

guyau's spinoza: between epicureanism and stoicism

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Jean-Marie Guyau died in 1888, at 33 years old. His premature death interrupted an already prolific and promising philosophical trajectory. As Gabriel Tarde writes, he was “prematurely taken from us in the full bloom of a train of thought”.¹ Guyau, who was once called “the Spinoza of France,”² is today an unknown figure in the history of philosophy, still occupying only a marginal place in its narratives. During his lifetime, however, Guyau was far from being a marginal figure in the debates of his time. He was read by scholars across different fields, and his work was translated into several languages.³ He was known especially for two of his main published books: the *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction* and the *Irréligion de l'avenir*, as well as for his book on Epicurus, *La morale d'Épicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines*.⁴

Guyau was part of a transnational intellectual debate, having for example engaged in a fruitful philosophical exchange with English thought. This is clear in a series of analyses of Hobbes, Bentham, Mill and Spencer, but also the lively debate with his English contemporaries and a series of mentions, texts and book reviews. In 1879, Sidgwick reviewed *La morale d'Épicure* for *Mind*.⁵ G.E. Moore reviewed Guyau's work in 1899 and commented the *Esquisse* in his 1903 *Principia Ethica*.⁶ Spencer himself claimed that Guyau was the first to describe his ethics with precision.⁷ Guyau's thought also left its mark in the arts, for his works on aesthetics were important for artists and writers such as Proust and Tolstoy.⁸ Moreover, Guyau was

himself a poet (having published the *Vers d'un philosophe*, in 1881). Guyau's ideas also reverberated in nineteenth (and early twentieth) century political thought, especially anarchism. Indeed, Piotr Kropotkin, who admired Guyau's critique of sanction as well as his ideas of fecundity and evolution through cooperation, saw in Guyau the founder of an "anarchist ethics."⁹

Guyau's impact was not any less remarkable in the debates taking place around the formation of sociology in France. Authors from opposite ends of the spectrum of rising sociological thought—such as Émile Durkheim¹⁰ and Gabriel Tarde¹¹—have read his work and critically engaged with his ideas.

Finally, Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche were also attentive readers of Guyau's work: praising him, while at the same time critically assessing some of his positions. Bergson edited and published—together with French philosopher and Guyau's stepfather Alfred Fouillée—one of Guyau's important posthumous books, *La g n se de l'id e de temps*, an important book for the formation of Bergson's own thinking. Nietzsche, in his turn, referred to the young philosopher as "the brave Guyau," and covered his copies of the *Esquisse* and of *L'Irr ligion* with enthusiastic notes, both praising and criticising Guyau. As Mazzino Montinari has shown, Guyau was part of a constellation of authors that Nietzsche read during his stay in Southern France.¹² Furthermore, scholars such as Ilse Walther-Dulk believe that there is a strong historical link between Guyau's work and the French reception of Nietzsche. According to Walther-Dulk, Guyau prepared the ground for the successful reception of Nietzsche's work in France (and ended up by being absorbed by this reception).

In what follows, my attempt is to present the key parameters of Guyau's reading of Spinoza, in the context of one of his first major books, *La morale d' picure*. To do this, I situate Guyau's interpretation of Spinoza in relation to the general philosophical project and the main concerns of the book.

The analogies and convergences existing between Guyau and Spinoza have often been stressed in scholarship. However, no systematic study exploring this relation is currently available in English.¹³ My intention in presenting the first English translation of Guyau's text on Spinoza is to contribute to deepening research on this topic by providing the tools and textual evidence for further understanding this relationship.

Guyau's text is a chapter of his *Morale d'Épicure* and, in this context, it shows a contact with Spinoza's philosophy mediated by the two Hellenistic schools which were, for Guyau, also the guiding principles of the history of moral thought: Epicureanism and Stoicism. More specifically, Guyau's reading of Spinoza appears in the part of the book dedicated to the "modern successors of Epicurus" (*Livre IV—Les successeurs modernes d'Épicure*) and after the analysis of Gassendi and Hobbes (chapter 1) and La Rochefoucauld (chapter 2). In order to understand why and how Guyau reads Spinoza as a "modern successor of Epicurus"—and a very special one, who operates a synthesis or reconciliation between Epicurus and the Stoics—we must situate this reading within the context of the general philosophical and historical project of *La morale d'Épicure*.

