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Published online: 11 Sep 2022.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Morality of Self-Acceptance: La Rochefoucauld and the Augustinian Challenge

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This article argues that the reception of Augustinian ideas in Pascal and Nicole can be used to clarify what is distinctive in La Rochefoucauld's treatment of self-relations. La Rochefoucauld does not share the Augustinian dichotomy between self-love at the price of forgetting God and love of God at the price of self-contempt that is prominent in both Pascal and Nicole. Rather, La Rochefoucauld develops a conception of an attitude towards the self that could be described as self-acceptance. As he describes it, being open about one's character faults falls short of self-esteem, if self-esteem is understood as involving a positive evaluation of one's own character traits. However, it counterbalances these faults and can enhance the esteem in which we are held. And it offers a remedy for competing for social esteem which can be detrimental to our lives because the sincere person does not seek to be esteemed for qualities that are only pretended. At the same time, it overcomes an inflated self-image, thereby improving both social relations and the relation to the self.

KEYWORDS Augustinianism, self-contempt, self-esteem, self-acceptance, sincerity

Introduction

Does it make sense to take up the old question of La Rochefoucauld's relation to the Augustinian tradition? Probably not, if the point were to argue for an interpretation of La Rochefoucauld as a covert Augustinian. Jean Lafond and Philippe Sellier, who

made the Augustinian reading prominent some fifty years ago, have left no possibly relevant aspect of the available sources unexamined.[1] Yet their work does not seem to have made a lasting impact; more recent scholarship places La Rochefoucauld in the context of court culture.[2] In what follows, I do not propose an Augustinian reading of La Rochefoucauld, but would like to show that keeping in mind the contrast between La Rochefoucauld and aspects of the Augustinian tradition reveals what is distinctive about La Rochefoucauld's conception of self-relations.

The fact that La Rochefoucauld extensively reflects upon aspects of the gallant life – especially gender relations, court society, and military valor – has not been overlooked by proponents of the Augustinian interpretation. Lafond interpreted these remarks as an expression of a regional ethics that corresponded to the highly segmented character of society in early modern France. This is why he takes them to be a description of norms valid in a certain segment of French society, which would be fully compatible with the view that living according to these norms embraces disguised vices.[3] Critics of the Augustinian interpretation of La Rochefoucauld have noted that La Rochefoucauld's few explicit commitments to theological doctrines – the doctrine of original sin,[4] the view that in their present condition humans live without divine grace,[5] and the doctrine of Christian humility[6] – are highly unspecific and could be shared by thinkers outside the Augustinian tradition, even including *libertins*.[7] This criticism, however, underestimates the subtlety of the Augustinian interpretation. As Sellier argues, even if La Rochefoucauld remains silent about specifically Augustinian assumptions, these assumptions can be inferred from the picture that La Rochefoucauld gives of the human condition without divine grace: 'Could one not think that La Rochefoucauld had the idea to develop what, in Pascal's project, presents itself as a "negative" – in the photographic sense – of the Augustinian theology?'[8]

To criticize the Augustinian interpretation, it will not suffice to emphasize the presence of themes from the gallant life or the lack of theological doctrinal formation. What is also needed is an identification of some substantial divergence between La Rochefoucauld's views concerning the human condition without divine grace and the view of the Augustinians. This is not a trivial task because,

[1] P. Sellier, 'La Rochefoucauld, Pascal, Saint Augustin,' *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 69 (1969), 551–75; J. Lafond, *La Rochefoucauld. Augustinisme et littérature* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977).

[2] See O. Roth, *Gesellschaft der Honnêtes Gens. Zur sozialethischen Grundlegung des honnêteté-Ideals bei La Rochefoucauld* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1981); H. C. Clark, 'La Rochefoucauld and the Social Basis of Aristocratic Ethics,' *History of European Ideas* 8 (1987), 61–76; M. Galland-Szymkowiak, 'Le mérite chez La Rochefoucauld ou l'héroisme de l'honnêteté,' *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 102 (2002), 799–811; I. Chariatte, *La Rochefoucauld et la culture mondaine. Portraits du coeur de l'homme* (Paris: Garnier, 2011).

[3] Lafond, *La Rochefoucauld*, pp. 146–47.

[4] F. de La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes suivi des Réflections diverses*, ed. by J. Truchet (Paris: Garnier, 1967), maxims L 195 and L 256.

[5] 'Avis au lecteur' (now widely believed to have been written by La Rochefoucauld).

[6] Letter to Thomas Esprit, 6 February 1664 (La Rochefoucauld, p. 578); see maxim 358.

[7] See H. Ostrowiecki, 'La bible des libertins,' *XVIIe siècle* 194 (1997), 43–55.

[8] Sellier, p. 560: 'Ne peut-on penser que La Rochefoucauld a eu l'idée de développer ce qui, dans le projet pascalien, se présente comme un « négatif » – au sens photographique – de la théologie augustinienne ?'

as Lafond and Sellier have demonstrated, there is a wide-ranging convergence deriving from the view of apparent virtues as combinations of vices that mutually cancel out their detrimental effects,[9] and from the view that self-love, understood as the desire to have everything for one's own sake, is the origin of vice.[10] I would like to argue that La Rochefoucauld has identified a relation to the self that diverges from anything that can be found in the Augustinian tradition. Although La Rochefoucauld does not use the term, I call this relation 'self-acceptance'. It is an attitude that sincerely identifies one's own character traits, even if these character traits may not be virtuous. Those who develop self-acceptance need no longer engage in the (often futile) efforts to deceive others. And it is an attitude that greatly improves the opinion that others have of us.

La Rochefoucauld's conception of self-acceptance diverges from the Augustinian analysis of what goes wrong when humans love temporal things – an analysis that became prominent in early modern France through the reception of Cornelius Jansen's *Augustinus* (1640). According to Augustine and Jansen, loving temporal things is a situation in which humans acquiesce in themselves and lose the impulse to develop the love of God.[11] This applies even in cases where we love a person who fulfils the duties of civil life. As Augustine and Jansen argue, this is so because non-Christian virtues are turned into hidden vices as they are an expression of arrogance and complacency with oneself.[12] This is why Augustine and Jansen hold that there is a dichotomy between the self-love that comes at the price of forgetting God and a form of loving God that involves contempt for oneself.[13] My objection to the Augustinian interpretation of La Rochefoucauld is this: Self-acceptance, as described by La Rochefoucauld, frees us from unfounded self-esteem while preventing us from falling into self-contempt. In this sense, self-acceptance is an attitude towards the self that avoids the Augustinian dichotomy.

