

SOPHIE DE GROUCHY ON THE PROBLEM OF ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

GETTY L. LUSTILA

ABSTRACT: In this article, I consider Grouchy's critique of economic inequality and her proposed solution to what she perceives as this grave social ill. On her view, economic inequality chips away at the bonds of accountability in society and prevents people from seeing one another as moral equals. As a step toward restoring these bonds between people, Grouchy argues that: first, we should expand property ownership, thereby giving each person a stake in the community; second, we should ensure access to education and redirect its aims, to provide people with the necessary tools to reason about the common good. In so doing, Grouchy claims, we can reawaken the sense of accountability that people have to one another in community.

1. INTRODUCTION

Economic inequality was pervasive in eighteenth-century Europe. Though many treated it as a social ill, inequality was seen to be largely unavoidable. Some philosophers like Sophie de Grouchy argued that inequality on the level it existed was pernicious and unsustainable. On her view, vast inequality produces conditions of dependence for the least fortunate and places

Getty L. Lustila is Assistant Teaching Professor of Philosophy at Northeastern University. His primary area of research is eighteenth-century European moral and political philosophy. Lustila has published on several figures, including David Hume, Damaris Cudworth Masham, John Gay, Catharine Trotter Cockburn, Adam Smith, and Sophie de Grouchy.

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their livelihood in the hands of the privileged classes. Meanwhile, the powerful can cement their hereditary honors and secure their position of privilege for generations to come. Without any meaningful opportunity for advancement, the least fortunate will resent the wealthy and powerful for the benefits that they have been gifted off the backs of others. Over time, Grouchy points out, a shared distrust develops between the parties, which chips away at their sense of accountability to one another: they cease to see each other as moral equals. Unless this situation is addressed, she warns that virtue and happiness will seldom be found in our societies. Fortunately, Grouchy notes, there are solutions to these dire concerns.¹

In this article, I will be focusing on how to restore interpersonal bonds of accountability in the community in wake of the moral damage caused by economic inequality. Grouchy's solution here is, first, to expand property holdings and thereby give people a stake in community life; second, to increase access to education and ensure that its aim is moral—that it helps people develop the ability to think about themselves in relation to the common good. There is another story to tell about restoring the bonds of accountability between people and their community. The reforms required here are political and legal in nature. For instance, Grouchy argues that appointments should be made “by a general choice and a free election” to ensure those in office are accountable to everyone (Grouchy 2019, 147). In this way, the electorate could see the laws under which they live as reflections of their own interests. Also, as Grouchy claims, the justice of a law “must be perceptible to average reason” (147). Only then can we come to see those who enforce them “not as the masters of the law but only as its defenders and its friends” (148).²

My concern in this article is to analyze Grouchy's strategies for how to address interpersonal failures of accountability due to economic inequality. I begin by examining her view of accountability. For Grouchy, to see ourselves as being accountable to another is to consider them as our moral equal. She maintains that this, in her terms, “sentiment of natural equality” is awakened in us through the experience of remorse (66). In the second section, I address the widespread loss of interpersonal accountability Grouchy sees in her time and how it impacts the relationship between the wealthy and the poor. On her view, the wealthy have

¹See Scurr (2009) for the reception of Grouchy's thoughts on inequality, especially as they relate to Adam Smith.

²Thank you to the anonymous referee who encouraged me to clarify the scope of this article.

become slaves to their vanity and tyrants to all, while the poor have been gradually reduced to a state of dependence. In sections three and four, I consider two of Grouchy's proposals to help restore these bonds of interpersonal accountability: first, expand property ownership; second, increase access to education and redirect its aims toward moral ends. In so doing, Grouchy maintains these strategies are necessary for the wealthy and the poor to see each other as moral equals and, hence, to restoring the bonds of accountability between them.

2. BEING ACCOUNTABLE TO OTHERS

To be accountable to someone is not just to be obligated to treat them in certain ways. It also requires that you recognize yourself as falling under this obligation.³ I may be obligated to respect your property rights. It follows that I should not steal your record collection. Still, I might not see myself as owing you anything. Perhaps I think you are an unlikeable person or that you do not deserve a nice collection. In this case, I do not see myself as accountable to you with regard to your property rights even if I recognize that you do have them. This presents a problem for us. It is all too easy to populate our lives with obligations via any reasonable set of moral principles, but seeing ourselves as beholden to them is a different matter. For Grouchy, the key to understanding the nature of accountability lies in our grasping the experience of being accountable, delving into the sentiments that shape our moral experience. On her view, remorse is that sentiment most central to our experience of accountability.

Remorse derives from our sympathetic nature.⁴ We experience others' pleasures and pains by way of sympathy and are naturally averse to the sight of suffering. Grouchy notes that this aversity is "sharper still when we are the voluntary, or even the involuntary cause of this unhappiness" (107).

³My understanding of the relationship between obligation and accountability is influenced by Darwall (2006).

