

Original citation:

Ansell-Pearson, Keith, 1960-. (2015) Beyond obligation? Jean-Marie Guyau on life and ethics. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, 77 . pp. 207-225.

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Publisher's statement:

© 2015 Cambridge University Press.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1358246115000260>

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Beyond Obligation?:
Jean-Marie Guyau on Life and Ethics

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There is a tradition of modern French philosophy that contains valuable resources for thinking about the nature and limits of obligation and how a higher calling of life beyond obligation might be conceived. This is a tradition of an ethics of generosity whose best exemplar is perhaps Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and that extends in our own time to the writing of Gilles Deleuze (1925-95). Bergson writes in 1904:

Is there anything more daring, anything newer than to announce to physicists that the inert will be explained by the living, to biologists that life will only be understood through thought, to philosophers that generalities are not philosophical, to teachers that the whole must be taught before its elements, to students that one must begin by perfection, to man, more than ever given over to egoism and hatred, that the natural driving power of man is generosity?¹

In this paper my focus is on the contribution to an ethics of generosity made by Jean-Marie Guyau (1854-88). Although an unduly neglected figure today, Guyau was read as making an important contribution to ethics in his own day by the diverse likes of Nietzsche, Peter Kropotkin, William James, and Josiah Royce. His major work on ethics was published in 1885 and is entitled in English *Sketch of Morality Independent of*

¹ H. Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1946), 252.

Obligation or Sanction (Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation, ni sanction).² Prior to this work Guyau had published studies of ancient and modern ethics (especially English utilitarianism), being especially concerned with Epictetus and Epicurus with regards to the ancients and with Darwin and Spencer with regards to the moderns. In this talk I shall seek to cast light on Guyau's contribution to a post-Kantian ethics that is centred on a commitment to naturalism and a philosophy of life. I aim to illuminate three topics: (a) his criticism of Kant; (b) his criticism of an ethics based on hedonism; (c) how his ideas can be deployed so as to advance a criticism of the limitations of Nietzsche's thinking on ethics. Finally, in my conclusion I shall raise some critical concerns over Guyau's attempt to establish a new approach to questions of ethics, such as the nature and limits of obligation, on the basis of a philosophy of life. Guyau does not deal explicitly with the topic of supererogation or with analyzing supererogatory acts, but he is offering an ethics of generosity and *caritas* that brings him into rapport with this trajectory in moral thought. He wants to analyse the nature and limits of obligation, to demystify and naturalise it, and then ask: what would obligation look like to someone who has given up on the idea of there being an *absolute* obligation? In short, he does not wish to throw the baby out with the bathwater, so he is best seen as a modern figure who reconfigures obligation in the light of his developing a philosophy of life. Guyau's essential point is to claim, and I quote, that 'The sentiment which is at bottom of all human morality is

² For the purposes of this essay I have been able to consult the fourth edition of the French from 1896 and the English translation of 1898 based on the second edition. The differences between the different editions are slight. In the citations that follow in the essay the first page reference given is to the French edition, the second to the English translation. *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation, ni sanction* (Elibron 2006, based on the edition of 1896); *A Sketch of Morality Independent of Obligation or Sanction*, trans. Gertrude Kapteyn (London, Watts & Co., 1898).

always that of generosity'.³ Let's now see where such an insight takes Guyau in his reflections on life and ethics.

Guyau and Ethics

Guyau's aim is to promote a renewal of ethics in the face of the rise of mechanical materialism to a position of intellectual dominance in his time; he wants to focus attention on emotional and reflective activity in contrast to the exclusive attention paid to physical and external phenomena. Guyau's thinking takes its bearings from a number of influences. On the one hand he is strongly influenced by naturalist and positivist developments and on the other by an idealist legacy. Naturalism offers, to its credit, no unchangeable principles either with regards to obligation or sanction; idealism can furnish at best only hypothetical and not categorical imperatives. As one commentator on Guyau has noted, his goal is to provide a satisfactory holistic approach to modern ethics since positivist and idealists consider only one aspect, either the factual or the ideal, at the expense of the other. Thus a proper account of the dynamics of moral life must account for both moral ideas and moral actions.⁴ For Guyau the reign of the absolute is over in the domain of ethics: 'whatever comes within the order of facts is not universal, and whatever is universal is a speculative hypothesis'.⁵

³ J. M. Guyau, *Education and Heredity*, trans. W. J. Greenstreet (London: Walter Scott, 1891), 182.

⁴ Marco Orru, 'The ethics of anomie: Jean-Marie Guyau and Émile Durkheim', *The British Journal of Sociology* (1983) 34: 4, 499-518, 503-4.

⁵ *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation, ni sanction*, 6; *A Sketch of Morality Independent of Obligation or Sanction*, 4.

