

# Flattery\*

YUVAL EYLON  
*The Open University, Israel*

DAVID HEYD  
*The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

Flattery is an 'ordinary vice' in a double sense. It is common in its cross-cultural prevalence, and modern theoreticians do not usually consider it among the worst moral vices. The term is etymologically derived from the act of 'flattening down,' or smoothing, that is to say, the attempt to ease personal relations in some way. Flattery also appears to be flat in the sense of lack of moral or psychological depth. This apparent flatness of flattery may be responsible for the scant philosophical attention given to the concept. Not surprisingly, modern moral philosophy completely ignores it. A moral theory based on right and wrong, on justice and rights, or on utility and welfare, has little interest in the practice of flattery. Liberal ethics, which focuses on the harm principle, does not view flattery as a distinct moral wrong. Modern theories tend to view it as a form of deception, morally indistinguishable from any other. Flattery is wrong inasmuch as it causes harm or leads to a violation of rights. But in and of itself, flattery does not seem to be a significant moral category.

In contrast, more traditional virtue-oriented ethical thought does refer to it, at least in a cursory way. We would like to take our lead from that tradition and offer in this paper some more systematic reflections on the concept, which turns out to be complex and elusive, yet illuminating in a general account of the moral defects of the human character. It will emerge that flattery is a 'Platonic vice' that brings to the fore Plato's contrast between the real and the fake and his

---

\* We wish to thank Alon Harel and an anonymous referee of the article for their helpful comments.

insistence on the moral importance of the interplay between the personal and the social. It is closely related to the concepts of self-respect and self-deception.

### I. Basic Analysis

What is flattery? Unlike servility, which is a general psychological disposition, flattery consists of an overt communicative act which is essentially 'propositional.' An act of flattery typically makes use of excessive commendatory language in describing the qualities or record of another person for the purpose of creating a favorable attitude in that person towards the flatterer. It contains an explicit assertion of alleged merit. It should be noted that what distinguishes acts of flattery is not only their content. In many cases flattery indeed consists of an exaggeration in the content of the complimentary attribution to another person, but in some cases it may be characterized by the wrong context in which the attribution is made. For example, even if listing the degrees and awards a person has attained may be appropriate in one context (such as introducing her to the audience of a public lecture), it would be inappropriate flattery in another context (such as introducing that person at a private dinner party).

In one sense, an act of flattery is very similar to bribery, using words rather than money or goods and appealing to the addressee's vanity rather than to his material self-interest. There are, however, two (related) differences between bribery and flattery. First, bribery is typically a 'deal' between the two parties, the conditions of which are laid on the table. Second, the currency used in bribery is 'real'—its value is undiminished by its use. The first difference, then, is that flattery is a surreptitious form of deception, and its success as a manipulative act is conditioned by the (partial) lack of awareness on the part of the addressee about its nature.<sup>1</sup> Flattery succeeds only if the flatteree believes the flatterer has made an *honest* compliment. Since it is the perception in the eyes of the flatteree that matters, flattery may consist of a statement known to its utterer to be completely untrue or at least over-inflated in its positive evaluation of the addressee.

The second difference concerns the speech act of flattery. The flatterer uses a compliment in order to endear oneself to the flatteree who is unaware of its phony nature. If A bribes B with 100 genuine gold

---

<sup>1</sup> We will discuss later cases in which the flatteree *is* aware of the disingenuous element in the compliment but is nevertheless flattered. However, such cases will be shown to be parasitic, depending on the satisfaction derived either from the very fact of being an object of flattery or from the recognition of some (other) element of honest admiration in the flattering act.

coins, the value of these coins remains the same. Not so in the case of flattery. Flattery, accordingly, is to compliments as lying is to assertions. Williamson argued that 'assert p only if you know that p' is a constitutive rule of assertion (Williamson 1996: 489–523).<sup>2</sup> A similar argument can be applied to compliments, which are very similar to, if not a type of, assertions. Like complimenting, flattery makes positive assertions about another person. However, unlike someone who pays an honest compliment, the flatterer's aim is to win the flatteree's favor. Consequently, even if one flatters by uttering a compliment she knows to be true, the assertion does not transmit knowledge. This is so even if the flatterer uses a true compliment on purpose, is a reliable judge of the matter at hand, and has a reputation for being reliable. The reason is that the flatterer is unreliable in another sense: he would not have made the compliment unless he wanted to gain something from the flatteree and might just as well have made a false compliment if such a compliment were useful and available.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the fact that one is flattering nullifies the value of the compliment as a compliment. Unlike the currency used in bribery, that used by the flatterer is, by definition, counterfeit.<sup>4</sup> An act of flattery, then, is an act of deception designed to win over the flatteree. In this respect, it seems morally indistinguishable from any other act of deception. In order to appreciate its moral significance, we must look both at the character traits involved, and at the relation between flatterer and flatteree.

The significance of the relation between flatterer and flatteree brings the social aspect of flattery to the fore. In contrast to hypocrisy, which applies to (double) standards or values and is displayed in public, flattery is primarily addressed to a particular individual. Unlike courage or temperance and their correlative vices, which apply individually in human beings, flattery is an essentially inter-personal or social vice. It takes two for flattery. Flattery is *relational* in the sense that it operates only towards another person, usually in the public sphere (often in a competitive context in which others are involved), who must 'co-operate' for the act to succeed. It should be emphasized that flattery is a relation that is neither

---

<sup>2</sup> The analogy between compliments and assertions, on the one hand, and flattery and lying, on the other, does not depend on adopting the knowledge condition, but rather some other, weaker, condition.

