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REMORSE AND MORAL PROGRESS IN SOPHIE DE GROUCHY'S *LETTERS ON SYMPATHY*

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43.1 Introduction

Sophie de Grouchy (1764–1822) is best known for translating Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) into French. Her translation, which appeared in 1798, remained the foremost French edition until 1999.¹ Alongside her translation, Grouchy published a series of essays, *Letters on Sympathy*, which look to expand on Smith's "system of sympathy."² Like Smith, Grouchy argues that sympathy is the basis of morality. By understanding how sympathy functions, she claims, we can grasp the nature of moral thought and action. Importantly, Grouchy's *Letters* also mark the end of the sentimentalist tradition, whose roots lie in John Locke's science of human nature and its expansion in the work of the French sensiblists, along with the polite writings of Shaftesbury and Joseph Addison.³

According to Smith's "system of sympathy," our ability to sympathize with others explains how we develop a concern for their happiness. If our sympathy is cultivated, this concern extends to include all of humanity. But there are limits to what sympathy can accomplish in terms of motivating us. This sympathy-produced motive to benefit humanity is quite weak, being easily overpowered by the motive to act on behalf of more parochial concerns. Sympathy also contributes to faction by reinforcing the bonds we have to those near and dear over the interests of distant others. For instance, the sympathy we have for our friend explains why we hope for their success and wish failure upon their competition. To function in a morally beneficial way, the thought goes, sympathy therefore requires assistance.

For Grouchy this assistance is found in the attitude of remorse. We experience remorse whenever we harm another, even if doing so was seemingly justified. Our remorse weakens the undue confidence we have in our own judgments and limits any attempt to license harming others for the sake of some local good. By recognizing these limits, we thereby awaken our "sentiment of natural equality," which grounds just norms and institutions (Grouchy 2019: 66). Moral progress occurs when remorse checks our norms and institutions by ensuring that they are made coincident with natural equality.

This chapter is divided into five Sections. First, I examine how, for Grouchy, sympathy gives rise to a concern for humanity. Second, I explore the complications of personal sympathy (i.e., bonds of love, friendship, or party) that result from enthusiasm, and which bolster self-conceit and faction. Third, I discuss Grouchy's account of remorse and show how it addresses her concerns about self-conceit. Fourth, I illustrate how, for Grouchy, remorse amplifies the sentiment of natural equality, which grounds our moral norms and helps to obstruct faction. Lastly, I argue that

Grouchy's moral philosophy is progressive, and that she sees remorse as the principal engine of moral progress.

43.2 Extending Our Concern

Grouchy refers to sympathy as “the disposition [we have] to feel in a way similar to others” (2019: 59). There are two aspects to sympathy: sensitivity and reflection. We are naturally sensitive to displays of pleasure and pain.⁴ When we witness someone fall on a patch of ice, hurt themselves, and begin to cry, we register the person as “in pain” and experience pain ourselves. Our pain is short-lived, and perhaps only results in our wincing at the sight of their fall. Still, from here, reflection abstracts from this particular experience, which leads us to exercise caution when we walk, or ensures that we clear away any ice from our property lest it cause anyone to fall. For Grouchy, the proper functioning of sympathy then depends on educating our sensitivity and reflection. In this section, I discuss this process of education, the aim of which is to ensure that we develop a concern for humanity.⁵

According to Grouchy, “sensitivity” is the disposition to be impacted by the sight of another's expression of pain or pleasure. Two factors determine one's sensitivity: first, the extent to which one is “acquainted with the symptoms of suffering”; second, the scope of one's “sensibility, imagination, and memory” (Grouchy 2019: 61). The first factor influences our ability to recognize a certain display of emotion as an instance of pleasure or pain, while the second alters the vivacity of this impression we receive from experience. So, if you have previously fallen and hurt yourself, seeing someone cry after having fallen on ice will have a greater impact on you than if you have never before fallen. In this way, shared experiences and the ability to imaginatively place ourselves in another person's situation determine our degree of sensitivity to their pleasure or pain, and thus to our capacity of sympathy.

Though we are naturally sensitive creatures, Grouchy claims, there is much which “tend[s] to lead sensitivity astray” (2019: 63). Children are taught to mind “their charms, their accomplishments, their employments,” and their own success (Grouchy 2019: 65). Yet, success often comes at another's expense, and so we “tacitly become habituated to count the misfortunes of others as a personal gift” (Grouchy 2019: 93). Seeing another in pain may bring us relief, or even joy, if we consider them to be our competition. For Grouchy, this result is an aberration of nature, the responsibility of which lies with our norms and institutions. The very institutions meant to provide us with the conditions for our security and happiness often foster division and resentment, which dulls our sensitivity to the suffering of others. The aim of moral education, for her, is therefore to combat this dulling of sensitivity.⁶

