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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE ROAD TO VIRTUE AND THE ROAD TO FORTUNE:  
THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE PROBLEM OF  
INDIVIDUALISM IN COMMERCIAL SOCIETY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

BY

SARAH RAMIREZ

CHICAGO, IL

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In the middling and inferior stations of life, the road to virtue and that to fortune, to such fortune, at least, as men in such stations can reasonably expect to acquire, are, happily in most cases, very nearly the same.

–Adam Smith

The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding . . . . He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life.

–Adam Smith

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## INTRODUCTION

Do liberal commercial societies—that is, those based on the principle of self-governance in both the economic and political spheres—inevitably capitulate to the problem of excessive individualism?<sup>1</sup> Individual rights must be accompanied by duties—but, since commercial republics cannot compel such duties, they risk the problem of individualism, the possibility that their citizens will become engrossed with their own pleasures or interests at the expense of duty to others. Joseph Cropsey defines the problem as follows: liberal government needs “a feasible and satisfactory substitute for strong authority, which is yet compatible with good order and good living in society. Whether, and wherein, such a substitute exists, is the lasting problem of freedom” (1957, xii).

Doubts over whether liberalism provides such a substitute have continued to flourish, even in the face of declarations that it constitutes the inevitable “end of history.” Alasdair MacIntyre complains that “contemporary debates within modern political

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<sup>1</sup> There is by no means a consensus on whether liberal democratic capitalism fosters individualism. John Stuart Mill (1974) worried about an apparently opposite tendency, that towards mindless conformism. Frankfurt School thinkers such as Erich Fromm (1941) and Herbert Marcuse (1991) analyzed the role of the mass media and consumerism in manufacturing conformism, while Michel Foucault argued that institutions such as education function as “disciplines” that socialize individuals into “docility-utility” (1995, 137). Interestingly, however, some observers have connected the two phenomena of individualism and conformism. Cyrus Patell argues that capitalist culture adopts an “ideology of individuality” that “enforces conformity at the very moment that it extols individuality” (2001, xii). Mark Kingwell has similarly identified “a peculiar tension that is lodged at the heart of the modern liberal project,” that of “individualist conformity” (2009, 12).

systems are almost exclusively between conservative liberals, liberal liberals, and radical liberals. There is little place in such political systems for the criticism of the system itself, that is, for putting liberalism in question” (1988, 392). Yet he overlooks many sites of vigorous debate about liberalism—including the streets, as Students for a Democratic Society and now Occupy Wall Street take up demands for “participatory democracy.”

Society and now Occupy Wall Street take up demands for “participatory democracy.” Some take liberalism to task for failing to endow citizens with public spirit. Hannah Arendt, for instance, laments that liberal concern with mere bodily necessity, in the form of the right to life and of economic prosperity, brings “housekeeping activities to the public realm” (1998, 45). Hence, instead of providing a space for public virtue, “state and government gives place here to pure administration—a state of affairs which Marx rightly predicted as the ‘withering away of the state,’ though he was wrong in assuming that only a revolution could bring it about” (1998, 45). Others point to the impact of unrestrained autonomy on family and social life. Bruce Frohnen argues that selfish hedonism is so debasing that it merits community concern, even if it results in no tangible harm to others: “unrestrained exercise of the human will, even if limited by contract, degrades the soul as it warps the mind . . . by sanctifying the pursuit of a life of sensual pleasures” (1993, 5). Still others argue that liberalism leaves social or economic exploitation largely untouched. Catherine MacKinnon argues that the liberal notion of privacy functions as protection for male brutality, for “practices through which women are violated, abused, exploited, and patronized by men *socially*” (1987, 765). These criticisms issue from different points on the political spectrum and may harbor



incompatible assumptions, but they can be broadly subsumed under one main objection: liberal institutions predicated on individual rights are insufficient for perpetuating virtue. The critics may conceptualize virtue as public spirit, as prudence, as consideration for the disadvantaged, or as some other concept entirely—but, while the proper definition of virtue is certainly no trivial matter, it is significant that even such vastly divergent definitions seem to implicate liberalism. Many of these critics remain liberals in spite of their reservations, but others think this problem demands that we consider political alternatives.

The anti-liberals have a point: finding solutions compatible with liberalism is an inherently difficult business. According to Peter Berkowitz, “the structure of liberal thought itself guarantees that virtue will be an enduring problem for liberalism, a problem that can neither be resolved by theory nor fixed once and for all by institutional design” (1999, xii). Since liberalism is based on the notion of free choice and individual rights, “every attempt to deny or resolve the problem of virtue within liberalism suppresses an important dimension of the liberal spirit” (1999, xii). It is difficult for a liberal state to command its members to exhibit personal morals, because such decrees violate our cherished notion of autonomy. Indeed, liberal governments, with their constitutional limitations, are designed specifically to function well even in the absence of virtuous politicians or citizens. As Thomas Pangle observes, the American political system includes “institutional mechanisms to channel, balance, and exploit grand as well as petty selfish ambitions in such a way as to obviate the need for constant reliance on noble impulses” (1988, 110). Or, in the words of T.S. Eliot, liberals seek “systems so perfect

that no one will need to be good.” It has been said that modern political theorists built on the “‘low but solid ground’ of selfishness” by making safety and prosperity a matter of public concern while leaving definition of the *summum bonum* to individual preference (Leo Strauss 1965, 247). However, if even these goals are undermined by lack of virtue, if individuals decide their *summum bonum* does not require even minimal duties to others—such as paying taxes for services they don’t use, or being good neighbors and citizens in private life—then it may be wondered how solid that ground really is. After all, liberal states do require some degree of virtue in their inhabitants. John Rawls acknowledges that “political justice needs always to be complemented by other virtues” (1996, 21). But some influential thinkers urge people to forsake such virtues. Ayn Rand, a figure who inspires a fanatical band of followers, writes that “altruism is incompatible with freedom, with capitalism and with individual rights. One cannot combine the pursuit of happiness with the moral status of a sacrificial animal” (1964, 91). Like its critics, she shares an underlying assumption about liberal society’s inherent selfishness—but wants to take it to its logical conclusion.

The difficulties in fostering virtue within liberalism are considerable, but not insurmountable. Berkowitz concludes that concerns with virtue are indeed consistent with liberal ideals, but that the problem of individualism requires ongoing attention: “a crucial task for future liberal theory is to determine how the virtues necessary to the preservation of liberalism may be sustained in a manner consistent with liberalism’s fundamental premise” (1999, 177). In considering whether and how liberalism might mitigate individualism, it is worthwhile to continue to revisit eighteenth-century political

philosophy. After all, critics such as C.B. Macpherson have argued that these problems might “lie as much in the roots of the liberal tradition as in any subsequent growth” (1962, 1). When we turn to the beginnings of liberalism, we find concerns mirroring our contemporary difficulties with individualism. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, political philosophers of all stripes portrayed commercial society as selfish. On the one hand, thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau decried large commercial republics for their individualistic competition. On the other hand, many defenders of commercial society, such as Thomas Hobbes and Bernard de Mandeville, agreed with the idea that denizens of these nations sought to fulfill only their own interests—but argued that this selfishness was actually a strength, as private vice led to the public good. Judging from much of political philosophy, then, one might assume that commercial society was characterized by extreme individualism. Whether this individualism is a problem was subject to debate, but it seemed clear that, for good or evil, it was inherent in commercial society.

### **Individualism in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Thought**

James Harrington was one of the leading civic humanists known to the Scots—though they usually referred to civic humanists as “projectors” because of their idealistic political projects. Though Harrington has been eclipsed in later years, his 1656 treatise *Oceana* was beloved by many eighteenth-century students of political theory, including the American Founders. It presented a fictionalized history of England and a fantastic, often humorous account of debates to frame a new government. The proceedings were led by a character named Lord Archon, who represented Harrington’s own views and

whose proposals ultimately carried the day. In fact, Lord Archon's proposals proved so persuasive and effective that he was lauded by his fellow citizens: "he shall sit higher in their hearts, and in the judgment of all good men, than the kings that go up stairs unto their seats" (1992, 254).

One orator in the book described equality as the dominant theme of Lord Archon's government: "the fundamental laws of Oceana, or the centre of the commonwealth, are the agrarian and the ballot: the agrarian by the balance of dominion preserving equality in the root, and the ballot by an equal rotation conveying it into the branch" (1992, 100). Through the ballot laws, the government was organized into three orders: "of the Senate debating and proposing, of the people resolving, and of the magistracy executing" (1992, 50). Citizens would meet in person to debate and choose their officials. Through the agrarian laws, men's estates would be restricted to no more than 2,000 pounds a year (1992, 101). Education, though not identified as a fundamental law, likewise perpetuated this equality through instilling the same values in all. Parents would be required to send their children to public schools operated by their local tribes; travel to other countries would be unlawful without a pass obtained through parliament, in order to prevent the propagation of exotic ideas (1992, 191). But "the main education of this commonwealth" was "the militia of Oceana," which was "but a repetition or copy of that original which in ancient prudence is, of all other, the fairest; as that from whence the commonwealth of Rome more especially derived the empire of the world" (1992, 206). And this Roman-style militia, in which rich and poor alike would be obliged to serve, would be the greatest school of virtue for the youth.

Throughout the work, Harrington approvingly cited Machiavelli's *Discourses* and adopted ancient republics such as Rome and Sparta as his models. His guiding philosophy was the republican ethos that the common good is tantamount to individual good: "that which, being good for all, could hurt nobody" (1992, 101). What is good for the city is good for the citizen. J.G.A. Pocock observes that Harrington's work displayed little concern with natural law or with Christian morality; rather, "he revert[ed] almost unequivocally to an earlier vocabulary," that of classical republicanism (1992, xiii). He was concerned not merely with equality before the law, but with "equality at the root," with the idea that citizens should share largely similar conditions and values—hence his proposals for a common education and for economic equality. He also saw political participation as the most fundamental right of man, rather than property or freedom of worship, both of which he thought could be seriously curtailed for the good of the whole. Liberty of conscience, for instance, was guaranteed in Oceana, but religion's influence was to be strictly confined: "the ministry . . . is neither to be allowed synods nor assemblies . . . [nor] suffered to meddle with affairs of state nor to be capable of any other public preferment whatsoever" (1992, 202).

Andrew Fletcher, a Scotsman writing a few decades later than Harrington, likewise took up the civic humanist vocabulary, but directed it towards the social problems of his day rather than towards the construction of an imaginary republic. Fletcher described government as "the noblest and most useful of all applications" (*A Discourse of Government with Relation to Militias* 1698, 1). Yet devotion to the public good had deteriorated in modern times—a development he attributed to "the restoration

of learning, the invention of printing, of the needle and of gunpowder” (*Militias* 1698, 2). In the fifteenth century, new knowledge flourished, and armed with increased knowledge, “the arts which the Italians first applied themselves to improve were principally those that had been subservient to the luxury of the ancients in their most corrupt ages . . . A prodigious expense was made in buildings, pictures, and statues” (*Militias* 1698, 2). Decadence soon spread throughout Europe, undermining feudalism as the barons squandered their estates on those buildings, pictures, and statues—and, in doing so, liberated the serfs (*Militias* 1698, 3). Though feudalism was of course beset by its own problems, the system that emerged from its demise was far worse. The rough simplicity and martial honor of the Middle Ages was lost, giving birth to modern nation-states weakened by commercial luxuries and propped up by standing armies.

Fletcher argued in favor of a citizens’ militia to replace those standing armies. Lamenting the fact that the ancients had left few details about their militia training, he created his own plan for compulsory military service. Under his plan, all men would be required to enter the militia at the age of twenty-two; those who could support themselves financially would serve for two years at their own expense, whereas the poor would serve one year while supported by the public (*Militias* 1698, 9). The militia camp would be mobile, never remaining in one place more than eight days, and no one but military men could enter. The soldiers would live on bread and water, grinding wheat with hand-mills to make the former. In addition to learning the military arts, the men would be forced to study history (primarily military history) and, on Sundays, would hear speeches and read books “as may be fit to exhort the rest to all Christian and moral duties, chiefly to

humility, modesty, charity, and the pardoning of private injuries” (*Militias* 1698, 10). They could not, however, attend church, as clergymen were not to be admitted to the camp.

Through these policies, Fletcher sought a revival of public virtue and freedom. Fletcher believed participation in a militia to be the highest form of freedom: “arms . . . are the only true badges of liberty” (*Militias* 1698, 9). Man attains the highest fulfillment of his nature through courageously serving his country. Moreover, the martial spirit is a teacher of personal virtue: “such a camp would be as great a school of virtue as of military discipline: in which the youth would learn to stand in need of few things; to be content with that small allowance which nature requires; to suffer, as well as to act; to be modest, as well as brave” (*Militias* 1698, 11). For Fletcher, Christian morality is useful only insofar as it serves the public, by teaching men to pardon their own private injuries while obeying and suffering for the state. Spartan asceticism and sacrifice for the public good, not spirituality or humanity or knowledge, should be the key values ordering society.

Fletcher also endorsed slavery as a means of solving commercial society’s problems. He adopted the slavery of ancient republics as his model: “the condition of slaves among the ancients will upon serious consideration appear to be only a better provision in their governments than any we have, that no man might want the necessities of life, nor any person able to work be burdensome to the commonwealth” (*Second Discourse Concerning the Affairs of Scotland* 1698, paragraph 8). Slavery would allow each individual and his family to be fed and clothed by a master, which Fletcher thought

would eliminate the “the inconveniences that befall the most part of poor people, when they are all abandoned to their own conduct” (*Second Discourse* 1698, paragraph 8). In addition to eliminating want, slavery would enhance civic virtue, for it was due to slavery that ancient cities were “able to perform those great and stupendous public works” (*Second Discourse* 1698, paragraph 11). Slavery therefore “explains to us by what means so much virtue and simplicity of manners could subsist in the cities of Greece,” for by means of slavery masters could provide public service while they themselves lived simply (*Second Discourse* 1698, paragraph 12).

In addition to slavery and a militia, Fletcher also proposed other policies: “all interest of money to be forbidden” and “no man to possess more land than he cultivates” (*Second Discourse* 1698). Adopting stricter usury laws would reduce the finances available for commercial enterprises, essentially cutting commerce off at the root. Requiring personal cultivation of one’s land would prohibit absentee landlordism and ensure that more of the nation’s efforts would be spent on agriculture. Fletcher admitted that “these proposals, by some men who aim at nothing but private interest, will be looked upon as visionary” (*Second Discourse* 1698). But since such men oppose anything calculated to serve the public good, their views need not be considered. According to John Robertson, Fletcher’s proposals added up to “a political community constituted on strict civic principles” of martial virtue, positive rather than negative liberty, and suspicion towards commercial activity and luxury (1985, 15).

