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## Self-Deception and Illusions of Esteem: Contextualizing Du Châtelet’s Challenge

This article discusses Du Châtelet’s challenging claim that entertaining illusions, especially illusions of being esteemed by posterity, is conducive to happiness. It does so by taking a contextualizing approach, contrasting her views with some Epicurean aspects of the views on illusions and happiness in Bernard de Fontenelle and Julien Offray de La Mettrie. I will argue for three claims: (1) Du Châtelet’s comparison between self-related illusions and illusions in the theater is vulnerable to objections deriving from some distinctions that Fontenelle’s poetics draws between the role of illusions in the theater and the role of illusions in real life. (2) Examining Fontenelle’s analysis of the detrimental effects of self-related illusions indicates several respects in which Du Châtelet has underestimated the ambivalent nature of illusions. (3) Du Châtelet’s view that illusions are akin to sensations that are favorable to us problematically generalizes La Mettrie’s insight that some acts of the imagination have a quasi-perceptual nature.

**Du Châtelet’s Challenge**

In her *Discours sur le bonheur*, Émilie Du Châtelet emphasizes the function of illusions for a happy life. Her praise of the value of illusions goes beyond anything that can be found about the value of illusions in early modern French thought. Of course, it did not elude the French moralists that there is something pleasant about entertaining illusions. For instance, La Rochefoucauld observes that one would not have much pleasure if one did not flatter oneself (La Rochefoucauld 2007, maxim 123), that one does a bad service to those whom one disillusions about themselves (La Rochefoucauld 2007, maxim 92), and that those who are happy will never correct themselves (La Rochefoucauld 2007, maxim 227). Still, these remarks cannot be read as implying an endorsement of the value of illusions for human life. On the contrary, his ideal of the “true” *honnête* *homme* involves the absence of illusions concerning one’s own faults (La Rochefoucauld 2007, maxim 202). By contrast, although Du Châtelet is explicit that discarding prejudices is a precondition of living happily (DuChatZin2009, pp. 352–353), she treats the capacity to maintain illusions as a necessary condition for happiness—which implies that she believes that illusions are not prejudices:

“I say that to be happy one must be susceptible to illusion, and this scarcely needs to be proved; but, you will object, you have said that error is always harmful: is illusion not an error? No: although it is true that illusion does not make us see objects entirely as they are but as they must be in order for them to give us agreeable feelings, it only adjusts them to our nature. Such are optical illusions: now optics does not deceive us, although it does not allow us to see objects as they are, because it makes us see them in the manner necessary for them to be useful to us.” (DuChatZin2009, p. 354)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Her choice of comparisons suggests that illusions (in contrast to prejudices) should not be understood as false judgements, but rather as modes of sensation that are beneficial for oneself. This reading is confirmed by the analogy she draws between self-related illusion and illusions in theatre: In the latter case, illusions are part of the pleasure that we experience while watching a play, even though we would not mistake the events on the stage to be events in reality (DuChatZin2009, p. 354–355). In line with this thought, she defends the value of entertaining illusions concerning how much we will be esteemed by posterity, and she regards illusions as the foundation of our love of fame or the desire for the applause of future generations (DuChatZin2009, pp. 357–358). Du Châtelet holds that the desire for fame contributes to the happiness of society; moreover, she holds that thinking of the applause of posterity leads to a real happiness that derives from our hopes. As she claims, this happiness itself is not an illusion (DuChatZin2009, p. 358).

This line of thought is certainly startling. But it raises two questions: (1) What is distinctive about Du Châtelet’s views? (2) How persuasive are they? In the present article, I will address both questions by taking a contextualizing approach. As Robert Mauzi has pointed out, Du Châtelet’s *Discours* belongs to the tradition of modern Epicureanism: “the issue of virtue there makes an appearance only from the Epicurean perspective of tranquility, and the necessary morality of our actions there is only considered as a warranty of inner peace and satisfaction with oneself” (Mauzi 1961, LXXXV). At the same time, Mauzi is clear that Du Châtelet does not simply replicate a view that is shared by other thinkers; rather, he holds that what makes her position distinctive is that she includes the passions in an Epicurean weighing of pleasures (Mauzi, 1961, LXXXVIII). Arguably, her treatment of illusions is also a significant modification of Epicurean ethics. In what follows, I will proceed in three steps. First, I will outline how the connection between esteem and happiness was analyzed in a central Epicurean text that was still widely read in the eighteenth century—Francois Bernier’s *Abregé de la philosophie de Gassendi* (second edition, 1684). As it turns out, Bernier provides strong reasons to believe that the desire for esteem is conducive to happiness only under the condition that one is realistic about one’s own personal qualities. Du Châtelet, however, is not the only thinker in early modern France to depart from this aspect of Epicurean ethics. Du Châtelet’s Epicurean assumption that “we have nothing to do in the world but to obtain for ourselves some agreeable sensations and feelings” (DuChatZin2009, p. 349) is shared by Bernard de Fontenelle (1657–1757) and Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–1751). But unlike Bernier, Fontenelle and La Mettrie have some interesting things to say about how illusions could contribute to producing agreeable feelings. However, unlike Du Châtelet, Fontenelle and La Mettrie also analyze situations in which illusions, and especially esteem-related illusions, lead to unpleasant experiences. Taken together, these considerations show that Du Châtelet departs from the Epicurean view of the connection between esteem and happiness more radically than Fontenelle and La Mettrie. But for this very reason, she may also have overlooked some difficulties arising from esteem-related illusions that were diagnosed by Fontenelle and La Mettrie.

