D’Holbach on self-esteem and the moral economy of oppression

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ABSTRACT
Recently, the idea that our desire for the esteem of others could function as a regulative principle of social life has been criticized because the economy of esteem could reinforce oppressive structures due to expressions of mutual esteem within oppressing groups with deviant group norms. This article discusses this problem from a historical point of view, focusing on the moral and political writings of the eighteenth-century French materialist Paul Thiry d’Holbach. D’Holbach’s thoughts are relevant in two respects: (1) For situations of extreme power and wealth differences within oppressing groups, he shows that the economy of esteem does not work in favour of the members of these groups. This is so because the conditions of esteem and self-esteem of the members with lower hierarchical standing tend to be precarious, while the members with higher standing cannot use the flatteries of their inferiors as credible sources of esteem. (2) D’Holbach concedes that self-esteem could be stabilized by refraining from self-reflection but argues that such a strategy comes at the price of an impaired capacity for protecting one’s natural needs. The upshot of his considerations is that our interest in esteem and self-esteem provides strong pragmatic and moral reasons for opposing oppression.

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Introduction
Among the possible answers to the question of what could motivate moral action, the insight that humans have a desire for esteem has always played some role. Evidently, the desire to be esteemed by others contributes to explaining why individuals are ready to comply with the norms of a given community – compliance will be seen positively, non-compliance will be seen negatively, and the wish to be thought of positively will, independent of any compulsion, motivate compliance.
These issues were particularly prominent in early modern moral and political thought, and have been revived during the past two decades in a philosophical debate initiated by Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit (Brennan and Pettit, ‘Hands Invisible and Intangible’; ‘The Hidden Economy of Esteem’; The Economy of Esteem). Brennan and Pettit use the notion of ‘moral economy’ to analyse the workings of esteem, alluding to the eighteenth-century usage of ‘economy’ as any kind of value-based exchange of goods. Esteem is a good that cannot in a literal sense be exchanged for other goods, but it is a good that is often a reward for what one does and that is often a subject of competition. Furthermore, esteem is a good that can be conferred upon others through paying attention to them, through lauding them, and through associating oneself with them. The crucial question that has to be answered by any account of the moral economy of esteem is: How can the esteem-oriented mechanisms that motivate compliance with norms – no matter how contingent these norms may be – constitute a motivation for genuine moral action?

Brennan’s and Pettit’s answer refers to the presence of two necessary conditions: (1) publicity and (2) absence of oppression. The first condition excludes situations in which disesteem of others cannot occur due to a lack of information, and the second condition excludes situations in which disesteem of others may actually occur, however without any negative practical consequences for the disesteemed.

Does this mean that, in situations characterized by oppression and lack of publicity – that is, situations typical of the real world – the moral economy of esteem is bound to be ineffective or even counterproductive (see Langton, ‘Esteem in the Moral Economy of Oppression’)? Moreover, do publicity and the absence of oppression guarantee that the action motivated by the desire for esteem is not merely conformist (see McAdams and Sugden, ‘Conformity to Inegalitarian Conventions and Norms’)? If the theory of the moral economy of esteem could not offer responses to the problems of oppression, secrecy and conformism, it would clearly fall short of a general theory of moral motivation.

These criticisms leave room to ask whether some of the early modern precursors of the idea of an economy of esteem provide theoretical resources that could respond to these problems. In what follows, I will focus on the moral and political writings of Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach (1723–89), which contain a long series of scattered but thematically related remarks that turn out to be highly relevant in this context. As far as I can determine, the extensive literature about d’Holbach – perhaps due to the scattered occurrence of the relevant remarks – does not contain any detailed discussion of these matters.¹

¹For general expositions, see Topazio, D’Holbach’s Moral Philosophy; Naville, Paul Thiry d’Holbach et la philosophie scientifique au XVIIIe siècle; Di Tasio, Il pensiero politico di d’Holbach; Sandrier, Le style philosophique du baron d’Holbach; Boulad-Ayoub, “L’homme de la raison future”.

distinctive feature of d’Holbach’s approach is that – in contrast to Brennan and Pettit – it treats the desire for esteem together with the desire for self-esteem, and that – again in contrast to Brennan and Pettit – it takes into consideration not only empirical but also normative aspects of esteem and self-esteem.

His empirical analysis of the economy of esteem in paradigmatic situations of oppression – despotic regimes and economic exploitation – shows that, in spite of the illusions that the actors may entertain, such situations do not fulfil the desire for self-esteem, not even for members of the oppressing groups. To show why this is so, d’Holbach analyses the precarious nature of the conditions of self-esteem that depend on the good will of the more powerful. He also points to the pervasiveness of flattery that both undermines the self-esteem of the flatterer and provides an insufficient basis for self-esteem of the flatteree. D’Holbach’s analysis thereby indicates why the desire for self-esteem provides strong prudential motivations for opposing these forms of oppression.

Still, these considerations hinge on a crucial assumption, namely, that political agents are minimally self-reflective. Hence, a method of stabilizing self-esteem among members of an oppressing ground could be just to refrain from self-reflection. D’Holbach is clear that this is exactly what often happens in situations of oppression. This is why a normative conception of justified esteem and self-esteem based on natural law theory complements his empirical analysis. To put it in a nutshell, his view is that only self-reflection is capable of conferring insights into our natural needs and rights, and into how we can realize them. If the attitude of being ready to defend one’s needs and rights, as David Sachs has suggested, can be called ‘self-respect’ (see Sachs, ‘How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem’, 347), then d’Holbach’s argument for why we should be interested in justified self-esteem would draw our attention to the role of self-reflection for self-respect. And it is this interest that neither secrecy nor conformism can fulfil.