<sup>3</sup> Similar unreliability characterizes also the flatterer who is unaware of the reasons for his manipulative or groveling behavior.

<sup>4</sup> Assuming that the knowledge condition is constitutive of assertions and applies also to compliments, it seems to follow that 'do not make compliments for an ulterior motive' is not only a moral principle, but also a constitutive rule of complimenting. If this rule is violated, compliments do not transmit knowledge. Therefore, even if one knowingly compliments someone falsely, the action may be tactful or polite rather than one of flattery.

reflexive nor symmetrical. Although it involves complimenting and deception, both of which may apply reflexively, people cannot flatter themselves. And although, as we shall see, flattery is a failed attempt to create a personal relationship, unlike friendship, it is not necessarily mutual. In normal cases it cannot be mutual. Flattery is typically unidirectional, like the hierarchical relations on which it depends. Thus, although rulers, bosses and teachers can compliment their subjects, subordinates and students, they cannot normally be said to flatter them.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Two Types of Flatterers

Flatterers have a common character trait, although this is not easy to articulate, as we shall presently see. Flattery differs from servility, which is a general psychological disposition, because the flatterer must create the appearance of paying an honest compliment. Expressing a certain trait of character that manifests a moral defect of personality, flattery naturally belongs to the category of *vice*. Like adulation, flattery is made from a position of inferiority or need—material or psychological. But unlike compliment, flattery is necessarily disingenuous. And, as is not the case with servility, the flatterer wishes to break to some extent the hierarchical relationship rather than acknowledge it. Aristotle tries, somewhat artificially (as he himself admits), to apply his model of virtue to flattery, suggesting that it belongs to the sphere of social intercourse, in general, and to the agreeable in the business of life, in particular:

The man who is pleasant in the right way is friendly and the mean is friendliness, while the man who exceeds is an obsequious person if he has no end in view, a flatterer if he is aiming at his own advantage, and the man who falls short and is unpleasant in all circumstances is a quarrelsome and surly sort of person. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1108a, 27–29)<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle's general formula, and the distinctions between flattery and complimenting and between flattery and servility lead to a general mapping of the two ideal types of flattery, or rather the two extreme poles

---

<sup>5</sup> This does not exclude the possibility of some forms of mutual flattery when one tries to find favor in the eyes of the other in some particular sphere, while the other tries the same towards the first in another sphere. However, such mutual flattery obviously works only in the 'manipulative' sense and not in the 'obsequious' (as we refer to the two below), since the latter characterizes an attitude to the whole personality of another person.

<sup>6</sup> If we consider the virtue of social intercourse in terms of the way truth is conveyed (rather than in terms of agreeableness), then the opposite of flattery should be bluntness or tactlessness (rather than quarrelling). This means that flattery may be interpreted as either over-friendliness or over-complimentary behavior.

on a continuous spectrum. The first may be called 'the manipulative;' the second, 'the obsequious.' The first corresponds to Aristotle's description of excessive friendliness aiming at one's own advantage; the second to the person who suffers from the same excessive need but has 'no end in view.' In zoological metaphor, the two forms of flattery are captured by 'snake' and 'dog,' respectively.<sup>7</sup>

The flatterer of the first type acts with cool design, aiming at achieving a particular favor or personal benefit as a consequence of the favorable attitude the flatteree would (presumably) develop towards her. A clear illustration would be flattery in politics. Manipulative flattery is the mirror image of tact. Tact is the art of leaving certain things unsaid with the aim of sparing the addressee embarrassment. Flattery is saying things which should better have not been said. Both are ways of smoothing social relations, but tact is a virtue of introverted restraint which takes as its goal respect for the other, while flattery is a vice of extroverted deception. Both the tactful person and the flatterer are sensitive to the addressee's self-image and honor, but the one respects it while the other manipulates it.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to mere politeness, which is conventional and hence not considered subject to the norm of truth, both tact and flattery can operate only on the basis of the other party's unawareness of the deviation from it (Adler 1993: 447–448). The vice of the flatterer relies on, or turns to, the susceptibility of the flatteree. Like tact, successful flattery requires a particular knowledge—knowledge of the flatteree, his vanity and ambition, as well as the ability to make the compliment sound real, convincing, honest and well-founded. But unlike tact, this knowledge is used to further the flatterer's own aims, not to spare the addressee embarrassment.

Flattery of the second type is psychologically more complex. It is an attempt to create some personal relationship in order to partly overcome a hierarchical gap. Unlike the manipulative kind, it is partially sincere and does not seek 'material' benefit, but only personal attention and reciprocal appreciation.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> For Shakespeare's use of 'dog' in this context, see Hobday 1965. This meticulous survey of the various semantic fields in which 'flattery' appears (so frequently) in Shakespeare includes also the examination of the repeated juxtaposition of sweetness and poison as two complementary aspects of flattery, which falls into line with our analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Heyd 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Our view differs from the short comment on the subject by Avishai Margalit, who conflates the two types of flattery when he says that '[g]roveling is a form of flattery in which a person acts servilely to others in order to give them a false feeling of superiority, thus advancing the groveler's interests' (Margalit 1996: 44–45). Margalit, though, rightly observes the groveller humiliates himself in order to achieve some advantage, for instance self-esteem, at the cost of his self-respect.

