As Shield, Never as Brake: Libertine Political Philosophy in the Marquis de Sade

Verkleij, Axel

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As Shield, Never as Brake: Libertine Political Philosophy in the Marquis de Sade

By

Axel Verkleij

Programme: Philosophy (MA) (120 EC)
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Supervisor: Dr. Bart Zantvoort

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I see those frightful spaces of the universe which surround me, and I find myself tied to one corner of this vast expanse, without knowing why I am put in this place rather than in another, nor why the short time which is given me to live is assigned to me at this point rather than at another of the whole eternity which was before me or which shall come after me. I see nothing but infinites on all sides, which surround me as an atom and as a shadow which endures only for an instant and returns no more.
Blaise Pascal, Pensées

For 'many', as they say in the mysteries, 'are the thyrsus-bearers, but few are the mystics'.
Plato, Phaedo

There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.
William Shakespeare, Hamlet

He never kissed the neck of his wife or mistress without saying: 'And this beautiful throat will be cut whenever I please.'
Suetonius, Life of Caligula

'Of course,' he muttered, 'this is all hypothetical, what we're discussing, isn't it? All academic…'
'Yes, sir, of course,' said Riddle quickly.
J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

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Miscellaneous

Given the subject, it is self-evident that graphic language will occasionally be used throughout this thesis.

For this thesis, I have used English translations of Sade’s work. For both the reader’s and my own convenience, I have used abbreviations for the four libertine novels where I cite them. They have also received an entry in my reference list. The abbreviations are as follows:

[JL]	*Juliette*
[J]	*Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue*
[S]	*The 120 Days of Sodom*
[B]	*Philosophy in the Boudoir*

Introduction

The late 18th century French aristocrat Donatien Alphonse François, the Marquis de Sade, has immortalised his name in Western culture through his life and works: a life of infamy and an *oeuvre* of unparalleled sordidness. Though he is indeed the namesake of the noun ‘sadism’, that is, the phenomenon of deriving pleasure from someone else’s pain, this fact in itself hardly scratches the surface of what horrors lie underneath. Sade has left behind a legacy in the canon of historical villains as a producer of literary output that must be counted among the vilest, blackest pornographic works that have ever been dreamt up by humankind: torture, incest, anthropophagy and paedophilia all feature prominently in his books. Despite the revulsion which will hit every reader upon the sight of these obscenities, the works and figure of Sade have elicited consistent morbid fascination from literary and scholarly circles alike – at first predominantly from the French, but ever since the Second World War from an increasingly international audience as well (see Bridge, 2011, and the first chapter of Roche, 2004 for reasonably comprehensive historical overviews of this).

Whence this sustained interest in such an author? I believe that there are two main overarching reasons for this. First, there is an academic reason: Sade’s work – especially the libertine[1] novels featuring aforementioned themes – is complex and often ostensibly contradictory, and has therefore provided a fertile ground for many different, conflicting interpretations. Second, there is a socio-ethical reason: Sade’s work has often been taken to have, as biographer du Plessix Gray (1998, p. 380) puts it, “expressed several ideas that were quite novel to Western thought”. Not only were they new, but Sade indeed either fully presents – in passages where his writing is most lucid – or at least foreshadows – in parts where his writing remains vague and the concepts implicit – many themes and ideas that would be further developed by later writers, such as totalitarianism, the role of the subconscious in desire formation, and the importance of sexuality in human life. However, it is not just on these specific themes that Sade remains a relevant voice. No reader of Sade who looks beyond the orgy-massacres can fail to see that his work is, first and foremost, very much modern as a whole. It is not merely in discussing a single, specific philosophical issue that Sade is relevant. Instead, there are large, crucial parts of the whole worldview that can be nothing but recognisable to the reader in the 21st century: the worldview that says matter is all that exists, that there is no god or afterlife, and that the ultimate meaning of life is to be found in the pursuit of pleasure. Where Sade ceases to be recognisable, of course, is in the conclusions that he draws from these fundamental assumptions. It is not liberal values and a democratic system that follow from them. Instead, Sade's characters believe that the logical outcomes of these assumptions lie in the desirability of inflicting of pain on others. Where the logic of this system is best expressed, and where the full implications of these ideas are most visibly found, is in his political theory: it is there where Sade's characters describe what their ideal social world ought to look like. It is therefore Sade's political theory, as it follows from his overall philosophy, that I will study.

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[1] “The French word *libertin* meant ‘free thinker on religion’ by the end of the 16th century, but during the course of the 17th century, it gradually came to designate a person leading a dissolute lifestyle” (Phillips, 2005, p. 2).

Why, then, a thesis about Sade's political thought? It is in the same aforementioned two reasons that the relevance of this thesis ultimately lies. On the one hand, there is an academic reason: by presenting a political interpretation of Sade, my thesis engages with the existing literature in a number of ways. First, its very existence refutes the idea, endorsed by some (e.g. Roger, 1995; Phillips, 2005) that Sade is not a political thinker – or, more precisely, the idea that politics form a peripheral or even negligible component of the libertines philosophy. Indeed, about these political implications of Sade's philosophy relatively little has been written. Where scholars have engaged substantively with the politics of Sade, the results have often been outdated (e.g. Gorer, 1934), insufficiently attentive to the libertine novels in favour of his other work (e.g. Fink, 1989), or simply incomplete (e.g. Roche, 2004). Perhaps, this has simply been due to the fact that Sade's work is littered with scattered, fragmented meditations on politics, often in direct opposition to one another. However, this should not deter us from taking seriously the political dimension of his work, or make us argue, as Roger (1995, p. 94) does, that "the denial of what we call politics" is precisely what characterised his thought. Indeed, the second way in which my thesis engages with the existing literature is by showing that it is when we take Sade's political project seriously that both the coherent philosophical claims and the ostensible contradictions – such as those pertaining to the concept of transgressive pleasure – within the system are best brought to light. My claim herein is that the political component of Sade's oeuvre is simply an area in which metaphysical, metaethical and psychological claims underlying the whole project are concretely applied and, importantly, made visible in the open. Whereas others have often looked at these foundational claims in a largely abstract way, it is instead by putting them into practice that I believe a better understanding of them can be reached.

On the other hand, there is a socio-ethical justification for this essay and for the importance of continuous engagement with Sade. As I mentioned earlier, Sade's worldview is both recognisable (in its fundamental tenets) and simultaneously beyond recognition (in the conclusions that it reaches). Because of this, Sade presents a constant challenge that needs to be overcome to the secular, liberal worldview. Furthermore, he presents a warning. Although Sade's political philosophy is unlikely to be implemented on a large scale, it does serve as a reminder of what a failure to uphold liberal norms could *in principle* lead to. In other words, it is precisely through reading a voice as extreme as Sade that we can fully understand what is at stake here – what we risk by carelessly slipping into a world where "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Thucydides, 1989, p. 505). In no way, then, is this thesis meant to be what Bertrand Russell allegedly[2] described Machiavelli's *The Prince* as – a "handbook for gangsters" (Berlin, 2013, p. 44). On the contrary, it can more aptly be described as having the intention to warn, not to inspire; for the political philosophy of Sade shows a dystopia infinitely more nightmarish than those found in the dystopias currently capable of inducing dread in popular thought – e.g. the fate of the crude proles of Orwell's 1984 or the drug-addled hedonists in Huxley's Brave New World. Indeed, what this thesis hereby allows us to do is to creatively retain, in a modern context, an element that some (e.g. Lloyd, 2018) have described as fundamental in Sade's oeuvre: its thoroughly didactive nature.

In what remains of the introduction, I will do two final things. After giving a brief, chapter-by-chapter outline of the thesis, I will, in a separate section, describe and justify in some length the methodological choices which I have made in it. First, then, the overview. The first chapter will describe the idea of nature that Sade's characters believe they are living in, based on three key tenets: transmutational materialism (the idea that matter, while forming certain constellations now, will in the future be recycled to create new forms of existence); atheism; and the sensationist, sadistic concept of pleasure (the idea that the capacity to feel sensations is the most important characteristic of a human being, and that the strongest sensations are experienced through the infliction of pain on others). The second chapter will describe the (meta)ethical theories which are both concluded from and meant to support this concept of nature. Specifically, I will distinguish one anti-realist, and two realist ethical theories that the libertines present. In codas to these first two chapters, I will show how the source of the libertines' pleasure, upon close analysis, first shifts from the infliction of pain to the committing of evil, and thereafter shifts from the committing of evil to the desire to affirm the self through the tyrannising of others. The third chapter will dive into the ultimate research object of this thesis: the political prescriptions given by the libertines. I will argue that the libertines' meditations on politics ultimately fall into three broad approaches to politics, all clearly distinguished from one another that the libertines advocate. These approaches, for which I use the word 'strategies', are as follows: first, the reforming of the state; second, the destruction and potential replacement of the state by small-scale communities; and third, the weaponizing of the existing state for personal pleasure. Apart from mapping out these approaches, I will evaluate whether each of these strategies is capable of satisfying the conditions under which the libertines can maximise their pleasure. The two conditions on which I zoom in are, on the one hand, the problem of libertine sociability (that is, how it is that these self-interested libertines can form any sort of meaningful, lasting social bond with one another, when they all act according to ruthless self-interest), and, on the other hand, the possibility to derive pleasure from transgressing existing laws and social norms. I will argue that the first two strategies are ultimately incompatible with these conditions. Since the ability to commit transgressive acts presupposes the existence of moral and political frameworks that render transgression possible and, more importantly, conceptually meaningful, it is only the third approach, which is addressed only sporadically (and in these rare moments, often contradictorily) by the libertines, that is capable of satisfying these conditions. What this means is that taking the libertines' philosophy seriously ought to lead them to the endorsement of a class-based society in which a small upper class of libertines has the power and resources to (predominantly clandestinely) exploit and thoroughly tyrannise the much larger lower class of 'ordinary' citizens. Only a social arrangement such as this, which due to the possibility of antagonism and outright betrayal between the libertines can never be completely stable, is capable of satisfying both the desire for total domination over all other forms of life and the desire for the existence of pervasive, robust social norms and laws outside of their control which they can transgress with pleasure and impunity.

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[2] The anecdote is most likely apocryphal.

Methodology

To engage with a philosophical work that comes in the form of a novel is to enter a methodological marshland – and for the *oeuvre* of Sade, this situation is no different. All those who write about Sade will invariably have to make interpretative choices, and these choices will have far-reaching consequences for the arguments presented by them. One's methodological choices will frequently be seen to clash with those made by different authors. For example, where Gorer argues that the political ideas put forth in the republican pamphlet in

Philosophy in the Boudoir not only ought to be taken seriously but, even stronger, show "Sade at his most typical and vigorous" (Gorer, 1934, p. 171), he is in direct interpretative opposition to the arguments made by authors like Phillips (2005) and du Plessix Gray, the latter of whom argues that even "[t]he very title of the tract . . . suggests that the author meant it to be a parody of revolutionary principles" (du Plessix Gray, 2006, p. xiv). The issue here, of course, is that of authorial intent, which I will return to in a moment.

