*Rivista di filosofia* 113 (2) (2022): 341-360.

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Bentham and Helvétius on the Morality of the Desire for Esteem

Abstract

The present article draws attention to some specific similarities between Helvétius and Bentham in their treatments of the morality of the desire for esteem. These similarities can be observed in three fields: (1) Helvétius and Bentham integrate the desire for esteem into more general accounts of how sensible interest motivates human action; (2) they analyse various everyday situations in which the desire for esteems has consequences that are detrimental for social life; and (3) they emphasize republican constitution building as an instrument for making the desire for esteem virtue-supporting.

Key-words: social esteem, self-esteem, sensible interest, despotism, republicanism

Famously, Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832) ascribed to his reading of Helvétius’s *De l’ésprit* (1757) a crucial influence on his own intellectual development.[[1]](#footnote-1) It has not eluded his commentators that two of Bentham’s central ideas—the view that there is a duty to contribute as much as possible to the happiness of as many people as possible, and the view that expected happiness could be measured by weighing expected pleasures against expected displeasures—can be traced back to Helvétius.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, his interpreters have always been puzzled by the apparent lack of more specific points of influence. Bentham cites Helvétius only infrequently, and many of Bentham’s writings concern issues that Helvétius did not write about. Bentham may have been Helvétius’s disciple, but he was not Helvétius’s clone. Thus, it is not surprising that a significant part of the scholarship concerning the relation between Helvétius and Bentham has tended to emphasize the *divergences* between the two thinkers. For instance, Élie Halévy contrasts Helvétius’s scientific approach to moral philosophy with Bentham’s scientific approach to legislation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Irving Louis Horowitz contrasts Helvétius’s universalistic approach to sensualistic ethics with Bentham’s attention to the class-interests of the bourgeoisie.[[4]](#footnote-4) Édouard Pacaud contrasts Helvétius’s idea of an intuitive weighing of expected pleasures and pains with Bentham’s idea of a quantifiable calculation of expected pleasures and pains.[[5]](#footnote-5) Mark Hulliung emphasizes Helvétius’s thought experiment about a hypothetical country in which «the women were common and the children declared children of the state»—an idea completely foreign to Bentham’s moral universe.[[6]](#footnote-6) Hulliung also contrasts Helvétius’s occasional references to natural law with Bentham’s dismissal of the concept of natural law,[[7]](#footnote-7) Helvétius’s defence of the public utility of the fine arts with Bentham’s view of the fine arts as mere decorations and potential dangers to the state,[[8]](#footnote-8) and Helvétius’s acceptance of aspects of heroic ethics with the absence of any trace of heroism in Bentham.[[9]](#footnote-9)

I’m not contesting the reality of these divergences. But do they imply that, as Hulliung puts it, «any resemblance between [Helvétius’s] thought and Bentham’s utilitarianism is purely coincidental»?[[10]](#footnote-10) In the absence of textual evidence, I will remain non-committal as to matters of influence. However, I would like to draw attention to some specific similarities between Helvétius and Bentham in their treatments of the morality of the desire for esteem—similarities that I have not seen emphasized in the literature.[[11]](#footnote-11) Using Helvétius as a point of comparison, I hope, will make a strand of thought that occurs in several of Bentham’s philosophical writings more visible than it would otherwise be.

Helvétius’s and Bentham’s views on esteem are of persisting philosophical significance, for three interrelated reasons. First, both Helvétius and Bentham argue that esteem is sought for its instrumental value in securing sensible pleasure and averting sensible displeasure. Thereby, they question the assumption that we seek esteem for its own sake, and integrate the desire for esteem into more general accounts of how sensible interest motivates human action (section I). Second, both Helvétius and Bentham are acutely aware of the many ways in which sensible interest can lead to everyday pathologies of esteem—situations where individuals want to be esteemed more highly than they deserve, where they want to be esteemed for things that do not deserve esteem at all, or where they esteem others less than they deserve. This is why Helvétius’s and Bentham’s considerations caution against the optimistic assumption that, in ordinary cases, the desire for esteem is supportive of virtue (section II). Third, Helvétius and Bentham share the view that, if the desire for esteem is to become supportive of socially useful action on a large scale, legislation has to connect esteem with pleasure and disesteem with a loss of pleasure. In their view, this is a consequence of the widespread pathologies of esteem. Thus, Helvétius and Bentham hold that pathologies of esteem can only be overcome by institutional arrangements that regulate the distribution of esteem (section III).