I will proceed as follows. I will analyse how two of the thinkers influenced by Augustinianism – Pierre Nicole (1625–95) and Blaise Pascal (1623–62) – use diverging argumentative strategies to show how the negative roles that striving for esteem plays in human life can be used to support the Augustinian dichotomy. Subsequently, I will show that, even if La Rochefoucauld shares with the Augustinians the view that the desire for esteem is often distorted through deception and self-deception, he upholds the possibility of self-knowledge. This is crucial for how he connects the concept of *honnêteté* with the concept of sincerity. Finally, I will

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[9] Maxim 182; On La Rochefoucauld's analysis of virtue, see M. Moriarty, *Disguised Vices. Theories of Virtue in Early Modern French Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 317–42.

[10] Maxim 583.

[11] A. Augustinus, *Opera oratoria. Sermonum classis I. Sermones de scripturis 115–183*, ed. by A. B. Caillau (Paris: Mellier, 1842), *Sermo* 149.14; C. Jansen, *Augustinus seu doctrina S. Augustini de humanae naturae sanitate, aegritudine, medicina adversus Pelagianos & Massilienses*. 3 vols (Louvain: Zeger, 1640), 2: col. 361.

[12] A. Augustinus, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. 3 vols, ed. by E. Deckers (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956), ch. 121; Jansen, 2: col. 607.

[13] A. Augustinus, *De civitate Dei*, 2 vols, ed. by B. Dombart and A. Kalb (Turnhout: Brepols, 1955), 14.28; Jansen, 2: col. 424. For a detailed analysis of Augustine's and Jansen's treatments of these matters, see A. Blank, 'The Morality of the Desire for Esteem: Gassendi and the Augustinian Challenge,' *History of European Ideas* 47 (2021), 1228–1242.

show how, in La Rochefoucauld's view, accepting our own ethical shortcomings and being open about them can improve both our social relations and our relation to ourselves.

The persistence of the Augustinian dichotomy

Nicole and Pascal are Augustinians in the sense that they believe that the only way of overcoming misguided dynamics of esteem is by renouncing the desire for esteem. Using the epithet 'Augustinian', of course, is not meant to convey the view that everything that Nicole and Pascal say is derived from Augustine or Jansen's reading of Augustine. To a varying extent, there are elements in the thought of Nicole and Pascal that cannot be found in either Augustine or Jansen. In fact, they support the Augustinian dichotomy with diverging argumentative strategies.

The Augustinian dichotomy in Nicole

What is distinctive to Nicole is the emphasis on the role of common language (*langue commune*). Yet, even in this context, he takes up Augustine's concept of concupiscence, understood as 'the motion of the mind to enjoy oneself and one's neighbour and any bodily object not for the sake of God'.[14] In his *Discours où l'on fait voir combien les entretiens des hommes sont dangereux*, Nicole integrates this concept into his analysis of how common language distorts what we esteem, when he claims that 'Les idées de grandeur ou de petitesse, de mépris ou d'estime, y sont toûjours jointes aux objets selon que la concupiscence se les repré-sente [...].'[15] Because ideas that are shaped by concupiscence are expressed in common language, what we ordinarily say reinforces distorted esteem even when individuals personally do not share these ideas:

> Ils sont obligez de parler avec estime de plusieurs choses que le monde estime trop, & leurs discours étant pris par les autres dans le sens auquel on le prend dans le monde, & ceux qui les entendent y appliquant leurs propres idées, ils contribuent contre leur inten-tion à augmenter ces fausses impressions, qui sont la source de tous les vices.[16]

That Nicole's analysis of what is wrong about esteeming worldly things derives from specifically theological assumptions becomes clear when he describes the desire for esteem as being that which prevents us from searching for God.[17] Evi-dently, Nicole here takes up the Augustinian notion of acquiescence, understood as the state in which humans lose the impulse to develop love for God. This notion also underlies Nicole's analysis of why it is morally wrong to want to be esteemed for secular virtues. One of the examples that Nicole uses in his moral reflections about the Gospels and Epistles is the Pharisees, as portrayed in the

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[14]   Jansen, 2: col. 354; A. Augustinus, *Mélanges doctrinaux: Quaestiones 83. Quaestiones VII ad Simplicia-num. Quaestiones VIII Dulcitii. De divinatione daemonum*, ed. by G. Bardy (Paris: Desclée de Brower, 1952), *Quaestiones octagintatres*, q. 33.

[15]   P. Nicole, *Essais de morale. Volume second* (Paris: Desprez, 1682), p. 59 ['Danger des entretiens des hommes,' 1.3].

[16]   Nicole, *Essais de morale*, 2: 74 ['Danger des entretiens des hommes,' 1.6].

[17]   Nicole, *Essais de morale*, 2: 64 ['Danger des entretiens des hommes,' 1.4].

New Testament. And he follows closely the interpretive pattern developed by Jansen, who describes what has gone wrong with the Pharisees thus:

> To be greeted by others and to be addressed with title and to sit at the first place in meetings is not something evil but rather something good. However, to love it is rightly reprehended by the Saviour as a vice and a sin. About the Pharisees, he says: 'they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces' [Matthew 23:6–7]. […] [T]o love things of this kind are sins of arrogance; and this is so for the only reason that they are loved and that love finds its goal and rest in them and does not search any further.[18]

Similarly, Nicole believes that the Pharisees took virtue to consist in external actions. As he comments: 'Il est fort naturel que ceux qui s'estiment eux-mêmes, désirent aussi d'être estimés des autres ; & c'est pourquoi le désir de l'honneur & de l'estime étoit encore un des caractères des Pharisiens.'[19]

To explain what is morally problematic about being motivated by the desire for esteem, Nicole takes up the Augustinian dichotomy between love of God and self-love. He does so by placing what we esteem in the context of the theological conception of a struggle between diabolic influences and Christian faith. He takes the 'illusions of the devil' to be those illusions that do not represent creatures as they are and 'qui nous en cachent les défauts & tout ce qui pourroit en diminuer en nous l'estime & l'amour'. By contrast, faith instils in us the truths 'qui nous apprennent le vrai prix & le vrai usage des créatures ; mais en nous découvrant d'autres objets & d'autres biens, dont la grandeur & la beauté nous rendent toutes les créatures méprisables'.[20] Thus, Nicole holds the Pharisees, despite their high self-esteem, to be worthy objects of contempt:

> [I]ls ne portoient point contre eux-mêmes ce jugement de justice, par lequel on se reconnoît non-seulement pécheur & miserable, mais aussi pécheur & orgueilleux, par conséquent digne de mépris, d'abaissement & d'humiliation.[21]

