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Personal Identity
and Self-Interpretation
& Natural Right
and Natural Emotions

Budapest Seminars in Early Modern Philosophy 2 & 3

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Table of Contents

Introduction	7
PERSONAL IDENTITY	
Judit Szalai: States of the “Person” in Descartes	13
Przemysław Gut: Leibniz on Personal Identity	22
Charles T. Wolfe: Diderot and Materialist Theories of Self	37
Ákos Forczek: Apperception and Affinity: Kant on the Material Condition of the Identity of the “Psychological Person”	53
SELF-KNOWLEDGE	
Bartosz Żukowski: Richard Burthogge’s Epistemology and the Problem of Self-Knowledge	69
Peter West: Knowing Me, Knowing You: Berkeley on Self-Knowledge and Other Spirits	84
NATURAL LAW	
Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann: The Space for Emotions in Natural Law	107
Szilárd Tattay: Francisco Suárez and Modern Rationalist Natural Law Theories	121
Gábor Boros: Natural Right and Worldly Emotions of Love: Descartes, Molière, Spinoza	139
Heikki Haara: The Concept of Simple Esteem in <i>De jure naturae et gentium</i> . . .	153
József Simon: Shame, Common Wealth and Religion in the Thought of Miklós Bethlen (1642–1714)	167

Mariangela Priarolo: Love and Order: Malebranche and the Feeling of Natural Law	180
Paolo Santangelo: Chinese Cultures of Love: The “Cult of <i>Qing</i> ” and <i>Qing</i> ’s “Naturalness”	198
LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS	221

Shame, Common Wealth and Religion in the Thought of Miklós Bethlen (1642–1714)¹

Introduction

The call for papers of the Third Budapest Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy drew the attention of potential participants to “resources from different traditions, both ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’ ones”. I will discuss “peripheral sources” in relation to my ongoing research, concerning which I have rather questions and problems instead of solid and established answers. Miklós Bethlen, the hero of this paper, wrote his texts mirroring his philosophical thoughts on the periphery of institutional conditions of the Early Modern history of European philosophy. His name is well-known for scholars of early modern Hungarian *history* (R. Várkonyi 1984, 1999) or early modern Hungarian *literature* (Ötvös 2013; Tóth 2012; Förköli 2010; Maráczsi 2005; Gömöri 2001; Czigány 1984; Tolnai 1970).² One can say without exaggerating that the whole history of Hungary and Transylvania between 1660 and 1704 can be described in the form of footnotes to his biography. His main political achievement was the so-called *Diploma Leopoldinum* (1691), which declared the legal status of the Principality of Transylvania within the Habsburg Empire after its liberation from Ottoman rule (cf. R. Várkonyi 1994). In the course of his negotiations with Kaiser Leopold, Bethlen succeeded in achieving guarantees for a much more liberal legal status than had previously been expected. The regulations of the *Diploma* proved to be enduring, they remained in place until the revolutionary events of 1848.

1 This research was supported by project nr. EFOP-3.6.2-16-2017-00007, titled Aspects on the development of intelligent, sustainable and inclusive society: social, technological, innovation networks in employment and digital economy. The project has been supported by the European Union, co-financed by the European Social Fund and the budget of Hungary.

2 These references include chiefly contributions in English, German or French. For a more detailed guide regarding the research, see Tóth 2016!

But the protagonist of my paper is Miklós Bethlen, the *Philosopher*³ (Lacházi 2007, 2015, 2016; Simon 2016a, 2016b, 2017), who as such remained in the shadow of his role played in the local and international scenes of politics. In the present paper I would like to introduce some of the philosophical ideas developed in the *Foreword* of his own *Autobiography* (*Élete leírása magától*) written in Hungarian in 1708.⁴ It is more than puzzling that the only text which provides us with the possibility to reconstruct his philosophical ideas was written in the very late period of his life; Bethlen remained in silence regarding philosophical matters until 1708, when after he had been arrested in 1704 accused of high treason he was transported from Nagyszeben (today Sibiu, Romania) to Vienna. Along the way he was held in prison for two months in May and June 1708 in Eszék (today Osijek, Croatia). According to his own account, he composed the *Foreword* to his *Autobiography* there, while the rest of the manuscript containing the extended narration of his own life was produced by him later in his prison in Vienna during the years from 1708 to 1710. The available sources of his own life present him as an intellectual of high quality regarding practical matters, but we have no sign of the refined philosophical orientation in the documents preceding the *Foreword* of the *Autobiography*.

