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To cite this article: Andreas Blank (2021): The morality of the desire for esteem: Gassendi and the Augustinian challenge, History of European Ideas, DOI: [10.1080/01916599.2021.1883090](https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2021.1883090)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2021.1883090>



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Published online: 19 Feb 2021.



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The morality of the desire for esteem: Gassendi and the Augustinian challenge

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ABSTRACT



Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655) has not been perceived as one of the early modern philosophers who had something interesting to say about the role of the desire for esteem in social life and the moral duties connected with this desire. Nevertheless, in his *Animadversiones in decimum librum Diogenis Laertii* (1649) there are some scattered, but interrelated remarks about how the desire for esteem could be supportive of civic virtue. These remarks were written during the years when Jansenism became a considerable intellectual force in France, and the specific strengths of Gassendi's approach to the desire for esteem can be seen when it is read against this background. In the second volume of *Augustinus* (1640), Cornelius Jansen comments upon Augustine's objections to the moral value of striving for esteem. Contextualizing Gassendi's remarks against the Augustinian challenge is made plausible by two circumstances: The Augustinian challenge with respect to the desire for esteem contains explicit criticism of Epicurean ethics; and Gassendi responded to Augustine's central charge that, in desiring temporal goods such as esteem, one confuses things that are useful with things that should be enjoyed.

KEYWORDS

Social esteem; civic virtue; distributive justice; grace

1. Introduction

Early modern Epicureanism has received much scholarly attention during the last three decades. It seems fair to say that by far the largest share of attention has been devoted to Epicurean natural philosophy and its role in shaping the great early modern systems of metaphysics and the emerging life sciences.¹ Some attention has been given to the Epicurean roots of social contract theories² and the connection between Epicureanism and early modern atheism.³ But there is relatively little work about Epicurean moral philosophy, where Gianni Paganini's articles on Pierre Gassendi's theory of justice⁴ and Lisa Sarasohn's *Gassendi's Ethics* are still the most notable contributions. This relative imbalance in research on early modern Epicureanism is puzzling because Gassendi devoted the third, and longest, part of his *Animadversiones in decimum librum Diogenis Laertii* (1649) to Epicurean ethics.

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¹See Detel, *Scientia rerum natura occulatarum*; Joy, *Gassendi the Atomist*; Fisher, *Pierre Gassendi's Philosophy and Science*; Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*, chs. 1–6, 8–9.

²Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*, ch. 7.

³Kors, *Epicureans and Atheists in France*.

⁴For a detailed analysis of Gassendi's theory of justice and its context, see Paganini, 'Epicurisme et philosophie au XVIIe siècle. Convention, utilité et droit selon Gassendi'; 'Prudenza, utilità e giustizia nel seicento: Pierre Gassendi'; 'Early Modern Epicureanism'.

Not all issues discussed in the over 600 folio pages of this third part have been explored by commentators. For instance, up to now Gassendi has not been considered to be a contributor to the early debate about honour, reputation, esteem and glory.⁵ Still, in his *Animadversiones*, there is a series of remarks about social esteem, and these remarks are closely connected with central issues of his moral philosophy such as the natural goodness of pleasure. There are certain limits to Gassendi's treatment of these matters – most notably, he does not explore how social esteem may connect with self-esteem. Nevertheless, his remarks about social esteem deserve to be studied because, taken together, they provide a fairly coherent view of how the desire for esteem could motivate us to cultivate civic virtue.

Why could be interesting about these considerations? Arguably, searching for a context could point toward an answer. In general, it is no new observation that the relevance of Gassendi's reading of Epicurus derives partly from its position in an intellectual context. Gassendi's early critique of Aristotelian natural philosophy motivated his interest in the Epicureanism;⁶ Descartes, to whose *Meditations* Gassendi wrote a set of *Objections*, certainly belongs to the relevant context, too.⁷ Also, it is uncontroversial to assume that much of the intellectual context is not documented by explicit references – in fact, in the *Animadversiones* there are almost no reference to modern authors. Other early modern atomists who were building, in sometimes very divergent ways, on intuitions found in Epicurus and Lucretius may belong to the wider context, even if Gassendi did not discuss their views explicitly.⁸ The same may also hold for the reception of Epicurean ethics in medieval and Renaissance philosophy.⁹ But what about the specific context of Gassendi's remarks on duties of esteem?

Gassendi himself does not give any hints, nor do his commentators. Yet, in the years immediately preceding the publication of the *Animadversiones*, the most challenging treatment of the moral problems arising from the desire for esteem can be found in the second volume of Cornelius Jansen's *Augustinus* (1640). Jansen's reading of Augustine articulated profound doubts concerning whether the desire for esteem could ever motivate moral action. Gassendi's *Animadversiones* were written during the years in which theological controversies about Jansen's work first became prominent in intellectual life in France, and it seems implausible to assume that a thinker leading a religious life as Gassendi did should not have noticed these controversies.

Does it make sense to understand Gassendi's naturalistic defense of the moral value of the desire for esteem against the background of the Augustinian challenge? There are two thematic connections between Jansen's reading of Augustine and Gassendi's reading of Epicurus that deserve attention. First, Jansen uses Augustine's views on the desire for esteem to criticize the Epicurean view that esteem should be sought for the sake of pleasure. Hence, it might make sense to ask whether Gassendi's treatment of these matters offers the theoretical resources for countering the Augustinian objections to Epicurean ethics that became prominent in the period. Second, Gassendi responded to the objection that is central for the Augustinian refusal of the ethical value of the striving for esteem – the objection that, in seeking temporal goods, individuals try to enjoy (*frui*) something that they should make use of (*uti*). In Augustine's view, only God is the suitable object of enjoyment. Since this argument lies at the heart of Augustine's critique of the desire for esteem,

⁵On this debate, see Saastamoinen, 'Pufendorf on Natural Equality, Human Dignity, and Self-Esteem'; Haara and Ladenranta, 'Smithian Sentimentalism Anticipated: Pufendorf on the Desire for Esteem and Moral Conduct'; Toto, 'L'impensé de Claude-Adrien Helvétius. Le problème de l'estime dans *De l'esprit*'; Slomp, *Thomas Hobbes and the Political Philosophy of Glory*; Stuart-Buttle, "'A Burthen Too Heavy for Humane Sufferance'"; Blank, "D'Holbach on Self-Esteem and the Economy of Oppression"; Blank, "D'Holbach on (Dis-)Esteeming Talent".

