

## RESEARCH

## D'Holbach on (Dis-)Esteeming Talent

Andreas Blank

Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt, AT  
andreas.blank@aau.at

Rousseau argues that holding the talented in high public esteem leads the less talented to esteem their natural virtues less highly and therefore to neglect the cultivation of these virtues. D'Holbach's response to Rousseau indicates a sense in which esteeming talent can avoid these detrimental consequences. The starting point of d'Holbach's defense of the sciences and arts is an analysis of the impact that despotic regimes have on esteeming talent. He argues that there is not only a problem of *over*-valuing talent but also a problem of *under*-valuing talent. These considerations form the background for his conception of valuing talent in the right way. The phenomenon of political deception in despotic regimes indicates a sense in which talent can be regarded as a tool for solving a pressing political problem: Genuinely estimable uses of talent are those that oppose despotism and support republican virtues. Esteeming such talent does not lead to a loss of esteem and self-esteem for ordinary people because republican virtues themselves are a source of esteem and self-esteem. Comparison with some aspects of the response of d'Holbach's friend, Claude-Adrien Helvétius, to Rousseau will accentuate the specific strengths of d'Holbach's argument.

**Keywords:** Economy of Esteem; Despotism; Republicanism; Jean-Jacques Rousseau; Paul Thiry d'Holbach

### 1. Rousseau's Challenge

Perhaps no-one in the French Enlightenment was more skeptical about the practices of esteeming talent than Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). His observations about what can go wrong with esteeming talent form an important part of his critique of the excessive *amour-propre*, understood as the 'frenzy to achieve distinction' (D 184; OC 3:189). In the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, Rousseau argues:

hat gives rise to all of these abuses, if not the fatal inequality introduced among men by the distinction of talents and the disparagement of virtues? ... People no longer ask about a man whether he has probity, but whether he has talents, nor about a book whether it is useful but whether it is well written. Rewards are lavished upon wits, and virtue remains without honors. (D 23; OC 3:25)

According to this argument, holding the talented in high public esteem leads the less talented to be held in lower esteem. This is why ordinary people esteem their natural virtues less highly and therefore neglect the cultivation of these virtues. Excessive *amour-propre* of the talented thus leads to a morally debilitating lack of *amour-propre* of the less talented.

Michael Locke McLendon maintains that Rousseau's challenge is significant because in liberal societies public recognition is, for the most part, doled out to those who can succeed in economic or intellectual spheres. This attitude, Locke McLendon argues, leads to a devaluation of achievements in other spheres of life—such as parenting or care-giving—no matter how morally valuable these achievements may be (2003: 116). Unless our cultural attitudes do not change, other spheres of life cannot easily function as equivalent, alternative sources of esteem and self-esteem (Locke McLendon 2014: 354–55, 2018: 127). This is why liberal societies based on merit systems of distributive justice will be 'most likely to suffer from an excess of *amour-propre*' (Locke McLendon 2003: 128). As Locke McLendon argues, inflated self-love not only indicates a lack of self-knowledge (which is bad for the lives of individuals with an exaggerated self-image),

but also leads to loosening the bonds of civic friendship (which is bad for the social relations of everyone) (2003: 134).

Of course, it has not eluded commentators that it may be rewarding to think about how Rousseau's challenge could be answered. Frederick Neuhouser has suggested that a solution acceptable for Rousseau would be to demand fair chances for everyone to participate in those arts and sciences that are useful for everyone. According to Neuhouser, the detrimental consequences of esteem for talent could be avoided by creating institutional arrangements that would guarantee that everyone could pursue preeminence in a particular field. Such institutional arrangements would have to protect the chances of others to 'have similar aspirations and at the same time find a rationally acceptable level of satisfaction in their quest for recognition' (Neuhouser 2008: 99). Neuhouser explains that rational acceptability of such arrangements involves the demand that esteem be 'commensurate to genuine merit' and that 'everyone benefits appreciably from such a system in the end' (Neuhouser 2008: 102). As Neuhouser conjectures, Rousseau would accept 'that the desire to be a star can serve as a powerful motivator for individuals to put themselves through the excruciating labor of perfecting their natural talents, the results of which—the brilliant lecture, the exquisite poem, the perfectly executed jump—enrich the lives of everyone' (2008: 101).

Against the conjecture that Rousseau might accept this solution, it may be objected that Rousseau does not propagate the idea of equality of chances. On the contrary, what he propagates at the end of the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* is *renouncing* the wish of participating in arts and sciences—at least for the vast majority of those whom he takes to be unable to unite talent and moral virtue (D 28; OC 3:30). This corresponds closely to the beginning of the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, where Rousseau announces that he will be writing from the perspective of someone who does not seek scientific knowledge but does not esteem himself less for this reason (D 1; OC 3:7).

Also, the concrete examples that Neuhouser gives shed doubt on the idea that talents easily can benefit *everyone*—after all, the capacity of deriving advantage or pleasure from the best in dance, poetry, and academic teaching depends on a variety of developed skills and tastes that are not shared by everyone. And even if one concedes that some of these activities in some very indirect way benefit everyone, there is still the problem that the benefit that they would bring with them may be *counterbalanced* by a much greater damage that they might cause for the self-esteem, and hence the moral self-cultivation, of those who lack any special abilities. This problem would not even be touched by more fairness of chances—even if those who unite exceptional talent and exceptional virtue get what they deserve, the effect on those with ordinary abilities and moral qualities may be disheartening.

Rousseau's challenge triggered a storm of outrage in his own time, and the responses of the most influential *philosophes*—Voltaire, d'Alembert, and Diderot—have been intensively studied (Mervaud 1991; Hulliung 1994; Garrard 2003; O'Dea 2010). However, it seems fair to say that these thinkers defended an elevated social standing of intellectuals, or at best took a condescending attitude toward ordinary people (for detailed textual documentation, see Locke McLendon 2009). Since their portrayals of the role of intellectuals exemplify the very problems Rousseau diagnosed, it might make sense to look for other, potentially more persuasive responses to Rousseau's challenge. One such response is found in Paul-Henri Thiry, baron d'Holbach (1723–1789).<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that this aspect of his work has not received much attention from commentators because, taken in isolation, d'Holbach's remarks are rather sketchy. However, his objections, even if brief, derive from deep layers of his moral and political thought. If they are properly contextualized, they articulate an understanding of esteem for talent that avoids the pitfalls Rousseau identified. For the purposes of contextualization, I will use a wide variety of d'Holbach's moral and political writings. But since d'Holbach discussed these matters over years with his friend Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715–1771), who also developed a subtle response to Rousseau (see Sonenscher 2007: 266–81), I will widen the context and consider some aspects of Helvétius's thought. Taking a comparative approach will be useful to accentuate both the similarities between d'Holbach's and Helvétius's responses to Rousseau and the specific strengths of d'Holbach's argument.

The only discussion of d'Holbach with a view to Rousseau's critique of the Enlightenment that I have found in the literature is the one offered by Mark Hulliung (1994: 138–40, 204–5). Hulliung's reading is focused on d'Holbach's republicanism that forms a part of the intellectual background of Rousseau's political thought. As far as the concept of republicanism goes, d'Holbach takes up a notion that was present in

<sup>1</sup> For expositions of d'Holbach's thought, see Topazio (1956), Naville (1967), Di Iasio (1993), Sandrier (2004), Boulad-Ayoub (2006), Devellennes (2013, 2014).

early modern political theory ever since Machiavelli's *Discorsi*—the idea of a republic understood as an equilibrium between the different groups of a society:

Factions are useful for a nation to assure it of its liberty more and more. ... In a political body, there needs to be action; the different bodies out of which a nation is composed need to be in a fight that becomes dangerous only when the equilibrium is destroyed. (PN 2:92)<sup>2</sup>

Using d'Holbach's republicanism as a background of Rousseau's critique of the elitist aspects of Enlightenment culture reveals how much Rousseau's political thought has in common with d'Holbach's. However, the interpretive strategy taken by Hulliung downplays the significance of d'Holbach's critique of Rousseau's views concerning esteeming talent. Arguably, it is d'Holbach's republicanism that makes his opposition to Rousseau's denigration of the arts and sciences substantial.

