

Research Proposal

Recognition and Respect in Early Modern Philosophy: From Hobbes to Hegel and Beyond

The point of departure for my proposed research project is the insight that the philosophers who contributed most seminally to thinking about civil society in the early modern period, from Hobbes to Hegel, were acutely sensitive to the individual’s concern for approval and esteem from their neighbours. The concerted early modern interest in this deeply-embedded characteristic of human nature was, I propose, intimately connected to the emergent conceptualisation of society as, to some extent, a self-regulating human domain of order and stability. Such a vision of society was underpinned by the insight that the individual possessed the capacity to learn within – or, on account of their psychological make-up, to be moulded in profound and insensible ways *by* – their community and its apparatuses of socialisation. Even those philosophers who are often interpreted as conceiving of the individual as an independent, self-contained and instrumentally rational entity, such as Hobbes and Locke, emphasised the extent to which the processes of socialisation indelibly shape the subject’s sense of self. Seen from this perspective, Rousseau’s concept of *amour propre* and Hegel’s notion of a struggle for self-consciousness represent just two, particularly powerful and imaginative ways of exploring how the individual’s desires and reflective capacities develop inter-subjectively, through an engagement (and comparison) between their ‘self’ and other ‘selves’ in social contexts. If we are to grasp how the languages of natural law, civic republicanism and political economy contributed to, and shaped early modern thinking about civil society, this widely-shared insight – and the complex series of questions it raised for the design of political and social institutions in modern, commercial societies which respected *both* the universally-shared rights of citizens *and* recognised the particularities of the individual – needs to be placed centre-stage. This project aims to reconstruct historically the concerted debates on these questions in the period between Hobbes and Hegel, and thereby to recover both the continuities and the deep fissures within early modern thinking about civil society. A broader objective is to illustrate how intellectual historians can make a valuable contribution to ongoing contemporary discussions about civil society, by uncovering the historically-conditioned (and contested) nature of many of their central concepts and assumptions. In what follows I offer an outline of my proposed research project; but it should be noted that this is provisional, and I expect (and hope) that my thinking will evolve through dialogue and further reading in the coming three years.

Attentiveness to the individual’s desire (or need) to have their sense of self-worth validated by others was by no means new. Aristotle’s distinction between the friend and the flatterer, or Augustine’s condemnation of fallen man’s desire for praise and glory, form part of a much longer discussion in the western philosophical tradition regarding this human trait. Indeed, both of these lines of interpretation were developed further in the seventeenth century: the Aristotelian, in the voluminous conduct literature as well as moral philosophy of the period; and the Augustinian, in the thinking about moral psychology and its implications for a broadly secular understanding of post-lapsarian human societies which emerged from Calvinist and Jansenist theological circles. For a variety of reasons, however, the individual’s desire for admiration and recognition acquired a renewed importance in the early modern period, and was conceptualised in freshly complex ways. This is reflected in the transvaluation of the language of ‘honour’, ‘glory’, ‘fame’, ‘honesty’ and ‘dignity’ from the seventeenth century; and, indeed, of cognate terms such as ‘reputation’, ‘trust’ and ‘credit’, which accreted distinctly economic, even as they retained their honour-based significations. This alerts us to one, important reason why the individual’s desire for recognition, and its implications for society, received increased attention across a

wide range of discourses: the growth of commerce and the increasing importance of sprawling capital cities, rather than the royal court, in dictating fashions, tastes and manners. As my project aims to show, from Hobbes to Hegel the question of the preconditions for civil society in a recognisably ‘modern’, commercial age was considered to be intimately related to the channelling (and domestication) of its members’ need for esteem and admiration from others.

