HELVÉTIUS AND HIS CRITICS: ESTEEM, BENEVOLENCE, AND THE QUESTION OF THE DIMINUTION OF THE INDIVIDUAL

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*Abstract:*

How persuasive are Rousseau’s and Diderot’s objections against Helvétius’s view that it is always interest that guides our esteem? Against Helvétius’s view that we always esteem ourselves in others, Rousseau objects that we can esteem the ideas that we recognize to be superior to our own ideas; against Helvétius’s idea that particular societies and nations can only esteem ideas that are useful for them, Diderot objects that we can experience and esteem the feeling of universal benevolence. However, Rousseau and Diderot overlook that Helvétius’s conception of moral luck explains why experiences of the kind that they describe can occur. At the same time, Helvétius’s conception of moral luck explains why these experiences occur so rarely. This is why he holds that what we esteem needs to be modified through republican constitution building—expresses itself a kind of optimism concerning the possibility of cultivating morally good qualities of individuals through political agency.

*Key-words*: social esteem, contempt, sensible interest, civic virtue, republicanism

Rousseau’s and Diderot’s refutations of Helvétius have been an object of intensive study for more than a century, and it seems fair to say that commentators have tended to side with Helvétius’s critics.[[1]](#footnote-2) In the light of this history of reception, it certainly would be implausible to allege that Helvétius was always right and his critics always wrong. However, Helvétius’s moral philosophy may offer the theoretical resources to answer some of Rousseau’s and Diderot’s criticisms. I have in mind Rousseau’s and Diderot’s critical remarks concerning the consequences of a claim prominent in Helvétius’s *De l’ésprit* (1757)[[2]](#footnote-3)—the claim that it is always interest that guides what we esteem. One of the consequences is that Helvétius draws from this claim is the view that we always esteem ourselves in others; another consequence is that particular societies (such as professional groups) as well as nations esteem as morally valuable only what is in their interest (or what they take to be in their interest). Against the first consequence, Rousseau objects that, according to his own experience, it is easy to recognize the intellectual superiority of others; against the second consequence, Diderot objects that Helvétius overlooks the innate sentiment of beneficence toward all other humans that implies that we can esteem actions that are useful even for members of other groups and nations. If the experiences that Rousseau and Diderot describe are real, then it would seem that Helvétius could not be right about how the dynamics of esteem work.

However, on closer reading it will become clear that Helvétius does not exclude the possibility of the experiences described by Rousseau and Diderot. Rousseau’s and Diderot’s objections against Helvétius conception of esteem purport to show that Helvétius’s sensualist ethics leads to the absurd consequence that some of the attitudes that Rousseau and Diderot report to have experienced toward others cannot occur. If these experiences are real, then there seems to be something wrong with Helvétius’s theoretical principles; and Sophie Audidière has recently coined the expression «diminution of the individual» to describe what is going wrong. Evidently, Rousseau’s and Diderot’s objections require an examination of the theoretical assumptions that stand behind his claims concerning the nature of esteem. Arguably, Helvétius conception of moral luck is relevant here—that is, his view that the concurrence of a multiplicity of factors outside human control can produce a personal constitution allowing to take pleasure in ideas and actions that promote public interest. His conception of moral luck explains why he regards esteem for virtuous qualities to be a genuine possibility and why he holds that the striving for intellectual achievements can express probity toward the universe.

The real challenge that Helvétius poses does not consist in a denial of the reality of the experiences described by Rousseau and Diderot but rather in his explanation for why these experiences occur more rarely than Rousseau and Diderot may have realized. Moral luck occurs rarely, which is why it is prudent to expect that the less lucky will be prone to show the attitudes described by Helvétius: They will disesteem ideas in which they cannot recognize themselves, and they will esteem only actions as expressions of probity that are useful for particular societies. If Helvétius’s explanation is on the right track, then it offers a strong reason for Helvétius’s view that distributing public esteem should become the object of republican constitution building since only legislation can guarantee that genuinely useful ideas are rewarded by power enough to secure pleasure.

The Question of the Diminution of the Individual

Let me begin by outlining those aspects of Helvétius’s views to which Rousseau and Diderot responded,[[3]](#footnote-4) and by indicating why Rousseau’s and Diderot’s objections to these aspects are of persisting significance. On first sight, Rousseau’s and Diderot’s responses are quite heterogeneous—the one concerning esteem for superior ideas, the other concerning universal benevolence—but they are connected by the fact that they are reactions to different consequences of the same central idea. This central idea is well expressed in the following passage:

