

**THE ESTEEM ENGINE:  
A RESOURCE FOR  
INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN**

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**THE ESTEEM ENGINE:  
A RESOURCE FOR INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN**

**Geoffrey Brennan**

I

It is an honour to have been asked to deliver the 2004 Cunningham Lecture. I know people always say that sort of thing; but on this occasion I say it not just in deference to the conventions of politeness (which I may later violate anyway) but also with a certain 'special intellectual intent'. Because honour, glory, fame, regard, approval – and their corresponding opposites – dishonour, contempt, shame, disregard, disapproval – constitute the theme of this lecture. My interest in this family of phenomena is not just as objects of social analysis in their own right, but more especially in the normative possibilities they offer – their possible role as a resource in institutional design.

I shall generally use the term 'esteem' to stand for the whole family. I don't deny that there are distinctions to be drawn between, say, esteem and approval, or between esteem and fame. But I also don't want here to engage in fine-grained logic-chopping – so I hope that I will be forgiven if I suspend a lot of relevant distinctions in the interests of painting on a slightly larger canvas.

Of course, the subject matter is hardly new. In fact, from antiquity to somewhere in the first half of the nineteenth century, there is scarcely a social theorist who did not believe the desire for esteem to be among the most universal and intense engines of human action. An extended catalogue of quotations could easily be offered to support this claim – running from Cicero and Polybius through Thomas Aquinas to Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, the American Founding Fathers, Kant, and notably Adam Smith – though more of him later. What is conspicuous about this tradition of thought however is that somewhere in the early nineteenth century, it pretty much stops – especially in those traditions of social theorising that are most formal and analytic (and of course I have economics in particular in mind). So that the introduction (or reintroduction) of the desire for esteem - and the corresponding desire to avoid dis-esteem - into 'rational actor models' of policy design and institutional reform is now something of a novelty, both at academic and practical levels.

In what follows, I want to say a little about what I take to be one element in the story of this eclipse – namely, the emergence of the idea of 'invisible-hand' mechanisms in normative social analysis. I want to use the discussion of invisible hands to introduce the topic of esteem – and to say a little in general

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terms about how esteem might be mobilised for normative purposes. I shall then consider a couple of specific examples of areas where I believe esteem to be important and what the normative significance of its operation in those areas might be.

I have been advised that in giving a lecture of this kind it's not a bad idea to pose a question of some form at the outset, so that the audience can mull it over in the sub-conscious while the speaker burbles on. I think this might be good advice. So let me pose a question that almost everyone here will have thought about at some point and most will have views on: namely – 'what's the role of this Academy?' I'm not going to try to answer that question in its entirety, but I will come back to it at the end of my talk and offer what I like to think are some 'reasoned speculations' about it.

**II**

In the meantime, let's return to invisible hands and Adam Smith.

Smith was not the inventor of the idea of 'invisible hand' mechanisms. That honour probably belongs to Mandeville, if anyone. But Mandeville was an *enfant terrible* figure who deployed the idea largely as a shock tactic. Smith's role was to rescue the idea for academic respectability. In any event, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, following Smith (and Adam Ferguson and Frances Hutcheson), economists and social theorists of all kinds became intrigued with, and began to promote, institutional arrangements that achieved their good outcomes 'invisibly' – that is, without the goodness of the outcome being the primary motivating force for its coming into being. The chief advantage of such arrangements was seen to be that they 'economised on virtue', as we might put it. When Smith observed that we typically do not depend on the benevolence of our butchers and bakers in their supplying our dinner, but rather on their self-interest, he took this to be a desirable feature of social organisation. Benevolence Smith took to be scarce and fragile; self-interest is plentiful and robust. So to use Smith's terms, it is a good thing that the 'benign deity' does not leave humanity to rely on virtue alone in order to achieve tolerable social outcomes.