Here, Hobbes was a crucial figure: his writings raised deeply troubling questions regarding the preconditions for peace and social order in pluralistic modern communities which set the basic framework for philosophical debate for the following century and a half. Hobbes’s denial of natural sociability led him to argue that stable civil societies could not rely upon the public-spirited virtue of the few: the tradition of civic republicanism had little to offer the civil scientist. Hobbes’s account of the state of nature as a realm of irresolvable conflict was not predicated solely on the struggle for finite material resources, which were, in fact, relatively abundant. Rather, Hobbes drew attention to men’s *psychological* craving to have their (inflated) sense of self-worth affirmed by others. The quest for recognition was a zero-sum game: the individual sought ‘respect’ from others, and yet was unwilling to satisfy or recognise their claim to the same. It followed that the only possible type of inter-subjective relation in man’s natural state took the form of non-recognition, and yielded not dialogue but attempted domination. In the absence of an authoritative umpire, the lack of a common moral language precluded the possibility of any resolution of these competing claims: the economy of ‘credit’ and ‘trust’ – understood primarily in reputational, rather than economic terms – required comprehensive state intervention to function in ways which conduced to social peace and harmony. Meanwhile, the pathological tendency of individuals to prioritise a desire for admiration and ‘glory’ above their (rational) concern for physical self-preservation was a perennial source of danger within civil societies: as *Behemoth* showed, it had led to the dissolution of the English commonwealth.

Yet Hobbes’s evaluation of men’s concern for esteem was decidedly ambivalent, for three reasons. First, the ‘internal pride’ that resulted from a favourable comparison of one’s own worth with others’ was a source of ‘joy’ and ‘delight’: that is, it was an essential component of human happiness. Second, one’s sense of what set one apart from others – that is, of individuality – was inherently comparative: those qualities prized, and cultivated, by the individual were attributes the value of which was to a great extent determined by the intersubjective opinions of others (and by no means confined merely to moral attributes). Given Hobbes’s hedonic understanding of human psychology, this ensured that the individual’s sense of what was good and desirable was shaped insensibly by the community of which they were a member. Third, Hobbes argued that the passions and faculties which were specific to man, and which potentially enabled them to form rich and meaningful associations – such as curiosity, language, a capacity for causal reasoning and foresight, and industry – were stimulated in civil societies by this concern for honour and recognition. Hobbes’s objective was consequently to show how this might (and must) be directed in civil societies in ways which conduced to the strength and unity of the commonwealth. Unconstrained, it led to conflict in both man’s natural and civil states; but it potentially offered the means by which a stable and prosperous civil society might be constructed and maintained. This aspect of human nature made it possible for the sovereign to mould and channel subjects’ passions, by seizing control of the apparatuses of socialisation: most importantly, the university, church and printing press. Rather than conceiving of the individual as an independent and self-contained entity, the optimism of Hobbes’s project lay in his conviction that they could be moulded in society into responsible citizens who understood the need for civil obedience. Civil society relied upon the

resolution of this potentially destabilising dualism between the rational dictates of self-preservation, and the frequently pathological concern for admiration.

The importance of man's desire for reputation was, if anything, even more central to the social theories which were developed within an extreme, Augustinian tradition of thinking about the post-lapsarian human condition: both Protestant and Catholic. The French Jansenist, Pierre Nicole, explored the implications for an understanding of society of the Augustinian separation between the realms of nature and grace. In the absence of regenerating grace, only fallen man's craving for recognition, an expression of their self-love, provided them with an adequate incentive to live together peaceably: even as Nicole was adamant that society only mired men yet further in sin and depravity. This yielded a distinctly secular, and tragic, explanation of how societies functioned. It was taken further by moralists such as La Rochefoucauld and Jacques Esprit, who were particularly vexed by the epistemic, rather than merely soteriological or moral, consequences of self-love. So powerful was the desire for esteem that the judgments of others entirely effaced the authentic voice of conscience: how could the individual 'know' and live according to their own true nature, let alone place any faith in the character of others who feigned qualities which they did not possess for the sake of approval and social advancement? This rendered the bonds of trust upon which societies relied decidedly fragile. Pierre Bayle, a member of the exiled Huguenot émigré community in the Low Countries, mined a similar furrow. To the extent that individuals felt compelled to adhere to moral rules, Bayle argued that this was a consequence of their regard not for eternal sanctions and righteousness, nor for a rational concern for the good, but for decidedly baser considerations – most notably, the desire for admiration and aversion to contempt.

