**Sophie de Grouchy on sympathy, economic inequality, and the corruption of moral sentiments**

**I. Introduction**

Sophie de Grouchy’s *Letters on Sympathy* is a collection of eight epistolary essays devoted to analysing and celebrating ‘the disposition we have to feel in a way similar to others’ (LS: 59).[[1]](#footnote-1) The essays, Grouchy’s only work published under her own name, are a late and comparatively little-known entry in the history of early modern theorizing about sympathy.[[2]](#footnote-2) They appeared in print in 1798 as an appendix to Grouchy’s celebrated French translation of Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* and this fact about their publication invites questions about the relationship between the *Letters* and the more famous text with which they were literally bound.[[3]](#footnote-3)The two works undoubtedly have a lot in common. Like *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* the *Letters* locate sympathy right at the heart of human life, as the psychological force that gives shape to our ethical ideas, our patterns of sociality, and even our sense of self. However, commentators have also noticed some differences between Grouchy’s and Smith’s accounts, two of which will be the focus of my discussion here. First, only the *Letters* trace the origins of sympathy back to infant psychology and physiology. And second, only the *Letters* propose an extensive programme of economic and social reforms aimed at the rehabilitation of sympathy.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is natural to wonder: Do these differences reflect *disagreements* between Grouchy and Smith? And what, if anything, do the two differences have to do with one another?

On one interpretive line that dates to the time of the *Letter*s’ publication, these differences are simply the products of Grouchy’s friendly (if rather haphazard) efforts to extend and bolster Smith’s philosophy.[[5]](#footnote-5) That interpretation does sit well with Grouchy’s own claim in *Letter 1* to have ‘had the impudence to make up for’ certain ‘omissions’ in Smith’s account (LS: 58). However, we should not be too taken in by this tactfully modest statement of purpose. I propose that the two differences are more fruitfully understood as deeply and interestingly linked manifestations of a serious disagreement about the nature of sympathy, one with real moral and political stakes. Grouchy is too decorous to frankly insist upon the depth and coherence of her own critical project, but we can draw it out for ourselves: the *Letters* make the case that (1) Smith has the wrongpicture of how and why we come to sympathize, and (2) mistakes in his developmental moral psychology lead to errors in his political and social-scientific theorizing. Crucially, he ends up misdiagnosing how sympathetic feeling flows in societies marked by high degrees of economic inequality, and he thus fails to appreciate exactly how this inequality threatens to corrupt our moral sentiments and undermine our happiness. To truly grasp the importance of combatting extreme economic inequality through institutional reform, we need to go all the way back to the cradle, to the motives and mechanisms that first impel our feeling for others’ pain and pleasure.

In this chapter, I consider how Grouchy’s dramatic recasting of our basic sympathetic inclinations supports her new diagnosis of extreme economic inequality as a ‘desolating’ force, one that universally strangles sympathy and so threatens the happiness of both the rich and the poor (LS: 151). In Section II, I show how Grouchy’s discontentment with Smith’s developmental psychology informs her alternative account of how our sympathetic inclinations interact with economic inequality. In section III, I show how Grouchy’s departures from Smith at the level of developmental psychology also make it relatively easier for her to occupy the role of a wholehearted agitator for economic equality. Smith does suggest that economic inequality naturally fuels a morally troubling form of sympathetic bias. However, Smith’s own theoretical commitments make it hard for him to coherently condemn either major economic inequality or the sympathetic bias it supposedly fuels. By contrast, Grouchy can readily characterize major economic inequality and its sympathetic repercussions as conditions that all of us have both prudential and moral reason to oppose. In section IV, I conclude by briefly reflecting on the merits of Grouchy’s account.

**II. The source(s) of sympathetic inclination and the social distribution of sympathetic feeling.**

**i. Smith’s ‘lopsided’ account**

To appreciate the significance of what de Grouchy calls her ‘rather daring’ disagreements with Smith, it is helpful to have in view the outlines of Smith’s own story concerning how and why we sympathize (LS: 89). For Smith, ‘sympathy’ can be used ‘to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever’ (TMS: 10). We sympathize with another’s feelings principally in virtue of having undertaken an imaginary change of perspectives, one that involves mentally adjusting not only our circumstances but also elements of our character in order to more accurately model the other’s position (TMS: 317). When we thus imagine occupying the other’s situation, a ‘passion arises in our breast from the imagination’ (TMS: 16). That passion is sympathetic just in case and in so far as it corresponds to the other’s original passion. Sympathetic passion either constitutes or is inevitably accompanied by the approval of the other’s passion as ‘agreeable to truth and reality’ (TMS: 20).

Clearly, the psychological mechanisms that produce Smithean sympathy require substantial cognitive sophistication. We need to be able to recognize and accommodate differences between our own circumstances and psychology, on the one hand, and the circumstances and psychology of those whom we aim to sympathize with, on the other. As Grouchy points out, Smith does not describe how more basic mental activities might serve as stepping-stones to the complex feat that is sympathetic imagination (LS: 58). He does, however, tell us something about what motivates people to sympathize. We strive to sympathize because sharing another’s feelings is inherently joyful for us. That is true even in cases where the other’s feelings are painful. In those cases, we do experience a sympathetic passion that is painful to us (a painful ‘echo’ of the other’s grief, for instance), but that passion is accompanied by a distinct pleasurable feeling of accord (TMS: 14). Our passionate desire for this feeling of accord is strong enough that we are willing to strain our imaginations in pursuit of it. Still, we would rather not have to exert that effort. We prefer accord that comes easily, and we are even inclined to resent those who set us up for undue sympathetic exertion by too obviously displaying passions with which we cannot easily sympathize (TMS: 13).

