

SELF-INTEREST BEFORE
ADAM SMITH

A Genealogy of Economic Science

PIERRE FORCE

Columbia University



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Self-interest as a first principle

Self-interest is the only motive of human actions.

P. H. d'Holbach, *A Treatise on Man* (1773)

In his classic work, *The Passions and the Interests*, Albert Hirschman describes the rise of the concept of interest in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He shows how this concept, originally linked to statecraft and *raison d'État* theory, was so successful that it soon became a tool for interpreting not only the behavior of rulers, but also the totality of human conduct. "Once the idea of interest had appeared," Hirschman remarks, "it became a real fad as well as a paradigm (à la Kuhn) and most of human action was suddenly explained by self-interest, sometimes to the point of tautology."¹ It is generally assumed that the birth of modern economic science, conventionally marked by the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, was one of the most significant manifestations of the triumph of the "interest paradigm." According to this view, self-interest provided the axiom upon which Adam Smith constructed his political economy. After the marginalist revolution in the second half of the nineteenth century, when economics became a highly formalized and mathematical discipline, self-interest was enshrined as the first principle that made all theoretical constructions possible. As F.Y. Edgeworth put it in 1881, "the first principle of Economics is that every agent is actuated only by self-interest."² More recently, Kenneth Arrow traced back to Adam Smith the idea that "a decentralized economy motivated by self-interest and guided by price signals would be compatible with a coherent disposition of economic resources that could be regarded, in a well defined sense, as superior to a large class of possible alternative dispositions."³

¹ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests. Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1977], p. 42.

² Francis Y. Edgeworth, *Mathematical Psychics. An Essay on the Application of Mathematics to the Moral Sciences*, London: C. Kegan Paul, 1881, p. 16.

³ Kenneth Arrow and F. H. Hahn, *General Competitive Analysis*, San Francisco: Holden Day, 1971, p. vi.

Traditionally, economists have maintained that the assumption of self-interested behavior holds only for economic activity (as well as the business of warfare, according to Edgeworth). There have been attempts, however, to generalize the scope of self-interest (or its more abstract synonym, *utility maximizing behavior*) as a first principle in the analysis of all human conduct. Gary Becker claims that “the economic approach is a comprehensive one that is applicable to all human behavior, be it behavior involving money prices or imputed shadow prices, repeated or infrequent decisions, large or minor decisions, emotional or mechanical ends, rich or poor persons, men or women, adults or children, brilliant or stupid persons, patients or therapists, businessmen or politicians, teachers or students.”⁴ Becker too ascribes a long ancestry to his axiomatic choices. “The economic approach to human behavior is not new,” he writes, “even outside the market sector. Adam Smith often (but not always!) used this approach to understand political behavior.”⁵ Becker could have added other moral philosophers of the same period, who are probably better examples of the “interest paradigm.” In 1758, Claude-Adrien Helvétius asserted that “if the physical universe be subject to the laws of motion, the moral universe is equally so to those of interest.”⁶ In the same spirit, d’Holbach, a major contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, wrote: “Self-interest is the only motive of human actions.”⁷ Incomparably more famous, however, is Adam Smith’s pronouncement: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”⁸ George Stigler expresses a view shared by the vast majority of economists when he says that the inevitable quote about the butcher, the brewer and the baker, constitutes the first principle not only of Smith’s doctrine, but also of modern economic science:

Smith had one overwhelmingly important triumph: he put into the center of economics the systematic analysis of the behavior of individuals pursuing their self-interest under conditions of competition. This theory was the crown jewel of

⁴ Gary Becker, “The Economic Approach to Human Behavior,” in *Rational Choice*, edited by Jon Elster, New York: New York University Press, 1986, p. 112.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁶ Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *Essays on the Mind*, London: Albion Press, 1810, II, 2, p. 42. “Si l’univers physique est soumis aux lois du mouvement, l’univers moral ne l’est pas moins à celle de l’intérêt.” *De l’Esprit*, Paris: Durand 1758, vol. 1, p. 53.

⁷ “L’intérêt est l’unique mobile des actions humaines.” Paul Henri Thiry, baron d’Holbach, *Système de la nature, ou des lois du monde physique et du monde moral*, Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1973 (2 vols.) [London, 1770], I, xv, p. 312.

⁸ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 2, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976 [London: Strahan and Cadell, 1776], I.ii.

The Wealth of Nations and it became, and remains to this day, the foundation of the theory of the allocation of resources.⁹

ONE OR SEVERAL PRINCIPLES?

The fact that interest-based interpretations come to mind so easily, even in popular consciousness, testifies to the power of the “interest paradigm.” Originally, the idea that the pursuit of self-interest by independent agents would result in some kind of order or equilibrium was a paradox. Arrow and Hahn rightly notice that the most surprising thing about the interest paradigm is that it is no longer seen as a paradox:

The immediate “common sense” answer to the question “What will an economy motivated by individual greed and controlled by a very large number of different agents look like?” is probably: There will be chaos. That quite a different answer has long been claimed true and has indeed permeated the economic thinking of a large number of people who are in no way economists is itself sufficient grounds for investigating it seriously.¹⁰

For social scientists, the principle of self-interest complies with the injunction that one should not needlessly generate assumptions. Between two explanations, the one that relies on the smallest number of first principles is to be preferred. That certainly is Gary Becker’s view. Whenever human behavior seems to contradict the assumption that self-interest is the motive, the theorist must stick to the axiom, and assume that an explanation based on self-interest is possible, even if it cannot be provided immediately:

When an apparently profitable opportunity to a firm, worker, or household is not exploited, the economic approach does not take refuge in assertions about irrationality, contentment with wealth already acquired, or convenient *ad hoc* shifts in values (that is, preferences). Rather it postulates the existence of costs, monetary or psychic, of taking advantage of these opportunities that eliminate their profitability – costs that may not be easily “seen” by outside observers. Of course, postulating the existence of costs closes or “completes” the economic approach in the same, almost tautological, way that postulating the existence of (sometimes unobserved) uses of energy completes the energy system, and preserves the law of energy . . . The critical question is whether a system is completed in a useful way.¹¹

Alternatively, one may decide to deprive self-interest of its pre-eminent status, and assume that motives other than self-interest are at work. For

⁹ George J. Stigler, “The Successes and Failures of Professor Smith,” Selected Papers no. 50, Graduate School of Business, University of Chicago, 1976, p. 3.