When we compare the two idealized kinds of flatterers, we observe that the manipulative could be described as cynical, the obsequious as pathetic. Our response to the former is usually *indignation*, since it involves deception and consists of an immoral attempt to achieve something the flatterer does not deserve. If successful, the flatterer might attain something which is unjust (like a higher grade in school, a promotion in the office) in a way which is unfair, even harmful, to third parties. Typically, indignation is absent when we consider the initial inequality to be unjust and the benefits sought by the flatterer deserved, or when we find the flatterer amiable and the flatteree repugnant or ridiculous. Flattery can even serve as a means of exposing illegitimate hierarchy. Such cases are the stuff of comedy rather than of tragedy.

Our response to the second form of flattery is *aversion* and perhaps even pity, since although we do not stand to lose anything from the act, we judge its agent seriously defective in character. The two forms of flattery address the inequality of power and status between the two parties in different ways. The manipulator tries to circumvent its implications by achieving his goals indirectly. The groveling flatterer does not accept the gap but rather tries to transform the impersonal hierarchical relation into a personal, more egalitarian one. Unlike the manipulator, he seeks personal attention and friendship. Typically, even if we pity this type of flatterer, condemn the circumstances that lead him to flattery, and recognize the validity of his need, it is difficult to ‘side’ with such a character, who demonstrates his weakness and lack of self-respect.

Aristotle views both types of flattery as manifestations of excessive friendship. This characterization is not very informative, and at first glance seems simply false, in particular as far as the cynical flatterer is concerned. In order to better understand what these vices consist in, and what is morally wrong with flattery, we must return to Plato’s discussion of flattery, flatterers, and the vice of the flatteree. Ultimately, this discussion will highlight the significance of Aristotle’s insight.

### III. The Vice of the Flatteree

First, let us consider the manipulative type of flatterer and his effect on the flatteree. From the point of view of his metaphysically-based morality, Plato despises flattery for its being *fake*, that is, parasitical on truth (*Gorgias* 463b ff.). It has the appearance of reality but is illusory. It is based on the power of pleasure bestowed on the addressee, rather than on her good.<sup>10</sup> Flattery is a practice which is not ‘craft like’; it is

---

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle follows Plato in grounding the distinction between friendship and flattery on that between truth and pleasure. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1173b.

not based on knowledge of the good, but on guessing. It ignores what is best but gives the impression of doing good. Its sole aim is causing pleasure, regardless of the moral cost. The context of the discussion is oratory, which Plato characterizes as flattery, but he also mentions the analogous practices of cosmetics, pastry cooking and sophistry—all pretending to do good like their reality-based counterparts—gymnastics, medicine and legislation. Following tradition, Plato warns that flattering practices are so close to their good-seeking counterparts that people easily confuse the two categories. He judges these forms of flattery harshly, describing them as ‘mischievous, deceptive, disgraceful and ill-bred’ (*Gorgias*, 465b). And as noticed in Proverbs (11:9), flattery has a corrupting effect: ‘An hypocrite [literally, flatterer] with his mouth destroyeth his neighbour.’ Plato’s main insight is this: flattery leads to the replacement of a human good by a barely distinguishable substitute. Its most salient feature is the corruption of the flatteree. This corruption is achieved through the seductive power of flattery: its appeal to the pleasure derived from the adulation of others, vanity, and the promise it holds for a genuine personal relationship of the type(s) that normally serve as background to honest compliments and constructive criticisms. The manipulative flatterer knows his victim, understands him, tempts him, and accordingly manipulates him.

Note that vices usually involve self-corruption, that is, forms of behavior which destroy the integrity or harmony of the agent’s soul. But flattery (unlike ordinary deception, which harms the victim’s interests) corrupts the personality of the other: it traps the addressee in a condition of self-delusion and sometimes self-deception when that addressee innocently trusts the friendship and complimentary attitude of the flatterer.

So the flatteree is susceptible to compliments. But as the notion of ‘fake’ applies both to the compliments themselves and to the relationship or attitude that the complimenting discloses, this susceptibility is the vice of a virtue and not a *sui generis* disposition to enjoy the compliments of others. The vulnerability of the flatteree is a consequence of the genuine importance and significance of the opinions of others, the significance and importance of *honest* compliments paid by competent persons, and the central role relationships with others of the type internally related to honest compliments occupy in our lives. These facts mitigate the vice of the flatteree in many instances. The vice is one of weakness, not of wickedness. An honest compliment is fittingly pleasurable, and there is value in friendship and other relationships that honest compliments and mutual respect can give rise to. Thus, it is the unsuspecting and trusting person who is most vulnerable to flattery (as well as the vain person or one who is desperate for love).

If susceptibility to flattery is a vice, what is its opposite? Clearly, insusceptibility. But there are two possible types here. The first is the person who is not interested in the opinions of others at all; the second is one who can tell the difference between honest compliments and flattery. The first is morally defective, whereas the second is virtuous.<sup>11</sup> But the mean, the position between arrogant self-confidence and the lack of interest in the opinions of others, and the lack of self-confidence and self-respect that leads to attaching too great a weight to the compliments of others, is as usual an extraordinarily difficult position to occupy and maintain, in particular in face of the efforts of a crafty flatterer. Inability to accept a compliment is a defect of character; a thirst to receive one, irrespective of its real motive, is equally faulty; and distinguishing between deserved and undeserved, genuine and false praise, requires a combination of strength of character and an uncanny cognitive awareness.