I. Esteem and Sensible Interest

Helvétius claims that individuals desire esteem only because they expect that being esteemed will lead to pleasurable experiences.[[12]](#footnote-12) As he observes, «the desire for esteem is common to all humans, not as if no-one would not want to join to the pleasure of being admired the merit of disdaining admiration; but this disdain is not true, and the admirer is never stupid in the eyes of the admired …» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 195). More specifically, 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). In this way, Helvétius reduces the love of esteem to the love of the pleasures connected with esteem (*Oeuvres*, 2: 115-6). This has the consequence that «our love of esteem is proportional to the advantages that it provides to us» (*Oeuvres*, 2: 113).

The question, of course, is why we should believe that the services we receive or expect to receive from others should be regarded as the only reason we desire esteem. Helvétius offers a group of arguments: (1) The first argument invokes a thought experiment: imagine that there were other inhabited worlds, and that some beings with super-human powers were able to spread your fame in these other worlds. Would you prefer galactic esteem over national esteem? Helvétius suggests that everyone would prefer national esteem (*Oeuvres*, 2: 113). As a related consideration concerning esteem in remote regions of our planet, he suggests this is so because our co-nationals (in contrast with inhabitants of other worlds and inhabitants of remote regions of our planet) can do something useful for us (*Oeuvres*, 2: 114). (2) Humans show a desire for high political positions in spite of circumstances under which it is politically impossible to achieve much. People have this desire although they know that they will attract public contempt for their indifference toward public esteem. Hence, in situations where they can procure for themselves personal advantages without gaining esteem, they will prefer these advantages over being esteemed (*Oeuvres*, 2: 113). (3) One is more flattered by esteem from the powerful than from those in low positions; hence, the interest in being esteemed is proportional to the advantages that esteem can procure (ibid.). (4) Everyone in France prefers military fame to literary fame because the public gives more esteem to a general than to a philosopher (*Oeuvres*, 2: 111-2). And, as Helvétius notes, almost everyone prefers the esteem of the unenlightened multitude over the esteem of some few enlightened persons because «the larger number of admirers recalls to our mind the enjoyable image of the pleasures that they can procure for us» (*Oeuvres*, 2: 112).

Bentham does not offer comparably detailed arguments. Nevertheless, like Helvétius he ascribes a purely instrumental value to social esteem—a value in procuring the services of others. In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*,[[13]](#footnote-13) he maintains that «[t]he pleasures of a good name are the pleasures that accompany the persuasion of a man’s being in the acquisition of the possession of the good-will of the world about him; that is, of such members of society as he is likely to have concerns with; and as a means of it, either their love or their esteem, or both: and as a fruit of it, of his being in the way to have the benefit of their spontaneous and gratuitous services» (*Principles* 5.7.5). Accordingly, diminishing the esteem in which someone is held is bad because it makes it more difficult to derive happiness or security from services from others (*Principles*, 16.11). Also, the thought that one has lost the good-will of others is part of why having a low reputation is painful (*Principles*, 5.24.5)

Even if Bentham later came to distance himself from his early *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, some of his later remarks concerning esteem take up his earlier remarks, refining them and thinking through their consequences. A modification introduced in the *Theory of Legislation*[[14]](#footnote-14) emphasizes that the pleasures of being held in good esteem not only consist in the services that others actually offer to us but also in the expectation that they will offer such services in case we should need them. Among the «Pleasures of a good Reputation», Bentham counts «[t]hose which accompany the possession or acquisition of the esteem and good will of the people about us, the persons with whom we may have relations or common interests; and as a fruit of this disposition on their part, the right of expecting their voluntary and gratuitous services, should we happen to need them» (*Theory of Legislation*, 22).

Helvétius and Bentham thus would agree that what ultimately motivates the desire for esteem is the desire for pleasure. They would also agree that there is nothing intrinsically bad about this fact. On the contrary, the connection between the esteem and sensible interest makes the desire for esteem a powerful motivation of human action. Moreover, it is a motivation for acting virtuously, because doing so is most likely to secure the esteem of others. For instance, Helvétius holds that «[p]ride 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 to direct it toward honourable things» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 226). Likewise, Bentham maintains that seeking reputation—«the interest created by the power of the popular or moral sanction»—is one of the best examples of how a kind of self-interest at the same time motivates acting according to what Bentham calls the «extra-regarding interest,» that is, «the interest constituted by the pleasure or exemptions from pains of others» (*Deontology*, 192-4).[[15]](#footnote-15)

But even if Helvétius and Bentham agree that the dynamic of social esteem could work in a socially beneficial way, they are aware that sensible interest itself can lead to distortions of this dynamic. If the only value of being esteemed is instrumental—its contribution in securing the pleasures that we seek for their own sake—then the desire for the esteem of others competes with other desires that are meant to secure pleasures. Some of these other desires turn out to be contrary to the desire for social esteem. This is why both Helvétius and Bentham are aware of the many ways in which the dynamics of esteem can be distorted—not only in exceptional circumstances but also in ordinary, everyday situations.