Consequently, Nicole recommends to Christians that they renounce entirely the desire to be esteemed for talents and that they willingly accept contempt for not having developed any talents – except for the talent to live in a state of humiliation and contempt.[22]

The Augustinian dichotomy in Pascal

While Pascal's recommendations concerning the relation to the self are not far from Nicole's, his argumentative strategy differs significantly. Pascal develops a series of arguments that question the idea that we are capable of identifying what is naturally

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[18] Jansen, 2: col. 359.
[19] P. Nicole, *Continuation des Essais de morale. Tome septième* (Paris: Desprez & Elie Josset, 1688), pp. 430–31 ['Sur l'Évangile du V. Dimanche d'après la Pentecôte,' § 7].
[20] Nicole, *Continuation des Essais de morale*, 7: 356–57 ['Sur l'Epître du III. Dimanche d'après la Pentecôte,' § 9].
[21] Nicole, *Continuation des essais de morale*, 7: 427 ['Sur l'Évangile du V. Dimanche d'après la Pentecôte,' § 4].
[22] Nicole, *Continuation des Essais de morale*, 7: 574–75 ['Sur l'Epître du X. Dimanche après la Pentecôte,' § 9].

good for us, and, if so, then we seem to be unable to identify what deserves to be esteemed. This is how his discussion of distorted esteem forms part of the plan for the first part of his projected work, to prove by nature itself that nature is corrupt (S 40).[23] His remarks about how imagination influences what we esteem form a part of this argumentative strategy. Famously, he holds that 'étant le plus souvent fausse, elle ne donne aucune marque de sa qualité, marquant du même car-actère le vrai et le faux' (S 78). If what reason tells us feels exactly the same as what imagination tells us, then, as a consequence, there is no standard against which we could check the esteem that we have for things: 'La raison a beau crier, elle ne peut mettre le prix aux choses' (S 78). Imagination therefore determines both self-esteem and the esteem in which we are held by others. This is why Pascal suggests that imagination distributes reputation, both of persons and of achievements. As he argues, this is seen in how important vocal and facial expression, body language, dress, and means of transportation are for creating in others a favourable opinion of one's own professional skills. If real skills were the object of esteem, handling the imagination of others through these means would be otiose (S 78).

Pascal also observes that the wish to make a good impression, even if successful, is an impediment to developing personal talents. Evidently, what makes a good impression on others depends on their own preferences. In a series of remarks, Pascal draws attention to the influence of admiration and praise in our choices of professions (S 69; S 71; S 97; S 162). The expressions of admiration and praise, however, are not expressions of momentary personal preferences; rather, Pascal believes that custom is what usually determines the choice of professions because custom shapes what people esteem (S 527). In his view, the desire for being well thought of is something that prevents us from developing the talents we may have:

> Nous ne nous contentons pas de la vie que nous avons en nous et en notre propre être :
> nous voulons vivre dans l'idée des autres d'une vie imaginaire, et nous nous efforçons
> pour cela de paraître. Nous travaillons incessamment à embellir et conserver notre
> être imaginaire, et négligeons le véritable. (S 653)

Far from holding that we could rely on our natural qualities to overcome custom, he maintains that imagination has made ideas of human nature and natural goodness empty because it has established a 'second nature' (S 76): 'La vraie nature étant perdue, tout devient sa nature ; comme, le véritable bien étant perdu, tout devient son véritable bien' (S 16; see S 94; S 181; S 523).

The only sense of human excellence that Pascal accepts is the theological con-ception of traces remaining from the prelapsarian state. But even these traces cannot ground favourable evaluations of actual qualities since they are mere, unrea-lized potentialities (S 151). Insight into unrealized human potentialities, for Pascal, is the reason both why we shy away from self-knowledge and why we deserve the contempt of others. Both aspects are brought out in an entry in the *Manuscrit Périer*:

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[23] References are to B. Pascal, *Pensées. Edition établie d'après la copie de référence de Gilberte Pascal*, ed. by
Philippe Sellier (Paris: Bordas, 1993).

> La nature de l'amour-propre et de ce moi humain est de n'aimer que soi et de ne considérer que soi. Mais que fera-t-il ? il ne saurait défauts et de misères : il veut être grand, et il se voit petit ; il veut être heureux, et il se voit misérable ; [...] il veut être l'objet de l'amour et de l'estime des hommes, et il voit que ses défauts ne méritent que leur aversion et leur mépris. (S 743)

Our aversion to self-knowledge explains why we often prefer to deceive ourselves and others in order to gain esteem (S 743). One consequence that Pascal draws from this observation is that deception and self-deception are all-pervasive: 'Ainsi la vie humaine n'est qu'une illusion perpétuelle ; on ne fait que s'entre-tromper et s'entre-flatter' (S 743).[24] Furthermore, our aversion to self-knowledge constitutes a kind of injustice – that of wanting to be esteemed more highly than one deserves. If one were really committed to justice, one would accept being treated with contempt as a justified response to one's own corruption. With respect to those who help us to escape ignorance of our imperfections, he remarks: 'Nous ne devons pas être fâchés qu'ils les connaissent, et qu'ils nous méprisent : étant juste et qu'ils nous connaissent pour ce que nous sommes, et qu'ils nous méprisent, si nous sommes méprisables' (S 743). That is, accepting the contempt of others is understood to be a demand of justice. The resulting attitude towards the self is one of self-hate: 'je le hais parce qu'il est injuste' (S 494). Note that the adequacy of self-hate here is not derived from any theological assumptions. Rather, it is a consequence of the injustice involved in wanting to be esteemed more highly than one deserves. However, it is an attitude towards the self that supports an Augustinian view of what loving God implies: 'il ne faut aimer que Dieu, et ne haïr que soi-même' (S 405).

In this way, Pascal supports the Augustinian dichotomy through considerations concerning how imagination distorts the dynamics of esteem, how it makes insight into natural goodness impossible, and how it renders any desire for being esteemed for personal qualities an instance of injustice. While these considerations do not depend on specifically theological assumptions, they identify problems that, in Pascal's view, can only be solved by accepting the theological precept central to Augustinianism. But for the very reason that Pascal's observations concerning the distorted nature of the dynamics of esteem do not depend on the theological assumptions they are meant to support, they challenge confidence in the value of civic virtues much more efficiently than the line of argument developed by Nicole. This is so because they raise doubts – on grounds acceptable even from a non-theological perspective – about whether we are confident that fulfilling the duties of civil life is naturally good for us. Can we be confident that we could identity *any* non-religious quality that deserves to be esteemed?

