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On pliability and progress: challenging current conceptions of eighteenth-century French educational thought

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Examining the educational writings of three of the eighteenth-century's most innovative thinkers, the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, Morelly and Helvétius, this article challenges the currently accepted view that it was a belief in human pliability which gave rise to the contemporary groundbreaking faith in the power of education to improve society. The article delineates an intellectual process that culminated in the stance that man's innate behavioural tendencies are unalterable. It argues that, at least prior to Rousseau, the eighteenth-century faith in the power of education to improve society rested on a conviction that it is possible to beneficially direct man's fixed behavioural tendencies.

Keywords: pliability; progress; eighteenth century; education; France; philosophy

Introduction

The rise of the belief in the power of education to bring about the progress of society is closely associated with the work of eighteenth-century French educational thinkers. Identifying progress with the increase and spread of happiness in society, these thinkers famously argued that education can greatly contribute to it by perfecting the existing modes of conduct. Historians and those concerned with the history of educational philosophy have traditionally tied the eighteenth-century emergence of the above belief to two intellectual developments: the declining faith in the doctrine of original sin, and the implementation of scientifically inspired methods of philosophical inquiry for the study of the mind which led to the embracement of a sensualist psychology. Expounding and amending Locke's understanding of the mind, many eighteenth-century French educational thinkers maintained that all knowledge comes from experience and that the mind is originally a blank slate.[1] The embracement of these views, a familiar argument goes, led to an increased emphasis on the importance of external influences in determining our mental capacities and the patterns of human behaviour which, in turn, resulted in a growing confidence in human pliability. This confidence, the familiar argument continues, served as the foundation and cause of the eighteenth-century belief in the power of education to generate the progress of society.[2]

What tends to be overlooked, however, is that the use of philosophical methods inspired by contemporary natural sciences was not restricted to the study of the mind. These methods were also utilized by educationalist to probe into man's behavioural tendencies, a sphere in which they led to very different conclusions.[3] Examining the ideas of three of the earliest and most influential exponents of the eighteenth-century belief in the power of education, Abbé de Saint-Pierre, Morelly and Helvétius, I argue that, in contrast to the common view, prior to 1760s–1770s' widespread acceptance of this belief, there was a growing tendency among progressive educational philosophers to perceive man's behavioural tendencies as increasingly less alterable. I also maintain

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that this development took place despite the triumph of the conviction that the mind was a blank slate. I link this development to a shift in the methods of philosophical inquiry that was influenced by contemporary changes in the scientific outlook. In addition, in this article I reveal that Saint-Pierre, Morelly and Helvétius believed that what permitted education to direct people's conduct in ways that improve society was a familiarity with man's unalterable behavioural tendencies. Moreover, I challenge the common view that, prior to Rousseau, there was in eighteenth-century French educational thought an increasing belief in the power of reason. I show that because human nature was progressively seen as unalterable, the role and importance attributed to reason was declining. Based on the study conducted, I conclude that there is a need to reassess the role of the notion of pliability in eighteenth-century educational thought.

Concentrating more on ideas and less on the context in which and from which these ideas stemmed, in this article I explore Locke's *Some thoughts concerning education* (1693), Abbé de Saint-Pierre's *Projet Pour perfectionner l'éducation* (1728), Morelly's *Essai sur le Cœur humain ou principes naturels de l'éducation* (1745), and Helvétius's *De l'esprit* (1758) and *De l'homme* (1771). Following Bevir's *The logic of the history of ideas* (1999), I endeavour to make the different authors' perceptions of man's behavioural tendencies more intelligible by reconstructing them as internally consistent webs of beliefs. In this article I analyse Locke's, Saint-Pierre's, Morelly's and Helvetius' understanding of the internal sources that move the self and examine their perception of reason, the passion, self-love and their interrelationship. In accordance with Bevir's (1999) approach, I show how the understanding of man's behavioural tendencies was transformed with the author's new ideas, and how existing webs of belief were accordingly adjusted.