If the public has always made not much out of those errors whose invention sometimes presupposes more combinatorial skill and wit than the discovery of a truth, and if it esteems Locke more than Malebranche, then this is so because it measures its esteem by its interest. What other balance could it use to weight the merit of the ideas of humans? Every particular individual judges things and persons through the pleasant or unpleasant impression that he receives from them; and since the public is nothing but the assemblage of all these particular individuals, it therefore cannot avoid to take its utility as the measure of its judgements. (*Oeuvres*, 1: 176)

As Helvétius explains, what he has in mind is interest that goes beyond love of money and includes «everything that could procure us pleasures or save us from pains» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 176, note 1).[[4]](#footnote-5) Helvétius develops the consequences of his views on the connection between interest and esteem first with respect to what individuals esteem, and subsequently with respect to what particular societies and nations esteem. As to the question of what individuals esteem, he claims that «personal interest is the unique and universal ground for appreciating human actions» (*Oeuvres*, 1:185). Interest therefore depends on what we take to be useful for ourselves: «[W]e take more interest in an idea the more this idea is useful for us.» This explains why «[t]he captain, the physician and the engineer will have more esteem for the constructor of ships, the botanist and the physician than the librarian, the jeweler, the builder, who will always prefer the novelist, the graphic artist and the architect» (*Oeuvres*, 1:185-186). Moreover, when it comes to ideas that relate to our passions and tastes, we will always prefer those ideas that are flattering to our own passions and tastes, not those that challenge them (*Oeuvres*, 1:186). Helvétius argues that this is so because these ideas «are suitable to justify the high opinion that they all have of the rightness of their mind» (*Oeuvres*, 1:187)—that is, they are suitable to give us a pleasant feeling about ourselves. Also, we esteem in others only those qualities that lead us to the expectation that we will be esteemed by them:

[I]f all humans are greedy of esteem, and each of them is instructed by the experience that ideas appear estimable or contemptible to others only in so far as they agree or disagree with their opinions; each of them consequently … cannot avoid to esteem in other a conformity of ideas that assures him of their esteem, and to hate in them an opposition of ideas that is a sure guarantee for their hate or at least their contempt … (*Oeuvres*, 1: 195)

This is why Helvétius distinguishes between «verbal esteem» (*estime sur parole*) and «felt esteem» (*estime sentie*). As he explains, the former kind of esteem consists only in the respect that one has for public opinion or in the confidence that one places in the judgment of experts; in order to express such esteem, one does not need to have any detailed understanding of the ideas that receive public esteem (*Oeuvres*, 1: 196). By contrast, he takes felt esteem to be the outcome of the effect that certain ideas make upon ourselves—which can take place only if one understands these ideas (*Oeuvres*, 1: 197). Helvétius claims that only ideas that have an analogy with the ideas that we already have can make such an impression upon us. In support, he invokes the experience that, when learning geometry, only those new ideas can be taken in that have a connection with what we already have understood (*Oeuvres*, 1: 197). He also presents a thought experiment and asks us to consider an imaginary conversation between Newton, Quinault and Machiavelli. What will happen?

[O]ne will see that, after having unsuccessfully tried to communicate their ideas to each other, Newton will regard Quinault as an insupportable maker of rimes, Quinault will take Newton to be a maker of almanacs; and both of them will regard Machiavelli as a courtier of the Palais Royal; and finally, all three of them will treat each other as mediocre minds and take revenge for the boredom that they have brought to each other through contempt. (*Oeuvres*, 1: 200)

If it is difficult for the greatest minds to develop a mutual appreciation of their ideas, Helvétius asks, how much more difficult will it be for ordinary people? He concludes that «most people understand only ideas that are analogous to our own ideas, that we have felt esteem only for this kind of ideas, and from this results the high opinion that each of them is … forced to have about themselves …» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 201)—a situation that he describes as the «necessity to esteem oneself in preference of others» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 201). When the superiority of others is acknowledged, in his view, then what is expressed is only verbal esteem: people «give to public opinion preference over their own and agree that these persons are more esteemed, without being convinced within that they are more estimable» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 203).

In response, Rousseau questions the descriptive adequacy of Helvétius’s observation that esteem for those who have superior ideas is always *estime sur parole*:

That is not true. I have meditated on a subject for a long time, and I have drawn some personal views with all the attention of which I am capable, if I communicate the same subject to another man, and during our conversation I am able to see leaving the brain of this man a crowd of new ideas and grand views on the same subject on which I was able to furnish so few. I am not so stupid not to see the advantage of those views and ideas above my own; I am then forced to feel inside me that this man has more spirit than me, and to accord him an esteem felt in my heart as superior to that which I have for myself.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Illuminatingly, Sophie Audidière places Rousseau’s remark into the context of his letter to Gimprel d’Offreville of 4th October 1761.[[6]](#footnote-7) There, Rousseau distinguishes between two types of interest, first, a sensible and tangible (*sensuel et palpable*) interest which includes reputation (*réputation*), and, second, an interest which is relative to the well-being of our soul (*le bien-être de notre âme*), to our complete well-being (*bien-être absolu*).[[7]](#footnote-8) If one reads Rousseau’s comment on Helvétius from this perspective, his objection seems to be that Helvétius has overlooked that, in addition to sensible interest in reputation—which in fact is frustrated in the face of the superior performance of someone else—there are other interests in mental well-being, and that these interests can motivate us to esteem ideas that we recognize to be superior to our own ideas.