How can education properly address this dulling? According to Grouchy, the solution lies in appreciating how our institutions negatively reinforce certain aspects of our nature, particularly our self-conceit. For instance, we experience pleasure from “feeling our own strength,” or exercising our capacities (Grouchy 2019: 96). Improperly curbed, children “acquire an exaggerated opinion of their own strength...childhood self-love...become[s] in them the source of all the mind's defects and the heart's vices” (Grouchy 2019: 97). In this way, self-conceit poisons our sensitivity. An educator can help to check our self-conceit by giving us the resources to develop our reflection: “It is reflection, which, when we see someone oppressed by pain, reminds us that we, too, are subject to that same tyrant” (Grouchy 2019: 67). Reflection extends our sensitivity, resulting in “an active and permanent sentiment out of the humanity of our souls,” which obstructs our self-conceit (Grouchy 2019: 68).

While education sharpens our reflection, however, this process of extending sympathy “begins in the crib,” (2019: 70). In this state, our happiness is dependent on those around us, a condition that disposes us to be concerned for their fate alongside ours. At first, the expansion of this concern

is the “result of habit, and does not require any special or reflective attention to our own interest” (Grouchy 2019: 71). Over time, we appreciate the ways in which others also impact our happiness. Our sympathy extends to those on whom we “rely for help and support” and to that company we find “fitting and agreeable” (Ibid.). Gradually, we are made to be “sensitive to the sufferings and needs of humanity” (Grouchy 2019: 115). Reflection then becomes second nature: those who “acquired the habit of always extending or generalizing their ideas never stop doing so” (Ibid.). Education cements this habit.

Even if we are successful in cultivating a concern for humanity (“general sympathy”), however, it will be weak when considered alongside the concern we have for friends and loved ones (“personal sympathy”).⁷ After all, our connection to humanity is governed by abstract sentiments rather than the “sweet affection” of friendship and love (Grouchy 2019: 77). This problem extends to personal sympathy. For Grouchy, bonds of personal sympathy are the result of enthusiasm, which makes them impervious to considerations of humanity. It follows, first, that local concerns will override remote ones and, second, that sympathy reinforces parochialism and instills undue confidence in us about our own aims. This self-conceit therefore leads us to conflate our interests with the general interest. To address this issue, Grouchy argues we must cultivate our sense of remorse. Before examining remorse, however, we must first turn to consider the threat of enthusiasm and personal sympathy.

43.3 Personal Sympathy and Enthusiasm

According to Grouchy, the “multitude” are “impervious” to what “does not directly bear on their own existence and happiness” (2019: 67). The average person recognizes that people to whom they bear no relation suffer and rejoice, and that these people’s lives are of equal value to their own; still, these observations are insufficient to “forc[e] our compassion into action” (Grouchy 2019: 77). In other words, our concern for humanity is no match for our more local concerns. For Grouchy, the way forward for most people is to cultivate their personal sympathy, or “intimate ties” of friendship and love; in so doing, one becomes “more refined and more prone to feeling” regarding other people (Ibid.). Consider someone who becomes receptive to the issues facing working parents after having a child of their own. The love they have for their own child thereby extends this concern to others.

The problem, for Grouchy, lies in the nature of personal sympathy, which makes transitioning from ties of intimacy to a more reflective concern for humanity difficult. Personal sympathy is initially based in a perception of beauty and merit (Grouchy 2019: 78–79). We desire intimacy with those whom we see as beautiful or admirable. Our perceptions are amplified by enthusiasm, or the tendency of the mind to “represent to itself...all the pleasures or all the pains we would gain from a particular situation, or from a certain person and our relationship with him or her” (2019: 79).⁸ Our mind “bring[s] together in one instant what should, in reality, span months, years, and sometimes an entire lifetime” (Ibid.). We come to treat our friend as the standard of beauty and admirability. In this way, enthusiasm presents its object in an “exaggerated” way, involving “error” on a personal and collective level (Ibid.).

On a personal level, Grouchy uses the example of being seduced by the charms of a gallant (2019: 84).⁹ On a collective level, she refers to the phenomenon of crowds, or interest groups. Crowds make it easy for people to have the “dispositions of their soul” manipulated for foolish or inhumane ends (Grouchy 2019: 100). Part of what makes crowds compelling is they proceed with self-certainty, which appeals to that aspect of us “weary of doubt” (Ibid.). The desire to be free of doubt leads us to adopt views we would shun or avoid expressing out of “ridicule or danger,” so long as they are shared by others. This willingness to give ourselves to “uncertain ideas or sentiments” is also explained by a “need to be moved” (Grouchy 2019: 100; 75). Once we find

ourselves in a crowd, we find sympathetic concordance, which grants us access to sentiments we would not otherwise be able to experience.

