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Why do Helvétius' writings matter? Rousseau's *Notes sur De l'esprit*

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Helvétius had a dubious reputation among eighteenth-century French *Philosophes*, being accused of exposing other writers who were more vulnerable to the threat of censorship, condemnation and arrest, by publishing works on materialism which drew attention to them indiscriminately. Despite considerable differences between Helvétius, Diderot and Rousseau from a sociological as well as from a philosophical point of view, Rousseau tended to lump the former two together for philosophical attention. With his book *On Mind (De l'esprit)*, which earned him this dubious reputation, Helvétius had tried to stake out ground within the circle of eighteenth century philosophers. The work was read and commented on by Rousseau, Diderot, and Voltaire in 1758; a pattern that was repeated with *On Man (De l'homme)* when it appeared posthumously in 1773. This series of books, marginalia, and refutations constitutes my subject.¹ As a group of commentaries it provides us with an interesting window onto the diversity of Enlightenment thinking.

Because of the many controversies that characterize it, this corpus can also help us understand modern enlightened materialism and even distinguish between several materialisms. As an example, the debate between Rousseau and Helvétius, often presented from the point of view of Rousseau, is supposed to prove the opposition between Rousseau and the 'materialism' of the 'philosophes' (Besse 1972, Bloch 1979, Cumming 1955, Schøsler 1980). Personally I think the assessment we make of the marginalia by Rousseau to his copy of *De l'esprit* needs to be reviewed and that it would be fruitful to address the question what exactly was being discussed between the three authors during the 1750's, especially in our corpus. The purpose of this article is to highlight the fact that the marginalia are clearly the source of theoretical disagreement between the authors and that their differences turn on Rousseau's own position and the materialism that he attributes to Helvétius. However, if we take a closer look, we will see that this discrepancy does not focus on the

¹ During the winter 1758-1759, Rousseau annotated *De l'esprit*; he re-read his book while revising *Émile*. Helvétius never read Rousseau's *marginalia*. Masson published them in Masson 1911 and in Rousseau 1969. Diderot left very few *marginalia*, see Diderot 1981 (a), p. 261-298. He reviewed the book in the *Correspondance littéraire* 15 August, 15 September and 15 October 1758, see Diderot 1981 (b), p. 302-312. Voltaire left many *marginalia* on his *De l'esprit*, see Voltaire 2011, p. 279-326. *De l'homme* was published posthumously in 1773, though it probably was ready since the end of 1769. Helvétius wanted to publish it himself, see Helvétius 2011. In *De l'homme*, he wrote a long 'refutation' of Rousseau, essentially based on *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Émile*. Diderot carefully read this work of Helvétius during his stay in Holland, and he left on his book what we call *Réfutation suivie de l'ouvrage d'Helvétius intitulé L'Homme* (see Diderot 2004, p. 421-767), as it was titled in the *Correspondance littéraire* where it appeared from January 1783 to march 1786.

aspects we might expect (the theory of the uniqueness of substance, the nature of beings and the possibility of an immaterial being, or the hypothesis of thinking matter), and that Rousseau in a strategic way, gave an *a posteriori* interpretation of Helvétius' materialism that does not correspond to an impartial assessment of the texts. This will help us to characterize Helvétius' materialism more precisely, and to identify the exact points that Rousseau dismisses. We will see that the discussions, in the final analysis, dealt mainly with anthropological questions.

Deciding what is at issue between Rousseau and Helvétius in Rousseau's marginalia, known as *Notes sur De l'esprit* (*Notes on Essays on the Mind*), is particularly relevant to answering the philosophical question about what precisely is being discussed. Is it 'materialism'? Rousseau's assertion about *Émile*, according to an account he gave himself of a conversation that might have been fictitious, is widely known.² Rousseau wrote that he might have said that *Émile* was a response to 'that infernal work *On Mind* which, following the detestable principle of its author, pretends that feeling and judging are one and the same thing, which is clearly establishing materialism' ('*l'ouvrage infernal de l'Esprit, qui, suivant le principe detestable de son Auteur, prétend que sentir et juger sont une seule et même chose ce qui est évidemment établir le matérialisme*'). There is no need to further demonstrate that, despite what Rousseau wrote, *Émile* was not meant initially to be a refutation of *De l'esprit*, anymore than his *Profession of faith of the Savoyard Vicar* (*Profession de foi du Vicaire savoyard*) (Rousseau 1914) was so intended. I will try instead to focus on what happened when Rousseau read and commented on Helvétius, taking into account his two different readings.

Rousseau's first reading was after he wrote the first version of the *Profession* and just before, and possibly during, the writing of the first version of *Emile* (Favre manuscript); his second reading was while revising *Emile*. What caught his attention, then, what did he object to or confirm? We will see in the *Notes* that Rousseau commented on Helvétius' theory of judgment from the position of what it is to be a feeling and judging human being. An examination of the Favre manuscript and the revised version of *Émile* easily proves that there is, besides, a real opposition on the question of matter and its properties. But this question is not the key to Rousseau's first reaction to Helvétius' work, as

² See Frédéric-Guillaume de Montmollin to Jean Sarasin, 25 september 1762: the former reports a conversation that he could have had with Rousseau, who might have said that *Émile* 's'élè[ve], non pas précisément directement, mais pourtant assés clairement contre l'ouvrage infernal de l'Esprit, qui, suivant le principe detestable de son Auteur, prétend que sentir et juger sont une seule et même chose ce qui est évidemment établir le matérialisme' (Leigh 1971, letter 2191, p. 115). Rousseau himself amended the letter and added this sentence with his own hand. The conversation may be fictitious (Leigh, *id.*, p. 119-120). See also Voltaire to D'Alembert, 28 august 1765 (Voltaire 1973, D. 12854, p. 274-275) and Voltaire to Thiériot, 30 august 1765 (D. 12859, *id.*, p. 278-279).