Self-acceptance as an alternative to the Augustinian dichotomy

La Rochefoucauld's treatment of self-relations derives much of its interest from the concerns articulated by the Augustinians. Like them, La Rochefoucauld was highly

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[24] For a detailed analysis of Pascal's views on deception, see W. D. Wood, *Blaise Pascal on Duplicity, Sin and the Fall. The Secret Instinct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

aware of the detrimental forms that the desire for esteem can take and of how much these forms are connected with deception and self-deception, but, at the same time, he saw the possibility of developing a beneficial attitude towards the self that amounts neither to contempt for the self nor to inflated self-esteem. This is the attitude that I call 'self-acceptance'. This attitude can be seen as an alternative to the Augustinian dichotomy because it involves a form of sincerity that does not serve our interest in deception and self-deception. But to carve out a space where a different kind of self-interest can be operative, it is crucial to grasp what La Rochefoucauld wanted to communicate in his many remarks that give a pessimistic portrayal of the everyday dynamics of esteem.

Pathologies of esteem and the problem of scalar expressions

The *Maximes* are interspersed with observations concerning the distorted forms of the desire for esteem. Some of the distortions that La Rochefoucauld diagnoses have to do with the self-image that most people cultivate. For instance, he suggests that pride is equal in everyone (maxim 35). Since presumably not everyone has achievements that justify being proud to the same degree, and since it is impossible that everyone scores above the average degree of smartness, most people suffer from an inflated self-image. Worse, our adverse qualities become an object of pride: 'Nous essayons de nous faire honneur des défauts que nous ne voulons pas corriger' (maxim 442). Also, inflated self-images can be upheld by downplaying those qualities in which one knows that one is inferior to others compared with the qualities in which one believes oneself (often without good reason) to be superior to others: 'Il n'y a point d'homme qui se croie en chacune de ses qualités au-dessous de l'homme du monde qu'il estime le plus' (maxim 452). Accordingly, one cannot plausibly complain about being deceived by others because one is often satisfied with self-deception (maxim 114). This is also why he takes disillusioning others about their merits to be a bad service (maxim 92).

A further kind of distortion is the question of whether expressions of esteem can be taken at face value. La Rochefoucauld has doubts: for instance, he takes esteem for the merit of our friends to be proportional to the satisfaction they give us (maxim 88). Likewise, 'Nous ne louons d'ordinaire de bon cœur que ceux qui nous admirent' (maxim 356). What is more, he notes that expressing esteem for others often expresses only esteem for our own sentiments (maxim 143) and for our own equity and discernment (maxim 144). What is esteemed often expresses nothing other than partiality: 'Nous ne trouvons guère de gens de bon sens, que ceux qui sont de notre avis' (maxim 347). Also, approval of newcomers is often an expression of envying those who are established (maxim 280). Yet it is not human excellence that is most esteemed: 'L'art de savoir bien mettre en œuvre de médiocres qualités dérobe l'estime et donne souvent plus de réputation que le véritable mérite' (maxim 162). Even worse, 'Le monde récompense plus souvent les apparences du mérite que le mérite même' (maxim 166). The illusory nature of many expressions of esteem renders the striving for esteem irrational:

> Nous récusons des Juges pour les plus petits intérêts, et nous voulons bien que notre
> réputation et notre gloire dépendent du jugement des hommes qui nous sont tous

contraires, ou par leur jalousie, ou par leur préoccupation, ou par leur peu de lumière […]. (Maxim 268)

In these passages, La Rochefoucauld takes the problems of misguided esteem and self-esteem no less seriously than Nicole and Pascal. The question, of course, is whether La Rochefoucauld's observations should be taken to express 'the negative' of Augustinian theology. A crucial issue in this respect is the meaning of scalar expressions such as 'd'ordinaire', 'souvent', and 'plus souvent' that seem to qualify the apodictic statements using expressions such as 'il n'y a point' and 'ne … guère'. This an issue not only raised by La Rochefoucauld's remarks about malfunctioning self-esteem and social esteem; rather, throughout the *Maxims* there is such an oscillation between statements of the two kinds. Since most of the statements involving scalar expressions still express scepticism about the greatest number of cases, Jean Starobinski maintains that, for La Rochefoucauld, '[l]'échelle idéale des valeurs morales persiste et règne dérisoirement, sans trouver nulle part d'application réelle'. With respect to the realm of values, humans are 'incapables de s'y conformer, sont trop déchus pour mener une existence justiciable d'une appréciation morale'.[25] By contrast, E. D. James takes the statements involving scalar expression to express genuine exceptions to moral scepticism. As he argues, the insight that '[l]'esprit est toujours la dupe du cœur' (maxim 102) should be set off against the insight that '[l]'homme croit souvent se conduire lorsqu'il est conduit […]' (maxim 43). In James's view, maxim 43 leaves open the possibility that *sometimes* we are guided by reason, which seems to be confirmed by the insight that 'Celui-là n'est pas raisonnable à qui le hasard fait trouver la raison, mais celui qui la connait, qui la discerne et qui la goute' (maxim 105). James takes this to amount to a 'recognition of the objective discernment of what is in accord with the reason'.[26]

In his view, the objective discernment at stake here allows us to recognize positive virtues that can count as examples of intrinsic goodness. This would be a convincing way of interpreting the scalar expressions in the remarks about rationality if, in La Rochefoucauld's writings, there were any unambiguous examples for virtues that are not hidden vices. In fact, James tries to identify such examples. Most importantly for present purposes, he holds that La Rochefoucauld describes certain character traits such as magnanimity as objects of justified praise,[27] that La Rochefoucauld constantly prompts 'us to more complete, more profound knowledge of ourselves',[28] and that La Rochefoucauld regards sincerity as an ethical virtue.[29] But this interpretive strategy overlooks that dynamics of esteem are the object of a series of pessimistic maxims such as those documented at the beginning of the present sub-section. Likewise, there is a group of highly sceptical statements concerning the obstacles to self-knowledge, and also a group of highly sceptical

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[25] J. Starobinski, 'La Rochefoucauld et les morales substitutives,' *Nouvelle revue française* 14 (1966), 16–34, 211–29.

[26] E. D. James, 'Scepticism and Positive Value in La Rochefoucauld,' *French Studies* 23 (1969), 349–61, p. 351.

[27] James, p. 354.

[28] James, p. 357.

[29] James, p. 356.

statements concerning the detrimental uses that can be made of sincerity (I will return to these in the following sub-sections). And all these statements oscillate between apodictic forms and forms that use scalar expressions.