Bethlen was born in 1642 into one of the most ancient families of Transylvanian high nobility. Members of his family played an important role throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of early modern Transylvania struggling in the political space of power between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy, respectively. Bethlen grew up in the immediate circle of Transylvanian Princes in the exclusive group of other youths with a similar high social background. In the 1650s he attended lectures at the princely court in Gyulafehérvár (today Alba Iulia, Romania) given by János Apáczai Csere, who is honoured as the first Hungarian Cartesian thinker (Hanák 1990, 29–31).

In 1661–1663 Bethlen visited the University of Heidelberg in Germany and the Universities of Utrecht and Leiden in the Low Countries. While in 1659 Bethlen studied under the Ramist-Cartesian Apáczai Csere; shortly after the death of his teacher he attended the lectures of the young Samuel Pufendorf in Heidelberg in the early months of 1661.⁵ Bethlen mentions his German professor in the usual laconic manner of the *Autobiography*, nevertheless he does not fail to note that Pufendorf lectured on Grotius's masterwork *De iure pacis ac belli* (Bethlen 1980, 573). One cannot overestimate the striking difference in intellectual milieu between Transylvania and Heidelberg: while attending Pufendorf's lectures, Bethlen must have gained immediate experience of his professor's most intensive dilemmas concerning *a priori*-mathematical *versus* historical argumentation for the theory

3 There is some research concerning Bethlen's philosophy, however neither Lendvai's (2001) nor Hanák's (1990) laconic interpretations provide us with insights into the philosophical substance of the *Foreword* in Bethlen's *Autobiography*.

4 Despite all my caveats (cf. Simon 2016b), I refer to Bethlen's text in the standard edition (1980).

5 See Benrath's publication of the advertisements of lectures at the University of Heidelberg in 1661 (Benrath 1961, 95).

of positive and natural rights, or concerning the removal of moral theology from the realm of natural rights (Dreitzel 2001, 779).

The other scene of his higher education was the Low Countries. Bethlen studied at the universities of Utrecht and Leiden between 1661 and 1663. He attended both public and private lectures of leading intellectuals belonging either to the philosophical movement of Cartesianism (Johannes de Raey, Henricus Regius – if Henry de Roy may be treated as Cartesian), or to the theological camp of Cocceianism (Frans Burman, Abraham Heidanus and Johannes Cocceius himself). Bethlen acquired his basic cultural identity as a Reformed Cartesian in Utrecht and Leiden, due to the decisive role played by intellectuals in the Low Countries in Cartesian philosophy joining the main stream of contemporary philosophical reflections.

Now let us turn to the *Foreword* of his *Autobiography*, written more than 40 years after having finished his university studies! I divide my paper into four parts. First, I present Bethlen's mechanical interpretation of speech acts; it follows the discussion of the influence of Pufendorf's teaching about moral entities on Bethlen's conception of common wealth. Thirdly, I will touch on the function of shame within and outside the positive state of political community and introduce Bethlen's ideas concerning the religious inclinations of humans as the basis of natural law. Last, but not least, I will highlight some questions and problems which emerge in the constellation of these seemingly divergent topics in Bethlen's text.

I will not discuss philological problems. I will quote Bethlen's text according to my own research to reconstruct an *ultima manus* version of his *Foreword*, which in some cases proves to be different from the formulations of the standard modern edition (cf. Simon 2016b). For the English version I follow Bernard Adam's translation published in London in 2004,⁶ but I made emendations of some passages relevant to our topic.

Mechanism of Speech Acts

According to Bethlen, we are living in a physical world which is mechanical in its entire nature. He accepts many of Descartes' teachings, such as the threefold division of corpuscular particles as developed in *The Principles of Philosophy*.⁷ There are minds merged into mechanical bodies, or at least we anticipate the existence of immaterial souls while perceiving social behaviour and speech acts of others. However, our anticipation turns out to be false most of the time. Bethlen is deeply convinced that social behaviour and communicative speech acts can be generally described in a mechanical way. This means that ordinary cases of behaviour in everyday life lack consciousness. One is subjected to various physical effects in a society, to which he or she gives automatic responses without being conscious

6 *The Autobiography of Miklós Bethlen*, transl. by Bernard Adams, London, Kegan Paul, 2004.