⁶On Gassendi's intellectual context, see Jones, *Pierre Gassendi: 1592–1655. An Intellectual Biography*; Joy, *Gassendi the Atomist*, chs. 1–4; Lolordo, *Pierre Gassendi: 1592–1655. An Intellectual Biography*, ch. 2.

⁷See Osler, 'Divine Will and Mathematical Truth'; Lennon, 'Pandora; or, Essence and Reference'.

⁸See Joy, *Gassendi the Atomist*.

⁹On the medieval reception of Epicurus, see Marenbon, *Pagan and Philosophers*, chs. 5 and 6; on the reception of Epicurus in the Renaissance, see Joy, 'Epicureanism in Renaissance Moral and Natural Philosophy'.

Gassendi's response to Augustine is highly relevant for defending the Epicurean view against Augustine's critique.

Thinking about how persuasive Gassendi's account of social esteem is thus leads into some unmistakably theological aspects of Gassendi's work. Exploring these aspects may shed new light on a longstanding controversy about the significance of theology for Gassendi's overall perspective on philosophy. In this respect, two observations cannot be easily dismissed: (1) Gassendi never worked out theological theories in as much detail as some of his contemporaries did, and (2) there are many long passages in his writings where no theological issues are mentioned explicitly. From this perspective, it may seem plausible to treat Gassendi's theological interests – as Antonia Lolordo does¹⁰ – as side issues that are not strongly connected with his philosophical interests. However, there are other observations that also cannot be easily dismissed. Margaret Osler has emphasized that Gassendi interprets natural teleology as an outcome of divine providence,¹¹ that his defense of the idea of the immortality of the human soul modify atomistic ontology significantly, and that the same holds for his interest in the relation between time and eternity.¹² In the present article, I would like to draw attention to a modification of Epicurean ethics that is likewise motivated by Gassendi's theological interests. It is a modification does not discard the ethical value of the desire for esteem but rather regards the striving for esteem to be compatible with the goal of enjoying divine grace.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will argue that Gassendi's scattered remarks on esteem are connected with the Epicurean view of the nature of civic virtue. Then, I will exploit Jansen's *Augustinus* as a source that is helpful for understanding the Augustinian critique of the Epicurean view of the desire for esteem. This provides the background for considering Gassendi's response to Augustine's charge that desiring temporal goods confuses things that should be used with things that should be enjoyed.

2. Gassendi on esteem and civic virtue

At first sight, suggesting that the desire for esteem could play a significant role in Epicurean ethics may appear to be implausible, for two reasons: (1) Epicurus is usually understood as endorsing the value of retreat from public life;¹³ and (2) Epicurus sees the value of friendship to be utility rather than a way to secure public esteem. As to the former issue, Gassendi emphasizes an ad-on to one of the Epicurean precepts for the life of the sage that can be found in Seneca's portrayal of Epicurus: 'The sage does not engage in public *affairs unless something intervenes*' (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1207; see Seneca, *De otio*, 3.2; my italics). This means that, if circumstances are such that the home country (*patria*) needs the advice and service of the sage, then he will prefer his own well-being over his rest (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1207).

As Gassendi notes, in Plutarch's exposition of Epicurus one finds a further qualification that those who are by their own nature ambitious should devote themselves to public affairs because leading a quiet life will be a cause of confusion and unrest for them (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1207; see Plutarch, *Moralia*, 414). In this sense, the ethical value of striving for esteem depends on personal character traits and political circumstances. As to personal character traits, Gassendi argues that this striving is good for those who sense the desire for glory, who have the necessary personal qualities. As to political circumstances, he argues that personal qualities have to be complemented by the required social status and family connections (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1208). By contrast, he recommends that those who by their nature are destined for a life of rest, will abstain from public affairs out of a modesty of mind as long as no necessity calls for their services (*ibid*).

¹⁰LoLordo, *Pierre Gassendi*, ch. 10.

¹¹Osler, 'Providence and Divine Will in Gassendi's Views on Scientific Knowledge'.

¹²Osler, 'The Search for the Historical Gassendi'.

¹³On this aspect of Gassendi's thought, see Garrett, 'Seventeenth-Century Moral Philosophy: Self-Help, Self-Knowledge and the Devil's Mountain'.

The second idea, which at first sight seems to speak against the view that the desire for esteem could be ethically valuable, is Epicurus's insight that one should seek friendship for the sake of utility. Gassendi explains that the utility in question is not the role that friends can play in securing honors, but rather in the pleasures that one derives from conversation with them (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1224). This is why Gassendi maintains that even those who do not seek honors will seek friendship; otherwise, friendship would be an instance of 'mercenary love' (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1225). This remark shows that Gassendi saw the problematic side of a quasi-economic way of thinking about esteem in terms of exchange.

However, he notes that there is a non-economic way in which the idea that esteem is a source of pleasure could become relevant in friendships. Commenting upon Epicurus's precept that the sage will do everything for his own sake, Gassendi concedes that upholding friendship with a person in misery is a kind of relationship that, by itself, certainly is not very pleasurable. Still, the desire for esteem could be a reason for upholding such a friendship since cultivating such a visibly altruistic attitude can enhance one's own reputation (*fama*) for being a generous, benevolent and magnanimous person (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1556). What is more, the desire for esteem can also motivate people to enhance the esteem in which their friends are held. Very much as people can be motivated to increase the wealth of their friends because this procures something more honourable (*honestum*) for themselves; they are even motivated to increase the honour and dignity in which their friends are held because this is decent (*decorum*) for themselves. This non-competitive way of dealing with the desire for esteem increases the esteem in which one's friends and oneself is held (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1226).