Reversing natural tendencies

In his thorough study of eighteenth-century French educational thought, Grandière (1998, 77) argues that from about 1715 to around 1740 John Locke's (1632–1704) innovative ideas had a shaping influence on all French educational innovators. By inaugurating a prominent new view of the mind, by introducing a novel method of philosophical inquiry, and by shifting the educational emphasis from man's relationship with God to man's relationship with society, Locke had laid the foundations for the creation of the modern understanding of education (Grandière 1998, 81).[4] Yet Locke was still deeply committed to many long-established Christian doctrines and notions. Such commitment was particularly evident in Locke's conception of man's behavioural tendencies as it appears in his *Some thoughts* (1693). In this treatise, instead of employing his new method of philosophical inquiry, Locke relied on and borrowed from the prevailing religious traditions. Although Locke did introduce some amendments to his predecessors' Christian-based view of man's behavioural tendencies, he still preserved its general structure. Examining Locke's educational view of human nature then will also enable us to gain some insight into the ideas that dominated French educational thought at the beginning of the eighteenth century. This together with Locke's shaping influence on educational innovators make him an excellent starting point for our investigation.

Although Locke famously argued that the mind was a blank slate empty of innate knowledge, he still held that humans have inborn behavioural tendencies. He wrote: 'I deny not that there are natural tendencies imprinted in the minds of men' (Locke 1690, 27). Since Locke (1690, 77) believed that like all animals 'the only thing we [humans] are afraid of, is Pain or the loss of Pleasure', he believed man to be a pleasure seeking creature by his nature. Like his Christian predecessors, Locke (1693, 170) was persuaded that humans were born with a strong inclination to give absolute priority to their own immediate personal good. Locke's renowned rejection of the traditional doctrine of original sin then did not result in significant changes in the prevailing Christian image of man as naturally passionate and self-regarding.

Following a path set by St Augustine, most of Locke's Christian educational predecessors painted untutored human nature in very unflattering colours. The passions and self-love, they held, distance man from the way of God and, thereby, prevent him from attaining true happiness and eternal bliss. Similarly, Locke too argued that self-love and the passions preclude true happiness by leading man astray. Yet the convictions which brought Locke to this conclusion were somewhat different from those of his predecessors. Considering man first and foremost as a social being, Locke argued that social esteem was absolutely essential for reaching true worldly happiness. He wrote:

> … those that are commended, and in esteem for doing well, will necessarily be belov'd and cherish'd by everybody, and have all other good things as a consequence of it; and on the other side, when any one by miscarriage falls into disesteem, and cares not to preserve his credit, he will unavoidably fall under neglect and contempt; and in that state, the want of whatever might satisfy or delight him will follow. (Locke 1693, 117)

At this point, it is important to emphasize that Locke's conception of happiness significantly differed from the one that prevails today. Today, we mostly tend to think of happiness as a subjective mental state. A person is considered happy when he holds himself to be so. For Locke, on the other hand, happiness was an objective state of affairs. According to this conception of happiness, which dominated western thought from the time of ancient Greece to the middle of the eighteenth century, one was to be regarded as truly happy not when he perceived himself to be so, but only when he lived in a worthy way. While Locke's Christian predecessors maintained that to be truly happy it was necessary to obey and love God, Locke linked happiness to one's relationships with those around him, and society at large. For Locke, a person who did not enjoy social recognition and was not esteemed by others could not be happy regardless of how this person felt (Tarcov 1984, 186). Yet Locke believed that the passions and self-love were in their essence egoistic and would, therefore, naturally lead man to anti-social conduct and unhappiness. He declared that the inborn behavioural tendencies of man are the source from which 'spring all the Vitious Actions, and irregularities of life' (Locke 1693, 112).

Locke, however, did not think that our innate behavioural tendencies were carved in stone. He wrote: 'I imagine the Minds of Children as easily turned this or that way, as Water itself' (Locke 1693, 83). He added: 'By this direction… they receive different tendencies, and arrive at last at very remote and distant places' (83). Remaining faithful to a long-established Christian educational tradition, Locke maintained that the key for overcoming our innate behavioural tendencies was reason, which he referred to as 'the highest and most important faculty of our minds' (186). Locke was convinced that reason inescapably leads us toward society; that it reveals to us that there is more to life than egoistic forms of pleasure; that it teaches us that we have a natural need for fellowship and that it guides us toward true happiness. He claimed that when placed under the guidance of reason, man would seek to overcome and even reverse his naturally anti-social tendencies. The reasonable and well-educated man, proclaimed Locke, 'is able to *deny himself* his own desires, Cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what Reason directs as best tho' the appetite lean the other way' (103). He concluded: 'This temper… so contrary to unguided nature, is to be got betimes' (111). Locke's educational theory then, required that man's innate tendencies be reversed; that self-love be transcended and that the negative influence of the passions be eliminated. But this, Locke believed, was possible. It was within reason's capacity to achieve it.