7 Descartes AT VIII/1, 80–202, passim, esp. 103–15.

of it. This also holds in the special case of communicative speech acts. In sharp contradiction to Descartes' intention,⁸ Bethlen claims that most cases of speech performances in a society prove to be mechanical and are not indubitable signs of the existence and operation of immaterial mind (Bethlen 1980, 434–6).

Does not even the simplest of men experience this within himself; if his mind is fixed on something, he knows nothing about whatever he may hear or see apart from that which he then perceives. Indeed, he often does not know whether or not he has said that to which his tongue is accustomed; he may say a prayer or whatever, but his mind is far away. Sometimes he will even speak to another and answer, but he will not know of it when questioned later, and it will merely seem like a familiar dream that comes to mind. This everyone may experience best of all in church, during divine service, when repeating a prayer after the priest or listening to a sermon; if one's soul is far away one will know nothing of what one's tongue is saying or one's ears are hearing, but one will be perfectly well aware of that which one's mind has perceived. (Bethlen 1980, 434; 2004, 52)

Bethlen's example of the automatically praying man whose mind is intended to an entirely other object than the expressed content and whose mind directs the bodily organs for performing speech act without consciousness probably follows Claude Cleselier's *Preface* to the Paris edition of Descartes' *De l'homme* in 1664. There are several problems concerning this account of unconscious use of language. Without going into details,⁹ for the purpose of the present paper it is enough to cognise that Bethlen's treatment of the topic depends on Cartesian discussions in France and in the Netherlands of the 1660s and 1670s.

Pufendorbian Moral Entities¹⁰

Let's take a new point of departure! Bethlen develops a theory of reputation, esteem¹¹ and honour in a community. Members of a society always evaluate themselves and others, always make judgements of their own or of other's good or bad deeds, intentions and behav-

8 Descartes AT VI, 57–59.

9 See my interpretation, Simon 2017.

10 Cf. Dreitzel 2001, 779–81 and Heikki Haara's contribution to the present volume!

11 The Hungarian equivalent for Pufendorbian *existimatio* is *hírnév*, a compound word from *hír* (rumour, news) and *név* (name). Consequently, Bethlen divides his definition of esteem into two parts following the structure of the Hungarian compound. Bethlen's definition of *name* as a linguistic unit focuses on its communicative character instead of treating it primarily as an expression of mental content. The mechanical structure of a word as sign is determined by its communicative effectivity. On the other hand, communicative effectivity is made responsible for creating Pufendorbian civil and moral entities by Bethlen.

our respectively. By doing so they can judge correctly or commit errors – paradigmatically we cannot even make appropriate judgments of our own behaviour, that is, we esteem ourselves erroneously. However, whether these evaluations are correct or not, reputation and esteem produce special social entities, which Bethlen calls moral or civic qualities (*qualitates morales sive civiles*; Bethlen 1980, 410). Bethlen speaks about qualities that legitimate political authority, that make the representants of different kinds of practical knowledge to be honoured in a society and that construct relationships within families. The idea is clearly Pufendorffian in its origin, especially as Bethlen emphasises the ontological efficacy of these qualities (“they can become real and acts affecting men” – Bethlen 1980, 411; Bethlen 2004, 26). It is important to note that Bethlen is aware of the Pufendorffian principle that esteem itself is not a civil or moral quality, but it *produces* civil and moral qualities. As mentioned above, Bethlen refers laconically to the young Pufendorff’s lectures on Grotius, which he attended in Heidelberg in the year 1661 (Bethlen 1980, 573). The theory concerning the ontological status of moral entities was already involved in the 1660 publication of the German scholar’s *Elements of Jurisprudence* (Böhling 2014, 10–2).¹² Bethlen’s use of Pufendorff’s theory is quite loose. While alluding to specific *moral qualities* imposed on things and persons by esteem and speech performances, Bethlen does not refer to the general concept of moral *entities*, of which moral *qualities* are only but one type besides moral *state*, moral *substances* and moral *quantities*. Without making it explicit, he seems to accept that there is a moral state of humans imposed on physical space, in which moral substances are imposed on physical bodies.

Now, with the connection of both the respects of mechanical interpretation of speech acts and the ontology of moral entities, we arrive at a very strange point that cannot be found in Pufendorff. Namely, Bethlen stresses that speech acts play a crucial role in the genesis and reality of moral qualities. Against this background, esteem and honour are paradigmatically results of unconscious verbal interactions in society; therefore they can be described in a mechanical way as well.¹³

12 Cf. Dreitzel’s note that the doctrine of *entia moralia* grew out of Pufendorff’s “Auseinandersetzung” with Erhard Weigel’s “specific Cartesianism” (Dreitzel 2001, 780). On the relationship between Weigel and the young Pufendorff, cf. Wolfgang Röd’s classic summary: Röd 1969.