Gassendi also holds that some competitive forms that the desire for esteem could be ethically valuable. As he argues this can be seen in the fact that there is no political community that does not use esteem as a reward for what is regarded to be virtuous (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1362). For this reason, Epicurus's and Cicero's conceptions of what is honourable (*honestum*) converge in a significant respect:

Cicero himself contends that what is honorable should be defined as *what by itself can be lauded with right, even when all usefulness is disregarded and without any rewards and remunerations*. Does not the fact that he says that what is honorable is such *that it can be lauded* carry a connotation that relates to those who praise, or to popular reputation, or the rumor of the multitude, which is exactly the definition of Epicurus that he opposes?¹⁴ (*Animadversiones*, 1360; see Cicero, *De finibus*, 2.14)

With a view to the role of the striving for esteem in political communities, Gassendi did not overlook that usually people compete for honour and glory (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1238). The question, of course, is why citizens should be motivated to accept the labors and risks of such competition. Gassendi notes that Epicurus regards reputation (*fama*) as a source of pleasure in itself; and he notes that it is also a source of security, which in itself is a source of pleasure (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1363). As he spells out this idea, good reputation provides security in old age, the ability to pursue the pleasures that one wants to pursue, freedom from the fear of falling back into a status that is vulnerable to injuries, especially from esteem-related injuries such as detraction (*contumelia*); and good reputation attracts positive emotions from one's co-citizens (*ibid.*). Gassendi also draws attention to Epicurus's precept that one should care about good reputation to the extent that one does not fall into contempt (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1218). Gassendi explains that, according to Plutarch, Epicurus accepts the view that good reputation is a source of pleasures of its own (*ibid.*; Plutarch, *Moralia*, 197); but it is equally important to avoid the grievances that follow from contempt that arises from a bad reputation (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1218).

Gassendi holds that the conceptual connection that both Cicero and Epicurus draw between honour and what is publicly esteemed is adequate because justice is a virtue that relates to others

¹⁴cum Cicero ipse definiendum potius Honestum contendat, *Id, quod tale est, ut detracta omni utilitate, sine ullis praemiis, fructibusque, per seipsum possit iure laudari*: Nonne vel ex eo, quod ait Honestum tale esse, *ut possit laudari*, connotat respectum ad ipsos laudanteis, sive ad famam popularem, multitudinisve rumorem, quae est ipsamet Epicuri definitio, quam insectatur?

(*Animadversiones*, 2: 1360). As Gassendi conjectures, this is why the terms ‘honestum’ and ‘virtus’ are used as synonyms in ancient sources (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1361). As Gassendi explains, virtue is sought for two reasons: First, acting virtuously comes from a good disposition and therefore leads to pleasure; and second, it arises because it deserves honour, whose pursuit itself is pleasurable (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1362). Due to its virtue-supportive function, he concludes that there are no ethically valuable achievements ‘if you take the desire for glory and honour away from minds’ (ibid.). This is so, he argues, because there are many more individuals who strive for places of dignity than individuals who strive for virtue for its own sake (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1363).

His insight into the virtue-supportive role of the desire for esteem leads Gassendi to the view that duties of gratitude and duties of esteem should themselves be included among the duties of natural justice (*Animadversiones*, 2:1755). He maintains that honour is owed as a matter of justice, in the sense that honour is a remuneration (*merces*) and reward (*praemium*) for labors undertaken for the sake of the common good. This is why he understands civil honour as honour that is due to the laws of the commonwealth (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1580):

[B]ecause they are understood to be in a leading position because of the virtue in which they are obliged to stand out, their remuneration cannot be money or something that can be esteemed to be of the same value as money; but they must propose for themselves as the only goal the unique glory of governing well and doing well.¹⁵ (ibid.)

In Gassendi’s view, how honors are distributed is a question of special justice among those who belong to the same political community, in analogy to the question of how money and other goods are distributed (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1522). And in distributive justice, the merit of a person has to be weighed relative to the merit of other persons (ibid.). The idea of distributive justice also offers a way of understanding modesty, understood as the disposition of seeking merited honour that is proportional to the extent of the merit (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1515). As Gassendi argues, such duties of justice with respect to honour are based on the tacit consent of all persons who follow what reason demands and is also expressed in our actual practices of gratitude and esteem. In his view, these duties are demands of justice: ethical goodness (*honestum*) is what deserves honour (*honor*), reputation, approbation (*commendatio*) (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1359); reputation and honour are the just price (*iustum pretium*) for actions that are useful for the community (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1581); by right (*iure*) we can expect a grateful mind, and an ungrateful mind is described as unjust (*iniquus*) (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1589).

Moreover, the relevant sense of right involves the reference to the public good:

there is an interest that those who hold positions of dignity are honored; for if this does not happen, then there are none who want to take the labors necessary for the political community upon themselves; then a turmoil that only reverence can prevent will be the consequence.¹⁶ (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1580)

This is a sense of justice that makes clear why fulfilling duties of esteem in a political community is not an instance of personal vice:

The political community has an interest that those who are in leading positions are honored, to avoid that if contempt breaks in, the government itself will fall. But to protect the honor of the positions of dignity is not vanity but equity, and to neglect it is not private modesty but public injury.¹⁷ (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1516)

Clearly, then, Gassendi’s view of the ethical value of the desire for esteem does not only involve the idea of personal modesty but is also placed in the context of the concept of public utility. Still, the

¹⁵[C]um ob virtutem, qua tenentur praecellere, esse praefect intelligantur; non pecunia sane aut quidpiam pecunia aestimabile elle illorum merces potest; sed quae illis unica bene administrandi, ac bene faciendi gloria elle pro scopo proposita debet’.

¹⁶‘interest, ut qui in dignitate constituti sunt, honorentur; cum nisi fiat, tum non sint, qui labores suscipere pro Republica necessarios velint; tum perturbatio, quam reverentia sola cohibet, sit consequutura’.

¹⁷‘intersit Reipublicae, vt iis qui praesunt, honor deferatur; ne si contemptus irreperit, regimen ipsum labefactetur. Sed nempe honorem dignitatis tueri, non vanitas, sed aequitas esse; ac illum negligere, non tam esse privata Modestia, quam publica iniuria videtur’.

question arises of whether Gassendi's analysis of the desire for esteem is convincing in the light of the denial of the ethical value of the desire for esteem that became prominent through Jansen's *Augustinus*. The question is pressing because Augustine and Jansen present their concerns explicitly as a critique of the Epicurean view of social esteem. Moreover, their critique is not an outcome of grossly misrepresenting Epicurus (although it seems fair to say that they over-emphasize the role that bodily pleasure has for Epicurus); rather, what they have to say is so interesting because it is directed at some of the central elements of the Epicurean view of what motivates the striving for esteem.