Diderot targets the consequences that Helvétius’s views on the connection between interest and esteem has for what particular societies and nations esteem as morally valuable. When Helvétius speaks of «petites sociétés,» what he has in mind are families (*Oeuvres*, 1: 209), as well as groups of individuals with a certain social rank or a certain profession (*Oeuvres*, 1: 227). Probity with respect to such societies «is nothing other than the more or less strong disposition toward actions that are particularly useful to this small society» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 207). Something analogous holds for what nations esteem:

I say that the public, like the particular societies, is determined in its judgements only by the motivation of its interest; that it gives the name «honorable,» «great» or «heroic» only to actions that are useful for it, and that it does not at all make its esteem for this or that action proportional to the degree of strength, courage or generosity necessary to carry it through, but to the importance itself of this action and the advantage that it derives from it. (*Oeuvres*, 1: 259)

This is why Helvétius holds that «in all centuries and in different countries, probity can be nothing other than the disposition toward actions that are useful for one’s own nation» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 274). And, as he explains, what matters for the diverging conceptions of what is morally good is an—sometimes not even fully explicit—understanding of what is useful for the people that constitutes a nation:

[I]t is certain that, if they had been enlightened about their interests, they would not have adopted, without motivation, the ridiculous customs that one finds established among some of them; the bizarre nature of some of these customs thus derives from the diversity of the interests of peoples; in fact, if they had not always confusedly understood by the word «virtue» the desire of public happiness; if they had not consequently given the name «honorable» only to actions that are useful for the home country; and if the idea of utility always had been secretly associated with the idea of virtue, one can assert that the most ridiculous customs, and even the most cruel ones, have … always had as their foundation the real or apparent utility for public well-being. (*Oeuvres*, 1: 276-277)

This line of argument seems to imply that it is impossible to form a notion of probity that is not relativized to nation. And this is exactly what Diderot takes to be an inacceptable consequence of Helvétius’s philosophy:

It seems to me that he does not have an exact idea of what one understands by probity with respect to the entire universe. He has made out of it a word devoid of sense: which would not have happened to him if he had taken into consideration that in no matter which place of the world, the one who gives something to drink to the thirsty and to eat to the hungry is a good person; and that probity with respect to the universe is nothing other than a sentiment of beneficence that embraces the human species in general; a sentiment that is neither false nor chimerical … [[8]](#footnote-9)

Diderot does not elucidate in detail what the sentiment that he has in mind consists in; but the connection with fulfilling duties of aid seems to suggest that what is involved is more than merely a feeling of benevolence (in the sense of desiring the well-being of everyone) and also includes the wish to contribute something to the fulfilment of duties of assistance.

If Helvétius’s theoretical principles would exclude the possibility of the experiences identified by Rousseau and Diderot, then these principles would turn out to be blind to some realities of our moral lives—realities, moreover, that seem to indicate something positive about human nature. In light of Rousseau’s and Diderot’s objections, Sophie Audidière explains what she takes to be important about Helvétius as follows:

[Rousseau and Diderot] reacted strongly to what they understood and felt as the diminution of the human and individual subject in Helvétius’s philosophy. Their own private experience of real friendship, based on an esteem which is gladly given and received, was a reason to challenge the idea that individual identities are nothing but an effect of physical sensitivity, that is to say, to challenge Helvétius’s specific type of materialism.[[9]](#footnote-10)

That is to say, Audidière sees the importance of Helvétius in making us aware of what *does not work* in a type of materialism that reduces human motivation on sensible interest. However, I think that Helvétius’s treatment of the role of sensible interest for the desire to be esteemed is more persuasive than his critics may have realized. Of course, Rousseau’s and Diderot’s observations, in themselves, are highly plausible. But are they convincing as objections against the descriptive adequacy of Helvétius’s views? I do not think so. This is so because Helvétius accepts both the possibility of esteem for ideas that differ from one’s own and the possibility of universal benevolence.

