

Hedonistic Morality and the Art of Life: Jean-Marie Guyau Revisited

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To approach Jean-Marie Guyau today is not an easy job. His thought, influential and well known at first, nearly forgotten later, and rarely used or quoted nowadays, appears in those rare interpretations as eclectic structure build from Epicurean and Stoic shell, French positivist and English evolutionary scientific theories and their philosophical universalisations, put on liberal and utilitarian background, and brought into relation with artistic modernism and *l'art pour l'art*-ism. From such perspective, it resembles eclectic imperial universality of French Second Empire.

However, Jean-Marie Guyau (1854-1888) belongs to next generation, not to that of *Palais de l'industrie* and Second Empire, and is definitely not a Saint-Simonian *scientifico*, as emissaries of Napoleon III to Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz were called. His end was not to put ideas one beside, or one over the other, classifying them into mechanic and invented order. His aim was to discover a moving force uniting conflicting ideas and conflicting facts of the 19th century into readable and acceptable synthesis which should appear as more than just sterile scientific explanation: it must make sense. A moving force which makes sense – that is what his short but creative philosophical expedition was trying to get at. As his stepfather Alfred Fouillée said in his »Preface« (Guyau 1927, p. 2), »le ordre est la lumière de la pensée« -order is the light of thought-, but there are two ways to illuminate. One is to put different systems into a structural grid prepared in advance to enlist any possible kind of thought, another, a way taken by his stepson, is to put aside artificial divisions and subdivisions, and to reproduce

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systems development and evolution by starting from fundamental and concrete idea. If we apply this Guyau's method on Guyau's philosophy, we find that his master-key is life as energy which makes everything else possible. For Guyau, however, »life« is not just an idea, and not even a source of energy only: before any philosophical utterance life is an embodied truth about ourselves and our world. This vital force echoes in, but is not to be confused with Bergson's later *élan vital* (translated as vital impetus or vital force). For Guyau life is »morally indifferent, a blind force« (Michon 2008), and this means that it is morally neither good nor evil. But life always appears as embodied, which means that it appears in concrete circumstances; concrete circumstances include its ability to reflect upon its being-in-the world, and its position in circumstances which are historically shaped. This goes for all that is life, but in human conditions it brings out an evolutionary difference: our circumstances are historically pre-determined through our culture and not just through humans being another species of life among the others. Or, to put it in relationship with other kinds of social Darwinism and/or positivism, Guyau promotes history into primary human evolutionary environment. However, it would be wrong to interpret this historicity in terms of historical materialism (Marx) or cultural studies. History is a social environment which includes embodied artifacts and institutions already framed, but primary substance of historicity of human beings is their sociality as a space of free intersubjectivity beyond any strict determinism. Guyau's idea of social environment as historically embedded is not oriented towards discovery of hard mechanical laws of human behaviour, quite the contrary, it seeks to understand social *milieu* with its traditions and interactions as a complex field of differentiations and free choice. To put Guyau in relationship with Taine and positivism, F. J. W. Harding (1973, p. 65) accentuates that »...the influence of a social environment ceases to be dominant in highly complex and dynamic communities which tend to break up into a number of smaller, independent *milieux*.« Beside »life« as dominant idea, there is a dominant motive in Guyau's thought: to liberate philosophy and science from positivist or social evolutionist ambition to represent human beings and their social interaction in terms of mechanical determinism, and to synthesize such knowledge into laws of absolute necessity which call for scientific manipulation management of the people, a discipline which political leaders found so compelling in Saint-Simonian doctrines.

Life is an unconditional force, and source of ethical considerations which are not deducted from duty or other already culturally constructed principles. What conditions our ethical disposition in the first place is time, following »life« as next ethically most important Guyau's category. For the sake of interpretation, I will speak here about clock-time, psychological time, and existential-ethical time. Clock-time developed through 19th century for the first time: a phenomenon of time-control over life and especially over working time periods which was examined and interpreted so well by historian E. P. Thompson, including invention and mass use of clock and watch by individuals which started initially as a consequence of »Puritan discipline and bourgeois exactitude« (E.P. Thompson, 1967). What Guyau is best known for is his elaboration of psychological time.