II. Everyday Pathologies of Esteem

Helvétius claims that «personal interest is the unique and universal ground for appreciating human actions» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 185). Personal interest depends on what we take to be useful for ourselves: «we take more interest in an idea the more this idea is useful for us» (ibid.). This is why sensible interest can lead to a discrepancy between what we take to be useful for ourselves and what is useful for society (and, hence, for ourselves). When it comes to ideas that relate to our passions and tastes, Helvétius notes, we will always prefer those that are flattering to our own passions and tastes over those ideas that challenge them (*Oeuvres*, 1: 186). As he argues, this is so because these ideas are suitable to justify the high opinion that we all have of the rightness of our own minds (*Oeuvres*, 1: 187)—that is, they are suitable for giving us a pleasant feeling about ourselves. Also, he notes that thinking about ideas that diverge from one’s own requires effort (*Oeuvres*, 1: 195-6)—that is, they force us into a labour that, for most people, has an unpleasant feeling.

The high opinion that we have of ourselves and the admiration that we show for ourselves is therefore not so much the result of pride than of the «necessity in which we are to esteem ourselves in preference over others» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 201). Moreover, since no two humans have exactly similar ideas, we think that we think better than anyone else (*Oeuvres*, 1: 202). This does not exclude the insight that one is much inferior to others in highly specialized skills; still, one believes in one’s own superiority over specialists by denying the importance of their skills and by elevating the importance of common sense and social versatility (*Oeuvres*, 1: 204). Another aspect of irrational practices of esteem shows itself in systematically distorted low esteem for others. One example that Helvétius mentions is the contempt between members of different social classes (*Oeuvres*, 1: 227); another example is the contempt that we have for other historical ages (*Oeuvres*, 1: 324).

Helvétius invokes the same psychological mechanism to explain why we esteem the ideas of other societies according to their correspondence with our own ideas (*Oeuvres*, 1: 219). In his view, the resulting attitudes toward other nations are systematically flawed: «This folly, common to all nations, … leads them not only to disdain the ways of living and the customs different from their own, but also leads them to regard the superiority that some have over others as a gift of nature—a superiority that they owe only to the political constitution of their state» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 369). Accordingly, Helvétius holds that «contempt for a nation is always an unjust contempt» (*Oeuvres*, 1: 370-1). But no matter how unjust contempt between nations may be, he nevertheless describes it as being grounded in human nature (*Oeuvres*, 1: 226).

Bentham, too, is aware that most individuals try to uphold an unjustifiably high self-esteem through developing contempt for others:

«The bulk of mankind, ever ready to depreciate the character of their neighbours, in order, indirectly, to exalt their own, will take occasion to refer a motive to the class of bad ones as often as they can find one still better, to which the act might have owed its birth. Conscious that his own motives are not of the best class, or persuaded that if they be, they will not be referred to that class by others; afraid of being taken for a dupe, and anxious to show the reach of his penetration; each man takes care, in the first place, to impute the conduct of every other man to the least laudable of the motives that can account for it: in the next place, when he has gone as far that way as he can, and cannot drive down the individual motive to any lower class, he changes his battery, and attacks the very class itself. To the love of reputation he will accordingly give a bad name upon every occasion, calling it ostentation, vanity, or vain-glory.» (*Principles*, 11.17.5, note 1)

