

Rousseau and Smith in the Age of Imagination

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Introduction

In the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality amongst Men*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau proclaims that the only natural law that benefits society is *amour de soi*, the desire for self-preservation. And in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith discusses the impossibility of a perfect system of natural jurisprudence on the basis that moral concepts arise from feelings through an inductive generalization. Neither of them seems to defend the existence of universal laws demarcating right from wrong, the way through which morals are tied to knowledge and social progress to rationality. Yet both are chief figures of an epoch usually referred to as the ‘Age of Reason’, and as a result rationalist postulates will be attached to them. This is how systematic approaches to history and hermeneutical labels work. It does not matter if neither Rousseau nor Smith offers any reason to be considered rationalist philosophers; they will be considered as such, and many of their own arguments will be misunderstood because of this.

In this paper, I will briefly consider if the characterization ‘Age of Reason’ might be biased, and I debate other forms of Enlightenment intellectual engagement by putting forward some of Rousseau’s and Smith’s insights. To do so, in the first section I respond to the approach systematically taken to the eighteenth century of trying to correlate everything to the primacy of reason; in the second section I discuss the importance of the changes in public awareness of *les Hommes des Lumières*; in the third section I examine how Rousseau’s anthropological theory fits the renewed organization of the public sphere; and in the fourth section I consider whether Rousseau’s views might be compatible with those of Smith.

The Age of Reason

The characterization of the eighteenth century as the ‘Age of Reason’ is well known. Historians, philosophers and writers use the label regularly to avoid repeating labels such as ‘eighteenth century’ and, one might say, as though it were a factual description. Although it is a fact that reason was celebrated during the French Revolution, it is quite daring to characterize a century of achievements

through what happened during its last decade in a nation involved in a movement that unsettled the whole Western world. It would be reasonable to ask if reason was the distinctive feature of the Enlightenment, and even to wonder if the depiction of the era as the 'Age of Reason' is biased.

Ernst Cassirer is one of the notable scholars who endorse the primacy of reason during the Enlightenment. He has argued that:

variety and diversity of shapes are simply the full unfolding of an essentially homogeneous formative power. When the eighteenth century wants to characterise this power in a single word, it calls it 'reason'. 'Reason' becomes the unifying and central point of this century, expressing all that it longs and strives for, and all that it achieves.

(Cassirer 1951:5)

His proposal is to systematize the activities of countless individuals over a hundred-year period along a single axis. The project is upheld by the premise that events and individuals behave through their being guided by the powers of their historical circumstance, and the objective is to show the historian how to explain the diverse collections of events and personalities that they find laid out before them on their desk. Under this interpretation, since we know that reason articulates everything in the eighteenth century, we can easily correlate events and personalities within a unique account of the Enlightenment. I am more inclined to support Charles Griswold's definition of the Enlightenment as 'a vast canvas of extraordinary complexity' (Griswold 1999:25) and to suggest that the historian then draws up an organic chart of people, ideas and events. Of course, it may be that Cassirer possesses some source of understanding that I cannot match, but I think that we, in fact, have rather different aims. Cassirer does not aspire to discuss historical momentum. Instead, he seeks to defend a systematic approach to the Enlightenment in which reason must correlate everything to Kant's philosophy.

Indeed, reason was a common subject in salons and academies in the eighteenth century, as were science, freedom, scepticism, atheism, materialism, the New World and so forth. The disputes entered into were diverse, and even if our goal is simply to summarize them in the course of advocating some kind of primacy of reason, we would need to keep in mind that, for example, most of the more prominent works of the century were signed by empiricist authors. Peter Gay follows Cassirer's proposal and also exemplifies the key academics who firmly defend the primacy of reason in the eighteenth century. In the second volume of *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, The Science of Freedom* (1969), Gay devotes a section of the book to the 'Career of Imagination'. His conclusion is that imagination was linked to arts, morals and passions, but not to understanding. To support this claim, he repeats a statement by Joseph Addison in *The Spectator* to the effect that poets' works are the product of imagination and those of philosophers are the result of understanding, and he dismisses La Mettrie's arguments that imagination must be exercised to make thought possible by saying these were no more than popular clichés. However, Gay recognizes that

imagination had a special consideration ‘outside Germany, [since it] was spontaneous and creative’ (Gay 1969:212), whereas for the German, reason shaped perceptions and imagination was passive. He even acknowledges that there was an ‘empiricist Enlightenment’ that assumed imagination to be the foundation of human experiences, and, following Hume’s philosophy, these empiricists challenged the ‘frivolous proprieties of our thought’ (Gay 1969:212), appealing to the attributes of those experiences. But even then, the importance of imagination is pruned down to a bridge between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, where it will be adequately discussed. In a manner similar to Cassirer, Gay assumes the hypothesis of reason’s primacy and then reinforces this idea by deprecating every other feature of the Enlightenment.