The irreversibility of self-love

In the 1720s, the engagement of French educational thinkers with the thought of Locke helped stir interest in new methods of philosophical inquiry and their potential benefits. Acquainted

with Locke's work, educational thinkers such as Vallange, the Jesuit priest Claude Buffier and the Abbé de Saint-Pierre started applying methods inspired by the natural sciences to the study of man's behavioural tendencies (Grandière 1998, 81).[5] In the France of the 1720s, however, the scientific outlook was still dominated by Cartesianism and other deductive–rationalistic theories (Brockliss 1987, 350–60). The reception of the more empirically oriented Newtonian–Lockean current of thought was still limited (Israel 2001, 523). As a result, the methods of philosophical inquiry utilized by innovative educational thinkers were an eclectic mix combining inductive and experimental elements into a mainly Cartesian framework. These methods led to a new understanding of man's behavioural tendencies and the first to explicitly and meticulously elaborate its educational implication was the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, in his *Projet pour perfectionner l'éducation* (1728).

The Abbé de Saint-Pierre (1658–1743) was a prolific French thinker who is often seen as one of the forefathers of the French Enlightenment. He began his career as an active natural scientist, but around 1690 he turned to the study of ethics and politics. Saint-Pierre argued that ethics and politics should not be based on authority and ideal notions of behaviour as they usually were, but rather on experience and reasoning (Perkins 1959, 39). Encouraged by the success of methods used in physics, he studied and observed people and their behaviour, yet not abandoning the rationalistic outlook he sought to establish ethics and politics on the dictates of reason. Putting his ideas to practice, Saint-Pierre published numerous treatises on how to improve the state of humanity. Among these treatises was a plan to reform education. Claiming that the aim of education is to maximize earthly happiness for all, he dedicated most of this plan to moral education which he saw as the key for achieving this aim (Saint-Pierre 1728, 1). His plan of education, however, was grounded in a modified understanding of man's behavioural tendencies; an understanding which stemmed from what he considered to be the implementation of a more scientific method of inquiry.

Saint-Pierre's point of departure was similar to that of Christianity and Locke. Like them, he held that people 'are led by their nature to seek pleasure and avoid pain' (Saint-Pierre 1728, 1). Saint-Pierre, accordingly, also accepted the common stance that there was a strong anti-social inclination within unguided human nature. He argued that instinctively we tend to trample over the happiness of others when we look for our own (3). Moreover, Saint-Pierre, sharing Locke's objective conception of happiness, maintained, like him, that the esteem and appreciation of others were necessary conditions for attaining true happiness (41). Saint-Pierre also attempted to further validate this position by asserting that happiness in the next world is determined by our actions toward others (4). Saint-Pierre, however, referred to happiness in the next world not as a goal in itself, but only as a means for directing conduct.

Locke, as we have seen, suggested that the way to counter the detrimental effects stemming from man's innate behavioural tendencies was to reverse the latter. But Saint-Pierre's own scientifically inspired inquiries into man's behavioural tendencies, led him to conclude that it is 'impossible to change human nature' in the way Locke suggested (Saint-Pierre 1728, 1). Based on the observations and inquiries he conducted, Saint-Pierre argued that the natural tendency humans have 'to promote their good and diminish their pain' was irreversible (1). Man, he insisted, will always remain self-regarding. But this meant that what was traditionally considered as one of the most destructive human tendencies will always have its influence. Was man then condemned to live with this tendency's negative consequences? Saint-Pierre was unwilling to answer this above question in the affirmative.