3. The Augustinian challenge

What Augustine and Jansen have to say against the ethical value of the desire for esteem can be understood as a special case of their general analysis of concupiscence (*concupiscentia*). As Augustine puts it: 'Concupiscence is nothing other than the love of perishable things'¹⁸ (Augustinus, 2: col. 354; Augustine, *Quaestiones octagintatres*, q. 33). It is 'the motion of the mind to enjoy oneself and one's neighbour and any bodily object not for the sake of God,'¹⁹ by contrast, the Christian virtue of *charitas* consists in the 'motion of the mind to enjoy God for His own sake and to enjoy oneself and one's neighbour for the sake of God'²⁰ (*De doctrina Christiana*, 3.10). Jansen comments that love for temporal things expresses the inclination to enjoy oneself; in this sense, concupiscence is a form of self-love (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 355). Love of temporal goods, Jansen notes, is nothing but the desire to obtain temporal goods for oneself; and this means that one feels love of creatures always for one's own sake, not for the sake of God (*ibid.*). As he explains, what is bad about love of creatures is it is impossible to love something without experiencing rest once the desired object has been attained (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 356). And when this experience concerns creatures, then it is not directed toward God (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 369).

Jansen uses these considerations to draw a sharp contrast between Augustinian and Epicurean ethics. He suggests that an analysis that Augustine had developed with regard to the Platonists and the Manicheans also applies to the Epicureans. As Augustine notes, those who regard the human soul as the highest good, desire the soul 'carnally' (*carnaliter*), even when they regard the body as the origin of evil (*Augustinus*, 321; Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 14.5). Jansen argues that the idea of loving the soul carnally can be applied to Epicurean ethics, even though the Epicureans do not regard the body as the origin of evil because 'carnal predilections are those through which we are directed toward created goods without relating them to the creator.'²¹ This is why Jansen counts the Epicureans among the pagan philosophers who accept a form of self-love that is contrary to Christian love of God:

Because this self-love at the same time is the most general one, in the sense that [the pagan philosophers] regard absolutely everything that in any way contributes to the tranquility of the body or the soul as a goal, understood as what every animal naturally desires; it is no wonder if, out of this single love, we are driven to commit sins of all kinds. For once we have lost the rule and the goal of true love, anything that appears good to humans will be desired out of this love ...²² (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 424)

Jansen is aware that Augustine did not reject the view that the desire for enjoyment is the goal that humans seek but that he rather wanted this desire to be directed toward the only object that deserves to be enjoyed (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 384): 'For enjoyment is, as it were, the weight of the

¹⁸Nihil aliud est cupiditas, nisi amor rerum transeuntium'.

¹⁹'motum animi ad fruendum se, & proximo, & qualibet copore non propter Deum'.

²⁰'motum animi ad fruendum Deo propter ipsum, & se atque proximo propter Deum'.

²¹'carnales affectiones sunt, quibus in bona creata ferimur, nulla habita ratione creatoris'.

²²'Cum vero amor iste sui sit simul generalissimus, utpote in quem velut finem omnia omnino, quae quoquo modo faciunt ad corporis aut animae requiem, quam omne animal naturaliter appetit, referuntur; nihil mirabile, si ex illo solo amore ad omnia omnino vitia incessanter urgeamur. Nam amissa verae dilectionis regula & fine, quidquid homini bonum videtur, istud ex illo amore concupiscitur ...'

soul; hence, enjoying gives direction to the soul²³ (Augustine, *De musica*, 6.11). When it is an obstacle to the enjoyment of God, loving temporal things is a vice even when it occurs in a person who does not take away anything that belongs to others but only demands what is owed to him, and allows others to judge (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 363; see Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, ch. 80). This is so because, when people acquiesce (*conquiescere*) in something, they do not strive any further. For Augustine, this is the basic structure of sin: in all sins we enjoy the things that should be used and use the things that should be enjoyed (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 369; see Augustine, *Quaestiones octagintatres*, q. 30). As Augustine explains, ‘to enjoy is to be attached with love to something for its own sake. But to use means to relate something that is ready to hand to the goal of obtaining what you love’²⁴ (Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, 1.4). And for Augustine, only inner things – that is, the wisdom and the word of God – should be enjoyed, all other things should be used, according to necessity, not in order to enjoy them (Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, ch. 4).

From this perspective, Augustine concedes that the good offices of the gentiles fulfil duties; nevertheless, he holds that they do not deserve the praise that is due to justice (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 575; see Augustine, *De spiritu et littera*, ch. 27). Jansen also adduces a passage, where Cicero comments upon the Epicurean view that pain is the ultimate evil that should be overcome:

So long as you think it disgraceful and unmanly to groan, wail, lament, be shattered and broken down by pain, so long, that is, as honor, nobility, good reputation are present, and contemplating them, you control yourself, surely pain will give ground to virtue ...²⁵ (*Tusculanae disputationes*, 2.31)

Jansen concludes: ‘Here it can be seen that he teaches that, in overcoming pain, one should have in view respectability, dignity, manliness: through which they aspire to nothing other than some elevated standing ...’²⁶ (*Augustinus*, 605). As Jansen explains, in acquiescing one takes oneself to be happy; this applies to pleasure, honour, and generally the Epicurean notion of ‘first things by nature’ (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 598; on this notion, see Gassendi, *Animadversiones* 1349–1350).

Jansen notes that this line of argument applies to the love of honour, praise, dominion, good reputation and natural excellence (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 356). He concedes that, from an Augustinian point of view, ethical and intellectual excellence is something good in itself. However, it turns into something ethically bad when it is loved for its own sake or for the sake making a profit. Loving excellence for its own sake is an instance of arrogance (*superbia*) and vanity (*vanitas*) (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 360):

And it is the sin of arrogance for the only reason that excellence is loved, even if it is good, for the sake of excellence: and the concupiscence of the eyes or curiosity is reprehensible only because by means of it *humans want nothing but to know*, Augustine says, or because they try to know for no other goal than *for the sake of the pleasure of making experiences and knowing* ...²⁷

Similarly, while being esteemed is something good in itself, it becomes vicious if it leads to acquiescence that prevents the striving toward God.