¹⁰ Arrow and Hahn, *General Competitive Analysis*, p. vii.

¹¹ Becker, “The Economic Approach to Human Behavior,” p. 112.

instance, Jon Elster, while acknowledging the appeal of interest-based explanations, dismisses them as being contrary to experience:

The assumption that all behavior is selfish is the most parsimonious we can make, and scientists always like to explain much with little. But we cannot conclude, neither in general nor on any given occasion, that selfishness is the more widespread motivation. Sometimes the world is messy, and the most parsimonious explanation is wrong.

The idea that self-interest makes the world go round is refuted by a few familiar facts. Some forms of helping behavior are not reciprocated and so cannot be explained by long-term self-interest. Parents have a selfish interest in helping their children, assuming that children will care for parents in their old age – but it is not in the selfish interest of children to provide such care. And many still do. Some contributors to charities give anonymously and hence cannot be motivated by prestige.¹²

Another type of argument is invoked by Hirschman, who recalls Macaulay's critique of an attempt by James Mill to construct a theory of politics on the axiom of self-interest. Simply put, if self-interest explains everything, it explains nothing. In that sense, the interest doctrine is "essentially tautological."¹³ For Hirschman, parsimony is certainly a virtue when it comes to positing first principles, but like any virtue, it can be overdone. Consequently, Hirschman proposes to complicate economic discourse by assuming that "benevolence" may be just as important as self-interest in explaining economic behavior.¹⁴ In so doing, he implicitly goes against Smith's famous statement dismissing "the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker" as a motive for trade.

Along the same lines, Amartya Sen questions the wisdom of limiting the first principles of economics to self-interest, and notices that, according to Edgeworth himself, pure egoism could not explain the behavior of real people: "I should mention that Edgeworth himself was quite aware that his so-called first principle of Economics was not a particularly realistic one."¹⁵ Indeed, Edgeworth added a caveat to the assertion that self-interest is the first principle of economic science. His system is based on a dichotomy between economics and ethics. Each domain has its own species of agents.

¹² Jon Elster, *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 54.

¹³ Albert O. Hirschman, "The Concept of Interest: From Euphemism to Tautology," in *Rival Views of Market Society*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992 [1986], p. 48.

¹⁴ Albert O. Hirschman, "Against Parsimony: Three Easy Ways of Complicating Some Categories of Economic Discourse," in *Rival Views of Market Society*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992 [1986], p. 159.

¹⁵ Amartya Sen, "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (1977), pp. 317–344.

The “Egoist” (driven only by self-interest) operates in the economic sphere. The “Utilitarian” (who cares only about the interest of all) operates in the ethical sphere. That is the theoretical construction. However, Edgeworth adds, “it is possible that the moral constitution of the concrete agent would be neither Pure Utilitarian nor Pure Egoistic, but “μικτη τις [some combination of both] . . . For between the two extremes Pure Egoistic and Pure Universalistic, there may be an indefinite number of impure methods.”¹⁶ For his part, in an attempt to come up with a more realistic set of first principles, Sen proposes to add “commitment” to self-interest in the analysis of human behavior.¹⁷

While Gary Becker quotes Smith as the founder of the “economic approach” to explaining all human behavior, Amartya Sen refers to the founding father in order to prove the opposite.¹⁸ He mentions Part VII of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where Smith criticizes Epicurus for building his ethical system on a single principle:

By running up all the different virtues too to this one species of propriety, Epicurus indulged a propensity, which is natural to all men, but which philosophers in particular are apt to cultivate with a peculiar fondness, as the great means of displaying their ingenuity, the propensity to account for all appearances from as few principles as possible. And he, no doubt, indulged this propensity still further, when he referred all the primary objects of natural desire and aversion to the pleasures and pains of the body. The great patron of the atomical philosophy, who took so much pleasure in deducing all the powers and qualities of bodies from the most obvious and familiar, the figure, motion, and arrangement of the small parts of matter, felt no doubt a similar satisfaction, when he accounted, in the same manner, for all the sentiments and passions of the mind from those which are most obvious and familiar.¹⁹

According to Smith, Epicurus showed the same parsimony in his physics as in his ethics. In physics, he derived all explanations from the fall and combination of atoms. In ethics, “prudence” was “the source and principle of all the virtues.”²⁰ Prudence itself was based solely on self-interest. Smith believes that parsimony is no virtue here, but rather a vain display of theoretical prowess.

A few years before Adam Smith wrote these lines, his friend David Hume criticized the propensity of Epicureans to “explain every affection to be

¹⁶ Edgeworth, *Mathematical Psychics*, p. 15. ¹⁷ Sen, “Rational Fools,” p. 344.

¹⁸ Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987, p. 24.

