Self-Knowledge and Varieties of Human Excellence in the French Moralists

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Abstract

Contemporary accounts of knowing one’s own mental states can be instructively supplemented by early modern accounts that understand self-knowledge as an important factor for flourishing human life. This article argues that in the early modern French moralists, one finds diverging conceptions of how knowing one’s own personal qualities could constitute a kind of human excellence: François de la Rochefoucauld (1613-1680) argues that the value of knowing one’s own character faults could contribute to an attitude of self-acceptance that liberates one from the effort of deceiving oneself and others. Madeleine de Scudéry (1607-1701) argues that knowing one’s own character faults could be an incentive for self-cultivation that leads to the development of character traits that are naturally good. Anne-Thérèse de Lambert (1647-1733) concurs with Scudéry’s insight and develops it further. According to Lambert, self-knowledge is crucial for developing character traits that give rise to the natural right of being esteemed by others and, hence, crucial for justified and stable self-esteem.

1. Introduction

Ancient and early modern views on the nature of self-knowledge differ significantly from contemporary accounts of knowing oneself.[[1]](#endnote-1) The research interests that drive contemporary work are focused on phenomena such as being aware of bodily feelings, moods and beliefs. Evidently, such forms of awareness are basic to our mental activities, and they pose intricate philosophical problems. Still, focussing on these experiences and the questions that they raise may draw attention away from a further role that knowing oneself could play. As Ursula Renz has recently argued, the ancients and early moderns held a view of self-knowledge as a personal achievement that presupposes a real effort and is important for our lives. As she describes it, self-knowledge in the sense of a personal achievement possesses two characteristics:

(1) Self-Ascription: It discloses to a person “some of her properties, and in such a manner that she is willing to commit herself to the view of their being properties of herself” (Renz 2017, 265).

(2) Connectedness: “[W]hether or not some insight improves our overall grasp of ourselves is dependent on how it relates to other features of ourselves, such as our physiological and psychological condition, our personality, our culture and biography” (ibid., 265-266).

The second characteristic explains why the relevance of a piece of the knowledge in question can only be assessed “with respect to the particular knowing subject” and sometimes “its importance can only be judged by the subject itself” (ibid., 266). Due to the importance of such knowledge for the life of a person, it can be regarded as “a specific kind of human excellence” (ibid., 256). The notion of connectedness suggests that the kind of excellence that Renz has in mind does not consist in the skill for carrying through an isolated cognitive task but rather in the role that such a skill can play in functioning well as a human being. Moreover, the notion of excellence implies that the relevant achievement lies significantly above the average achievement, without involving the idea that the relevant achievements lie on a scale with a clearly defined maximum.

While Renz is concerned with the conceptual framework in which self-knowledge as an achievement could be analysed, her analysis raises the question of how the forms of human excellence resulting from knowing oneself could be realized. One of the historical examples discussed by Renz is François de la Rochefoucauld (1613-1680). Renz conjectures that La Rochefoucauld uses a writing strategy that is calculated to surprise his readers because he hopes that his readers will thereby gain insights that “eventually result in an improvement of their self-knowledge” (Renz 2017, 260).[[2]](#endnote-2) This conjecture seems highly plausible to me. Of course, it did not elude La Rochefoucauld that there is something pleasant about entertaining self-related illusions. For instance, he observes that one would not have much pleasure if one did not flatter oneself (maxim 123), and that one does a bad service to those whom one disillusions about themselves (maxim 92). Still, these remarks cannot be read as implying an endorsement of the value of illusions for human life. On the contrary, his ideal of the “true” *honnête* *homme* involves the absence of illusions concerning one’s own faults (maxim 202). Clearly, living without illusions about oneself, for La Rochefoucauld, is both possible and better than enjoying the pleasures that illusions may bring with them.

Still, it can be asked whether the human excellence described by La Rochefoucauld might be the only way of functioning well associated with early modern views of self-knowledge. In what follows, I would like to suggest that there may be not only *one* sense in which self-knowledge can be said to be a kind of human excellence, but *two* different senses. To substantiate this suggestion, I will contrast La Rochefoucauld’s views on knowing oneself with those found in two other early modern French moralists, Madeleine de Scudéry (1607-1701) and Anne-Thérèse de Courcelles de Marguénat, Marquise de Lambert (1647-1733). Scudéry and Lambert agree with La Rochefoucauld that the value of self-knowledge consists in developing *honnêteté*.However, it will useful to have in mind a distinction between two different concepts of *honnêteté* first suggested by Maurice Magendie: the “bourgeois” or “moral conception,” in contrast to what Magendie called the “conception mondaine”—which could be translated as the “gallant conception” (reflecting the terminology that Scudéry and Lambert use to describe this aspect of *honnêteté*[[3]](#endnote-3)).

To state it briefly, the gallant conception is concerned with how to communicate successfully in courtly society, while the bourgeois conception is concerned with moral virtues, especially virtues connected with family life.[[4]](#endnote-4) Both conceptions can be found in La Rochefoucauld, Scudéry and Lambert; however, I would like to argue that La Rochefoucauld is instructive for seeing how the gallant conception leads to one way of understanding the connection between self-knowledge and human excellence, while Scudéry and Lambert are instructive for seeing how the bourgeois conception leads to a different understanding of this connection. The relation to the self that derives from the gallant conception of *honnêteté* could be described as self-acceptance—a kind of acquiescence with oneself *in spite of* negative judgements concerning the moral value of one’s character traits. Persons who have this attitude function better in life in the sense that they are more relaxed and get along more easily in the commerce of society. The relation to the self that derives from the bourgeois conception could be described as self-cultivation—a conscious effort to improve one’s own moral qualities. A benefit of self-cultivation could be that it enables one to develop another kind of affirmative relation to the self—not merely self-acceptance but self-esteem.