To contemporary readers, Rousseau is the best-known critic of the nascent commercial economy. He famously wrote that commercial republics are systems in



which “each finds his profit in the misfortune of another” (*Second Discourse* 1987, 90). Rousseau believed that bourgeois societies engender ruthless individualism, as people seek riches and rank at the expense of others. The story of commercial society’s development is a narrative of paradise lost and innocence tarnished. Primitive man is solitary and self-sufficient: “all his needs are satisfied” and thus he is “a free being whose heart is at peace” (*Second Discourse* 1987, 40, 52). Even as men advance to the savage state and develop familial relationships—a state that Rousseau described as the “happiest” of all men’s stages—they maintain their original freedom: “as long as they applied themselves exclusively to tasks that a single individual could do and to the arts that did not require the cooperation of several hands, they lived as free, healthy, good and happy as they could in accordance with their nature” (*Second Discourse* 1987, 65). But, through the development of agriculture, commerce, and the division of labor, man gradually falls from grace. In civilization, man becomes “subject, by virtue of a multitude of fresh needs, to all of nature and particularly to his fellowmen, whose slave in a sense he becomes even in becoming their master” (*Second Discourse* 1987, 67). Civilization introduces him to artificial desires such as luxury and status by inviting him to compare himself invidiously with others. In order to obtain these false goods, which he pursues “less out of real need than in order to put himself above others,” he forfeits his early self-sufficiency and becomes dependent (*Second Discourse* 1987, 68). Becoming dependent also “makes him two-faced and crooked” as he must mask his jealousy and selfishness while simulating benevolence (*Second Discourse* 1987, 68). Dependence on

society thus paradoxically renders man more selfish, as it instills in him false needs and a competitive spirit.

According to Rousseau, liberal democracy offers no solution to this problem; a society predicated on classical republicanism, rather than individual rights, is the only solution. Citizens could not be left at liberty, but rather must be “forced to be free” (*Social Contract* 1987, 150). It is solely through submission to the community’s general will that personal dependence can be eliminated: “in giving himself to all, each person gives himself to no one” (*Social Contract* 1987, 148). This submission must be total, for Rousseau’s ideal is that “each citizen would be perfectly independent of all the others and excessively dependent upon the city” (*Social Contract* 1987, 172). Independence of one another, and complete devotion to the general will, can only be maintained if private business and luxuries are abolished: “the hustle and bustle of commerce and the arts, the avid interest in profits, softness and the love of amenities” soon lead the citizen to pay others to fulfill his patriotic duties, thus enslaving him once again to those others rather than to the city (*Social Contract* 1987, 197). Therefore, “the better a state is constituted, the more public business takes precedence over private business in the minds of the citizens. There even is far less private business, since, with the sum of common happiness providing a more considerable portion of each individual’s happiness, less remains for him to look for through private efforts” (*Social Contract* 1987, 198). How does the state discourage such private business? Rousseau suggested many methods, such as a civil religion to fortify the state with divine authority; a smaller state, in order to prevent “a multitude of men who are unknown to one another;” and censorship (*Social*

*Contract* 1987, 167). Overall, the goal must be social and political unity, for “whatever breaks up social unity is worthless. All institutions that place man in contradiction with himself are of no value” (*Social Contract* 1987, 223).

Many scholars have argued that Rousseau did not really desire an absolutist state. They draw attention to “points of resistance to a community’s demands” in Rousseau’s political thought, such as his sympathetic portrayal of outsiders in *Emile* and *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (Jonathan Marks 2005, 20). Others point out an apparent contradiction between the *Social Contract* and the primordial freedom he extolled in the *Second Discourse*, arguing that the *Social Contract* cannot be taken as a complete reflection of his thought. Yet the political theory of the *Social Contract* is actually quite compatible with that of Rousseau’s other works. As John Scott writes, “Rousseau's portrait of our original position as good beings in a good natural whole serves (especially in contrast to Hobbes and Locke) as a positive formal model to enable us to remake our corrupted existence through the legitimate state” (1992, 697). The *Second Discourse* portrays man in “harmony” with his surroundings, embedded in an unproblematic whole because he accepts his natural impulses and is therefore free of conflict (Scott 1992, 705). But through a long chain of events, man falls from his original condition and becomes ensnared in the evils of liberal commercial society. Therefore, “Rousseau intends to solve the problem of personal dependence by making the state an imitation of the divine or natural whole” (Scott 1992, 708). The powerful state frees man from dependence on other individuals and forges a new unity between man and his environment, a unity

similar to that which he enjoyed at the dawn of time. As Rousseau himself wrote, “give him over entirely to the state or leave him entirely to himself, but if you divide his heart you will tear it” (*Political Fragments* 41). For Rousseau, “our species does not admit of being formed halfway” (*Emile* 1979, 37). If man will not retreat from civil society and the market, giving himself wholly to the inner stirrings of his heart, then he will be divided between his own desires and his social *persona*. Since modern man is not willing to seek such solitude, the state must overcome this division by obliterating his individual desires.

Rousseau, a contemporary of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, found himself in the thick of their arguments—both intellectual and personal. He roomed with Hume, who initially considered him a great philosopher but who later had a very public falling-out with him—and who came to believe that Rousseau’s philosophical ideas were an outgrowth of his paranoid personality (David Edmonds and John Eidinow 2007).

Rousseau was quoted and highly praised by Smith in a letter to the *Edinburgh Review*. Millar called him “a late celebrated author, possessed of uncommon powers of eloquence” while Ferguson praised his “great force of imagination” (*Historical View of English Government* 2006, 746; *Essay on the History of Civil Society* 1995, 5).

Harrington, Fletcher, and Rousseau, who all fascinated the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, offered different critiques of commercial society but agreed on its inherent individualism and on the necessity of a total renovation of political institutions. But then, several political thinkers who were also well-known to the Scots argued in

favor of liberal commercial society: specifically, in favor of its individualism and even its perceived selfishness. Chief among these thinkers were Hobbes and Mandeville.

Hobbes' philosophy may have culminated in an all-encompassing Leviathan, but, as C.B. Macpherson argues, that philosophy rested on individualistic premises: "although his conclusion can scarcely be called liberal, his postulates were highly individualistic. Discarding traditional concepts of society, justice, and natural law, he deduced political rights and obligations from the interest and will of disassociated individuals" (1962, 1). Macpherson thus counts him as a proponent of "possessive individualism," in which the individual is considered to be the sole owner of his rights, his labor power, and his knowledge or skills (1962).<sup>2</sup> Hobbes' epistemology presumed that knowledge is gained through a man's own effort; nothing is given or revealed to him through natural law. Hobbes stated in the second paragraph of the *Leviathan* that "there is no conception in a mans mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of Sense" (1968, 85). He went on to argue that an object striking our sense organs creates a "Fancy," which is distinct from the object itself: "the object is one thing, the image or fancy is another" (1968, 86). We cannot know the objects in themselves, and so we remain cut off from any true knowledge of them, for "*True* and *False* are attributes of Speech, not of Things" (1968, 105). From this argument followed Hobbes' statement that "words of Good, Evill, and Contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule of

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<sup>2</sup> While Macpherson's interpretation has been contested by such scholars as Quentin Skinner (1978, 347) and D.J.C. Carmichael (1983), see also the more recent defenses mounted by Louise Marcil-Lacoste (1993) and Jules Townshend (2000).

Good and Evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves” (1968, 120).

Since good is essentially unknowable, since man has no natural *telos*, Hobbes replaced the concept of the “*Summum Bonum*” with a radically subjective account of man’s purpose, in which he uses his reason only to seek what he personally desires: “the Thoughts, are to the Desires, as Scouts, and Spies, to range abroad, and find the way to the things Desired” (1968, 160, 139).

Because people are motivated by idiosyncratic whims, they are naturally isolated from one another, seeking to serve only their own interests. Hobbes notoriously described the state of nature as “a condition of Warre of every one against every one” (1968, 189) in which every individual is plagued by “continuall feare, and danger of violent death” (1968, 186). People can be persuaded to form a social contract only through an understanding that it serves their selfish interests—that it will promote the self-preservation and commodious living of each individual. Because of the fear of death in the state of nature, self-interest dictates “that a man be willing, when others are so too, as farre-forth, as for Peace, and defence of himselfe he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself” (1968, 190). Man exchanges his power and rights for safety. Hobbes’ view of society as an exchange leads Macpherson to argue that “Hobbes was using a mental model of society which . . . corresponds only to a bourgeois market society” (1968, 38).

Thus, for Hobbes, government, society, and economy are possible only through enlightened selfishness. Selfishness is a positive good insofar as it reinforces obedience

in an advanced commercial society. Predictably, Hobbes' conclusions proved unpopular, and Scottish philosophers such as Hutcheson continually attacked, to the point of monotony, what Hume called Hobbes' "selfish system" (*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* 2006, 83).

Bernard de Mandeville, like Hobbes, loomed large as a major figure in the detested "selfish system." His notorious poem, *The Fable of the Bees*, was subtitled "Private Vices, Public Benefits"—and the actual text of the poem was even more provocative than its title. The poem was a commentary on the vices of commercial society as told through a parable about a beehive. Some bees "with vast Stocks, and little Pains / jump'd into business of great Gains" and some even ventured upon the "seas" for lucrative international trade (2003, 205, 216). While these bees accumulated capital and managed businesses, others were doomed to "hard laborious Trades" (2003, 205). Their society therefore exhibited the inequalities between capital and labor common to early commercial society. The hive also had an advanced government, in the form of a limited monarchy: "rul'd by . . . Kings, that could not wrong, because/ their Power was circumscrib'd by Laws" (2003, 204). *The Fable of the Bees* depicted the moral and political situation of a sophisticated commercial society.

Mandeville portrayed this society as beset with the same vices that would later be denounced by Rousseau. The bees cared more about "Fame and Wealth" and "Luxury and Ease" than about others, or about their own virtue (2003, 206, 204). Yet such vice was not openly admitted, for they wore "the Mask [of] Hypocrisy" (2003, 212), covering their ruthless pursuit of self interest "with formal Smile, and kind How d'ye" (2003, 206).

And, according to Mandeville, these vices were necessary to the society's flourishing economy and political freedom. Because "millions [were] endeavouring to supply/each other's Lust and Vanity," the laborers found employment and "the very Poor / liv'd better than the Rich before" (2003, 205, 210). Because the society pursued "empty Glory got by Wars," their army was great and their nation secure (2003, 214). Because the bees were dishonest and hypocritical, they were able to do business with each other—for Mandeville was skeptical as to whether "Honesty and Trade agree" (2003, 214). Because the Kings were "cheated by their own Ministry," their power was kept in check (2003, 207). Mandeville concluded that "thus every Part was full of Vice / yet the whole Mass a paradise" (2003, 209). "Fraud, Luxury, and Pride must live"—individual selfishness must be embraced for its material benefits.

A number of Mandeville's essays elaborated on the ideas represented in *The Fable of the Bees*. Like Hobbes, he was a moral relativist, believing that "things are only Good and Evil in reference to something else" (1988, 367). Nothing is absolutely good or evil, for "there is nothing so perfectly Good in Creatures that it cannot be hurtful to any one of the Society, nor any thing so entirely Evil, but it may prove beneficial to some part or other of Creation" (1988, 367). Mandeville thus defined good and evil in instrumental terms: good as pleasure or benefit, and evil as disadvantage. Since any action or quality can cause a mixture of both, there is no absolute good. Rather than seek an absolute and illusory good, we must simply try to minimize aggregate hurt and maximize aggregate pleasure. For instance, if society is best served overall by executing a few innocent men, then it should do so (1988, 273). Thus, as F.B. Kaye points out,



Mandeville was both a relativist and a utilitarian, and these positions were not necessarily contradictory: “to say that welfare, or pleasure, or happiness, should be the end of action does not mean the limiting of this welfare, pleasure, or happiness to one particular kind, but may allow the satisfaction of as many kinds as there are people” (1988, lix).

Commercial society is therefore desirable because it maximizes pleasure and individual welfare—the “public benefits” of the “Fable of the Bees.” But in enabling the pursuit of desire, it exposes man to new pleasures that he never would have known in his primitive state. It spurs him to satisfy more and more refined appetites: “while Man advances in Knowledge, and his Manners are polish’d, we must expect to see at the same time his Desires enlarg’d, his Appetites refin’d, and his Vices increas’d” (1988, 185). In order to satisfy their growing lust for power or pleasures, it is necessary for men to hide their self-centered motives from each other: “men are taught insensibly to be Hypocrites from their cradle, no body dares to own that he gets by Publick Calamities, or even by the Loss of Private Persons” (1988, 349). Such selfishness and hypocrisy are necessary for commercial society’s greatness, for “would you render a Society of Men strong and powerful, you must touch their passions” (1988, 184).

No other impulse is as strong as a man’s passion for himself. For Mandeville, pity is insufficient to counteract such a passion. He grudgingly admitted that pity is “the least mischievous of all our Passions,” but nonetheless described it as a “Frailty” that generally affects “the weakest Minds” (1988, 56). “Pity is often by our selves and in our own Cases mistaken for Charity,” while in reality it is no virtue (1988, 257). Pity is nothing but an automatic feeling that “comes in either at the Eye or Ear . . . and the nearer

and more violently the Object of Compassion strikes those senses, the greater Disturbance it causes in us” (1988, 254-255). It is therefore “a thing of Choice no more than Fear or Anger,” and it does not fulfill “the Definition of Virtue, that our Endeavours were to proceed from *a rational ambition of being Good*” (1988, 257, 260). While it is true that we can choose to cultivate pity through imagining another’s situation, this mental construction “is only an Imitation of Pity; the Heart feels little of it” (1988, 257). Pity is therefore not a virtue; it is only a passion, because it does not participate in rational choice. In fact, pity is often a source of “mischief,” as when parents cannot bear to discipline their children, or women yield to seduction (1988, 260).

Sociability, too, is inadequate for instilling virtue. Sociability is rooted not in our higher impulses such as benevolence; rather, “the Bad and Hateful Qualities of Man, his Imperfections and the want of Excellencies which other Creatures are endued with, are the first Causes that made Man sociable . . . . The Sociableness of Man arises only from these Two things, *viz.* The multiplicity of his Desires, and the continual Opposition he meets with in his Endeavours to gratify them” (1988, 344). Man seeks society only to satisfy his selfish desires. Consequently, the weakest, most frivolous men tend to be the most sociable, while the wisest and most self-sufficient tend to seek solitude: “the weakest Minds, who can least govern their Passions . . . will take up with any Company rather than be without; whereas the Men of Sense and of Knowledge . . . will prefer their Closet or a Garden, nay a Common or a Desert to the Society of some Men” (1988, 341).

Finally, Mandeville saw education as useless for uplifting men or restraining their passions. As a country advances and public spirit dissipates, the people “become

likewise so narrow-soul'd, that it is a pain for them even to think of things that are of uncommon extent" (1988, 320). Education merely facilitates this narrowness by endowing men with cleverness to further their own interests: "where deep Ignorance is entirely routed and expell'd, and low Learning promiscuously scatter'd on all the People, Self-Love turns Knowledge into Cunning" (1988, 320). A little learning will make the common people more manipulative and devious. For this reason, Mandeville opposed charity schools (1988, 298).

Throughout his writings, Mandeville maintained a high—some would say impossibly high—standard for virtue, which is what enabled him to dismiss pity, sociability, and education as potential aids to virtue. For instance, he defined luxury as anything "that is not immediately necessary to make Man subsist as he is a living Creature" (1988, 107). He also declared that "all Passions center in Self-Love," that our affections are only self-centered feelings and not a rational ambition of being good (1988, 75). Kaye argues that Mandeville did not really believe in such rigorous standards, that "his very adoption of rigorism is in a way a means of satisfying his dislike of it . . . By making his ethical standards so exaggeratedly rigorous, he renders them impossible of observance, and therefore can and does discard them" (1988, liv). Mandeville's exaggerated parody of virtue is a way of attacking the very concept by showing that our categories of virtue have no correspondence to any lived reality and are hence fictional. In this view, he comes closer to Hobbes' rejection of virtue as a nominalist construct, and the Scottish tendency to conflate both Hobbes and Mandeville into a single "selfish system" appears legitimate.