According to Guyau, we are witnessing today the decline of religious faith and this faith is being replaced by a dogmatic faith in morality. Although its fanaticism may be less dangerous than the religious sort it is equally menacing. The new voice is conscience and the new god is duty:

The great Pan, the nature-god, is dead; Jesus, the humanity-god, is dead. There remains the inward and ideal god, Duty, whose destiny it is, perhaps, also to die some day.⁶

The belief in duty is so questionable because it is placed above the region in which both science and nature move. Guyau maintains that all philosophies of duty and of conscience are, in effect, philosophies of common sense and are thus unscientific, be it the Scottish school of 'common sense' derived from Thomas Reid or neo-Kantianism with its assumption that the impulse of duty is of a different order to all other natural impulses. Phrases such as 'conscience proclaims', 'evidence proves', 'common sense requires' are as unconvincing as 'duty commands', 'the moral law demands'.

Guyau asks, then, 'what is the exact domain of *science* in moral philosophy (*la morale*)?'⁷ Speculation beyond the empirically given and ascertainable can be permitted in moral philosophy but the most important task is to work out how far an exclusively scientific conception of morality can go. Guyau inquires into the ends pursued by living creatures, including humankind. The unique and profound goal of action cannot, he argues, be the good since this is a vague conception which, when opened up to analysis,

⁶ Ibid., 63; 54.

⁷ Ibid., 83; 71.

dissolves into a metaphysical hypotheses. He also rules out absolute duty and happiness: the former cannot be regarded as a primitive and irreducible principle, whilst the latter presupposes the advanced development of an intelligent being. Guyau, then, is in search of a natural aim of human action. The principle of hedonism, which argues for a minimum of pain and a maximum of pleasure, can be explained in evolutionary terms in which conscious life is shown to follow the line of the least suffering. To a certain extent Guyau accepts this thesis but finds it too narrow as a definition since it applies only to conscious life and voluntary acts, not to unconscious and automatic acts. To believe that most of our movements spring from consciousness, and that a scientific analysis of the springs of conduct has only to reckon with conscious motives, would mean being the dupe of an illusion. He holds that consciousness embraces a restricted portion of life and action; acts of consciousness have their origins in dumb instincts and reflex movements. Thus, the 'constant end of action must primarily have been a *constant cause* of more or less unconscious movements. In reality, the ends are but *habitual motive causes become conscious of themselves*' (ibid.).⁸

Guyau contends that when conceived as the 'systematization of moral evolution in humanity' the science of ethics will come to exert an influence on this very evolution and alter the human animal in the process: 'The gradual and necessary disappearance of religion and absolute morality has many...surprises in store for us. If there is nothing in this to terrify us, at least we must try to foresee them in the interest of science'.⁹ The chief problem thrown up by the new scientific approach to morality is the question Nietzsche also focuses on: why obedience? Why submission? This is perceived to be our

⁸ Ibid., 87; 74.

⁹ Ibid., 135; 114.

problem today by Guyau because we are bound by an impulse or inward pressure which has only a natural character, not a mystical or metaphysical one that can be completed by any extra-social sanction. Science can only offer excellent hypothetical advice and not anything that would purport to be categorical or absolute. If we wish to promote the highest intensity of life, then we have to experiment, that is, if we take the realm of the practical seriously we must recognize that a scientific conception of morality cannot give a definite and complete solution of moral obligation.

Contra Kant

Like his philosophical predecessors such as Hegel, Guyau notes the formalist character of Kant's ethics. With its stress on the absolute character of the imperative independent of the idea of its object and application, such an ethics makes appeal to natural or empirical facts virtually worthless since it is always possible to find an answer by appealing to the distinction between the alleged intention behind the act and the act itself: 'If the act is practically harmful, the intention may have been morally disinterested, and that is all that the moral philosophy of Kant demands'.¹⁰ Furthermore, the good intention of the feeling of obligation in Kant must make an appeal to a supra-sensible reality. Guyau corrects Kant on this point:

The *feeling* of obligation, if exclusively considered from the point of view of mental dynamics, is brought back to a feeling of resistance.... This resistance, being of such a nature as to be apprehended by the senses, cannot arise from our

¹⁰ 57; 48.

relation to a *moral* law, which hypothetically would be quite intelligible and independent of time. It arises from our relation to natural and empiric laws.¹¹

Guyau points out that the feeling of obligation is not moral but sensible, that is, the moral sentiment is, as Kant himself concedes, *pathological*. Kant's position is distinctive in holding this sentiment to be aroused by the mere form of the moral law and not its subject matter. This generates a mystery, as Kant fully acknowledges: an intelligible and supra-natural law generates a pathological and natural sentiment, namely, respect. How does a pure idea that contains nothing sensible produce within us a sensation of pleasure and pain? Kant acknowledges that he cannot explain why and how the universality of a maxim, and consequently morality, interests us.¹²