LA MORALE D'ÉPICURE AND GUYAU'S SPINOZA

La Morale d'Épicure is better understood when situated in the context of Guyau's formative engagement with the history of philosophy. Fouillée, played an important role in this itinerary, initiating his relative in the history of philosophy and the study of the classics.¹⁴ In 1869, Fouillée was still a young scholar working on his books on Plato and Socrates. These books were developments from what was originally two *mémoires* that he wrote and submitted to the *Académie de sciences morales et politiques* in 1867 and 1868.¹⁵ However, due to the excess of work, Fouillée was temporarily blind and therefore unable to read and write. It is then that a 15-year-old Guyau "lent" him his eyes (to quote Fouillée's expression). Not only has Guyau worked on the research of material and sources, but he would also write under Fouillée's dictate, adding his sentences to those of his mentor. According to Walther-Dulk, at the age of 17, Guyau was already a "*licencié ès lettres*," having translated Epictetus' *Handbook*, accompanied by a "brilliant essay on the Stoics."¹⁶

Contini claims Guyau began his scholarly activity with "a series of translation of classical works, usually accompanied by introductory essays and critical apparatus."¹⁷ It is as the pinnacle of this development that, in 1873, Guyau decides to take part in a competition proposed by the *Académie de Sciences Morales et Politiques*, like Fouillée had previously done. The topic of the competition of the *Section Morale*, announced in 1871, was utilitarianism. In 1874, two authors won the *prix de budget*. In Elme-Marie Caro's report, the first name that appears is that of Ludovic Carrau, a professor at the Besançon Faculty of Letters (who submitted his study *La morale utilitaire. Exposition des doctrines qui fondent la morale sur l'idée*

de bonheur). The second awardee is the 19-year-old Jean-Marie Guyau. It is from the 1300-page *mémoire* on *L'histoire et la critique de la morale utilitaire* submitted to the *Académie* that he will extract two books. These will be the last books he dedicated to the history of philosophy: *La morale d'Épicure* and *La morale anglaise contemporaine*, published in 1878 and in 1879 (re-edited in 1885), respectively.

In *La Morale d'Épicure*, Guyau proposes an original reading of the Hellenistic philosopher by looking at his work from the perspective of modern utilitarianism. As Caro writes in the report: “the Epicurus presented in this *mémoire* is an Epicurus seen through [John] Stuart Mill.”¹⁸ In effect, Guyau traces the origins of utilitarianism back to the ancient Epicurean school, which allows him to say that modern utilitarianism is a form or an embodiment of Epicureanism. On the other hand, Guyau sees in Epicurus an accomplished expression of utilitarian ethics. In this sense, Guyau’s approach reveals the surreptitious continuity of an Epicurean tradition in the history of thought, ultimately concerned with human emancipation and happiness: a tradition which finds its modern expression in Gassendi, Hobbes, La Rochefoucauld, Spinoza, Helvétius, Bentham and the French thinkers of the Enlightenment, as well as in the “contemporary English school,” especially with Mill and Spencer.

Visualising this continuity in the development of Epicurean ideas throughout time corresponds to one of the main tasks established in the *Avant-Propos*. In this text, Guyau argues that his method considers philosophies as living systems. This means that a merely structural or architectonic reconstruction of the system is insufficient to understand its history. Guyau proposes to look at the formation of the philosophical system in the same way one sees the formation of an organism, for “the laws of life and the laws of thought are the same.”¹⁹ The organism, beginning from a cell or a small number of cells, develops into an increasingly complex entity. The same would be valid for a philosophical system: the historian must identify the key idea or ideas and look at their development in time. To an “anatomy of thought,” Guyau claims, an “embryogenesis of thought” should be added.²⁰ However, one cannot understand the evolution of a living system simply by analysing its internal development.