D'Holbach uses the phenomenon of undervaluing talent in despotic regimes as a starting point for his defense of the value of arts and sciences. His analysis of the structure of despotism shows that there is not only a problem of *over*-valuing talent but also a problem of *under*-valuing talent. To be clear, d'Holbach does not extend the problem with excessive *amour-propre*, which Rousseau identified in Enlightenment societies to other, less enlightened societies. Rather, he identifies a different problem—the problem that less enlightened societies, by discouraging *amour-propre*, become vulnerable to the detrimental effects of despotic regimes. This will be the topic of section 2. Of course, arguing that other societies have problems of their own does not provide a direct refutation of Rousseau's diagnosis of the esteem-related problems of Enlightenment societies. However, the importance that despotic systems give to steering the distribution of esteem indicates how important esteem for talent could be in overcoming despotism and protecting republican constitutions. The phenomenon of political deception in despotic regimes indicates a sense in which cultivating talent can be regarded as a tool for solving a pressing political problem: Genuinely estimable uses of talent are those that oppose despotism and support republicanism. This will be the topic of section 3. Finally, the value of talent in promoting republican virtues will provide an answer for why the desire for esteem can be seen as a legitimate motivation for intellectuals: republican virtues are themselves a source of both social esteem and self-esteem, which is why esteeming talents that support such values leads to an overall increase of esteem and self-esteem. This will be the topic of section 4.

## 2. Despotism and Disesteeming Talent

Both Rousseau and d'Holbach tell stories of cultural decline, and in both, the stories integrate the idea that separating citizens is a symptom of decline. The question, however, is how close d'Holbach's account of cultural decline is to Rousseau's. Rousseau focuses on the role of arts and science in disuniting citizens:

From the extreme inequality of conditions and fortunes, from the diversity of passions and talents, from the useless arts, the pernicious arts, the frivolous sciences, would arise masses of prejudices equally contrary to reason, happiness and virtue; one would see chiefs foment everything that can waken assembled men by disuniting them ... (D 185; OC 3:190)

In Rousseau's view, this is one of the factors that ruin republics and make the ascent of despotism possible (D 185; OC 3:190). Can the same view be found in d'Holbach? As Hulliung suggests, 'the cultural refinement and good taste of past eras, Holbach generalized, were part of a pattern that featured the fall of republics and the rise of despotisms' (Hulliung 1994: 140). Unfortunately, Hulliung does not give any specific textual support. Hence, a closer look is needed into d'Holbach's analysis of how the desire for esteem could go wrong, both in republics and in despotisms.

D'Holbach notes that republican constitutions can have detrimental effects on esteem for the talented. Discussing Montesquieu's view that love of virtue is the central motivation in democratic republics (Montesquieu 2011: III:3), d'Holbach maintains that love of equality there is the real motivation. And he is clear that the passion for equality can have detrimental effects for how talents are treated: out of love for equality, citizens can develop contempt for talents because 'everyone suspects the one whom he is forced to respect' (PN 1:68). D'Holbach is also aware that republics can degenerate into despotisms, and that the

<sup>2</sup> All references to Helvétius's writings will be to the 1795 edition; I have checked the text against Helvétius (2006) and Helvétius (2011). Except where otherwise noted, translations from d'Holbach and Helvétius are my own; however, I have also consulted with Helvétius (1777). All emphases are those of the original texts.

malfunctioning of the desire for esteem plays a central role in this process: 'An envious and shadowy multitude believes that it has to revenge itself against all citizens that their merit, their talent or their wealth make hateful to it; envy, not virtue, is the moving power of republics ...' (PN 2:239). Moral decline also affects arts and sciences. About luxury, d'Holbach writes that 'one cannot deny that it triggers a very marked competition between different artists, whom the prospect of gain engages in surpassing each other. But a nation can possess a crowd of painters, sculptors and famous manufacturers without being any happier for it' (PN 2:257). As he explains, what is going wrong with the influence of luxury is that, if one wants to get rich, one has to please; but then 'arts and talents renounce truth, simplicity and energy' (PN 2:257). Clearly, then, while the decline of a society has a contagious influence on the arts and sciences, and while corrupted arts and sciences themselves contribute to the decline of a society, it would be misleading to ascribe to d'Holbach the view that what is detrimental for a society is cultural *refinement*.

Rather than being worried about the effects of cultural refinement, d'Holbach uses the experience of cultural decline in despotisms as a starting point for his response to Rousseau. In this respect, d'Holbach shares a lot with Helvétius. In his response to Rousseau, Helvétius, too, contrasts the living conditions in Oriental despotisms with the living conditions in early modern Europe—a comparison that hardly speaks in favor of the view that cultural decline is a consequence of the cultivation of arts and sciences (Oeuvres 3:463). Using the experience of despotism for the purpose of criticizing Rousseau is highly relevant since Rousseau takes the possibility that men of letters can reach the highest dignities in Oriental despotism to demonstrate that esteem for talent does not have any positive influence on public well-being (OC 3:11). Both Helvétius and d'Holbach deny that the elevated social positions that the talented may reach in despotism are a source of public esteem. Still, as will become clear in the following sections, as to the question of how talent could contribute to the solution of the problems of despotism and the question of how esteeming the talented could avoid a decline in the self-esteem of the less talented, Helvétius's considerations may have been less persuasive than d'Holbach's.

### **2.1. Helvétius and d'Holbach on disesteeming talent**

D'Holbach shares with Helvétius the view that one of the consequences of despotism is that esteem for talent vanishes. Helvétius derives the former view from his thesis that the passion for esteem is 'an effect of physical sensibility,' namely, of the desire for the benefits for our sensible life that being esteemed brings with it (Oeuvres 2:112). This has the consequence that 'our love of esteem is proportional to the advantages that it provides to us' (Oeuvres 2:113). In particular, he holds that the desire for esteem is grounded in the desire for power. He maintains that the interest in happiness is nothing but an interest in having all the means necessary to be happy, and in his view, this interest in the adequate means boils down to an interest in power. The reason for this is straightforward: Power is the personal quality that is sufficient to procure the means necessary for happiness (Oeuvres 3:337). If so, then the desire for esteem is shaped by political institutions that give power to the talented. But, as Helvétius observes, great talents are suspect to despots; for this reason, in despotism only visible goods such as wealth and power are esteemed (Oeuvres 1:352). In particular, he notes that in despotism there is no interest in esteeming precision of ideas and their expression (Oeuvres 1:356). This holds especially for sciences that reflect upon the rules of living together in a society: 'In the greatest part of arbitrary governments, citizens cannot, without displeasing the despot, devote themselves to the study of natural law, public law, ethics and politics' (Oeuvres 1:268).

Helvétius is aware that the flourishing of arts and sciences in absolutist France could be a strong objection against his analysis of how despotism shapes the interests of citizens. However, he counters this objection by proposing something that could be called a 'diversion theory' of protection for arts and sciences in despotism. According to this theory, during the initial stages of a despotic regime, passions for political liberty will remain alive. For this reason, the despot needs to prevent feelings of shame over the loss of liberty. Activities in the arts and sciences can be offered as alternative objects of esteem. However, Helvétius predicts that, once despotism is firmly established, the interest in supporting arts and sciences will disappear (3:469–70). In the long run, then, disesteem for talent will lead to a decline of arts and science because success in these fields does not lead to positions of power.

As in Helvétius, the most significant of d'Holbach's remarks on cultural decline concern the detrimental effects of despotism. As d'Holbach points out, a characteristic of despotic regimes is that talents do not have any genuine function. As to the dispensability of talent in despotism, d'Holbach gives a nod toward La Bruyère, who had observed in his *Caractères*:

There is no need for arts and sciences in the exercise of tyranny; and the politics which consist only in bloodshed are very shallow and gross: To murder all that are obstacles to our ambition is what they urge us to do; and this a man, naturally cruel, does with ease. (La Bruyère 1776: 146, 1999: 373)

Referring to this passage, d'Holbach observes that despotism is so widespread because it does not require any talent or virtue; and 'without virtue, it is easy to reign through terror. ... One easily becomes the head of a mass of subjects divided through vice, isolated by distrust, annihilated by fear' (PN 2:56). Also, d'Holbach observes that 'there is no need for intelligence nor talent to be an instrument of tyranny' (PN 1:224). Talent will likely neither be recognized nor supported in a despotic regime since a despot, 'being devoid of talents, devoid of merit and devoid of virtue himself, is an incompetent judge of talent, merit and virtue' (SS 3:15). Likewise, 'it would be against nature to see corrupt ministers, who do not believe in virtue, to love and protect noble souls, to favor talents who will eclipse themselves ...' (SS 3:16). This has also consequences for the motivation of citizens to develop their talents: 'Under an arbitrary government, no citizen is tempted to acquire merit and talents; he knows that rewards and positions are reserved only for intrigue and distributed by unjust caprice ...' (SS 3:18–19). And if the talented are not rewarded, the state not only loses their services 'but also of the services and talents of all those who would have been tempted to imitate him' (SS 3:19).