⁴Grouchy argues that morality is based in our capacity for sympathy. In this respect, she follows Adam Smith and David Hume, though she does not express any familiarity with Hume's work. Grouchy does take herself to depart from Smith in that she aims to discover the "first cause and show, at last, why sympathy is the property of every sensible being susceptible to reflection" (Grouchy 2019, 58). As many scholars have pointed out, the contents of *Letters on Sympathy* do not follow through on this intention in any systematic way. For more on her account of sympathy, see Dawson (1991, 2004), Forget (2001, 2003), Tegos (2013), Malherbe (2015), Bréban and Dellemotte (2016). For more on her view of remorse and its place in morals, see Lustila (2023).

Remorse names that pain we experience when we harm another. But unlike other pains, remorse sticks with us long after “the pain memory of the harm we caused is no longer distinct in our mind” (108). Say that I strike you with my bike in a moment of inattention, and you fall and break your arm. I experience remorse in the moment, but this pain remains with me after you are no longer on the ground. Even though my inattention is hardly a sign of gross moral failure I feel awful for harming you, and I resolve to be more attentive in the future: “the fear of causing the same evil again is added to that painful feeling, producing a painful sensation that bring about the resolution to avoid any occasion that might lead to it, and is thus the inspiration for prudence” (108).

This lesson in prudence causes us to be more aware of our “power to benefit and harm others” (109). Grouchy claims that this lesson is not one we will soon forget, identifying remorse as “one of the most deadly enemies of man’s peace . . . [as] it renders him incapable of enjoyment” (109). She argues that this experience of being in the grips of remorse makes the fear of it an effective motive against vice: “fear of remorse is enough to keep all men away from evil, either because all are at least a little acquainted with remorse, even for a small misdeed, or because imagination alone suffices to give an idea of the torments that result from remorse even to a person who has only ever done good—if indeed such a person even existed!” (108). Our fear of remorse turns us back on ourselves and forces us to reflect on how we impact others with our actions, even unintentionally.

One consequence of this increased awareness is that we learn how to take up the perspectives of others and to think about matters from a general point of view.⁵ From this point of view, we develop our moral ideas, those of moral good—any action that benefits another in a way that is sanctioned by reason—and moral evil—an action that harms another in a manner not sanctioned by reason (110–11).⁶ Armed with these ideas, we are able to

⁵When speaking of the general point of view, Grouchy uses the language of “general sympathy,” which she distinguishes from “particular sympathy.” See Grouchy (2019, 77, 109–10). For more on this distinction and its significance for her moral theory, see Bréban and Dellemotte (2016), Dawson (2004), and Forget (2001).

⁶It is not immediately clear what Grouchy means by the terms “sanctioned by reason” or “in a manner contrary to reason.” I tend to interpret the former as “producing an all-things-considered benefit to another” and the latter as “producing an all-things-considered harm to them.” Many benefits and harms are short-term and overridden by their contrary in time. Grouchy is interested in genuine, long-lasting benefits and harms. On this reading Grouchy’s normative ethics is straightforwardly utilitarian. While this interpretation is an unpopular one, even Bergès and Schliesser have trouble avoiding it completely. See Grouchy (2019, 26–27).

better reflect on and guide our behavior. We begin to recognize any harm we cause that does not produce a corresponding and overriding benefit as a moral evil. This idea of moral evil is implanted in our hearts as our “conscience,” and we learn to govern ourselves by its lights without needing to “weigh or calculate the consequences of doing so” (112). Even if my shortsighted self-interest dictates that I filch your record collection to bolster my own, conscience will ensure that my selfishness is never given a legitimate hearing.

Still, Grouchy recognizes that we can be overpowered by remorse.⁷ She discusses those “easily moved” people who tend to act “rashly” when influenced by their experience of remorse (113). These individuals act foolishly and without regard for situation, all in hopes of relieving their remorse as quickly as possible. Consider the case where I strike you with my bike. I might offer you an outrageous amount of money or give you my shirt after seeing you have ripped yours in falling. Neither of these actions are dictated by moral goodness—they are driven by a remorse-stricken state. Your need and genuine benefit should take priority over my pain. I should instead let the situation unfold and respond to what you seemingly require, whether it be a ride to the hospital or nothing at all. In this way, Grouchy claims that if one’s “sensibility is deeper and more reasoned,” remorse will direct one’s attention to a harm, but one will be guided by moral goodness in addressing it (113).

According to Grouchy, a second consequence of this increased awareness of how we impact others with our actions is that we open the door to experiencing other people as moral equals. When we harm someone and feel remorseful, “the sentiment of natural equality” is awakened in us (66).⁸ Through this awakening I come to see this person as member of my moral community. It is important, for Grouchy, that this “sentiment of natural equality” is a sentiment as opposed to merely an idea. She is looking to capture the way in which our experience of others as moral

⁷This paragraph is a response to the objection that remorse is too fickle an emotion to guide moral action.

