

# Letters on Sympathy

first published as an appendix to the author's French translation of  
Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Sophie de Grouchy

1798

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. —The titles of the Letters are not in the original. Presenting this material in the form of letters was a stylistic device; they were evidently never *sent* to anyone. But in writing them Sophie de Grouchy evidently imagined a recipient whom she addresses only as ‘my dear C\*\*\*’. This was probably—especially from evidence on the last two pages—her husband, the Marquis de Condorcet, one of whose principal works can be found on the website containing the present text. When these ‘letters’ were being written, he was in hiding from the revolutionary authorities that had condemned him; he died before they were published. —In this work ‘sympathy’ (*sympathie*) means ‘fellow-feeling’ unrestrictedly; it allows me to direct my sympathy towards your pleasures as well as towards your pains. —So as avoid editorial clutter in the work’s final paragraph, let it be explained here that the ‘resplendent gifts’ and the ‘enchanted cup’ referred to in it are feminine beauty.

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## Glossary

**affection:** (*affection*) In the early modern period this word—in English as in French—could mean ‘fondness’, as it does today; but it was also often used to cover every sort of pro or con attitude: desires, approvals, likings, disapprovals, dislikings, etc. It has seemed safest to use ‘affection’ here when and only when de Grouchy uses *affection*.

**arbitrary:** It means ‘chosen’ or ‘dependent on what someone decides’; it doesn’t mean that there is no reason for the decision.

**drive:** Translates *motif*. It may be a little too strong to be exactly right, but ‘tendency’ and ‘bent’ are much too weak, and ‘motive’, ‘motivation’ and ‘ground for action’ are in many contexts obviously quite wrong. Also **driven**.

**enthusiasm:** (*enthousiasme*) In early modern times both words meant something close to ‘fanaticism’; in the present work—see page 10—it seems to refer to over-excitement, a wild intensity of feeling that can produce confusion and bad judgment.

**generous:** (*généreux*) Used here in a sense that both words used to have, meaning ‘noble-minded, magnanimous, rich in positive emotions’ etc.

**grammar:** Mistranslates *grammaire*, which as used on page 28 really means something much broader, closer to ‘learning to read and write’.

**love:** As a noun this translates only *amour*. The verb *aimer* can mean either ‘like’ or ‘love’; each of those is used in translating it, on the basis of the translator’s guess as to which is more likely to be meant.

**mœurs:** The *mœurs* of a people include their morality, their basic customs, their attitudes and expectations about how people will behave, their ideas about what is decent. . . and so on. This word—rhyming approximately with ‘worse’—is left untranslated because there’s no good English equivalent to it. English speakers sometimes use it, for the sort of reason they have for sometimes using *Schadenfreude*.

**sentiment:** In the present work this usually means ‘feeling’; but it can also mean ‘opinion’ or ‘belief’, and is left untranslated when it’s not certain which was intended.

**soul:** This translates *âme*. In this work it refers to *the mind* (in the broadest sense, including the whole range of thought and feeling), and has no religious implications.

**TMS:** Adam Smith’s *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, with page-numbers referring to the version on the website from which the present text came.

**vice:** This translates de Grouchy’s noun *vice* which simply means ‘bad behaviour (of whatever kind)’. Don’t load it with the extra meaning it tends to carry today.

## Letter 1: The root causes of sympathy

It seems to me, my dear C\*\*\*, that man has nothing more interesting to think about than man himself. Is there really any activity any more satisfying and enjoyable than to turn the soul's [see Glossary] gaze on itself, to study its operations, to trace its movements, to use our faculties to observe and speculate about one another, and to try to identify and grasp the hidden and elusive laws that govern our thoughts and our feelings? Furthermore, to be often with oneself seems to me the most pleasant way of life and the wisest. It can blend the pleasures of wisdom and philosophy with those provided by strong deep feelings. It puts the soul in a state of well-being that is •the main ingredient in happiness and •the frame of mind most favourable to the virtues. Many people never achieve the moral stature and happiness that they could have attained because—hating it or fearing it or just not knowing about it—they do not live this life that perfects reason and sensibility together, making things better for oneself and for others. You know if I live it myself. I rank •works that lead us back to ourselves and make us live within our souls second only to •works that treat the primary means of assuring human happiness in society,

However, I had not yet read Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. I had heard bad reports of the French translation of this famous work, and I did not understand English well enough to read the original. I finally ventured to undertake this task, but instead of following the Edinburgh philosopher's ideas I gave free rein to my own. In reading his chapters on sympathy, I made out of them others on the same subject. I will write them out for you so that you can judge me. I don't say 'judge us' because I am far from claiming to be on a level with him.

As you know, his opening chapters concern sympathy.

Smith confined himself to noting its existence and showing its principal **effects**. I was sorry that he did not venture to trace it back, getting through to its first **cause** and finally showing how sympathy must belong to every being capable of feeling and thinking. You will see how I had the temerity to fill in these gaps.

Sympathy is the disposition we have to feel as others do.

Before examining the causes of the sympathy we feel when faced with a *moral* evil, we should examine the causes of the sympathy we feel when faced with *physical* afflictions.

Every physical pain produces a compound sensation in the person who has it.

It first produces a localised pain in the part of the body that the cause of pain initially acts on.

It also produces a painful impression in all our organs, an impression quite distinct from the localised pain; it always accompanies the localised pain but can continue to exist without it. To grasp just how distinct the two are, observe what is felt the moment localised pain stops. Often one experiences both •the pleasure caused by its stopping and •a general feeling of malaise. This feeling of malaise is sometimes very painful. If particular causes prolong it, it can even become harder to bear than more intense though short-lived local pains, because the organs that are the main seat of the general impression are the most essential for vital functions as well as for the faculties that enable us to sense and to think.

This general sensation is renewed when we remember physical harms we have suffered; it is what makes the memory of them distressing, and some degree of it always accompanies this memory.

Although this impression is doubtless capable of some variation, it is nonetheless the same for many very different local pains, at least when they have some similarities in

intensity or in character. But when this impression would be different for different types of pain—e.g. from a broken bone and from damage to an internal organ—it can happen that the man who has felt them both experiences the same impression in recalling them, if time has weakened his recollection of them or if he doesn't linger on them for long enough for his imagination and memory to transmit to him the different sensations they involved.

The painful impression we experience when recollecting past localised pains of our own is something we also feel as a response to pain being suffered by any other feeling creature—when we can see from the signs that he is suffering or when we know ·in some other way· that he is.

In fact, as soon as we have an abstract idea of pain—thanks to the development of our faculties and the repeated experience of pain—that idea alone renews in us the general impression made by pain on all our organs.

So there is an effect of pain that follows equally from both its physical presence and its moral presence. I am using 'its moral presence' to cover both •the idea of pain that our memories give us and •the idea we can have of it through seeing or knowing about others' pain.

So sympathy for physical pains comes from the fact that the sensation physical pain produces in us is a compound sensation, a part of which can be revived simply by the idea of pain.

One can see now •how a child who has developed to the point of being able to discern the signs of pain sympathises with the suffering being who shows them; •how witnessing pain can affect the child to the point where he cries out and flees the scene; •how he is more or less moved by the sight, depending on whether he has more or less knowledge of the signs of pain and more or less sensitivity, imagination, and memory.

The reproduction of the general impression of pain on our organs depends especially on sensibility and imagination. The intensity of this impression varies with the strength of our sensibility, and its recurrence is easier in proportion to how intense the impression was and to how good our imagination is at receiving and conserving all the ideas that can make it recur.

Not only is the *general* impression of pain on all our organs reproduced by the mere idea of such pain, but the *localised* impression of pain is sometimes repeated when the memory or the idea of the pain strikes us vividly. That is how it happens that a man who has undergone a major operation, when recalling it in full detail, thinks he feels a part of the localised pain it caused him; and how someone with a strong or easily moved imagination who sees a wounded man, besides the painful impression felt at the sight of pain, thinks he experiences a localised pain in the corresponding part of his own body. . . . I knew a woman who, after reading a very detailed chapter on lung diseases in a medical work, had her imagination so frightened by the many causes that can harm this vital organ that she thought she was experiencing some of the pains characteristic of lung congestion, and she had trouble ridding herself of this idea. There are plenty of examples of this sort of thing, especially among people whose soft and idle lives leave them with few defences against being misled by an overactive imagination.

It is easy to see that the general impression produced by seeing physical pain recurs more easily when we see afflictions that we ourselves have also suffered, because then the impression is aroused both by our memories ·of our own pains· and by seeing the effects ·of the pains of others·. That is why pain and adversity are so effective in making men more compassionate and more human. It is a school that is needed by the rich and powerful, who are distanced

from the very idea of misery and misfortune by the almost insurmountable barriers of wealth, egoism, and familiarity with power!

Old folk who have usually lost some of their sensibility are inevitably less prone to have sympathetic reactions to physical pain ·in others·. If one sees some of them wilt easily and often shed tears, that is not because of strong sympathy but from weakness of their organs which increases pain's power over them, so that the sight of pain is dangerous to them and can even shorten their lives.

Why are surgeons, physicians, and others who provide care to suffering beings usually less affected than other men by the sight of pain? How, for example, do surgeons remain cool enough to probe a wound, to apply iron and fire to it, and to penetrate into delicate organs through bloody and torn flesh, without the sight and sound of pain affecting their own organs enough to make their hands tremble, disturb their gaze, and distract their attention and judgment? On thinking about it we see that this is partly because

- the need to protect themselves from a pain that would be unbearable if repeated too often has hardened them against the impression of pain. . . ., even more because
- their habit of viewing their patient as *someone to be saved* gets in ahead of the painful impressions and blocks them, and finally because
- the idea of *keeping the patient alive* continually softens what they see of the patient's awful physical condition and what they hear of his screams and complaints.

·As regards the last of these·: The urgent concern to save his fellow-creature, and the focus he needs to work out how to do this, protects the surgeon from his impression of the pain; as soon as this impression might prevent him from being useful, beneficent nature keeps it away from him.

There seems to be no need to prove that the more sensibility is exercised the more it intensifies—up to the point where over-stimulation makes it tiresome and unpleasant and leads one to seek relief from it. A sensibility that is not exercised at all tends to weaken and can no longer be stimulated except by very strong impressions. Voltaire wrote: 'The soul is a fire that must be fed; if it doesn't grow it dies.'

How important it is, then, to get children's sensibility to be active enough to reach the stage of development where it can no longer be dulled by things that tend to lead it astray, carrying us far from nature and from ourselves, centring our sensibility on all the passions of egoism or vanity,<sup>1</sup> and taking us away from simple things, from a reasonable life, and from the natural inclinations in which each individual's true happiness resides, happiness that does not sacrifice anyone else's and tends toward the good of all. Fathers, mothers, teachers, the destiny of the next generation is almost in your hands! Ah! How guilty you are if you allow to wither away in your children these precious seeds of sensibility that need nothing more to develop than the sight of suffering, the example of compassion, tears of recognition, and an enlightened hand that warms and stirs them! How guilty you are if you care more about your children's successes than about their virtues, or if you are

<sup>1</sup> [Re 'centring': 'Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person. . .'. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ch. 27.]

more impatient to see them please a social circle than to see  
 •their hearts boil with indignation when they see injustice,  
 •their brows pale when confronted with pain, •their hearts  
 treat all men as brothers! Think less of their graces, their  
 talents, and their occupations. Draw out from their souls all  
 the feelings that nature has placed there; make them easily  
 remorseful and sensitive to the voice of honour and integrity;  
 let them be unable to see suffering without being driven by  
 the need to relieve it. . . . Let the gentle habit of doing good  
 teach them that it's through their hearts that they can be  
 happy, not through their titles, their luxury, their high rank,  
 their riches!

[In this next passage de Grouchy apostrophises her mother, who died  
 a few years before this was written.] You have taught me this, my  
 dear mother whose footsteps I have so often followed into  
 the dilapidated homes of the unfortunate, fighting poverty  
 and distress! Receive the life-long homage I owe you every  
 time I do good, every time I have the happy inspiration and  
 the sweet joy of so doing. Yes, it was in seeing •your hands  
 relieve misery and illness and •the suffering gaze of the poor  
 turn towards you and become tender in blessing you that  
 I felt my heart come alive and saw the true good of social  
 life—laid out before me—as consisting in the joy of loving  
 humanity and serving it.

The impressions of pleasure reach us through the same  
 organs as the impressions of pain, and follow the same laws.  
 As with physical ailments, so all physical pleasure produces  
 in us a particular sensation of pleasure in the organ that  
 first receives it accompanied by a general sense of well-being.  
 And this latter sensation can recur at the sight of pleasure,  
 just as the general impression of pain on our organs recurs  
 at the sight of pain.

So we can have sympathy towards other people's physical  
 pleasures as well as towards their afflictions. But this

sympathy is harder to arouse and consequently more rare:  
 •because pleasure is less intense of pain, so that this general  
 impression of pleasure on our organs is less easily awakened;  
 and •because nearly all physical pleasures have about them  
 something *exclusif* that conveys to us the idea and the feeling  
 of deprivation, and this weighs against—and can even go so  
 far as to destroy—the agreeable impression that the idea of  
 others' pleasure would •otherwise• arouse in us. [The adjective  
*exclusif* is left untranslated because the translator can't see what she is  
 getting at with it.]

So the sympathy that the sight of physical pleasure makes  
 us feel is a feeling with less power over our soul than the  
 sympathy inspired in us by the sight of pain; but it was  
 important to recognise its existence because it explains  
 several phenomena of moral sympathy.

You see, my dear C\*\*\*, that the root causes of sympathy  
 come from the nature of the sensations that pleasure and  
 pain make us have, and that our status as beings who *feel* is  
 what basically makes us capable of sympathy for the physical  
 ailments that are men's most common afflictions. You will  
 see in my next letter how this sympathy that starts with our  
 feelings is completed by our thought. What do we not owe to  
 sympathy! Right from its first faint beginnings sympathy is  
 the root cause of the feeling of humaneness that has such  
 precious effects, counteracting some of the evils arising from  
 personal interests in large societies and battling against the  
 coercive force that we encounter everywhere we go and that  
 only centuries of enlightenment can destroy by attacking  
 the vices [see Glossary] that have produced it. Amid the clash  
 of so many passions that oppress the weak or shove aside  
 the unfortunate, humaneness pleads—secretly but from the  
 bottom of its heart—the cause of mankind and avenges it for  
 the injustice of fate by awakening the sentiment of natural  
 equality.

**Letter 2: Three topics**

·THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS·

The sympathy we can have for physical pains—the sympathy that is one part of what we understand by ‘humaneness’—would not be lasting enough to be much use, my dear C\*\*, if we could not think as well as feel. And just as reflection ·or thinking· prolongs the ideas that the senses bring to us, so it extends and preserves in us the effects of the sight of suffering, and we could say that it is what makes us truly human. In fact, **reflection** is what

- fixes in our soul the presence of an injury that our eyes have seen only for a moment, inciting us to relieve it so as to efface the nasty idea of it;
- reinforces our natural volatility, activating our compassion by letting it see again something that had made a merely momentary impression on it at first;
- reminds us when we see suffering that *we too* are subject to this life-destroying tyrant, thus drawing us closer to the sufferer through a concerned feeling for ourselves that leads us to be concerned with his pains even when our **sensibility** might find them repellent; and finally
- conditions our sensibility by prolonging its activity and so installs humaneness in our souls as a permanent sentiment that is always eager to spring into action, and unprompted
  - seeks men’s happiness through works of science, meditations on nature, experience, and philosophy, or
  - attaches itself to suffering and misfortune, pursues them everywhere, and becomes humanity’s comforter, its god.

Thus humaneness—·or the feeling for humanity·—is a kind

of seed planted deep in man’s heart by nature, to be nurtured and developed by the faculty of reflection.