While Bentham’s portrayal of the distorting effects of inflated self-esteem for social life is similar to the protrayal given by Helvétius, there are two aspects in which Bentham’s account of pathologies of esteem goes beyond Helvétius’s. First, Bentham analyses the psychological mechanisms that detraction sets in motion in others: «[S]uch is the constitution of human nature, and such the force of prejudice, that a man merely by manifesting his own want of good-will towards you, though ever so unjust in itself, and ever so unlawfully expressed, may in a manner force others to withdraw from you a part of theirs» (*Principles*, 16.34). As Bentham describes it, an essential part of the evil of actions that express contempt consists in a change in sentiments that leads individuals to take sides *against* the victim with «a succession of cowardly sarcasms and neglects» (*Theory of Legislation*, 295). And what explains this unjustified change of sentiments is that others can gain a heightened sense of self-worth by looking down upon someone who has become the object of contempt. And this interest in self-esteem makes expressions of contempt so dangerous because these expressions can trigger public disesteem :

«Whether an insult be deserved or not, is a question which nobody deigns to ask; deserved or not, it furnishes a triumph not only to its insolent author, but to everybody else who chooses to assist in aggravating it. People take honour to themselves for trading on the fallen; an affront received separates a man from his equals; and, like a social excommunication, renders him impure in their eyes. Thus the real evil—the ignominy—is more the work of other men than of the first offender; he has but pointed out the game, they have torn it to pieces; he orders the punishment, they are the executioners. For example, let a man go so far as publicly to spit in another's face. In itself, what is this evil?—a drop of water, forgotten as soon as felt. But this drop of water turns into a corrosive poison which torments the sufferer through his whole life. What works the change? Public opinion, that opinion which distributes at pleasure honour and shame. The cruel enemy who inflicted it knew well that this affront would be the forerunner and the signal for a torrent of contempt.» (*Theory of Legislation*, 295-6)

A second respect in which Bentham’s analysis of how the desire for pleasure can lead to socially detrimental forms of striving for esteem concerns political agency, both national and international. In *Deontology*, he gives detailed consideration to how the sovereign’s desire for «honour, glory, fame, renown, encrease of dignity» leads to the «invasion of popular rights and, in case of non-resistance, oppression and misrule, in case of resistance, civil war» and to «foreign conquest …, murder, rape, depredation and destruction committed abroad» (*Deontology*, 230-1). As Bentham notes, «the quantity of these ideal possessions which, in the situation of the sovereign, it will be in a man’s power to possess will be in proportion to the quantity of power in the *international* and in the *natural* sense which he possesses» (*Deontology*, 231). Moreover, from the perspective of the sovereign, there can be no limit to striving for this kind of esteem: «according to the notions respectively attached to these names, the desire of national honour, national glory, national fame, national renown, natural dignity, can be not be carried to excess» (ibid.). Bentham concedes that such an attitude may be useful at least in the restricted field of military professions. However, a marginal comment on this assumption show that Bentham’s was critical with respect to the beneficial effects of this form of striving for esteem for society as a whole. The problem taht he sees is that this form of striving for esteem cannot be confined to a particular professional field: «[I]t is not thus confined. The poison conveyed by it is inhaled by the whole people, as well as by its rulers» (*Deontology*, 232, note 3).

What makes distorted mechanisms of esteem, for both Bentham and Helvétius, an ineliminable part of human nature is that such mechanisms make individuals feel good about themselves. But if so, then the desire for pleasure leads to antagonistic tendencies: on the one hand, the desire for social esteem will lead to actions that are socially useful and therefore have a good chance of being esteemed by others. On the other hand, if human motivation is a matter of weighing expected pleasures and pains—or, in the case of Bentham, calculating expected pleasure and pains—what guarantees that this weighing in most cases leads to desirable decisions? Perhaps the pleasures of distorted practices of esteem turn out to be stronger than the pleasures of deriving esteem from socially useful virtues.

III. Esteem and Political Agency

Helvétius and Bentham believe that pathologies of esteem are grounded in human nature. If they are right about this, then there is little reason to assume that the desire for esteem will be supportive of virtue in a manner that is both wide-spread and spontaneous. This is the problem that leads Helvétius and Bentham to the view that, in order to be supportive of socially useful virtue on a wide scale, the dynamics of esteem needs to be steered through political agency. Helvétius and Bentham agree that such steering can occur both in enlightened monarchies and republics, but not in despotic regimes. And they agree that republican constitutions are most favourable for the virtue-supportive function of the desire for esteem.

