



Mably on Esteem, Republicanism, and the Question of Human Corruption

ANDREAS BLANK 

RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

Gabriel Bonnot de Mably (1709–1785) takes up the republican commonplace that the desire for esteem is what could motivate the fulfilment of duties of civic virtue. This commonplace, however, has become problematic through the discussion of the problem of human corruption in philosophers such as Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) and Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715). In this article, I will show that Mably takes this problem seriously. However, his critique of Malebranche’s solution to this problem and his critique of the economic reinterpretation of Malebranche’s concept of natural order in the work of Le Mercier de la Rivière (1719–1801) motivate his own republican defense of the moral value of the desire for esteem. What makes this defense plausible is his argument that distorted esteem derives from imagination that is distorted, not only as a result of natural factors, but in many cases rather as a result of misguided politics. If some cases of distorted esteem derive from misguided politics, Mably argues, then they can be modified by republican constitution building that modifies the imagination of citizens.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Andreas Blank

Alpen-Adria Universität,
Klagenfurt, AT

andreas.blank@aau.at

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The view that the desire for public esteem and the love for glory are the driving forces behind civic virtues is a commonplace in ancient and early modern republicanism. In one sense, it is therefore not surprising to find this thought in Gabriel Bonnot de Mably (1709–1785), one of the most resolute republican thinkers before the French revolution.¹ For instance, he puts the commonplace as follows:

It is public esteem that—since it is the natural reward for love of glory—can alone carry our soul to a certain degree of height. It amounts to not knowing human beings when one wants to stimulate them to perform great actions other than through a branch of laurel or a statue. It means to debase virtue, to debase it when one presents to it a price that only avarice and greed could desire.²

In another sense, however, there is something puzzling about finding this idea expressed, apparently without any hesitation, in the late eighteenth century. This is so because distorted esteem has been a central topic in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century French moralism. Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) offered a wealth of observations that show that what we esteem is often an expression of distorted imagination; and he used these observations as one of the lines of argument supporting the view that human nature is corrupted.³ Nicholas Malebranche (1638–1715) described the dynamics of what he called ‘imaginative contagion’—the ability of those with vivacious imagination and high self-esteem to influence the imagination of others and thereby to determine what others esteem.⁴ Mably, too, sees the problem of distorted imagination:

Nature has given us an imagination that is as docile with respect to the passions as it is rebellious with respect to reason; it dominates us by magnifying in our eyes our pleasures and our pains; our blind love for ourselves obeys it without resistance, and our reason becomes silent and lets itself be carried away. If this imagination is inflamed by a single passion, or guided by several very active passions, it will give excessive hopes and fears ...⁵

Mably is clear that the excessive hopes and fears generated by imagination form an obstacle to self-knowledge, and that a lack of self-knowledge implies a lack of knowledge concerning the causes of corruption: ‘By having corrupted ourselves, we have forgotten the history of the generation of our vices and the true origin of our corruption.’⁶ Mably also regards distorted imagination as something that is an obstacle for recognizing what is good for us: ‘[W]hen I dream ... of the jumps and caprices of our imagination, it seems to me that we are capable of everything, and that a negligible event suffices sometimes to carry us to the extremes from which we seem to be most remote.’⁷ Or again:

1 For overviews of Mably’s political philosophy, see Sée (1924), Lecercle (1963), Maffey (1968), Coste (1975), Wright (1992), Sonenscher (2007: 239–53); on Mably’s reception in the French Revolution, see Baker (1981), Schleich and Pozzo (1984), Roza (2014).

2 Œuvres, 10: 136: ‘C’est l’estime publique, qui, étant la récompense naturelle de l’amour de la gloire, peut seule porter notre ame à un certain degré d’élévation. C’est ne pas connoître les hommes, que de vouloir les exciter aux grandes actions autrement que par une branche de laurier, ou une statue. C’est avilir la vertu, c’est la profaner, que lui présenter un prix que l’avarice et la convoitise peuvent seules désirer.’ Except where otherwise noted, translations are my own.

3 For detailed analysis, see Lazzeri (1993: ch. 1).

4 For detailed analysis, see Carbone and Vermeir (2012), Pellegrin (2012), Saliceti (2012).

5 Œuvres, 14: 44–45: ‘La nature nous a donné une imagination aussi docile aux passions que rebelle contre la raison; elle nous domine en grossissant à nos yeux nos plaisirs ou nos peines; notre aveugle amour pour nous-mêmes lui obéit sans résistance, et notre raison se tait et se laisse entraîner. Si cette imagination est enflammée par une seule passion, ou conduite par plusieurs passions très-actives, elle donnera des espérances ou des craintes excessives ...’

6 Œuvres, 9: 366: ‘A force de nous être corrompus, nous avons oublié l’histoire de la génération de nos vices et la véritable origine de notre corruption.’

7 Œuvres, 9: 104: ‘[Q]uand je songe ... aux saillies et aux caprices de notre imagination, il me semble que nous sommes capable de tout, et qu’un rien suffit quelquefois pour nous porter aux extrémités dont nous paraissons les plus éloignés.’

After humans having disguised everything, changed everything, corrupted everything, will our justice, which is so capricious and so uncertain, retain the marks that allow us to recognize it? Will we not let ourselves be deceived by the promises of our passions, without being aware of it?⁸

Mably thus was aware of the problem of human corruption. However, human corruption seems to be a problem that plagues all constitutional forms, including republics. Why should one expect Mably's republican defense of the moral value of striving for esteem to be a promising project? One step toward an answer derives from Mably's critique of Malebranche's answer to the problem of human corruption—a critique that itself is a little-studied strand within the many eighteenth-century responses to the philosophy of Malebranche.⁹ Mably's critique of Malebranche may be too brief to do full justice to the subtlety of Malebranche's suggestion to make natural order the criterion for justified esteem. However, it provides good reasons to believe that Malebranche's suggestion that insight into eternal truths concerning degrees of perfection should guide what we esteem leads to an improvement of our inner lives without changing any of our distorted social relations. This does not mean that Mably would have accepted the *physiocrates'* reinterpretation of Malebranche's notion of natural order in economic terms. In fact, Mably criticized the physiocratic theory developed by Paul-Pierre-François Le Mercier de la Rivière (1719–1801), among other matters because he believed that the inequality implied in economically optimal arrangements leads itself to distortions of esteem. Mably's criticisms of Malebranche and Le Mercier de la Rivière contain insights that indicate why a republican solution to the problem of distorted esteem could have advantages over Malebranche's and Le Mercier de la Rivière's solutions to this problem.

Mably was not the only political thinker in late eighteenth-century France to place the idea of reshaping social esteem into the context of republican constitution building. This thematic connection can prominently be found in Claude-Adrien Helvétius and Paul Thiry d'Holbach. Still, the dialectical setting of Mably's considerations differs markedly from the dialectical setting of Helvétius's and d'Holbach's discussions. The question of human corruption is central for Mably and nearly absent in Helvétius and d'Holbach (although, of course, they have much to say about irrationality and prejudices); by contrast, much of what Helvétius and d'Holbach have to say about esteem is shaped by their responses to Rousseau, while Mably says nothing informative about Rousseau's objections against esteeming talent.

The latter is puzzling because Mably's letters of recommendation enabled Rousseau to get into touch with the intellectual scene in Paris, and over the years, Mably and Rousseau had many friendly encounters. However, after Mably's rejection of what he regarded to be an incitement to revolutionary violence in Rousseau's *Letters from the Mountain*, their personal relations deteriorated. Rousseau accused Mably of plagiarism, while Mably declared that he regarded Rousseau's work—from the earliest writings onward, where Rousseau put forth his analysis of distortions of esteem in enlightenment culture for the first time—to be an expression of an ever-increasing mental disorder (*Œuvres*, 14: 183).¹⁰ Perhaps Mably had Rousseau in mind when he remarks that '[a] very eloquent writer, but who often neglects to pay enough attention to his own opinions, has said that whoever invented clogs deserved to be put to death' (*Œuvres*, 10: 208, as suggested by Sonenscher, 2008: 391–92). But if so, this would be a gross misinterpretation of Rousseau's concern that esteem for excellence in the arts and sciences discourages those who have only ordinary virtues and skills. To be sure, Mably said some informative things about the role of esteeming talents in republican constitutions (to which I will come back at the end of section 5); but he never presented these considerations as a *response* to Rousseau. To the best of my knowledge, Mably also never referred to Helvétius and d'Holbach, nor did Helvétius and d'Holbach ever refer to Mably (nor did they ever invite him to the famous gatherings of d'Holbach's *côterie*).¹¹ Of course, it would be possible

⁸ *Œuvres*, 10: 334: 'Après que les hommes ont tout déguisé, tout altéré, tout corrompu, notre justice, si capricieuse et si incertaine, conservera-t-elle ces traits frappans qui la font reconnoître? Sans nous en apercevoir, ne nous laisserons-nous pas tromper par les promesses de nos passions?'

⁹ On the history of the reception of Malebranche, see Antoine-Mahut (2014).

¹⁰ On the development of the personal relations between Mably and Rousseau, see Roggerone (1990).