Esteem and self-esteem: empirical and normative aspects

Before going into the details of d’Holbach’s analysis of the economy of oppression, it will be useful to distinguish two strands in his thought about esteem and self-esteem. One strand is built around what could be called an empirical conception of esteem and self-esteem: a conception that looks into how esteem, self-esteem and their connection work in the real world. From an empirical point of view, self-esteem is essentially comparative: ‘One always esteems oneself relatively to others’ (Système Social, 1: 151). Moreover, such a comparative relation can have a multiplicity of different objects: the rights that one has, the value that one ascribes to oneself, the

2In what follows, translations are my own; however, I have consulted with the German translation in Holbach’s Soziales System. The original French texts are all available online at the Gallica website of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
superiority over others that one enjoys (*Système Social*, 1: 151). Self-esteem understood in this way consists in acts of positive self-evaluation, that is, evaluations of whatever personal qualities are taken to be good:

[I]t is to congratulate oneself for the useful qualities that one has or one believes to have; it is to applaud oneself for possessing those qualities of which one imagines that they deserve the recognition of those beings by whom one is surrounded. Some esteem themselves for their power, some for their high birth, their credit, their titles, their riches; others for their beauty, their talents, their spirit; but all these sentiments are founded on the knowledge of the price that those human beings whom we see put on these qualities. Place a man who esteems himself for these things into a society where they are unknown or where one does not attach any price to them, he will soon cease to applaud himself for the possession of qualities, which would appear to be useless.

(*Système Social*, 1: 151)

Thus, d’Holbach’s empirical conception of self-esteem has a quasi-economic side: self-esteem is seen as dependent on the value or ‘price’ that other members of the same society put on a certain quality. Whatever quality is valued in a society can be a foundation for self-esteem for members of this society, while qualities not valued in a society cannot be a foundation for self-esteem for members of this society. D’Holbach is also clear that the reason why we seek the esteem of others lies in its importance as a source of self-esteem:

It is impossible to destroy the feelings that lie in the nature of humans; each of them loves himself and desires to be loved in order to love himself more; each of them desires the esteem of others, in order to be more estimable in his own eyes.

(*Système Social*, 1: 152)

Finally, he points to the everyday experience that, even if persons exemplify qualities that are valued in a given society, if they show forms of self-esteem that are humiliating for others, they will not be esteemed. The reason for this is unsurprising: esteem is a kind of affection, and no one will develop positive affects for someone who humiliates him (*Système Social*, 1: 152).

Yet, the empirical, quasi-economic conception of esteem and self-esteem raises the question of whether, in d’Holbach’s view, the usefulness of personal qualities is simply determined by the price that others put on them. D’Holbach’s answer would presumably be complex because he connects the notion of utility with the notion of virtue, and utility in this context has an entirely non-relativistic connotation. For instance, he maintains that moral virtues:

are necessary for the entire human species; their usefulness is not imaginary, apparent, momentary; it is made to be sensed by all inhabitants of the earth; they do not at all depend on conventions and caprices, they tend visibly to the happiness of all those who practice them faithfully.

(*Système Social*, 1: 114)
Consequently, virtuous action does not reduce to conformity with whatever a society happens to put a price upon. Rather, d’Holbach places his analysis of moral duties into the context of natural law theory.

To be sure, d’Holbach is not usually counted among the early modern natural law thinkers. Still, he takes up some tenets of Roman natural law conceptions. Thus, he refers to Cicero’s conception of law as ‘right reason, which prescribes what is honest and forbids what is not honest’ (Éthocratie, 1). As he maintains, laws are ‘results of the necessary relations deriving from the nature of things’ – an idea that he applies to both physical and moral laws (Politique Naturelle, 1: 35). Reason suggests to us to unite in society and teaches us to discover the goods that it is our nature to desire: ‘all laws derive from reason or from reflection that we carry out upon our own nature: hence, all the laws that reason suggests to us, can be called natural laws, because they are founded upon our nature’ (Politique Naturelle, 1: 35). From reflection about our nature also derives the insight into the sameness of duties, needs and aversions that are common to all human beings (Politique Naturelle, 1: 36). He calls ‘natural laws’ those laws ‘whose immediate conformity with the human species is shown by reason and which derive directly from this’ (Politique Naturelle, 1: 36). Civil laws are understood as natural laws applied to the circumstances of a particular society: ‘In order to be just and reasonable, they must be founded upon the nature of humans’ (Politique Naturelle, 1: 38). From these assumptions derives a version of a theory of right as subjective potency: ‘Right is every potency whose exercise is approved by natural law and society’ (Politique Naturelle, 1: 35; emphasis in the original). Likewise, ‘actions that agree with our nature, i.e. those that the natural laws command or permit, are just, actions that are contrary to our nature, or that the natural laws forbid, are unjust’ (Politique Naturelle, 1: 36). Justice therefore is built into the notion of right:

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 between 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 everyone to work for one’s own interest, which it limits and subordinates to the public interest, from which the individual interest never can separate itself without danger.

(Système Social, 1: 106; emphasis in the original)

D’Holbach clearly sees the critical potential of such a conception of right: ‘All laws that do not have these characteristics are undermined by reason; they are not made to oblige rational beings’ (Politique Naturelle, 1: 39). Consequently, ‘[w]hatever name one may give to them, laws never can annihilate

\footnote{For a more detailed analysis of d’Holbach’s conception of justice, see Blank, ‘D’Holbach on Self-Esteem, Justice, and Cosmopolitanism’.
the natural rights of humans or the duties of morals ... Any law that would deprive humans of their liberty, their security, their property would be unjust’ (Système Social, 2: 8). And ‘an unjust law never can confer any rights’ (Système Social, 2: 8). One of the political applications of this line of thought can be found in d’Holbach’s view that it is the duty of sovereigns to make it felt to the members of nobility that one never can acquire rights through the mere passage of time against natural equity and the rights of nations (Éthocratie, 48). Such a conception of the relation between natural equity and rights also offers a straightforward resolution to the tensions between positive law and the demands of natural law. D’Holbach mentions Cicero’s insight that one should never regard as just whatever results from the approbation of peoples (Système Social, 2: 9; see Cicero, De legibus, I, 15). In particular, d’Holbach applies this insight to the actually existing fundamental laws that regulate sovereign authority – laws that he regards to be for the most part confused and deficient (Système Social, 2: 9; Éthocratie, 13–14). Accordingly, he recommends taking natural law as the starting point for legal reform:

Natural equity, universal justice, is the basis of morality; and morality should guide jurisprudence; jurisprudence will then be universal, because, once it is founded on the nature common to all humans, it will disregard the limitations that conventions have imposed on states.