Esteem and Moral Luck

To see this, it will be useful to start from Helvétius’s conception of moral luck—the view that some individuals, due to chance, have personal qualities that make their sensible interests to coincide with the demands of virtue. Helvétius never gives any explicit definition of the concept of chance. But he observes that a vast amount of small impressions goes into the education in early age, most of which are entirely unintended by the educators (*Oeuvres*, 3:30). It is the effects that such small impressions have on the ideas that come to the mind of a child that Helvétius describes as the effects of chance (*Oeuvres*, 3:30).[[10]](#footnote-11) The concept of chance implies that it occurs rarely; this is why it is no wonder that the less lucky often esteem the wrong things. For instance, many of those who know that they are much inferior to others in highly specialized skills still believe in their own superiority over specialists by denying the importance of arts and sciences and by elevating the importance of broad knowledge, common sense, social versatility and practical skills (*Oeuvres*, 1: 204-205). Other examples that Helvétius adduces are the exaggerated esteem for their own mental capacities that many people entertain (*Oeuvres*, 1: 202), the readiness to suppress all works that express ideas that differ from one’s own (*Oeuvres*, 1: 202, note 1), the contempt between members of different social classes (*Oeuvres*, 1: 227), the contempt that small minds have for philosophers (*Oeuvres*, 1: 226). These cases of misguided esteem, Helvétius is clear, are expressions of a kind of pride that arises from ignorance—but for that matter, they are no less inherent in human nature (*Oeuvres*, 1: 226). Helvétius also applies this line of thought also to esteem between nations: «This folly, common to all nations, … leads them not only to disdain the ways of living and the customs different from their own, but also leads them to regard the superiority that some have over others as a gift of nature—a superiority that they owe only to the political constitution of their state» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 369). Accordingly, he holds that «contempt for a nation is always an unjust contempt» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 370-371).

Yet, sometimes individuals are morally lucky, and these individuals will take pleasure in virtuous actions and ideas (*Oeuvres*, 1: 207). Helvétius holds that honors can create public esteem only if they reward actions that are useful for a nation; in this sense, widespread reputation (*considération générale*) is always an outcome of public gratitude (*reconnaissance publique*) (*Oeuvres*, 4: 47). For tasks of the same usefulness, Helvétius holds, esteem should be given proportional to their difficulty (*Oeuvres*, 2: 272-273). He offers the following explanation for why the public gives more esteem to skills that are rare: «It is because the public confusedly senses that, in its hand, esteem is an imaginary treasure, which has real value only to the extent that it makes a wise and considered distribution of it …» (*Oeuvres*, 2: 271). Helvétius holds that the public owes praise to the probity of an individual, even when the usefulness for society is not obvious on first sight. As he argues, this is so because for two reasons: (1) Even instances of probity that do not have any effects can serve as an example, which contains the seed of probity that is useful in a more obvious way; (2) even if this should not be the case, «it contributes to general harmony»—which itself is something useful (*Oeuvres*, 1: 217-218, note).

Clearly, then, Helvétius takes esteem for genuinely virtuous action and the idea that motivate them to be a genuine possibility. But in view of the observation that people often esteem the wrong things, such esteem will occur only in rare cases. In fact, Helvétius understands our readiness to judge about the actions and ideas of others according to public interest as the outcome of a multiplicity of lucky accidental factors:

Interest presents objects to us only from the side that it is useful for us to apperceive them. When one judges according to public interest, it is not so much due to the justness of one’s mind or the justice of one’s character that one should render honor than to the chance that has placed us in circumstances where we have an interest to see as the public does. (*Oeuvres*, 1: 226-227, note 1)

When actions are judged according to public interest, Helvétius holds that those who pass such judgments form «virtuous societies» that «fulfill nothing other than the passion that an enlightened pride gives them for virtue and, consequently, nothing other than obeying, like every other society, the law of personal interest» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 207). The particular societies formed by the morally lucky have different interests than the particular societies formed by the less lucky; but even in the case of the morally lucky, «interest is the only distributor of esteem» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 410). This is why «[t]he justice of our judgments and our actions is never anything but the lucky coincidence of our interest with the public interest» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 226). Consequently, Helvétius holds that «every author who gives new ideas to the public can hope for the esteem of only two kinds of humans: either young people who, because they have not yet adopted any options, still have the desire and the leisure to instruct themselves; or those whose mind, being a friend of truth and analogous to the mind of the author, already suspects the existence of the ideas that he presents to him» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 201).

Esteeming ideas recognized as being superior to one’s own is thus not esteeming ideas that are entirely foreign to one’s own mind; rather, it is esteeming ideas found in the minds of other who search for truth in a way similar to how we search for truth. In this sense, even ideas that are novel for ourselves can be said to be anticipated. Esteeming ideas that one recognizes as superior to one’s own can thereby pleasantly confirm inclinations that we can be proud of. «Noble and enlightened pride» allows persons of the latter kind «to be attached to their beliefs without being opinionated» and «to preserve in their mind the suspending of judgment, which there leaves free access to new truths» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 187). As Helvétius explains, «humans of this kind always esteem in others ideas that are true, enlightened, and suitable to satisfy the passion that an enlightened pride gives them for what is true» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 187). For this reason, he takes it to be important to cultivate the right kind of pride: «Pride is the seed of so many virtues and talents that one must not hope to destroy it, nor even to try to weaken it, but only to direct it toward honorable things» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 226). In this way, mutual esteem between the morally lucky is motivated by a kind of sensible interest—the interest in triggering a pleasant self-related emotion.