For now, what needs to be said first is that when an author neglects to (or simply refuses to) sufficiently clarify these interpretative matters – such as Gorer failing to engage with, and argumentatively refute, the possibility that this particular section of Sade's work was parodic in intent – the result will be, on the one hand, a weakening or even a potential collapse of the argument in itself if the implicit methodological assumptions turn out to be untenable or self-contradictory, and, on the other hand, a decrease of the usefulness of the argument by, through its opaqueness, rendering it more arduous for other commentators to substantively engage with it in turn. I believe it therefore necessary to, before I continue to the substantive part of this thesis, describe concisely in which way I have chosen to engage with Sade's work. Since many of these interpretative choices are intimately connected with the arguments themselves, it is not possible for me to give a full justification of my choices in this section. The attentive reader will, hopefully, see them defended throughout the main body of my thesis.

My interpretative framework consists of three separate choices. First, there is the question of intention, though it is not yet the possibility of parodic intent that matters here. After all, this idea already presupposes something else: namely, that the main aim of the text, whether parodic or sincere, is to present a substantive collection of arguments. This, however, is something that many writers on Sade have disputed. Authors like Airaksinen (1995) and Bennington (1984), for example, maintain instead that it is, respectively, sheer irrationality or, alternatively, the desire to subvert the possibility of linguistic meaning that form the key to Sade's works. I will argue against this, as a significant majority of the texts I have read do, that notwithstanding the possibility that a desire to shock, nauseate or even arouse might have informed Sade's writing process, its most important characteristic is still its actual substance. The second question, mentioned twice now, is whether these works were written with sincere or parodic intent. In this thesis, I will – with an important, justificatory caveat – put this question aside, unanswered. In this answer – or, rather, refusal to answer – I follow the line of writers like Roche (2004, p. 7), who writes that he has "no interest in writing a *What Sade Really Said*, a project as philosophically uninformative as it would be impossible", and Baruchello and Arnarsson (2022,

p. 293), who argue in a footnote that they "stand open to correction, or to sheer uncertainty, but we write as though Sade were his own pornographic novels' erudite, prolix, lustful and criminal libertines". The aforementioned caveat to this answer is that, although I will put aside the question whether Sade as a human being personally endorsed the worldview presented by his characters, there are absolutely elements within the text which enable me to identify those passages incompatible with the libertine worldview. As I will show, this method perfectly allows me to indeed discard much of the political pamphlet found in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, which we saw Gorer earlier mistakenly attribute great theoretical significance to.

Perhaps this answer will leave some, who insist on seeing Sade's face behind the mask, dissatisfied. To these, I have two further comments to make about this issue. First, even biographers such as Schaeffer have grappled unsatisfactorily with this issue: for instance, at a certain point in discussing Sade's work, he raises the question: "For a moment, you do not know whether you are reading *Mein Kampf* or *A Modest Proposal*. Is Sade serious or is he a satirist?" (Schaeffer, 2001, p. 459-460). The best answer Schaeffer can give to this question is that Sade as a person ultimately seemed to oscillate between two extreme views of the world, neither of which he ultimately endorsed, and that the question therefore remains permanently unanswered.[3] The second reason why this lack of an answer need not be to our dissatisfaction is that it has not necessarily been the historical Sade who has attracted most fascination and philosophical analysis – it has been his libertines. It is not the humane, sensitive Sade who "watched this bloody slaughter [of *la Terreur*] day after day, and declared in correspondence that it affected him greatly" (Phillips, 2005, p. 53) who attracted this fascination and, to give one example, made Flaubert write in his private journal:

> Once you have read the Marquis de Sade and once you recover from the dazzling effect, you find yourself wondering if it's all true, if what he teaches is the truth – this because you cannot resist the hypothesis he makes you dream about, unlimited power and magnificent ejaculations (Flaubert, 2001, as cited in Wall, 2007, p. 115).

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[3] See McMorran (2013, p. 1133) for an even stronger defence of Sade's ultimate authorial elusiveness – namely, one which sees this as precisely Sade's intention: "Long before Barthes, Sade imagines the author exiting the scene to be replaced by autonomous text".

The source of this interest, of course, is the collection of characters he wrote in his libertine novels. The libertine worldview deserves separate analysis, detached from their author, and I leave it to others to engage in a more biographical study if they deem it appropriate.

The third and final interpretative question is as follows: even if we accept that there is, regardless of the author's ultimate intentions, substance worth analysing in the books, we will still find that the book's characters present a wide range of views that are often in conflict with one another. Whose voice, then, do we accept as representing *the* libertine philosophy? As I stated earlier, it is only by answering this question satisfactorily that we can ultimately justify our sidestepping of the question of authorial intent. My answer to this question partly follows the line of thinking of Lloyd (2018) in his recent study of Sade. Where he writes that he has "moved beyond the polyvocity of the texts *qua* literature and identified a voice which, if not that of the 'authentic' Sade, is at least the philosophical voice that he intended to be heard speaking with" (Lloyd, 2018, p. 31), I too accept the idea that there is a single, dominating voice to be heard in the libertine novels, although I, as I just explained, do not feel the necessity to simultaneously assert that this is the voice he 'intended' to be heard with. However, it is with the corollary of Lloyd's claim that I almost fully identify:

> I show in this book that there is a relatively coherent philosophical 'system' to be found in Sade's *oeuvre*. In reconstructing this 'system' I am able to show which, and to what extent, the various Sadean characters speak for this 'system' and which do not. I can show for example that when the narrator claims to attack the libertine values established by another persona they contradict the Sadean 'system' and, insofar as they do, so are being disingenuous (Lloyd, 2018, p. 31).

As I will show, it is only the final claim here that is incomplete: more often than not, it is not necessarily disingenuousness that makes the libertines disagree with one another, but simply an unequal degree of libertine commitment or zeal.

I. The Libertine Universe: Matter, Atheism and Pleasure

In this chapter, I will describe the idea of the cosmos in which the libertines believe. The three main subsections will zoom in on the three most important features of this universe: first, its deterministic and materialist character; second, its absence of a god; third and last, the sadistic concept of pleasure. In the coda, I will argue why two aspects about this third element – the sadistic concept of pleasure – need further elaboration through an ethical framework in order to make sense.

The Materialistic Universe: Transmutation and Determinism

The most important claim about nature made by the libertines is that matter is the only thing that really exists. There is only one sort of substance, they argue, out of which everything that exists – both animate and inanimate – is composed. This substance comes in the form of small particles for which there is no fixed, single term used by the libertines. However, they at various moments suggest that this substance come in the form of "pieces of matter" (J, p. 61), "molecules" (JL, p. 675) or "certain elements" (B, p. 51). All that is in the cosmos can ultimately be reduced to these pieces of matter, organised into different forms, which interact with one another. Although the pieces of matter themselves are indestructible and imperishable, the shapes that they take on together are not. Upon the destruction and decomposition of these forms which matter temporarily takes on, the matter itself will therefore go on to form new forms of existence, either animate or inanimate. This forms a circle of life – and lifelessness – characterised by "a perpetual metempsychosis, a perpetual variation, a perpetual permutation" (JL, p. 769). In this, Sade draws on – and positions himself within – a long tradition of materialist philosophers. The idea was already present in Ancient philosophy – see for instance Lucretius's (1989, p. 27) claim that "[d]eath does not extinguish things in such a way as to destroy the bodies of matter, but only breaks up the union amongst them, and then joins anew the different elements with others" – but it is from French materialist philosophers such as La Mettrie and d'Holbach that Sade provably took inspiration (see e.g. Warman, 2002).[4] Juliette's first mentor, Madame Delbène, summarises this view as follows:

> The universe is an assemblage of unlike entities which act and react mutually and successively with and against each other; I discern no start, no finish, no fixed boundaries, this universe I see

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[4] In the case of d'Holbach, Sade even "took whole passages from The System of Nature more or less verbatim and placed them in the mouths of his libertines" (Phillips, 2005, p. 35

> only as an incessant passing from one state into another, and within it only particular beings which forever change shape and form (JL, p. 43).

From this basic system, which Lloyd (2018, p. 23) aptly describes as "transmutational materialism", the libertines derive two corollaries which are important for this thesis. First, since matter is the only thing which can be said to have real existence and all forms are merely temporary, they conclude that Nature – seen as the cosmos as a whole – must be fundamentally indifferent towards the various forms that matter might take on. As the Comte de Bressac puts it in *Justine*:

> Oh, what does it matter to Nature's eternal creation that the mass of flesh which today makes up a biped creature should tomorrow be reproduced as a thousand different insects? Dare we say that the construction of this two-footed animal is more valuable to it than that of a tiny earthworm, and that Nature must take a greater interest in it? (J, p. 61).

This idea is repeated *ad nauseam* in the libertine novels, and the libertines most frequently present it in connection with its ethical implications: "what can it matter if of a man I make [i.e. by killing him] a cabbage, a lettuce, a butterfly, or a worm" (JL, p. 773). I will return to these ethical implications in the next chapter.

The second conclusion drawn by the libertines from this materialist worldview is that, since human beings are composed exclusively of matter and since the external world is likewise so, there cannot be such a thing as free will. This denial of the free will is given in two versions: on the one hand, in a weak version that pertains to our desires, on the other hand, in a strong version that pertains to our actions. In the weak version, it is merely affirmed that our desires and inclinations are the result of these physical forces beyond our control. The catalogue of desires which forms *The 120 Days of Sodom* is in some way an expression of the inexhaustible variety of human desires. All of them originate in Nature, and we did not choose to be born with them. As the Chevalier de Mirvel rhetorically asks: "Is man the master of his tastes?" (B, p. 5). The libertines think not.