¹⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (sixth edition), in *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976 [London and Edinburgh, 1790; first edition 1759], VII.ii.2.14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, VII.ii.2.8.

self-love, twisted and molded, by a particular turn of imagination, into a variety of appearances.”²¹ For Hume, “the selfish hypothesis” is so counter-intuitive that “there is required the highest stretch of philosophy to establish so extraordinary a paradox.”²² Epicurean philosophers have erred in their search for theoretical simplicity at any cost:

To the most careless observer, there appear to be such dispositions as benevolence and generosity; such affections as love, friendship, compassion, gratitude. These sentiments have their causes, effects, objects, and operations, marked by common language and observation, and plainly distinguished from those of the selfish passions. And as this is the obvious appearance of things, it must be admitted; till some hypothesis be discovered, which, by penetrating deeper into human nature, may prove the former affections to be nothing but modifications of the latter. All attempts of this kind have hitherto proved fruitless, and seem to have proceeded entirely, from that love of *simplicity*, which has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy.²³

In many ways, Hirschman’s critique of Becker’s “economic approach” is a modern continuation of Hume’s critique of the neo-Epicurean philosophers of his age. The arguments and counter-arguments remain very much the same. The Epicureans posit interest as the one and only first principle, and assume that an interest-based explanation is always possible. In that sense, says d’Holbach, “no man can be called disinterested. We call a man disinterested only when we do not know his motives, or when we approve of them.”²⁴ Of course, countless observations seem to contradict the self-interest doctrine, and the theorist does not claim to be able to solve them all to the interlocutor’s satisfaction. All that is needed, according to Stigler and Becker, is an overall confidence in the explanatory power of the theory:

It is a thesis that does not permit of direct proof because it is an assertion about the world, not a proposition in logic. Moreover, it is possible almost at random to throw up examples of phenomena that presently defy explanation by this hypothesis: Why do we have inflation? Why are there few Jews in farming? Why are societies with polygynous families so rare in the modern era? Why aren’t blood banks responsible for the quality of their product? If we could answer these questions to your satisfaction, you would quickly produce a dozen more.

What we assert is not that we are clever enough to make illuminating applications of utility-maximization theory to all important phenomena – not even our entire generation of economists is clever enough to do that. Rather, we assert

²¹ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by J. B. Schneewind, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983 [London, 1777; first edition 1751], Appendix II, p. 89.

²² *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix II, p. 90. ²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ D’Holbach, *Système de la nature*, I, xv, p. 321.

that this traditional approach of the economist offers guidance in tackling these problems – and that no other approach of remotely comparable generality and power is available.²⁵

In a footnote to the foregoing passage, Stigler and Becker humorously give an example of the *regressus ad infinitum* that characterizes the conflict between interest-based interpretations and interpretations that allow for a multiplicity of motives. If there are few Jews in farming, they hypothesize, it may be that “since Jews have been persecuted so often and forced to flee to other countries, they have not invested in immobile land, but in mobile human capital – business skills, education, etc. – that would automatically go with them.”²⁶ This argument invites a counter-argument: “Of course, someone might counter with the more basic query: but why are they Jews, and not Christians or Moslems?”²⁷

One could make similar arguments with the examples provided by Jon Elster in his refutation of interest-based theories. For instance, Elster observes that “parents have a selfish interest in helping their children, assuming that children will care for parents in their old age – but it is not in the selfish interest of children to provide such care. And many still do.”²⁸ Economist Oded Stark proposes a selfish interpretation for this apparently disinterested behavior. Children take care of their aging parents because, anticipating their own physical decline, they want to instill a similar behavior in their own children. If this theory is correct, people with children would be more likely to let their aging parents move in with them than people without children, even though the burden of child-raising makes this living arrangement less attractive. Empirical evidence seems to indicate that it is the case.²⁹ Of course, one could counter that, no matter what their motives are, parents are simply teaching altruism.

Not much seems to have changed since the eighteenth-century disputes between neo-Epicureans and their critics, except for the highly mathematical form assumed by the interest doctrine in the twentieth century. All these disputes, then and now, seem to have one common feature. First comes the self-interest theorist, who examines an apparently innocent conduct and claims that, beneath the surface, lies a self-interested motive. Then come the critics, who say that the selfish interpretation is intellectually attractive but factually incorrect. However schematic this presentation may appear,

²⁵ George J. Stigler and Gary S. Becker, “De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum,” *American Economic Review* 67:2 (1977), p. 76.

²⁶ *Ibid.* ²⁷ *Ibid.* ²⁸ Elster *Nuts and Bolts*, p. 54.

²⁹ Oded Stark, *Altruism and Beyond. An Economic Analysis of Transfers and Exchanges within Families and Groups*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 59–64.

it pretty much describes the historical development of the debate in the eighteenth century. We shall see that, surprisingly, Adam Smith sides for the most part with those who believe that interest-based explanations are too clever to be true.

THE PRINCIPLE OF PITY

We started this discussion with Hirschman's account of the extraordinary success of the doctrine of interest in the eighteenth century. This must be kept in mind in order to fully understand the opening lines of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.³⁰

By the middle of the eighteenth century, any attempt to give a reasoned account of human behavior must start with the examination of the hypothesis that all behavior might be driven by self-interest. Hence the beginning: "How selfish soever man may be supposed . . ." The clearest, most univocal, and most famous presentation of the doctrine of self-interest is Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*.³¹ Bert Kerkhof³² sees in the first paragraph of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* an allusion to a graphic passage in *The Fable of the Bees*, where Mandeville describes the passion of pity. The scene that causes pity is the dismemberment of a two-year-old child by a mad sow:

To see her widely open her destructive jaws, and the poor lamb beat down with greedy haste; to look on the defenseless posture of tender limbs first trampled on, then tore asunder; to see the filthy snout digging in the yet living entrails suck up

³⁰ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.I.I.I.

³¹ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, edited by F.B. Kaye, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924, 2 vols. [*The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits*, sixth edition, London: J. Tonson, 1732].

