

Investigating the Ethics and Politics of Sociability

Leverhulme Research Project Grant

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Overview

The overarching ambition of the Sociability Project is to solidify a new field of study in moral and political philosophy on the ethics of sociability. The ethics of sociability concerns 1) the reasons and duties we have to provide decent social contact to each other; 2) the social rights we may assert; 3) the virtues in being sociable; 4) the implications of sociability for personal freedoms such as freedom of association; and 5) the value of social inclusion.

To achieve its ambition, the Sociability Project has three specific objectives. First, it will take forward various lines of argument in the PI's account of social needs, rights, and freedoms. Second, it will look beyond the realm of rights to investigate the rich, interpersonal conditions necessary for us to flourish. Third, it will apply analyses of both social rights and social goods to specific domains of moral and political concern, including animal ethics, global justice, and disability.

The project team will include the PI, a three-year postdoctoral Research Fellow, and a PhD student. The results of the project will be disseminated in a monograph, *Social Goods* (Brownlee, under contract with OUP), a series of single authored and co-authored articles by the project team members, and a journal special issue.

1. Social Rights

The project team will advance research on interpersonal social rights by taking forward some of the lines of investigation opened up by the PI's work to date. Topics for investigation include: 1) providing a taxonomy and analysis of the philosophical respectability of the social rights enumerated in international human rights agreements; 2) locating interpersonal social rights in relation to debates about distributive justice, luck egalitarianism, and social egalitarianism; and 3) assessing the social pre-conditions for political participation and their implications for democratic theory. Among other things, the project team will co-organize a conference and co-edit a journal special issue on social rights.

2. Social Goods

Contemporary philosophers tend to subsume the social aspects of a truly good life under broader categories of non-contingent elements of flourishing. Philosophers have explored a range of candidate elements including preserving agency, securing basic liberties, protecting persons from harm, realizing capabilities, securing meaningful functionings, and protecting individual wellbeing. With few exceptions, none gives more than a passing nod to our deep interests in companionship, social inclusion, love, and social contribution. The Sociability Project will seek to remedy

this and, in doing so, specify the boundary between social duty and social virtue. Some key questions about the social aspects of flourishing include the following:

- What are the social conditions for a truly good life (as opposed to a minimally decent life)?
- How do social wellbeing and material wellbeing interact and affect each other?
- What is the moral status of acute, unwanted loneliness understood as perceived social isolation?
- Related to that, how morally serious is childhood loneliness?
- What is the boundary between social duty and social virtue?
- Which personal and societal virtues can contribute to the stability of institutions that support social rights?
- What impact does social isolation have on our ability to learn from our moral failures, especially if we learn from our moral failures best (or only) when we are *seen to fail*?
- What is the overall value of being sociable?

3. Globalisation, Interspecies Sociality, and Disability

To what extent can the rights and goods of sociability be applied to specific domains of moral and political concern? The project will explore three domains: global justice, animal ethics, and disability. The questions that the project will address include:

- What does it mean to be sociable in our globalised world where distant strangers' needs are readily knowable and the means of assisting them are broadly accessible?
- How expansive can our sociability be since we can be intimate with relatively few beings?
- What is the moral status of interspecies social connections?
- What rights should non-human social animals have that protect their core social needs?
- What barriers to social inclusion are posed by impairment, notably cognitive impairment?
- Do we need to revise our judgements about preferable forms of connection in order to include fully people with severe cognitive impairments?