2. La Rochefoucauld on Self-Knowledge and Self-Acceptance

The obstacles to acquiring self-knowledge are always on La Rochefoucauld’s mind, and his conception of the value of self-knowledge can be understood as a partial response to the sceptical challenges that he raises himself. In a long series of remarks, he points out that seemingly virtuous actions are often the result of self-interested motivations (maxims 1, 18, 55, 83, 180, 213, 220, 233). His analysis of virtues as combinations of vices that mutually cancel out their detrimental effects can be understood as a consequence of these observations.[[5]](#endnote-5) He also notes that insights into our true motivations are highly unpleasant, which is why we have a strong motivation for deceiving both others and ourselves about our true motivations (maxims 36, 87, 114, 119, 196, 227; see Moriarty 2006, 316-327). The challenges that La Rochefoucauld raises for self-knowledge thus derive from everyday experiences with our mental life and our life in society. This is why adducing other such experiences can be the right response to these challenges. This kind of response is what one finds in La Rochefoucauld, Scudéry and Lambert alike.

La Rochefoucauld believes that deception and self-deception are not the *only* things that keep individuals content with themselves and connected to others. To begin with, he notes that it is much more difficult to deceive others than to deceive oneself (maxim 115). On the contrary, he suggests that we gain by letting ourselves be seen as we are (maxim 457). This is why openness about one’s own faults is closely connected with his notion of *honnêteté*. As La Rochefoucauld puts it, true *honnêtes hommes* “perfectly know” their faults and “confess them”—this is exactly what distinguishes them from false *honnêtes hommes* who pretend to have virtues that they do not have (maxim 202). Consequently, the true *honnête homme* is not proud about anything (maxim 203) and always wants to be exposed to the view of other true *honnêtes gens* (maxim 206).

One aspect of what, according to La Rochefoucauld, is valuable about the qualities of the *honnête homme* could be compared with the function that Montesquieu ascribes to virtue, and especially to truthfulness, in the social life of monarchies. As Montesquieu analyses it, virtue under a monarchic constitution is not so much something that one owes to others but rather something that one owes to oneself. In particular, openness (*franchise*) it is an attitude that is opposed to the insecure and inhibited carriage resulting from having to hide something. Openness demands keeping to the truth in speaking, but *not* out of respect for truth itself but because it contributes to realizing the aristocratic personality ideal of being courageous and free (Montesquieu 1875-1879, 3:143 [IV, ii]).

From a similar perspective, La Rochefoucauld analyses confidence, understood as the practice of sharing secrets with others who are considered trustworthy (ibid., 209). As he describes it, confidence is “a kind of dependence to which we submit voluntarily” (ibid., 207), and holds that the relations between *honnêtes gens* could not subsist without a certain amount of mutual confidence (ibid., 197). But why would *honnêtes gens* want to enter into such mutual dependence? As La Rochefoucauld explains, it gives “an air of reassurance and tact, so that there is never any reason to fear that anything imprudent could possibly be said” (ibid., 199). Confidence thus contributes to a personality ideal whose value clearly relates to the smooth functioning of social relations. Something similar holds for the role of sincerity. In his *Self-Portrait* (1658), La Rochefoucauld ascribes to himself such a strong desire to be the complete *honnête homme* “that my friends could give me no greater pleasure than by sincerely showing me my faults” (ibid., 281). As he claims, he has always received such advice “with the greatest possible joy and in the most submissive spirit that one could desire” (ibid.). Openness about one’s faults thus has a function in entertaining friendships and in upholding a serene state of mind; however, what is perspicuously absent from this characterization of *honnêteté*—although La Rochefoucauld immediately before ascribes to himself “virtuous sentiments” and “beautiful inclinations”—is any reference to the desire of *improving* character traits. A similar observation can be made in the *Remarques diverses*: “Sincerity is a form of open-heartedness, and shows us as we really are; it is a love of truth, a dislike of disguising ourselves, a desire to compensate for our faults and even reduce them in a meritorious way by confessing them” (ibid., 207). No word here about *amending* our faults; rather, being open about our faults is seen as a merit that can counterbalance them in some way. The *Maxims* are even more precise about this respect: Sincerity about our faults “may repair the damage that our faults have done to us in other people’s eyes” (maxim 184).

 Does one find a conception of *honnêteté* in La Rochefoucauld that goes beyond the gallant conception? Perhaps the strongest reference to the moral conception *honnêteté* can be found in the *Remarques diverses*:

The *honnêtes gens* should, without any prejudice, approve what deserves to be approved, follow what deserves to be followed, and to be proud of nothing …: we must be able to distinguish between what is good in general and what is appropriate for ourselves, so that we can, with good reason, follow our natural inclinations toward the things that please us. If men wanted to excel only by means of their own talents, and only by doing their duty, there would be nothing false in their tastes and conduct; they would show themselves as they really are; they would judge everything by their own light, and cling to it by their own powers of reason … (ibid., 225)

Except for the idea that the *honnête homme* is not proud of anything, nothing of this passage made it into any of the five editions of the *Maxims*. But the final version of the *Maxims* still suggests that there can be a prudent use of vices in order to find a remedy for the evils of life (maxim 182), that “supreme cleverness lies in knowing the exact value of things” (maxim 244), and that, even if someone with vices can be esteemed, someone destitute of virtues never will be (maxim 186).