Reconsidering Rousseau’s Criticism

This line of argument offers an answer to Rousseau’s critique. If public esteem for ideas and actions that are useful for a community is both possible and obligatory, then it is not surprising to see that Helvétius holds that esteem for such ideas and actions can occur also on the level of personal relations. Helvétius is explicit that it can happen that one develops a strong desire to instruct oneself and that in such cases esteem does not depend on ideas that we already have (*Oeuvres*, 1: 197-198). He describes the attitude operative in such cases as «the serene eye with which two humans examine each other, who, curious to know the human heart and the human mind, regard each other as two subjects of instruction and two living courses in moral experience» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 253). Thereby, Helvétius’s theoretical assumption offers an explanation for why situations of the type described by Rousseau—the admiration for ideas that we take to be superior to our own—are a genuine possibility.

However, it is a possibility that, as the notion of luck implies, will be realized only rarely—that is, unless there are institutional factors that help up the less lucky. In fact, Rousseau’s response to Helvétius offers an illustration of how difficult esteem for superior talents may be even for the morally lucky. Consider a seemingly small detail in Helvétius’s text that has caught Rousseau’s attention. Helvétius has coined the expression «uneasy weight of esteem» (*poids importun de l’estime*) to describe how difficult it is for ordinary people to acknowledge the merit of extraordinary individuals (*Oeuvres*, 1: 205). Rousseau flatly denies the reality of the phenomenon: «The uneasy weight of esteem! My God, nothing is as sweet as esteem, even esteem for those whom one believes to be superior to oneself.»[[11]](#footnote-12) But is it really so sweet? Helvétius illustrates the weight of esteem by imagining how mediocre administrative employees defend their feeling of intellectual superiority over Corneille:

One of them remarks that this Corneille is, in all truth, a great man, but in a frivolous genre; it is certain that if one judges by the contempt that certain people feel for poetry, the two other practical men could follow the advice of the first of them; and, confidentially, if it comes to comparing procedural rules, the art of procedure, say another, has certainly its tricks, subtleties and combination as every other art … (*Oeuvres*, 1: 205).

Thus, it is easy to question the relevance of excellence in a certain field simply by questioning the relevance of this field, and it will not difficult to come up with further examples for this practice.

Of course, Rousseau is far above the mean detractors of Corneille. But he, too, plays with the idea that one can uphold self-esteem in the presence of the excellence of others by distinguishing different dimensions of evaluation. Rousseau in fact does not have difficulties with recognizing a personal quality such as ingenuity; but he dissociates this personality trait from the ability of hitting on truth:

If the author does not believe that a man could sense the superiority of someone else in his own genre, surely, he deceives himself a lot; I myself sense his superiority, although I do not agree with him. I sense that he errs as a man who has more spirit than me: he has more numerous and more luminous views, but mine are saner. Fénelon surpasses me in every respect, this is certain.[[12]](#footnote-13)

On first sight, the last sentence appears to exemplify Rousseau’s claim that it is easy to acknowledge the superiority of other minds. However, read from the perspective of the preceding sentences, the sentence about Fénelon may be read as expressing admiration for personal qualities—an admiration that is compatible with disagreement in matters of truth. But insinuating that Fénelon’s ideas are deficient with respect to truth and sanity (not exactly irrelevant criteria in the realm of ideas) sheds doubt on Rousseau’s claim that he is easily able «to see the advantage of those views and ideas above my own.»[[13]](#footnote-14)

Reconsidering Diderot’s Criticism

Is Diderot’s view that a sentiment of beneficence toward the entire human species is widespread as unproblematic as he seems to take it to be in his response to Helvétius? And does Helvétius’s conception of the nature of esteem imply, as Diderot seems to believe, that there cannot be anything like probity across national boundaries?