That esteem is loved for self-interested motives, Jansen argues, is shown by the fact that honors are usually sought for the enjoyment that they bring with them (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 356). Likewise, people strive for good reputation (*fama*) because they expect that being held in good reputation is conducive to pleasure (*ibid.*). Jansen is clear that the Augustinian view should be seen as an alternative to the Epicurean view that what is ethically good (*honestum*) should only be sought because it is

²³‘Delectatio quippe quasi pondus est animae, delectatio ergo ordinat animam’.

²⁴‘Frui est amore alicui rei inhaerere propter seipsam. Uti autem, quod in usum venerit ad id quod amas obtinendum referre’.

²⁵‘Dum turpe, nec dignum viro videbitur, gemere, eiulari, frangi, debilitari, dolore, tum dignitas tum decus aderit: tuque in ea intueberis, te continebis, cedet profecto virtutis dolor ...’ (Douglas’s translation).

²⁶‘Ecce decus, dignitatem, virilitatem intuentiam docet in illo dolore superando; quae nihil nisi quandam celsitudinem spirant ...’

²⁷‘Neque enim aliunde superbiae peccatum est, nisi quia diligitur excellentia, quamvis bona, propter excellentiam: neque alia ex causa concupiscentia oculorum seu curiositas reprehensibilis, nisi quia per eam *nihil aliud, quam scire homines cupiunt*, ut Augustinus loquitur [*Confessiones* 10.35], seu non ob alium finem scire tentant, quam *propter experiendi noscendique libidinem* ...’

connected with pleasure, including the pleasure deriving from honour and glory (*ibid.*). In Jansen's view, the problem with connecting virtue and social esteem in this way is that honour, glory and knowledge belong to the things in which the mind can acquiesce and enjoy itself (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 365). Something analogous holds with respect to honour for intellectual achievements. For instance, eloquence is not an adequate object of praise because otherwise one would regard reaching perfection in this respect to be a goal in itself (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 371; see Augustine, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos*, 10.5). These passages bring what is ethically reprehensible in desiring esteem into the perspective of how Augustine explains the origin of evil: When people acquiesce in the esteem that they receive from others, they forget that they should always remain 'on the road' (*in via*) toward God (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 371).

In Augustine's view, the desire for esteem is therefore one of the many cases where real vices are hidden behind the image of virtue. As he argues, seeking reward (*merces*) is opposed to seeking divine justice (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 576; see Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 5.15). For Augustine, these two attitudes are mutually exclusive due to the quasi-economic nature of the workings of social esteem. As he cautiously formulates: 'I do not know whether there is no guilt in converting the non-commutable good (*incommutabile bonum*) that is left behind into commutable goods (*commutabilia*)' (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 575; see Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 2.3). Jansen is certainly right that Augustine's phrasing does not express any doubt (*ibid.*). This reading is supported by another passage from Augustine quoted by Jansen some pages later: 'Who likes himself for his own sake, does not relate himself to God; turned toward himself he does not turn to what is non-commutable'²⁸ (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 618, Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, 1.22). If these two passages are drawn together, then Augustine's view seems to have been that what is bad about the quasi-economic aspects of seeking esteem is a kind of acquiescence with oneself that draws us away from the radically non-economic nature of divine goodness.

Again, this concern speaks to the question of how persuasive the Epicurean account of the striving for esteem is from a Christian point of view since the idea of an exchange of honour for merit is central for Gassendi's account of distributive justice with respect to honour. But thinking about honour in terms of justice is exactly what, for Augustine, is unacceptable. This is so because he understands that when one loves something that should be used for the sake of something else and when uses things for the sake of something else although they should be loved for themselves, these are instances of iniquity because one thereby overturns in oneself the order of nature (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 372; see Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, 22.78). This corresponds to his understanding of justice as consisting in using things only according to divine command (*ibid.*). Augustine's notion of justice thus implies that there cannot be anything like distributing esteem justly according to personal excellence.

4. Gassendi's reply to the Augustinian challenge

Since the Augustinian critique of Epicurean ethics rests on the idea that desiring to be esteemed for ethical and intellectual virtue is an obstacle to remaining 'on the way' toward God, evidently one possible response to the Augustinian challenge would be to contest the ideal of enjoying God. This, however, is not a possibility that was even considered by Gassendi, who was ordained in 1617. Another possible response would be to contest the Augustinian view that embracing this ideal is incompatible with the striving for natural virtue. And this is the strategy adopted by Gassendi, who was very much aware that Augustine took the doctrine of immortality and the ensuing view that what is really honourable and beautiful cannot be perceived with bodily senses but only 'internally' (*ex intimo*) to be the crucial argument against accepting Epicurean ethics (*Animadversiones*, 1715; see Augustine, *Confessiones*, 7.16).

²⁸Si se propter se diligit, non se refert ad Deum, sed ad seipsum conversus non ad incommutabile aliquid convertitur'.

Gassendi directly addresses the central issue that motivates Augustine's argument against the ethical value of the striving for esteem: The view that, in striving for temporal goods, individuals confuse things that should be enjoyed with things that should be used. Gassendi summarizes the Augustinian challenge as follows:

[M]any think that it detracts much from virtue when virtue is said to be for the sake of something else. They infer from this that virtue belongs to what is useful, which differs from what is honorable; and in this way we should properly say that we use it rather than enjoy it; and this enjoyment can be found only in these things that exist for their own sake and are honorable ... ; as Saint Augustine says, *humans become unjust when they enjoy what should be used and use what should be enjoyed*.²⁹ (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1370).

