
IV. BOOK REVIEWS

Henry Martyn Lloyd, *Sade's Philosophical System in its Enlightenment Context*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 305 pp., Hardcover ISBN 978-3-319-97195-7, 80.24 €

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Henry Martyn Lloyd's monograph, *Sade's Philosophical System in its Enlightenment Context*, contends that, despite many invocations, monologies, and his own -ism, the Marquis de Sade has not received the philosophical attention he deserves. Lloyd aims to show (a) that Sade *had* a philosophy, which is worthy of closer academic study, and (b) that this philosophy is deeply intertwined with and must be understood through the active and sophisticated discourse of the early Enlightenment *philosophes*. In my opinion, his book amply demonstrates both.

What the book does *not* contend, contrary to its title, is that Sade's philosophy can be understood as a coherent or comprehensive system. Indeed, Lloyd only ever deploys the word "system" in quotation marks, and discusses at length in Part I why Sade may not have regarded systematicity itself as a philosophical ideal. Nevertheless, Lloyd wants to problematize an all-too-easy reading of Sade as simply non- or anti-philosophical, and succeeds in presenting a Sade who is both highly sensitive to the philosophy of his time, and who responds to and develops this philosophy in sophisticated ways.

In accordance with the second contention outlined above, the book is split roughly evenly, first providing the "philosophical context" in the form of a reconstruction of the early French Enlightenment discourse around the "body of sensibility," then proceeding to Sade's critique and appropriation of this discourse for his own ends.

In Parts II and III, Lloyd succeeds in animating a rich and varied philosophical milieu which is seldom studied in modern academic philosophy. I expect that many who read this book will come away with a desire to delve into the less-known figures including Étienne Condillac,

Baron d'Holbach and Antoine Le Camus, in addition to (or perhaps instead of) Sade himself.

In Parts IV and V, Lloyd traces Sade's responses to the various strands of moral and aesthetic philosophical discourse outlined in the first. Because this discourse is both broad and multifaceted, Sade must be "ambidextrous" as Lloyd often says, offering multiple and sometimes mutually contradictory arguments with the aim of advancing his own position. Finally, in Part V, Lloyd turns to a closer study of the positive elements of Sade's philosophy, with analysis of some of the inconsistencies and difficulties which frustrate a thoroughly systematic reading of Sade's thought.

The figures Lloyd presents in his account of the "Enlightenment context"—including Rousseau, Fouquet, d'Holbach, Le Camus, Jaucourt and Condillac—were not all philosophers. Rather, they counted among them a number of scientists and physicians who had little to no explicit interest in "doing philosophy." Yet this mixed milieu seems to be responsible for the richly *medicalist* discourse which emerges in the period, and which Lloyd reconstructs excellently in his book.

In particular, we wish to focus on the status of *sensibility*, to which the *philosophes* accord a status and function which often appear idiosyncratic to modern readers. First, sensibility is not treated as happening solely in or for the mind. Rather, it is distributed in and continuous with the organs of the body. Consequently, it is highly particular: "not only different [between] various parts of the body but [different] between particular individuals" (p. 53). The influence of medicine in the era, a consideration of the ways in which disease and impairment modify the sensing body not only from part to part but from person to person, leads numerous *philosophes* to prioritize sensibility and sensible experience—and pleasant and painful bodily experiences in particular—over *a priori* knowledge and reason.

Even abstract concepts, theoretical and practical reason are thus ultimately derived from "impulsions" in the body of sensibility. Condillac goes so far as to postulate a "statue man"—a statue with all the sense organs of a human, imbued with no innate knowledge or reason, but only the capacity for pleasurable and displeasurable sensations. Condillac argues that, by undergoing sufficiently many sensible experiences, the statue would nevertheless become able to acquire all of the supposedly "innate" faculties of the mind, and thus that "the *a priori* is deriva-

tive of, or supervenes on, sensation" (p. 97).

For Lloyd's purposes, the greatest significance of this blurring pertains to the aesthetic, and particularly the literary experience. For Fouquet, Le Camus, and others, the physical sensibility of reading was not restricted to the optical comprehension of words on a page. Rather, fiction *itself* is sensible insofar as it produces excitations which are *ontologically* continuous with those caused by the physical world. Condillac begins his statue argument by emphasizing that the readers must "put themselves exactly in place" of the statue, and *observe* the effects of the argument as it progresses (Condillac, quoted on p. 95). There is here an assumption that the truth of the argument can be *experienced* by undertaking an imaginary excursion, as a sky's hue can be experienced by looking.