¹¹ On Mably's personal relations with the reform-oriented high aristocracy, see Schleich (1981: 47–69).

to compare Mably's considerations with Rousseau's, Helvétius's and d'Holbach's. But this would be the topic for an article of its own; and since I have written about Helvétius and d'Holbach's views about esteem and their response to Rousseau's critique of esteeming talent elsewhere (Blank 2020), I will not go into these issues here. Instead, I will focus on what is distinctive about Mably's republican response to the question of human corruption—a response that, as far as I can see, has not been discussed in recent commentaries on Mably's republicanism.¹²

I will proceed as follows. In section 2, I will argue that Mably has identified two shortcomings of Malebranche's solution to the problem of distorted imagination: it does not lead to esteem connected with positive emotions for those with whom we live; and it remains limited to a private ethics without any political implications. In section 3, I will show that Mably's considerations concerning distortions of esteem in the autocratic constitutions advocated by Le Mercier de la Rivière play a central role in his critique of physiocratic economy. In section 4, I will establish the connection between Mably's analysis of the role of political factors in distorting imagination and his intuition that some instances of distorted esteem could be remedied through political change. In section 5, I will analyze how Mably's republicanism could reshape what we esteem in such a way that the desire for esteem becomes a motivation for fulfilling the duties of civic virtue.

2. ESTEEM AND NATURAL ORDER: MABLY'S CRITIQUE OF MALEBRANCHE

While Mably never discussed Pascal's views in detail, he developed some thoughtful criticisms of Malebranche's solution to the problem of human corruption and offered his own solution to this problem as an alternative to Malebranche's. One of the objections that Mably raised against Malebranche is that Malebranche's conception of love of order does not lead to a satisfactory solution to the problem of distorted esteem. This, of course, was exactly what Malebranche had intended. Malebranche accepted the view that human nature is corrupted because sensible pleasure binds us to sensible objects, thereby distorting our emotions and inclining us to judge about objects only with a view to the relation in which they stand to us (*Recherche*, 1.5.1). At the same time, he defended the idea that there is a realm of rational capacities that have remained unaffected by distorted imagination: the realm of eternal, immutable and necessary truths (*Traité*, 1.2.11). As Malebranche understands it, this realm is not restricted to mathematics but includes insights into the order of nature.¹³ According to his view, the order of nature is constituted of relations between degrees of perfection; and as he suggests, insight into these relations should regulate social esteem. This is why he takes loving natural order to be a remedy for distorted esteem that arises from a distorted imagination (*Traité*, 1.1.6).

Against this line of argument, Mably objects in the *Principes de morale* (1784) that comparing humans with infinite divine goodness can be an obstacle that stands in the way of developing esteem for human qualities: 'When father Malebranche will succeed in putting the idea into my head that, among humans, there are two kinds of societies: a society for a number of years, and an eternal society; a society of commerce and a society of religion, I believe that the former will seem to me vile in comparison with the latter'¹⁴ (*Œuvres*, 10: 321). Even worse, contrary to Malebranche's intention of offering an antidote against a distorted imagination, Mably surmises that Malebranche's conception of love of order could be a source of distorted imagination of its own and therefore leaves the problem of distorted esteem unsolved: 'My imagination will become heated, and my reason, full of contempt for myself and for everything that surrounds me, will not at all be disposed to cherish my neighbor'¹⁵ (*Œuvres*, 10: 320). A further objection is that

¹² On Mably's republicanism, see Wright (1997), Baker (2001), Hammersley (2010), Ferrand and Orain (2017).

¹³ On Malebranche's concept of order of nature, see Riley (2003).

¹⁴ 'Quand le père Malebranche m'aura bien mis dans la tête qu'il y a entre les hommes deux sortes de sociétés; une société de quelques années et une société éternelle, une société de commerce et une société de religion, je crois que l'une me paroîtra vile en comparaison de l'autre.'

¹⁵ 'Mon imagination s'échauffera, et ma raison, pleine de mépris pour moi et pour tout ce qui m'environne, ne sera guère disposé à chérir mon prochain.'

Malebranche's position leads to a private ethics that does not possess any political application: 'With Malebranche's doctrine, you make some persons who are virtuous for themselves, lovers of a quiet life, but useless for society'¹⁶ (*Œuvres*, 10: 322). And this is why he regards republican political theory that teaches civic virtues—'the virtues that make good citizens, good heads of families, good friends, good masters and good servants'¹⁷—as an alternative to Malebranche's approach (*Œuvres*, 10: 322).

Is Mably correct that Malebranche cannot offer a remedy for distorted esteem? Certainly, Mably has overlooked some of the strengths of Malebranche's position. One of these strengths concerns the relation between human and non-human beings. As Malebranche argues, we sometimes can recognize some differences in perfection and regulate our esteem accordingly. For instance, the difference between organic bodies and inanimate matter is not imaginary (*Traité*, 1.1.13). Likewise, the powers of humans are more perfect than the powers of animals (*Traité*, 1.1.13). But this grounds only what Malebranche calls 'simple esteem'—that is, the esteem that is due to all humans and that excludes all forms of contempt since 'man is the most noble of all creatures' (*Traité*, 2.7.2). This conception is not without bite because Malebranche demands that this form of esteem is due to the poor, and even to criminals whose actions we may detest without, however, being permitted to detest their persons (*Traité*, 2.7.4; 2.7.10). But no matter how despicable a social position and no matter how detestable an action may be, simple esteem is due to all human beings—and simple esteem precludes all forms of humiliating treatment (*Traité*, 2.7.2).

A second strength of Malebranche's position that Mably has overlooked concerns the prudential role that expressing esteem can play in social life. Malebranche argues that the duties of esteem toward our enemies can be even more pressing than toward our friends. As he argues, our friends will assume that we esteem them, which is why it is superfluous to signal our esteem to them all the time (*Traité*, 2.7.7). By contrast, our enemies will assume that we do not esteem them, which is why they will interpret every situation in which we do not signal esteem as an expression of contempt—which will exacerbate their enmity (*Traité*, 2.7.7). By contrast, giving signs of esteem to our enemies signals that we will be ready to follow the demands of justice in not preventing them from the social positions that they deserve. Fulfilling such duties of esteem could play a big role in politics since, as Malebranche remarks: 'Self-love and secret pride do not allow to continue to regard someone as an enemy who signals voluntarily that he is convinced of our excellence'¹⁸ (*Traité*, 2.7.8).

No doubt, the world would be infinitely better than it actually is if people would take these aspects of Malebranche's ethics to heart. Still, the presence of these strengths does not imply that Mably has seen problems that are not there. Perhaps his diagnosis has to be refined in certain respects; but his basic insights seem to be viable and will make clear what is persuasive about his own solution. Is Mably persuasive when he claims that, if we follow Malebranche's line of thought, we will detest ourselves and others? Perhaps the problem is not so much the comparison with divine perfections—after all, Malebranche is clear that human qualities can only participate in divine perfection but never reach it (*Traité*, 2.2.16). However, there may be other problems. One of them is epistemological. Malebranche notes that nothing is more difficult to esteem than individuals in proportion to their perfection. This is so for several reasons: First, many personal qualities are unknown to us (*Traité*, 1.3.10). Second, the exact relation between the perfection of different personal qualities is unknown to us (*Traité*, 1.3.10). Third, the relation that a given personal quality has to all aspects of human life is unknown to us (*Traité*, 2.7.10). Hence, it is impossible to know precisely which duties of esteem we have toward others (*Traité*, 2.7.10).

A further problem arises from the consideration that, according to Malebranche, in social life duties of esteem are not always proportional to the perfection of personal qualities. This is so,

¹⁶ 'Avec la doctrine de Malebranche, vous ferez quelques hommes vertueux pour eux-mêmes, amis de la retraite, mais inutiles à la société.'

¹⁷ 'les vertus qui font les bons citoyens, les bons pères de famille, les bons amis, les bons maîtres et les bons serviteurs.'