In response, Gassendi concedes that whatever is done for the sake of something else can in some sense be called 'useful', but he adds that the relevant sense of utility differs from economic advantages. Rather, in his view what is honourable is at the same time useful and pleasurable (*ibid*). Deriving pleasure from human virtue, he argues, does not detract from loving God for His own sake. This is so because deriving pleasure from loving God has a supernatural origin:

[I]t seems as if there could be no sincere piety unless God is loved purely and precisely for his own sake, because he is infinitely good and is venerated because he excels infinitely; but the one who loves and venerates in no way does so with a view to himself, his own commodity and his own pleasure ...³⁰

Because he accepts the possibility and desirability of such an experience, Gassendi emphasizes that he does not want to detract from religion; rather, he approves of searching after the beatitude that derives from divine grace (*ibid.*). But he does not believe such a striving to be incompatible with the striving for natural goodness that he discusses in his interpretation of Epicurean ethics:

It is to be taken to be a divine gift and above nature that someone can become capable of loving and venerating God in this way. But what is here at stake is piety, or generally virtue, that is in agreement with nature, according to which everything that humans do is done with a view to themselves.³¹

Gassendi supports his view that cultivating natural virtue is compatible with enjoying God by relying on Epicurus's distinction between two different kinds of felicity. Referring to the treatise *De Epicureis et Stoicis* – a text that, in his time, was wrongly taken to be an authentic work of Augustine – he writes:

Augustine, after having first said that the desire for a happy life is common to Christians and philosophers, added, as if correcting himself: *I should have said to all humans: for if I could ask evil persons, do you want to be happy? no-one would, I don't*. However, as it seems, this matter should be understood according to the division of felicity drawn by Epicurus in his precepts.³² (*Animadversiones*, 1244)

Setting aside the misattribution – which also occurs in Jansen (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 613) – it is interesting to see that Gassendi here uses a conceptual distinction drawn by Epicurus to explain how the Augustinian notion of felicity could be upheld without giving up the striving for natural virtue. The passage from *De Epicureis et Stoicis* does not misrepresent the significance of the concept of felicity for Augustine. Jansen draws attention to a passage from Augustine's *Letter to Macedonius* that indicates why Augustine himself set his view of the nature of felicity apart from the view of pagan

²⁹[R]eputant multi virtuti nimium detrahi, dum esse dicitur propter aliud. Inferunt enim exinde sequi, vt virtus sit in genere utilium, quod ab honestorum genere est diversum; sicque fore, ut proprie ipsa dicamur uti, non frui, quod fruitio non sit, nisi earum rerum, quae & propter se & honestae sunt ... ; dicente aliunde B. Augustino, *iniquum fieri hominem, cum fruitur utendis, aut utitur fruentis*'.

³⁰[N]on videtur posse sincera esse pietas, nisi Deus pure, ac praecise propter seipsum & ametur, quia infinite bonus sit, & colatur, quia infinite excellat; nullatenus vero qui amat, & colit, ad se, suum-ve commodum, suamque voluptatem respicit'.

³¹Scilicet hoc divinum donum, ac supra naturam reputandum est, ut quis se ad Deum hac ratione amandum, colendumque accingere possit. Ast heic agitur de Pietate, seu universe de virtute, quae secundum naturam est, iuxta quam quicquid homo agit, quodam cum respectu ad seipsum agit'.

³²D. Augustinus, postquam praemisit appetitionem beatae vitae, esse Christianorum, Philosophorumque commune, tum quasi sese corrigens, *debiui dicere*, inquit, *omnium hominum: Si malos enim interrogare possem, vultis beati esse? nemo diceret, nolo*. Videtur tamen re accipienda iuxta illam Felicitatis inter Effata traditam ab Epicuro divisionem'.

philosophers: ‘We reject ... the vanities and insane lies of false philosophers: because for us there will be no true virtue unless the one who helps us is present; nor felicity unless the one is present whom we enjoy’³³ (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 588; Augustine, *Epistola* 52). Jansen comments:

And this is no wonder because true virtue and true felicity are inseparably connected. For it cannot happen that true virtue is not a way toward true felicity and that it does not contribute to seeking it ... For as true virtue cannot but descend from the heavens, it cannot but in turn ascend to the heavens because felicity is nothing but enjoying what true virtue loved.³⁴ (*Augustinus*, 2: col. 588–589).

The Augustinian view of the nature of felicity thus is a corollary to the view that the only suitable object of enjoyment is God. When Gassendi says that the insight that all humans strive for felicity should be understood from the perspective of a distinction drawn by Epicurus, he evidently signals that he intends to offer an alternative account of felicity.

However, it is an account that is by no means meant to reject the possibility or the desirability of the experience described by Augustine. Gassendi explains the conceptual distinction that Epicurus had in mind when commenting upon the Epicurean precept reminding us that the highest felicity belongs only to God and that human felicity always allows for more and less:

The advice is ... that humans should try to delve into themselves; when they define felicity, as it happens commonly, as the *accumulated collection of goods with the exclusion of all evils*; ... or in another, similar way, they presume that they could attain felicity of this kind as long as they live this life; although it pertains only to God; or certainly we can participate in it only in another life that awaits us after this mortal life ...³⁵ (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1227)

Here, Gassendi distinguishes two concepts of felicity that are distinct but compatible because they relate to different circumstances. Felicity in the sense of possessing all perfections is a concept recognized by Epicurus, and Gassendi is quick to extend this concept such as to include the state of Christian souls in eternal life. At the same time, Gassendi is aware that Epicurean ethics presents a view of human felicity that tries to dissolve the illusions that individuals often incur by connecting the notion of felicity with the notion of perfection. As to human felicity, Gassendi emphasizes that it is always characterized by some kind of deficit:

The words of this precept have no other intention than that we may understand that there is no felicity among humans that deserves to be called felicity in a more than comparative sense; that is, because no felicity that is absolute ... pertains to them, it happens that, since all humans in some respect are unhappy (for they are affected by some evils or deprived of some goods), but these more, those less; these in this way, those in another way; nevertheless those are called happy who are less unhappy; and those are called the happiest of all, in whom there is the minimum of unhappiness.³⁶ (*Ibid.*)

Gassendi again makes use of this insight when he discusses the Epicurean precept that advises us to think about what leads to happiness:

Of course, it is true that commonly under the term ‘felicity’ one understands the state in comparison to which one could not imagine any better, sweeter and more desirable state; in which there is nothing bad that you would have to fear, nothing good that you would lack; in which you would not like to do anything that is not allowed; and finally, which is more stable than it even could be lost. In fact, such a felicity, as long as

³³Abjiciamus ... falsorum Philosophorum vanitates & insanias mendaces: quia nec virtus vera nobis erit, nisi adsit ipse quo iuivemur; nec beatitudo, nisi adsit ipse quo fruamur’.