This weak version has elicited some criticism from commentators. Roche (2009), for example, notes that there exists a tension between the denial of the free will and another important element of the libertine lifestyle: the deliberate augmentation and expansion of their desires in the pursuit of pleasure. How can one deny that man is master of his tastes when one at the same time invents ways to change them? Roche concludes: "Sade's characters only reject the doctrine of free will when it suits them. . . . On the subject of the imagination, by contrast, Sade implies that one can directly introspect and influence one's own mental processes" (Roche, 2009, p. 367). To reinforce this point, we can also find multiple passages where Sade does actually use the concept of free will to describe the actions of his characters, such as where Juliette muses that "having of my own free will resumed the profession, it was only just that together with its profits I also accept its liabilities" (JL, p. 566). This tension, however, is easily resolved if we look at the stronger denial of free will given by the libertines. In this version, it is not merely our desires, but also, significantly, the way that we act on them that is determined by laws outside of our control. As Juliette's mentor Clairwill puts it: "all our actions being determined for us, we are responsible for none of them" (JL, p. 377). In other words, the absence of free will means that everything we do is ultimately foreordained by laws outside our control. The character Dorval introduces the word necessity to describe this idea: "Nothing occurs accidentally; everything in this world if of necessity; well, necessity excuses no matter what" (JL, p. 121). In this, we again see the immediate jump from physics to ethics made by the libertines. In conclusion, the libertines' denial of free will is simply an endorsement of a conventional deterministic philosophical position in which "there really is only one possible path into the future, not many" (Kane, 2005, p. 7). The possibility of changing one's inclinations is perfectly compatible with such a view, because its determinism embraces every single thing we think about and act on; and to speak of a free will nonetheless is little more than a manner of speech, born of the poor vocabulary available to describe choices that, at the moment we make them, still feel very much free. The character Cardinal de Bernis mentions this paradoxical feeling too, only to still endorse determinism:

> [I]n the moment when the decision is taken it is not we who determine it; it is enjoined upon us, it is necessitated by the various dispositions of our organs; they always dictate the direction, we always follow their guidance, the choice between this or that alternative is never exercised by us: constantly impelled by necessity, the constant slaves of necessity, that very instant when we believe we gave the clearest demonstration of our freedom is the very one in which we were subject to the most invincible constraint (JL, p. 677-678).

The Godless Universe: Atheism and Conscience

The second characteristic of the libertine universe is the absence of God and any other anthropomorphised creator. The importance of this feature cannot be overstated: for instance, the *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man,* one of Sade's earliest essays, revolves almost entirely around a discussion on the existence of God. In this essay, we find many of the arguments that the libertines, throughout all four novels, use against the existence of God and against religion. For this thesis, two of these arguments are of specific importance. The important argument against the existence of God is connected with the materialistic worldview described in the previous subsection: the libertines argue that God simply has no meaningful place in this universe. The one thing that God could potentially provide is the (initial) movement of matter – to give what we call a ‘first cause’. In the aforementioned essay, Sade’s character indeed concedes this point: “Prove to me that matter is inert, and I shall grant you a Creator” (Sade, 1999, p. 152). Against this, however, the libertines argue two things. First, they claim that motion is simply a quality of matter itself, and that ”the perpetual movement of matter explains everything” (JL, p. 43). Secondly, they claim that the idea of a first cause is merely the product of erroneous human reason, of humans “fancying there could exist a cause which was not being nor a body either” (JL, p. 35). Combined with the affirmation of the universe’s infiniteness that we saw earlier, the most accurate interpretation of the rather ambiguous passages from which these quotes are dawn is probably that the libertines answer the question whether something can have a beginning without being caused by simply denying that the universe had a beginning. In this materialistic universe, both temporally and spatially infinite, the existence of God as first causer simply serves no need.

The important argument against religion revolves around the consequences for the human psyche that their doctrines – most notably the Christian ones – have brought about. It is in the passages aimed against Christianity that Sade – who, notes Gorer (1934, p. 119), had an “encyclopaedic” knowledge of its scripture and doctrines – makes his libertines unleash their true vitriol. For this essay, the most important complaint made against Christianity is that it forms a tyrannical force which prevents humans to live life to the fullest. Specifically, it forms a force which is tyrannical not merely by simply commanding humans what to do, but one which, by working on the human conscience, subtly causes those under its rule to internalise its tyrannical thought through their own inner voice.

The reason why this is seen as detrimental to human happiness is because the libertines’ project is, to an important extent, one of a psychological transformation of the individual towards a special state of mind and state of being. This transformative idea, which Lloyd (2018, p. 232) refers to as a theory of “libertine askesis” and Roche (2009, p. 373) calls a “doctrine of apathy”, is featured most prominently in *Juliette*, and has as its most important aim the complete elimination of the inclination of the individual’s conscience to protest against the committing of atrocities. The reason why this project is so important is because the workings of the conscience, this “terrible voice” (JL, p. 552) inside us, are seen by the libertines as the greatest barrier to human happiness: it makes the committing of crimes painful by afterwards plaguing us with feelings of guilt. Conscience, as Crocker (2019, p. 412) concludes, is thereby reduced to “merely a matter of conditioning”. It is therefore not surprising that the libertine education of Juliette starts precisely with the reversal of this socio-biological conditioning: she is told that “[w]e alone can make for our personal felicity: whether we are to be happy or unhappy is completely up to us, it all depends solely upon our conscience”. (JL, p. 9). Religion is herein identified as only one – albeit the most powerful – of many possible manifestation of this human tendency to deny the full potential for happiness in individual human beings.[5] When the Christian doctrines, by emphasising the importance of virtue and extolling brotherhood, are internalised through our consciences, they will, if left unaddressed, serve as “a perpetual source of discomfort and remorse to anyone languishing in its grip” (JL, p. 341). As we will soon see, the libertines extend this analysis to other forms of social control, such as laws and norms. It is this half-life of psychic pain and self-negation that the libertines reject in favour of complete freedom from the protestations of conscience. As the Comte de Belmor laments:

> Woe betide them who, setting shackles on a man’s passions while he is yet young, develop in him the habit of self-denial and thereby render him the most unfortunate of beings. What a terrifying disservice is thus done to him (JL, p. 498-499).

The Sadistic Universe: Pleasure and Pain

As one might have noticed, the importance of this doctrine of apathy in *Juliette* only makes sense if we accept one very important claim that has not been discussed yet: namely, the claim that we will become happy precisely through committing those acts which our conscience – conditioned by (societal, religious and legal) institutions as it is – will revolt against. This, at last, brings us to the most well-known aspect about Sade’s work: the actual sadism. In this final subsection of the first chapter, I will describe how the libertines come to the conclusion that it is by inflicting pain on others that we ourselves will feel pleasure.

The primacy that the body and its ‘sensibility’ or ‘sensitivity’ has for the libertines has been analysed by – or given an important role in the interpretations of – many writers (e.g. Warman, 2002; Quinlan, 2013; Lloyd, 2018). This importance follows in a relatively straightforward way from the materialist concept of the universe that I described above. Since everything, argue the libertines, can be reduced to the acting of pieces of matter upon one another, the human body is no exception to this. The defining characteristic of the matter composing this body is its sensibility: its ability to passively receive and actively respond to stimuli from the external world. As Lloyd (2018) shows in his study of Sade in his historical context, this concept played a crucial role in the philosophy of the 18th century French sensationalists on whom Sade drew heavily. These abilities were seen as so crucial that they were frequently identified with human life itself: in the absence of sensations, "according to this definition, [the] body does not exist as a human. Sensation is equivalent to life" (Warman, 2002, p. 26). The libertines affirm this importance of human feelings in the strongest terms: "Only physical sensations are true" (J, p. 36).

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[5] The libertines here echo a well-known line of criticism on Christian doctrines. See, for instance, Rousseau’s claim in *The Social Contract* that Christianity “has the effect of taking [people] away from all earthly things” (Rousseau, 1989b, p. 437).

To explain the body's reception of pleasure, the libertines offer explanations that, although they use diverging terminologies, are all similar in their reduction of pleasure and pain to a purely physical phenomenon. In *The 120 Days of Sodom,* for example, we find a very atomistic explanation in the idea that there are "salts" in external bodies which, "emanating from the object serving our desires, [will] excite our animal spirits and set them in motion" (S, p. 142). It is in the motion thereby produced that we experience pleasure. These 'animal spirits'[6], elucidates Cardinal de Bernis in *Juliette*, form the substance of which the neural fluids exists. The concept of pain receives identical treatment: a little earlier in *Juliette*, we see Noirceuil argue that it arises when "atoms emanating from these foreign objects strike [the atoms composing our neural fluids] aslant, crookedly, sting them, repulse them, and never fuse with them" (JL, p. 267). As we see in the idea of salts or atoms making impact with our own bodies, the libertines argue that pleasure is essentially dyadic in nature: it requires the presence of an external object. How this works is explained repeatedly. In *Justine*, we see the monk Clement argue that it is "by watching this object experience the strongest possible sensation" (J, p. 140) that we receive pleasure. This idea – that the gradation of intensity is a crucial defining characteristic of all possible sensations – is a key component of the libertine novels: "The degree of violence to which one is moved alone characterizes the essence of pleasure" (JL, p. 146). However, to move from such a reductionist and intensity-focused account of pain and pleasure to the embracement of sadism, the libertines need to make one final, crucial step: they need to explain why, if intensity is the defining characteristic of sensations, it is by causing pain, not pleasure, that we are brought to our greatest highs. The explanation given for this is shockingly simple: namely, that "there is no more vivid sensation than pain" (J, p. 141), that "there is no doubt that . . . pain affects us much more sharply than pleasure", and that "the shocks reacting upon our nerves when we arouse this agonizing sensation in another person are likewise more violent, our nerves vibrate more vigorously" (B., p. 64).[7] Beyond pain being the most powerful sensation in itself, the libertines also occasionally suggest that the sensation of pain expresses itself in the most pure, unadulterated way in the designated object and is thereby the easiest to perceive for the subject, whereas the physiological results of pleasure are much "too equivocal, too unsure" (JL, p. 362): "Its impressions are sure, they do not deceive like those of the pleasure that women constantly feign and which they practically never feel" (J, p. 141).[8] This idea, when brought to its logical extremes, can be summarised as follows:

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[6] See Rusu (2012) for a short summary of the role played by the concept of animal spirits in early modern philosophy.

> The man, then, who can create the most tumultuous effect in a woman, who can best shatter this woman's whole body, will have truly succeeded in obtaining for himself the greatest possible amount of pleasure, because the shock he feels, deriving from the impact others experience and being necessarily caused by that impact, will necessarily be more vigorous if the impact on others has been painful than if it has only been sweet and tender (J, p. 141).

Coda: From Pleasure To Evil

With these three elements, we have surveyed what is most important about the libertine cosmos. Although the ideas underlying it are relatively straightforward, the fragmented way in which they are expressed – each libertine contributes a little to the puzzle – makes a coherent reading possible only when we put the pieces together ourselves. In doing so, as many commentators have noted, various ostensible contradictions arise – most notably in the concept of sensation and pleasure. The first alleged contradiction is concerned solely with its physical characteristics, the second revolves around its embeddedness in an ethical framework. This first contradiction is as follows: if intensity in the way sensations are experienced is the most important property that these sensations possess, then to what extent can we even describe pain and pleasure as essentially distinct phenomena to begin with? To this question, Roche (2009) answer that Sade occasionally seems to abandon the idea that pain and pleasure are different; others, such as Lloyd (2018), have put forward a much stronger version of this claim and argued that he collapses the distinction between pain and pleasure altogether and completely reduces all differences in sensation – regardless of whether they inflict pain or pleasure – into simple intensity: "[T]here is, at the most fundamental metaphysical level, no difference between pleasant and painful sensations: both are shocks" (Lloyd, 2018, p. 139). The contradiction is only intensified by the occasional desire of the libertines to have pain inflicted on themselves. Though the exact relation between sadism and masochism – the enjoyment of the infliction or recipience of pain, respectively – for the libertines does indeed seem to be underdeveloped at best, and most certainly deserves further study, I will for now set this first contradiction aside to focus on the second one, because it is through this one that we can reach the libertine political philosophy I will present in the third chapter.