But aren’t some animals capable of pity though not of reflection? Well, they are able to *feel*, and this is enough to enable them to sympathise with pain. But we do not know the nature and extent of any *ideas* they can have; so we cannot affirm or deny that some degree of reflection enters into the degree of whatever compassion they are capable of. One of the animals most affected by the sight of pain, namely the dog, is also one of those that seem closest to human intelligence.

Anyway, look at man himself and you will easily see how he owes most of his humanity to the faculty of reflection. Indeed, it is to the extent that he has sensibility and reflection that man is human. Peasants and other folk whose occupations are closest to material concerns that don’t allow for reflection are less given to compassion than other people are. One of main things the laws should aim at is to establish and maintain among citizens an equality of wealth, so that no citizen has to focus so exclusively on the necessities of life that he has no time for the degree of reflection needed for the perfection of all natural sentiments, and particularly for that of humaneness.

Don’t we also see that men in a less constrained and wealthier class, at a higher social level, are more or less human in proportion as they are more or less capable of sensibility and especially of reflection? Beings preoccupied by unbridled passions born of egoism or vanity, attentive only to their own goals and not reflecting on anything except how to get what they want—aren’t they always devoid of humaneness as well as of compassion?

Just as the general impression of pain on our organs is renewed when we see pain or even merely remember it, so also it is produced by our abstract idea of pain and consequently



by our idea of pain's after-effects and of situations where pain is inevitable. This impression *usually* comes up in a more vague and indeterminate manner because the abstract idea of pain brings it home to us only weakly; but when this idea offers us a new and extraordinary combination of pains it can have as much effect as an actual pain. That is the source of the painful sensation we experience •when we—without thinking of anyone in particular—turn our thoughts to the class of men doomed to the harshest labours and to misery or at least the terrifying threat of it, or •when we—without thinking of any particular pain or hardship—are powerfully moved on hearing that someone has been reduced to poverty by an unexpected reversal of fortunes or even if he is only threatened with that possibility.

Thus the most abstract idea of physical pains, namely the idea of their possibility for an individual whom we don't know, more or less strongly renews the general impression of pain on our organs. The idea of moral pain has the same effect. But to explain our sympathy with regard to moral suffering that is shared by all the members of our species we must go back to our particular sympathies<sup>1</sup>, which are its causes, and then further back to *their* cause.

·SELECTIVE SYMPATHY·

Let us see first how we are inclined to sympathise with the distress of certain individuals rather than with similar or equal distress suffered by other individuals. Quite apart from the moral proprieties that constitute the greater part of the happiness and existence of those whose souls have been developed and exercised—quite apart from everything that makes civilised man happy—each individual depends on many others for necessities, for his well being, and for life's

conveniences. This dependence, though more extensive and more obvious in childhood, continues to a certain degree into later years with a strength proportional to how far moral development pushes it aside or leaves it alone. But because the extreme inequality of wealth reduces most men to providing for their own physical needs, most of the human species are condemned to a strict dependence on everyone who can help in satisfying their needs. The upshot is that each individual soon recognises those to whom he owes the better part of his existence, the immediate and permanent causes of his hardships or his joys; he cannot be indifferent to their presence or even to the mere idea of them, which unfailingly give him pain or pleasure.

This dependence on some particular individuals begins in the cradle. It is the first tie that attaches us to our fellows. It causes the first smiles, and a child's most regular smiles are for his wet-nurse; he cries when he is not in her arms and for a long time he likes to throw himself upon this breast that satisfied his first needs, that made him feel the first sensations of pleasure, and where he eventually began to develop and form his initial life habits.

Because

- the force of our sensibility depends on the state we happen to be in, and
- the mere idea of the persons to whom we owe most of our well-being welfare is sufficient for us to experience a feeling,

we are predisposed to have emotions regarding anything that could happen to them; so their pleasures and pains must affect us more intensely than the pains and pleasures of other people.

<sup>1</sup> *sympathies particulières*; de Grouchy more often—starting on page 9—calls them *sympathies individuelles*, which will always be translated as 'individual sympathies', though for her the two phrases seem to be synonymous.

It comes down to this: their suffering must move us more than anyone else's because we regard these people as *connected* to us, and because—as they are so often present to our eyes and our thoughts—when they suffer we must be moved by the idea of their current pain *and* by the idea of its after-effects, i.e. of the more or less long-lasting and more or less grievous ills their present state exposes them to.

Because we are •accustomed to feeling the ties that bind their existence to ours, the sight of their pains or pleasures makes us experience the feeling we would have at the idea of a danger or a good happening to us personally; and this happens by the force of •habit alone, without any definite or conscious thought about our own interests.

When civilisation has reached a certain level, what I have said about our sympathy towards people who contribute to our happiness or help us to satisfy our needs extends to two other classes of individuals. **(a)** First are those whom we can regard as a resource or support in the face of mishaps that may threaten us. The connection this creates between them and us seems vague—less direct, less physical, so to speak—but it can become very close at certain levels of social development where people are more concerned with their fears and hopes than with their needs, and where they are mostly living in the future. **(b)** There can also be a specific sympathy between folk who are drawn together by their tastes and habits and find in one another's company a sense of being comfortably with their own kind. How strong this sympathy is depends on how large a role this sort of feeling plays in their happiness. [She then has a paragraph summarising the content of this segment of the chapter.]

•WHY, FOR INSTANCE, WE ENJOY TRAGEDIES•

Perhaps you have wondered, my dear C\*\*\*, given the disagreeable impression the sight or idea of pain spreads through

all of our organs, why we like to recall the troubles we have undergone or witnessed, and why we are not satisfied with the emotions provided by real woes and go looking for new ones in purely fictional accounts of the most frightful misfortunes and the most heartrending circumstances. Why do all vibrant and tender souls, upon whom the impression of pain is stronger and more unailing, enjoy renewing it by reading romances and tragedies and identifying with unhappy beings and devouring every detail of their misfortunes? Why do they continually seem to *need* to expend the full power of their sensibility on such things?

There are several reasons for this need. •I shall present three•

**(i)** Obviously, we are led to concern ourselves with the sufferings of others in order to relieve them; and this desire acts in us without our giving any thought to whether there is—or even whether there ever will be—any possibility of actually doing this. This desire is at work when people on the shore who see someone struggling in the waves and nearly drowning frantically stretch out their arms towards him—a movement of sublime nature that unveils in an instant •all the power of humanity over our hearts and •all the effects the legislator *could* derive from this sentiment if it were not weakened more often than strengthened by our institutions.

We know from experience how useful it has been for us to have exact knowledge of things, and how important it has been for us to distinguish facts from fictions. That is the source of a sentiment of ours that habit makes natural and almost mechanical, so that we are often unaware of having it. When a combination of confused ideas is presented to our minds or a vague picture of some event comes before our imagination, the sentiment I am talking about causes in us a discontented impression that compels us to clarify the •confused• combination or delve into all the details of

the vaguely imagined event. This is the same type of impression that we feel at the sight of pain; it has the same source; it is produced by the vague idea of a harm that might result from a real state of affairs that we don't know anything about. Thus we have a hidden impulse •to *know about* the sufferings of others as soon as we *suspect* their existence, and in general •to work out the details of every fact or combination of ideas of which we only have an incomplete notion; and this drive [see Glossary] from concealed personal interest (if it concerns us) or from comparison (if it concerns others) is a significant cause of natural human curiosity. As soon as we are at peace regarding our physical needs, moral needs torment us, and we become liable to *ennui* [sometimes = 'boredom', here = 'extreme discontent']. **Some people** (especially those whose souls are subject to whims, calculation, and the empty pleasures of vanity) are given to discontent because the desire for a more advantageous position than the one they have—the mere possibility of such a position—makes them disgusted with everything they possess and desirous only of what they do not possess; because the human heart, although hard to satisfy even by things that can bring it true contentment, is even more voracious and insatiable for things that can only fleetingly satisfy its needs. **Other people**, who have no new ideas and can't generate any because the frailty of their minds or of their physical health will not allow it, are captives of the malaise created by the state of their physical constitution, the troubles that they fear are coming to them, and the recollection or idea of their burdens. Many are tormented by *ennui* [here = 'boredom'] only because they lack reason enough and courage enough to exercise their minds, or experience and insight enough to recognise that the mind is like an instrument that overburdens and fatigues the hand that carries it without using it. Boredom is thus one of the most cruel ailments of the human heart. It is so

unbearable that •to avoid it we are willing to give ourselves over to painful sensations, and •the desire to avoid it is one of the causes that draw us to the idea of pain.

(ii) Another more powerful, active and continuous cause is our *need to be moved*—a need that we have although we cannot hope for as many agreeable sensations as painful ones, the causes of pain being far more numerous than those of pleasure, and pain being more intense than pleasure. This need to be moved is found not only among souls whose sensitivity and natural activity have been enormously developed by education, thinking, and emotional experience; it is easy to observe even in the mass of people who are almost habitually insensitive. Isn't this attraction to all emotions, even painful ones, what leads the multitude to crowd around the scaffold, where they sometimes to see tortures in all their horror that nearly always melt them and make them weep? The human heart is somehow drawn to what agitates it and moves it. It senses that these emotions coming from the outside •will distract it from the habitual impressions that it finds disagreeable or insipid, •will save it from boredom, •will extend its range, and by making the heart more pliant •will open it up to receiving new impressions, thereby enhancing one of its richest sources of enjoyment. Emotion thus seems fitting for the soul, just as exercise is fitting for the body; and the calm that follows seems to be the only one the soul can genuinely appreciate.

(iii) The unpleasant emotions that we seek are almost always mixed with some pleasure, and the impression produced by these pleasures overcomes or at least erases the idea of pain. We know, for example, that when in the theatre we are about to surrender our soul to the grand sweep of a tragedy, the painful sensations that will be involved will be outweighed, erased, and outlived by the pleasures of

- the charm of the poetry,
- the novelty of the plot,
- the grandeur and originality of the characters, and
- the skill of the production and the acting,

and the pleasure of combining those pleasures with a sense of the effects the work is having on us, namely of

- enriching our imagination and memory with images and new ideas, and
- feeling ourselves moved in new ways that can sometimes ennoble us and make us like ourselves better.

This is so true that we rarely seek disagreeable emotions in the way I have been describing unless we are sustained by the hope of having agreeable ones later. We are not likely to reread a romance or tragedy that ends in a sinister catastrophe unless the beauties of the art and the dramatic settings—constantly taking us from fear to hope, from tears of pain to tears of joy—make us forget at each moment the work's tragic and unhappy ending.

You see, my dear C\*\*, that nature has in a way made up for surrounding us by a crowd of troubles by sometimes turning our pains into deep source of our pleasures. Let us bless this sublime connection of the moral needs of some men with the physical needs of others, of the misfortunes to which nature and our vices subject us with the leanings towards virtue that are satisfied only when relieving misfortune.

### Letter 3: Individual sympathy

Today, my dear C\*\*, I want to speak to you about individual sympathy, the one that •establishes between men the intimate bonds that are necessary for their perfection and happiness, and •draws hearts together and entwines them with the most tender affections [see Glossary]. Being based

on connections that are more direct than the ones general sympathy is based on, it more readily pertains to *all* men; and if it were cultivated more it could produce, in the mass of men who have become almost insensitive to everything but their own survival and their own happiness, a concern for the ills and needs of all humanity. The fact is that all the parts of our sensibility are inter-connected: as soon is one is exercised, the others become more refined and more likely to be stimulated.

The first manifestations of this sympathy arise at the moment when things that can arouse it come into our view. When we see someone for the first time, we look at his features, seeking his soul in his face. If it is graceful or beautiful, or even merely unusual in some way, we scrutinise it closely, trying to take in its features and to sort out those that are most permanent in it. There is *no-one* whose looks do not immediately give us some idea of his character or at least give us an opinion, favourable or not, about his mind. Impressions based on facial features are soon strengthened, changed, or erased by impressions based on how the person moves, on his mannerisms, on his speech, and by how well or badly his conduct squares with what he says. When we believe we can find

- in the *look* through which the soul seeks to come through,
- in the speech that unfolds its movements,
- in the features that reveal habits, and
- in the mannerisms that betray them,

the characteristics and signs of qualities of particular interest to us because they are connected with our own, or we hold them in high esteem or find them striking and unusual, then there rises within us a surge of goodwill towards the person who appears to be endowed with these qualities; we feel drawn toward him, take pleasure in attending to him,

and experience an interest in him that leads us to redouble our observations of him and makes them more penetrating. Sometimes, however, this first impression is strong enough to confuse us, swamps us so that we lose our ability to observe. For those endowed with a lively soul, the effect of this first impression is the basic source of the preconceptions that blind them and that make them incapable of distinguishing reliably and sometimes even of judging reasonably.

This individual sympathy, so long regarded as inexplicable, is actually just a very natural effect of our moral sensibility. When someone offers promise of qualities that we like, we feel drawn towards him because, by awakening in us the idea of these qualities, he leads us to expect all the advantages we tacitly associate with their reality. That's how it is that our most elementary and unthinking self-love leads inevitably to our liking people whose opinions concur with ours, enhancing the value we attach to our own judgments and reassuring us against the fear of being wrong; and that's how it is that we are interested in those who are praiseworthy for their virtues, their humaneness, their benevolence—whether because our memory of them is a resource for our own planning and projects or because the mere idea of the good they have done and can do renews in us the forceful impression ordinarily caused by the reality or the promise of some public happiness or by the relief of a particular misfortune.

·ENTHUSIASM·

You may think, my dear C\*\*, that the effect is disproportionate to the cause, and you will surely ask me why individual sympathy is sometimes so strong when its sources are so weak and vague. Why? The answer is that our first impressions have an admixture of enthusiasm [see Glossary], which extends them beyond the point where our knowledge

of the facts would take them. If you consider this moral phenomenon you will see how large a part it plays in our strong at-first-sight individual sympathies, and how perfectly it explains them.

Enthusiasm comes from our soul's ability to represent to itself—all at once but rather vaguely—all the pleasures and *all* the pains that may result for us from a certain state of affairs or from the existence of a particular person and of our relationship to him or her. This representation takes material that would actually require months, years, sometimes even a lifetime to unfold, and condenses it into a single instant. Thus, enthusiasm sees its subject with one kind of exaggeration, and this representation is always vague in some respects because it takes in too much for the mind to see its parts clearly; and this generates another kind of exaggeration in the realm of feeling, because of the proliferation of pains and pleasures we imagine; it even generates real error, getting us agitated by fears of things—and desires for things—that can't possibly arrive, or that can't possibly *all* arrive, this impossibility being hidden from us by the agitation of our soul. Habit has an odd influence on this disposition: if some event or individual stirs it up in us several times, habit retains the power to stimulate it again without our even thinking about it, and in that case we can classify enthusiasm as an emotion [*sentiment*] of the soul. The fear of being dishonoured, for example, is so active only because we conjure up—vividly and all at once—all the miseries of a life in disgrace; but once this has happened, the *mere* idea of dishonour can arouse this feeling without calling up any of the other ideas that first gave rise to it; and in the same way our enthusiasm for certain qualities disposes us to an immediate and unreflective sympathy toward people in whom we think we see them.

So our proneness to experience these strong immediate

sympathies depends, as does enthusiasm, on

- (1) the strength of the imagination that takes in vast panoramas of sensations and events, on
- (2) the strength of the sensibility that is more or less strongly affected by these imaginings and retains them more or less constantly, and perhaps also on
- (3) some more or less deep reflections that we have made on the object of these sympathies.

Regarding (3): If a sort of instinct or some particular circumstances have made us reflect on a situation, an opinion, or a personal quality, then our ideas—having spread themselves over its advantages or drawbacks—have in a way prepared within our hearts an affection [see Glossary] for individuals who are in that situation, who have that opinion or that personal quality; and the need to find an object for that affection, to let loose an emotion we have long carried in our soul without consciously experiencing it, produces in us these sudden sympathies that often seem like products of chance or whim. (I speak of the *need to find*. . . , but it may be the *pleasure of finding*. . . )

So the nature and the duration of individual sympathies depend on the strength of the imagination, on the strength of the sensibility, and on how far we go in thinking about the sympathies' causes.