Guyau cannot see any reason *a priori* why we should connect sensible pleasure or pain to a law that would, hypothetically, be suprasensible. Equally, can duty be detached from the character and qualities of the things we have to do and the actual people to whom we have obligations? Like Hegel, Guyau appeals to 'social life' (what Hegel calls *Sittlichkeit*) as the context in which duties and obligations find their sense. The moral law can only be a social law; just as we are not free to get outside the universe, so we are not free (in our thinking) to get outside society. Moreover, even if we were to suppose that the universal, qua universal, produces in us a logical satisfaction this itself remains 'a satisfaction of the logical instinct in man' and 'is a *natural* tendency' because it is 'an

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 128.

expression of life in its higher form...favourable to order, to symmetry, to similitude, to unity in variety...'13

For Guyau, and contra Kant, moral sentiment is not to be explained rationally and *a priori*. It is impossible to prove by fact the act of respect for a pure form. The sentiment that Kant wishes to attach either to pure reason or to pure will can be accounted for in terms of appealing to the natural interest we experience in our superior faculties, and in our intellectual life: 'We cannot be indifferent to the rational exercise of our reason, which, after all, is a more complex instinct, nor to the exercise of the *will*, which, indeed, is a fuller force and a potentiality of effects anticipated in their cause'.¹⁴ Indeed, if pureness were pushed to its utmost limit we would have the indifference of the senses and the intellect, and not 'that definite state of the intelligence and the senses which is called the *affirmation* of a law and the *respect* of a law';¹⁵ in short, there would be nothing for human judgment and sentiment to work upon.

In addition, we can state the critical point that the will cannot be indifferent to the aims it is seeking to pursue or promote. Guyau contends that a purely formal practice of morality, as Kant's ethics demands, would ironically prove demoralizing to an agent: 'it is the analogy of the labour which the prisoners in English prisons are obliged to do, and which is without aim – to turn a handle for the sake of turning it!'¹⁶ Nietzsche describes

¹³ Guyau, 59; 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Kant's ethics a form of 'refined servility'.¹⁷ Guyau makes the same criticism of Kant when he questions the performance of duty for the sake of duty, which he regards as pure tautology and a vicious circle. We might as well say be religious for the sake of religion, or be moral for the sake of morality. He then closely echoes Nietzsche when he argues, 'While I believe it to be my sovereign and self-governed liberty, commanding me to do such and such an act, what if it were hereditary instinct, habit, education, urging me to the pretended duty?'¹⁸ As Nietzsche points out, one's judgment that 'this is right' has a pre-history in one's instincts, likes and dislikes, experiences (including the lack of them), and so on.

Guyau does not dispute that Kant's thinking on ethics is without importance or merit; indeed, he holds the theory of the categorical imperative to be psychologically exact and deep and the expression of a fact of consciousness. What cannot be upheld, however, is the attempt to develop it without the requisite naturalistic insight in which what we take to be a practical, internal necessity will be demonstrated to be an instinctive, even mechanical, necessity.¹⁹ In short, Guyau holds that there is within us a primitive, impersonal impulse to obey that is prior to philosophical reasoning on goodness, but our understanding of this needs to be opened up to naturalistic and critical inquiry. For Guyau this inquiry into the sentiment of obligation is to take the form of a

¹⁷ F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), section 5.

¹⁸ Guyau 67; 57. In *The Gay Science* section 335 Nietzsche seeks to show that any attempt to truly know ourselves must have recourse to the intellectual conscience which works as a conscience behind our moral conscience and which may be little more than the product of habitually acquired opinions and valuations.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 102-3; 89. See also Nietzsche on 'the automaton of duty' in *The Anti-Christ* section 12.

dynamic genesis in which we come to appreciate that we do not follow our conscience but are driven by it and in terms of a psycho-mechanical power. In addition questions of evolution – the evolution of the species and of societies – also need to be taken into account. What kind of ‘impulse’ is duty? How has it evolved? And why has it become for us a ‘sublime obsession’?²⁰ Ultimately, Kant’s ethics, Guyau argues, must be seen as belonging to an age that future humanity will outgrow. It is ‘a moral philosophy similar to ritualist religions, which count any failure in ceremonial as sacrilege; and which forget the essence for the sake of the form’; it is thus ‘a kind of moral despotism, creeping everywhere, wanting to rule everything’.²¹

Life and Pleasure: Beyond Hedonism

Let me now turn to examining Guyau’s engagement with ethical hedonism. Here we will see how he develops an ethics from his philosophy of life.

For Guyau, the cause operating within us before any attraction of pleasure is life. Pleasure is but the consequence of an instinctive effort to maintain and enlarge life, and nature is to be regarded as self-moving and self-governing. Guyau writes:

One does not always act with the view of seeking a *particular pleasure* – limited and exterior to the act itself. Sometimes we act for the pleasure of acting... There is in us an accumulated force which demands to be used. If its expenditure is impeded, this force becomes desire or aversion; if the desire is satisfied, there is pleasure; if it is opposed, there is pain. But it does not follow from this that the stored-up activity unfolds itself solely *for the sake* of pleasure – with pleasure as

²⁰ Ibid. 21; 101.