⁸The idea of humanity plays a central role in eighteenth-century moral philosophy. The concept of humanity has its roots in Ancient Rome, most famously in Cicero’s *De Officiis*. For Cicero, to possess a sense of humanity is to acknowledge that we belong in the “fellowship of the human race” (Cicero 1991, 60). Readers who are familiar with Hume’s moral writings will notice similarities between Hume and Grouchy in their treatment of sympathy and humanity. The parallel is most likely coincidental, given that Grouchy was likely unfamiliar with Hume’s writings. For more on the role of humanity in Hume’s works, see Debes (2007), Hanley (2011), and Taylor (2013).

equals binds our actions. While the idea of moral equality may motivate the fully developed agent, Grouchy maintains that these rational commitments have their basis in fellow-feeling, or our sense of our humanity. Surely our ideas of moral good or evil help direct this sentiment of natural equality, serving as guidelines for how to treat moral equals; however, unless this sentiment is awakened in us, these guidelines will not be seen by us as binding. We will then fail to see others as moral equals and ourselves as accountable to them.

On Grouchy's view, there are two facets to seeing another as our moral equal. First, we "turn pale at the sight of [their] suffering," and if they do so wrongly, our "heart brim[s] with indignation for [this] injustice" (65). But indignation is not sufficient to secure this idea of full-blooded moral equality. We must also learn how to treat them as our moral equal. The second facet to seeing someone as my moral equal comes in treating them as a rights-bearer, who is owed respect on these grounds. This respect proceeds from more than an acknowledgement of their moral equality, like with the undeserving owner of the record collection that I happen to covet. I acknowledge this person as an equal but harbor resentment toward them for their ill-gotten gains, gains that I would be happy to take off their hands. If I viewed myself as their equal, I would be reticent to harm them. The experience of being beholden to another person then gives rise to this sense of an accountability inside us.

For Grouchy, a characteristic sign that you see someone as your moral equal, and yourself as accountable to them, is that you are repulsed by their rights being violated. Grouchy's chief example is property rights: "Thus, a man who . . . has taken pains to cultivate a field, to supervise its harvest, has a right to this harvest . . . reason demands that we give him preference even when he does not need all his harvest while another has a real need of some harvest" (119). To compel the farmer to share his harvest violates his rights, and so to be repelled by this compulsion is to view him as my equal. Even when you are moved to violate another's rights, Grouchy claims, you experience a "fear of a more violent remorse," which stops you (123). On her view, we "cannot see the rights of others violated without feeling keenly the idea that [our] rights might be violated" (123). That "unpleasant sentiment" we feel for the perpetrator is turned back on us (130).

One might argue that Grouchy's point is too strong; after all, we are quick to violate the rights of others and jealously protect our own.⁹ I agree

⁹This objection was raised by an anonymous referee.

that, as a description of our behavior, her view should strike anyone as hopelessly naïve. Still, Grouchy would respond that our failure to be repulsed by rights-violations is explained by the fact that our sense of remorse is being blocked by a countervailing idea, likely the thought that we have something to gain from the violation. The fault for this idea, for her, is to be laid squarely at the feet of “a vicious system of legislation [that], instead of bringing together the interests of individuals, has for a long time now only separated them and set them against each other” (93). Until we address this incentive structure, we will experience other people as our competition and fall short of seeing them as moral equals. Our sense of accountability will thereby be smothered by our inhumanity. In the next section, I discuss how this unfortunate process occurs.

3. TROUBLES IN THE RANKS

To understand how our remorse can be dulled and we can fail to see others as our equals, it is important to touch on a few aspects of Grouchy’s account of sympathy. According to her, there are two aspects of sympathy: sensitivity and reflection. Sensitivity refers to our baseline receptiveness to the sentiments of others, while reflection is our ability to connect these sentiments to our own experience. When our sensitivity and reflection work together, we develop the ability to both take on and appropriately respond to the sentiments of others. This “dulling” of our sentiments takes place at the level of our sensitivity.¹⁰ Two factors determine our degree of sensitivity to others’ sentiments: first, our acquaintance with the relevant “symptoms of suffering”; and second, our scope of “sensibility, imagination, and memory” (61). If we lack experience, our sensitivity will not function properly; we will not process what others are feeling or know how to respond appropriately. While our capacity for sensitivity is natural, the extent to which we are sensitive is determined by experience.¹¹

Grouchy points out that “the school of pain and adversity is [so] efficacious in rendering men more compassionate and humane” (62). Her claim is that exposure to hardship leads us to understand that everyone is

¹⁰The concept of “sensitivity” plays an important role in the eighteenth-century French philosophical and scientific context. For more on this context see Riskin (2002).