I will try to demonstrate by examining the first reading in the original *Notes*, rather than from Rousseau's later point of view. I shall then focus on the moral and anthropological dimensions of the discussion in the *Notes*, and we will see what the similarities (rather than the points of opposition) between the two philosophies are. It is worth noting that the experience of real friendship based on mutual esteem that Diderot and Rousseau once shared for each other was relevant to the refutation of Helvétius by both philosophers, even long after their friendship broke up.

Because many interpretations of Helvétius' philosophy depend on a second-hand reading that relied on Rousseau's, Diderot's or Voltaire's reformulations of Helvétius, I will also take this opportunity to correct some misunderstandings. My aim is not to defend Helvétius' 'true philosophy' but to measure the discrepancy between Helvétius' texts and representations by his contemporaries in their marginalia. Sometimes, as in the case of Diderot, the distortion is so great (Stenger 1984) that we cannot believe it is simply the result of Diderot's misunderstanding. Rather it belongs to a complex literary reasoning structure (in this case with respect to *De l'homme* rather than *De l'esprit*). Although Rousseau's marginalia do not present such an extreme case, the question is also relevant here. For instance, on the so-called theory of passive judgment, Rousseau in his marginalia attributed to Helvétius more than is to be found in the text of *De l'esprit*. It is important to base the analysis on a first-hand knowledge of Helvétius' thought which, it is true, too easily lends itself to simplification due to its lack of technical style, marked by many anecdotes, provocations and a penchant for debate. This article proposes to address these questions as well.

1. What Rousseau read and wrote for himself, and what he wrote for others

At first glance, Rousseau's reading is very selective and fast. *De l'esprit* is 643 pages long, and Rousseau's comments are to be found on 38 pages, covering only the 276 first pages of *De l'esprit*. To be more precise, from page 125 on, they appear only at very long intervals (on average every thirty-five pages), and become anecdotal (six of the last notes are silent or spelling corrections). They focus on only 5 passages of *De l'esprit* (pp. 2-12, pp. 40-41, pp. 69-71, pp. 79-81, and pp. 110-115). But a thematic mapping of the notes discloses three fairly identifiable groups. A first group of comments relates to the subject of sensation, feeling and memory; a second group focuses on 'integrity' («*probité*»); and a third group concerns the question of self-esteem, investigating our ability or inability to give preference to another above oneself. We will begin by examining the first group of twenty notes on sensation, feeling, judgment and memory to show what is holding Rous-

seau's attention in Helvétius' work, what he opposes and what he retains. We will see that materialism, as a debate concerning matter and its properties, is a secondary question in Rousseau's first reading, discussed indirectly, and only really addressed at the time of the second reading.

1.1 What drew Rousseau's attention

What is at issue in the distinction made by Rousseau in these notes between, on the one hand, to feel (*sentir*) and, on the other hand, to measure, to compare or to judge, is the question whether sensation (*sensation*), memory (*souvenir*), comparison (*comparaison*) and judgment (*jugement*), are all simply species of feelings (*sentiments*). And this question is asked from the subject's point of view. As a matter of fact, Rousseau at first used the metaphor of the subject as an eye, or a gaze, the operations of which differ depending on the subject under view, as the following marginalia will show (from now on, I give Helvétius' passage in italics, immediately followed by Rousseau's marginalia on the very same section, called by * or ° just like Rousseau himself did, translated by Patricia Springborg and myself, and then the French original in brackets):

Helvétius (*De l'esprit*, p. 9) : *'Then, as judgment is only the perception as such [of similarities and differences], or at least the articulation of this perception, it follows that all the operations of mind are reduced to judging *.*

* [Rousseau's marginalia] To perceive objects is to feel, to perceive their connections is to judge.'

('Or, comme le jugement n'est que cette appercevance elle-même [des ressemblances et des différences], ou du moins que le prononcé de cette appercevance, il s'ensuit que toutes les opérations de l'esprit se réduisent à juger.*

* [note manuscrite de Rousseau] appercevoir les objets c'est sentir; appercevoir les rapports, c'est juger.')

It is notable that in his marginalia, Rousseau always took the point of view of the subject. When he distinguished between sensation (French: *sensation*) and feeling (*sentiment*), he did so according to the criterion of an affection that was either 'universal' or 'local' to the 'individual'. Again, the difference between sensation (*sensation*) and memory (*souvenir*) was always seen from the subjective point of view of the sensible individual: I know, wrote Rousseau in another note, that sensation and memory are two different (*distinct*) operations in me, because I can distinguish them, not by an external examination, but by an inner feeling (that is not conceptualized here).