### **The Scottish Enlightenment**

Whose side did the Scots take in this debate over the proper relationship between the individual and the newly emerging commercial society? There is little room for such a question in the formerly dominant (though still powerful) interpretation of the Scottish Enlightenment, which portrays it as a morally neutral forerunner to the contemporary social sciences. In this view, the Scots sought to describe and understand how people make moral judgments—not make any pronouncements as to what those judgments should be. They only documented the facts, and did not seek to derive any values from them—or, in Hume’s own (misinterpreted) words, did not seek to derive an “ought” from an “is.” The Scots were fledgling social scientists, psychologists, historians, sociologists, and economists, but not moral philosophers. Ronald Meek, for instance, writes that the Scottish school aimed “to seek for reasons and causes, with the aid of the new scientific methodology” (1971, 9). Gladys Bryson likewise states that the Scots’ main concern was “to establish an empirical basis for the study of man and society” (1945, 1). Part and parcel of this view is the reduction of virtue to a merely psychological phenomenon; as Knut Haakonsen puts it, the Scots believed “moral judgments were empirical occurrences to be understood like all other parts of nature” (2003, 208). Because of their supposed interest in applying the Baconian scientific method to the study of man and society, the Scots are often identified as early progenitors of the sociological approach. Both Millar and Ferguson have been described as fathers of contemporary sociology (William Lehmann 1960). Many adherents of this interpretation go one step further, declaring that

the Scots pioneered the doctrine of determinism—that is, that culture, the “superstructure,” is entirely determined by a society’s material “base.” Thus Alan Swingewood writes that “the Scottish theorists accepted the materialist argument that man was simply the product of his environment” (1970, 170). Meek describes the Scots’ stadial theory as “a, if not the, materialist conception of history” (1971, 10). Mark Blaug, apropos of Adam Smith’s intellectual background, specifically names Marx as an inheritor of the Scots’ theory of history: “Scottish writers of the time, such as Adam Ferguson, John Millar, William Robertson and even David Hume” were “forerunners of the Marxist theory of historical materialism” (1997, 59).

However, in recent decades, there has been a trend towards taking seriously the Scots’ claim to be moral philosophers. But many of these studies, such as that of Ryan Hanley (2009), analyze the Scots’ contributions to moral philosophy largely in isolation from their contributions to political and social thought. For some scholars, this isolation is deliberate: they maintain that the Scots saw self-interest and virtue as entirely unrelated passions. Harvey Mansfield thinks that, in the Scottish philosophy, interest “replaces virtue as an end . . . at the cost of obscuring one’s interest in being virtuous” (1995, 58). He chides the Scots for maintaining a complete separation of interest and virtue and thus for failing to understand that virtue is itself a part of interest (“self-interest rightly understood”). Other scholars such as Vivienne Brown (1994) argue that the Scots believed the economic realm to be governed by lower-order virtues such as justice and prudence. These studies therefore make little attempt to answer the question of how the Scots thought virtue could prevail over individualism in commercial society—other than

through the Scots' own efforts to exhort citizens to virtue in books like *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.

Other scholars have sought to explain the relationship between virtue and the social problem of individualism in the Scottish philosophy—and have concluded that the Scots are essentially Mandevillean. They argue that the Scots applauded individualism because of its positive (though unwitting) contributions to society's material welfare, particularly to its wealth or to political liberty. J.G.A. Pocock, for instance, implies that the Scots endorsed the individualism of emerging commercial society. He writes that, according to the Scottish philosophers, commercial man “was more than compensated for his loss of antique virtue by an indefinite and perhaps infinite enrichment of his personality” (1985, 49). The Scots spoke not of virtues or morals but of manners: “the capacities [developed by commercial society] . . . were not called ‘virtues’ but ‘manners’” (1985, 49). They advocated “politeness” rather than virtue (1985, 248). They believed that such self-involvement serves the cause of liberty, for personal liberty can only flourish alongside trade: “true freedom was modern and could only be found in commercial society, where the individual might profit by wealth . . . and did not risk his liberty in paying others to defend and govern him, so long as he retained parliamentary control of the purse strings” (1985, 231). Thus Pocock argues that the major figures of the Scottish Enlightenment opposed the traditional discourse of virtue in favor of individual development, wealth, and polished manners.

Similarly, Kaye thinks that the Scottish Enlightenment accepted Mandeville's radical revision of virtue. According to Kaye, the Scots “agreed with his [Mandeville's]

analyses,” and they decided that “if it be vice which produces all the good in the world, then there is something the matter with our terminology; such vice is not vice but good” (1988, cxxx). If the prosperity and liberty of commercial society are due to selfishness, deception, and hypocrisy, then these traits could not be vices. For Kaye, then, the Scots accepted as virtue whatever served the material good of society. They promulgated “a utilitarian scheme of ethics” (1988, cxxx). Their utilitarianism owed a direct debt to Mandeville: “that it was Mandeville who furnished much of the specific stimulus towards the utilitarian solution of the paradox is demonstrated by the fact that in the case of at least two of the earlier utilitarian leaders—Francis Hutcheson and John Brown—their first statements of the utilitarian theory are found in those books of theirs that deal with Mandeville” (1988, cxxxi). Kaye also believes that “Hume, too, may have owed to Mandeville some impulse towards utilitarianism” (1988, cxxxi). Kaye argues that Smith’s writing echoed Mandeville on many occasions—for instance, in his discussion of the laborer’s coat in *Wealth of Nations*—and thus that he was “influenced by Mandeville in conceiving his exposition of *laissez-faire*” (1988, cxli).<sup>3</sup>

However, other scholars take a slightly different view. In their interpretation, the Scots sanctioned the unbridled pursuit of self-interest—not in order to perform any positive good to society, but to serve as a negative check upon potentially disruptive passions. Perhaps the most influential proponent of this interpretation is Albert O. Hirschman (1977), who argues that during the Enlightenment “interest-motivated behavior and money-making were considered to be superior to ordinary passion-oriented

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald Hamowy (1987), Marvin Becker (1994), and Jack Russell Weinstein (2009) also argue for a pronounced influence of Mandeville on the Scots.

behavior” (1977, 58). The Scottish Enlightenment philosophers warned of the threats posed by passions such as lust, honor, superstition, and anger; but self-interest they saw as socially innocent precisely because it is self-regarding and not other-regarding: a man engrossed by money-making is concerned with his accounting-books, not with torturing heretics or challenging his associates to duels. Hirschman exempts Smith from this general line of reasoning, but thinks he went even further than his colleagues in elevating self-interest: “noneconomic drives . . . are all made to feed into the economic ones and do nothing but reinforce them, being thus deprived of their erstwhile independent existence” (1977, 109). In this view, the Scots promoted individualism as a form of social control. Other scholars have likewise stressed the importance of self-interest over passion in the Scottish philosophy. Jane Mansbridge, for instance, adopts a quote from Bentham in order to illustrate what she sees as the Scottish attitude: “For diet, nothing but self-regarding affection will serve: but for a dessert, benevolence is a very valuable addition” (1990, 135).

In contrast to these views, I will argue that the Scots tried to bring self-interest and self-love into the moral domain by documenting the ways in which they were, in commercial society, pursued in the context of social cooperation. This context has the potential to activate the sympathetic and benevolent tendencies that are inherent—though often regrettably dormant—in man’s nature. The Scots did not teach that self-interest is always inoffensive and innocent, nor that it always results in the public good, for they did launch devastating critiques of its dangers. However, they hoped that commercial society might bring about conditions in which both self-interest and self-love can point beyond



themselves by driving man into relationships that take him beyond the self. They disagreed with both the selfish system and the projectors insofar as they believed that commercial society need not be inevitably individualistic—though it often can be. They also suggested reforms such as a citizens' militia and public education in order to further strengthen the potentially socializing power of commercial society and to mitigate its negative effects.

Five thinkers—Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and John Millar—are particularly relevant in any study of these themes. Smith, of course, issued what many see as the manifesto of the commercial philosophy, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. But he did not do so in isolation. His teacher Hutcheson remained a great influence in his mature thought, and, in turn, Smith became professor to Millar, who further developed and even criticized his ideas. Hume, meanwhile, was excluded from the professoriate because of his allegedly scandalous views, yet maintained a close friendship with Smith, who visited with him on his deathbed and eulogized him to the press. As W.L. Taylor (1965) has argued, Hume was probably the largest influence on Smith, except perhaps for Hutcheson. Ferguson stands somewhat outside this academic line of succession, but he corresponded with his Scottish colleagues, maintained membership in some of the same societies such as the Poker Club, and, like Hutcheson and Smith, he held the coveted chair of moral philosophy. Thus, if we accept Smith as perhaps the most recognized authority on this subject, the other four demand consideration as well, both because of their original contributions and because of their unique intellectual relationships with Smith.

In addition to the great intellectual prowess these thinkers brought to bear on the problem, they were also situated in historical and geographical circumstances that allowed them a unique window into the rise of commercial society. Scotland experienced many economic and political changes after it joined with England through the Act of Union in 1707. Formerly a “backwater” and a “Third World country,” it now became part of a powerful and advanced nation, “Europe’s new superpower” (Marvin Becker 1994, xv; Arthur Herman 2001, 31, 54). Due to the removal of trade restrictions with England, many of its industries began to flourish, improving standards of living across the board (Norbert Waszek 1988, 181). Around the same time, the universities expanded and modernized, establishing department specializations—and, thanks to Scotland’s high levels of literacy even among the poor, they found many willing pupils (Waszek 1988, 315). However, these developments came with certain costs—England prohibited Scotland from raising militias and, in the wake of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, imposed restrictions on the Scottish lords and even on traditional Scottish dress (Lisa Hill 2006, 218). The Scots would have had an accurate point of comparison for commercial society, and thus a keen understanding of both its advantages and disadvantages.

Certain concepts must be kept in mind while examining these authors. For instance, their historical writings were guided by the framework of stadial theory. Stadial theory, or four stages theory, was first advanced in rudimentary form by the French thinker Baron Turgot (Meek 1971). Unaware of Turgot’s work, Smith and Lord Kames independently developed a more complete version of the theory. Four stages theory interprets history as progressing through a series of four chronological stages: the hunter-

gatherer age, the shepherds' age, the agricultural age, and the commercial age. Under this theory, the commercial age is distinguished by the division of labor and economic exchange. Smith, for instance, wrote that in a commercial society, every man becomes a merchant because increased specialization requires him to exchange for his other needs:

When the division of labour has been once thoroughly established, it is but a very small part of a man's wants which the produce of his own labour can supply. He supplies the far greater part of them by exchanging that surplus part of the produce of his own labour, which is over and above his own consumption, for such parts of the produce of other men's labour as he has occasion for. Every man thus lives by exchanging, or becomes in some measure a merchant, and the society itself grows to be what is properly a commercial society. (*Wealth* 1976, 37)

Smith implied that the division of labor contributes to technological development and hence to "civilization," for he referred to "civilized and commercial society" (*Wealth* 1976, 784). Hume, meanwhile, associated the rise of commercial society with moderate and limited government, for, as he wrote in his essay "Of Civil Liberty," "commerce . . . is apt to decay in absolute governments" (*Essays* 1985, 93).

Another concept—which has already been alluded to—is that of the "selfish system" (in Hume's words), the "splenetic system" (in Hutcheson's), "splenetic philosophers" (in Smith's), the "selfish philosophy" (in Ferguson's), or "selfish maxims" (in Millar's). The term refers to the philosophical system that posits optimization of self-interest and self-love as the basis of all civilization. In this view, regard for one's family members is self-interested, since they are but an extension of oneself; forming a social contract to obey the laws of justice is self-interested, since doing so protects one's own rights; engaging in charitable activity is self-interested, since it allows the giver to congratulate and feel good about himself. Commercial society is the form of social

organization that best unleashes self-interest to perform its useful functions. The Scots identified Hobbes and Mandeville as the two masterminds of the selfish system, but the Scots also sometimes associated it with John Locke—and, of course, they deplored its countless, lesser-known proponents.<sup>4</sup> As E.P. Thompson has pointed out, “Mandeville is only unusual in pressing to the point of satire the argument that private vices were public benefits. In more softened form the same argument . . . was part of the economic cant of the time” (1991, 55).

Throughout this study, I will use terms such as “selfishness,” “self love,” “self-interest,” and “individualism,” so a definition of what I mean by these terms is in order, as they are distinct concepts. Self-interest as the Scots understood it simply denotes concern with one’s own material well-being, whether physical or financial. Self-love has an affective component: it implies an affectionate attachment to the self. These two terms do not correspond to Rousseau’s distinction between *amour de soi* and *amour propre*. Self-interest is a more expansive term than *amour de soi*, which refers only to basic self-preservation, while self-love is a less expansive term than *amour propre*—for, as Hume pointed out, “the French express . . . self-love as well as vanity by the same term . . . AMOUR PROPRE” (*Enquiry* 2006, 95). As we shall see, the Scots thought vanity to be an excessive or misplaced form of self-love, and hence self-love is a narrower concept than *amour propre*. Selfishness—again, as the Scots understood the term—means to be engrossed either with self-interest or self love, to the point of neglecting duties such as benevolence and charity. Individualism I take to mean approval of such selfishness.

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<sup>4</sup> Other selfish system proponents often mentioned by the Scots included the Duc de la Rochefoucauld, Claude Adrien Helvetius, and Baron Holbach.

Individualist doctrines hold that the individual does not really have any positive duties—that the individual owes nothing to society for his rights, and hence can demonstrate as much concern with self-interest and self love as he wishes.

Bearing these concepts in mind, we will soon see how the Scots provided a distinctive answer to the problem of individualism—not a “utilitarian solution to the paradox,” as Kaye contends, but one that drew upon the virtuous potential of commercial society.

CHAPTER ONE  
SENSE AND SENSIBILITY: FRANCIS HUTCHESON AND THE MORAL SENSE  
OF COMMERCIAL SOCIETY

Adam Smith described his favorite professor as “the never to be forgotten Dr. Hutcheson” (W.L. Taylor 1965, 17), but aspects of Francis Hutcheson’s philosophy have in fact been largely forgotten. Much has been written about his aesthetic theory<sup>1</sup> or moral theory,<sup>2</sup> but less has been written pertaining to his political or economic thought—and what has been produced on that subject is conflicting or incomplete.<sup>3</sup> Istvan Hont argues that his work “followed the conventional lines of civic humanist analysis” (1983, 307) and Terry Eagleton likewise describes him as “a civic humanist of a traditional stamp”(2009, 29), but Murray Rothbard talks of his “devotion to *laissez-faire*” (1995, 423) and Eamonn Butler calls him a “libertarian” (2007, 32). There is no clear consensus on his attitude towards commercial society.

