



Center for the History of Women Philosophers and Scientists
Paderborn University, Germany

Duties towards strangers/others in Sophie de Grouchy (1764–1822)

Karin Brown
San José State University

Duties toward strangers for de Grouchy are grounded in both reason and sentiments beginning with sympathy for those who are close to us. We depend on many others for our survival and well being, a fact which de Grouchy notes begins in infancy. She argues that we cannot be indifferent to those who cared for us and thus we have an initial propensity to sympathize with their pains and pleasures. Upon reflecting on these sentiments, we know that we possess an obligation and a duty to care for them as well. Repeated experiences of pain and pleasure create an “abstract idea of pain” no longer linked to a specific experience. It is this general familiarity with pain that enables us to sympathize with strangers. Upon reflecting on this sympathy, we can, she argues, turn our thoughts to groups of people suffering from poverty, for instance, and know that we ought to help. Unfulfilled duties, de Grouchy claims, will give rise to feelings of regret and remorse. De Grouchy’s discussion of duties toward strangers is also framed by the overall goal of social justice. We have an obligation to ensure people’s rights are not violated, and consequently, de Grouchy claims that we should help others as long as our own rights are not violated. De Grouchy sets out to show that extending our consideration to everyone in need is not only a natural moral tendency and a necessary component of our own happiness, but it is also a necessary condition for a well functioning society.

Primary Sources:

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