Rousseau's answer to the question whether sensation (*sensation*), memory (*souvenir*), comparison (*comparaison*) and judgment (*jugement*) are all equally feelings (*sentiments*), is famously negative. The marginalia to *De l'esprit* show how his answer was elaborated, not yet in the name of an active principle (or principle of activity), nor within the frame of a larger theory of judgment. Rather it is in terms of the experience of the subject who distinguishes between them, and who feels their difference. In other words, the debate is not immediately a controversy over activity (judgment) and passivity (feeling). Rousseau's point is rather to give an account of subjective experience that is true to the phenomenon.

1.2 What Rousseau opposed

Rousseau opposed Helvétius on what we might call the fallacy of approximation. It is precisely from the subject's point of view, wrote Helvétius, that sensation and memory are roughly the same (*De l'esprit*, p. 10):

'one is able, as experience proves, by striking the ear with certain sounds, to excite in us more or less the same sensations that one would experience in the presence of certain objects*

* [Rousseau's marginalia] here again that same 'more or less' as the one before, in both cases it is pure sophistry'

*('on peut, comme l'expérience le prouve, en frappant l'oreille de certains sons, exciter en nous à peu près * les mêmes sensations qu'on éprouverait à la présence même des objets*

* [note manuscrite de Rousseau] voici encore le même à peu près que ci-derrière employé d'une manière aussi sophistique.')

According to Rousseau, Helvétius minimized the difference between sensation and memory to the point where it was so slight as to be meaningless. But for Rousseau, the experience of the sensitive being was all-important: if one feels a difference, then there must be one, a real one. Sensation and memory, said Rousseau, must be '*two distinct operations*' ('*deux opérations distinctes*'), though we do not know what exactly this means. In the first twenty notes, we do not even know how this difference is possible, since Rousseau said that the displacement of the organs was the same in the case of a sensation (e.g., the sensation of a tree) and in the case of a memory (e.g., the memory of this tree), so that the slight feeling of their difference had no organic basis.

As a matter of fact, Rousseau was more or less approving of what Helvétius wrote, on page 7 of his *De l'esprit*:

'then my internal organs ought necessarily to find themselves in almost the same situation as when they viewed this oak. Then the situation of the organs ought doubtless to produce a sensation^o: and then it is clear that to remember is to feel.*

* [Rousseau's marginalia] they find themselves in that same situation indeed, but as the effect of a very different operation'

('alors mes organes intérieurs doivent nécessairement se trouver à peu près dans la même situation où ils étoient à la vue de ce chêne. Or cette situation des organes doit incontestablement produire une sensation^o: il est donc évident que se ressouvenir, c'est sentir.*

* [note manuscrite de Rousseau] ils s'y trouvent à la vérité ; mais par l'effet d'une opération très différente.')

But during his second reading of *De l'esprit* (Masson 1911, p. 106), Rousseau added a new note just after the word « sensation » (called by ^o). He then wrote in the margin (same p. 7):

^o[Rousseau's marginalia] What do you call sensation ? If a sensation is the impression transmitted by the external organ to the internal organ, the situation of the internal organ might well be thought of as the same, whether the external organ is there or not, but when the external organ is lacking, this deficiency alone is sufficient to distinguish the memory from the sensation. Otherwise it would be impossible to distinguish the memory of the sensation from the sensation itself. The author rescues his position by writing that they are more or less the same. But a situation of organs that is only more or less the same as another one, certainly does not produce an effect that is exactly the same.'

(^o[note manuscrite de Rousseau] *Qu'appellez-vous sensation ? Si une sensation est l'impression transmise par l'organe extérieur à l'organe intérieur, la situation de l'organe intérieur a beau être supposée la même, celle de l'organe extérieur manquant, ce défaut seul suffit pour distinguer le souvenir de la sensation. D'ailleurs il n'est pas vrai que la situation de l'organe intérieur soit la même dans la mémoire et dans la sensation. Autrement il seroit impossible de distinguer le souvenir*

de la sensation d'avec la sensation. Aussi l'Auteur se sauve-t-il par un à peu près. Mais une situation d'organes qui n'est qu'à peu près la même, ne doit pas produire exactement le même effet.')

Finally, for Rousseau, there were two distinct dispositions of the internal organs: one for sensation, one for memory, and he left aside the vocabulary of operations which he had used in the first series of marginalia (*'deux opérations distinctes'*) and focused on the internal experience of these two distinct dispositions of the organs.

1.3 What Rousseau added... afterwards

It is only at this point in his reasoning, and only in a late note dating from the second series of marginalia (Masson 1911, p. 112), that Rousseau introduced the word 'activity'. Judgments, wrote Rousseau, relate to something that is not in a feeling and that is the product of an activity (on Helvétius 1758, p. 256):

[Rousseau's marginalia] 'The principle according to which the author deduces in the following chapters the natural equality of minds, and which he has tried to establish at the beginning of his work, is that human judgments are purely passive. This principle has been established and discussed with much philosophy and depth in the *Encyclopedia*, in the article *Evidence*. I do not know who is the author of that article, but he is certainly a very great metaphysician. I suspect the Abbé de Condillac or Monsieur de Buffon. But, whoever it may be, I have tried to refute the principle and to establish the active nature of our judgments, both in the notes that I have written at the beginning of this book, and especially in the first part of the profession of faith of the Savoyard Vicar.'