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[7] I believe that, given its embeddedness in a materialist worldview, this explanation possesses sufficient clarity, but others, most notably Beauvoir (2012, p. 58) have argued against this: "Sade does not clear up the mystery of how the violence of a vibration may become voluptuous consciousness".

[8] Given the extreme malice contained in these words, it is indeed difficult not to see this comment as the product of a resentment born of the writer's personal anxiety or sexual impotence. On the latter idea, see the biography of du Plessix Gray (1998, p. 236-239).

This second contradiction is as follows. The libertines do not merely derive pleasure from the visible infliction of physical pain. Instead, a significant portion of their pleasure is instead a product of distinct mental operations. First, the libertines argue that mere thought, even when no act has yet been committed and no other person is even in sight, is sufficient to yield pleasure. For instance, Juliette muses in a mental soliloquy that the thought of turning away starving peasants produced in her nerves "a certain rush of heat much like the blaze ignited in us whenever we violate a law or subdue a prejudice" (JL, p. 411). Furthermore, the vital role of the imagination for the libertines is shown by the fact that *The 120 Days of Sodom* is structured around the narration of six hundred erotic tales meant to arouse the protagonists. Some, such as Roche (2009), have doubted whether the libertines can coherently use such a concept of mental pleasure to begin with in a materialist universe. However, such an objection misses the fact that the libertines do actually devote attention to reducing this form of mental pleasure to physical causes: our imagination is said to "create new fantasies which, injecting energies into the voluptuous atoms, cause them to collide at greater speed and more potently with the molecules they are to make vibrate; these vibrations are your delight" (JL, p. 341). In other words: the use of our imagination is merely the action of giving additional energy to the atoms which, upon impact with our nerves, create pleasure. This act is so important that some libertines even go far as to say that "the pleasures of the senses are always dependent on the imagination" (J, p. 136).

However, this materialist explanation of mental pleasure only seems to make sense when applied to thoughts of the infliction of pain which, as we saw, was described by the libertines as their ultimate source of pleasure. Yet in the part of Juliette's monologue that I cited in the previous paragraph, it was clear that its pleasure was not derived from the thought about inflicting pain, but instead derived from a different type of mental pleasure – that which is the result of transgressing social and legal norms. One possible response is saying, as Allison (1994) does, that the libertine project is merely an 'itinerary' that seeks to destroy all possible inhibitions on the road to pleasure. As we saw earlier, the destruction of limits placed by external forces – such as religion – is absolutely a vital component of the libertine worldview, for "the putting on of any shackle is a folly, every bond is an attempt against the physical liberty which is our due, and which we ought to enjoy here on earth" (JL, p. 512). This would make the desire to transgress them a temporary activity in the pursuit of liberty. However, this reading – which, on the surface, is obviously correct – fails to account for one thing. It is not merely the case that the libertines see these limitations as obstacles to be overcome. Instead, they see them as significant sources of pleasure in themselves: our "delights are all the keener the greater the gulf between these things and approved behavior, the more radically they countercarry every practice, and the more sternly they are proscribed by vulgar law" (JL, p. 87). This is the fundamental paradox in the libertines' pleasure: they engage in acts not merely because they simply cause pain, but because they are transgressive. For example, they derive pleasure from transgressing social taboos such as parricide. A very succinct expression of this is found in one of Saint-Fond's exclamations, made while he is recounting the moment where he sodomised his daughter beside the deathbed of his father, who he had poisoned: "Ah, the joy that was mine! Foul accursed unnatural son who all at one stroke was guilty of *parricide, incest, murder, sodomy, pimping, prostitution*. Oh, Juliette, Juliette! Never in my life had I been so happy" (JL, p. 266, emphasis in original). However, these same libertines are found exclaim – sometimes mere moments later – that these taboos are absolutely groundless: "How would you have me think myself in any way beholden to a man, merely because, once upon a time, some whimsy moved him to discharge into my mother's cunt?" (JL, p. 252).

Ultimately, it is not merely the infliction of pain, but the committing of evil that the libertines aim for. Juliette herself declares: "I love evil for its own sake; only in crime, I have recently noticed, do my passions catch fire, and where the seasoning of crime is lacking I taste no joy" (JL, p. 476). This capacity to derive pleasure from the deliberate transgression of social constructs such as familial bonds – which are, significantly, described in distinctly moral terms

– seems at odds with the very worldview which the libertines purport to believe in: the idea, seen at the start of this chapter, that "we are made of matter only, that what is immaterial is inexistent" (JL, p. 385-386). Clearly, then, an important aspect of the libertines' pleasure cannot be explained by having recourse to physical explanations alone: it is their moral quality – specifically, their evil nature – that is responsible for the pleasurable feeling. In order to untangle this conundrum, we need to make the move – which, as I stated earlier, is the quintessential argumentative strategy of the libertines – from physics to ethics. If matter is all that exists, then to what extent can we still describe actions as evil or as crimes? This will be the subject of the next chapter.

II. Chimeras and Crime: Libertine Ethics

This chapter will first present three distinct ethical views expressed by the libertines and thereafter, in the coda, discuss whether any possible synthesis of them is possible. These three views are, first, the idea that moral values have no objective existence; second, that moral values exist, but that the universe requires a careful balancing of vice and virtue; third, that objective values exist, but that evil – not good – is the primary value. Before I present these three views, I shall first explain – in the remaining part of the introduction – why the moral theories presented by the libertines need to be studied in the first place, despite the fact that, in their plain defence of egoism, they already possess a justification for their actions.

Given the unclear relation to pleasure that the idea of crime has, it is not surprising that it is this element that has without a doubt attracted most discussion and, consequently, most diverging interpretations of Sade in the secondary literature: what do the concepts of good and evil mean to him, and what implications do these concepts have for the libertine philosophy? The untangling of this uncertain connection between pleasure and ethics is not made easier by the fact that the libertine novels additionally present a number of (meta)ethical theories which are, especially at first sight, mutually incompatible. Some, such as Corey (1966), have read the chaotic restlessness of these ethical reflections as the result of the fact that the libertines, rather than trying to understand the world, are merely seeking to retroactively invent spurious justifications for their pleasure-seeking.[9] Roche (2010, p. 51) makes a similar argument when he claims that the imperative to pursue personal pleasure is itself assumed but never justified: "Sade assumes hedonism to be a sound principle, but gives no discussion as to why one would take mere pleasure seeking (in particular intense, sadistic and destructive pleasure seeking) to be the only good". However, a closer reading reveals that the libertines very much already possess a justification for their self-centered hedonism. As Warman (2002) and Lloyd (2018) have argued, from the epistemological primacy that the libertines give to sensation as the way to understand reality follows the realisation that "there is no reasonable comparison between our concerns and those of others. The former affect us physically, while the latter are of only moral interest to us, and moral feelings are deceptive" (J, p. 36). This is why the personal pursuit of pleasure is justified, whatever the consequences to others, whose sensations we after all cannot ourselves experience: "[B]ecause my existence means everything to me, and those of fifty million people nothing" (JL, p. 758).[10]

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[9] Admittedly, there is some textual evidence for this in passages like the following, where Juliette describes her lover Noirceuil: "You'll agree that where it comes to constructing rational bases to one's irrational extravagances, the man has few peers" (JL, p. 139).

The fact that the libertines, despite the fact that they already possess a justification for their behaviour, nevertheless devote so much time to discussing ethics and metaphysics has, I believe, another explanation: to an important extent, it is the result of their own desire to understand the nature and meaning of their own passions, which are at various times described as irrational and inexplicable for both outsiders and, significantly, themselves (e.g. JL, p. 743, 895). The fact that the narratives describe such an exercise in self-understanding reinforces the importance of our attempts to find a possible coherent interpretation of Sade's novels: if the libertines believe that it is through metaphysical and moral discourse that they might understand their own passions better, we ought to take them seriously.

Anti-Realism: Morality as Illusion

The first metaethical position that we find in the libertine novels is one of which we already saw glimpses in the first chapter. This is the view that the concepts of good and evil have no objective existence. Earlier, I cited brief passages in which the libertines allude to the ethical implications of their belief in transmutational materialism. The argument is as follows: since the world is composed of matter which is infinitely recycled into new forms of life, and since none of these forms – which, after all, exist only temporarily – have inherent worth (let alone more worth than other forms), there is no such thing as a crime or an act of evil. Reality, taken as a totality, is indifferent toward all our acts, no matter what they are: the libertines affirm that "in themselves all acts are indifferent, that they are neither good nor bad intrinsically" (JL, p. 170-171). As it is put in *Justine*, when we murder someone, we "will have taken an oblong piece of matter and formed three or four thousand round or square pieces out of it. Oh, Thérèse, how can such actions be crimes?" (J, p. 142). What this means, argue the libertines, is that the vocabulary that we use in moral discourse – such as the terms good and evil – simply do not refer to anything. In *Juliette*, this idea is made explicit when Delbène argues that vice and virtue are words that "have no real signification, they're arbitrary, interchangeable, express only what is locally and temporarily in vogue here and there" (JL, p. 89). What she expresses here is a view that seems indistinguishable from what is called the 'error theory' variant of moral anti-realism[11] (see Joyce, 2022) in contemporary philosophy: the idea that, although "a belief in objective values is built into ordinary moral thought and language . . . this ingrained belief is false" (Mackie, 1977, p. 48-49). In other words: what humans do when engaging in ethical discourse is ascribing actual existence to the moral concepts that they use. When something is judged to be good or evil, this utterance has cognitive content and is truth-apt: it is meant to describe a property, and it can therefore form a correct or false statement. However, since no such moral properties are taken to exist, every moral statement is therefore necessarily false: morality is a 'chimera', as Sade often calls it. That this line of thought is followed precisely by Delbène is indisputable. A few pages before the passage cited above, she explicitly affirms that humans do indeed (mistakenly) believe that the claims they make about theological concepts – such as God – contain cognitive content: we "ascribe an independent existence to the objects of [our imagination] and, more, in our supposing that they exist outside of ourselves" (JL, p. 34). Through the force of habit, she concludes, "one becomes accustomed to considering as something real that which is but the fictive creature of our own weakness" (JL, p. 36): indeed, we end up "according the same degree of belief to a fable as to geometrical proof" (JL, p. 29). The weakness mentioned here is mankind's ignorance of life's meaning and the nature of the universe: it is this ignorance that, through fear, leads to the invention of a supreme being "invested with the power of producing all the effects of whose causes we are profoundly ignorant" (JL, p. 29). It is during this same monologue that Delbène immediately makes the connection between the invention of God and the invention of morality: "This abominable ghost was no sooner envisaged as the author of Nature than he had also to be deemed that of good and evil" (JL, p. 29). Delbène is not the only libertine positing this view: others, too, claim the very same thing: "Justice has no real existence . . . there is no God in this world, neither is there virtue, neither is there justice" (JL, p. 607).