**Happiness and Esteem: The Epicurean View**

To set the stage, it will be useful to outline how the connection between esteem and happiness was understood in early modern Epicureanism. The basic idea is found in Gassendi’s *Animadversiones in decimum librum Diogenis Laertii* (1649), and it is spelled out in greater detail in Bernier’s *Abregé*. In his chapter about the constitutive role of pleasure for happiness, Gassendi points out that Epicurus’s and Cicero’s conceptions of what is honorable (*honestum*) converge in a significant respect:

“Cicero himself contends that what is honorable should be defined as *what by itself can be lauded with right, even when all usefulness is disregarded and without any rewards and remunerations*. Does not the fact that he says that what is honorable is such *that it can be lauded* imply a connotation that relates to those who praise, or to popular reputation, or the rumor of the multitude, which is exactly the definition of Epicurus that he opposes?” (Gassendi 1649, 2: 1360; see Cicero 2005, 2.14; for detailed discussion, see Blank 2021)

This thought is taken up, almost verbatim, in Bernier’s chapter on happiness (Bernier 1684, 7: 148-149). As Bernier explains:

“Epicurus would agree that honorable people do not pursue any profit, nor any advantage such as money or other things of this kind, but not that they do not pursue any other good such as praise, glory, honor, reputation, recommendation, etc.” (Bernier 1684, 7: 149)

Far from believing that the desire for esteem could be detrimental to the pursuit of virtue, Bernier maintains that this desire is both natural and conducive to virtue:

“It is certainly not without any reason that this desire is considered to be natural; for we become aware that it is dominant in children, and even in brutes, and that there is no-one, no matter how much he pretends to have an aversion for it, who would recognize that he loves it always, and that he could not, even if he wanted to, abandon this passion. It is also not without any reason that he makes so much of esteem, because one ordinarily presents it as the price for virtue, and because there is neither a political community nor a state that does not motivate its citizens for great actions through this hope.” (Bernier 1684, 7: 152–153)

Understanding the honorable as what is publicly praised implies that in different countries with different customs different things will be considered to the virtuous; still, Bernier argues that in all countries it is regarded to be a conceptual truth that what deserves esteem is what is considered to be useful for the community. This is why he believes that there are two kinds of pleasure for the sake of which honor is desired: “The first is this extreme joy that someone hopes to experience when his reputation is established among humans …” (Bernier 1684, 7: 153). As Bernier points out, it is easy to find historical examples that show how much the desire for this experience triggers the striving for glory (Bernier 1684, 7: 153–154). But this is not the only pleasure intrinsically connected with social esteem that has a motivating power:

“The other kind of pleasure that stimulates humans to desire honor is this security that is so sweet to enjoy, and even more so as the one who lives in full and complete security sees himself to have the power to do whatever he likes to do and to enjoy the pleasures that are suitable for him, without any hindrance from others. After all, one easily believes that security is acquired through honor because either honor is bestowed due to virtue or due to positions and dignities that presuppose virtue; if it is due to virtue, it is certain that there is no contempt and that the honored person does not fall into a condition that is vulnerable to insults and disrespect: if it is due to positions and dignities, and consequently with a view to some good that one hopes for, or with a view to some evil that one fears, one ordinarily takes it to offer great and reliable assistance.” (Bernier 1684, 7: 154–155)

According to this line of thought, being esteemed provides security, either because others trust in the virtuous qualities of the esteemed person, or because others expect some support from the esteemed person. Either way, being esteemed will be the source of pleasurable experiences deriving from a secure social standing.

Evidently, in both situations esteem provides a stable foundation for security because it is grounded in real qualities: either virtuous character traits, or the power to provide useful services for others. In this sense, the weighing of expected pleasures that motivates the desire for esteem is based upon something entirely non-illusory. Discussing the virtue of modesty, Bernier concedes that there can be a certain discrepancy between personal qualities and the honor due to political positions. But this discrepancy is justified only because it is publicly useful:

“[M]odesty does not hinder those who are in a position of dignity to preserve the honor that is owed to the position of dignity; because it is in the interest of the political community that those who are in leading positions are honored, due to the fear that, if contempt slides in, this would do an injustice to the government, and that preserving the honor of positions of dignity is not vanity but justice, as neglecting it does not seem to be personal modesty but an injury to the public.” (Bernier 1684, 7: 489)

In this sense, those who hold public offices have a duty to uphold the esteem in which they are held. At the same time, Bernier is clear that modesty requires being realistic about one’s own qualities:

“Now, if in a man of great merit ostentation diminishes the glory of the merits and obscures it much, how much must it be indecent and hateful in a man of no merit to be inflated so much by the opinion of himself, and to be become so insolent that in the end he does succeed in making himself admired? Vanity has the bad quality that it is not approved by anyone, and that it is hateful to everyone; whereas modesty has the good quality that it there is no-one for whom it is not agreeable and by whom it is not loved.” (Bernier 1684, 7: 488)

As Bernier explains, modesty involves an aversion to accepting unmerited or pretentious honor—that is, honor without personal achievements or honor that is not proportional to personal achievements; and what triggers this aversion is the wish “to avoid the dishonor that is caused by vanity” (Bernier 1684, 7: 488–489). Being realistic about one’s own personal qualities thus is motivated by the striving for pleasure: Weighing expected pleasurable and unpleasurable experiences will tell us that being perceived as a vain person will lead to a loss of social esteem and, thereby, to a loss of the pleasurable experiences connected with esteem.

**Fontenelle on Happiness and Illusions of Esteem**

In Gassendi’s and Bernier’s conceptions of the connection between esteem and happiness, pleasure thus plays a central role; but it is a role that does not seem to make it possible to assign to esteem-related illusions—or for that matter, to illusions in general—any significant role in leading a happy life. Did Gassendi and Bernier overlook something important? May not illusions be one of the factors that have a very real influence on happiness? The early writings of Bernard de Fontenelle, who like Bernier was a *habitué* of Madame de la Sablière’s salon, may give some illuminating hints. Although in his early writings Fontenelle had not yet adopted the materialist analysis of the soul found in his later work (Downing 2005; Mullet 2011; cf. Fontenelle 1825, p. 236), and although Fontenelle never adhered to any philosophical system, there are noticeably Epicurean themes in his early thought—especially in his leaning toward a hedonist ethics. However, as Jean Dagen puts it, when Fontenelle exploits the ideas of his predecessors such as the Epicureans, he does so only “to retain what withstands his critical examination without complaisance” (Dagen 2003, p. 405). Arguably, Fontenelle’s treatment of the role illusions for happiness is one of the areas where his critical examination of traditional ideas leads to a significant modification of the Epicurean analysis of the sources of happiness.

