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Towards a Virtuous Public Policy
Donald G. Richards
- 193 Ricardo on Money**
A Reappraisal
Ghislain Deleplace
- 194 Natural Law and the Origin of Political Economy**
Samuel Pufendorf and the History of Economics
Arild Saether
- 195 Ricardo and International Trade**
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and Taichi Tabuchi*
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The Economics of Jeremy Bentham and Robert Owen
Estrella Trincado and Manuel Santos-Redondo
- 197 War in the History of Economic Thought**
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- 198 Schumpeter's Price Theory**
Harry Bloch
- 199 Economics and Literature**
A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approach
Edited by çinla Akdere and Christine Baron
- 200 Economic Analyses in Historical Perspective**
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**Economic Analyses in Historical
Perspective**

**Festschrift in Honour of
Gilbert Faccarello**

**Edited by José Luís Cardoso,
Heinz D. Kurz and Philippe Steiner**

6 Jean-Baptiste Say as a classical moralist

Pierre Force

One of Gilbert Faccarello's main scholarly contributions has been his study of the connections between early modern Augustinianism and the emergence of classical political economy. Such connections appear, for instance, in the work of Pierre de Boisguilbert,¹ who was indebted in part to Pierre Nicole's *Moral Essays* and the theory of "enlightened self-love." Here, I would like to show an example of similar connections well after the rise of political economy, made by an author who, at first sight, had few affinities with seventeenth-century French moralists: Jean-Baptiste Say.

The *Petit volume contenant quelques aperçus de l'homme et de la société* (Small Volume Including Some Observations About Man and Society) was published with Deterville, Say's usual publisher, in 1817.² It presented itself as a work written "in the manner of La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld" and added that the subject matter ("man and society, our tastes and our flaws, our ridicules and our vices, our interests and our actions") "will never be exhausted."³ The word "*aperçus*" in the title was an implicit reference to La Bruyère, who had presented his work as a series of *remarques* (observations) in the tradition of humanist *notationes*, which did not have the generalizing aim of La Rochefoucauld's maxims and were not necessarily short and pithy like maxims. The book was filled with references to classical moralists: Montaigne, Pascal, and La Rochefoucauld are mentioned three times each, Molière and La Bruyère, twice each. One might be tempted to read this volume as a belated attempt to produce "literature" in the *Grand Siècle* tradition in a way that is entirely disconnected from the "scientific" aims of the *Traité d'économie politique* (Treatise on Political Economy).⁴ I would like to show that, quite to the contrary, these considerations about human nature, expressed in the vocabulary of classical moralists, are directly linked to Say's economic thinking. I will do this with a single example by showing how a particular remark echoes earlier debates that were economic and moral at the same time. The remark is about the difference between self-interest and vanity:

Self-interest, in spite of all the calumnies directed at it, leads to far fewer and far less dangerous mistakes than vanity, which was called an

anti-social vice by a contemporary philosopher. A man's self-interest does not always, and in fact does rarely go against another man's self-interest. All useful professions are beneficial to those who exercise them and those for whom they are exercised. However, the vanity of one man necessarily goes against the vanity of another because the one will not rule unless the other lets himself be ruled.⁵

According to this line of thinking, self-interest is a beneficial impulse because it promotes cooperation, while its nefarious cousin, vanity, leads to the war of all against all because it makes each of us a potential tyrant who will be satisfied only when others bend to our will. The definition of vanity as an "anti-social vice" is credited to an unnamed "contemporary philosopher." Who is this philosopher with whom Say agrees?

In all likelihood, this vocal critic of vanity was Condorcet. In the preface to his 1776 work *Réflexions sur le commerce des blés* (Reflections on the Grain Trade), Condorcet criticized an earlier author who had praised vanity as a social virtue:

A modern author asserted in print that vanity is a social virtue because it puts our happiness in the hands of others (*Praise of Colbert*, page 34). However, since vanity is always invested in the possession of material goods, of which most men are deprived, it follows that vanity needs others only as victims, and is precisely an anti-social vice.⁶

We can see from this reference that Condorcet coined the expression "anti-social vice" as the exact opposite of an earlier author's expression ("social virtue"): vice against virtue, anti-social against social. An earlier view had been that vanity promoted cooperation among humans (and therefore economic activity and prosperity). Condorcet saw vanity as the impulse behind extreme social inequality and oppression of the poor by the rich.