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[10] Compare Hume's (2007, p. 267) assertion that it is "not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger".

However, this is not the only form of moral anti-realism developed by the libertines. In fact, much more space in the novels is taken up by their arguments for an alternative version of anti-realism which is instead non-cognitivist (again, see Joyce, 2022) in nature: rather than, as before, arguing that moral statements seek to describe moral facts (which do not exist, rendering them categorically false), they argue that such statements merely express an individual's opinion or preference. Significantly, the libertines inject an all-encompassing dose of cynicism into this metaethical view, and argue that all these preferences are at bottom thoroughly selfish. Multiple concise formulations of this idea are found in *Juliette*: "Why do you object to crime? Not because you find it evil in itself, but because it is prejudicial to you" (JL, p. 1120), and "man does not practice virtue save for a purpose, and that is the advantage he hopes to reap therefrom" (JL, p. 144). Throughout this book, we find the libertines denouncing a wide variety of specific moral concepts, desires and virtues for all being essentially based on egoism: in other words, they argue that all moral claims are in fact mere expressions of personal preference, framed in terms of the desire to do good to others, while they are in reality merely born out of selfish motives. These notions include, but are not limited to, the desire for monogamous exclusivity with a lover (JL, p. 259), gratitude (p. 203, 253), and friendship (p. 232). Importantly, even pity or compassion, taken by Rousseau in his *Discourse on Inequality* (1989a, p. 343) to be a crucial human feature with as its aim to "moderate, on certain occasions, the impetuosity of egoism", is reduced by the libertines to an expression of selfishness. At a certain moment, the libertines advise Juliette to, when she is experiencing this emotion, submit her conscience to a rigorous analysis: they predict that, if done with ruthless precision, there is only one conclusion that she could possibly reach. Her heart would tell her:

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[11] Roche (2010), in his otherwise solid paper on Sade's ethics, largely misses – through his own focus on the other, realist positions which we will explore later – the extent to which moral anti-realism is equally developed by the libertines. The same is true for Lloyd (2018), who similarly focuses on Sade's realist positions by describing a three-tiered development of natural law theory in *Juliette*.

> *Thou dost shed tears to behold the sore plight of thine unhappy neighbor; thy tears bear witness to thine own wretchedness, or to thy dread of being more miserable still than him for whom thou thinkest to weep*. Well, what voice is this, if not that of fear? whence is this fear born, if not of egoism? (JL, p. 192, emphasis in original).

In other words: whenever we pity others, it is the product of our own desire not to undergo the same fate as them, not out of a genuine sympathy for them. This idea – that through extensive analysis of ourselves we can access the hidden, almost subconscious truth that selfish motives animate our every belief and act – recurs again and again: when one act in the interest of others in any way, "let him peer into the depths of his heart, he'll discover he has done nothing but flatter his vanity, he has labored for no one's benefit but his own" (JL, p. 203). Disturbingly, some libertines even go so far as suggesting that our own aversion to their destructive creed is the product of selfish motives, not moral concerns, in the exact same way: "Because you are afraid of becoming their object, and that is egoism" (J, p. 143). Given the extremes to which the libertines carry their principles, it is to be expected that they ultimately move from analysing single, simple ethical notions towards the more complex ones – and, thereafter, towards entire religio-ethical systems. We saw earlier that the libertine worldview is profoundly anti-humanist: they fail to see why the human form of life deserves any sort of priority or privilege over other forms, whether they are insects or cabbages. It is no surprise that the notion of brotherhood is therefore sacrificed too, described as the cynical creation of those who would benefit from it, the weakest in society: it was "invented by some puny wretch, and it is founded upon arguments quite as futile as would be this one addressed by the lamb to the wolf: *You mustn't eat me, I am four-footed too*" (JL, p. 177, emphasis in original).[12] Christianity is similarly denounced as a religion which, practiced by the weak, necessarily had to use a moral vocabulary which, through its universalistic idea of the brotherhood of humankind, was most conducive to their own survival: "The follower of the Nazarene, tormented and unhappy, and consequently the state of weakness that was supposed to invite tolerance and humanity, necessarily had to establish this fantastic relation between one human being and another" (J, p. 142).

Ultimately, there is but one real exception to this argument which receives a mention: it is only through love, a single libertine argues, that we are indeed transported beyond our personal needs and acquire a genuine, heart-felt investment in the wellbeing of someone else. However, this same libertine soon rejects love as a destructive delusion of cosmic proportions, which

> leads us into a certain metaphysic, which, confounding us with the loved object, transforming us into it, making its actions, its needs, its desires quite as vital and dear to us as our own—through this alone it becomes exceedingly dangerous, by detaching us from ourselves, and by causing us to neglect our interests in favor of the beloved's; by identifying us, so to speak, with this object, it causes us to assume its woes, its griefs, its chagrins, and thus consequently adds to the sum of our own" (JL, p. 502).

In this, the delusionary quality of love lies precisely in the fact that it moves us to prioritise someone else's sensations, which we cannot experience ourselves, whereas a true understanding thereof, absent delusions, would make us realise that "selfishness is the sole law of Nature; well, virtue contradicts selfishness, since it consists in the incessant sacrifice of one's leanings and preferences in the interest of the welfare of others" (JL, p. 556).

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[12] Compare this with the analogy by the better-known describer of slave morality: "That lambs dislike great birds of prey does not seem strange: only it gives no ground for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs" (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 480).

Realism: The Vice-Virtue Equilibrium

These two versions of moral anti-realism, then, are well-established by the libertines. However, the embracement of these positions result in a barren ethical landscape which seems antithetical to the libertines' simultaneously declared attachment to doing evil. How can one love evil if evil does not exist, and how can one derive pleasure from transgressing laws and norms if they are groundless? It is in answering these questions that the libertines frequently move to two different theories of ethics, both of which are 'naturalist' in the sense that they (partly) appeal to a concept of Nature to justify themselves: what is good is that which serves nature. As Airaksinen (1995) points out, these theories are thereby teleological: nature is taken to develop towards a certain goal, and all which is in line with this goal can be called good. Just like the two anti-realist positions, these theories take as their starting point the transmutational materialism I described in the first chapter. However, rather than arguing that a mechanical universe does not contain moral properties, the libertines now instead argue that it is by keeping the universe running that our behaviour can be called, in a way, 'good'. The main idea is that Nature, taken as the totality of all matter, is simultaneously a destructive and creative force. After all, for objects to be created, matter needs to be made available, and this matter is made available by the destruction of already existing objects. Vice, in this theory, is the term applied to all destructive activities; virtue is the word given to all activities that leave things intact. This means that, in order for the universe to be sustained, a careful balancing of vice and virtue is required: "A totally virtuous universe could not endure for a minute; the learned hand of Nature brings order to birth out of chaos" (JL, p. 172). This sum total of vice and virtue is at different moments described as "the universal economy" (JL, p. 118), "universal harmony" (JL, p. 608) and "the equilibrium so indispensable to the maintenance of her workings" (JL, p. 734). The dynamic character of this universe, argue the libertines, is visible in many phenomena produced in it. The existence of power differences in humans – i.e. between the strong and weak – begets strife and domination an is thereby one of these manifestations, but so are the existence of wars, diseases, and conquerors. Whether individual human beings will be inclined towards vice or virtue is another of these manifestations: those whose physiological constitution produces little response from external objects will be inclined towards virtue, those with a more receptive body will become vicious. In other words: sensibility is "the source of all virtues and likewise of all vices" (JL, p. 277).

In this theory, then, equal worth is attributed to virtue and vice. It is precisely because vice is not morally privileged that the libertines can coherently claim that "from the sum of all these misdeeds, from the entirety of all these lawful or unlawful destructions, she extracts the chaos, the decline, the decrepitude she must have to recast order, to renew growth, to restore vigor" (JL, p. 172). It other words: pruning encourages growth – the renewing and revitalisation of creation – and that is why it is justified. However, the two powers composing this equilibrium are most certainly not given equal praise by the libertines. Whereas the value of destruction is praised incessantly, there is only one true paean on virtue in the libertine novels which is consistent with this ethical theory, and it is not even given by a libertine, but instead by the incorrigibly virtuous Justine: "You admit that there is a balance of good and evil in Nature, and that in consequence, there is a need for a given number of individuals who do good and another who do evil. The position I adopt is therefore in Nature" (J, p. 223). Yet apart from this, the libertines overwhelmingly express their hatred for the idea of virtue. This is a hatred not merely limited to rejecting it in favour of restoring a natural equilibrium through their personal perpetration of vices, but a hatred which even goes so far as to deny that happiness can be found in virtue to begin with: "He lies who pretends to have found happiness there; he seeks to have us call happiness what are rather pride's illusions. For my part, this do I declare to you: that with all my soul I detest, I hate virtue, I despise it" (JL, p. 90). Over and over, they affirm that it is actually only through vice that we serve nature, and that "whoever refuses to destroy offends Nature very grievously" (JL, p. 308).

Realism: The Primacy of Destruction

It is not unsurprising that, given the lack of substantive development of the role played by virtue in this cosmic equilibrium on the one hand and the frequent emphasis on the primacy of vice over virtue on the other, the libertines ultimately move on from the vice-virtue equilibrium to the affirmation that, after all, it is only evil that has real existence and value. In this, they propose an inversion of the concepts ordinarily used in moral discourse, for rather than all terms relating to 'good', it must now be everything relating to what is normally called 'evil' that is endowed with positive normative content: we must "endeavor to make virtues out of all human vices, and vices out of all human virtues" (JL, p. 735). Again, this is a teleological theory, but unlike the previous one, it is only destruction that is now affirmed as the *telos* inherent in nature. In the majority of cases,[13] this idea of nature is not understood as a personal entity, but merely as a sort of transcendental force, recognisable by the fact that it has given us a desire for destruction which, upon the committing of it, yields pleasure to us: “[A]trocity in crime pleases Nature, since ‘tis according to this factor alone she regulates the amount of delight to provide us when we commit a crime” (JL, p. 776). In well-known passages, the libertines fantasise about taking this desire for destruction to its utmost limits:

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[13] Saint-Fond's belief in an evil God and 'maleficent molecules', found in *Juliette*, is the best example of this. He has received some study: Klossowski (1965, p. 62), for example, refers to him as an "exemplar of the great libertine and debauched lord". However, as Lloyd (2018) argues, there are good reasons to regard Saint-Fond as simply an

> How many times, good God, have I not wished it were possible to attack the sun, to deprive the universe of it, or to use it to set the world ablaze – those would be crimes indeed, and not the little excesses in which we indulge, which do no more than metamorphose, in the course of a year, a dozen creatures into clods of earth (S, p. 154).