¹⁸ 'L'amour-propre et l'orgueil secret ne permettent guère qu'on regarde long-temps comme ennemi celui qui nous donne volontairement des marques qu'il est persuadé de notre propre excellence.'

he argues, because the value of thing often derives from the relations in which they stand to aspects of human life. For instance, it would be strange to claim that a fly is more valuable than a diamond, even though each animate being has a higher perfection compared with an inanimate being (*Traité*, 2.7.11). The same holds, he claims, for human qualities, some of which require what he calls ‘relative esteem’ due to their function in the life of a society even if they lack intrinsic perfection (*Traité*, 1.3.11). Malebranche defends the view that such duties of relative esteem can be even more extensive than duties of esteem connected with positive emotions:

In judging what esteem we ought to show for things and persons, it is not sufficient to consider them by themselves. The mind must reach to the various relationships they have with other, much more estimable things or persons. The good graces of the Prince give prominence to the vilest persons, and the esteem men have for things ought to govern their price, and hence govern our external and relative esteem, if we are not resolved to scorn them by themselves and thus make ourselves ridiculous and contemptible. But we must be careful not to let our mind be polluted by the judgments usually made of things. ... We need not judge persons or things as men judge them, men may attribute imaginary perfections to the objects of their passions. But, whether or not they are mistaken in their judgments, we must esteem by relative esteem what they esteem with perhaps no reason, because in society it is general esteem which governs the price of things.¹⁹ (*Traité*, 2.7.12)

The attitude recommended by Malebranche thus avoids a distortion of passions: There should be no esteem connected with positive emotions for persons who have only what Malebranche calls ‘relative perfections’—perfections that arise from their social role. What Malebranche can also offer is a kind of mental reservation: By keeping in mind that this kind of esteem related only to relative perfections, one prevents misguided imagination that could lead to false judgments. However, restraining emotions and judgments in this way has two disconcerting consequences. First, doing so remains a purely private experience that does not change anything in external behavior. Even if people may be able to avoid misguided passions and false judgements about others, outwardly everyone will act as if relative esteem were felt esteem. Mably thus may have had a viable point when he observed that Malebranche’s precepts lead to an entirely private improvement of our moral lives that does not have any political implications. Second, in fulfilling duties of relative esteem one withholds ‘love of esteem.’ And if our social lives are regulated mostly by duties of relative esteem, we in fact end up devoid of esteem connected with positive emotions. This is another problem that Mably has seen, even though he may not have offered a fully adequate explanation for it.

3. ESTEEM AND NATURAL ORDER: MABLY’S CRITIQUE OF LE MERCIER DE LA RIVIÈRE

One of the most significant philosophical developments that took place in the long time between Malebranche and Mably is the emergence of the economic and social thought of the so-called *physiocrates*, who started from the intuition that the laws of social life are a kind of physical laws. Mably wrote a book-length response to one of the most prominent physiocratic works, Le Mercier de la Rivière’s *L’ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés* (1767). This work, and Mably’s *Doutes proposés aux philosophes économistes sur l’ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* (1768, *Oeuvres* 11: 1–256), are relevant for present purposes for two reasons: (1) Le Mercier de la Rivière invokes

¹⁹ ‘Car il ne suffit pas, pour juger de l’estime qu’on doit faire des choses et des personnes, de les considérer en elles-mêmes: il faut que l’esprit s’étende aux différents rapports qu’elles peuvent avoir avec d’autres beaucoup plus estimables. Les bonnes grâces du prince donnent du relief aux personnes les plus viles, et l’estime que les hommes font des choses doit régler leur prix, et par conséquent notre estime extérieure et relative, si nous ne sommes résolus à les mépriser eux-mêmes, et à nous rendre ridicules et méprisables. Ce qu’on doit seulement observer, c’est de ne pas se laisser gêner l’esprit par les jugements qu’on fait ordinairement des choses. ... Il ne faut pas juger des personnes ou des choses comme les hommes en jugent qui attribuent aux objets de leurs passions des perfections imaginaires; mais, qu’ils soient ou ne soient pas trompés dans leurs jugements, il faut estimer d’une estime relative ce qu’ils estiment peut-être sans raison, parce que dans la société c’est l’estime générale qui règle le prix des choses.’ Translation from Malebranche (1993: 176–77), slightly modified.

Malebranche's conception of natural order and discusses a socially beneficial role that the desire for esteem could play when it follows the natural order of society; and (2) Mably argues that the economic order envisaged by the *physiocrates* is hampered by its own esteem-related problems.

Although there is a long tradition of commentaries that see a direct influence of Malebranche on the *physiocrates*,²⁰ it might be more adequate to speak of a reinterpretation rather than an adoption of Malebranche's concept of natural order. Le Mercier de la Rivière is not concerned with ontological considerations about the intrinsic perfection of natural objects but focusses on the value that natural objects have for human life:

Natural order is the perfect consistency of the physical means that nature has chosen to produce necessarily the effects that it expects from their coincidence. I call these means physical means because everything in nature is physical; hence, natural order, of which the order of society is a part, is and cannot be anything other than physical order.²¹ (*Ordre naturel*, 1: 60)

What is more, Le Mercier de la Rivière reduces the value of natural objects in human life to economic categories:

The best possible condition of a nation consists in the greatest possible abundance of its annual harvest, connected with the greatest market value of its productions. The combination of these two advantages secures for it ... , relative to its territory, the greatest possible wealth, the greatest possible population, the greatest possible industriousness, the greatest possible stability among other nations.²² (*Ordre naturel*, 2: 242)

This conception of perfection could be described as an economic reinterpretation of Malebranche's conception of relative perfections. While Malebranche separates the sphere of relative perfections from the eternal order of intrinsic perfections represented in the divine mind, Le Mercier de la Rivière regards his own economic conception of perfection to be an insight into the optimal condition of human society intended by God. In his view, an economically optimal arrangement is 'an order ... whose sanctity and utility, by manifesting to humans a benevolent God, prepares them and disposes them, out of gratefulness, to love him, to adore him, and to search out of self-interest the state of perfection that corresponds most closely to his will'²³ (*Ordre naturel*, 1: xv).

Le Mercier de La Rivière does not take up Malebranche's worry that, due to the infinite multiplicity of relations involved in how natural objects can be good for human life, we never will be able to assess the relative esteem due to material goods in any definitive way. On the contrary, he holds that the laws of social order are both immutable and susceptible to demonstrative proof. In his view, a clash of opinions is useful in scientific debate about economic and social laws; but he surmises that this clash of opinions eventually will lead to evident demonstrations that forms the end-point of a debate (*Ordre naturel*, 1: 92). Once this point has been reached, the task of the legislator is to implement what science has proven: 'Positive legislation can be regarded as a collection of completed calculations ...'²⁴ (*Ordre naturel*, 1: 187).

²⁰ See Allix (1911), Larrère (1994), Perru (1997), for critical assessment, see Sonenscher (2002).

²¹ 'L'ordre naturel est l'accord parfait des moyens physiques dont la nature a fait choix pour produire nécessairement les effets physiques qu'elle attend de leurs concours. J'appelle ces moyens, des moyens physiques, parce que tout est physique dans la nature; ainsi l'ordre naturel, dont l'ordre social fait partie, n'est, & ne peut être autre chose que l'ordre physique.'

²² 'Le meilleur état possible d'une nation consiste dans la plus grande abondance possible de ses récoltes annuelles, jointe à la plus grande valeur vénale possible de ses productions. Ces deux avantages réunis ... lui assurent, en raison de son territoire, la plus grande richesse possible, la plus grande population possible, la plus grande industrie possible, la plus grande consistance possible parmi les autres nations.'

²³ 'un ordre enfin dont la sainteté & utilité, en manifestant aux hommes un Dieu bienfaisant, les prépare, les dispose, par la reconnaissance, à l'aimer, à l'adorer, à chercher par intérêt pour eux-mêmes, l'état de perfection le plus conforme à ses volontés.'

²⁴ 'La législation positive peut être regardée comme un recueil de calculs tout faits ...'

This view of the nature of legislation has autocratic and inegalitarian consequences. As to the former, Le Mercier de la Rivière holds that a legislator who grounds laws on evidence can never find justified opposition, neither from officials nor from the population (*Ordre naturel*, 1: 186). In his view, evidence is the only source of the authority of law, while a plurality of votes can establish only a temporary union of wills (*Ordre naturel*, 1: 210). Consequently, there can be only single authority and a single will that can impose obligations upon all citizens (*Ordre naturel*, 1: 193). Le Mercier de la Rivière also claims that, for the sake of economic optimization, economic inequality has to be encoded by law. As he argues, this is so because two individuals form a society not with the intention of becoming economically equal but to profit both from the society, and unequal starting conditions and unequal skills of individuals will inevitably perpetuate economic inequalities (*Ordre naturel*, 1: 200). This is why law must necessarily respect *unequal* property rights, as long as it is a legal order that makes all members better off than they would have been otherwise (*Ordre naturel*, 1: 201).

Mably is dissatisfied with the autocratic and inegalitarian consequences of the physiocratic view. His response is complex and includes detailed critique of the practices of autocratic government (especially that in China, see Jacobsen 2019) and an extended defense of the value of separation of powers (see Wright 1997: 109–21). For present purposes, let me focus in on the role that considerations concerning the dynamics of esteem play in his response. This issue has not been neglected by Le Mercier de la Rivière, and his views are more interesting than Mably may have realized. Le Mercier de la Rivière offers an intriguing alternative to understanding esteem in international relations as a function of a hierarchy of military power and relations of domination. Nothing could be more opposed to the physiocratic conception of economic perfection than deriving status from the violation of the rights and liberties of other nations:

Because there are no rights without duties, duties are the measure of rights, and a man who demands that one respects his possessions, can demand this only in virtue of the obligation that he imposes to respect the possessions of others; likewise, a nation can establish its property rights and its liberty only on the duty that it imposes upon itself never to attack the property rights and the liberty of other peoples.²⁵ (*Ordre naturel*, 2: 243)

Beyond this negative duty, Le Mercier de la Rivière maintains that there is also a duty of peoples to contribute as much as possible to the protection of the rights and liberties of other peoples (*Ordre naturel*, 2: 243). And it is exactly on this cooperative conception of international duties of justice that legitimate esteem between nations could be grounded:

It is surely in the interest of a nation that its dealings with strangers are in accordance with the form of its internal government, in order to publicize a politics that excludes those ambitious projects of which other nations cannot form a suspicion without getting alarmed and seeking to prevent them; now, a nation can find this advantage only in establishing the natural and essential order of societies, because this order is the only one that makes evident the personal interest that sovereigns have in preserving peace. ... At the same time that a nation inspires this confidence, it is also important for it to carry its forces to their highest possible degree, in order to enjoy all the reputation to which it can aspire among other powers.²⁶ (*Ordre naturel*, 2: 246)

²⁵ 'Par la raison qu'il n'est point de droits sans devoirs, que les devoirs sont la mesure des droits, & qu'un homme, qui prétend qu'on respecte ses propriétés, ne peut l'exiger qu'en vertu de l'obligation qu'il s'impose de respecter celles des autres, une nation aussi ne peut établir solidement ses droits de propriété & sa liberté, que sur le devoir qu'elle se fait de ne jamais attenter sur les droits de propriété & sur la liberté des autres peuples.'