Before going into Fontenelle’s essay *Du Bonheur*, it will be useful to draw attention to some aspects of other essays and dialogues that touch upon the issue of illusions and happiness. Like Du Châtelet, Fontenelle defends illusions in the theater. Thus, he pushes to an extreme the demand for an “exact verisimilitude of representation of an action” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 353). In particular, he takes the idea of the unity of time to demand that the theatrical representation should take exactly as much time as the action represented (Fontenelle 1825, p. 353). If the unity of time and place is violated, he claims, the spectator will “easily recognize the illusion, and all the charm will vanish” (Fontenelle 1825, pp. 353–354). However, unlike Du Châtelet he is clear that the illusions experienced in the theater work quite differently from illusions in real life:

“It is certain that in the theater the representation has almost the same effect as reality; but still it does not give it entirely: no matter how much one may be taken away by the force of the performance, no matter how strong the rule may be that the senses and the imagination take over reason, at the back of one’s mind there is always some unfathomable idea of the falseness of what one sees. This idea, even though feeble and folded up, suffices to diminish the pain of seeing the suffering of someone whom one loves, and to reduce this pain to the degree where it begins to change itself into pleasure.” (Fontenelle 1825, pp. 334–335)

As he explains, this pleasure results from a “mixture of feelings”—experiencing sadness about the misfortune of a hero for whom one has sympathies, and at the same time knowing that it is a fiction that derives from an “inner reflection” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 335). This distinguishes illusions in the theater from illusions in real life.

As to the role of illusions in real life, Fontenelle’s earliest texts explore conflicting intuitions. In the *Nouveaux dialogues des morts* (1683), the question of the illusory nature of fame is discussed in an imaginary dialogue between Lucretia, who committed suicide to protect her honor, and Barbe Plomberge, one of the lovers of Emperor Charles V., who agreed to act as the mother of an illegitimate son of one of Charles’s sisters (on the latter story, see Bayle 1741, p. 408). In the dialogue, Plomberge is characterized as someone who does not strive for public esteem: “Didn’t you hear that it is said that, whatever merit a person has, she should place herself even above this merit through the low esteem in which she holds it …?” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 54). Lucretia is astonished: “you do not care at all about reputation” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 55). In response, Plomberge turns against Lucretia: “There have been people that have been in some way hurt by your excess of striving for fame; they have done everything they could not to give you as much credit for your death as it would have deserved” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 56). As she suggests, “does it not belong to a great soul to despise the chimera of fame?” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 57). Lucretius objects that “this chimera is the most powerful in the world; it is the soul of everything; one prefers it over anything else; and have a look how it populated the Champs-Élysées” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 57). Lucretia explains that, for the very reason that the desire for fame is grounded only on imagination, it is much more powerful than reason (Fontenelle 1825, p. 58). She admits that it was not the sense of duty but the desire of making a name for herself that led to her decision to commit suicide (Fontenelle 1825, p. 58). But as she notes, the desire for fame leads to the same actions that would have to be performed out of a sense of duty: “all the great actions that must be made by humans turn out to be carried out; after all, the order that nature wanted to establish in the universe always takes its due course, which means that what nature did not obtain from our reason, she obtains from our folly” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 58).

Likewise, in an imaginary dialogue between Montaigne and Socrates, the illusory nature of fame with posterity is discussed. The point is not that the hope of being esteemed by posterity itself is illusory—on the contrary, Fontenelle presents a surprising argument in favor of the realistic nature of this aspiration. Rather, the point is that, even if it may be realistic to aspire for fame with posterity, nothing can be gained for one’s self-esteem from this expectation. The issue is introduced in the context of a debate about the prospects for great intellectual achievements in the future. The figure of Montaigne is skeptical—as he puts it, humans “are like birds that let themselves be caught in the same nets that were used for catching thousands of birds of the same species” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 52). Socrates, by contrast, takes it to be implausible to assume that nature should be incapable of bringing forth great minds anymore—after all, nature has not exhausted itself in all other biological species (Fontenelle 1825, p. 54). As Socrates argues, it is only the distance in time that leads to inflated esteem for the merits of the ancients: “One elevates the ancients only to derogate contemporaries. As long as we live, we esteem our ancestors more than they merit; and likewise, our posterity esteems us more than we merit; but our ancestors, we and our posterity, all of this is quite equal …” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 55). This consideration is taken up in the *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes* (1688), where Fontenelle takes the preference for antiquity to be an expression of prejudice and argues for the necessity of practicing a form of literary criticism that exposes the faults of ancient authors no less than those of modern authors (Fontenelle 1825, pp. 242–244). This attitude is grounded upon the assumption that nature has distributed her gifts—such as happiness, talents, the advantages and disadvantages of different positions in life, the easiness and difficulty of intellectual endeavors—almost equally (Fontenelle 1825, p. 251):

“Due to these compensations, we can hope that we are admired excessively in centuries to come, to recompense us for the little consideration that was given to us in our century. The future will strenuously try to find in our works beauties that we did not pretend to have put there … In this way, it is the same prejudice that lowers us in one time, only to exalt us in another time, and it is in this way that one is first its victim and then its goddess; a rather pleasant game when one regards it with indifferent eyes.” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 251)

Fontenelle therefore conjectures: “If the great men of this century had charitable sentiments for posterity, they would advise it not to admire them too much and always to strive at least to equal them” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 253). And he adds the caveat that “it is not certain that posterity will put the two or three thousand years that one day it will have between them and us to our credit” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 254)—at least, this will not be the case if reason perfects itself. In this case, “we only lose by admiring the ancients, without ever being admired for the same quality. Which would be a little regrettable” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 254).

A similarly ambiguous treatment of illusions can be found in the *Jugement de Pluton* (1684)—an imaginary conversation between the dead and the Lord of Hell, who is to pass judgement over controversial matters—where at one place the virginity of Queen Elizabeth I of England is debated. A recently deceased society lady argues:

“Elizabeth did not find anything more beautiful than to form plans, to make preparations, and not to carry out anything … And do we not owe to her this admirable maxim: ‘What one receives is always worth less than it was worth when one was only hoping for it; and things do not pass from our imagination to reality without any loss.’” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 107)

Another figure in the dialogue takes a pessimistic stance according to which nature has provided humans with few occasions for happiness, which is why entertaining illusions cannot help (Fontenelle 1825, p. 107). The figure of a “fat Dutchman” subsequently offers an alternative to both views: “You are crazy … if you complain about the natural condition of humans … It is the simple and common pleasures that are the sweetest. Do you know how much Elizabeth was flattered about this expression in the Dutch manner that I used to praise her?” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 108). In response, Pluton confesses his confusion:

“I don’t understand anything of Elizabeth’s character. Elizabeth wants nothing but preparations and hopes; and then, here we have Elizabeth who shares the most solid tastes with the Dutchman … One says that pleasures are in the imagination; one says that they are not there; one says that one must search for refined and chimerical pleasures; one says that the most simple and common pleasures are the best? Who rescues me from this perplexity?” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 108)

None of the figures of the dialogue steps up with a helpful suggestion, and the first part of the dialogue ends with a literary witticism Pluton decrees that the figures that have already appeared together in Fontenelle’s book are not allowed ever to appear together in one and the same book (Fontenelle 1825, p. 109).

