

---

H-France Review Vol. 11 (December 2011), No. 263

Natasha Gill, *Educational Philosophy in the French Enlightenment. From Nature to Second Nature*. Surrey, UK and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2010. vi + 306 pp. Appendices, Works Cited, and Index. \$ 124.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-6289-1.

Review by Samia I. Spencer, Auburn University.

At the outset of her book in a detailed introduction, Natasha Gill sets the time limits of her ambitious project. It begins in 1693 with the publication of John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, and ends two-thirds of a century later in 1762—an eventful year marked by the publication of Rousseau's *Emile* and the *arrêt* leading to the expulsion of the Jesuits, followed by numerous plans for educational reform submitted to the *parlements*. Gill also explains her choice to focus on France, the country where the subject of education “exploded during the eighteenth century into a society-wide debate between philosophers, teachers, social critics, *salonnières*, *parlementaires*, and government ministers... [and where the] debate ran parallel to wide-ranging political and philosophical explorations about the nature and future of the French nation” (p. 3).

There is symmetry in the format of the study. It is divided into five parts of approximately fifty pages, each consisting of a prologue, followed by one, two, or three chapters. Locke, the subject of the first part, is by far the most discussed educator in the volume, viewed as the most influential throughout the century. Parallels and contrasts are consistently drawn between his ideas and those of other authors and theorists studied in the book. *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*—and to a lesser extent *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) and the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690—continued to be the most influential source of educational principles, not only in England but also in France and elsewhere, beyond the early decades of the 1700s. According to Gill, “almost all eighteenth-century French educational writers, from prominent philosophers like Rousseau to obscure teachers” (p. 23), referred to his lessons in their own writings.

Although the focus of the study is the French Enlightenment, the author also delves into works from earlier periods, especially from the seventeenth century, to uncover and analyze the ideas of educational theorists such as Claude Fleury (1640-1723)[1], Charles Rollin (1661-1741)[2], and Swiss-born Jean-Pierre de Crousaz (1663-1750)[3] who were well-known in their time, were instrumental in spreading and popularizing Locke's ideas, and inspired later generations of more renowned educational *philosophes*. Other lesser-known transitional figures of that period are also remembered, including, for example, the abbé de Saint-Pierre, abbé Pluche, Louis Dumas, and Pierre Py-Poulain de Launay. These authors shared and emphasized four fundamental goals of the educational process: 1) to refine their understanding of the relationship between nature and habit; 2) to make learning an effortless and more pleasurable experience for children; 3) to reconcile Christian values with respect for rank; and 4) to link education to social and political transformation (p. 117).

Gill devotes one of the five sections to a study of Etienne-Gabriel Morelly, whom she acknowledges as both “obscure” (p. 122) and “minor” (p. 120) and whose “educational work did not exert a direct or lasting influence” (p. 156). She nevertheless considers him “an important but overlooked transitional

figure, situated at the crossroad between several political and intellectual traditions” (p. 155), “perhaps the first modern educational theorist” (p. 121) who, more than any other, prepared the ground for Rousseau. Furthermore, she describes his *Essai sur l'esprit humain ou principes naturels de l'éducation* (1743) and *Essai sur le coeur humain ou principes naturels de l'éducation* (1745) as “remarkable educational works in which Lockean and Cartesian principles battle for supremacy and the tensions between various pedagogical concepts elaborated in French literature are beautifully reconciled” (p. 120). As she does with Locke, Gill often establishes parallels and contrasts between Morelly's theories and those of other educators. Among specialists, Morelly is generally remembered not for his *Essais* and its educational principles, but for his *Code de la nature ou véritable esprit de ses lois* (1755), “a radical utopian work” (p. 120) that was attributed to Diderot for more than fifty years, placing Morelly among the eighteenth-century socialists whose disenchanting voices called “for an end to all economic, social, and political inequalities” (p. 124).

As she details Morelly's educational theories and principles in the *Essais*, Gill asserts his optimistic views of humanity and disagrees with scholars who argue that he had a fundamentally negative and pessimistic perspective on mankind, although she recognizes that there were two different tendencies in his educational theories. She attempts to explain and analyze the social and political conditions that may have caused the dramatic change in his writing style and intellectual preoccupations during the ten years between the *Essais* and the *Code de la nature*. From “a dynamic and reformist force” (p. 149) in the earlier works, education became in the later ones “a conservationist one” (p. 149).

The fourth part of the book finally leads readers into the heart of the Enlightenment in mid-century, when the focus shifts to two prominent figures, Helvétius and Rousseau. Although Gill recognizes that *De l'esprit* (1758) “is not an educational treatise, and Helvétius makes no claim to expertise in the area of education” (p. 169), as the subject appears only at the end of his essay, she believes the work “is extremely significant as a distillation and radical statement of ideas that had been put forth in French educational works by mid-century” (p. 180). Thus, the author devotes full attention to him in chapter eight in order better to contrast his thoughts with those of Rousseau. Helvétius's idea of a science of education, the power he attributes to the teacher and the legislator, and his utopian vision that education can result in social and political change, are all factors that describe his method of “positive education” (p. 200) outlined in his posthumous work, *De l'homme*. By contrast, Rousseau's “negative education” (p. 199) consists of protecting children from negative external influences, and rejecting incentives to emulate or learn by example.