Smith also observes that some passions are more readily sympathized with than others, with bodily pain being the passion least susceptible to sympathy. This is partly because bodily sensations are extraordinarily hard to imaginatively recreate. We can comparatively easily imaginatively slip into the grief of a heartbreak, or the pleasure of a friendship, but the same does not go for the agony of a toothache (TMS: 47). We are also less keen to sympathize with bodily pains because sympathy with painful feelings, whether bodily or mental, does come at some cost. The delight of being in passionate harmony is inevitably paired with the pain of the sympathetic passion itself (TMS: 46).

For Smith, these basic facts about our sympathetic inclinations shape the flow of sympathy at the societal level. Sympathy with any person helps to satisfy our basic desire to harmonize with others’ sentiments, but some people make for more congenial targets of sympathetic effort than others do. Smith explains:

When we consider the condition of the great, in those delusive colours in which the imagination is apt to paint it, it seems to be almost the abstract idea of a perfect and happy state. It is the very state which, in all our waking dreams and idle reveries, we had sketched out to ourselves as the final object of our desires. We feel, therefore, a peculiar sympathy with the satisfaction of those who are in it. (TMS: 52).

The ‘great’ (that is, the rich, powerful, and famous) are imagined to be especially joyful in part because of the luxurious circumstances in which they live. Since we would rather sympathize with joy than sorrow, all classes of people extend their sympathies more readily to the rich than to the poor.

Now as Smith himself points out, luxury goods do not ultimately greatly improve one’s bodily well-being (TMS: 50). One might think that this fact would render the incipient sympathetic tilt towards the rich unstable. Once we remember that the ‘meanest labourer’ sleeps as soundly as the richest king, a special sympathy for the rich will lose its appeal (TMS: 50). But on Smith’s account, once the sympathetic tilt is initiated (as it will tend to be in any society with some measure of wealth inequality), it actually generates the conditions for its own retrenchment and exacerbation. The rich may not get *that* much bodily pleasure out of their baubles, but they do get great joy out of being the special target of others’ sympathetic efforts. Because everyone else strives to harmonize with their passions, the rich enjoy sympathetic harmony with others without bearing the costs of imaginative effort. And *that* easy enjoyment naturally becomes the primary target of their economic inferiors’ special sympathy. For a poor person whose grief and pain is largely ignored by others, it is exceptionally rewarding to imagine having an ‘easy empire over the affections of mankind’ (TMS: 56).

The final turn of this screw is that poorer people’s special sympathy with the great inclines them to help the rich become still richer. For one thing, sympathy is naturally accompanied by approval and admiration, so the poor are inclined to support the rich for the latter’s own sake (TMS: 53). For another, the poor also have reason to support the rich because the latter offer such an easy and pleasing target for sympathy. The poor find compensation for their own real bodily and mental suffering in their imaginative enjoyment of the sympathetic attention that the rich receive (TMS: 52). At the same time, when the poor are progressively sapped of both material resources and sympathetic attention, they thereby become less attractive as targets for both sympathetic effort and the inclination to aid that follows in sympathy’s train (TMS: 51).

To sum up: on Smith’s account, the social distribution of sympathetic feeling is lopsided, and this lopsidedness is a natural product of our basic inclinations. We are moved to sympathize because we crave the special pleasure of affective harmony, especially when that harmony can be achieved easily and painlessly. The preference for easy and painless sympathetic harmony means that we naturally sympathize more with the relatively materially better off. Economic inequality fuels that affective asymmetry and is in turn fuelled by it**.[[6]](#footnote-6)**

**ii. Grouchy’s alternative account: a new developmental psychology**

Grouchy has little patience for Smith’s analysis of our feelings for the rich or otherwise ‘great.’ If we do sometimes sympathize keenly with dethroned kings, she writes, it ‘is not (as Smith believes) because the idea of greatness, joined in the thoughts of many to the idea of happiness, disposes us, through a sort of affection and indulgence toward their well-being, to sympathize with them more closely’ (LS: 90). Commentators have characterized this denial as motivated by Grouchy’s republicanism and egalitarianism (Dawson 2004: 276; Forget 2001: 326).[[7]](#footnote-7) But Grouchy does not simply reject Smith’s social psychological account on the grounds that it is awkward for her revolutionary politics. If we look to Grouchy’s study of sympathy’s origins, we can find deeper grounds for her conviction that Smith is wrong on this point.

Smith mostly confines himself to adult psychology.[[8]](#footnote-8) Grouchy finds this choice disappointing, and adopts a different tack (LS: 58). She investigates at length how our sympathetic capacities and inclinations evolve as we grow. This developmental orientation leads her to three key conclusions that together tell against Smith’s ‘natural lopsidedness’ thesis. In brief, they are these: (1) sympathy is the joint product of sensibility and reflection; (2) a drive to exercise and expand our affective and agential capacities is the primary motivator of our progress in sympathy; (3) we are naturally most moved by pain, particularly physical pain. I will first elaborate on these three key points and their interrelation, and then draw out their implications for the socio-economic distribution of sympathy.