³² Bert Kerkhof, "A Fatal Attraction? Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and Mandeville's *Fable*," *History of Political Thought* 16:2 (Summer 1995), pp. 219–233.

the smoking blood, and now and then to hear the cracking bones, and the cruel animal with savage pleasure grunt over the horrid banquet; to hear and see all this, what tortures would give it the soul beyond expression!³³

Such a scene, says Mandeville, would provoke pure, unadulterated feelings of pity in any human being:

There would be no need of virtue or self-denial to be moved at such a scene; and not only a man of humanity, of good morals and commiseration, but likewise an highwayman, an house-breaker, or a murderer could feel anxieties on such an occasion; how calamitous soever a man's circumstances might be, he would forget his misfortunes for the time, and the most troublesome passion would give way to pity.³⁴

To Mandeville's "house-breaker" or "murderer" who is taken by pity, corresponds Smith's "greatest ruffian," or "most hardened violator of the laws of society," who is "not altogether without it." Mandeville's purpose in presenting this vision of horror is to demonstrate that the virtue of charity "is often counterfeited by a passion of ours called pity or compassion, which consists in a fellow-feeling and condolence for the misfortune and calamities of others."³⁵ This fits within Mandeville's general argument that virtues are nothing but the manifestation of various passions. Smith, however, makes his own use of the reference. He seems to be saying: if the greatest advocate of the interest doctrine acknowledges that pure pity is possible, we can take this as proof that there is such a thing as pure pity. Indeed, Mandeville insists that in this case, the feeling of pity is not tainted with any other passions:

Let me see courage, or the love of one's country so apparent without any mixture, cleared and distinct, the first from pride and anger, the other from the love of glory, and every shadow of self-interest, as this pity would be clear and distinct from all other passions.³⁶

Because Smith operates *more geometrico* in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (he starts from first principles, and gradually derives the consequences of the first principles),³⁷ the beginning of the book is of the utmost importance. The remark concerning pity is an empirical illustration (not a proof, since first principles cannot be proven – and if they could, they would not be first principles) of the psychological phenomenon that Smith

³³ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, vol. 1, p. 255.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 254. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

³⁷ Unlike *The Wealth of Nations*, where the order is the reverse, i.e. analytical: gradual resolution of a problem posed in the introduction.

subsequently proposes to call sympathy. If it is true that the first sentence of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* refers to *The Fable of the Bees*, then the doctrine of sympathy, which forms the core of Smith's first book, must be regarded as a response to Mandeville's "licentious system," as Smith labels it in Part VII.³⁸

In order to discover further evidence in support of this hypothesis, it will be useful to examine a book published four years before *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Rousseau's book happens to include an explicit reference to Mandeville's pathetic description of the dismemberment of a child:

One sees with pleasure the author of the Fable of the Bees, forced to recognize man as a compassionate and sensitive Being, departing from his cold and subtle style in the example he gives in order to offer us the pathetic image of an imprisoned man who sees outside a wild Beast tearing a Child from his Mother's breast, breaking his weak limbs in its murderous teeth, and ripping apart with its claws the palpitating entrails of this Child.³⁹

Rousseau's purpose in bringing up this scene is strikingly similar to the point made by Smith at the beginning of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Talking about man in general, Smith asserts that "there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it."⁴⁰ In other words, pity is an entirely disinterested feeling. Similarly, in his analysis of the spectator's feelings regarding the slaughter of a child, Rousseau notices that the witness has "no personal interest"⁴¹ in what is happening. This is a crucial point for Rousseau: pity cannot be derived from, or explained by self-interest.

³⁸ For a full account of sympathy in Smith's doctrine, see T.D. Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971, pp. 94–106; David Marshall, *The Figure of Theater. Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 167–192; Eugene Heath, "The Commerce of Sympathy: Adam Smith on the Emergence of Morals," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33:3 (July 1995), pp. 447–466.

³⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 3, edited by Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, translated by Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, Christopher Kelly, and Terence Marshall, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992, p. 36. "On voit avec plaisir l'auteur de la *Fable des Abeilles*, forcé de reconnaître l'homme pour un être compatissant et sensible, sortir, dans l'exemple qu'il en donne, de son style froid et subtil, pour nous offrir la pathétique image d'un homme enfermé qui aperçoit au-dehors une bête féroce arrachant un enfant du sein de sa mère, brisant sous sa dent meurtrière les faibles membres, et déchirant de ses ongles les entrailles palpitantes de cet enfant." *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964 [Amsterdam: Marc Michel Rey, 1755], vol. 3, p. 154.

⁴⁰ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.I.I.I.

⁴¹ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, p. 36.

Rhetorically, Rousseau's reference to Mandeville is, in the technical sense, an *ad hominem* argument. Not a personal attack against Mandeville (that would be an argument *ad personam*) but a way of refuting Mandeville's theory on the basis of premises that Mandeville himself accepts as true.⁴² The reference to *The Fable of the Bees* comes in the context of a discussion of Hobbes. Rousseau seeks to refute Hobbes's assertion that self-interest is the engine of all human behavior:

There is, besides, another principle which Hobbes did not notice, and which – having been given to man in order to soften, under certain circumstances, the ferocity of his amour-propre or the desire for self-preservation before the birth of this love – tempers the ardor he has for his own well-being by an innate repugnance to see his fellow suffer.⁴³

What better way to refute an advocate of self-interest than to invoke another leading exponent of the interest doctrine? This argument, Rousseau believes, is absolutely compelling:

I do not believe I have any contradiction to fear in granting man the sole Natural virtue that the most excessive Detractor of human virtues was forced to recognize. I speak of Pity, a disposition that is appropriate to beings as weak and subject to as many ills as we are.⁴⁴

If Mandeville, “the most excessive detractor of human virtues,” the one who sees selfish motives behind all virtuous conduct, has acknowledged the reality of pity, that is proof enough of the existence and authenticity of this feeling.

Affirming the authenticity of pity is a primary concern for Smith as well. After stating it in the opening lines of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he comes back to this issue in his examination of systems of moral philosophy. “Sympathy,” he writes, “cannot, in any sense, be regarded as a selfish principle.”⁴⁵ Although sympathy proceeds from “an imaginary change of

⁴² See Gabriël Nuchelmans, “On the Fourfold Root of the *Argumentum ad Hominem*,” in *Empirical Logic and Public Debate*, Amsterdam, 1993, pp. 37–47, and Pierre Force, “*Ad Hominem* Arguments in Pascal's *Pensées*,” in *Classical Unities: Place, Time, Action*, Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2001, pp. 393–403.

⁴³ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, p. 36. “Il y a d'ailleurs un autre principe que Hobbes n'a point aperçu, et qui, ayant été donné à l'homme pour adoucir, en certaines circonstances, la férocité de son amour-propre, ou le désir de se conserver avant la naissance de cet amour, tempère l'ardeur qu'il a pour son bien-être par une répugnance innée à voir souffrir son semblable.” *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, p. 154.