Alternatively, Saint-Pierre claimed that the human tendency to follow personal interest was neither good nor bad in itself. To support this claim he introduced a distinction between people's 'apparent interest' and their enlightened interest which he referred to as their 'real and true interests' (Saint-Pierre 1728, 28). To him the source of the former was the passions. 'The

passions', he held, 'encourage us to take imprudent steps, which go against our aim' (17). He maintained that since people naturally pursue their passions, their self-regarding tendency becomes detrimental, especially since the passions are in their essence anti-social (32). But Saint-Pierre argued that if people came to know their enlightened interest, that is, if they came to know that their own personal good depended on the good of others and on obeying God, then their self-regarding tendencies would have positive consequences. Recognizing their enlightened interests, people would care for the good of others out of concern for their own personal good. Saint-Pierre then was able to assert that what led humans astray was not their unalterable tendency to pursue their personal good, but rather their tendency to misconceive the nature of the latter.

Saint-Pierre believed that when the inherent human faculties are developed to the full, through education or any other means, reason teaches us that we should resist the influence of the passions. Turning reason from a faculty that permitted man to conquer self-love into one that had to serve it, Saint-Pierre (1728, 36) argued that 'the main use of reason is to properly direct man towards the exemption from or reduction of the pains which are the greatest and most durable'. Reason, he believed, by impeccably calculating potential benefits and losses could reveal to man his enlightened interests. Saint-Pierre, like Locke and his predecessors, attributed to reason an essential role in changing man's natural tendencies.

There were, nevertheless, significant ways in which Saint-Pierre's conception of reason and its role differed from those that were found in educational theory before him. Saint-Pierre no longer regarded reason as an active power controlling the actions of individuals. Reason, for him, had the capacity to indicate what the right modes of conduct were, but the power that motivated people to act in one way or the other was that of their interests. Moreover, according to Saint-Pierre, reason could no longer independently stifle the effects of the passions. Reason, he asserted, could contribute to subduing the passions only by enlightening self-love; by revealing that the passions oppose our greater good.[6] Ultimately then, the power to stifle the influence of passions came from self-love and not from reason. The reduced capacities attributed to reason by Saint-Pierre both reflected and stemmed from his conviction that certain elements of human nature were unalterable.

Saint-Pierre's conviction that the self-regarding tendencies of the individual could not be changed did not limit his belief in the power of education to improve society. On the contrary, Saint-Pierre was the first eighteenth-century French educational thinker to conceive a plan for a comprehensive moral and social reform through education. He declared that if the right system of education would be erected 'those who would live in a hundred and fifty years, would have the advantage of living in a society which is much more reasonable, more just, more virtuous, incomparably more tranquil' (Saint-Pierre 1728, 194). According to Saint-Pierre, the key for the success of education was to beneficially direct the conduct of individuals through the use of their unalterable behavioural tendencies. He argued that 'what he [the student] has to gain from a good education is to perfect this self-love, and render him more enlightened, and consequently virtuous and religious' (44). His proposed education, therefore, emphasized guiding conduct and offered ways to teach the individuals to pursue their enlightened interest instead of their apparent one.

Making a place for the passions

In the 1730s and 1740s, the Newtonian–Lockean approach to science and philosophy, as disseminated and interpreted by Voltaire and other Enlightenment thinkers, conquered France. The breakdown of Cartesianism and *Malebranchisme* set the stage for the flourishing of an empirically oriented philosophy modeled on English ideas (Israel 2001, 517). In educational milieus, argues

Grandière (1998, 147), the reception of this philosophy prompted a re-examination of the heart of man, namely of the unmediated sources of human conduct. From the 1730s, due to the success of the new spirit of inquiry, progressive educational thinkers, unlike Locke and Saint-Pierre, were willing to rely fully on scientifically inspired methods for exploring the heart. They attempted to get a better insight into all aspect of human behaviour by using a more empirical approach. Such an approach brought them to a reformed understanding of man's behavioural tendencies.

Among the educational works published in the 1730s and the 1740s Etienne-Gabriel Morelly's *Essai sur le cœur humain* (1745) occupies a special place. On the one hand, the conception of man's behavioural tendencies presented in it is a natural development of Saint-Pierre's and the 1720s' ideas. But, at the same time, it paved the way for the emergence of innovative conceptions which were to dominate progressive educational discourse from the 1760s onward. Very little is known about Morelly himself; even his date of birth and death remain unclear. Some historians actually doubt that such a person ever existed. They believe that Morelly was a pseudonym used by other writers to convey radical ideas. But the writings of Morelly, whoever he was, had an important influence on the intellectual climate of his age (Wagner 1978, 16).