Consider first the claim that sympathy is the joint product of two universal human capacities, sensibility and reflection. Grouchy’s search for the ‘first cause’ of sympathy begins with infantile experience of physical suffering (LS: 58). Grouchy concludes on the basis of introspection that that experience involves two distinctive sensations of pain. There is a local sensation of pain in the affected body part and then an additional non-local sensation of pain. This additional general sensation of pain, unlike the first, is easily ‘renewed’ when we recall previous pains (LS: 59). Crucially, we also feel it when we see or recognize that another is in pain, starting with our earliest recognition of our caregivers’ feelings (LS: 70). This general pain is not, *contra* Smith, secondary to a sophisticated imaginative engagement with the other’s circumstances. It may be directly triggered by any sign of others’ pain, especially when those others are people we have come to associate with our own wellbeing. Grouchy observes that we are from infancy dependent creatures, and so we take a special interest in the happiness of those who ensure our survival (LS: 70-71). Our awareness of their suffering tends to prompt in us an especially fierce general pain, and our hatred of this general pain generates aversion to that which causes it, namely others’ suffering.

Sensibility is the tendency to feel pain or pleasure, either general or local. It includes the tendency to feel secondary pain at the sight of another’s pain, or secondary pleasure at the sight of another’s pleasure. Sensibility can be enhanced through repeated and varied exercise (LS: 64). However, mere sensibility is not enough for human sympathy. We also need reflection (LS: 65, 67). Through reflection, an operation which ‘fastens in our souls’ ‘instances of suffering,’ we develop a more durable sympathetic pain response, we extend this response to include ‘moral’ (psychological) pains, and we expand its reach beyond the pains of those who are physically and psychologically close to us, to the pains of those who are remote or even unknown (LS: 67). One of reflection’s functions is to reveal likenesses.[[9]](#footnote-9) As Grouchy explains, ‘it is reflection which, when we see someone oppressed by pain, reminds us that we, too, are subject to that same tyrant, destroyer of life’ (LS: 67). In reflecting on the suffering of even our most distant fellows, we come to recognize this suffering as *the same sort of thing* as those physical pains to which we are primitively averse. And as this deep likeness is impressed upon us, it is natural for our original aversion to the suffering of ourselves and our caregivers to extend to encompass first the recognizably similar woes of others whom we admire or benefit from, and then eventually the woes of all humanity. We move from the experience of individual physical pains to an abstract but still aversive representation of pain in general.

With that abstract representation in hand, we are poised to develop the idea of moral evil, that is, the idea ‘of an act that is harmful to others and which is prohibited by reason’ (LS: 111). For a mature reflective agent, the thought of any pain anywhere is itself aversive, and the thought of being the *cause* of that pain is still more dreadful (LS: 108-109). To ensure her own ‘lasting satisfaction’, then, this agent needs to choose those actions that promote the ‘greatest good’, that is, the actions that best serve the ends of maximizing overall happiness and minimizing overall suffering (LS: 110, 106-107). Reason is the tool mature agents use to calculate which rules of conduct they ought to adhere to in order to produce the greatest good.[[10]](#footnote-10) Once an individual has developed ‘general sympathy’, an impartial aversion to all pain, it is prudentially rational for her to conform her behaviour to those rules (LS: 110).

For Grouchy, in contrast to Smith, sympathetic feeling need not involve any imaginative effort at all. It can be a quasi-automatic response to seeing others’ pain. Still, our own sympathy is something we could hypothetically aim to minimize rather than expand. Grouchy acknowledges that children may sometimes want to ‘run away from’ the sight of others’ pain, instead of pausing to reflect on it (LS: 60). A question therefore arises: Does Grouchy wrongly ignore the possibility of ensuring our own ‘lasting satisfaction’ on the cheap? Even if we are naturally sympathetic, if we made a habit of turning away from others’ suffering, then we could perhaps avoid forming an inconvenient general aversion to their pain in the first place (LS: 110). Happily, Grouchy does have something more to say about why prudence recommends sympathizing in a continuous and increasingly expansive way, rather than doing what we can to suppress or minimize our sympathy, and this brings us to the second key point of difference from Smith.

Smith identifies our desire for the innately pleasurable experience of sympathetic harmony as the core motivator of our sympathetic efforts. By contrast, Grouchy understands our sympathetic tendencies as ultimately shaped by a dynamic drive to exercise and expand our affective and agential capacities. Grouchy casts sympathetic harmony as a state we seek out not primarily because the harmony itself is inherently rewarding to us, but rather because sympathizing with others helps us to preserve and extend our selves in a way that ignoring others’ suffering could not.[[11]](#footnote-11) As we grow, different dangers threaten to limit, diminish or even extinguish us, and we need sympathy to overcome them all.

Especially when we are very young, Grouchy reckons, our sympathy is bound up with our drive to survive. As profoundly dependent creatures with little knowledge of the sorts of harms that might come to us, persistently ignoring the alarm or distress of our caregivers would surely endanger our own well-being (LS: 74). Feeling with others helps us to learn about threats in our environment, and may also help further endear us to other people (see LS: 85).