²¹ Ibid., 170; 144.

motive. Life unfolds and expresses itself in activity because it is life. In all creatures pleasure accompanies, much more than it provokes, the search after life.²²

For Guyau, Epicurus, along with his faulty thinking about evolution, in which pleasure is said to create an organ's function, needs correcting on this point. In addition, he argues contra Bentham that 'to live is not to calculate, it is to act'.²³ An essentially Spinozist position – the tendency to persist in life is the necessary law of life – is deduced: 'The tendency of the creature to continue in existence is at the root of all desire, without forming in itself a determinate desire'.²⁴ Guyau takes this tendency to be one that goes beyond and envelops conscious life, so it is 'both the most radical of realities and the inevitable ideal'.²⁵ Therefore, Guyau reaches the conclusion that the part of morality that can be founded on positive facts can be defined as, 'the science which has for object all the means of *preserving* and *enlarging* material and intellectual life'.²⁶ His ethics centre, then, on a desire to increase the intensity of life that consists in enlarging the range of activity under all its forms and that is compatible with the renewal of force. A superior being is one that practices a variety of action; thought itself is nothing other than

²² 90; 77.

²³ Ibid. 247; 211.

²⁴ 92; 79.

²⁵ 88; 75.

²⁶ Ibid.

condensed action and life at its maximum development. He defines this superior being as one which ‘unites the most delicate sensibility with the strongest will’.²⁷

Guyau’s approach to ethics has its basis in a philosophy of life. For him this rules out any appeal to a supernatural principle to explain morality:

There is no supernatural principle whatever in our morality; it is from life itself, and from the force inherent in life, that it all springs. Life makes its own law by its aspiration towards incessant development; it makes its own obligation to act by its very power of action.²⁸

Guyau is interested in the evolution of human life and how this leads to ethical transformations. Although the evolved human being possesses a source of varied enjoyment in its own activity, this does not mean that such a human being will decide to shut itself up in itself, establishing an autarchic realm of self-sufficiency, like some Stoic sage. For Guyau, intellectual pleasures are both the most inward pleasures and also the most communicative, being both individual and social. The bonds that the sharing of the higher pleasures can generate create a particular kind of obligation: ‘an emotional bond – a union produced by the complete, or partial, harmony of sentiments or thoughts.’²⁹ Guyau does not, of course, deny that there is often conflict and disagreement over values and ideals, but at the same he insists new bonds between individuals arise from the sharing of the higher pleasures. Indeed, he maintains that the higher we rise in the scale

²⁷ 42; 35.

²⁸ 248; 211.

²⁹ 113; 94-5.

of evolution, the more we see the highly social and sociable character of the pleasures of humankind.

We moderns are becoming more intellectual in our enjoyments and tastes, and with this arises a ‘universal consciousness,’ in which consciousness becomes easier of penetration.³⁰ It’s on this point that Guyau thinks we are going beyond the life of pleasures envisaged by Epicurean philosophy. In modern conditions of human social evolution we find that the self distinguishes itself less and less from other selves and, in fact, has more in need of them so as to form itself and flourish. Here Guyau locates an important principle of human evolution: although the point of departure is selfishness, it is such ‘by virtue of the very fecundity of all life,’ and it is ‘obliged to enlarge itself, to create outside of itself new centres of its own action.’³¹ For Guyau, then, human evolution is on the way to an epoch in which primitive selfishness will more and more recede. Compared to the selfish component of our existence, the sphere of altruism is becoming considerably larger and even the so-called purely physical pleasures, such as eating and drinking, only acquire their full charm when one shares them with others. The social sentiments are, then, of crucial importance for understanding the character of our enjoyments *and* pains: ‘Neither my sufferings nor my pleasures are absolutely my own.’³² Guyau regards Epicurean morality as resting on a confusion of fact and duty and sees the contemporary English school – John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer – as providing the necessary corrective, so that instead of personal pleasure being the sole

³⁰ 114; 95.

³¹ 114; 95.

³² 115; 96.

legitimate end of our moral being, it is also the pleasure of others that needs to concern us.