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<sup>1</sup> For analyses of Hutcheson’s aesthetic theory, see Clarence Thorpe (1935), Owen Aldridge (1951), Carolyn Korsmeyer (1975; 1979), Dabney Townsend (1993), Strasser (1994), Elizabeth Telfer (1995), Patricia Matthews (1998), P.J.E. Kail (2000), Peter Kivy (2003), and Alexander Broadie (2009).

<sup>2</sup> For scholarly works exclusively on Hutcheson’s moral philosophy—which do not address his political philosophy—see Aldridge (1946), D.D. Raphael (1947), Elmer Sprague (1954), William Frankena (1955), William Blackstone (1965), David Norton (1974; 1985), Kenneth Winkler (1985), Strasser (1990), Jeffrey Barnouw (1992), John Bishop (1996), Stephen Darwall (1997), Jeffrey Edwards (2006), Simon Grote (2006), James Harris (2008), Joseph Filonowicz (2008), Michael Gill (2006; 2009), Dale Dorsey (2010), and Christian Maurer (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Particular aspects of his political theory have come under consideration—for instance, Caroline Robbins (1954) writes of his concept of resistance; Norbert Waszek (1988) considers separation of powers and the social contract; and Knut Haakonssen (2003) situates him in the natural law tradition and evaluates his debt to Samuel von Pufendorf.

The reason for this lacuna may lie in the sources usually considered by Hutcheson scholars. Many studies treat only Hutcheson's early works, the *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), the *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* (1728), and *Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (1728), dismissing his later works such as *System of Moral Philosophy* (1755) and *Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (1745) as less interesting or influential.<sup>4</sup> For instance, D.D. Raphael writes that "the theory of the *System* has less originality and less bite" (1947, 263). Henning Jensen concurs that "since [the *Inquiry*, the *Essay*, and the *Illustrations*] are the works which had most historical influence, it seems reasonable that they should be emphasized in any study of Hutcheson" (1971, 106). It is true that the two later books—the *System* and the *Introduction*, published posthumously—were less well-known at the time. However, these books reflect the material taught in Hutcheson's courses, which influenced many subsequent Scottish thinkers, particularly his student Smith (Taylor 1965, 18). Luigi Turco also notes that the *System* circulated among Hutcheson's friends as early as 1737 (2007, x). Most importantly, however, his later works contain the fullest explication of his social and political thought, and it is therefore here that we can see how he thought the conditions of commercial society could promote the practice of the moral sense.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the neglected area of Hutcheson's political and economic philosophy. Specifically, he believed the moral and sympathetic senses are improved through repeated practice, and that the social cooperation required by markets

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<sup>4</sup> Raphael (1947), Jensen (1971), Filonowicz (2008), and Gill (2009), among others, all concentrate on Hutcheson's early work.

and the division of labor provide opportunities for such practice. Moreover, the close association between the moral and aesthetic senses means that they can be mutually reinforcing, and hence the development of arts in commercial society can create a mentally uplifting effect that promotes greater reflection and greater appreciation of fitting or beautiful actions. In making this argument, I will draw on all of Hutcheson's writings and seek common areas of agreement among them, rather than divide his work into distinct and mutually incompatible periods as some scholars have done.<sup>5</sup>

### **Hutcheson's Critique of Commercial Society**

Hutcheson acknowledged and even agreed with some of the civic humanist critiques of commercial society, as he, too, deplored its luxuries and its economic stratification. For Hutcheson, excessive devotion to one's own self or pleasures precipitates withdrawal from public duties and the potential downfall of society. Hutcheson attributed the decline of nations to the following causes: "the selfish, ambitious, or meaner passions of the governors, and their subjects, jarring with each other and among themselves . . . the opposition of those seeming interests which such passions pursue . . . the weakness and inconstancy of human virtues . . . [and] the proneness of men to luxury and present pleasures" (*System II* 1969, 377-378).

Hutcheson believed that extreme economic inequality is incompatible with a free and virtuous state. He warned against the "immoderate increase of wealth in the hands of a few" (*System II* 1969, 248). Such inequality could undermine self-governance by

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<sup>5</sup> William Scott has identified four distinct stages of Hutcheson's thought: hedonism, benevolence, utilitarianism, and Stoicism.



“support[ing] a force superior to the whole body” (*System II* 1969, 248). Adopting a Harringtonian analysis, Hutcheson wrote that “the power wheresoever lodged will never remain stable unless it has large property for its foundation; without this it must be fluctuating, and exposed to frequent seditions. Wealth carries force along with it, which will overturn rights not supported by wealth” (*Introduction* 2007, 248). In a democracy or a government with a democratic branch, “lands must be dispersed among great multitudes, and preserved thus dispersed by agrarian laws . . . or some other cause must keep property diffused” (*Introduction* 2007, 248). Concentration of wealth is a political problem, because it allows a minority of the rich to amass power and use this power against the propertyless majority. Political equality cannot coexist with severe economic inequality.

Hutcheson also feared that luxury could be detrimental to the individual and, by extension, to society. He condemned those who indulge in “a nasty solitary Luxury” (*Essay* 2002, 45). Selfish preoccupation with pleasure undermines nations because it erodes public-spiritedness: where “luxury, voluptuous debauchery, and other private vices” exist, they “would destroy all publick virtues, and all faithful regard to the general good” (*System II* 1969, 265). Luxury causes men to redefine virtue as it suits their self-interest: “in ages of luxury and corruption, men can so far forget the true natures and names of things, as not to look upon all such [criminal] gains as scandalously infamous to men of better condition” (*System II* 1969, 76). Hutcheson described how luxury warps the individual soul and disposes it towards crime:

luxury, in this notion of it, as it lavishes out mens fortunes, and yet increases their keen desires, making them needy and craving; it must occasion the strongest

temptations to desert their duty to their country and friends, whenever it is inconsistent with pleasure; it must lead the citizens to betray their country, either to a tyrant at home, or a foreign enemy, when they cannot otherwise get funds for their luxury. (*Introduction* 2007, 268-269)

Luxury causes men to become enamored with pleasure; they can no longer sacrifice their own interests to their duties. These problems are not offset by any advantages, for “he who saves by abating of his own excessive splendour could by generous offices to his friends, and by some wise methods of charity to the poor, enable others to live much better, and make greater consumption than was made formerly by the luxury of one” (*System II* 1969, 320). Luxury is thus both a pernicious and a useless practice, endangering virtue without contributing anything of value to the economy.

Are inequality and luxury inevitable in a commercial nation? Hutcheson acknowledged in *Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees*, first published in 1726, that “these vices often attend wealth and power” (*Remarks* 1750, 56). In fact, “it is probable indeed we shall never see a wealthy state without vice” (*Remarks* 1750, 65). He also believed that they were common in his own nation, for he referred to “the present corruption of manners” (*Remarks* 1750, 56). The corrupted manners were legion: “how much injustice, depravation of manners, avarice, ambition, and luxury prevail among men” (*Introduction* 2007, 236). Hutcheson’s analysis of inequality and luxury therefore portrayed them as a pressing danger, both in his own society and in commercial societies in general.

### **Hutcheson’s Heavenly City**

Despite these misgivings about luxury and inequality, Hutcheson did not seek wholesale changes to commercial society and maintained a skeptical attitude towards social revolutions. He wrote that “violent changes are attended with many dangers and

some considerable evils. They must not be attempted, except when necessary to avoid or prevent some greater evils” (*System II* 1969, 270). Drastic changes carry their own set of ills, often outweighing those of the present system.

Perhaps Hutcheson’s caution resulted from his view of the inherent limitations of political life. He wrote that seeking for political perfection was folly: “we may not deceive ourselves with false hopes, imagining a more stable external happiness to be attainable by individuals or states than nature will allow” (*System II* 1969, 377).

Imperfection and decay are natural, for “states have within themselves the seeds of death and destruction” (*System II* 1969, 377). We must therefore seek perfection in God and not in man-made structures. Hutcheson ended the *System* with the statement that “as we see that all states and cities upon earth are unstable, tottering, and presently to fall into ruins, LET US LOOK FOR ONE THAT HATH A SOLID FOUNDATION, ETERNAL, IN THE HEAVENS; WHOSE BUILDER AND MAKER IS GOD” (*System II* 1969, 380). It is foolish to expect perfection in the political realm.

Ultimately, then, for the highest good we should turn not to political philosophy, but to moral philosophy. Hutcheson opened his *Introduction* with the statement that “as all other arts and sciences have in view some natural good to be obtained, as their proper end, Moral Philosophy, which is the art of regulating the whole of life, must have in view the noblest end . . . Moral Philosophy therefore must be one of these commanding arts which directs how far other arts are to be pursued” (2007, 23). While Turco claims that this statement echoes the opening of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (2007, 23), there is in fact an important difference. For Aristotle, politics aims at the highest good and is

therefore the architectonic art; for Hutcheson, moral philosophy displaces politics from this position. He believed that moral philosophy and the study of human nature help us to learn the duties enjoined upon us by God: “we must . . . search accurately into the constitution of our nature, to see what sort of creatures we are . . . what character God our Creator requires us to maintain” (*Introduction* 2007, 24). It is through the fulfillment of these moral and religious duties—not through life in a *polis*—that we attain our end as human beings.

Hutcheson never sought alternatives to the present system, as he believed that imperfections in social organizations must be tolerated as far as possible. The ills he saw would have to be solved within, not outside of, commercial society.

### **Development of the Moral Sense in Commercial Society**

Hutcheson’s acceptance of the present stage was not simply a matter of prudence. He believed not only that the vices he discussed could be largely prevented, but also that commercial society offers opportunities for the flourishing of virtue. In order to understand how, we must first review Hutcheson’s moral philosophy—which takes pride of place in his system—before discussing how this philosophy shaped his political and economic attitudes.

#### Hutcheson’s Moral Philosophy

Scholars generally assume Hutcheson to be a utilitarian, due to his emphasis on “the greatest good for the greatest number” and “the greater good.”<sup>6</sup> Additionally, many

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<sup>6</sup> Scott describes Hutcheson’s mature thought as “simply Utilitarianism,” emphasizing its influence on Bentham and Mill (1900, 272). Gobetti groups him with the “classical utilitarians,” although she stipulates that he differed from them by embracing a theory of rights (1992, 137). Robbins credits him with “phras[ing] the famous utilitarian statement ‘that that Action is best, which procures the great Happiness

scholars see his particular brand of utilitarianism as hedonistic—in other words, concerned with maximizing pleasure rather than with maximizing some other outcome deemed good. According to William Blackstone, Hutcheson is “a hedonistic utilitarian” (1965, 37). Jensen credits him with pioneering “the hedonic calculus” (1971, 2). Dale Dorsey describes him as a “quantitative hedonist,” meaning that he only cared about the intensity of the pleasure and not its quality or dignity: “he does not treat the excellence, quality, or ‘dignity’ of certain pleasures as a feature in the axiological evaluation of particular pleasures” (2010, 466).

Some have tried to modify this account of Hutcheson’s thought. Jeffrey Edwards believes that Hutcheson’s “consequentialist factorial account of the overall good” was mitigated by “deontological features” (2006, 31). But the view of Hutcheson’s philosophy as “simply Utilitarianism” is deeply entrenched in the literature, and is only rarely challenged. This is unfortunate, as Hutcheson’s moral philosophy was more complex than this characterization allows. Much of his utilitarian reputation stems from his earliest book, the *Inquiry*, in which he reduced morality to a series of equations such as “ $M = B \times A$ ,” meaning “the moral Importance of any Agent, or the Quantity of publick Good produc’d by him, is a compound ratio of his Benevolence and Abilitys” (2008, 128). But he never repeated this attempt. He continued to praise the virtues for their ability to bring pleasure both to self and others, but also stipulated that they were valuable

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for the great Numbers” and describes his moral philosophy as “determined by the criterion of utility” (1954, 217, 243). Rothbard laments that “Hutcheson’s devotion to natural rights was weakened still further by his being the first to adumbrate the chimerical and disastrous formula of utilitarianism” (1995, 423). Campbell describes Hutcheson as “the founder of utilitarianism” while Taylor admits that Hutcheson “did a lot to prepare the ground for this school” (1982, 170; 1989, 264). Alessandro Roncaglia says that Hutcheson “contributed to the utilitarian approach” (2005, 111).

as ends in themselves. As we shall see, he developed a moral philosophy that adhered more closely to virtue ethics than to utilitarianism, because of his emphasis on the agent's qualities rather than the actions themselves. His virtue ethics are also bound up with a teleological philosophy in which virtue constitutes man's highest good.

Hutcheson is famous for his development of the concept of a "moral sense," which he adapted from Shaftesbury. Hutcheson offered various definitions of the moral sense throughout his career. In the *Inquiry*, the first of his works to address the moral sense, he defined it as "a superior Sense, which I call a Moral one, [by which] we perceive Pleasure in the Contemplation of such Actions in others, and are determin'd to love the Agent, (and much more do we perceive Pleasure in being conscious of having done such Actions our selves)" (2008, 88). In the *Essay*, he referred to it as that "by which we perceive Virtue, or Vice, in our selves, or others" (2002, 17). These perceptions bring us pleasure: "who has ever felt the Pleasure . . . of *compassionate Relief and Succour* to the distressed; of having *served a Community*, and render'd Multitudes happy; of a strict *Integrity*, and *thorow Honesty*?" (2002, 94). In the *Introduction*, he described the internal senses as "those powers or determinations of the mind, by which it perceives or is conscious of all within itself, its actions, passions, judgments, wills, desires, joys, sorrows, purposes of action. This power some celebrated writers call consciousness or reflection" (*Introduction* 2007, 27). The moral sense he defined as "that *Conscience* by which we discern what is graceful, becoming, beautiful, and honourable in the affections of the soul . . . . By this sense, a certain turn of mind or temper, a certain course of action, and plan of life is plainly recommended to us by nature; and the mind

finds the most joyful feelings in performing and reflecting upon such offices as this sense recommends” (*Introduction* 2007, 35). All of these definitions thus portray the moral sense as a faculty that experiences pleasure upon perceiving virtue.

Hutcheson always stipulated that the moral sense was but one among several internal senses; his most comprehensive list of the non-moral senses appears in the *System*. The first internal sense he discussed was the sense of beauty, or “the pleasures of the imagination” (*System I*, 1969, 19). Through this sense, humans have “natural powers or determinations to perceive pleasure” from the beautiful—specifically, from beautiful sights or forms, from clever imitation, from harmonious music, from ingenious designs, and from novelty or grandeur (*System I*, 1969, 15-19). We receive these sights or sounds from the external senses, but the internal sense of beauty is what registers these impressions as aesthetically pleasing. The second internal sense is the sympathetic sense, by which “our hearts naturally have a fellow-feeling with” others (*System I*, 1969, 19). Earlier, in the *Essay*, he had termed it the “publick sense” (2002, 17). Through sympathy, “all our affections and passions . . . seem naturally contagious”: we feel sad at others’ suffering and happy at their joy; we laugh when others laugh, admire what they admire, are inspired by others’ religious devotion (*System I*, 1969, 20-21). The next internal sense is a “constant propensity to action . . . and an implanted instinct towards knowledge” (*System I*, 1969, 21). This natural tendency towards action is observable even in infants or toddlers, who are in constant motion and reluctant to sleep. Hence “mankind can be happy only by action of some kind or another” (*System I*, 1969, 23). Next, there is an internal “sense of honour and shame,” which is a natural love of being

praised by others, and fear of condemnation. Finally, there is a sense of decency, which approves the higher uses of our powers—such as “manly exercises” or intellectual achievements—while regarding “the exercise of our lower powers . . . with indifference” (*System I*, 1969, 28-29). In other words, we think more highly of activities that are dignified—like the pursuits of science or business—than of basic activities like eating and drinking.