·FINE-TUNING THE ACCOUNT OF INDIVIDUAL SYMPATHIES·

These sympathies come about all more readily and seem more intense in folk who see with their imagination, feel according to first impressions, and have more agitation of ideas than warmth of feeling.

They occur even more often between people with a highly developed moral sense; and they are gentle in proportion to how delicate and pure the other person is. That is because nature, to strengthen our links with one another, has willed

that virtue's affections be nearly as sweet as its deeds.

They are longer lasting between those whose sensibility is more deep than lively, more gentle and delicate than passionate; and between those who *love* with the truth and purity of heart that are as necessary for the affections' attractiveness as for their durability.

They are more intimate between melancholic and reflective souls who enjoy feeding on their own feelings, savouring them in memory, •who, seeing in life only what binds them to it, remain focused on their affections and can't want anything beyond them; because if the human heart stops right there, it never reaches the bottom of the well of true happiness, however insatiable it is.

It has often been said that *esteem* was the strongest basis for individual sympathies; but not enough has been said about the appeal of this feeling itself; •in previous accounts• the human heart has not been made delicate enough. Esteem is essential for the first levels of well-being that our soul is capable of, namely trust and freedom. Only with esteem can we love with the full force of sensibility; it is in a way the single medium where our affections develop, where the heart has free rein, and where, as a result, it fully develops. In honest souls, esteem is always a silent companion of individual sympathies; it can even shape these sympathies by focusing on some special personal qualities—it is itself a pleasure when it does that.

A man who is worthy of esteem is happy to esteem •others•; his heart, easily moved by the mere thought of a good deed, is tied and attached to anyone he thinks capable of performing one. He is glad to be with him, and this brotherhood of virtue establishes between them a freedom and an equality the feeling of which may be as tender as that of the closest blood and natural ties.

If the first stirrings of sympathy—elicited by the looks and mannerisms of someone we hardly know, and by a few words of conversation with him—are enough to make his presence a pleasure; and if mere esteem creates in us a sentiment of goodwill and freedom—the basic positive feeling that disposes us to have all the others—that shows how sweet can be a more deeply rooted and more *felt* sympathy, and what the pleasure of friendship can be; we can say that this pleasure begins before friendship has begun, as soon as we can see that the friendship is going to come. In fact, as soon as we can have the *idea* of someone who might befriend us—merely someone who is capable of deep and delicate affections—we have a delightful feeling because we assemble in our soul an idea of all the sweetness that friendship can bring us. This feeling is already a joy; and that is why, even when we regard ourselves as beings sensitive to physical pain and pleasure, the pleasure of loving and being loved is, all on its own, happiness for us.

·THE PLEASURE OF LOVING·

The pleasure of loving also comes in part from our enjoyment of the idea—the recollection or hope—of our affection's bringing happiness to another sensitive being; if we are regularly in the company of this person, if his rapport with us is strengthened by individual sympathy, if enthusiasm vividly represents to us all the happiness our friendship can bring him and the happiness we can expect from it, then our pleasure in caring for him increases; and as soon as this pleasure has been repeated enough for our sensibility to feel its attraction and develop a need for it, the person in question becomes dearer to us and the feeling he inspires in us becomes a necessary part of our existence.

The pleasure we get from loving (at least in the case of friendship) is largely due to our pleasure in making

other people happy through our affections; this is so true that only generous [see Glossary] souls *can* love; souls that lack magnanimity or nobility or have been corrupted by selfishness may well want to *be loved* and seek the delight and fruits of love; but the only ones that know how to *love* are generous hearts that can be touched by the happiness of others. All the sources of individual sympathy—agreement in opinions, tastes, and ·moral· characters—can bring two people together and unite their hearts on the surface; ·but· solid, true, durable affections that •are independent of place, time, and self-interest and •are suitable for enchanting life or softening it have to be based on the felicitous capacity to get joy from the happiness of others. When we lead children to practise and carefully cultivate in their souls their natural sensitivity to the joys of others and especially to the pleasure of contributing to such joys, we not only dispose them toward the most tender and useful virtues but also are assured that they will be capable of love, that they will feel all its charm, or at least that they will be worthy of it.

The sight of beauty inspires a pleasurable feeling. (Whatever the true origin of the beautiful is, all I mean here by 'beauty' is 'what we enjoy seeing'.) A beautiful person is, to all eyes, a being endowed with the power to add to the happiness of anyone who has any connection with him. We are led to attach greater value to his words, his mannerisms, his *sentiments* [see Glossary], and his actions, because they are more charming; so we are naturally drawn to him. This feeling ·of attraction·, combined with the feeling that physical traits and qualities of soul can produce in us, gives rise to a particular feeling that we call 'love' [see Glossary]. It differs from other feelings mainly because it gives us a pleasant sensation that always recurs at the sight or even the idea of the person whom we love. This power to make us happy at every moment—to carry away, to occupy, to bind, and to fill

our entire sensibility—. . . has more command over people than all the joys of friendship, than the appeal of engaging with virtuous men. One can hardly doubt that beauty, or at least something agreeable and interesting in the person's physical appearance, is necessary for love. Exceptions to this are fairly rare among *men*, the taste for pleasure being nearly always the cause. If there are more exceptions among *women*, that is because from their infancy they have had instilled in them moral values of modesty and duty that have led them •to be wary of first impressions, •not to make decisions based on physical appearance, and •to attach more weight to certain qualities (always) and to a certain moral rectitude (sometimes). Love can have many different causes, and the more causes it has the greater it is. Sometimes, a single charm, a single quality, touches and captures our sensibility; often (*too* often) our sensibility falls for gifts that are extraneous to the heart; when it becomes more fine-tuned and enlightened, it is drawn only by what can give it satisfaction and—steering by an instinct that is as sure as the instinct of reason and prudence—it yields to *love* only when love dominates all that is worthy of love. *Then* love becomes a true passion, even in the purest souls, even in creatures who are the least enslaved by the impressions and needs of the senses; *then* innocent caresses can long suffice, and lose nothing of their charm and their value after they have been given; *then* the happiness of being loved is the most needed and desired rapture; *then* all ideas of happiness and physical pleasure arise from a single object, always depend on it, and are wiped out with regard to anyone else.

But for love to be *love* a perfect mutual understanding must allow two souls to unite without reservations, to love with boundless trust, and to value everything that they love. It has to be the case that •the person who is drawn to our

form and good looks is also drawn to everything about us, our imperfections as well as our attractive personal qualities; that •he would restore and guide our happiness in our failures as well as our successes, at times when we need to be consoled for what we have undergone and learned about the human condition, as well as times when we can hardly bear life; and above all that •the happy blend of character, minds, and hearts of two individuals will allow their happiness to check the natural inconstancy and rash desires of the human heart.

How far individual sympathy is reciprocated depends on what its causes are: it is sure to be reciprocated when it is based on conformity of tastes, opinions, and (above all) ways of feeling. But it is often reciprocated without this conformity: in those cases it springs from our being naturally drawn to those who love us; and it is just as strong even when the inducements that bring two people together are different. So loving is a reason for being loved, unless special factors have distorted our sensibility in such a way that sympathy cannot be returned; thus, in everyday language the meaning of 'sympathy' includes the idea of reciprocity.

This reciprocity is harder to find in the passion of *love*, because the primary driver of love—even the purest kind of love—is an attraction that is mostly independent of the moral qualities that condition sympathy in other feelings. A sweet face pleases, affects, and inspires love; but what distinguishes this love from friendship is precisely the ever-renewed pleasure we feel in seeing or remembering that face. Thus, for love to be reciprocated its causes must be at least to some extent reciprocated. The causes of this reciprocity may be common in nature, but they are scattered thinly, and one can sense how rare it must be for them to coincide, or at least how difficult for them to be absolutely the same or equally strong in two beings brought together by them.



## ·SYMPATHY IN FRIENDSHIP·

Let us now explore what degree of sympathy is needed for us to be attracted by and get pleasure from the company of people we see often.

It seems to me, my dear C\*\*, that the sympathy based on *esteem* is not sufficient for that, because what is ordinarily meant by 'esteem' is only the calm interest we have in ordinary goodness, or the one that austere virtues or brilliant mental qualities inspire in us; and an interest of this kind, unaided, has only a quite weak charm (unless, as rarely happens, it is raised to the highest degree). Besides, if any quality or perfection is not to disturb our independence or weigh on our weaknesses it must be accompanied by indulgence, gentleness, goodness. The human heart's first need is freedom; for it to be just and happy it must be free to attach itself to what it admires; and it is no doubt a misfortune that the virtues we most admire are often those that give us the least hope of indulgence. A man of sensibility, therefore, can love only the qualities of mind that come with virtues; he can love only the virtues •that are feelings rather than opinions, •that indulgence makes likable and affecting, •that seek to be imitated only by making themselves felt, and •that we cannot see in others without feeling them stir in us even before we act on them.

The sympathy needed for friendship does not always demand likeable qualities or the tender virtues without which a relationship of the less intimate kind can't have charm. Often the particular knowledge we have of some merit that is very rare in itself or somehow capable of stirring our sensibility attracts us, gradually binds us, and makes us forget the imperfections that come with it—that being what often unites folk whose characters and tastes are very dissimilar. This seeming oddity often takes place between more buttoned-up souls who open themselves up only to

things that captivate them; these souls reserve themselves so completely for their affective life that their affections are sweeter and more valuable, and can be reciprocated without help from any other feelings. These souls are the most capable of constancy and passion, but their feelings won't endure unless there is a very broad and intimate sympathy. When *love* becomes powerful enough to count as 'passion' it is a series of desires, needs, and hopes that ceaselessly clamour for satisfaction; they are still pleasures for the soul that they disturb, because this very disturbance becomes an habitual emotional state that always has happiness mixed in with it. The harmony of hearts and minds, the union of tastes and opinions, and the sweetness of feeling everything together as though feeling everything for each other—this alone, in the bosom of shared happiness, can satisfy love's demands and support its enchantments that so often cut short its duration. Pleasures of the mind, of the skills, and of virtue, savoured in the bosom of the heart's pleasures, deepen and intensify the latter; given the present state of civilisation they are even necessary for the continuation of those pleasures, adding to them a myriad of different charms. They purify them, enrich them, and renew them, extending them across all the stages of life. [This paragraph starts with 'friendship' (*amitié*) (once), then moves to 'love' (*amour*) (twice). This transition is de Grouchy's, not an artifact of the present version.]

Up to here, my dear C\*\*, I have shown you how physical sympathy that becomes individual—strengthened by various circumstances and made more active and energetic by enthusiasm—can unaided give rise in us to moral pains and pleasures; but this sympathy with another human being has an origin independent of the *nature* of his pains or pleasures; we suffer in seeing him suffer; the idea of his pains is a pain for us too. . . . So it is clear that what I have said about physical pains is also true of moral pains from the

moment when we are first able to experience them. Seeing or remembering someone else's moral pains affects us in the same way as does seeing or remembering his physical pains.

Here, then, are new bonds of sympathy that unite us with others and broaden our connections to them.

Not only are *the sight or memory* of others' moral or physical pains or pleasures accompanied by pain and pleasure in us, but also, as I have explained, once this sensibility is awakened and activated in our souls it is re-activated purely by *the abstract idea* of well-being or suffering. This gives us an internal and personal incentive to do good and to avoid doing harm. This incentive follows from our natures as feeling and thinking beings; and in delicate souls it can be a monitor for the conscience and an engine for virtue.

#### Letter 4: Some disagreements with Smith

You have seen, my dear C\*\*\*, that our sympathy with physical pains and pleasures is proportional to our knowledge from our own experience of their force and effects; and we sympathise in general with moral pains and pleasures according to how much *we* are susceptible to them. I say 'in general', because no doubt there are *exceptions*: souls sensitive enough to be touched by pains that they would not experience in the circumstances that produce them in others, i.e. pains they can appreciate only through imagination, *not through experience*. And so, as with physical pains that we have not experienced, sympathy *with moral pains* is stimulated by the general idea of suffering.

This opinion is contrary to that of the illustrious Smith, and here I am again going to take issue with a few of his assertions. You may think this is rash of me; and I do accept that Smith is rightly regarded as one of Europe's top philosophers; but it seems to me that on matters having to

do less with profound knowledge than with self-observation, anyone who *thinks* can claim a right to enter the discussion.

I do not believe that Smith indicated the true reason that makes us pity dethroned kings; if we feel for their misfortunes more intensely than for those of other men, it is only because

- kings seem to us to be protected from such misfortunes by their elevation, so we judge that they must feel them more acutely *when they occur*,

and not (as Smith thinks [TMS [see Glossary] p. 29]) because

- the idea of grandeur, which in most minds is tied to that of felicity, predisposes us by some sort of affection and consideration for their happiness to sympathise more particularly with them *across the board*.

It seems to me that this feeling is rare in the British empire, unknown in the rest of Europe, and *absolutely* opposed to the sentiment of natural equality that leads us to view everything above us with jealousy or at least with severity.

#### ·SYMPATHY AND PHYSICAL SUFFERING·

Our sympathy for physical suffering is stronger, more general, and more deeply felt than our sympathy for moral sufferings. The spectacle of physical suffering is heartrending and intrusive even for those who have been distanced from the face of pain by their education—or rather by the errors of their education. The reason for this obviously lies in the nature of physical suffering itself: it most often leads to death, it is more striking *than moral suffering*, its signs are more certain, and the image of it is more distressing and affects our organs more sympathetically.

Smith lays down the contrary proposition, which he thinks he can justify by saying that the *imitation* of corporeal pains hardly moves us, that it is an object of ridicule rather than compassion, whereas the imitation of moral sufferings

brings more intense impressions to the soul. A man's loss of a leg cannot be made the subject of a tragedy, whereas his loss of his mistress *can*; is that because sympathy is weaker for the first loss than for the second? Certainly not! It is purely because **(i)** it would be hard to create the illusion of physical pain necessary for theatrical success, because **(ii)** this imitation would have to be accompanied by moral pains in order to produce a genuine and varied interest, and **(iii)** because the appeal of tragedy lies largely in the talent that makes us enjoy our sympathy for the misfortunes of others by gradually arousing our sensibility and not by presenting a sudden and heartrending image of physical suffering, an image that we cannot distance our thoughts from if it latches onto us and that becomes ridiculous if it does not. Also, it is known that for the populace in general the public spectacle of physical pains is a real tragedy—a spectacle that it doesn't often look for except through unthinking curiosity, but the sight of which sometimes awakens its sympathy to the point of turning it into a fearsome passion.

Smith says that firmness and courage in physical suffering is a result of how little sympathy such suffering elicits from others [TMS p.16]. This is absolutely false. Resignation in ordinary hardships and in all-consuming pain is caused by •the inevitability of suffering, indeed •the utility of certain sufferings, and •the uselessness of complaint. Resoluteness comes either from the desire to be admired or from the kind of contentment that comes with a sense of great courage—a contentment that often keeps courage going and can be a lively pleasure for strong and elevated souls.

•SYMPATHY AND LOVE•

Smith claims that we sympathise very little with the pleasures of love (ibid.). If he means by this that we see without

interest the delights that a deep and pure feeling holds in store for two young lovers and the mysterious asylum that it draws them into; that we have no interest in the details of a happiness so often the object of our own secret plans; then his opinion will be contradicted by the opinion of everyone whose imagination is alive and whose lives have been given over to this passion. Whenever we see or imagine love that doesn't arouse envy or jealousy, and doesn't offend modesty or our principles of honesty, it pleases us and awakens impressions of pleasure in us; it can even please us when it stimulates our regrets, because for those who have felt this passion and inspired it, tender and even painful regrets are long-term pleasures. As I have just implied, we can be prevented from fully sympathising with the joys of love by jealousy, envy, or considerations of honesty and modesty; but we shouldn't infer from this that this kind of sympathy is not natural; it's just that it is *antérieur* to [here = 'less deep in our nature than'] jealousy and ideas of honesty and modesty. But do notice this: we sympathise more or less with these joys depending on whether our principles in this regard are more or less severe, more or less complicated, and on how easily we share pleasures that are not natural to us or that we do not currently have.