The point of departure of Morelly (1745, 1), in his *Essai sur le cœur humain*, was that 'man is created to be happy'. Attacking the morality taught in school for not being conducive for increasing happiness and for being based on tenets which were empirically unsound, he sought to reform society through moral education (161). Like Saint-Pierre before him, he believed that in order to maximize happiness, morality had to be established on the dictates of reason. Yet Morelly, loyal to the spirit of the age, argued that 'the first measures that education employs for shaping the heart of man must be based on the nature of the heart itself' and not on speculative reasoning (30). Equipped with new methods of philosophical inquiry, he, therefore, set to explore man's behavioural tendencies; an exploration to which most of the book is dedicated.

Morelly's exploration did not bring him to an original conception of man's innate behavioural tendencies. He viewed man as a pleasure seeking being who was instinctively governed by self-love and the passions (Morelly 1745, 5). He shared Saint-Pierre's belief that it is impossible to change man's self-regarding tendencies. 'Man', he wrote, 'cannot stop loving himself' (X). He was also convinced that the passions caused people to falsely comprehend what their personal good consisted of. 'The passions', he asserted, 'almost always persuade us [to follow] something which is contrary to our real interest' (105). He too was particularly troubled by the passions' antisocial effects. He contended that if a man solely obeyed his passions he would 'separate his particular interests from the general interest of the society' (26). This, thought Morelly, would prevent him from being truly happy, because he too viewed the esteem and respect of others as essential for true happiness.

Morelly, however, was not contented with his predecessors' sweeping assertion that the effects of the passions were detrimental and should, therefore, be stifled. Once recognizing the negative effects of the passions, Morelly's predecessors, including Saint-Pierre, narrowed their investigation to ways of countering the passions' influences. Morelly, on the other hand, decided to examine the function of and role of the passions. His pioneering use of scientifically inspired methods to do so led him to conclude that 'the heart is always… moved by one of the passions' (Morelly 1745, 10). He, thus, rejected as unfounded the stance that the passions could be fully stifled. For him, to try and stifle the passions was 'to want to change entirely human nature' (41). 'Only God', he maintained, 'has this power' (41). Moreover, Morelly's analysis of the heart led him to assert that the passions' presence was necessary. Firstly, he maintained that the passions were an irreplaceable spring of action that was the source of all human motivation (163). To him, self-love in itself could not generate motivation. Secondly, Morelly's investigation also

brought him to conclude that to a certain extent the gratification of the passions was a necessary condition for attaining the ultimate aim of life on earth, namely happiness (191). Morelly then moved toward a more subjective perception of happiness which acknowledges the importance of desire satisfaction. Morelly's view of the passions resulted in him arguing that 'our passions are born from our necessities, for that they are nothing but legitimate' (28). But did this mean that the passions' detrimental consequences had to be accepted as an inevitable side-effect?

Morelly held that the negative effects of the passions were the outcome of the passions' domination over man and not the result of their mere presence in him. He wrote: 'as long as they [the passions] do not break the bonds that unite people all is in order' (Morelly 1745, 28). Morelly, however, believed that when the passions had full command this break was unavoidable. He therefore argued that to prevent it, the domination of the passions had to be countered. Like Saint-Pierre, Morelly left the role of opposing the influence of the passions to reason, which was to enlighten self-love and exploit its power. But Morelly, aware of the passions' ineradicability and their potential value, sought to balance their effects and not to stifle them. For him the ultimate aim of reason was to constitute an equilibrium between its own dictates and the demands of the passions. He stated: 'the empire of the sentiments and that of reason must be equal' (26). Morelly believed that this equilibrium would be attained when reason supported by self-love had the power to moderate and attune the influence of the passions. According to Morelly, reason had to channel the energy of the passions in more beneficial directions (41).