The moral sense may gain support from these other internal senses, or from reason, but it operates independently of other human powers. While praising the sympathetic or public sense, Hutcheson also specified that it differs from the moral sense: “this sympathy can never account for all kind affections, tho’ it is no doubt a natural principle and a beautiful part of our constitution” (*System I* 1969, 47). According to Hutcheson, “sympathy could never account for that immediate ardour of love and goodwill which breaks forth toward any character represented to us as eminent in moral excellence” (*System I* 1969, 48). Love of the virtuous requires some knowledge or sense of what virtue is—a knowledge that cannot be imparted by sympathy alone, which is but an automatic reaction to others’ feelings or circumstances. However, the sympathetic sense certainly can complement the moral sense, and particularly the virtue of benevolence, by directing our attention outward and interesting us in others’ happiness.

Similarly, the sense of honor is not identical to the moral sense: a prospect of honour may be a motive to the agent, at least to external actions, “but the tendency of an action to procure honour cannot make another approve it, who derives no honour from it. Our very desire of gaining honour, and the disposition in spectators to confer it, must



presuppose a moral sense in both” (*System I* 1969, 55). Without a moral sense, we cannot define certain actions, such as sacrificing oneself for one’s country, as honorable. The sense of honor motivates us to pursue honor and praise, but the moral sense determines the content of what is honorable and praiseworthy. Furthermore, the two senses are distinct because our love of virtue does not necessarily depend on the esteem of others—we can become virtuous even if others do not acknowledge us as such. The sense of honor therefore depends on the moral sense, and not the other way around. But although a desire for praise is not tantamount to a desire for virtue, the sense of honor is still “a strong incitement to every thing excellent and amiable” because “it gives a grateful reward to virtue” (*System I* 1969, 26). Thus Hutcheson described the honorable sense as “related” to the moral sense (*Logic, Metaphysics, and the Natural Sociability of Mankind* 2006, 120).

Hutcheson also believed that the moral sense operates prior to rational thought. He wrote that “reason can only direct to the means; or compare two ends previously constituted by some other immediate powers” (*System I*, 1969, 58). Hutcheson therefore saw reason as nothing more than instrumental rationality. But instrumental rationality can certainly aid the moral sense, for “Men have Reason given them, to judge of the Tendency of their Actions, that they may not stupidly follow the first Appearance of publick Good” (*Inquiry* 2008, 141). The moral sense does not convey “innate complex ideas of the several actions; or innate opinions of their consequences or effects upon society” (*System I* 1969, 97), and so reason must supply these deficiencies. The moral sense equips us with an affinity for doing good to others, while reason helps us to

ascertain the best method of doing so, to evaluate the consequences of different actions, and to compare different kinds of goods.<sup>7</sup> Michael Gill explains Hutcheson's rejection of rationalism as follows: "he dismissed the possibility that speculative reason could be the origin of morality, because morality is practical . . . . And then he explained why practical truths cannot be the origin either . . . . According to Hutcheson, practical reason is always merely instrumental. Practical reasoning can only inform us of the means to attain ends given to us by our desires . . . . About *ultimate* ends, reason is completely silent" (2006, 157-158). Because Hutcheson relegated reason to the role of instrumental rationality, he downgraded it from its ancient status as the standard of the good life. According to Charles Taylor, "for the ancients, it was enough to answer the question of why the proper form of life was my good by pointing out that it was the rational life" while, for Hutcheson, "the providential design of nature, as against the hierarchical order of reason, now takes the central place" (1989, 282-283). The good life is recommended to us neither by reason nor by revelation, but by our instinctual perceptions.

Having established what the moral sense is *not*, can we explain how it *does* work? Some scholars believe that Hutcheson's moral sense functions differently from the other internal senses. For instance, Caroline Robbins believes that "Hutcheson's idea of this infallible inner light or moral sense, reflecting an omnipresent natural reason" differed

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<sup>7</sup> In order to understand how reason can aid moral development, let us consider a parallel example from aesthetics. Renaissance artists used intellectual aids such as geometry or anatomy in order to perfect their artistic techniques. However, in doing so they followed inborn human preferences for perspective, symmetry, imitation of nature, etc. Reason therefore provided the means to help reach the artistic ends dictated by human intuitions.

from “his concept of a more passive reception of beauty” (1954, 243). However,

Hutcheson himself compared the moral sense’s operation to that of the aesthetic sense:

as, in approving a beautiful form, we refer the beauty to the object; we do not say that it is beautiful because we reap some little pleasure in viewing it, but we are pleased in viewing it because it is antecedently beautiful. Thus, when we admire the virtue of another, the whole excellence, or that quality which by nature we are determined to approve, is conceived to be in that other; we are pleased in the contemplation because the object is excellent, and the object is not judged to be therefore excellent because it gives us pleasure. (*System I*, 1969, 54)

Here Hutcheson rejected a hedonistic identification of virtue with pleasure. In aesthetic or moral contemplation, our judgments do not simply derive from the pleasure given by a certain object—if that were the case, then merely sensual pleasures could be judged as beautiful or even moral.

There is a third term in this operation. The pleasure perceived through the aesthetic sense derives from qualities in the object—the symmetry, the regularity, or some other quality that we perceive. Hutcheson argued that people “have perceptions of beauty in external objects”—that is, that the properties are inherent in the external object itself (*Remarks* 1750, 44). What are these qualities that cause us to perceive beauty? In the *Inquiry*, he argued that “what we call Beautiful in Objects, to speak in the Mathematical Style, seems to be a compound Ratio of Uniformity and Variety” (2004, 29). And in the *Essay* he wrote that through the internal senses, we receive “*Pleasant Perceptions* arising from *regular, harmonious, uniform* Objects” (2002, 17). These qualities are perceived automatically: “the *Regularity, Proportion, and Order* in external Forms, will as necessarily strike the Mind, as any Perceptions of the external senses” (*Essay* 2002, 74). We have an affinity for these particular attributes because they are

easier for our limited minds to process: “those Objects of Contemplation in which there is uniformity amidst Variety, are more distinctly and easily comprehended and retain’d, than irregular Objects . . . . [T]his prevents Distraction in their Understandings” (*Inquiry* 2008, 79). Hutcheson’s aesthetic theory, while it has been derided by some as “naïve realism” (Jensen 1971, 50), has been borne out by recent psychological studies showing that people across cultures exhibit aesthetic preferences for certain characteristics such as symmetry, balance, and simplicity. Researchers theorize that people do in fact prefer these characteristics because they are easier for our minds to encode and process.<sup>8</sup>

Hutcheson’s own words sometimes appear to contradict his belief in the objectivity of aesthetic judgments. For instance, he wrote in the *Inquiry* that “Beauty, like other Names of sensible Ideas, properly denotes the Perception of some Mind; so Cold, Hot, Sweet, Bitter, denote the Sensations in our Minds, to which perhaps there is no resemblance in the Objects” (2008, 27). In other words, just as certain physical qualities that our mind perceives—such as light—are not really inherent in the objects and instead are created by the eye’s perception of different wavelengths, so too is it possible that beautiful characteristics are apprehended through some trick of perception. However, Hutcheson also wrote that “the Ideas of Beauty and Harmony being excited upon our Perception of some primary Quality, and having relation to Figure and Time, may indeed have a nearer resemblance to Objects, than these Sensations” (*Inquiry* 2008, 27). Beauty,

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<sup>8</sup> Palmer, Gardner, and Wickens (2007), for example, found that people prefer artistic images that are balanced and centered. Rhodes, Proffitt, Grady, and Sumich’s (1998) showed that people across cultures overwhelmingly prefer symmetrical faces. Also see Nick Chater, who argues that empirical research shows that “simplicity is a guiding aesthetic principle . . . [because] simple patterns . . . are the most reliable” (1997, 495).

as it can be connected to identifiable, inherent characteristics such as uniformity, actually has a much better claim to universality than mere physical sensation.

This account of the aesthetic sense provides a clear parallel for the moral sense. Hutcheson argued that the pleasures offered by the moral sense are not arbitrary, but rather signal a perception of qualities that are objectively, universally virtuous—“when we admire the virtue of another, the whole excellence, or that quality which by nature we are determined to approve, is conceived to be in that other” (*System I* 1969, 54). In the *Inquiry*, he defined “Moral Goodness” as “our Idea of some Quality apprehended in Actions, which procures Approbation, and Love toward the Actor” (2008, 85). Like the aesthetic sense, the moral sense is at least partially passive: “we are not to imagine, that this moral Sense, more than the other Senses, supposes any innate Ideas, Knowledge, or practical Proposition: We mean by it only a Determination of our Minds to receive amiable or disagreeable Ideas of Actions, when they occur to our Observation” (*Inquiry* 2008, 100).<sup>9</sup> The moral sense processes the raw impressions and experiences received by the senses, and cannot provide moral ideas in the absence of such impressions. Thus, while there is a considerable debate in the secondary literature as to whether Hutcheson saw virtue as an objective principle, it is clear that he did believe the moral sense perceived qualities of the real world.<sup>10</sup> Like his aesthetic realism, his moral realism has been supported by empirical studies.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> While the aesthetic and moral senses are both passive, it is not clear that the other internal senses work in the same way. The sense of activity, as its name implies, appears to be an instinct that moves us, not just a disposition to receive and process certain impressions.

<sup>10</sup> See Blackstone (1965), Winkler (1985), Gill (2006), Filonowicz (2008), and who argue that Hutcheson did not believe in objective moral standards. For the moral realist perspective, see Norton (1974; 1985) and Haakonssen (1996, 65-66).

Hutcheson therefore did not intend to establish relativism by emphasizing the role of affective reaction in moral judgment, since he believed these reactions correspond to qualities of the real world. He admitted the existence of moral disagreements, but he attributed these differences to reason, not to failures of the moral sense:

But what foolish opinions have been received! What [sic] fantastick errors and dissimilitudes have been observed in the admired power of reasoning, allowed to be the characteristick of our species! Now almost all our diversities in moral sentiments, and opposite approbations, and condemnations, arise from opposite conclusions of reason about the effects of actions upon the publick, or the affections from which they flowed. (*System I* 1969, 93)

The moral sense leads all of us to desire the public good, and to approve of benevolent affections. But reason misleads us as to how to do so. One person may believe that the public good is furthered through “schemes of community,” and another through private property; but both are driven by the same desire to help others. It is because of confused ideas about how to promote the public good, or how to do God’s will, that monstrosities like human sacrifice have been accepted by some cultures (*System I* 1969, 96). The moral sense shrinks from such deeds, yet they have been committed because they were thought to benefit society.

Due to Hutcheson’s emphasis on societal good, most scholars believe him to be utilitarian. Throughout his work, he emphasized the human desire to benefit as many people as possible. In the *Essay*, he defined “UNIVERSAL Good” as “what tends to the Happiness of the whole *System of sensitive Beings*” (2002, 35). Hence the “*greatest or*

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, Hamlin, Wynn, and Bloom (2007) showed infants figures that exhibited “helping” behavior and figures that exhibited “hurting” behavior. The infants preferred the figures that exhibited “helping” behavior. In a study of adults, Nichols and Mallon (2005) found that people tend to agree in their solutions to the “trolley problem.”

*most perfect Good* is that whole Series, or Scheme of Events, which contains a greater Aggregate of Happiness in the whole, or more absolute universal Good, than any other possible Scheme, after subtracting all the Evils connected with each of them” (*Essay* 2002, 36). And, of course, there are the notorious equations in the *Inquiry* that sought to quantify the greatest good.

Although Hutcheson did want to serve the greater good, it is not clear that he should be classed as a utilitarian. One difficulty in interpreting him as utilitarian emerges in the *System*, in which he discussed whether it is permissible to violate common norms for the greater good. He believed that in most cases, doing evil, even for the sake of good, will have evil consequences: “there are innumerable cases in which if we only consider the immediate effect, it were better to recede from the common rule; and yet the allowing a liberty to recede from it in all like cases would occasion much more evil by its remote effects, than the particular evils in adhering to the ordinary rule” (*System II* 1969, 120). In some cases, it may appear that a greater good could be achieved through, say, theft or murder, but these actions could have far-reaching evil consequences by leading others to accept them as normal. However, Hutcheson did believe that people should sometimes engage in morally questionable actions for a greater good—for instance, an innocent man fleeing from a murderer may steal a horse, even though stealing is generally wrong (*System II* 1969, 123).

How do we tell those cases apart? How do we know when it is permissible to depart from the norm to achieve a greater good, and when it is not? First of all, we must take into consideration the norm which is to be violated, for “’tis plain here that some of

the ordinary rules are of much greater importance than others” (*System II* 1969, 122). According to Hutcheson, “some rules are made so sacred by the moral feelings of the heart . . . that scarce any cases can happen in which departing from them can occasion in the whole superior advantages to mankind; or, which is the same, some laws of nature admit no exceptions” (*System II* 1969, 123). In other words, the moral sense holds some principles so sacrosanct that we cannot contravene them at all. To do so would ultimately bring worse consequences, by coarsening the human heart and creating a slippery slope of exceptions to this norm.

Second, the character of the agent matters. Hutcheson thought that killing a tyrant, for example, is permissible, but like Cicero he stipulated that it must be done openly and honorably: “a manifest tyrant or usurper may be cut off by any private man: here killing is no murder. But may he accomplish this design by oaths of fidelity, by all professions of friendship, by the dark arts of poison amidst the unsuspecting pleasantries and friendship of an hospitable table? This must shock the greatest lovers of liberty” (*System II* 1969, 134). Certain methods are prohibited even when they do serve the greater good, because they corrupt the agent’s moral character. Character is essential in navigating such difficult situations, so sacrificing one’s character at the altar of utility would rescind one’s very right to act: “but when one departs from the ordinary law only in great and manifest exigencies, and is known to adhere religiously to the law in all ordinary cases, even contrary to some considerable interests of his own, men will have . . . full confidence and trust in his integrity” (*System II* 1969, 135). Hutcheson argued that “the more virtuous any man is, and the higher his sense is of all moral excellence, the less



apt he will be to abuse this plea” (*System II* 1969, 137). Only a virtuous man can understand which cases necessitate departures from the norm—and can avoid doing so indiscriminately, or to serve his own self-interest, or in a way that would precipitate corruption. This virtuous man must reflect carefully in order to apply his moral sensibility to the situation: “as he weighs all the advantages expected from such an unusual step, he must also weigh all the disadvantages probably to ensue even by the mistakes of others” who imitate him by violating the same moral law (*System II* 1969, 137).