It is arguably this third and final ethical theory, then, which is most frequently defended by the libertines: the destructive nature of the universe simultaneously causes and morally justifies the destructive acts committed by the libertines. Many in the secondary literature have used the term cruelty to describe this destruction-aimed essence of the libertine psyche: Sade’s work gives “a sophisticated rediscovery of the cruel, natural, selfish instincts animating all individuals alike” (Baruchello & Arnarsson, 2022, p. 296). However, it is still unclear whether the mere drive for cruelty can accommodate the key characteristics of libertine pleasure that I mentioned earlier: the transgressive nature of much of these pleasures.

Coda: From Evil to Despotism

As I believe has become clear from this discussion of libertine pleasure and ethics, none of the three moral theories – both the realist and antirealist ones – are capable of fitting this particular concept of transgressive cruelty into it. It is at this paradox where speculation about the ultimate source of pleasure, or the ultimate aim of the libertines, comes in. In the secondary literature, many voices essentially converge on the same point here: the missing component in the relationship between pleasure, cruelty and transgression is the fact that the ultimate aim of the libertines is to affirm themselves, their being, which necessarily comes at the expense of others. As Hallie puts it, the libertines’ cruelty “must collide with the customs, laws, and dominant morality of society before it can be stimulation, before it can make the ‘strong being’ come to boil” (Hallie, 1970, p. 296). The most influential version of this idea is arguably found in Blanchot, whose essay forms the basis of many subsequent French interpretations (see e.g.

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unorthodox libertine voice who is rejected precisely for his failure to accept the libertine doctrines by the more important characters – i.e. Juliette and Clairwill.

Foucault, 1980 and Bataille, 1986). Blanchot (2004, p. 22) writes that the endpoint of the libertines is the complete negation of all other forms of life, to establish themselves as a "Unique Being, unique among men . . . truly a sign of sovereignty". Others have come to similar conclusions: Crocker (2019, p. 407), for instance, writes that "[i]n the countless examples Sade offers us, we see that the sadistic pleasure derives from a feeling of absolute power over another human being, from an affirmation of one's being, to the point of godhood, by the denial of another's". In the libertine novels, we sporadically find this idea expressed more or less literally. In *Juliette*, for example, Saint-Fond says that "I affirm that the fundamental, profoundest, and keenest penchant in man is incontestably to enchain his fellow creatures and to tyrannize them with all his might" (JL, p. 317). Furthermore, as Roche (2009) has shown, an additional source of the libertines' pleasure is the making of social comparison: it is "born of the comparison made by the happy man [i.e. the libertine] between his lot and the unhappy man's. . . . The more he crushes his woe-ridden prey, the more extreme he renders the contrast and the more rewarding the comparison; and the more, consequently, he adds fuel to the fire of his lust" (JL, p. 119). A similar claim is found in *The 120 Days of Sodom,* where the libertines speak of "the pleasure of comparison, a pleasure that can arise only from the spectacle of the unfortunate" (S, p. 152).

In conclusion: it is not merely the case that pleasure is a zero-sum game in which "my enjoyment would be far less were you any more willing to comply with it" (JL, p. 138), but, even stronger, the achievable sum total of pleasure is increased enormously, touches levels that consensual, mutually pleasing interactions would never reach, precisely because one of the parties involved is seen to suffer. Importantly, this aspect of pleasure stands in stark contrast with that feature which many (e.g. Phillips, 2005) have described as a vital part – and original contribution – of the libertines' worldview: their *isolisme*, that is, the idea that all humans "are born isolated", and that "from birth, they have no need of the other" (JL, p. 176). Instead, what we see here is a worldview in which the existence of other person is extremely important – because one cannot be a tyrant without other as material to tyrannise. This is why the political dimension is of vital importance to the libertines: it is through politics that their relationship with other human beings is ultimately given shape. It is to this that I shall now finally turn.

III. Between Despotism and Transgression: The Possibility of a Libertine Political Philosophy

In the same way that the libertines present a mixture of ethical theories, they present scattered reflections on what exactly one ought to do with the state – most notably in *Juliette,* in the first half of *Justine*, and in the much-studied republican pamphlet at the end of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*. In this chapter, I argue that there are three broad approaches to politics that the libertines advocate. These strategies are, first, the reforming of the state; second, the destruction and potential replacement of the state by small-scale communities; and third, the weaponizing of the existing state for personal gain. Much of this material has already been mapped out in the secondary literature. However, where others have described the political theories found in the libertine novels, they either tend to catalogue them only in their opposition to the political models found in Sade's other works, such as the novel *Aline et Valcour* (Gorer, 1934 and Fink, 1989 are good examples of this), or, alternatively, they tend to highlight merely a single political model found in the libertine novels and ignore the others (e.g. Corey, 1966; Deleuze, 1991; Wright, 2015). What this chapter therefore does is showing how the political thought in the libertine novels falls into three broad 'strategies' which can be distinguished from one another. I will argue that only the third approach, which is addressed only sporadically (and in these rare moments, often contradictorily) by the libertines, is capable of truly satisfying the conditions under which they can maximise their pleasure.

Reform: The Minimalist State

The first two models given by Sade's characters both start off from the assumption that the current organisation of civil society is unjust, and that political thought ought to address and resolve these injustices. That is, they are both responsive and thoroughly emancipatory in nature. The first of these models is one which many commentators (e.g. Lacan 1989) have taken to be *the* defining Sadean political idea in which the ethical notions are applied, and is most extensively described in a pamphlet read out loud in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*. In this pamphlet, Sade describes what Rogers (1995, p. 95) has called a "minimalist" state, that is, a state which concerns itself with much less than is ordinarily expected of it. Though it is not made explicit in it, the pamphlet ultimately prescribes two main political endeavours. On the one hand, the state ought not to legislate morality in any way, and every action imaginable – including theft, adultery, rape and incest – ought to be left unpunished by the political authorities. On the other hand, the state ought to actively sponsor and protect those institutions and activities which are commonly included in the libertine lifestyle, such as public brothels, to secure the continued possibility of easily accessible and undisturbed licentiousness.

This emancipatory discourse is not confined merely to this pamphlet. Throughout the other libertine novels, including in the footnotes, we often find denouncements of all laws and social norms that inhibit the attainment of pleasure. As I wrote earlier, these ideas are simply the continuation of the same logic which makes the libertines rage against the tyrannical force of organised religion. Again, the way in which it forms this force is twofold: not only does it form an obstacle to the pursuit of individual pleasure once desires arise that are incompatible with the laws and norms, but it also prevents the arising of the desires to begin with through the social conditioning that they bring about in the individual's psyche.[14] The libertines' conclusion, unsurprisingly, is that everything that stands in the way of the individual's desire ought to be removed. Often, the first two moral theories outlined in the previous chapter are called upon to justify this removal of laws: laws have declared forbidden what is not evil because evil does not exist; or, alternatively, laws have declared forbidden what is merely a natural, desirable impulse towards destruction – and because of this, they ought to be done away with. It is because of this detachment between ethics and law, because the creation of laws is therefore always the implicit creation of an erroneous ethical system, that they are criticised again and again. This emancipatory discourse is so pervasive in the libertine novels that Deleuze (1991, p. 87) even concludes: "The heroes of Sade are inspired with an extraordinary passion against tyranny; they speak as no tyrant ever spoke or could ever speak; theirs is the counter-language of tyranny" (Deleuze, 1991, p. 87).

However pervasive this discourse might be, it is fundamentally incompatible with two crucial components of the libertine worldview and lifestyle. First of all, it clashes with the idea that personal pleasure is ultimately all that matters, and that the wellbeing – let alone the liberty – of others is of no true concern to us. Against this, one could argue against that the libertines' emancipatory project merely seeks to liberate themselves from the yoke of the law and that it, only incidentally, produces the liberation of all as a by-effect of its abolition. Even if we concede this argument, weak though I find it, there is an additional way in which the libertine discourse of emancipation runs counter to their own philosophy. More than just occasionally, the libertines argue that it is not merely the securing of individual liberty that they aim towards, but instead the greater good of the state itself. For example, when arguing that the institution of marriage brings more ill than good, Delbène claims that the abolition of it will not merely result in "leaving the two sexes at liberty to consult their [sexual] wishes", but that it will equally result in a stronger, more unified body politic: the disappearance of the jealousy and resentment brought about by marriage will lead to "a homogeneous, tranquil State, with one attitude, one objective, one desire, to live happily together, and together to defend the fatherland" (JL, p. 65, 66). Similarly, the idea of the greater good of the state being the goal of political action is frequently found in passages where the libertines discuss their plans to address their country's overpopulation by preventive measures which vary from the promotion of sodomy and abortion to the outright endorsement of depopulation. For example, while speaking of a plan to exterminate all French Christians, the character Belmor argues that "it would ensure France's health and happiness forever; it is a potent remedy administered to a vigorous body" (JL, p. 501).

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[14] The best expression of this in found in a footnote in which Sade additionally argues that this effect is never so great as to preclude psychic liberation from it: "Man is impudicious born, his impudicity he has from Nature; civilization may tamper with her laws, but never shall civilization extirpate them from the philosopher's soul" (JL, p. 63).

The second component of the libertine worldview as I have outlined it in the previous chapters with which this emancipatory discourse is incompatible is the idea that pleasure is, to an important extent, found in acts which transgress laws and social norms. After all, it is precisely these laws and social norms that this political model seeks to do away with altogether, decrying them for the way in which they inhibit the pursuit of desires. This point will be further elaborated on later in this chapter; first, however, I wish to discuss the second political strategy argued for by the libertines. As we will see, this model – though it is much more adapted to libertine egoism – equally falls short in its compatibility with the transgressive nature of pleasure.

Destroy and Replace: The Social and Antisocial Contract

Rather than aiming for the reforming of the existing state, the second strategy advocated for by the libertines is the abolition of the state altogether. This strategy, expressed mostly in *Juliette* and *Justine*, is firmly embedded in the contractarian tradition in political theory: the libertines discuss the idea of a social contract and explain why it ought to be rejected in favour of a return to the state of nature, i.e. a society with no political structure whatsoever.