Smith famously identified the free market – the system of natural liberty, as he termed it – as a primary instantiation of an invisible hand institution. But across the Atlantic, about the same time, defenders of the new US Constitution were making much the same points about constitutional democracy. 'The best hope for the fidelity of mankind' observed James Madison in the Federalist Papers, 'is to make interest coincident with duty'. The discipline of electoral competition was seen to offer the prospect of making good politicians 'even out of bad men': it transformed political agents' desire for power into a derived desire to provide citizens with good government. There were seen to be problems in this – the problems of faction, for example. But these were problems that the

Founding Fathers believed could be handled by shrewd constitutional design. The point here is that invisible hand mechanisms are relevant not just to market applications. Nor do they carry any ideological disposition against politics – either in Smith's or in other familiar applications.

I want, though, to offer three general comments about the 'invisible hand' picture of social organisation.

First, it suggests an account of human motivations in which there are just two elements – virtue and self-interest (though the self-interest can take a variety of forms). My sense is that this motivational picture is now pretty widespread in policy circles on all sides. Opinions may differ about how much 'virtue' there is around and how reliable it can be – with economists typically taking a sceptical posture – but the bi-polar motivational picture itself is essentially a matter of common consent. Given this picture, there are two ways we might hope to secure improvements in social outcomes: we can either appeal to people's virtue; or we adapt the incentive structure in such a way that the desired behaviour is in the actor's interests. In the latter case, we make it 'worth people's while' to behave in desirable ways.

Second, many people worry that institutional arrangements that 'economise on virtue' may do so in much the same way as the pathological liar economises on the truth – that is, by dispensing with it altogether. They worry that mobilising self-interest 'crowds out' virtue – that bending interest to the service of duty just undermines such sense of duty as there may be. I think that this is almost certainly true in some cases; but almost certainly in fewer cases than critics suggest. The mechanisms by which virtue is produced in the population are not well understood – and exactly how the crowding out occurs is rarely carefully argued. One might naturally think, for example, that lowering the cost of being a virtuously motivated person (a baker who loves to bake high-quality bread for its own sake, for example) just leads to there being more such people. Accordingly, invisible hand mechanisms, far from driving out virtuous motivations, might actually encourage them. The verdict here is still out, though the case is still before the court.

Third, there is a certain irony in attributing this simple bi-polar motivational picture to Adam Smith. Smith operated with a much richer psychology and, in particular, within the tradition that took the desire for esteem to be extremely important.

'Nature, when she formed man for society,' says Smith towards the beginning of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 'endowed him with an original desire to please, and an original aversion to offend, his brethren. She taught him to feel pleasure in their favourable, and pain in their unfavourable regard. She rendered their approbation most flattering and most agreeable to him for its own sake; and their disapprobation most mortifying and most offensive.'

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This Smithian account of esteem as 'favourable regard' is the one that I shall here take to be definitional.

Indeed, there is more than a little textual evidence to suggest that Smith considered the desire for goods and services – the staple of economic interest – to be largely derivative from the desire for esteem. In a famous passage (famous because it contains one of Smith's few explicit references to 'invisible hand' processes) Smith attributes the acquisitiveness of the rich to their desire for the esteem that luxury consumption affords – not for their desire for grand houses or estates or art collections in themselves.

As I see it, the desire for esteem offers a kind of half-way house between virtue and interests. It is connected to virtue because its operation depends on the existence within society of a structure of values – values that form the basis on which actors are esteemed or dis-esteemed. People are, after all, esteemed and dis-esteemed for reasons – for their courage or their intelligence or their benevolence or their singing abilities or their tennis prowess. For esteem to play any systematic behavioural role, these valued attributes must be a matter of common belief among actors. For example, I have to have a fair idea of what constitutes a good lecture and what a bad one – or what my audience is likely to believe about these things – in order to have an esteem-based incentive to produce a tolerable effort. In this sense, esteem depends on a fairly rich and widespread value base – one that is more or less common knowledge, at least within the relevant audience. There has to be, if not widespread *possession* of virtue, then at least a common *understanding* of what virtue would require.

Moreover, there is a certain complementarity between esteem and virtue. As Hume puts it:

to love the fame of laudable actions approaches so near the love of laudable actions for their own sake that those passions are more capable of mixture than any other kinds of affection.

The love of fame and the love of virtue are not identical affections, because the former is responsive to the size and quality of audience and the latter presumptively not. But still, one might plausibly worry rather less about problems of virtue being 'crowded out' in the case of esteem than in the case of material self-interest.