As d'Holbach observes, the only use that despotism makes of talent is for the purpose of deceiving citizens: 'Talents therefore are there forced to sound in unison with public weakness; the man of letters becomes a flatterer; ... he prefers the futile advantage of a temporary success over the durable fame of being transmitted to posterity' (SS 3:54). D'Holbach describes what happens with talent under despotic regimes as follows:

The noble esteem for oneself that merit gives is getting replaced by pretensions; [the author] sees at every moment that in order to please, one must make compliments, and that the literary revenues are commonly the booty of complaisant persons, of flatterers, of mediocre spirits who, much better than the genius, know the secret of pleasing, both to the dispensers of graces and to the frivolous beings who have become arbiters of merit and distributors of reputation. (SS 3:55)

Despotic regimes thus not only do not care about rewarding talents by esteem; the lack of self-esteem induced by despotic regimes also explains why intellectuals have so little motivation to oppose such regimes. And if success becomes a matter of flattery and complaisance, then reputation fails to provide a source of self-esteem.<sup>3</sup>

## **2.2. *Helvétius and d'Holbach on the varieties of interests***

The question of what happens with the interests of citizens lies at the heart of Helvétius's and d'Holbach's analyses of the nature of despotism. It is relevant for explaining why citizens lose interest in being esteemed for talents. But it is also relevant for explaining why despotic regimes can be highly stable. Helvétius notes that despotism is grounded upon the division of interests of citizens, followed by a process of humiliating souls by punishing virtues (2:152). Likewise, d'Holbach describes the essence of despotism as a political system in which equity is replaced through the will of those in power and in which public interest is replaced by personal interest (MU 2:50). Helvétius draws attention to the role that manipulating the desire for wealth plays in dividing citizens with respect to interest (Oeuvres 2:213). He also takes ignorance in despotic regimes to be not a natural state but rather a state that has been brought about by those in power in a calculated way: 'If daring and powerful crime so often put justice and virtue into chains, if it oppresses nations, this is only due to the assistance of ignorance: it is ignorance that, by hiding from each nation its true interests, prevents action and the reunion of its forces ...' (Oeuvres 1:385). A further explanation is found in d'Holbach, who also emphasizes the role that manipulating the desire for esteem can play in bringing about this outcome:

Don't these politicians use pieces of greatness, of credit, of riches, of titles, of privileges, of dignities to sow discord and to make ambition, avarice and greed for honors grow in some, while in others envy, a mentality of intrigue and a dangerous rivalry bring about that no-one is satisfied with his fate? (Préjugés 341–42)

<sup>3</sup> On d'Holbach's analysis of the negative effects of oppression on self-esteem, see Blank (2017).

Helvétius applies the term 'interest' to 'everything that can procure pleasures for us or relieve us of pain' (1:176, note 1). But his remarks about deception in despotism indicates that he also draws a distinction between what people happen to desire and what is in their true interest. But it seems fair to say that he worked out this distinction in much less detail than d'Holbach, who connects the notion of interest (*intérêt*) with the notion of need (*besoin*). Certainly, this conceptual connection is not absent in Helvétius—for instance, he notes that our interests are modified through the differences between our needs, our passions, our kind of mind, and our circumstances (Oeuvres 1:228). But while Helvétius mentions natural needs of food and love only in passing (Oeuvres 1:339; 2:88; 2:99; 2:105), d'Holbach's account of interest makes systematic use of the distinction between needs that are natural and needs that arise from imagination.

Generally, d'Holbach takes needs to be 'everything that is useful or necessary either for preservation or for human happiness' (MU 1:19). As he explains, this comprises natural needs, such as nourishment, clothing, shelter, and propagation of the species, which are the same for all humans (MU 1:19). Such needs include the need common to all humans to secure the assistance of other humans (SS 1:90), the need for justice that is common to humankind (SS 1:82),<sup>4</sup> and the needs to be free, to be protected by laws, to live in security, and never to depend on the passions and arbitrary will of those who govern (PN 2:272). D'Holbach also recognizes needs that are natural for individuals, without being common to all humans, such as the need for certain kinds of nutrition arising from sensitivities regarding certain nutriments (MU 1:20). Other needs arise from imagination, habit, convention, and prejudice (MU 1:20). As d'Holbach notes, imaginary needs often derive from a disordered imagination that wrongly represents certain goods as being indispensable for our happiness (MU 1:21). Both kinds of needs are used to define the notion of interest: 'Our desires, triggered by real or imaginary needs, constitute *interest*; by which one designates generally what everyone wishes because he believes it to be useful or necessary for his happiness ...' (MU 1:23).

Defining interest in this way raises the question of whether real interests can be distinguished from what is actually desired. Clearly, d'Holbach holds that there can be a discrepancy between what people find interesting and what is really of interest for them:

The idea of well-being, or interest, attached to pleasures or objects that are contrary to our own happiness, constitute the *badly understood* interest, which is the source of errors and depravations of humans who, due to a lack of experience, reflection and reason, do not know their true interests ... (MU 1:24)

D'Holbach's discussion of despotism is informative in this respect because it gives good examples of how citizens might lose goods that are essential for their well-being, even though they may not find these goods interesting. He describes the essence of despotism as a political system in which equity is replaced through the will of those in power and in which public interest is replaced by personal interest (MU 2:50). Thereby, despotism separates the interests of citizens from public interests (SS 2:134). As d'Holbach puts it, despotism wants to turn a citizen into 'a slave separated from his companions of servitude with respect to interest, such that their divergent passions will prevent them from reuniting against those who have formed the nonsensical project of making themselves happy through the infelicity of all' (SS 1:198).

D'Holbach's analysis of despotism thus gives substance to the distinction between our real interests and what we happen to desire. Evidently, individuals in despotic regimes may desire to promote their private interests separated from the interests of others—this is, in d'Holbach's view, the very dynamic upon which despotism rests. But while they may desire to adapt their preferences to the conditions of despotic rule, their needs—finding assistance from others, being guaranteed security against force and arbitrary decisions, possessing rights and liberties, being able to earn the esteem of others and to build self-esteem—are in fact not met. What is morally bad about this situation is shown by the widespread suffering experienced in despotic regimes. Conversely, meeting needs that are common to all humans, in d'Holbach's view, defines what utility and true interest consist in. For instance, consider the following passage concerning the connection between right, utility, and interest:

*Right* is every capacity or power whose practice is in accordance with justice or the utility of society; society is only useful when it maintains justice among its members. One gives to justice the name *equity* because it is a remedy against the inequality that nature has established between humans; it constrains force; it protects the weak against the strong, the poor against the rich; it enables

<sup>4</sup> On d'Holbach's conception of justice, see Blank (2016).

everyone to work for their own interest, which it limits and subordinates to the public interest, from which individual interest never can separate itself without danger. (SS 1:106)

Also, d'Holbach's notions of merit and virtue are bound to such a conception of utility: 'Merit and virtue are founded on the nature of humans, on their needs' (SN, 1:319–20). Hence, if arts and sciences have something morally valuable about them, then they must support the fulfilment of needs that derive from human nature; and they can do so only if they contribute to uniting personal interests with public interest. As we will presently see, this is exactly the idea that underlies his defense of the value of talents.

### 3. Republicanism and the Utility of Talent

Saying that despotisms have their own esteem-related problems, of course, does not by itself refute the idea that Enlightenment societies have esteem-related problems. However, diagnosing the problem of disesteeming talent in despotisms in the ways suggested by Helvétius and d'Holbach draws attention to a sense in which talent could be genuinely useful for a society. This sense is exactly what Rousseau has overlooked.

#### 3.1. Helvétius on the utility of talent

The basic idea, again, can be found in Helvétius, who holds that arts and sciences can play a role in overcoming the separation of interests that results from calculated ignorance. This at least is suggested when he regards metaphysics, jurisprudence, and politics as belonging to the 'sciences that are interesting for humanity' (Oeuvres 2:244). One of the reasons why jurisprudence and politics are interesting presumably concerns their role in republican constitution building; in any case, Helvétius holds that republican constitutions are the ones that bind a diversity of particular interests to public interest. For instance, he recommends the Greek and Roman model of division of power between the people and the aristocracy or kings: As he argues, such constitutions bind particular interests to public interest because the division of power 'forces citizens to observe each other and to restrain each other' (Oeuvres 2:183). The question, of course, is what kind of interest could motivate individuals to apply their talents to prepare a transition from despotism to republican constitutions. As we have seen, in Helvétius's view, despotisms shape the structure of interests of their subjects exactly in the way that they will not have any interest in esteeming talents. Helvétius concedes that some people 'automatically recognize a great merit where they perceive great power;' but he objects that this holds only for the weak part of the public, not for individuals who, 'like foreigners, recognize only persons distinguished by their talents as persons of merit' (Oeuvres 1:256).