There is for Guyau an abundance of life that motivates us to care and work not only for ourselves but for others. This is, in large part, what he means when he seeks to locate 'morality' – the sphere of the social expansion of the human animal and of other-regarding actions – within life itself. Life has two main aspects: nutrition and assimilation, on the one hand, and, production and fecundity on the other. The more a life form takes in, the more it needs to give out. He maintains:

Thus, the expenditure for other which social life demands is not...a loss for the individual; it is a desirable enlargement, and even a necessity. Man wishes to become a social and moral being; he remains constantly agitated by that idea. The delicate cells of his mind and his heart aspire to live and to develop in the same way as those 'homunculi' of which M. Renan somewhere speaks, every one of us feels in himself a kind of pushing of moral life, like that of the physical sap. Life is fecundity, and, reciprocally, fecundity is abundance of life; that is true existence.³³

Even in the life of the cell we can locate a principle of expansion and one that prevents any individual being sufficient unto itself. Moreover, the 'richest life' is to be found in the life that lavishly spends itself, sacrificing itself within certain limits, and sharing itself with others. The most perfect organism will also be the most sociable being: not simply because this carries with it certain evolutionary advantages but also because it is part of the higher moral development of life itself. It's on this point that Guyau sharply distinguishes himself from the likes of Bentham and the school of utilitarianism. It is within the very depths of our being that the instincts of sympathy and sociability emerge

³³ 101; 86-7.

and that the English school has shown us to be more or less artificially acquired in the course of human evolution, so being little more than adventitious in consequence.

For Guyau the higher life is that which expands beyond the narrow horizon of the individual self. We have, he thinks, a need to go out of ourselves to others: ‘we want to multiply ourselves by communion of thoughts and sentiments.’³⁴ We enjoy others knowing that we exist, feel, suffer, and love. In this respect, then, ‘we tear the veil of individuality,’ and this is not simple vanity but a fecund desire to ‘burst the narrow shell of the self.’³⁵ Guyau, however, is not utterly naïve in his appreciation of ‘life’: he draws our attention to the phenomenon of ‘affective debauchery’ in which ones lives too much for others and neglects a healthy care of self.³⁶ So, although he is keen to attack what he sees as the dogmatism of egoism,³⁷ he also appreciates the need for a healthy form of egoism consisting in the cultivation of a care of self.

Guyau is inspired by the idea, which he partly derives from his stepfather Alfred Fouillée, of making the moral ideal strictly immanent, for example, that it is derived from experience. He puts it in his own philosophical language as follows: ‘It is from *life* that we will demand the principle of morality.’³⁸ By this he means that although the communicability of emotions and thoughts can be explained on its psychological side as a phenomenon of nervous contagion, it can also be explained as an integral feature of the

³⁴ 98; 84.

³⁵ 98; 84.

³⁶ 99; 85.

³⁷ 76; 65.

³⁸ 81; 70.

evolution of life itself, that is, ‘by the fecundity of *life*, the expansion of which is almost in direct ratio to its intensity.’³⁹ Guyau is attempting to explain phenomena of morality, such as sympathy and altruism, including intellectual altruism, in terms of this conception of the development of life. If sympathy of feeling can be regarded as ‘the germ of the extension of consciousness,’ in which to understand is also to feel, and to understand others is to feel ourselves in harmony with them, then this can be explained by the fecund character of life itself.

Guyau’s overriding aim, then, is to establish the foundations of an understanding of moral development through a philosophy of life. Its moral ideal is ‘activity’ and in all its variety of manifestations; to increase the intensity of life means to enlarge the range of activity in all its forms.⁴⁰ There is a *culture* of human activity in this principle of ‘to act is to live’, in which, from its point of view, the worst of all vices is laziness and inertia. But what is its relation to hedonism or the moral philosophy of pleasure? Here Guyau is very delicate in his thinking. He argues that there are two principal kinds of pleasure: first, the kind that corresponds with a particular and superficial form of activity, such as eating and drinking, and this is the pleasure of the senses; second, the kind that is connected with the very root of that activity such as the pleasure of living, willing, and thinking. The latter is the more deeply ‘vital’ and the more independent of exterior objects for its fulfilment and expression, indeed, ‘it is one with the very consciousness of life.’⁴¹ The hedonists and utilitarians grant too much importance to the first kind of

³⁹ 81; 70.

⁴⁰ 89; 76.

⁴¹ 90; 77.

pleasure, and Guyau insists that we do not always act with the view of seeking the satisfaction of a particular pleasure. Rather, we act on occasion for the pleasure of acting and we live for the pleasure of living. Here, there 'is in us an accumulated force which demands to be used.'⁴² Indeed, he maintains that where the expenditure of this force is impeded it becomes desire or aversion: pleasure where the desire is ultimately satisfied and pain where the contrary takes place. The key point is this: from this it does not at all follow that the stored-up activity unfolds itself solely or largely for the sake of pleasure and with pleasure as the motive: 'Life unfolds and expresses itself in activity because it is life...Before all we must live; enjoyment comes after.'⁴³ If there is pleasure then this is something that accompanies the search after life and does not provoke it. The basic idea is that nature is self-moving and self-governing, and as such it becomes superfluous to appeal to a particular motive, such as any special pleasure.⁴⁴ Whilst it can be acknowledged, in accordance with the English school, that consciousness only comes into being with some sensation of pleasure or pain, and in which to act and react is always to enjoy or to suffer, to desire or to fear, it does not follow that this can explain the movement of life: instead of being the deliberate end of action, enjoyment is, like consciousness, merely an attribute of it. Only the distinction between consciousness and the unconscious can make this fact of life intelligible: 'Action springs naturally from the

⁴² 90; 77.

