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Esteem and Self-Esteem in the British and French Moralists. A Comparative Approach

This special issue takes a comparative approach to a theme that was extensively discussed by the British and French moralists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the morality of the desire for social esteem and the connection between social esteem and self-esteem. In recent years, a series of articles about esteem and self-esteem in the British moralists has been published[[1]](#footnote-1), which is complemented by a series of articles about the corresponding issues in the French moralists[[2]](#footnote-2). But not much work has been done from a comparative perspective. This is puzzling because comparative approaches to other thematic fields have already proven fruitful in clarifying what the British and French moralists have in common and what is distinctive to them. Rousseau has inspired the greatest number of such comparative studies, including studies about his tempestuous personal encounter with Hume[[3]](#footnote-3), his relation to Hobbes’s views on free will and the passions[[4]](#footnote-4), his relation to the role of imagination in Mandeville’s political economy[[5]](#footnote-5). Smith’s responses to Rousseau have also been the object of intense study[[6]](#footnote-6), as has been Malebranche’s possible influence on Hume[[7]](#footnote-7). Another important group of studies concerns the reception of Bentham in France[[8]](#footnote-8). But while esteem and related concepts such as recognition are touched upon in passing in various places in this body of literature, to our knowledge these issues have not been made the object of detailed comparative studies. The case studies in the present special issue are meant to make a start at filling this lacuna.

While such a project could be illuminating from an intellectual history perspective, we believe that the British and French moralists also deserve to be studied because they address theoretical questions that have lost nothing of their philosophical relevance. Among the possible answers to the question of what could motivate human action, the insight that humans have a desire for esteem—roughly, the desire to be evaluated positively by others—has always played some role. Evidently, the desire to be esteemed by others contributes to explaining why individuals are ready to comply with the norms of a given community—compliance will be seen positively, non-compliance will be seen negatively, and the wish to be thought of positively will, independently of any compulsion, motivate compliance. While it is evident that this dynamic in social regulation is ubiquitous, it also raises some pressing questions.

One of them is the question of whether striving for esteem has beneficial effects on those who strive for it. In one sense, getting what they strive for will lead to an experience of satisfaction. But they will not always be successful; they will have to compete with others; they will have to invest effort; they will sometimes have to accept norms that they do not share. Competing with others may put stress on our personal relations. After all, competing with others seems to imply that one does not want those others to get what one would like for oneself. If so, then the striving for esteem seems to be fraught with all the adverse effects of competitive behavior—ranging from constant status insecurity to the weakening of bonds of friendship and solidarity. Also, if the striving for esteem is essentially competitive, only a small number of individuals will perform significantly above the average—which means that many will have experiences of dissatisfaction, with all the negative implications for their level of self-esteem.

Other questions arise from the connection between social esteem and conformism. Complying with norms commonly shared within certain groups seems to be required for achieving social esteem—but does complying with commonly shared norms involve caring about the interests of others? Many activities that are highly esteemed in certain historical periods—think of military conquest or conspicuous consumption—are deeply destructive of the social and natural foundations of human life. If caring about the interests of others lies at the heart of ethical duties toward others, and if caring about one’s own personal well-being lies at the heart of ethical duties toward oneself, then the question arises of whether the desire for esteem is always (or typically) supportive of ethical virtue. Does the desire to be esteemed for complying with commonly shared norms or norms characteristic of particular groups not simply lead to conformist behavior?

Both the competitive and the conformist dimensions of social esteem raise the question of how social esteem relates to self-esteem. Should esteem and self-esteem be regarded as phenomena with largely independent sources? Such a view would seem to be highly counter-intuitive. After all, it is very difficult to think highly about one’s personal achievements if these achievements are rated low by all competent judges. But should self-esteem therefore be regarded as just an internalized form of social esteem? Again, such a view would seem to be highly counter-intuitive since, usually, the judgment of others counts for our self-image only once we have critically scrutinized it—which suggests that self-esteem relies on independent sources of evaluation. Still, we would not regard a person who is entirely immune to criticism and unfavorable evidence as having high self-esteem—which suggests that the relationship between social esteem and self-esteem will be highly complex; and it is a relationship that will require a conception of both justified esteem and justified self-esteem.