What constitutional monarchies and republican commonwealths have in common is the possibility of criticism. Crucially, if the desire for esteem is meant to motivate human action, it has to be contestable. Helvétius describes what happens to enlightened monarchs as follows:

«It is due to the dangers to which the latter have been incessantly exposed on the throne that they owe the superiority of their talents, which places them above most of the usurpers of the orient: they were in the position of a person of genius in other fields, who is always the target of criticism and always anxious about a reputation that is always about to elude him; he therefore senses that he is not only driven by the passion of vanity and that, if his vanity leads him to desire the esteem of another person, the vanity of this person must constantly refuse it if he does not console him through useful and pleasurable efforts for the pain of having to praise him. It is on the throne as in other fields that this fear keeps the mind in the state of fruitfulness …» (*Oeuvres*, 2: 80)

Similarly, in his *Book of Fallacies*[[16]](#footnote-16) Bentham regards the possibility of criticism to be one of the necessary conditions of good government. But criticism cannot take place without diminishing the esteem in which a person or a system of administration is held; and lowering the esteem in which those in charge of government are held is the only way of constantly checking the lawfulness of the measures taken (*Fallacies*, 99). As Bentham argues, the possibility of criticizing the members of the government or the system of administration does not imply a lack of allegiance to the government—suggesting that it has this implication is one of the fallacies that Bentham discusses at length. On the contrary, it is the interest in the security that government can provide that expresses itself in the critique of those aspects of government that are dysfunctional (*Fallacies*, 97). In this sense, the possibility of diminishing the esteem in which those in power are held is a stabilizing factor in a political community. This is why the possibility of criticism depends on the constitution of a nation: «Under the English constitution … the most strenuous defenders of the existing set of managing hands, as well as of the existing system of management, are not backward in representing an Opposition as being no less necessary a power among the movements of government than the regulator is in a watch» (*Fallacies*, 100). It is the constitutional guarantee of the possibility of criticism that prevents a political system from degenerating into despotism: «both hands and system will, until they arrive at the perfection of despotism and misrule, be continually growing worse and worse» (*Fallacies*, 103). And this has consequences for designing a system of institutional rewards such as salary and respect. As Bentham recommends, salaries and respect should in the smallest possible degree be habitually connected with the office itself and as much as possible with the quality of the performance in office (*Fallacies*, 108). Like Helvétius, Bentham thus regards the possibility of losing public esteem to be a strong motivation for those in leading political positions.

Evidently, paying attention to public opinion supports responsible political action only when public opinion reliably traces achievements that are publicly useful. Given the widespread occurrence of pathologies of esteem, it cannot be assumed that such an outcome will occur spontaneously. For both Helvétius and Bentham, the everyday pathologies of esteem require political interventions. And they agree that taking political action to guarantee the fairness of the distribution of public esteem is something that distinguishes constitutions that can take advantage of the desire for esteem from despotic regimes.

Helvétius points out that experience with oriental despotisms demonstrates that people show contempt for the striving for public esteem when the political system does not offer any rewards for merit but rather discourages actions that document moral and intellectual virtues: «One makes few efforts to merit esteem in countries where esteem is sterile …» (*Oeuvres*, 2: 114). In Helvétius’s view, a just distribution of esteem is not just the result of *politics*, but the result of specific political *constitutions*.[[17]](#footnote-17) In this respect, the connection between the desire for esteem and sensible interest becomes crucial. Helvétius offers an argument for why, in a despotic regime, the desire for esteem does not motivate virtuous action:

«[I]f honours derive their price from the way in which they are administered, and if in the Orient sultans are the distributors of honour, one senses that they must often discredit honours through the bad choice of those whom they decorate with them. Also, in those countries, honours … cannot vividly flatter pride because they are rarely united with glory, which is not at the disposal of princes but of peoples; for glory is nothing other than the expression of public gratitude.» (*Oeuvres*, 2: 196)

In Bentham, one finds similar observations:

«Go back in the field of *place*. Turn to any of the Mahometan, to any of those called Oriental nations. In those countries—under their governments—degrees not numerous, but the distance between degree and degree enormous. There, unless in so far as inhibited by probity, no obsequiousness is undue. To how low soever a pitch carried, self-abasement is self-preservation. Carried to whatsoever excess, servility is but conformity to the laws of prudence.» (*Deontology*, 228)