(Éthocratie, 86)

A normative conception of esteem derives from d’Holbach’s conception of general laws based on human nature. Actions that are in conformity with human nature are the proper objects of justified esteem: ‘Those who dismiss these laws are punished for this by the hate, the contempt and the indignation of their likes; those who submit to these laws find their sure reward in esteem, order and peace that they enjoy themselves’ (Politique Naturelle, 1: 48). Accordingly, ‘[v]eritable honor is … the right that we have to the esteem of our co-citizens and to our own esteem’ (Système Social, 2: 152). In d’Holbach’s view, ‘the sanction of universal laws’ consists in nothing other than experiences of esteem and disesteem (Politique Naturelle, 1: 48). Generally, he takes the desire for justified self-esteem to be a motivation for fulfilling moral duties: ‘[S]elf-esteem, founded upon virtuous, useful talents, real benefits, is a legitimate recompense that a good person owes to herself’ (Système Social, 1: 154). This applies in particular to the gens de lettres who, in d’Holbach’s view, have to fulfil moral duties toward the entire human species (Morale Universelle, 2: 276): ‘The desire to distinguish oneself is not crazy envy; it is a natural sentiment, highly laudable when one distinguishes oneself through honest comportment, through wise manners, through talents that are useful for the public … ’ (Morale Universelle, 2: 267; see Morale Universelle, 2: 290). Moreover, the desire for justified esteem includes the desire to be esteemed by future generations – a thought that d’Holbach
articulates both with respect to the gens de lettres (Morale Universelle, 2: 275; 2: 296) and to political leaders (Système Social, 2: 79). Clearly, then, the desire for justified esteem and self-esteem is seen as a crucial factor in motivating the fulfilment of the duties that arise from human nature.

There are thus two clearly distinguishable conceptions of esteem and self-esteem in d’Holbach’s moral and political thought: one empirical that acknowledges the fact that esteem and self-esteem can be based upon whatever happens to be valued in a given society; and one normative that indicates that only the desire for justified esteem and self-esteem could be regarded as a motivation for fulfilling duties grounded in human nature. The presence of these two conceptions of esteem and self-esteem raises the question of why d’Holbach has thought it necessary to develop both conceptions. What did he believe that the empirical conception could achieve, and where did he see its limits? And why did he believe the normative conception to be necessary in ethics and political thought? His analysis of the role of esteem and self-esteem in oppressive political and economic structures will give interesting hints at answers to these questions.

**Self-esteem, flattery and the economy of oppression**

Rae Langton has criticized Brennan and Pettit for being too sanguine about the prospect of understanding the moral economy of esteem and disesteem as an efficient means for controlling action. One of the central points of her criticism is that the moral economy of esteem alone cannot transcend the preconceptions inherent in the values of certain groups or cultures and that it therefore is bound to break down under circumstances of oppression, where powerful groups or cultures tend to rely on their internal reinforcement of esteem and to become immune to the dissent of the powerless. Moreover, as she argues, situations of secrecy are particularly conducive to the development of deviant group norms (Langton, ‘Esteem in the Moral Economy of Oppression’, 277–80). Brennan and Pettit are aware of the problem: they acknowledge that in circumstances in which immoral behaviour is not publicly perceptible or the costs of expression of dissent are high, the economy of esteem cannot fulfil its regulative function (Brennan and Pettit, ‘Hands Invisible and Intangible’, 192). Should the moral economy of esteem therefore be seen as a mechanism that works well only as long as things go well? Or could the moral economy of esteem do some work in restraining action even in situations of secrecy and domination?

It is exactly the assumption that the economy of esteem always keeps on working well for the members of the oppressing group that d’Holbach challenges. Interestingly, the difficulties that he identifies occur on the level of the empirical concept of esteem and self-esteem, thus indicating some senses in which the idea that the economy of esteem provides strong
reasons for restraining one's actions is not invariably refuted by the structure of oppression. In the case of despotistic regimes, d'Holbach points out that oppression is connected with an extremely hierarchic structure of the oppressing group itself – thereby making esteem dependent on the will of the more powerful, and leading the less powerful to have recourse to the strategies of flattery. In the case of economic exploitation, he points out that esteem shown to the rich depends on the possibility of profiting from them – thereby making expression of esteem for the rich cognitively unreliable. In both kinds of situations, no-one can use the available expressions of esteem as reinforcement of self-esteem. On the contrary, both precariousness of esteem and the recourse to flattery tend to undermine the self-esteem of in-group members.

Let us first look into the details of d'Holbach's analysis of the economy of despotism. Given the political context of the last decades of the Ancien Régime, it is unsurprising that much of d'Holbach's political thought is concerned with structural problems of absolutism. Still, one of the problems that he identifies in the context of his criticism of absolute power is one that can easily be identified in other despotic regimes. One of the problems associated with despotism is the common occurrence of flattery in politics: 'It is the flatterers who form the tyrants; and it is the tyrants who, by incessantly corrupting the morals of nations, make virtue painful and so rare' (*Morale Universelle*, 2: 52). Thus, d'Holbach is aware that such flattery involves character faults of both the flatteree and the flatterer. As to the character faults of the flatteree, he points to the role of flattery in princely education. The flatterers can be said to 'make' tyrants because they actively form the vicious character of the future ruler. Moreover, flattery leads to deception of the ruler with respect to truths concerning the needs and attitudes of his subjects. And while the role of flattery in character formation may be neutral with respect to the ruler's capability of political action, the role of flattery in screening the ruler from truths concerning the needs and attitudes of his subjects genuinely limits his capability of political action:

An obsequious and flattering minister does nothing but nourish in the mind of his master the vices that both this master and the state and he himself will be the victims of one day in the future. Truthfulness must be the first virtue of a loyal minister; placed to see from closer up than the prince the needs, the desires, the misfortunes of nations, he cannot deceive him or conceal truth without committing treason towards both his country and his master.