⁴³ 90; 77.

⁴⁴ 91; 78.

working of life, which is, to a considerable extent, unconscious.’⁴⁵ In short, Guyau is giving priority to an ethical philosophy of life over an ethical philosophy of pleasure.

A Critique of Nietzsche

Before turning to examine how duty gets reconfigured in Guyau’s account let me say something on the relation between Guyau and Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s attitude towards Guyau was ambivalent. On the one hand he calls him ‘brave Guyau’, and regards him as a courageous thinker who has written one of the few genuinely interesting books on ethics of modern times.⁴⁶ On the other hand, he thinks Guyau is caught up in the Christian-moral ideal, and partly for this reason he is only a free thinker and not a genuine free spirit. In part, Nietzsche is right: in contrast to Nietzsche, who celebrates power, the instinct of life in Guyau is one of fecundity and amour in which the most intensive life is also the most extensive. As one commentator notes, Guyau’s ‘immoralism’ reinstates the central virtues of Christian morality.⁴⁷ Still, I find it possible to locate in Guyau a potent criticism of elements of Nietzsche’s more celebrated ‘immoralism’. Let me explore this issue a little further.

⁴⁵ 92; 79.

⁴⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Walter de Gruyter, 1977), volume 11, 35 [34], p. 525. This note is from May-July of 1885. It begins with Nietzsche noting the deplorable condition of literature on morality in today’s Europe and then reviews contributions in the area from England, France, and Germany. Nietzsche singles out Guyau’s book for special praise along with Paul Rée’s *The Origin of Moral Sensations* (1877) and W. H. Rolph’s *Biological Problems* (1881). He regards these three texts as the strongest in contemporary ethics.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey C. Fidler, ‘On Jean-Marie Guyau, Immoraliste’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 55, 1995, 75-98, 77.

Nietzsche was impressed by Guyau's critique of Kant, his insights into the new dogmatic faith in morality, and his claim that the reign of the absolute was now over. Nietzsche has, in fact, anticipated several of Guyau's insights in the works of his middle period. However, Guyau's philosophy of life departs from the core assumptions of Nietzsche's thinking. For him, life is expansive in the sense of a need to share: 'It is as impossible to shut up the intelligence as to shut up flame'⁴⁸ For Guyau, human nature is sociable and cannot be entirely selfish even if it wished to be: 'We are open on all sides, on all side encroaching and encroached upon... *Life is not only nutrition; it is production and fecundity*'.⁴⁹ As we have seen, it is this fecundity of life that reconciles egoism and altruism for him. Guyau objects to any ethics of pure egoism: 'We cannot mutilate ourselves, and pure egoism would be meaningless, an impossibility. In the same way that the ego is considered an illusion by contemporary psychology, that there is no personality, that we are composed of an infinite number of beings and tiny consciousnesses, in the same way we might say that egoist pleasure is an illusion: my pleasure does not exist without the pleasure of others... My pleasure, in order to lose nothing of its intensity, must maintain all of its extension'. Guyau regards morality conceived as *caritas* as the great 'flower of life':

There is a certain generosity which is inseparable from existence and without which we die – we shrivel up internally. We must put forth blossoms... in reality, charity is but one with overflowing fecundity...⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Guyau 247; 210.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ 101; 87.

Nietzsche finds this aspect of Guyau's thinking 'incredible'. Like Guyau he wishes to push life in the direction of an increase in individual difference and moral variability. Yet in opposition to Guyau, Nietzsche often seems to assume that this entails a radical form of self-sufficiency, associability and incommunicability. Nietzsche stresses that his model of individual experimentalism is incompatible with all or most forms of shared sentiment, especially shared suffering (*Mitleid*). Let me make clear: Nietzsche is not a total pure egoist in his ethical thinking. For him, the task is one fashioning out of oneself a mode of being that others can behold with pleasure. As he puts in *Dawn*, clearly acknowledging that there is a need for the self to express, albeit in a subtle manner, its altruistic drive:

... the question itself remains open as to whether one is *more useful* to another by immediately and constantly leaping to his side and *helping* him – which can, in any case, only transpire very superficially, provided the help doesn't turn into a tyrannical encroachment and transformation – or by *fashioning* out of oneself something the other will behold with pleasure, a lovely, peaceful, self-enclosed garden, for instance, with high walls to protect against the dangers and dust of the roadway, but with a hospitable gate as well.⁵¹

However, the main difference from Guyau is that Nietzsche shows few signs of being a thinker of society and, at least in his middle period writings, favours social withdrawal and a retreat into Epicurean gardens. In *The Gay Science* he writes:

Live in seclusion so that you can live for yourself. Live in ignorance about what seems most important to your age...the clamor of today, the noise of wars and revolutions should be a mere murmur for you. You will also wish to help – but only those whose distress you understand entirely because they share with you one suffering and one hope – your friends – and only in the manner in which you help yourself.⁵²

⁵¹ F. Nietzsche, *Dawn: Thoughts on the Presumptions of Morality*, trans. Brittain Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), section 174.