³⁴Nec mirum, cum vera virtus, veraque beatitudo inseparabiliter nexae sint. Ut enim vera virtus non sit via ad veram beatitudinem, ad eamque prosit assequendam, fieri nullo pacto potest ... Virtus enim vera sicut non potest nisi de caelo descendere, ita non potest non eo rursus ascendere, cum nihil sit aliud beatitudo, quam illo frui, quod virtus vera diligebat’.

³⁵Proponitur ... , ut homo tentet in sese descendere; ne cum Felicitas definitur, ut solet vulgo fieri, *Secretis malis omnibus, cumulata bonorum complexio* [Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 5.29]; ... aut alio modo consimili; praesumat, donec vitam hanc vivit, posse se huiusmodi felicitatem assequi, quippe quae soli Deo competat, aut cuius certe non possimus participes evadere, nisi in vita alia, quae nos post hanc mortalem maneat ... ’

³⁶Effati verba non alio tendunt, quam ut intelligamus, nullam esse inter homines felicitatem, quae valeat, plusquam comparate, felicitas dici; hoc est, cum nulla, quae absolute ... est, ipsis competat; contingere solum, ut, cum omnes homines aliqua ratione infelices sint (affecti nempe quibusdam malis, aut privati quibusdam bonis) sed hi quidem plus, illi vero minus; hi isto, illi alio modo; felices tamen illi dicantur, qui minus infelices sunt; & illi omnium felicissimi, in quibus est minimum infelicitatis’.

we live mortal life, is rather wished than real; and we can at best have an idea, or exemplar, to which the condition of life approaches more or less and accordingly can be taken to be a greater or smaller felicity. But I say mortal life to insinuate that beyond this life there is another, immortal life, in which sacred religion teaches that for good persons there is a felicity that infinitely goes beyond understanding, namely, enjoying or vision and ineffable love of the more-than-highest being and more-than-excellent good ...³⁷ (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1244).

But if so, Gassendi argues, then pursuing the kind of felicity that Epicurus has in mind is no obstacle to pursuing the felicity that consists in enjoying God. This is so because natural felicity that can be brought about through natural powers never offers a genuine point of rest. Rather, it is ‘as optimal as it can be; in it as much as possible of the necessary goods and as little of evil is present’ (ibid.). It is limited according to circumstances of the region, the nature of particular societies, the social position in life, the physiological structure of the body, and the influence of the different life ages (ibid.). Even if striving for such felicity is the goal that we pursue with our natural powers, it is a goal that always reflects the fact that a human being is ‘a weak animal and, according to the condition of nature, exposed to countless evils and miseries’ (ibid.). By contrast, Gassendi maintains that, for the kind of felicity taught by the teachers of the Christian faith, one needs supernatural assistance (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1245) – a claim that cannot be rejected from an Augustinian point of view.

The insight into the imperfect and precarious character of natural felicity corresponds closely to the function that Gassendi ascribes to the striving for esteem. To be sure, according to the Epicurean view, esteem is a source of pleasure and in this sense contributes to natural felicity. But it is a source of pleasure whose essential functions reflect human vulnerability. Esteem has the purpose of warding off contempt and insecurity through which we are always threatened. In this sense, being esteemed, even if pleasurable, is never an experience that allows us to acquiesce in a way that leaves human weakness behind. And this means that the danger that Augustine has seen – that enjoying esteem prevents us from searching for God – is entirely spurious.

On the contrary, in his response to the Augustinian challenge Gassendi maintains that striving for temporal happiness leaves the possibility of the experience described by Augustine – enjoying God (*delectari in Domino*) – unimpaired (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1371). Gassendi explicitly defends the value of loving God without any hope of recompense, only for the sake of the sweetness of this experience itself (ibid.). Gassendi concludes those go wrong who use the ideal of loving God for his own sake to criticize to Epicurus (ibid.). What is more, he not only believes that Epicurus’s notion of natural felicity is compatible with the Christian notion of supernatural felicity; he also provides textual evidence that Epicurus himself endorsed a view that is analogous to the Christian view. According to Seneca’s testimony, Epicurus held that ‘God should be venerated not for the sake of some hope or the sake of some price; but because of his highest majesty and supreme nature ... ; everything that excels has its just veneration’ (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1570; see Seneca, *De beneficiis*, 4.19). From this perspective, Gassendi takes the view that God should not be venerated for the benefit received from him since this would be an instance of mercenary love to be fully compatible with Epicureanism (*Animadversiones*, 2: 1571). And this view comes as close as it can get to Augustine’s view that God should be venerated as a non-commutable good.

5. Concluding remarks

The close reading of Gassendi and Jansen offered above should have substantiated three interpretive claims: (1) Gassendi’s analysis of the desire for esteem articulates a coherent view that is grounded

³⁷[V]erum quidem profecto est, Felicitatis nomine intelligi vulgo eum statum, quo nullus possit melior, suavior, desideratior exco-gitari; in quo nihil sit mali quod timeas, nihil boni quod non habeas; nihil, quod agere libeat, ac non liceat; qui denique constantior sit, quam ut amitti unquam possit. Verum talis Felicitas, donec mortalem vivimus vitam, in voto potius, quam in re est; ac potest ad summum haberi ut idea, sive exemplar, ad quod prout magis, vel minus vitae status accesserit, possit pro maiore, minoreve felicitate reputari. Dico autem mortalem vitam, ut praeter istam esse aliam immortalem insinuem, in qua sacra Religio docet manere bonos felicitatem, quae omnem captum infinite excedat, fruitionem puta, seu claram visionem, ineffabilemque dilectionem super-summi illius, & super-excellentissimi Boni ...’

in deep layers of Epicurean ethics, such as the view that ultimately what is morally good is what is pleasurable in the long run; (2) the critique of the Epicurean analysis of the desire for esteem plays a significant role in articulating the Augustinian view of love of God; and (3) Gassendi's use of the Epicurean distinction between human felicity and divine felicity indicates why the Epicurean view of the desire for esteem is not vulnerable to the Augustinian critique. This distinction grounds the view that cultivating natural virtue is not an obstacle for remaining on the road toward God. Gassendi encourages both, the pursuit of precarious natural happiness through living according to the demands of natural goodness, and also the never-ending pursuit of supernatural happiness in the hope of receiving the gift of divine grace.