([note manuscrite de Rousseau] '*Le principe duquel l'auteur déduit dans les chapitres suivants l'égalité naturelle des esprits, et qu'il a tâché d'établir au commencement de son ouvrage, est que les jugements humains sont purement passifs. Ce principe a été établi et discuté avec beaucoup de philosophie et de profondeur dans l'Encyclopedie, article Evidence. J'ignore quel est l'auteur de cet article ; mais c'est certainement un très grand metaphysicien. Je soupçonne l'Abbé de Condillac ou M. de Buffon. Quoiqu'il en soit, j'ai taché de le combattre et d'établir l'activité de nos jugemens, et dans les notes que j'ai écrites au commencement de ce livre, et surtout dans la première partie de la profession de foi du Vicaire savoyard.*')

This late comment rewrites the story! Firstly, contrary to what he says, Rousseau's first notes during his first reading of Helvétius' book, do not aim to 'establish the activity of our judgments'. As I tried to show above, their point of view is different, and in these notes, not only the word but the very idea of activity is missing. The question of the activity of our judgments is simply not at issue. Secondly, the first version of the *Profession de foi du Vicaire savoyard* certainly addresses the theory of passive judgment, like the *Encyclopedia* article (Quesnay 2005, pp. 61-90), but it does not address Helvétius. The first version *Profession* bears no trace of Helvétius, for the very good reason that this first version of the *Profession* was written before Rousseau had read *De l'esprit* (which he probably did only in November 1758) and possibly even before *De l'esprit* had appeared. *De l'esprit* was published on 27th July 1758, being the second issue of the first edition, after a first issue, in late June, had been suspended and never put on sale. Rousseau had no knowledge of the first issue of the first edition (Smith 2001, p. 111). Therefore, the first aim of the *Profession de foi* was, among others, to refute the theory of passive judgment, but not to refute Helvétius. This time, it is what Rousseau himself says to which we must listen, and we should not make a confusion which Rousseau himself does not make.

Thirdly, in the second version of the *Profession*, written after Rousseau had read *De l'esprit*, the refutation is clearly aimed again more at the *Encyclopedia* article than at Helvétius' work. The passivity of judgment is not Helvétius' position — and the first marginalia, written when Rousseau had read *De l'esprit*, and not afterwards, prove to us that Rousseau did not misunderstand this point. So, rather than simply misunderstanding Helvétius' work, Rousseau in this late note on page 256 of *De l'esprit* is rewriting his earlier remarks on it, and the purpose of the *Profession*, after the fact.

One could imagine that Rousseau was anxious to prevent misunderstanding of his marginalia by potential readers. Indeed in 1767, before leaving for England, when he was selling his books, and especially his *De l'esprit*, to Dutens, he was both cautious and talkative about these marginalia.³ Many people knew of their existence and wanted to see them,⁴ so Rousseau may have anticipated that they would be well-known one day, despite Dutens promises to keep them confidential.⁵

³ Vincent-Louis Dutens to Rousseau 5th March 1767 (Leigh 1978, letter 5766, p. 204-205) and 19th March 1767 (*id.*, letter 5783, p. 226-228). Rousseau and Davenport 9th and 14th February 1767 (Leigh 1978, letters 5717, p. 120-124 and 5729, p. 143-144).

⁴ See *Mélanges extraits des mss de Mme Necker*, 1798, 3 vol, II, p. 246, in D. Smith 1991, p. 366.

⁵ Dutens to Rousseau (*id.*, letter 5766, p. 204).

Rousseau's claims about his reading of Helvétius are often more strategic than truthful. In 1764, in the *Letters written from the Mountain (Lettres écrites de la montagne)*, he wrote that he burned his refutation of a dangerous work, which he had begun as soon as the work appeared, once he saw the author persecuted ; and he implies that this work was *De l'esprit*. But at the end of October 1758,⁶ Rousseau had already written that he had not yet read *De l'esprit*, although by that time Helvétius' book had been in wide circulation for 3 to 4 months, and had even become a hard-to-find best-seller! In the face of universal condemnation, Helvétius had already withdrawn his work twice. None of this fits with the story suggested by Rousseau. The same is true of the account of the conversation, whether fictitious or not, where he stated that *Émile* was a refutation of Helvétius. I would like to stress that despite his own strategic statements, Rousseau's *Notes sur De l'esprit* show that what he discusses, when he does read Helvétius, is primarily the experience of the subject and its philosophical status. For Rousseau, this 'inner feeling' must not be underrated, and Rousseau will gradually pay more and more attention to it, maybe from the moment when he noticed how much Helvétius underrated it. In the first version of the *Profession de foi du Vicaire Savoyard*, written before Rousseau read *De l'esprit*, the 'inner feeling' is simply named, but in the second version, written after Rousseau read Helvétius, the 'inner feeling' is precisely conceptualized. So why did Rousseau say that the Helvetian theory of judgment is a path to materialism? What thesis did he designate if not that of the passivity of judgment?