⁴⁴ *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, p. 36. “Je ne crois pas avoir aucune contradiction à craindre, en accordant à l'homme la seule vertu naturelle, qu'ait été forcé de reconnaître le detracteur le plus outré des vertus humaines. Je parle de la pitié, disposition convenable à des êtres aussi faibles, et sujets à autant de maux que nous sommes.” *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, p. 154.

⁴⁵ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, vii.iii.1.4.

situations with the person principally concerned,” if I sympathize with you, I don’t imagine myself suffering from the same ills you are suffering. I imagine that I have become you:

When I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief I do not consider what I, a person of such a character and profession, should suffer, if I had a son, and if that son was unfortunately to die: but I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters. My grief, therefore, is entirely upon your account, and not in the least upon my own. It is not, therefore, in the least selfish.⁴⁶

It is clear from the order of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that sympathy is the cornerstone of Smith’s system. It is also widely acknowledged that pity has a central role in Rousseau’s philosophy. It is the foundation of all natural virtues. One of the first critics to have noticed the centrality of pity in Rousseau’s system is Adam Smith himself. In March 1756, just a few months after the publication of Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*, Smith, who was then thirty-three years old and a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow, reviewed Rousseau’s latest book in the *Edinburgh Review*. In his review, Smith hailed Rousseau as the most important and original French philosopher since Descartes, and presented him as the worthy continuator of a philosophical tradition that used to thrive in England, with authors like Hobbes, Locke, Mandeville, Shaftesbury, Butler, Clarke, and Hutcheson. “This branch of the English philosophy,” he added, “which seems to be now entirely neglected by the English themselves, has of late been transported into France.”⁴⁷ Consistent with his claim that Rousseau was a continuator of the English philosophical tradition, Smith asserted that Rousseau’s main source of inspiration in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* was none other than Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*:

Whoever reads this last work with attention, will observe, that the second volume of the Fable of the Bees has given occasion to the system of Mr. Rousseau, in whom however the principles of the English author are softened, improved, and embellished, and stripped of all that tendency to corruption and licentiousness which has disgraced them in their original author.⁴⁸

Following this initial statement is a detailed parallel between Mandeville and Rousseau, where Smith analyzes the similarities and differences between the two authors, in order to show how Rousseau has adapted and

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Adam Smith, “Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*,” in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 3, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 250.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

transformed Mandeville's work in order to build his own system. A crucial point is the role of pity:

Mr. Rousseau however criticizes upon Dr. Mandeville: he observes that pity, the only amiable principle which the English author allows to be natural to man, is capable of producing all those virtues, whose reality Dr. Mandeville denies. Mr. Rousseau at the same time seems to think, that this principle is in itself no virtue, but that it is possessed by savages and by the most profligate of the vulgar, in a greater degree of perfection than by those of the most polished and cultivated manners; in which he agrees perfectly with the English author.⁴⁹

As we have seen above, when Rousseau refers to the passage in *The Fable of the Bees* where a small child is dismembered by a mad sow, he makes an *ad hominem* argument. He starts by agreeing with Mandeville in order to refute him. However, as Smith's reading of Rousseau and Mandeville shows us, the purpose of Rousseau's argument is not exclusively polemical. Rousseau subscribes entirely to Mandeville's psychological analysis of pity. Here, the only change he brings to Mandeville's doctrine consists in positing pity as the first principle and the foundation of natural virtues:

Mandeville sensed very well that even with all their morality men would never have been anything but monsters if Nature had not given them pity in support of reason; but he did not see that from this quality alone flow all the social virtues he wants to question in men. In fact, what are Generosity, Clemency, Humanity, if not Pity applied to the weak, to the guilty, or to the human species in general? Benevolence and even friendship are, rightly understood, the products of a constant pity fixed on a particular object.⁵⁰

From what we have seen so far, two preliminary conclusions and one hypothesis can be made. Firstly, as Adam Smith himself suggests, reading Rousseau's *Second Discourse* as an appropriation of *The Fable of the Bees* will yield some important insights. Secondly, the similarities we have seen between Rousseau's analysis of pity and Smith's account of sympathy indicate that they are both taking Mandeville's description of pity as their starting point. Thirdly, the similarities between Rousseau's pity and Smith's sympathy would appear to indicate that, when Smith talks about Rousseau's work

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 251.

⁵⁰ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, p. 37. "Mandeville a bien senti qu'avec toute leur morale les hommes n'eussent jamais été que des monstres, si la nature ne leur eût donné la pitié à l'appui de la raison: mais il n'a pas vu que de cette seule qualité découlent toutes les vertus sociales qu'il veut disputer aux hommes. En effet, qu'est-ce que la générosité, la clémence, l'humanité, sinon la pitié appliquée aux faibles, aux coupables, ou à l'espèce humaine en général? La bienveillance et l'amitié même sont, à le bien prendre, des productions d'une pitié constante, fixée sur un objet particulier." *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, p. 154.

as an appropriation of *The Fable of the Bees*, he is also thinking about his own work in progress, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as an appropriation of Mandeville's book, and acknowledging Rousseau as a philosopher who shares many of his concerns.