From this point of view, time is an acquired organisation of representations enabling humans to store and remember past events. According to Guyau who was well informed about most recent developments in psychology, the cognitive functions or strategies that realize this organisation nearly always establish coherent episodes that are situated in concrete, spatially defined contexts, which means that we get to the idea of time by constructing our own narrations from raw memory material, or, if you want, by knitting autobiographic telenovelas about our own lives. Guyau himself states that our memory is an art as well – »*la mémoire est aussi un art*« (Guyau 1890, III). Still, beside this posthumously published text on time, Guyau treated time as an ethical category in his first great text already. This happened in Guyau (1927) »*La morale d'Épicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines*« (The Morality of Epicurus and its Relations to Contemporary Doctrines) which gained him an award by French Academy for moral and political sciences. In this text, divided in two parts (on Epicurus, and on his influence on contemporary thinkers), he connects contemporary utilitarian morality with Epicureanism in a way which strongly suggests his personal idea of moral integrity. There are two schools of practical morality fighting passionately for supremacy through centuries: Epicurean which starts from embodied life and its interest for pleasure or joy (*jouissance*) of being alive, and Stoic which starts from virtue and builds a case for moral duty of a person. For Epicureans (and Guyau here enlists himself among the ranks), good is what is good for us, and that is pleasurable life: pleasure is at the same time true and good (Guyau 1927, p. 23). Before we start to measure morality of our decisions and actions with any kind of virtues deducted from pure ideas, we have to recognize our senses and our bodily existence as moral and epistemic criteria which cannot be pushed aside or subordinated to something else because such diminishing of their authority cannot function in practice.

Life is desire for pleasure. Looking for pleasure and avoiding pain is its sensual experience. For pleasure to appear as good to be followed, it is enough to have senses and bodily existence. This makes life a utilitarian, making choice between pleasure and pain to get at maximum pleasure. Reason (*phronesis*) starts from these decisions and experiences. But to stop at this stage and call it a source of all our ethical stance would be Aristippus' of Cyrene position, i.e. bare hedonism which lives always in present, making decisions from past experiences but recognizing no other future than continuing repeat of the same. If compared with utilitarian approach, bare hedonism is wrong because there is no pleasure without pain, as well there is no pain without pleasure: the joy of being alive is always there (Guyau 1927, p. 39). To live life in full sense, it is not enough to be happy from pure pleasure. This is an empty happiness, and what we want is fullness of living, not emptiness of pain. To use French expressions, it is not enough to be *hereux*, what we have to long for is to be *bienheureux*. Experiencing life in full sense is real happiness – *le bonheur*. Those who remember that Stendhal's definition of love and of artistic beauty is *promesse de bonheur* might ask if there is a connection to aesthetics in this fullness of life. Indeed there is: Guyau calls this state a state of

beauty, because it means subordination of all of its parts, sensations, pleasures and pains to universal tendency to get at a state of balanced harmony of life.

To proceed from one pleasure to another, Aristipe's choice is obviously not an option. But this morality of balance would hardly hold our lives together without existential time framework. We are born into life, and getting aware of that fact means getting aware of our mortality as well. The span between birth and death is our time-span, the first form of time we get aware of, and it constitutes the meaning of future in our reflective ability: because life has to end, we need to follow an end during its duration. Death does not concern us, because (a well known Epicurus and also Stoic position) when we are alive, there is no death, and when death is here, we are already absent. Dying is another story, and it could be painful as it was in Epicurus case, but we have to suffer without complaint, with serene mind and calm awareness: if we have courage to live, we have to have courage to die.