Narrow sympathy might itself be enough to ensure our literal survival, but Grouchy suggests that once our physical needs are met, another danger looms. If we neglect others’ feelings, we will lead an uncomfortably cramped and stagnant inner life: ‘The human heart... senses that alien emotions will distract it from the habitual impressions it finds painful or insipid, that will preserve it from boredom. Instead, these emotions will increase the heart’s strength…making it easier to receive new impressions, and thereby expanding one of its most fecund sources of enjoyment’ (LS: 75). Grouchy compares sympathy to exercise for the soul. We enjoy exercising and developing our natural capacities, and one of those is our capacity for feeling. It is more rewarding for us to endure sympathetic pain than to be constrained to feelings (however happy) about our own situation. What is more, once we build up the resources and skills necessary for furnishing aid, we will be able not just to feel others’ pains, but also to relieve them. Our interest in others’ pains is in that case enhanced by our interest in being the author of their amelioration.

We take a great satisfaction in having and exercising the ‘power’ to increase happiness (our own or others’) ‘at will’, and this satisfaction is especially piquant when our choices to aid reflect our moral reasoning (LS: 106). A person who does not sympathize widely is less able to take advantage of opportunities to exercise her deliberative and agential powers. While she may not be troubled by many pains, her satisfaction will also be comparatively meagre. Unless circumstances somehow prevent us from developing naturally, then, our drive to preserve, develop, exercise, and revel in our powers will incline us to sympathize ever more broadly and deeply.

A final relevant point of departure from Smith is Grouchy’s insistence that we sympathize more readily with pains than pleasures, and more with bodily pains than any ‘moral’ (that is, mental) ones (LS: 65, 90). This commitment, which upends Smith’s own ranking of relative sympathetic ease, is anything but arbitrary. For one thing, it coheres well with Grouchy’s understanding of sympathy as rooted in infantile bodily sensibility. Pain is, for Grouchy, the feeling that it most obviously behoves young, physically vulnerable creatures to take a keen interest in. It is also the most outwardly manifest feeling. Since Grouchy’s sympathy begins with impressions of others’ feelings acquired through our sensory organs (and not, as on Smith’s view, through sophisticated perspective-taking), it stands to reason that the feeling we can most easily detect through our sensory organs would be the most natural target for sympathy. Grouchy’s conclusion that we sympathize most easily with physical pains also pairs well with her view that that sympathy is fuelled by a primitive interest in feeling our own strength. Grouchy strikingly suggests that ‘nearly all physical pleasures are by nature exclusive, giving us the idea and sentiment of being deprived’ (LS: 65). The vivid representation of another’s physical pleasure is not unequivocally enjoyable for us, because it reminds us that we are comparatively disadvantaged and thus in one sense diminished.[[12]](#footnote-12)

We are now in a position to appreciate how these three intertwined observations, formed through reflection on our primitive drives and capacities, together support a novel understanding of how economic inequality distorts our sympathetic tendencies. *Contra* Smith, Grouchy judges that the pleasures of the rich will never attract great general sympathy. This claim fits neatly with Grouchy’s identification of a primary and universal drive to exercise and expand our powers. Sympathy with exclusive pleasures beyond our reach is unappealing because it promises to painfully remind us of our own comparatively limited resources and powers. What is more, sympathy with already-achieved pleasure does not even alert us to particularly satisfying opportunities for rational do-gooding. We could always take steps to avoid interfering with the rich’s pleasures, of course, but that would not amount to the kind of dramatically impactful action we find particularly rewarding.

Since we are on Grouchy’s view naturally inclined to sympathize most with bodily pains, one might think her view would actually predict something like an *inversion* of the sympathetic lopsidedness Smith posits. In societies like Grouchy’s France, the laws that helped to sustain the great wealth of the aristocracy also engendered physical misery in the poorer classes. The greater and the more obvious the poor’s bodily suffering, we might think, the more natural and rewarding it should be for others to sympathize with that suffering and to relish relieving it. So, we might expect Grouchy to conclude that in conditions of great material inequality, the bodily suffering of the poor will be counterbalanced by an asymmetric flow of sympathetic attention. In that case, given that a desire to aid follows in the train of sympathetic attention, pain-inducing material inequalities should in fact be rather unstable: they should themselves prompt their own extinction rather than their own retrenchment.

Grouchy does not reach that optimistic conclusion, however. She does hold that if our sympathetic capacities were properly developed and naturally functioning, then humans of all social ranks would strongly sympathize with the bodily pain of the most materially disadvantaged. For humans with well-developed sympathetic dispositions, doing great good in accordance with reason is exceptionally enjoyable. And the way to do great good in accordance with reason is to allow our sympathies and our attendant care to be directed to the most serious and enduring of pains. So, our own self-interest should direct us to be particularly moved by the plight of the poor. The problem is that conditions of economic inequality block the development of our sympathetic capacities, and thereby erect barriers to doing or even recognizingwhat would be in our interest.