In his view, the striving for esteem can motivate acting virtuously better than the love of virtue for its own sake because being esteemed is a source of pleasure – both in the sense of having a pleasant experience and in the sense of protecting against contempt and humiliation as well as possible. But striving for esteem can be only part of a precarious and imperfect form of felicity – the only kind of felicity that humans can achieve when they strive for natural virtue. There is no risk, therefore, that anyone could acquiesce in being esteemed in the sense of not experiencing any deficit. And if being esteemed remains always part of an imperfect form of felicity, it cannot be an obstacle to seeking perfect felicity through divine grace. In this way, Gassendi's response to the Augustinian challenge documents a much-neglected aspect of his theological interests – interests that may not have led to innovative theological doctrines but rather express themselves in how Gassendi integrates the Augustinian doctrine of enjoying God as a non-commutable good into the framework of Epicurean moral philosophy.

The philological method followed in the *Animadversiones* was soon to disappear from the writings of the French moralists. Is Gassendi's revival of a conception of the ethical and political value of esteem that originates in the ancient world, therefore detached from later developments in French moral thought? For those fond of philosophical controversies, a part of the answer will be disappointing. The major French moralists influenced by Augustinianism – Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), Pierre Nicole (1625–1695) and Jacques Esprit (1611–1677) – did not devote, as far as I can determine, any detailed discussion to Epicurean ethics and, hence, also no detailed response to Gassendi's conciliatory strategy. Likewise, the thinkers who took up central ideas of Gassendi's ethics – François Bernier (1620–1688), Jacques Parrain Des Coustures (1645–1702) and Charles Batteux (1713–1780) – did not respond, as far as I can see, to the Augustinian challenge. But it is worth noting that Gassendi's basic ideas about ethical value of the desire for esteem made their way into the works of the latter group of authors. Instead of documenting the textual parallels – which would be easy, but also highly repetitive³⁸ – I would like to conclude by offering two conjectures as to why it may be significant that these ideas persisted well into the middle of the eighteenth century.

First, the persistence of Gassendi's ideas in the writings of his followers may be relevant for addressing a puzzle that has been left unresolved by Tad M. Schmaltz. As Schmaltz has noted, there is a dissimilarity between the Cartesian tradition and the Epicurean tradition in early modern France: While there are some prominent Cartesians who were at the same time Jansenists – most prominently Pierre Nicole and Robert Desgabets (1610–1678) – there were no Epicureans who were inclined toward Jansenism.³⁹ Schmaltz offers Descartes's professed indifference about religious matters as an explanation for the possibility of combining Cartesian metaphysics with Augustinian religious views.⁴⁰ But he does not explain why the same combination does not occur in the Epicurean tradition. If one keeps in mind the importance that the desire for esteem has both in Jansen's reading of Augustine and in Gassendi's reading of Epicurus, as well as in the writings of Gassendi's

³⁸The following passages could be consulted: Bernier, *Abregé*, 7: 148–54, 331–2, 402–5, 488–9; Des Coustures, *La morale d'Epicure*, 104–5, 123–4, 229–30; Batteux, *La morale d'Epicure*, 154–7.

³⁹Schmaltz, 'What Has Cartesianism to Do with Jansenism?' 49.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 39–40.

followers, an explanation may offer itself: One cannot uphold the view that some forms of striving for temporal goods, such as esteem, exemplify ethical virtue – and at the same time be a Jansenist.

Second, Gassendi's treatment of the desire for esteem has a significant shortcoming: It did not anticipate skeptical observations concerning the dynamics of esteem that do not depend upon Augustinian theology but sometimes were used to support it. For instance, the distorting role of imagination, custom and habitus in influencing what is esteemed became a dominant topic in moralists such as Blaise Pascal, Francois de La Rochefoucauld (1613–1680), Jean de La Bruyère (1645–1696) and Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715).⁴¹ Read from the perspective of this later development, Gassendi's enthusiasm about ancient views concerning distributive justice with respect to esteem may sound naïve. Still, the tradition initiated by Gassendi remained a valuable repository of ideas. Recently, Pierre Force has shown that the political theory of Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715–1771) has been inspired by Bernier's exposition of Epicureanism.⁴² Such a line of interpretation could be expanded since, arguably, Helvétius also made use of Epicurean ideas concerning the desire for esteem. This can be seen in his adoption of the idea that the interest in esteem is grounded in the interest in pleasure⁴³ and in his adoption of the idea that esteem should be the object of distributive justice regulated by law.⁴⁴ He also integrated his analysis of the desire for pleasure into a theistic worldview.⁴⁵ However, going beyond what can be found in Gassendi and his followers, he used the notion of interest to explain why in many everyday contexts people esteem the ethically wrong things, and he proposed republican constitution building as an antidote against the malfunctioning of the desire for esteem.⁴⁶ This is a much less naïve approach to the desire for esteem than the one found in Gassendi and his followers. However, it perhaps could not have been developed if the ideas propagated by Gassendi and his followers had not been around in mid-eighteenth-century Paris.

Acknowledgement

Work on this article was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (M-2097).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Austrian Science Fund: [Grant Number M-2097].

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⁴¹For some of these issues, see [note suppressed for anonymous review].

⁴²Force, 'Helvétius as an Epicurean Political Theorist'.

⁴³Helvétius, *Oeuvres*, 2: 112–16.

⁴⁴Helvétius, *Oeuvres*, 2: 196–9; 2: 271–3.

⁴⁵Helvétius, *Oeuvres*, 2: 86; 3: 71.

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