These questions were intensely and illuminatingly discussed by the French and British moralists. From a theoretical point of view, there are at least three reasons why their discussions are of interest. First, perhaps never in the history of moral thought has the virtue-supportive nature of the desire for esteem been questioned as radically as in early modern France and Britain. The writings of the French moralists offer a wealth of observations that one could put under the heading of “everyday pathologies of esteem.” This epithet could be used to designate situations in which the desire for esteem leads to social practices that are irrational and that have adverse consequences on human lives. It is not surprising to find such skeptical views with respect to the desire for esteem in our everyday lives because skepticism with respect to the possibility of moral virtue was the hallmark of early modern French thought. This skepticism derives from analyzing the various detrimental roles that self-love plays in human life. This can be seen in the reception of the Augustinian tradition by thinkers such as Pascal and Nicole, and again in Rousseau’s observations about *amour-propre*. In British moral thought, skepticism concerning the morality of the desire for esteem took its origin from Hobbes’s political philosophy. Hobbes emphasized that the desire for glory is not only the cause of the greatness of political communities, but also an object of competition. Understanding glory as a scarce good implies a conception of the worth or dignity of a person as “the value or price of a man, or as much as would be given for the use of his power”[[9]](#footnote-9). Placing social esteem in the context of quasi-economic exchange relations points toward a conception of esteem as a source of conflicts over status, both in personal and political relations.

 The second reason for studying the treatment of esteem and self-esteem in the French and British moralists is that, in response to the potentially damaging consequences of the striving for esteem, many of these thinkers (with the exception of Pascal and, perhaps, Rousseau) developed various conceptions of justified esteem and justified self-esteem based on personal qualities that exemplify varieties of natural goodness. Thereby, they took a normative approach to esteem and self-esteem, that is, an approach that aims at identifying the norms upon which assessments of personal qualities *should* be grounded. In this sense, they also seek to find ways to overcome the everyday pathologies of esteem. Of course, such a project could be pursued from a variety of perspectives on morality. Take any theory of what is morally good, and you get an account of what should be justifiably esteemed. It could be argued that such theory-oriented strategies do not take seriously the extent to which many people have reliable ethical intuitions. If so, one should be wary of ethical theories that try to make prescriptions concerning what people should esteem. However, what makes the conceptions of natural goodness discussed by the French and British moralists attractive is that these conceptions are not based on abstract ethical theories but on commonsensical, everyday observations concerning what is naturally good for beings of our kind (no matter how morally problematic beings we may be). The relevant varieties of goodness ranged from factors supportive of social stability and political security, to factors supportive of socially beneficial character traits, and to factors valuable for our ability to connect with others, such as sympathy and moral emotions. In this sense, their considerations concerning how justified esteem and self-esteem could be grounded in natural goodness exemplify non-elitist approaches to ethics—that is, approaches that see the task of ethics not so much in theory construction than in drawing attention to experiences that are shared by everyone.

 The third reason for studying the French and British moralists is that many of them treat the desire for esteem in conjunction with the desire for self-esteem. What the French and British moralists have in common is that they explore the relevance of social esteem for the formation and preservation of self-esteem without, however, reducing self-esteem to an internalized version of social esteem. While they acknowledge that one of the reasons why social esteem is important for us is its function in strengthening and correcting self-esteem, binding self-esteem to criteria of natural goodness also allows them to use this source of self-esteem as an antidote to an overly strong dependence on the judgment of others. And cultivating such an independent source of self-esteem offers a further source for criticizing corrupt practices of social esteem. In this way, analyzing the sources of self-esteem is a strategy for overcoming the pathologies of esteem. The concepts of esteem and self-esteem are embedded in a field of other concepts that, too, relate to attitudes that we have toward others and toward ourselves. The concept of esteem derives its meaning partly from similarities and contrasts with concepts such as respect, reputation, honor, fame, and glory; the concept of self-esteem derives its meaning partly from similarities and contrasts to concepts such as self-knowledge, self-respect, and self-love.