The psychological root of this difficulty lies in the universal inclination to 'vainglory,' i.e., the pleasure in basking in an enhanced self- and social image, which undermines the capacity to assess the flatterer's real motives (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part I, chap. 11).<sup>12</sup> All human beings are prone to suppress information that would undermine the sincerity of their admirers' motives. People of status and power are natural objects of flattery. From experience they are often aware of this susceptibility and become suspicious of expressions of praise. Sometimes the suspicion becomes tragically sweeping, that is to say, such people cannot accept any compliment on face value and completely disregard positive judgments about themselves. But most people still believe that they can make the distinction between flattering words and real praise. This is why flattery always has some chance of success, even with people who seem to be completely immune to it.

Shakespeare, in his perceptive insight, touches on a limiting case of flattery. Trying to persuade Julius Caesar to come to the Capitol on the fateful day, Decius, one of the conspirators, suggests that Caesar loves to hear that in the same way as 'unicorns may be betrayed with trees/And bears with glasses,' so may 'men with flatterers,' and proceeds:

---

<sup>11</sup> Not every honest (non-flattering) compliment is, of course, of the same value. The knowledge, authority, status etc. of the person making the compliment affect its worth. But the ability to assess these factors is different from the ability to detect the motive behind the compliment (which is the virtue of the 'unflatterable' person).

<sup>12</sup> Hobbes associates a person's dependence on flattery with ostentation and rashness. These are manifestations of the absence of inner autonomous resources for the sustenance of a positive self-image.

But when I tell him he hates flatterers, He says he does, being then most flattered. (*Julius Caesar*, II, i, 204–208)

The ultimate, and apparently inescapable trick which would ‘over sway’ even suspicious Caesar is a *second-order* flattery, namely an appeal to his pride about being able to trace flattery and resist it! And indeed, who could fail to be pleased with such praise?

But beyond the psychological obstacle, there is a cognitive one. It is not clear that making the distinction between a real and a feigned motive of a compliment is always possible. A crafty flatterer who does not exaggerate or otherwise disclose her motives may be impossible to detect. In such a case, only the over-suspicious is protected, and vulnerability to flattery is not only the vice of a virtue but a danger that accompanies the virtue, a danger that cannot be avoided without cost. Thus, flattery highlights an inherent tension in our conception of the virtuous person and the good life. Someone who is not overly suspicious, and not overly dependent on others is rendered vulnerable to the deception of flattery. This vulnerability is inevitable unless our conception of the virtuous person is one of an infallible judge of the motives and character of others. Consequently, flattery is profoundly troubling: the difficulty in distinguishing flattery from real praise threatens to pull the ground out from under our feet: if friendship and kindness can be aroused so easily, how can we be sure that our friends and loved ones are not manipulating us? The virtue of openness to sincere personal relationship (friendship) comes hand in hand with the inevitable risk of becoming the victim of flattery.

The vanity or naiveté of the flatteree notwithstanding, the real villain is the flatterer, or in Plato’s taxonomy, the sophist, orator, cosmetician, and cook. Although our notion of flattery does not apply to social practices such as cookery and cosmetics and is more personal than Plato’s notion, two core elements of our analysis of the deceptive nature of flattery are clearly articulated by Plato: the effort to please and the disregard of truth. In the *Gorgias* Plato seems to be thinking primarily of the manipulative sense of flattery rather than the obsequious, since he is not concerned in this context with the pathetic attempt to awaken personal attention. Nevertheless, what makes flattery wrong is not merely its deceitfulness but also its shameful and disgraceful aspect, and in particular the way this reflects on the flatterer’s character. Furthermore, Plato’s warning about the blurred dividing line between doing good and flattery may be interpreted as relating to the difficulty of distinguishing between sincere and deceptive expressions of praise or between doing good and causing pleasure. Part of the problem is that as in our analysis of flattery, Plato’s bakers and maybe even

orators are not themselves aware of the shameful nature of their trade, and their sin involves some type of ignorance. We will return to this point below.

#### IV. A Self-defeating Practice

The manipulative type of flatterer, then, deceives, and possibly corrupts, the flatteree by appealing to his vanity. In order to better appreciate the specific nature of the wrong involved in flattery and in particular its corrupting effect, we must turn to the second, obsequious type of flatterer. In the *Phaedrus*, in the course of the discussion of love, Plato gets much closer to our second sense of flattery:

A flatterer, for example, may be an awful beast and a dreadful nuisance, but nature makes flattery rather pleasant by mixing in a little culture with its words. So it is with a mistress—for all the harm we accuse her of causing—and with many other creatures of that character, and their callings: at least they are delightful company for a day. (*Phaedrus*, 240b)

Under the illusion of the momentary pleasure provided by flattery lies the grim truth of an ‘older man who’s lost his looks,’ who ‘follows [the youth] around like a servant.’ It is ‘disgusting’ ‘to hear praise of yourself that is out of place and excessive’ (240d). Plato draws a colorful picture of the pathetic flatterer, eager to please, clinging to another person who is not really interested in *him*, desperate to find some human warmth and win reciprocal love. The flatterer is repellent here not because of his deceptive manipulation but because of his excessive need and weakness manifested in overabundant praise and insensitivity to its proper context. Furthermore, the allusion to prostitution highlights the profound illusion of achieving love through a relationship which one should know is necessarily one-sided and based on the other’s self-interest.