Fontenelle works his way toward a solution to this impasse in his essay *Du Bonheur*, probably written in the late 1680s or sometime during the 1690s, and first published together with other early pieces in 1724 (on matters of chronology, see Adkins 2000, p. 445, note 32). A central theme of this short text is the detrimental role that our imagination plays in making us unhappy. Still, it seems to be an oversimplification when Mauzi suggests that for Fontenelle we are only unhappy because we *love* to be unhappy (Mauzi 1960, p. 225). This does not seem to be an adequate reading. To be sure, Fontenelle notes that “[o]ften it seems as if we love our unhappy work, and that we please ourselves in it” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 281). However, according to Fontenelle, our happiness is to a high degree dependent on circumstances; and even were circumstances not too unfavorable, most persons are driven by blind impulses toward things that they understand only confusedly (Fontenelle 1825, p. 279). As he puts it, these persons are “absolutely at the mercy of chance” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 279).

Still, Fontenelle holds that there are persons whose happiness is not only a result of chance: “We have some influence on our happiness, but this is only through our ways of thinking …” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 279). In his view, philosophy speaks to those who can change their ways of thinking:

“It is true that through the favor of nature they are already quite happy, and that the assistance of philosophy does not seem very necessary for them; but … when it comes to happiness, it does not fall upon us to neglect anything. Thus, let us listen to philosophy, which preaches in the desert to a small group of hearers that it has chosen because they already knew a good part of what it can teach them.” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 280)

With a view to this potential audience, Fontenelle believes that philosophy could help to “chase away all imaginary evils,” that is those “that take their origin in some false, or at least problematic, way of thinking” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 281). Gregory Matthew Adkins has recently described Fontenelle’s strategy as follows:

“[T]hrough contemplation it is possible to distinguish between what we imagine to be misfortune or what we imagine deserves our desires and passions, which, however, are not real at all, and what truly deserves our attention. Fontenelle’s prose sounds somewhat muddled at this point. Essentially, however, he is arguing that people often imagine things to be worse than they are, or they fail to recognize the good they have, always desiring what are perceived as greater and better goods …” (Adkins 2000, p. 446)

To be sure, Adkins is right that the way in which Fontenelle develops his plan is somewhat opaque. However, it is not opaque to such an extent as to become unintelligible. And if one examines the detail of his argument, it will become clear that Fontenelle may have something subtler in mind, even if he certainly would have agreed with everything that Adkins says.

Two concrete examples of acts of self-related imagination that Fontenelle gives may be instructive here: (1) Some persons take themselves to be inconsolable about the passing away of friends. Fontenelle concedes that this thought may itself offer some consolation since we thereby ascribe to ourselves good character traits such as tenderness and fidelity. In this sense, it is an imagination that enhances self-esteem. But Fontenelle points out that there can be no advantage in being afflicted forever. Moreover, he argues that this attitude involves an error concerning our psychological possibilities: It just goes beyond our powers to mourn incessantly, and in this case, it is exactly our weakness that brings relief with it (Fontenelle 1825, p. 282–283). Evidently, these observations indicate situations in which reflecting critically on a problematic way of thinking about ourselves is an adequate strategy for liberating oneself from self-related illusions that are detrimental to happiness.

(2) As Fontenelle notes, we sometimes aggravate real evils by taking them to be injustices to ourselves. “Even with respect to real circumstances of the evils that we experience, we take pleasure in giving them value for ourselves, in presenting them to ourselves as if we demand justification from a judge for an injury that has been done to us” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 283). As Fontenelle points out, this attitude has the detrimental effect that we develop a kind of “complacency” (*complaisance*) with respect to our suffering. Fontenelle’s idea seems to be that representing our suffering as an injustice confirms the view that our good personal qualities deserve more happiness. This conjecture is confirmed a little later in the text, where Fontenelle remarks that “[w]e ordinarily regard the goods that nature or fortune give to us as debts that they pay us, and consequently, we receive them with a kind of indifference …” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 286). Thereby, Fontenelle draws attention to how profoundly our self-esteem shapes the way in which we experience favorable and unfavorable events: If we entertain high self-esteem, then we regard favorable events as something that we deserve and unfavorable events as something that does an injustice to us. High self-esteem thus diminishes the pleasure that we experience from favorable events and increases the distress that we experience from unfavorable events. As Fontenelle explains, this attitude is the result of the illusion that happiness is quite common—an illusion in part maintained by misguided practices of mutual esteem: “Everyone shines with false brilliance in the eyes of someone else; everyone is envied, while he is himself envious …” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 286). Entertaining the unrealistic view that happiness is the common state of humans, Fontenelle points out, leads us to reject consolation since persons who try to console us appear to be indifferent to our suffering (Fontenelle 1825, p. 283). Fontenelle recommends a different attitude toward oneself: “Those who cannot doubt that they always have a sane view of everything are incurable; it is quite just that a lower opinion of oneself has sometimes its recompense” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 284). High self-esteem thus can be itself a source of suffering when things do not go as one believes that one deserves, while lower-esteem can be conducive to happiness because it facilitates accepting consolation for misfortunes; and lower self-esteem facilitates insight into the illusions concerning happiness as the normal state of humans.

