv). In 1755 this critique had been brought to the attention of the French reading public by Charles-Louis de Villette, who defended Hutcheson against Gay in his *Dissertation sur l'Origine du Mal*. Dublin. See Carey (2015).

¹¹ Traces of sensationism are encountered in the writings of many French *philosophes* of the second half of the eighteenth century. The most influential sensationist philosopher was probably Etienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715-1780). The most systematic other variants of sensationist philosophy were developed by

authors, like Charles Bonnet (1720-1793) and Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715-1771) (see O'Neal 1996) while a whole host of other authors subscribed to part of their views (see Schösler 1997).

¹² For these reasons Israel (2001: 517) sees sensationist thought as a continuation of a current of 'radical enlightenment' descending from Spinoza. However, other authors warn against the interpretation that sensationist thought necessarily led to monism. This point cannot be pursued here.

¹³ Since it was far less credible to ascribe deliberation to animals, naturalists of the time who were especially strongly drawn to sensationist conceptions of acquired habits, as an alternative to innate dispositions, for explaining instinctive animal behaviour. On this theme see Richards (1979). More specifically, see Jordanova (1976, esp. ch. 3) for the connection between Lamarck's concept of habit and sensationist philosophy.

¹⁴ These ideas were developed in *Essai de psychologie* (1754) and *Essai analytique sur les facultés de l'âme* (1760). For a more extended discussion of Bonnet's theory of habit see Anderson (1982: 99-105). Bonnet was self-conscious of the novelty of his theory. In his Memoirs he wrote: 'Before me, scarcely any attempt had been made to indicate the first psychological principles of habit [...] My manner of philosophising [...] led me to first seek the foundation of habit in the organic mechanism' (p. 173, quoted in Anderson 1982:100). However, a similar physiological explanation of habit, that of 'repeated vibrations in the white medullary matter' had been proposed in Britain by David Hartley some years earlier in his *Observations on Man* (1749). On this see Porter (2003: 249-52).

¹⁵ That the application of general sensationist principles to the domain of *moral* judgment and action was not an obvious step to all authors can be seen for example in Robinet's *De la nature*. In the fourth part of this work the physical underpinnings of the *intellectual* operations of the mind are described by means of a fiber habituation theory that is strongly reminiscent of Bonnet. However, as we saw, in the third part of the same work Robinet does not apply this to the *moral* operations of the mind. For this reasons one may say that when it comes to moral theory Robinet was not a 'thoroughgoing' sensationist.

¹⁶ 'Predominantly' because even Helvetius allowed for some unreflective, habitual decision-making. On this see Gislain (1993: 77-80).

¹⁷ In this way Helvétius in effect combined sensationist thought with the French ‘Mandevillian’ tradition of the duke de la Rochefoucauld, who argued that man always acts according to his personal interest or *l’amour de soi*. On this tradition see Heilbron (1998) and Moser-Verrey (2001).

¹⁸ In some respects the critique of moral sense theories by the physiocrat Nicolas Baudeau is reminiscent of that of Helvétius. Baudeau discusses what he calls the system of the ‘Shaftsburistes’ in *Ephémérides du citoyen* (1767, ii: 185-9). His principal objection against the notion of a moral sense was its presumed involuntary, even instinctive nature. This was inadequate since the moral sense theories did not explain the *causes* of moral sentiments: ‘[...] it is not enough to say that the *instinct* gives us a *repulsion* for what is *vice*, and *attraction* for what is *virtue*; one has to explain *how and why*’ (Baudeau 1767, ii: 186). True morality was based on reasoned understanding of the “socio-economic” requirements for human conduct. In this Baudeau resembles Helvétius only insofar as both men maintained that *reflection* is indispensable for the understanding of the moral precepts that are the best for society. However, an important difference between the two men is that where Helvétius considered laws and moral principles as ‘means *invented* by men’, Baudeau saw them as precepts of nature to be *discovered* by men. Physiocratic doctrine offered a very concrete guide to their discovery: ‘Subsistence, multiplication, the perpetuity of the human race on earth, *voilà* the goal of nature; general and individual *well-being*, *voilà* the fundamental means; the *physical order* that is evidently the best to assure it, *voilà* the general, unique and indivisible system: whatever it prescribes is *good*, whatever it disapproves of is *bad*. Every reasoned action is more or less *good* depending on whether it contributes to the *order*; and more or less *bad* depending on whether it strays from it. The intelligence [*la raison*] that knows the *order* judges according to its principles, and accordingly it disapproves of *vice* and cherishes *virtue*. One may call this faculty of judgment *moral sense*, if one likes; but do not call it an *instinct*, and do not confuse it with *pain* and *pleasure*. It is an enlightened and reasoned judgment, however fast it may be pronounced by the human intellect. It supposes knowledge of the Laws of the [social] *order*, and consequently [it supposes] examination and judgment (Baudeau 1767, ii: 187-88; emphases in the original; for another physiocratic discussion of moral sense theory see Le Trosne 1777:27).