The *Phaedrus* passage sets up the contrast between the flattering lover and the ‘true lover’ described in Socrates’ second speech. The distinction between the flatterer and the ideal lover turns to the motivation of the flatterer and to the type of relationship sought and created. This division suggests a sharp distinction between flattery and courting. First, unlike flattery, courting consists precisely in falling in love, meaning that at least in some sense the lover believes his own words, either literally or figuratively. Secondly, even if the lover often uses ‘flattering’ words in the uni-directional effort to create a relationship and win reciprocal love, his motives are different from the flatterer’s: he is neither engaged in a cynical manipulation the aim of which is personal gain

(for he seeks love), nor is he aiming to overcome a perceived hierarchical scheme (for he aims at egalitarian love). The distinction in attitude and motive renders the exaggerations of romantic wooing honest, and locates it in the context of caring and love. Hence there is nothing morally problematic about it, and courting is not normally considered a shameful display of weakness or lack of self-respect. And even the expressions of weakness and servility of the courting party are merely feigned and provisional, serving as a show of love towards the other party. Plato's old lover is denigrated because he does not, and cannot, seek true love, and because he is not aware of the incongruence of a true loving relationship with 'the boy.' This makes his courtship inappropriate and even disgusting, a fake of true love, an occasion for momentary pleasure rather than a real relationship. This, of course, takes us back to flattery.

The distinction between flattery and courting exposes what may turn out to be the deepest source of the negative value of flattery. The second type of flattery is straightforwardly *self-defeating*. Plato is correct, as is Lear: nothing 'real' can come out of it. It is based on deception, self-deception, manipulation, illusion and short-term gratification of vain wishes. In particular, it involves a loss of self-respect. Indeed, some forms of manipulative flattery may achieve ad hoc success, but in the long run flatterers become objects of contempt both to the flattered party (who becomes impatient with them or sometimes even violent in his response to them), to the public at large, and possibly to themselves. So even on the scale of manipulative scheming and deception, such flattery occupies a low status.

The flatterer is pathetic since he tries to achieve the impossible: his starting point is a hierarchical distance within which he operates. He believes that by an excessive manifestation of servility and praise he can expect a personal reciprocal attention from the addressee, without really annulling the relationship of authority and subjection or somehow transforming it into one of friendship and mutual concern. This is of course a paradoxical hope and is bound to fail.<sup>13</sup> The flatterer honors his object of admiration, but really aims at creating some friendship; the flatteree is gratified by being honored, disregarding the motivation of friendship. But as Aristotle notices, even the honor felt by the object of flattery is not genuine since it does not come from the

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *The Book of Job*, 15: 34 (King James Version): 'For the congregation of the hypocrites [literally, in the original, flatterers] shall be desolate,' meaning that flatterers, despite their eagerness to win friends and connections, remain lonely. (The verse could also be read as referring to the loneliness of the powerful flatteree). The continuation makes the analogy to bribery: 'and fire shall consume the tabernacles of bribery,' the briber, like the flatterer, being accused of mischief and deceit.

right people (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1159a). Both the vain flatterer and the pathetic flatterer are weak in that they are overly dependent on others. They both seek reassurance and comfort in the attitude of others, which they mistake for genuine friendship or love, and they cater to each other's vice and weakness.

Plato goes a step further. In the final speech of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates—under the influence of his *daimon* which stops him from returning to the city—presents the ideal of Platonic love that can flourish only outside the city walls, social hierarchy and sexual conventions. This type of *eros* is neither reassuring nor comforting. A genuine relationship requires that lovers transcend any differences of power and seek a mutual and egalitarian relationship based on mutual respect and the attraction of their souls—not mistaking the pleasures of love for the love of pleasures. Flattery and the type of *eros* associated with it and criticized in the first two speeches of the *Phaedrus* are the marks of corrupt souls and a corrupt society. Corruption, both political and personal, is perhaps created by the manipulative flatterer of the *Gorgias*, but its obsequious counterpart thrives in a city which is already corrupt.

The confusion of respect for another person and flattery may be described in terms of *distance*. Proper respect, not to speak of reverence, is a recognition of appropriate distance. Friendship, and even more so intimacy, is a relation of closeness which is unencumbered by the symbolic signs of distance. Like over-familiarity, flattery involves a confusion about the proper distance between two people or a misguided (or feigned) attempt to disregard the norms of maintaining a distance.

Thus, even though courtship often fails, it does not create contempt. Its failure is contingent and may well arise from conditions that are independent of the wooer (primarily the lack of interest on part of the object of the courtship). We can easily feel sorry for the disappointed suitor and wish her well in her future endeavors. But we do not consider her weak. However, toadying behavior creates no sympathy, even when it fails. It is structurally misguided, hopeless. Furthermore, flattery is not based on some cognitive mistake or wrong evaluation (which may be the case in courtship). It is a manifestation of a defect of character, the lack of *self-respect*. Groveling is a sign of the diminution of one's self-image. Submissive behavior might at times be a matter of necessity, a means of survival, but the typical cases of flattery are freely chosen. The subject must show respect to the king; the student to the teacher; the aide to his boss. But the opposite is true as well: kings, teachers and bosses should respect other people as well. Only when due respect is transformed into a loss of self-respect and

excessive praise motivated by a wish for reciprocal personal favor, does respect become flattery.