Recently, Kirsti Sellevold has drawn attention to linguistic research that shows that one of the functions of scalar expressions 'is to enable the speaker to circumvent or switch off "epistemic vigilance" – a wide-ranging mechanism of defense against deliberate or accidental misinformation or deception – in her listeners and thus to influence or manipulate them'.[30] She concedes that the standard communicative implicature of 'often' is 'sometimes it's different'.[31] But she holds that La Rochefoucauld's many sceptical statements in apodictic form render 'often' as meaning 'more often than not', even where this is not made explicit. Thus, 'its contextually acquired upward-bound orientation discourages one from' following the standard implicature.[32] If so, then these expressions are not meant to mitigate a pessimistic worldview but rather to make it even harder to resist it.[33]

This is a serious challenge. Still, I do not agree with Sellevold's view that all of La Rochefoucauld's scalar expressions are meant to discourage the search for counter-examples. This, however, cannot simply be assumed but must be supported by textual evidence. The most difficult task will be to find counter-examples to the many cases in which the dynamic of esteem and self-esteem goes wrong. Before addressing this task in the following sub-sections, I will address two issues that concern two requisites for developing more beneficial relations to oneself and others: the possibility of self-knowledge and the possibility of sincerity.

Scalar expressions and the possibility of self-knowledge

Scalar expressions play no smaller role in La Rochefoucauld's treatment of self-knowledge than in his treatment of malfunctioning esteem and self-esteem. This is so because our readiness to deceive ourselves and to be deceived by others also has consequences for knowing ourselves: 'Nous sommes si accoutumés à nous déguiser aux autres, qu'enfin nous nous déguisons à nous-mêmes' (maxim 119).[34] The idea of being accustomed to something implies that in most cases we act in a particular manner. And if in most cases, we follow the habit of disguising ourselves from both others and ourselves, it is not surprising that many of our mental states are not known to ourselves: 'Il s'en faut bien que nous ne connaissions toutes nos volontés' (maxim 295); 'S'il y a un amour pur et exempt du mélange de nos autres passions, c'est celui qui est caché au fond du coeur, et que nous ignorons nous-mêmes' (maxim 69); 'Tous ceux qui connaissent leur esprit ne connaissent pas leur coeur' (maxim 103). Again, the question is whether the scalar expressions occurring in some of La Rochefoucauld's remarks about self-knowledge ('Nous

[30] K. Sellevold, 'Reading Short Forms Cognitively,' *Paragraph* 37 (2014), 96–111, p. 101.
[31] Sellevold, p. 102.
[32] Sellevold, p. 103.
[33] Sellevold, p. 105.
[34] On La Rochefoucauld's views on self-deception, see M. Moriarty, *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves. Early Modern French Thought II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 316–27. On the problem of self-deception, see A. Garrett, 'Self-Knowledge and Self-Deception in Modern Moral Philosophy,' in *Self-Knowledge. A History*, ed. by U. Renz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 164–82.

sommes … accoutumés … ', 'Il s'en faut bien que … ') are meant to discourage the search for examples of undistorted self-knowledge.

This, however, is not their purpose. The difficulties that La Rochefoucauld sees for self-knowledge derive from everyday experiences with our mental life and our life in society. This is why adducing other such experiences could be the right response to these difficulties. Indeed, La Rochefoucauld offers two lines of argument for the existence of undistorted self-knowledge. One emphasizes that self-knowledge can be a result of our reactions to novel situations, for the very reason that many of our qualities are revealed only under certain circumstances: 'La plupart des hommes ont comme les plantes des propriétés cachées, que le hasard fait découvrir' (maxim 344); 'Les occasions nous font connaître aux autres, et encore plus à nous-mêmes' (maxim 345). This can be seen as a special case of the insight that 'La fortune nous corrige de plusieurs défauts que la raison ne saurait corriger' (maxim 154). In the case at hand, the lack of self-knowledge can be corrected, not through rational efforts at reflection, but through external circumstances that bring character traits to the fore cognitively inaccessible to us previously.

Another line of argument uses dissimulation as evidence in favour of the existence of undistorted self-knowledge:

> Ce qui fait voir que les hommes connaissent mieux leurs fautes qu'on ne pense, c'est qu'ils n'ont jamais tort quand on les entend parler de leur conduite : le même amour-propre qui les aveugle d'ordinaire les éclaire alors, et leur donne des vues si justes, qu'il leur fait supprimer ou déguiser les moindres choses qui peuvent être condamnées. (Maxim 494)

Hence, even if deceiving others is not ethically valuable, it is an activity that can be successful only if one has a reliable anticipation of what character traits others will see negatively, as well as a reliable feeling for how many of these character traits one exemplifies. The subtlety of our strategies of deception indicates that the self-knowledge required for successful dissimulation is rather fine-grained. If successful dissimulation is real, then so is the self-knowledge required for it, even if putting self-knowledge to such a use cannot count as an ethical virtue.

Scalar expressions and the possibility of sincerity

Carving out a space for undistorted self-knowledge raises the question of how self-knowledge could be connected with sincerity. La Rochefoucauld evidently is committed to the possibility of sincerity when he says that true *honnêtes hommes* 'perfectly know' their faults and 'confess them' – this is exactly what distinguishes them from false *honnêtes hommes* who pretend to virtues that they do not have (maxim 202). The true *honnête homme* is not proud about anything (maxim 203) and always wants to be exposed to the view of other true *honnêtes gens* (maxim 206). At the same time, La Rochefoucauld is aware of the possibility that the pretence of sincerity could itself be part of seeking social esteem by deceiving others. Again, one encounters a mixture of observations that are negative without qualification and observations that use scalar expressions. An example for the former is the observation that 'Nous n'avouons de petits défauts que pour

persuader que nous n'en avons pas de grands' (maxim 327); an example of the latter is the observation that 'L'envie de parler de nous, et de faire voir nos défauts du côté que nous voulons bien les montrer, fait une grande partie de notre sincérité' (maxim 383). La Rochefoucauld is also aware that there can be a pretence of sincerity: 'La sincérité est une ouverture de cœur. On la trouve en fort peu de gens : et celle que l'on voit d'ordinaire n'est qu'une fine dissimulation pour attirer la confiance des autres' (maxim 62). Even where sincerity is not dissimulated, it can be used manipulatively: 'L'aversion du mensonge est souvent une imperceptible ambition de rendre nos témoignages considérables, et d'attirer à nos paroles un respect de religion' (maxim 63). Also, our expectations concerning the sincerity of others may be hampered by illusions concerning their preference for us: 'Quelque défiance que nous ayons de la sincérité de ceux qui nous parlent, nous croyons toujours qu'ils nous disent plus vrai qu'aux autres' (maxim 366).