Personal enthusiasm also plays a role in explaining our connection to a crowd. For Grouchy, we are typically linked to a crowd through a charismatic leader, who we tend to “vest with supernatural powers” (2019: 101). For this leader, “it is enough to use a few key words to inspire a sort of worship and enthusiasm through the grand thoughts the words suggest” (Ibid.). They put “together words in such a way as to replace reason and thinking,” leaving their audience with the impression that they have been liberated from falsehood (Ibid.). This perceived liberation plays into our self-conceit: “we are vain...about seeing – even through someone else’s eyes – what others did not” (Ibid.). As a result, Grouchy claims, we develop an exaggerated attachment to our compatriots in the crowd, which ends up gradually driving a wedge between the general interest and those of our own particular group.

The most troubling consequence of these attachments to party is that we are apt to cause harm when another’s interests are not coincident with our own. In this way, enthusiasm is a primary cause of injustice, which Grouchy defines as a “preference to local and particular interests over general ones” (2019: 133). This preference fosters divisions between people by providing them with incentives to dominate others (Grouchy 2019: 137).¹⁰ If one group succeeds in attaining a position of privilege, their interests will come to be seen as representative of the general interest. This conflation gives members the justification to pursue conformity from others and to harm them when doing so is necessary for its establishment. In so doing, the partisan then dulls their sensitivity, and gifts themselves the means of “deceiving their own heart” by believing this dulling is merited for some end (Grouchy 2019: 142).

Let us take stock: through education, Grouchy argues that we can extend our sympathy beyond our narrow sphere of concern to include the good of humanity. Still, these sentiments of humanity stand little chance against those of love, friendship, and party. More concerning, for Grouchy, is that these latter sentiments can be a product of enthusiasm, making them impervious to abstract concerns like the good of humanity. As a result, there are limits to how far a person’s sympathy can naturally extend. Their identity is ultimately tied to their bonds of intimacy, but these bonds give rise to faction, bolster self-conceit, and generate spurious justifications for us to harm others. The solution to this problem, Grouchy claims, lies in developing a proper sense of remorse. By cultivating our remorse, we thereby increase our receptivity to the suffering of others and thereby weaken our self-conceit.

43.4 Making Room for Remorse

Enthusiasm jeopardizes our moral development by dulling us to the suffering of those with whom we are not already bound in personal sympathy. However, we are averse to the suffering of others; an aversity “sharper still when we are the voluntary, or even the involuntary, cause of this unhappiness” (Grouchy 2019: 107). The pain we feel on account of causing harm to another, either voluntarily or involuntarily, is what Grouchy refers to as remorse. Unlike other unpleasant sensations, remorse remains after “the painful memory of the harm we caused is no longer distinct in our minds” (Grouchy 2019: 108). The resiliency of remorse pertains to the imagination: harms cannot be undone, so the imagination cements a relation between the harm and ourselves, fortifying our sense of remorse (Grouchy 2019: 109). Not surprisingly, our fear of remorse is a chief motive against vice (Ibid.).¹¹

That said, Grouchy neither expects nor wishes that we escape remorse altogether. Each of us is guilty of at least “a small misdeed” and can consequently expect to be saddled with some degree of remorse in our lives, a fact that she finds fortunate rather than tragic (2019: 109). For Grouchy, we should cultivate our capacity for remorse, which, in turn, plays two roles in our

moral development. First, our experience of remorse is the foundation of our idea of moral evil: “an act that is harmful to others and which is prohibited by reason” (Grouchy 2019: 111). Second, remorse checks our natural self-conceit, which clears a path for the sentiment of natural equality and, in time, moral progress. I leave these latter two points for Sections 43.4 and 43.5 and focus here on the attitude of remorse itself.

As discussed in Section 43.1, reflection leads us to consider how our actions impact those beyond our narrow sphere (Grouchy 2019: 109). The cultivation of reflection and the education of sentiment leads to our development of general sympathy. As children, we are concerned with the good of those on whom we depend for our happiness; with education, this concern can extend to all of humanity. Consequently, our remorse extends as well. Any harm we produce, either voluntarily or involuntarily, gives rise to remorse. Once we reach a stage of maturity, we treat even the smallest harms as worthy of remorse. The only justification for causing these harms, we conclude, is if by doing so we create a benefit for others. Eventually, we come to accept the view that “any good or evil that reason approves or disapproves of corresponds to that which is useful or harmful to humanity” (Grouchy 2019: 111).¹²

In time, this principle is imprinted on our heart and takes the form of our conscience (Grouchy 2019: 112). Whenever we are tempted to sacrifice the general happiness for the “promise of a private good...the idea of evil tells us that remorse will follow” if we proceed (Ibid.). In this way, there is no need to “weigh or calculate the consequences of doing so” to awaken this sense of remorse (Ibid.). Prior to calculation, we know that if we were to sacrifice the happiness of others for our own sake, we should experience remorse. Importantly, Grouchy is not saying that moral judgment is made easy by remorse taking the form of conscience – her claim is that remorse is not fooled by calculation since the two function separately: self-conceit cannot argue us out of feelings of remorse altogether.