It is astonishing that a philosopher whose work shows that he has dispassionately observed both natural man and social man should find something ridiculous in love's passion [TMS p.16]. One would think that this opinion came from frivolous youthfulness that judges love before having loved, and thinks it is following the path of true happiness because it aims to obtain pleasure without paying any price.

•SYMPATHY AND HATE•

Our sympathy for passions associated with hatred—such as envy, revenge, etc.—is not general; it is usually shaped by

our personal relations with the person who is having these passions, by

- the particular sympathy we have with him that can corrupt our judgment,
- how how much we know about the rightness of his feelings and how impressed we are by it; and
- how the causes of his feelings relate to our interests, our opinions, and the nature of our sensibility.

When sympathy is not energised by any of these particular springs, it gives way to the gentler emotion of pity, and far from sympathising with hate-filled passions we are led instead to take an interest in the person they are aimed at. The reason for this is a fortunate aspect of our nature: we sympathise with the desire to do good for someone because a sentiment in us inclines us to do good for all and to find a personal pleasure in doing so; and we do not sympathise with hatred because no sentiment in us inclines us to do harm to all—so there has to be a particular reason for sympathy towards hatred, as there must be for hatred itself. You will ask me, my dear C\*\*\*: ‘If that is true, why are there beings who enjoy seeing their fellow-creatures tormented, who have a kind of *need* to spoil the happiness of others, and who never learn of disturbances to the happiness of others without a secret joy?’ Why indeed? It is because in society a wicked system of legislation, instead of uniting the interests of individuals, has for too long separated them and set them at odds. Greed for pleasure has led men to the point where they cannot all satisfy their so-called ‘needs’ at the same time—‘needs’ that are really social fantasies turned into habits. From childhood they easily get the habit of regarding the lows and highs of others as a *given* which fortune has provided for their own enjoyment. So civilised man, if he is governed by prejudices and bad laws, is naturally envious and jealous—and increasingly so as the

vices of social institutions distance him further from nature, corrupt his reason, and make his happiness depend on the satisfaction of a greater number of ‘needs’.

This opinion is so true that the men who can be accused of enjoying the misfortunes of others and of being saddened by their happiness only feel this way regarding troubles involving vanity or luck or regarding a sensibility that they believe to be artificial or exaggerated; and they cease to be like that when. . . the troubles involve physical pain and real misfortune. The exceptions to this observation are very rare and concern only a very small number of individuals: these are monsters whose existence can be explained by the particular circumstances of their education and their place in society. Civilisation, such as it still exists in half the nations of Europe, is thus the enemy of goodness in man as well as of his happiness. What an immense labour remains for education! Not to develop nature or direct it; simply to preserve ‘nature’s’ beneficent tendencies, to prevent them from being stifled by *authorised* and common prejudices that choke the sentiments of humaneness and equality that are as necessary for the moral happiness of each individual as for maintaining fairness and security in all relations in the social order.

·LAUGHTER·

Why do we laugh when we see someone being ridiculous? (Our tendency to laugh along with those who are amused by others’ flaws and absurdities is no doubt born of sympathy, ·but *that* laughter is not what I am asking about·.) Is it because when we see such things our pride takes pleasure in the idea of our superiority? That can indeed be one cause of this laughter, but it is not the main one. •The usual sign of a ·feeling of· satisfied pride is widely known to be a calm smile; it seems that we would be afraid of cheapening this feeling

(in cases where it is appropriate) if we burst out in the peals of laughter that the sight of ridiculous behaviour elicits from us. •Also, the idea of our superiority gives us a completely different pleasure from the one produced by the sight of the ridiculous. •And anyway the idea of our superiority makes us look ridiculous more often than it arises from the ridiculousness of others.

One can say that the bodily movements that constitute laughter are intrinsically pleasant, though they are sometimes tiring; and that those that bring tears are painful, though in some circumstances tears bring solace. This helps to explain the sympathy for laughter sparked by ridiculous behaviour; but it does not explain why ridiculous things lead to the movements that produce laughter and to the pleasure that precedes it.

Children laugh from a very early age. They laugh as soon as they have a clear and wide enough knowledge of objects and states of affairs to compare them; they laugh at the same things we do, since in their games they laugh at those they make their dupes. So the cause of laughter cannot be very complicated and cannot depend on elaborate ideas. Indeed, imbeciles also laugh; they laugh at what surprises them, just as reasonable people laugh at what they find funny.

So we should look to children for the cause of laughter; because they have fewer and more limited ideas, we have fewer possible causes to examine and more hope of finding the right one. This manner of observing the facts from their origin (of which Locke is the exemplar) is the most certain one for discovering the general laws they fall under.

It seems that the most ordinary cause of laughter in children is the sight of an unexpected event that strikes them by offering them new images and ideas and by vigorously exercising their growing faculties. In addition, everything

that arouses a feeling of pleasure or anticipation in children also produces laughter because laughter is the natural *expression* of everything that affects them agreeably. But the older one gets the more *thinking* one does, and the more laughter is reserved for unexpected things that draw our attention without inspiring great interest and thus without being thought about much. The reason for this is simple: the light spasm of laughter, and the kind of pleasure that goes with it, stop when the slightest thought is brought to bear; and unexpected events that we enjoy but do not think about become extremely rare after childhood.

That is why in the rest of our lives laughter (except for imbeciles) is almost exclusively reserved for bizarre, unexpected, or contrasting things, and ridiculous behaviour is among those.

The first cause of laughter is thus found in the pleasure we take from an easy and unexpected exercise of our faculties, and from the kind of contentment—of inner joy—that goes with it. So it is obvious that as we grow older laughter and mockery come together because the pleasure of feeling our advantages and our power leads us to the naughty pleasure of making our superiority felt, a pleasure very like the one that comes from exercising our faculties.

·THE PLEASURE OF EXERCISING ONE'S FACULTIES·

You will forgive me, my dear C\*\*\*, for working backwards from cause to cause in order to reach the first one. And, after having observed that the cause of laughter generally has much to do with the pleasure attached to the exercise of our faculties, you will join me in wanting to search for the origin of that pleasure.

To find it we may need only to notice that the exercise of our faculties *improves* them, that this improvement is a source of pleasure and avoiding pain, and that children can

be aware of this—especially since the improvement of their faculties is very rapid and very important for their welfare. So a sentiment of pleasure is automatically attached to any flexing of our faculties that tends to develop them.

This pleasure, which is the same as the pleasure of feeling our own strength—power, capacity—is often concealed from us by habit, so off-hand one might think it must be weak; but in fact it is very intense, and children are the proof of that. The sheer exercise of their faculties, independent of all the pleasures [*jouissances*] they may find in it, is accompanied in them by every sign of joy. For a long time this feeling of their own strength is all they need to be happy. The more they cultivate it, the easier it is for them to be happy later in life. What matters most at first is to make this feeling spread across [*not along*] their whole lives for as long as possible; and after that it is essential not to let them get an exaggerated opinion of their own strength. If when they compare themselves to others they don't have an extremely fair and accurate opinion of their own strength, their childhood self-esteem—stroked by all the uncritical care they received back then—becomes for them the source of all the mental defects and all the moral vices [see Glossary].

But the pleasure tied to the exercise of our faculties has yet other causes.

The exercise of our bodily faculties is not only good for our health but also nearly always produces a feeling of well-being, i.e. the sensation that goes with being in good health and that is, if not a positive pleasure, at least the recent and agreeable cessation of all painful feelings. This sensation does not just exist for the totality of our organs; think about it and you will see that it is felt clearly and separately in each organ. One takes pleasure in walking after a long rest, and in recognising this pleasure one thinks one can feel the agreeable sensation that is spread throughout the body

being concentrated in a special way in the legs.

Now, this observation about our bodily faculties can also hold for the organs that come into play when we think and when we have feelings.

If over-applying ourselves fatigues us, it may be that going without new ideas for too long is fatiguing in a more unpleasant way. If over-intense emotions, even of joy, produce a painful sensation in the diaphragm, why wouldn't the exclusion and absolute cessation of all feeling not be followed in due course by a painful numbness?

It thus appears that movement and action contribute in an essential way to the well-being and even the survival of living beings; as final evidence of this we have the fact that movement and action are necessary in childhood for the development of the organs and in old age for their continuing force.

[Then a paragraph summing up the main theses of this part of the chapter.]

·A MISCELLANY OF POINTS ABOUT SYMPATHY·

Let us return to sympathy.

I cannot believe, as Smith does, that we do not sympathise with great joys or small sorrows [TMS p. 23]. It seems to me, on the contrary, that we sympathise with moral pains and pleasures whatever their force and degree. This is a consequence of what I have been saying about our moral sensibility. Our sensitivity to the great joys of others, as for their minor troubles, is especially keen when it concerns persons for whom we have very strong particular sympathies; in that case, we are obeying nature. On the other side, we are sometimes upset to see someone whom we don't care about making an extraordinary fortune—because this fortune breaks the equality that held between us, or because it stops us being a level above him, or because what he

has is something that we have wanted. If someone who is socially far below us moves up a class, though still far below our own level, then sympathy will win out over pride, which shows that sympathy exists even when it is not supported by personal interest. This remark is so true that when genuine sympathy is wiped out by personal interest, we can still present our pretended sympathy as a natural and appropriate affection.

The sympathy for moral suffering is stronger than for moral pleasure, for the same reason that it is stronger for physical injuries than for physical pleasures. One can nonetheless observe that although moral pains are far more intense than moral pleasures, the difference between them is far less considerable than the difference between physical pains and physical pleasures, and that moral pleasures have a far greater influence on our happiness.

Among the effects of sympathy are the power a large crowd has to arouse our emotions, and the power a few men have to inspire us with their opinions. Here are what seem to me a few causes of these phenomena.

**(i)** The mere presence of a large gathering of men acts on us through impressions awakened by their looks, their speech, and the memory of their past actions. Also, their attention draws our attention, and their excitement alerts our sensibility to the emotions it is about to receive and in so doing triggers those emotions.

**(ii)** There is also the pleasure of hearing said something that one would not have risked saying oneself, or perhaps has groped for in vain, or has glimpsed only confusedly.

**(iii)** There is also the pleasure of acquiring an idea or sentiment on the spot. When it is very intense this pleasure sometimes leads us to accept the idea or sentiment without reflection, and we suddenly develop an admiration for the person who awakens it in us. Does not the person who

gives you a new idea, my dear C\*\*\*, seem to have an aura of supernatural power?

Causes **(ii)** and **(iii)** also act, though less strongly, when one is alone and reading.

**(iv)** Sometimes the uncertainty of our ideas and sentiments brings it about that we need to see them shared by others before we fully make them our own. An idea strikes us as true, beautiful, and touching, but we fear adopting it lightly; then the applause of others reassures us, decides for us, and we confidently give in to our first inclination. At other times, this same applause alerts us to some thought that escaped our notice; and our own applause in turn produces the same effect, and each person enjoys all the pleasures that would otherwise have been parcelled out among many people. A lone individual who—through fear of ridicule, fear of compromising himself, or mere timidity—does not dare to whole-heartedly accept a violent sentiment does dare to do so as soon as this sentiment is shared.

**(v)** Since we sympathise with the passions of others, the *signs* of those passions move us and suffice to make us feel them. Then, once we are experiencing them with a certain force, the sight of these passions must augment them further; and as we have the same effect on other people, an ever mounting rush of passion builds up to the highest level that each is capable of. Such is the cause behind the energy of crimes and of virtues in popular uprisings.

·WAYS OF CONVINCING OTHERS·

Sympathy also comes into the power that certain men exercise over those who hear them or read them, taking advantage of the character of their souls. This power comes from an art that is not so much difficult as dangerous, but stops being dangerous when it is exposed.

These men know

- that some minds are wearied by doubt,
- that there are those who—with regard to some topics or with regard to everything—find rest only in the peaceful lap of belief, and
- that for most men the need to believe wins out over reason, which forbids belief that isn't shown to be right.

So they have only to present an opinion forcefully and persuasively, skillfully concealing any uncertainties, and the hearers—pleased to be rescued from doubt—embrace this opinion with an ardour and confidence proportional to how much peace it brings them.

Someone can also get himself to be believed—to inspire confidence in himself and his way of thinking—by choosing certain opinions that are more eagerly received because they trigger a secret desire to yield to them. This explains the success of writers who declare paradoxes. People secretly take pride in not holding common opinions and in seeing (even through the eyes of others) something that escapes the common run of men; and this is something that they (·the paradox-mongers·) use to manipulate readers. By a similar mechanism someone can succeed in rejuvenating old opinions; he has on his side all the people who were forced to abandon these opinions, reluctantly, and have been afraid to maintain them. They take pleasure in spoiling the triumph of those who seek to destroy prejudices and establish new truths—a project that the amour-propre of men of middling ability •describes as foolhardy, •tries to cast doubt on, and •will never forgive because it claims a superiority that is demeaning to such men.

Another (and perhaps the most efficacious) way of winning minds is to **attach** to generally recognised principles, especially ones that are accepted with enthusiasm, other

opinions that are in no way their **consequence**. When that is done, the latter opinions come with an escort that gets them respected. When a writer agrees with us on important matters and professes opinions dear to us, this inclines us to believe him on other things as well. Indeed, sometimes someone can persuade others merely by using certain sacred words that inspire a kind of veneration and enthusiasm because of the grand ideas they evoke. The art of

placing such words in a manner that makes them substitute for reasons and thoughts, and affects the souls of readers and listeners in a way that deprives them of their critical power

is one of the most reliable secrets of false eloquence, and in our day it has made the passing reputation of more than one political orator.

The successes of genuine talent are even easier to explain, because they are almost entirely the work of nature. If a writer or orator expresses himself passionately, we are bound to feel the emotion aroused by the sight of someone agitated by an intense and profound sentiment; and this emotion, which automatically echoes his, inclines us to share the sentiment, provided that its cause strikes us as sufficient. The influence these men have over us is not limited to making us warmly embrace views we would otherwise have regarded coldly; it also affects *what* we believe. If you carefully examine what leads us to believe something, you'll see that one of the strongest and most common sources of belief is our natural and involuntary tendency to regard as constant anything that we have seen repeated many times, a tendency that is a consequence of our constitution. We regard as having always existed anything that we have ourselves experienced as a constancy; in our unreflective moments we don't distinguish



- an opinion that always accompanies the idea of something that is habitually repeated from
- an opinion arising from the impression of something that strikes us vividly [i.e. arises from sense-experience].

This makes us more apt to believe anything that moves us, and to adopt the opinions of passionate authors.

·ROUSSEAU AND VOLTAIRE·

Such is the art of Rousseau, their model. He fills you with his own conviction, immediately creating in the depths of your heart an emotion in favour of the opinion he wants to impart, as strongly in favour as if the entire case for it consisted of things that you had long accepted. One of Rousseau's contemporaries may have had an even more striking and general influence on this century—at least if one does not limit oneself to France—but their approaches, equally crowned by success, were not the same. Rousseau spoke more to conscience, Voltaire to reason. Rousseau established his views on the strength of his sensibility and his logic; Voltaire by the stimulating charms of his wit. The one instructed men by touching them; the other by enlightening them while also entertaining them. The former, taking some of his principles too far, has spread a taste for the exaggerated and the singular; the latter, too often content to fight the most dreadful abuses with no weapon but ridicule, has not widely enough aroused against them the salutary indignation which, while less effective than scorn in *scolding* vice, is more vigorous in *fighting* it. Rousseau's morality is appealing, though severe; it carries the heart along even while reproaching it. Voltaire's is more indulgent, and perhaps has less effect on us because, demanding fewer sacrifices, it gives us a more limited idea of our strengths and of the perfection we can attain. Rousseau spoke of

virtue with as much charm as Fénelon and with the power of virtue itself on his side. Voltaire fought against religious prejudices as zealously as if they were the only enemy of our happiness. The former will renew, through the ages, enthusiasm for freedom and virtue; the latter will awaken every century to the dire effects of fanaticism and credulity. Still, given that there will be passions as long as there are men, Rousseau's influence over souls will still be at the service of *mœurs* [see Glossary] long after Voltaire's influence over minds has completed its work because it will have destroyed the prejudices opposing the happiness of societies.

