

DOES SENSIBILITY HAVE AN HISTORICAL CONTEXT?

“Sensibility in the Early Modern Era: From Living Machines to Affective Morality”, ed. Anik Waldow, *Intellectual History Review*, Volume 25, Issue 3 (2015), ISSN: 1749-6977 (print), 1749-6985 (online), pp. 255-372

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When a special issue of an intellectual history journal is dedicated to sensibility, one of the first questions asked is whether sensibility is particularly connected to a certain historical context. Isn't the nature of sensibility something beyond time and not entirely situated within early modernity? There are claims about particular historical periods but especially the early modern as being an “age of reason” or “the scientific revolution,” but “age of sensibility”? Although there have been a few recent books about sensibility in the early modern context¹, this has never been claimed by historians, although the eighteenth century has been described as the “age of sentiment.” Why is it that sensibility is particularly suited to the period between Kepler and Kant or Goethe?

One way to approach the question of sensibility is through the self, as Udo Thiel points out, insofar as concerns of the self and identity arise in the work of Locke, Condillac, and Rousseau. Since sensation is passive for Locke, how is it that self-presence, or one's awareness of self, comes about through sensibility (and not necessarily through reflection)? Taking into account journal notes from before the publication of his *Essay* (1690), Locke claims that sensibility “here refers to an immediate awareness or feeling of one's own state, a feeling which is part of being alive” (258). French thinkers took over from Locke, such as Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746) and *Traité des sensations* (1754), in which the basis of the self is further divided into consciousness and memory (*réminiscence*). “[W]e recognize our identity through reminiscence,” according to Condillac, “[i]f this connection [between perceptions] was interrupted every night, I would, so to speak, each day begin a new life... Thus reminiscence is the product of the connection that preserves the sequence of our perceptions” (261, quoting the *Essai*). Rousseau also takes over Lockean sensibility as constitutive of the self, especially by means of *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*, but Thiel claims that even prior to these is something more basic, that is, the enjoyment of life (*sentiment de l'existence*), “a notion that goes back to Malebranche and other broadly Cartesian thinkers” (266). This awareness for Rousseau involves memory, and while there are some differences between the three, all of them believe that the self relates to sensibility and its existence through time by means of memory.

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Another approach, which also seems to arise around the same period, is by means of the camera obscura, as Michael Olson argues. This instrument is introduced in Kepler's *Ad Vitellionem Paralipomena* (1604). But this is in fact a different notion of sensibility, an analogy between eye and camera, in which both are types of mechanism. Descartes takes over such a perspective in his *Dioptrics* (1637), and like Kepler it is the soul that has sensory perceptions, but not the body: "The mechanisms of the body, and of vision in particular, are firmly distinguished from the activities of the soul such that the camera obscura can offer clear insight into the former without threatening metaphysical accounts of the latter". (282) Olson continues by looking into Locke and Leibniz as well as Wolff's *German Metaphysics* (1724), where the latter explicitly tried to defend the soul (particularly its immateriality) from a mechanistic projectionist interpretation of the act of cognition. Mechanistic representations (*Vorstellungen*) and thoughts (*Gedancken*) must be distinguished in this picture and it is with the danger of materialism that Wolff is most concerned.

If the self and the camera obscura are two lenses of approaching sensibility, a third, as Jessica Riskin points out, concerns the science of life, or rather an "historical science of life" in which a "movement of poets, physiologists, novelists, chemists, philosophers, and experimental physicists [were] often contained in the same person"². (302) Kant (and Goethe) most explicitly, but also Coleridge, Leibniz, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Emerson, and Poe, among others, pointed out that there is a dilemma over the role of agency in nature: either the stone, plant or animal is purposive or not. Kant's third *Critique* somehow posed this question to nature along with the union of science and poetry: "Natural philosophers of this period were by default also poets, often presenting their scientific findings in poetic form" (293). With a particular concentration on the second half of the third *Critique*, Riskin points to the dilemma of reconciling a mechanistic ban on agency in nature where teleological judgments are possible, but must be local and relative. Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants* mirrors the transformation of vitality, exemplifying Lamarck's coining of the term *biologie* in 1802. A plurality of characters are discussed in what Riskin calls the dilemma dramatized, and her interaction of poetry and science ends in "a form of explanation that might best be named historical."

As we have seen, a critique of sensibility can be the flip side of reason and a rejection of mechanism. Dalia Nassar also takes up Kant and Goethe on this question concerning purposiveness, in which experience becomes a more plastic principle. This means that Kant's third *Critique* improves upon and provides a richer account of the role of sensibility in the first *Critique*. If there is a model for this account of the plasticity of cognition, it is how *internal purposiveness* (but not formal or relative). Her example of the circle in space and ecosystems or habitats shows how the "concept of purpose differs from all other ideas of reason because its objects are given in experience ... [whereas] nothing is actually given in intuition" (319). Goethe completes the circle of what Kant had begun by making experience even less sequential and more spontaneous. "A stem does not first grow, and is then followed by a leaf. Rather, leaves develop simultaneously with the stem" (321). The imagination is thus the faculty that best explains why and how the parts relate to one another successively and simultaneously, "transforming what is given to perception and

imagination into an idea” (322). Kant’s *Critique*, for Goethe, were the seeds for a philosophy of sensibility.