As to the best remedy for the collapse of the dynamic of esteem in despotic regimes, Helvétius recommends the Greek and Roman model of the division of power between the people and the aristocracy or kings. As he argues, such constitutions bind particular interests to the public interest because the division of power «forces citizens to observe each other and to restrain each other» (*Oeuvres*, 2: 183). In a republican constitution, the economy of esteem is always a fragile interplay between political agency and public opinion. This is why those who are active in defining positions of honour have to develop a fine discernment for when a certain kind of honour has become too common since «honours owe their price only to the opinion of humans» (*Oeuvres*, 2: 198). The magistrate of a republic, Helvétius demands, must follow it as 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 devaluate these signs (ibid.). Since this is such a delicate task, Helvétius proposes the creation of institutions that have the task of regulating the distribution of honours in a society (ibid.). Under a republican constitution, the desire for esteem thus plays a central role in social regulation. If the political institutions define positions of honour in such a way that personal and public interests are united, the desire for esteem may also be largely supportive of virtuous action. Still, the fact that esteem leads to enough power to secure sensible interest may be shaped more profoundly by political institutions than we may be aware of.

Bentham’s suggestions about how esteem-related sanctions could work are more concrete with a view to punishment than with a view to rewards. In *The Rationale of Punishment* (based on notes from 1775, first published in 1811),[[18]](#footnote-18) he maintains that «the sense of infamy which constitutes the characteristic evil, is liable in many instances to be brought upon a man by the doom of the political magistrate» (*Punishment*, 211). For instance, he discusses the legal status of infamy or «forfeiture of reputation,» which has a historical background in the Roman-law tradition (*Punishment*, 215). Other possibilities of institutionalized sanction include shaming offenders by making their offenses publicly known (*Punishment*, 226); publishing evidence for one kind of practice, which is commonly taken to be evidence for another practice which is already in public disrepute (*Punishment*, 225); prohibiting certain activities that are a source of reputation (*Punishment*, 224); and degradation (*Punishment* 234). Already existing patterns of public disesteem also can be used by the legislator:

«There is an art of guiding opinion, without the public suspecting how it is led. It consists in arranging things so that the act which you wish to prevent cannot be performed without first doing something else, which popular opinion condemns already. If it be desired, for example, to secure the payment of an impost, you may exact from him whose duty it is to pay, a certificate or an oath that he has paid. To take a false oath, to fabricate a false certificate, under what ever pretence, are offences which the public is prepared beforehand to stamp with disapprobation. So that here we discover a sure means of rendering an offence infamous, which without this addition would not be so.» (*Theory of Legislation*, 433)

As to the side of esteem-related rewards, Bentham notes that «in civilized society there are many sources of enjoyment, and consequently many wants, which can be supplied only from considerations of reciprocal esteem … » (*Punishment*, 221). And, like Helvétius, Bentham observes that the effectiveness of these dynamics depends on constitutional structures, with two clearly identified extremes: «Under a popular Government it is carried to the highest degree, under a despotic Government it is reduced almost to nothing» (*Punishment*, 221). What sets Bentham, however, apart from Helvétius are his considerations concerning the influence of class membership on the dynamic of esteem:

«Among the poorer classes … sensibility to honour is in general less acute. A day labourer, if he is industrious, though his character is not unspotted, will be at no loss for work. His companions are companions of labour, not of pleasure: from their gratuitous services he has little to expect and as little to ask.» (*Punishment*, 218-9).

Consequently, Bentham believes that it is in the middle classes that «the inconveniences arising from the forfeiture of esteem are most sensibly felt» (*Punishment*, 218). But the difference that Bentham has in mind is a difference of degree, and he is clear that republican constitutions increase the motivating force of the desire for esteem for the working classes:

«The free workman has his honour like the rest of us. In a free country there is a shame attached to the reputation of being idle and incapable; in this respect, the eyes of his comrades are an addition to those of his employer, and this punishment of honour is inflicted upon an infinity of occasions, by judges who have no interest to soften it. Free labourers exercise in this way a reciprocal inspection, and are sustained by emulation. This motive has much less force upon a slave. The treatment to which slaves are subjected renders them little sensible to a pain so delicate as that of honour; and as the injustice of labouring without compensation, for the sole benefit of another, cannot escape them, slaves are not ashamed to avow to each other a repugnance to labour, in which they all agree.» (*Theory of Legislation*, 205-6)

Bentham’s observation draws attention to how a seemingly spontaneous dynamic esteem—the mutual esteem that arises from assessing abilities in manual labour—depends on political constitutions. Still, it does not offer a clue as to how a system of esteem-related rewards could be institutionalized. Bentham envisages a role for the public in such rewards: «An enlightened public, the depository of the laws and of the archives of honour, and administrator of the moral sanction, forms a supreme tribunal, which decides upon all cases and all persons» (*Theory of Legislation*, 432). At the same time, he is aware that designing a system of esteem-related rewards will take a lot of prudence: «It is very difficult to employ the motive of honour as a means to aid the enforcement of the laws … Rewards not well selected, repulse, instead of attracting, and deprive the law of much gratuitous assistance» (*Theory of Legislation*, 434).