At the same time, the desire for esteem remains essentially egoistic. Each cares about the esteem in which he himself is held – or perhaps the esteem of his group if his level of esteem is attached to that of his group. There is nothing therefore especially benevolent about the desire for esteem. This fact might be expected to appeal to economists, given our habits of thinking. And indeed, one way of conceptualising esteem is as a distinctive currency of reward, and as creating incentives in much the same way as material interests do.

After all, the desire for esteem – and the desire to avoid dis-esteem – will often lead individuals to behave more generously, more courageously, with greater professional conscientiousness – more generally, ‘better’ by reference to prevailing values – than those individuals would otherwise behave. Better, in particular, than if sole reliance were placed on the agents’ virtue as such. We might on this basis refer to esteem effects, when they work benignly, as involving the operation not of an *invisible* hand but, say, an *intangible* hand’. The intangible hand, so defined, is *like* the invisible hand in that good results are produced by forces other than a desire for good outcomes *per se*, but *unlike* the invisible hand in that the forces in question operate in complementarity with virtue rather than substituting for it.

### III

Moreover, esteem has some distinctive features – features that mark it off from goods and services in the familiar economics treatment. One is that esteem is quite difficult to trade – in most cases, virtually impossible. Each has to earn her own esteem; she can’t buy and sell it on the open market. This non-tradeability constraint arises as we might put it, on the supply side. The point is that I can’t just decide to esteem you: I have to come to believe that you are esteem-worthy. And I can only hold that belief if I think it’s true. Your offering to pay me for holding that belief just can’t make a relevant difference. You can *earn* my esteem – by performing well in arenas that invoke it. But you can’t *buy* my esteem. An economist’s way of putting this thought is that esteem is necessarily produced under conditions of autarky: you only get what you yourself produce. And you produce it by behaving in the right kind of estimable ways.

A second feature of esteem, and one that is quite important for the functioning of the intangible hand, is that the desire for esteem is somewhat ‘self-effacing’. That is, there are lots of cases where to be recognised to be doing an act for the sake of the esteem it yields serves to reduce the esteem you receive. Suppose, for example, that you are esteemed for your benevolence. The esteem you get, we shall suppose, accrues partly for the acts of benevolence you undertake and partly for the concern for the plight of others that you exhibit. But suppose people come to realise that you only give in order to get the attached esteem. You only put money in the beggar’s bowl when there is someone watching, for example. In this case, the esteem is likely to diminish. Though not necessarily disappear, for it is presumably more estimable that you give money sometimes than that you shamelessly refuse ever to give the beggar anything.

In somewhat the same spirit, blowing your own trumpet is usually a source of dis-esteem in itself, even in cases where the accomplishments trumpeted

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themselves merit esteem. It is best to be esteemed for your modesty as well as your accomplishments!

The 18<sup>th</sup> century satirist Edward Young put the point rather nicely:

The love of praise, howe'er concealed by art,  
Reigns more or less supreme in every heart;  
The Proud to gain it, toils on toils endure;  
The modest shun it, but to make it sure!

This is an important point for the operation of the intangible hand because it suggests that the economy of esteem may be somewhat inhibited in its operation, because publicity is likely to be inadequate. Those people who do dis-estimable things will naturally seek to avoid scrutiny entirely: having an audience will just expose them to dis-esteem. But even in the case of positive esteem, those who do entirely estimable actions may often fail to ensure adequate publicity for those actions because they do not wish to be seen to be blowing their own trumpets.

The point here could, though, be carried too far. If the demand for esteem were *totally* self-effacing, then however much I would like to have it, I could not seek it: esteem could act as a reward but never as an incentive. But such an extreme position, though sometimes asserted (eg, by Elster in *Sour Grapes*) is quite implausible. It would imply, for example, that if I refrained from some act because it was dis-estimable, then I would gain nothing in esteem terms by so refraining – I might as well commit the act, and this whether observed or not! Any such conclusion is, I think, absurd.