### Letter 5: The origins of moral ideas

It seems to me, my dear C\*\*\*, that the preachers of virtue (Rousseau excepted) do not go back often enough to the origins of moral ideas; yet this inquiry is the only one that can lead us to understand the scope of the intimate relation between these ideas and our conscience, between the feelings we have in following them and our happiness. Moralists have often and eloquently underscored the immediate influence of vice and virtue on our felicity, they have not been sufficiently concerned with demonstrating that •the impulses to virtue and the internal pleasures it provides are a necessary consequence of our moral constitution and that •the need to be good would be an almost irresistible inclination for men who lived under wise laws and had been educated without prejudices.

·THE FEELING OF HAVING DONE GOOD·

It arises necessarily from the satisfaction we naturally feel at the sight or even the idea of others' pleasure or well-being—a pleasure for ourselves when we have brought this about for them, and an especially strong pleasure in that case because

- it is savoured with more reflection,
- our intention sought it out, and
- it is preceded by *hope*, which always increases the soul's activity.

If the pleasure of contributing to others' happiness is more intense than the pleasure of being a passive witness, then the pleasure we experience in alleviating the ills of others must be even more so because it is enjoyed with even more reflection and is always accompanied by the pleasant sensation one feels when one is freed from the idea of misery. Something else that increases the pleasure of doing good is the thought that one owes this pleasure to oneself and that consequently one holds in one's hands the power to procure it for oneself, to reproduce it at will. . . .

We feel a natural pleasure in *doing* good; but another feeling also arises from this pleasure, namely the satisfaction of *having done* good (comparable with something that arises in the case of physical pain beyond the immediate, localised impression, namely an unpleasant sensation throughout our body). So we take personal pleasure in the recollection of a happiness that wasn't our doing; but this recollection to recur often in our memory it must be linked to our existence and to our own trains of thought, and that is what happens when we are the cause of it. *Then* this memory integrates itself into our intimate awareness of ourselves, becomes a part of it, becomes as habitual as it is, and produces in us an agreeable sensation that lasts far longer than the particular kind of pleasure that originally gave rise to it. So when we have clearly brought benefit to others the pleasure we get from this is independent of the nature of the pleasure they get from it; but when we have freed them from some harm—our pleasure in this being, like theirs, a result of the cessation of pain—it is even more natural that the satisfaction of having made pain stop stays with us without our having a detailed

memory of the occasion or even any present thought about the nature of the pain we have alleviated.

Thus the pleasure of *doing* good forms a long-term alliance with the satisfaction of *having done* good, and this feeling becomes (in a way) general and abstract since we feel it anew at the mere recollection of good actions without recalling their particular circumstances. In my first letter I spoke of this abstract sentiment, the most general principle of the metaphysics of the soul, just as the theory of abstract ideas is the most general principle of the metaphysics of the intellect. Also, this general feeling of having done good is

- the most delightful of our sensations,
- the one most analogous to our moral affections,
- the one that attracts and charms the soul without impressing on it the insatiable and devouring activity of the passions,
- the only one that can recompense humanity for all the ills it can suffer,
- the only one constantly at our disposal, never letting us down, always responsive, calming and filling our hearts, and
- an indissoluble tie between ourselves and our fellow men.

Happy is he, my dear C\*\*\*, who carries this sentiment unwaveringly in the depths of his heart and who dies feeling it! He alone has lived!

·THE FEELING OF HAVING CAUSED HARM·

Because the sight or idea of another's misfortune gives us a painful feeling, this feeling is more intense when we are the cause of this misfortune, even if only accidentally. If we are the cause in an absolutely involuntary manner—i.e. if we cannot attribute it to our intentions, thoughtlessness or frivolity—then the sentiment is strong only because, being

more connected to our memories, it is more present in us and we have more trouble freeing ourselves from it. If the other person's misfortune results from our thoughtlessness or frivolity, our pain will be greater because it will join forces with the thought that we could have spared him that misfortune. This thought produces in us a very painful sentiment, through the contrast between •the state our error has put us in and •the state we could have been in. The thought that we could have been better makes our unease all the more sharply felt, for the same reason that one feels something bad more intensely when it follows something good, and a •possible •past• good, strongly represented by the imagination, is mourned as if it had been •real. To this thought is joined the fear of repeating the same mistake, an unpleasant sensation that makes one decide to avoid opportunities for it and is the driving force behind prudence. When we have voluntarily done something bad, all of these causes come into play and must act even more strongly, and mixed in with them there is a particular pain—that of feeling for ourselves the disagreeable feeling aroused by the sight or idea of someone who has wronged others.

Just as the satisfaction of having done a good is integrated into our existence and gives us a delightful feeling, so also the awareness of having done something wrong attaches itself to our existence and disturbs it. It produces feelings of regret and remorse that afflict us, disturb us, make us suffer, and won't let us go even when we no longer have any clear memory of the initial impression of pain that we felt because of the harm that we caused.

The fear of remorse is enough to distance everyone from evil. •*Everyone?* Yes•, either •because there is no-one who has not felt some remorse, at least for minor transgressions, or •because the imagination is sufficient to give an idea of the torments of remorse even to someone—if there can be any

such person!—who would never do anything but good. The satisfaction associated with good actions and fear of having bad ones in one's memory are two effective drives for shaping all our actions. Those two sentiments—that satisfaction and that fear—are universal; they are the driving force and the foundation of human morality.

After learning the origin and nature of these sentiments by applying what you have read in the preceding letters about

- particular sympathy,
- the effects of enthusiasm, and
- the power of habit,

you will easily understand, my dear C\*\*\*, that these sentiments can become active and permanent and can acquire, according to circumstances, a shaping force and even an irresistible power. Thus, for example, remorse over a bad action (or the mere fear of it) will be intensified by the idea of its staying power when the imagination depicts misfortunes spread over a whole lifetime. If this faculty—this capacity for remorse—is

one of the most deadly enemies of man's peace of mind when, more insatiable than his heart, it makes him incapable of enjoyment by constantly leading his thoughts and desires beyond what he possesses or beyond what he can attain,

it is also

one of the most effective causes of his happiness when it highlights for him the effects of vice and virtue, reminding him that he has—along with the power of doing good for others—the power of carrying in himself a joyful sentiment, a power that makes his happiness largely independent of chance and with which he can both brave death and withstand all the ills of life.

So there you are, my dear C\*\*\*—we already have a distinction among our actions, based solely on sentiment: it is the distinction between •actions that are accompanied by pleasure and followed by an internal satisfaction and •actions that are accompanied by anguish and followed by an always disagreeable and often painful feeling.

·DEFINING ‘VIRTUE’ AND ‘MORAL EVIL’·

But this more lasting feeling of satisfaction or pain connected to the memory of good or harm we have done to others is necessarily modified by reflection, and it’s the modifications brought by reflection that lead us to the idea of *moral* good or evil, the idea of the first and eternal rule

- that judges men independently of the laws,
- that so few laws have consecrated or developed,
- that so many others have violated, and
- that prejudices have so often and so absurdly stifled!

For example, when we provide for someone a pleasure that is only momentary and won’t affect his life as a whole, we will have less satisfaction—unless we were motivated by a particular sympathy—than we would if we had given someone a pleasure that would remain a long-lasting possession. We may even repent for having left this person to whom we have rendered only a passing service to be exposed to real dangers, ·in which case· we will have remorse rather than satisfaction. Here then the difference starts to emerge between •the good we do by chance and •the good we do by reflection, and between •the good we are pulled to by particular sympathy and •the good we are directed to by general sympathy. In following a particular sympathy we are obeying, as if by instinct, the leanings of our heart. In following a general sympathy—often. . . undecided between the option that our inclination inspires in us and a greater good towards which we are not so inclined—we silently weigh which of the two

actions would do the greater good to others, and we opt for the one that will give us the most lasting satisfaction, even if not the greatest immediate pleasure.

From there on, our actions that were merely beneficent and humane acquire a moral goodness and beauty. From this is born the idea of virtue, i.e. of actions that give others a pleasure approved by reason.

The idea of the distinction between •doing someone moral harm and •doing someone physical harm is harder to form, but it is no less precise. When situations arise in which

a slight harm to one individual prevents a greater harm to another or an equal harm to several others,

then if we don’t do this slight harm we can suffer much more remorse for having failed to prevent the greater harm than ·we would have suffered· from having committed the lesser one. Indeed, if we *do* do the lesser harm our regret over that will be offset by the more intense satisfaction of having prevented the more serious one. The same holds true if the hurt done to another gives us some pleasure. The pleasure will be weak and won’t compensate for the remorse attached to the damage that gave rise to it. In these various circumstances we get the habit of consulting our reason as to what action we should take, what decision will afterwards leave us with the greater satisfaction. ·In this way· we acquire the idea of moral evil, i.e. of an action harmful to another and repudiated by our reason.

·MORAL KNOWLEDGE SHOULD BE EASY·

This definition seems to me better than Vauvenargues’s, according to which moral good/evil are what are useful/harmful to humanity taken as a whole. His definition is at bottom the same as mine, because the good or evil that reason approves or condemns is the same as that which is useful or harmful to humanity. But Vauvenargues’s

definition is less precise and harder to understand because it does not match the notion that the common run of men have of moral good and evil. Indeed, one can have ordinary reason and conscience without knowing what is good or bad with respect to *everyone!* In defining moral concepts it matters, more than people might think, to prefer definitions that the least enlightened of men can understand. When it is a question of discovering the general laws that govern the human heart, the most commonplace reason is the most certain and enlightened one.

·SETTING ASIDE DETAILS·

Once the idea of moral good and evil is acquired and once the habit of differentiating one from the other has become familiar, we distinguish the pleasure and pain and the satisfaction and remorse that result from taking or abstaining from a particular action without weighing or calculating the effects that might follow. The idea that this action is good implies a secret satisfaction, and the idea that it is bad predicts remorse, in exactly the way in which the mere idea of physical pleasure or pain produces a painful or pleasant sensation now and for the future. This is somewhat like what happens in sciences where the scientist uses certain methods and certain principles, relying on them for their exactness and truth, without remembering how he once proved them. Similarly, we follow general sentiments without thinking of how they were formed or of all that justifies them.

So our remorse for wrongdoing and satisfaction from doing good can occur without running over the effects of these actions in our mind; nor do we need to have retained the general memory of having *done something good* or having *done something bad*; all that is needed is the still more abstract and more general feeling of having *acted well* or *acted badly*. Other feelings can be joined to that one,

depending on circumstances, but they don't have to enter the picture for our conscience to act on our soul—determining, judging, or rewarding/punishing our actions. When they do, though, they make a difference, often by extending rather than weakening the reach of conscience: for example, our remorse for acting badly or satisfaction for acting well is increased if the signs of pain or pleasure arising from our actions are more expressive, more affecting, more capable of etching themselves into our imagination and speaking through it to our conscience. Souls that are easily moved are more often guided by these particular factors (·signs of grief or joy, etc·); those whose sensibility is deeper and more thoughtful usually comply with the more abstract and more general sentiments that go with good or evil. The former in doing good act with less self-restraint; the latter act in a more orderly fashion and with a more refined justice; the former get a more intense pleasure from this, whereas the pleasure of the others owes more to reason, though more often amour-propre also comes into it. The former are apt to make their minds up in advance and refuse to face facts; the latter are apt to miss the good through insisting on looking for the best. It is to be hoped that easily moved souls are common among the vast number of people who have only superiors and equals, and that the others are common in the class—the too large class!—of men who command and govern, whether by recognised right or by hidden power.

Another way of distinguishing some hearts and minds from others concerns how easily they come to experience an abstract and general sentiment, i.e. one that is simply an awareness of what is common to several individual sentiments, akin to how easy they find it to have abstract and general ideas. Hearts capable of these sentiments are the only genuinely upright ones, because only they can be guided by unwavering principles; they are the only ones whose

sensibility can be relied on, because general considerations are always there to stimulate it effectively; conscience is not easily silenced in them. Remorse is thus more dependable and effective in them, and their ideas of their obligations are more complete. They above all are the ones who know how to perform those duties demanding delicacy and honesty •that morality alone imposes and recognises, •the forgetting of which bring only regret and the loss of joy, and •in which one finds the disinterested virtues that can only be produced by the lofty striving to have the highest and most satisfying ideas possible about oneself.

Egoism, no doubt produced by forgetting these abstract and general sentiments or by an inability to experience them, then extinguishes them. The shameful and base habit of considering everything in relation to *oneself*, and of judging essentially from this point of view, really does gradually weaken the feelings attached to good and evil. When people regard egoism as less dangerous and less blameworthy than the apparently more harmful passions such as hatred, vengeance, even envy, they are letting it off too lightly. Those passions are almost always short-lived.

- They are rare, and each instance of them is ruinous to only a very small number of men, whereas egoism infects and torments entire classes.
- Excesses of the passions in question are nearly always suppressed by the law, whereas egoism has so far been only lightly condemned and weakly punished by morality and public opinion.
- Finally, it is true that these passions sometimes lead to violent actions, but when egoism does not do so that is nearly always because such actions would bring harm to the egoist; there is hardly a secret injustice or cruelty of which egoism is not capable.

If other passions can make someone more dangerous, egoism

makes him more corrupt, because it leaves him with no push towards virtue except his amour-propre and no restraint except human respect, a flimsy 'barrier' that manipulative skill abolishes at will.

·THE HARM DONE BY EDUCATION·

Minds lacking strength or scope to arrive at abstract and general ideas, so as to receive and combine all their components, can never achieve substantial results; nor, therefore, can they enlarge the sphere of important truths in any domain or (in some cases) even *grasp* truths that are the upshot of calculation and broadly-based comparisons. So you would try in vain to get views that grow out of these ideas adopted by someone who cannot even grasp the ideas. Solely concerned with humdrum and isolated issues and with particular and local views, he will label as dangerous any system that he can't understand; taking pride in his false discretion, he will disdainfully wrap himself up in his errors.

The greater or lesser ability to have abstract and general ideas is a kind of scale on which to place all minds in order to know what level they are at and what they can relate to. Those to whom reflection or a sort of instinct have given the habit of adding to and generalising their ideas are never stopped. Those in whom the need to extend the number and reach of their ideas has been foiled or stifled by other passions (and that is most people) usually remain at a certain level and never (so to speak) switch thoughts. That is why it is so hard to enlighten men, even regarding their real interests. One must first look into their passions to find forces to extend and renew their intelligence that has been weakened by inaction or degraded by error; and then get them to accept the truth, either •by presenting it to them under clever or brilliant guises that prove seductive or •by gently captivating reason through a logic so compelling that

the last step leading to the conclusion is no harder to take than the first.

One of the primary goals of education should thus be to provide the ability to acquire general ideas and to experience these abstract and general feelings I have spoken to you about; and ordinary education usually distances itself from this goal.

The study of grammar [see Glossary] comes first and, if children understand it, it admittedly gives them a start on having a few metaphysical ideas, but some of these are the most mistaken or at least the most incoherent; children learn languages through the drill of applying rules to translate authors whose thoughts they often cannot understand; they are nearly always presented with history 'cleansed' of the sweeping results that alone make history useful, because those results would make it too easy for them to grasp the abuses that the powers that be want them to respect; they are brought up amid prejudices of pride and vanity that

- deprive them of a sense of the inalienable rights that all men have—their right to genuine happiness and to their genuine worth, in order to
- instill in them instead the idea of counterfeit pleasures and social hierarchies, the respect and desire for which shrivel the mind, corrupt reason, and snuff out conscience.