(*Morale Universelle*, 2: 100–1)

One reason why deception is contrary to the stable happiness of a ruler is that it poses a threat to his security: '[He] must listen to this nation in order to know the truth; it is this nation on which he must base his own safety ...’ (*Morale Universelle*, 2: 61). Flattery is so dangerous because it prevents a ruler from
learning about the needs and attitudes of his citizens, which then find only a violent expression:

[T]he princes with unlimited power would have the greatest interest in knowing the true attitudes of their subjects; because the subjects who cannot get through to the throne with their complaints express themselves only through revolts, revolutions, and massacres, of which the tyrant is the first victim.

(Morale Universelle, 2: 59–60)

Still, one may object that manipulative flattery at least works out for the flatterers. After all, by separating the interests of the ruler from the interests of the citizens, they are able to gain advantages for themselves. However, that manipulative flattery is contrary to the interests of the flatterers is an idea that has a long history. As Eylon and Heyd point out in their recent analysis of flattery, ‘it is Plato’s charge that [the flatterer] is mistaken about the value of the thing sought (pleasure, material goods) and the price paid (“fake” personal relationships instead of genuine ones)’ (Eylon and Heyd, ‘Flattery’, 697; see Plato, Gorgias, 463b–5b). D’Holbach is aware of the problem of fake personal relationships (see Système Social, 3: 98) but he also develops an additional line of argument to show why flattery is contrary to the rational self-interest of those who practice it. As he argues, manipulative flattery in conditions of oppression undermines the self-esteem of those who hope to profit from the favour of those in power. This conclusion derives from his analysis of the nature of despotic regimes.

D’Holbach identifies the essence of despotic regimes in their strategy of dividing political groups and individuals from each other with respect to their interests. Moreover, he explores the consequences that such a political constellation has for the self-esteem even of the privileged classes such as the nobility.

A political body whose members are corrupted and divided can enjoy only a precarious power. Each political body that pursues interests separated from those of its nation or other bodies of the state, cannot for a long time resist to the force, the ruses and the traps of despotism, which seeks relentlessly to divide and demolish everything that could pose an obstacle to its fantasies.

(Morale Universelle, 2: 172)

Consequently, it is the interest in stable power that could motivate members of powerful groups to adhere to the rule of law:

The most powerful citizens, like the feeblest ones, are evidently interested in upholding equity; they can find in the laws the remedy against the defamations and intrigues that accuse them. In order to be stable, greatness must be founded upon justice … This universal and social justice is a much surer protection against violence than useless titles and frivolous distinctions, which caprices can give and take away again.

(Morale Universelle, 2: 102)
What is more, their dependence on the more powerful members of the oppressing group undermines the self-esteem of the less powerful: ‘Can one regard oneself as something, when the power and greatness that one enjoys depend alone on the fantasy of a despot …?’ (Morale Universelle, 2: 102). Or again: ‘What is an honor that depends on caprices, favor, opinion, fashion?’ (Système Social, 2: 152). It is the dependence on the most powerful characteristic of despotic regimes that deprives citizens of the foundations of self-esteem:

How can a man humiliated by fear have a high opinion of himself, in spite of the fact that everything proves to him his dependence and his weakness? … [C]an he have the power and high-minded attitude that security gives?

(Morale Universelle, 2: 152)

What is more, a lack of self-esteem leads to a collapse of the desire for the esteem of others:

Whoever despises himself, or does not care at all about the esteem of others can become only a very low and very mean being. It is from this disposition that one sees that meanness, flattery, criminal complaisance and a heap of detestable actions flow. Disdain for oneself is evidently the source of almost all crimes, both of the court-men and of ordinary people … Every man who despises himself does not hesitate to make himself detestable in the eyes of others.

(Système Social, 1: 155)

Consequently, flattery is part of a vicious circle: it causes a breakdown of self-esteem (because it expresses the consciousness of dependency and vulnerability), but it is also caused by low self-esteem (because low self-esteem brings with it indifference to what others think). But also the flatteries of the less powerful members of the oppressing group cannot be a suitable foundation for the self-esteem of those on the top of the hierarchy:

[F]ear can well keep them from letting their indignation explode and extract from them signs of a submission that the heart disapproves: but virtue alone receives sincere homages, and receives them with a pure pleasure, although vice, always disquiet and suspicious, knows how to take the signs of respect that one shows to it.

(Morale Universelle, 2: 89)

Because those in power know perfectly well that the expressions of esteem that are shown toward them cannot be taken at face value, they cannot take pleasure in these expressions but rather remain suspicious of the sincerity of the less powerful. Evidently, feedback from the less powerful in such a situation cannot be useful as a foundation of self-esteem. Hence, in circumstances of despotism the economy of esteem works poorly both for the most powerful and for the less powerful members of the oppressing group.
Ministers are themselves interested in the virtue of the prince: hence, far from flattering these despots …, they should oppose the despots’ actions with reason, truth, justice, even fear; they should remember that, without laws, there is no assured greatness, ranks, and privileges ….

*(Morale Universelle, 2: 96–7)*

Here, the desire for self-esteem clearly appears as prudential motivation for opposing despotism, even if it may not yet fully amount to a moral motivation.

Analogous considerations apply to the case of economic oppression. D’Holbach is clear about the pervasive presence of exploitation in European culture:

> The passion for wealth … evidently tends toward dissolving the bonds of society … [and] toward suffocating the true feelings of honor. The rapaciousness of princes is the true cause of the injustice and the violence that they exert with respect to their subjects. The greed of citizens is the true source of the thefts, the robberies, the frauds, and the conflicts that we see reigning.