What could be made of the idea of individuals who take the perspective of foreigners? Helvétius's conception of moral luck could give an answer. As to the role of luck in our moral lives, Helvétius proposes: 'Without despising the vicious man, one must mourn him, and congratulate oneself for a lucky natural constitution ...' (Oeuvres 1:184). Moral luck here is characterized as a kind of natural luck—luck that has brought forth natural dispositions that others are lacking. Helvétius never gives any definition of the concept of chance. But he observes that a vast amount of small impressions goes into education in early age, most of which are entirely unintended by the educators (Oeuvres 3:30). From a contemporary perspective, Helvétius's conception of moral luck could be described as a conception of 'constitutive' luck—that is, luck that explains what an individual is like.<sup>5</sup> The crucial point for present concerns is that, in Helvétius's view, even for the morally lucky, sensible interest is necessary for motivating them to act according to what reason demands:

It is not only the light of reason, nor only the inner sentiment of the law alone that guides humans in their deliberations. Inner sentiment makes them attentive; reason enlightens them; but in addition, it is necessary that sensations represent the objects that provide the motivations of physical goods or evils, of moral goods or evils, which determine the decisive acts of the will. (Oeuvres 5:282)

This holds in particular for philosophers. As Helvétius suggests, the task of philosophers is to think about the morality relating to legislation, and the task of the legislator is to find out what, under ever changing circumstances, is useful for a given community (Oeuvres 5:337). 'But the one and the other grounds the institution of public laws on human nature ..., and on the physical dynamics of human actions, and on justice that is co-essential for the general well-being of society' (Oeuvres 5:337–38). The philosopher and the legislator who fulfil this task thus exemplify the character traits that give substance to the idea of constitutive moral

<sup>5</sup> For detailed analysis, see Blank (2020).

luck. Consequently, Helvétius describes our readiness to judge the actions and ideas of others according to the norms of morality as the outcome of a multiplicity of accidental factors:

Interest presents objects to us only from the side that is useful for us to apperceive them. When one judges according to public interest, it is not so much due to the justness of one's mind or the justice of one's character that one should render honor, but rather to chance, which has placed one in circumstances where we have an interest to see as the public sees. (Oeuvres 1:226–27, note 1)

When actions are judged according to public interest, Helvétius holds that those who pass such judgments fulfill nothing other than 'the passion that an enlightened pride gives them for virtue and, consequently, nothing other than obeying, like every other society, the law of personal interest' (Oeuvres 1:207). Even in such cases, 'interest is the only distributor of esteem' (Oeuvres 1:410). As Helvétius explains, 'humans of this kind always esteem in others' ideas that are true, enlightened, and suitable to satisfy the passion that an enlightened pride gives them for the true' (Oeuvres 1:187). For this reason, he takes it to be important to cultivate the right kind of pride: 'Pride is the seed of so many virtues and talents that one must not hope to destroy it, nor even to try to weaken it, but only try to direct it toward honorable things' (Oeuvres 1:226).

Consequently, even when the morally lucky engage in the morally right activities—such as republican constitution building—they, too, are motivated by a kind of sensible interest. This sensible interest allows them to esteem ideas and activities of others that follow the demands of rationality. Helvétius holds that

every author who gives new ideas to the public can hope for the esteem of only two kinds of humans: either young people who, because they have not yet adopted any options, still have the desire and the leisure to instruct themselves; or those whose mind, being a friend of truth and analogous to the mind of the author, already suspect the existence of the ideas that he presents to him. (Oeuvres 1:201)

In this way, Helvétius identifies a sense in which esteem for the talents of others can reinforce high self-esteem. But this sense applies only to the morally lucky:

These humans are in such small number that I mention them here only for the sake of the honor of humanity. The most extended class, and the one that almost alone composes the human species, is the one of those who are attentive only to their own interests and never have drawn their attention to the general interest. (Oeuvres 1:181)

To be sure, Helvétius believes that republican constitutions also change the motivational structures with respect to esteem for everyone else. Republican constitutions can connect personal interest with public interest by rewarding virtuous action through honors and public esteem (Oeuvres 2:199). Evidently, the public distribution of honors would fail to motivate human action if legislators would not connect power with esteem. In fact, Helvétius is clear that the just reward for virtuous action always should be 'general esteem *and the advantages connected with this esteem*' (Oeuvres 4:47). With a view to his thesis that 'Love of power is ... the most favorable disposition toward virtue,' he explains that this is so because the legislator 'can always connect esteem, wealth, and finally power ... to the practice of virtue' (Oeuvres 3:349). In particular, the connection between esteem and power explains how individuals can come to cherish justice:

This generous sentiment is ... the effect of an excellent education. How to engrave it in all souls? By presenting to them, on the one hand, the unjust person as debased, disdained and consequently as weak; and on the other hand, by presenting the just person as esteemed, honored and consequently as strong. (Oeuvres 3:404, note 33)

However, what motivates virtuous behavior in those citizens who lack moral luck is not anything like love for the common good but the power associated with esteem: 'Why is fame regarded as a plant of republican soil, which, degenerated in despotic countries, never grows there with a certain strength? It is because in fame one loves properly only power, and in an arbitrary government, all power disappears in the face of the power of the despot' (Oeuvres 3:314). By contrast, 'in a free nation, public reputation and esteem is a power, and the desire for this esteem there becomes consequently a powerful principle of action' (Oeuvres 3:328). Because republican constitutions confer upon the talented the power to pursue pleasures, talent will become esteemed, in the sense that everyone will believe that the power connected with being talented is desirable.

Of course, those citizens who lack talent and therefore do not receive esteem still could realize that their personal interests are promoted by the talented; if so, they will esteem the ideas of the talented because these ideas are useful for them (Oeuvres 1:185). However, both in esteeming talent for the power that it confers on the talented and in esteeming talent for the useful consequences for those who lack talent, the relevant sensible interest is the interest in pleasure, not the sensible interest in satisfying enlightened pride. For those who are not morally lucky, esteem for talent therefore does not bring any *strengthening* of self-esteem with it. On the contrary, esteeming talent for the power that arises from it, in Helvétius's view, is essentially an affair of a competition for a scarce good. In quasi-economic terms, he analyzes the role of power and honor—the signs for public esteem—by comparing them with the role of money:

Power is like money, a currency [*monnaie*]. The effect of power and a bill of exchange is the same; if I am equipped with such a bill, upon arriving in London or Paris I receive one thousand Écus and, consequently, all the pleasures that this sum represents. If I am equipped with a letter of recommendation or a document of authorization, I likewise derive on inspection from my co-citizens such-and-such an amount of merchandise or of pleasures. (Oeuvres 3:146)

Similarly, he understands honors as 'a currency likewise representative of all kinds of merchandise and of pleasures' (Oeuvres 3:147). In his view, the magistrate of a republic needs to develop an acute sense for the precise moment where already existing honors have become too common to function as motivations for virtuous action: 'If public interest forbids creating new coins of gold and silver, it on the contrary demands that one does this in the currency of honors once they have lost with respect to the price that they owe only to the opinion of humans' (Oeuvres 2:198). For this aspect of regulated scarcity, Helvétius uses the expression 'economy' (*économie*):

Honors are a currency that raises and sinks in value according to the greater or smaller justice with which one distributes it. Public interest would demand that one preserves for it the same value and that one dispenses it with as much equity as economy. (Oeuvres 4:71, note 24)

In particular, Helvétius regards it to be a demand of justice that only exceptional talents and extraordinary merits get rewarded through public esteem—as he argues, bestowing signs of esteem on mediocre qualities would devalue these signs (Oeuvres 2:198). Thinking about esteem in quasi-economic terms thus implies that esteeming the talented is part of a dynamics that *excludes* those who lack talent from public esteem—with all the detrimental effects that this situation may have on their self-esteem. If so, then for the great majority of citizens Rousseau's challenge seems to remain intact.

### **3.2. D'Holbach on the utility of talent**

Does d'Holbach fare better? Like Helvétius, he places the value of talent in its function in countering calculated deception:

If one would take care never to deceive us in our childhood, to give us only truth and sensible ideas, we would have enlightenment and reason ...; our passions would be directed towards the objects of which we would be assured that we would find the solid utility that constitutes the true happiness of humans ... (SS 1:16)

In particular, he points out that it is *political* lies that prevent citizens from knowing what is of interest for their own happiness (Préjugés 150). And immediately before his response to Rousseau, he points out that only 'impostors and despots have a right to despise the science'—a remark that is accompanied by a footnote that refers to La Boétie's insight that 'the Grand Turk has given exactly the right advice to himself when he realized that books and instruction give more than any other thing a sense both for recognizing and for hating tyranny' (MU 2:201, note 109; see La Boétie 1993: 104). While Helvétius treats insight into the connection between public and personal interest as an exceptional case of moral luck, d'Holbach trusts in the possibility of communicating to others insight into the connection between public and personal interest through rational argument. In d'Holbach's view, this is a genuine possibility because these insights concern natural needs that are common to all humans. In this way, d'Holbach's distinction between real and imaginary needs turns out to be crucial for his defense of the value of talent.