The less extreme conclusion that *is*, I think, warranted is that, though the intangible hand operates to constrain the behaviour of real functioning actors – encouraging them to do things that are positively esteemed and discouraging them from doing things that are dis-esteemed, it doesn't work as extensively as it might, if it is left entirely to its own devices. Publicity will, in general, be inadequate for esteem to exert its full effects on behaviour.

#### IV

All this, the sceptic may say, is all very well – but what evidence do we have that the desire for esteem is as ubiquitous and as potent as I have claimed? The citing of authority figures apart – even ones as luminary as Adam Smith – where is the evidence?

Now, I have to confess that my perceptions are themselves probably targets of scepticism here. I'm sure that everyone has had the experience of coming across a new word and looking it up in the dictionary; and then seeing or hearing it in use remarkably frequently in the period immediately afterwards. That has been my experience with esteem since Philip Pettit and I began working on the topic: I have been inclined to see esteem just about

everywhere. Take, for example, the competition among medieval Italian city states for the most lavish art collections and cathedrals; or the construction of those utterly impressive pyramids all over the place in Mexico; or the behaviour of suicide bombers in terrorist cadres; or the enthusiasm with which soldiers volunteer in situations of imminent warfare; or the stability of apparently perverse norms, like the caste system in India. What of the intense training, commitment and effort expended by athletes – even amateur athletes? And what of the corresponding effort we observe in academia? Later I shall say more about the academic case. At this point, I simply want to underline the point that I find esteem-based action ubiquitous; and that on the question of the universality and potency of the desire for esteem, I am a prejudiced judge.

But let me refer here to greater authority. In Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, Algernon Bunthorne (Gilbert's parody of Oscar Wilde) is soliloquising – and he sings:

In short, my medievalism's affectation,  
Born of a morbid love of admiration!

Gilbert's implication – and mine in quoting him - is that there's more than a bit of Bunthorne in all of us.

Of course, if the desire for esteem is itself dis-estimable, as I earlier suggested, then we are unlikely to be able to assess the true extent of esteem motives simply by asking people. Everyone has good esteem-based reason to pretend that they are less concerned about esteem than they are. This is a point that the Young quatrain makes nicely; as does Bunthorne's song, since the whole scene begins (with the actor staring out into the audience):

Am I alone and unobserved? I am!

Even introspection might be misleading in this, because as the psychologists assure us, we are prone to think better of ourselves than we merit. In our conceptions of our own motivations, virtue is likely to play a bigger role than the desire for esteem. Of course, we might make the same point in relation to the ubiquity of self-interest. As economists often claim, questionnaires that ask subjects about the role of self-interest in motivating their action tend to underestimate its role. Though if I can make an *ad hominem* remark to my profession, it seems difficult to explain this fact solely on the basis of self-interest itself: a concern with esteem seems to be required!

Moreover, in measuring the importance of esteem-based action, it is relevant to observe that the effects of esteem are often revealed in the dog that *didn't* bark as the dog that did. Specifically, the threat of *dis-esteem* discourages actions of a kind that one doesn't observe but which theories, based on alternative motivational schemes, tell us we ought to. Explaining the absence of things we have reason to expect, is just as important in the esteem setting as explaining social phenomena that we do observe. It is just as important, but

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more difficult to do, because such explanation requires theories to suggest what our expectations ought to be. But to take an example in this spirit, isn't it something of a puzzle that people tend to concentrate their efforts and activities in domains where they are already talented – and therefore where their efforts are more likely to be applauded? Why is the taste for playing tennis, for example, strangely biased towards those persons who happen to be naturally good at the game?

Against all these difficulties in actual measurement, it might be useful for me to report briefly on a small experiment that took place in the New York public lavatory system. An invisible camera was installed in women's toilets. Subjects were observed in two settings. In the first setting, they were entirely alone in the precinct throughout. In the second setting, someone else was around in the toilet at the time the subject was there - not especially scrutinising the subject and presumably not someone who the subject was acquainted with. In particular, the 'observer' was neither especially attentive, nor someone with whom the subject could expect to have future transactions. Results: in the case where the subject was in the bathroom alone, 40 per cent of subjects washed their hands after use. In the case where the subject was observed, 80 per cent of subjects did.