The literary conventions of the time leaned against naming contemporary authors even when they were being quoted verbatim. Here, Condorcet does not name his polemical target, but he quotes the title of the book, which makes identification easy. The *Éloge de Colbert* (Praise of Colbert) had been published just three years before by Jacques Necker as the winning entry in an essay competition organized by the *Académie française*. In Necker's book, the praise of vanity occurs in the context of Colbert's efforts in fostering economic growth:

From every corner under his ministry new occupations and new businesses arose, through the creation of countless manufactures; he encouraged some with subsidies, some by borrowing techniques from abroad, some by honorific distinctions, and all by paying attention and showing interest. This is how the sovereign or his minister exercise power over a receptive nation, which is motivated by vanity, a weakness that

should be called a social virtue because it feeds on the opinion of others and in doing so puts one's happiness in their hands and forms between men an endless chain of relationships, pleasures, and reciprocal needs.⁷

According to Necker, Colbert was a great minister because he knew how to use vanity to foster economic growth. Vanity, which is a vice from an individual point of view, is a virtue when it comes to the interests of society as a whole and is therefore deemed to be a "social virtue." This is the classic apology for luxury, which peaked in public discourse in France in the 1730s and 1740s and was based on a combination of Colbertist and *mondain* arguments.⁸ The philosophical-theological underpinnings of these arguments were largely Augustinian and revolved around the paradox of a vice's seemingly virtuous effects. The most deliberately shocking form of the paradox was Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. A more reasonable-sounding version could be found in the *Moral Essays*, in which Pierre Nicole explained that the effects of *amour-propre* (self-love) were hardly distinguishable from the effects of charity. The key question, however, was exactly how this transmutation of a vice into a virtue was taking place. Augustinians like Nicole gave various psychological explanations and ultimately ascribed the transmutations to the work of divine Providence. In the *Fable of the Bees*, Providence was invoked as well, perhaps ironically, as was the work of "the dexterous management of a skilful politician"⁹ who was turning private vices into public benefits. It is the latter aspect that is emphasized in Necker's *Éloge de Colbert*. Necker invoked not the mysteries of Providence but the *arcana imperii*. Vanity is an engine of economic growth because the sovereign knows how to put its effects to good use. A clever minister knows how to use the vanity of the king's subjects to get them to work more and more efficiently in order to produce the wealth that will make the country strong.

John Shovlin has shown that starting in the 1750s, there was a backlash against the apology for luxury as well as various attempts to moralize modern commercial society and make it compatible with civic virtue. If we examine Condorcet's thinking, we will see that his main objection against the apology for luxury was a political one. In the *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, Condorcet acknowledged that "manners have become less violent...through the influence of the spirit of industry and commerce which is inimical to unrest and violence as the natural enemies of wealth."¹⁰ However, the clever manipulation of the passions and interests of the citizens by the sovereign was both wrong and ultimately doomed to fail because it divided society into two camps: "the one fated to rule, the other to obey, the one to deceive, the other to be deceived."¹¹ Such a division overlooked the fact "that all men have an equal right to be informed on all that concerns them, and that none of the authorities established by men over themselves has the right to hide from them a single truth."¹²

A similar political argument can be found in the work of Say, who was writing in the same civic-minded tradition. In the *Petit volume*, Say tells

the story of a conversation he had with Napoleon. The economist sums up the courage to criticize the emperor for corrupting the nation. The emperor replies that the economist is naïve:

I once ventured to chastise Napoleon on the grounds that he was depraving the nation. Nothing can depict the exquisite disdain with which he replied: Haven't you heard that one governs men better with their vices than their virtues? Where did his purported cleverness lead him? What is the use of having the vicious and the fools on your side, when their rule is temporary, while being against good sense, enlightenment, and good faith, which grow in authority every day, and whose reign is the strongest because it is based on the interests of the majority?¹³

This anecdote, published in 1817, two years after the fall of the emperor, highlights the failure of political cleverness. It should be added that Napoleon's posture was not a particularly shocking or cynical one. It was the expression of an eighteenth-century conventional wisdom that Hume once summarized in the following way:

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 knave, and to have no other end, in all his actions, but private interest. By this interest we must govern him, and, by means of it, make him cooperate to public good, notwithstanding his insatiable avarice and ambition.¹⁴

As Richard Whatmore has shown, Say's dislike of Napoleon's politics was based on the same principle as his dislike of British politics: "Britain was a modern republic in the same sense as Bonaparte's Empire: leaders ruled in the name of the people, but in practice against the interests of the people."¹⁵ Against the clever rule of the few in the name of the many, Say proposed a democratic conception of politics based, as we have just seen, on "good sense, enlightenment, and good faith, which grow in authority every day, and whose reign is the strongest because it is based on the interests of the majority." The concept of *intérêt du plus grand nombre* (interests of the majority) was directly borrowed from Helvétius.¹⁶ It assumed that a stable and moral system of government would come only if the citizens had a clear understanding of their own interests.

These debates ultimately revolved around questions of moral psychology, which Say, following Helvetius, still understood as informed by a dialogue with seventeenth-century French moralists. The key question was whether the impulse that La Rochefoucauld, Nicole, Bayle and many others called *amour-propre* promoted conflict or cooperation. In the *Moral Essays*, Nicole had shown how self-love became enlightened for reasons of internal necessity that could ultimately be tied to divine Providence. However,

for Augustinians like La Rochefoucauld or Bayle, if self-love had a way of putting checks on itself, the results were not always reliable or consistent. As Bayle puts it, "monarchs do not always orient their passions by the wind of their interest" and sometimes "give up their glory, their prudence, and their most fundamental interests."¹⁷ Similarly, for La Rochefoucauld, the military enterprises of Augustus and Marc Anthony could be described as rational, self-interested behavior or, just as plausibly, the result of childish vanity:

Great and striking actions which dazzle the eyes are represented by politicians as the effect of great designs, instead of which they are commonly caused by the temper and the passions. Thus the war between Augustus and Anthony, which is ascribed to the ambition they entertained of making themselves masters of the world, was probably but an effect of jealousy.¹⁸

War and ambition as expressions of vanity are a recurrent theme in the *Petit Volume*. Children as well as kings often engage in irrational and self-destructive behavior based on an inflated sense of their own importance:

Moral philosophers seem to believe that the love of self, or self-interest, governs the actions of men more than self-love, or vanity. I believe on the contrary that in general vanity has a greater influence on them than love of self. One just needs to observe how often men follow their vanity against their own interests: take the child who starves himself in protest of a punishment he received or the potentate you could flatter into making so many mistakes, and who destroys his country, which is the foundation of his own power, to avenge himself of an insult he read in the newspaper.¹⁹

The descriptions of human behavior that we find in the *Petit volume* explicitly present themselves as continuations of La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld, and Say, like La Rochefoucauld, highlights the many discrepancies between actual behavior and what a rational, normative sense of one's interests would dictate. The main difference is the following: In La Rochefoucauld, all behavior, rational or irrational, is ascribed to *amour-propre*, a mysterious entity that generates self-awareness and self-delusion at the same time. Say, on the other hand, has different names for each end of the spectrum: Self-delusion is called *vanité* and self-awareness is called *intérêt*. The former leads to conflict, the latter leads to cooperation. As I have shown elsewhere, the word *amour-propre* had been used to describe and explain a wide spectrum of behavior, rational and irrational. In Say's work, the word took on the narrower meaning it still carries in French today and was used as a synonym for vanity.²⁰ One may argue that some of the richness of Augustinian anthropology was lost in the process. On the other hand, the disambiguation

was necessary for the promotion of self-interest to the status of an axiom in economic thinking.