How could La Rochefoucauld's concept of *honnêteté* carve out a space where sincerity functions as a genuine alternative to deception and manipulation? The concept of *honnêteté* is notoriously difficult to interpret. Almost a century ago, Maurice Magendie suggested drawing a distinction between two different concepts of *honnêteté*: the 'bourgeois' or 'moral conception', in contrast to what Magendie called the 'conception mondaine' – which could be translated as the 'gallant conception'. Briefly, this is concerned with how to communicate successfully in court society, while the bourgeois conception is concerned with moral virtues, especially those connected with family life.[35] Certainly, there are aspects of La Rochefoucauld's remarks about *honnêteté* that could best be explained in the context of aristocratic society, for instance his remarks about politeness, manners, conversation, the art of pleasing, the importance of style in linguistic expression, and the gendered conception of female *honnêteté*.[36] Does the same hold for La Rochefoucauld's remarks about the connection between sincerity and *honnêteté*?

Court culture is structured by a competitive and comparative attitude towards social esteem. Reading the *Maximes* from the perspective of this attitude, Pierre Force explains: 'In the context of the court, a person's interest is this person's position within a scale of hierarchy and prestige. Everyone competes to attain and keep the highest possible rank on this scale.'[37] This is why Force emphasizes the presence of economic concepts in La Rochefoucauld's description of social relations (Force, p. 177). For instance, kindness 'is a form of disinterestedness that carries a usurious rate of interest' (maxim 250); friendship is a 'trade' (maxim 94), 'an exchange of favours', and 'a commerce where self-love always expects to gain something'

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[35]   See M. Magendie, *La politesse mondaine et les théories de l'honnêteté, en France au XVIIe siècle, de 1600 à 1660* (Paris: Alcan, 1925), pp. 386–93, 892–900 (on the gallant conception), 633–75 (on the bourgeois conception). For more recent studies, see D. D. Stanton, *The Aristocrat as Art: A Study of the Honnête Homme and the Dandy in Seventeenth- and Nineteenth-Century Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); E. Bury, *Littérature et politesse. L'invention de l'honnête homme (1580–1750)* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1996); C. Losfeld, *Politesse, morale et construction sociale. Pour une histoire des traités de comportement (1670–1788)* (Paris: Champion, 2011); J. Steigerwald, *Galanterie. Die Fabrikation einer natürlichen Ethik der höfischen Gesellschaft (1650–1710)* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2011).

[36]   For explorations of these aspects of honnêteté, see Starobinski, pp. 211–29; Roth, pp. 226–67.

[37]   Pierre Force, *Self-Interest Before Adam Smith. A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 176.

(maxim 83); and gratitude is compared to 'business credit' because 'it keeps trade brisk, and we pay up, not because it is the proper thing to do, but because it makes it easier to borrow again' (maxim 223). Force reads these passages as expressing norms of '"aristocratic" behavior, which seeks to maximize symbolic gains (glory, prestige, etc.)'.[38] However, the connection that La Rochefoucauld draws between *honnêteté* and sincerity indicates that his conception of *honnêteté* is more complex than the aristocratic competition for status and reputation: (1) it involves some form of ethical self-improvement – namely, an improvement in how we deal with our ethical faults, which in itself is a remedy for ethically problematic ways of dealing with our ethical faults; (2) it involves an improvement in social relations that provides a solution to the dynamics of esteem that arise from deceiving others and ourselves.

Saying that the pretence of sincerity occurs frequently allows for the possibility that, in rare cases, true sincerity occurs – that is, the kind of sincerity that is a characteristic of *honnêteté*. Some aspects of La Rochefoucauld's later view of the connection between openness about one's own faults and *honnêteté* can already be found in his earlier *Self-Portrait* (1658), where La Rochefoucauld ascribes to himself such a strong desire to be the complete *honnête homme* 'mes amis ne me sauraient faire un plus grand plaisir que de m'avertir sincèrement de mes défauts'.[39] He claims he always received such advice 'avec toute la joie imaginable, et toute la soumission d'esprit que l'on saurait désirer'.[40] Openness about one's faults thus has a function in entertaining friendships and in upholding a serene state of mind. What is perspicuously absent from this characterization of *honnêteté* – although La Rochefoucauld immediately before has ascribed to himself 'virtuous sentiments' and 'beautiful inclinations' – is any reference to the desire of *improving* character traits.

While the idea of improving character traits remains absent from the descriptions of sincerity found in the *Réflections diverses* and the *Maxims*, La Rochefoucauld in both texts ascribes functions to sincerity that go beyond upholding a serene state of mind and an obsequious attitude towards one's friends. As he puts it in the *Réflections diverses*, 'la sincérité est une ouverture de cœur, qui nous montre tels que nous sommes ; c'est un amour de la vérité, une répugnance à se déguiser, un désir de se dédommager de ses défauts, et de les diminuer même par le mérite de les avouer'.[41] Here, being open about our faults is seen as a kind of merit that can somehow counterbalance them. The *Maxims* takes up this idea: Sincerity about our faults 'may repair the damage that our faults have done to us in other people's eyes' (maxim 184). This is certainly a view of the function of sincerity that goes beyond the fulfilment of the norms of the aristocratic lifestyle and the competition for status characteristic of court society. It is also a view that gives substance to the idea that *sometimes* sincerity can be used in a way that is opposed to taking pride in one's faults and to deceiving others. A form of sincerity that fulfils this function could be labelled 'self-acceptance'. But self-acceptance raises another

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38 Force, p. 178.
39 La Rochefoucauld, p. 256.
40 La Rochefoucauld, p. 256.
41 La Rochefoucauld, p. 194.

question: If our ethical faults are not amended through being sincere about them, why does being open about them counterbalance or repair such damage? This question brings us back to the question whether the many ways in which self-esteem and social esteem can be distorted leave room for more beneficial relations towards self and others. Should La Rochefoucauld's scalar expressions that suggest that, in most cases, self-esteem and social esteem are distorted be understood as fending off the impulse to search for less distorted relations to self and others? Or are they meant to convey the idea that, in some cases, such relations can be developed?