¹¹Thank you to the anonymous referee who suggested there is an overlap between Grouchy’s claim about how our social position impacts our status as a knower and standpoint epistemology. Currently there are no studies of Grouchy’s social epistemology. The topic strikes me as an important avenue for future research.

apt to undergo “misery and pain,” regardless of position (62). This realization highlights what we share with others, expanding our imagination, increasing our sensitivity, and nurturing our benevolence (63). It is this susceptibility to the sentiments of others that allows us to see ourselves as bound to one another in our common humanity. As Grouchy notes, “in the midst of the shock of so many passions oppressing the weak and fending off the unfortunate, humanity secretly pleads for them from the bottom of its heart” (66). When we encounter a great deal of suffering in our lives, we are apt to view this suffering as an inextricable part of our condition as opposed to a moral failing. The problem with the wealthy is that their power shields them from everyday suffering, causing them to see those who undergo it as lazy, foolish, or wicked.

Grouchy argues that when we are children, the job of our caretakers to ensure these “precious gems of sensitivity” develop naturally (64). When this process is successful, she claims, our hearts will “brim with indignation for an injustice” and our faces will “turn pale at the sight of suffering” (64). When it is unsuccessful, however, we will learn to treat injustice as natural or good. The problem, on Grouchy’s view, is that this process tends to be unsuccessful.¹² Children are taught to value “their charms, their accomplishments, their employments,” not their virtue (64). Instead, “nonpersonal qualities” like attractiveness become our basis of esteem, which enables “presumptuous mediocrity to rise” (138, 137). The wealthy benefit from this situation, and so they will be the first to adopt “fake talents [that] seduce opinions” (138). Those who succeed in this scheme will do all they can to maintain their position. In the next paragraphs, I will track how the wealthy’s descent occurs and how they trap the poor in a state of hopelessness.

Grouchy imagines that after rising to power, the wealthy inevitably use their position to cement their standing. One way that they fortify their position is by introducing the notion of hereditary rights: “so-called rights of the despot, the aristocrat, and the priest” (121).¹³ These “rights” brand the privileged as a protected class and elevate their interests to priorities for the community, a process she thinks harms everyone. As Grouchy point out, these rights “are prerogatives, which, even though they banished liberty and equality from our midst, many nations, through ignorance and weakness, still describe them as rights!” (121–22). The “sacred title[s] of

¹²I appreciate the anonymous referee who pushed me to clarify this point.

¹³While Grouchy is skeptical of appeals to “hereditary rights,” the idea of rights is a cornerstone of her politics. For more on this point, see Schliesser (2017b) and Halldenius (2019).

right” that the wealthy use to “hide and disguise the power of might” is eventually “inscrutable for the multitude” (122). Over time, these rights are no longer seen as artificial; they are treated as natural and requirements for living peacefully.¹⁴ In time, the wealthy do not see themselves as answerable to others, who in their eyes are subservient to them and whose vocation requires only that they obey.¹⁵

As these rights become further entrenched in the minds of the community, Grouchy maintains that they “give him [the wealthy and powerful person] the permission to look upon the evil of which they are the source and for which they then become the excuse, as inevitable, necessary, or even politically indifferent, or even useful” (142). The wealthy use this defense to cope with the realities of poverty and inequality for which they are responsible. After all, Grouchy claims, absent our being cognitively and affectively aligned with the common good “we have a natural tendency to rid ourselves of any painful feeling; and a person tormented by remorse will strive to move away from all the ideas that keep remorse alive, and to surround himself instead with all the objects that might lighten its weight” (142). Given the intractable conflict between their own successes and the good of the least fortunate, the wealthy look to reframe the poor’s suffering as a regrettable but a nonetheless necessary sacrifice for progress. Dulling their sense of remorse is the price to pay for this result.

Bringing about a society where most people can live safe, secure, and meaningful lives will be near impossible under these circumstances. The wealthy will continue to thrive while all others will be “reduced to a pressing need” by the “lack of wages or insufficient wages” (134). From here, a wedge will be driven between the interests of the wealthy and those of the poor, which creates a state of mutual distrust and hatred. The laws which, as Grouchy points out, are meant to supplement conscience and sharpen our sense of remorse, are rightfully seen by the poor as morally bankrupt, a thinly veiled attempt to reinforce the wealthy’s interests. Not surprisingly, the result is a sense amongst the poor that existing laws and institutions are illegitimate, a judgment with which Grouchy concurs and stresses in *Letters on Sympathy*. Without any reasonable hope to secure property, to hold office, or to enjoy any

¹⁴The idea that heredity rights are seen as natural in time is discussed by Smith as well. For more on this topic, see Schliesser (2017a, 169–86). I thank the anonymous referee who helped me to make this connection.

¹⁵Grouchy proposes holding free and for all individuals to hold public office to ensure that they see themselves as answerable to the general population (2019, 147).

advancement, the poor will begin to treat these institutions as a tool “made against them and in favor of the rich, as the result of an association to oppress them” (147).¹⁶

The least fortunate will begin to “hate” and to “fear” the institutions that govern their lives, especially property, which mutually ensure their disenfranchisement (147). Over time, Grouchy stresses that their “hatred will be enough to overcome fear in strong souls and in those made bitter by the joint feeling of injustice and need” (147). The fear of remorse, which would normally ensure allegiance, or obedience, to the laws of the state will be swamped by feelings of overwhelming hatred. After all, those institutions that were said to liberate us from want and assist us in our journey to fulfillment instead function as “oppressive chains” to everyone except the wealthy and powerful (136). The poor will be “those who have nothing to lose” and be willing to do what is needed to be free (147). In this case, there is little reason for the poor to recognize the authority of their superiors; even if they did so, their obedience would not secure their happiness.