1.4 A good reader

One knows indeed that at the beginning of *De l'esprit* (I, 1), Helvétius affirmed that his system needed only sensitivity (*sensibilité*) and recollection or memory (*mémoire*). Moreover, he affirmed that there was no answer to the question 'whether these two faculties [sensibility and memory] are modifications of a spiritual or material substance' (*'si ces deux facultés [la sensibilité et la mémoire] sont des modifications d'une substance spirituelle ou matérielle'*). The answer could be but a probable one. His own philosophy, Helvétius wrote, 'accords equally well with either one of these hypotheses' (*'s'accorde également bien avec l'une et l'autre de ces hypothèses'*). And he concluded by declaring the difference between them as being only a question of the properties of matter. Rousseau read this of course and even quoted this passage in the Favre Manuscript (Rousseau 1969, p. 1283), but he did not comment on it and left no note in the margin of his *De l'esprit*.

⁶ To Jacob Vernes, 22nd October 1758 (Leigh 1967, v, letter 715, p. 185); see also the draft of the letter to Jean-Antoine Comparet, beginning of September 1762 (Leigh 1971, XIII, letter 2147, p. 37).

Helvétius' theory of judgment does not address directly either the question of matter and its properties, or the question of activity or passivity. His theory cannot be understood if one does not recall the underlying theory of language. To give a very brief account of Helvétius' text, it should be remembered that a judgment, which articulates (*prononcer*) the ratio between two objects, is the result of three steps. First, we must make the two related objects present to ourselves, which is the stage of attention. Then we must compare them. And finally, we must name (*nommer*) the impression produced by the comparison. Judgment, Helvétius wrote, is 'the articulation' of this impression (Helvétius 1988, 22, '*le prononcé*').

Helvétius described the stage of attention as a state of conscious and concentrated sensitivity, which does not originate in an explicitly voluntary movement toward the object, but is the result of the avoidance of pain and the search for pleasure. Fleeing pain and pleasure-seeking are the natural motions of the sensitive being synonymous with physical sensitivity (*sensibilité physique*). The stage of comparing is where this physical sensitivity is swinging or swaying from one object to another. For Helvétius, to compare simply means to observe carefully and alternately two different sensations caused by two different objects, regardless of whether they are present to my senses or to my memory. In other words, observation is a sensation, and comparison does not designate any actual operation of the mind. Rousseau formulates this quite well when he writes that for Helvétius, comparison is a feeling.

And finally, we name. To quote *De l'homme* (Helvétius 2011, 115, the emphasis is Helvétius'):

'I judge, that is to say, *I record exactly the impression that I have received. [...] Every judgment is only the account of two sensations, whether actually experienced or preserved in my memory [...] what is to judge? it is to say what I feel.*

(*'je juge, c'est-à-dire, je rapporte exactement l'impression que j'ai reçue. [...] Tout jugement n'est donc que le récit de deux sensations, ou actuellement éprouvées, ou conservées dans ma mémoire. [...] qu'est-ce que juger? c'est dire ce que je sens'*).

In this saying or naming, there is again no free manipulation of linguistic signs, but solely 'the habit of uniting certain ideas with certain words' (*'l'habitude d'unir certaines idées à certains mots'*, *De*

l'esprit, Helvétius 1988, 23). And the acquisition of these habits is nothing more than the capacity to learn one's own mother tongue.

In the end, for Helvétius, judging is saying. Naming is the *habit* of linking one sensation to a sign or name, not the *initiative* for linking. Indeed, the sentence 'to judge is to feel' (*'juger est sentir'*) is not based on a characterization of sensation as passive, but on general support for the laws of sense experience, or the law of interest. The law of interest, i.e. the very simple 'fact' (*fait*) that all sensitive beings flee from pain and seek pleasure, is the natural movement that supports all our activities, including judgment (and moral judgment, at that). We have no light on its origins nor on its development, which is increasingly complex. But all the dynamics of judgment, its cause (*mobile*) and its intention (*motif*), are supported by this 'law' of physical sensitivity, and not by the will of a subject. For Helvétius, we do not need any separate faculty other than sensitivity to understand either the mind (*esprit*) as a faculty to judge, or the spirit (*esprit*, for Helvétius, as well) as the combination of knowledge that one may have and which makes one a 'spiritual man' or 'a spiritual woman' (*homme d'esprit* or a *femme d'esprit*). But in a world in which we know nothing but physical sensitivity (*sensibilité physique*), Helvétius' philosophy tends to materialism.⁷ Rousseau is right. There is no need to champion the theory of the passivity of judgment or to answer the question of thinking matter to be a materialist.

To conclude on this point, what is interesting about Rousseau's marginalia is that, leaving aside the late strategic note on the passivity of judgment, they present him as a good reader. Firstly, Rousseau identified what *he* was going to develop elsewhere (the 'inner feeling'). Secondly, he noticed the closeness between his own anthropology and that of Helvétius that lay beyond their opposition, and identified what needed to be deepened. This concerns the second group of notes, those on the idea of integrity (*probité*), and leads us to what really is at stake here, why all this, where matter is indirectly addressed, matters.

2. Where Rousseau met Helvétius, and where they parted ways

2.1 The author of justice

⁷ I will address this point in the conclusion of this article.