It follows that we experience remorse even in cases where, given the scope of possible actions, we have acted rightly. In these cases, our sense of remorse “will be softened by the stronger satisfaction of having prevented the more serious harm,” but will still persist (Grouchy 2019: 111). Satisfaction does not *weaken* our remorse but ensures that our overall mental state is bearable by reminding us that we have acted well. Whether we attend to remorse or to satisfaction is then a function of our character. Grouchy explores two different “characters” in this context to illustrate the contrast in response: first, are those whose “souls are easily moved” and second are those “whose sensibility is deeper and more reasoned” (2019: 113). Each of these characters interacts differently with their sense of remorse, which gives Grouchy the opportunity to examine the complexities of its role in morality (Ibid.).

The “easily moved” person is apt to be led astray by their remorse, which they experience as overwhelming – this experience prompts them to act “rashly” and without regard to what is called for by a particular situation (Grouchy 2019: 113). In this way, those easily moved lack orderliness in their decision-making, resulting in actions that are foolish or dangerous. In contrast, the person of reasoned sensibility possesses a remorse that is “less fallible and more efficacious” (Ibid.). From here, we might conclude that Grouchy views the “easily moved” person with suspicion. Still, she also finds fault with the sensible person, whose orderliness and “stubborn determination to seek the best” leads them to “neglect the good” of those people whose interests are thereby sacrificed for what is best (Ibid.). For her, neither of these characters should be taken as an ideal – each has an important role to play.

Grouchy places these character’s roles in a political context to illustrate her point, noting that “the large number of men who have only superiors or equals” should be among those who are easily moved while “those who rule and govern” should be people of more reasoned sensibility (2019: 113). For Grouchy, the former type of remorse pushes us to consider the suffering of individuals, while the latter draws our attention to the overall balance of suffering. In this way, legislators are

to make all-things-considered judgments about policy that impact the suffering of others, while the rest of us attend to the suffering of those with whom we encounter and remind the legislators of its existence. On Grouchy's view then, remorse is a self-correcting mechanism: sensible remorse recommends we act in way to reduce overall suffering; rash remorse guards against the self-certain satisfaction which comes from good all-considered policies by reminding us of the continued existence of suffering.

It follows that, for Grouchy, remorse obstructs self-conceit, which is instrumental to our moral development. Despite self-conceit being "only weakly condemned and weakly punished by morality and opinion" it produces violence and "hidden injustice or oppression" (Grouchy 2019: 114). She identifies three of the four "impulses toward injustice" as being rooted in self-conceit (2019: 133). The pervasiveness of self-conceit makes it a formidable foe. Remorse pressures its acceptance by ensuring we cannot silence the suffering of others, regardless of whether we view their suffering as reasonable. Remorse forces us to address the suffering party as an equal; we recognize that we could also undergo "an unanticipated reversal of fortune," or be harmed (Grouchy 2019: 69). This experience of remorse places us in a position to heed the sentiment of natural equality, to which I turn in Section 43.4.

So, according to Grouchy, remorse is central to our moral lives. While our fear of remorse is an important motive to act virtuously, our aim should not be to avoid remorse altogether, which we could never hope to achieve. After all, we feel remorse even in cases where we have acted rightly; the purpose of this experience is not to burden us with unending shame but for us to appreciate that we have caused another person to suffer. To ignore this suffering would be, Grouchy claims, to "abort our precious gems of sensitivity," which otherwise make our face "turn pale at the sight of suffering" and our "heart brim with indignation for injustice" (2019: 65). The remorseful person guards against the deleterious influence of self-conceit and is motivated to address the suffering of their fellow beings, even if this is an unending task: their guide, Grouchy argues, is the sentiment of natural equality.

43.5 The Sentiment of Natural Equality

If we do not properly attend to our sense of remorse, Grouchy claims, the "oppressive barriers, raised between man and man from need, strength, and vanity," will go unaddressed and the humanity that "secretly pleads for them [those weak and unfortunate] from the depths" of our heart is swamped by self-conceit (2019: 66). In this way, for Grouchy, remorse "awak[ens] in us the sentiment of natural equality" (Ibid.). When this sentiment is given audience, we abhor oppression, injustice, and "vicious institutions" that give "permission to look upon the evil of which they are the source and for which they become the excuse, as inevitable, necessary, politically indifferent, or even useful" (Grouchy 2019: 142). More than putting us in a position to detest injustice, the sentiment of natural equality gives us the resources to reshape our institutions in a way that recognizes equality and lays the groundwork for moral progress. With the assistance of remorse, this progress becomes actual.