No doubt, then, there are moral aspects to La Rochefoucauld’s conception of *honnêteté*. Note, however, that these aspects do not coincide with the Stoic conception of the *honestum* as what would be praiseworthy even if its utility were set aside (see Cicero, *De finibus*,II, 14.45). Rather, in La Rochefoucauld’s view, reason or prudence seeks to reach good consequences or to avoid bad ones. Such a conception need not necessarily go beyond the conventions of aristocratic life. Even if the customs of aristocratic life are highly context-sensitive, they can be regarded as a solution for the evils of life (perhaps not the worst one). Still, La Rochefoucauld’s formulation applies to other forms of avoiding evils, as well. This is suggested when he points out that the best thing that can be said in favour of virtue is that it can avoid the suffering resulting from crimes (maxim 183). Thus, what motivates a prudent management of vices is a kind of interest, but it would be an interest in handling the evils that plague human life.

Even if there are moral aspects to La Rochefoucauld’s treatment of *honnêteté*, there is a significant qualification to the sense in which, for La Rochefoucauld, moral virtue could be regarded as a kind of personal achievement. This qualification derives from his treatment of luck. To be sure, he regards both luck and cleverness as two complementary sources of virtue (maxim 1). But weighing matters a lot in this respect. For La Rochefoucauld, luck corrects more character faults than reason ever could (maxim 154). Moreover, even if we are lucky, this does not change the nature of virtue—for instance, even luckily acquired moderation is nothing other than the combination of fear of falling into contempt, vain ostentation of our mental powers, and the desire to appear greater than one’s fate (maxim 17 and 18). Even more disturbingly, La Rochefoucauld regards wisdom itself as the result of luck, as much as all other goods in human life (maxim 323). Physiological factors and rational capabilities thus explain how self-improvement is possible. But if rationality is mainly the result of lucky circumstances, neither having virtues nor discarding illusions about the self seems to be much of a personal achievement. Rather, all factors that lead to virtue and self-knowledge turn out to be natural factors that are fortuitous in the sense that they are not under our own control. If reasoning itself just happens to us, then there is not much occasion to think highly of our contribution to an admittedly preferable outcome.

Still, there is a sense in which the self-knowledge that La Rochefoucauld ascribes to the *honnête homme* exemplifies the characteristics identified by Renz. Clearly, the true *honnête homme* fulfils the characteristic of self-ascription of one’s own properties. Moreover, the properties in question are not just peripheral or momentary, but rather character traits that define the personality of their bearers. Such properties can plausibly be understood to be influenced by cultural factors, and, evidently, they influence biographies. In this way, the self-knowledge of the true *honnête homme* fulfils the characteristic of connectedness. Renz further explicates the value of self-knowledge that fulfils these two characteristics by pointing out that such knowledge creates self-intimacy and a sense of friendship for ourselves (Renz 2017, 268). Renz seems to take the value of these kinds of self-relations to be self-evident because we “can choose our friends, but not the persons we are identical with” (ibid.). However, it may be objected that greater self-intimacy may not automatically create feelings of friendship—after all, if the qualities with which one becomes intimately acquainted turn out to be repelling, this will not automatically lead us to like the person who has these qualities. And while other early modern thinkers, including Lambert, used the concept of friendship with oneself, it is absent from La Rochefoucauld. But there is a different sense in which a person who discards illusions may function better in life than a self-deceived person. La Rochefoucauld’s remarks about the *honnête homme* imply a relation to the self that could be described as self-acceptance. This can be seen as a quality that is good both in relation to others and in relation to oneself. The true *honnête homme* who develops self-acceptance frees himself from the (often futile) effort that the false *honnête homme* invests into deceiving others. And evidently it is an attitude that greatly facilitates living together with others who entertain the same attitude toward themselves.

However, there is something deeply problematic about the self-acceptance deriving from the gallant conception of *honnêteté*. This becomes clear from the gendered aspects of La Rochefoucauld’s conception of *honnêteté*. He really means *men* when he is talking about *honnête hommes*. To women, he concedes an entirely different kind of *honnêteté* that reduces to the desire for reputation and repose (maxim 205). He also regards the *honnêteté* of women to be only a result of the absence of temptation (maxim 368), hence, not as a stable character trait. And he does not regard the life of *honnêtes femmes* to be pleasurable: As he remarks, there are few *honnêtes femmes* who are not tired of their way of living (maxim 367). Why does he ascribe to men and women completely different forms of *honnêteté*? The context of the gallant life could offer an explanation. This is so because the gallant conception works within the conventions of aristocratic life, which assigned different roles to men and women. One of the central aspects of the female role in the gallant life was coquetry. A coquette was understood to be a woman who behaves in a way calculated to trigger feelings of love without the intention of binding herself to anyone.[[6]](#endnote-6) La Rochefoucauld describes coquetry as a central character trait of women (maxims 241 and 334). And he holds that, in contrast to *honnêtes hommes* who at least know their faults, women suffer from a lack of self-knowledge because they do not even know the whole extent of their coquetry (maxim 332). This explanation for the lack of self-knowledge in women confirms that La Rochefoucauld develops his gendered conception of *honnêteté* very much from the perspective of the conventions of aristocratic life. And according to these conventions, it is an accepted and desirable character trait for men to be open about their vices, while what is valued in women is their ability to please (men).

Even more problematically, not only La Rochefoucauld’s gallant conception of *honnêteté*, but also his conception of rationality, which underlies his moral conception of *honnêteté*, has a gendered aspect. For instance, he believes that the mind of most women fortifies their folly, not their rationality (maxim 340). Likewise, he conjectures that it is the temperament that gives the rules for what the reason of women can acknowledge (maxim 346). Somewhat paradoxically, then, there seems to be evidence for the persistence of a moral conception of *honnêteté* in La Rochefoucauld. But unlike his gallant conception of *honnêteté*, it is not so clear how his moral conception of *honnêteté* could contribute to a positive attitude toward the self. And like his gallant conception of *honnêteté*, his moral conception of *honnêteté* does not lead to a solution to the problem of the gendered nature of his conception of self-knowledge. Still, the moral aspects of La Rochefoucauld’s conception of *honnêteté* presuppose something important: namely, that it is possible to identify character traits that are useful for us. This is the possibility that Scudéry and Lambert explore in more detail. And they do so in a way that offers an alternative to La Rochefoucauld’s gendered conception of *honnêteté* and rationality.