The role that he ascribes to arts and sciences in making citizens aware of their true interests explains why he assigns a high value to the virtue of truthfulness in the work of the *gens de lettres*. Somewhat anachronistically, the concept of *gens de lettres* could be correlated with the concept of intellectuals<sup>6</sup>—what the two concepts have in common is that they both comprise not only those who are active in producing texts but also those who are seriously engaged in reading, reflecting on, and disseminating them. Perhaps the concept of *gens de lettres* is wider than the concept of intellectuals since it also includes those active or interested in the natural sciences—however, as Voltaire explains, interest in the natural sciences counts for membership in this group only if it is combined with an interest in some other arts or sciences (1767: 599). As will become clear presently, such an understanding of the concept fits neatly into the inclusive way in which d'Holbach uses it. For him, the truthfulness of *gens de lettres* is not only a personal quality but also a quality that is modeled according to the role that he assigns to truthfulness in politics. To substantiate this point, it will be useful to follow a detour into some aspects of d'Holbach's political theory. This detour will make it clear that d'Holbach's conception of the truthfulness of *gens de lettres* follows the same idea of uniting individuals with respect to interest as his conception of the nature of political agency. This function of truthfulness, I will argue, explains why the activity of *gens de lettres* can become the object of justified esteem.

Generally, d'Holbach describes the nature of the political as follows: 'To govern ... is to reunite with respect to their interests the members of a political body, with the goal of prompting them to work together for the public good' (SS 2:134). Thus, the nature of the political is exactly contrary to the nature of despotism—which is why d'Holbach believes that despotism is not a form of government but rather the dissolution of all political constitutions (PN 2:43–44). This is why he holds that genuine authority must be based on a reconciliation of interests through standards of justice:

When, guided by the light of reason, we ascend to the true sources of authority, we will become convinced that justice is its true basis; that the union of interests constitutes its force; that the happiness of humans is the goal from which the government must never separate itself, and that this happiness cannot exist without virtue. (PN 1:49)

Moreover, a reconciliation of interests requires truthfulness in the sense of making the parties to a conflict aware of their true interests:

To negotiate in politics is to seek to reconcile the interests of several peoples; it is to induce them to understand the means that can serve for their mutual preservation and happiness—a reciprocal one; it is to direct their eyes away from a chimerical object or a momentary advantage, in order to hold them fixed onto a more real object; in a word, it is to enlighten them about their true interests. (PN 2:204–5)

This political conception of truthfulness also informs d'Holbach's treatment of the value of truthfulness in the arts and sciences. What truthfulness in the arts and sciences has in common with truthfulness in politics is that it makes individuals aware of their real interests, which in turn is a precondition for reuniting citizens with respect to their interests. The reference to facts is therefore crucial for d'Holbach's conception of truth:

Truth is the conformity of our ideas with the nature of things: it is of interest for humans only because it makes known *what there is*; that is to say, nature, real qualities, the relations between causes and effects. ... Truth is necessary for humans because humans, in order to be happy, need to find out the route that can lead there; they love truth because they love happiness; they fear truth because often one persuades them that it can hurt their happiness. ... Some errors can be temporarily useful for individuals; but they always have the most baleful consequences for the human species. (SS 1:19)

As d'Holbach explains, different kinds of truth relate to different kinds of facts: Truth in physics relates to the effects of natural causes on our senses; truth in morals to the effects that human actions have on human beings. Truth in politics, too, is a kind of factual knowledge: 'Truth in politics is the knowledge of

<sup>6</sup> On the relation between the concept of *gens de lettres* and the concept of intellectuals, see Bayreuther, von Engelberg, Rauschenbach and von Treskow (2011).

the effects that the government produces on society, that is to say, the way in which it has influence on public happiness and the particular happiness of citizens' (SS 1:20). Thus, truth in politics is bound to the goal of politics—public and individual well-being. Similarly, he maintains that physics searches in nature for what can contribute to human happiness (MU 2:203). In line with such a conception of truth, d'Holbach is clear that the only value of truth is its instrumental value in promoting human well-being. Consequently, d'Holbach's explanation of why truth can change human action has to do with the connection between truth and interests: 'Truth attracts us because it is necessary for our conduct by making known to us the quality of things that we must seek or flee' (SS 1:78).

Presumably alluding to the idealized portrayal of 'savage' men in Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (OC 3:139–49), d'Holbach applies this conception of the connection between truth and interest to his conception of the task of moral philosophy: 'The goal of ethics must therefore be, not to isolate humans, not to trigger their disgust for society, not to make them savage; but to reunite them with respect to interest; to free them from illusion of the opinions that separate them ...' (SS 1:197). That is, the goal of ethics is directly opposed to the dynamics of despotism. Moreover, d'Holbach regards ethics as the foundation for the formulation of the fundamental laws of a state—and these laws are lacking in despotic regimes. In this sense, he regards fundamental laws formed according to the principles of ethics as the political means to realize the goal of reuniting interests (Préjugés 29). More generally, this goal informs d'Holbach's characterization of the role of philosophy:

In fact, what is philosophy other than the study of causes and effects, the examination of what is useful or hurtful for society? Therefore, to say that philosophy is useless for or contrary to politics is to say that it is useless or dangerous to think or reflect maturely about the object that is most important for the happiness of nations, and that they must be governed by nothing other than folly, routine, imprudence and caprice. (PN 2:118)

Thus, d'Holbach claims that there is a sense in which philosophers have a better insight than politicians into what could fulfill the goals of politics. To make this claim plausible, he points to the countless historical instances when politicians in fact failed to foresee the effects of their decisions. This happens to those involved in the daily affairs of politics, as he argues, because 'the most perceptive eyes will never discover the secret motivations, the hidden seeds and, so to speak, the political elements, which by combining one with the other at the end build up masses capable of changing the face of nations' (PN 2:118–19). By contrast, he surmises that philosophy can fulfil such a function because philosophy involves the study of human passions, which politicians do not find time to reflect upon (PN 2:119). Thus, because the motivations of political actions lie in human passions and the nature of human passions is the subject matter of philosophy, philosophers can foresee the consequences of political decisions better than politicians can.

Of course, this view of the duties of truthfulness may appear to ascribe to the *gens de lettres* an exaggerated capability of hitting on truth. However, d'Holbach is clearly aware of the fallibility of each of the *gens de lettres* and therefore connects the duties of truthfulness with the necessity of public debate:

Science ... is not useless even for the people itself: sages, *gens de lettres*, and the erudite can be regarded as citizens destined to provide food for thought, to ease labors, to correct errors. The most marvelous genius can err, no doubt; but it is the task of the united reason of all thinking beings to ponder, correct, improve the ideas that each of them offers to the public. The truths that are most interesting for general happiness are difficult to find and cannot be anything other than the late fruit of human research. Every author must be clear, sincere, truthful; it falls upon the honest, impartial, enlightened public to judge about his ideas. (MU 2:211)

Thus, it is not truthfulness alone that guarantees the value of the activity of *gens de lettres*, but rather the role of public scrutiny that sincere pronouncements have to undergo. And building political and legal institutions that support public debate can be motivated through the consideration that such debate is the best protection against despotism:

The free communication of ideas, education, and the publication of useful discoveries are things that are interesting for the whole society. ... Therefore, in a well-governed country, humans have the right to think, to talk and to write; this liberty is a powerful and necessary barrage against the conspirations and attacks of tyranny. (SS 2:53)

D'Holbach's objections against some of Rousseau's criticisms of the arts and sciences can be understood as consequences of these considerations. Most explicitly, d'Holbach addresses Rousseau's *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* in *Morale Universelle*, where he gives a series of quotations that represent Rousseau's central concerns (MU 2:202) and subsequently answers each of them. Take Rousseau's allegation that arts and sciences have a defective origin—for instance that eloquence has its origins in ambition, hate, flattery and lies, physics its origins in vain curiosity, and ethics its origin in human pride (OC 3:17). Shortly before his discussion of Rousseau, d'Holbach concedes that charlatans who do not care about truth can abuse eloquence (MU 2:198, note 106). However, fully in line with his political conception of the function of truthfulness, in his response to Rousseau he maintains that eloquence has its origin in the need of putting passions and human interests into action. In particular, he regards eloquence as a tool for persuading individuals of truth and for making them do something that is useful for themselves (MU 2:203). Here, d'Holbach's point is not that eloquence can flourish only in republican constitutions—although he would subscribe to this widely held idea (SS 3:53).<sup>7</sup> Rather, his point is that eloquence plays a central role in *enabling* the political life characteristic of republics. In fact, he believes that it is the task of eloquence to oppose adulatory poets who praise the violent conquests of despots (PN 2:193). Likewise, he holds that ethics has its origin in the need for knowing how beings that live in society should act (MU 2:203). Rather than diverting readers from his agreements with Rousseau, d'Holbach here spells out the consequences of his conception of the nature of the truthfulness of the *gens de lettres*.