To be clear, my argument is not that there are no valuable arguments to support the importance and influence of ‘reason’ during the ups and downs of the eighteenth century. Rather, I am simply drawing attention to the way in which hermeneutical approaches to the Enlightenment that build upon ready-made assumptions can produce anomalies and cause human activities to be hidden from sight. Reason was important and became prominent – even threatening during the Reign of Terror, albeit only in France and during the last decade of the century. Discussing the Enlightenment requires us to understand how the notion of a *Nouvelle Régime* came to be conceived and how society and public awareness changed in Western cultures. When discussing the Enlightenment, it is worth recalling the words of Adam Smith in his ‘Letter to *The Edinburgh Review*’: ‘[Although *les Lumières* are] cultivated in some degree in almost every part of Europe, it is in France and England only that it is cultivated with such success or reputation as to excite the attention of foreign nations’ (Smith 1982b:243). Why was this the case? Because it was only in France and Britain that ‘*les Lumières*’ left the academies and became a public phenomenon that brought about social changes. It is important to always remember that the main features of the Enlightenment are scientific, philosophical and political revolutions; these occurred throughout the eighteenth century and across the Western world with different expressions.

The most persuasive argument in support of the primacy of reason in the eighteenth century that I have encountered fits nicely with this background: reason had a crucial role in propaganda. In *Science and the Enlightenment*, Thomas Hankins, who approves Cassirer’s and Gay’s views, brings our attention to the fact that the ‘philosophers of the eighteenth century believed that the Scientific Revolution was changing all of human activity, not just the natural sciences’, and he remarks that ‘Reason was the key to a correct method’ (Hankins 1985:2). To support reason was therefore to promote social progress, and not philosophical debate. This claim is fair, since individuals are convinced that they defend positive change and they firmly believe their arguments to speak the truth. An example of this is found in a series of pamphlets by Thomas Paine known as *The Age of Reason*. Paine’s defence of natural religion is built upon the rightness of reason and the denial of faith as an alternative mode of knowledge. The premise that ‘the most formidable weapon against errors of every kind is reason’ (Paine 2011:41) does not make room for any non-rational answer, unlike Hume’s discussion of miracles

or the considerations in the *Encyclopaedia* about the connections between faith and reason and the role of the natural world in freeing reason from faith (*Enc* 13:773). Paine's metaphor of a 'weapon against errors of every kind' for reason recalls the debate about God among both Christians and deist believers, but above all it is an acknowledgement of the use of scientific activities to conquer practical problems. This is how we know that 'reason' is propaganda: the complexity of the idea is less relevant than the briefing; we merely recall a flawed meaning of the concept to appeal to the public. French revolutionaries would make clear this when they introduced the Cult of Reason or renamed the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris the Temple of Reason: the 'weapon against errors' is more likely a faith than a method – or a faculty – that we must adhere to. When trying to explain what reason was for *les Hommes des Lumières*, Hankins therefore concludes:

It could mean order imposed on recalcitrant nature, or it could mean common sense (as in the term reasonableness), or it could mean logically valid argument, as in mathematics. Because reason in any of these meanings was a valuable guide to knowledge and to life, the philosophers of the Enlightenment used it as a rallying cry without worrying too much about its precise definition. (Hankins 1985:2)

The historical importance of reason as propaganda is beyond dispute. The French Revolution, the Reign of Terror and the subsequent endless debates surrounding the last decade of the century are crucial for Western civilization. Even so, I consider that it is possible and worthwhile to discuss whether reason is the spirit or the essence of the Enlightenment. There are many relevant alternative views to take into account, such as David Stove's claims for egalitarianism as the main feature of the century because of its novelty: 'Most of the elements of the Enlightenment can be traced back to classical antiquity, but its egalitarianism cannot' (Stove 2002:12). Likewise, Jessica Riskin argues that science had to become technique in order to be able to change the world and that rationality was conditioned by our own acquaintance with its values: 'If one could name a unifying feature of the Enlightenment as a whole, it would not be rationalism, but instead a pervasive ambivalence about rationalism, created by the very project of self-conscious inquiry into reason's nature and limits' (Riskin 2002:285). Incidentally, both views can be linked through defence of the individual will against the imposition or guidance of external authorities such as a god, king or state – or even reason.

The Age of Imagination

As Riskin remarks, there are many appealing anecdotes that illustrate the difficulties experienced by the sciences in becoming socially acknowledged. The story quoted by Neil Safier in *Measuring the New World* is one of them; it recounts Native Americans' rejection of the intuitive – at least for Europeans – work of cartographers and the view that following the new sciences was not an easily acceptable solution:

Having worked on the geographical map of Cuenca, [La Condamine] still needed to measure a few blocks of the city. Not daring to carry out these measurements by day for fear of the anger of the local populace, he went out one moonlit night accompanied by various high-ranking people of the city who could protect him. As he began to carry out [his measurements], an old woman recognized him and proclaimed that he was plotting to use his measurements to carry out some treachery against the city. She incited the neighbourhood to such a degree that other women came out with sticks and stones and made them all flee.

(Velasco 1981, T3:240 quoted in Safier 2008:273).

The picture can be linked to another commonplace about the primacy of reason, namely the claim that reason represents the light in ‘Enlightenment’, meaning that natives were acting without lights or engaged in irrational behaviour. That said, if the *Encyclopaedia* reflects to some degree commonly held views from the Enlightenment, we should be mindful that throughout the text the references to ‘lights’ mean knowledge and not reason. Moreover, the *Encyclopaedia* defines ‘reasoning’ (*Enc* 13:776) as correlating judgements, and therefore reason is not presented as a faculty but a tool. I consider the *Encyclopaedia* to express the main concerns and worries of its time, and as a result I understand the incident of La Condamine as an example of the difficulties of spreading scientific and philosophical breakthroughs among society and thereby making the new scientific rationality meaningful for the populace.