 Our hope is that taking a comparative approach to the debates about esteem and self-esteem in early modern Britain and France will not only draw attention to the fact that these debates answer a common set of problems, but also to the various ways in which the answers given by British and French moralists differ from each other and, sometimes, converge on particular issues. Because their esteem-related remarks can be understood as responses to a common set of problems, widening the intellectual context beyond national borders may lead to a broader view of the range of theoretical possibilities considered in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debates. And it may also offer the resources required for a more accurate assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of these possibilities.

 One topic that led to diverging responses was the question of how the effects of the competition for esteem in social life could be analyzed. In his contribution, **Christian Lazzeri** suggests three notable differences between Hobbes’s and Rousseau’s conceptions of the competition for esteem. First, while Hobbes understands the striving for social esteem to be a form that the striving for self-preservation takes, Rousseau argues that the striving for social esteem is so dysfunctional that it alienates us from the natural needs that arise from the desire for self-preservation. Second, this difference brings with it that Hobbes believes that social esteem is always desired for the sake of its instrumental value—its value in achieving further goals such as pleasure, power, or security—while Rousseau believes that social esteem becomes a goal in itself—something that is desired although it does not fulfill any further function in human life than procuring a feeling of self-approbation. And third, as Lazzeri argues, there is a profound difference as to the temporal structure and the protagonists in the process of the competition for esteem. While Hobbes analyses the competition from the perspective of the sovereign who decides about the status of individuals, Rousseau analyses this competition from the perspective of whole societies whose esteem each individual seeks—which implies that, unlike in Hobbes, the competition is universal and at no point in time settled in any definitive manner.

Another issue that was controversially debated was the role of deception and self-deception in the striving for social esteem and self-esteem. **Mauro Simonazzi** explores how Mandeville tried to give a positive turn to the skeptical portrayal of the dynamics of esteem found in Nicole and La Rochefoucauld—a turn that accepts the view that the striving for esteem often involves deception but still assigns to hidden vices a beneficial function for upholding social relations. As Simonazzi argues, Mandeville derives from Nicole and La Rochefoucauld a conception of human nature based on the primacy of the fear of shame rather than the fear of death as the fundamental motivating passion. However, Mandeville progressively abandons the language of the Jansenists and their metaphysical scheme, grounded on *ordo amoris*and the notions of guilt or sin, in order to study the psychological dynamics of their natural emotional processes. From a developmental perspective, it is worthwhile noting that in his early writings, Mandeville used the term “Pride”to define the desire to be esteemed, while at the beginning of the *Fable of the Bees Part II*(1728), he introduced the neologism “Self-liking”to provide a neutral term for that passion. In Simonazzi’s view, this terminological shift indicates that the originality of Mandeville’s reflection in the history of theories of esteem stands in his translation of a discourse on passions originating in the religious sphere into the medical-psychological one.

A further topic that triggered responses characterized both by similarities and subtle divergences was the question of whether rational self-control could be a source of self-esteem that is independent of social esteem. As **Francesco Toto** notes, Cartesian generosity is defined neither as the sacrifice of particularistic interest to which it leads nor in terms of the bonds of friendship that it allows, but rather as a self-esteem based on the good use of one’s free will, that is, on that virtue which consists in the strength of mind with which the subject manages to oppose his own passions. Toto argues that Smith accepts several elements of the Cartesian picture, in particular the valorization of self-control, generosity, and friendly relations, but at the same time rejects the centrality accorded by Descartes to self-esteem. Smith locates the source of self-critical moral subjectivity instead in the sympathetic ability to internalize the judgments of an external spectator. However, beginning with the second edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he introduces the concept of an imaginary impartial spectator identified with the “man within”. Thereby, Smith ends up falling back on a Cartesian, monological moral subject who can esteem himself independently of the contempt and blame of others, and whose moral conduct is thus motivated no longer by the desire to be esteemed but by the desire to consider himself worthy of such esteem.

