That is man. An animal which has an urgent desire for a thought of a thought – and of a thought not its own – and whose action is profoundly affected by this type of desire, more profoundly and more pervasively than by any other.

A.O. Lovejoy, Reflexions on Human Nature 1961

Cassio: "Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation!"

Iago: "Reputation is an idle and most false imposition; oft got without merit, and lost without deserving".

Othello, Act II, Scene III

Thus speaks Cassio, when he discovers he has lost the favours of Othello, due to a fight with another nobleman in the second act of Shakespeare’s famous play. His first concern is not for himself - for the consequences of this loss on his concrete existence - but for another kind of self, his reputation, that is, that part of ourselves whose custody is in the eyes and the words of others. Iago, who is secretly manipulating Cassio’s reputation in order to demote him, is certainly aware that reputation, the “most immortal part” of ourselves, is also the most fragile: we earn and loose it without deserving and are in a constant quest of reassurance about what we think the others think about us.

Every social interaction brings forth an evaluative dimension of reciprocal judgment, a perception of who we are that we leave in the eyes of others. Every social interaction brings forth also a mastery of this presentation of ourselves, a consciousness of the image of ourselves we want to leave track of through our behavior. As Hume says, we learn about our conduct as we
learn about our bad breath: the reactions of others act as a mirror in which we discover features of ourselves. In the evaluative dimension of our social life, the generation of opinions on each other’s actions is reputation.

I mean to use reputation as a perspicuous notion in which to explore some themes resonating through many areas of academic concern and that belong, in part, to many academic disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, economics, evolutionary game theory, epistemology, cognitive science, cultural history, anthropology, political philosophy and even literature.

Reputation is commonly seen as the informational trace of our past actions: it is the representation of credibility that an agent or an item earns through repeated interactions. Reputation is a relational property: it is the informational value of our interactions. If interactions are repeated, reputation may conventionalize in “seals of approval” or disapproval or social stigmas. Reputation is also a cognitive notion: it is a set of evaluative representations that circulates in a society about a person or an item through rumors, gossip and other, more controlled rating devices (such as quality indexes, rankings, indicators).

There exists a rich moral/philosophical tradition that acknowledges the seeking of reputation as one of the most fundamental human passions. Ironically, among the tenants of this tradition, we find Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith, who both enjoy a reputation of founders of the model of society uniquely based on self-interest. In the Elements of Law and Natural Politics, Hobbes places honor and glory among the central passions of the mind. And in his Theory of Moral Sentiments, Smith acknowledges the quest for sympathy as a fundamental motive of human action. Yet, apart from some scattered attempts and some notable exceptions\(^1\), mainstream economics has poorly developed the idea that the

everyday exchange of beliefs and opinions about one another can be the
object of a theory of motivation and action, and has privileged more
concrete motives over the vanity of opinions.

Banned by economics as a vestige on an aristocratic value, reputation
seems to be making a comeback as a way of dealing with collective action,
reciprocity and trust in decentralized societies\(^2\). It is at the core of many
contemporary concerns with the management of information in ICT-driven
society\(^3\). And it is becoming a major resource of governance through the
multiplication of rating devices and indicators\(^4\).

The notion of reputation has surprisingly attracted little attention in
contemporary philosophy. My project is to investigate reputation from an
epistemological perspective. The main thesis that underlies my approach
is the following: in informational-dense societies, reputation has become
an unavoidable tool to gather information about people and things around
us. Without an access to other people’s reputations and evaluations,
without a mastery of the tools that crystallize collective evaluations,
knowledge would be impossible. Paradoxically, in societies where
information grows, the role of reputational devices that filter information
becomes crucial. Moreover, social uses of new technologies, such as social
networks, are geared by our cognitive dispositions to look for other’s
reputations and care about our own image.

What exactly is a reputation? What do we lose when we lose it? Why do we
care so much about it? Is it the vestige of ancient values – *fama*, honor,
glory, prestige, renown – in our disenchanted contemporary societies, or is
it an obsession of our present times? Is it a rational motivation, a matter
of social strategy to earn trustworthiness, as contemporary economy and

\(^2\) Cf. R. Trivers (1971) “The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism” Quaterly Review of
Biology, 46, 35-57.

\(^3\) Cf. R. Conte, M. Paolucci et al. (2002) Reputation in Artificial Societies, Springer.

\(^4\) Cf. Davis, Fisher et al. (2012) Governance by indicators. Global Power through
classification and rankings Oxford UP.
game theory suggest, or is it an *alternative* motivation, that suspends our strategic action in the name of another level of concerns? What are the reasons to communicate a reputation? Is it possible to frame an analysis of reputation that encompasses the reputation of people, of things and of ideas? What are the norms we should endorse when we spread around our judgments about the others and about the value of things and ideas? What is a responsible use of contemporary reputational devices for governance that are more and more often used to produce rankings and “objective reputations”? 