It is worth recalling that common tasks in the daily routines of *les philosophes* included avoiding censor, joining friends in private salons where free thinkers were not prosecuted, writing anonymous pieces to spread inconvenient ideas, and concealing criticisms in unsuspecting novels, plays and the like. The Enlightenment happened through many underground activities. Without public acceptance, scientific and philosophical innovations were not only worthless, but also meaningless. Provocation and propaganda were much more needed than truth. The Enlightenment’s chief objective was to transform society by freeing knowledge, educating people and changing the world through changing public awareness. The difficulties encountered in pursuing this objective were not the product of a failure of reason, as many over-simplified critiques have claimed. The failure of the Cult of Reason may have been a problem for the French Revolution, but it was not for the much broader Enlightenment. The obstacles for *les Hommes des Lumières* were that the public preferred dogmatic knowledge and governments to, among other things, evidence and reasons or the safeguard of individual freedoms; Rousseau’s negative education and Montesquieu’s division of powers are examples of gambits to overcome these. The challenge, hence, was to raise public awareness of scientific method and philosophical debates and to free public imagination from prejudice and, of course, the darkness that represented ignorance.

The *Encyclopaedia* entry for ‘history’ (*Enc* 8:220) was written by Voltaire, a well-known deist, who supported the belief described by Hankins concerning

the identification between scientific and social progress. The text differentiates three types of history: 1) the history of opinions, which covers humans' constant wrongness; 2) the history of arts, which contains the progress and inventions of practical knowledge, in a broad sense of the term; and 3) natural history, which Voltaire says should not be considered history at all because it is actually the scientific knowledge of nature and holds the only real certainties. Voltaire's view is that the divergence between the state of opinions and the state of the arts is a failure in social progress that the Enlightenment and its spreading of knowledge might resolve by uniting mores with knowledge. Voltaire's positivism about progress was discussed by Rousseau among others. Rousseau defends a more complex position about the success of the Enlightenment by explaining the divergence between knowledge and society based on the workings of the public sphere. Acceptance of progress in the arts and sciences by the public is a question of will as long as knowledge does not obligate either individuals or society:

On aura beau me parler de l'éternité des temps, je ne l'ai point parcourue; de l'infinité des jets, je ne les ai point comptés ; et mon incrédulité, tout aussi peu philosophique qu'on voudra, triomphera là-dessus de la démonstration même.¹

(Rousseau 1861:376)

Changing people to be open minded and inquisitive is not an easy task. In the present, we are still working on and discussing how to teach critical thinking, creativity, curiosity and so on. In the eighteenth century, the difficulty of such enterprises was much bigger, as the authorities exercised control over speech and thought, and there were no universal public education systems. But there were some channels to spread knowledge, such as private salons where people enjoyed shared readings and intellectual debates, public scientific and technological exhibitions and, chiefly, press and books that fed salon discussions and public demonstrations with news. With this kind of reader in mind when depicting 'sound' in his *Music Dictionary*, Rousseau uses tactile and visual figures to explain what the sound is by feeding the imagination of the reader with the aim of producing either a theoretical or practical understanding of the phenomenon:

Si l'on touche le corps d'un Violoncelle dans le temps qu'on en tire du Son, on le sent frémir sous la main et l'on voit bien sensiblement durer les vibrations de la Corde jusqu'à ce que le son s'éteigne. Il en est de même d'une cloche qu'on fait sonner en la frappant du batail; on la sent, on la voit même frémir, et l'on voit sautiller les grains de sable qu'on jette sur la surface. Si la Corde se détend, ou que la Cloche se fende, plus de frémissement, plus de Son.²

(Rousseau 1995:1048).

The visual dimensions of the phenomena involved in sound facilitate comprehension of the scientific depiction of sound and simultaneously offer an experimental model of physics in the surrounding world. With guidance of this kind, readers are

able to make inquiries about other vibrating objects once they have developed a manageable understanding of the physical laws that govern their world.

Nowadays, it is impossible to make economic arguments without citing large volumes of data and macroeconomic indicators that are totally unintelligible to the uninitiated; yet Adam Smith explained economic facts such as the benefits of water-based transport over carriage by land by depicting real business activities:

A broad-wheeled waggon, attended by two men, and drawn by eight horses, in about six weeks' time carries and brings back between London and Edinburgh near four ton weight of goods. In about the same time a ship navigated by six or eight men, and sailing between the ports of London and Leith, frequently carries and brings back two hundred ton weight of goods. Six or eight men, therefore, by the help of water-carriage, can carry and bring back in the same time the same quantity of goods between London and Edinburgh, as fifty broad-wheeled wagons, attended by a hundred men, and drawn by four hundred horses'

(WN:33).

One could argue that economics has evolved into a much more complex science since Smith's time, but even if this statement is true, when teaching economics in schools or writing books for non-specialists such as Tim Harford's *The Undercover Economist* (2007:194), the visual discourse employed by Smith remains both valuable and true. Economics might have evolved in its scientific knowledge and discourse, but to learn this discipline we still feed our understanding with images that are replaced by figures later on. We still think that to educate people about a discrete knowledge of the world it is necessary to talk to the imagination.