Socially problematic aspects of the desire for esteem include not only competitiveness and deception but also debatable objects of esteem. **Angela Ferraro** takes a comparative approach to Hume’s treatment of the esteem of the rich and powerful, using some related considerations in Malebranche as a context. While this form of esteem was often seen to be irrational and detrimental to human well-being, both Hume and Malebranche tried to explain the experience within the framework of their theories of passions and to assess its moral value. As Ferraro shows, while Malebranche consistently maintained that passions such as love of greatness and sympathy can lead to distorted acts of the imagination that misguide our social esteem, Hume’s attitudes developed over time. Malebranche saw the origin of admiration for the rich and powerful in an (often erroneous) expectation that one would be able to profit from those whom one admires. Hume’s initial intuition was to describe the esteem of the rich and powerful as a source of pleasure independently of any expectation of practical advantages. As it turns out, in his later years, he began to move closer to the analysis given by Malebranche.

One passion that played a central role in moral sense theories is pity, and this could be a passion that is highly relevant for what we esteem. **Marco Menin** discusses how the connections between pity and esteem were understood by Rousseau and Smith. The aim of Menin’s article is to highlight how the philosophical use of the rhetorical and descriptive dimension represents a privileged key to understanding the similarities between Rousseau’s and Smith’s doctrines of imaginative identification, as well as the direct influence of the former on the latter. This aspect makes it possible to reinterpret, from a different point of view than the one usually adopted, the dialectic between esteem and pity at the basis of the social bond. As far as Smith is concerned, this specific interpretative perspective brings out the importance of the idea that the narration of fictional experiences, capable of arousing the sympathy of the spectator, can allow the individual to transcend his or her own individual experience, setting aside selfish interests. The comparison with Rousseau proves decisive in bringing out some peculiarities of Smith’s theory of sympathy with respect to that conventionally held by moral sense theorists.

While the dynamics of esteem of self-esteem have much to do with the structures of human psychology, the British and French moralists also were highly aware of its political dimension. **Eric Marquer** starts from the consideration that it may be informative to compare d’Holbach’s view that man “desires the esteem of others, in order to be worthy in his own eyes”[[10]](#footnote-10) with Hobbes’s view that “every man looketh that his companion should value him at the same rate he sets upon himself”[[11]](#footnote-11). Since Hobbes and d’Holbach agree that everyone expects his companion to esteem him as highly as he appreciates himself, one can observe that the figure of the other plays a determining role in both authors. Nevertheless, the forms of recognition differ from one author to another: while for Hobbes self-esteem appears as the criterion which determines what is expected from others, for d’Holbach, the esteem of others appears as a condition of self-esteem. Marquer proposes to compare the respective implications of these statements for Hobbes and for Holbach from a political point of view. We know that for Hobbes sensitivity to signs of disdain and contempt is one of the reasons why men in the state of nature “derive great displeasure from life in company.” Should we consider that for D’Holbach, the desire for the esteem of others leads men to find more enjoyment in life in society? The answer to this question will be an opportunity to reassess the importance of the reading of Hobbes by d’Holbach who also was his translator.

A further political dimension to the dynamics of esteem is its connection with the issue of utility. **Andreas Blank** argues that this can be seen in Helvétius’s and Bentham’s treatments of the desire for esteem. Helvétius and Bentham are acutely aware of how often sensible interest leads to situations where what is esteemed is irrational or morally flawed. This is why Helvétius’s and Bentham’s considerations can offer an illuminating counterblast to the optimistic assumption that, ordinarily, the desire for esteem is supportive of virtue. At the same time, Helvétius and Bentham share the view that, if the desire for esteem is to become supportive of virtue on a large scale, legislation has to connect esteem with the power to secure pleasures and disesteem with the risk of losing pleasures and incurring unpleasant experiences. In their view, this is a consequence of the widespread pathologies of esteem. Thus, their counterblast against the optimistic assumption that the desire to be esteemed for virtuous action arises primarily spontaneously (and subsequently can be supported by institutional arrangements). In spite of their recognition of the pathologies of esteem Helvétius and Bentham thus defend the project of enlightenment by drawing attention to how strongly the desire to be esteemed for actions that are genuinely useful for others is shaped by enlightened constitution building.

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9. T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. N. Malcolm, 3 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2012, X.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. D’Holbach, *Le système social ou principes naturels de la morale et de la politique, avec un examen de l’influence du gouvernement du les mœurs*, Londres, 1773, p. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIII.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)