What qualities must this virtuous man embody? “The cardinal virtue of justice” is essential because it promotes “the most universal happiness in our power,” by doing good offices and “abstaining from whatever may occasion any unnecessary misery in this system” (*System I* 1969, 222). The moral sense also approves a “habit of self-command,” which is “a power over these lower appetites . . . [that] frequently seduce men from the course of virtue” (*System I* 1969, 222). Hutcheson refers to self-command as “the virtue of *temperance*” (*System I* 1969, 223). Fortitude, or “a just estimation of the value of this life,” is approved because we must sometimes risk death in order to do what is right (*System I* 1969, 223). Finally, “prudence . . . is some way prerequisite to the proper exercise of the other three” (*System I* 1969, 223-224). Prudence is “a habit of attention” which helps us to understand the consequences of our actions and how they affect either the happiness of others or our own virtue (*System I* 1969, 223). Prudence is not “a sort of

crafty sagacity in worldly affairs, which assumes to it self the title of Prudence and Wisdom, but yet is very remote from it” (*Introduction* 2007, 71).<sup>12</sup>

It is through these virtuous qualities, particularly the virtue of prudence, that we can apply moral standards in ambiguous cases. Hutcheson referred approvingly to Aristotle in explaining his position:

But after all we can suggest on this head, unless something more precise and accurate be discovered, we must have recourse to the inward feelings of an honest heart. A sense, which Aristotle often tells us, must make the application of general principles to particular cases; and thus the truly good man, and his sentiments, must be the last resort in some of these intricate cases. (*System II* 1969, 140)

There is no equation, no pat slogan, that can help us decide when to violate certain principles. Judgment must be reserved to the virtuous man.

This discussion should show that Hutcheson’s philosophy defies categorization as “simply Utilitarianism.” He did not believe that maximizing utility is the only morally relevant concern, but rather believed in the sacredness of some laws and in the importance of individual character and intention. It is tempting simply to refine the category of “utilitarian” by referring to Hutcheson as a “rule utilitarian.” This is what Blackstone implies when he writes: “Hutcheson, although a hedonistic utilitarian, nonetheless takes into consideration when calculating the effects of an act the rules or maxims . . . For this reason his utilitarian theory is more adequate than those theories which do not consider the consequential value of formal rules” (1965, 37). This characterization is true up to a point: after all, Hutcheson did believe that following certain rules generally served the greater good, and that violating them could ultimately

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<sup>12</sup> See Taylor (1989, 261) for a discussion of how Hutcheson’s cardinal virtues differ from the ancients’.

do more harm than good in the long term. However, Hutcheson does not quite fit the category of rule utilitarian either. Unlike most rule utilitarians, he makes no idol of rules: he does believe that it is sometimes permissible to break rules, and he does not expound on them in any systematic way. Rather, he seeks to ensure the good through concentrating on the moral characters of agents, through the development of the moral sense.

Hutcheson, utilitarian equations to the contrary, therefore emerges more as a proponent of virtue ethics than as a classical Benthamite utilitarian. As Philippa Foot points out, it is not only the utilitarians who are concerned with “a good state of affairs” (1985, 204). In seeking the virtues, we often seek good outcomes: “benevolence is not the only virtue which has to do, at least in part, with ends” (1985, 207). The virtue of justice is concerned with giving others their due; the virtue of friendship is concerned with treating our friends and benefactors well. Therefore “virtues are in general beneficial characteristics, and indeed ones that a human being needs to have, for his own sake and that of his fellows” (1978, 3). Charles Griswold also draws attention to the overlap between different approaches: “deontological and utilitarian theories have roles for the virtues in their schemes—for example, the virtues may be understood as the habit of following the relevant rules or of maximizing intrinsic values” (1999, 188). But there is a difference in emphasis: “virtue theories typically give pride of place not to rules but to judgments by persons of a certain character. In virtue theories, doing one’s duty is understood to mean acting in accordance with the judgments of a virtuous person” (1999, 188). A virtue approach can therefore come to resemble utilitarianism because it does

seek a good end, but is fundamentally different in that it emphasizes neither *acts* nor *rules*, but intentions and character, in order to achieve this end.

It may be pointed out that utilitarian accounts of “the greater good” can certainly include virtue, either as a part of the good to be furthered or as a means to promote that good. John Stuart Mill famously argued that utilitarianism must be directed to fulfilling man’s higher capabilities, not just his animal pleasures: “better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (1974, 260). More recently, Julia Driver has argued that virtues can be conceptualized as utilitarian because “a virtue is a character trait that produces more good (in the actual world) than not *systematically*” (2001, 82). But Hutcheson differed from both of these attempts to subsume virtue ethics into a scheme of utility. For the utilitarians, virtue is purely instrumental, a means to the greater good. Mill wrote that “actions and dispositions are only virtuous because they promote another end than virtue” (1974, 289). Therefore, “there was no original desire of it [virtue], or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure” (1974, 291). An individual’s possession of the virtues may be useful if they bring pleasure to him, or dispose him to act in socially beneficial ways; but society could safely disregard the virtues if it could construct other institutions that would serve the same purpose, for “he who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty, or the hope of being paid for his trouble” (1974, 270).

Hutcheson took a different view of the origin and purpose of virtue, arguing that it is an innate tendency of human nature—and that this tendency points towards the ultimate good for the individual. His views on the moral sense’s origin are worth

considering in some depth, as they are often misunderstood. Joseph Filonowicz, for instance, considers Hutcheson's moral sense to be a "black box": that is, we do not know why it exists or exactly how it develops and works (2008, 222). It is true that in his first major work, the *Inquiry*, Hutcheson referred to the moral sense as "an occult Quality" (2008, 180). However, the next sentence reads "but is it any way more mysterious that the Idea of an Action should raise Esteem, or Contempt, than that the motion, or tearing of Flesh should give Pleasure, or Pain, or the Act of Volition should move Flesh and Bones?" (*Inquiry* 2008, 180). When viewed in too abstract a light, any aspect of human nature may appear mysterious or arbitrary. For centuries philosophers have debated how an "act of volition" can result in the movement of our bodies, with some even arguing that the connection is illusory. Is it any wonder that the moral sense should also appear mysterious when scrutinized too closely? Despite the inherent difficulty of elucidating human nature, Hutcheson did endeavor to explain the origin of the moral sense in his subsequent writings. He argued that it is evidence of design by a benevolent Creator: "an omnipotent and good God governs the world. By the whole structure of our nature we feel his approbation of virtue . . . . [H]e has implanted in our hearts natural desires, nay ardent affections, towards a more noble and lasting happiness" (*System II* 1969, 380). Through these internal senses, we can come to better understand "the will of God concerning our conduct" (*System I* 1969, 265). Hutcheson was a teleological thinker, who believed that "we must therefore search accurately into the constitution of our nature, to see what sort of creatures we are . . . what character God our Creator requires us to maintain" (*Introduction* 2007, 24). It is through our instincts that we infer our *telos*,

for “whatever is ultimately desirable is either recommended by some immediate sense or some natural instinct or impulse, and approbation prior to all reasoning” (*Introduction* 2007, 53). Our inborn tendency to approve of moral good, like an apple seed’s inborn tendency to grow into an apple tree, provides evidence of our nature’s ultimate aim.<sup>13</sup>

For Hutcheson, then, virtue may bring us pleasure, or serve the good of others, but it is more than just a means to these ends. The former end could, if we had no innate preference for virtue, be served by any number of other pleasures, such as music appreciation or intellectual achievements, since these too bring us pleasure and social admiration. The second could—as Mill admitted—be achieved through strategically offering incentives for pro-social behavior. But Hutcheson, in opposition to the utilitarians, saw virtue itself as an end. The moral sense—that is, our inherent tendency to feel sublime pleasure through contemplating virtue—is an instinct implanted by God to guide us towards this end.

Hutcheson’s originality therefore lies not in his status as founder of utilitarianism, but in his attempt to provide a modern, psychological account of virtue’s appeal for the individual. John Locke’s criticism of the concept of innate ideas had weakened the traditional Christian notion of conscience as a law naturally written on mankind. After Locke, it was no longer respectable to believe in innate ideas or laws; as Mark Hulliung writes of the French *philosophes*, “any conception in their thought that so much as hinted

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<sup>13</sup> However, it must be acknowledged that Hutcheson differed from two of the greatest teleological thinkers, Aristotle and Aquinas. For Aquinas, truth can be discerned through nature alone—through the rational faculty of synderesis—but this knowledge must be completed and perfected through revelation. Hutcheson believed the moral sense operates independently of revelation. We can infer the existence of the Deity from the existence of the moral sense, but this knowledge comes from observation and not from revelation. Moreover, the moral sense is purely an affective quality, while for Aristotle and Aquinas reason rules moral judgments.

of the innate was a scandal” (1994, 54). Moreover, the Platonic teaching that virtue results from a properly ordered soul would seem to be undermined by empiricism, because of its rejection of the ancient conception of reason. In contrast to these philosophies, Hutcheson appealed to the moral sense as an instinctive capacity, but one that requires sensory experience in order to process and systematize moral law—in other words, as a potentiality that must be activated. While Hutcheson invoked God in explaining its origin, he never relied on Biblical revelation to provide a content for the moral sense, thus implying that it can be observed by any reasonable person and requires no supernatural faith. He therefore steered a middle course between Locke’s revolutionary empiricism and the rationalist notion of *a priori* moral ideas. Hutcheson’s moral sense is a minimalist concept—it is common to all people, even the most seemingly corrupt, and it is a passive principle that can only respond to moral qualities rather than formulate any notion of them on its own. Nonetheless, it is quite ingenious in its attempt to resolve some of the difficulties faced by Enlightenment moral philosophy, particularly by virtue ethics.

A critic of Hutcheson’s philosophy might point out a major weakness in the concept of the moral sense: namely, that it is not our only instinct and therefore cannot easily guide us when it conflicts with another of the instincts on Hutcheson’s considerable list. Gill, in fact, criticizes Hutcheson for offering no standard for adjudicating between the senses: “Hutcheson’s insistence that morality is based in a sense puts morality on a normative par with other senses in the same way that your auditory and visual senses are on a normative par with each other . . . . And so it seems in the case

of internal conflict, Hutcheson can give us no reason” to choose one desire over another (2006, 176-177). Gill argues that Hutcheson therefore tried to show that “such conflict would never actually occur in practice” (2006, 177). But Hutcheson did acknowledge that different internal senses or desires could conflict. In his inaugural lecture at the University of Glasgow, he said that “aversion from work and a taste for pleasures often get the better of an ambition” (*Logic* 2006, 198). Even internal senses, such as sympathy, can conflict with the moral sense. Hutcheson invoked the example of “a judge, [who] from the motions of pity, gets many criminals acquitted” (*System I* 1969, 60). While the judge’s pity for defendants is understandable, it would ultimately conflict with the moral sense by violating the rules of justice and unleashing criminals on society (*System I* 1969, 60). The judge must overcome his natural pity and follow the moral sense, embracing “a more extensive affection, a love to society, a zeal to promote general happiness” (*System I* 1969, 60). Love and affection, in addition to pity, are natural and good impulses that can nonetheless lead us astray from the more stringent requirements of morality. According to Hutcheson, the good of society sometimes “limits, and counteracts the narrower Attachments of Love” (*Essay* 2002, 19). We experience many conflicts, not just between our lower and higher desires, but between perfectly commendable desires—affection for family, or pity for an individual—and the public good.

Hutcheson offered two possible ways to adjudicate such conflicts. One method is simply to look inward and more carefully ponder the moral sense, “this nobler sense which nature has designed to be the guide of life” (*Introduction* 2007, 40). Hutcheson wrote that “as the several narrower affections may often interfere and oppose each other,



or some of them be inconsistent with more extensive affections . . . our *moral sense* . . . both points out the affection which should prevail, and confirms this nobler affection by our natural desire of moral excellence” (*System I* 1969, 101). In his inaugural lecture, Hutcheson gave more details about how this process could work:

Conflict often arises between these two . . . . But he who has truly seen into himself and has experienced the whole of himself will find there is a part of his nature which is equipped to remedy these evils, and to reconcile these warring passions to peace . . . . For God has given us understanding and discernment . . . . God gave us a sense of the fitting and the beautiful; associated with this sense, as moderator of all the grosser pleasures, is shame; he also gave us the keen spur of praise. (*Logic* 2006, 209-210)

In other words, we must use the discernment process to decide which of our warring sensations should prevail. We might feel great, genuine pleasure at the prospect of a certain action, but if we also feel a sense of shame, or if our moral sense points towards an even higher kind of pleasure, we should embrace that action instead. Another method for sorting out conflicts already discussed above, is reason, for “’tis the business of reasoning to compare the several sorts of good perceived by the several senses, and to find out the proper means for obtaining them” (*Introduction* 2007, 28). Rational standards may never be able to provide us with ends, but they can at least compare different sorts of ends, or point out the best means to an end.

We are therefore capable of attaining a virtuous character, though such goodness is fragile and can be overwhelmed by other impulses if proper self-reflection is not employed. Hutcheson vigorously rejected what he called “the selfish scheme” (*System I* 1969, 40) of Thomas Hobbes and Bernard de Mandeville. He argued that people really do act independently of their own interest, which he illustrated through a hypothetical

example of choosing benevolence in the face of impending death: “should the Deity assure us that we should be immediately annihilated, so that we should be incapable of either Pleasure or Pain, but that it should depend upon our Choice at the very Exit, whether our Children, our Friends, or our Country should be happy or miserable; should we not upon this Scheme be intirely indifferent” if the selfish scheme were true (*Essay* 2002, 27-28)? The fact that people in this situation would choose the happiness of others illustrates that we are capable of disinterested benevolence.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, even in such an example, the agent may receive some benefit, however intangible, from his action. He may experience pleasure and happiness from viewing the joy of others, or from having fulfilled his moral sense, even if only for a few seconds before annihilation. But for Hutcheson, these inner sensations do not constitute self-interest—he always described them as disinterested, as when he discussed “the manifestly disinterested nature of . . . [parental] affection” (*System I* 1969, 189). He therefore adopted an implicit definition of self-interest as *material*. An action only benefits our self-interest if it improves our tangible, material conditions in some way—

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<sup>14</sup> In addition to being labeled a utilitarian, Hutcheson is also sometimes labeled a Stoic. Indeed, Scott argues that he adopted his utilitarian maxims from the Stoics and followed their cosmopolitan concern with the greatest good (1900, 275). Hutcheson certainly admired the Stoics, particularly Marcus Aurelius, whom he translated. But he also had reservations about certain aspects of their thought, as Maurer (2010) points out. In the *Essay*, he wrote that “to secure therefore independently of all other Beings invariable and pure Happiness, it would be necessary . . . to root out all *Sense of Evil*, or Aversion to it, while we retained our *Sense of Good*, but without previous Desire, the Dissapointment of which could give Pain” (2002, 82). If we are to become truly happy despite external events, such as the suffering of others, we must uproot our natural desire for moral good. And for Hutcheson, such insensibility would not be a positive development: “the *rooting* out of all Senses and Desires, were it practicable, would cut off all Happiness as well as Misery” (2002, 82). In addition to obliterating true happiness, such stoicism would also prove selfish: “that must be a very fantastick Scheme of Virtue, which represents it as a *private sublimely selfish Discipline*, to preserve ourselves wholly unconcerned . . . even in all *external Events* whatsoever, in the fortunes of our dearest *Friends* or *Country*” (2002, 83). Therefore Stoicism ultimately resembles the “selfish scheme” that Hutcheson so despised.

for instance, if it increases our wealth, power, physical comfort, or reputation. Expanding the definition of self-interest to include good feelings or satisfaction would dilute its meaning. He criticized philosophers such as Hobbes and Mandeville who “twist Self-Love into a thousand shapes” (*Inquiry* 2008, 93). Simon Grote is therefore wrong to state that “Hutcheson refused to admit any fundamental distinction between affections directed towards private interest and affections toward which we are led by a desire for the pleasures of virtue itself. In so far as both types have as their end the attainment of pleasure, however sublime, Hutcheson considers them both self-interested” (2006, 167). In fact, Hutcheson adopted a narrow definition of self-interest and rejected the expansive definition put forth by “the selfish scheme.”