We are left with the following situation. The wealthy and the poor are “strangers to each other” (151). Each of the ranks “gets lost in the distance between them, the one [the wealthy] may oppress the other nearly without remorse, while the other [the poor] will in turn cheat him with impunity, even believing that he is in this way bringing justice to himself” (152). After having “abused power” and “isolated men from one another,” Grouchy claims that our institutions will make “justice useless and alien to them [to people] by annihilating all their advantages and reasons to act on them” (152).¹⁷ While Grouchy blames the wealthy, she hardly rejoices at the poor feeling as if they have nothing to lose. Even if their desperation is the spark needed to light the fire of revolution, we can still mourn the characters of those birthed by these circumstances. Anyone who is deadened to the suffering of others runs the risk of becoming an oppressor, even when their cause is noble.

Grouchy proposes a series of reforms aimed at remedying what she sees as the unfortunate status quo in eighteenth-century France. In the rest of this article, I explore Grouchy’s proposed reforms, the first of which is

¹⁶Letters VII–VIII concern how to ensure that the least fortunate do not see the laws of society as made against them. Delving into this aspect Grouchy’s thought is crucial for addressing our loss of accountability to existing laws and institutions. As noted in the introduction, my focus is how to address the loss of accountability to one another as moral equals. The former issue is an important one that I hope to address in future research.

¹⁷I thank the anonymous referee who asked me to clarify the following point.

aimed at increasing property ownership and will be discussed in the next section. The second set of reforms is aimed at education, both at expanding access and redirecting its aims toward moral ends. If we meaningfully pursue these reforms, Grouchy claims that we will chip away at the obstacles keeping people from seeing each other as equals and restore a sense of mutual accountability. Without the appreciation of moral equality between people living together, there can be no morals.

4. A PLACE OF ONE'S OWN

Grouchy argues that the hereditary honors and privileges of the monarchy and aristocracy is chiefly to blame for conditions of inequality. Many of these privileges concern property ownership, ensuring that the wealthy and powerful have exclusive rights to the use and possession of land. On Grouchy's view, this protectionism "favor[s] inequality of fortunes" and end up multiplying the number of people without property (147). This is a problem because, for her, the reason people respect property rights is that they "are restrained by the fear of losing his own property, by that of retaliation, and by the necessity of repaying at least the value of what he has stolen" (147). In this context, however, the poor have no property to fear losing. Mutual distrust and fear are natural results: the poor are "too far from the rich to be known by them, and the rich too far from the poor to see them, and to let the voice of humanity reach their hearts" (150–51). Grouchy argues that these circumstances make it difficult for each to view the other as their moral equal.

The only way to address this situation, Grouchy argues, is to tackle this inequality by ensuring the poor can own property. Grouchy's claim seems to be that once one owns some property, the fear of losing it motivates one to respect the property rights of others. It is also the case that, once a person owns some property, they are entangled in dependence relations with other property owners. This fact is important because, as Grouchy notes, dependence relations are key in accounting for how our sympathetic concern expands to those beyond our narrow sphere, like our family or our close friends (71–72). While we might not initially be concerned with the good of our fellow property owners, we come to see them as our moral equals once we appreciate our shared interests. After all, in conditions of relative equality, property owners meet one another as equals, which pushes them to recognize that their shared success requires mutual respect—a respect that binds the property owners' interests to one another. Without this respect between them no one's rights are secure.

In perhaps an even more important sense, Grouchy maintains that we can only meaningfully recognize the utility of the institution of property after we become property owners: “the general utility that leads one to respect others’ property is noticeable as soon as all can hope to possess something” (150). Without reasonable hope to own property, the disadvantaged will come to look upon the institution of property and the laws that govern it as tools of oppression. This is why, on Grouchy’s view, “in a well-governed country, nearly all inhabitants would have some small property” (150). While utility grounds our institutions, the existence of even the best institutions requires that we perceive their utility. Otherwise, appeals to utility will seem to be a farce. Central to the efficacy of these institutions is that people can easily see their benefit and take this benefit as their own.

Grouchy is not clear on how much property is required for one to recognize the institution as useful. An uncharitable reading might suggest that any amount of property could do—that tending one’s own garden, however small, is sufficient to elicit respect for others’ property, even in conditions of vast inequality. This interpretation seems unreasonable given the text. For Grouchy, it is important that we possess property because it frees us from a state of dependence on others.¹⁸ If we enjoy relative independence, we will have no reason to fear or to harm others; we can learn to resist the false promise of status and seek our own peace of mind (124). It follows that, according to Grouchy, we require the amount of property necessary to secure our independence, whatever that may be. This amount of property will depend on considerations like one’s station or needs. Once we achieve this independence, we can meaningfully affirm the institution of property and other people’s holdings.