The morality they are taught almost always consists of a jumble of separate precepts in which the most minor duties are mixed with the most sacred ones, all announced in the same way and with the same air of importance. Rarely does this morality lead them •to look into their own hearts for the eternal and general laws that decide between good and evil, •to find there the sentiments that reward the one and punish the other. The study of the sciences is nearly always rejected at the moment when the mind—already accustomed

to settling for vague ideas and attending to words rather than things—

- has trouble following their methodical, reasoned path,
- gets tired even when they are nothing but a sequence of obvious truths, and
- has to struggle to grasp their general principles or cannot *do* anything with them intellectually.

So let us, my dear C\*\*\*, stop reproaching nature for being miserly with its supply of great men, stop being surprised that the general laws of nature are still so little known. How many times in a century does education succeed in giving minds the strength and rigour needed to form abstract ideas? How often has it perfected the mind's instinct for truth? has it strengthened the truth through its tendency to follow it alone and to be ceaselessly nourished by it? On the other side, how often education leads us astray into the byways of routine and convention, from prejudice to prejudice and from error to error! How often it has transformed •our need to live exclusively through the useful, true, and wide-ranging activities to which nature calls our minds and hearts into •a need to live only for the deceptive and narrow-minded pleasures of amour-propre and vanity! Oh! What pools of virtue, talent, and enlightenment this single error has eliminated and still eliminates from the human species!

### **Letter 6: The nature of justice and injustice**

·RIGHTS·

You have seen, my dear C\*\*\*, that when the sentiments awakened in us when we do good or harm to others are accompanied by reflection, they generate the abstract idea of moral *good and evil*. This gives rise to the idea of *just and unjust*, which differs from the other only in that reason's

assent to a just action must be based on the idea of **right**, that is

a preference commanded by reason itself in favour of a particular individual—so that even if in a given situation that individual's interest appears to be weaker than someone else's, it should nevertheless be favoured.

Thus for example a man who in the state of nature has taken the trouble to cultivate a field and to oversee its harvest has a *right* to this harvest, i.e. reason says that it belongs to him preferentially because he has bought it ·by his labour·; because in depriving him of it, in nullifying his work, in robbing him of what he had long hoped for and deserved to possess, one does him greater injury than denying him a similar harvest that he had simply *found*. This preference that reason orders be granted to him, even when he does not need all the fruits of his harvest and when someone else has a real need for them, is precisely what a *right* is; it is based on reason and on the necessity of a general law to regulate actions, a law that is common to all men, and that spares us from having to examine the causes and effects of each particular action; and it is likewise based on feeling because the effect of injustice—being more harmful to the victim than the effects of a simple wrong—must create a greater repugnance in us.

At first glance you may be inclined to think, my dear C\*\*\*, that in the state of nature the neighbour of this successful farmer could without injustice force him to share his surplus with a third party who hasn't enough to live on. In thinking about it, you will see that this man's right to the surplus of his harvest comes from his work and not from any need that he has; that this right began with his work, and even if humaneness should lead him to renounce it, reason does not permit anyone to force him to do so. You will also see

that if this man refuses to share his bounty with the poor, he is committing a lesser evil than would be committed by a powerful neighbour who forced him into this beneficent act: the former would lack humaneness; the latter would violate one of those very general laws that reason ordains and gets men to respect by showing that •they serve the common interest and that •the good resulting from their infringement in some very rare particular circumstances is vastly less than the advantages provided by the generality and certainty of these laws. Morality may excuse someone who in a case of absolute necessity violates the rights of someone else solely to relieve this immediate need, but it does not follow that this strict right does not exist in general; if it ceases to exist in a case of absolute necessity, it is because in that case the man who refuses necessary subsistence is in a way an enemy attacking the life of the man he refuses to help. The definition I have given you of *right* may seem to you incomplete because the word 'preference' seems contrary to natural *equality*, which is the basis for a part of real human rights. But this conflict is only apparent, for ·preference can come into play *on behalf of* equality·. When equality is upset, and there is a choice between

(i) •putting the sufferer back on a level with the other person(s) and

•(ii) allowing the others' claim to superiority to stand, though it is not acknowledged by reason,

preference should be given to (i). So the right one then attains over everything necessary to restore equality is an act of justice and not a favour.

A right such as the right of property is positive: it consists in a reason-based preference for the possession of something. A right such as the right to liberty is in a way a negative, since it exists only on the supposition that it's in someone's interests to attack my freedom, in which case it is reasonable



to prefer my interests in preserving it, because there is no reason why this man should have a hold over me that I do not have over him. The same applies to equality: if someone claims a standing over me that is not based on reason, then reason sides with my concern to maintain equality over his concern to obtain his claim. Why? Because submission to someone else's will and being made inferior to him does more harm to me than dominating my will and being superior to me does good to him. In evaluating moral good or evil, we submit the natural sentiment of sympathy to reason, which directs it toward the most pressing claim. In evaluating the just and the unjust, we submit this sentiment to reason that is itself guided by general rules, by a preference based on general and reasoned grounds that aim for the greatest good, i.e. guided by the rule of right.

Given this exact definition of right, do you not see, my dear C\*\*\*, how the monstrous edifice of the pretended rights of the despot, the noble, the priest, and all holders of non-delegated power crumbles into dust and instantly vanishes? These prerogatives—these claimed 'rights'—had banished liberty and natural equality from among us, and in so many nations ignorance or weakness still raise them to the rank of rights! As if reason could approve leaving to a sovereign (who, sometimes, can be a tyrant) no restraint except his remorse, the progress of enlightenment, or the despair of his victims! As if it admitted that the social standing of fathers was more than a prejudice favouring children! As if it authorised the minister of religion (if there were one true religion) to possess obscene riches and allowed that intolerance could ever be a consequence of his ministry! And finally, as if reason could permit any power that was originally established in the interests of those who are subject to it to become a source of tyrannical privilege and a license for the impunity for its holders! Yet how does it happen that the sacred

name of 'right', which has been used everywhere to hide and disguise the power of force, becomes a mask that is nearly impenetrable to the eyes of the masses, despite the interest they have in tearing it off? Doubtless for a long time now those who governed men had calculated that they could easily control the ·ordinary· populace by crushing reason under the weight of *needs*; that they could keep the *grandees* in line by turning the people over to them and distracting their vanity with trifles; and that all they had to fear was •misfortune for the *grandees* and •the spread of enlightenment among the ordinary folk.

·JUSTICE AND INJUSTICE·

An action in conformity with right is just; an action contrary to right is unjust.

A misfortune created by injustice produces a stronger painful feeling ·in the victim or the spectator· than an equal misfortune that doesn't come from injustice. Why? Because misfortune is greater when it is unexpected. Personal interest can also amplify this feeling: everyone *has* rights, and cannot see someone else's rights being violated without being pushed into the disagreeable thought that his own may be violated. Furthermore, injustice involves fraud or violence in those who commit it; it proclaims an enemy to be feared by all; it thus produces unsettling feelings of mistrust and fear.

Remorse for injustice must also be greater than remorse for having simply done wrong because it adds to

- remorse for having opposed the general sentiment that defends our rights
- remorse for having lost trust in seeing these rights respected, and of having done something wrong that has worse consequences because it violates an accepted rule and brings added injury to its victims.

The sentiment that leads us to be just is stronger than the one that directs us to do good, because it is accompanied by a fear of more intense remorse. But the satisfaction we derive from justice is perhaps weaker than what we get from having done someone good directly. They are both grounded in sympathy, and the satisfaction of justice is as strong as the other, but it seems to be different in kind: peace enters into it more; it is less active and less lovely to have.

·OBLIGATIONS AND THE PLEASURE OF CARRYING THEM OUT·

From the idea of right and justice is born the idea of our obligations towards other people.

If someone could, without infringing any of our rights, require us to do something whether or not we wanted to, then we are *obliged* to do it. That is the strict meaning of ‘obligation’, which applies only to actions required by absolutely rigorous justice. But in speaking of actions that someone could (without infringing our rights) oblige us to perform, I don’t mean ‘could’ in the sense of real and physical possibility, only ideal possibility. Thus, for example, one can say that a judge is obliged to judge on the basis of what he believes to have been proved, though it is physically impossible to force him to do so. [The use of three verbs for one purpose is in the original: ‘require us’ *exiger*, ‘oblige us’ *obliger*, ‘force him’ *contraindre*.]

There you have it, my dear C\*\*\*: our actions subjected to two rules, reason and justice, the latter being nothing but reason reduced to an absolute rule. We have already found very powerful internal grounds for obeying these two rules, namely the internal satisfaction of doing good to others and remorse for having done them wrong. There is also a third—the immediate pleasure of following reason and of carrying out an obligation. I am sure that the occurrence of these feelings owes nothing to what anyone else thinks.

The pleasure of following reason appears to have the same source as the pleasure we get from feeling our own strength [see page 18 above]. We experience a pleasant feeling in following our reason because we tell ourselves that if we were drawn by an unreasonable impulse to do harm in some way we would have a resource, reason, for resisting the impulse and avoiding the harm. Most of what I have told you in Letter 4 about the pleasure of exercising our faculties applies here even more absolutely because reason is one of our most wide-ranging, useful, and important faculties. What more comforting and gentle feeling is there than that of recognising through experience that one possesses such a guide, such a guardian of our happiness, such a guarantor of our inner peace! Our pleasure in following our reason is also combined with the feeling of being free and the feeling of having a sort of independence of—and supremacy over—any immediate causes that might be harmful to us. This pleasure thus reassures us, elevates us in our own eyes, and satisfies the natural inclination we all have to depend on ourselves alone, an inclination that comes from the greater confidence we have of our well-being when it is in our own hands.

The pleasure we take in carrying out an obligation is immediately linked to a sense of security, to the comfort of feeling oneself sheltered from resentment, vengeance, and hatred; the special satisfaction of having avoided the regret that would have followed us if we had acted differently, boosted by the hope of never having to experience remorse; an exquisite hope because it banishes the idea of every internal obstacle to our happiness.

·DRIVES TOWARDS ACTING MORALLY·

So we have drives [see Glossary] not only •to do good to others but •to prefer good actions to bad ones, and just actions to unjust ones. These drives are based on our natural

sympathy, itself a consequence of our sensibility. Up to this point, nothing outside ourselves plays any part in this. The morality of our actions, the idea of justice, and the desire to be just are the necessary outcomes of sensibility and of reason; every being who can feel and think will have the same ideas about this. The limits of these ideas are the same in everyone; so these ideas can become the object of an exact science because what they are ideas of is invariable. Of course you can express by the word 'just' any idea you like, but there is a common notion of justice, and everyone who reasons well will have it. Given that moral ideas are not arbitrary [see Glossary], their definitions can vary only in how clearly and how generally they present these ideas.

This base had first to be built. It had to be shown that our moral sentiments stem from our natural unthinking sympathy for the physical pains of others, and that our moral ideas stem from reflection; and above all it had to be made clear that assent to a moral virtue [*vertu*, a slip for *vérité* = 'truth?'] differs from assent to a mathematical or physical truth in being naturally combined with a deep desire

- to act in accordance with it, and
- to see others do the same,

along with

- a fear of not doing so, and
- a regret for having failed to do so.

But morality cannot be said to be based purely on sentiment—on desire, fear, regret—because it is reason that shows us what is just or unjust. But still less can morality be said to be based uniquely on reason, because reason's judgment is nearly always preceded by a sentiment that proclaims it (and followed by one that confirms it), and because it's from this sentiment that reason first gets the moral ideas that it forms into principles. Smith recognises that reason is indisputably the source of morality's general

rules, but finds it impossible to derive from reason the basic ideas of *just* and *unjust*; so he declares that these first perceptions of just/unjust are the upshot of an immediate sentiment and are what that sentiment is of or about, and claims that our knowledge of just/unjust and of virtue/vice derives in part from their harmony or disharmony with a kind of *deep sense* that he has postulated without defining it. However, this kind of deep sense is not one of those 'first causes' whose existence has to be acknowledged but cannot be explained. It is simply the effect of the sympathy that our sensibility makes us liable to, the sympathy whose different appearances I have described to you, the sympathy which when it becomes a general sentiment can be awakened simply by abstract ideas of good and evil, and consequently must always accompany our judgments on the morality of actions. My dear C\*\*, let us reject this dangerous tendency whenever we encounter a fact we cannot explain to *postulate* a 'deep sense', a faculty, a principle [see Glossary], this rush-to-conclusions philosophy which

- makes no room for ignorance or doubt,
- imagines when it should only observe,
- invents causes when it cannot discover any, and
- not only distances us from the truth but weakens our ability to know it when we see it, and
- is the sole source of the systems, so inadequate or false in their principles, that have tried to explain to man things that he cannot know or that can't be revealed to him except through the passage of centuries, and have disfigured or weakened the power of the most useful and sacred moral truths by mixing them with monstrous fables.

So when we are looking for what drives us towards being good, there is no need for us to look outside nature and always far from it, coming up with candidates that are as

incomprehensible as they are independent of our direct and immediate concerns. By his moral constitution, man is not a wicked or corrupt being, or even one who is indifferent to good; because he carries within himself a general drive towards being good and none towards being bad.

But is this drive sufficient? This question, the most important in moral theory, deserves to be discussed carefully, especially given that previous treatments of it have been shallow and biased. The trouble may have been that those who have answered it decided in advance to answer 'No', so as to replace the natural supports for morality by imaginary bases that favour their interests. Or it may be that no-one has tackled this question while distancing himself from the present or recent state of civilisation, thinking in terms of what civilisation could one day become. On the contrary, civilisation has always been taken as an immutable *given* or as almost incapable of being perfected.

To know whether •the fear of feeling remorse for an injustice sufficiently outweighs •the advantage of committing it, we must examine this advantage and the cause that produces it; for if it could be proved that it is less the work of nature than of certain social institutions, and that the inadequacy of the drives away from injustice was almost entirely the result of those institutions, one would then have to try to reform *them* and stop slandering human nature.

If a private interest to be just was outweighed by another private interest to be unjust, and if the latter's weight could be attributed to corrupt institutions without which the inclination to be just would nearly always be equal or superior to its opponent, then the purported inadequacy of our drives towards doing good would be merely the effect of our errors and not of a naturally depraved disposition.

If it could be shown •that the influence of drives towards practising virtue and following justice—an influence that

could so easily be strengthened and spread by education—was in fact nearly always weakened and attacked by education and met insurmountable obstacles in prejudices and the anti-sympathetic sentiments they give rise to, •the result would be that for men formed and governed by reason these drives would be effective in nearly all circumstances and would fail only in very rare circumstances or in actions of little importance. I don't need to prove here that they would always suffice—that all men would infallibly be just if no other drives were at work in them—but only that they would be just more often. In fact the fake supernatural drives towards doing good that morality is usually supposed to be based on nearly always miss their mark and are even less capable than those under discussion here of acting with force and constancy and in a general enough manner to make them useful in all circumstances and available to all men. So all that needs to be shown is that reason alone, united with sentiment, can lead us to the good by means that are more sure, more gentle, easier, less complicated, and liable to fewer errors and dangers; and these means, far from requiring us to sacrifice or silence any of our faculties, make our intellectual perfection give birth to our moral perfection.

·THE GOOD MAN AND THE BAD MAN: THEIR LIVES·

Let us pause here, my dear C\*\*, to see how this single capacity for experiencing pleasure and pain at the idea of another's pleasures and pains, perfecting itself through reason and magnifying itself by reflection and enthusiasm, not only •becomes for us a rich source of delightful or cruel feelings, but •guarantees an always pleasant and peaceful existence to **(a)** the person who, faithful to his reason and sensibility, bows to benevolence and justice, and •condemns **(b)** anyone who behaves in a contrary manner to an always painful and agitated existence.