SMITH'S "REAL SENTIMENTS" ON ROUSSEAU

Each of the three points mentioned above goes against the conventional wisdom regarding Mandeville, Rousseau and Smith. Rousseau's reference to Mandeville is explicit and therefore well known, but it is generally assumed that Mandeville is a polemical target, not a worthy interlocutor. Since Rousseau is usually seen as a fierce critic of trade and commerce as foundations of civil society, one wonders how he could build his system on the work of an author who extols the public benefits of greed. It is also surprising to see the author of *The Wealth of Nations* and the author of the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* together as readers of Mandeville. Finally, it would seem implausible that *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* could share some of the premises of the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Few Smith scholars would be inclined to see the author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as a secret admirer of Rousseau.⁵¹ This view is not shared by many Rousseau scholars either, but it was proposed by a Rousseau scholar of the *Quellen-Kritik* period who stated that, although Adam Smith "was suspicious of Rousseau's sentimental picture of the state of nature, there was much in the *Discourse* that he found to praise and even to make use of in future publications of his own."⁵² The same critic added that the first paragraph of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* "is little more than a restatement of Rousseau's conception of pity."⁵³ More recently, Donald Winch suggested that "Smith's theory of sympathy, as expounded in the *Theory*

⁵¹ For an insightful discussion of Smith's position with respect to Rousseau, see Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty. An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 57–89, as well as Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1984, pp. 107–131, and "Smith, Rousseau and the Republic of Needs," in *Scotland and Europe, 1200–1850*, edited by T.C. Smout, Edinburgh: J. Donald, 1986, pp. 187–206. Also see A.L. Macfie, *The Individual in Society. Papers on Adam Smith*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1967, p. 44 and D.D. Raphael, *Adam Smith*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 71–72 and 79–80. The relatively small number of critics who mention Rousseau as an important interlocutor for Smith tend to agree that Smith is only interested in refuting Rousseau's theories. I'm arguing here and will argue again in chapters 4 and 6 that the ambiguities in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* can be traced in no small part to Smith's ambivalent assessment of Rousseau's philosophy.

⁵² Richard B. Sewall, "Rousseau's Second Discourse in England from 1755 to 1762," *Philological Quarterly* 17:2 (April 1938), p. 98.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

of *Moral Sentiments*, is an augmented version of Rousseau's conception of *pitié*.⁵⁴

On the other hand, in another recent study of the Mandeville–Rousseau–Smith triangle, E.J. Hundert argued that Smith's review of the *Second Discourse* in the *Edinburgh Review* was an "attack upon Rousseau."⁵⁵ This view is consistent with the prevailing opinion on the Rousseau–Smith connection, and it is based on a plausible reading of the review. Smith's final assessment of the *Second Discourse* is that it "consists almost entirely of rhetoric and description."⁵⁶ In his essay on the imitative arts, Smith characterized Rousseau as "an author more capable of feeling strongly than of analyzing accurately."⁵⁷ We also know that in a letter to Hume, Smith called Rousseau a "hypocritical pedant."⁵⁸

At first sight, these quotes seem totally inconsistent with the notion that Smith might have been an admirer of Rousseau. However, the language Smith uses in his letter to Hume must be put in the context of the Hume–Rousseau quarrel. That Smith should side with his close friend Hume is to be expected. The Hume–Smith correspondence reveals at the same time that Smith was eager to hear the latest news about Rousseau.⁵⁹ In response, Hume provided a lot of details, including Davenport's prognostication that Rousseau's *Confessions* (still unpublished at that time) would be "the most taking of all his works."⁶⁰ We also know that Smith possessed most of the books that Rousseau published during his lifetime.⁶¹ As we have seen above, in the *Edinburgh Review* article, Smith presented

⁵⁴ Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, p. 72. Winch qualifies his judgment by mentioning the fact that Rousseau thinks *pitié* diminishes with civilization, while Smith sees civil society as the vehicle for the perfection of sympathy. This is certainly true but, as I argue later in this chapter, the pertinent concept for this discussion is not *pity* but *identification* (a concept that is very close to Smith's *sympathy*). In Rousseau's narrative, natural pity diminishes with civilization, but the capacity for identification increases with it.

⁵⁵ E.J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's Fable. Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 220. This is an old debate. Sewall's 1938 article takes issue with an earlier critic who was reading Smith's 1755 review of the *Second Discourse* as an attack on Rousseau.

⁵⁶ Smith, "Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*," p. 251.

⁵⁷ Adam Smith, "Of the Imitative Arts," in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 3, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 198.

⁵⁸ Letter 92 to David Hume (March 13, 1766) in *Correspondence of Adam Smith, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 6, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 113.

⁵⁹ Letter 109 to David Hume (September 13, 1767), *ibid.*, p. 132.

⁶⁰ Letter 112 from David Hume to Adam Smith (October 17, 1767), *ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶¹ *Lettre à d'Alembert* (Amsterdam, 1758); *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (Amsterdam, 1761); *Émile* (Frankfurt, 1762); *Lettres écrites de la montagne* (Amsterdam, 1764); *Dictionnaire de musique* (vols. 10 and 11 of *Œuvres de M. Rousseau de Genève*, Amsterdam: Marc Michel Rey, 1769). See James Bonar, *A Catalogue of the Library of Adam Smith*, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1966 [first edition 1894] and Hiroshi Mizuta, *Adam Smith's Library. A Supplement to Bonar's Catalogue with a Checklist of the Whole Library*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967.

Rousseau as the most important and original philosopher writing in French since Descartes, in a field (“morals” and “metaphysics”) where improving upon the doctrines of the Ancients was much more difficult than in natural science.⁶² According to Smith, English moral philosophy, from Hobbes to Mandeville and Hutcheson, had made genuine attempts to bring something new to the field (it “endeavored at least, to be, in some measure, original”)⁶³ but it was now quiescent. Because he based his *Second Discourse* on Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*, Rousseau was, in Smith’s eyes, the worthy continuator of a philosophical tradition that the English had developed and then neglected.

Evidence and testimony regarding Smith’s personal views (aside from what we can infer from his writings) is scarce. As Donald Winch puts it, “if behind those publications to which he attached his name, Smith often appears private and aloof, that is how he wished it to be.”⁶⁴ Smith’s review of the *Second Discourse* is difficult to interpret because in this text, as in many other instances, Smith is ironic, elusive, and almost impossible to identify univocally with a particular opinion or position.⁶⁵ As a result, the few anecdotes we have on Smith’s private sentiments carry much more weight than they would for another author (and should accordingly be treated with an abundance of caution). There is at least one testimony regarding Smith’s private views on Rousseau. In October 1782, Barthélémy Faujas de Saint-Fond, a French geologist, had several conversations with “that venerable philosopher” Adam Smith in Edinburgh. Saint-Fond describes Smith’s admiration for Rousseau in the strongest possible terms:

One evening while I was at tea with him he spoke of Rousseau with a kind of religious respect: “Voltaire sought to correct the vices and the follies of mankind by laughing at them, and sometimes by treating them with severity: Rousseau conducts the reader to reason and truth, by the attraction of sentiment, and the force of conviction. His *Social Compact* will one day avenge all the persecutions he experienced.”⁶⁶

This testimony is consistent with Emma Rothschild’s recent speculation on “Smith’s real sentiments,”⁶⁷ which, according to many of his French

⁶² Smith, “Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*,” p. 249. ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁶⁴ Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, p. 35.