Diderot never has developed any detailed analysis of the dynamics of esteem and self-esteem. However, in his immediate intellectual context, as documented by some anonymously published *Encyclopédie* articles, one find a series of observations that may indicate that Diderot’s expectations concerning the widespread occurrence of universal beneficence may have been overly optimistic. For instance, the article «Glorieux» draws attention to how the desire for esteem can lead to detrimental effects in personal relations. There, the character trait of being vainglorious is described as «the mask of greatness» which «stupidity has replaced for merit.» It is a mask because the vainglorious person wants to be valued for qualities that are absent; it is a character trait that systematically distorts the possibility of esteeming others: «Those who have it almost always believe to see it in others, and meanness that prostrates itself before the feet of favor rarely distinguishes from disdaining pride the high-mindedness that rejects contempt.» And while the vainglorious may, in private settings, be ready to express esteem for those who give signs of respect to them, they will associate, in public settings, only with the high-ranking because they expect to enhance in this way their own standing.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Similarly, the article «Mépris» analyses how the desire for esteem and self-esteem can be contrary to feelings of universal benevolence:

Excessive love of esteem brings it about that we have for our neighbor the contempt that is called insolence, arrogance or harshness, depending on whether it is directed toward our superiors, our inferiors or our equals. We seek to degrade those more who are below us, believing that we rise higher in the same measures as they descend; or to do injustice to our equals to escape parity with them; or even to humiliate our superiors because they shed shadow upon us through their greatness. Our pride deceives itself visibly in this; for if humans are an object of contempt for us, why do we develop an ambition for their esteem?[[15]](#footnote-16)

No matter how self-refuting these practices of esteem may be, they are described as the source of detractions, defamations, poisoned praises, malignity and envy.[[16]](#footnote-17)

What is more, the article «Luxe», now attributed to Saint-Lambert,[[17]](#footnote-18) notes that distortions of the desire for esteem that undermine universal benevolence may not only the outcome of problematic character traits but also of detrimental legal orders. This article takes extreme economic inequality that makes luxury possible to be the outcome of concrete legal privileges that allow certain persons to build up unfair economic power, be it through building up monopolies or through the administration of public funds.[[18]](#footnote-19) Accepting such unfair advantages expresses a state of mind that has given up the desire for reputation. Those who enjoy luxury are «hateful for the largest part of their co-citizens, to whom they have been preferred unjustly, and for whose fortunes they have been an obstacle, they do not at all seek to obtain from them what they could not hope to receive, esteem and benevolence.»[[19]](#footnote-20) As a consequence of such a situation, in peasants «there is no elevation in sentiments, [and] little courage that is due to self-esteem to the sentiments of one’s own forces,» and in urban artisans «there is the same lowness of the soul, they are too close to those who disdain them to esteem themselves;» while the middle class is both exposed to humiliation and corrupted by greed.[[20]](#footnote-21)

These observationsshed doubt on Diderot’s assumption that a feeling of universal beneficence comes naturally to most people. Nevertheless, Diderot seems to make a viable point because, in a particular sense, Helvétius denies that there could be probity with respect to the universe (*Oeuvres*, 1: 399). Note, however, that Helvétius presents this claim as identifying a *practical* problem, not as a problem of the attitudes that we take toward other nations: «[T]his probity would be the disposition toward actions that are useful to all nations; however, there is no action that could immediately influence the happiness or unhappiness of all peoples» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 399). In spite of stating the evident practical impossibility of doing something good for a large number of individuals, Helvétius acknowledges that there can be a «probity of intention that consists in a constant and habitual desire of the happiness of humans» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 399). This idea is spelled out in his discussion of the relation between patriotism and universal love. Helvétius concedes that, on first sight, one may think that patriotism is absolutely opposed to universal love (*Oeuvres*, 1: 400). However, he objects:

[I]n intellectual matters, as in matters of probity, love of the home country does not exclude universal love. It is not to the loss of its neighbors that a country acquires its enlightenment: on the contrary, the more nations are enlightened, the more they mutually reflect about ideas and the more the power and activity of the universal mind augments. (*Oeuvres*, 1: 401)

In a specific sense, Helvétius suggests, one could regard intellectual activities from the perspective of probity with respect to all humans, namely, when the aim of these activities consists in developing ideas that are of interest for all nations (*Oeuvres*, 1: 402). More concretely, Helvétius regards metaphysics, jurisprudence, politics as belonging to the «sciences that are of interest for humanity» (*Oeuvres*, 2: 244). In this respect, «the mind of an individual can have relations to the entire universe» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 409). The point, of course, is that not everyone will find these ideas interesting; hence, it is also not to be expected that everyone will esteem them. Rather, intellectuals can be guided by the intention to develop ideas that are useful for everyone. If so, then Helvétius’s theoretical assumptions explain why the attitude described by Diderot—the attitude of universal benevolence—is a genuine possibility. However, it is a possibility that will occur spontaneously only in the morally lucky; this is why his principles also explain why it will be prudent to expect this attitude to occur spontaneously only in some few individuals.

A Diminution of the Individual?