*(Système Social, 1: 134)*

Interestingly, he expands his analysis of flattery to situations of economic exploitation:

The opulent man, incapable of making useful use of his riches, wants to represent, that is to say to have a great number of witnesses of his pretended happiness: he assembles in his home a crowd of flatterers, parasites, complaisant persons whom he calls his friends although they are nothing but envious, jealous and hidden enemies who, by profiting from his crazy vanity, help him to dissipate his fortune, exalt his good taste, his magnificence, his expensive goodness, his generosity, his mind; and succeed sometimes to make him believe himself that he is happy, although in truth he does not enjoy anything.

*(Système Social, 3: 98)*

But why should the rich man not just enjoy the life style that his wealth makes possible? One answer, hinted at in this passage, is that the rich man will have difficulties in finding real friends (which indicates that not only the flatterers but also the flatterees suffer from deception concerning the price they have to pay for the goods that flattery can procure). But a second answer, suggested by another passage, has to do with the sources of self-esteem:

Can the unjust rich man flatter himself to deserve the public esteem by displaying insolently in front of the eyes of his impoverished co-citizens an insulting sumptuousness? In the fear of triggering general indignation, wouldn’t these men, saturated by the substance of peoples, be better off if they withdrew an opulence bought by injustice and crimes from all looks? Can the self-love of these favorites of Plutus blind them to the point to believe that a nation, oppressed to enrich them, will pardon them the insolence with which they dare to reap the fruits of their robberies? No; the applause and the homages of flatterers, of parasites, of whom their table is surrounded, will never persuade them of their merit ….

*(Morale Universelle, 2: 223)*
This passage is relevant not only for the issue of oppression but also for the issue of secrecy. It indicates that even the absence of publicity does not guarantee that the economy of esteem would work well for the members of an oppressing group. Even if hiding unjustly amassed riches from the eyes of the public may be effective in avoiding expressions of public disesteem, still conditions of secrecy do not help the unjust rich man to gain any source of credible feedback that could convince him of a merit that is in fact absent.

Finally, d’Holbach indicates that under circumstances of oppression the economy of esteem also does not work in favour of the gens de lettres. Again, he casts the problem in terms of the problems associated with flattery:

Under a despot, the sciences, the arts, industriousness, talents, children of liberty, become lax and degraded because they uniquely turn to frivolous objects; they offer their assistance only to detestable monuments of the pride of the master, of the vanity of favorites ... Degraded poetry prostitutes its accentuations only to flattery, to frivolity ...

(Politique Naturelle, 2: 30–1)

Oppression makes the gens de lettres vulnerable to the same esteem-related risks that all who flatter those in power incur. Thereby, they give up a real good – the esteem of future generations – in exchange for something that cannot provide a stable foundation of self-esteem:

Despotism makes use of talents only to deceive: when it condescends to look at them favorably, it is only with a view to provide incense to vanity ... [T]he author becomes an adulator; ... he prefers the futile advantage of a momentary success over the durable fame of being passed on to posterity ... The noble esteem for oneself that merit gives is getting replaced by pretensions, 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.

(Système Social, 3: 54–5)

Again, it is the dependencies that despotism brings with itself that make the suggestion questionable that the economy of esteem could function well at least for the members of an oppressing group.

Self-esteem and self-reflection

At this juncture two interrelated objections can be raised. The first objection concerns the generality of the problems identified by d’Holbach. These problems seem to be specific to situations of oppression with extreme power and wealth differences within oppressing groups. Less strongly hierarchically structured oppressing groups seem to be a conceptual possibility and (perhaps) a real-world occurrence. In such cases, the members of the in-
group would not have to fear a sudden loss of esteem and self-esteem due to power differences. Also, the lower degree of dependence would make the use of manipulative flattery superfluous. If the members of such a more egalitarian oppressing group, moreover, refrain from self-reflection, they could in fact maintain and mutually reinforce a highly stable kind of self-esteem. Under such circumstances, the self-esteem of members of the oppressing group is not threatened by the problems of precarious power and flattery; but still it is threatened by the perspective of members of the oppressed group. Of course, this perspective can be ignored by refraining from self-reflection. The second objection derives from the consideration that refraining from self-reflection also could stabilize the self-esteem of the members of oppressing groups with extreme power and wealth hierarchies. As long as they do not suffer from the negative consequences of power differences, these persons could uphold and mutually reinforce high self-esteem by just not reflecting about the problems of precarious power and the pitfalls of flattery.

D’Holbach is aware that there is a multiplicity of factors that keep people away from reflecting about themselves. First, there is the factor of personal self-deception, such as the illusion of ministers that they will be smart enough to avoid falling into disgrace like so many of their predecessors (Système Social, 2: 160). Second, d’Holbach points to the influence of prejudices:

Prejudices have to such a degree degraded the human spirit that even those who, through their standing and their circumstances, should have more elevation of the soul, have reached the point of making for themselves a chimerical honor out of what naturally would have to cover them with ignominy and to debase them either in their own eyes or in the eyes of their co-citizens. (Système Social, 2: 150)

Third, there are difficulties inherent in the development of the habit of reflection:

Nothing is more difficult than to change a shallow man who does not reflect at all, who is always distracted and does not return to himself at all, whose heart and mind have not been cultivated, into a moral person. (Système Social, 1: 84)

And fourth, there are specific effects of despotic regimes:

The one who announces truth is obliged to fight at the same time against the cruelty of tyrants and the sloth of their slaves. The greatest part of humans is so discouraged that they seem to fear truth, liberty, and reason as much as those who derive profit from their errors … . (Système Social, 3: 155)

Presumably, in view of these problems d’Holbach would admit that self-esteem could be stabilized by just refraining from reflecting about one’s
actions. Still, while he acknowledges the difficulties in making people reflect about themselves, he also argues that a lack of self-reflection comes at a price:

[D]espotism, vice and luxury throw humans either into a kind of dementia, or into a lethargy that makes them equally incapable of reflecting. The lack of habit of thinking and living with oneself forces everyone to extend oneself to the outside. He does not want to exist unless in the imagination of others; he throws himself into a perpetual whirlwind in order to make himself insensible of his secret dissatisfaction; given the impossibility of finding well-being in his own heart, he goes and searches for it in the tumult of the world, where he will rather rarely encounter himself. In the desperation of making himself happy, he at least wants to appear happy.