These conditions strangle sympathetic capacities in several different ways. One problem for rich and poor alike is that economic inequality creates distance between the classes. Grouchy explains: ‘the extreme inequality of fortunes, and the great distance there is between one class and another, renders men strangers to each other…the powerful man and the worker in his employ are too far removed from each other to be able to judge one another’ (LS: 151-152). In part, the problem may be one of physical separation: tucked away in their palaces, the rich are *literally* ‘too far from the poor to see them’ (and vice versa) (LS: 151). The rich and the poor have few occasions to actually behold each other’s physical suffering, and thus to recognize their common nature. In addition, a great divergence in ways of life generates sympathy-inhibiting psychological distance. The rich and the poor share the basic human drive to preserve and extend themselves, but wealth-concentrating social institutions mean that the most advantaged do not need to labour to satisfy their actual material needs. To avoid boredom, then, the idle classes develop new *faux* needs, such as those attached to the ‘gallant’ pursuit of high-status women (LS: 140). Those ‘needs’ have no sympathetic resonance for the poor, who are mostly concerned with fending off starvation and avoiding draconian punishments. So, the rich and the poor come to regard each other as alien, and perhaps even as less than entirely human.

The rich are in addition specially hampered in the development of sensibility. As Grouchy explains, ‘the general impression produced by the sight of physical pain is more easily renewed when we witness suffering that we have been subject to, because it that case both our memories and the sight of their object arouse it in us’ (LS: 62). Wealthy children experience comparatively little physical pain. They are consequently less prone to recognize that they share basic bodily vulnerabilities in common with the poor. Without the base of easy sympathy for physical pains, the rich will also struggle to do the more advanced and challenging work of viscerally representing others’ ‘moral’ pains. So it is that ‘Wealth, egoism, and customary power’ erect an ‘insuperable barrier’ between the rich and ‘the very idea of misery and pain’ (LS: 62). The rich lack the vivid and broad awareness of suffering necessary for mature sympathy and moral reasoning.

By contrast, the poor are intimately acquainted with all manner of pains. However, their more expansive experience still does not yield mature sympathy, because their reflective capacities are underdeveloped. For one thing, their backbreaking labouring hours simply leave no time to practise reflection. For another, the ‘anxiety caused by constant awareness of life’s necessities and whether they can be met’ also forestalls abstract thought about others’ pain (LS: 62). Combine these circumstances with an aimless educational system that provides no training in general reasoning, and the result is a life of suffering that nevertheless inhibits reflection on the universal badness of pain.[[13]](#footnote-13) In the end, then, the gross material inequality characteristic of modern civilization inhibits sympathy in both the rich and the poor, albeit via partially divergent means.

Grouchian sympathy may be exercised without sophisticated perspective-taking efforts, but it does need to be cultivated. Children are not born with mature sympathetic dispositions, and while developing these dispositions naturally aligns with our self-interest, inegalitarian social-economic arrangements can effectively block their maturation. In the abstract, a broad and mature sympathy is the surest route to the end of enjoying and extending our powers, but cultivating care for unseen overlords is not a realistic option for the desperate poor. From Grouchy’s developmentally-informed perspective, Smith’s claim that the poor sympathize especially readily with the great is doubly mistaken. First, people in modern massively materially unequal European societies generally do not *want* to sympathize across class divisions. And second, even if they did want to do so, they have not built up the requisite sympathetic skills.

**III. Moral corruption and institutional reform**

We have already seen enough to reach two conclusions about matters that have engendered some interpretive controversy. First, Grouchy does definitely depart from Smith’s ideas about sympathy’s core mechanisms and motivators. These departures are substantial enough that it seems inapposite to understand the *Letters’* primary work or aim as one of ‘fill[ing] in a supposed gap in Smith’s moral philosophy’ (Bréban and Delmotte 2017: 20). Second, Grouchy’s alternative diagnosis of how economic inequality impacts sympathy is not merely the product of partisan wishful thinking. Instead, it is supported by a network of novel hypotheses about the dynamic pressures and incentives that shape us from birth. We have not yet exhausted the differences between Grouchy and Smith’s views, though. A further question confronts both philosophers: Is there anything *wrong* with the social distribution of sympathy that material inequality produces? And if so, what is to be done about it?

**i. Smith’s moral ambivalence**

Smith does characterize the sympathetic lopsidedness that inevitably results from economic inequality as *the* source of the ‘corruption of our moral sentiments’ (TMS: 61). In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments,* he claims that our outsized admiration and respect for the ‘rich and great’ is ‘scarce agreeable to good morals’. Special sympathy with the rich fuels poorer men’s ambition to join the ranks of those who wield ‘easy empire’ over others’ affections (TMS: 56). Ambition is not just painful – though it is that – but also morally perverting. It leads individuals to ‘abandon the paths of virtue’ in the pursuit of what look (at least from a ‘splenetic’ perspective) like trivial goods (TMS: 64, 183). Those who are already rich may not be cursed with ambition, but they do have free rein to indulge immoral impulses; in the eyes of the very sympathetic public, even the rich’s vices become objects of admiration (TMS: 64). At least in some passages, then, Smith seems inclined to depict our sympathy for the rich as a bit of lamentable folly, something that we collectively have decisive moral reason to oppose. At the same time, though, it is not clear that Smith’s own moral theory can actually authorize such damning depictions. Is his theory of moral propriety genuinely compatible with a full-throated moral condemnation of sympathetic lopsidedness, and (by extension) of the economic inequalities that generate it?