Though Grouchy never defines the "sentiment of natural equality" it seemingly refers to our natural abhorrence of cruelty, oppression, and inequality. For her, this sentiment grounds our respect for others, while rules of justice guide our respect to ensure equality is realized (Grouchy 2019: 120–21). However, these rules are only motivationally efficacious if they recognizably contribute to the common good. That said, Grouchy argues, our "vicious institutions...have isolated men from each other, making probity and justice useless and alien to them by annihilating all their advantages and any reasons to act on them" (2019: 152). This problem, according to her, is clearest in the case of property laws, which exacerbate inequality by allowing some people to accumulate "oppressive riches" under the guise of a "sacred title of right," while others are left in a state of

poverty and destitution (Grouchy 2019: 121).¹³ Without the reformation of these laws, Grouchy warns that people will over time be made “strangers to each other,” unable to see one another as equals (2019: 150).

If people are unable to see one another as equals, for Grouchy, they will have little regard for the common good. The wealthy will view property laws simply as an instrument of their own “greed,” allowing them to protect their “heaps of gold...the smallest and least illegitimate of which probably has, in secret, a thousand victims to its name” (Grouchy 2019: 150–51). Meanwhile, the multitude, who cannot hope to attain what the wealthy possess, will consider property laws as the tools of their oppression. To both parties, these laws will then appear absurd and without substantial justification “established, apparently for reasons of utility...preserved as if they were sacred prerogatives and properties” (Grouchy 2019: 151). As a result, Grouchy points out, a state of nature will arise in civil society: the rich and powerful “will oppress the other [worker] nearly without remorse, while the other will cheat him...even believing he is in this way bringing justice to himself” (2019: 152).

Notice the importance of remorse here. Both the powerful and the less powerful worker will find it difficult to feel remorse for harming the other, even in cases where the harm is caused intentionally, because each is insensitive to the suffering of the other. As discussed in Section 43.1, for Grouchy, even though our sensitivity to the pleasure and pains of others is natural, it can be obscured by prejudice, enthusiasm, or a warped system of values. The result of this obstruction is not only a deficit of remorse but the sense that one is *justified* in causing harm to another. According to Grouchy, this disturbing situation is the fault of our institutions, which separates us from one another; the only solution is to find a way to awaken our sentiment of natural equality so we can establish laws based in the common good. The first step to awakening this sentiment is to cultivate our remorse.

Without remorse we are left with those feelings of humanity that produce only a weak motive to relieve the suffering of those with whom we are not already bonded; a motive that is easily overcome by local or factional concerns, especially when these concerns are reinforced by our institutions. Still, while the wealthy and the less fortunate find it difficult to experience remorse when it comes to each other, their remorse is never extinguished altogether. In fact, as discussed in Section 43.3, Grouchy thinks most people are prone to this rash form of remorse. It is only the more cultivated, the wealthy and powerful, whose remorse abstracts from individual suffering. Still, it is this abstraction that enables the cultivated to access the common good; provided their vanity is somehow checked, remorse gives rise to the sentiment of natural equality, which brings us to the second step in this process.

According to Grouchy, the vanity of the powerful could be checked if “all appointments were granted by a general choice and free election” and that, once appointed, “one were bound by law and forced to act in according with it (2019: 137).” The former policy change would then correct for the “sanctioning [of] heredity rights,” which “enable[s] presumptuous mediocrity to rise... [that] becomes tyrannical if it is not established and limited by general interest,” that latter change would help to reverse the current state, whereby, “man is dominated by man rather than laws” (Grouchy 2019: 136–37). Eventually, this change would remove the “corrupting means that are too often necessary for success” and the motivation to commit “injustices inspired by ambition” (Grouchy 2019: 137). Instead of pursuing “exaggerated rewards” and those “intoxicating honors” of vanity, Grouchy argues that the powerful will seek the “true glory” that arises from service to the interest of humanity; once their conscience is liberated, they will begin to see others as their equals (2019: 152; 138).

Once the sentiment of natural equality is awakened in the powerful, the institutional changes necessary to realize this equality can commence; law can cease to be an obstacle to equality and become its instrument. Grouchy stresses that without the influence of our institutions, “reasonable

laws” would be sufficient to strengthen our conscience against the temptation to commit injustice (2019: 145). By removing any incentive for the powerful to dominate others, and by rewarding “probity and virtue,” laws that were previously “oppressive chains” to the citizens can be reformed in light of the general interest (Grouchy 2019: 151; 136). The sentiment of natural equality helps to guide this process by informing our shared conception of justice, which ensures there is equal consideration in both the formation and enforcement of law. This sentiment lays the foundation for respect between citizens, provided this equality is realized and that people can access the goods necessary for happiness.

Grouchy cautions that progress will take more than just awakening the powerful to the equal worth of the multitude. The vanity of the powerful requires checking, thus her recommendation of free elections. More importantly, however, the reasonable form of remorse to which the powerful are disposed will also need to be curbed. Even a policy that is conducive to the general interest will have its victims. Without the input of a rasher form of remorse, the powerful will remain satisfied with its implementation; after all, crafting policy that benefits the public is all that is expected as a legislator. In this case, the powerful are at risk of dulling their sensitivity to the pain of those who are adversely impacted by overall good legislation. It is the role of the multitude, whose remorse is easily moved, to remind the powerful of this suffering, even if it appears insignificant.