The vices of the obsequious flatterer and the flatteree stem from an overdependence on others. Both confuse genuine personal relationships with pleasant but fake substitutes. It is this lack of self-respect—the failure to live up to one’s own standards (those that make a genuine relationship and honest compliment important), and the weakness displayed and symbolized by flattery—that make flattery so distasteful. This is the crux of Plato’s indictment against the manipulative flatterer: he breeds on and takes advantage of the inability to maintain self-respect.

### V. Deception and Self-deception

We suggested in the previous sections that the manipulative flatterer not only sacrifices her own self-respect and perhaps personal relationships for material gain, but also creates and exploits the lack of self-respect that gives rise to the vices of the obsequious flatterer and of the flatteree. Both ideal types of flatterers operate by using compliments, but as we saw above the distinguishing feature of flattery is not its *content*. Flattery is distinguished by the motives of the flatterer and by the way these are understood by the flatteree and by third-party observers.

These observations lead us to a deeper contrast between the two forms of flattery, associated with the degree of opacity of the motives in the two cases. The cynical flatterer is, by definition, fully aware of his scheme. His success depends on the lack of corresponding awareness in the flattered party. Only if the flatteree believes in the purity of the flatterer’s motives (or suppresses doubts about them) can the act achieve its intended goal.<sup>14</sup> Inasmuch as any ignorance on the part of the manipulative flatterer is involved, it is Plato’s charge that he is mistaken about the value of the thing sought (pleasure, material goods) and the price paid (‘fake’ personal relationships instead of genuine ones). Self-deception is involved only if we accept Plato’s further claim that the flatterer—any flatterer—actually knows the truth, on some level.

But in the obsequious case, although the flatterer cannot be described as intentionally trying to deceive his addressee, his own motives are not fully transparent to him. Partially, this is a

---

<sup>14</sup> Social psychologists too have noted the necessary vagueness of motives as the condition of ingratiation. A fully transparent act of flattery will not have the expected effect on the addressee; and a praising act perceived by the ‘target’ as a mere gesture of politeness (which is equally transparent) will not work as an act of flattery either (Gordon 1996: 57).

consequence of the psychological need of this type of flatterer. While the one form of flattery is thus based on deception, the other involves self-deception. It should, however, be noted that the purely manipulative flatterer is only an ideal type and that in reality even cynical flatterers become obsequious when they make flattery their habit. In other words, the snake-like flatterer often deceives herself, seeing herself free of dog-like characteristics. For example, since manipulation is considered less loathsome than groveling, and deception less pathetic than self-deception, the flatterer might make herself (and others) believe that instrumental reasons rather than obsequiousness are her real motives. Naturally, the mechanism of self-deception involved in flattery is particularly noticeable in its operation in the flatteree. It is true that not every person is a flatterer, but as claimed above everybody is susceptible to being flattered. Despite the difficulty of distinguishing between flattery and honest compliment, in many cases the flatteree—like King Lear—should, in fact, know better, and perhaps even does.

Flattery turns out, therefore, to be both profoundly unsettling (because it is so difficult to detect) and contemptible. It arouses indignation since it involves benefits bestowed undeservedly on the flatterer. And it creates revulsion since we judge the flatteree and both types of flatterers to be of low character, lacking self-respect—dependent on others or accepting their weakness and ready to act in ways that symbolize it, in order to achieve some benefit. There is something loathsome about a person who tries to compensate for his low self-image or take advantage of another's weakness by excessively aggrandizing that person. But the aversion we feel towards flattery is also directed at the flattered person. We respect people who are less susceptible to flattery and despise those who can be easily flattered. Again, this has to do with self-respect. A person who has sufficient inner resources, both cognitive and emotional, to realistically assess his own merits is not desperate for external praise and admiration, particularly if he can only accept those through self-deception (i.e., knowing in some way that they are not completely genuine). The object of flattery is censured for her moral weakness and her insatiable thirst for honor which make her derive superficial pleasure from praise she knows in her heart is wrongly motivated.<sup>15</sup> This is why having found out that I was victim to deception or fraud makes me feel stupid or angry; but

---

<sup>15</sup> Spinoza defines pride in terms of self over-estimation and hence considers proud people as susceptible to acts of flattery (which he deems too well known to be in need of a definition!) (*Ethics*, Part IV, Prop. 57).

realizing that I was impressed by flattery makes me feel embarrassed and ashamed (Adler 1993: 442).<sup>16</sup>

The moral badness of a successful act of flattery is ultimately a matter of the *joint* vice of the two parties. Unlike lying or many forms of deception, flattery occurs only when both sides play their part. An unholy meeting of a wish to find favor and a desire for glory. Both share moral responsibility for the false representation. But who should be denounced more—the flatterer or the object of flattery—is difficult to say. We tend to be more critical of the former, perhaps since he is engaged in a positive intentional act, while the latter is just a passive responder taking private (secret) pleasure in the act.

However, from a Platonic point of view focused on self-deception and the lack of awareness of the disingenuous character of the (obsequious) flattering action, the two parties are on a par. And when the flattered party is in a more powerful position and under less psychological (or practical) pressure, he should be held even more responsible for the inculcation of flattery relations.<sup>17</sup> The analogy to the legal question of the relative degree of liability of the briber and the bribed in the criminal law may give us some insight into this question. In both cases it may be epistemologically easier to establish evidence for the attempt to flatter or to bribe than to prove the acceptance of flattery and bribery; but equally it may be easier to hold the acceptor as morally and politically more responsible for the action than the initiator.<sup>18</sup> Like in other relations based on temptation, it may be the flatterer who traps the otherwise self-respecting person into receiving a feigned compliment, or the powerful superior who lures the otherwise respecting subordinate into an ingratiating behavior.