Here, in brief, is a reason to think not. According to Smith, our basic interest in interpersonal sentimental harmony shapes not just our special regard for the rich, but also our desire to be the kind of person whom people in general would sympathize with, were they knowledgeable about our situation. We are naturally anxious that well-informed others with ‘no particular connexion’ to us should be able to sympathize with our attitudes and motivations, and we seek to moderate our passions accordingly (TMS: 135). Indeed, we come to regard the perspective of the ‘indifferent’ or ‘impartial’ spectator as uniquely normatively authoritative. Their sympathetic feelings are recognized as the ‘precise and distinct measure’ of moral propriety (TMS: 69, 294). Hence, an attitude, motivation, or disposition is morally proper on Smith’s view if and only if the impartial spectator would sympathize with it.

Since our concern for the impartial spectator’s perspective is ultimately grounded in our interest in *human* sympathetic harmony, the impartial spectator’s normative authority for us rests on his having human (rather than, say, angelic) passionate dispositions. Smith repeatedly emphasizes that the impartial spectator’s sentimental life is subject to ordinary ‘irregularities’, quirks that are universally shared even if seldom acknowledged (TMS: 86, 135, 182). Like any regular person, the spectator’s sympathies shift based upon the vagaries of moral luck, and also upon variations in fashion, custom, and (crucially for our purposes) rank. Smith acknowledges that mere wealth and greatness are ‘in some respects, the natural objects’ of our respect and admiration (TMS: 62). The impartial spectator, no less than any other human, will be inclined to sympathize more readily with the rich’s happiness than the poor’s misery.[[14]](#footnote-14) Suppose then, we were to ask: Is it actually moral improper for us to sympathize in a lopsided way? Since the impartial spectator is himself bound to sympathize with this universal slant in our human sympathetic tendencies, finding it echoed in himself, and since the impartial spectator is the ultimate arbiter of moral propriety, it looks like the answer to this question must be *no.* If economic inequality is morally suspect, it seems it cannot really be because of its morally improper influence on our sympathies.

Smith sometimes describes our sympathy for the rich in deprecatory tones. Still, there is at the very least a sort of tension or ambivalence in Smith’s thinking about the badness of our sympathetic lopsidedness. It is not easy to see how he can coherently condemn this sympathetic bias, given his own account of how we arrive at our idea of the morally proper, and of what that idea consists in. Recall also that for Smith, economic inequality and social-sympathetic lopsidedness are the mutually reinforcing products of basic human preferences for easy, pleasurable sympathy. At least some degree of sympathetic bias toward the rich is for Smith both practically inevitable and not unambiguously morally condemnable. So, it is not surprising that while Smith does occasionally recommend policies aimed at the alleviation of poverty, he shies away from recommending grand institutional reforms to combat economic inequality or its attendant sympathetic bias *per se.*[[15]](#footnote-15)

**ii.** **Grouchy’s reformatory ambitions**

Commentators have noted that the impartial spectator is never mentioned in Grouchy’s *Letters* (Bergès and Schliesser 2019: 25, Schattsneider 2003: 4, Brown 2008b: 57). On the interpretive line according to which Grouchy is mostly reiterating and filling in Smith’s moral philosophy, this has to be a puzzling omission. Why would she leave out his signature moral arbiter, the lynchpin of his theory? Once we recognize that Grouchy has a fundamentally different understanding of the drives that shape our sympathizing, though, the mystery clears. Grouchy has not somehow forgotten to include the impartial spectator. Rather, she sees no role for this device in her moral theorizing, because the Smithean impartial spectator’s perspective is simply not one that humans are moved to adopt as authoritative. It is true that we do on her view take some pleasure in sharing other’s sentiments, but our moral development is not impelled by primary interest in sentimental conformity. Hence, we are not specially concerned with whether an imagined person with ordinary human sympathetic tendencies would sympathize with our attitudes or endorse our choices. Instead, our own interest in our personal flourishing, combined with the fact that minimizing others’ pain turns out to be the key to our own personal flourishing, militates in favour of the adoption of an alternative standard for worthy attitudes and actions. The criterion of approvability that we must be driven to embrace, at least in so far as we are prudentially rational, is that of promoting the greatest good. What is choiceworthy is that which best serves to promote overall happiness (LS: 110, 106-107).

For Grouchy, the truly moral social and economic system, and the one that we all have decisive prudential reason to promote, is not one that supports sentimental tendencies a Smithean impartial spectator would approve of. Rather, the morally choiceworthy system will be one that serves to promote human wellbeing over the long run. Could economic inequality serve to promote human wellbeing in the long run?

As we’ve seen, sympathetic feeling is on Grouchy’s view universally diminished by serious economic inequality. Grouchy does obliquely acknowledge that we take some pleasure in sympathetic feeling *per se*, even though the intrinsic pleasurableness of sympathy is not what motivates us to pursue it. So, we can immediately conclude that very economically unequal arrangements will diminish at least one minor source of human well-being (LS: 83). More importantly, though, extremely economically unequal arrangements will also undercut all people’s abilities to fully exercise their affective and agential capacities. Economic inequality distances us all from each other and thereby erects barriers to the recognition of others’ needs. As we’ve seen, Grouchy thinks that it also tends to sap the sensibility of the well-off, while impairing the rational and reflective capacities of the poorer classes. Reflection, rationality, and sensibility are all necessary for us to reliably achieve the sweetest and most enduring human happiness, which consists in knowingly securing others’ well-being through the exercise of our rational agency.