What if imagination was the drawing board on which *les Hommes des Lumières* sketched out their designs to educate society? If this was the case, would imagination not have been more structurally important in the eighteenth century than reason? When discussing 'substance' in the *Encyclopaedia*, there is a warning about trusting reason to study substance because reason can only see bodies and recognize clear ideas. The only way to inquire into the complexity of the reality is by using imagination, because only imagination can dive into the complexity of the substance and distinguish modes and accidents. But the entry warns readers to be cautious about the ideas derived from perceptions, as they are not real images of the substance but 'défectueuses & très-diverses chez la plupart des hommes, comme étant l'ouvrage de leur esprit'³ (*Enc* 15:584), because imagination is not a universal faculty but the common ground where each individual's different experiences of the world emerge. In dialogue with this idea, Voltaire's definition of imagination in the *Encyclopedia* claims that imagination, memory and senses are faculties that we cannot discuss because 'ces ressorts invisibles de notre être sont dans la main de l'Être suprême qui nous a faits, & non dans la nôtre'⁴ (*Enc* 8:560) – because they are out of range of the natural sciences (though perhaps not out of the range of the neurosciences nowadays). In the *Encyclopaedia*, then,

imagination is presented as the active faculty that makes possible the unique and individual human experience of the world by composing sensations within the individual understanding that composes public awareness. Could imagination furthermore correlate with the existence of the epistemic free will that can choose dogmatic knowledge over reasonable arguments? In Rousseau's systems we find a positive answer to this question that also seems to fit with Adam Smith's thought.

The importance of the imagination in Rousseau's anthropology

The foundations of Rousseau's philosophical system are established in the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*. Rousseau states this several times throughout his biographical writings. And despite the comments of some scholars, I agree with him, mainly because he introduces the idea of 'second nature' and also discusses its main philosophical implications, among which is a worthwhile anthropological theory. Furthermore, it is pertinent to remember how the antecedents of the text bring him to his settling of his main concerns: 1) Rousseau had attacked arguments linking social progress to the progress of technologies and sciences in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, his first successful philosophical publication; 2) he then challenged the controversial reception of this first philosophical work in the Preface to *Narcisse*, denouncing its critics for not discussing its author's arguments and for instead making a twisted interpretation of his claims following a biased reading of the text; and 3) in the play *Narcisse*, he describes how an individual's own image can be completely transformed by the public to the point of its producing a completely different person, an observation that he makes to remark upon how different public and private identities can be. All these issues would be challenged by the system proposed in the *Second Discourse* by denaturalizing humanity, his main argument being that we are cultural beings and not natural ones. This is the main feature of Rousseau's argument on second nature and the premise to all of his subsequent philosophical works: human acts are first of all moral acts. Accordingly, human affairs and problems are always moral – a matter of decisions such as enclosing a plot of land, an action that is not related to natural necessity or to any teleological condition and that therefore cannot be either true or false. Furthermore, to err is not a problem for understanding but a condition for developing human knowledge.

To support this statement, Rousseau introduces an anthropological theory in which body and soul, the classic elements of dualism, are replaced by a natural entity and a moral identity. We can find a clear-cut depiction of his re-interpretation of dualism in a draft of *Emile* known as the *Manuscrit Favre*:

chaque homme est un être double; la nature agit en dedans, l'esprit social se montre en dehors [. . .] ceux qui concluent de là que rien n'est changé dans nous que l'apparence, et qu'au fond l'homme de la société n'est que l'homme naturel sous le masque se trompent. Car quoiqu'on ne puisse renverser l'ordre de la nature ou l'altérer, on donne à la tige de l'arbrisseau une

direction oblique, et à l'homme des inclinations modifiées selon l'état des choses dans lequel il s'est trouvé, selon l'institution civile dans laquelle il vit. Nous ne sommes pas précisément doubles mais composés.⁵

(Rousseau 1969:57)

The *Second Discourse* does not contain a plain definition of man as 'compound being' as the *Manuscrit Favre* does, but the consequences of this model would be thoroughly discussed by inquiring into the anthropological boundaries of nature and culture. There is humans' first nature, which belongs to natural history and is a subject of the natural sciences:

Je ne pourrais former sur ce sujet que des conjectures vagues, et presque imaginaires: L'anatomie comparée a fait encore trop peu de progrès, les observations des Naturalistes sont encore trop incertaines, pour qu'on puisse établir sur de pareils fondements la base d'un raisonnement solide.⁶

(Rousseau 1964:134).

And then there is humans' second nature, or culture, which is studied by moral and metaphysical philosophers. Rousseau does not discuss the limits of the natural entity, as they are clearly linked to the nature of the body and its features, but he does argue against metaphysical interpretations of second nature. He proposes two important arguments against the existence of any metaphysical necessity in culture: *le bon sauvage* and random external causes. The former asserts that the natural entity of the human is not different from the entity of animals and that such a *sauvage* could survive in nature only guided by his instinct, without morality or knowledge, and that as a result the argument that there are moral laws that cross from nature into society is misleading: the only inheritance we keep from nature in the second nature is the existence of the universe. The latter argument suggests that the birth of culture is not correlated to any teleological necessity but to an independent and contingent event that could, perfectly, never have happened.