²⁶ 'Il importe assurément à une nation que ses procédés à l'égard des étrangers s'accordent avec la forme de son gouvernement intérieur, pour annoncer une politique exclusive de ces projets ambitieux que les autres nations ne peuvent soupçonner sans s'allarmer, & sans chercher à les prévenir; or elle ne peut trouver cet avantage que dans l'établissement de l'ordre naturel & essentiel des sociétés, parce que cet ordre est le seul qui mette en évidence l'intérêt personnel que les Souverains ont à conserver la paix . . . En même-temps qu'une nation inspire cette confiance, il est important pour elle aussi de porter ses forces à leur plus haut degré possible, afin de jouir de toute la considération à laquelle elle peut prétendre parmi les autres puissances.'

Mably seems to have missed this aspect of Le Mercier de la Rivière's work. This is regrettable because this aspect draws attention to how the desire for esteem could provide a motivation for peaceful economic cooperation between nations. Still, Le Mercier de la Rivière's treatment of esteem between nations has limits of its own. He notes that esteem between nations based on success in cooperative economic activities could be transferred to personal relations between sovereigns—which is why the desire for admiration and glory can motivate the political agency of sovereigns (*Ordre naturel*, 1: 303). But he assumes, problematically, that citizens will be content with being esteemed in proportion to their participation in economic success:

Whatever the routes toward positions of dignity, honours and public reputation are in a nation, be certain that the desire for pleasure will always lead us to embrace them. In every place where wealth is the measure of this public reputation ..., humans are necessarily greedy of gold ...²⁷ (*Ordre naturel*, 2: 487–88)

Le Mercier de la Rivière takes this situation to be socially beneficial because it provides the strongest incentive for economic activity (*Ordre naturel*, 2: 488). By contrast, Mably argues that, even if the arrangement suggested by physiocratic economy were the most efficient one, there remain esteem-related problems, both for the governing class and the governed class. As to the governing class, Mably points out that economic inequality is destructive of the esteem in which those at the top of the hierarchy are held. This idea is developed in his critique of the idea of the *physiocrates* that the natural order of society demands high salaries for those who guarantee security for agriculture.²⁸ As Mably claims, establishing a right to receive high salaries in administrative positions is the seed of corruption (*germe de la corruption*) (*Œuvres*, 11: 35). This is so, he argues, because high salaries extinguish the love of public well-being and give rise to dangerous passions: 'It is not possible that magistrates and warriors whom you have made mercenary do not esteem the money that has become their recompense'²⁹ (*Œuvres*, 11: 35). This will lead to a cascade of detrimental developments:

While their laziness will imagine a hundred reasons to diminish their duties, their ingenious avarice will bring a hundred ways of increasing their salaries; the needs of the state will multiply instantly; one soon will give an imposing name to the most frivolous needs of the magistrate. Then everything is lost, because your land-owners and your agricultural producers will not fail to see that the government abuses its power, and they will ridicule them. Where do you find thus the natural and essential order of society? For myself, I only see everywhere people dissatisfied with each other. ... No-one renders justice to himself; no-one is content with his status; no-one wants to remain in the position that he occupies; or where there still is an appearance of order, it is the work of fear.³⁰ (*Œuvres*, 11: 35–36)

The resulting situation is not only characterized by oppression and impoverishment of those who are exploited for the sake of imaginary needs; it is also characterized by a loss of esteem and self-esteem, both on the side of the poor and on the side of the rich. The situation can be stable, but not because it produces a high degree of satisfaction but rather because it produces a high degree of fear. Mably presents his analysis as an analysis of a specifically modern development.

27 'Quelles que soient dans une nation les voies qui conduisent aux dignités, aux honneurs, à la considération publique, soyez certain que le désir de jouir nous portera toujours à les embrasser. Par-tout où les richesses seront la mesure de cette considération publique ... , il faut nécessairement que les hommes soient avides de l'or ...'

28 Mably's reference is to Le Mercier de la Rivière (1767, 1: 75–76). On the *physiocrates'* conception of natural order, see Miglio (1986), Albertone (1986).

29 'Il n'est pas possible que les magistrats et les gens de guerre, dont vous avez fait des mercenaires, n'estiment l'argent qui est devenu leur récompense.'

30 'En même temps que leur paresse imaginera cent raisons pour diminuer leurs devoirs, leur avarice ingénieuse trouvera cent moyens d'augmenter leurs salaires: les besoins de l'état se multiplieront à vue d'oeil: on donnera bientôt ce nom imposant aux besoins les plus frivoles du magistrat. Tout est alors perdu, parce que vos propriétaires et vos cultivateurs ne manqueront pas de voir que le gouvernement abuse de ses forces, et se moque d'eux. Où trouverez-vous alors l'ordre naturel et essentiel de la société? Pour moi, je ne vois de toutes parts que des hommes mécontents les uns des autres. ... Personne ne se rend justice, personne n'est content de son état, personne ne veut se tenir dans la place qu'il occupe; ou s'il paroît encore une apparence d'ordre, il est l'ouvrage de la crainte.'

What makes his analysis so interesting from a contemporary point of view is that the phenomena that he describes are far from having disappeared from the planet. And if his analysis is correct, then these phenomena point to the conclusion that some of the most problematic aspects of the economic world order that began to develop in the early modern period may be the outcome of distorted esteem—not resulting from factors that belong to human nature in general but rather from factors that derive from political decisions in particular historical situations.

4. IMAGINATION AND POLITICS

Why did Mably believe that republicanism could be more successful in solving the problem of distorted esteem than Malebranche's and Le Mercier de la Rivière's conceptions of natural order? Would not giving up the idea that justified esteem could be grounded on natural order imply that the pathologies of imagination diagnosed by Malebranche would affect republican constitutions as much as any other constitution? The answer is that, unlike Malebranche, Mably did not ascribe all cases of distorted imagination to natural factors that are the same for all humans. For Mably, not all cases of distorted esteem are expressions of corruption that is due to factors inherent in human nature; rather, he takes many cases to be expressions of erroneous political decisions. Correcting these political decisions, therefore, also can remedy distorted imagination.

Malebranche devotes no less than nine chapters in the *Recherche* (2.1.1–8; 2.2.1) to the physiological causes of the errors of the imagination. It will not be necessary to go into the details of his highly speculative physiology which—like the physiology of his contemporaries—invokes hypothetical entities such as animal spirits and brain pores. What matters here is that all distortions of imagination that have a physiological explanation can occur in all human beings with the respective physiological disorders. Malebranche adds seven chapters that consider what he calls 'moral' causes of errors of imagination (*Recherche*, 2.2.2–2.2.8). As he explains the concept, moral causes lead persons to judge about everything with relation to 'their different conditions, their different work—in a word, their different ways of living'³¹ (*Recherche*, 2.2.2). Again, the explanations that are found under this heading invoke physiological factors—for instance, Malebranche explains perceptual experiences such as seeing a face in the moon through the fact that we have seen many faces, usually with great attention, and that these perceptions have left traces in the brain that determine the movements of animal spirits (*Recherche*, 2.2.2). As Malebranche argues, something analogous happens through a particular kind of study—for instance, studying a particular author causes brain traces that can be so strong as to confuse the traces that objects leave on the brain (*Recherche*, 2.2.3). Also, particular states of mind are explained through physiological factors. For instance, the 'bel esprit' that disregards matters of truth in favor of matters of conventional taste is explained through 'lack of power' of animal spirits (*Recherche*, 2.2.8.1); superficiality is explained through the 'slowness' of animal spirits and the inflexibility of brain fibers (*Recherche*, 2.2.8.2); and the susceptibility to authority is explained through the impression that solemnity (*gravité*)—the combination of body language, vocal expression, and dressing style—makes upon the imagination of others (*Recherche*, 2.2.8.3; see 1.18.2).