Led by his conception of man's behavioural tendencies, Morelly (1745, 164) argued that 'Morality must begin by directing the sentiments'. Persuaded that the ability to direct the passions and balance their influence is not naturally or easily attained, Morelly maintained that 'Education must provide the means to counterbalance the power of the passions by the lights of reason' (28). According to him, a good education is manifested 'in regulating the imagination and the sentiments, forms or straightens the heart's inclinations' (32). Furthermore, 'in working to rectify the judgement', a good education also 'renders man capable of distinguishing right from wrong and good from bad, and consequently enables him to make good use of the passions' (32). Morelly's education unlike that of his predecessors, did not seek to alter the initial human constitution by practically suppressing one, or several, of its elements. It accepted the human constitution as given and only sought to generate social progress by attuning human nature. According to Morelly, once education had been successful in directing man's behavioural tendencies, people would become happier and more virtuous and society would consequently progress.

The irreversibility of innate behavioural tendencies

After the mid 1740s the hegemony of the Newtonian–Lockean outlook was undermined by advances in the biological sciences which offered new perspectives and innovative methods of investigation. Unlike the Newtonian–Lockean science which described the world as static and left a central place to God or a divine designer, the new scientific approach that was advanced by thinkers such as Maupertuis, Buffon and Needham offered a more dynamic view of the world and liberated science from the need to rely on any form of theology or spirituality (Roger 1963, 750). Although, in many ways, this new approach sprang from Spinozism, materialism and other seventeenth-century radical philosophies, it was more than just their simple extension and included the development of a new methodical apparatus especially in biology and the life sciences (Roger 1963, 751). From around 1750 the success of these methods prompted their embracement by leading figures in the contemporary French Enlightenment. The Newtonian–Lockean approach was gradually losing its place as the period's leading intellectual force to new forms of materialism (Israel 2006, 751–863).

One of the main proponents of the new scientific materialism and its methods, and the first to apply them in the educational context was Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715–1771). Helvétius, a prominent figure of the French Enlightenment, believed that the rules of morality, the principles of legislation, the structure of the social institutions and the precepts of education must all be derived from empirical investigations which relied on the methods of scientific materialism. In his *De l'esprit* (1758), he began, among other things, to draw educational implications from an allegedly purely materialistic view of human nature. This radical book, however, caused a public outcry and was banned. Helvétius himself was condemned and persecuted and finally forced by the civil authorities to deliver a formal recantation of his views. Fearing further persecution, Helvétius delayed the release of his second book, *De l'homme* (1772), until after his death. Despite the recantation, this later book, concerned primarily with education, was nothing but a reiteration and development of ideas that had already been expressed in the first one. Made famous by the events surrounding the publication of *De l'esprit,* Helvétius's ideas had a strong impact on the development of educational theory.[7]

Seeking to base education on a conception of human nature that would be scientifically verifiable, Helvétius was reluctant to incorporate into it any notion that could not be empirically proven. Adopting a purely materialistic stance, he proclaimed that 'if all things can be explained by corporeal sensibility it is useless to admit of any other faculty in us' (Helvétius 1772, vol. 1, 149). According to him what determined human behaviour were only physical pains and pleasures (123). Helvétius, reducing all to sensuality and arguing that the mind was a blank slate, rejected the view that man could also be moved by pleasures or pains which were intellectual or spiritual. For Helvétius, all pleasures and pains could be reduced to two sorts: present physical sensations and sensations stemming from foresight and memory (124).

Building exclusively upon corporeal pain and pleasure, Helvétius developed an understanding of man's innate behavioural tendencies which in its general features highly resembled that of Morelly. Like Morelly, Helvétius viewed man as self-regarding and passionate, and believed that his passions were anti-social in their essence. Nevertheless, despite the similarities, Helvétius' materialistic stance had significant implications for his understanding of the human constitution. Firstly, since all could be reduced to corporeal sensitivity, there was no place left in Helvétius' perception of the human constitution for the traditional view of reason. Helvétius rejected his predecessors' idea that reason existed as an independent faculty within us. And indeed, when referring to faculties of the individual, Helvétius wrote about the mind and not about reason. According to Helvétius (1772, vol. 1, 179), the mind was a thinking mechanism which had the power to compare and calculate. Helvétius, nonetheless, viewed the mind as so deeply embedded in the passions as to form practically an extension of them. He thus held that the mind could not exhibit any form of control over the passions. 'Only a passion', he argued, 'can get the better of a passion' (123). In discrediting the traditional concept of reason, Helvétius in fact abolished man's ability to transcend his passions and his innate behavioural tendencies. To Helvétius, man's behavioural tendencies were fixed in his nature in an unalterable manner.