Even if owning property gives us a stake in the community and frees us from a state of relative dependence, one might argue that Grouchy puts too much stress on property ownership as a solution to inequality. Part of her reason for doing so is that she sees inequality as a natural product of debt. France was an agrarian society in the eighteenth century. Peasants scraped

¹⁸Grouchy’s use of the language of “dependence” and “independence” mark her as someone working within the neorepublican tradition of early modern political thought. Scholars agree that Grouchy was republican. For more on the connection between Grouchy’s works and neorepublican thought see Bergès (2015a, 2015b), Tegos (2019), and Grouchy (2019, 39–41). For more on her place in the liberal tradition, see Schliesser (2017b). There has been a great deal of recent discussion about the relation between feminism and republicanism during the Revolution. For more on this discussion, see Ball (2019), Bergès (2019), Coffey (2019), and Green (2019, 2021).

out a meager existence by farming on land they did not own. They would incur large debts to buy land, after which they would be subject to an “unequal distribution of the tax burden” that would easily overwhelm them (135). Trapped between debtors and the whim of provincial governments, the peasants would sink into poverty and be forced to either turn to a life of “fraud” or risk imprisonment for being unable to pay their debts (135).¹⁹ For Grouchy, if people could only own “two or three acres of crop” without debt or the fear of high taxation, they could come to live self-sufficiently (134).

Of course, this proposal does not erase the problem of inequality. It is important to note that for Grouchy, agriculture is “the most productive of all professions for individuals, while for states, it is the unique source of real income” (135). On this view, if people can work the land without interference, they will produce wealth for themselves and for the nation—if they are prudent and have a bit of luck. Grouchy admits that inequality would still exist under these ideal circumstances. In fact, she claims, there is some degree of “natural inequality” between people due to differences in “behavior, degrees of intelligence, or the greater or lesser fecundity of families” that can account for an unequal distribution of fortunes (134). Even admitting these factors, however, Grouchy notes, the greatest state of inequality that could be created by a “random distribution” would be one where the rich absorbed 75 percent of the wealth created by land. Even in these circumstances, the peasants would retain enough wealth to live independently, which they cannot currently do.

Once the peasants have some property on which to base their wealth, Grouchy maintains that those suited to agriculture would be able to acquire the land from those who find farming less to their tastes. As Grouchy points out, “there will be a large number who, because they engage in industrial or commercial pursuits, will have no interest in keeping their share of land and might in some case divest themselves of it” (134). With this newfound sense of independence gained from their land holdings, Grouchy envisions that many people could now pursue occupations of their choice. The problem, she argues, is that “prohibitive laws hampering commerce and industry” ensure that only the well-connected enjoy such freedom, leaving most other people to a life of subsistence farming (135). Absent these laws, which have institutionalized

¹⁹Grouchy is concerned with how the criminal justice system targets the poor and disenfranchised. She would have been intimately familiar with this injustice through her uncle, Charles Dupaty, a magistrate who was known for defending three peasants who were sentenced to torture on the wheel for petty theft. Bergès and Schliesser discuss this point further in their introduction to *Letters on Sympathy* (Grouchy 2019, 5–6, 12–14).

hereditary privilege, Grouchy argues that there would be a “free movement of interests” (135). People could explore their interests and talents, working to the degree that prudence required in a way most suitable to them.

In general, Grouchy holds the view that protectionism is to blame for the rife inequality found through much of France, particularly in the countryside. In this way, she sides with French economists like Quesnay, Turgot, Condorcet, and Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations*, against the mercantilists.²⁰ Grouchy’s motivation for holding this view seemingly derives from her skepticism of the wealthy and powerful, who in large part steered economic development during her time. She refers to them as the “idle class”; their days are passed in gallantry, while the laws they enact serve to cement their position and oppress the poor (140). As a result, Grouchy claims, the institutions for which the wealthy and powerful are responsible, that were “meant to complete human happiness have long instead degraded and corrupted it” (152). Given this diagnosis of the status quo, it is unsurprising that she sides with the partisans of free trade on matters of development.

Questions about the depth of Grouchy’s commitment to free trade or the defensibility of her views on political economy go beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, we can understand why she considers expanding property ownership to be an important tool for addressing inequality. By giving people a stake in the community in the way of property and ensuring that they secure enough to enjoy “domestic peace,” you liberate them from dependence (152). These liberated classes can demand recognition from others. If all goes well, members from both classes can begin to see each other as moral equals, restoring the bonds of accountability that have degraded. Still, Grouchy argues, expanding economic freedom is not enough to repair these bonds. There must be reforms that expand access to education, which provide us with the tools to see one another as moral equals.