Keeping Helvétius’s views about moral luck in mind thus indicates why his version of materialism offers theoretical resources for countering Rousseau’s and Diderot’s objections. What matters about Helvétius that we can get insight into how a morality based on sensible interest can offer an explanation *both* for the possibility and for the relatively rare occurrence of experiences such as those described by Rousseau and Diderot.From this perspective, it becomes clear why Helvétius’s views concerning our practices of esteem do not amount to a diminution of the individual—not at least if this expression is meant to convey the idea that Helvétius denies qualities that people usually have. Helvétius’s observations concerning the pathologies of esteem—both the pathologies of esteem between individuals and the pathologies of esteem between nations—shed doubt on the idea that individuals usually have such good qualities.

But Helvétius does not leave things at that. It is exactly his insight into the everyday pathologies of esteem that explains his insistence on the influence of political constitutions on the practices of esteem: As he argues, where moral luck is missing, politics has to guarantee that virtuous action is rewarded by esteem, and in his view, this can happen only in republican constitutions (*Oeuvres*, 3: 348).

This, of course, is an idea that is by no means absent from the political thought of Rousseau. In the *Discourse on Political Economy* and the *Social Contract*, Rousseau advocates an institutionalized system of rewards that can be expressed by honors, not by privileges that would exempt some citizens from the equal force of the laws (OC, 3: 249; 3: 458-459).[[21]](#footnote-22) At the same time, Helvétius gives to the idea of the relevance of republican constitution building for shaping practices of esteem a turn that is absent in Rousseau. This turn derives from another realistic aspect of Helvétius’s view of personal qualities—his view that the desire for esteem is grounded in the desire for power. He maintains that the interest in happiness is nothing but an interest in having all the means necessary to be happy; and, as he argues, this interest boils down to an interest in power because power is the personal quality sufficient to procure the means necessary for happiness: «The love of power is founded on the love of happiness, and it therefore is the common object of all our desires; also, wealth, honor, fame ... respect, justice, virtue … are in us nothing other than love for power disguised under different names» (*Oeuvres*, 3: 337). This is why Helvétius takes the interest in esteem to be nothing but a disguise that the interest in power takes: «The one who spends the night under arms or in the office imagines loving esteem, but that’s an error. Esteem is nothing but the name that one gives to the object of one’s love, and the thing itself is power» (*Oeuvres*, 3: 340-341). As he argues, this is so because power is desired as a source of pleasure: «Humans love themselves: all of them desire to be happy and believe that they were perfectly happy if they were in the possession of the degree of power necessary for procuring them all kinds of pleasure. The desire for power thus derives its source from the love of pleasure» (*Oeuvres*, 3: 145). Aversion to contempt expresses the fear of a loss of pleasures:

If dishonor or contempt of humans is insupportable for us, it is because the dishonored is partly deprived of the advantages connected with the union of humans in society; it is because contempt announces little enthusiasm on their side to oblige us; it is because it presents to us the future as being devoid of pleasures … (*Oeuvres*, 3: 143, note (a))

But whether or not esteem leads to power enough to secure pleasure is a question of political constitutions: «Why is fame regarded as a plant of republican soil, which, degenerated in despotic countries, never grows there with a certain strength? It is because in fame one loves properly only power, and in an arbitrary government, all power disappears in the face of the power of the despot» (*Oeuvres*, 3: 314). On the contrary, «[i]n a free nation, public reputation and esteem is a power, and the desire for this esteem there becomes consequently a powerful principle of action» (*Oeuvres*, 3: 328). In this case, the desire for esteem becomes virtue-supportive since it is exactly the fulfilment of duties of civic virtues that will be rewarded by republican legislation.

Being realistic about the actual qualities of humans thus leads Helvétius to promote enlightened legislation that pursues the aim of changing the motivations of those citizens who lack moral luck. Rewarding virtuous actions through public esteem that is connected with power enough to pursue pleasures makes citizens want to do the right things and to be esteemed for doing the right things. Far from diminishing the individual, Helvétius’s aim thus is to encourage individuals to overcome their esteem-related biases—personal, group-specific, and national—and thereby to develop civic virtues. The morally lucky will be able to do this by reflecting about human nature; those who are less lucky will be able to do it through the guidance of a legislation that motivates citizens to fulfil what public interest demands. And his trust into the potential of shaping personal qualities, either through rational reflection or through republican constitution building, is an aspect of Helvétius’s ethics that goes beyond a diminution of the individual.