⁶⁵ The practice of concealing one’s “real” sentiments, especially on political and religious issues, is characteristic of many Enlightenment thinkers. Smith is an extreme case, however, because, unlike Voltaire for instance, his correspondence reveals little about his private views.

⁶⁶ Barthélémy Faujas de Saint-Fond, *Travels in England, Scotland and the Hebrides, undertaken for the purpose of examining the state of the arts, the sciences, natural history and manners, in Great Britain*, London: James Ridgway, 1799 [Paris: H.-J. Jansen, 1797], vol. 2, p. 242.

⁶⁷ Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments. Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 66. Rothschild makes a brief reference to this anecdote (p. 54) but she takes it only as a proof of Smith’s republican sentiments.

friends, were considerably more radical in private than they were in public. As we shall see, it can also be reconciled with Smith's apparently negative assessments of Rousseau's work. What is remarkable about Saint-Fond's testimony is that Smith judges Voltaire and Rousseau less on the intellectual validity of their doctrines than on their ability to change the hearts and minds of their readers. Voltaire is presented as a satirist and a moralist who "sought to correct the vices and the follies of mankind" through mockery and blame. Rousseau's effectiveness, on the other hand, is based on "the attraction of sentiment" and "the force of conviction." In the comparison, Rousseau appears therefore as a more profound philosopher than Voltaire. This is particularly significant if we recall that Smith's admiration for Voltaire was immense.

As Hadot and Davidson have shown,⁶⁸ the ancient tradition of "philosophy as a way of life" made a strong comeback during the early modern period. That explains the profound interest in Hellenistic philosophy (Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism) that characterizes many philosophers from Erasmus to Kant. In this tradition, intellectual speculation is not an end in itself (as it is in the institutional practice of philosophy), but rather a tool for moral and personal reformation. Smith's deep interest in Stoicism and other Hellenistic doctrines must be understood in this context. If one believes, as Smith probably did, that the ultimate purpose of philosophy is the moral progress of the philosopher and his disciples, the *rhetorical* dimension of philosophy must be acknowledged as fundamental. Constructing a solid and coherent doctrine is not enough. The philosopher's task is to change and reform some of his reader's most deeply held beliefs. In this enterprise, rational argumentation plays of course an important role, but feelings and sentiment are also essential. The interlocutor will not change his fundamental beliefs if he is not moved by a profound *desire* to achieve a greater degree of wisdom. This ability to appeal to feelings and sentiment is what Smith admires most in Rousseau. The philosopher from Geneva may be wrong on some particulars in his doctrine, but he is a great philosopher because he inspires his readers, and he leads them to change some of their core beliefs through "the attraction of sentiment" and "the force of conviction."

It appears therefore that when Smith characterizes Rousseau as "an author more capable of feeling strongly than of analyzing accurately," he criticizes him and pays him a compliment at the same time. As to the characterization of the *Second Discourse* as consisting "almost entirely of rhetoric and

⁶⁸ Pierre Hadot and Arnold Davidson, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

description” it is much less critical than it sounds. “Rhetoric” in modern parlance is often a pejorative term. For Smith, however, the “rhetorical” is simply a type of discourse to be distinguished from the “didactic”:

Every discourse proposes either barely to relate some fact, or to prove some proposition. In the first . . . the discourse is called a narrative one. The latter is the foundation of two sorts of discourse: the didactic and the rhetorical. The former proposes to put before us the arguments on both sides of the question in their true light . . . The rhetorical again endeavors by all means to persuade us.⁶⁹

The goal of both the didactic and the rhetorical discourses is to “prove some proposition.” In didactic discourse, reasoning is primary, persuasion secondary. In rhetorical discourse it is the opposite. As to “description,” it is, for Smith, the main characteristic of “narrative” discourse. Smith talks about Milton’s “description of Paradise,”⁷⁰ and he dedicates four lectures to the various modes of description in poetry and prose.⁷¹ When Smith refers to the *Second Discourse* as consisting “almost entirely of rhetoric and description,” he is simply stating a fact. Rousseau’s work consists of “rhetoric” because its primary goal is to *persuade*. It consists of “description” because it is mostly a *narrative*. Smith’s own way of philosophizing was of course much more “didactic” than “rhetorical.” This does not diminish (and it may even explain) Smith’s admiration and respect for Rousseau’s rhetorical abilities.

PITY AS A MANIFESTATION OF SELF-INTEREST

Both Rousseau and Smith seek to build systems on principles other than the “selfish hypothesis.” In order to do so, they must respond to the account of pity that can be found in the proponents of the interest doctrine. Augustinians and Epicureans agree that pity is a manifestation of self-interest. Among the Augustinians, one may quote La Rochefoucauld, whose maxim 264 reads:

Pity is often a way of feeling our own misfortunes in those of other people; it is a clever foretaste of the unhappiness we may some day encounter. We help others to make sure they will help us under similar circumstances, and the services we render them are, properly speaking, benefits we store up for ourselves in advance.⁷²

⁶⁹ Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 4, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 62.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64. ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Lectures 12 to 15.