The outcome of Fontenelle’s considerations is that the value of self-related illusions for happiness should not be entirely denied, but that there are better alternatives:

“It is true that there are many people for whom hopes themselves are pleasures, and who know to enjoy only what they do not have. Let us keep for them their kind of possession that is so imperfect, so little tranquil, so agitated, because they cannot have another; it would be too cruel to take it away from them; but let us try, if it is possible, to direct ourselves toward the present, to what we have; and a good does not lose all its price because it has been conceded to us.” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 287)

Here, the connection between happiness and sensibility comes to the fore. As Fontenelle understands it, happiness is “a state or a situation whose duration one wishes without change.” And it is exactly the permanent nature of this state that distinguishes happiness from pleasure, which he understands as an “agreeable sentiment, but short and transitory, and which can never be a state” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 277). Thinking about the conditions for happiness, understood as a permanent state, leads Fontenelle to take sides with the view that, in the *Jugement de Pluton*, he had ascribed to the “fat Dutchman”: “one must return to simple pleasures, such as the tranquility of life, society, hunting, reading … [T]he vivacious pleasures take place in instants, and often instants that are fatal through an excess of vivacity, which does not leave anything to be enjoyed after them; whereas simple pleasures are usually of the length that one wants; and spoil nothing of what follows them” (Fontenelle 1825, p. 289). In the Epicurean weighing of expected pleasures and disturbances small pleasures are thus far better than the pleasures that could be derived from self-related illusions.

**La Mettrie on Happiness and Illusions of Esteem**

A more enthusiastic portrayal of illusions as sources of pleasure can be found in La Mettrie. Yet even so, in La Mettrie this enthusiasm does not occur without some significant qualifications. Compared with Fontenelle, Epicurean ideas are certainly more prominent in La Mettrie, who had written a short exposition of Epicurus’s philosophy which mainly focused on natural philosophy. In several other writings one finds the idea that illusions, and especially esteem-related illusion, contribute to happiness because they contribute to pleasure. In his view, this is so because illusions have a quasi-perceptual nature. This idea is expressed in his *École de la volupté* in the context of a description of love:

“There are moments … where the force of imagination represents an adored object so vivaciously to the mind that one believes to see and to be in its presence. What am I saying? One sees it, one talks to it, one touches it, one finds that one can sense it … It is in these lucky moments, my dear friend, that often illusion bestows greater goods upon me than reality itself.” ([La Mettrie] 1783, no pagination [“A ma chêre amie”])

In the same work, La Mettrie is also clear that the kind of pleasure specific to humans essentially involves the cultivation of illusions—an idea that is developed in the following imaginary dialogue:

“[I]s not the fore-taste of pleasure worth the disgust that pleasure subsequently often carries with it? – But Céphise is content, as a lover she has one of the greatest masters in the art of pleasures. – Yes, certainly, the most useless efforts of a voluptuous man contribute more to the glory of love than the momentary pleasures of those species of animals that would sense nothing without the power and elasticity of their organs. Only the voluptuous man unites all illusions, only he enjoys all ideas, he calls them to his mind, he awakens those that please him according to the inclination of his imagination: not as if I would know how the imagination grinds its colors; but the image of pleasure that results appears to be pleasure itself.” ([La Mettrie] 1783, pp. 44–45)

Here, the pleasure that derives from the anticipation of pleasure, even if this anticipation may be illusory, is placed in the context of the Epicurean idea of weighing expected pleasures. And La Mettrie’s provocative point is that even such a rational weighing of expected pleasures might speak in favor of entertaining illusions—even those illusions that will be followed by disappointment.

The question, of course, is why one should understand such experiences to be sensation-like. This is a question that is discussed in detail in La Mettrie’s *Traité de l’âme*. There, La Mettrie assimilates imagination and sensation in way akin to what can be found in Du Châtelet. What underlies this assimilation is his view that sensation cannot represent reality as it is. Here, La Mettrie adopts some of the standard arguments of Pyrrhonian skepticism that all purport to show that sensations depend on the constitution of our sense organs and, therefore, are incapable of providing access to the qualities that physical things really have (La Mettrie 1996, pp. 60–61; for a critical edition of this work, see La Mettrie 1988). Nevertheless, he holds that there is a meaningful distinction between sensation and sense-deception: In normal cases, but not in the case of sense-deception, the senses cause behavior that is conducive to our well-being. La Mettrie holds that sensation is shaped by our nature and also accommodated to it:

“Thus, sensations do not at all represent things as they really are in themselves, since they depend entirely on the parts of the body which open the path for them. But do they therefore deceive us? No, of course not, whatever one may say, as they were given to us more to conserve our machine than to acquire knowledge.” (La Mettrie 1996, p. 61)

This view of the function of sensation is significant for La Mettrie’s interpretation of illusion because he holds that, in some cases, acts of the imagination can be of the same quality as sensations: “[I]n those who are dreaming or in delirium, imagination produces true sensations; which proves clearly that it is no different in nature and in its effect on the sensorium, even though the multiplication of ideas and the rapidity with which they follow one another weaken the former ideas the brain has retained” (La Mettrie 1996, p. 69). As he explains, “a true imagination represents objects in their natural state, while in false imagination the soul sees them as other than they are. Sometimes it recognizes this illusion and then it is only vertigo …” (La Mettrie 1996, p. 69). Of course, putting things this way is perplexing if one keeps in mind that La Mettrie denies that sensations can ever be true in the sense of representing things as they are. La Mettrie takes this concern into account when he gives the following characterization of “true delirium”: “Sometimes the soul participates in the general error of all the internal and external senses, and believes that objects really resemble the phantoms produced in the imagination, and then it is true delirium” (La Mettrie 1996, p. 69). Accordingly, true imagination could be described as a state that is qualitatively like sensation, while false imagination could be described as a state that differs from how we usually perceive things. And it is experiences of the former kind that makes some instances of imagination akin to sensation.

La Mettrie also analyses dreaming and some states of delirium in quasi-perceptual terms. Only dreamless sleep, in his view, is an entirely sensation-less state: “In perfect sleep, the sensitive soul is as it were annihilated, because all powers of being awake that give sensations to it are entirely intercepted in this state of compression of the brain” (La Mettrie 1988, p. 132). By contrast, dreaming is analyzed as a perceptual state: “During imperfect sleep, there is only a part of these powers that is suspended or interrupted; and the sensations that they produce are incomplete or always deficient in some point” (La Mettrie 1988, p. 132). This is how, in La Mettrie’s view, one can distinguish dreams from sensations; but still, both are described as functions of the sensitive soul. However, it is only a difference of degrees of confusion: “The pieces of knowledge that we in other circumstances have with more exactness and neatness reveal to us sufficiently the nature of dreams, which are formed by a chaos of confused and imperfect ideas” (La Mettrie 1988, p. 132).

