

Helvétius as an Epicurean political theorist

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To the memory of Jean Lafond

Recent accounts of Helvétius have tended to ignore the specifically epicurean dimension of his moral and political thought.¹ D. W. Smith's analysis of Helvétius' ethical system is written entirely in the language of utilitarianism and does not mention the Epicurean tradition.² David Wootton's fine study of Helvétius' republicanism does not mention Epicurean political theory.³ The recent collection of essays, *Matérialistes français du XVIII^e siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, d'Holbach*, focuses on materialism as natural philosophy, not on Epicureanism as moral and political thought.⁴ By contrast, Jean-Marie Guyau's 1878 essay, *La Morale d'Epicure*, has several concluding chapters on 'the modern successors of Epicurus', namely Gassendi, Hobbes, La Rochefoucauld, Spinoza and Helvétius.⁵ Guyau claims that 'Helvétius is, in eighteenth-century France, the most famous representative of epicurean doctrines, the one whose ideas were the most influential as they spread quickly all across Europe'.⁶ There is no explicit mention of Epicureanism in *De l'esprit*, or *De l'homme*, even though *De l'esprit* has an epigraph from Lucretius. Helvétius' posthumous *Notes*, however, mention Lucretius and Epicurus many times. For instance, Epicurus is praised as 'le seul des anciens qui humanisa la vertu philosophique'.⁷ In addition, the *Notes* include several attacks against

1. Two exceptions are Frederick Rosen, *Classical utilitarianism from Hume to Mill* (London and New York, 2003) and 'Epicureanism and utilitarianism: a reply to Professor Lyons', *Utilitas* 18:2 (2006), p.182-87.
2. See D. W. Smith, 'Helvétius and the problems of utilitarianism', *Utilitas* 5:2 (1993), p.275-89.
3. David Wootton, 'Helvétius: from Radical Enlightenment to Revolution', *Political theory* 28:3 (2000), p.307-36.
4. *Matérialistes français du XVIII^e siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, d'Holbach*, ed. Sophie Audidière et al. (Paris, 2006).
5. Jean-Marie Guyau, *La Morale d'Epicure* (1878), ed. Jean-Baptiste Gourinat (La Versanne, 2002). Guyau's work caught the attention of Nietzsche, who annotated the volume on Epicurus' morals.
6. *La Morale d'Epicure*, p.365.
7. *Notes de la main d'Helvétius, publiées d'après un manuscrit inédit*, ed. Albert Keim (Paris, 1907), p.59. Spelling in all French quotes has been modernised.

Seneca and the hypocrisy of Stoic morality that are a sure marker of an Epicurean or Augustinian stance. For Helvétius, the Stoics ‘entendent plus la voix de l’orgueil plutôt que celle de la vérité’⁸ and Seneca ‘vivait en philosophe avec le revenu d’un prince’.⁹ Another classic reference shared by Epicureans and Augustinians is the image of drugs, which are beneficial or harmful depending on the dose: ‘Les passions sont comme les herbes empoisonnées. Les doses seules en font des poisons ou des antidotes’.¹⁰ This passage is an allusion to a famous maxim by La Rochefoucauld: ‘Les vices entrent dans la composition des vertus comme les poisons entrent dans la composition des remèdes’.¹¹ La Rochefoucauld is himself alluding to a passage from *The City of God*: ‘Even poisons, which are disastrous when improperly used, are turned into wholesome medicines by their proper application’.¹² I have argued elsewhere, following Lafond,¹³ that there is such a convergence of language as well as of polemical aims between authors like La Rochefoucauld, Bayle and Mandeville that it is often difficult to tell whether a particular argument is Epicurean or Augustinian: so much so that I have proposed to think of these authors as belonging to an Epicurean/Augustinian tradition.¹⁴

From *amour-propre* to *intérêt personnel*

Since Lafond’s work on the *Maximes*,¹⁵ we have been reading La Rochefoucauld as an Augustinian, but from the eighteenth century onwards he was most often read as an Epicurean. Helvétius certainly thought of himself as a continuator of La Rochefoucauld’s reflections on *amour-propre*. Voltaire, never a charitable reader, suggested that whatever was true in *De l'esprit* was directly borrowed from La Rochefoucauld and Locke: ‘Tout ce que des fanatiques ont anathémisé dans cet homme si estimable se trouvait au fond dans le petit livre du duc de La Rochefoucauld, et même dans les premiers chapitres de Locke’.¹⁶ Helvétius was explicit about the connection between his theories and

8. *Notes*, p.38.

