

Thomasius's *decorum* and Elias's manners

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Abstract

This paper seeks to make a connection between the ideas of the early modern civil philosopher Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) and those of the sociologist Norbert Elias, via an evaluation of Thomasius's ethic of *decorum* and Elias's history of manners. The aim of this pursuit is to demonstrate that these are histories of person formation, identifying different types of person with specific practices and techniques suited to their historical and social setting. It is my contention that both Thomasius and Elias demonstrate, albeit in their own ways, that people are not made fit for society by nature, but need to attain definite capacities and attributes for social existence, capacities that render them particular kinds of person.

Keywords:

Manners; *decorum*; person formation; personhood; Norbert Elias; Christian Thomasius

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This paper seeks to make a connection between the ideas of the early modern civil philosopher Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) and those of the sociologist Norbert Elias, via an evaluation of Thomasius's ethic of *decorum* and Elias's history of manners. The aim of this pursuit is to demonstrate that these are histories of person formation, identifying different types of person with specific practices and techniques suited to their historical and social setting. There is no reason to believe that Elias was familiar with the work of Thomasius; he certainly makes no reference to Thomasius in any of his published work. Nevertheless, it is my contention that both Thomasius and Elias demonstrate, albeit in their own ways, that people are not made fit for society by nature, but need to attain definite capacities and attributes for social existence, capacities that render them particular kinds of person. While I am here discussing only Thomasius and Elias, the relevant literature deals with many other thinkers (see for example, Davidson 1999; Foucault 1986a, 1986b; Oestreich 1982; Pufendorf 1991).

Histories of person formation examine the history of specific forms of personhood which people acquire in distinctive settings (Wickham and Evers 2010: 124). These forms of personhood demonstrate that there is nothing timeless or universal about any particular form of personhood, rather, each particular status is achieved or acquired by a variety of historically specific means. Different modes of personhood demonstrate that personhood is not a given entity, concepts of personhood (or person) differ between cultures, and 'not only concepts, the practices, institutions, and forms of reference which constitute "personalities" also differ, and with them speech, gesture and conduct' (Hirst and Woolley 1982: 118). In other words, patterns of change and continuity as well as

structures of meaning and motivation are not uniformly given or available to everyone; rather, this depends on time and circumstance.

Thomasius and Elias each describe the different codes of behaviour attached to types of persons, in different social and historical contexts; the ideals, practices and techniques differ from one culture to the next. Thus, these studies of personhood, or 'sociology of persons', concern themselves with the formation and maintenance of forms of life-conduct and 'provide a suitable descriptive sociological account of the ways in which individuals have acquired definite capacities and attributes for distinctive forms of existence as certain types of person' (du Gay 2007: 14). Contrary to general social theoretical accounts of "the person", these studies of person formation demonstrate that one should not divorce forms of personhood from the empirical and historical settings within which they are formed.

Christian Thomasius was a reformer of German intellectual life in the early modern period. His ethic of *decorum*, and his ideas on toleration were influenced by the upheaval of the religiously motivated Thirty Years War in Germany. He was eager to produce a set of techniques for the formation of the appropriate sort of person to deal with his country's needs, that is, 'to equip a new educated stratum with the interests and capacities appropriate to service in the civil offices of State' (Saunders 1997: 90). This involved a different curriculum: rather than teaching metaphysical theory, practical skills (political, legal and administrative) were to be taught. Part of that new curriculum was Thomasius's notion of *decorum*. In 1689 Thomasius's instructional essay 'How a Young Man is to be Educated' ('Wie ein junger Mensch zu informieren sei') sought to train students of jurisprudence and future statesmen in the art of *decorum* (Thomasius 1994 [1689]).

His practical teachings aimed to induct students into a particular way of relating to and conducting themselves: namely, as beings whose conduct requires constant monitoring and control in order to attain the inner restraint necessary for public civility. Using Thomasius's triad of ethical categories, '*honestum, decorum and justum*' (Barnard 1971: 237) civil conduct would be taught, with the stress on avoiding incivility and impertinence, cultivating winning ways and manners, and engaging in peaceful interaction with those whose beliefs they may not necessarily share. This civil conduct was to be taught through an ethic of *decorum* 'a middle term between positive law and moral law, between the enforceable *justum* and the unenforceable *honestum*, connoting a property that would generate a measure of self-imposed civility' (Barnard 1988: 584). This self-imposed civility required tuition in practical thinking, reflected by the distinction Thomasius drew between '*Gelehrtheit* (abstract knowledge) and *Gelahrheit* (practical knowledge) (Barnard 1971: 224-226). *Gelehrtheit* was the privileged knowledge of scholasticism and metaphysics, and related more to knowledge for knowledge's sake, whereas *Gelahrheit* pursued knowledge not for its own sake but for the use-value/practical use it has in daily life.