3. Scudéry on Self-Knowledge and Self-Cultivation

The interlocutors in Scudéry’s imaginary conversation *Sur la connaissance d’autruy, et de soi mesme* identify a series of the obstacles to acquiring self-knowledge:[[7]](#endnote-7) Knowing oneself is not simply a matter of observation (Scudéry 1680, 1:74); on the contrary, one develops a repertoire of excuses for one’s own faults (ibid., 1:75); *amour-propre* is what prevents one from knowing oneself well (ibid., 1:78); the same holds for becoming habituated with our own faults (ibid., 1:79); one diminishes one’s own faults, aggrandizes one’s own good qualities, disguises oneself, and represents oneself as one wants to be and not as one is (ibid., 1:110); and false praises are really pleasurable such that “one insensibly comes to persuade oneself about them” (ibid., 1:110-111). Systematic self-deception is therefore no less a genuine possibility for Scudéry than it is for La Rochefoucauld:

From self-interest, from curiosity, or even from a good opinion of their own intelligence, everyone wants to delve deep into the heart of other people, without ever reflecting on their own … People esteem themselves, and sometimes admire themselves quite unjustly; and falling asleep over this esteem, they busy themselves getting to know other people, while being profoundly ignorant of what they are. (ibid., 1:108)

What should be bad about being systematically deceived about oneself? Scudéry’s dialogue is triggered by the provocative claim, made by one of the interlocutors, that “[i]n order to experience enough sweetness of living, you should just stop at the surface of things, for as soon as you delve a bit deeper, you find some bitterness even in pleasures …” (Scudéry 1680, 1:71). For instance, “if you want to have lovers, you must think that everything that looks like it is love: if you want to have friends, then you must be happy with the testimonies of friendship that you get, without making an effort to investigate whether they are sincere” (ibid., 1:72). What should be wrong about such an attitude? One objection raised in Scudéry’s conversation is that self-knowledge is necessary in order to be able to develop one’s real talents (ibid., 1:122). This closely corresponds to one of the functions that Renz assigns to self-knowledge: it “provides us with good ground for future self-guidance” (Renz 2017, 268). However, it is not clear why the self-knowledge of La Rochefoucauld’s *honnêtes hommes* should be inferior in this respect. A further objection presented by one of Scudéry’s interlocutors is that self-knowledge is necessary for advancing in virtue (Scudéry 1680, 1:122). On first sight, this seems to be a questionable claim because, as Renz points out, it is not obvious that “self-knowledge results in a person’s being more virtuous” (Renz 2017, 267). Evidently, Scudéry has to explain how self-knowledge makes us morally better and why we are better off if we are morally better. This is where her own conception of *honnêteté* becomes pertinent.

In Scudéry one finds a fascinating combination of insights into the role of *honnêteté* in gallant life and insights into the moral dimensions of *honnêteté*, as Magendie has pointed out(Magendie 1925, 652). As an authority on the gallant life—think of her dialogue “L’air gallant”—Scudéry is clearly aware of the existence of a highly attractive alternative to a moral conception of *honnêteté*: the attitude that she calls “universal good manners” (*civilité universelle*). As she describes it, this attitude is characterized by a readiness to perform mutual good offices, developing esteem for others in certain respects, even if one takes them to be persons of mediocre merit, and the habit of meeting persons whom one finds entertaining without esteeming them (Scudéry 1680, 1:84). And she emphasizes that such an attitude does not involve any vicious ingratitude, because gratitude is due only to great merit, great services and great friendship (which are absent from the gallant life) (ibid., 1:87).

What Scudéry says about sincerity and confidence falls within the gallant conception of *honnêteté*, as well. As she puts it, sincerity carries with it “all the charms of openness (*franchise*) and all the sweetness of confidence” (ibid., 1:305). As La Rochefoucauld’s *honnête homme*, the sincere person wants to be seen in full light, since for true sincerity “it is advantageous … if one examines it carefully, out of fear to be taken as false sincerity, which sometimes deceives those who do not know well the true one” (ibid. 1:306). And while false sincerity adapts itself to others, “true sincerity reflects neither upon others nor upon itself …” (ibid., 1:306-307). Strikingly, then, sincerity here is described as an attitude that is *not* an outcome of self-reflection. And, as Scudéry goes on to explain, sincerity is a character trait of *honnêtes gens* that does not exclude flattering language, as long as one knows that this language does not deceive anyone, because even saying something that is false can be an expression of genuine esteem (ibid., 1:309-310). Similarly, with respect to the prudential rules for confidence she emphasizes bonds of mutual dependence even more strongly than La Rochefoucauld: “One must give to each other hostages, as in war, when one carries out a capitulation”—a thought upon which Scudéry subsequently comments: “This is thought very gallantly” (Scudéry 1692, 2:642). Thus, in Scudéry, as in La Rochefoucauld, there clearly is a value to sincerity and confidence that derives from the norms of aristocratic life.