9. *Notes*, p.75.

10. *Notes*, p.103.

11. François, duc de La Rochefoucauld, *Réflexions, ou Sentences et maximes morales* (1665), ed. Jean Lafond (Paris, 1976).

12. Augustine, *The City of God*, translated by John O’Meara (London, 1984), XI.22.

13. Jean Lafond, *L’Homme et son image: morales et littératures de Montaigne à Mandeville* (Paris, 1996).

14. Pierre Force, *Self-interest before Adam Smith: a genealogy of economic science* (Cambridge, 2003), esp. ch.2.

15. J. Lafond, *La Rochefoucauld: augustinisme et littérature*, 3rd edn (Paris, 1986).

16. Voltaire, letter to Dimitri Alexéïevitch, prince Golitsyne, 19 June 1773, *Correspondance générale d’Helvétius*, ed. D. W. Smith, 5 vols (Oxford, 1981-2004), vol.3, p.442.

the description of human nature one finds in the *Maximes*. He sought, however, to mark a distinction:

Lorsque le célèbre M. de La Rochefoucauld dit que l'amour-propre est le principe de toutes nos actions, combien l'ignorance de la vraie signification de ce mot amour-propre ne souleva-t-elle pas de gens contre cet illustre auteur? On prit l'amour-propre pour orgueil et vanité; et l'on s'imagina, en conséquence, que M. de La Rochefoucauld plaçait dans le vice la source de toutes les vertus. Il était cependant facile d'apercevoir que l'amour-propre, ou l'amour de soi, n'était autre chose qu'un sentiment gravé en nous par la nature.¹⁷

A deliberately Lockean move, the distinction consisted in presenting philosophical disputes as the result of misunderstandings about the meaning of words. Helvétius endorsed La Rochefoucauld's insight about the role of self-love in human psychology. At the same time, he wanted to dissociate himself from the moral and religious connotations that came with *amour-propre*. In the 1750s, the word 'amour-propre' (as the word 'self-love') was still associated with the Augustinian critique of virtues and with Mandeville's paradox: self-love (a vice) is the source of human virtues. Essentially, Helvétius' position consisted in saying: La Rochefoucauld and Mandeville are right, but there is no paradox here, no vice becoming virtue; *amour-propre* is an impulse that is universal, natural and morally neutral. Helvétius' indebtedness to the psychology of *amour-propre* can be seen in his early work. In *De l'esprit* and *De l'homme*, *amour-propre* is hardly used at all, but in the *Notes*, Helvétius refers to it as '[la] tige de nos passions'.¹⁸ Similarly, in an unfinished epistle, Helvétius designates *amour-propre* as the prime mover behind the formation of society, law, morality and government:

L'un, d'un œil curieux,
Voit comment l'amour-propre, en tous temps, en tous lieux,
Père unique et commun des vertus et des crimes,
Creusa de nos malheurs et combla les abîmes,
Forma des citoyens, les soumit à des rois,
Fit, rompit, resserra le noeud sacré des lois,
Eteignit, ralluma les flambeaux de la guerre,
Et mut diversement tous les fils de la terre.¹⁹

In *De l'homme*, Helvétius does not use 'amour-propre' and instead uses 'intérêt personnel'. The words are synonyms but 'intérêt personnel' has the advantage of carrying less baggage. While 'amour-propre' has been

17. *De l'esprit* (Paris, Durand, 1758), p.34.

18. *Notes*, p.101.

19. Fragment of an epistle on *amour-propre*, *Oeuvres complètes de M. Helvétius*, 4 vols (London, s.n., 1777), vol.1, p.219-20.

used since the early seventeenth century and carries a generally negative connotation, ‘intérêt personnel’ is a relatively new expression. Its first recorded use is in the memoirs of the cardinal de Retz.²⁰ It is associated with reason of state theory and is therefore morally neutral: in politics, individual agents have interests that may or may not be in agreement with the public interest.