I suppose that 'non-esteem' explanations of these results are possible here – and not beyond the creative powers of ingenious minds. Still, it seems to me most natural to attribute this remarkable difference in hygienic display to the role of dis-esteem avoidance. All the relevant pieces are in play. There is a well-established norm to the effect that you should wash your hands after toilet use – and the norm is common knowledge across the relevant population. Failure to abide by the norm invites an assessment of you as a rather dirty person. People don't like to be thought of in such terms. As far as I know, there was no communication between the toilet-denizens: no expressions of rebuke; no mutterings of 'disgusting!' under anyone's breath. Action of that kind is not required for the forces of esteem to be mobilised. All that's necessary is that the potential hand-washers believe that others are likely to think badly of them if they don't act as the norm requires.

Of course, it could hardly be said that washing one's hands is a costly exercise – it doesn't take much time or effort or imagination. So what is perhaps surprising is that as many failed to wash their hands when unobserved as did. But what is impressive to me is the magnitude of the behavioural effect, even if compliance is, on the face of things, low-cost. The forces of esteem *can* have big effects on behaviour.

**V**

Suppose you are persuaded, if you needed persuading, that esteem can be a potent force in influencing behaviour – and specifically, that it induces

individuals to behave in accordance with prevailing norms and to improve their performance in arenas where greater esteem is on offer. How might the forces of esteem be made more potent? What might we do to support the intangible hand's operation?

Here's a short list.

1. Probability of being observed:

The New York toilet experiment, no less than the Bunthorne example, testifies to the importance of the observability of the esteem-generating behaviour. Arguably, the increase in the size of audience from zero to one is just a special case of audience size. What matters, one might think, is making the relevant performance more salient or more generally conspicuous.

There are lots of techniques for increasing publicity in this sense. Suppose, for example, that you have recently become Head of your department and are concerned to improve the research performance of your staff. One thing you might do is to insist that a report listing publications and other research activities for the year be circulated each year among the academic staff. You might in addition publish the list in some prominent local place.

Or if you are concerned with performance in your field overall, you might try to organise a national ranking of departments – preferably with individual performances noted. You are perhaps more likely to support national rankings if you think your department – or perhaps just you individually – will do well. There is, after all, no reason to think that you yourself will be impervious to the forces of esteem. But just doing it yourself might seem self-aggrandising. Better – both for you and overall perhaps - if some independent body could be induced to conduct the ranking.

Equally, though, you think your staff are 'over-publishing', manically sacrificing quality for quantity for example. Then you might want to focus the individual annual reports on the single best piece for that year – or extend the period to five years and ask for the best three or four pieces over that period, as, interestingly, the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) does. The working of the intangible hand is amenable to fine-tuning of this kind: the patterns of publicity more or less directly structure the patterns of esteem incentives, so those who control the publicity control a great deal.

One important publicity-augmenting technique is via the award of prizes and honours of various kinds. There are lots of examples here. McDonald's 'worker of the Month' Award, with the plaque nicely displayed near the front entrance where everyone will see it; Victoria Crosses in the military case, Knighthoods and Orders of Australia, Nobel Prizes in science, Academy Awards in the movies – and of course, even *our* Academy awards, including Academy membership itself. Reputation – and fame, and no less infamy or notoriety – operate to extend the effective audience of potential esteemers beyond those who directly observe the relevant performance. Prizes don't have to involve

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money to be significant and many significant prizes don't: their value depends just on the esteem they connote.

2. Audience quality:

Audience size is often less an issue than audience quality; an obvious point, I think. Suppose you are to give a seminar presentation to an audience that you know will contain several Nobel Laureates. My prediction is that you will work especially hard to make your presentation as good as it can be. You will be more nervous than usual because more hangs on whether you do well or not. Or to take the UK RAE example again, being reviewed by a panel of acknowledged experts whose judgements you truly value is different from being reviewed by a group of academic hacks whose own lacklustre research record has led them to a career of administration! How exactly the audience is constructed under various arrangements is a matter of some importance.