13 In this sense my interpretation stands very close to what Haara and Lahdenranta call “sentimentalism”: “By sentimentalism, we mean a metaethical view that takes moral qualities to be constituted by human judgements which either are or have their basis in emotional responses.” (Haara-Lahdenranta 2018, 22) Bethlen’s specific contribution to the relationship between moral-civil qualities and human judgments consists in the incorporation of the Cartesian dilemma of (un)consciousness of speech acts.

Shame Within and Outside of Community

Bethlen introduces the topic of shame as follows:

From these [i.e. from one's esteem/honour from the perspective of others – JS] there arise and born naturally in a man two things: *ambitio* or *generositas*, *gloriae cupido*, which is the desire for favourable judgement upon him; and shame, disgrace, *pudor*, which is fear and horror of unfavourable judgement. (Bethlen 1980, 413; 2004, 28)

Shame and ambition¹⁴ are emotions which reflect on intersubjective esteem and honour among people. Shame is a reflective prolongation of mechanical structure of social qualities on the level of emotions, its aim is a kind of emotional management of social esteem; that is, a strategy to avoid actions which result in negative evaluations of others in my direction. However, shame as one's psychological disposition does not depend on whether the evaluative judgment is correct or false. May my fellows in a society make a *false* judgement of my intended act, I will intend *not* to perform the act in question, that is I will feel shame to do so *as if* the expected evaluations of my fellows in a society were *right*. The certainty of my conscience's eventually correct judgement about myself is not so strong as it were able to eliminate my natural felt shame caused by the expected unfavourable judgement of others, even if this latter is false. The same with ambition: Even if the morsel of conscience informs me correctly concerning the evilness of my planned act in the future, I will intend to perform it ambitiously, because of the expected favourable judgment of others in society.

The efficacy of shame and ambition in a community presupposes a general view of the sociality of human beings. Despite all the similarities of Bethlen's theory concerning reputation, esteem and honour with Pufendorf's teaching, the Hungarian thinker builds his interpretation of society on motifs other than those of his professor in Heidelberg. Bethlen explains the basic feature of the sociality of humans in terms of their shared anthropological standard of religious inclinations. Paraphrasing the Ciceronian-Senecan *consensus* argument in the manner of Gerhard Vossius (Vossius 1668, 1–2) and Herbert of Cherbury (Herbert of Cherbury 1663, 2), Bethlen establishes a general leaning towards religious behaviour in all nations (Bethlen 1980, 427–432; 2004, 45–50). He introduces three moments as anthropological standards and builds an idea of natural religion on it: 1) natural inclination towards esteem and honour even after one's death, 2) belief in God and 3) conscience. God implanted these "*qualities or inclinations*" in man through nature – the anthropological weight of these natural features is so strong that even original sin could not extinguish or modify them. They are also present in all pagan nations, who "prefer to worship stones, trees, reptiles or frogs than to be without a God to whom to turn in time of need" (Bethlen

¹⁴ For the prevalence of shame and ambition as emotional constituencies of Pufendorfsian human sociality, cf. Haara 2018, 99–136!

1980, 427; 2004, 45). However, Bethlen did not follow the typical procedure of comparative studies of religions of his time: instead of describing different religions in the light of their worships of physical objects, the argumentation focuses on intersubjective relations resulting from speech performances in a *social* context. It follows consequently from the basic religious feature of mankind that none of the nations lacks and lacked social phenomena depending on speech acts: “[t]here is no nation on earth in which there is not worship, oath-taking, blessing, cursing [átok], reproach [szitok], some slight modesty, glory, outrage, reward and punishment” (Bethlen 1980, 427; 2004, 45). Therefore, Bethlen embeds Pufendorfian civil and moral constituents of society into a theory of natural religion.