According to Grouchy, a dynamic tension exists between the two forms of remorse, as well as the two classes of society. Provided that each can perform its role, the sentiment of natural equality will be felt by all, thereby providing the tools necessary to reform our norms and our institutions. Still, Grouchy does not provide a sketch of a well-functioning system of morals or politics in her *Letters*. Her aim there is to criticize existing institutions and ways of thought. Nonetheless, Grouchy lays the foundation for a better society in the *Letters*. The only obstacle for us pursuing this end is the courage necessary to undertake this process. In the next section, I explore the process by which this reform is meant to take place. In so doing, I consider the final work of Grouchy's husband, Condorcet. I claim that, for Grouchy, moral norms are provisional, and remorse is the engine of moral progress.

43.6 Moral Progress

Given the centrality of remorse to Grouchy's moral theory, one might worry that her account is forced into the following problem. Enforcing a norm or law always produces some pain, meaning that remorse is always fitting. In light of this fact, we can either hold, first, that no laws or norms are authoritative in the face of sincere remorse since they cause suffering to at least someone; or, second, that we should enforce these norms despite our remorse. In other words, should we retreat into irony or grin and bear it as we knowingly cause others to suffer? In this final section, I forward the view that Grouchy adopts a *progressive* theory of morals, which treats the content of moral norms as provisional and their authority as subject to change. On this view, recognition of suffering is the engine of change by which we come to see our existing norms as increasingly inadequate considering future needs.

This progressive theory of morals is also presented in Condorcet's work, *Sketch for the Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795) (Bergès 2018). Sandrine Bergès has argued that Grouchy played an extensive role in the completion of the *Sketch*. In this work, Condorcet presents a stadial theory of the human mind, proceeding from tribal society to the future of humanity, where he concludes that “the perfectibility of man is infinite” (Condorcet 2012: 146). It is in these final sections of the *Sketch* where Bergès claims that Grouchy exercised the most influence. In support of this interpretation, Grouchy's *Letters* begin with a comment on the perfectibility of the mind (Grouchy 2019: 57). She hoped that the *Letters* would awaken our humanity by exposing the

obstacles to our moral improvement. In this way, they are a companion piece to the *Sketch*, complementing its social philosophy with a moral theory. But how do we make sense of perfectibility and its connection with remorse and the progress of morals?

First, it is important to distinguish “perfectibility” from perfectionism, in both an Ancient and Modern sense.¹⁴ Grouchy and Condorcet use the term perfectibility in manner similar to Rousseau, who defines it as that innate, “almost unlimited faculty,” which “successively develops all the others, and allows us” and helps to explain our ability to exceed our natural capacities (Rousseau 1997: 141).¹⁵ For Rousseau, this capacity is responsible for our greatest virtues and our worst vices; our institutions determine whether this perfectibility gives rise to liberation or enslavement. As we have seen, Grouchy also maintains that existing institutions have a deleterious effect on our humanity: “far from guarding man against his own weakness, often they would take advantage of it in order to corrupt him” (Grouchy 2019: 145). The hope, for her and for Condorcet, is to reshape our institutions so that they enable the proper development of our sentiments while also correcting for those vices that result from our nature.

For Grouchy, we should treat our norms as perfectible as well: treating their content as open to revision and their authority as conditional. In this way, our norms can track our moral development. We ensure this concordance by experiencing proper remorse. Consider Grouchy’s appeal to the reader on behalf of all women: “unhappy, especially, [is] the sex who one moment is gifted by nature with its brightest gifts, but for whom nature soon turns into a cruel mother” (2019: 154–55). If we are properly remorseful, we have no choice but to recognize the unhappiness felt by women. This recognition gives us reason to revise gender norms. While revising these norms will lead to instability, this fluidity allows for the innovation needed for norm revision. We cannot predict or control this process: we can only provide the conditions for change to occur and for hearts to follow. Her hope is that this process will continue, from gender to class; from religion to occupation, as we become ever happier and freer.

In this chapter, I have argued that, for Grouchy, the cultivation of our sense of remorse is central to moral progress. Our openness to the suffering of others allows us to recognize the impact that our conduct has on them. Life teaches us that people suffer for reasons outside of their control and that moral desert is worth little in a world ruled by fortune.¹⁶ As a result, we should exercise due consideration in our conduct and aspire for humility in our judgments and our endorsement of moral norms. Grouchy argues that the trappings of self-conceit have little influence over us once we are sincerely committed to our moral development. With some degree of effort, we can begin to see ourselves and the world around us, as a work-in-progress to which we are obligated to positively contribute. In so doing, we will enjoy the highest degree of happiness afforded to us in this life.