(Système Social, 3: 97–8)

Hence, even if the mutual feedback within an oppressing group may lead to positive self-evaluation among members of this group, these persons will at least know that they derive their self-esteem only from the fulfilment of group norms, not from values that they define themselves. D’Holbach describes this as a case of unhappy consciousness: ‘One lives only in the opinion of others; everyone there plays very awkwardly a role that is not made for him; nobody wants to be himself, because no-one is content with how nature has made him’ (Système Social, 3: 99–100). The resulting social relations are described as a ‘fraudulent commerce’ (commerce frauduleux): it is a sort of exchange in which everyone pretends to be something that they know that they are not (Système Social, 3: 100). This is why he regards the desire for looking good in the opinion of others as an expression of dissatisfaction with one’s own nature.

By contrast, the function of self-reflection is to establish a positive attitude toward our own nature. D’Holbach characterizes the self-relation that results from self-reflection – that is, the self-relation that cannot be achieved by someone who lacks self-reflection – as ‘being good with oneself’ (Système Social, 1: 67–8). He also alludes to Aristotle’s concept of being a friend to oneself (see Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, IX, 8). What is the difference between this self-relation and positive self-evaluation? Unfortunately, d’Holbach neither discusses any details of Aristotle’s or Seneca’s treatment of the notion nor does he give any explication of his own. Still, one can get some glimpse of what he had in mind in his discussion of the features of friendship between persons. This discussion is replete with short allusions to treatments of friendship in ancient philosophy, in particular in Aristotle, Cicero and Plutarch; thus, his views on friendship can well be seen as a reformulation of some core ideas of the ancients and, as it turns out, some of these ideas could be highly relevant for characterizing the sense in which one could be a friend to oneself.

To collect the relevant characteristics of friendship between persons, the following items certainly would belong on the list: (1) Friendship involves ‘sentiments of preferment for some persons, based on the idea of the well-being
that we hope to find in an intimate exchange with them’ (Morale Universelle, 1: 118). (2) Enjoying pleasures that the friends ‘can procure for themselves through their personal qualities, which alone can give solidity to human relationships’ (Morale Universelle, 1: 120). As d’Holbach explains, only friendship founded on habitual disposition can be permanent, in contrast to friendship that has only the goal ‘to share some advantages of fortune’ (Morale Universelle, 1: 120).

(3) ‘Confidence can only be founded on qualities of which one is prompted to presume the duration; there are only dispositions cemented by habit on which one can count; these dispositions must be useful for the association that one forms, and consequently virtuous …’ (Morale Universelle, 1: 121). As he explains the role of virtue: ‘Only virtue can give the necessary confidence in a friendship …; only in a virtuous person, interests do not change …’ (Morale Universelle, 1: 132).

(4) ‘One must know each other to love each other; friendship is a serious, reflected sentiment, founded on the needs of the heart … True friendship, always produced by esteem, wants to find qualities that are the suitable objects of esteem; it needs virtues to which it can connect itself with constancy …’ (Morale Universelle, 1: 129). This shows that, for d’Holbach, a normative conception of esteem is built into the notion of friendship. (5) To the duties of friendship belong the readiness to defend the friend’s interest in reputation, as well as the readiness to defend the friend’s needs in circumstances of distress (Morale Universelle, 1: 126). (6) The duties of friendship imply that ‘a true friend cannot demand from a friend unjust and dishonoring complaisance’ (Morale Universelle, 1: 133).

Now it should not be difficult to extrapolate how the notion of friendship to oneself could be spelled out in line with d’Holbach’s concerning the nature of friendship between persons: (1) It must be a relation that has one’s well-being as a goal. (2) It must be grounded in personal qualities, which are habitual and, therefore, permanent. (3) It must be grounded in personal qualities that are the suitable basis of self-confidence. (4) It must be grounded in qualities that are the object of esteem that passes the test of self-reflection. (5) It must be connected with the readiness to defend the interest in one’s own reputation and, generally, the readiness to defend one’s needs in circumstances of distress. (6) It must be adverse to demanding from oneself dishonouring complaisance.

How close does this somewhat conjectural extrapolation come to d’Holbach’s views concerning being a friend to oneself? Points (5) and (6) are confirmed when d’Holbach remarks: ‘Merit esteems itself, and does not consent to dishonor itself through mean behavior and intrigues’ (Morale Universelle, 2: 93). Thus, it is the normative conception of self-esteem that is relevant for explaining why people can resist the pressure of engaging in dishonouring activities. This also exemplifies point (1): protecting oneself against dishonouring activities certainly is essential for protecting one’s well-being.
What is more, the role of justified self-esteem – that is, self-esteem that passes the test of reflection – for mental security and tranquility seems to confirm points (2), (3) and (4):

Even if one gets accustomed a little bit to have a conversation with oneself, it will be very easy to judge oneself with candor and to discover whether one is worthy of the sentiments that one wants to excite in others. Just and deserved self-esteem, confirmed by others, constitutes the peace of the soul, the security of conscience, the habitual tranquility without which there is no durable happiness. It is always outside of themselves that humans have the folly to seek happiness; one must begin by establishing within oneself, in order to put oneself in to the position to be capable of returnng to one’s interior with pleasure.

(\textit{Système Social}, 1: 166–7)

Being good with oneself thus does not reduce to positive self-evaluations (which the feedback from in-group members could reinforce). Rather, reflection is important to gain insight into what virtue – understood as what is naturally good for beings of our species – demands. Only this insight can lead to the confidence that the personal qualities that we esteem are habitual and, moreover, not subject to sudden changes of interest. Reflection thus leads to insight into our natural needs and interests, which is not only crucial for our capability of defending these needs and interests but also a condition for a state of mind that d’Holbach describes as involving ‘peace’, ‘security’ and ‘tranquility’. And in his view, such a state of mind itself forms part of our natural needs because without it our interest in happiness cannot be fulfilled.