Unlike most scholars who study Rousseau's educational theories by focusing almost exclusively on the complexities in *Emile* and generally tend to overlook what he owes his predecessors<sup>[4]</sup>, Gill extends her discussion beyond *Emile* into Rousseau's lesser-known unfinished sequel, the short story entitled *Emile et Sophie ou les solitaires* (1780)<sup>[5]</sup>, in which he tried “to confront the unresolved issue of his educational treatise” (p. 218). In this work, the *philosophe* appeared to be “unsatisfied with the ending of *Emile* and questioned the oppositions he elaborated in the educational process between liberty and constraint, man and woman, nature and society, and individual growth and sociability” (p. 218). Gill acknowledges the paradoxes and shortcomings of *Emile's* education, the impracticality of Rousseau's method, and the difficulty of its implementation. However, she appears indulgent in her assessment of the lack of moral, social, and intellectual training of the student until adolescence, and notes that Rousseau was not alone in encountering difficulties in uniting “his vision of individual freedom with an ideal of social morality” (p. 203), as these also “plagued other Enlightenment educational thinkers” (p. 203). She concludes enthusiastically that despite their many shortcomings, Rousseau's lessons “are timeless and deeply moving” (p. 225).

In the fifth and last part of the book, Gill studies the reform plans submitted by educators, lawmakers,

clergymen, members of various academies, and women and men of letters following the expulsion of the Jesuits and the closing of their *collèges*. The priorities of these reformers were the urgency to recruit qualified teachers to replace the banished instructors, and the exploration of ways to put education at the service of the state. They proposed that new institutions seek to implement modern theories of education, in order “to offer professional training, instill civic values, ensure social stability, enhance state power, and contribute to the establishment of a new moral code” (p. 229). They believed that instruction must reach “beyond the intellect ... [and] educate ‘the whole child’” (p. 237), and insisted on the importance of including modern and contemporary subjects, instead of focusing only on basic skills and the classics. Instead of considering each plan or each writer separately, Gill groups all of them together in this section, but notes particularly two among the better-known *mémoires*: one by Louis René François de Caradeuc de La Chalotais, the attorney general of the *parlement* of Bretagne; and another by Louis Bernard Guyton de Morveau, a chemist, a well-known man of letters, and the attorney general of Dijon.

Readers are bound to be impressed by Gill’s extensive knowledge and thorough scholarship. She has consulted a broad range of sources, e.g., books, *mémoires*, essays, articles, and philosophical tracts of the period, and quotes academic studies, master’s theses, and doctoral studies extending from the nineteenth and twentieth century to the present. Gill takes particular care to set the works and authors studied in their particular social, cultural and political milieu. For example, while discussing Helvétius’s ideas on education, she places them in the broader context of his theory on sensations. Before detailing the reform proposals of the 1760s following the expulsion of the Jesuits, she reviews the incidents that fueled the attacks against them and the gradual developments that led to the dissolution of their Society.

The comprehensive quality of the volume and its exhaustive treatment of the subject are its unequivocal strengths, though they may be viewed by some as a liability. While scholars of Enlightenment education will appreciate the meticulous analysis and the painstaking comparisons between theories, methods, and principles of various authors, non-specialists may find the details and inevitable repetitions tedious and wearying. Other readers may question the choice of authors that Gill has opted to study in rigorous detail while omitting the input of Enlightenment titans Voltaire, Diderot and D’Alembert, and excluding discussion of the most significant eighteenth-century undertaking, the *Encyclopédie*. Specialists will find insightful ideas and discover previously unknown authors in *Educational Philosophy in the French Enlightenment*. Few students and generalists, however, will have the energy to read the entire volume.

#### NOTES

[1] Fleury’s *Traité du choix de la méthode des études*, drafted in 1675, was published in 1686.

[2] Rollin’s major work, *Traité des études. De la manière d’enseigner et d’étudier les belles-lettres*, was written in 1712. “Published in seven editions by the end of the century, [it] became a classic for eighteenth-century educators” (p. 77).

[3] *Logique* (1712), Crousaz’s first important work, was followed by *Traité de l’éducation des enfants* in 1723.

[4] Gill refers to more than a dozen such studies (p. 183, note 5).

[5] According to several of Rousseau’s friends, he began working on this short story shortly after the publication of *Emile* in 1762, but writing was interrupted when he had to flee France. They report that he continued to indicate all along that he intended to complete the work (p. 218, note 17).

Samia I. Spencer  
Auburn University, Alabama  
[spencsi@auburn.edu](mailto:spencsi@auburn.edu)

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172