Notes

- 1 Gilbert Faccarello, *Foundations of Laissez-Faire: The Economics of Pierre de Boisguilbert*, London: Routledge, 1999.
- 2 Jean-Baptiste Say, *Petit volume contenant quelques aperçus de l'homme et de la société*, Paris: Deterville, 1817, 1.
- 3 "On a fait bien des écrits dans le genre de La Bruyère et de La Rochefoucauld; on en fera beaucoup encore, et la matière ne sera pas épuisée. Quelle matière que l'homme et la société, nos goûts et nos travers, nos ridicules et nos vices, nos intérêts et nos actions!" Ibid.
- 4 Jean-Baptiste Say, *Traité d'économie politique*, Paris: Deterville, 1803.
- 5 "L'intérêt, tant calomnié, ne nous fait pas faire de si grosses, de si dangereuses sottises que la vanité, qu'un philosophe de nos jours a nommé un vice anti-social. L'intérêt d'un homme n'est pas toujours, et même n'est pas souvent, en opposition avec l'intérêt d'un autre homme. Toutes les professions utiles sont profitables à ceux qui les exercent et à ceux pour qui elles sont exercées; mais la vanité d'un homme, est nécessairement en opposition avec la vanité d'un autre, parce que l'un, ne peut dominer, que l'autre ne se soumette." *Petit volume*, 89.
- 6 "Un auteur moderne a imprimé que la vanité est une vertu sociale, parce qu'elle met son bonheur entre les mains des autres. (Eloge de Colbert, page 34). Mais comme la vanité se place toujours dans la jouissance des choses, dont une grande partie des hommes est privée, il s'ensuit que la vanité n'a besoin des autres que pour en faire ses victimes, et qu'ainsi elle est précisément un vice anti-social." Condorcet, *Réflexions sur le commerce des blés. Avertissement, Œuvres complètes*, vol. 19, Paris: Cramer, 1804, 187, note 1 [London, 1776].
- 7 "On vit s'élever de toutes parts sous son ministère de nouvelles occupations et de nouveaux objets d'industrie, par l'établissement d'un nombre infini de manufactures; il excitait les unes par des secours d'argent, les autres par des instructions prises chez les étrangers, quelquefois par des marques d'honneur, et toujours par cette attention et cet air d'intérêt qui ont tant de pouvoir de la part du souverain ou de son ministre, sur une nation sensible, et qu'on peut exciter par la vanité, par cette faiblesse qu'on devrait appeler une vertu sociale, puisqu'en se nourrissant d'opinion elle met son bonheur entre les mains des autres, et forme entre les hommes une chaîne éternelle de rapports, de plaisirs, et de besoins réciproques." Jacques Necker, *Eloge de Jean-Baptiste Colbert. Discours qui a remporté le prix de l'Académie française en 1773*, Paris: Brunet, 1773, 42.
- 8 See John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue. Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006, 13–48.
- 9 Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, edited by F. B. Kaye, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924, vol. 1, 369 [sixth edition, London: J. Tonson, 1732].
- 10 Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955, 127. "Les mœurs se sont adoucies ... par l'influence de cet esprit de commerce et d'industrie, ennemi des violences et des troubles qui font fuir la richesse." *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, Paris: Boivin, 1933 [Paris: Agasse, 1794], 148.
- 11 *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, 129. "...l'une est destinée à gouverner, l'autre à obéir; l'une à mentir, l'autre à être trompée" *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, 151.