Hutcheson conceded some ground to the selfish scheme insofar as he recognized that human beings are, to some extent, self-interested—but even in this concession, he vigorously disagreed that such self-interest must always be taken as “vice” and therefore negates the possibility of goodness. He wrote that in addition to our sympathetic and moral senses, we also have more selfish desires, “so a Ballance might be preserved” (*Essay* 2002, 43). For instance, anger, which might seem a pernicious passion, “is really as necessary as the rest; since Men’s Interests often seem to interfere with each other ; and they are thereby led . . . to do the worst *Injuries* to their Fellows. There could not therefore be a wiser Contrivance to restrain *Injuries*, than to make every mortal some way *formidable* to an unjust Invader, by such a violent Passion” (*Essay* 2002, 46). In fact, “self-love is really as necessary to the Good of the Whole, as Benevolence” (*Inquiry* 2008, 187). By encouraging people to assert their rights, self-love preserves the whole

system of rights and duties that is necessary for society's good. Self-love thus becomes vicious only when it oversteps its proper boundaries: "the selfish affections are only then disapproved when we imagine them beyond their innocent proportion, so as to exclude or over-power the amiable affections, and engross the mind wholly to the purposes of selfishness" (*System I* 1969, 65). Hutcheson wrote that "what we chiefly disapprove is that sordid selfishness which so engrosses the man as to exclude all human sentiments of kindness, and surmounts all kind affections" (*Introduction* 2007, 39).<sup>15</sup> Selfishness, not self-love *per se*, poses a problem for human society, and this is what must be resisted if commercial society is to flourish.

#### Hutcheson's Political Philosophy

For Hutcheson, political systems are shaped by the perceptions of rightness and fairness intuited by the moral sense—and political systems, in turn, must be constructed to encourage the practice of this sense. Individual rights are not an artificial contrivance, but are recommended by the moral sense: "the private rights of individuals are obviously intimated to us in the constitution of our nature" (*System I* 1969, 285). These rights develop for two reasons: "first, natural desires and senses pointing out the gratifications we are fitted to receive as parts of that happiness the author of our nature has intended for us, and secondly, by the powers of reason and reflection which can discover how far the gratification of our natural desires is consistent with the finer principles in our constitution" (*System I* 1969, 285). He wrote that "as soon as we form moral notions,"

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<sup>15</sup> Hume, echoing Hutcheson, wrote in "Of Refinements in the Arts" that "a gratification is only vicious, when it engrosses all a man's expence, and leaves no ability for such acts of duty and generosity as are required by situation and fortune" (*Essays* 1985, 279).

we come to believe that our other desires and senses should be gratified “until we discover some opposition between these lower ones, and some principle we naturally feel to be superior to them” (*System I* 1969, 255). Upon reflection, we eventually conclude that fairness grants this same liberty to others.<sup>16</sup> Hence “this very sense of right seems the foundation of that sense of liberty” (*System I* 1969, 255).

The natural rights resulting from this process are those to life, liberty, freedom of opinion, property, commerce, and society (or association). These rights also imply obligations on the part of others to respect them: “to each right there corresponds an obligation” (*System I* 1969, 264). Of all these rights, the right to natural liberty seems to be the core of Hutcheson’s political philosophy:

‘tis plain each one has a natural right to exert his powers, according to his own judgment and inclination, for these purposes, in all such industry, labour, or amusements, as are not hurtful to others in their persons or goods, while no more publick interests necessarily requires his labours, or that his actions should be under the direction of others. This right we call natural liberty. (*System I* 1969, 294)

To put it more succinctly, “men must enjoy their natural liberty as long as they are not injurious, and while no great publick interest requires some restriction of it” (*System I* 1969, 295). Men have natural liberty to pursue their own interests and inclinations in their own way, as long as they harm no one—either individuals or the manifest public interest—in doing so.

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<sup>16</sup> Hutcheson sometimes implied that the principle of fairness is recommended by the moral sense. For instance, in a chapter titled “The Rights of Masters and Servants” in the *Introduction*, he wrote that “if anyone . . . has incautiously insisted for no more [than food and clothing] in his [labor] contract, yet as the contract is plainly onerous, he has the right to have the inequality redressed” (2007, 272). Fairness, however, was not a principle that he insisted on with any regularity.

For Hutcheson, the freedom of commercial society is a moral imperative—a “perfect right” that could only be violated for reasons of great exigency. Furthermore, he believed that the progress of society encourages the development of the moral sense. The complexities of markets and the division of labor, by drawing us ever further into social life, offer more opportunities for the exercise of the moral sense; and the improved overall standard of living, with its comforts and sophisticated arts, sensitizes men to beauty and thus creates possibilities for a greater sensitivity to moral beauty. Norbert Waszek laments that benevolence “becomes a mere ideal” in Hutcheson’s thought because he provided no guidance as to how societies can encourage it (1988, 49). But Hutcheson did delineate ways in which the conditions of commercial society may allow benevolence to flourish.

Moreover, Hutcheson’s emphasis on the “public good” has been somewhat misunderstood, and often misinterpreted as a call to civic humanism. In reality, he questioned whether “schemes of community,” as he called attempts to empower the public sphere or control property, constitute true virtue. He believed that the good of mankind is best served not by aiming directly at it, but by serving the people providence has particularly entrusted to our care. The average man can therefore serve the greater good by working and providing for his family. Samuel Fleischacker writes that “Smith’s teacher Hutcheson . . . did not share this confidence in ordinary people’s judgment, and therefore looked to a government where the wise would guide investment, and control the labor and consumption choices of the poor” (2004, 97). But Hutcheson, contrary to this

characterization, advocated the freedom of commercial society as a positive incentive to virtue.

In order to consider the specific advantages of commercial society, we must first consider the general role of sociability in Hutcheson's philosophy. As we saw in the discussion of Hutcheson's moral philosophy, he delineated a number of internal senses that support, and operate similarly to, the moral sense. Many of these senses—our sense of sympathy, our sense of honor—add up to a natural impulse towards sociability in humans: “their [human beings'] other principles, their curiosity, communicativeness, desire of action; their sense of honour, their compassion, benevolence, gaiety, and the moral faculty, could have little or no exercise in solitude, and therefore might lead them to haunt together, even without an immediate or ultimate impulse, or a sense of their indigence” (*System I* 1969, 34). Because of sympathy, in particular, people love to share emotions with others: “by some wonderful sympathy of nature, there are few or no pleasures, even physical pleasures, which are not augmented by association with others” (*Logic* 2006, 204). Our emotions “bubble over from the human heart, and long to be poured out among others” (*Logic* 2006, 204).

It is because humans are socially embedded that they discover and develop the moral sense, for

we cannot avoid observing the *Affections* of those we converse with; their *Actions*, their *Words*, their *Looks* betray them. We are conscious of our own *Affections*, and cannot avoid *Reflection* upon them sometimes . . . . Our own *Temper*, as well as that of others, will appear to our *moral Sense* either lovely or deformed, and will be the *Occasion* either of *Pleasure* or *Uneasiness*. We have not any proper *Appetite* toward *Virtue*, so as to be uneasy, even antecedently to the *Appearance* of the lovely *Form*; but as soon as it appears to any *Person*, as it certainly must very early in *Life*, it never fails to raise *Desire*. (*Essay* 2002, 76)

Early in life, we are presented with both virtuous and vicious qualities in other people, and perceiving these qualities brings us either happiness or uneasiness. Upon reflecting on these reactions, we develop an understanding of the qualities that provoke them.

The family is the natural institution of sociability, because it first cares for children in their helplessness: “their preservation, in their tender years, must depend on the care of the adult; and their lives must always continue miserable if they are in solitude, without the aid of their fellows” (*System I* 1969, 3).<sup>17</sup> Man must thus be nourished by “the mutual aid of a few in a small family” (*System I* 1969, 288). However, even family life is not enough to fulfill all of man’s needs, because “the same advantages could still be obtained more effectually and copiously by the mutual assistance of a few such families living in one neighbourhood, as they could execute more designs for the common good of all; and would furnish more joyful exercises of our social dispositions” (*System I* 1969, 288). Families therefore congregate together, out of an instinctive impulse to serve the common welfare and create more social outlets.

But mankind must continue to move even beyond the neighborhood or the village, for “larger associations” may “further enlarge our means of enjoyment, and give more extensive and delightful exercise to our powers of every kind” (*System I* 1969, 289). In a large and sophisticated society, “the inventions, experience, and arts of multitudes are communicated; knowledge is increased, and social affections more diffused” (*System I*

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<sup>17</sup> Because of Hutcheson’s belief in natural sociability, he rejected conventional portrayals of the state of nature. He wrote that “’tis also a foolish abuse of words to call a state of absolute solitude a *natural* state to mankind, since in this condition neither could any of mankind come into being, or continue in it a few days without a miraculous interposition” (*System I* 1969, 283). For Hutcheson, lack of recognized political authority, not lack of society, constitutes the state of nature.



1969, 289). This cultivates our moral sense in particular because “as we improve and correct a low taste for harmony by enuring the ear to finer compositions; a low taste for beauty, by presenting the finer works, which yield a higher pleasure; so we improve our moral taste by presenting larger systems to our mind” (*System I* 1969, 60). As we are continually exposed to more people through the hustle and bustle of worldly business, we gather more input for the moral sense and can refine our understanding of its reactions. Larger societies thus develop all of our internal senses. They develop our capacity for sympathy by exposing us to more people and experiences; they develop our sense of beauty by disseminating the arts; they develop our moral sense through giving us more opportunities to exercise it. For Hutcheson, as for Aristotle, there is a hierarchy of natural associations, the highest of which fulfills man’s *telos* or calling. But unlike Aristotle, Hutcheson believed that our highest purpose is to exercise our capacity for individual virtue and benevolence, and that this purpose could be fulfilled in society, not in a *polis*.<sup>18</sup> Hutcheson was therefore attracted to the large commercial nations rather than to the small city-states or republics.

However, would the moral aspect of commercial society be eroded by its citizens’ pursuit of wealth, power, and external beauties? According to Hutcheson, these objects are not inherently wrong and, in some cases, can even function as tools to enable virtue.

In addition to his natural propensities, man develops a number of secondary desires in

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<sup>18</sup> Hutcheson went so far as to misinterpret Aristotle’s views as being in accordance with his own preference for social life: “when many of the ancients speak of man as a species naturally fit for civil society, they do not mean as men immediately desire a political union, or a state of civil subjection to the laws, as they desire the free society of others in natural liberty, or as they desire marriage and offspring, from immediate instincts . . . As men are naturally endued with reason, caution, and sagacity; and civil government or some sort of political union must appear, in the present state of our nature, the necessary means of safety and prosperity to themselves,” men are gradually brought to realize the necessity of government (*System I* 1969, 213).

order to fulfill his primary affinities for beauty, sympathy, action, virtue, honor, and dignity. For instance, “as wealth may be useful in gratifying any of our desires, may promote the good of the individual, or be a fund for offices of humanity, ‘tis no wonder that it is very generally pursued” (*System I* 1969, 163). The desire for wealth is a secondary desire that helps us fulfill our primary purposes. Hutcheson stressed the “*universality of these Desire for Wealth and Power,*” which is “as naturally fit to gratify our *Publick Desires,* or to serve *virtuous Purposes,* as the *selfish ones*” (*Essay* 2002, 19). For this reason, Hutcheson referred to wealth and power as “the great Engines of Virtue” (*Inquiry* 2008, 157). For this reason, “desire of it [wealth] is innocent, and wise” (*System I* 1969, 163), and “wealth and power do not naturally tend to vice” (*Remarks* 1750, 55). In fact, “since Wealth and Power are the most effectual *Means,* and the most powerful *Instruments . . .* the neglect of them, when honourable Opportunities offer, is really a weakness” (*Essay* 2002, 20). Similarly, “the desires of power and of glory” are innocent and understandable, because they allow us to fulfill our primary desires for the good (*System I* 1969, 164). These resources need not be pursued through vice or selfishness, for they “should naturally lead a wise man into the same virtuous course; since it is by obtaining the favour and good-will of others, and maintaining credit in society, that wealth and power are easiest obtained and preserved” (*Introduction* 2007, 63). It is through establishing oneself as trustworthy and honest that one finds financial rewards. (Hutcheson, perhaps recognizing the optimism of his association between wealth and virtue, elsewhere downgraded his standard of acceptable commercial behavior to “a commerce in which we neither directly violate that pious reverence due to God, nor the

perfect right of another” [*Introduction* 2007, 179]). Therefore, while the desires for wealth, power, or glory certainly should be kept moderate, the mere pursuit of these objects is not cause for moral censure.

Desire for comforts or fine objects—such as good food, well-made clothing, a beautiful home—is also not automatically vicious. First of all, many of these things derive their appeal from their social setting: “the very luxury of the table derives its main charms from some mixture of moral enjoyments, from communicating pleasures, and notions of something honourable as well as elegant” (*System I* 1969, 86). In such social pleasures, “the force of the moral sense is diffused through all parts of life” (*System I* 1969, 86). We enjoy a good meal not just because of the food, but because of the stimulating conversation and the opportunity to be generous and sociable; we enjoy a beautiful, spacious house because it provides a home for our family. A taste for material goods often reflects concern and sympathy for others. Even the most gluttonous or luxurious are motivated by the desire for social approval:

if we examine the pursuits of the Luxurious, who in the opinion of the World is wholly devoted to his Belly; we shall generally find that . . . a large share of the Preparation must be suppos’d design’d for some sort of generous friendly Purposes, as to please Acquaintance, Strangers, Parasites. How few would be contented to enjoy the same Sensations alone, in a Cottage, or out of earthen Pitchers? (*Inquiry* 2004, 77-78)

The social context of conspicuous consumption explains why “why we are not ashamed of any of the Methods of Grandeur, or high-Living. There is such a mixture of moral Ideas, of Benevolence, of Abilitys kindly employed; so many Dependants supported, so many Friends entertain’d, assisted, protected” (*Inquiry* 2008, 158). Second, even

unsocial pleasures are compatible with virtue. These pleasures are often recommended to us by the internal senses rather than by mere appetite. In *Remarks*, Hutcheson wrote:

since men are capable of a great diversity of pleasures, they must be supposed to have a great variety of desires, even beyond the necessities of life . . . they have perceptions of beauty in external objects, and desire something more in dress, houses, furniture, than mere warmth or necessary use. (1750, 44)

Our sense of beauty leads us to pursue beauty in our surroundings, while our sense of sympathy leads us to pursue the means to help others. As a result, people continually seek economic improvement, not resting content with the bare necessities of life: “what man, who had only the absolute necessities of meat and drink, and a cave or a bear’s skin to cover him, would not, when he had leisure, labour for farther conveniences, or more grateful food?” (*Remarks* 1750, 49). Virtuous men are not exempt from these desires: “the temperate, the sober, the chaste, the humble, have senses at least as acute as others, and enjoy all the good in sensual objects” (*System I* 1969, 115). Such pursuits can leave their virtue untouched, for as he argued in an earlier work, “though we shall not look upon them as the chief good in life, or preferable to the public interest, to our virtue, or our honour; yet, when they can be enjoyed consistently with superior pleasures, our sense of them may be as acute as that of others” (*Remarks* 1750, 47). Therefore, the physical comforts offered by the commercial arts can diffuse the moral sense through all parts of life, by turning neutral activities like eating into opportunities for cheer, benevolence, and sociability; and even when they do not directly promote virtue, neither do they necessarily hinder it.