Helvétius’ stance that self-interest is the cause of all human actions is well known. In a sense, Helvétius was only stating what had been a matter of conventional wisdom and manifesting what Hirschman called ‘a real fad as well as a paradigm’.²¹ That is Voltaire’s point: Helvétius was only repeating what La Rochefoucauld said about *amour-propre*. He even made the effort of sounding less offensive by using ‘intérêt personnel’ instead of ‘amour-propre’. Why is it then that the book caused such scandal and fury? Here too Voltaire can help us understand what happened. In a letter addressed to Helvétius in August 1760, he writes:

Il y a des choses que tout le monde sait, et qu'il ne faut jamais dire, à moins qu'on ne les dise en plaisantant. Il est permis à La Fontaine de dire que cocuage n'est point un mal, mais il n'est pas permis à un philosophe de démontrer qu'il est du droit naturel de coucher avec la femme de son prochain. Il en est ainsi, ne vous déplaise, de quelques petites propositions de votre livre: l'auteur de la *Fable des abeilles* vous aura induit dans le piège.²²

The Fable of the bees belonged to the genre of paradoxical encomium. It caused a scandal but the readers understood that the purpose of the book was to shock and amaze by displaying a paradox: private vices produce public benefits. In a sense, what was most shocking about *De l'esprit* was its earnestness: its refusal to appear shocking, and its embrace of Mandeville’s paradox as an obvious and uncontested truth, based on Epicurean principles. As to the relationship with La Rochefoucauld’s *Maximes*, we know from contemporary accounts that La Rochefoucauld’s views on *amour-propre* were widely known and accepted. For instance, the ‘Intérêt’ article of the *Encyclopédie* (written by Saint-Lambert) states that ‘Ce livre de M. de la Rochefoucauld, celui de Pascal, qui étaient entre les mains de tout le monde, ont insensiblement accoutumé le public français à prendre toujours le mot d’amour-propre en mauvaise part.’²³ The lexical shift, from *amour-propre* to *intérêt personnel*, was deliberate. It took away the paradoxical dimension present in Mandeville and La Rochefoucauld. Just as importantly, while La Rochefoucauld wrote as a

20. *Mémoires de Monsieur le cardinal de Retz* (Amsterdam, J.-F. Bernard, 1717).

21. Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the interests* (Princeton, NJ, 1977), p.42.

22. Voltaire, letter to Helvétius, 13 August 1760, *Correspondance générale d'Helvétius*, vol.2, p.290.

23. ‘Intérêt’, in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert, 17 vols (Paris and Neufchâtel, Briasson, 1751-1765), vol.8 (1765), p.818.

moralist, stating generalities about human nature, Helvétius engaged in apodictic reasoning. La Rochefoucauld's maxims almost always include qualifiers, modelled after the formula: 'Nos vertus ne sont, le plus souvent, que des vices déguisés.'²⁴ In La Rochefoucauld's Augustinian perspective, *amour-propre* is the motive of all human actions – except when God's grace is at work. Since we can never know for sure whether God's grace is present, there is a fundamental uncertainty as to the real motives of human behaviour. This is what explains the widespread use of qualifiers in the *Maximes*. There is no such uncertainty in Helvétius, who states his Epicurean principles unequivocally (even though he does not call them Epicurean). Self-interest is at work 'En tous temps, en tous lieux'²⁵ to dictate the way in which individuals form their opinions. The apodictic nature of Helvétius' stance is clearly indicated in the comparison between his psychological theory and Newton's physics. The laws enunciated in *De l'esprit* apply to the moral universe without any exceptions: 'Si l'univers physique est soumis aux lois du mouvement, l'univers moral ne l'est pas moins à celle de l'intérêt.'²⁶ Ultimately, Helvétius is explicit about the first principles of his system. In accordance with Epicurean tradition, he derives his account of human behaviour from the feeling of pleasure and pain:

Je vois que, sans la sensibilité à la douleur et au plaisir physique, les hommes, sans désirs, sans passions, également indifférents à tout, n'eussent point connu d'intérêt personnel; que, sans intérêt personnel, ils ne se fussent point rassemblés en société, n'eussent point fait entre eux de conventions, qu'il n'y eût point eu d'intérêt général, par conséquent point d'actions justes ou injustes; et qu'ainsi la sensibilité physique et l'intérêt personnel ont été les auteurs de toute justice.²⁷

In other words, the first principles are pleasure and pain, from which are derived the passions and the interests, then society and laws, then morality.

The authors I described as belonging to an Epicurean/Augustinian tradition are all deliberately ambiguous, cryptic or paradoxical: they never state their assumptions explicitly; as a consequence, they have historically been subject to widely diverging interpretations: La Rochefoucauld was read as a classic Epicurean before Lafond called him an Augustinian. Bayle and Mandeville have been read as Epicureans or Augustinians or both.²⁸ In *De l'esprit*, there is no such ambiguity. One

24. La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, epigraph.

25. *De l'esprit*, p.47.

26. *De l'esprit*, p.53.

27. *De l'esprit*, p.276.