Still, Scudéry develops an alternative to the gallant conception of *honnêteté* in the framework of her discussion of moral virtue. She regards justice, sincerity, friendship and courage as foundations of the morality of *honnêtes gens*—a conception that applies to men and women equally (Scudéry 1680, 1:81) and thereby solves the problem of the gendered nature of *honnêteté* in La Rochefoucauld. As a complement to the gallant conception of *honnêteté*, Scudéry adopts a conception of natural goodness:

Our own reason engages us in several reciprocal duties, and experience alone teaches us that intemperance in all pleasures is detrimental for us: all of this belongs to nature and to the jurisdiction of uncorrupted, purely human reason, which is without doubt capable of knowing justice in the simple boundaries that nature prescribes. (Scudéry 1692, 1:45)

Is this a claim that is plausible regarded from the perspective of La Rochefoucauld’s views on reason and nature? I think it is. Apart from a single reference to original sin in the early Liancourt manuscript (La Rochefoucauld 2007, 183 [L 256]), La Rochefoucauld does not seem to have been committed to the view that human nature is corrupted. Rather, in the *Maxims* he holds that “our powers of reason must make us careful of our possessions and our confidence; by contrast, nature must give us kindness and valour” (maxim 365). However, he thinks that it is not reason alone that can make naturally good qualities effective: “In the depth of our minds, it seems, nature has hidden away talents and forms of cleverness unknown to us; only the passions have the power of bringing them to light …” (maxim 404). And generally, he holds that it is interest that brings to light both vice and virtue (maxim 253). Scudéry, too, offers an analysis of the interest that could motivate us to be virtuous; however, she goes beyond La Rochefoucauld by invoking the idea that being virtuous involves living according to nature. That living according to nature is a genuine possibility for her is indicated by her conjecture that “trees and herbs produce everything that is necessary to allow humans to subsist in the simplicity of nature” (Scudéry 1693, 1:170). As she goes on to explain, rural life—not as it actually exists with its fierce competition over markets and rights, but as it could be realized if only the enjoyment of natural things and their beauty is sought (ibid., 1:173-174)—could be “the only means that humans have to live without injustice” (ibid., 1: 172).

Scudéry is explicit about the Roman origin of the concept of justice as what natural reason demand (see, e.g., Cicero, *De legibus* I.6.18). Her point is not to present a novel conception of the nature of virtue but rather to use everyday experience to show its adequacy. Her analysis of the vice of avarice is a good example for this. In her view, “the person who said that the greatest good is to have everything that one desires did not speak equitably; because it is a much greater good to desire only what is just and what benefits us, and this is what the greedy never do” (Scudéry 1688, 1:300). Scudéry thus does not think of acting morally as demanding giving up something that is good for us. Rather, she understands acting morally as what contributes to leading a flourishing life. This is brought out indirectly by considering what the greedy person lacks: Such a person cannot build any real friendships because the only object of love for the greedy person is wealth; for the same reason, such a person is also more unthankful, more distrustful and more choleric than anyone else (ibid., 1:303). Also, the pleasures of a greedy person are always accompanied by the worry that arises from the fear of losing wealth (ibid.). At the same time, he loses the capacity for enjoying ordinary pleasures (ibid.). Taken together, this is not the constitution of someone who enjoys a satisfying emotional life. Also, the relations of the greedy person to others is hampered: Being perceived as striving only for what is useful precludes being esteemed by others because such a striving is seen as low and repelling (ibid., 306). Moreover, avarice is a character trait that tends to kill the tenderness in the heart of the children of the greedy person, thus hampering their capacity for feeling natural moral emotions toward their parents (ibid.).

As Scudéry describes it, the vice of avarice involves injustice in a dual sense: (1) It leads to richness in superfluous things, combined with a disregard for necessary things (ibid., 1:305). (2) From this distortion of the inner life of the greedy person arise external injustices, both in the realm of the economy of the private household and international economy: The greedy person never recompenses those who work for him in the household; he treats them like slaves and lets them be needy both in times of health and in times of malady (ibid., 1:306). Also, “avarice is the source of most injustices of which the world overflows … [A]ll the deceptions used in business, which constitutes the bond of all nations, only spring from avarice” (ibid., 1:307). Thus, the greedy person not only fails to receive much emotional satisfaction; the existence of many greedy persons is also an obstacle for the flourishing of entire nations.

Scudéry’s analysis of avarice illustrates that her account of virtue and vice is based on everyday observations concerning what is naturally good for us (experiencing positive emotions, enjoying beneficial relations to others, possessing necessary material goods) and what is naturally bad for us (experiencing negative emotions, suffering from disturbed relations to others, being deprived of necessary material goods). These considerations about the moral side of *honnêteté* give substance to her idea that we should develop self-knowledge “out of an interest in virtue” (Scudéry 1680, 1: 115-116). But why should we regard self-knowledge as a condition for realizing the interest in virtue? The answer is that many persons suffer from self-deception, which is why even the vicious do not develop the wish to become morally better. For instance, one of her interlocutors notes that there “is not a single greedy person in the world who would agree with respect to his avarice. One calls it economy, good management, the desire to leave wealth to one’s children” (ibid., 119-120). This example shows that “those who believe to know themselves best in fact know themselves very imperfectly.” This is why accurate self-knowledge, in one respect, is more valuable than knowing others: “in order to make progress in virtue, self-knowledge is a thousand times more advantageous” (ibid., 122). In this way, Scudéry offers an analysis of the sense in which self-knowledge can be part of human excellence: If insight into one’s own moral faults triggers the desire for moral self-cultivation in those who understand the interest that we have in being virtuous, it is easy to see how self-knowledge could contribute to leading a flourishing life.