5. ALIGNING OURSELVES WITH THE COMMON GOOD

The first step to addressing inequality and the loss of interpersonal accountability is to ensure that everyone owns property and can reasonably hope to secure a moderate degree of wealth through fair dealings with others. In so doing, Grouchy claims, we guarantee that everyone has a stake in the community. However, she acknowledges that expanding property

²⁰For more on these debates and about the relation between republicanism and commercialism generally, see Groenewegen (1969), Pocock (1972), Hont and Ignatieff (1983), Hont (2006), Rothschild (1992, 2013), and Bergès (2018b).

ownership will not safeguard against the wealthy and poor viewing each other as strangers—they must come to view one another as moral equals. People must learn then to appreciate the common good, and in time come to see themselves as bound to one another in community. For Grouchy, we accomplish this end through education.²¹

But there are two problems: first, educational resources are unequally distributed; second, the education system reflects many societal flaws. On Grouchy's view, the solution is to expand access to education while also rethinking its aims.²² For Grouchy, the education system is governed by the same forces of comparison and competition found in society. The interests of the students are set against one another, which leads them to see each other as enemies or as obstacles to overcome. The lessons imparted here are troubling, as they reward antagonism, or indifference, to others. As Grouchy notes, education fills children with a desire for “superiority, which, when they are desired or respected, make their mind smaller, corrupt their reason, and extinguish their conscience” (116). Rather than extinguishing our conscience, education should “provide [children] some ease in acquiring general ideas and in experiencing those abstract and general sentiments” (116).

I will unpack each of these ideas in turn. The general ideas that Grouchy is concerned with are those of “moral good” and “moral evil” (110). The former is a benefit to another that is “sanctioned by reason,” while the latter is a harm that is not similarly sanctioned by reason (110–11). Reason, according to Grouchy, is that cognitive faculty we use to abstract from our experiences. Through the use of reason, we can consider the experiences of others and generate a “general perspective” by triangulating the individual standpoints we have encountered. In this way, a moral good is any benefit sanctioned by this general perspective.²³

²¹Schliesser (2019) cites the importance of moral education to Grouchy's project of moral and political reform. That said, Schliesser does not provide any details of Grouchy's account beyond noting a few ways in which it coincides with Smith's treatment of education in *Wealth of Nations* (214). Here the idea is that education forms a bulwark against enthusiasm. While Grouchy is concerned with enthusiasm to some degree, moral education has a more expansive role in her view. She sees moral education as giving us the means to no longer be strangers to one another and the tools by which bonds of community and accountability can be forged.

²²For more on the educational context of the early modern period and its connection to ideas about developing a sense of the common good, see Chisick (1981), Palmer (1985), Bloch (1995), Bell (2003), and Gill (2010).

²³Grouchy defends a utilitarian account of moral goodness. She contrasts her view with that of Vauvenargues, who she cites as defending the position “that moral good and evil refer to whatever is more useful or harmful to humanity in general” (Grouchy 2019, 111). Whether Grouchy is right to interpret him in this way cannot be considered here. As Bergès and Schliesser note, while she rejects Vauvenargues' account it is not clear that they disagree about the idea of moral goodness (14–16). For more on Vauvenargues, see Lainey (1966).

A general (moral) sentiment is an affection of approval or disapproval that follows from the judgment that an action is morally good or evil. A moral person is then one who approves of what is generally beneficial and disapproves of what is generally harmful. I will work through these ideas in turn and how they relate to education.

Grouchy imagines that most people struggle with thinking about matters from a general perspective. This failure does not come from wickedness but an inability to think abstractly. She claims that the education system fails to cultivate a “strength” or “breadth” of minds in children, leaving many unable to focus or to see the relations between phenomena (115). They become fatigued and lack the “propensity to pursue the truth” (117). In turn, children cultivate a taste for the familiar, leading them only “toward trivial and common opinions, from prejudice to prejudice, from error to error” (117). When they come of age, few people can then defend themselves against the allures of “self-love and vanity” or the “manipulations of cunning,” both of which threaten their self-direction (117, 114). Grouchy argues that we can become self-directed in our thoughts and actions only if we free ourselves from prejudice and error. The key to our liberation, for her, lies in us being able to cultivate a general perspective from which we can check ourselves.

That said, it is not enough to simply consider the perspectives of others, we must also learn to align our sentiments with the general interest. According to Grouchy, the education system fails here, because to the extent that it treats moral education, the morals “they [the children] are taught nearly always consist in a few isolated precepts in no particular order” (116). They are taught to memorize moral precepts without regard to why they are beneficial. As a result, children never end up cultivating general sentiments and instead fall back on judging matters on their own interest. For Grouchy, this turn inward severs our connection to others: “the culpable and mean habit of relating all objects to oneself, and of judging them essentially from that perspective, little by little weakens the sentiments associated with good and evil” (114). Egoism is the result: even if a person does consider the general interest, they will not be disposed to see it as aligning with their own.