28. See Force, *Self-interest before Adam Smith*, ch.2; Jean Lafond, *L'Homme et son image*; E. J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's fable: Bernard Mandeville and the discovery of society* (Cambridge, 1994).

could think of this book as the moment in which the Epicurean/Augustinian tradition takes a resolutely Epicurean turn.

How to reach equilibrium

Helvétius' Epicureanism in discussing *amour-propre* and pleasure is easy to see. However, his doctrine forms a coherent whole that is not limited to individual psychology. First, Helvétius thinks of political association as a living organism. The analogy between a system of government and the human body is of course not specifically Epicurean. What is specific here is the notion of a living force that is necessary to sustain and animate the body. In *De l'esprit*, Helvétius compares the desire for glory, which animates the political body, to the slow fermentation that sustains life. Despotic countries are lifeless because they lack such fermentation: 'La passion de la gloire, inconnue chez ces nations, peut seule entretenir, dans le corps politique, la douce fermentation qui le rend sain et robuste, et qui développe toute espèce de vertus et de talents.'²⁹ Helvétius adds that the vitality of a political body in a particular time and place explains the development of letters as well as the abundance of great generals and great politicians: 'Le même soleil vivifie les cèdres et les platanes.'³⁰ The need for fermentation as a vital force appears in *De l'homme* as well:

Dans le corps politique comme dans le corps humain il faut un certain degré de fermentation pour y entretenir le mouvement et la vie. L'indifférence pour la gloire et la vérité produit stagnation dans les âmes et les esprits. Tout peuple qui par la forme de son gouvernement ou la stupidité de ses administrateurs parvient à cet état d'indifférence, est stérile en grands talents comme en grandes vertus.³¹

For Helvétius, the equivalent in politics of the vital force that sustains living organisms is the passions. Helvétius describes the human heart as the theatre of a constant war between competing passions: 'Les passions se disputent un cœur tel que les vents ou les vagues se disputent les débris d'un naufrage qu'ils rendent enfin au rivage. [...] tel qu'on voit des chiens se disputer entre eux les morceaux du cerf qu'ils ont forcé et qu'ils déchirent ainsi les passions se disputent l'une à l'autre le cœur.'³² This imagery is inspired by La Rochefoucauld, whose *Maximes* describe the war between the passions: 'Il y a dans le cœur humain une génération perpétuelle de passions, en sorte que la ruine de l'une est presque toujours l'établissement d'une autre.'³³

29. *De l'esprit*, p.413.

30. *De l'esprit*, p.413.

31. *De l'homme* (1771; London, Société typographique, 1773), p.327.

32. *Notes*, p.67.

33. *Maximes*, maxim 10.

The war between the passions does not necessarily mean instability. Equilibrium can be reached when the passions pull with equal strength in opposite directions: ‘L’homme qui a beaucoup de passions à la fois n’en a aucune ainsi les astres attirés également de tous côtés roulement dans les plaines de l’air sans se jeter les uns sur les autres.’³⁴ Similarly, in *De l’esprit*, Helvétius argues that psychological balance is the result of passions pulling in opposite directions:

Des forces qui agissent sur notre âme

L’expérience seule peut nous découvrir quelles sont ces forces. Elle nous apprend que la paresse est naturelle à l’homme; que l’attention le fatigue et le peine; qu’il gravite sans cesse vers le repos, comme le corps vers un centre; qu’attiré sans cesse vers le centre, il s’y tiendrait fixement attaché, s’il n’en était à chaque instant repoussé par deux sortes de forces qui contrebranlent en lui celles de la paresse et de l’inertie, et qui lui sont communiquées l’une par les passions fortes, et l’autre par la haine de l’ennui.³⁵

One recognises here what Hirschman called the doctrine of ‘countervailing passions’, which is originally Augustinian.³⁶ According to Hirschman, the ‘Montesquieu-Steuart doctrine’ can be thought of as the encounter of the countervailing-passions doctrine with reason of state theory: if a passion can tame another passion, self-interest can tame the passions.³⁷ Hirschman has also shown that there is a conceptual connection in Montesquieu between countervailing passions and the theory of countervailing power.³⁸ A comparison between Helvétius and Montesquieu will be useful here. On the one hand, there are passages in Helvétius that seem to refer favourably to the notion of countervailing passions and the theory of countervailing power. Of the citizens in democratic governments, Helvétius says that ‘Ils vivent en paix, parce qu’au moral, comme au physique, c’est l’équilibre des forces qui produit le repos.’³⁹ In *De l’esprit*, where he argues on both sides of the issue, Helvétius lines up all the classic arguments of *doux commerce*.⁴⁰ The letters he writes from England contain qualified praise of the way in which the English political system balances competing passions and interests. To his wife, he writes:

Je ne vous dirai rien encore du caractère des Anglais, sinon qu’ils aiment l’argent autant que les autres hommes, que c’est le ressort général qui me paraît mouvoir toute cette nation où les patriotes sont très rares. Cependant

34. *Notes*, p.67.