Something analogous holds for d'Holbach's response to Rousseau's claim that the arts and sciences are defective with respect to their objects. According to Rousseau, tyrants, wars, and conspiracies of the past are detestable objects of history; and paying attention to such objects leads us to forget the most indispensable duties and natural needs (OC 3:17). In response, D'Holbach concedes that some arts are products of luxury, without any real usefulness, and that some sciences concern themselves with vague speculations, without any connection with experience (MU 2:203–4). However, where experience is used as a criterion for theory formation, science leads us to the fulfilment of duties by communicating other experimental truths that can be useful for them (MU 2:204). If sciences do this, their origin lies in the true needs of humans (MU 2:204). D'Holbach objects that history teaches us facts that are useful for our instruction by showing the horrors of tyrannies, wars, and conspiracies (MU 2:203). In particular, the task of history is 'to engage us in finding means that rescue us from the evils that have so often afflicted the human species' (MU 2:203). As d'Holbach explains, history should transmit reliable knowledge about vices and virtues of kings and the rights of nations: 'In order to be useful, the historian must be truthful, and develop the causes whose effects were advantageous or detrimental: he must direct the eyes of peoples to the deliria of their masters, their crimes, their attacks against public felicity ...' (SS 3:53–54). In his view, this is relevant under a government that repeats 'the same mad courses of action' and that 'does not tolerate one to depict it under its true traits' (SS 3:54).

D'Holbach also has something to say about Rousseau's allegation that the arts and sciences are defective with respect to their effects because they produce laziness (OC 3:18), propose paradoxes that annihilate virtue (OC 3:19), and introduce a false politeness that destroys well-founded confidence, sincere friendship and real esteem (OC 3:8). D'Holbach is aware of the detrimental forms that politeness can take:

Politeness is too often nothing but dissimulation; it consists in disguising the feelings that one has for those with whom one lives, to hide from them the opinion that one has of them, to make them believe that one attaches the same value to them that they give to themselves. (SS 3:95)

Nevertheless, d'Holbach objects that politeness can be understood as the outcome of reflection because it makes us aware of the value of living together with others in a society (MU 2:205). Similarly, d'Holbach holds that by practicing history, we do not forget our duty; rather, we fulfil a duty by making experiences available that are useful for all (MU 2:204). At the same time, by providing insights into the horrors of despotism, history enhances a sense of the value of political liberty (MU 2:205). Again, these objections exemplify d'Holbach's insight that the value of talent derives from its role in defending republican constitutions against despotism.

#### 4. Republican Education and Esteeming Talent

So far, one could say that d'Holbach has identified a function of the arts and sciences that Rousseau has overlooked. However, it is easy to imagine Rousseau's response: Would the talented, even if their activity may be genuinely useful in upholding republicanism, not become arrogant and thereby discourage others? As Hulliung describes Rousseau's fatalism about the *gens de lettres*:

<sup>7</sup> On eighteenth-century views on republican constitutions as a precondition for eloquence, see Starobinski (1977).

From Rousseau's point of view, it was not implausible that a republic might come to the rescue of the republic of letters. ... What was unthinkable was that such a republic would mean anything to the people, victims no less in the new world of talents than they had been in the world of hereditary status. (Hulliung 1994: 242)

This is why Rousseau looked for solutions to the problem of excessive *amour-propre* that did not assign to the *gens de lettres* any central role. Famously, Rousseau was enthusiastic about a return to rural life (*Émile*, 59; OC 4:277; *Émile* 95; OC 4:326; SC 149; OC 3:437). Rousseau formulates the ideal of the rural artisan who does not compare himself to anyone (Letter to D'Alembert 60; OC 5:55). As Locke McLendon reads Rousseau, agricultural lifestyles could offer a solution for the problem of excessive *amour-propre* because there is less division of labor, people therefore are less dependent of the services of others and, hence, will be less inclined to judge one another (2014: 350).

Rousseau argues that there is a natural order among the arts according to the relations of dependence between them. In his view, the more an art is indispensable for other arts, the more does it merit esteem because it is closer to original independence. Since usually those that depend more on other arts are esteemed more highly, Rousseau describes this situation as an 'inversion in men's esteem' (*renversement dans l'estime des hommes*) (*Émile*, 188; OC 4:459). To remedy this inversion, Rousseau suggests that those arts that depend less on other arts should be ranked higher. This indicates that, for Rousseau, in a well-ordered republic there still will be competition for esteem. As he clarifies in his most optimistic work on republican constitution building, the *Discourse on Political Economy*, what he has in mind is a reward that can be expressed by honors, but not by privileges that would exempt some citizens from the equal force of the laws (OC 3:249).<sup>8</sup> Also, one of the tasks of good governance is enhancing the esteem in which citizens are held; this is implied by Rousseau's critical remark that 'every prince who disdains his subjects dishonors himself, by showing that he did not know how to render them estimable' (OC 3:251). In particular, the magistrates who oversee republican education—in Rousseau's view, the most important task in a republic—are to be taken from among those who have deserved the highest honors for fulfilling other civic duties (OC 3:261). However, what one does not find in the *Discourse on Political Economy* are any considerations concerning esteem for intellectual and creative talent—on the contrary, Rousseau holds that 'the more virtue rules, the less are talents necessary' (OC 3:254). Already in the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, he suggests that the talented ought to 'find honorable asylum in the courts' (D 27; OC 3:29–30). As Locke McLendon understands this passage, according to Rousseau 'the talented are bracketed away from the citizenry; they are to be socially invisible. They produce more harm than good unless they are unseen' (2014: 349).

#### 4.1. *Helvétius on education and self-esteem*

Keeping these aspects of Rousseau's thought in mind will be useful to clarify what is distinctive in d'Holbach's analysis of the role of the desire for esteem in republican constitutions. Again, beginning with Helvétius as a point of comparison will be useful. Helvétius recognizes the possibility of situations in which esteem for talent can enhance self-esteem in the process of education; but he regards these situations as the outcome of luck. Among the natural dispositions that are acquired through luck, Helvétius counts intellectual capacities: 'chance has a greater part in our education than we think. It is chance that puts certain objects before our eyes and consequently occasions for us lucky ideas and sometimes leads us to greater discoveries' (*Oeuvres* 2:7). This is why he takes talents to be the outcome of a coincidence of lucky circumstances (*Oeuvres* 3:287). Helvétius points out that Rousseau's biography provides ample examples for such a coincidence of unforeseeable circumstances (*Oeuvres* 3:44–45). And Rousseau himself seems to agree that, in contrast to the development of moral virtue, achievements in the arts are entirely a product of chance. This at least seems to be suggested when, in *Émile*, he writes: 'The good man can be proud of his virtue because it is his; but of what is the man of genius proud? What did Racine do not to be Pradon?' (E IV 245/OC 4, 536–37). Rousseau here acknowledges that some authors are superior to others; but he does not believe that this superiority is a suitable object of pride because the difference between an excellent and a mediocre author is not brought about voluntarily. Helvétius would agree that the superiority of an author is not the outcome of voluntary action *of this author*. But he would add that the superiority of an author can be the outcome of voluntary action in the framework of educational reform. This is so because he is aware

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Rousseau's conception of honor as reward for civic virtue, see Neuhouser (2008: 236–39). Puzzlingly, this strand of thought seems to have disappeared from Neuhouser's more recent interpretation of Rousseau's views on honor; see Neuhouser (2014: Ch. 4).

of the possibilities that analyzing lucky circumstances might open up for education: Once we have analyzed the lucky circumstances that have produced exceptional talents in the past, we can build an institutional framework that provides circumstances of the same kind to produce *more* talented individuals.