Still, as to the question of whether self-knowledge leads to a positive attitude toward oneself, Scudéry takes an ambivalent stance. On the one hand, she is clear that developing virtuous character traits can be a source of self-esteem. As one of the interlocutors remarks with respect to moral virtue, “I believe it to be quite difficult to have rather good qualities without knowing them and without esteeming oneself a bit” (ibid., 1:140). The answer to this worry points out that this form of self-esteem is unobjectionable because it does not blind the mind and therefore is compatible with humility (ibid.). On the other hand, Scudéry notes that knowing moral qualities, both one’s own and those of others, poses a serious epistemological problem. As she argues, dispositional features such as moral virtues can be known only by observing a person’s behaviour in critical situations (ibid., 1:116-117). But situations that can provide reliable knowledge, both about others and about oneself, seem to be an exceptional occurrence. For this reason, Scudéry holds that, in the absence of such decisive experiences, one should be cautious with making judgement about moral character, both of others and oneself. Consequently, she accepts the Ciceronian rule of prudence recommending to love others as if one could hate them one day (see Cicero, *De amicitia*, 16.59), and to be always suspicious about one’s own moral qualities that have not yet passed the test of critical situations (Scudéry 1680, 1:113-114). Recognizing the value of self-knowledge thus does not lead immediately to more self-intimacy. Rather, in the absence of decisive experiences, it may create an attitude toward oneself (and others) that is more distanced than the attitude that someone who did not even begin to reflect would entertain.

4. Lambert on Self-Knowledge and Self-Esteem

While the attitude recommended by Scudéry seems to guard against falling into illusions concerning oneself and others, it may itself constitute an obstacle both for building up friendships with others and for being a friend to oneself. If so, guarding oneself against illusions could come at the price of an estranged attitude toward oneself and others. Lambert’s considerations concerning self-knowledge may give some hints at what a plausible solution to this impasse could look like.[[8]](#endnote-8) This is so for two reasons: (1) Lambert explores how reflection upon whether the esteem we receive from others is justified plays a role in our self-esteem; and (2) Lambert explores the role that the judgements of our friends form about our qualities, combined with our desire to be esteemed by our friends, have for our self-knowledge.

The plausibility of Lambert’s views crucially depends on her conception of *honnêteté*. Again, one finds both gallant and moral aspects. In contrast, to Scudéry, Lambert sees gallantry already from a historical perspective, with a lot of nostalgia for the lost ideals of the gallant life. As she describes the *honnêtes gens* of the past, they were models of “delicacy of sentiment” and “gallantry of mind and manners.” She is also explicit about the gendered aspects of the gallant conception: for instance, she takes the desire to please to be characteristic of women and the delicacy of politeness to be characteristic of men (Lambert 1808, 29-30). But this is a description of something that has been lost: As Lambert thinks, gallantry has become a business practiced mostly by dishonest people (ibid., 30).

At the same time, Lambert develops a moral conception of *honnêteté* that is connected with her distinction between estimable and merely agreeable qualities. As she explains it, qualities that are merely agreeable derive from the disposition of our organs and our imagination and are therefore changeable without a change in their object. By contrast, “[t]he estimable qualities are real and intrinsic to things; and, by the laws of justice, they have a natural right to our esteem” (ibid., 172-173). She explicates the idea of intrinsically estimable qualities by invoking the notion of *honnêteté*. For her, *honnêteté* does not reduce to the ideals of gallantry but rather comprises a range of substantial virtues, such as refraining from revenge (ibid., 33) and fulfilling the laws of humanity (ibid., 38). For instance, she takes extreme differences of social standing to be contrary to the laws of humanity: “In an empire where reason would reign, everything would be equal, and one would give distinctions of rank only to virtue” (ibid.). *Honnêteté* has also esteem-related aspects: “[T]he honest person praises on the right occasion; she is someone who experiences more pleasure in rendering justice than in enhancing her own reputation by lessening that of others” (ibid., 32). This is why the duty of avoiding rash judgements and of applying equity and justice in judgements concerning reputation is described as an aspect of *honnêteté* (ibid., 92-93). Fulfilling the duties of judgemental justice also involves developing a reflective attitude toward one’s own self-esteem; this is why *honnêteté* demands reflection upon one’s own weaknesses (ibid., 94).

Such a moral conception of *honnêteté* also underlies Lambert’s distinction between esteem (*considération*) and reputation (*réputation*). As she explains, “[e]steem derives from the effect that our personal qualities have on others. If they are great and eminent qualities, they trigger admiration; if they are likeable and obliging qualities, they give rise to the sentiment of friendship” (ibid., 210). By contrast, one gains reputation with those who do not know oneself on a personal level (ibid.). It is usually “triggered by spectacular actions, almost never by virtuous actions” (ibid., 181). As Lambert notes, spectacular actions inspire more envy than admiration; and even admiration “for most humans is a violent state of mind and only calls for finding an end” (ibid., 211). What is more, reputation cannot be a reliable source of self-esteem:

At the end of the day, nothing is as sad as a great lord without virtues, who is laden with signs of honour and respect, and to whom one makes it felt at every moment that one owes these signs only to his high standing and nothing to his person. (Ibid., 213)

This thought is explicated further in an imaginary dialogue between Diogenes and Alexander the Great that turns around the question of whether illusions could not fulfil the same function for the happiness of fools that reason could play for the happiness of the wise. Diogenes explains why Alexander does not profit from his capacity to make a vivid impression upon the imagination of others:

Always dependent on the opinion of humans, you place your happiness in the judgements of others. You are happy only to the extent that pleases them. You never know how to respect yourself or to be self-sufficient. You do not believe that you are worthy of your own esteem; but public acclaim, no matter how illusory, recompenses you … Your self-love and the signs of respect that humans give to you hold a veil before your eyes. But there are moments when truth lifts the veil and shows you naked. Then you cannot uphold this view of yourself, and it is in order to flee from yourself that you embark on your conquests. (Ibid., 320)

The overly strong dependence on the imagination of others can constitute an obstacle to happiness, for three reasons: (1) The imagination of others does not provide any reliable feedback concerning one’s own qualities: “One praises in you not what one sees but what one wishes were there” (ibid., 321). (2) Being dependent on the imagination of others implies being destitute of an independent source of self-esteem: “Here you have your spectators, spectators so necessary that, if you were without witnesses, you would be without happiness” (ibid.). (3) The desire for reputation does not create any attachment through sentiment; hence, what it can achieve is not any primary good but only flattering illusions (ibid.). These three considerations thus indicate what is wrong with a person whose strong imagination leads to systematic self-deception. The point is not that such systematic self-deception is impossible, but rather that it cuts off the self-deceived person from genuine goods—that is, self-esteem based on the knowledge of personal qualities, as well as the ability to build up emotional bonds with others.