¹⁹ E.g. Condillac (1780: 45): ‘Virtue consists in the habit of good acts, like vice consists in the habit of bad ones’. Saint-Lambert (1798, 2: 21): ‘Question: What is virtue? Answer: It is a habitual disposition to contribute to the happiness of others’.

²⁰ In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle devoted a well-known chapter to the establishment of ‘Moral Virtue as a Result of Habits’ (title of chap. I, book II). There he asserted that ‘[m]an is not born either moral or immoral, but he has the capacity to develop moral virtue and the capacity can only be developed through habituation’. Moral virtues, according to Aristotle, were qualities that were ‘[...] acquired only by exercising them, just as skill in the arts and crafts is acquired only through use’. Therefore virtue is not a natural faculty, since ‘[t]he ability to use [natural] faculties is acquired before they are actually used (e.g., man has the ability to see before he sees, he has the ability to hear before he hears)’. Hence it is an important task of rulers and legislators ‘[...] to seek to make good men of their citizens by making good behaviour habitual through good laws’ and to engage in early education ‘[...] for it makes a great difference whether or not one is inculcated in certain habits from an early age’.

²¹ For a discussion of the emphasis put by d’Holbach on the *habitual* performance of virtuous behaviour see Jimack (1996:259).

²² For a longer discussion of Isnard’s views on morality see van den Berg (2007); for a general introduction to Isnard’s work and a selection of his various writings see van den Berg (2006).

²³ The dissociation between psychological hedonism and interested reflection is particularly clear in the following passage: ‘It is said that self-love [*l’amour de soi*] is the motive for all the actions of men, and that they always decide on the basis of the pleasure that they hope for and the pain that they fear. *Admitting the truth of the second part of this proposition, the first is not a necessary consequence of it.* [W]hile man is [always] motivated by a sensation that is suitable and analogue to his sentient being, he is not therefore [always] motivated by self-love. *Only in the case of acts and movements that require reflection could one suppose such a cause,* and even then the power of the sentiments will often get the upper hand over the effects of reflection’. (Isnard 1784: 74-5; emphases added).

²⁴ While this changed during the Revolution, some authors continued to lump Smith together with a group of ‘discarded’ British moral philosophers. In 1798, for example, Saint-Lambert rejected (in a book that was probably largely written many years before) the *Shaftesburistes* amongst whom he counted ‘Pope, Bolingbroke, Hutchison, Fergusson, Smith, etc.’.

²⁵ This summary is offered in a chapter with the title *Sentimens des Philosophes sur le principe de l’Approbation* (Sauri 1777: 61-65).

²⁶ The passage continues with this description of sympathy: ‘When the approbation that our friend gives to the conduct of a third accords with our own, we approve of it and regard it in a manner as morally good. Conversely, when it does not accord with our sentiments, we disapprove of it and regard it as in a manner morally wrong. It has to be acknowledged that in that case it is the accord or opposition between the observed person and the observer that produces a moral approbation or disapprobation; and it appears that the moral sense does not enter into this’ (Sauri 1777: 65).