In addition to the fundamental ideas that engender the system, one must look at the evolution and development of its structure throughout time. It is in the interaction with the environment and the challenges it imposes (33) that the system evolves. In the case of a system of thought, these challenges are the objections and

the opposition it encounters. In this sense, the Epicureanism that Guyau identifies in antiquity, and in modernity with utilitarianism, should be understood as a living system developing and evolving throughout time. This vitalist and evolutionist insight is what allows Guyau to say that modern utilitarianism is Epicurean, and that ancient Epicureanism is already utilitarian.²¹

Another important claim that *La morale d'Épicure* puts forward—and which will be essential for Guyau's reading of Spinoza—concerns the grounds of what we could call the history of moral thought and ethical attitudes. Indeed, in the history of Western ethical thought, Guyau argues, Epicureanism plays a key role, occupying what could be considered a “quasi-metahistorical place.”²² However, Guyau proposes an agonistic model in which Epicureanism shares its fundamental role with Stoicism. It is the conflict between these two “doctrines” that fuels the development of thought. Guyau claims:

Everywhere, in theory and in practice, we find two moralities [*morales*] ... split philosophical thought and divide human beings. We could say that today the fierce half-a-millennium struggle between the Epicureans and Stoics has rekindled and is burning anew (43).

The history of ethical thought and practice is described by Guyau, then, as the staging of the conflict between Epicureanism and Stoicism (43), understood not merely as ancient philosophical schools, but as two fundamental forces in human ethical experience. The claim regarding this agonistic structure underlying the history of thought could be more clearly translated in ethics by the reference to two different principles: *duty*, on the one hand, represented by the Stoics; *pleasure* or *interest*, on the other, represented by the Epicureans.

As the title of the chapter dedicated to Spinoza expresses—“a synthesis of Epicureanism and Stoicism”—Guyau understands the thought of the Dutch philosopher as an expression of this *agon*. However, Spinoza's philosophy is also its suspension or, at least, an attempt to reconcile the two forces in conflict.

Guyau's reading of Spinoza situates the philosopher within the framework of the history of Epicureanism (understood as utilitarianism). In this sense, Guyau sees Spinoza's system as already containing the fundamental theories of French and English utilitarian schools (317). This is evident in Guyau's discussion of Spinoza's redefinition of the *good* as relative to us: the good is that which we know to be

useful to us. Now, that which is useful is what produces *joy*. The latter is defined as is the “satisfaction of desire”. To this “Epicurean definition” Spinoza adds a “metaphysical complement” (319), which is his definition of desire as “the tendency of our being to persevere in being” (i.e. *conatus*). This metaphysical addendum allows Spinoza to redefine the good: “The good is, for a being, to succeed in this effort to conserve and satisfy its nature. The good, therefore, is nothing other than this *success* and it amounts to *power* [*puissance*]; and it is this power [*puissance*] that we call virtue” (319).

For human beings, however, virtue and power are directly linked to reason and to the *knowledge* of the best means to satisfy one’s desires.²³ In this sense Guyau recasts the dynamics of interest in terms of the use of reason and the “laws of intelligence,” and thus he finds the bridge linking Epicureanism and Stoicism in Spinoza. Because reason is the essence of man (320), satisfying one’s true nature—and therefore seeking one’s own advantage and utility—means understanding (by *E IV, P26*). As he explains, “The conciliation of interests finds its place in the common interest of reason. ‘A man acts entirely from the laws of his own nature when he lives according to the guidance of reason; and only to that extent must he always agree with the nature of other men.’”²⁴

In this sense, the more one affirms and satisfies one’s own nature (that is, the more one knows and understands through reason), the more one is also useful to others. As Guyau says: “Here one finds Epicurus and Zeno finally reconciled: to live according to nature [...] or reason is to live according to one’s particular interest and to the interest of all.”²⁵

Working through Spinoza, Guyau finds moral relativity: in the same manner that perfection is a way to relate reality to our thought (318), so the notions of good and evil are ways in which we relate reality to our desires, which is to say that good is that which we desire and that which is useful for us. Moreover, achieving what is useful to us depends on a certain power [*puissance*], and this power increases the more we actively *know* the means to obtain what is useful. In this sense, for human beings, to the extent that they are rational, power is this knowledge and understanding. Therefore, within this fundamentally Epicurean movement of the research of happiness and utility, Guyau finds the place of reason, of common notions and of intelligence, by means of which man understands that happiness (and what is useful to him) presupposes others and is equally useful to others. It is in pleasure and utility—and understanding the necessity of seeking them—that

one finds sociability.