35. *De l’esprit*, p.290.

36. *The Passions and the interests*, p.20-31.

37. *The Passions and the interests*, p.41.

38. *The Passions and the interests*, p.78.

39. *De l’homme*, p.314.

40. *De l’esprit*, p.17-18.

la forme du gouvernement les contient jusqu'à un certain point et ils sont obligés d'en jouer le rôle et c'est déjà l'être un peu.⁴¹

This is the standard apology of commerce: civic sense is not natural to the English but they have something resembling it, which is driven by their love of money. In a letter to Servan, written a few months later, Helvétius praises the English political system as a system of checks and balances that produces stability:

J'ai visité l'Angleterre et j'ai été très content de ma visite. C'est pour un homme tel que vous un voyage presque nécessaire; vous y verrez des hommes éclairés et des peuples heureux, un gouvernement où toutes les passions sont en jeu, où toutes se contrebalancent, et où le repos naît de l'équilibre de leurs forces, et cette espèce de repos n'est pas comme en Espagne l'effet de l'engourdissement. Par la forme de l'Etat, tout jusqu'aux vices est avantageux à l'Angleterre.⁴²

According to this line of argument, England is a strong and stable country. The equilibrium is not produced by any lack of vitality (the counterexample is Spain, a despotic country). It is the result of countervailing passions and interests. This sounds like a standard Anglophile position coming from an admirer of Montesquieu. It is also consistent with the conventional wisdom of the time, as expressed by Hume in his *Political discourses*: 'Political writers have established it as a maxim, that in contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a *knavé*'.⁴³ The conclusion of the letter, however, casts doubts on Helvétius' final judgement on this issue: 'Est-il possible que ce gouvernement subsiste longtemps dans cet état? Je n'en sais rien, et dans une lettre on ne peut entrer à cet égard dans aucun détail'.⁴⁴ The same scepticism appears a few years later in *De l'homme*. Helvétius begins by saying that the awesome power of England is a result of the countervailing passions:

A quelle cause attribuer l'extrême puissance de l'Angleterre? Au mouvement, au jeu de toutes les passions contraires. Le parti de l'opposition excité par l'ambition, la vengeance ou l'amour de la patrie, y protège le peuple contre la tyrannie. Le parti de la cour animé du désir des places, de la faveur ou de l'argent, y soutient le ministère contre les attaques quelquefois injustes de l'opposition. L'avarice et la cupidité toujours inquiètes des commerçants y réveillent à chaque instant l'industrie de l'artisan. Les

41. Letter to Mme Helvétius, 15 March 1764, *Correspondance*, vol.3, p.92.

42. Letter to Michel-Joseph-Antoine Servan, 19 December 1764, *Correspondance*, vol.3, p.150.

43. Hume, 'Of the independency of Parliament', in *Political essays* [*Political discourses*, 1752], ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, 1994), p.24.

44. Letter to Michel-Joseph-Antoine Servan, 19 December 1764, *Correspondance*, vol.3, p.150.

richesses de presque tout l'univers sont par cette industrie transportées en Angleterre.⁴⁵

In conclusion, however, he suggests that the equilibrium resulting from the countervailing passions is fragile and may not last long: 'Mais dans une nation aussi riche, aussi puissante, comment se flatter que les divers partis se conserveront toujours dans cet équilibre de force qui maintenant assure son repos et sa grandeur? Peut-être cet équilibre est-il très difficile à maintenir.'⁴⁶ Helvétius' sentiments on this issue are expressed in a more theoretical chapter in *De l'homme* on the 'division of interests'⁴⁷ that takes place in large states. Economic development produces classes of citizens with conflicting interests. These conflicts can be managed by clever politicians who pit the interests of one class against another. This system, however, results in a fundamental divide between the interests of the people and the interests of their representatives. Such a split is sustainable as long as the majority of the people are landowners. When that is no longer the case, there is a continuous trend of growing economic inequality, all the power and wealth flow into the hands of a few and the country turns to despotism. In conclusion, Helvétius suggests that is the destiny of all large states:

Ne sent-on pas qu'en un pays vaste et peuplé la division des intérêts des gouvernés doit toujours fournir aux gouvernants le moyen d'envahir une autorité que l'amour naturel de l'homme pour le pouvoir lui a toujours fait désirer? Tous les empires se sont détruits; et c'est du moment où les nations devenues nombreuses, ont été gouvernées par des représentants; où ces représentants favorisés par la division des intérêts des commettants, ont pu s'en rendre indépendants, qu'on doit dater la décadence de ces empires.⁴⁸

One finds a similar republican line in a later text by Condorcet: the clever management of competing interests by politicians may produce some temporary stability, but ultimately such a system is doomed because it establishes a fundamental division between a class of rulers and a class of people being ruled: 'L'une est destinée à gouverner, l'autre à obéir, l'une à mentir, l'autre à être trompée.'⁴⁹ Helvétius' alternative to the system of checks and balances à la Montesquieu is well known: legislation that will enforce a convergence between the interests of individuals and the interests of the public, and reinforcement of such convergence through education.

45. *De l'homme*, p.141.

46. *De l'homme*, p.141.

47. *De l'homme*, p.99.

48. *De l'homme*, p.102.

49. Marquis de Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1797; Paris, 1933), p.151.

What standard accounts of the origins of utilitarianism do not pick up is the fact that the ‘artificial identification of interests’⁵⁰ is fundamentally tied to Helvétius’ organicist view of the social body. Here again, Helvétius uses the language coming from the Epicurean/Augustinian tradition but he gives it a univocally Epicurean twist. He abundantly uses the notion of countervailing passions, but he drops (as Hume did a few years before)⁵¹ the notion of vice becoming virtue. More importantly, the countervailing passions are reinterpreted as the ‘fermentation’ that sustains the life of the social body. In the Augustinian tradition, the equilibrium that comes as a result of competing passions is described as inherently unstable and precarious, because it is based on forces that are fundamentally destructive.⁵² As a matter of fact, Helvétius shares that prognosis for all systems that try to transmute greed into civic sense. For him, the countervailing passions are healthy only in republican political systems that share power among classes of citizens and consequently enforce some convergence between individual interest and the public interest:

L’effervescence modérée des passions est salutaire aux empires: ils sont, à cet égard, comparables aux mers dont les eaux stagnantes exhaleraient en croupissant des vapeurs funestes à l’univers, si, en les soulevant, la tempête ne les épurait. Mais, si la grandeur des nations soumises au pouvoir arbitraire n’est qu’une grandeur momentanée, il n’en est pas ainsi des gouvernements où la puissance est, comme dans Rome et dans la Grèce, partagée entre le peuple, les grands ou les rois. [...] J’ajouterai même que, si l’intérêt particulier n’est point entièrement détaché de l’intérêt public; si les moeurs d’un peuple, tel que les romains, ne sont pas aussi corrompues qu’elles l’étaient du temps des Marius et des Sylla; l’esprit de faction, qui force les citoyens à s’observer et à se contenir réciproquement, est l’esprit conservateur de ces empires. Ils ne se soutiennent que par le contrepoids des intérêts opposés. Jamais les fondements de ces états ne sont plus assurés que dans ces moments de fermentation extérieure où ils paraissent prêts à s’écrouler.⁵³

For Helvétius, who is speaking here as a Machiavellian republican, there is nothing wrong with the spirit of faction as long as each class of citizens is given by law a share in deciding what the public good is. It is remarkable that wherever Helvétius refers to countervailing passions in a positive sense, he describes their power as one of ‘fermentation’, which, as we have seen above, is the process that, according to him, sustains living organisms (from plants to human beings). In the language of the time, fermentation is the process through which compounds are broken

50. Elie Halévy, *The Growth of philosophic radicalism* (1901-1904; London, 1928), p.17.

51. Hume, ‘Of refinement in the arts’, in *Political essays*, p.105-14.

52. See Force, *Self-interest before Adam Smith*, ch.2.

53. *De l’homme*, p.407.

into simpler elements through the action of one element (the ferment). The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* of 1697 cites digestion as an example of fermentation. The *Dictionnaire* of 1762 mentions a figurative use of the word: fermentation can refer to the spirit of faction ('Les esprits étaient dans la plus grande fermentation'). More generally, for Helvétius, fermentation is the movement of nature itself, in which bodies break down and are continuously recomposed under new forms:

Ceux-là ne sont pas athées qui soutiennent le mouvement essentiel à la matière, qui le regardent comme la force invisible et motrice qui se répand dans toutes ses parties. Voit-on les astres changer continuellement de lieu, se rouler perpétuellement sur leur centre; voit-on tous les corps se détruire et se reproduire sans cesse sous des formes différentes; voit-on enfin la nature dans une fermentation et une dissolution éternelle.⁵⁴

Jean Meslier expressed a similar idea some fifty years before: for him, the life of human beings, of animals, of plants 'n'est qu'une espèce de modification, et de fermentation continue de leur être, c'est-à-dire de la matière dont ils sont composés'.⁵⁵ Translated into political terms, this view means that political bodies are always already in the process of dying because they are compounds that will ultimately break down into simpler elements and be rearranged into other compounds. This breaking down, however, is the movement of life itself, which must be embraced as such and can be slowed down and sustained through appropriate means. Despotic governments are the low point in this cycle because they are the moment of death, when fermentation is no longer operating because the body is entirely decomposed: 'Le propre des gouvernements despotiques est d'affaiblir dans l'homme le mouvement des passions. Aussi la consomption est-elle la maladie mortelle de ces empires: aussi les peuples soumis à cette forme de gouvernement, n'ont-ils communément ni l'audace, ni le courage des républicains.'⁵⁶

Utility and consent

Helvétius' conception of the relationship between justice and utility is also epicurean, and perfectly consistent with the moral and political theory developed in volume 3 of Gassendi's remarks on the life of Epicurus by Diogenes Laertius,⁵⁷ and its summary in Bernier's *Abrégé de*

54. *De l'homme*, p.242.

55. Jean Meslier, *Mémoire des pensées et des sentiments. Huitième preuve*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol.3 (Paris, Anthropos, 1972), p.13-126 (89).

56. *De l'homme*, p.81.

57. Pierre Gassendi, 'Epicuri ethica', in *Animadversiones in decimum librum Diogenis Laertii*, vol.3 (Lyon, G. Barbier, 1649), p.1181-1768.

*la philosophie de Gassendi.*⁵⁸ As Gassendi puts it, referring to the founder of the school, the first principle of politics is that justice is based on utility: ‘Epicurus traced the origin of all justice and equity to utility.’⁵⁹ There is no need to multiply examples: the principle is at work everywhere in Helvétius. What may be worth noticing here is that, in accordance with Epicurean tradition, Helvétius places the invention of justice in a narrative of the origins of humanity:

J'écarteraï d'abord les idées de justice qui me sont les plus familières: je rappellerai à ma mémoire, et j'en rejeterai successivement une infinité d'idées, jusqu'au moment où j'apercevrai que, pour résoudre cette question, il faut d'abord se former des idées nettes et générales de la justice; et, pour cet effet, remonter jusqu'à l'établissement des sociétés, jusqu'à ces temps reculés où l'on en peut mieux apercevoir l'origine.⁶⁰

The second principle of justice is consent. For something to be just and legal, two conditions are necessary. The first one is utility, the second one is the agreement of all:

J'estime qu'afin que quelque chose soit juste, et observée de droit, deux conditions sont nécessaires, l'une qu'elle soit utile, ou qu'elle ait par soi l'utilité, c'est-à-dire la sûreté commune; l'autre qu'elle soit prescrite, et ordonnée du commun consentement de la société: car rien n'est entièrement juste que ce que la société d'un commun accord, ou par un pacte commun, a cru devoir être observé.⁶¹

Helvétius refers to consent many times. For him, the laws of small States are just because they are based on utility and the consent of all: ‘Il est de grandes, il est de petites sociétés. Les lois de ces dernières sont simples; parce que leurs intérêts le sont: elles sont conformes à l'intérêt du plus grand nombre, parce qu'elles se font du consentement de tous.’⁶² Similarly, the laws of nascent societies, limited to the prohibition of theft and murder, are just because they are based on consensus: ‘De telles lois seront toujours justes, parce qu'elles seront faites du consentement de tous.’⁶³ Elsewhere, Helvétius asks why the laws of nascent societies are always fair and wise. The answer is: ‘Les lois s'y font du consentement et par conséquent pour l'utilité de tous.’⁶⁴ The problem of course is how to

58. François Bernier, *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi* (Lyon, Anisson, Posuel & Rigaud, 1684).

For an insightful analysis of Gassendi's political theory, see Gianni Paganini, ‘Epicurisme et philosophie au XVII^e siècle: convention, utilité et droit selon Gassendi’, *Studi filosofici* 12-13 (1989-1990), p.5-45.