Obviously, one has to place the right persons into the right circumstances, and for finding out what the right circumstances are, the desire for esteem plays a crucial role. In order to recognize a talent, the educators first have to find out about the objects that, for the pupil, are connected with the desire for esteem (Oeuvres 2:428). What is more, the desire for esteem must be stimulated in early youth. As Helvétius argues, this age is open for enthusiasm because one does not yet have any motivation for detracting the talent of others; rather, one can still hope that others will esteem in oneself the qualities that one esteems in others (Oeuvres 2:430). Using others as role models indicates an important sense in which esteem and self-esteem can function in a non-competitive way in the process of education. It is exactly the capacity of esteeming the good qualities of role models—in contrast to the desire of surpassing others in matters of esteem—that is conducive to the cultivation of personal qualities that subsequently can become a source of self-esteem. Holding role models in high esteem thus does not decrease the self-esteem of those who accept the role models, but rather increases it. Thereby, Helvétius has indeed identified a situation in which esteem for talent does not diminish self-esteem but rather enhances it. However, no matter how much such educational settings can be the outcome of deliberate political planning, they apply only to those who are capable of emulating great talents and who happen to be selected to take part in an elitist educational program. And both factors are matters of luck—which by definition is a rare occurrence. Even if emulating great talents does not diminish the self-esteem of those who have natural qualities that allow them to be successful in this pursuit, increasing the number of talents in this way will be frustrating for the self-esteem of those who lack the necessary natural qualities exactly in the way that Rousseau anticipated.

#### 4.2. D'Holbach on education and self-esteem

D'Holbach's views on the role of esteem and self-esteem in republican education are more promising in this respect. To be sure, in general terms d'Holbach has much in common with Rousseau. Hulliung writes about the third part of d'Holbach's *Système Social*, entitled "On the Influence of Government on *Mores*":

Rousseau is never named, but the arguments set forth by the baron read as glosses to the *First Discourse* and to several other works from the pen of Jean-Jacques. After delivering a scathing republican indictment of the cultural consequences of monarchy, Holbach proposes withdrawal to 'domestic felicity, to happiness in private life.' (Hulliung 1994: 140; see SS 3:137).

In fact, d'Holbach recommends: 'The more a nation is corrupt, the more the reasonable citizen will take precautions to protect himself from the public infection. In the event he cannot remedy the ills of his *patrie*, he should at least search to procure domestic happiness' (SS 3:137–38; translation from Hulliung 1994: 143). D'Holbach also shares with Rousseau the ideal of a rural economy of peasants and artisans, where commerce has only a supplementary function and remains mainly restricted to goods that fulfil true needs (SS 3:75; SS 3:84).

However, for d'Holbach the reason for a return to a rural economy seems to be that everything should be banished that diverts the attention of citizens away from their true needs. There is no indication that he places the value of a rural economy in the greater independence of individuals from the services and judgments of others. On the contrary, d'Holbach regards the necessity of mutual services to be what connects all members of a society (PN 1:172). And these services offer a ground for mutual esteem: 'In this way, in a well-ordered society, no person is contemptible as long as he is truly useful; every citizen is precious when he fulfils the functions that his rank assigns to him.' (PN 1:173). Recompenses for virtue, utility, industry and talents can thus be understood as expressions of the relations of esteem that keep a society of mutually dependent individuals united.

D'Holbach notes that relations of mutual esteem lead to 'inner and ideal satisfaction that arises from esteem, respect and distinctions' (PN 1:174). In this sense, the relations of mutual esteem are indispensable for upholding self-esteem. D'Holbach is clear that this holds in particular for the work of the *gens de lettres*: 'the interest of the man of letters consists in meriting fame; ... the interest of a good man consists in making himself esteemed and appreciated by beings of his kind' (MU 1:23). But would not making esteem proportional to merit lead to exactly the kind of detrimental excess of esteem for talent that Rousseau has described? D'Holbach's answer derives from the role that he ascribes to esteem for intellectuals in republican societies. He takes the education of the working classes to be the most important goal of legislation, and

he expects an immediate positive impact on the self-esteem of those who receive access to public education: 'By liberating the weak and poor from the insults and vexations of the great and rich, citizens of the lower classes will have more elevated minds, they will esteem themselves to be something, they will be capable of feelings of honor ...' (Éthocratie 194). Clearly, then, the goal of educational reform, in d'Holbach's view, is to increase the self-esteem of those who were previously oppressed: 'Talents, sciences and arts are destined to make humans happier by making their existence dearer to them; but what could be their utility if they do not rely on experience and truth?' (Préjugés 221). High self-esteem, in turn, is seen as the strongest precaution against the mechanisms of despotism: 'Virtue esteems and respects itself; the great talents do not know the arts of flattering' (SS 3:16); and someone who has developed such greatness of mind has 'too much respect for himself [*respect pour soi-même*] to consent to humiliate himself' (SS 2:154).

Because public education thus serves the most fundamental interests of a society, esteeming the talents that make this education possible should be rationally acceptable for everyone:

The love for preferment that each man has for himself, brings about his desire to elevate himself above his equals and to make him envious and jealous with respect to everything that makes him feel his own inferiority; but when he has equitable sentiment, these jealousies will disappear when he sees that those who one prefers to him or that one distinguishes from him, possess estimable talents and qualities from which he is in a position to profit himself. (MU 2:67–8)

Crucially, however, in d'Holbach's view cultivating civic virtues not only yields practical advantages. Rather, he believes that cultivating civic virtues also brings about esteem and self-esteem. As he puts it, enlightenment is what 'reminds humans of the nobility of their being' (PN 2:31). Or again: 'Truth elevates the soul, it makes humans feel their dignity; they can only be active and courageous if they esteem themselves and if they are not jealous of the esteem of beings like them ...' (Préjugés 71). Due to their role in public education, intellectuals have a strong motivation for not becoming arrogant. To avoid falling into disrepute with a wider public, it is important to avoid expressions of disesteem for the uneducated:

Nothing does as much harm to literature and science as arrogance and a defiant tone that their practitioners sometimes acquire. Reflection should inform them that contempt and haughtiness are unbearable and tend to destroy sentiments of gratitude and benevolence that the most exceptional talents should attract. (MU 2:214)

Avoiding expressions of disesteem for the uneducated is directly connected with the motivation for fulfilling duties of truthfulness: Only if truthfulness is a suitable means to generate rights to esteem will the *gens de lettres* have a rational self-interest to fulfill duties of truthfulness. This is why the norms of comportment derive directly from the insight into the rational interests of the *gens de lettres*:

The most enlightened men should best know their true interests and therefore distinguish themselves through their sociability, their humaneness against everyone, and their union among each other. Discord that is so frequent among the *gens de lettres* can serve for nothing other than to make men detestable for whom the desire for esteem, for reputation, for fame should be the true motivation. (MU 2:215)

The interest in justified esteem and self-esteem is thus what will keep intellectuals from becoming arrogant. As long as intellectuals are esteemed for activities that enhance the self-esteem of everyone, the desire for esteem can thus prevent excessive *amour-propre*. If so, then there is a way of esteeming talent that is not vulnerable to the challenge that enlightened meritocracy weakens identification with others and dissolves the bonds of society. This is why d'Holbach answers to Rousseau's allegation that the arts and sciences lead to a 'frenzy to distinguish oneself' (OC 3:19):

The desire to distinguish oneself is not at all a crazy desire; it is a natural sentiment that is very laudable when one distinguishes oneself by an honest comportment, wise *mores*, and talents that are useful for the public; a crazy desire to distinguish oneself is the one that seeks to become famous by combatting in bad faith the most evident and most reasonable notions that concur to convince us that ignorance is an evil and that knowledge is a good, no matter from which perspective it is seen. (MU 2:206)

## 5. Conclusion

D'Holbach's response to Rousseau expresses a conception of esteeming talent that allows for comparison and competition within the arts and sciences but at the same time eliminates the negative effects that such competition may have on the self-image of those who cannot compete in these fields. This sets his response to Rousseau apart from Helvétius's response to Rousseau: Although their arguments have some starting points in common, Helvétius's conception of how we could esteem the talents of others without diminishing our own self-esteem is restricted to situations of moral luck—situations in which our natural qualities allow us to take pride in ideas of others that correspond to our own values and anticipations, and educational contexts in which the successful emulation of talents leads to a heightening of self-esteem. Institutional arrangements may increase the number of the talented; they may also increase esteem for talent in the sense that the power connected with talent in republican constitutions is desired; but this does not solve the problem that esteem for talent may diminish the self-esteem of the less talented.