## VI. The Vice of Flattery—Venial or Mortal?

The discussion so far has left open the issue of the degree of moral severity of the vice of flattery. Thomas Aquinas devotes an Article to this question, asking whether flattery is a mortal or a venial sin. Following Augustine, he argues that it is usually among ‘the slight sins’, whether it is performed by choice or by necessity. The reason is

---

<sup>16</sup> Adler does not discuss flattery, but his argument that deception is often less blameworthy than straightforward lying is convincing and pertinent to our analysis. Flattery, like deception, can be more easily excused (once it is exposed) due to the ambiguity of the content and the motive of the act, that is, by not being a blunt lie.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Nothing poisons monarchs more than flattery: nothing, either, by which bad men can more easily gain credit in their courts’ (Montaigne 1991: 703).

<sup>18</sup> This is exactly the case in the Israeli criminal code (sections 290–291) where the punishment for acceptance of bribery is double the punishment for offering it.

that it expresses ‘a mere craving to please others, or again in order to avoid some evil, or to acquire something in a case of necessity,’ and hence ‘is not contrary to charity’ (*Summa Theologica*, II, IIa, Question 115, Article 2). But Aquinas admits that sometimes at least flattery may be considered a mortal sin—either when it encourages sin, or when it intends to injure the addressee in body or soul by an act of deception, or when it creates, even unintentionally, the occasion for sin.<sup>19</sup> But in his replies to the objections, he seems to underplay these circumstances of grievous flattery.

It seems then that unlike Plato, Aquinas is less concerned with the deceptive, disgraceful, self-deceptive and self-defeating dimensions of flattery and approaches it more indulgently as either a wish to please or a matter of necessity. In the Question following the one on flattery, in comparing flattery to quarrelling (referring to Aristotle’s juxtaposition of the two), Aquinas insists that quarrelling is a more grievous sin than flattery due to its being ‘more inconsistent with the spiritual state’ (Question 116, Article 2). As two opposites to the virtue of friendship, the one which gives excessive displeasure is more of a vice than the one which gives excessive pleasure. Aquinas is perhaps correct in that generalization, but it is doubtful whether the comparison is itself valid, since, as we have tried to show, flattery *undermines* the very possibility of true friendship. Quarrelling, on the other hand, does not run against the very idea of genuine personal relationship and its occasional occurrence may be considered a natural accompaniment to it. For unlike flattery, which is uni-directional and submissive, quarrelling takes place between parties who stand on equal grounds and is essentially ‘symmetrical.’ Furthermore, it does not replace friendship with a fake image of it. It is not deceptive and does not leave anyone in a state of delusion.

However, Aquinas is willing to concede that there *is* an element of shamefulness and disgrace in flattery and that in that respect it is worse than quarrelling. To maintain the consistency of his analysis, he introduces the distinction between ‘grievous’ and ‘vile,’ attributing the former to quarrelling and the latter to flattery. This fits well with our description of flattery as ‘low’ or revolting. Aquinas ascribes the vile nature of flattery to the use of deceptive means and to its secretive operation, but says nothing about self-respect or self-deception. He seems to be thinking only of the manipulative kind of flattery. But he is right in claiming that we feel more ashamed of our vile sins than of the more grievous ones. We may add that there is the shameless flatterer who exercises his complimentary excesses publicly and

---

<sup>19</sup> And vainglory is, of course, a capital vice.

there is the flatterer who operates in secrecy since he is ashamed of his obsequious behavior. The first is not aware of his vice; the second is partly aware of the repellent nature of his behavior and does his best to hide it.

The contrast between Aquinas' view and that of Aristotle and more so of Plato brings us back to the issue of the failure of modern theories to account for the specific moral nature of flattery. The secondary moral role of personal relationships and the primary role awarded to the prohibition to mislead or act insincerely suggest that flattery is but a type of deception, and its gravity depends on the particular consequences or circumstances of particular acts. Furthermore, the vice of the flatteree—the supposed victim of intentional manipulation—is hardly interesting to moral theories that focus on rules and intentional actions. But for Plato, flattery is extremely unsettling, and grievous. This attitude reflects the significance he attaches to genuine personal relationships, self-respect, and of course knowledge and self-knowledge. As has emerged above, our reaction to flatterers of both types and to the flatteree and the unsettling effect of the very possibility of flattery strongly points to the Platonic view.

## VII. Hypocrisy and Flattery

Flattery is closely associated with hypocrisy, the two vices consisting of false pretence.<sup>20</sup> Both can carry the form of self-aware acting out with the aim of achieving a particular benefit or positive image, but both can equally manifest an attempt at sincerity, however, which is based on self-deception. This second form calls for constant effort on the part of third parties to *expose* the real motives underlying the appearance of sincere behavior. The difference between the two vices is that while flattery is concerned with the merits of another person, hypocrisy is primarily concerned with the image of oneself. Hypocrisy is the attribute of a person who is eager to prove that he conforms with an existing set of social norms and values when deviation from it may be costly. The hypocrite loudly and proudly avows a position or an ideal that he markedly does not live up to. Rather than an active initiative to establish personal relationship of friendship (as is the case in flattery), hypocrisy is an essentially *social* mechanism for maintaining at least the appearance of conformity to a system of values, that is to say, it has a protective element (both for the individual and for the social order itself). This is why hypocrisy is often considered as having some

---

<sup>20</sup> Judith Shklar, in her masterly work on ordinary vices (Shklar 1984: chap. 2), does not deal with flattery, although her chapter on hypocrisy is relevant to our discussion.

redeeming features, associated with its operation in sustaining social cohesion.