IV. Concluding Remarks

The passages from Helvétius and Bentham considered here draw attention to a common line of argument. The argumentative core shared by Helvétius and Bentham could be expressed as follows:

1. Since esteem is sought for the sake of sensible pleasure, it is a matter of prudence to seek the esteem of others.
2. However, sensible interest often leads to inflated self-esteem and humiliation of others.
3. Therefore, an institutional framework has to be created that guarantees that seeking the esteem of others leads to greater pleasure than cultivating inflated self-esteem and humiliating others.

This line of argument challenges the assumptions that esteem is sought for its own sake, that we usually esteem personal qualities that are also good for others, and that what we esteem is largely spontaneous. Helvétius and Bentham differ when it comes to the considerations that they adduce to support this line of argument, and one finds a wealth of observations in Bentham that complement the observations made by Helvétius, thereby giving further plausibility to the argumentative patterns that Bentham shares with Helvétius. At the same time, Bentham is as little forthcoming as to how the distribution of esteem could be implemented in concrete institutional frameworks. This is no trivial problem since an institutional structure would have to guarantee not only standards of distributive justice but also find a way to let a sufficiently large number of citizens participate in the esteem distributed.

Some reflections by Bentham’s French editor and translator, Étienne Dumont (1759 – 1829) may give some indication as to how this lacuna could be filled. Dumont had the habit of supplementing Bentham’s notes with chapter-long additions of his own, where he had the feeling that Bentham had omitted something important.[[19]](#footnote-19) The considerations about the role of esteem in an institutionalized system of rewards that he inserted into *The Rationale of Reward* (based on notes written shortly after 1775, first published in 1811)[[20]](#footnote-20) are an example for this. Dumont is aware of the absurdity of giving prizes to the single best book or the single most virtuous action of a given year.[[21]](#footnote-21) He offers a number of observations concerning how things could be done better. In the context of small rural societies and of city republics such as Geneva, he points out that practices of rewarding outstanding performances in everyday activities are already widespread.[[22]](#footnote-22) He takes the English *Humane Society* that honours those who performed life-saving acts by making them publicly known to be an example that could be emulated on a wider scale—an institution that works in a non-competitive manner in the sense that it intends certain virtuous dispositions to become more widespread.[[23]](#footnote-23) The third strategy of rewarding common virtues that Dumont recommends is building up a system of comparative tables that collect quantitative data concerning the performance of particular institutions (for instance, regional administrations, hospitals and tribunals).[[24]](#footnote-24) To be sure, this system will create winners and losers. For instance, those who belong to administrations that achieve the lowest level of delinquency, or to hospitals with the greatest success rates combined with an economic use of resources, or to tribunals with the largest number of decisions reached in the shortest time and the smallest number of successful revisions can regard themselves as winners.[[25]](#footnote-25) But belonging to the winners does not presuppose *exceptional* talents, or membership in the higher classes. Also, it excludes fewer individuals from participating in the competition, thereby motivating more individuals to develop those ordinary virtues on which the good functioning of society depends—which itself can be a source of self-satisfaction independently of the question of whether one has surpassed others in a competition.