Thomasius deemed this practical knowledge more able to 'come to grips with the changing vicissitudes of ordinary life' (Barnard 1971: 224); this type of learning was open to the officials of government, who could thus gain actual knowledge of the historical context and specific conditions of the societies they were to govern. This did not mean every official of the government; Thomasius was quick to limit the use of his practical learning to a select group of officials who had the predisposition for *decorum* (Hunter 2005: 119-120). He used a typology of foolishness, differentiating between three

degrees of foolishness: ‘the greatest fools, who allow their inner passions to break out in civil disruption’; the middle fools, who can acquire inner-tranquillity but not rational accountability, one of the requirements in order to be classified as ‘least foolish’ alongside the capacity to manage to calm inner passions (Hunter et al 2007: 113). Only this last category of persons could achieve *decorum* through Thomasius’s practical teachings.

Decorum, ‘the politics of life’, linked vital requirements for social relationships and included ‘the acceptance of a customary code of manners...ways of doing things, a common understanding about mutual expectations, and a readiness to grant at least a modicum of fairness and decency to those we have dealings with’ (Barnard 1971: 238). The curriculum combined ‘the educational desiderata of gentlemen (including riding, fencing, foreign languages, and the new sciences) with the state’s formal requirements for civil service education’ (Saunders 1997: 91, citing McClelland). Thomasius’s ethic of *decorum* was an end in itself, it did not pretend to be a theological or universal truth, it was a set of socio-cultural practices to reach the goal of social peace. Thus, *decorum* was to serve a very practical purpose; equally, *decorum* would require ongoing reflection and renewal in light of changing circumstances.

Hunter stresses the importance of Thomasius’s insight regarding ‘the relation between the elaboration and transmission of particular philosophies and science on the one hand, and the formation of particular kinds of intellectual department in and through this elaboration and transmission on the other’ (2000: 606). In other words, Thomasius saw a direct connection between the techniques and practices that were taught, and the formation of particular types of person. Thomasius’s ethic of *decorum* was instrumental

in forming a particular kind of person, the future early modern statesman, educated in the art of *decorum*. This type of person would function well in civil society and be able to engage in peaceful conduct with those whose beliefs they may not necessarily share.

Elias made a similar connection between social spheres of conduct and their impact on the formation of particular persons. Particularly in *The Civilizing Process* (2000) and *The Court Society* (2006), Elias demonstrated how social relations and human traits are always interdependent and historically contingent. Elias tracked the changes in the structure of Western society and in ‘the standard of behaviour and the psychical makeup of Western peoples’ (2000: xi). He discerned new forms of conduct that were shaped by an ethical process, which Elias termed “courtisation”. Over time more controlled, peaceful, and refined ways of being developed in the form of *courtoisie* at the courts of feudal lords and, later, as *civilité* in the courts of absolutist rulers. Over time restraint replaced ‘rage as the emotion that defined an honourable man’ (Morris 2014: 12). The person of the feudal warrior became a court aristocrat. In other words, Elias traced the particular types of person that individuals became in their specific social settings.

In *The Court Society*, Elias tracked the changes within the courtly world of early modern France (roughly the 15th-16th century), and discerned a shift in the balance of power from monarch to nobility, resulting in a new courtly lifestyle. Elias’s analysis sought to understand the specific court ethos of the people who were part of this particular social unit/grouping – the society of the court. Elias examined the court, specifically Louis XIV’s, as the site where courtiers learned correct behaviour. He was particularly interested in what sort of demands were transmitted from the structure of court society to those who wished to rise or merely to survive within it (Elias 2006: 39), in other words,

the sort of socio-cultural practices that were required of the courtiers in order to fit into that social setting.