Self-acceptance and avoiding ridicule

There are two chains in La Rochefoucauld's remarks about self-acceptance that favour the latter interpretation. The first is connected with the insight that the esteem-related advantage of self-acceptance is that, by being open about our faults, we become less ridiculous in the eyes of others: 'On n'est jamais si ridicule par les qualités que l'on a, que par celles que l'on affecte d'avoir' (maxim 134). To La Rochefoucauld, this is a serious problem because 'Le ridicule déshonore plus que le déshonneur' (maxim 326). On first sight, invoking this paradox in order to clarify the implications of La Rochefoucauld's scalar expressions seems futile. Starobinski invokes La Rochefoucauld's use of paradoxes to support the view that he denies that humans are capable of applying moral categories to justify their value judgements. La Rochefoucauld's use of paradoxes, for Starobinski, amounts to 'un jeu combinatoire, à une redistribution du sens par permutation des termes au sein d'une même fonction syntaxique ; jeu dont la gratuité pouvait servir d'antidote estétique à la gravité sans appel du "contenu"'.[42] As Starobinski explains, this combinatorial game 'attire l'attention sur les artifices de distribution des *significants*, empêchant l'esprit de se perdre trop complètement dans la signification et dans ses conséquences'.[43] Does maxim 326 imply that there is no meaningful distinction between dishonour and ridicule that humans could apply in evaluating actions? Not if two things could be shown: (1) La Rochefoucauld had identified a sense in which being vicious is only moderately dishonouring, and (2) he had identified a sense in which being ridiculous is gravely dishonouring.

It is obvious that if our ethical faults are terrible, then they would be more dishonouring than ridiculous. But while La Rochefoucauld concedes the existence of great moral faults (maxim 190), he does not take them to be common. On the contrary, he maintains that 'On n'a guère de défauts qui ne soient plus pardonnables, que les moyens dont on se sert pour les cacher' (maxim 411). Remarkably, a scalar expression is used here to support an optimistic rather than a pessimistic conclusion. The idea seems to be that moderately bad character traits can be weighed against the evils of deception and self-deception – much to the favour of moderately bad character traits. This is how being sincere about moderately bad character traits improves how we are perceived by others.

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[42] Starobinski, p. 228.
[43] Starobinski, pp. 227–28.

Why does La Rochefoucauld believe that our vices usually remain in the realm of what can be counterbalanced by sincerity? He never gives an explicit explanation, but his view of the nature of apparent virtues may support his claim. Famously, he takes up a metaphor from Augustine: 'Les vices entrent dans la composition des vertus comme les poisons entrent dans la composition des remèdes' (maxim 182).[44] Take the apparent virtue of moderation. In La Rochefoucauld's view, this character trait consists in nothing other than the combination of the fear of falling into contempt, vain ostentation of our mental powers, and the desire to appear greater than one's fate (maxims 17 and 18): 'La modération est la langueur et la paresse de l'âme, comme l'ambition en est l'activité et l'ardeur' (maxim 293), and moderation is compared to sobriety, where a combination of the desire to eat a lot is counterbalanced by the fear of harming oneself (maxim I: 21). Analysing apparent virtues as arising from motivations that are not virtuous themselves and always self-interested has both unfavourable and favourable implications. The unfavourable implication is that apparent virtues are not a proper object of pride – not only because we usually have not contributed much to them but also because their ingredients are nothing to be proud of. But the favourable consequence is that, usually, our vices are combined in such a way that they motivate us to be supportive of others. The honour we receive for our supposed character traits may not be justified, but even if these traits are combinations of vices, they keep us on track in fulfilling our duties towards others: 'Pendant que la paresse et la timidité nous retiennent dans notre devoir, notre vertu en a souvent tout l'honneur' (maxim 169).

This way of distinguishing between duty and virtue is remarkably close to what we find in Augustine. According to Augustine, *fficial* consist in actions that are owed to others, while *virtutes* consist in states of mind that pursue morally right goals. Complacency with oneself, in Augustine's view, makes it impossible for pagans to pursue the goal of enjoying God. This is why he holds that the good offices of the pagans do not deserve the praise that is due to virtue; simultaneously, he concedes that the good offices of the gentiles fulfil obligations towards others.[45] La Rochefoucauld's view that praise is erroneously attributed to virtue, while hidden vices can fulfil duties towards others, comes very close to this Augustinian idea. This is crucial for the question of why ordinary vices may be capable of being counterbalanced by sincerity. Even if disguised vices are not appropriate objects of honour, their role in fulfilling duties towards others prevents them from being gravely dishonourable.

As to how being ridiculous could be gravely dishonourable, consider how La Rochefoucauld describes how we become ridiculous by pretending to be what we are not:

> Ce qui fait que la plupart des petits enfants plaisant, c'est qu'ils sont encore renfermés dans cet air et dans ces manières que la nature leur a données, et qu'ils n'en connaissent point d'autres. Ils les changent et les corrompent quand ils sortent de l'enfance : ils

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44 On the Augustinian background of the metaphor, see Augustinus, *De civitate Dei*, 11.22; Sellier, pp. 553–54.

45 Jansen, *Augustinus*, 2: col. 575; see A. Augustinus, *De peccatorum meritis et remissione … De spiritu et littera … De natura et gratia … De natura et origine animae … Contra duas epistolas Pelagiorum*, ed. by C. F. Vrba (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1913), *De spiritu et littera*, ch. 27.

croient qu'il fait imiter ce qu'ils voient faire aux autres, et ils ne le peuvent parfaitement imiter ; il y a toujours quelque chose de faux et d'incertain dans cette imitation.[46]

This passage describes one way of becoming ridiculous, but it does not explain why being a bad copy should be less forgivable than ordinary vices. What is so corrupting about imitating others (and not only unpleasurable from an aesthetic point of view)? In the *Réflections diverses*, La Rochefoucauld diagnoses the following problem: 'On ne voit point les choses précisément comme elles sont ; on les estime plus ou moins qu'elles ne valent, et on ne les fait point rapporter à nous en la manière qui leur convient, et qui convient à notre état et à nos qualités' (La Rochefoucauld, p. 225). Being sincere offers a solution to this problem in the following sense:

> [I]l faut savoir discerner ce qui est bon en général, et ce qui nous est propre, et suivre alors avec raison la pente naturelle qui nous porte vers les choses qui nous plaisent. Si les hommes ne voulaient exceller que par leurs propres talents, et en suivant leurs devoirs, il n'y aurait rien de faux dans leur goût et dans leur conduite ; ils se montreraient tels qu'ils sont ; ils jugeraient des choses par leurs lumières, et s'y attacheraient par leur raison [...].[47]

Rational self-guidance here is not described as a path towards developing substantial ethical virtues. Rather, it gives sense to the idea that a person who discards self-related illusions may function better in life than a self-deceived person. They may be in a better position to use rational capabilities to develop their talents and thereby make themselves less dependent on the judgement of others and of customs. Thereby, sincerity provides the foundation for esteeming things according to the value that they have with respect to our talents. Evidently, this is something that is good for us. What is more, La Rochefoucauld aligns the desire of excelling by one's own talents with the desire of fulfilling one's duty. Although he does not explain the relation between the two desires, the conditions for fulfilling the former desire can be plausibly seen as conditions for fulfilling the latter desire. If so, then being bad copies hampers not only our ability to develop our personal talents but also our ability to fulfil those duties that require the development of these talents. This could explain why being ridiculous in the sense of badly imitating others is more dishonouring than our ordinary vices. While our ordinary vices do not impair our ability to fulfil the duties of social life, being ridiculous imitators does impair this ability. Being open about our moral faults could thus genuinely improve our social relations because it reduces the occasions when we become an object of ridicule because we are personally and socially dysfunctional copies.