Locke engaged closely with Nicole's social theory and, if less directly, with Bayle's writings. Locke similarly foregrounded the importance of habituation through social interactions in the formation of the law-abiding individual. Locke indicated that, in practice, it was this acute (and universal) concern for reputation which potentially allowed for societies to cohere in the absence of Hobbes's Leviathan: even as, in theory, the individual ought to govern their conduct on the basis of their comprehension of a law of nature of divine origin, and out of a concern regarding the eternal sanctions which enforced it. In marked contrast to Nicole and Bayle, however, Locke severed almost entirely the commonplace link between concupiscence and a desire for reputation. Locke indicated that a concern for reputation rendered the individual pliable in socially-beneficial ways: it allowed for a dialogical interplay between individuals' sense of their interests, and yielded shared moral (and subsequently legal) 'norms' to which almost all felt obligated to adhere. This process was also of fundamental importance to the development of subjectivity. On Locke's account, personal identity depended upon a consciousness of one's accountability for one's actions before a law. For almost every individual, the most important such law was the 'Law of Reputation' generated within (and by) society, enforcing those qualities and actions which were found to contribute to the wellbeing of the community. Locke, however, argued that, due to God's beneficence, there was an ordained harmony between the dictates of communal utility and natural law. The initially solipsistic individual's natural craving for approval acted as a (providential) mechanism which reconciled their subjective sense of their private good with the collective interests of their community. This standard of communal utility then offered a criterion by which men might judge of the legitimacy of a political, or indeed an ecclesiastical order: true Christianity reaffirmed, rather than contradicted a social ethic which visibly advanced mankind's collective interests in this world. If Locke's interest in reputation and its implications for civil society was the result, in part, of an engagement with French currents of thought, then the conclusions to

which it led him fed back into later French theories of civil society. The Jesuit, Claude Buffier’s *Traité de la Société Civile* (1726) drew heavily from Locke in elaborating the principles of a rational, secular and broadly utilitarian social ethic whilst nonetheless explaining its rules and rewards within an ultimately religious normative framework.

On Locke’s account, civil society – of which a legitimate *political* establishment constitutes an essential component – must always be a profoundly fragile achievement. This is, in part, because there is no single mechanism, given Locke’s rejection of Hobbes’s political solution, which ensures that citizens’ concern for recognition reliably conduces to the harmony and prosperity of civil society. This relies upon an understanding, and institutionalisation, of the discrete jurisdictions of the state (securing property and person) and church (concerned with eternal salvation), thereby ensuring the *non-interference* of both in the processes of socialisation which habituate subjects in modes of behaviour which broadly accord with the dictates of natural law. Mandeville and Hume, both of whom were well-versed in the French, Dutch and English debates on this issue, were considerably more complacent on this point. This was due to their confidence that, in advanced commercial societies, market forces tended to encourage a tolerable harmony between private and public interest, autonomy and constraint. Both philosophers were deeply interested in man’s need for admiration on account of their ‘self-liking’ (Mandeville’s translation of the French *amour propre*), and in the pleasure that resulted from recognition by others. Both were also inveterately hostile to the language of civic republicanism which, as Francis Hutcheson’s philosophy indicated, relied upon the empirically dubious claim that man was by nature a sociable creature, drawn to the common good. For Hume and Mandeville – as for Hobbes, Nicole, Locke and Bayle – this overlooked the importance of economic, social and political institutions in habituating the individual to a sense of accountability to their community.

Hume’s French contemporaries, notably Montesquieu and Rousseau, engaged directly with these questions. Montesquieu was deeply interested in the concept of honour, and distinguished it from civic virtue: if the latter was other-regarding, the former was self-serving. Yet he nonetheless identified honour as of greater importance to modern civil societies which were concerned (unlike classical republics) to safeguard the liberties of the individual. If, as Hobbes had noted, the quest for recognition frequently stimulated civil disobedience and risky acts of self-assertion which appeared to contradict the agent’s purely material interests, then this had (often unintentionally) beneficial consequences for civil society. In Montesquieu’s moderate monarchies, such active resistance in the name of honour or reputation prevented the illegitimate encroachment of political power on the rights of the individual and on the historical privileges of that society’s institutions, traditions and practices (an insight later developed by Hegel). The challenge, for Montesquieu, was not to suppress the affective, desiring and inherently partial side of the human psyche as, he felt, both classical civic republicanism and Christian morality sought to do. It was instead to arrange the political and social institutions of civil societies so as to channel those ambitions and desires, in ways which protected both individual liberty *and* the common good. Rousseau was acutely sensitive to this charge that, in its ancient form, civic republicanism had asphyxiated individual autonomy or selfhood by dissolving the ‘man’ into the ‘citizen’. Yet he maintained that the civic republican tradition, shorn of the doctrine of natural sociability, offered valuable conceptual resources which allowed for the challenges faced by commercial societies – not least for subjectivity and individual agency – to be articulated and (perhaps) addressed. Rousseau offered a decidedly ambivalent evaluation of *amour-propre* as both the primary cause of the

inequality and attendant evils which plagued human life (in the *Discourses*), and as the source of potential redemption (*Emile*, the *Social Contract*): precisely because it allowed men to be educated into virtue.