An important consequence of the elimination of metaphysical necessity from culture is that human knowledge is also contingent, despite the presence of the term 'perfectibility' in the *Second Discourse*. 'Perfectibility' is an oft-quoted and biased concept when talking about Rousseau's anthropology. Scholars such as Jean-Marie Beyssade (1988) and Henri Gouhier (1984:22) have claimed that perfectibility means that Rousseau considers human faculties – for example, reason, free will and speech – to be granted by human nature. But it is hard to defend this statement using Rousseau's writings without applying some rationalist prejudice to them. It is worth remarking that Rousseau only makes use of this term in the *Second Discourse*, and furthermore that he later avoided it because of the misunderstandings produced by its choice, as Bernard Binoche's (2004) analysis points out. Binoche also shows that Rousseau's aim when using the term 'perfectibility' is to introduce 'une projection empirique de la liberté'⁷ (Binoche 2004:69) and not to bring metaphysical contents back into human nature after displacing metaphysics from humans' second and current nature. For Rousseau,

all the human faculties that are not in our natural entity – the ones that the *savage* needs to survive such as senses, instinct or imagination – belong to our second nature, and therefore they are metaphysically contingent: ‘[ces facultés] ne pouvaient jamais se développer d’elles mêmes, [elles] avaient besoin pour [se développer] du concours fortuit de plusieurs causes étrangères qui pouvaient ne jamais naître, et sans lesquelles [l’homme] fût demeuré éternellement dans sa condition [naturelle]’⁸ (Rousseau 1964:162). If there was any metaphysical or natural necessity in the human entity that pushed humans to become cultural beings, why should their development require the actions of several different random causes? How can the presence of sleeping faculties in the human natural entity be justified without stating that other beings might also possess the same faculties in the same state? Rather, as he discusses in *Emile*, Rousseau supports an empiricist model for the development of human faculties via the appropriation of our perceptions through judgements.

When discussing *Emile*’s education, Rousseau says that children should only be recognized as moral beings once they master their body and environment. The claim might sound ruthless, but he does not deny the moral entity of child, which is a cultural attribute; he merely remarks that until the appropriation of their circumstance, children are passive beings. Thus, the main goal of education is to push the child to acquire their own moral identity and to step up to a ‘second degré [où] commence proprement la vie de l’individu’⁹ (Rousseau 1969:284). Once the child

prend la conscience de lui-même [...] la mémoire étend le sentiment de l’identité sur tous les moments de son existence, il devient véritablement un, le même, et par conséquent déjà capable de bonheur ou de misère. Il importe donc de commencer à le considérer ici comme un être moral,¹⁰

(*ibid.*)

moral identity is built by the acquisition of an awareness of one’s own existence and the prolongation of this awareness through memory into a fate built by one’s decisions and moral activity. In *Emile*’s education we can see how understanding and morality correlate inasmuch as the child cannot even recognize his existence without appropriating perceptions through conforming to a very moral identity of his own. We can analyse the implications of this statement in the example of the temperature of the water in the child’s bath: Rousseau suggests that the child is aware of the temperature of the water, but we can condition their body to prefer the cold water by gradually making their baths colder (Rousseau 1969:277). The child will tamely adapt their passive existence to the environment because they are only aware of how their body reacts – ‘Dans le commencement de la vie où la mémoire et l’imagination sont encore inactives, l’enfant n’est attentif qu’à ce qui affecte actuellement ses sens’¹¹ (Rousseau 1969:284) – and they will not exhibit any preference so long as the alteration is smooth enough to not alarm their instincts. At this point, the child’s imagination only correlates perceptions and produces awareness in a fashion similar to animals’ imaginations; his reactions

are thus not wilful because there is not yet any moral awareness. For Rousseau, the difference between animals and humans lies in humans' ability to disagree with their perceptions and develop judgements and expectations independently of the ways in which the world affects them thanks to a moral understanding of their perceptions that gives them a choice.

Rousseau claims that once humans obtain a moral identity, perceptions will not always command their activities, since the world becomes part of their free agency. This statement might sound awkward, but it is quite obvious. One might consider what happens if a parent asks a sick toddler if they want to vomit; the child will answer 'no', and then throw up. They will act in the same manner several times until they realize that the parent's question is not about their desires but about the awareness they possess of their own body. To answer the parent's question correctly, the child not only needs to be conscious of their sick bodily existence. Their sickness must become part of their own existence, and this is what their moral identity is supposed to do. They will then be able to act freely to prevent sickness or try to heal their upset stomach with medicines. This process and its possible deviations are what Rousseau discusses in his critique of education. The standard educational method that people use if they forget that the child is not yet an adult is positive education: 'J'appelle éducation positive celle qui tend à former l'esprit avant l'âge et à donner à l'enfant la connaissance des devoirs de l'homme'¹² (Rousseau 1969:945). Following this methodology, adults impose unacquired judgements onto children's understanding; these involve moral commitments that dogmatically shape their awareness of the world – for example, that things fall to the ground because of gravity – —and that might impose unrealistic judgements – for example, that things fly because of the lack of gravity. This dogmatic side of the positive education is what Rousseau denounces in the example of the hot and cold water; the parents impose on the child their judgements about hot baths instead of letting the child grow up enjoying healthier cold baths. A less controversial example could be what happens the first time a toddler bumps into a chair and their parents react in a state of alarm, asking where they feel pain; the child mostly starts crying because of the overreaction of the crowd surrounding them and when asked if the 'pain' is in their head, they might point with a finger somewhere on their head just to fulfil the subtle command of their parents. The whole situation teaches the child many judgements about bumping into chairs, though mostly prejudices not related to their own awareness of a new feature of the world. The alternative to this kind of training is what Rousseau names negative education: 'J'appelle éducation négative celle qui tend à perfectionner les organes, instrumens de nos connoissances, avant de nous donner des connoissances et qui prépare à la raison par l'exercice des sens'¹³ (Rousseau 1969:945). Following this method, adults will first let the child exercise their awareness of the features of the world and not teach them how we do understand these. Thus, throughout the book, Emile has to find his own way, and the educator is just the guardian of a certain world where knowledge does not disrupt the development of the child's moral identity. In this scenario, the child will evaluate the pain resulting

from bumping into a chair alone; they feel something uncomfortable in their body, they link the sensation to the unwanted contact with the chair, they want the pain to stop but this desire is not fulfilled, and so on. The negative educational method aims to teach the child to be in charge of their own judgements and not to populate their imagination with prejudices, because this is the only way to develop the child into a responsible epistemic agent; negative education ‘dispose l’enfant à tout ce qui peut le mener au vrai quand il est en état de l’entendre, et au bien quand il est en état de l’aimer’¹⁴ (Rousseau 1969:945).