59. ‘Epicurus omnem Iuris, & aequi originem ab Utilitate repetiit’, ‘Epicuri ethica’, p.1526.

60. *De l'esprit*, p.275.

61. *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi*, p.323.

62. *De l'homme*, p.89.

63. *De l'homme*, p.90.

64. *De l'homme*, p.424.

have consent in a large State. A tentative solution is Helvétius's famous project to divide up France into thirty small republics. It includes the clause that no republic could modify its laws without the consent of all the others.⁶⁵ At any rate, the Epicurean notion that consent is a precondition of justice runs through the work of Helvétius.

One last point: for Gassendi, since there is no justice or injustice before the establishment of laws, there can be no justice or injustice between human beings that have no pact or agreement between them:

Parmi les hommes qui n'ont fait aucun pacte, ni aucune société, si quelqu'un en maltraite un autre, on peut bien dire qu'il lui est dommageable, ou qu'il lui fait du mal, mais non pas qu'il soit injuste à son égard, ou qu'il lui fasse tort, et injure, parce qu'il n'y a aucune loi qui l'oblige de ne lui point faire de mal.⁶⁶

For Helvétius, one consequence of this principle is the fact that justice within a country and justice between countries are fundamentally different things. There is no agreement between nations about such basic things as the possession of goods and territories. In this perspective, Helvétius gives a sober assessment of the slave trade, and states that *jus gentium* has no legal force because it is made up of ad hoc agreements instead of being based on the consent of all nations:

Si, par ce commerce, les Européens entretiennent sans remords des guerres éternelles entre ces peuples; c'est que, sauf les traités particuliers et des usages généralement reconnus auxquels on donne le nom de droit des gens, l'église et les rois pensent que les peuples sont, les uns à l'égard des autres, précisément dans le cas des premiers hommes ayant qu'ils eussent formé des sociétés, qu'ils connussent d'autres droits que la force et l'adresse, qu'il y eût entre eux aucune convention, aucune loi, aucune propriété, et qu'il pût, par conséquent, y avoir aucun vol et aucune injustice. A l'égard même des traités particuliers que les nations contractent entre elles, ces traités n'ayant jamais été garantis par un assez grand nombre de nations, je vois qu'ils n'ont presque jamais pu se maintenir par la force; et qu'ils ont par conséquent, comme des lois sans force, dû souvent rester sans exécution.⁶⁷

There is a bitter irony in this passage: it combines a critique of slavery with a re-statement of Epicurean legal and political principles, which in this case are said to be implicitly held by kings and the Church. As often in Helvétius, realism and utopianism go hand in hand: slavery and war will disappear when nations have carried out 'le projet de Henri IV ou de l'abbé de Saint-Pierre'⁶⁸ – a general agreement among themselves to

65. *De l'homme*, p.285.

66. *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi*, p.328.

67. *De l'esprit*, p.278.

68. *De l'esprit*, p.280.

guarantee the ownership of their possessions and to prohibit the takeover of a country by another.

Of course, many of the notions discussed above are present in Hobbes or Locke. Helvétius said repeatedly that he was indebted to Locke. The authorities who banned *De l'esprit* mentioned Hobbes as a malign influence. Some concepts in isolation may indeed be traced to this or that reference. I have tried to show in this paper that the most useful frame of reference to understand the political theory of Helvétius is the Epicurean tradition. It is from this perspective only that all the aspects come together: self-interest as a first principle, organicism, republicanism, utility and consent. Why Helvétius did not explicitly present his theorising as Epicurean is a complex issue that lies beyond the scope of this paper. In 1838 John Stuart Mill wrote that 'the premises of Bentham are all clearly given by Helvétius',⁶⁹ acknowledging that the psychological assumptions of standard economic theory could be traced back to Helvétius. This recognised the staying power of Helvétius' ideas but it overlooked the rest of his doctrine: a democratic republicanism that was still alive in the political thought of Jean-Baptiste Say,⁷⁰ and shared by the 'idéologues' who were regulars of Mme Helvétius' salon after the philosopher's death.

69. John Stuart Mill, 'Bentham', *London and Westminster review*, August 1838, revised in *Dissertations and discussions*, 2 vols (London, 1859), vol.1, p.330-92 (383).

70. See Richard Whatmore, 'Democrats and Republicans in Restoration France', *European journal of political theory* 3:1 (2004), p.37-51 and *Republicanism and the French Revolution: an intellectual history of Jean-Baptiste Say's political economy* (Oxford, 2000).