Throughout the libertine novels, we find a number of variations on what is essentially the same genealogical account of political society. In *Juliette*, the kleptomaniac libertine Dorval argues that the origins of political organisation can be traced back to private property. Famously, Rousseau argued that it is the desire of the rich to safeguard their possessions that must have lead them to tempt the poor into entering a social contract with them, since it was the rich who had something to gain from it: "[I]t is more reasonable to suppose a thing to have been invented by those to whom it would be of service, than by those whom it must have harmed" (Rousseau, 1989a, p. 356). Against this, Dorval argues instead that the impetus to the formation of political society originates in the poor: it is them who desire to safeguard what little they have, and it is to that end that they band together, alongside the rich (who equally wish to preserve their property) in a body politic:

> When the first laws were promulgated, when the weak individual agreed to surrender part of his independence to ensure the rest of it, the maintenance of his goods was incontestably the first thing he desired, and so to enjoy in peace whatever little he had, he made its protection the prime object of the regulations he wanted formulated (JL, p.115).

A second variation on this account, which equally claims that the drive towards civil society is ultimately based on the needs of the weak and poor, is expressed a little later in *Juliette* by Noirceuil. Here, the argument is only implicitly political in nature, for it instead mainly describes the origin of the existence of a sentiment: human solidarity and brotherhood. However, since it is framed in contractarian terms – the word 'pact' is used repeatedly – it is appropriate to see it as an extension of the same argument. Here, too, we find the idea that a contract is formed, ostensibly to the benefit of all (to further the wellbeing of the contracting parties) with the weak and poor being the initiating party. Crucially, however, Noirceuil adds that this agreement – to see others as brothers, and to give aid to others and receive aid oneself – is only imaginary and therefore null and void: he claims that the rich and powerful "would never have consented and never will consent to it", since "by taking it seriously and accepting it, the strong cedes a lot and gains nothing, which is why he never once subscribed to this nonsense" (JL, p. 178). What Noirceuil does here is centring individual interest in engaging with the idea of a social contract, and it is because of this that the second strategy – that of destroying the social contract – is an improvement over the first strategy: unlike in the strategy to reform existing political structures, this one does put the individual's selfish interests first. However, the libertines do not argue – as Hobbes has – that each person's pursuit of their interest logically leads them into the acceptance of a social contract. Lloyd (2018) argues that the libertines do adhere to a Hobbesian logic, though two important differences exist between their conception of the state of nature (the situation in the absence of civil society) and that of

Hobbes. First of all, Hobbes claims that people in the state of nature are relatively equal in their physical and mental capacities, and therefore lack the ability to permanently overpower others – and thereby permanently safeguard their own lives and possessions. The libertines, however, argue that the division of humans into weak and strong is an essential fact of nature: as Gorer (1934) has shown, the idea of humans being divided into a higher and lower class permeates Sade's oeuvre. Because of this, the strong in the state of nature "will see to their livelihoods wholly unaided; the weak alone may need some assistance" (JL, p. 176-177). The second difference that Lloyd highlights is that the libertines lack the fear of death which, in Hobbes's theory, makes humans pursue the safety found in civil society. This idea is indeed mentioned once during a dialogue on the social contract in *Justine*, where Ironheart argues that perishing while resisting the social contract which would curtail our freedom is the lesser of two evils: when he does so, "his last resource is to lose his life, which is an infinitely lesser misfortune than that of living in opprobrium and misery" (J, p. 39). However, Lloyd stresses this idea of the libertine being an inegalitarian, "fearless Hobbesian" (Lloyd, 2018, p. 215) too much. For one, the libertine attitude towards death is less straightforward than that: though some (but not all) do not fear it, this does not mean that they do not value life, and it is common to find them affirming that "my existence means everything to me" (JL, p. 758). It is perhaps more accurate, as Allison (1994) does, to read their ability to sometimes even derive pleasure from the mimicking of death in mock-executions, which Lloyd discusses, as simply the transgressive pleasure derived from an attempt to overcome even the most insurmountable obstacles – death itself. Perhaps more importantly, Lloyd does not engage with a component of the libertine worldview which actually detaches their deliberations altogether from the Hobbesian logic. As Hume (2014) argued in his essay *Of the Original Contract*, one flaw of contractarian theory is that it already assumes that we ought to keep our promises – but this assumption is everything but self-evident. It is precisely this assumption that the libertines reject. They are also well aware that others will not necessarily keep their word, and they insist on remaining vigilant: "We must always suspect even those whom we consider to be closest to us" (B, p. 57). Furthermore, the libertines do not merely reject this assumption, they even describe, at times, the idea of ungratefulness and betrayal as a property from which they can derive pleasure. (e.g. JL, p. 704, 239).

The problem that this creates has been noted extensively in the secondary literature: what forms of social cooperation, if any, remain possible under this worldview? Blanchot (2004, p. 16), for example, asks in a much-cited passage: "[W]hat commonality can there be between exceptions?"; and Lloyd (2018, p. 26) aptly defines the issue as the "problem of libertine sociability". In their attempts to resolve this problem, many authors have noted that the existing forms of social cooperation between the libertines found in the novels are all attempts at establishing small-scale 'utopias' (the word is explicitly used by e.g. Gorer, 1934; Fink, 1989; Airaksinen, 1995) in which the libertines, by bundling their resources, increase their pleasure. The castle in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, the monastery in *Justine* and the Sodality of the Friends of Crime in *Juliette* are the most well-developed examples of these libertine utopias. However, despite the complete unwillingness of the libertines to be subjected to constraints in the form of the law, all these utopias are structured rigidly around highly detailed rules and guidelines – sometimes even inserted verbatim, page by page, into the novels – which meticulously lays out what they ought and ought not to do (given this codification, Roche (2004) describes these forms of cooperation as an 'anti-social contract'). These rules are justified by the argument that they, contrary to what an ordinary social contract, in which participants alienate a part of their freedom to the state, are fully compatible with the retention of each member's full freedoms. Speaking of the anti-social contract upheld by a robber's gang, Ironheart argues that it is not "out of virtue that . . . I don't stab my companions to death to get their share": instead, it is "because I would then be all alone and would thereby deprive myself of the means by which I could secure the fortune that I expect to obtain with their help" (J, p. 38). However, as Roche (2004) notes, this is an unworkably instable foundation for cooperation, and there is in principle nothing which could withhold a gang member who, concluding that through the betrayal of his companions he will benefit more than through his continued association with them, betrays them.

The most that can be said of these joint enterprises, then, is that they, even though they are seen to exist in practice, are purely theoretically speaking not destined to last long. Still, both the destruction of the social contract and the institution of an anti-social contract satisfy the condition that they serve each participating individual's self-interest – at least as long as it lasts. What it does not yet do, however, is enable the continued existence of laws and norms that can be transgressed. That this is necessary is seen from the way that the libertine utopias interact with the broader world. Rather than merely kidnapping whatever person they can find to satisfy their desires on, the libertines often create elaborate systems of human trafficking in which dozens of henchmen are employed to procure victims who meet specific criteria: for example, they must be children of aristocratic families (e.g. in *The 120 Days of Sodom*) or destitute, virginial girls (e.g. in *Justine*). These criteria presuppose the existence of large forms of social cooperation beyond the libertine utopias with broadly shared laws and social norms which can be transgressed: for example, the alure of aristocratic children is based precisely on them being seen as superior, aloof and refined. It is for this reason that the libertines never fully isolate themselves from the rest of society, and on many occasions even exert direct influence on it. In this, we find the final political strategy.

Weaponise: As Shield, Never as Brake

This third strategy advocated for by the libertines is therefore to use the existing political framework to their own advantage: the institutions need to be infiltrated and weaponised against their victims. There are four main ways in which the state can be of benefit to the libertines.

First, it enables the amassing of vast riches. As I wrote in the previous subsection, some libertines argue that the social contract is the product of the poor banding together to protect what little property they have. However, they argue that the rich, though they will consent to this contract, will have no desire to uphold it. Instead, they will merely see it as a way "to prevent the weak from despoiling one another – so that they, the powerful, could despoil the weak more conveniently" (JL, p. 114). This is done by institutionalising theft in the form of various rent-seeking practices. Judges, priests, merchants and politicians are all accused of swindling and heavily taxing the populace: "stealing was performed juridically" (JL, p. 114).

Second, the possession of not merely wealth, but also of political power and influence enables the libertines to commit crimes with impunity: "[H]e whose gold or influence removes him beyond the reach of the law . . . he, I say, and be certain thereof, he may do whatever he pleases and whenever, and never know an instant's fear" (JL, p. 339). By all sorts of actions, such as employing servants, by bribing witnesses, and by simply using one's influence to build a respectable reputation, the libertines are able to reconcile participation in high society – being a high-ranking clergyman, government official, and so forth – with the committing of all sorts of crimes. Even in the case that someone would wish to accuse these libertines of crimes, they would not be taken seriously: one "could only submit appeals which would soon be dismissed with a laugh if ever they were heard or which, more probably, would be immediately branded as calumnies" (JL, p. 102). In fact, it is this prospect of committing crimes with impunity which convinces Juliette, after having been abandoned by her erstwhile libertine mentor, to pursue a career of vice: it is only then that she will "enjoy the same rights and the same pleasures" (JL, p. 102) as her mentor. Furthermore, the libertines occasionally describe their ability to commit crimes with impunity as prudentially desirable, but also as something pleasurable: "[T]he certitude that you will get away scot-free enormously enhances the charms of crime" (p. 643). In addition, the possession of wealth and power enables the libertines to not only commit crime while participating in society, but also to simply retreat into the utopic communities described earlier and organise their whole existence around libertinage: the first paragraph of *The 120 Days of Sodom*, for example, describes how the four libertines made their fortune by leeching of the French population during the war-torn rule of Louis XIV. The vast resources put into the libertines' project enable them to isolate themselves in a castle to such an extent that they are not merely invulnerable to the law but also literally out of sight for the rest of society. To the assembled victims in this castle, the Duc de Blangis says:

> [H]ere you are far from France in the depths of an uninhabitable forest, beyond steep mountains, the passes through which were cut off as soon as you had traversed them; you are trapped with an impenetrable citadel; no one knows you are here – you have been taken from your friends, your families, *you are already dead to the world and it is only for our pleasures that you are breathing now* (S, p. 56, emphasis my own).

This desire for absolute privacy is expressed in the location of many of the libertines' utopias: they are places hidden by forests, or subterranean, or accessible only through hidden passages, and so forth. It is a privacy that not merely ensures that their crimes will be committed with impunity, but it is a privacy in which the complete domination of the victims can be achieved. It is not merely destruction of others that the libertines aim for here. As the Duc says, it is by transporting their victims to an inaccessible world entirely constructed by the libertines that these victims are ultimately stripped of their humanity and reduced to the status of objects.