Lying behind the questions raised by Rousseau's comments (the question of the relativity of our moral values; the opposition between the enlightened virtue of the philosophers, or the learned, and the virtue of simple people; and also the articulation of private virtues and public utility) is a fundamental opposition between Helvétius and Rousseau demonstrated in the following note (on Helvétius 1758, p.276):

*'I see that without sensitivity to physical pleasure and pain, men, without desires, without passions, equally indifferent to everything, would not know what personal interest was, and without personal interest ... there would be no general interest, and as a consequence no such thing as just or unjust actions and therefore physical sensitivity and personal interest have been the authors of all justice**

*[Rousseau's marginalia] to reason like the author, one could say that if men had not lived they would not have acted, that without actions there would have been no justice, etc. from which one would conclude like him that human life is the author of all justice'

('je vois que, sans la sensibilité à la douleur et au plaisir physique, les hommes, sans desirs, sans passions, également indifférents à tout, n'eussent point connu d'intérêt personnel; que, sans intérêt personnel ... il n'y eût point eu d'intérêt général, par conséquent point d'actions justes ou injustes; et qu'ainsi la sensibilité physique et l'intérêt personnel ont été les auteurs de toute justice.*

*[note manuscrite de Rousseau] pour raisonner comme l'auteur on peut dire que si les hommes n'avoient pas vécu, ils n'auroient point agi, que sans actions il n'y auroit point eu de justice etc. d'où l'on concludroit comme lui que la vie humaine est l'auteur de toute justice.')

Rousseau was absolutely right and Helvétius could not deny this reformulation of his philosophy. For Helvétius, human thought and human morality are not necessary but contingent. They arise from the lived situation of humanity, characterized by a bundle of factors: human anatomy (especially the presence of a hand), longevity, population and the density of settlement, a carnivorous diet, an organic disposition conducive to boredom, language ability and social institutions... None of these factors alone, but some combination of these physical factors, has produced a history of mind which is synonymous with the history of humanity. Human development was originally contingent or accidental, but once in process it is strictly governed by the law of physical sensitivity or human interest, which supersedes all specificity.

In the same way, at the individual level the law of physical sensitivity, as Helvétius repeats obsessively, leads to a complete desubstantialization of the subject, including the subject considered as subject of pleasure. That is to say that there is no *personal* or *individual* necessity to seek this pleasure rather than that one, no subject which can be considered as a cause. Necessity is external, rooted in circumstances and, even in our more individual passions, ‘we are uniquely what we are made by the objects which surround us’ (*‘nous sommes uniquement ce que nous font les objets qui nous environnent’*) (Helvétius 1988, 539). We can give an account of this necessity by an analysis of the physical situation of a person — and this physical situation is analyzed by Helvétius first and foremost in terms of political and economic circumstances. For Helvétius in fact, self-love (*amour de soi*) immediately becomes love of power, that is to say love of the means which allow, or substitute for, physical pleasures. My individual passions arise from and depend on my political and economic situation, which constitute and particularize what can be called human life (*la vie humaine*). Under the rule of the law of physical sensitivity, humanity is nothing by itself; like our individual selves, it is insubstantial, virtue and moral values being no exception. Rousseau formulated this masterfully: life (and life as particular and contingent as it is), is the author of all justice, as well as of all knowledge.

2.2 Conceptual enlightenment

Of course Rousseau was opposed to the consequent form of moral relativism. But I would like to show that his rejection of this moral consequence raises a philosophical difficulty for Rousseau, and an explicitly conceptual one. The problem is constructed as follows. In the first place, for Rousseau, to say that physical sensitivity explains everything (knowledge and virtue) is to say nothing and especially nothing about humanity. This is very much Diderot’s reproach to Helvétius (Diderot 2004). But in the second place, it is problematic to explain knowledge and virtue solely and simply by freedom, because an explanation in terms of freedom seems to root knowledge and integrity as well as evil and injustice in the human subject itself. Now in the *Notes*, Rousseau explicitly endorsed Helvétius’ position as it is expressed on page 40 [Helvétius, 1758, p. 40]:

‘Error does not then essentially attach to the nature of the human mind’; our false judgments are then the effect of accidental causes*

*[Rousseau’s marginalia] You have not proved at all that your analysis was exact; your conclusion is not then necessary, but I agree with you though’

(*L'erreur n'est donc pas essentiellement attachée à la nature de l'esprit humain**; *nos faux jugements sont donc l'effet de causes accidentelles*)

*[note manuscrite de Rousseau] vous n'avez point prouvé que vôtre division fut exacte; vôtre conclusion n'est donc pas nécessaire, ce qui n'empêche pas qu'en ceci je ne sois de vôtre avis.'

In other words, human beings never *will* error or vice. One always wants one's own good and nothing else, or as Rousseau himself expresses it: one always acts in an *interested* way. At this point, Rousseau has to articulate 1) this concept of interest and 2) something else... that he is going to maintain and elaborate (spiritual interest? innate conscience? a certain concept of freedom?). In other words, he has to provide an explicitly conceptual clarification of his own concept of *interest*, i.e. of the idea that *human beings are not free to want anything other than their own good*. This conceptual clarification takes place precisely in the revised version of *Émile*, written after he had read *De l'esprit*, and in the letter to Gimprel d'Offreville (4th October 1761), written when *Émile* was going to press.