1. For an overview of Bentham’s references to Helvétius, see M. Hoesch, *From Theory to Practice: Bentham’s Reception of Helvétius*, «Utilitas»,XXX, 2018, pp. 294-316, at pp. 294-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For detailed discussion, see D. Long, *‘Utility’ and the ‘Utility Principle’: Hume, Smith, Bentham, Mill*, «Utilitas»,II, 1990, pp. 12-39; F. Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill*, London, Routledge, 2003, chap. 5; E. de Champs, *Enlightenment and Utility. Bentham in French, Bentham in France*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 42-5; Hoesch, *From Theory to Practice*, cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. É. Halévy, *La formation du radicalisme philosophique. Tome I. La jeunesse de Bentham 1776* – *1789*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1995, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I. L. Horowitz, *Claude Helvétius: Philosopher of Democracy and Enlightenment*, New York, Paine-Whitman, 1954, pp. 159-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E. Pacaud, *Sur l’une des sources de l’utilitarisme benthamien: la théorie de l’utilité de Claude-Adrien Helvétius*, in *Deux siècles d’utilitarisme*, ed. by M. Bozzo-Rey and E. Dardenne, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2011, pp. 41-52. On Bentham’s conception of calculation, see M. Quinn, *Bentham on Mesuration. Calculation and Moral Reasoning*, «Utilitas»,XXVI, 2014, pp. 61-104; J.-P. Cléro, *Le calcul benthamien des plaisirs et des peines*, «Archives de philosophie»,LXXVIII, 2015, pp. 229-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. M. Hulliung, *From Classical to Modern Republicanism. Reflections on England, Scotland, America and France*, New York, Routledge 2020, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. On the relevance of heroic ethics for Helvétius’s account of social esteem, see F. Toto, *L’impensé de Claude-Adrien Helvétius. Le problème de l’estime dans* De l’esprit, in *La reconnaissance avant la reconnaissance. Archéologie d’une problématique moderne*, ed. by F. Toto, T. Pénigaud de Mourgues and E. Renault, Lyon, ENS Éditions, 2017, pp. 167-94; F. Toto, *‘Le héros citoyen.’ L’esemplarità in Helvétius*, forthcoming in «Rivista di storia della filosofia», 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hulliung, *From Classical to Modern Republicanism*, cit., p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This holds also for four volumes on cultural transfers between France and Britain: *Anglo-French Attitudes. Comparisons and Transfers between English and French Intellectuals since the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by C. Charle, J. Vincent, and J. Winter, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007; *Bentham et la France. Fortune et infortunes de l’utilitarisme*, ed. by E. de Champs and J.-P. Cléro, Oxford, SVEC, 2009; *Cultural Transfers: France and Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. by A. Thomson, S. Burrows, E. Dziembowski and S. Audidière, Oxford, SVEC, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. All references to Helvétius’s writings will be to *Oeuvres complettes d’Helvetius. Nouvelle édition, corrigé & augmenté sur les manuscrit de l’auteur*, 5 vols., Paris, Serviere, 1795. This edition is available online at the Gallica website of the Bibliothèque Nationale. I have checked the text against C.-A. Helvétius, *De l’esprit*, ed. by J. Steffen, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2016. All translations from Helvétius are my own. For an overview of Helvétius’s philosophy, see J.-L. Longué, *Le système d’Helvétius*, Paris, Champion 2008; on Helvétius’s political thought, see J.-F. Spitz, *L’Amour de l’égalité. Essai sur la critique de l’égalitarisme républicain en France, 1770* – *1830*, Paris, Vrin-EHESS, 2000, pp. 53-78; D. Wooton, *Helvétius: From Radical Enlightenment to Revolution*, «Political Theory», XXVIII, 2000, pp. 307-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. J. Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. by J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996 (henceforth: *Principles*). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. J. Bentham, *Theory of Legislation*, trans. R. Hildreth, London, Trübner, 1871. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. J. Bentham, *Deontology, together with A Table of the Springs of Action, and Article on Utilitarianism*, ed. by A. Goldworth, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983 (henceforth: *Deontology*). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. J. Bentham, *The Book of Fallacies*, ed. by P. Schofield, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2015 (henceforth: *Fallacies*). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On the role of constitutions in Helvétius’s account of social esteem, see A. Blank, *Helvétius’s Challenge: Moral Luck, Political Constitutions and the Economy of Esteem*, «European Journal of Philosophy», XXVIII, 2020, pp. 337-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. J. Bentham, *The Rationale of Punishment*, London, Robert Heward, 1830 (henceforth: *Punishment*).On matters of chronology, see Dumont’s preface to J. Bentham, *Théorie des peines et des récompenses*, 2 vols., Paris and London, Bossange & Masson, 1811 (the first publication of what later became two separately published works, *The Rationale of Punishment* and *The Rationale of Reward*). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. On the personal relations between Bentham and Dumont, see C. Blount, *Bentham, Dumont and Mirabeau, an Historical Revision*, «University of Birmingham Historical Journal», III, 1952, pp. 53-67; F. Rosen, *‘You have set me a strutting, my dear Dumont’: la dette de Bentham à l’égard de Dumont*, in *Bentham et la France*, cit., pp. 85-96; de Champs, *Bentham and France*, cit., especially chap. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Dumont’s preface to Bentham, *Théorie des peines et des récompenses*, cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. J. Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward*, London, Robert Heward, 1830, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., pp. 130-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., pp. 131-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)