In the work that John Braithwaite has done on the role of shame and its use in community sentencing, this issue of audience construction plays a critical role. Often it seems, it is not the direct effect of the account of the crime's effects on the victim that is crucial in securing some level of awareness in the perpetrator, but the effect of those remarks on the perpetrator's so-called 'support group'. When the perpetrator's mother breaks down in tears, then the perpetrator is affected. And the sentencing process is deliberately constructed with this possibility in mind.

There is much more that might be said about audience quality – but let me turn instead to the next issue.

3. Prevailing values:

As we have said, esteem depends on the actors' knowledge of the values on the basis of which esteem is assigned. But those values can be more or less well-established – and more or less a matter of common awareness.

Broadly, for example, academics are familiar with the values that undergird our practices – we know what good and bad performances are; we know whose approval counts and whose doesn't in our particular fields. Still, at the margin, there may be some uncertainty. Not everyone will make the same trade-off between quality and quantity of research output; not everyone will weigh teaching performance relative to research equally – and not everyone will think that particular measures of performance are equally valuable. Just how highly, for example, should grant-getting be weighed in the assessment of academic performance? Should an ARC grant be as high a priority for *you* as it seems to be for your head of department or your Vice-Chancellor – who after all distribute the infrastructure grants your research grants generate?

Ultimately, the values relevant for the economy of esteem are those values applied in assessing you by those whose judgements you care about – and no less the values *you* employ in assessing others.

Attempts to chart these values across the academic community are not unknown. Every academic is now familiar with 'mission statements', 'ethics protocols', 'declarations of values' and so on. Academia has no monopoly on these devices. Sometimes they can be extremely useful in clarifying ambiguities or promoting particular modes of conduct. But as the longstanding insistence on principles of 'peer review' in academia testifies, public statements that actually reflect prevailing beliefs about what is to be valued are usually more successful than statements that seek to articulate some more particularised agenda.

#### 4. Prevailing practices:

Even where the underlying values are not a matter of major dispute, there can be considerable ignorance about behaviour in relation to those values. For example, every academic recognises that serious scholarship involves publication – but what precise rate of publication is 'the norm'? We tend to take our cues in this respect from the prevailing practices within our field – at least the prevailing practices in the league we take ourselves to be playing *in*. Suppose in a given discipline, two papers a year is believed to be about average: anyone who does better than that is worthy of our esteem (quality considerations equal); and anyone who does much less well than this is dragging the chain and receives our dis-esteem. But our perception of the facts may be faulty. When I did some work on the research output of Australian economists a couple of decades ago, I was quite shocked to find how low the publication rates per academic were, and also how extremely skewed they were, with a very small number of individuals producing a quite high proportion of the total research output.

This was bad news not only in itself, but also and more relevantly here, this news serves to ease the pressure on those whose performance is weak. They do not look so bad. They are therefore subject to less dis-esteem. But the news also reduces pressure on those whose performance is good. All of a sudden you discover that you are in the top 10 per cent of publishers anyway. You will have a real interest in having the information circulated widely, but you will feel less pressure to produce than when you thought your performance was merely average.

Take the obverse case. Suppose it is a common belief that most people cheat to some extent on their income tax returns. But suppose empirical evidence comes available that suggests that this belief is wrong: cheating is actually much less common than widely believed. Suppose this evidence is widely circulated. Public perceptions of prevailing standards change. You can no longer rationalise your failure to record your full consulting income on the grounds that everyone else is doing it. If everyone else is *not* doing it, then your practices, if revealed, would be much more shameful than you thought. What the 'neighbours would say if they knew' will be rather more

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contemptuous, now that they are in possession of the facts about what most others do.

So going public about prevailing practices can either raise performances or lower them depending on whether prevailing practices are underestimated or overestimated. Sometimes greater publicity will have two effects. It will increase the scrutiny applied to persons whose performance is lacklustre – which will encourage them to improve their performances. It will also make evident how extensive poor performance is – which will lower standards and the associated esteem incentives. Not all the effects of increased publicity are performance enhancing.

**V**

It will not pass undetected that my examples here are mainly taken from academia and that the style of reasoning – reference to incentives and the like – is rather economic. I make apology for neither feature.

I am after all an economist. I believe in the usefulness of a kind of systematic slightly abstract approach to the analysis of social phenomena. Historically, the analysis of *esteem* has largely fallen outside that net; and I think that's something that ought to be rectified.