“In dreaming, we have an inner sentiment of ourselves, and at the same time a delirium that is sufficiently great that we believe we see, and in fact believe we see clearly, an infinity of things outside of ourselves … From this it follows that the immediate cause of dreams is any strong or frequent impression on the sensitive part of the brain that did not fall asleep or is closed, and that the objects by which one is so vividly affected are visibly games of imagination. One also sees that the delirium that accompanies sleeplessness and fevers comes from the same causes, and that dreaming is being half-awake, in so far as a part of the brain remains free and open for the traces of spirits, although all other parts are tranquil and closed.” (La Mettrie 1988, p. 133)

Thus, there are several respects in which La Mettrie pushes the limits of what belongs to sensation. Clearly, he includes dreams, some form of delirium, and very vivacious acts of the imagination in the realm of states that result from the sensitive powers of the soul. However, he also sets clear limits to the realm of the perceptual, and non-pathological acts of the imagination, in his view, clearly do not belong to this realm: “Imagination in a sane man is weaker than the sensation of external sensations and … gives no real sensations at all” (La Mettrie 1996, pp. 68–69).

Accordingly, even if for La Mettrie sensations can be distinguished from sense-deceptions through the beneficial nature of the former, it is an open question for him whether or not a given illusion is conducive to human well-being. Some illusions he takes to be beneficial. For instance, he includes the pleasant, calm state caused by opium among the states that belong to “temperamental” or “organic happiness” (La Mettrie 1996, p. 123).[[2]](#footnote-2) The same holds for some dreams: “Dreams, which do not need opium in order to be often very pleasant, confirm the same point. As a loved one is pictured better absent than present, because reality sets limits on the imagination which are not there when it is left to its own devices; in the same way depictions are more vivid when one is asleep than waking” (La Mettrie 1996, p. 124). There is thus a sense in which illusions can contribute to happiness: “You can see that even the illusions produced by medicines or dreams are the true causes of our mechanical happiness or unhappiness.” As he explicates the nature of such states:

“And though the charming objects which give me delicious dreams are not really with me, I am nevertheless with them and I nevertheless feel the same pleasures as I would if they were present. There are the same advantages in delirium and in madness, which is itself a delirium. To cure these illnesses is often to do a disservice; it means disturbing a pleasant dream and providing the sad perspective of poverty to a man who, like the famous madman of Athens, saw only wealth and ships belonging to himself.” (La Mettrie 1996, p. 124)

Describing the experience of the mentally deranged man as “seeing” things as belonging to himself articulates nicely the conception of some illusions being akin to sensation. At the same time, La Mettrie is clear that not all such experiences are pleasant:

“Such is the power of feelings; they can never deceive us and they are never false in relation to ourselves, within the illusion itself. For they show us and make us feel ourselves as we are really at the moment we feel them: sad or happy, contented or discontented; for they affect our whole being as far as it is sentient, or rather they constitute it. From which it follows, (1) whether life is a dream or possesses some reality, the effect on one’s well-being or ill-being is the same; (2) contrary to Descartes’ opinion, an unpleasant reality is less welcome than one of the charming illusions so well described by Fontenelle in his *Eclogues*: ‘Often, pursuing vain phantoms, our seduced reason permits herself to go astray with great pleasure, enjoying those objects she has herself produced; and this illusion will repay for a moment the lack of true gifts, which miserly nature has not given to humans’.” (La Mettrie 1996, p. 125; see Fontenelle 1688, p. 4)

Of course, this is a highly one-sided use of Fontenelle, and, as we have seen above, Fontenelle was by no means unaware of the detrimental effects that self-related illusions can have. But no matter how one-sided La Mettrie’s use of Fontenelle is, La Mettrie does not overlook the downsides of illusions. For instance, he reminds us that there are not only pleasant dreams but also nightmares (La Mettrie 1996, p. 124). This is why he concludes that there is always the possibility that our illusions will render us sad and frightened (La Mettrie 1996, p. 124).

A similar observation can be made with respect to our desire for fame with posterity. On the one hand, La Mettrie notes that seeking fame can lead to a pleasurable experience:

“Our imagination that is inflated and, as it were, bloatedby praises, transfers someone else’s esteem onto ourselves, where it changes into such a high assessment that we regard ourselves as personalities of high importance; and while we see in ourselves nothing but matter and form, we not only believe that we have a soul but a soul of special, superior making, especially made for us. From thence arise all the advantages that the mind can procure for the body: for certainly, the humors circulate more easily when the soul is affected agreeably.” (La Mettrie 1996, p. 71)

Clearly, then, there is a sense in which illusions concerning the degree to which we are esteemed by others can have beneficial organic effects. On the other hand, however, there is always the possibility that our imagination represents us to ourselves as an object of contempt: “Contempt is not more an evil than praise is a good. But again, we are deceived when we shape our imagination on the imagination of others, which flatters us or hurts us through an agreeable or disagreeable image that results from it in the brain” (La Mettrie 1996, p. 73). Accordingly, there are two contrary kinds of possibilities: Either imagining the phantasies of others is pleasant, and hence a source of happiness (when we imagine that others hold us in high esteem), or it is unpleasant, and therefore a source of unhappiness (when we imagine that others hold us in low esteem). If so, then there is also no guarantee that thinking of the attitude of future generations toward ourselves is always a source of pleasant experiences.