Time-span of life from birth to death makes ethical stance of human beings complete: if we follow our own happiness which is in living full life, we make prudent and rational decisions without need for any external moral doctrine, just following the determination of our existence. This brings out a life which is at the same time pleasurable and morally perfect, aesthetically and ethically consistent. But, to bring ethical and aesthetic attitude of our lives together, and to proceed from his youth inclination towards Epicurus and its contemporary utilitarian and evolutionary followers, Guyau has to alter the idea of the aesthetic too. On one side, there were modernists with their insistence on the pure aesthetic which does not belong to life but to art beyond everyday life; on the other side, there were utilitarians and evolutionists who dismissed art and beauty because they seemed to be mere play: pleasant, but not serious business. Guyau's position, build in just few years of his active life, was that there is much more to the aesthetic than just pure art, and that there is much more to art and beauty in our lives than simple play and entertainment. The aesthetic is at the core of everyday life: feeling of being alive is in itself pleasurable and aesthetic feeling which engages all our senses, which makes our sensuality and perception aesthetic pleasure in itself. We are not aware of this side of our *aisthesis* all the time, but when we turn our attention from »just existing« to awareness of »being alive« it springs out immediately. We could say that our primordial aesthetic experience is also a kind of primordial reflexivity: from our immediate perception of external stimuli we turn perceptual attention to our own sensuality and perception, and this is pleasurable because it turns on awareness of being alive.

This fact has ethical consequences for our moral choices. If life itself generates ethical stance, we do not need to deduct moral norms from ideas and ideals. We do not need the idea of God for moral guidance, as Stoics thought, but have to listen to ourselves and reflex on our life in its living context which is, among other circumstances, the necessity of some pain in pleasure and some pleasure in pain, our life-time embedded between birth and death, our ability for reflexive

perception which brings out aesthetic awareness of being alive, and our historically determined existence which puts us in previously existing social and cultural circumstances of our lives. This kind of ethics is therefore evolutionary ethics and not normative ethics. Guyau translated Epictetus' manual for stoic ethical life when he was 17, being deeply inspired by him, but in 'war' between Epicureism and Stoicism his philosophical position was more with Epicurus. Ethics without obligation and sanction, i.e. without any higher court above human life demanding that metaphysical rules should be followed, is ethics of freedom which belongs to life itself. Guyau opposed the view that starting from drive for pleasure we must arrive at selfish struggle between individuals. Here again, his principle of life and pleasure is opposed to the idea of isolated individual. »Living means spending as much as it does acquiring« (Guyau 1898), he states, meaning that life has to be active, and in activity it tends to increase its own strength: »Like fire, life only preserves itself by communicating itself.« (Guyau 1898) Our entire being is sociable. Not because of some law superior to life itself, but because there is pleasure in sharing, as well as there is pleasure in sharing pleasure. It is a pleasure to see others seeing that we enjoy: »Sensibility has the same expansive force: we must share our joy, we must share our pain.« (Guyau 1898)

Aesthetic realm thus becomes much wider than in pure artistics, and aesthetics cannot deal only with beautiful, as in calistics. What it amounts to, however, is a definite connection and merger between aesthetics and ethics founded on pleasure principle as reliable criterion and guide of ethical choices. Ethical attitude might depend on personal choice and not on definite arguments, which makes it hard to say that Guyau invented a certain aesthetic compass for ethical dilemmas. But I believe that his solution is the most consistent possible if we want to avoid obligations and sanctions as the only way to establish ethical principles applicable to human existential situation. At the same time, the aesthetic as unavoidable component of our sensual and supra-sensual life is not without ethical. Avoiding to get trapped in well known paradoxes of ordinary utilitarianism, Guyau puts in front two phenomenological features of human existence: life embraced in timespan from birth to death, and our pleasure's call for presence and pleasure of the others. To put it differently: the aesthetic is not something objective, yes, but neither is it simply subjective relationship, because its basic conditions arise from sociality, and its fundamental features come from collectivity.