If self-reflection thus is crucial for fulfilling our natural needs, this also has far-reaching consequences for our attitude toward the esteem and disesteem of others: reflection about our own natural needs also tells us that we cannot disregard the esteem and disesteem of others because they are beings with the same natural needs: ‘A sensitive heart, a vivacious imagination, trained by experience and reflection, makes us take part in the pleasures and pains of all beings of our species … ’ (\textit{Système Social}, 1: 80). Thus, while it is coherent to refrain from self-reflection and to disregard the esteem or disesteem of members outside an oppressing group, the same cannot be said of someone who seeks justified self-esteem. This is why being good with oneself is bound to virtuous behaviour toward others: ‘But one is good with oneself only when one is good with others, and in order to be good with them, one needs to show them virtues’ (\textit{Système Social}, 1: 167). Being good with oneself, then, is the relation to oneself that mere conformism cannot bring about.

Even if d’Holbach does not draw this terminological distinction, the self-relation resulting from self-reflection may be called ‘self-respect’ – the readiness to defend one’s needs and rights, such as the need for dignity, the need
for self-confidence, the need for mental equilibrium, and the right to the esteem of others. It is thus ultimately our interest in self-respect that, in d’Holbach’s view, motivates our interest in justified self-esteem. His argument leads to an interesting corollary with respect to the relation between self-esteem and self-respect. David Sachs has argued that the degree of self-esteem does not have any influence on the degree of self-respect (Sachs, ‘How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem’, 354–6). Sachs’s argument is certainly plausible for many situations – for example, having a low opinion of a particular professional performance should not influence our readiness to defend our needs and rights. Still, d’Holbach’s considerations indicate a kind of dependence between self-esteem and self-respect: If self-esteem is upheld by a lack of self-reflection, self-esteem can in fact impair our capacities to defend our natural needs and rights because without self-reflection we do not acquire insight into these needs and rights. And it is exactly this fact that could motivate us to strive for justified self-esteem.

Finally, the role of self-reflection also explains how the desire for the esteem of posterity can become a strong motive for moral action. Obviously, the esteem of future generations cannot be part of our present experience. Still, through self-reflection the anticipation of future esteem becomes part of our imagination. Thus, about the passions that drive gens de lettres, d’Holbach writes:

These passions are founded on the ideas that [the persons of genius] have formed of the rights that their endeavors will give them over the affection, the esteem and the gratitude of future generations. Therefore, do not let us call chimeras what is quite real for the one who enjoys it within himself, in each moment of its duration.

( Morale Universelle, 2: 300; see Essais sur les Préjugés, 158)

Something analogous holds for the self-reflection of a political leader who follows the demands of universal morality:

[H]e will refresh himself not through the smoke of flattery but through solid fame. He will return to himself with joy … ; he will taste without interruption the satisfaction of loving himself, a sentiment that he will see to be sincerely applauded, not by suspect flatteries of some courtiers, but by the applause and the good wishes of an entire people. He will enjoy in advance the recognition of posterity … .

( Système Social, 2: 79)

Strikingly, d’Holbach understands the benefits of such a reflective attitude toward the self as what could motivate a political leader ‘to banish oppression’ ( Système Social, 2: 79). In this way, then, the desire for the esteem of future generations can function as an antidote to the pathologies of esteem in the economy of oppression.
Self-esteem and the idea of radical enlightenment

Before concluding, it may be worth pausing to reflect on what d’Holbach’s remarks about esteem and self-esteem could imply for the wider question of his relation to what Jonathan Israel has called ‘Radical Enlightenment’. Israel has given some concrete indications concerning the senses in which he understands the radical nature of d’Holbach thought. In one sense, he counts d’Holbach among those thinkers whose ‘doctrine was intrinsically revolutionary more in the post-Cartesian sense of involving a drastic shift in perspective, values, social theory, law, administrative practice, court culture and education than in the sense of unleashing violent insurgency’ (*Democratic Enlightenment*, 820). Given the criticism of despotism and court culture connected with d’Holbach’s remarks on esteem and self-esteem, it is not difficult to see how these aspects of his thought could be subsumed under this sense of being ‘radical’. In fact, d’Holbach himself characterizes what can surmount the vices of a government as ‘a happy revolution in the ideas of those who live in the more enlightened countries’ (*Essai sur les Préjugés*, 90).

In a further sense, Israel counts d’Holbach among the thinkers ‘who were also deliberate, conscious revolutionaries albeit not in the sense of being planners of revolutionary action but rather as ideologues preparing the ground for revolution’ (*Democratic Enlightenment*, 809). In particular, he maintains that d’Holbach, ‘while condemning individual and small-group seditions, offers a qualified but clear justification for mass armed resistance to tyrannical government’ (*Democratic Enlightenment*, 820). This assessment contrasts strongly with the characterization of d’Holbach’s attitude towards philosophy that Alan Charles Kors has given. As Kors suggests, d’Holbach’s views concerning the importance of having the approbation of one’s own mind implies a conception of philosophy as a ‘personal refuge’ rather than as an activity that could exert any influence on the course of events (*D’Holbach’s Coterie*, 140).

I believe that d’Holbach’s remarks about esteem and self-esteem show that both Israel and Kors have overlooked something important. It is no new observation that d’Holbach’s writings are interspersed with rather general statements against the advisability of revolutions of the violent sort (Mornet, *La pensée française au XVIIe siècle*, 117; Lough, *The Philosophes*, 10; 23; see *Essais sur les Préjugés*, 63; 233; *Système Social*, 2: 33–4; *Politique Naturelle*, 1: 79–81). One possible explanation for his scepticism in this respect could be found in his pessimistic portrayal of the frame of mind of uneducated masses:

History proves to us that, in matters of government, nations always have been the toys of their ignorance, their imprudence and their credulity … and, most of all, of the passions of those who have managed to rise to influence over the masses.