**Reconsidering Du Châtelet’s Challenge**

Du Châtelet’s remarks about illusions, and in particular esteem-related illusions, thus stand in the broader context of the debate about how social esteem contributes to pleasure and thereby to happiness. While in the interpretation of Epicurus articulated by Gassendi and Bernier there seems to be little room for a positive function of such illusions, Du Châtelet shares with Fontenelle and La Mettrie the intuition that neglecting illusions would overlook an essential factor of the “great machines of happiness” (DuChatZin2009, p.355). Before specifying some significant differences between Fontenelle, La Mettrie and Du Châtelet, it may be useful to address the general question whether assigning any positive function to illusions of esteem would not be vulnerable to Bernier’s argument in favor of the importance of being realistic about one’s own personal qualities. As we have seen, Bernier argues that modesty plays a crucial role in weighing expected pleasures and displeasures by drawing to the attention that vanity is disesteemed by everyone. Would not entertaining illusions about how much others, especially posterity, esteem us lead to a display of vanity? Du Châtelet never addresses this problem directly. However, she addresses the more general question of decent behavior (*bienséances*) as a factor conducive to happiness. Du Châtelet emphasizes that she does not regard decent behavior to be an expression of prejudices—in her view, prejudices are always false (DuChatZin2009, p. 353). This is what distinguishes them from decent behavior:

“The proprieties have a conventional truth, and that is enough to convince all good people never to deviate from them. No book teaches the proprieties; nevertheless, no one can in good faith claim not to be aware of them. They vary according to rank in society, age, and circumstances. Whoever wishes for happiness must never deviate from them.” (DuChatZin2009, p. 353)

What, in Du Châtelet`s view, motivates decent behavior is the desire for esteem, and this is one of the ways that the desire for esteem contributes to happiness:

“Villains are the false and perfidious, the slanderers, the informers, the ungrateful. In a word, all those who have vices the laws do not curb, but against which custom and society have brought formal judgments. These formal judgments are all the more terrible, as they are always carried out …

I maintain then that there is no one on earth who can feel that he is despised and not feel despair. This public disdain, this turning away of people of good will, is a torture more cruel than all those that the public executioner could inflict, because it lasts much longer, and because hope never accompanies it.” (DuChatZin2009, p. 353)

Although Du Châtelet does not mention the vice of vanity, it is easy to see how this consideration could be applied to the problem identified by Bernier. If the person who is perceived as vain is the object of contempt, then vanity leads to unpleasant experiences that make living happily impossible. It therefore seems plausible to assume that Du Châtelet’s emphasis on the importance of decent behavior would imply that self-related illusions should not be expressed in a way that hurts the self-esteem of others. If so, then her emphasis on decent behavior would carve out a sense in which self-related illusions are unaffected by Bernier’s concerns about modesty: As long as these illusions do not hurt the feelings of self-worth of others, they cannot be a source of contempt.

Keeping standards of decency in mind is what lends plausibility to Du Châtelet’s exploration of the role of illusions for happiness when read against the problem of vanity. Still, comparing her approach to illusions with the approaches taken by Fontenelle and La Mettrie may draw attention to some of the problematic aspects of Du Châtelet’s generalizations. Three issues may be relevant here: (1) the question of whether illusions on stage and illusions in real life feel the same; (2) the question of whether self-related illusions—even apart from the problem of vanity—are always beneficial for one’s life; and (3) the question of whether self-related illusions are really sensation-like.

(1) The close analogy that Du Châtelet draws between illusions in the theater and illusions in real life seems to rest on a generalization that could be criticized even within an aesthetics of illusion. This may be so even if some of the emotions that make a play significant for the audience are similar to emotions that are significant in real life. Referring to the story of Armida and Rinaldo from Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, Du Châtelet observes:

“[W]hen two lovers are reconciled, when their jealousy is gone, when the obstacles that separated them have been surmounted, they are no longer proper drama. The play is over for the spectators, and the scene of Rinaldo and Armida would not interest us as much as it does if the spectator did not expect that the love of Rinaldo is the effect of an enchantment that must be dispelled, and that the passion displayed by Armida in this scene will make her unhappiness more interesting. The same motives move our soul at the theatre and in the events of life.” (DuChatZin2009, p. 350)

While this observation seems to be accurate, saying that watching a play on stage can trigger some emotions that are also operative in real life is not enough to substantiate the point that illusions in the theater and illusions in real life feel the same. As we have seen, Fontenelle’s poetics supports the view that creating illusions is crucial for the play’s effect on the spectators. At the same time, Fontenelle points out some phenomenological differences between experiencing a play and entertaining illusions in real life. As Fontenelle makes clear, illusions in the theater feel different than illusions in real life, and the effect of tragedies essentially depends not only on illusion but also on the difference between various kinds of illusion. If so, the pleasurable nature of illusions in the theater is not a guarantee for the pleasurable nature of illusion in real life, where there is no distance between the spectator and the depicted events.

(2) Drawing too close an analogy between illusions in the theater and illusions in real life is also vulnerable to a series of observations that Fontenelle makes with respect to the detrimental effect of illusions on human happiness. What Du Châtelet says about the illusory nature of the desire for glory may not be fully consistent. One the one hand, she makes a very general claim:

“The love of glory that is the source of so many pleasures of the soul and of so many efforts of all sorts that contribute to the happiness, the instruction, and the perfection of society, is entirely founded on illusion.” (DuChatZin2009, p. 357)

A little earlier in the text, however, she articulates a view that comes close to the Epicurean view that esteem is the justified reward for virtuous actions:

“To the inner satisfaction caused by virtuous actions can be added the pleasure of enjoying universal esteem, but even though rogues cannot refuse their esteem to integrity, only the esteem of honorable men is truly worthwhile.” (Du ChatZin2009, p. 354)

Perhaps both strands of thought are reconciled in the following passage, where the possibility of virtue-based esteem seems to be acknowledged, while illusions are restricted to the expectation of fame with posterity:

“I know there is some substance in the love of glory that one can enjoy in one’s lifetime; but there are scarcely any heroes, of whatever kind, who would want to close themselves off entirely from the plaudits of posterity, from which one expects more justice than from one’s contemporaries … Philosophy would have us feel the vanity of it; but the feeling prevails, and this pleasure is not an illusion; for it proves to us the very real benefit of enjoying our future reputation.” (DuChatZin2009, p. 358)

Here, Du Châtelet seems to regard the mere anticipation of future reputation—no matter how mistaken we may be about this anticipation—to be an unrestricted source of pleasant experiences. By contrast, Fontenelle is aware of the ambivalent nature of such illusions. With respect to our desire to be esteemed by posterity, Fontenelle points out that reflecting on the causes of fame with future generations—their tendency of overvaluing what is ancient—makes imagining fame with future generations a much less effective source of pleasure. Du Châtelet’s view that imagining future fame is a beneficial illusion thereby loses much of its persuasiveness. Also, Fontenelle draws our attention to the detrimental effects that high self-esteem has on what we expect from life—we form unrealistic expectations that will likely be frustrated. Unlike Du Châtelet, Fontenelle therefore provides some strategies for getting rid of detrimental ways of thinking and imagining, such as thinking that happiness is the ordinary state of humans and that we possess personal qualities that make any disappointment an instance of injustice. What is more, even for pleasant illusions he offers a more differentiated treatment: For him, deriving happiness from pleasant illusions is at best a kind of default option for those who cannot master their imagination. It provides a sort of second-rate happiness that lacks one of the experienced qualities of happiness that result from the enjoyment of simple and common pleasures that nature offers to those who have freed themselves of self-related illusions. These are insights that Du Châtelet, much to her disadvantage, seems to have overlooked.