As Adam Smith observed, the questions raised by these debates in England, France and the Low Countries over recognition and its implications for the proper organisation of civil society stimulated Scottish philosophical and historical inquiry from mid-century. Smith's own writings show how the languages of classical political economy and civic republicanism were not necessarily regarded as mutually exclusive: commerce, and the quest for recognition which a wage-economy further perpetuated, could result in self-alienation rather than self-consciousness. This insight enables us to grasp Smith's concern with public education and the cultivation of the 'impartial spectator' (the true judge of one's actions), and his compatriots' campaign for a citizen militia: both of which were intended to stimulate the public spirit and autonomous moral personhood which modern civil societies were seen to discourage. The distinctive Scottish predilection with the chasm separating the praised and the praiseworthy – and with the issue of how social and political institutions (church, university, law courts, voluntary associations) might be reformed in ways which brought them closer together – reflects just how broadly shared was the conviction that the individual was shaped in the most fundamental of ways by the forces governing society. The need for recognition might, as many of Hobbes's critics maintained, potentially encourage consensus and conformity rather than conflict, most especially in commercial societies – but at what cost to subjectivity and moral agency, and to the enriching and meaningful forms of association which were reliant upon them? It is perhaps unsurprising that these anxieties were articulated most forcefully by Ferguson, a Gaelic speaker acutely sensitive to how (to use a series of anachronisms) the 'liberal' and supposedly egalitarian credo of "laws not men" was very far from 'difference-blind', instead expressing the (impoverished, as materialistic) values of a hegemonic culture which denied value to other cultures and ways of life. Remarkably, Ferguson envisaged a civil society which channelled its subjects' need for recognition in ways which actively *encouraged* precisely the competition, conflict and dissent within the commonwealth (and in the international arena) for which an earlier generation of philosophers, not least Hobbes, had presented civil society as the necessary antidote. It was through this (continual) struggle for pre-eminence that the distinctive personalities of both the individual citizen and the institutions of civil society were forged and brought into harmony.

The foregoing offers a rich context within which to consider the development of theories of civil society in Germany from the later eighteenth century. The quest for recognition occupies a particularly central role in Hegel's dialectic of self-consciousness, which acquires its highest stage in the sphere of right (*Sittlichkeit*), in which there is a perfect correspondence between subjective freedom and universal duty as embodied in the rationally-ordered institutions of civil society. Hegel's theory of recognition has attracted a great deal of attention in recent decades from critical theorists and sociologists interested in the concept of civil society (e.g. Honneth, Taylor). They tend, however, to interpret Hegel through the prism of later commentators such as Mead, Kojève and Habermas; and the approach they adopt is, for the most part, determinedly ahistorical, seeking to identify the 'salvageable core' of this Hegelian theory in order to meet contemporary needs. By reading Hegel's philosophy as a contribution to a longer debate over recognition and its implications for the ordering of the institutions of civil society, neglected aspects of his thinking – which, like his advocacy of the corporation or guild, appear distinctly archaic to contemporary critical theorists – return to view. It is precisely because Hegel engaged so closely, and directly, with the questions raised by Hobbes *et al* that his philosophy quickly appeared curiously outmoded or irrelevant to those nineteenth-century thinkers for whom the 'social

question’ was *the* issue in need of address. (This point has been made, if again in an historically-uninformed way, by critical theorists who argue that we need to focus on redistribution rather than recognition – and on the evils of poverty, rather than humiliation – if we are to address the problems confronting modern societies defined by gross economic inequality (e.g. Fraser).) Hegel’s conception of civil society simply cannot be understood apart from his identification of the quest for recognition as a craving the satisfaction of which was essential for a fully human (and social) life. As I endeavour to show, however, this was not a new insight. The challenge is to explain why Hegel’s thinking about the kind of community that can justly be created and sustained out of our human diversity looks so very different to that offered by Hobbes, by reconstructing the debates that took place in the intervening years on this question.