

FROM ONE SYMPATHY TO ANOTHER: SOPHIE DE GROUCHY'S TRANSLATION OF THE THEORY OF *MORAL SENTIMENTS*

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Abstract

This paper aims at providing a critical analysis of Sophie de Grouchy's translation and commentary of Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments. We insist on what we interpret as Grouchy's misunderstanding of Smithian sympathy, the main concept of his treatise of moral philosophy.

This paper focuses on Sophie de Grouchy's translation of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), published in 1798. At that time, her translation was not the first attempt to spread Adam Smith's moral philosophy in France. However, the two previous French translations did not succeed there. The first one, from Marc-Antoine Eidous and entitled *Métaphysique des mœurs* (1764), was unanimously criticized because of its bad quality. Smith himself looked at it as responsible for the bad reception of his work across the Channel. As for the second translation (1774-75), from Jean-Louis Blavet, it seems to have been poorly disseminated. This contrasts with the reception of Grouchy's translation which was praised, from the very moment of its publication, for its accurateness with respect to the original text. The success was such that it has been viewed, for two centuries, as the definite French translation of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*¹. And Grouchy is even sometimes considered as "Smith's best-known contemporary translator" (see, for instance, Britton 2009, 72). Beyond its intrinsic qualities, the success and posterity of Grouchy's translation might be due to three others factors:

- i. The fame of the couple formed by Sophie and her husband, Nicolas de Condorcet. Indeed, their philosophical salon, attended by many French philosophers but also by foreign visitors, was considered as one of the most prominent and progressive of Paris, from 1786 to the reign of Terror;
- ii. Grouchy was the first to bring in French the definitive version of Smith's moral philosophy. She translated the posthumous edition (7th edition) of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, identical to the 6th edition from 1790, which was the last during Smith's lifetime and where the author made consistent revisions and additions;
- iii. Mostly the fact that Grouchy's work is something more than a mere translation since she added a critical commentary to Smith's analysis written in the epistolary style and entitled

¹ Since a new translation, more literal, was published on the Presses Universitaires de France in 1999 by M. Biziou, C. Gautier and J.-F. Pradeau.

*Lettres sur la sympathie*². This critical commentary is composed of eight letters addressed to an anonymous “Mon cher C***” which was presumably her stepbrother, the physiologist and philosopher Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis.

Our paper aims at emphasizing Grouchy’s understanding, or rather misunderstanding, of Smith’s moral philosophy on some particular points. We show that, despite the accurateness of her translation, there is sometimes a gap between what she kept from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and what Smith really meant; a gap that we ascribe to the role which is granted to sympathy in two different philosophical traditions: the French Sensualism and the Scottish Sentimentalism.

In order to fulfill this aim, we first discuss the main features of Grouchy’s translation in the light of what has been pointed out by scholars. This allows us to provide a survey and to stand in a quite abundant literature. Most commentators agree that, despite its particular respect for the original text, Grouchy’s translation is not completely literal as it sometimes takes liberties with Smith’s vocabulary (see Biziou, Gautier and Pradeau 1999). However, we only partially share the existing interpretations of these modifications such as the one of Seth (2010a, 2010b) or Bernier (2010a).

Our interpretation relies on the critics that Grouchy addresses to Smith’s conception of sympathy in her *Lettres*. This allows underlying, in a second time, major philosophical differences. This perspective on Grouchy’s translation is not entirely new. But while some divergences have been rightly estimated, we believe that some of them have been exaggerated. For instance, it doesn’t seem obvious to us that Grouchy’s version of sympathy is less rooted in a representational or imaginative process than Smith’s. Consequently, we disagree with Bernier’s interpretation (2010a) according to which this supposed divergence is likely to explain Grouchy’s distance with Smith’s original vocabulary.

Conversely, one important aspect of Grouchy’s *Lettres*, which concerns their reevaluation of Smithian sympathy, has been usually ignored by commentators. There is, indeed, scarce any comment on Grouchy’s understanding of Smith’s analysis. Our intuition is that she misunderstood, at some points, what the author meant. The reason is that Grouchy analyzes Smith’s thinking in the light of a philosophical framework into which he could not enter. This leads us, in a third time, to emphasize the influence of some famous thinkers of the Enlightenment on her reading of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

For instance, Grouchy’s critic according to which Smith did not succeed in going back to the primary causes of sympathy reveals a sensualist influence which is not consistent with the sentimentalist tradition. For her, physical pain and pleasure are the primary cause of sympathy. Thus, they constitute the *de facto* explicative principles of our morality and sympathy takes the second place. But for Smith, it is the primary principle of our moral judgment.

Moreover, Grouchy and Smith do not share the same meaning of sympathy. The Marchioness of Condorcet identifies sympathy with virtuous feelings such as benevolence, pity or our worry for others happiness. On the contrary, for Smith, it cannot be identified to a specific sentiment as it designates a concordance of feelings whatever their nature. This distinction comes from a fundamental difference in both authors’ goals. Indeed, Grouchy’s aim is much more normative and prescriptive than Smith’s. She clearly wants to promote virtue as she claims, in her *Lettres*, for institutional and educative reforms likely to “nurture” sympathy among children and citizens. By contrast, Smith mainly uses his principle in a positive perspective since sympathy comes to *explain how* people morally judge their fellowman as well as their own behavior.

Curiously, Grouchy also charges him for having presupposed a kind of innate intimate sense whereas Smith raises the same objection to Francis Hutcheson’s theory of the moral sense. Grouchy’s critics rely on the un-reflexive character that the author assigns to sympathy. Her willingness to distinguish between an instinctive particular sympathy and a reflexive general sympathy shows her reluctance to

² At the time, the epistolary style was very fashionable as reflected by Choderlos de Laclos’ famous novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, published in 1782.

found our judgments on instinct. But while criticizing Smith, she confuses instinct and immediacy (“Lettre VI”, p. 84).

Our investigation will also lead us to focus on some Rousseauian aspects of Grouchy’s reflection. Rousseau’s influence can be easily identified: through Grouchy’s extension of the faculty of sympathy to “all sensitive beings” (including animals); through her reference to Rousseau’s concept of *pitié*, from his *second discourse*; and mostly, through the prescriptive and reforming dimensions that she gives to her essay, stressing the necessity of education and institutional reforms.

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