(3) Du Châtelet’s *Discours* and La Mettrie’s *Anti-Sénèque ou sur le souverain bien* were written almost at the same time. In fact, the relation between La Mettrie has already been the object of instructive works of commentary (Jauch 1998, pp. 314–335; Whitehead 2006; Rodriguez 2010; Hagengruber 2012, pp. 47–53). Still, the relation between their respective views concerning illusions can be clarified further. Robert Mauzi has pointed out that the character of La Mettrie’s *Anti-Sénèque* differs strongly from the character of Du Châtelet’s *Discours*: The detailed analysis of psychological mechanisms that lead to happiness that one finds in Du Châtelet is largely absent from La Mettrie’s text, which rather emphasizes natural factors that work with a necessity that eludes the influence of the will (Du Châtelet 1961, p. c). As Mauzi has argued, it seems most plausible to assume that Du Châtelet’s *Discours* had been written sometime between 1746 and 1748 (Du Châtelet 1961, pp. lxxvi–lxxxiv), which is why there is no way of telling whether Du Châtelet has read La Mettrie’s *Anti-Sénèque* (first version, 1748) before finishing her essay (Du Châtelet 1961, p. c). Things stand differently with the *Traité de l’âme*, which appeared in three different versions between 1745 and 1750. The second version, published in 1747 under the title *Histoire naturelle de l’âme*, was prefaced by a “Critical Letter” of La Mettrie to Du Châtelet ([La Mettrie] 1747, pp. 1–12). It seems plausible to assume that Du Châtelet took notice of this work.

The *Traité de l’âme* may give some clues as to what Du Châtelet could have had in mind when she described illusions as quasi-perceptual phenomena.Concerning this issue, Barbara Whitehead has described the relation between Du Châtelet and La Mettrie as follows:

“For Du Châtelet, the defense of illusion comes from illusion’s ability to enable us to see reality in a more pleasing way; it is ultimately grounded in the material world. La Mettrie’s position differs in that he is not defining illusion as a tool providing us with an alternative way of viewing reality; instead, he sees the virtue of illusion in the fact that it can supply an alternative reality, one not based on the material world but on the immaterial fantasies of the mind.” (Whitehead 2006, p. 271)

Now, it certainly sounds strange to ascribe to a materialist like La Mettrie the view that acts of the imagination should be regarded as immaterial states of the soul. For La Mettrie, souls are as much material beings as they are for Epicurus and Lucretius, and in this sense acts of the imagination cannot but be based on the material world. What matters most for present purposes, however, is that there are not only some significant similarities but also some significant differences between La Mettrie’s and Du Châtelet’s views on illusions.

As to the similarities, La Mettrie and Du Châtelet hold that sensation is shaped by our nature and also accommodated to it. Du Châtelet recommends that we take an active attitude toward our illusions: “We cannot give ourselves illusions any more than we can give ourselves tastes, or passions; but we can keep the illusions that we have; we can seek not to destroy them. We can choose not to go behind the set to see the wheels that make flight and the other machines of theatrical productions” (DuChatZin2009, p. 355). La Mettrie proposes a similar active attitude with respect to pleasant illusions: “If being deceived by nature is to our advantage, well, let her always deceive us! Let us use our very reason to mislead ourselves if it makes us happier” (La Mettrie 1996, p. 125). As to the differences, La Mettrie’s analysis of illusions indicates why some illusions are not sensation-like and, for this reason, can be detrimental to our well-being. In this sense, La Mettrie sees the ambivalence of illusions as a possible source of both happiness and unhappiness. Also, the insight into the difference between healthy and pathological mental states sets La Mettrie apart from Du Châtelet because, if imagination (in normal circumstances) and sensation are mental states of different kinds, then there is no ground for analyzing illusions generally as quasi-perceptual phenomena.

Considered in the context of Fontenelle’s and La Mettrie’s views on happiness, Du Châtelet’s challenge thus articulates a position that is more extreme than the positions of other thinkers influenced by Epicurean hedonism. But for the very reason that she pushed claims concerning the beneficial effect of illusions to extremes, her position also does not seem to be persuasive in every respect. Fontenelle and La Mettrie would certainly accept the view that entertaining illusions can contribute to happiness, namely, when the illusions at hand are exactly those that have beneficial consequences for our organic life and/or our emotional states. However, Fontenelle’s and La Mettrie’s considerations shed a critical light on the generalizations that Du Châtelet makes. Comparison with Fontenelle shows that Du Châtelet focuses on similarities between emotional experiences with theatrical fictions and emotional experiences in real life without taking into account the qualitative differences between our experiences with fictions and our real-life experiences. Comparison with La Mettrie indicates that Du Châtelet generalizes an idea that La Mettrie applies to a more limited range of mental states. Du Châtelet’s remarks are certainly thought provoking—not the least because they draw attention to alternative ways of thinking about the same issues in her predecessors. But contextualizing her thought within the various options for thinking about the connections between esteem, illusions, and happiness in the Epicurean tradition also indicates that Du Châtelet’s challenge overlooks some of the detrimental effects that esteem-related illusions may have for human life. If so, then the differences between Fontenelle, La Mettrie and Du Châtelet may draw attention to the possibility that the “great machines of happiness” would have to be more complex than she had believed.

**Abbreviation**

[DuChatZin2009] Du Châtelet, É. (2009). *Selected Philosophical and Scientific Writings*, trans. and ed. Judith Zinsser, trans. Isabelle Bour, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago & London.

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1. Translation modified according to the second edition [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a critical edition of this work, see La Mettrie 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)