It is worth recalling that *Emile* is not a manual on educating a child but rather an essay on anthropology. The objective of Rousseau’s educational project is to express his main worries about how authorities, opinions and knowledge twist our awareness and his thesis on how to foster responsible and active awareness. Rousseau does not completely reject positive education; he recognizes the importance of the acquisition of mores or of training in sciences but wants to prevent this valuable knowledge from becoming dogmatic teaching. Likewise, Rousseau’s criticism of the ‘public simulacrum’ (Rousseau 1964:972) in *Narcisse* reflects his concerns about how the public sphere imposes twisted priorities and figures in our imagination that cannot be easily corrected; his proposal is to reinforce our moral identity so that it is inquisitive and autonomous in order to prevent this kind of epistemic decadence. Rousseau therefore establishes in the imagination the battle for both the emancipation of man from natural necessity and a responsible epistemic agency of individuals with the aim of counteracting the dullness of the public awareness.

Imagination and moral identity in Smith

Adam Smith could be wrongly catalogued as an example of the primacy of reason among *les Hommes des Lumières* because his name is often linked to the idea of the *homo economicus* or ‘economic man’, an expression introduced by John Stuart Mill that depicts humans as rational beings in their pursuit of self-interest. It is worth recalling the conclusion reached by Ronald H. Coase in his paper ‘Adam Smith’s View of Man’:

Adam Smith would not have thought it sensible to treat man as a rational utility-maximiser. He thinks of man as he actually is dominated, it is true, by self-love but not without some concern for others, able to reason but not necessarily in such a way as to reach the right conclusion, seeing the outcomes of his actions but through a veil of self-delusion.

(Coase 1976:545)

Following Coase’s view, it is possible to find shared concerns between Smith and Rousseau about the unavoidable social nature of men and their commitment to err.

Furthermore, many authors have remarked upon the importance of discussions of the role and activity of the individual in Smith’s work – for example, Ryan P. Hanley suggests that

his interest—and his interest to us today—lies in his effort to chart a course whereby we might best navigate the challenges of a world in which freedom and subjectivity have displaced the order and security afforded by certain traditional institutions and beliefs.

(Hanley 2009:7)

Others such as Charles Griswold have focused on the importance that Smith attaches to imagination:

The imagination turns out to be fundamental, not only to understanding the world but to practical reasoning as well. [. . .] Since imagination turns out to be essential to the constitution of morality as well as to that of reason, we are creatures of the imagination no less than of the passions.

(Griswold 1999:15)

The question that I will attempt to address is whether for Smith imagination might ground epistemic free will, as is the case for Rousseau, and whether it might be a pivotal question with regard to the study of the epistemology of public opinion.

In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith proposes the example of an earthquake in China to show how the distant misfortunes of unknown people do not really affect us:

Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe [. . .] express[es] very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, [. . .] when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened.

(*TMS* III.III.4)

This depiction points to the faintness of the sentiments that we all demonstrate when sympathizing with unacquired misfortunes, although Smith's aim is not to denounce our meanness but to analyse why we act in this way. He realizes that this behaviour is reasonable, unlike the implicit mimicking of 'extreme sympathy with misfortunes which we know nothing about [that] seems altogether absurd and unreasonable [. . .] To what purpose should we trouble ourselves about the world in the moon?' (*TMS* III.III.9). Yet it is not the distance from the ill-fated that make us feel feigned sympathy, but rather the lack of identification with the passions 'which take their origin from a peculiar turn or habit' (*TMS* I.II.II.1) – for example, lamenting the unfortunate fate of unknown people. Smith discusses the same problem explored by Rousseau in speaking about taking in consideration the experience of the world from someone else's judgements or customs; they 'may be acknowledged to be perfectly natural [. . .] but little sympathised with [since, the imagination], not having acquired that particular turn, cannot enter into them' (*TMS* I.II.II.1).

Smith agrees with Rousseau about the requirement of first-person scrutiny of experiences to acquire a responsible awareness of them.