With this chapter, I hope to lay the groundwork for two further lines of research. The first would explore the connection between Grouchy’s progressive moral theory and her policy proposals in the *Letters*. A point of contact worth considering is her view of punishment, where her views about remorse, the applicability of moral norms, and the validity of penal institutions meet. A second line of research would consider the relation between Condorcet’s *Sketch* and Grouchy’s *Letters*. Philosophers are late to considering the *Sketch* to be alongside other works of philosophical anthropology and social philosophy from the period. The prospect of treating the *Sketch* and the *Letters* as a combined defense of a unique theory of moral and political philosophy is both notable and worth pursuing.¹⁷

Notes

- 1 Grouchy’s translation of the TMS was replaced by Bizioux et al. 1999.
- 2 Smith refers to his own moral theory as a “system of sympathy” (Smith 1985: 7.3.1.4).

- 3 The concept of “sentimentalism” is a fraught one, for which there is little agreement. Questions about whether and to what extent Grouchy is properly labeled a “sentimentalist” moral thinker therefore go beyond the scope of this chapter. What can be said is that Smith’s “system of sympathy” is a subset of sentimentalism – a school of thought to which Smith considers himself and Hume adherents – and that Grouchy’s *Letters* operate within this system, regardless of her disagreements with the particulars of Smith’s moral theory.
- 4 The idea of sensitivity (*sensibilité*) played a crucial role in the eighteenth-century French philosophical and scientific context. Grouchy’s methodological commitments are in line with those of the French sentimental empiricists (e.g., Georges Buffon, Denis Diderot, and Étienne Condillac). For more on this tradition, see: Riskin 2002.
- 5 Much has been written on Grouchy’s account of sympathy, the relation it bears to Smith’s view in the TMS, and how she means for it to serve as a foundation for morality. My treatment of sympathy has benefitted from reading: Dawson 1991; Forget 2001, 2003; Tegos 2013; Malherbe 2015; Bréban and Dellemotte 2016.
- 6 Moral education is a central topic in Grouchy’s *Letters*. Many of these discussions center on a critique of status quo methods of education. Rather than instill in us a concern for humanity, Grouchy argues that education inflames our vanity and desire for distinction. Even moral education proceeds in a didactic fashion, presenting children with “isolated precepts in no particular order,” and leaving them with no better understanding of how these precepts relate to our nature (Ibid., 116). Grouchy’s comments on education will surely remind the audience of similar ones made by Rousseau, in *Émile* (Book One), and Mary Wollstonecraft, in the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Chapter 2), as well as Smith’s discussion of casuistry in the TMS (Smith 1985: VII.iv.33).
- 7 The idea of humanity plays a central role in eighteenth-century moral philosophy. The concept of humanity has its roots in Cicero’s *De Officiis*. To possess humanity, for Cicero, is to appreciate the obligations which bind us to our fellow beings, which acknowledge our existing in the “fellowship of the human race” (Cicero 1991: 60). Readers who are familiar with Hume’s moral writings will also notice a degree of similarity between him and Grouchy in their discussions of sympathy and humanity. Evidence suggests that Grouchy was unfamiliar with Hume’s work so the parallel is most likely coincidental. The presence of the idea of humanity in Grouchy’s *Letters* says more about the ubiquity of Cicero and the importance of his writings during this period.
- 8 Enthusiasm is a central concern for figures writing in the early modern period. Much of this concern developed in the context of the wars of religion and debates about tolerance, though some of this uneasiness proceeded merely from observations about the structure of human psychology. In both cases, Locke is a key source for discussions about enthusiasm (see (Locke 1975, 2.33, 4.19; Jolley 2003; Corneau 2011, 141–68; Tabb 2018; Anstey 2019). Locke’s account of enthusiasm was adopted by a number of figures, such as Voltaire, who discussed both enthusiasm and fanaticism in his *Philosophical Dictionary*. (See Voltaire 1901: IV.238–44; V.5–30.)
- 9 Grouchy’s discussion of gallantry illustrates a concern for the experience of women in eighteenth-century France. This concern is expressed in her discussions of love and marriage (Grouchy 2019: 83–85, 139–41). Consider her closing comments in the *Letters*:

Unhappy, especially, the sex who one moment is gifted by nature with its brightest gifts, but for whom nature soon turns into a cruel mother. He must not neglect or ignore you, for he will spend half his life with you, and (if it is possible) forget that enchanted cup that the hand of time spills for him in the middle of their journey!

(Ibid., 154–55)

For more on this, see: Bergès 2015a, 2018.