If Guyau's broader ethical project can be described as an attempt to surpass both utilitarian ethics (going beyond pleasure understood as egoistic self-satisfaction) and the ethics of duty (going beyond duty understood as obligation and sanction), reconciling them, it is possible to say that he found a first formulation of this synthesis in Spinoza. Guyau discovers in Spinoza an agonistic equilibrium between *hedonē* and *kathekonta*, which would be, perhaps, his own way to surpass utilitarianism, equalising *pleasure* and *duty* beyond sanction and obligation.

What follows is an extract of *La morale d'Épicure*, in its first English translation, where Guyau discusses the philosophy of Spinoza.

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NOTES

1. Gabriel Tarde, *Penal Philosophy*. Trans. P. Berne. New Brunswick/London: Transaction Publishers, 2001, 29.
2. Jean-Marie Guyau, *A Sketch of Morality Independent of Obligation or Sanction*. Trans. Gertrude Kapteyn. London: Watts & Co., 1898, xii
3. In Fouillée's 1913 short biography of Guyau, he mentions English, German, Spanish, Polish and Russian translations.
4. During his lifetime, Guyau published at least six philosophy books: *La morale d'Épicure* in 1878, *La morale anglaise contemporaine* in 1879, *Les problèmes d'esthétique contemporaine* in 1884, the *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction* in 1885 and, finally, *L'irreligion de l'avenir* in 1887. In 1889, Fouillée edits and publishes two of Guyau's unpublished manuscripts: *L'art au point de vue sociologique* and *Education et hérédité*. In 1900, he edits and publishes, with Henri Bergson, Guyau's *La genèse de l'idée de temps*. As a teacher and educator, Guyau also wrote a series of school books, namely: *Première Année de lecture courante* in 1875, *L'Année préparatoire* in 1884, *L'Année enfantine* in 1883. Guyau's method for teaching to read and write was widely used in French schools, and it was later named "méthode Guyau."
5. Henry Sidgwick, "M. Guyau, La Morale d'Épicure et ses Rapports avec les Doctrines contemporaines." *Mind* 4:582, 1879. According to Jordi Riba, Sidgwick and Guyau later became acquainted: the two philosophers met in 1882, when Guyau hosted Sidgwick in Menton. See Riba, *La morale anomique de Jean-Marie Guyau*. Trans. Mariló Fedz Estrada. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999, 30.
6. G.E. Moore, "Book Review: A Sketch of Morality Independent of Obligation or Sanction. M. Guyau, Gertrude Kapteyn." *International Journal for Ethics* 9 (2), 1899.
7. Riba, *La morale anomique*, 8.
8. Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Penguin, 1995, §II.
9. Riba, *La morale anomique*, 31. See Jean-Marie Guyau. *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction*. Biography, Preface and Postface by Jordi Riba. Paris: Payot, 2012. See especially the extracts of Kropotkin's *Ethics*.
10. See, especially, Michael Behrent, "Le débat Guyau-Durkheim sur la théorie sociologique de la religion. Une nouvelle querelle des universaux?" *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 53^e année, no. 142, April-June, 2008. See also Durkheim's review of Guyau's *Irréligion*: "De *L'irréligion de l'avenir*." *Revue philosophique*, 1887, 23, 299-311.
11. See Tarde, *Penal Philosophy*.
12. Mazzino Montinari, "Nietzsche e la decadenza", *Studia Nietzscheana*, 7 June 2014, 18
13. This is valid both for a comparative study or a study on Guyau's reception of Spinoza. This is not the case in French. See André Comte-Sponville, "Jean-Marie Guyau et Spinoza," In Tosel, A., Moreau, P., & Salem, J. (Eds.), *Spinoza au XIX^e siècle : Actes des journées d'études organisées à la Sorbonne (9 et 16 mars, 23 et 30 novembre 1997)*. Éditions de la Sorbonne. Philippe Saltel (*La puissance de la vie: Essai sur l'Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction de Jean-Marie Guyau*, Paris : Belles Lettres, 2008) shows how Guyau implicitly engages with Spinoza's work (see, for example, p.50 and p.93).
14. According to Gourinat, Fouillée is involved in Guyau's education long before 1884, when he marries the young student's mother, Augustine Tuillerie, who was also his cousin. Guyau's mother, who wrote under the pseudonym "G. Bruno," published popular books on education, among which the most known is the *Tour de la France par deux enfants*, which is a "reading book