The third way in which the state can be made to serve the libertines is by using it to keep the masses of poor in destitution and servitude. This is important for two reasons. For one, it prevents everybody else from similarly approaching the state with equal opportunism and thereby robbing the libertines of their ability to effectively weaponise it. In a dialogue between Juliette and Noirceuil, the situation is described as a collective action problem: if everybody were to see the law as a mere instrument to enforce their own will, then the ability of the government to enforce its laws would disappear:

> "But these laws, originating with mere mortals, merit no consideration from the philosopher; never shall they be allowed to halt or influence the gestures Nature dictates to him; the one effect they can have upon a man of intelligence is to encourage him to cover up his movements and maintain vigilance: laws? let's use them for our own purposes, as a shield, never as a brake."

> "But, my friend," I remarked to Noirceuil, "if that were everybody's attitude, there'd be no shield." (JL, p. 175-176).

Interestingly, Noirceuil jumps to the wrong conclusion here, and merely argues that, if this were indeed to happen, the state of nature would be preferable over civil society:

> "Very well," my lover replied, "in that case we shall revert to the state of uncivilization in which Nature created us: that, surely, would be no great misfortune" (JL, p.176).

However, the conclusion much more compatible with the libertine worldview – one which they themselves, however, only sporadically express explicitly – is that, in order to ensure the ability to weaponise the government which serves them so well, the masses need to be kept ignorant and under strict control: "There is no governing human beings unless you deceive them" (JL, p. 480). Roche (2004), chiefly following Fauskevåg's (2001) work, synthesises the scattered meditations of the libertines on this subject into four points which together form "a methodology of total control and domination of the masses" (Roche, 2004, p. 263). First, other sources of authority, such as the church, ought to be co-opted or destroyed. Second, their own power needs to be mythologised – e.g. by presenting themselves as godlike figures – through propaganda. Third, economic policies ought to be implemented that are aimed at the impoverishment of the populace in order to leave them too powerless and too occupied with ensuring their own survival to resist the political order. Fourth and last, demographic policies equally aimed at enfeebling the people ought to be enacted too. As I mentioned earlier, the libertines frequently advocate for measures aimed at depopulating the country – they are usually defended by pointing at the supposed link between population size and political stability (this point is further developed by Rohrbasser et al., 2019).

The second reason why it is in the libertines' interest to keep the poor in a state of destitution is because the existence of large differences in wealth, social status and wellbeing between the libertines and their victims enhances the pleasure which is born from interpersonal comparisons. As I argued in the coda to the second chapter, the idea that pleasure is derived from, and justified by, the act of destruction ultimately fails to explain certain aspects of the libertines' projects. What they desire is not just to destroy, but also to transgress boundaries and limitations. In this coda, I argued that the concept most capable of encompassing both the destructive and transgressive nature of the libertines' pleasure is the desire for self-affirmation, achieved by the complete negation of others. This is why pleasure increases as the difference between the libertine and his victim grows: the former experiences not merely the pleasure born of inflicting pain, but additionally receives “the thrill that comes of contrasting weal and woe and finding the comparison heavily in [his] favor” (JL, p. 284). This is why the libertines consistently prey on the weak – the poor, children, women – and pay little attention to the strong: “It is the downtrodden, the unlucky, the helpless [that] one should whenever possible make the targets of one’s wickedness: the tears you wring from indigence have a pungency which very potently stimulates the nervous humours” (JL, p. 710). When, in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, Durcet asserts that “[w]herever men shall be equal and where differences shall cease to exist, happiness too shall cease to exist” (S, p. 152), it is – though this is not the context in which it is given – a profoundly political statement which other libertines are seen putting into practice: in order to keep social comparisons as source of pleasure intact, the poor must be held poor.

These three points, though they have not been synthesised and catalogued as I give them here, have already seen analysis by those who taken the true libertine political philosophy to be, in the words of Corey (1966, p. 30), the “establishment of a government with laws to compel obedience to the tyranny of Sadistic elites”. The fourth final way in which the weaponizing of the state serves the libertines’ interests, however, is one which has received – to my mind – little to no serious attention in the secondary literature. This is the fact that the maintenance of political order enables the libertines to uphold both laws and societal norms among the populace from which they, by transgressing it, can derive pleasure in a durable way. Throughout the novels, the libertines mention an extensive list of norms from which they derive transgressive pleasure. Many of these, predominantly those relating to sexuality, have already been mentioned throughout this thesis. However, they also show a capacity to enjoy the presence of all sorts of virtues: “Beauty tends to excite us further; virtue, innocence, candor embellish the object” (JL, p. 270). Moreover, the idea of falsely accusing someone and seeing them punished while innocent by the authorities is repeatedly brought up. The best example of this is when Juliette and Noirceuil falsely accuse their handmaid of theft and have her jailed by a constable. Afterwards, Noirceuil muses: “And the pleasure you have felt was doubled, wasn’t it, Juliette, by your knowledge of her innocence? Had she been guilty, our deed would have been in the service of the law: and we would have been cheated of all that is delicious in evil” (JL, p. 175). The logical conclusion of this, which is however only rarely made explicit by the libertines, is that it is actually very much in the interest of oneself to, in order to maximise pleasure, have the taboos that are transgressed be both present and as robust as possible: “If one has tasted all that, one would like the barriers to increase further so that infringing them will be harder and offer greater charms" (J, p. 207).

The problem, however, is that the existence of these laws and norms presuppose the existence of a functioning state and society. Both the first and second political strategy advocated for by the libertines would risk this source of pleasure disappearing. If the social contract is destroyed and replaced only by an anti-social contract for some, as is the goal in the second strategy, there is no guarantee that such a society from whose laws and norms they can benefit will arise. The first strategy yields even more disastrous results: if they seek to inculcate the entire population with libertine norms and values and abolish all laws that sanction morality, then no act will any longer be seen as taboo, and from no such act will transgressive pleasure be able to arise. It is doubtful, however, whether the libertines fully grasp this point. They affirm how they yearn for the existence of limits but they, even in the rare moments where they describe how a despotic political order would benefit them, cannot help themselves from slipping into the idea that the existing norms and values ought to be rooted out. For instance, Saint-Fond gives a lengthy exposition of the methods through which the lower classes can be permanently subjugated where he endorses two mutually incompatible prescriptions. On the one hand, he argues that the teaching of conventional morality to children will have to stop: instead, "the pure and unadulterated principles of Nature will be taught in the public schools" (JL, p. 320). On the other hand, he does argue for the importance of teaching these morals to those that the libertines will tyrannise: "Everything denominated crime of libertinage at present . . . will be reprehensible *only if committed by a member of the slave castes*" (JL, p. 321, emphasis added). What Saint-Fond endorses here is simply the idea of two sets of moralities existing alongside each other: a conventional one for the tyrannised, a libertine one for the tyrants. The fact that this class distinction can only function if the lower classes are unaware of the divide – if they were to correctly identify the tyrannical intent of their moral system, they would cease to have the true attachment to it which is necessary for transgressive pleasure – reinforces a point which Roche (2004) has drawn attention to, namely, the importance of secrecy and dissimulation to uphold the libertines' despotic regime.

Although this third strategy is indeed compatible with the concept of transgressive pleasure – even if, as I argued, the libertines themselves rarely realise this themselves – the question yet remains whether this system, given the 'problem of libertine sociability' that I mentioned earlier, has any chance of long-lasting success. Is the existence of an upper class of libertines, cooperating in secret to tyrannise the lower classes, feasible when the libertines have no attachment except to their own interest and are no strangers to betrayal? A faithful reading of Sade can only yield an ambivalent response to this question. The idea of "honor amongst thieves" or "honor amongst rakes" (JL, p. 159, 646) is usually mentioned ironically and hardly taken seriously by the libertines. However, the mere fact that they so often band together – even if betrayal always remains a realistic option – shows that the libertines do ultimately seem capable of long-term cooperative schemes. Indeed, the ambivalent answer to this question lies precisely in the two-pronged emotional attitude which the presence of their fellow libertines elicits from them. On the one hand, their shared love for evil and their capacity to reach greater heights through their cooperation certainly does seem to result in a sort of friendship between them, a friendship which one libertine describes as "founded upon likeness of humor and compatibilities of taste" (JL, p. 482). On the other hand, their close cooperation and occasional dependency on one another enables them to betray one another, too: by definition, only friends and confidants are betrayed. Despite the fact that this, logically speaking, can never fully be ruled out, it nevertheless remains true that the vast majority of their crimes are – as I mentioned earlier – deliberately aimed at the weaker classes, not at their own ilk. The possibility that they might eventually be stabbed in the back seems to be something that they ultimately just acquiesce to as a necessary risk in their lifestyles.

Coda: From Despotism to Illusion

The fact that only the third political strategy is capable of satisfying the conditions under which transgressive pleasure says something important about the libertines' philosophy. As I argued, the success of their political project depends on whether they manage to keep their true intentions hidden from the slave caste whose morals and laws the libertines will seek to undermine. However, what this ultimately should result in is the realisation that the social order most conducive to their pleasure equally depends for its success on the extent to which the artificiality of these laws and norms can remain hidden to the libertines themselves. After all, when a libertine is fully conscious of the true meaning of the political order they have constructed, is it truly still the pinnacle of self-affirmation to derive pleasure from the transgressing of limits which they themselves know are groundless, yet have an effect on them nonetheless merely because a rigorously conditioned and subjugated slave caste is convinced of the realness of these laws and norms? To say yes here would betray a weirdly impoverished conception of what it means to exercise power. The only credible alternative, then, is for the libertines to simply forget the true nature – and the true vapidness – of their actions in order to be still pleased by them. Tellingly, the libertines sometimes actually do express a preference for what is unreal over what is real: “Truth titillates the imagination far less than fiction” (JL, p. 459). However, this does not resolve the problem, for even in this yearning for the illusionary do the libertines express a desire to dominate:

> I sometimes think the reality possessed is not worth the images we chase thereof, and wonder whether the enjoyment of that which we have not, does not much exceed the enjoyment of that which is ours: lo, there is your ass, Juliette, there before my eyes, and beauteous it is to my contemplation; but my imagination, a more inspired architect than Nature, a more cunning artisan than she, creates other asses more beautiful still; and the pleasure I derive from this illusion, is it not preferable to the one which reality is about to have me enjoy? There is beauty in what you offer me there, but only beauty; what I invent is sublime; with you I am going to do nothing that anyone else may not do, whilst with this ass my imagination has wrought, I might do things which not even the gods themselves would invent (JL, p. 522).

In conclusion: though the libertines’ philosophy is coherent enough to lead to a specific political system, it is in this system too that we discover the best expression of the fragility of their entire worldview. The struggle to accommodate and explain the pleasure derived from transgressive acts, which already arose while discussing physics and ethics, here comes to its culmination – and its aporia.

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