The most provocative approach in this special issue for sensibility is found in Henry Martyn Lloyd’s contribution, who compares Rousseau to Sade. For Sade, philosophy literally serves as foreplay (as in the pornographic *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 1795) in which the virginal Eugénie finds that philosophical speech incites her to masturbation and here the title of Lloyd’s paper is part of Mme de Saint-Ange’s response: “Je n’ai jamais vu une sensibilité comme la tienne, jamais une tête si délicieuse!” What is it that is best effective, or sensible, such that it leaves an affect on the subject? An impact for Rousseau or Sade concerns the affect it has on the listener. “[I]n fact the use of the term ‘sensibility’ in Sade is a key indicator of the way that the Sadean text and Rousseauvian text ‘agree’ about the terms of their disagreement” (329). Both of these writers are born out of a medical context of Montpellier vitalism in which, as Lloyd claims, experience is not passive, instrumental, or disembodied (as in Locke), but rather affective or immersed (to use contemporary author Lisa Shapiro’s language). The difference, however, is that whereas Rousseau emphasises the heart, Sade emphasises the material body. The problem with the heart for Sade is that it cheats and misleads, even if both emphasise sensationism and vitalist anthropology. Whereas for Rousseau there is a primacy of heart over the head, the play on head (*tête*) for Sade is not a thinking head but rather sensibility as “the general capacity for excitation or arousal, particularly of the sexual kind...[and thus] sensibility is a power which must be cared for, nurtured, cultivated, or developed” (336).

Anik Waldow furthers the earlier discussions of Rousseau by Thiel and Lloyd, claiming that nature and artifice (or nurture) are much closer than contemporary culture leads us to believe. Nature acts in the guise of sensibility and for Rousseau’s *Emile*, education is really about habit and since habits are a product of education, they inhibit nature. Thus, how does a student develop in line with their natural needs without a teacher in the same way that a plant grows and flourishes? On Waldow’s reading, whereas human nature is vacuous for Rousseau due to the malleability between the natural and artificial, Herder is more consistent in emphasising the imagination: “To enter imaginatively into images and sentiments foreign to one’s own is not only regarded as a legitimate means in the study of the moral dimension of human life, but stronger than this it is even required if we want to understand morality as such” (349). Thinking and experience are intimately tied to feeling, for Rousseau and Herder, and sensibility “renders us susceptible to the way the world affects us” (352).

Finally, Michael Frazer’s “Seduced by System” closes the special issue by focusing on Adam Smith, primarily an academic, and Edmund Burke, primarily a politician. Sensibility, it appears, resists systematic analysis, and may be based more on the sublime and beautiful than rational categories, such as liberty or justice. Prudence applies as much to the statesman as to the philosopher and beauty is less an intoxication of “imagined perfection” (363) than it is based on sympathy. Utopian dreams are too perfect to be realized, and “the beauty of the *Theory* and the *Wealth* is akin to that found in the ordered harmony of classical architecture ... [whereas] the sublimity of the *Reflections* is akin to that of a bombastic tragedy, and is greeted with

weeping and gnashing of teeth” (366). Scientific positivism will never bring about happiness, and the roles of philosopher and statesman become reversed with the “philosopher advocating political caution, the statesman becoming enamored with the perfection of an imagined ideal” (368).

While there is no answer here as to the historical advent of sensibility, overall, the conceptions of sensibility discussed here and seen throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries take on slightly different forms in the British Isles, France, and Germany. Whether in John Locke or Adam Smith, Rousseau, Kant or Goethe, the issues at stake of what constitutes sensibility are conditioned and shaped by their historical context. A few questions arise: What about Shaftesbury, Elizabeth’s correspondence with Descartes, or Astell or Masham’s relation to Locke and Hobbes? Can there be such a thing as a “living machine” named in the subtitle? Could there have equally been a late medieval or Renaissance account of sensibility or a twentieth-century one and how would this be different from an early modern one? What is unique to this special issue concerns, what Waldow writes, “Moral and epistemic ways of relating to the world thus blend into one another, as both can be traced to the same capacity that enables us to affectively respond to stimuli that impinge on our perceptual apparatus” (255).

References

¹ See, for example, Stephen Gaukroger, *The Collapse of Mechanism and the Rise of Sensibility* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2010); Laura Linker, *Dangerous Women, Libertine Epicures, and the Rise of Sensibility, 1670-1730* (London: Ashgate, 2011); Koen Vermeir and Michael Funk Deckard, eds. *The Science of Sensibility: Reading Burke’s Philosophical Enquiry* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012); Henry Martyn Lloyd, ed. *The Discourse of Sensibility* (Cham: Springer, 2013).

² However, it is worth pointing out that Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have discussed that in separating artist and scientist, we are making such a distinction retrospectively. See their *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 186.