This will also apply to scientific knowledge. In *History of Astronomy*,¹⁵ Smith considers acceptance of a new astronomical system not to depend on its truth but rather on people's considerations about its accuracy and possibility: 'Nothing [. . .] embarrassed the system of Copernicus, but the difficulty which the imagination felt in conceiving bodies so immensely ponderous as the Earth, and the other Planets, revolving round the Sun with such incredible rapidity' (*Astronomy*, in Smith 1982b, IV.60). In a science such as astronomy, the accuracy of the mathematical calculation that predicts the position of the celestial bodies might be an objective criterion, but Smith remarks that people disregard those calculations once the proposed system includes an image of the sky that disregards the audience habits; this is the case in the context of Copernicus, where: 'The imagination had been accustomed to conceive such objects as tending rather to rest than motion' (*Astronomy* IV.60). In a similar vein, in his discussion of Emile's education Rousseau argues that before teaching astronomy to the child, they must display some interest in knowledge of it. Accordingly, Rousseau proposes a long walk into the forest until the night and, once the child realizes that they are lost, the adult teaches them how to navigate back home using knowledge of astronomy upon hearing the boy claim of his own volition that 'l'astronomie est bonne à quelque chose'¹⁶ (Rousseau 1969:450). Rousseau's example emphasizes the appropriation of the lesson learnt because, without the admission of that knowledge into the child's moral identity, the teaching might be useless and easily forgotten. The appropriation of the lesson allows the boy to maintain a responsible and active relationship with the acquired knowledge, something which can be correlated to Smith's claim about maintaining 'wonder' or keeping imagination open to scrutiny with regard to the new and the different (*Astronomy* II.11). Smith's wonder has the same practical implications as the aims of Rousseau's negative education: preventing knowledge from becoming dogmatic.

Smith's review of the history of astronomy starts by discussing the importance of habit in our perception of reality: 'It is well known that custom deadens the vivacity of perceptions [to the point that even for] pain and pleasure, abates the grief we should feel for the one, and weakens the joy we should derive from the other [custom]' (*Astronomy* I.10). Habits and custom are moral acts that can interfere with our awareness of the world, transforming our free will to the point where, as Smith suggests, it accepts vexations submissively. Knowledge therefore also has moral components. 'Who wonders at the machinery of the opera-house who has once been admitted behind the scenes?' (*Astronomy* II.9); a simple depiction of the essence of an object – a positive discourse about how the planets move, for example – puts the subject in a dogmatic position with regard to the machinery described if they do not approach that item from a moral angle. When inquiring about the world, habit will make us disregard differences and variations, as a result of which we also lose the unique human ability to freely scrutinize our environment within the limits of our natural entity.

In the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith argues more precisely about the moral, and therefore social, dimensions of understanding when discussing the expenses of the Institutions for the education of Youth (*WN* V.i.f). The overall argument of the article is that without correct education of the citizen, society is doomed to decay. Therefore, the State ought to pay close attention to the education of the people – especially, the common people. In Smith’s view, because of the division of labour, the common people’s

whole [lives are] spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, [having] no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. [They] naturally lose, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and [. . .] the torpor of [their] mind[s] render [them], not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life.

(*WN* V.i.f.50).

Education is important to prevent this loss when following some of the objectives of Rousseau’s ‘negative education’ by encouraging the contemplation of a great variety of objects to render the understanding ‘both acute and comprehensive’ (*WN* V.i.f.51). It might be said that the erosion of the habit of ‘wonder’ is related to the drain of the imagination.

Smith starts the article by criticising the fact that speculative systems are widespread in academic institutions, even though this knowledge is ‘frivolous’ (*WN* V.i.f.26), to plead for the importance of the study of the ‘great phenomena of nature [. . .] as those [. . .] are the first objects of human curiosity’ (*WN* V.i.f.24). The knowledge of nature allows ‘the proper use of man’s intellectual faculties [that prevent] the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders’ (*WN* V.i.f.61). So the education and correct appropriation of the objects that impact the imagination, as opposed to the speculative systems produced by reason, is important for ‘the safety of government, [that] depends very much upon the favourable judgment which the people may form of its conduct’ (*WN* V.i.f.61). This argument can be linked to the claims made about the foundation of society in Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*, if we take into consideration how imagination allows compassion, through sympathy, in Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.¹⁷

To really understand someone else’s suffering, we need to occupy that person’s existence. It is not enough to judge their fortune; we need to experience their same awareness and passions. Sympathy towards another’s fate is to conceive ‘what we ourselves should feel in the like situation [, but] our senses will never inform us of what he suffers [as they cannot] carry us beyond our own person’ (*TMS*, I.I.I.2). As is the case in Rousseau, there is a natural entity that attaches our understanding to a concrete awareness of the world, but it does not

fulfil our existence. When Smith claims that we should occupy the place of the one with whom we sympathize, he also remarks that to occupy their fate is not enough to share their physical awareness; we also need to share their present reasons and judgment. Natural circumstances are not enough to differentiate two humans; there is a private collection of memories that also preserves a concrete identity that brings significance to the past, present and future facts of life. Our own imagination is linked to the perceptions of our own natural entity, which produces our own awareness of the world, but this awareness is contingent and our moral identity can modify it.

I do not claim that Rousseau and Smith share the same anthropological model – doing so would be beyond the scope of this text – but where they inquire into the same historical reality, they share insights and concerns about sciences, society and philosophy, and so coincidences are to be expected. Likewise, Rousseau’s compound vision of human beings is also suitable for illustrating Smith’s statements about how the body cannot be altered by moral sentiments (‘the frame of my body can be but little affected by the alterations which are brought about upon that of my companion’ [TMS I.II.1.6]), but our imagination can visualize what it is like to be a different person: ‘My imagination is more ductile, and more readily assumes, if I may say so, the shape and configuration of the imaginations of those with whom I am familiar’ (TMS I.II.1.6). The depiction of humans as compound beings with a natural entity and a moral identity, or the idea that our awareness of the world is vivid when judging our own experiences and duller when we envision those of someone else, might only express their engagement with their present. The development of empirical sciences such as natural history, the ethnographic stories of the New World’s natives, a broader conscience of the world’s cultural pluralism and so on certainly reinforce the idea of a chasm between nature and morality that produces the observed pluralism while allowing the uniqueness of individual existence.