²⁷ On Roederer’s political and social thought see Forsyth (1989), Rademacher (2001), Scurr (2000; 2004), Verjus (2002, 2004) and Sonenscher (2007). Chappey (2003) discusses Roederer’s ideas and experiences with the freedom of press under the Directory and under Napoleon. For his activities as an *Idéologue* member of the *Institut* see Staum (1996) and Jainchill (2008); for his influence on J.B. Say see Whatmore (2000). The most detailed biography remains Lentz (1989). None of these contributions discuss Roederer’s reflections on the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

²⁸ He praised Smith especially in his work *Reculement des barrières* of 1787. On the importance of this work for his economic thinking see Faccarello (1992).

²⁹ For example, in the short-lived club ‘Société de 1789’ famous fellow members included Condorcet, Cabanis, Destutt de Tracy, Franklin, Lavoisier, Bailly, Dupont de Nemours and Lamarck.

³⁰ Before him Condorcet and after him J.B. Say lectured at the same institution.

³¹ Despite their considerable length –the *Cours* covers 176 densely printed pages of his *Oeuvres*- Roederer maintained that it was merely a hastily written outline of his views. When he delivered the lectures he had recently come out of hiding (August until October 1792) having been suspected of being a supporter of the monarchy. Soon after he had to go into hiding again, from 1 October 1793 until the end of the Terror on 28 July 1794 (Roederer 1753-58, 8, 129). During this period Roederer made improvements to his lecture notes, which however remained unpublished until the mid-nineteenth century. The fact that no subsequent edition has appeared has contributed to the relative neglect of these lectures.

³² Roederer divides social science into ‘physical’ and ‘moral’ elements. The study of physical elements consists of the description and enumeration and classification of ‘persons and things’ and is similar to political arithmetic. Cf. Vol. 5, 571: ‘The knowledge of things and men, considered by themselves as physical elements of social power is the object of the science called political arithmetic’. The ‘moral

elements' or the study of human relations are the subject of lesson three (discourse 6 to 8, pp.179-228; read on 3, 10 and 17 March 1793).

³³ All these texts are included in the 8-volume collected works. The *Cours* is in volume 8 (pp. 129-305), 'Of Imitation and Habit' is in volume 5 (pp. 258-272) and various fragments on 'Sympathy' are also in volume 5 (pp. 417-485).

³⁴ Rademacher (2001) makes the important point that in Roederer's 'republican social science' the social, i.e. the relations between citizens takes precedence over the political, i.e. the relations between the government and the governed.

³⁵ For this lineage cf. n. 17 above.

³⁶ In 1798 Roederer expresses himself somewhat more critical of this 'failure' of Smith. Despite many brilliant insights Smith's '[...] system was false for having searched for the faculty from which all phenomena of our moral affections proceed outside the system of understanding, instead of showing how it is part of it'. Smith had made sympathy a 'mysterious' faculty by believing it to be '[...] at the origin of everything and dependent on nothing' (Roederer 1853-9, 4, 497). Still, even on this occasion Roederer is careful not to accuse Smith of seeing sympathy as an innate faculty. In this respect he compares Smith favourably with Hume. The latter speaks in his *Moral Essays* of a '*bienveillance gratuite*', superior to any personal interest and which cannot be explained from a more fundamental principle. Roederer comments that Hume almost 'seems to regard [benevolence] as an *innate* sentiment, an idea that cannot be squared with what we know about the origin of human understanding and affections' (*ibid.* 8, 187).

³⁷ The similarity with Isnard (see n. 23 above) on this point is striking. Both men are careful to distinguish sensibility from self-love [*amour de soi*]. The latter is closely related to 'reflection', 'calculation of advantage', the former is a more general receptivity to impressions of pleasure and pain that can also take an unreflective, habitual form. Also note that both men use the term *amour de soi* rather than *amour propre*. Even though Roederer's description of interest as 'the interposition of calculation between sensation and action' reminds somewhat of Rousseau's notion of *amour-propre*, the former, in common with most political economists of the preceding decades, views 'interest' as a measured and generally benign exercise of self-seeking rather than an excessive exercise of egoism. In this context it is surprising

that the Grouchy was to translate Smith's term 'self-love' in a number of cases with *amour-propre*. For a discussion of Grouchy's possible reasons see Bréban and Dellemotte (2017).