⁵² F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 338.

In contrast Guyau has assimilated core aspects of Epicurean doctrine but goes well beyond it. In particular he criticizes the Hellenistic ideal of self-sufficiency, be it Stoic or Epicurean.

Guyau's attempt to locate the sources of morality in life is ultimately anathema to Nietzsche (life is will to power, he insists in his marginal notes on Guyau's text). For him free spirits need to resist the lure of the altruistic drives and affects, obviously compassion but also sympathy, philanthropy and love. However, we can ask: would Nietzsche's ethics, especially as we encounter it in the middle period, have benefitted from following Guyau in recognizing the value of shared sentiment for human flourishing? Perhaps Guyau's ethics help to clarify an important inconsistency in Nietzsche's perspective. Nietzsche is acutely aware that the Stoic strategy of eliminating the passions, conceived as a capacity to be affected by external causes, significantly limits on our capacity to flourish. Yet Nietzsche follows just this course in rejecting *Mitleid* or shared suffering as a pathological affect that only leads to ill-health. If, as Nietzsche argues strongly elsewhere overcoming one's *own* suffering is a necessary condition of individual flourishing then *prime facie* there is good reason for supposing that receptivity to and overcoming *others'* suffering can also contribute to one's own and others' flourishing. Nietzsche's justified suspicion that in some cases pity or compassion merely masks envy should have led him to criticize inauthentic compassion and friendship, not mistakenly and inconsistently sever the ties between shared suffering and shared joy. Even if we are destined to forget Guyau as an intellectual figure, we should

not forget his warning that we mutilate ourselves without sharing others' pleasures *and* pains.

Life and a New Duty

The aim of Guyau's inquiry is to ascertain what a moral philosophy looks like once it is stripped of *absolute* obligation and *absolute* sanction. To refashion ethics Guyau appeals to a philosophy of life: 'It is from life, both in its physical and moral form, that we have had to demand a principle of conduct'.⁵³ Life is divided into main forms, unconscious and conscious, and it is the former that he sees as the real source of our activity in the world. In fact, he wants a principle of harmony between the two spheres or realms of our identity, between reflection and spontaneity. This resides in a principle of action, one that although it becomes increasingly conscious of itself does not have the dissolving force typically associated with consciousness, so enabling action to fortify rather than destroy itself. This principle of action consists in living life in the most intensive and extensive modes possible. What needs to be given up is any appeal to an eternal, intelligible, and supernatural law, such as we find in Kant.

Guyau thinks that his new ethical philosophy that locates the moral sphere within life itself, enables him to unite the philosopher's stone of morality, namely, egoism and altruism. He is able to do this he thinks on the basis of his notion of moral fecundity. The life of the individual, he holds, diffuses itself for and in others, and in the process it yields itself up to these greater powers or forces of life; such expansion, he further holds, is not

⁵³ 244; 208.

contrary to its nature but in accordance with it and is 'the very condition of true life'.⁵⁴ How does he argue for this conception of the moral life? He refuses to see a logically inflexible division between the self and its others, and appeals to (a) the facts of physical life in which there is a need in the individual to beget another, which in turn becomes a necessary condition of its being; (b) the fact of life qua the need for it to communicate itself, which is true both of the body and the mind or intelligence. Our nature is sociable and there is a need to share our joys and sorrows with others. Life, then, is not only nutrition and gain, but spending and fecundity. It is with this insight developed that allows Guyau to go beyond what he sees as the limitations of logicians and metaphysicians with their absolute classifications and divisions.

Once this conception of life is in place we can then, he further thinks, come up with an equivalent to obligation and ask: what would such an obligation mean to a person who does not believe in an absolute imperative or transcendental law? The 'meaning', he answers, lies in an impulsive force: obligation and duty are forces that demand exercise. Whereas the utilitarians are caught up in considerations of finality – what is the aim of action? And it is utility reduced to pleasure – Guyau wishes to overcome this hedonism and remain in the perspective of efficient causality in which the cause operating in human agents as an aim, and before any attraction of pleasure, is the life that endeavours to grow and diffuse itself, and of which pleasure may be generated as a consequence: 'To live is not to calculate, it is to act', he pithily writes.⁵⁵ A cause needs to produce its effect, and within human agency we find an accumulation of force or a reserve of activity that spends itself and not simply for the pleasure of doing so.