Elias discerned several mechanisms which had to be part of a person's armoury, a form of 'court rationality' encompassing 'the art of observing people' and 'the art of dealing with people' (2006: 113-123). Court rationality was the coordinating principle of the court society. Elias was quick to specify that 'what is considered "rational" depends at any time on the structure of society'; in other words, different types of rationality were 'born of different social necessities' (2006: 120). For Elias, court rationality was the totality of conduct necessary for observing and dealing with people, etiquette and ceremony within court society. This particular, calculated lifestyle became so important to court people because 'affective outbursts are difficult to control and calculate' and can thus be damaging and signs of weakness, resulting in 'the [lowly] position the court person fears most of all' (Elias 2006: 121).

The art of observing people, according to Elias, was 'not "psychology" in the scientific sense, but an ability, growing out of the requirements of life at court, to understand the make-up, motives, capacities and limits of other people' (2006: 113). These techniques were not only used to observe others, but also to the self; the two were complementary. Those who lived within court society had to become specialists in the multiplicity and moulding of social conduct. Indeed:

A man who knows the court is master of his gestures, of his eyes and of his face; he is profound, impenetrable; he dissimulates bad offices, smiles at his

enemies, controls his irritation, disguises his passions, belies his heart, speaks and acts against his feelings (Elias 1983: 105, citing La Bruyère).

Elias underlined the practical nature of this code of behaviour. In order to fit into the court society one had to know one's own passions in order to conceal or show them effectively, just as one had to be aware of the true motives of others. The courtly art of observation arose 'not from a delight in theorising, but from the direct necessities of social existence' (Elias 2006: 116).

The art of dealing with people was a result of the first: 'observation of people provided the foundation of dealing with them, and vice versa' (Elias 2006: 116). In other words, one's strategy required calculation, based on close observation. Drawing on the famous diaries of the Duc de Saint Simon, Elias demonstrated how courtly encounters at all times required a 'constant testing of the power relationship between the partners' that was always in flux, due to the changing nature of courtly life (2006: 119). Thus, Gracian, the writer of *The Courtiers Manual Oracle*, stated that 'The substance is not enough, unless it be clothed with its circumstance' (Elias 2006: 119n, citing Gracian). Within court society more versatile and subtle forms of conduct – in tune with the constantly changing courtly environment – became extremely important in order to survive within this social milieu.

Elias's 'court rationality' can thus be seen as an examination of the court as the site where courtiers learned what was deemed as useful, and appropriate behaviour. Over time, Elias argued, 'the web of actions must be organized more and more strictly and accurately, if each individual action is to fulfil its social function. Individuals are

compelled to regulate their conduct in an increasingly differentiated, more even and more stable manner' (2000: 367). The courtiers who demonstrated a restraint in affects through deliberate aloofness and calculated manipulation were more likely to be successful in courtly life than those who did not. Thus, *The Court Society* can be considered as a study of the conduct and the shaping of a historically cultivated self to meet the purposes of that particular way of life: that is, of the formation of certain styles of persons.

Elias's stress on the practical nature of this code of behaviour is similar to Thomasius's focus on the use value of his ethic of *decorum*. Early modern ideas on person formation, such as Thomasius's illustrate that techniques and practices of the self are linked to distinct and plural spheres of everyday life and are thus historically contingent. The capacity to conduct oneself as a certain person, be it an official of state in the early modern era or the courtier in Elias's court society, is not innate but has to be cultivated. Thomasius's notion of *decorum* was not dependent on a universal moral law, but on a secular ethos. Civility in public life was a real accomplishment, something Elias would have agreed with. The new forms of conduct that were formed during the ethical process Elias described as courtisation, together with Thomasius's triad of *honestum*, *justum* and *decorum*, enable a more intricate history of the significance of the 'morate' sphere, where 'morate' is interpreted as 'mannered, well-mannered, respectably conducted, moral' (Saunders 1997: 66, citing Cromartie).

One does not need a general theory of human nature to understand personhood; indeed such a theory would be a hindrance. Forms of personhood are dependent upon particular socio-cultural practices and need to be analysed with reference to these practices. Thomasius's and Elias's accounts of person formation focus upon distinct and plural

spheres of life, which demand a variety of techniques and practices which in turn give rise to many different and non-transferable conceptions and types of person. The task is to describe the different categories, practices and activities, and thus the different forms of personhood, case by case, each in their own terms (du Gay 2007: 30).

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