Secondly, Helvétius' reduction of all to sensuality led him to conclude that happiness ultimately resulted from enjoying the pleasures of the senses and those that arise from expecting them. Happiness for him was purely a subjective sensation. Yet this understanding of happiness dissolves the link between the personal happiness of the individual and that of those around him – a link which was central to the educational theories of Helvétius' predecessors. So far, the educational thinkers that we have dealt with viewed the recognition and esteem of others as essential for achieving happiness, and therefore as a part of the individual's enlightened interest. As a result, they could expect that once enlightened, self-love would lead to socially viable behaviour. Helvétius, nevertheless, did not assume that to serve the good of others was always

in one's true interests. It was possible for man to achieve happiness by going against the good of others if this eventually maximized his own pleasures.

Although he viewed man's natural behavioural tendencies as unalterable and did not expect that the individual's interest would naturally coincide with that of society, Helvétius had a deep belief in the power of education to generate social progress. His notion that 'L'éducation peut tout' (education can do all) remains familiar today (Parry 2000, 25). Convinced that his scientific investigation into human nature has revealed the true laws governing human behaviour, he asserted that, equipped with this knowledge, education could channel man's innate tendencies in beneficial directions that would increase and spread happiness in society. He argued, for example, that nurturing emulation could be a key to bringing individuals to promote the public good. The following statement of Helvétius (1772, vol. 2, 23) attests to the centrality of emulation in his educational scheme: 'I have always thought that the science of education is, perhaps, nothing more than a knowledge of means of exciting emulation'. Science, he believed, has made man's behavioural tendencies predictable and therefore controllable. To Helvétius then, the real power of education and the key for the progress of society lay not in education's ability to change man's innate behavioural tendencies but rather in its capacity to properly harness and mobilize them.

Harnessing man's innate behavioural tendencies

By examining the writings of three central eighteenth-century educational philosophers working between the 1720s and the 1760s, I have traced an intellectual process that culminated in the emergence of the idea that man's innate behavioural tendencies were immutable. It has been revealed that, contrary to what is currently held, in this period, the stricter and more comprehensive pursuit of scientifically inspired methods led key progressive educational thinkers to a diminishing faith in human pliability. It was also demonstrated that Saint-Pierre's, Morelly's and Helvétius' belief in the power of education to generate the progress of society was not curtailed by their conviction that man's behavioural tendencies were less pliable than previously assumed. Quite the opposite, they were all among the founding fathers of the eighteenth-century belief in the power of education to bring about social progress. In addition, analysing the thought of the discussed authors, the article has pointed to two other significant developments in contemporary educational philosophy. Firstly, reason was gradually stripped of its powers. This development conflicts with the prevailing characterization of eighteenth-century educational thought as predominated by a belief in the supremacy of reason. Secondly, happiness was increasingly viewed as primarily a subjective sensation. This marks a major transformation in educational thought whose significance could not be discussed here. The findings of this article, I believe, show the need to reinvestigate and re-conceptualize the notions of pliability, reason and happiness in eighteenth-century educational thought and call for reassessing their role.

Moreover, in the decades that followed the appearance of *De l'esprit* (1758), the idea that man's innate behavioural tendencies were immutable quickly gained currency. Clearly, not all contemporary French educational thinkers adhered to these new philosophical currents. Markedly, Rousseau, who was involved in ongoing intellectual polemic with Helvétius, advanced a different line of thought.[8] Although in *Emile,* the most influential educational treatise of eighteenth-century Europe, Rousseau, like Helvétius, argued that people are naturally moved by self-love, that the passions cannot be stifled and that reason is almost powerless, his conception of human nature differed significantly from that of Helvétius and the other author examined in this article. Rousseau (1762, 209) believed that, unless corrupted by environmental and societal influences, people are born naturally benevolent; he held that the individual's

self-love will develop into the 'love of those about him'. Holding such a favourable conception of human nature and being highly critical of his social surroundings, Rousseau was convinced that man's natural behavioural tendency can easily change for the worst. The role of education, he maintained, is to prevent it from happening. In addition to Rousseau, many other contemporary educational thinkers, both traditional and non-traditional, still continued to regarded man's innate tendencies as alterable and even reversible.