⁵⁴ 246; 209.

⁵⁵ 247; 211.

Guyau thinks that this conception of ethical life allows him to reformulate duty: ‘*Duty* is but an expression detached from the *power* which necessarily tends to pass into action’ (ibid.). What does he mean exactly? He asks us to conceive it in the following terms: duty is that power which passes beyond reality at any particular moment and entails the conjunction of the ideal and the real, that is, it becomes what it ought to be because it can be thus, it is ‘the germ of the future already bursting forth in the present’ (ibid.). This means that a certain impersonal duty – since the duty is not specific to any particular individual – is created by the very power to act. Such a naturalized and demystified obligation entails that there be an identity between thought and action. Guyau writes: ‘He who does not, by his action, conform to his highest thought is at war with himself, in inwardly divided against himself’.⁵⁶ Acting in this way is, in fact, a way of life and a mode of being; it is not about making calculations of life, especially calculations of pleasure. Contra the idle fancy of certain epicureans that envisage a selfish happiness, Guyau insists that most of our human pleasures are social and that pure selfishness, far from being an affirmation of the self, is a mutilation of the self. He then writes:

Thus, in our activity, in our intelligence, in our sensibility, there is a pressure which exercises itself in the altruistic sense... This, then, is the treasure of natural spontaneousness, which is life, and which, at the same time, creates moral wealth.⁵⁷

Guyau does not, then, wish to take us beyond duty, only absolute duty and derived mystically from a supernatural law. But does he allow for heroism, sacrifice, and

⁵⁶ ; 212.

⁵⁷ ; 212.

spontaneous generosity? In a way he does, these phenomena are built into his conception of the ethical life, but he also speaks of higher or nobler duties that come with their practice. Let me indicate how he thinks this, and then move to my conclusion.

Guyau thinks he can identify in human nature a love of both physical risk and moral risk. Neither our thought nor our action stops at the point where certitude ends, and as we have seen he is against an ethics of calculation. The superior being is the one who undertakes and risks the most, and this superiority springs from the fact that such a being has more power. But a higher duty comes with this exercise of power. Moreover, even the sacrifice of life, which is sometimes entailed by the life of risk, can, under certain circumstances, amount to an expansion of life. Such individuals prefer a life of 'sublime exaltation' to one that involves years of 'grovelling existence'.⁵⁸ Indeed, he thinks an entire life can be concentrated into one moment of love and sacrifice. In short, Guyau thinks there is an active life of *joy*, and this joyful life is the kind of life I have just outlined, but it is not to be thought for him independently of the higher duty that comes with it.

Conclusion

Guyau makes a specific and unique contribution to an ethics based on the philosophy of life. He develops an original inquiry into the nature of the self, including its relation to others, and comes up with novel insights into how we define the boundaries of the self or the ego. He also inquires into the limits of a standpoint of pure egoism, showing it to be both an illusion and a misguided practice of self-mutilation. In relation to traditions and

⁵⁸ 250; 213.

conceptions of supererogation I see Guyau as having a connection with what the entry on the topic in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* calls ‘the open-ended dimension of morality’, that of ideals rather than principles, and what Urmson calls the ‘higher flights of morality’, and Bergson, writing in the wake of Guyau, calls the ‘morality of aspiration’ and that belongs to the open soul.⁵⁹

I think we can express a number of critical concerns over Guyau’s project, and in conclusion let me limit myself to articulating two. First, we may wish to articulate a concern over establishing ethics on the basis of an appeal to ‘life’; here, we need assurance that Guyau is not positing some abstract metaphysics that makes of life a substance and subject independent of the specifically human character of ethics and its inventions. Second, there is a concern that Guyau makes of morality a sociological ‘given’, namely, ‘an intrinsic feature of life as a simultaneously intensive and expansive force’.⁶⁰ This appears to be part of Nietzsche’s worry over Guyau’s project of a naturalistic ethics, namely, that it attributes to the so-called ‘natural’ elements of the very ethical ideal it seeks to promote. For Guyau, generosity is inseparable from life, and without it there can be no vitality and hence no progress in morality. Although a positivist by social-scientific inclination, Guyau remains an idealist as an ethicist and interprets the universe ‘as a realm whose significance lies in the ethical *ideals* that its *processes* realize’.⁶¹ For Guyau the moral end is ‘life’ itself in which morality is construed as an

⁵⁹ See chapter one of Bergson’s *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* for the distinction between the closed and open moralities.

⁶⁰ Fidler, 83.

⁶¹ Josiah Royce cited in Fidler 85.

energy. But, then, as one commentator notes, taken to its scientific limits morality remains incomplete and as a purely metaphysical concept it remains uncertain.⁶²

⁶² Fidler 92.