³⁸ According to Rey (1998:1860) the word *intérêt* did enter the French language as a derivation from the medieval Latin words *inter esse*, which meant 'there is a difference between'. Unsurprisingly, the history of the usage of the term is more complicated than suggested by Roederer. However, the seventeenth century emphasis on the aspect of the term indicating "attention directed to what is judged important", rather than the later association with selfishness seems to vindicate Roederer to some extent.

³⁹ Note that Roederer here uses the terms 'reason', 'deliberation' and 'calculation' almost as synonyms. This is quite typical for sensationist writers who in effect reduce reason to a faculty of reflective comparison between various impressions.

⁴⁰ In one fragment (Roederer 1853-9, 5, 475-9) he discusses the places where Smith defends this position against other theories (see esp. TMS VII, iii, chap. 2, 318-21). He notes that Smith derived this characteristic aspect of his theory from Hutcheson.

⁴¹ Elsewhere Roederer noted that he thought he borrowed the idea of the transparency of the human skin as a 'social principle' from Burlamaqui (Roederer 1853-9, 5, 418). He also immediately drew a racist consequence from it. Since the skin of black people is less transparent '[t]he sufferings of a negro interest us less and we feel them less than those of a white person; perhaps we also have here one of the reasons for their inability until now to form true societies among themselves' (*ibid.* 8, 193). Thus, Roederer suggested that there are physical reasons not only why white people do not as easily identify with feelings of black people, but also why black people do not identify as easily with each other's feelings!

⁴² Roederer (1853-9, 5, 262) states that he borrows this connection between 'imagination' and 'memory' directly from Condillac's *Traite des sensations* iv, chap. X, part 11. For a discussion of Condillac's distinction between 'memory' and 'imagination' see Goldstein (2005: 33-6). While Goldstein emphasizes the 'dangerous' tendencies of the 'runaway' imagination (as opposed to the factuality of 'memory'), Roederer appears to see it as a benign mental faculty and a prerequisite for human sociability.

⁴³ This passage appears in a section of the *Cours* consisting of 'further notes on the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*' (Roederer 1853-9, 8, 194-9), which may have been added after he delivered his lecture series. The qualification of this particular aspect of Smith's thought as 'Mesmerism' is interesting. In the later

article ‘Of Imitation and Habit’ Roederer discussed the investigation into Mesmerism and Bailly’s conclusion that the psychological phenomena of Mesmer’s animal magnetism rested on the principles of imagination and imitation (see *ibid.* 5, pp. 260-1, 265). For a discussion of the investigation into Mesmerism see Riskin (2002 chap. 6).

⁴⁴ For his criticism of the *impartial* spectator see Roederer (1853-9, 5, 432-3).

⁴⁵ In a comment on an extract from Condillac’s *La Logique*, made in May 1795, Roederer (1853-9, 5, 403) favourably contrasted Bonnet’s physiological approach to Condillac who had avoided ‘explaining in detail the physical causes of sensibility and memory’. Condillac had explained that he did not want take a position in the debate whether nerves are solid chords that work by vibrating or whether they are soft conductors of animal spirits. Instead he chose to explain sensibility mostly not by actual physiological mechanisms but ‘by analogy’. Perhaps Roederer later became convinced by the wisdom of Condillac’s position because the descriptions in 1797 are more general. For example, the characterisation of habit as ‘a falling back in one’s creases’ is a reference to the French expression ‘*Son pli est pris*’. In one fragment (*ibid.* 5, 480-1) he ponders: ‘It is thus supposed [according to this expression] that ideas affect the brain like a fold affects a textile; one stretches it, one presses it, but still, when one releases it, it takes on its crease. Is it like that with ideas in the brain?’