But the borders of both flattery and hypocrisy are culture-dependent. The context in which some excess in complimentary rhetoric, or some gap between what one really believes and what one professes are acceptable is defined by social convention and hence the judgment of these practices as vices is liable to change from one society to the other.

Finally, consider two limiting cases of flattery: the first, in which the flatterer is unaware of the flatteree's awareness of the flattering nature of the act; the second, in which the flatteree is totally unaware of the flatterer's shrewd manipulation. In the first case, the object of adulation may be fully aware of the disingenuous motive of the sycophant, but still take pleasure in it, since the act itself proves his powerful position and the dependence of others on him. 'What really flatters a man is that you think him worth flattering,' says George Bernard Shaw. Again, the act of flattery involves the flatterer's unawareness of this kind of pleasure created in the flattered. The flatterer is misled by self-deception into believing that the object of his praise is touched by it. But of course there is the alternative response of the self-aware addressee of flattery, namely anger at those who dare to over-praise him in order to achieve personal benefit, or contempt for those who simulate personal relations.<sup>21</sup> However, since every human being, including an absolute dictator, needs some form of personal relationship and warmth, no one can completely avoid the trap of flattery. In that sense, the thirst for reciprocal friendship characterizes not only the pathetic groveler but also the powerful ruler, like King Lear. Thus, the manipulative flattery of Lear's daughters is made possible only by Lear's own yearning to be loved even in the distorted way he expects at the beginning of the play. Only God cannot be flattered, first because he cannot be over-praised, secondly because he never deceives himself, and thirdly because he is in no need of praise. His glory is never vain and is independent of any recognition by human beings. God cannot be deceived and does not derive pleasure from the awareness of being the object of flattery.

The second case is arguably the most far-reaching use of the concept of flattery. Bernard de Mandeville takes the ultimate step in considering the whole moral system as based on flattery. Flattery is the most effective means for the 'lawgivers,' those who design and govern

---

<sup>21</sup> The ambiguity of the flatterer's motives is typically manifest when flattery comes from parties who at least *could* be in a position to make a genuine, justified compliment. Therefore, flattery is not usually exercised by slaves toward their kings, the gap between them being too wide to allow even the semblance of a real compliment, but rather by a junior partner to a professional senior.

society, to employ in inculcating human commitment to the priority of the public interest over the private. This process goes against human nature and can succeed only with the aid of natural human pleasure in praise: 'flattery must be the most powerful argument that could be used to human creatures' (Mandeville 1964: 349). Flattery, which is described as 'this bewitching engine,' is used to extol human nature above that of animals, to bestow unbounded praise on human beings. The moral virtues are nothing other than 'the political offspring which flattery begot upon praise' (Ibid 353). Mandeville explains the sweeping political efficacy of flattery as the outcome of the principle that the wider the targeted audience of the praise, the less suspicious it is regarding the motives behind it. Mandeville's concept of flattery lies at the extreme manipulative pole on the spectrum. Disgrace or shame are not involved in this analysis, since shame and honor, says Mandeville, are *created through* flattery. In that sense, flattery lies beyond morality, being a constitutive element in its formation. However, by treating the possibility of the whole social order as the function of the universally effective flattery of the whole citizenship, Mandeville seems to lose the very core of the concept of flattery. It becomes a super-human manipulative design which not only does not have any moral cost but constitutes a fundamental virtue by making the moral and legal order possible. It is the extreme opposite of Plato's view of flattery, which was the guiding spirit of this article.

### References

- Adler, Jonathan E. (1993), "Lying, Deceiving, or Falsely Implicating," *Journal of Philosophy* 94: 447-448.
- Aquinas, Thomas (1947), *Summa Theologica*, Benziger Bros. edition.
- Aristotle (1966), *Nicomachean Ethics* (ed. R. McKeon). New York: Random House.
- Gordon, Randall A. (1996), "Impact of Ingratiation on Judgements and Evaluations: A Meta-Analytical Investigation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71: 54-70.
- Heyd, David (1995), "Tact: Sense, Sensitivity, and Virtue," *Inquiry* 38: 217-31.
- Hobbes, Thomas (1996), *Leviathan* (ed. Richard Tuck). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobday, C. H. (1965), "Why the Sweets Melted: A Study in Shakespeare's Imagery," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 16: 3-17.
- Mandeville, Bernard de (1964), *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue*, in L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), *The British Moralists* (vol. 2). Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

- Margalit, Avishai (1996), *The Decent Society*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Montaigne, Michel de (1991), "On Glory," *The Complete Essays* (trans. M. A. Screech). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Plato (1997), *Complete Works* (ed. John M. Cooper). Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Shklar, Judith N. (1984), *Ordinary Vices*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Williamson, Timothy (1996), "Knowing and Asserting," *The Philosophical Review* 105: 489–523.