- 10 For more on Grouchy on the problem of domination, see: Bergès 2015b and Tegos 2019. As many scholars have aimed to show, concerns about domination in the context of political and social life gave rise to a renewed form of republicanism in the early modern period. The chief source of this thought in France was François Fénelon, and, later on, Rousseau, who was also responding to contemporary liberal thinkers like Voltaire and Montesquieu. Women played an important role in the British and French movements during this period. For more on the French context of republicanism (see Ball 2019; Bergès 2019; Coffee 2019; Green 2019, 2021). For an alternative perspective on Grouchy as a potential founding figure of liberalism, see Schliesser 2017b.
- 11 I do not discuss Smith’s view of remorse in this chapter. While Smith mentions remorse at various points throughout the TMS, he thinks of its role in morality differently than does Grouchy. For Smith, remorse works in conjunction with our norms rather than puts pressure on us to rethink them. There is space in

Smith's theory to expand the function of remorse – Grouchy does precisely that – but he seems largely uninterested in doing so. Still, Smith's analysis of remorse surely had an impact on Grouchy:

It [remorse] is made up from the sense of impropriety of past conduct; of grief for the effects of it; of pity of those will suffer by it; and of the dread and terror of punishment from the consciousness of the justly-provoked resentment of all rational creatures.

(Smith 1985: TMS 2.2.2.3.)

According to Grouchy, I argue, our experience of remorse – particularly that of grief and pity – forces us to revisit our ideas about propriety, provided that their application results in the suffering of others.

- 12 (Grouchy 2019: 111). Grouchy seems committed to utilitarianism in the *Letters*. When she introduces her view of the moral good, she contrasts it with Vauvenargues' account, which states that "moral good and evil refer to whatever is more useful or harmful to humanity in general" (2019: 111). Notably, Grouchy points out, "these two definitions [Vauvenargues' account of moral good and evil and her own] are fundamentally the same" (Ibid.). The only difference is that Vauvenargues' account seems to preclude ordinary people from partaking in the idea of moral good because "ordinary reason and conscience are not enough to understand good and evil from a universal perspective" (Ibid.). As there is little known about Vauvenargues' work, it is difficult to judge the validity of Grouchy's criticism. Delving further into this topic goes beyond the aim of this chapter.
- 13 Grouchy's comments on economic theory and policy show the influence of Turgot, Quesnay, and Condorcet. For each of these figures, wealth is problematically concentrated in the church, aristocracy, and the royal family. Under these conditions, most people cannot attain the resources necessary for safe and secure lives, removing the incentive to produce and thereby contribute to the nation's growth. Without such an incentive, the thought goes, growth is impossible. That said, Grouchy's concern is less with the lack of economic progress, than with the poverty produced by this stagnation. In this sense, she mirrors Smith's concern in the *Wealth of Nations*.
- 14 There are two species of perfectionism: *human nature perfectionism* (HP) and *objective goods perfectionism* (OP). For HP, we are morally required to cultivate natural human capacities to the highest degree. If humans are by nature sociable, we are required to become *maximally sociable* or to *perfect* our sociability. For OP, there is no such appeal to human nature; instead, one is required to cultivate certain goods that are seen as objectively valuable (e.g., a disposition to be just). Both HP and OP enjoyed a great deal of popularity in modern moral philosophy, though my discussion here focuses on HP. For more on perfectionism, see Wall 2017.
- 15 Rousseau 1997: 141. Notably, Condorcet does not mention Rousseau when discussing the "doctrine of the indefinite perfectibility of the human race," noting instead that "Turgot, Price, and Priestley were the first and most brilliant apostles [of this view]" (Condorcet 2012: 102). Given Rousseau's second *Discourse* was published in 1755, years prior to Priestley's *Essays on the First Principles of Government* (1768), Turgot's *Reflections on the Formation and Distribution of Wealth* (1770), and Price's *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty* (1778), it seems odd that Condorcet would resist making note of him. Then again, there are no references to Rousseau in the *Sketch*, despite his dominance in late eighteenth-century French intellectual life and the enormous influence of his work on the *Letters*.
- 16 Luck has a central place in Grouchy's view of the moral world. This emphasis is seen most in her examination of tragedy and its value for moral development (Grouchy 2019: 72–76). Considering this discussion would take us too far afield given the aim of this chapter. I will simply note that this topic is underexplored in the literature for two principal reasons. First, because discussions about the relationship between tragedy and the cultivation of virtue were prominent in eighteenth-century France (seen in the work of Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, Pierre de Marivaux, Jean Racine, Rousseau, and others). Second, due to the role that luck plays in Smith's moral theory.
- 17 Thank you to Lisa Shapiro and Karen Detlefsen for their tireless work in organizing this handbook, and for choosing to include this chapter in its contents. Thanks to Sandrine Bergès and Eric Schliesser, whose masterful 2019 translation of Grouchy's *Letters on Sympathy* made writing this chapter a good deal easier. Thanks to the New Narratives in Philosophy Early career working (2020–2021) group, for their comments on this chapter, for sharing their research and for helping to foster a community amidst a global pandemic. Thank you to Alyssa Stockdale, Alex Yen, Taru Auranne, and Malin Lalich for providing comments on this chapter at various stages in the process. And thank you to the students in my Spring 2021 Modern Philosophy course, who forced me to think more deeply about many aspects of Grouchy's thought. This chapter is dedicated to them.

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