Conclusions

In this text, I have produced a critique of the idealization of the significance and importance of reason during the eighteenth century by suggesting that there were other subjects – for instance, imagination – that took up pivotal elements of debates about key subjects such as the relationship between scientific progress and social progress. I even gently advocated the primacy of imagination over reason on the basis that it may express the commitment exhibited by *les Hommes des Lumières* to debate the public sphere and individual freedoms, an aspect that I consider to be the Enlightenment’s main legacy to the Western world. To these ends, I reviewed Rousseau’s anthropological theory, through which I highlighted the importance of imagination within it when it articulates the possibility of second nature and introduces a gap between perceptions and judgment in which morality arises. I also correlate Rousseau’s considerations with Adam Smith’s insights about sympathy and sought out coincidences between these authors with regard to the role of imagination.

It is not my intention to propose an alternative systematic approach to the eighteenth century through this paper, even if I truly believe that imagination could be considered as a subject that introduces a broader view of the concerns that *les Hommes des Lumières* shared. Instead, my aim is to recover 1) the commitment of Enlightenment philosophy in order to articulate individuals' freedoms and the realization of its importance through raising public awareness; 2) the constitution of public opinion as a new epistemic authority and its acknowledgment by philosophers; and 3) the relevance of the insights produced by *les Hommes des Lumières* in discussing issues related to the public sphere. Even though, I believe that these arguments compel us to revise some of our lectures on the Enlightenment.

In my view, the chief problem for *les Hommes des Lumières* is a completely contemporary one: all human affairs are moral acts, and we are bound to err, either individually or socially. From a rationalist point of view, the aim of the Enlightenment was to defend the autonomy of the individual against political control, resulting in the political revolutions of the century being linked to the works of authors like Rousseau or Smith and their failures being judged as the defeat of a political Utopia. This approach misses a much more realistic insight into society and politics while promoting the identification of Enlightenment politics alongside the folk theory of democracy. It is worth noting that the paradox of voting was introduced by Condorcet in 1785 and recall, as I suggest through this paper, the importance given by Rousseau and Smith to 'negative education' for humans in order to obtain freedom of thought. *Les Hommes des Lumières* were ideologues of political revolutions, not by depicting utopias but by discussing the importance of education and manipulation, and this precisely because they were well aware that rational behavior is not to be taken for granted. The underlying question of how epistemic free will can be confronted in order to construct a healthier society still stands as a challenge to us. When calling for a second or even a third Enlightenment, therefore, we should consider that we have perhaps not yet finished the first.¹⁸

Notes

- 1 'Although they speak to me of the eternity of time, I still have not gone all the way through it; although they speak to me of the infinity of springs, I still have not counted them; and my incredulity, even if it is not philosophical at all, will triumph over any proper demonstration'.
- 2 'If we touch the body of a cello while we elicit the sound, we feel it quiver under our hand and we see very clearly the vibrations of the chords up until the sound is extinguished. It is the same thing with a bell, which we make ring by striking it with a clapper; we feel it, we even see it shake, and we see skip the grains of sand that we throw on the surface. If the chord loosens, or the bell bursts, no more vibration, no more sound'.
- 3 'defective and very diverse in most men, as being produced by their own spirit'
- 4 'these invisible springs of our being are at the hands of the Supreme Being who made us, and out of our grasp'
- 5 'Each man is a double being: nature acts inside, the social spirit shows itself outside [. . .] those who conclude from this, that nothing has changed in us but appearance, and that at bottom the man of society is only the natural man underneath a mask, are wrong. Since, although we might not be able to overturn the order of nature or alter it, we can

- give an oblique direction to the shrub's stem, and, to the man, we can give inclinations modified in accordance with the state of things in which he finds himself and in accordance with the civil institution he lives in. We are not precisely two different beings but a compound.'
- 6 'I could form only vague, and almost imaginary, conjectures on this subject: comparative Anatomy has as yet made too little progress and the observations of naturalists are still too uncertain to establish the basis of a solid argument on such foundations.'
- 7 'An empirical presentation of freedom'
- 8 '[these faculties] could never develop by themselves, as in order to do so, [they] needed the fortuitous concatenation of several foreign causes which might never have been born, and without them [the man] would eternally have remained in his primitive [natural] condition.'
- 9 'A second stage [where] properly starts the life of the individual'
- 10 'becomes aware of himself [...] the memory extends the sentiment of the identity through every moment of his existence, he becomes a real one, a self, and so, capable of joy and misery. It is then when he deserves the consideration of moral being.'
- 11 'At the beginning of life when memory and imagination are still inactive, the child is attentive only to what currently affects his senses.'
- 12 'I call positive education the one that tends to form too soon the spirit and teaches the child the duties of the man.'
- 13 'I call negative education the one that tends to improve the organs, the instruments of our knowledge, before teaching us any knowledge, and promotes reason through the exercise of the senses.'
- 14 'disposes the child to everything that can lead them to the truth when the will be capable of understanding it, and to the good when he will be capable of loving it.'
- 15 I thank Alexander Broadie for pointing me to this text.
- 16 'Astronomy is good for something!'
- 17 I thank Reviewer 1 for suggesting that I discuss this question.
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