for children, which proposes the values of the secular and jacobine morality of the Third Republic. His mother's influence is at the origin of Guyau's interest for pedagogy and of the pedagogical reading books for children which he himself wrote and were broadly used in the elementary schools of the time" (*La morale d'Épicure*. Paris: 2002, 24). Guyau develops a method for reading which will later be known as the "méthode Guyau" and which consists, according to Contini in a visual approach to the written text, stimulating memorisation through the use of lively images (1995, 60).

15. Contini, *Jean-Marie Guyau*, 61. These dissertations were awarded in the competitions promoted by the Académie in the respective years.

16. Walther-Dulk, *De Guyau à Proust*, 14.

17. Contini, *Jean-Marie Guyau*, 59. According to Contini, the main works of this period are: 1) translation of Epictetus' *Handbook*, preceded by a *Study on the Philosophy of Epictetus*, and followed by extracts from Epictetus' *Discourses* and extracts from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* (Paris, 1875); 2) a critical edition of the Greek text of Epictetus' *Handbook* (Paris, 1876); 3) a critical edition of Cicero's *On the Ends of Good and Evil* (or *On Moral Ends*), translated by Desmarais and edited by Guyau, followed by a study on the history of Epicureanism (Paris, 1875); 4) a critical edition of the Latin text of Cicero's *On Moral Ends* (Paris, 1876); 5) a critical edition of Pascal's *Entretiens avec de Saci sur Epictète et Montaigne*, preceded by a study by Guyau and followed by extracts from Montaigne (Paris, 1875); 6) a critical edition of Pascal's *De l'autorité et du progrès en philosophie*, followed by a study, by Guyau, on the history of the idea of progress (Paris, 1875); Finally, 7) a volume on the *Christian Literature from the 2nd to the 6th Centuries. Extracts from the Fathers of the Latin Church*, followed by extracts of Christian poets (Paris, 1876).

18. Guyau, *La morale d'Épicure*, 30.

19. Guyau, *La morale d'Épicure*, 35.

20. Guyau, *La morale d'Épicure*, 35..

21. "Epicurus and Lucretius already have the scientific and positivist spirit of the modern utilitarians" (41).

22. Testa & Dennis, "Pleasure and Self-Cultivation," 105.

23. Guyau quotes Spinoza (*E IV*, P24): "acting, living and preserving our being ... by the guidance of reason, and all this according to the rule of interest [*intérêt*] that is particular to each one."

24. T.N. *E IV*, P35C.

25. The other way that Guyau finds the coincidence between self-interest and collective interest is the love of God. He explains that the activity of reason par excellence is understanding (*E IV*, P26), and the supreme object of understanding is God (*E IV*, P28). As Guyau claims: "The activity which is proper to reason is that of understanding, and understanding is to perceive the necessity of things. This necessity is Nature or, if you wish, God." Knowing God means knowing eternal necessity, which, according to Guyau leads us to the "intellectual freedom of the Stoics." Moreover, it is through the love of God generated by this understanding that we love everything *in God*, that is to say, all other modes.