- 12 *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, p. 129. "...que tous ont un droit égal de s'éclairer sur tous leurs intérêts, de connaître toutes les vérités; et qu'aucun des pouvoirs établis par eux sur eux-mêmes, ne peut avoir le droit de leur en cacher aucune." *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, 151.
- 13 "Je me suis hasardé, une fois, de reprocher à Napoléon qu'il dépravait la nation. Rien ne peut rendre la finesse du dédain avec lequel il me répondit: Vous ne savez donc pas encore que l'on gouverne mieux les hommes par leurs vices que par leur vertu ? Où cette prétendue habileté l'a-t-elle conduit ? Quel est l'avantage d'avoir pour soi les pervers et les sots dont le règne n'a qu'un tems, parce que tout l'ébranle; et d'avoir contre soi le bon sens, les lumières et la bonne foi, dont chaque nouvelle circonstance avance l'autorité, et dont le règne est le plus inébranlable parce qu'il est fondé sur l'intérêt du plus grand nombre ?" *Petit volume*, 61.
- 14 David Hume, "Of the independency of Parliament," in *Political Essays*, edited by Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 24 [*Political Discourses*, Edinburgh: A. Kincaid and A. Donaldson, 1752].
- 15 Richard Whatmore, "Democrats and Republicans in Restoration France," *European Journal of Political Theory* 3:37 (2004), 47.
- 16 Claude Adrien Helvétius, *De l'homme: de ses facultés intellectuelles et de son éducation*, London: Société Typographique, 1773, 89, 91, 216, 433.
- 17 Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, Amsterdam: P. Brunel, 1740, "Louis XI" article [Amsterdam: Reinier Leers, 1697]. "Cela montre que les monarques ne tournent pas toujours leurs passions selon le vent de leur intérêt ... leur gloire, leur prudence, leurs intérêts les plus capitaux."
- 18 "Ces grandes et éclatantes actions qui éblouissent les yeux sont représentées par les politiques comme les effets des grands desseins, au lieu que ce sont d'ordinaire les effets de l'humeur et des passions. Ainsi la guerre d'Auguste et d'Antoine, qu'on rapporte à l'ambition qu'ils avaient de se rendre maîtres du monde, n'était peut-être qu'un effet de jalousie." François de La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes et réflexions diverses*, edited by Jean Lafond, Paris: Gallimard, 1976, maxim 7.
- 19 "Les philosophes moralistes paraissent croire que l'amour de soi, l'intérêt, dirige les actions des hommes plus que ne le fait l'amour propre, la vanité. Je pense au contraire que la vanité exerce sur eux plus d'empire, généralement parlant, que l'amour de soi. Il suffit d'observer dans combien de cas les hommes agissent par vanité d'une manière opposée à leurs intérêts, depuis l'enfant qui blessé d'une mortification qu'on lui a fait essayer, boude contre son ventre, jusqu'au potentat à qui l'on fait faire tant de sottises en le flattant, et qui détruit son pays, c'est-à-dire le fondement de sa puissance, pour se venger d'une insulte de gazette." *Petit volume*, p. 83.
- 20 "First Principles in Translation: The Axiom of Self-Interest from Adam Smith to Jean-Baptiste Say," *History of Political Economy* 38:2 (2006), 319–338.

7 Theology and knowledge of the "collective man" in the writings of Pierre-Simon Ballanche

Ludovic Frobert

The issue of the relationships between political economics and theology lies at the heart of several recent historical studies undertaken by Gilbert Faccarello.¹ The period immediately following the French Revolution as well as the first third of the 19th century stand out among the salient episodes of this history. In the wake of Jean-Baptiste Say's *Traité d'économie politique* (1803), political economics laid claim to its positivity and to its status as a leading science of a new era by ridding themselves of the domain of beliefs and opinions and by advocating for the foundation of the nascent industrial society upon the criterion of usefulness and individual interest. However, the reflection upon industrialisation immediately became more complicated at the turn of the 1820s. Liberal thinkers such as Benjamin Constant, Germaine de Staël and the nebulous Saint-Simonian group, which deployed after the death of its inspiration, the author of *Le Nouveau Christianisme* (1825), considered individual interest alone insufficient and so called for more soul for the new industrial world. In their article entitled "Religion and Political Economy in Early 19th Century France", Gilbert Faccarello and Philippe Steiner took great care to distinguish the three industrialist versions – associated with the names Say, Constant and Saint-Simon – from a line of reactionary and counter-revolutionary thinking that they associated with the names of Joseph de Maistre, Louis de Bonald and Pierre-Simon Ballanche.² This may be exact in general terms but should be nuanced concerning Ballanche. Rather than being a reactionary, he belonged to the category of "enlightened traditionalists."³ He insisted that "Christianity, the so perfect law of religious humanity, is eminently disagreeable to the initiatory law of theocracy." As Paul Bénichou underlined, in Ballanche's eyes, one should reconcile tradition and the Enlightenment by proposing "this idea of a Christianity responding to the present, although faithful to itself, and subject to the law of progress."⁴ This short note will provide an opportunity to revisit the author of the *Essais de Palingénésie sociale* (1827) and demonstrate that, in that work, Ballanche proposed not actual economic reflection but rather the outlines of a general knowledge of social laws, a science and philosophy of the "collective man" – both statically and dynamically – which later served as an inspiration for the more specifically economic reflections of other authors.