Malebranche concedes that the countless differences in ways of living lead to countless differences in distorted imagination; but he describes his intention as follows:

I wish only to speak of ways of living that sustain more errors, and more important errors: When these have been explained, we shall have given sufficient opening for the mind to proceed further, and each will be able to see at a glance, and with great ease, the very hidden causes of many particular errors, that one could not otherwise explain without much time and trouble.³² (*Recherche*, 2.2.3)

31 'leurs différentes conditions, leurs différents emplois; en un mot, leurs différentes manières de vivre;' translation from Malebranche (1997: 134).

32 'On veut seulement parler des manières de vivre qui portent à un plus grand nombre d'erreurs et à des erreurs de plus grande importance. Quand on les aura expliquées, on aura donné assez d'ouverture à l'esprit pour aller plus loin; et chacun pourra voir tout d'une vue, et avec grande facilité, les causes très-cachées de plusieurs erreurs particulières, qu'on ne pourrait expliquer qu'avec beaucoup de temps et de peine.' Translation from Malebranche (1997: 137).

Malebranche's treatment of these matters thus is not meant to be comprehensive; but it is meant to be general in the sense that all particular cases could be explained with the help of the resources provided. Strikingly, however, what is entirely absent from Malebranche's detailed treatment of the errors of imagination is a consideration of political factors.

By contrast, Mably argues that specifically political factors have shaped imagination; and the single most important factor, in his view, is economic inequality. As he argues in *De la législation, ou principes des lois* (1776), unequal wealth is the origin of debased imagination that always creates new desires; these desires, in turn, result in assigning high prices and a high value to what is desired, even if the desire is not related to natural needs:

Will one be otiose without imagining new pleasures and new commodities? And will one develop a somewhat far-fetched delicacy, without attaching to it a certain price, a certain value? And will one begin to esteem oneself so insanely without beginning to disdain those who have remained in their first simplicity?³³ (Œuvres, 9: 47–48)

Distorted esteem—inflated self-esteem together with contempt for the less wealthy—thus from a situation where refinement of taste acquires the roles of proof of superiority and measure of reputation:

What a strange folly leads us to invest research, study and refinement into our needs, if inequality of fortunes had not made us get used to regarding this ridiculous delicacy as a proof of superiority, and if it thereby had not acquired value for a kind of reputation?³⁴ (Œuvres, 9: 45)

In *De l'étude de l'histoire* (1778), Mably returns to the idea that luxury changes what we esteem:

The characteristic of luxury is that it debases the mind, to the point of not esteeming and not appreciating anything but luxury: this is why we are governed only by the most contemptible passions. A moderate fortune appears to be the greatest of evils to us; and the most immense fortune appears to be a moderate fortune to us. We sell our liberty at an abject price because we are incapable of recognizing its value.³⁵ (Œuvres, 12: 143)

Mably thus gives a diagnosis of the political causes of our inability to recognize the value that something that would be naturally good for us: this inability does not arise from some natural defect but rather from a politics that favors economic inequality. As Mably explains in *De la législation*, what is bad about this situation is that, if the rich do not recognize the value of their own liberty, then they also do not recognize the value of the liberty of others—especially of those whose work make the fulfilment of refined needs possible. Even worse, esteem for wealth turns exploiting other nations into an object of honor:

Plato says that lands that are sufficient for citizens who, in equality, know only the simple and limited needs of nature, cannot longer suffice for the sustenance of a society to whom inequality of fortunes has taught to esteem wealth, luxury and sensual pleasures. It appears to be profitable to plunder one's neighbors, and because pillage has been useful, it soon becomes honored more than justice, of which one then had only false ideas. We make two weights and two measures for ourselves; and to the shame of our reason, the rich inflict the death penalty against theft, because one could

33 'Sera-t-on oisif sans imaginer de nouveaux plaisirs et de nouvelles commodités? Aura-t-on une délicatesse un peu recherchée, sans y mettre un certain prix, une certaine valeur? Et commencera-t-on à s'estimer si follement, sans commencer à mépriser ceux qui seront restés dans leur première simplicité?'

34 'Par quelle étrange folie mettrions-nous de la recherche, de l'étude et du raffinement dans nos besoins, si l'inégalité des fortunes ne nous avoit accoutumé à regarder cette délicatesse ridicule comme une preuve de supériorité, et n'eût valu par-là une sorte de considération?'

35 'Le propre du luxe est d'avilir les esprits, au point de n'estimer et de ne considérer que le luxe: dès-lors nous ne sommes gouvernés que par les passions les plus méprisables. Une fortune médiocre nous paroît le plus grand des maux; et la fortune la plus immense ne nous paroît qu'une fortune médiocre. Nous vendrons notre liberté à vil prix, parce que nous sommes incapables d'en connoître la valeur.' On Mably's critique of luxury, see Galliani (1975), Ferrand and Orain (2017).

steal from them; and they approve conquests, because they themselves have been thieves of nations.³⁶ (Œuvres, 9: 51)

Whether or not Mably's reading of Plato is accurate from a historical point of view, this passage is interesting because it draws attention to a causal connection between imaginary needs and what is valued. In the *Principes de morale*, esteeming a politics of conquest is understood to be the result of distorted imagination concerning needs: 'Your imagination lets itself be carried away, and you will blame, as I do, the inconsiderate and unskilled use that some nations have made of passions, if you recall the goal of this wealth, these arts, this glory and these conquests that you esteem above their value'³⁷ (Œuvres, 10: 259).

Mably is aware that the detrimental consequences for those who work to satisfy imaginary needs pose a pressing problem even for constitutions with republican elements. As he notes in *De la législation*, the striving for wealth can even corrupt an institution such as the English parliament:

I do not deny that your commerce procures great wealth for you; but I deny that this wealth is a good, if by rendering the English citizens greedier, it renders them unjust with respect to each other. Wealth is an evil if, once it is there, the love of glory, of the home country, of liberty and of the laws is replaced by a vile interest; if wealth carries into your parliament a corruption that makes the parliament an accomplice of injustice and tyranny.³⁸ (Œuvres, 9: 18)

Accordingly, in the *Principes de morale* Mably is clear that triggering the desire for glory can misfire even in republics:

Those governments that are prone to derange the human heart with great vehemence have given rise to patriotism, of the love of public well-being and of glory before forming adequate ideas about the manner in which one should love one's home country, about the nature of the well-being that the citizens should pursue and about the glory that they should desire.³⁹ (Œuvres, 10: 349)

And Mably regrets the number of heroic deeds that the republican Athenians and Romans invested into what he understands as false ideas of glory and prosperity (Œuvres, 10: 350).⁴⁰

What Mably apparently has in mind is something that is naturally bad for us: 'Today, the insatiable needs of our luxury and our laziness do not cease to tyrannize the unlucky whom we have condemned to cultivate the earth.'⁴¹ What is bad about imaginary needs is that they cause entirely real suffering for others. That imaginary needs can cause real suffering draws attention to the fact that legislation—even legislation with republican elements—transforms the demands of imagination into a legal framework that allows exploitation of others:

36 'Des terres, dit Platon, qui suffisoient à des citoyens qui ne connoissent dans l'égalité, que les besoins simples et peu nombreux de la nature, ne purent plus suffire à l'entretien d'une société, à qui l'inégalité des fortunes avoit appris à estimer les richesses, le luxe et les voluptés. Il parut avantageux de piller ses voisins, et parce que le pillage étoit utile, il fut bientôt plus honoré que la justice, dont on n'eut dès lors que des idées fausses. Nous nous fimes deux poids et deux mesures; et à la honte de notre raison, les riches infligèrent peine de mort contre le vol, parce qu'ils pouvoient être volés; et approuvèrent les conquêtes, parce qu'ils étoient eux-mêmes les voleurs des nations.'

37 'Votre imagination s'est laissé éblouir, et vous blâmeriez, comme moi, l'usage inconsidéré et mal-habile que quelques peuples ont fait des passions, si vous vous rappeliez quel a été le terme de ces richesses, de ces arts, de cette gloire, de ces conquêtes que vous estimez bien au-delà de leur valeur.'

38 'je ne nie pas que votre commerce ne vous procure de grandes richesses; mais je nie que ces richesses soient un bien, si en rendant les Anglais plus avides, elles les rendent injustes les uns à l'égard des autres. Ces richesses sont un mal, si à leur approche, l'amour de la gloire, de la patrie, de la liberté et des lois fait place à un vil intérêt; si elles portent dans votre parlement une corruption qui le rend le complice de l'injustice et de la tyrannie.'

39 'Des gouvernemens propres à remuer fortement le coeur humain ont fait naître l'amour de la patrie, du bien public et de la gloire, avant que de s'être fait des idées justes sur la manière dont on doit aimer sa patrie, et sur la nature du bien que le citoyen doit se proposer et de la gloire qu'il doit désirer.'

40 On Mably's view of antiquity, see Schleich (1980).

41 Œuvres, 9: 39: 'Aujourd'hui les insatiables besoins de notre luxe et de notre oisiveté ne cessent de tyranniser les malheureux que nous avons condamnés à cultiver la terre.'