(*Système Social*, 2: 24)
It is highly implausible that a ‘mass of slaves fallen into misfortune, deprived of courage and virtues’ (Éthocratie, 282) could be a promising carrier of revolutionary action. A further reason for d’Holbach’s scepticism about revolutionary action, as Charles Devellennes has pointed out (‘A Fourth Musketeer’, 461), is epistemological: D’Holbach argues that insight into what is useful politically grows slowly, which is why we should be suspicious of revolutionaries who claim to have found the solution to all political problems at once (Essai sur les Préjugés, 47–9). Interestingly, his considerations concerning esteem and self-esteem could add two further lines of argument.

The first line of argument derives from his empirical analysis of the economy of esteem under the circumstances of oppression. As he analyses it, the practices of flattery in despotical regimes belong to the causes of violent revolutions: ‘It is the flatteries and the bad advices that make the bad princes or tyrants; it is the tyrants who render peoples disposed to revolt; it is the ambitious and not the good persons who make the revolutions’ (Système Social, 3: 157). One of his central political ideas – the necessity of political representation – is characterized as a solution to the problem of flattery in the economy of oppression:

\[\text{In order for the sovereign, who guards himself against the lies and flatteries of the courtiers that surround him, to be able to perceive distinctly the free voice of citizens, the fundamental laws must establish in a stable way a body of representatives … .}\]

(Éthocratie, 16)

Clearly, this is a reform-oriented project, whose very aim is to remove the causes of violent revolution.

The second line of argument derives from his considerations concerning how developing justified esteem could function as a remedy against the pathologies of esteem under despotical regimes. As he argues, the most detrimental effects of despotism arise from the degradation of the self-esteem of the lower classes:

\[\text{One is surprised to see the ordinary people so low, so devoid of shame, so disposed to commit evil for the most sordid interest; but one will cease to be astonished when one reflects on the fact, through the iniquity of governments, through their negligence to repress or punish the excesses of the rich and the great, the mental backbone of the poor is entirely broken; they despise themselves because they see themselves to be the object of contempt and reproach of all the world … .}\]

(Éthocratie, 119–20; see Éthocratie, 288)

Republican constitutions have the opposite effect on the self-esteem of ordinary citizens: ‘In republican and free states, where people are less unequal, ordinary people, free from fear, esteem themselves more because they know that the law will protect them’ (Éthocratie, 120; see Éthocratie,
However, d’Holbach maintains that in addition to constitutional reform the development of the capability of reflection is also called for:

It is hence to the peoples that truth must address itself. A nation enlightens itself proportionally to the number of persons that it includes who are capable of reflection, to make experiences on its behalf, to corrects its ideas, to combat its prejudices; whatever may be the reservations of the masses, enlightenment cannot cease to expand little by little ….

(Essai sur les Préjugés, 90)

In his view, developing the capability of reflection has substantial consequences for the self-esteem of citizens: ‘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 …’ (Essai sur les Préjugés, 71). The idea of developing a kind of self-esteem in which jealousy is absent cannot be well understood in the context of an empirical notion of esteem that regards esteem as an inherently comparative and competitive phenomenon. Rather, self-esteem without jealousy can only derive from a non-comparative, normative conception of esteem:

The love for preferment that each man has for himself, brings it about that he desires 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 as soon as 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.

(Morale Universelle, 2: 87–8)

Evidently, furthering esteem and self-esteem based on insight into what is really useful for beings of our kind is a goal that cannot be achieved by violence. This is why, in d’Holbach’s view, philosophy plays a crucial part in the project of enlightenment: ‘Let us console humans, not insult them, never despise them; let us teach them to esteem themselves, to sense their own value …’ (Essai sur les Préjugés, 166). Arguably, such a conception of the role of philosophy in furthering the sense of justified esteem and self-esteem in a wider population indicates why, in d’Holbach’s view, philosophy aims neither at retreating to a private refuge nor at justifying revolutionary action.

Conclusion

D’Holbach’s analysis of the economy of oppression, as exemplified by despotic regimes and economic exploitation, indicates that the idea of an economy of esteem may have more bite than both its contemporary proponents and critics have been aware of. This is so because his analysis shows that in situations of extreme hierarchical differences among the
members of the oppressing group – hardly a rare occurrence in the real world – the economy of esteem does not work at all well for the members of the oppressing group. As d’Holbach points out, situations of extreme power differences render the social conditions for esteem and self-esteem even within the oppressing group precarious, dependent on the will of those higher up in the hierarchy. The less powerful try to compensate the power gap through manipulative flattery, thereby undermining their self-esteem and at the same time depriving the more powerful of an important source of self-esteem. As d’Holbach has indicated, analogous arguments can be constructed for situations of economic exploitation that lead to extreme differences in wealth among the members of the exploiting group. Moreover, even if expression of public disesteem could be prevented through keeping the mechanisms of oppression secret, the problems connected with manipulative flattery could not be remedied through secrecy. Thus, interest in upholding the empirical conditions of self-esteem could function as a strong prudential motivation against participating in oppressive structures.

D’Holbach would admit that simply refraining from self-reflection could stabilize self-esteem as long as things go well for members of the oppressive group. Yet, d’Holbach is clear about the price at which this kind of stable self-esteem comes: the impaired capacity of self-reflection necessarily brings with it an impaired capacity of identifying one’s needs and rights. This argument is developed in the context of his analysis of the role of self-reflection in human life. Only persons accustomed to self-reflection, he argues, are capable of gaining insight into what is naturally good for them. This can be expressed in terms of the concept of self-respect: the readiness to defend one’s needs and rights. Self-reflection, however, also shows that what is naturally good is common to all human beings. This is why self-reflection is incompatible with disregarding the esteem or disesteem of others toward us. Hence, disregarding the esteem or disesteem of others toward us comes together with an impaired capacity for defending our own needs and rights. Conversely, if we want to be able to defend our own natural needs and rights, we must be ready to ground our self-esteem on our readiness to respect the natural needs and rights of others, no matter which group they belong to. And in this way, our desire for esteem and self-esteem can function as a motivation for specifically moral action.

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