By contrast, in Lambert’s view merit is bound to the usefulness of virtue to other people: “Because merit turns out to be profitable, they attribute it to us, not as merit, but as something that is useful for them …” (ibid., 211). As she notes, seeing the character of someone else as useful for oneself is connected with an emotional response: “Only the qualities of the heart enter into commerce: the mind does not bind us to others” (ibid., 93). This is why personal merits give rise to what she calls “esteem of sentiment” (ibid., 120-121), which could not be brought about by only fulfilling the conventional norms of a society. Consequently, Lambert holds that esteem based on genuinely estimable qualities leads to an enjoyment that is more sensed and more frequently repeated (ibid., 211). This is so because also one’s own happiness is bound to sensibility: “One is estimable only through the heart and one is happy only through the heart because our happiness depends only on the way of sensing” (ibid., 42). In this way, only striving for esteem, not striving for reputation can make us feel good about ourselves. Estimable qualities may be the result of luck, but if they are not, insight into why such qualities are good for ourselves can motivate us to develop them: “There are lucky characters who have a natural and delicate conformity with virtue; for those to whom nature has not offered these lucky gifts, there is only having good eyes and knowing one’s true interests to correct a bad inclination” (ibid., 27). Once one has developed genuinely estimable qualities, they not only trigger the esteem of others but at the same time function as a reliable source of self-esteem. As Diogenes puts it in Lambert’s imaginary dialogue with Alexander the Great: “A single notion of the heart, a single reflection of the mind has more credit with my soul to make me happy than all your luck has on your soul” (ibid., 322).

In Lambert’s view, seeking to develop genuinely estimable personal qualities is not only something that enables us to build friendships and other personal relations based on “esteem of sentiment.” Such relations also have an essential function in enhancing our self-knowledge. Lambert presents this interactive view of the origin of self-knowledge as a solution to the obstacles that the passions bring with themselves for knowing oneself: “No matter how reasonable one is, one has the need to be guided: one must distrust one’s own reason, whom passion often makes talk as it pleases her” (ibid., 111). Like Scudéry, Lambert thus sees a value in distrusting one’s own judgement. However, Lambert uses the cognitive resources that friendship with virtuous persons offers as something that can lead beyond such a cautious attitude toward one’s self-knowledge. On first sight, this strategy may seem to be a non-starter. As La Rochefoucauld holds, our self-love hampers our capability of assessing the merits of our friends. In his view, self-love augments and diminishes the good qualities of our friends proportionally to the satisfactions that they give us; we judge about their merit according to the manner in which they live with us (maxim 88). Accordingly, he holds that our enemies are the most reliable source of information concerning ourselves (maxim 458)

How could Lambert counter La Rochefoucauld’s pessimism about the function of friends for self-knowledge? As to the assessment of the merit of friends, she could plausibly use her moral conception of *honnêteté* to provide objective criteria. The assumption that we are able to recognize moral virtue in others seems to underlie her recommendation “to find in the friend a true model; because one desires the esteem of the one whom one loves, and this desire causes us to imitate the virtues that guide him” (Lambert 1808, 112). Contrary to Scudéry, Lambert holds that anticipating the possibility of later hate would spoil even the most perfect friendship: “I am far from believing that one should love as if one could hate one day … [I]n the best chosen and most merited friendship, one must build upon a foundation of constancy and virtue, in order to be able to bear its loss” (ibid., 127). This virtue-oriented conception of friendship is what allows one to show respect for former friends, even after the friendship has fallen apart (ibid., 125). What is more, choosing friends that embody moral virtue is what makes these friends a useful source of information about ourselves: “Nothing gives us as much of a response concerning ourselves and more assurance with respect to the others than an estimable friend” (ibid., 112).

In Lambert’s view, the emotional attachment that we have to our friends thus plays a crucial role in explaining why their judgement can guide us. This may draw attention to a weakness in the trust that La Rochefoucauld’s puts on the judgement of our enemies: He never indicates why the judgement of our enemies—no matter how accurate this judgement may be—should motivate us to become better. By contrast, Lambert emphasizes the importance of our emotional attachment to those who pass judgement: it is exactly because we want to be esteemed by those whom we like that we are motivated to take their virtues as a model for ourselves (ibid.). At the same time, Lambert is clear that the feedback from friends can never be a one-sided source of self-esteem. Rather, she regards a good relation to the self as a precondition for taking the advice and example given by a friend: “It is not allowed to us to be imperfect in his eyes … One does not at all like to see the one who judges us and always condemns us. One must be sure about oneself to dare to give to oneself certain friends” (ibid., 112-113). Thus, a certain degree of self-esteem must be present if we want to be capable of choosing friends who themselves are virtuous. “only one who knows how to live with himself knows how to live with other people” (ibid., 117-118). Lambert characterizes this attitude as “being a friend to oneself” (ibid., 117).