But one may suppose that these latter phenomena exist only under the circumstances of a positive state of commonwealth: “Now let us suppose that glory, outrage, reward and punishment are entirely human inventions for the maintenance of society.” (Bethlen 1980, 427; 2004, 45) Bethlen expresses the volatile and unstable feature of these social emotions through describing *reproach* as “the blazing up the angry heart, as it were the burning of a sooty chimney” (Bethlen 1980, 427). Here, we have the idea discussed above: inclination to glory is ambition towards expecting reward and esteem because of acting in accordance with the interest of the common good, or as Bethlen has it “maintaining of society”. *Outrage*, on the other hand, is punishment for violation of the interest of the common good. May these emotions have their origin deep in human nature, the content of the common good directing them in a social context proves to be contingent in its very nature, or as Bethlen writes: they “are entirely human inventions for the maintenance of society”. But mere fear of punishment in the case of violating the common good cannot account perfectly for feeling shame; and hope of reward in the case of acting in accordance with the common good cannot account perfectly for keeping promises in oath-taking.

Would there be worship, oath-taking, blessing and cursing if man did not believe in God, who has the power and the will, if you pray, to listen and come to your aid; to punish him that swears falsely; to implement blessing and cursing? For surely everyman knows that that is all merely words, the motion of the tongue and the air, and if there is none to give it power it is all futility and the wind bears it away. Would he that swears have any regard for that, or he to whom he swears, he that blesses or curses or those to whom these are directed? would they make use of them? would they fear them? if they had no faith of them. Would the powerful man who fears no punishment blush and feel ashamed where no one can see him, if his conscience did not prick him? (Bethlen 1980, 427–428; 2004, 45)

While leaving the positive social context behind, Bethlen arrives at the domain of natural laws. Bethlen appeals to God as the condition of causal efficacy of speech acts like oath-taking, blessing or cursing. However, it does not mean that the interpretation of their normativity beyond the positive legal state relies on supernatural moments of belief. Inclination towards pursuing glory or inclination towards avoiding shameful actions are natural endowments of mankind. Addressing the Hobbesian figure of the *powerful* in the

natural state, Bethlen declares that he feels shame even if knowledge of society, negative evaluation and the prospect of punishment for violating the common good are suspended. Therefore, shame proves to be not only an emotional management of esteem and honour in a community, but an emotion which mirrors a non-conventional, natural order of values. In this sense, shame has a strong connection to conscience. Even if Bethlen introduced conscience as a natural faculty of humans with theistic origin without the condition of revealed religion, one might ask whether feeling shame beyond and independently of the conventional positive state of a community has its origin in the anthropological standard of original sin.

Bethlen, being a convinced Calvinist, is aware of this challenge of Augustinian theological anthropology, and addresses the relationship between shame and original sin directly:

From that it is immediately apparent that the words of Moses are no *fabula*, and clothing is Adam's invention not only against warm or cool but also against shame. [...] In vain and falsely have certain atheists and profaners postulated that Moses and others like him wished to obtain honour for themselves, domination over others and the obedience of the simple, and therefore invented God, the soul, heaven, hell etc. (Bethlen 1980, 428; 2004, 45–46)

One should not be misguided by Bethlen's apology of Mosaic narration against allegedly atheistic or profane interpretations.¹⁵ His vision of the relationship between shame and original sin is entirely rational and that of Enlightenment. It is not the Mosaic law which provides us with a theological interpretation of natural shame, but it is the rational theory of naturally felt shame which justifies the *truth* of the inspired Mosaic narration of Adam's fall. In other words: we do not feel shame beyond social conventions because we are heirs of the theologically established original sin, but we as Christians inherit original sin because we, similar to representants of other confessions, are naturally ashamed to perform some acts. Bethlen explores a thin area for shame as natural emotion between the robust interpretative perspectives of social psychology and theological anthropology. He does not deny that one may feel shame because he or she experiences dishonour from his or her fellow citizens, and he does not rule out the possibility that one has bad conscience while feeling shame. But it is rather the natural emotion of shame, which allows for shame as an individual strategy for avoiding dishonour in society, as well as for upholding the *truth* of the Mosaic narrative of Adam's feeling shame after the Fall.

At this point, we can contrast Bethlen's formulations with Pufendorf's ideas again. The German scholar addresses the problem of deduction of natural laws' normativity from

15 For a defence of natural law theory against atheism, cf. DJN, 3,4,4 (Pufendorf 1672, 312–4). Pufendorf's main target is Hobbes's discussion of the atheist position, according to which there is no system of natural values that the atheist could violate. Therefore, Hobbes maintains that atheists do not violate natural law, but commit the error of ignorance and must be punished according to the jurisdiction of war instead of natural law.

theologically established shame in *Elements of Jurisprudence*, Book 1, definition 12, paragraph 15 directly.