Rousseau's thesis then is the following. Firstly, humans will always want their own good. But this does not preclude that this 'good' can be either the proper goal for a human being, or a 'good' as an object of possession. In the first case, the interest determining the will is self-love (*amour de soi*), and in the second case, it is self-esteem (*amour-propre*). The idea of a proper human *telos* must be clarified, and this is precisely the purpose of the second group of marginal notes to *De l'esprit*.

2.3 From interest and esteem to friendship, and back

In the letter to Offreville we read (Leigh 1969, letter 1500, p. 143):

'when we are active it is necessary that we have a motive for action, and this motive for action can not be foreign to us, since it is we who are put in action. It would be absurd to imagine that being myself I would behave as if I was another; isn't it true that if someone tells you that a body is pushed, without anything touching it, that you would think that was inconceivable? It is the same thing in morals when one thinks one acts disinterestedly.'

(*quand nous agissons, il faut que nous ayons un motif pour agir, et ce motif ne peut être étranger à nous, puisque c'est nous qu'il met en œuvre. Il seroit absurde d'imaginer qu'étant moi, j'agirois*)

comme si j'étois un autre; n'est-il pas vrai que si l'on vous disoit qu'un corps est poussé, sans que rien le touche, vous diriez que cela n'est pas concevable ? C'est la même chose en morale quand on croit agir sans nul intérêt.')

The letter distinguishes between two types of interest, first, a sensual and tangible (*sensuel et palpable*) interest which includes consideration (*réputation*), and, second, an interest which is relative to ourselves, to the well-being of our soul (*le bien-être de notre âme*), to our complete well-being (*bien-être absolu*). By including the second type of interest, Rousseau refutes the 'new philosophy' of Helvétius. Rousseau's philosophy may also be described as a philosophy of interest (Bernardi 2006, O'Dea 2012, Séglard 1998), but he needed to mark the distance, now is at its maximum, from Helvétius's philosophy. We do good in our own interest, but the preference given to what is really good for us, i.e. human beings endowed with this spiritual or moral interest (*intérêt spirituel ou moral*), is radically different from the preference given to social goods. We do not have to renounce on ourselves, but we may choose what we may call real happiness.

According to Rousseau, that is the reason why Helvétius produced false concepts, mistakenly deducing from the law of interest that the wicked produce crimes like an oak produces acorns, even though still maintaining that we always act in an interested way. And that is also the reason why, according to Rousseau, Helvétius did not understand the nature of self-esteem. The third group of notes and comments covers the chapter where Helvétius asked whether within his system we can give preference to another over oneself (*De l'esprit*, II, 4, 'De la nécessité où nous sommes de n'estimer que nous dans les autres'). In the margin of this chapter, Rousseau wrote five very long remarks. Helvétius had developed a relatively complex theory of self-esteem, including the distinction between felt esteem (*estime sentie*) and attributed esteem (*estime rapportée*), but he also developed an original topic concerning the situations or positions (*positions*) from which individuals can judge themselves as posterity will judge them, attributing esteem to what necessarily causes it, public interest. From these particular situations or perspectives (mainly those of youth, Academicians, strangers, posterity), esteem, so to speak, is forced on one. Here the preference given to another is gained by a sort of ruse with history (because the trick is to recreate the point of view of posterity), but it does not contradict the law of interest. One never really prefers another to oneself.

In the third group of remarks commenting on this theory Rousseau's tone is more lively. Esteem, or consent to the superiority of another, is really given and felt by a unified subject, and not gained due

to the chance of social position. Helvétius writes and Rousseau comments (Helvétius, *De l'esprit*, 1758, p. 69:

'But could one say that one sees some people who recognise in others a greater spirit than in themselves. Yes, I would reply, one sees people making a confession, and that confession comes from a beautiful soul: however what they have given those whom they declare to be their superiors is only esteem on parole; they are only giving their own voice to public opinion; and agree that these people are more esteemed, without being convinced inside themselves that these people are more estimable.*

*[Rousseau's marginalia] That is not true. Have I meditated on a subject for a long time, and have I drawn some personal views with all the attention of which I am capable, if I communicate the same subject to another man, and during our conversation I am able to see leaving the brain of this man a crowd of new ideas and grand views on the same subject on which I was able to furnish so few. I am not so stupid not to see the advantage of those views and ideas above my own; I am then forced to feel inside me that this man has more spirit than me, and to accord him an esteem felt in my heart as superior to that which I have for myself.'

('Mais, dira-t-on, on voit quelques gens reconnaître dans les autres plus d'esprit qu'en eux. Oui, répondrai-je, on voit des hommes en faire l'aveu; et cet aveu est d'une belle âme: cependant ils n'ont, pour celui qu'ils avouent leur supérieur, qu'une estime sur parole ; ils ne font que donner à l'opinion publique la préférence sur la leur, et convenir que ces personnes sont plus estimées, sans être intérieurement convaincus qu'elles soient plus estimables'*

*[note manuscrite de Rousseau] Cela n'est pas vrai. J'ai longtemps médité sur un sujet, et j'en ai tiré quelques vues avec toute l'attention que j'étois capable d'y mettre. Je communique ce même sujet à un autre homme, et durant notre entretien je vois sortir du cerveau de cet homme des foules d'idées neuves et de grandes vues sur ce même sujet qui m'en avoit fourni si peu. Je ne suis pas assés stupide pour ne pas sentir l'avantage de ces vues et de ces idées sur les miennes; je suis donc forcé de sentir intérieurement que cet homme a plus d'esprit [que⁸] moi, et de lui accorder dans mon cœur une estime sentie supérieure à celle que j'ai pour moi.')