For Grouchy, the rich are in an important respect no better off under regimes of serious economic inequality than are the poor. Their capacity for the most rewarding form of human action has also been artificially stunted (LS: 151). Hence, all parties prudentially ought to embrace Grouchy’s extensive proposals for combatting economic inequality. Among these, Grouchy includes the redistribution of those tax burdens that favour large property owners and the elimination of hereditary rights to wealth-conveying titles and appointments (LS: 123, 136-137). She also recommends abolishing criminal laws that impose unduly harsh sanctions on the needy, and restricting judicial discretion, which is often wielded to excuse the rich from punishment (LS: 147). Grouchy even urges changes to marriage laws to keep the desire for a mate from being ‘the instrument and accomplice of avarice and cupidity’ (LS: 140). Grouchy is above all frank in her ambition to ensure that the rich are no longer able to perch atop ‘heaps of gold’, wielding the ‘desolating scepter’ of their economic superiority (LS: 151). They cannot see it, handicapped as they are, but that lofty position is not a prudentially desirable one.

Setting aside the well-being of the rich, one might wonder if Grouchy’s wholehearted advocacy for institutional change gives adequate weight to the potential upsides of economic inequality for the *least* well-off. Smith famously argues that economic inequality breeds ambition, which in turns fuels the economic productivity that efficiently reduces abject poverty. The rich ‘divide with the poor all the produce of their improvements’, and so ‘advance the interests of the society’ (TMS: 184-185). We have seen that in her developmental psychology, Grouchy reproaches Smith for neglecting the role of basic bodily needs. By her own lights, those more fundamental needs take precedence over needs to exercise sophisticated agential capacities. In calling for radical equalizing reforms, is Grouchy not herself (rather ironically) treating the urgent moral significance of the poor’s basic bodily needs too lightly?

We can find the beginnings of a response to this challenge in Grouchy’s reflections on the psychological distance that great economic inequality generates. Workers and their rich overseers lose sight of each other’s qualities (LS: 151-152). That loss undermines economic productivity in two ways. First, because the rich and the poor are too removed to accurately judge each others’ character, they cannot be assured of each other’s competence and trustworthiness. Regulations, punishments, and surveillance systems spring up to compensate for this epistemic problem. The result is an elaborate and burdensome scheme of behavioural checks that compromises economic efficiency (LS: 151ff). Second, an inability to fully recognize each other’s humanity makes systematic ill-treatment psychologically viable. When our sympathies are diminished, we are liable to become unduly punitive and greedy. It is reasonable, then, for the poor to suspect that their overseers will readily exploit them. A person who assumes that they will not be treated fairly is not likely to be an efficient worker. Instead, she will seek opportunities to cheat the system that is cruel to her (LS: 147).

Some small degree of economic inequality may be compatible with robust sympathetic relations that allow for smooth, maximally economically productive cooperation between the more and less wealthy.[[16]](#footnote-16) But Grouchy is, effectively, betting that the sort of gnawing ambition characteristic of highly economically unequal regimes will not provide a boost to productivity big enough to offset the economic inefficiencies strangled sympathy induces. Neither people’s basic material needs nor their more sophisticated needs to cultivate and exercise their powers are well met by extremely unequal economic arrangements, so these arrangements are clearly morally bad. What is more, unlike Smith, Grouchy does not understand these arrangements to be the practically inevitable product of our natural sympathetic inclinations. They owe their existence only to the workings of pernicious institutions. There is no need to fear, then, that radically equalizing economic reform is quixotic because opposed by human nature itself.

**IV. Conclusion**

There is certainly space for worries about both the descriptive and normative adequacy of Grouchy’s theory. On the descriptive front, for instance, we might challenge Grouchy’s rejection of Smith’s sympathetic lopsidedness thesis. Grouchy’s rejection is solidly grounded in a comprehensive story about human development. Still, when we consider present socially prevalent attitudes about the rich, it seems hard to deny that Smith was on to something. In the current period of rampant extreme economic inequality, calls to ‘eat the rich’ rub up against a kind of solicitous fascination with the lifestyles of the wealthy and famous. Smith’s view is especially well fitted to explain people’s demonstrated willingness to vote in ways more obviously favourable to billionaires’ economic interests than their own. And on the normative front, there is something at least *prima facie* troubling about Grouchy’s understanding of our reasons to be concerned with other’s wellbeing. As Schliesser 2019 points out, Grouchy’s is ‘a remarkably egocentric model’ (219). For Grouchy, our ultimate normative reason to be concerned about others’ pain, and by extension our ultimate reason to secure equality and justice for all, is nakedly rooted in our own well-being. We have a reason to adopt these moral attitudes and priorities only because doing so naturally promotes our own full enjoyment of our affective and agential capacities. It might be suspected, then, that Grouchy’s normative framework recommends an unappealingly instrumentalized conception of the badness of others’ pain.