The hope is that the education system will help people see their own interests as aligned with the common good. Under the existing circumstances, however, virtue requires a strength of mind that “nature so rarely gives out” (143). If the necessary reforms to the system are sincerely pursued, Grouchy imagines that a life of virtue will become accessible to those who have traditionally lacked the privilege to choose this path. Each person will have the opportunity to enjoy the “intimate sentiment of peace and

safety” of their conscience (129). Grouchy notes that one need only learn to see others “in relation to the happiness he can offer them . . . it is by making them happy that he too finds happiness” (129). Such a person will have no reason to fear or to harm others and will be “effortlessly . . . disinterested” in their affections, except toward those whom they love (130). While such a person is a rarity, Grouchy claims this need not be the case.

Alas, Grouchy is unclear about which reforms are required to realize these aims. One might argue that Grouchy suggests reforming the content of formal education; after all, she seems dismissive of studying grammar, classical languages, and history (116). On further inspection, though, Grouchy is not principally concerned with the content of education but in how this content is traditionally taught. As she points out, grammar is taught through rote learning, classical languages by “mechanically translating authors,” and history through the memorization of great deeds and events (116). At best, these strategies generate students who appear to be educated. For Grouchy, education should promote curiosity, reflection, and self-direction in students, while protecting against the forces of comparison and competition. This proper education would treat learning as a journey of discovery taken with others and in hopes of forging bonds of community and friendship along the way. In Grouchy’s view, only by treating education in this way can we grow individually and together.

This leaves us with questions about access to education. Grouchy is concerned that few people have access to formal education. Without education, people are defenseless against the “prejudices of pride and vanity, and these deprive them of the sentiments of those inalienable rights common to all men, of real happiness and real merit” (116). For real happiness and merit to exist for most, it follows that we should expand access to education. However, Grouchy provides her audience little sense of how and to what extent education access should be expanded. It is notable that she ends *Letters on Sympathy* by commenting on how women are unable to realize their intellectual gifts in their position: “unhappy, especially, [is] the sex who one moment is gifted by nature with its brightest gifts, but for whom nature soon turns a cruel mother” (154). I claim that her comment is meant to remind us that whichever reforms are pursued must be done so with women in mind.²⁴

²⁴Grouchy refers to women three times in *Letters on Sympathy*. The first reference comes in a discussion of the nature and value of romantic love (2019, 83–85). The second reference is found in her critique of traditional marriage (139–41). The last reference comes at the end of the text. I discuss this one in the paragraph to which this note is appended. Bergès and Schliesser speculate on her silence, noting that Condorcet expressed concern about the extent to which his activism would endanger his family (19–20). Given that *Letters on Sympathy* were published after his death, Grouchy likely chose to censor herself without Condorcet’s input.

Though Grouchy's account of moral education is light on details, she is clearly committed to both expanding access to formal education and to rethinking its aims. I suspect one reason why she is hesitant to offer up specific proposals for educational reform is that she does not see it as her place to do so—these decisions will be made collectively by generations to come. Belief in the inevitability of such change requires a good deal of optimism. But Grouchy thinks we have reason to be optimistic about the future, despite all appearances to the contrary. Her optimism is most spectacularly on display in *A Sketch of the Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, a work that Grouchy wrote with her husband, Condorcet. The stated purpose of the *Sketch* was to show that:

The perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite; that the progress of this perfectibility, henceforth above the control of every power that would impede it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has placed us. The course of this progress may doubtless be more or less rapid, but it can never be retrograde. (Condorcet 2012, 11)²⁵

6. CONCLUSION

Grouchy identifies a canyon between the wealthy and the poor; each party views the other as a stranger and an obstacle to their interests. According to her, the blame for this situation should be laid at the feet of the wealthy and powerful. The wealthy's vanity licenses their indifference to the poor, whose interests are thereby overlooked. As a result, the poor begin to see the wealthy and powerful as responsible to their subjugation and as being morally bankrupt. Any accountability that they had to these people dissipates, and they begin to see those in power as their adversaries and as undeserving of any humanity. All the while, Grouchy notes, the wealthy continue to consolidate their power and cement their privilege. Under these circumstances, it is no surprise for her that inequality is rampant, social trust and friendship nonexistent, and bonds of accountability tethered. On Grouchy's view, the only way forward is through the difficult task of coming to see each other as our moral equals.

Grouchy claims that we should first ensure that everyone owns some property and can hope to secure a moderate degree of wealth in their lives. In this way, each person will have a baseline stake in their community and

²⁵For more on Grouchy's connection to Condorcet's *Sketch* and to his work generally, see Bergès (2018a).

can expect to better their situation over time. Through this process, many will be delivered from a state of dependence. As well, Grouchy maintains, we should extend our reforms to the educational system, broadening access and redirecting its aims. Rather than duplicating the conditions of comparison and competition found in society, the classroom should be a place where people learn how to reason about the common good and to forge community with one another. With great effort, Grouchy predicts that our sense of accountability to another, now dormant after centuries of neglect, will be reawakened and the evils of inequality and inhumanity gradually relieved.²⁶

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