If the legislators wanted to be nothing but brigands, I have nothing to say; but if they wanted to be just, if they wanted to make society happy, how could they not have had enough insight to suspect that, by rendering the superfluous necessary, they would derange the order of providence, and that a part of humanity could no longer satisfy their true needs, as soon as the other part of humanity created imaginary needs for themselves? Our needs that, in the order of nature, should unite us, serve, in the order or disorder of your politics, only to divide us.⁴² (Œuvres, 9: 32)

Mably here seems to take it to be a matter of common sense that humans can identify that some experiences are universally recognized as being bad, and it is hard to see how they could be wrong about why the violation of their basic needs is bad for them.

Mably points out that the standing of the poor is a problem that has become much more pressing through the transition from feudalism to industrialization. What makes the problem pressing, in his view, is not so much a changing mode of production as a changing attitude toward honor and dignity. As he argues in *De la législation*, the desire for honor created some limits to the exploitation of persons in dependent positions. This is so because the number of vassals was regarded to be a source of honor for land-owners, and having a large number of vassals presupposes a minimal level of material well-being (Œuvres, 9: 148–49). In this sense, the demands of honor were a counter-weight against the domination of feudal lords. Also, in the feudal order, the cultivation of land constituted a source of honor for vassals, for the very reason that it provided a sufficient livelihood. Both sources of honor are lost by reducing the dignity deriving from land-ownership to the ability to accumulate as much land as possible. This changing attitude toward the dignity deriving from land-ownership results in the depopulation of the countryside that is characteristic of many areas of pre-industrial Europe (Œuvres, 9: 149–150). What results from this change on the level of social esteem is not only that the descendants of vassals suffer from greater poverty than their ancestors.

5. ESTEEM AND CIVIC VIRTUE

Mably's treatment of the connection between distorted imagination and distorted esteem thus shifts from a focus on natural factors predominant in Malebranche to a focus on specifically political factors. Does this shift make a solution to the problem of human corruption easier? Not necessarily, since corruption resulting from politics can be as deeply ingrained as corruption resulting from physiological factors. In fact, one of the interlocutors in *De la législation* remarks:

If by eloquence and demonstration—concede this ridiculous assumption to me—one would have performed the miracle of guiding the great and the rich to be content with a full equality with the persons whom they disdain, I do not know whether the small and poor would want to consent, or at least, whether they could develop sentiments that correspond to their new situation. This is not at all a joke: In this respect, we have reached, almost all over Europe, such a degree of humiliation and misery that the poor will have a kind of resistance or shame to be equal to the others, and they will find themselves embarrassed on their side. Did you never encounter persons of low standing who are so convinced of their nothingness and so flattered by being approached by their superiors that they buy the honor of serving them and of meriting one of their glances with servility? ... I believed to have noticed a hundred times, even in persons who flatter themselves to think with more accuracy and force, that these persons let themselves

⁴² 'Si les législateurs n'ont voulu être que des brigands, je n'ai rien à dire; mais s'ils ont voulu être justes, s'ils ont voulu faire le bonheur de la société, comment n'ont-ils pas eu l'esprit de soupçonner qu'en rendant le superflu nécessaire, ils derangeroient l'ordre de la providence, et qu'une partie des hommes ne pourroit plus satisfaire ses véritables besoins, dès que l'autre s'en feroit d'imaginaires? Nos besoins qui, dans l'ordre de la nature, devoient nous unir, ne serviront, dans l'ordre ou le désordre de votre politique, qu'à nous diviser.'

be overwhelmed by the splendor of great positions and riches, and that they fall back mechanically to the place where they have been born by chance.⁴³ (*Œuvres*, 9: 98–99)

Clearly, then, Mably recognizes that overcoming a political order characterized by extreme inequality can face the problem that what is esteemed is determined by reactions that do not involve critical reflection. However, there is an interesting dissimilarity between Mably's remark and Malebranche's treatment of the role of mechanical reactions for what we esteem.

Malebranche takes the insight into the perfection of one's personal qualities or of one's personal belongings to be a natural source of esteem for oneself, of contempt for others, and insight into the imperfection of one's personal qualities of one's personal belonging to be a natural source of contempt of oneself and of respect for others; esteem for oneself in turn causes pride, contempt of oneself causes humility (*Recherche*, 5.7). In Malebranche's view, both pride and humility are useful for civil society. As he maintains, it is necessary to be humble and timid in the presence of a person of high standing because in such circumstance giving external signs of submission is advantageous for the well-being of the body (*Recherche*, 5.7). As Malebranche comments:

This occurs naturally and mechanically, with the will having no role and often in spite of its resistance. Even such beasts as dogs, which must submit to those with whom they live, generally have their machine disposed such a way that they assume the appearance they must in relation to those around them, for this is absolutely necessary for their preservation.⁴⁴ (*Recherche*, 5.7)

The kind of esteem that Malebranche describes here can be correlated with the 'external and relative esteem' that he describes in the *Traité de morale*. In Malebranche's view, fulfilling duties of external esteem—even if they are not connected with any positive emotions—could be justified because they have a natural function analogous to deferential behavior found in non-human animals. Mably certainly would not deny that human behavior sometimes shows such patterns of non-voluntary deference to the more powerful. But in the light of his critique of the detrimental consequences of inequality, he certainly would not agree that such machine-like behavior could ever be naturally good for humans. On the contrary, immediately after the passage about machine-like behavior, he describes inequality as an outcome of a long history of neglecting good legislation:

All states had at their birth laws favorable to equality; as time went by, all have seen the formation of shocking distinctions and preferences between citizens; and although riches and dignities at the beginning have not been very impressive, as time went by, they were sufficient to subjugate the multitude; so powerful is the empire of riches and dignities!⁴⁵ (*Œuvres*, 9: 99).

The diagnosis that some cases of distorted imagination have political origins leads Mably to the insight that there are natural remedies for some cases of distorted esteem, either through rational

⁴³ 'Quand à force d'éloquence et de démonstration, passez-moi cette supposition ridicule, on auroit fait le miracle de réduire les grands et les riches à se contenter d'une entière égalité avec les personnes qu'ils méprisent, je ne sais si les petits et les pauvres y voudroient consentir, ou du moins, s'ils pourroient prendre des sentimens conformes à leur nouvelle situation. Ce n'est point une plaisanterie: les choses en sont venues, dans presque toute l'Europe, à un tel degré d'avilissement et de misère, qu'ils auroient une sorte de répugnance ou de honte à égaler les autres, et se trouveroient embarrassés à leur côté. N'avez-vous jamais rencontré de ces hommes vils, si convaincus de leur néant, et si flattés d'approcher de leurs supérieurs, qu'ils achètent par des bassesses l'honneur de les servir et de mériter un de leurs regards? ... J'ai cru remarquer cent fois dans les personnes même qui se piquent de penser avec le plus de justesse et de force, qu'elles se laissent surprendre par l'éclat des grandeurs et des richesses, et retombent machinalement dans la place où la fortune les a fait naître.'

⁴⁴ 'Mais cela se fait naturellement et machinalement, sans que la volonté y ait de part, et souvent même malgré toute sa résistance. Les bêtes mêmes qui ont besoin, comme les chiens, de fléchir ceux avec qui elles vivent, ont d'ordinaire leur machine disposée de manière qu'elles prennent l'air qu'elles doivent avoir, par rapport à ceux qui les environnent; car cela est absolument nécessaire pour leur conservation.' Translation from Malebranche (1997: 377).

⁴⁵ 'Tous les états ont eu à leur naissance des lois favorables à l'égalité; tous cependant ont vu se former des distinctions et des préférences choquantes entre les citoyens; et quoique les richesses et les dignités fussent d'abord peu imposantes, elles ont cependant suffi pour subjuguer la multitude: tant l'empire des richesses et des dignités est puissant!'

insight into these political dynamics or through political agency guided by rational insight. As to the former, one of the explanations for how someone could succeed in preserving himself from the 'general contagion' (*contagion générale*) invokes the resources of rationality: 'It is through the assistance of a cultivated and enlightened reason that he disdains all the prejudices that great wealth, great titles and high birth give. Equality is dear to him, because it does not need miserable distinctions that we have imagined in order to be distinguished.'⁴⁶ Is it plausible to invoke rationality after having conceded that reason often is distorted by imagination? I think it is because the distortion of rationality that Mably has in mind is exactly the distortion that arises from a politics that creates the legal framework required for upholding economic inequality; if so, then understanding the detrimental influence that inequality has on the lives of humans is exactly what is needed to overcome the influence of this form of distorted imagination. This is why Mably understands rationality as a kind of prudence that makes us aware of the negative effects of distorted imagination on our lives:

Perhaps for societies, as for simple citizens, there exist false goods that one should distrust and that, under a seducing but deceiving appearance, hide a true misfortune; perhaps the happiness that you imagine is not the one for which nature destines us; perhaps, in order to be a good legislator, it does not suffice to be a good banker or a good merchant; perhaps a state must not make itself feared because makes itself vulnerable to hate; perhaps it is detrimental to make conquests.⁴⁷ (*Œuvres*, 9: 12)

At the same time, Mably does not overestimate the influence that such arguments have on the majority of citizens. Rather, he cautions that it is a precept of political prudence not to try to argue people into moral self-improvement; and it is here that using the desire for esteem for the sake of republican constitution building has its place. Under the disguise of triggering passions, he suggests, the desire for esteem could be used to support civic virtues. This is why triggering the desire for esteem can work as a remedy for those aspects of human corruption that derive from the politics of exploitation and oppression:

By reflecting upon itself and disguising itself, prudence will refrain from saying in a commanding tone to corrupted humans: 'be just, renounce your sensualities, have courage, carry your wealth to the temples, or rather throw them into the sea.' No; but it will examine whether in the souls there still remains some sentiment of honor. Doesn't it find there any spark of the love of glory?⁴⁸ (*Œuvres*, 10: 356)

The question at the end of this quotation seems to be rhetorical since, in the *Entretiens de Phocion sur le rapport de la morale avec la politique* (1763), Mably surmises that 'some spark of the love of glory, among all the virtues, is the only one that, with the assistance of vanity, can still show itself in the midst of an extreme corruption'⁴⁹ (*Œuvres*, 10: 207).