⁷² François de La Rochefoucauld, *The Maxims*, translated by Louis Kronenberger, New York: Stackpole, 1936. “La pitié est souvent un sentiment de nos propres maux dans les maux d’autrui. C’est une

As an Augustinian, La Rochefoucauld assumes that all human behavior, except when God's grace is at work, is driven by self-love (Augustine's *amor sui*). This particular maxim proposes an interest-based interpretation of pity. When we feel pity, La Rochefoucauld explains, the feeling is apparently directed towards the persons who feel pain, but in reality, it goes back to ourselves. We only see our interests in the sufferings of others. We help those who suffer in the hope that they will help us if we suffer in the future.

For an Epicurean account of pity, we may turn to Helvétius, in a text that is posterior to the *Second Discourse* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, but nonetheless illuminating, because it is a response to Rousseau's refutation of the interest-based interpretation of pity. Helvétius endeavors to prove that "compassion is neither a moral sense, or an innate sentiment, but the pure effect of self-love":⁷³

My affliction for the miseries of an unhappy person, is always in proportion to the fear I have of being afflicted of the same miseries. I would, if it were possible, destroy in him the very root of his misfortune, and thereby free myself at the same time from the fear of suffering in the same manner. The love of others is therefore never any thing else in man than an effect of the love of himself.⁷⁴

Helvétius goes on to say that compassion is only a product of education. Consequently, the only way of rendering a child "humane and compassionate" is "to habituate him from his most tender age to put himself in the place of the miserable."⁷⁵ The expression used by Helvétius in the original French (*s'identifier avec les malheureux*) is worth mentioning. Literally, it means "to identify with the miserable." In modern English or French, the word *identification* is commonly used by psychologists to describe a process whereby the subject puts himself or herself emotionally or mentally in the place of another person, real or imaginary. The first recorded use of the

habile prévoyance des malheurs où nous pouvons tomber; nous donnons du secours aux autres pour les engager à nous en donner en de semblables occasions; et ces services que nous leur rendons sont à proprement parler des biens que nous nous faisons à nous-mêmes par avance." *Maximes*, edited by Jean Lafond, Paris: Gallimard, 1976 [Paris: Barbin, 1678], maxim 264.

⁷³ Claude Adrien Helvétius, *A Treatise on Man*, translated by W. Hooper, New York: Burt Franklin, 1969, vol. 2, p. 18. "J'ai prouvé que la compassion n'est ni un sens moral, ni un sentiment inné, mais un pur effet de l'amour de soi." *De l'Homme. De ses facultés intellectuelles, et de son éducation*, London: Société Typographique, 1773, v.3.

⁷⁴ *A Treatise on Man*, vol. 2, p. 16. "Mon attendrissement pour les douleurs d'un infortuné est toujours proportionné à la crainte que j'ai d'être affligé des mêmes douleurs. Je voudrais, s'il était possible, en anéantir en lui jusqu'au germe: je m'affranchirais en même temps de la crainte d'en éprouver de pareilles. L'amour des autres ne sera jamais dans l'homme qu'un effet de l'amour de lui-même." *De l'Homme*, v.3.

⁷⁵ *A Treatise on Man*, vol. 2, p. 18. "... l'habituer dès sa plus tendre jeunesse à s'identifier avec les malheureux et à se voir en eux." *De l'Homme*, v.3.

term *identification* in French goes back to Rousseau's *Second Discourse*⁷⁶ (which gives Rousseau a plausible claim as inventor of this key concept in modern psychology). Rousseau uses the term in a passage dealing with La Rochefoucauld's conception of pity:

Even should it be true that commiseration is only a feeling that puts us in the position of him who suffers – a feeling that is obscure and lively in Savage man, developed but weak in Civilized man – what would this idea matter to the truth of what I say, except to give it more force? In fact, commiseration will be all the more energetic as the Observing animal identifies himself more intimately with the suffering animal. Now it is evident that this identification must have been infinitely closer in the state of Nature than in the state of reasoning.⁷⁷

Rousseau coins the neologism *identification* in response to La Rochefoucauld's Augustinian interpretation of pity.⁷⁸ As we have seen above, La Rochefoucauld claims that we feel pity because we put ourselves in the position of the person who is suffering ("Pity is often a way of feeling our own misfortunes in those of other people"). As a consequence, we see what it would be like to suffer, and we decide to help sufferers in order to get help from them in case we would need it in the future. Rousseau decides to retain the premise of La Rochefoucauld's analysis: we put ourselves in the place of the person who is suffering. He also gives a name to the psychological phenomenon described by La Rochefoucauld: *identification*. Then comes the *ad hominem* argument. La Rochefoucauld, a classic defender of the interest doctrine, agrees that pity is based on identification. For La Rochefoucauld, pity causes us to see that it is in our best interest to help others, with the understanding that favors will be reciprocated. In other words, a consequence of pity is *commerce*, in the classical sense: the exchange of services or goods, which may or may not involve money. These inferences, Rousseau claims, are false. If we really understand the psychological phenomenon of identification, we must agree that the capacity for pity was far stronger in the state of nature than it is in the state of civilization. If La

⁷⁶ I base this claim on a search of the University of Chicago ARTFL database. The *Oxford English Dictionary* mentions *identification* as a term of logic as early as the seventeenth century. *Identification* in the modern sense (identification with a fictional character) does not occur until 1857.

⁷⁷ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, p. 37. "Quand il serait vrai que la commisération ne serait qu'un sentiment qui nous met à la place de celui qui souffre, sentiment obscur et vif dans l'homme sauvage, développé mais faible dans l'homme civil, qu'importerait cette idée à la vérité de ce que je dis, sinon de lui donner plus de force? En effet, la commisération sera d'autant plus énergique que l'animal spectateur s'identifiera plus intimement avec l'animal souffrant: or il est évident que cette identification a dû être infiniment plus étroite dans l'état de nature que dans l'état de raisonnement." *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, p. 155.

⁷⁸ There is no explicit reference to La Rochefoucauld in the quoted passage, but most Rousseau scholars believe that the author of the *Second Discourse* has the *Maxims* in mind here. The Gagnebin and Raymond edition gives maxim 264 as Rousseau's most likely reference.