According to Lloyd, this blurring between "mental" and "physical" experiences, between what is imagined and what is seen, explains the predominance of the philosophical novel in the early French Enlightenment. For these thinkers, the novel gave its author the power to make their ideas not only intellectually understood but literally *felt*. In this way, the novel becomes a device for producing and cultivating moral, political, and philosophical attitudes in its reader. If, as the *philosophes* contended, knowledge is derived from sensibility, then knowledge of moral and metaphysical truths can and even *must* be attained by undergoing the appropriate sensible experiences.

The status of the philosophical novel is of course methodologically important for any exegesis of Sade, who wrote almost exclusively in the fictional mode. Yet Lloyd's extensive treatment of the French Enlightenment discourse of sensibility also enables a better grasp of Sade's own understanding of philosophy and sensibility as intertwined in the literary mode. For Sade, it is not only the case that aesthetic sensibility can be a vector for philosophical arguments and ideas; one also finds in Sade that "philosophy physically moves or stimulates the body" (p. 131). Sadean characters are roused to ecstasy and fury by philosophical speeches and rational debates.

Additionally, Sade draws from and modifies this discourse of sensibility, criticizing the *philosophes* for smuggling in "artificial" differentiations between good and bad, right and wrong, when discussing the "natural" capacities of the body. This differentiation at the *sensible* level is important to numerous thinkers of the early French Enlightenment in-

sofar as it is necessary to ground *conceptual* distinctions between what is morally or aesthetically good or bad. In Rousseau, for instance, a “natural sympathy” is “the first sentiment of humanity,” what leads humans to seek actions and arrangements that increase the well-being of all (Rousseau, quoted on p. 123). The innate capacity to distinguish between well- and ill-being thus acts as the ground for Rousseau’s moral and political philosophies. Even Condillac, who strips away almost all mental faculties from his statue-man, retains a polar distinction between pleasant and unpleasant experiences.

Sade argues in the course of his texts that these polar distinctions are unwarranted *assumptions*, extrinsic to a sensibility which only measures degrees of greater or lesser intensity. Sade’s critique of the discourse of sensibility consists in the expurgation of all that is “unnatural” or extrinsic to sensibility, including stipulated distinctions between moral and immoral, pleasurable and displeasurable, beautiful and ugly. Sade finds that, underpinning the moral and aesthetic theories of the *philosophes*, there is a monistic conception of sensibility as the experience of *shocks* upon the body. Thus, for Sade, “at the most fundamental metaphysical level, [there is] no difference between pleasant and painful sensations: both are shocks” (p. 139).

Lloyd calls this Sade’s “principle of intensity,” which Sade uses both to undermine the moral theories of the *philosophes* and to justify and exalt the abject horrors his characters both undergo and inflict on others. For Sade, what matters is not our judgment of an experience as pleasurable or painful, as moral or wicked, but only the *intensity* of the experience itself. If there is no innate ontological distinction between, say, pleasure and pain, then there is no reason why we cannot learn to enjoy the most extreme displeasures and pains. What becomes desirable is the maximization of intensity *tout court*, be it through physical, sexual, aesthetic, or intellectual experiences. Thus, his characters argue and fornicate, submit each other to violent tortures, partake of both the finest foods and every kind of bodily fluid and excrement. Sade’s fictions reflect and enact a *philosophical* indistinction between the sublime and the abhorrent from the perspective of pure sensible intensity.

In the preceding we have followed just one thread of the book’s general expository method. By careful back-and-forth analysis, Lloyd reconstructs not only Sade’s original philosophy, but the general intellectual background against and through which this philosophy is best

understood. Lloyd quotes generously and often, not only from Sade himself but from his many philosophical interlocutors, giving the reader a sense of familiarity with the period's rich variety of philosophical interests and styles. We are then able to concur with Lloyd when he claims, against the clichéd anti- or non-philosophical reading, that "Sade was a highly sensitive barometer of the period's moral theory," and that his literary *oeuvre* constitutes a deft and sophisticated critique of this theory (p. 284).

In the book's closing chapters, Lloyd turns to some of the inconsistencies in Sade's philosophical attitudes, which prevent a straightforwardly systematic reading of his works. For, though he makes Sade into a compelling philosophical figure, Lloyd is frank that Sade's is not a philosophy anyone should adopt. Lloyd's philosophical reconstruction of Sade mostly glides over the gruesome details of Sade's actual writings, so that we almost forget that we are studying the works of a genuine apologist for rape, torture, murder, cannibalism, and coprophagia. It is not clear how or whether we can accept his piercing critiques of Enlightenment moral philosophy without his concomitant advocacy for acts which most readers would rather not do (or have done to them).

These are problems which Lloyd cannot resolve in the course of his own text. Yet in unearthing them, he has shown that there is still much productive philosophical work to be done with Sade's *oeuvre*, and that Sade himself—despite being the subject or theme of many disquisitions—still suffers from a dearth of scholarly attention. Lloyd's book may be the impetus that finally provokes that attention.