As the century continued to advance, however, the spirit of the sciences spread among the educational thinkers and with it the popularity of the new views concerning man's innate behavioural tendencies. The idea that man's behavioural tendencies were practically unalterable was incorporated, either implicitly or explicitly, into the educational writings of the Enlightenment writers Denis Diderot and Baron d'Holbach; the members of local parliaments Guyton de Morveau and La Chalotais; the physiocrat economist Le Mercier de la Rivière; the educationalist Grivel; and many others.[9] Not all of these thinkers shared Helvétius' extreme materialistic tenets and the radical conclusions that followed from them. For example, some still viewed the recognition and esteem of others as essential for achieving happiness. Diderot even launched a direct attack on many aspects of Helvétius' conception of human nature and education.[10] The two most noticeably split on the question of the origins of individual difference. While Helvétius held that these differences are essentially the product of education and the environment, Diderot, like Rousseau, believed that they had dipper roots. Nevertheless, Diderot and the other thinkers referred to above principally accepted the idea that man was inevitably guided by his self-regarding passions. Like Helvétius, then, they were persuaded that the constitution of the self could not be fundamentally changed. Even the best education, they held, could not result in man transcending his innate inclinations.

Today, somewhat unexpectedly, we find that the educational thinkers who viewed man's innate behavioural tendencies as unalterable were the same ones who had the greatest belief in the power of education to advance society. It is they who are now accredited for creating the close link between education and the progress of society. How then can this seeming contradiction be explained? The writings of Saint-Pierre, Morelly and Helvétius provide an important lead. Can it be that like the three thinkers discussed here they held that education's ability to harness and channel man's unalterable innate tendencies was the key for improving society?

Notes

1. For more about the influence of sensualist psychology on eighteenth-century French thought see O'Neal (1996) and Schøsler (1997).
2. The thesis presented is reiterated in numerous sources that touch upon eighteenth-century French educational theory. It can be is found in general reviews of educational history. For example, see Lucas (1972, 338–41) and Bowen (1981, Vol. 3, 178–81). In addition, it can be found in sources dedicated to the history of eighteenth-century thought. See, for example, Gay (1969, 511–7) and Koch (2006, 58. It can also be found in pieces that focus on eighteenth-century educational theory such as Parry (2006, 614).
3. The masculine form will be used throughout the article. The reason for this form is that the eighteenth-century sources examined here refer almost exclusively to the education of males. Where the education of women is dealt with, as in Chapter 14 of Saint-Pierre's *Projet,* their nature is differently perceived. The ideas pertaining to them, therefore, require a separate investigation that cannot be conducted within the scope of this article.
4. For further discussion of Locke's educational theory and its influence see Ezell (1983), Tarcov (1984) and Yolton (1971).
5. For more on the educational ideas of Valange see: Grandière (1997). For more on Buffier see Marcil-Lacoste (1982) and Wilkins (1969). For an additional discussion of Saint-Pierre educational ideas see Drouet (1912), Perkins (1959) and Siegder-Pascal (1900).
6. Saint-Pierre's argument that only self-love and interest had the ability to overcome the influence of the passions was not original; it had been present for some time in political theory. See Hirschman (1997).

7. For more on Helvétius' life, theories and educational ideas see Cumming (1955), Horowitz (1954), Parry (2000) and Smith (1965).
8. For more about the intellectual debate between Rousseau and Helvétius see Smith (1965), Py (1997), Bloch (1979) and Domenech (1999).
9. See Diderot (1775), D'Holbach (1776), Guyton De Morveau (1764), La Chalotais (1762), Mercier de La Rivière (1775) and Grivel (1775).
10. For more about Diderot, Helvétius and the relationship between them and between their ideas see Creighten (1956), Smith (1965) and Stenger (1984).

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