But can we be confident that corrupted imagination does not present to us the wrong goals? What Mably has in mind is a legal framework that uses the desire for esteem and reputation as a motivation that could lead citizens to be active for the sake of public well-being (*Œuvres*, 9: 81–82). However, because he is also aware of the risk that the desire for esteem could misfire, Mably

⁴⁶ *Œuvres*, 9: 47: 'C'est par le secours d'une raison cultivée et éclairée qui lui fait mépriser tous les préjugés que donnent de grandes richesses, de grands titres et une haute naissance. L'égalité lui est chère, parce qu'elle n'a pas besoin des misérables distinctions que nous avons imaginées pour être distinguée.'

⁴⁷ 'Peut-être y a-t-il pour les sociétés, de même que pour les simples citoyens, de faux biens dont il faut se défier, et qui, sous une apparence séduisante, mais trompeuse, cachent un malheur véritable; peut-être que le bonheur que vous imaginez n'est pas celui que la nature nous destine; peut-être que pour être bon législateur, il ne suffit pas d'être bon financier ou bon commerçant; peut-être qu'un état ne doit pas se faire craindre, parce qu'il s'expose à se faire haïr; peut-être est-il nuisible de faire des conquêtes.'

⁴⁸ 'La prudence, se repliant alors sur elle-même et se déguisant, se garderoit bien de dire impérieusement à des hommes corrompus: soyez justes, renoncez à vos voluptés, ayez du courage, portez vos richesses dans les temples, ou plutôt jetez-les dans la mer. Non: mais elle examinera alors s'il reste encore quelque sentiment d'honneur dans les âmes. N'y trouve-t-elle aucune étincelle de l'amour de la gloire?'

⁴⁹ 'quelque étincelle de l'amour de la gloire; c'est la seule de toutes les vertus qui, par le secours de la vanité, peut encore se montrer au milieu d'une extrême corruption.'

advocates a legal framework that is (relatively) egalitarian.⁵⁰ A relatively high degree of equality is required, Mably argues, because equality keeps our needs modest and thereby prevents the occurrence of those passions that regard refined consumption as a sign of superiority (*Œuvres*, 9: 45). In this sense, a relatively egalitarian legal framework is what is needed to prevent distorted imagination that threatens even a republican constitution. What Mably has in mind is not a fully egalitarian framework because, as a passage from *De l'étude de l'histoire* indicates, he does not take it to be realistic under given political circumstances that institutionalized distinctions of rank could be abolished:

Because we do not know how to be brothers and to adapt ourselves to the intentions of nature, there must be classes of citizens who are more honored than others; but may no human be bent and humiliated in his condition, at least if he is not an offender condemned by law to live in contempt. In spite of the distinction connected with different classes within the state, they will be as equal as they can be today; they will not disdain each other, they will not oppress each other, if the law has taken wise precautions for balancing their power and rendered sacred and inviolable the particular rights of each of them. The *tiers-état* will respect the great aristocrats without being degraded by their distinctions, if the great aristocrats in turn are obliged to respect in the person of the bourgeois and the peasant the rights of humanity, and the quality of free citizens who participate in creating the law which they much obey.⁵¹ (*Œuvres*, 12: 357–58)

Mably formulates this passage using the verb 'respecter,' not the verb 'estimer.' What he has in mind seems to be a distinction that is similar to the one worked out by David Sachs. As Sachs notes, even though in everyday language the terms 'respect' and 'esteem' can in many contexts be used synonymously, it is easy to distinguish the two concepts. One of them describes the attitude of being willing to preserve the rights and needs of someone—one's own rights and needs or those of someone else. The other describes the attitude of giving an evaluation of particular achievements—one's own achievement or that of someone else (Sachs 1981). Respect for the rights of humanity is due to everyone, independently of any achievements that could be the ground for social distinction. In this sense, Mably characterizes the institutional structure of Sweden as a 'constitution where the rights of humanity and equality are much more respected than one should have expected in the unlucky times in which we are living'⁵² (*Œuvres*, 12: 257). While respect for the rights of humanity does not depend on success in competition, Mably holds that it facilitates competitive behavior that is beneficial because its goal is to be as virtuous as possible:

Where the dignity and honor of humanity are equally respected in all human beings, a certain taste for justice, honor and standing becomes dominant, which upholds peace without numbing the souls of citizens. Emulation there will develop all virtues, and love for public well-being will never allow talents to be hidden or to become dangerous.⁵³ (*Œuvres*, 12: 33)

50 On Mably's version of egalitarianism, see Composto (1955), Harpaz (1956).

51 'Puisque nous ne savons pas être frères et nous conformer aux intentions de la nature, il doit y avoir des classes de citoyens plus honorées que d'autres; mais qu'aucun homme ne soit flétri et humilié dans sa condition, à moins qu'il ne soit un malfaiteur condamné par les lois à vivre dans le mépris. Malgré les distinctions attachées aux différens ordres de l'état, ils seront égaux entr'eux autant qu'ils peuvent l'être aujourd'hui; ils ne se mépriseront point, ils ne s'opprimeront point mutuellement, si la loi a pris de sages précautions pour balancer leur pouvoir et rendre sacrés et inviolables les droits particuliers de chacun d'eux. Le tiers-état respectera les grands sans être avili par leurs distinctions, si les grands sont obligés à leur tour de respecter dans la personne des bourgeois et des paysans les droits de l'humanité, et la qualité de citoyens libres qui concourent à faire la loi à laquelle ils doivent obéir.'

52 'cette constitution où les droits de l'humanité et de l'égalité sont beaucoup plus respectés qu'on auroit dû l'espérer dans les temps malheureux où nous vivons.'

53 'Où la dignité et l'honneur de l'humanité sont également respectés dans tous les hommes, il doit régner un certain goût de justice, d'honneur et d'élevation qui entretient la paix, sans engourdir l'ame des citoyens. L'emulation y développera toutes les vertus, et l'amour du bien public ne permettra jamais aux talens d'être cachés ou de devenir dangereux.'

This is why the competition for social esteem can be virtue-supportive; but is so only under political constitutions that give reputation to what is socially useful:

When politics has reached the point of knowing what is truly estimable; when it has, so to speak, weighed the virtues; I wish it would assign a greater reputation to those virtues that are more useful for society and more difficult in their practice. Instead of wasting honor, I wish the republic would distribute honor only with an extreme economy, for the glory that is too common is degraded. I wish that rewards were rare; that all would desire them and few would obtain them; they will be disdained if one gives them in advance or by caprice.⁵⁴ (Œuvres, 10: 129)

Since Mably regards usefulness for the home country to be the only criterion that should guide legislation concerning rewards, the poets and painters do not deserve the same praise as excellent magistrates and excellent officers (Œuvres, 10: 129). But does not this kind of ranking of merit debase the arts and sciences?

In his posthumously published essay *Des talents* Mably argues that those who have reached mastery in different fields recognize that the same complexity of thought and the same amount of patience and the same degree of courage, even if it may be courage different kinds, is required for a good work of art as for a good military campaign (Œuvres, 14: 106–7). But still, this involves high esteem only for a small number of professions—philosophers; orators, historians, poets, painters, sculptors; magistrates and officers—and within each profession only for those who reach mastery in their field—that is, esteem for ‘great men’ (*grands hommes*) (Œuvres, 14: 106). Hence, while those who have reached mastery in the arts and sciences may not be objects of low esteem, the many who did not reach this level of skill may be debased by the esteem in which the arts and sciences are held.

If self-esteem is thought to be a kind of internalized social esteem, then it would seem as if many citizens of a republic organized along the lines suggested by Mably would end up with low self-esteem. However, Mably does not believe that this is what will take place, for several reasons. To begin with, there may be a connection between refraining from contempt and creating an economic situation that is egalitarian enough to guarantee the fulfilment of natural needs. This connection is hinted at by Mably’s recommendation: ‘May the political community ... govern [citizens] without disdaining them. The magistrate must take care that work provides to the artisans an easy and abundant subsistence ...’⁵⁵ (Œuvres, 10: 122). Here, Mably takes up the insight that esteem and honor are intimately connected with the distribution of wealth. Taking legislative measures to secure a less unequal distribution of wealth provides the material conditions under which citizens can acquire esteem, very much as depriving citizens from the material basis required for making an honorable living makes citizens vulnerable to contempt.