1. On the relations between these thinkers, see Pierre-Maurice Masson, *Rousseau contre Helvétius*, «Revue d’Histoire Littéraire de la France», 18, 1911, pp. 104–113; David W. Smith, *Helvétius. A Study in Persecution*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965; Guy Besse, *Observations sur la* Réfutation d’Helvétius *de Diderot*. «Diderot Studies»,12, 1969, pp. 29–45; Guy Besse, *D’un vieux problème: Helvétius et Rousseau*, «Revue de l’Université de Bruxelles»,2/3, 1972, pp. 132–44; Jean H. Bloch, *Rousseau and Helvétius on Innate and Acquired Traits: The Final Stage of the Rousseau-Helvétius Controversy*, «Journal of the History of Ideas», 40, 1979, pp. 21–43; Jørn Schøsler, *Rousseau et Diderot, critiques de la philosophie égalitaire d’Helvétius*, «Revue Romane», 15, 1980, pp. 68–84; Gerhardt Stenger, *Diderot lecteur de* L’homme: *une nouvelle approche de la* Réfutation d’Helvétius. «Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century», 228, 1984, pp. 267–91; Georges Dulac, *Les notes en marge de* De l’esprit *d’Helvétius*, «Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century», 254, 1988, pp. 227–233; Laurence Mall, *L’ego-philosophie à la manière de Diderot (*Réfutation de Helvétius*)*, «Littérature», 165, 2012, pp. 16-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In what follows, I will use the following abbreviations:

*Oeuvres*:Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *Oeuvres complettes d’Helvétius. Nouvelle édition, corrigé & augmenté sur les manuscrits de l'auteur*. 5 vols.,Paris, Serviere, 1795.

*OC*:Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, 5 vols., ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, Paris, Gallimard, 1959-1969.

All references to Helvétius’s writings will be to *Oeuvres*. I have checked the text against Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *De l'esprit*, ed. Jonas Steffen, Paris, Champion, 2006, and Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *De l'homme*, ed. David Smith, Paris, Champion, 2011. All translations from Helvétius are my own; however, I have also consulted with Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *A Treatise on Man, His Intellectual Faculties and His Education*, trans. W. Hooper, 2 vols., London, Law & Robinson, 1777. For an overview of Helvétius’s philosophy, see Jean-Louis Longué, *Le système d'Helvétius*. Paris, Champion, 2008; on Helvétius’s political thought, see Jean-Fabien Spitz, *L’Amour de l'égalité. Essai sur la critique de l'égalitarisme républicain en France, 1770–1830*. Paris, Vrin/EHESS, 2000, pp. 53–78; David Wooton, *Helvétius: From Radical Enlightenment to Revolution*, «Political Theory», 28, 2000, pp. 307–36. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For a detailed analysis of Helvétius’s views on esteem (which, however, does not consider Rousseau`s and Diderot’s criticisms), see Francesco Toto, *L’impensé de Claude-Adrien Helvétius. Le problème de l’estime dans* De l’esprit. In *La reconnaissance avant la reconnaissance. Archéologie d’une problématique moderne*, ed. Francesco Toto, Théophile Pénigaud de Mourgues and Emmanuel Renault, Lyon, ENS Éditions, 2017, pp. 167-194. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. On Helvétius’s notion of interest, see Sophie Audidière, *Philosophie moniste de l’interêt et réforme politique chez Helvétius*. In *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle. La Mettrie, Helvétius, d’Holbach*, ed. Sophie Audidière, Jean-Claude Bourdin, Jean-Marie Lardic, Francine Markovits, & Yves-Charles Zarka, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2006, pp. 139–145. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Masson, *Rousseau contre Helvétius*, p. 108; translation from Sophie Audidière, *Why do Helvétius’s Writings Matter? Rousseau’s* Notes sur De l’esprit, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», 24, 2016, pp. 983-1001, p. 997. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Audidière, *Why do Helvétius’s Writings Matter?*, pp. 996-997. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Correspondance complète*, ed. Ralph Alexander Leigh, 52 vols., Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1965–1998, 5: 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Denis Diderot, *Réflexions sur* De l’esprit, in Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Hans Dieckmann and Jean Varloot, vol. ix. Paris: Hermann, 1981, pp. 302–12, p. 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Audidière, *Why do Helvétius’s Writings Matter?*, p. 999. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. For a discussion of Helvétius’s conception of moral luck, see Andreas Blank, *Helvétius’s Challenge: Moral Luck, Political Constitutions and the Economy of Esteem*, «European Journal of Philosophy», 28, 2020, pp. 337–349. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Masson, *Rousseau contre Helvétius*, p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Ivi., p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Ivi., p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 17, Neufchastel: Faulche, 1765, p. 796. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 10, Neufchastel: Faulche, 1765, p. 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Ivi. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. See François Moureau, *Le manuscrit de l’article* Luxe *ou l’atelier de Saint-Lambert*, «Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie», 1/1, 1986, pp. 71-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 9, Neufchastel: Faulche, 1765, p. 769. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Ivi., p. 767. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Ivi., p. 768. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. For a discussion of Rousseau’s conception of honor as reward for civic virtue, see Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau’s Theodicy of Self-Love. Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 236-239. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)