⁴⁶ This idea of habit formation as a physiological process of a reduction in the movements required in the brain can also be found in later writers. In the mid-nineteenth century Alexander Bain wrote of habit as a ‘narrowing of the sphere of influence of a sensational or active impulse [to] one solitary channel [in] the cerebral system’ (cited in Camic 1986:1050).

⁴⁷ These factors deciding whether habitual or ‘mindful’ decision processes are followed are surprisingly similar to the ones identified by some modern social psychologists; see e.g. Ouellette and Wood (1998).

⁴⁸ She saw this sensibility as a ‘physical sensibility’. Any ‘physical pain’ caused a *sensation composée*, that is an immediate pain localized in an organ, and a longer lasting, ‘general’ painful impression. This general impression was transformed through memory or actual repetition into an abstract idea of “that kind” of pain. As such it had a continued ‘*présence moral*’ in the mind and could be evoked by memory or by ‘*la vue ou la connoissance des douleurs d’autrui*’ (de Grouchy 1798, 357-60). The sensationist background of these ideas is quite obvious. Like Roederer, she did however provide little further detail of the

physiological processes that constituted this fundamental sensibility. However, Forget (2001) suggests that she did inspire Cabanis to attempt such an account. On Cabanis see Staum (1980).

⁴⁹ Indeed Faccarello and Steiner (2002: 72-3) cite de Grouchy's case as an illustration of their more general claim about the reception of Scottish moral philosophy in France. In contrast, Brown and MacClellan (2008: 22) argue that, rather than seeing in de Grouchy a 'rationalist' reader of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 'she bridges the gap between the rationalists and the sentimentalists'.

⁵⁰ Roederer's review of the *Lettres* appeared in the *Journal de Paris* on 14 July 1798, separate from his review of her translation of TMS. Surely, the positive tone of this review was due in part to the longstanding friendship between Roederer and the Condorcets, which dated from 1784-5. In the Archives Nationales there survives a correspondence between Roederer and de Grouchy running from 1791 until 1799, in which he gives her frequent legal advice after the death of her husband (see Rademacher 2001: 28). In his review of the *Lettres* he claims that as early as 1789 Sièyes he had shown him her manuscript. This is curious because it is believed that de Grouchy wrote the letters between 1793 and 1794 (Dawson 2004: 274). Perhaps it can be surmised that Roederer was referring to a manuscript of her translation rather than of the letters.

⁵¹ Somewhat ironically, this interpretation is part of a larger thesis according to which Adam Smith belongs to a specific tradition of 'British Whig Evolutionary Liberalism' (Smith 2006: 3), which in the second half of the twentieth century also included Hayek. According to Smith '[...] this [British] evolutionary approach, in particular its stress on habit and non-deliberative behaviour, distinguishes the spontaneous order liberals from the more rationalist approach of 'continental' liberals' (*ibid.* 164). It is not clear where this classification leaves Roederer.

⁵² Alternatively, it may be argued that Smith considered the capacity for moral judgment simply more deeply embedded in the human psyche than mere obedience to custom or fashion, the former being more an innate than a socially acquired aptitude. An *innate* sense of moral propriety can of course be given an evolutionary explanation, as Darwin himself did indeed try to provide (see Richards 2003). But such a strictly naturalistic reading of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is not only anachronistic (cf. Laurent and Cockfield 2007), it also overlooks Smith's *ethical* motivations for not making sympathy too variable under the influence of custom.

⁵³About the longevity of the Old Regime he notes: ‘One sometimes asks how it was that such a government that was so detestable went for ten centuries. It is because it had been going on for nine centuries before the tenth, and one year before the second year of the first century. One asks why another one, which is so well organised, has such problems to get going. It is because it only started going yesterday’ (ibid. 271).

⁵⁴ Staum (1996: 110-11) is of the opinion that Roederer’s advocacy of public instruction and also of festivals, spectacles and dances as means to inculcate republicanism is in part ‘sinister, manipulative’ and ‘an exercise in scientifically managed Revolutionary propaganda’.

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