The most important part of Guyau's polemical evolutionism is a point he makes to establish aesthetical realm as something serious, against Spencer's and others attitude that art and the aesthetic domain are just a play on the other side of survival or adaptation principle. As F. J. Harding (Harding 1973, p. 14) characterizes Guyau's *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine* (1884), »Guyau at once reveals his own approach, which is indeed designed to show that art and poetry have all the seriousness of life itself... «Guyau's position is a typical polemic with two confronted camps, that of German aesthetic idealism represented by Kant and Schiller, and of English utilitarianism and evolutionism represented by Herbert Spencer, James Sully and Grant Allen. Those who defend

disinterestedness, and those who understand art and the aesthetic as pure play which has no impact on basic evolutionary change and adaptation, share the same bias because they cannot see how art is involved with life itself, not on some disinterested level far away from serious matters of usefulness and interest but within its very core. Similar reduction as this of art to pure play is reduction of our aesthetic sensibility to just two senses, those of eye and ear: from Guyau's position, all senses together are important for aesthetic experience.¹ Guyau does not oppose to Spencer's claim that art is a play, but to his presupposition that it is a harmless use of surplus energy.² For Guyau, all play contains some aesthetic elements, because even strength and skill are aesthetic qualities. The beautiful consists in a perception or an action which stimulates life in us, Harding rightly says (Harding 1973, pp. 27, 29) in his interpretation of Guyau. But positivism is just one side of this wrong approach; another belongs to art itself, with modern artists who also proclaim that it has nothing whatsoever to do with life (Harding 1973, p. VII). The beautiful, however, is not something deprived of its serious importance for and involvement with life: »We have seen that whatever is serious and useful, and all that is real and alive can, under certain conditions, become beautiful.« (Guyau 1884, p. 37). The beautiful can appear in movements, sensations and sentiments, and has three main components: power, harmony and grace. With this last component, Guyau enters in polemics with Schiller and Schelling, confirming Herbert Spencer views, but only to a certain extent: grace is power executed with ease, which means that it is efficiently applied. However, he again does not agree that grace appears in play only, and argues that there is grace in executing useful work as well. What is most important for Guyau, be it with grace or within aesthetics or with morality is freedom and liberty. Liberty, because there is no other power hidden in life or in control of life than life itself, and freedom, because all the movements of life come from its own energy. This view is compatible with Epicurus atomist theory.

Guyau appears as eclectic if we study his thought in positivist manner, as a crossroad of different influences and inspirations from otherwise conflicting schools of thought. What makes his philosophy, especially aesthetics and ethics, a coherent and still important contribution to pertinent problems of modern and post-modern condition, is his insistence on everyday aesthetics and everyday ethics, his insistence on importance of all senses and his development of aesthetics beyond art. On top of all that, he dismissed individualism of liberal theoreticians,

¹ But for Guyau, on the other hand, every agreeable sensation, no matter what its origin, can take on aesthetic character both by acquiring a certain degree of intensity and by a resultant re-echo in consciousness.« (Harding 1973, p.18) It is well known that Guyau was probably the first one in aesthetics to attribute aesthetic quality to all senses, and to everyday aesthetic feelings, such as mere breathing which, if we turn our attention to what otherwise goes on without reflection, becomes a source of our pleasant awareness of being alive.

² Spencer was wrong, however, to conclude from this form of pleasure that art, a kind of refined play based on the instinct of struggle against nature or man, is a harmless use of surplus energy which acts as a safety value in society, but remains a superfluous enjoyment.« (Harding 1973, p. 26)

and stressed that our relationship with the aesthetic is historical social relationship.

Guyau deserves his place in history of aesthetics, especially as philosopher who opened discipline to new fields after it became quite narrowly concerned with art, and still managed to support his claim that art has to be taken seriously. What is more important, however, is that today we have some similar problems as those he addressed at the *fin-de-siècle* moment, after pure post-modern subjectivism and relativism is confronted again with positivist interpretations of evolutionism in aesthetics. That, however, is another story: our own.

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