⁸ Rousseau writes : « plus d'esprit *de moi* » (!).

Diderot's and Rousseau's reactions to *De l'esprit* strikingly converge on this point. Both of them strongly advocate the reality of esteem, an esteem that has an intellectual dimension (*'je ne suis pas assez stupide pour ne pas sentir l'avantage de ces vues et de ces idées sur les miennes'*) and also an emotional one (*'accorder dans mon cœur une estime sentie supérieure à celle que j'ai pour moi'*). The conversation imagined here by Rousseau evokes Diderot's and Rousseau's own conversations, which Diderot himself recalled when commenting on Helvétius' *De l'homme*. In a very famous comment, Diderot indeed recalled the time when Rousseau visited the imprisoned Diderot, talked with him about Dijon's prize, and decided after their conversation to write the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (Diderot 2004, p. 498). Then Diderot added, that Rousseau did what he did because he was Rousseau, and that he Diderot would never have done the same, because he was Diderot. This expression is of course an indirect quotation of Montaigne trying to give an account of the reason why he loved Étienne de la Boétie: 'If I was pressed to say why I loved him, I feel that it could no otherwise be expressed, than by answering: because it was he, because it was I' (*'Si l'on me presse de dire pourquoi je l'aimais, je sens que cela ne se peut exprimer qu'en répondant: parce que c'était lui, parce que c'était moi'*). In other words, when Diderot recalled his conversation with Rousseau, he knotted together the intellectual esteem felt by both partners, the friendship felt, and, precisely, the individuality expressed in two distinct 'selves'. Diderot and Rousseau really loved and esteemed each other because they were two different persons or individuals. And in general, Diderot's comments on *De l'homme* sound very personal, recalling his personal history. Voltaire's reaction is a similar one. More than anything else, he reproached Helvétius for reducing friendship to physical interest.

In conclusion, we can say that the philosophy of Helvétius is reductionist, with the reduction of all of the logics of the production of human reality to the sole logic of sensibility or interest. This came as no surprise to contemporaries who were told to be philosophers of interest, Rousseau included. But in Helvétius' philosophy, the rule of the law of sensibility, asserted almost obsessively, leads to a complete desubstantialization of the subject.

As for the nature of this sensibility, Helvétius wonders again if extension and mass are the only common characteristics of all bodies, or if the discovery of attraction does not make one suspect that bodies possess other qualities up to now unknown, like of course sensibility. His answer is in terms of probabilities, which led me to say previously that Helvétius' philosophy tends towards a probable materialism without him clearly committing himself. This cautiousness is not a mere formality. In *De l'homme*, II, 2, Helvétius investigates the identification between soul (*âme*), sensitivi-

ty (*sensibilité*) and breath of life (*souffle de vie*). A final footnote quotes a *Treatise on the principles of Chemistry* (which like Stenger and Smith I failed to identify)⁹ in which a chemist suggests that sensitivity could be a short-lived (*fugitive*) and passing (*passagère*) phenomenon, produced and destroyed by new combinations, or movements. This would mean that sensibility could only be a potential of matter – as we have noticed, Helvétius stated that humanity was the product of a contingent process that stems from a conjunction of physical factors that are not peculiar to human beings, and that this development did not require humans to receive anything more than other animals. Thus, the development of the sensibility of physical creatures, and the historical development of this sensibility in which humans were engaged, was in no way necessary and we cannot therefore attribute it in the final analysis to the concept of matter. The repeated nominalist statements of Helvétius, for whom matter is not a being (*‘la matière n’est pas un être’*) and for whom human beings are the creators of this idea and the idea of matter itself (*‘les hommes sont les créateurs de l’idée de matière’*), are not mere formality. For Helvétius’ materialism could have been so named without a concept of matter.

Nonetheless, Helvétius is important. Rousseau, Diderot and Voltaire, from different departure points, strongly reacted to what they understood and felt as the diminution of the human and individual subject in Helvétius’ philosophy. Their own private experience of real friendship, based on an esteem which is gladly given and received, was a reason to challenge the idea that individual identities are *nothing but* an effect of physical sensitivity, that is to say, to challenge Helvétius’ specific type of materialism. Nothing other than real individuality can explain the emergence of real friendship. Therefore, the experience of friendship is a philosophical one. It shows us that if we accept the idea that we always act for ourselves, that is to say, if like Helvétius, Rousseau and Diderot we accept the key role of interest in philosophical anthropology, the concept of interest must be elaborated so as to include friendship, or real preference, care and esteem for another person. Twenty years after their deep friendship was so violently broken, Rousseau and Diderot both invoked this happy and painful memory as a philosophical argument against Helvétius’ philosophy.¹⁰

⁹ See Helvétius 2011, 579 n. 32.

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