Happily, these possible grounds for doubt do not detract from the interest of Grouchy’s work. We have seen thatGrouchydevelops an original critique of Smith’s theorizing: his undue emphasis on an innate desire for sentimental harmony, and his neglect of a still more primitive and compelling need to exercise our powers, bar him from accurately diagnosing the problems with extreme economic inequality. Grouchy does not merely attempt to fill in some gaps in Smith’s account. As she herself claims, the *Letters* reflect not her ‘following the ideas of this Edinburgh philosopher’, but rather her becoming ‘caught up’ in notions of her own (LS: 58). There is in fact a remarkable resonance between Grouchy’s understanding of our basic human drives, on the one hand, and her philosophical ambitions, on the other. In the end, Grouchy is not especially anxious to harmonize her views with Smith’s. Instead, she exercises her own powers of reflection to arrive at an alternative view of sympathy’s origins and significance.

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1. All citations of the *Letters on Sympathy* (LS) refer to the 2019 Oxford University Press edition, translated by Bergès and edited by Bergès and Schliesser. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bergès 2015 persuasively argues that Grouchy also authored two anonymous articles published in the journal *Le Républicain.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the history and reception of the *Letters,* see Forget 2001; Dawson 2004; Brown 2008; Bernier 2010; Bergès and Schliesser 2019: 23-28; Seth 2013; Bréban and Dellemotte 2017; and Bergès 2019. All citations of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) refer to the 1982 Liberty Classics edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* edited by Raphael and Macfie. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Forget 2001 describes these as the ‘two major points’ of divergence between Smith and Grouchy’s accounts (322). Tegos 2019: 416 makes a similar observation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, the presumed ‘C’ to whom the *Letters* are addressed, described Grouchy’s work as ‘removing the vagueness’ in Smith’s account, and in his commentary on the third edition of Grouchy’s translation of the *TMS,* Henri Baudrillart opined that ‘The philosophical theory upon which these *Letters on Sympathy* rest does not diverge significantly from that of Adam Smith’ (Cabanis 1802: 283; Smith 1860: 434, both cited in Forget 2001: 321). More recently, Bergès and Schliesser 2019 consider reading Grouchy’s developmental psychology as a ‘progression rather than a departure’ from Smith’s theory (31), and Bréban and Dellemotte 2017 judge that ‘the aim of the *Letters* is more to fill in a supposed gap in Smith’s moral philosophy than to object to his ideas’ (20). Bernier 2010 recognizes some originality in Grouchy’s project, but understands that originality to consist in ‘un ensemble de déplacements et d’infléchissements’; for Bernier, Grouchy departs from Smith primarily through more or less subtle changes in emphasis (13). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For useful additional discussion of the relation between economic inequality and sympathy in Smith, see e.g. Hanley 2009: 15-52; Rasmussen 2016; Boucoyannis 2013; and Fleischacker 2004: 114-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Pisanelli 2022 goes so far as to argue that De Grouchy’s ‘“obsession” with economic equality’ leads her to embrace an account of sympathy plagued by ‘contradictions’ (591). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mostly, but by no means always: as Schliesser 2019 points out, Smith draws on child psychology in his *The Dissertation upon the Origin of Languages* (208)*.* There is also some scattered discussion of children’s moral development in the *TMS* (see e.g. TMS: 110-110, 204-205, 326). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See also LS: 88, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The relation between reason and reflection in the *Letters* is controversial. Brown 2008 and Forget 2001 do not distinguish between these activities or faculties, whereas Schliesser 2019 does. My recreation of Grouchy’s position does not presume that they are the same faculty. Indeed, there is some reason to think that reasoning is not just the same thing as reflection for Grouchy. For Grouchy, reflection’s first function is to preserve in us a vivid and lasting impression of suffering; it re-presents experiences to us (LS: 67). Grouchy never uses ‘reason’ to name that sort of re-presentation; generally speaking, her references to ‘reason’ pick out a calculative activity (see e.g. LS 110-111, 119-126). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In locating a drive to preserve and extend our selves at the heart of Grouchy’s account, my analysis departs from that of Douglass 2023, which is likewise concerned with Smith and Grouchy’s disagreements over sympathy and socioeconomic inequality. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For more on how comparison between our own state and others’ affects sympathy, see LS: 90, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Smith also emphasized the moral-psychological importance of educational reforms, but not for the just same reasons as Grouchy. See his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations,* ‘Article II: Of the Expence of the Institutions for the Education of Youth’. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is not an uncontroversial interpretation. For a similar interpretation of the impartial spectator’s susceptibility to sentimental irregularities, see Sayre-McCord 2010, and for interpretations at odds with my own, see Tegos 2013 and Collins 2020. On the more general question of how just idealized the impartial spectator’s perspective is, see e.g. Raphael 2007, Forman-Barzilai 2010, Fleischacker 2004, and Griswold 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rasmussen 2016 usefully catalogues Smith’s recommended anti-poverty reforms, most centrally the provision of state-sponsored education for poor children (as discussed in *The Wealth of Nations:* 784-786). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In light of Grouchy’s defense of (limited) property rights, we can in fact safely conclude that she regards some local and mild forms of economic inequality as morally acceptable (see LS: 121-122). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)