At the same time, Lambert does not connect unrealistic expectations with the feedback from our friends. As she observes, imagination plays an ineliminable role in friendship:

Nascent friendship is subject to illusion: novelty pleases and makes promises, and everything that awakens hope is highly valued. Illusion is a sentiment that transports us beyond truth and that obscures the light of our reason. You see in persons who begin to please you all that there is good in them; and imagination, which always acts according to the taste of the heart, supplements to the loved person the merit that is missing. One loves one’s friends much more on the basis of qualities that one guesses than on the basis of those that one knows. (Ibid., 110)

Lambert expects that some of these illusions will disappear and that reason will take their place in the form of esteem based on the knowledge of merit. Still, she acknowledges the problem that reason is “a quality that is always dry,” which is not strong enough to cause the emotional bond necessary for friendship (ibid., 119). She draws the following consequence: “In friendship, as in love, one must govern one’s tastes: This is a permitted economy … The happy life consists in sensing and imagining agreeably” (ibid.). What Lambert has in mind is a strategy that makes use of the insight that novelty stimulates the imagination, and that positive contents of the imagination greatly contribute to the wish to be friends with someone. Hence, what we can do voluntarily is to create circumstances that preserve the feeling of newness in personal encounters. For instance, we can avoid routine and the fatigue that arises from seeing the same friends too often and in the same settings; and we can create a certain unpredictability in whom we meet on which occasion, thereby giving our encounters an element of novelty. Lambert presents this as a method of preserving the warmth of nascent friendship: “One can sometimes be inconstant but never without fidelity” (ibid.).

The ensuing view could be described as a dynamic interaction between self-reflection that renders oneself capable of associating ourselves with virtuous friends and moral self-cultivation triggered by the wish to be esteemed by these friends. Receiving “esteem of sentiment” from friends and entertaining self-esteem based on genuinely estimable qualities are not only aspects of human excellence resulting from self-reflection; they may also play an active role in improving self-knowledge. This dynamic interaction illustrates a source of self-knowledge that can be of use for those who do not have lucky disposition toward virtue. At the same time, what cannot be expected from the feedback from friends is anything like complete cognitive transparency. This is so because the emotional side of friendship can only be upheld by cultivating some illusions in a reflected way. The role of illusions certainly limits the epistemic value of friendship for self-knowledge; but these are the epistemic costs that we necessarily have to pay to get the epistemic benefits that depend on emotional bonds between friends.

5. Conclusion

By now it should be obvious why at the beginning I said that comparing La Rochefoucauld with Scudéry and Lambert reveals that there is more than a single sense in which self-knowledge could be understood as a kind of human excellence. One kind of excellent functioning that derives from knowing oneself is that it enables us to be open about our character traits to those who are equally open about theirs. We are liberated from the (often futile) attempt to deceive others; we can develop a relaxed and secure attitude that is both enjoyable for oneself and useful in interaction with others; and we can receive esteem from others for one’s sincerity. These matters are prominent themes in La Rochefoucauld. Another kind of excellent functioning that derives from knowing oneself is that it is conducive to the formation of personal qualities that are naturally good for human life. Due to their natural goodness, developing such character traits may bring emotional benefits since, due to their natural goodness, they are capable of triggering esteem from others and of triggering self-esteem, both of which feel different from the esteem and self-esteem deriving from merely conventional behaviour. These are prominent themes in Scudéry and Lambert.

Are Scudéry’s and Lambert’s considerations plausible when read from the perspective of La Rochefoucauld’s sceptical challenges to self-knowledge? I think they are. This is so because both Scudéry and Lambert consider a number of everyday experiences that pose obstacles to self-knowledge and that are also considered to be obstacles by La Rochefoucauld (as in the case of self-love) or similar to those considered to be obstacles by him (as in the case of imagination). And like La Rochefoucauld, Scudéry and Lambert describe everyday experiences that show why we nevertheless should be interested in developing self-knowledge. They expand on the range of relevant interests, but they do so by using considerations that are fully compatible with La Rochefoucauld’s view that prudence can help us to develop character traits that aim at avoiding the evils of life, and that reason and the passions together can bring to light natural abilities that can serve this purpose.

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1. For overviews concerning self-knowledge and self-deception in early modern philosophy, see Garrett 2012; Garrett 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Renz here builds upon Jon Elster’s analysis of La Rochefoucauld’s writing strategy. Elster describes the structure of La Rochefoucauld’s maxims as “reverse mechanisms.” As Elster characterizes it, such mechanisms replace everyday beliefs of the form “if A then B” by remarks of the form “if then C”, where C is a contrary of B (see Elster 1999, 83). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See the passages discussed below in sections 3 and 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Magendie 1925, 386-393, 892-900 (on the gallant conception), 633-675 (on the bourgeois conception). For more recent studies, see Stanton 1980; Bury 1996; Losfeld 2011; Steigerwald 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. On La Rochefoucauld’s analysis of virtue, see Sellier 1969; Moriarty 2011, 317-342; on responses to the conception of virtue as disguised vices in early modern French women philosophers other than Scudéry and Lambert, see Conley 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. On coquetry in eighteenth-century literature, see King and Schlick 2008. On coquetry in the French women moralists, see Blank 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For overviews of Scudéry’s moral thought, see Green 2010; Conley 2016; on Scudéry’s intellectual context, see Niderst 1976. In what follows, translations from Scudéry’s writings are my own; however, I have consulted with the English translation in Scudéry 1683. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For overviews of Lambert’s thought, see Zimmermann 1917; Geffriaud-Rosso 1984a; 1984b; Beasley 1992; Steinbrügge 1995, 18-20; Green 2014, 64-72. On Lambert’s relation to Pierre Nicole, see Danielou 1995. On Lambert’s *salon*, see McNiven Hine 1973; Marchal 1991; Hamerton 2010, 216-220. Due to its easy availability on the Gallica website of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, I will key all references to Lambert 1808. Translations from Lambert’s writings are my own; however, I have consulted with the translation in Lambert 1769 and the French text in Lambert 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)