Now there is controversy among the learned about the strength of obligation in pacts which have been formed by the law of nature alone, such as exist among those who acknowledge no common judge in a human forum, or about which the civil law makes no disposition. For some have maintained that the efficacy of such pacts consists in a bond of shame and modesty [*pudoris ac verecundiae vinculo*] alone, especially where no agreement [*συνάλλαγμα*] has as yet interceded and nothing has been furnished by either side, while the rest harshly criticize this opinion as weakening the trustworthiness of all treaties.

To us it seems that the matter is not so difficult if it is initially supposed that men have been fashioned by nature to cultivate society among themselves, and that no one should inflict on another that which can furnish a cause for discords and wars [...] it is quite apparent that men are altogether obligated by the law of nature to observe their pacts and that those who violate them sin against it [...] .¹⁶ (Pufendorf 1994, 55)

Pufendorf's idea of sociability as an anthropological standard of mankind makes the normative function of shame for acting in accordance with the natural law unnecessary. Bethlen does not admit human sociability even in its Pufendorffian version of ability to impose moral entities upon physical states of affairs and to be aware of natural values originating from these impositions. He insists on the normative function of shame for respecting natural rights of others and disqualifies human rationality for recognising natural values. Bethlen seems to occupy a third position within Pufendorffian-Hobbesian ramification of social norms. He accepts the Pufendorffian theory of civil entities and ascribes causal efficacy to them in a society; but this latter ability of introducing physical and mental changes in the world is bound to the mediation of psychological states and speech acts in human beings. Bethlen's sensitivity to psychological aspects of social norms and limiting the consciousness of speech acts converges in a Hobbesian direction, although the English thinker would have accepted neither Bethlen's vision of universal normativity of naturally felt shame in the natural state of humans, nor the religious syncretism built on it.

¹⁶ Latin and Greek insertions from Pufendorf 1660, 106–7. Cf. Pufendorf 1686, chapter 5, paragraph 5, 276–7.

Summary and Problems

There are some puzzling moments and problems in Bethlen's discussion of the relationship between shame, commonwealth and religion. If we accept Bethlen's view of shame as a reflective psychological management concerning acquiring esteem in a positive state of community, the religious aspect of shame proves to be problematic. According to the Hungarian author, natural religion (as a common and latent background behind all confessions) is based on a natural inclination towards reputation, esteem and honour – besides a reductive knowledge of God and the presence of conscience. The link between social and natural shame remains unexplained in the *Foreword* of the *Autobiography*. For maintaining natural shame outside human community, Bethlen should extend the relevance of Pufendorfian moral qualities to the realm of the natural state of humans as well. Bethlen seems to substitute natural – or as Pufendorf describes it, *simple* – esteem with the basic drive for religious behaviour in the human natural state. Furthermore, as Bethlen makes esteem strongly dependent on speech acts in the social context, he should treat the problem of use of language in the natural state, too. Are communicative performances in most cases *unconscious* in the *natural* state of humans as well, or is the mind *aware* of the contents of speech in the state of nature while producing natural moral qualities? There are some signs towards this latter direction, but this step is in no way explicit in Bethlen's text. The lack of this connection is crucial for his theory, because he seems to base natural religion on a natural inclination towards esteem.

But one thing is clear. Despite all the inconsequencies, we might suppose in Bethlen's application of Pufendorf's theory of moral qualities a deep understanding of the problems concerning human community. The gap between moral qualities and natural religion as explanatory ideas for human sociality is abridged by Bethlen's introduction of the Cartesian problem of the mind's transparency concerning speech acts. In Bethlen's vision of society, Pufendorfian imposition is driven through religious inclinations of human nature on the basis of mechanical speech performances. However, Pufendorf had no interest in embedding his theory of imputation into the problems of the Cartesian philosophy of mind. Likewise, prominent protagonists of Cartesianism who subscribed to the possibility of unconscious speech acts (such as Claude Clerselier (Clerselier 1664, oo ii^v), Jean Darmanson (Darmanson 1684, 62) or Jean-Baptiste Duhamel (Duhamel 1673, 89–90)), appeared to be entirely disinterested in the Pufendorfian enterprise of political philosophy. One possible way to bridge the gap between these tendencies can be found in Thomas Hobbes's philosophy. There may have existed parallel phenomena in Pufendorf's Early Modern reception of Bethlen's reformed Cartesian interpretation – above all in the Protestant Low Countries and Germany – which should be explored in the future.

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