The former **(a)** lives amidst the good he has done or hopes to do, and always has a deep sense of peace and security; he can remain alone with himself without experiencing emptiness or slackness, because one of his most active thoughts always centres on virtue. He is liable to pain, but at least pain cannot penetrate the sanctuary of his conscience where there is an inexhaustible well of satisfaction, and where he can peacefully and contentedly ride out the storms of the passions, purifying them by means of delicate and generous sentiments that bring happiness whether or not the passions are satisfied. Life and all its disappointments, people and all their weaknesses, cannot disturb or embitter him. He is easily contented with life because •it offers him pleasures that are always within his reach, that habit cannot blight, that even ingratitude •on the part of those to whom he does good• cannot entirely spoil; and because •he considers men in terms not so much of what they could be or what can be expected of them as of what happiness he can provide them with, so that in his relations with them he is not prickly or anxious, and—because *he* becomes happy in making others happy—he has a hard time believing anyone would wish him harm, never fears being harmed, and when he is forced to recognise that someone has harmed him he is more saddened than angered. Except for those to whom he is tied by a particular sympathy, it does not matter much to him what sort of human environment he is in, because the unfortunate exist everywhere. He does not have to put any effort into being free of self-interest—it hardly counts as a *merit* in him that he is so—and he rarely fails to touch those he loves and to obtain happiness in return; but when he does not succeed in that he does not experience bitter regret, and enthusiasm for virtue comes to distract him from this failure and to console him for it.

How different is the fate of **(b)** someone who resists his reason and sensibility! He loses even more happiness than he can take from others; he constantly finds himself blocked from tranquility by the vexing sentiment of his own existence; he is tormented by the need to escape from himself; the world strikes him as empty and inhabited, because the range of things that can distract him is so small. Passions may momentarily cater to his disquiet, but in vain; they are not wild enough to dull his conscience. He no longer has the use of his faculties, and the happiness he could draw from it retreats in face of this secret turmoil tyrannically agitating and dominating his soul. If he seeks human company, he is soon brought back to the painful sentiment he wanted to avoid because of •his sense of how others look down on him and •the mistrust he inspires in himself. Far from finding in his fellow men (as does the beneficent man) beings who can contribute to his happiness without even trying to do so, he sees them as enemies if he thinks they are onto him, or he is forced to extremes of dissimulation and cunning. He cannot peacefully savour the satisfaction of being loved; he never has that, because he always feels he is a usurper. Uncertain of the feelings he inspires in others, he does not expect any good from them except to the extent that he is skillful in deceiving them (they of course don't get any good from him). Trusting only himself, he cannot relax in the bosom of a friend and savour there the tranquil letting-go that is *trust*, because trust unnaturally keeps itself at a distance from him, denying him the peace that is the bedrock of all happy sentiments. He is even more guilty and more unfortunate when—tired of loathing and self-hatred and too far from virtue to be touched or enlightened by it—he tries to lose his reason and sensibility by becoming a brute, so as to stifle the remorse that outlives the feelings and ideas that created it.

### Letter 7: Why people act unjustly

All the drives that can lead a man to be unjust relate back to four principal interests.

(a) The interest of the passion of love, the only pleasure that cannot be bought, so that its appeal cannot be confused with the desire for money. I shall not here call love *volupté*, because unfortunately that word has come to stand, in the language and opinion of depraved men, for something that is all too often the object of a most gross commerce.

(b) The interest in having money, whether to meet needs or to acquire riches as a vague route to pleasure.

(c) The interest of ambition, sometimes mixed with the interest in money.

(d) The interest of amour-propre or vanity, which is often the drive and the goal of the two preceding ones.

#### (b) ·INJUSTICE FROM A DESIRE FOR MONEY·

Let us examine first of all, my dear C\*\*\*, the interest in being unjust that can arise from the desire for money or for something purchasable. If it is to meet a real need, this interest can be pressing, and we sense that someone lacking *everything* will have few scruples about being unjust, especially with respect to a rich man, if he can hope to get away with it. But this pressing need that is strong enough to stifle the voice of conscience and to triumph over it—is it common in a society governed by reasonable laws?

If the laws stopped favouring the inequality of fortunes, humanity and justice would then be satisfied; but greed—harder and slower to destroy than bad laws—would no doubt still have something to work on. Natural inequality comes from differences in behaviour, level of intelligence, and size of families; but might we not do adequate justice to those factors by thinking of them as distributing 75% of

the land's productive wealth while the other 25% was shared equally? [She speaks of the 75% distribution as happening *au hasard*, which can mean 'randomly' but here means: according to the *hasard* = 'chance, luck, etc.' of what each individual's intelligence, family-size etc. happens to be.] For example, imagine a country with 6,000,000 families and an annual agricultural income of 1,200,000,000 pounds. There would thus be 200 pounds of agricultural income for each family. If the effects of natural inequality absorbed 75% of this sum, making the income of the wealthy; there would still be 50 pounds for each family. Look at our peasants, my dear C\*\*\*, and judge whether many of those who have an income of 50 pounds are reduced to poverty! On the contrary, everyone knows that as soon as they own two or three acres of arable land they are known locally as well off; and the average productive value of two or three acres, supposing these to be optimal for growing wheat, is about 50 pounds per annum.

You will be convinced that this well-founded hypothesis is not exaggerated by observing that among those 6,000,000 families a very large number will be involved in industry and commerce, with no interest in retaining their share of the nation's farmland and even needing to urbanise [*dénaturer*] it to pursue their activities or investments profitably.

The pressing need that nearly always prevails over fear of retribution and fear of remorse can also arise for industrial workers—either from unemployment or because for a while wages don't keep step with the cost of living—and indeed it is most common in these classes. (There is less of it among agricultural workers, because agriculture, as well as being the unique source of real and lasting wealth for states, is the richest in resources for individuals.) But it has been shown conclusively in our day that unemployment and temporary short-falls of wages have been caused almost entirely by restrictive laws that inhibit commerce and industry. These

same laws also undermine the general welfare in another way, namely by allowing the gradual concentration into a few men's hands of wealth which

- they can if they choose use as a means of oppression, and which
- would otherwise—i.e. without those interfering laws—have been shared out among everyone, even if not equally, this being brought about by the unrestricted interplay of competing interests.

Unequal taxation ends up further overwhelming the lower class which, without property or freedom, is reduced to counting fraud as a resource, deceiving without remorse because conscience soon fades when entangled by chains. So the interest in being unjust because of need is very rare in the absence of bad laws; and even when bad laws are in effect, it manifests itself rarely and with the least extensive and least formidable effects.

You will next note, my dear C\*\*, that the interest in being unjust so as to get money presupposes that one has a chance of succeeding in this, and this possibility of success is itself in many ways the product of the laws:

- if they were clear, they would warn everyone equally;
- if they were just, they would allow no exceptions; and
- if they were precise, they would leave no opening for corruption and bad faith.

If civil administration among nearly all peoples did not sprawl across a host of actions that ought to be left alone, it wouldn't leave an opening for arbitrary [see Glossary] power, a power that is perhaps less sinister in its exercise than what is needed to create and maintain it. Finally, if laws alone were to govern universally and they alone were to be feared—instead of fearing men and classes, as is so often the case—then the only way to acquire a surplus through injustice would be *theft*, in the strict sense of this word. In

that situation, the force of

- remorse for being unjust
- would have to be balanced against only the force of
- the temptation to steal to acquire a gain, and not against the force of
  - allowing oneself quiet injustices favoured by long-standing examples and almost authorised by the silence (or rather by the vices) of the laws.

Laws should supplement the citizen's conscience, but too often they are merely oppressive chains or at most sometimes the last brake on wickedness. Now, given reasonable laws, the temptation of theft to attain more possessions would be so weakened by the costs of giving into it that theft would rarely have to be feared. . . .

•(c-d) INJUSTICE FROM VANITY AND AMBITION•

The interest in being unjust that comes from vanity and ambition is even more the product of social institutions. These alone bring it about that man is dominated by man, not by the law, and that a *great position*

- is something other than an office that is difficult to fulfill,
- offers personal rewards beyond the honour—or the glory—of filling it well if it presents opportunities for great talent,
- cannot be secured merely through public service and public esteem or through merely being thought worthy of it.

Social institutions alone, in opening fortune's gates to cunning, intrigue, cabal, and corruption for all classes, separate

- ambition from
- the love of glory that would ennoble it and purify its means.

Social institutions, in consecrating hereditary rights (most of which were abusive from the outset), have provided pushy mediocrity with an infallible way of

rising to a great position—and indeed to a tyrannical one, for any such position is (or will become) tyrannical unless it was established for the general interest and is limited to what that interest demands. If in all positions one were bound by the laws and obliged to act only in accordance with them, and if all positions were conferred by a general choice and by a free election, conscience would rarely have to combat the interest that leads to crime and the injustices that ambition can inspire. Morality would even cease needing to reproach the ambitious for the weakness of character, the cowardice in opinions, the base flattery, the art of toadying to vice and vanity—in short, *all* the corrupting means—that are too often required for success and that quietly undermine all the foundations of the virtues.

Vanity attached to non-personal things is obviously the work of depraved social institutions, because all these things owe their existence to these institutions that have pointlessly adopted them by always preferring individual and local interests to the general interest. As for pride born of personal advantages, it becomes dangerous and potentially criminal only when general opinion, led astray by institutions, exaggerates the worth of trivial qualities. The vanity of good looks and external charms is a passion that spawns jealousies and intense hatreds only in countries where •there are courts, grandees, and ruinous fortunes, •where favouritism is in play and being favoured is the marker of ascent, and •where these charms can lead to anything and can sometimes even produce revolutions. In such countries even men of the lower classes who cannot aspire to these brilliant successes view them with admiration and envy, and are excited by accounts of them; as in Rome the lowest soldiers, who could not hope for any honours in the •formal• triumph •in which they marched•, came away from that ceremony drunk with the fury of conquest. The same is true for vanity

based on intellect and talent; it is dangerous only when the seduced multitude lavishes on charlatans and hypocrites the esteem and rewards that should go only to true merit. But let all faulty institutions be abolished world-wide, let only necessary and reasonable laws remain, and let arbitrary power that sinks its victims into misery and servitude and reduces them to ignorance and credulity disappear forever, and

- human reason will re-emerge healthy and vigorous from beneath its chains, predominating in all classes and itself shaping public opinion;
- false talent will no longer be able to seduce public opinion, and
- disguised vices will no longer risk appearing before its tribunal.

Besides, in this battle against bad faith and base jealousy. . . . what is at stake is not *glory*; genuine glory is indisputable, and is fought for only by means worthy of obtaining it. All that can be usurped and snatched by injustice are the *outward signs of glory*. [Summing up this whole long paragraph:] Thus, among all peoples whose government is not based on the natural rights of man, the present social order is the single cause of the obstacles that ambition and vanity put in the way of the stirrings of conscience; and in a well-ordered society conscience would nearly always be able to overcome these obstacles, because if ambition and vanity acquired any force *there* they would be in accord with reason and justice.

•(a) INJUSTICE FROM AN INTEREST IN LOVE•

Immoral actions driven by love must also be imputed to these same faulty institutions.

By 'love' I do not mean the tender, profound, often generous and always delicate sentiment which



- has as its primary pleasure the pleasure of loving;
- has as its primary aim the sweetness of being loved;
- has as its most constant concern the happiness and tranquility of the loved one;
- attaches greater weight to possession than to enjoyment;
- does not usurp or deceive;
- wants to receive everything, grant everything, and deserve everything through the heart; and
- recognises only the sensuality [*volupté*] that *it* prepares for and approves.

This passion is not the common one: it involves •a mutual sympathy that is hard to find and even harder to recognise, •a generous character and strong sensibility that are rare, and are nearly always accompanied by some other superior qualities. Nor is it the passion that often leads to injustice, because what it leads to—what it *consists in*—is •a two-way devotion which inspires both parties to make sacrifices yet doesn't allow either to accept any sacrifice that would harm the other, •an automatic forgetting of oneself in order to enter into the existence and the happiness of the person one loves. Besides, the duration and the fineness of these feelings enables them nearly always to pass smoothly over obstacles, and their generosity and freedom from self-interest usually lead them to make their own judgments, that are as severe as conscience.

So in general the only 'love' that can be a drive towards an interest in being unjust is the desire to possess—or to have possessed—some woman. Setting aside the extra power that society has been able to give to this desire through faulty institutions that stir up pride and vanity, and looking at this 'love' in isolation, we will find straight off that the inequality that the laws have produced (and that will long outlast them)

has by itself •created an idle class of men for whom gallantry is an occupation, a pastime, a game, and •made it easy to sacrifice victims to the flames of this passion, putting it into the service of ambition and cupidity. Here is an imagined state of affairs that would put a stop to this.

- Imagine that this same inequality and the laws dreamed up to support it stopped reducing most marriages to mere contracts and commercial exchanges, signed off on so quickly that only long afterwards can anyone tell whether individual wishes played a part in them; contracts in which the sale price of 'love' . . . is set along with the dowry, before either party knows if he or she *can* love or (especially) be loved.

- Imagine also that man stopped up imposing on his inconstant heart and even more variable will unbreakable ties that clash with his nature whose mobility and proud independence require a habitual sense of being *free*.

- Imagine that divorce becomes permissible among all peoples; and that in the light of human weakness and the more persistent needs of one sex it becomes possible, as in ancient Rome, to form temporary unions that the law regulates and does not punish.

Then one would see right away that most of the unjust actions occasioned by love (or rather by the degradation of love) would have nothing to drive them, and that that passion itself, through the ease in satisfying it, would lose the dangerous force it gets from the obstacles to it. So it is society which—by

- for too long placing hobbles on unions that mutual likings would have formed,
- establishing (under the pretext of maintaining virtue) barriers between the sexes that virtually rule out the mutual understanding of hearts and minds that is needed for virtuous and enduring unions,

- arousing the vanity of men and giving them an interest in corrupting women,
- making pleasure accompanied by some feeling more difficult, and
- extending the realm of shame beyond what really deserves it (such as not securing the welfare of one's children, promise-breaking, contemptible going-along-with. . . , and character flaws indicating weakness or lack of self-control)

—has given birth to dangerous and corrupt passions that are not are not *love* and have made love so rare.

. . . It would be easy to apply to women everything I have said here about men on this subject, and to justify the opinion of a philosopher who is even more wise than famous: 'The faults of women are the work of men, just as the vices [see Glossary] of nations are the crime of their tyrants.' [The philosopher in question is her husband Condorcet.]

·THE POISONOUS EFFECTS OF HABITUATION·

You have just seen, my dear C\*\*, how the vices of social institutions help stir up the various interests we have for being unjust; but this—the strengthening of these interests—is not their only way of making conscience too weak to be effective. They also weaken conscience's power by giving people the *habit* of resisting it. The drives we might have for committing injustice, having acquired greater force through the errors of the social system, have led men to act badly *more often* than conscience has been able to keep them from doing so. That resulted in the influence of conscience being weakened, in some people by the habit of brushing off its warnings and in others by the habit of violating it; because frequency of engaging in or seeing bad behaviour indirectly lessens remorse and the fear of being exposed to it, except in robust souls whose sense of justice and goodness has

an incorruptible strength. Here is why I say that frequently acting badly or seeing others do so lessens remorse in an indirect way.

(i) We naturally seek to rid ourselves of any painful feeling, and a man tormented by remorse will try to distance himself from ideas that involve it and to surround himself with all the reasons that can lighten its burden. At this point vicious institutions finish the task they have started: they provide the man with the means for long-term misreading of his own heart; they even give him leave to consider as inevitable, as necessary, as politically neutral, or even as useful the evil for which the institutions are responsible and for which they then become the excuse.