Self-acceptance, self-trust, and esteem
The second esteem-related value of self-acceptance derives from the consideration that, if we have the tendency to forget our ethically problematic character traits

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46   La Rochefoucauld, p. 189.
47   La Rochefoucauld, pp. 208–09.

when we are not open about them, the response from others can be a factor that keeps our attention focused on self-knowledge. As La Rochefoucauld puts it: 'Nous oublions aisément nos fautes lorsqu'elles ne sont sues que de nous' (maxim 196). To be sure, there is the problem of partiality: We would be badly advised to rely on the judgement of insincere and inattentive persons. But if the relation between *honnêtes gens* is thought of as one of a mutual obligation to be sincere, others can evidently offer valuable information concerning one's own qualities. This can be seen as a special case of the more general insights that 'Celui qui croit pouvoir trouver en soi-même de quoi se passer de tout le monde se trompe fort [...]' (maxim 201) and that 'C'est une grande folie de vouloir être sage tout seul' (maxim 231). In this sense, sincerity can be a factor that stabilizes a realistic assessment of our own qualities – an assessment that may not amount to high self-esteem in the sense of a positive evaluation of our ethical qualities but may be an antidote against inflated self-esteem.

One of the positive effects that avoiding inflated self-esteem can bring with it could be described as self-trust. This is suggested when La Rochefoucauld remarks: 'Ce qui nous empêche d'ordinaire de faire voir le fond de notre cœur à nos amis, n'est pas tant la défiance que nous avons d'eux, que celle que nous avons de nous-mêmes' (maxim 315). If sincerity does not have the function of enhancing the qualities about which it is open, how could it be a source of self-trust? Perhaps La Rochefoucauld's insight that 'Les personnes faibles ne peuvent être sincères' (maxim 316) gives a clue. Even if there is no reason to have trust in the ethically good nature of one's qualities, sincerity may give trust in the strength of character that at least allows us to live without the additional evils of deception and self-deception. If sincerity is an indication of this strength of character, then it could give rise to the expectation that we rely on this character trait across a variety of situations.

In particular, it may be a way of overcoming the kind of contempt for others that arises from inflated self-esteem. This seems to be suggested by how La Rochefoucauld describes the effect of self-deception on the disesteem we have for others: 'Le même orgueil qui nous fait blâmer les défauts dont nous nous voyons exempts, nous porte à mépriser les bonnes qualités que nous n'avons pas' (maxim 462). Again, this maxim takes the form of a paradox that raises the question, what is its communicative implicature? Is it a mere 'combinatorial game' that is meant to undermine the distinction between justified and unjustified disapprobation? Not if one focuses on the causal story that the maxim tells when it identifies pride as the cause for the breakdown of this distinction. By implication, being realistic about our own faults and not taking pride in anything will diminish our inclination to take part in such distorted practices of evaluating others. Possibly this is because La Rochefoucauld assumes that, between persons that possess *honnêteté*, there can be something like esteem that does not depend on chance: 'Notre mérite nous attire l'estime des honnêtes gens, et notre étoile celle du public' (maxim 165). Presumably, the sense of merit that La Rochefoucauld here has in mind is the already mentioned sense in which sincerity could be regarded as a kind of merit that compensates for our faults.[48] This would

48   La Rochefoucauld, p. 194.

give a clue as to how the dynamics of esteem between *honnêtes gens* could be understood to differ from the dynamics of esteem that usually govern public esteem. In this way, the connection between sincerity and *honnêteté* could explain why La Rochefoucauld understood esteem between *honnêteté* and sincerity to be an alternative to those dynamics of public esteem that involve deceiving others.

Conclusion

The Augustinian tradition thus turns out to be highly instructive for getting a grip on what is innovative about La Rochefoucauld's treatment of the relation towards the self. La Rochefoucauld's divergence from Augustinians is so informative because he shares so much with them – the insight into the nature of many apparent virtues as hidden vices, the insight into the pervasive presence of self-love, and insights into distorted everyday dynamics of esteem. What La Rochefoucauld, in contrast to Pascal and Nicole, does not accept, however, is the view that these insights inevitably reinforce the Augustinian dichotomy. To be sure, La Rochefoucauld is acutely aware of our strategies of deception and self-deception. Still, he would by no means agree that human life not shaped by Christian virtue consists *only* in deception and self-deception. Rather, he offers his conception of the sincerity of those who embody *honnêteté* as a way of avoiding exaggerated self-esteem and seeking misguided esteem for qualities that one does not have.

In analysing the functions of self-acceptance, La Rochefoucauld has identified a variety of interests that we have in knowing our own faults and being open about them. In this sense, self-interest can be a source of motivation for overcoming both deceiving others and deceiving ourselves. This exemplifies his insight that 'L'interêt qui aveugle les uns, fait la lumière des autres' and that 'L'intérêt que l'on accuse de tous nos crimes mérite souvent d'être loué de nos bonnes actions' (maxim 305). If the self-interest most characteristic of court society is the advancement of one's own status and reputation, then the self-interest motivating non-manipulative forms of sincerity goes beyond the norms of court society. La Rochefoucauld's characterization of self-acceptance sets it apart from situations in which seemingly altruistic attitudes are used for self-serving purposes – for instance, when gratitude is used to obtain more favours, when assistance to friends is used to obtain their services, or when sincerity is used as a means of obtaining information from others or of establishing authority over them.

On the contrary, the self-interest motivating the form of sincerity characteristic of *honnêteté* is not contrary to the self-interest of others. This is why it also does not require deceiving others about one's motivations. The value of being open about one's own faults does not consist in surpassing others. The point is not to be *more* sincere than others, such that only those who rise above the average can derive esteem from it. Sincerity, unlike status and power, is not a scarce good for which individuals compete and whose value depends on the fact that only a few

individuals will win in the competition. Rather, the more individuals develop self-acceptance, the better will their life in society be. And because the sincerity characteristic of *honnêteté* is motivated by self-interest, it would be an exaggeration to claim that no-one will ever be able to recognize that cultivating self-acceptance is naturally good for us.

Funding

Notes on contributor

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