Mably also emphasizes the necessity of legislation concerning the formal qualifications required for higher positions. As he argues in *De la législation, ou principes des lois*, such legislation increases the esteem in which those in lower positions are held; this is so because if they lack the formal qualification, they do not believe that they could reach the higher positions through protection; otherwise, they would aspire to them and if they are frustrated in their aspiration, they become the object of contempt (Œuvres, 9: 208). Regulating qualifications for positions in the magistrature by law not only prevents unqualified person from holding offices; more importantly, it prevents those who hold subordinate positions from believing that they are humiliated by their lower standing. This amounts to a solution to one of the problems that Mably has diagnosed, namely, the problem of discontent with one’s own status (Œuvres, 9: 208). In this way, legislation can influence both

⁵⁴ ‘Quand la politique est parvenue à connoître ce qui est véritablement estimable; quand elle aura, pour ainsi dire, pesé les vertus; quelle accorde une plus grande considération à celles qui sont les plus avantageuses à la société, et un exercice plus difficile. Au lieu de prodiguer les honneurs, que la république ne les dispense qu’avec une extrême économie, la gloire trop commune s’avilit. Que les récompenses soient rares; que tous les désirent, que peu les obtiennent; elles seront méprisées si on les donne d’avance ou par caprice.’

⁵⁵ ‘que la république, qui ne peut s’en passer, les gouverne sans les mépriser. Le magistrat doit avoir soin que le travail fournisse aux artisans une subsistance facile et abondante ...’

social esteem and self-esteem *because* it remedies distorted imagination: ‘It seems to me that, since I know my rights and duties, I experience what you have experienced. It seems to me that the pomp of names and titles no longer makes an impression on my imagination’⁵⁶ (Œuvres, 11: 356).

Mably also believes that republican education could contribute to liberating students from distorted esteem for others (which can be one of the sources of low self-esteem). For instance, he expects that young citizens ‘will convince themselves through the experience of all times that passions such as avarice and ambition give only a passing prosperity; that virtue alone has made societies flourish, and that vice alone has ruined them. They will learn to disdain what Europe esteems ...’⁵⁷ (Œuvres, 9: 380–81). Also, educational laws should establish economic equality between pupils. Thereby they will develop self-esteem based on their personal qualities, rather than on the social standing of their families (Œuvres, 9: 383). Still, the question remains whether even those who do not perform clearly above the average will retain high self-esteem in the long run.

Mably has several things to say about this problem. He draws attention to the fact that equality, not just of civil rights but also of wealth, makes esteem for the talented more acceptable than it would otherwise be:

If I establish equal citizens, who count in humans only virtues and talents, emulation will keep itself within just limits. Destroy this equality, and on the spot, emulation will change into envy and jealousy, because it no longer proposes for itself an honorable goal.⁵⁸ (Œuvres, 9: 46)

Thus, equality of wealth is what makes a merit-based competition for esteem possible. Even those who do not win the competition can see that the rules of the competition are fair and that the goals of the achievements of those who have won are honorable. And the fairness is not limited to the idea of a proportionality between achievements and esteem.

What is more, relative equality of wealth creates a situation where everyone can participate in the competition. If everyone has to earn esteem through personal qualities, this gives hope even to those in low positions that they could earn esteem through developing these qualities:

The rich will try to be worth something by themselves, if they despair about the possibility of procuring consideration for themselves through their servants, their horses and their dresses; the poor, less degraded, will work toward making themselves esteemed once esteem will be linked with things that can belong to them as well as to the rich.⁵⁹ (Œuvres, 9: 135–36)

Here, Mably points to a significant dissimilarity between the dynamics of social esteem and the dynamics of self-esteem: even if in the competition for social esteem only few will be winners, believing that it is possible to attain the same degree of esteem as those who start from higher positions is itself a source of self-esteem—independently of the eventual outcome of one’s efforts.

Finally, in the *Principes de morale* Mably draws attention to the possibility of identifying oneself with those who are useful for the purpose of republican constitution building:

⁵⁶ ‘Il me semble, depuis que je connois mes droits et mes devoirs, que j’éprouve moi-même ce que vous avez éprouvé. Il me semble que la pompe des noms et des titres n’impose plus à mon imagination.’

⁵⁷ ‘Ils se convaincront par l’expérience de tous les temps, que les passions, telles que l’avarice et l’ambition ne donnent qu’une prospérité passagère; que la vertu, seule a fait fleurir les sociétés, et que le vice seul les a ruinees. Ils apprendront à mépriser ce que l’Europe estime ...’

⁵⁸ ‘Si j’établis des citoyens égaux, qui ne considèrent dans les hommes que les vertus et les talents, l’émulation se tiendra dans de justes bornes. Détruisez cette égalité, et sur le champ l’émulation se changera en envie et en jalousie, parce qu’elle ne se proposera plus une fin honnête.’

⁵⁹ ‘Les riches tâcheront de valoir quelque chose par eux-mêmes, s’ils désespèrent de se faire considérer par leurs valets, leurs chevaux et leurs habits; les pauvres, moins avilis, travailleront à se faire estimer, dès que l’estime sera attachée à des choses qui peuvent leur appartenir comme aux riches.’

In some way, I identify myself with the citizen whose merit I cannot equal. I incite him by my praise to perform great deeds that are useful for me; by loving him, I believe in some way to become his equal; and the greater his superiority is, the less my self-love is alarmed, because my admiration does not abandon me.⁶⁰ (Œuvres, 10: 255)

Thus, the dynamics of self-esteem differ from the dynamics of social esteem. Even if social esteem must remain rare in order to preserve its value, striving for social esteem can enhance the self-esteem even of those who ultimately fail to be successful in competition. This is a way of increasing self-esteem, even if one recognizes the superiority of others. Self-esteem is not necessarily the judgment that one is better than others; rather, self-esteem may be enhanced if one's own personal qualities are reinforced through the identification with those whose superiority one acknowledges.

6. CONCLUSION

No doubt, Mably uses republican commonplaces, including the idea that the competition for esteem is one of the most powerful driving forces behind the cultivation for civic virtue. These commonplaces, however, get a particular edge through his interest in the issue of human corruption. And it is exactly the careful consideration that Mably gave to the problem of human corruption that lends plausibility to his republican account of the duties of esteem. His central insight is that distorted imagination is not only a result of natural factors but also a result of misguided politics. This sets his response to the problem of human corruption apart from Malebranche's. Malebranche explains distorted imagination through physiological factors and how these factors are shaped by the particular ways of living. This is why his solution to the problem of human corruption tries to identify certain natural capacities that are not affected by these mechanisms. But very much as he does not take political factors into consideration when he explains the origins of distorted imagination, Malebranche offers precepts that may be effective when it comes to cultivating our own minds. But, as Mably has seen very clearly, Malebranche cannot offer a remedy for the problematic aspects of our social lives that are shaped by the necessity of fulfilling duties of showing external signs of esteem. By contrast, Mably regards the most detrimental effects of the world order emerging in the modern period—the poverty of laborers and their lack of social status, on the one hand, and the political of conquest and colonization, on the other hand—to be results of imagination misled by a politics of economic inequality. His emphasis on the entirely non-imaginary suffering resulting from imaginary need shows how central the problem of human corruption is for his political thought. And since the political results deriving from distorted esteem are recognizably the same in the present-day world, examining his republican solution to the question of human corruption still is of considerable interest today.

Keeping the political origins of distorted imagination in mind opens up the possibility that some cases of distorted esteem can be modified through political reform. By changing political values—moving away from appreciating wealth, exploitation, and conquest, and moving toward appreciating republican values such as economic equality, citizen rights and international justice—also what we esteem will change. For the very reason that distorted esteem can be remedied by removing the political causes that distort imagination, Mably can persuasively defend the idea that humans can gain insight into what is naturally good for them, by reflecting upon political decisions that have turned out to be bad for them. Republican constitution building is the most promising institutional framework for this project because it allows for a legal framework that creates a high degree of economic equality, thereby removing the most important cause of distorted imagination. It is also the institutional framework that is best suited for being supported by the desire for esteem. This is so because a high degree of economic equality implies that the main motivation for developing civic virtues does not derive from material rewards but rather from the pleasure that citizens expect to derive from reputation. And, as Mably argues, the competitive

⁶⁰ 'Je m'identifie en quelque sorte avec le citoyen dont je ne puis égaler le mérite. Je l'excite par mes éloges aux grandes choses qui me sont utiles; en l'aimant, je crois en quelque sorte devenir son égal: et plus sa supériorité est grande, moins mon amour-propre en est alarmé, parce que mon admiration ne m'abandonne pas.'

nature of social esteem is compatible with the idea that republican constitutions have positive effects on the self-esteem of all citizens—they are liberated from esteem for the wealthy and powerful, they are liberated from contempt that arises from economic inequality both for the rich and the poor, and they can retain high self-esteem by identifying with those who surpass them.

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AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Andreas Blank  orcid.org/0000-0002-7470-097X
Alpen-Adria Universität, Klagenfurt, AT

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