(ii) Also, habit alone dulls every feeling; pain and pleasure (especially when they are mild) are always increased by contrast with a recent different state; one of the factors in the intensity of any joy or suffering that we experience is the state we were in when it started. And this holds also for a man who is merely a habitual witness to injustice; it becomes attenuated in his eyes, unless he has both •a firm intellect that can't be taken in by the excuses of vice and •the strong, manly sensibility that cannot be misled or corrupted and that can remain indignant for a long time without becoming unpleasantly weary.

In proportion as vice becomes more common, its successes become more brilliant, more visible, and simply *bigger*, and the real interest in acting badly is stimulated by the hope of getting in this way the means for more vast and daring projects. The price-manipulator who pulls off a little swindle to win fifty gold coins has before his eyes the certified Croesus who has gained millions through something similar. Greed does not stop at the advantages a few silver coins might bring. The fanaticism of greed lets him look ahead to

the moment when he will have heaps of gold—it has already corrupted his conscience.

So the authority of an ordinary conscience, together with reasonable laws, would suffice for man to be just and good. But ever since social institutions in so many nations have

- degraded human nature more often than they have perfected it,
- given man incomplete and false moral ideas, and passions more dangerous than his natural ones, and
- led him to lose the rectitude and original vigour of his conscience,

man has needed, if he is to stay on the path of virtue, the power and insight that nature so rarely gives and that he, hearing nature at a distance, can get only by listening to her voice in deep and thoughtful meditation.

### **Letter 8: Sympathy and penal law**

You have seen, my dear C\*\*\*, how greatly the interest in being unjust was spread and intensified by faulty institutions; that the latter, far from protecting man against his own weaknesses, often do nothing but take advantage of them so as to lead him toward corruption by the means that are the most effective for enticing the small number who benefit from it, and for imposing it on the multitude who suffer from it; that by hindering man in the exercise of his natural rights for whole centuries they have led him from mere misfortune to the credulous and idiotic blindness that makes him accept as a law of necessity the chains he has become incapable of judging and breaking. It will not be difficult to show how reasonable laws can both add to the personal interest in being just and strengthen the power of conscience even with respect to matters which it alone must govern and punish.

Actions contrary to justice can be divided into two classes:

•genuine crimes that the law punishes, and •unjust actions that do not fall within the scope of the law because they are either unimportant or difficult to prove. In all societies there are laws to punish crimes, and penalties are established that seem at least strong enough to deter crimes but very often fail to do so, leading to complaints that the penalties are not severe enough.

But has anyone examined with enough impartiality and attention what some philosophers—all too few of them!—have written on this topic in recent years? [This refers mainly to Cesare Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments*.] I shan't be afraid to remind you of it here, because one *should* repeat important truths, not only to get them adopted by all enlightened men but also to silence the self-interested defenders of the abuses these truths challenge.

#### ·AGAINST EXTREMELY SEVERE PUNISHMENTS·

What prevents crime is not so much the severity of penalties as their certainty, and when they are extremely severe that always produces impunity. A humane man does not denounce a servant who has stolen from him when the servant is subject to the death penalty; and the same humane drive almost always keeps people from reporting minor thefts that would bring a penalty which, though less serious, would still not fit the crime. On the other hand, if for lesser crimes we limited correctional penalties to public opinion and really let that be the punishment, and if for ordinary offences as well as for the most heinous ones we did not abruptly break all the links that tie the guilty person to society. . . . (by taking his life or by shaming him with indelible infamy), then out of the common interest everyone would make it a duty to denounce criminals; and would be even less lenient toward them if *need* and the degradation to which it leads were not almost always their excuse. Thus criminal laws by their

severity and civil laws when they favour inequality are the cause of the impunity of lesser crimes, and they can also be seen as the cause of greater crimes, because the impunity of the lesser emboldens people to commit the greater.

For fear of punishment to be effective and salutary, the penalty must not be revoltingly severe; the justice of it must be apparent to the most ordinary reason; and above all it must, while punishing conscience's dozing silence, *awaken* it. If instead of that

- the penalties are too strong,
- rather than inspiring horror for the crime they themselves convey the idea of barbarism or of injustice,
- they do not punish the injustices the poor suffer at the hands of the rich, or
- when these injustices are not suitable for legal punishment the law does not prevent them in some other way,
- the judge can at his own choice stiffen or soften a penalty,
- there are personal privileges, hereditary or local, that allow someone to legally avoid punishment or provide indirect but reliable means of doing so,

then the people are tempted to regard the criminal laws as having been made *against* them *for* the rich, the result of a coalition intended to oppress them; in which case they hate these laws even more than they fear them—these laws that no longer sting their conscience because they sicken their reason. This hate conquers fear in resolute souls and in all those embittered by the allied sentiments of injustice and need.

Laws that favour the inequality of fortunes, in addition to all the drawbacks I have pointed out to you, also multiply the number of people who have nothing to lose. The man who has some property not only •feels more strongly that it is just

to respect the property of others but •is held back ·from theft· by the fear of losing his own property, by fear of reprisal, and by the necessity of giving back at least the value of what he has stolen. The interest in pursuing him is increased by the ·victims'· hope of restitution, which increases his fear of being exposed to the slightest suspicion and of having to put up an always unpleasant and expensive defence against accusations. Finally, if the vices of social institutions did not open the door to bad actions that are hard to prove, impossible to get reparations for, and sometimes dangerous even to complain about, there would be fewer men reduced to committing overt theft. If the social order preserved men's natural rights, that would put them in the best position to respect one another's rights, and then these rights would be guaranteed by each individual's interest in his own happiness and tranquility even more than by the laws.

#### ·DEFENDING THE PHILOSOPHERS·

You see then, my dear C\*\*\*, that social institutions are still very far from having derived from penal laws all the good that could come from them; and they cannot do this unless the people come to regard those whose business it is to apply the laws, to arrest the guilty, and to condemn them, not as their masters but only as their defenders and friends.

It is through thoughts like these about what criminal laws *could be* that the philosophers have been led to attack laws that bring more abuses than advantages. Though this critique was wanted by all unbiased men and justified by all too many injustices, it earned those who undertook it the label of 'innovators'—meant as an insult, but actually a badge of honour:

- if they called for laws that the guilty cannot escape and the innocent never have to fear, they called for *just* laws;

- if they called for less harsh laws, they did this by demonstrating that the harshness of the laws is as dangerous as it is unjust;
- if they considered *reason* and *public utility* as the natural and unshakable judges of social institutions, it is because they are the only general and infallible rules.

So their critics should either •stop slandering these philosophers and trying to silence them, or •come right out with it and claim that it is dangerous to make use of one's reason. . . . Another reproach levelled against these philosophers—one as apparently serious as it is obviously ridiculous—accuses them of wanting to substitute the wheel [a device for torturing someone to death] and the scaffold for the true foundation of morality and especially for supernatural drives towards being just. Those who are accused of wanting to govern men by these barbaric means. . . .are the very ones who sought to *soften* the laws so as to make them more inescapable and efficacious, the ones who asked for justice and reason to judge what punishments would fit what crimes. If until now cruel laws associated with supernatural drives have not been able to keep men from turning to crime, then the charge of 'slandering human nature' no longer holds against those who have said that laws that were gentler and better related to one another, uniting their force to that of reason and conscience, could have more power to prevent crime.

Are there any countries where a better and more common use of supernatural drives makes it unnecessary to establish a penal code? Does history reveal a people under the sway of these drives who were neither barbaric nor corrupt? •Of course not! Then let their defenders content themselves with offering them as a great hope, and a sometimes useful and gentle consolation, to the unfortunate individual for whom

the sentiments of courage and virtue cannot suffice; but let them stop boasting that they are elevating human nature at the very moment when they are degrading it by offering it an imaginary and make-believe grandeur and demeaning what is greatest and noblest in human nature, reason and conscience. Let them also stop *accusing* conscience of being insufficient, when it is they who make it so by establishing on the ruins of reason an extrinsic power that can only rule amidst their rubble.

•THE MAN WHO HAS NOTHING TO LOSE•

Tell me, my dear C\*\*\*, what drive or interest would lead someone who has nothing to lose to respect another's property? This question is not perplexing when one thinks about it. Start with an established craftsman or farmer who depends on his own labour for his subsistence: he has the greatest reason to respect others' property, either because without this respect he would soon be unemployed or because •he is afraid that others will not respect his property•. Even if he has no assured resources for his subsistence, he will have some garments, some animals, some supplies, and some furniture, and the poorer he is the more he must fear the loss of his last resources:

- if he is well off his fear of being robbed must be strong because of •his role as a target of• greed, and
- if he hasn't enough to live on the strength of this fear must be commensurate with his needs.

Besides, the general utility that leads one to respect the property of others is palpable from the moment everyone can hope to own something (and I have shown you that in a well-governed country nearly everyone will have some little property). Consider the worker who has nothing: if he hopes that in the prime of life he can accumulate enough to support him in his old age, he will lose this precious and

necessary hope the moment he stops respecting others' property. Precious and necessary though it is, this hope's *power* cannot be appreciated unless one follows—through time, and with concern—the lives of some of these unfortunate beings who, forced each day to weigh their strength against their needs, don't imagine any happiness beyond being able to live without work or at least without anxiety. Furthermore, if theft were limited to what is absolutely necessary to preserve existence at the moment an overriding need threatens it,

- first, morality would look on this act with forbearance, but in any case
- even then theft would be the least and the most dangerous option, because as soon as bad laws stop multiplying needs and accidents, one will always do better by trying to get help through legitimate and peaceable means.

Simply eliminate the extreme inequality that puts the poor too far from the rich to be known by them, puts the rich too far from the poor to see them or to have their hearts touched by the voice of humanity, and unexpected misfortunes will become rarer and will be more securely remedied. Deprive all the petty tyrants of their devastating power, and whisk away the heaps of gold of which the smallest and least illegitimate may have secretly created a thousand victims, so that man can no longer be raised so high above man that he stops seeing his duties alongside his interests, and thievery and fraud will become rare enough for their most fearsome punishments to consist in their being made public.

·UNJUST ACTIONS THAT ARE NOT ILLEGAL·

As for unjust actions that are rightly not the object of penal laws, be it noted that in general everyone has an interest in getting the trust of others through a reputation for honesty and virtue; we like our tenant farmer to be an upright man

and our servant to be faithful; we prefer the craftsman whose probity is recognised to one whose honesty is suspect. If this drive towards getting confidence is not very strong in today's societies, that is because

- with the acquisition of many social advantages general trust doesn't come into it, because
- a host of institutions, apparently established for a useful purpose and preserved as prerogatives and sacred possessions, exempt *civilised* men from virtues that *savage* men would need if they were to live together in peace; because
- nearly everywhere the rewards of vanity dislodge the rights of true merit and stifle the sense of merit; because
- the multiplicity and obscurity of laws, regulations, etc. do not allow us to recognise where probity exists, or allow people to acquire and preserve a false reputation for probity; because
- religious hypocrisy offers yet another almost certain means of doing that; because
- all the abuses make it possible for someone to get a reputation for probity by dishonest self-seeking and manipulative skill, without ·outright· lying and without even hiding anything much; and because
- men are estranged from one another by the extreme inequality of fortunes, the great distance separating one class from another.

For the virtues to be known and communicated, they must somehow be placed at the same economic level: the powerful man and the worker he employs are too far apart to judge each other; and at this ·social· distance where their duties towards one another seem to disappear, one can oppress the other almost without remorse, and the latter can deceive the former with impunity and can even believe that he

is entitled to do so. The misery of a large group, leading them to be suspicious and grasping and deceptive, makes it all the more impossible for them to insist on honesty in those they buy from or sell to. Thus, in all social relations a host of wicked institutions isolates man from man—on one side by the abuse of power, on the other by the denial of natural rights—making probity and justice useless and foreign, annihilating nearly all their advantages and the drives towards them. . . .

·MORE ON THE FAULTS OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS·

Not only did the errors of social institutions make men almost indifferent to performing the most sacred duties—confining a full-force interest in performing them to a small number of sensitive beings who *need* the happiness of doing their duty and have a built-in attraction for everything relating to virtue—but they also, also by means of the artificial ‘needs’ they created, weakened one of the most powerful drives towards honest conduct, namely the drive to enjoy domestic peace. Through exaggerated rewards and by unfair and heady distinctions, they exalted amour-propre to the point of turning it into a dominant passion that could stifle the most powerful as well as the most delicate sentiments. And they derailed, corrupted, and blinded amour-propre by assigning what ought to be the rewards of great deeds and grand virtues to those who were in high positions or happened to have ‘good’ births or large fortunes.

In all classes and in all passions, social institutions added to the primary and real existence of each individual an imaginary belief-fed existence whose ‘needs’ were more numerous, insatiable, and fickle, and whose pleasures were inevitably followed by disgust; so that a man shaped by these institutions was no longer happy or unhappy **in himself**, because his faculties were well or badly used or because he

possessed or lacked things his faculties pointed to; he no longer judged, acted, and enjoyed on the basis of **his own** thoughts and feelings;

- hemmed in on nearly all sides by unjust laws, and blessed by fortune or enticed towards it by the abuses spawned by these laws,
- blinded and softened by his interests that were nearly always opposed to the voices of reason and humanity,
- able to satisfy his most audacious claims without having to justify them by true merit, and to satisfy his most corrupt passions without universal contempt recalling him to remorse, and
- placed, as soon as he he had enough to live on, in the circle of vanity, a plaything of the innumerable prejudices with which it entangled his steps,

the opinion of **others** became the voice of his conscience, the always necessary justification of his pleasures and the first requirement for his happiness. This picture will doubtless seem exaggerated to you, my dear C\*\*, but I can explain why that might be so, without backing down. Automatically and effortlessly devoted as you are to your works and your affections, your habitual sense of reason and virtue has perhaps put you too far from most men to perceive all their errors or at least the errors’ deep roots. Yet who in society will not find, in an honest self-examination, that he bears within himself society’s principal traits? What man of the world (rare as he may be) is not still led—in his choice of home life, in the use of his time or his fortune, in his pleasures, tastes and even his affections—by the indirect but real effect of our institutions to sacrifice to vanity what his true happiness required?

•Where is he who, faithful to reason and nature, prefers the true pleasures attached to peace and domestic virtues to the seductive pleasures of amour-propre, the habit of

which makes one lose the need for the others and indeed for any taste or sense of them? •Where is he who never allows himself to be carried away by all that idleness and corruption have contrived to relieve man from the weight of self-awareness? an awareness that quickly becomes burdensome unless the charm of virtue comes to mix with the consuming charm of the passions and the dry pleasures of the mind. •Where is he who always reserves a part of his soul for self-reflection and for enjoying nature's sentiments with the ease and self-consciousness that is the source of all their delight and all their power? •Where is the man who, when surrounded by institutions, prejudices, and customs whose effect was to tightly bind sensibility to amour-propre, would *need* simple private pleasure, to find around his own hearth the security of mutual esteem and the exquisite peace of reciprocal understanding, goodwill, and boundless indulgence, still feeling some attraction for those gentle sentiments that passion and vanity look on with contempt but can be described as the warp and weft of happiness, the only fabric that time does not wear out or cast away?

•Where is he who, instead of always seeking far from nature some new way of enjoying or abusing his blessings, each day discovers in his ·immediate· surroundings a new pleasure in transforming all the constraints of duty and servitude into relations of beneficence, good faith, and goodness, thereby making his household an asylum where the happiness that he is owed forces him to delight in his own existence?

O you intimate and consoling enjoyments attached to peace and private virtues! True and touching pleasures that never leave a heart once you have melted it! You, from which we are ceaselessly alienated by the tyrannical power of vanity whose seductive magic allows us to perceive ourselves only under the dark colours of duty, discontent, and monotony. Woe unto anyone who disdains and abandons you! Woe above all to the sex who are briefly loaded with resplendent gifts from nature (which for so long afterwards is a cruel stepmother), if they neglect you or don't know you! For it is with you that they must spend half their lives forgetting (if possible) the enchanted cup that the hand of time overturns for them in mid-life!