But I am also an academic. I live my life within institutions that have strange features – many of which can be traced to the role that the desire for esteem plays in academic life. A little like opera-singers, and I suspect, creative imaginations of all kinds, academics care a lot about the esteem of their fellows. As economist Paul Samuelson put it:

we do all this, not for the money, but for the cheers of our peers and our fears of their jeers.

In this sense an alertness to the forces of esteem is a necessary prerequisite to any who are interested in the institutions of inquiry, in what makes them work well and in what might make them work better. That group, I take it, includes us – both individually and collectively as members of this Academy. After all, what is the Academy if not an 'honour society' within the Social Sciences? We, of all people, should be especially attentive to the role that honours play in academic life, concerned to use the instruments we have in the very best possible way. This isn't just a practical problem: it is also an intellectual one. Or, better put, how best an organisation like the Academy might use its distinctive location can, I reckon, be informed by systematic analysis of the forces of esteem.

**VI**

So we return to the question posed at the outset. What does all this suggest for the Academy's role? Do the forces of esteem have any practical bite in relation to the Academy?

I think they do and I'm not sure that they are all that comfortable.

But begin with the things we do well. In the economy of esteem an organisation like the Academy plays an extremely valuable role. It recognises and honours academic accomplishment: it does this in the first place and most importantly simply by having Fellows, and by having selection processes for them that arguably track scholarly recognition pretty closely. It provides recognition also by means of special prizes, but this is not the main game. Perhaps there is a role for more extensive prize-giving. But the chief recognition effect is via Fellowship – and it is an important one.

However, I wonder whether the academy might play a more active role in the more aggregative assessment of the strength of the various social sciences within Australia. Do we punch at or above weight in international quality terms in say economics, and political science, for example, in the way we do so spectacularly in philosophy? Is there systematic work being done on this question? I do not have in mind things like surveys of fields – content-oriented work, that seems to me to be better done as a disciplinary-based endeavour. I have in mind rather bibliometric and citation analysis and other attempts at assessing disciplinary quality – both across the board and in league-table mode, both by University and individually – and the dissemination of the results. Is there any body that is reliably charting the strongest places in various of the social sciences within the Australian system? Within the economy of esteem, that sort of thing seems to play a significant role. We might note too, the effects on recruitment of students, or as in the UK case, differential research grants. It seems to me that the Academy is better placed to organise such evaluation in a non-partisan and independent way.

It is not, however, a cheap exercise. So where might the resources come from? Well, the thought that the Academy is primarily an honour society for academic accomplishment raises the question as to whether it is necessary that Fellows have a formal Annual meeting. Nobel Laureates don't have annual meetings. Neither do recipients of Orders of Australia, or Academy Award winners in the film context. Why should the Academy membership?

The meetings could of course be rationalised on the grounds that the Academy is a body for the *doing* of academic work; but I have some doubts as to whether that is where the Academy's comparative advantage lies. I rather think that there is something to be said for concentrating activity and attention on the things that no-one else is doing. In other words, I believe in the principle of institutional comparative advantage. And it is no insult to the academic work that is done from time to time under the Academy's auspices to suggest that there are other institutions and not least the universities themselves that might undertake that work.

In short, my sense of the Academy's role is primarily to foster and promote excellent work in the Australian system – not to try to *do* that work! If I am right

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that the Academy's role, as it operates in the social sciences in Australia, lies primarily within the economy of esteem then that role is where its activities ought to be more explicitly focused.

I am aware that these observations are speculative and may well seem somewhat gratuitous – even an abuse of hospitality. They are not meant in that spirit at all. My intention is rather to see where, if anywhere, the logic of the argument goes. I believe the desire for esteem is a significant force in motivating behaviour in accord with widely prevailing norms, both in general and in academia in particular. I believe that the operation of the economy of esteem is amenable to systematic analysis. I also believe that this Academy is a primary player in mobilising and directing the forces of esteem within the social sciences in Australia. My object here has been to put those three beliefs together and see what they suggest. I think what they suggest is interesting and, I hope, worth further discussion.

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