By contrast, d'Holbach argues that those talents should be esteemed that make all citizens aware of their true interests and thereby promote republican constitutions. Becoming aware of one's true interests is what makes reuniting interests within a republican framework possible. If reuniting interests is the very essence of the political, then the truthfulness of the *gens de lettres* has a specifically political function. The talents that merit public esteem are those talents that derive their value from the role that they play in strengthening the civic virtues of all citizens. If so, then the increase in self-esteem that public education is meant to bring about is what makes esteeming talents possible without undermining the virtues of those who do not excel in any arts or sciences. This is a use of talent that enhances both the esteem in which citizens are held by each other and their self-esteem. This is so because, in republican constitutions, exercising civic virtues and enjoying civic liberties becomes an object of public esteem and of self-esteem. This conception of esteeming talent is therefore compatible with the occurrence of a level of esteem and self-esteem for everyone that is higher than the level of esteem experienced in despotic systems. In this sense, there is a non-competitive side to d'Holbach's conception of esteem and self-esteem since what he has in mind is esteem and self-esteem based on civic virtues that every citizen can cultivate. Because the talented can assist others in developing these virtues, esteeming talent can become part of a cooperative conception of social esteem according to which the qualities that should be esteemed derive their value from how much they contribute to the esteem in which others are held.

D'Holbach's insight into the political value of esteeming talents provides an answer to Rousseau's challenge. It is an answer that is illuminating not only from a historical point of view but also from a contemporary perspective. The situation that Rousseau has in mind can in one sense be described as an optimal distribution of esteem—namely, esteem that is proportional to the merit of different talents. Clearly, such a distribution can have significant positive effects, especially the stimulation of all activities that require talent. Also, what Rousseau has in mind does not seem to be the questionable assumption that the competition for esteem is zero-sum game in which esteem that is conferred upon some is always taken away from others. Rather, he considers the possibility of a much worse scenario. If Rousseau is right, then such a fair distribution of esteem can *diminish* the total amount of esteem and thereby lead to a decline in morality of ordinary people. If this takes place, then the beneficial effects of a fair distribution of esteem are counterbalanced by more detrimental effects. By contrast, d'Holbach indicates how rewarding talent through esteem can be connected with an *increase* in the overall amount of esteem and self-esteem. His insights can be applied to the question of whether liberal merit systems necessarily lead to inflated self-esteem and a loosening of civic friendship: The talents that merit public esteem are those that derive their value from the role that they play in *strengthening* civic bonds.

## Acknowledgements

Work on this article has been supported by a Lise-Meitner research position funded by the Austrian Science Fund (M-2097).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## References

### Rousseau

D: *The Discourses and Other Early Writings*, translated by Victor Gourevitch. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2019.

Émile: *Émile, or on Education*, translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books. 1979.

OC: *Oeuvres Complètes*, edited by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond. 5 vols. Paris: Gallimard. 1959–1969.

SC: *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, translated by Victor Gourevitch. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316584606>

Letter to D'Alembert: *Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre*, trans. Allan Bloom. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 1960.

### **D'Holbach**

Préjugés: *Essai sur les Préjugés*. London. 1770.

SS: *Système social. Ou Principes naturels de la politique. Avec un examen de l'influence du gouvernement sur les moeurs*. 3 vols. London. 1773.

PN: *La Politique naturelle, ou Discours sur les vrais principes du gouvernement*. 2 vols. Tours: Vauquer & Lheritier. 1773.

MU: *Morale universelle, ou Les devoirs de l'homme fondés sur sa nature*. 2 vols. Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey. 1776.

Éthocratie: *Éthocratie ou Le gouvernement fondé sur la morale*. Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey. 1776.

### **Helvétius**

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

### **Other Works Cited**

Bayreuther, Rainer, Meinrad von Engelberg, Sina Rauschenbach, and Isabella von Treskow, eds. 2011. *Kritik in der Frühen Neuzeit: Intellektuelle avant la lettre*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Blank, Andreas. 2016. "D'Holbach on Self-Esteem, Justice and Cosmopolitanism." *Eighteenth Century Studies* 49 (4): 439–53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2016.0028>

Blank, Andreas. 2017. "D'Holbach and the Moral Economy of Oppression." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25 (6): 1116–37. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2017.1301373>

Blank, Andreas. 2020. "Helvétius's Challenge: Moral Luck, Political Constitutions, and the Economy of Esteem." *European Journal of Philosophy* 28 (2): 337–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12471>

Boulad-Ayoub, Josiane. 2006. "'L'homme de la raison future' et la politique naturelle des passions." In *Matérialistes français du XVIIIe siècle: La Mettrie, Helvétius, d'Holbach*, edited by S. Audidière, J.-C. Bourdin, J.-M. Lardic, F. Markovits, and Y.-C. Zarka, 255–68. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Devellennes, Charles. 2013. "A Fourth Musketeer of Social Contract Theory: The Political Thought of the Baron d'Holbach." *History of Political Thought* 34 (3): 459–78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26225839>.

Devellennes, Charles. 2014. "Utility contra Utilitarianism: Holbach's International Ethics." *Journal of International Political Theory* 10 (2): 188–205. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0278364914526019>

Di Iasio, Domenico. 1993. *Il pensiero politico di d'Holbach: Pregiudizi, diritti e privilegi*. Bari: Levante.

Garrard, Graeme. 2003. *Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment: A Republican Critique of the Enlightenment*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Helvétius, Claude-Adrien. 1777. *A Treatise on Man, His Intellectual Faculties and His Education*, translated by W. Hooper. 2 vols. London: B. Law and G. Robinson.

Helvétius, Claude-Adrien. 2006. *De l'esprit*, edited by J. Steffen. Paris: Honoré Champion.

Helvétius, Claude-Adrien. 2011. *De l'homme*, edited by D. Smith. Paris: Honoré Champion.

Hullung, Mark. 1994. *The Autocritique of the Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

La Boétie, Étienne de. 1993. *De la servitude volontaire*, edited by Annie Prassoloff. Paris: Gallimard.

La Bruyère, Jean de. 1776. *Characters, or: The Manners of the Age: With the Moral Characters of Theophrastus Translated from the Greek*. Dublin: Whitestone.

La Bruyère, Jean de. 1999. *Les caractères de Théophraste traduits du Grec avec Les caractères ou les moeurs de ce siècle*, edited by Marc Escola. Paris: Honoré Champion.

Locke McLendon, Michael. 2003. "The Overvaluation of Talent: An Interpretation and Application of Rousseau's *Amour-Propre*." *Polity* 36 (1): 115–38. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/POLv36n1ms3235426>

Locke McLendon, Michael. 2009. "Rousseau, *Amour Propre*, and Intellectual Celebrity." *The Journal of Politics* 71 (2): 506–19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381609090422>

- Locke McLendon, Michael. 2014. "Rousseau and the Minimal Self: A Solution to the Problem of *Amour-Propre*." *European Journal of Political Theory* 13 (3): 341–61. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885113492504>
- Locke McLendon, Michael. 2018. *The Psychology of Inequality. Rousseau's Amour-Propre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812295733>
- Mervaud, Christiane. 1991. "De Westminster Abbey au Panthéon: Le statut des 'gens de lettres' dans les 'Lettres philosophiques.'" *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 91 (2): 177–95.
- Montesquieu, Charles Louis de Secondat de. 2011. *De l'esprit des lois*, edited by Robert Derathé. 2 vols. Paris: Classiques Garnier. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/kl-2012-0010>
- Naville, Pierre. 1967. *Paul Thiry d'Holbach et la philosophie scientifique au XVIIIe siècle*, nouvelle édition revue et augmentée. Paris: Gallimard.
- Neuhouser, Frederick. 2008. *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Neuhouser, Frederick. 2014. *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality: Reconstructing the Second Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107587731>
- O'Dea, Michael, ed. 2010. *Rousseau et les philosophes*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation.
- Sandrier, Alain. 2004. *Le style philosophique du baron d'Holbach: Conditions et contraintes du prosélytisme athée en France dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Sonenscher, Michael. 2007. *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Starobinski, Jean. 1977. "Eloquence and Liberty." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38 (2): 195–210. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708907>
- Topazio, V. W. 1956. *D'Holbach's Moral Philosophy: Its Backgrounds and Development*. Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire.
- Voltaire. 1767. "Gens de lettres." In *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 7: 599–600. Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton, & Durand.

**How to cite this article:** Blank, Andreas 2020 D'Holbach on (Dis-)Esteeming Talent. *Journal of Modern Philosophy*, 2(1): 10, pp. 1–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32881/jomp.70>

**Submitted:** 23 August 2019    **Accepted:** 16 March 2020    **Published:** 07 September 2020

**Copyright:** © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Journal of Modern Philosophy* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Virginia University Press.