But what about Hutcheson’s comments on the useless and pernicious effects of luxury? Do these conflict with his belief that comforts can act as social facilitators? In

reality, Hutcheson's views on luxury were complex. Hutcheson believed that luxury and intemperance are harmful, but—in opposition to Mandeville, who had defined luxury as anything “not immediately necessary to make Man subsist as he is a living Creature” (1988, 107)—his definition of the terms was narrow. As he wrote in *Remarks*, “intemperance is that use of meat and drink which is pernicious to the health and vigour of any person in the discharge of the offices of life” (*Remarks* 1750, 56). He defined luxury as “the using more curious and expensive habitation, dress, table, equipage, than the person's wealth will bear, so as to discharge his duty to his family, his friends, his country, or the indigent” (*Remarks* 1750, 56). Intemperance and luxury, then, involve neglect of duties on account of consumption. As a result, these vices cannot be judged by an absolute standard, but depend on individual circumstances:

there is no sort of food, architecture, dress, or furniture, the use of which can be called evil of itself. Intemperance and luxury are plainly terms relative to the bodily constitution, and wealth of the person . . . it is impossible to fix one invariable quantity of food, one fixed sum in expences, the surpassing of which should be called intemperance [or] luxury. (*Remarks* 1750, 56-57)

He repeated this definition much later in the *System*, where he wrote, “it is plain there is no necessary vice in the consuming of the finest products, or the wearing of the dearest manufactures, by persons whose fortunes can allow it consistently with all the duties of life” (*System II* 1969, 320). A rich man may be able to purchase quality clothing while still giving plenty of money to his family or to the poor; a common laborer who bought the same clothing would neglect these duties and become guilty of luxury. A man with a hearty constitution may be able to drink frequently without risking ill health or addiction;

a man with a weak constitution may become impaired by the same amount of drinking and thus commit intemperance.

Many scholars have misinterpreted Hutcheson's attitude towards luxury. Taylor portrays Hutcheson actively trying to discourage luxury spending through economic policies: "Hutcheson did not accept the beneficial effect of expenditure on luxury goods, and he formulated the completely opposite economic analysis that aggregate effective demand would be satisfactorily attained if luxury expenditure were not encouraged" (1965, 105). In contrast, Preben Mortensen writes that Hutcheson enthusiastically supported luxury. According to Mortensen, Hutcheson believed that "pursuit of luxury . . . can be and often [is] guided by high moral principles and [has] beneficial effects for the individual as well as for society in general" (1995, 163). Both analyses neglect Hutcheson's own definition of the term "luxury," which to him implied excess, a distraction from our moral duties. Hutcheson approved of the pursuit of beauty, of wealth, of comfort, even in such trifling matters as dress or home décor; but he did not, strictly speaking, approve of luxury or *overconsumption*. To say that he disapproved of spending on "luxury goods" is inaccurate, as there is no good that can be objectively assessed as luxurious. At the same time, he did not believe that luxury could be guided by "high moral principles," since the word "luxury" in his definition is inherently vicious.

Though luxury and intemperance can only be defined by reference to individual circumstances, Hutcheson is far from thinking that these vices should be tolerated. The individual must remain vigilant and examine his own conscience: "every one's own knowledge, and experience of his constitution and fortune, will suggest to him what is

suitable to his circumstances” (*Remarks* 1750, 57). Avoiding luxury is therefore a duty enjoined upon the individual—although, as we shall see, the public can play a role in preventing this vice through instruction.

In addition to physical comforts, commercial society also provides sophisticated aesthetic experiences, which can encourage our personal virtue. Our love of beauty, while different from the moral sense, can nonetheless come to strengthen and cultivate it. The deep associations between the two can be seen in the title of his first book, *Inquiry Into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, in which the two concepts are juxtaposed and even given a single “original” foundation. Many of the same qualities that we find aesthetically pleasing also tend to be morally pleasing when applied to human action. For instance, human action is morally beautiful when it is fitting. Hutcheson even went so far to call the moral sense “the sense of the fitting and the good, which passes judgment as from the bench on all the things men do, on all our pleasures of body or mind, on our opinions, sentiments, actions, prayers, intentions, and feelings, determining in each case what is fine, fitting and good, and what is the measure in each” (*Logic* 2006, 119). Actions are pleasing when they are appropriate and well-proportioned to their end. There exists, therefore, a “moral Beauty of Actions, or Dispositions,” which constitutes much of the pleasure experienced by the moral sense (*Inquiry* 2008, 127). These similarities do not contradict Hutcheson’s assertions that the two senses are separate, for qualities considered fitting or orderly in humankind are different than those so considered in inanimate objects. But the two senses can be

mutually reinforcing, and thus the more refined aesthetic taste developed by commercial society can also refine our appreciation of the fitting or orderly in moral actions as well. Perhaps because of these natural associations between beauty and virtue, the arts often adopt a didactic purpose. Poetry, history, and rhetoric are examples of arts with explicit moral content: “the chief pleasures of history and poetry, and the powers of eloquence, are derived from” their uplifting effect on the moral sense (*System I* 1969, 86). For instance, “history, as it represents the moral characters and fortunes of the great and of nations, is always exciting our *moral faculty*, and our social feelings of the fortunes of others” (*System I* 1969, 86). Similarly, “poetry entertains us in a way yet more affecting, by more striking representations of the same objects in fictitious characters, and moving our terror, and compassion, and moral admiration” (*System I* 1969, 86). Hutcheson wrote that our pleasure at viewing tragedies stems from sympathy: “our desiring such sights flows from a kind instinct of nature, a secret bond between us and our fellow-creatures” (*Remarks* 1750, 15). And sympathy, of course, can lead to virtue because it leads us to care about others. Even non-verbal arts can excite the moral sense: “the very arts of musick, statuary, and painting, beside the natural pleasures they convey by exact imitations, may receive a higher power and a stronger charm from something *moral* insinuated into the performances” (*System I* 1969, 87).

In addition to the natural association between beauty and virtue, we also tend to develop further, artificial, associations between the two. In *Remarks*, Hutcheson wrote that people are “desirous of whatever either directly procures approbation and esteem or, by a confused association of ideas, is made evidence of any valuable ability or kind



disposition” (*Remarks* 1750, 44-45). “If a certain way of Living, of receiving Company, of shewing Courtesy, is once received among those who are honoured,” then we come to associate that manner of living with honor and virtue, even though there is no necessary connection (*Essay* 2002, 20). Even “*Dress, Retinue, Equipage, Furniture, Behaviour, and Diversions* are made Matters of considerable Importance by additional Ideas” (*Essay* 2002, 20). But although these associations are confused, they are not always harmful. The wise man must observe his society’s standards of decency: “if any Circumstance be look’d upon as indecent in any Country, offensive to others, or deform’d; we shall, out of our Love to the good Opinions of others, be asham’d to be found in such Circumstances, even when we are sensible that this Indecency or Offense is not founded on Nature, but is merely the effect of Custom” (*Inquiry* 2008, 157). For instance, “the Shame we suffer from Meanness of Dress, Table, Equipage” is because “this Meanness is often imagin’d to argue Avarice, Meanness of Spirit, want of Capacity, or Conduct in Life, of Industry, or moral Abilitys of one kind or another” (*Inquiry* 2008, 158). While these kinds of associations may be despised by splenetic philosophers, they have real consequences for our ability to do good in the world: “this ordinary Connexion in our Imagination, between external Grandeur, Regularity in Dress, Equipage, Retinue, Badges of Honour, and some moral Abilitys greater than ordinary, is perhaps of more consequence in the World than some recluse Philosophers apprehend, who pride themselves upon despising these external Shews” (*Inquiry* 2008, 159). Gaining the respect of mankind can be necessary in order to facilitate good actions: “nor is it in vain that the wisest and greatest Men regard these things . . . since the bulk of Mankind will retain them, they must comply with their

Sentiments and Humours in things innocent, as they expect the *publick Esteem*, which is generally necessary to enable men to serve the Publick” (*Essay* 2002, 20-21). If people come to associate a certain style of living with upright behavior, and the opposite with moral turpitude, then wise men will adopt this custom out of respect for others’ feelings, even though they know it does not constitute virtue. By doing so, they can garner respect and better serve the public good.

Hutcheson also believed that people tend to associate novelty with virtue. He wrote that “since our Minds are incapable of retaining a great Diversity of Objects, the *Novelty* or *Singularity* of any Object is enough to raise a particular Attention to it among many of equal Merit” (*Essay* 2002, 21). Thus “were Virtue universal among Men, yet, ‘tis probable the Attention of Observers would be turned chiefly toward those who distinguished themselves by some *singular Ability*, or by some Circumstance, which however trifling in its own Nature, yet had some honourable Ideas commonly joined to it” (*Essay* 2002, 21). This human preference for novelty “raises in us a Desire of *Distinction*” (*Essay* 2002, 21). The desire for distinction leads people to “chuse things for their very *Rarity, Difficulty, or Expence*; by a confused *Imagination* that they evidence Generosity, Ability, or a finer Taste than ordinary” (*Essay* 2002, 22). The desire extends even to the most trivial pursuits or purchases: “a *Form of Dress, a foreign Dish, a Title, a Place, a Jewel*” (*Essay* 2002, 22).

The so-called excesses of commercial society—the splendid arts, the comforts, the opulence, the endless pursuit of novelties, the mannered politeness—are in many ways innocent. These pleasures are not the same as virtue, but many of them are so

closely allied to virtue, even if only through artificial associations and social customs, that they can uplift the mind. Man's senses of sympathy, honor, and beauty, which many of these pleasures stimulate, work in tandem with the moral sense by calling man to something higher than mere survival or self-interest. The consumption habits of commercial society reveal man's natural yearnings, however confused or misapplied, for the good.

It may be pointed out that commercial society commands no exclusive dominion over beauty. Hutcheson admitted that "the Contemplation of the Works of Nature is exposed to every one" regardless of economic class or nation (*Inquiry* 2008, 77). But many other aesthetic experiences lend themselves to commodification. Hutcheson wrote that "there are other Objects of these internal Senses, which require Wealth, or Power to procure the use of them as frequently as we desire; as appears in Musick, Gardening, Painting, Dress, Equipage, Furniture; of which we cannot have the full enjoyment without Property" (*Inquiry* 2008, 77).

Hutcheson's wholly positive view of aesthetic commodification must be understood in proper historical context. In eighteenth century Great Britain, culture came within easy reach, perhaps not of all people, but of a much larger audience than it formerly commanded. Roy Porter notes, for instance, that Handel's Fireworks Music played to an audience of 12,000 in London, that admission fees to gardens and plays dropped very low, and that even small towns boasted of theaters and lending-libraries. Most importantly from Hutcheson's point of view, however, was that "it became increasingly easy to take some of this culture home" (Porter 1990, 232). Sheet music,

fashion patterns, magazines, and quality home objects such as Wedgwood china now graced even humble homes. Thus “the idea of the ‘public’ in the arena of culture was realized,” ensuring that the contemplation of beauty was no longer an elite activity (Porter 1990, 232). In Hutcheson’s time, commodification was a new trend enabling culture to become more, not less, democratic.

Closely related to the desire for beauty is the desire for industry, for it naturally springs up to fulfill such desires for splendor and pleasure: “does not the universal choice of mankind, in preferring to bear labour for the conveniences and elegancies of life, shew that their pleasures are greater than those of sloth, and that industry, notwithstanding its toils, does really increase the happiness of mankind? Hence it is that in every nation great numbers support themselves by mechanic arts not absolutely necessary” (*Remarks* 1750, 49-50). Industry is natural to man not just because of his desire for improvement, but also because of his desire for the active life: “Nature hath given to all men some ingenuity and active powers, and a disposition to exert them” (*System I* 1969, 319). The instinct towards action is one of the inborn internal senses. These desires “are the ordinary springs of the activity of mankind in employing their labour to cultivate the earth” (*System I* 1969, 319). Because industry is necessary for the happiness of mankind, “this may shew us how little justice there is in imagining an Arcadia, or unactive golden age, would ever suit with the present state of the world, or produce more happiness to men than a vigorous improvement of arts” (*Remarks* 1750, 50). Our natural propensity for activity is channeled into useful pursuits that contribute to a greater happiness.

Industry, for Hutcheson, is as salutary for the public as it is for the individual. He wrote that “the utmost improvement of arts, manufactures, or trade, is so far from being necessarily vicious, that it must rather argue good and virtuous dispositions; since it is certain that men of the best and most generous tempers would desire it for the public good” (*Remarks* 1750, 54). One way in which industry serves the public good is through mitigating inequality. “The situation of the people, their manners and customs, their trade or arts,” can sometimes by themselves “cause such a diffusion of property among many as is requisite for the continuance of the Democrattick part in the constitution” (*System II* 1969, 248). Hutcheson hoped that industry would forestall the tyranny he so feared, by disseminating property more widely and thus supporting the popular branch of government.

Industry is also spurred by our natural affections. According to Hutcheson, “each man has not only selfish desires toward his own happiness and the means of it, but some tender generous affections in the several relations of life” (*System I* 1969, 319). It is “from these strong feelings in our hearts [that] we discover the right of property” (*System I* 1969, 320). This is one of the strongest motivations towards industry, for “nothing can so effectually excite men to constant patience and diligence in all sorts of useful industry, as the hopes of future wealth, ease, and pleasure to themselves, their offspring, and all who are dear to them” (*System I* 1969, 321). No other kind of affection can motivate work—certainly not “generous affection to his kind, which is commonly much weaker than the narrower affections to our friends and relations” (*System I* 1969, 321). Industry

can therefore be an embodiment of active love, since providing for one's family is the means by which most men express affection for them.

In order to encourage industry even further, society should make it honorable: "any foolish notions of meanness in mechanick arts, as if they were unworthy of men of better families, should be borne down" (*System II* 1969, 319). Industrious men should be honored, and "all men of industry should live with us unmolested and easy" (*System II* 1969, 319). All kinds of industry should be welcomed, even those that moralists might think too extravagant. As Hutcheson wrote, "all mechanick arts, either simpler or more elegant, should be encouraged" (*Introduction* 2007, 269). Industry is not merely a necessary evil, but a positive good, and should be promoted as such. The sense of honor and the sense of action should cooperate.

The division of labor, like industry, is also necessary for the happiness of mankind. Hutcheson wrote:

Nay 'tis well known that the produce of the labours of any given number, twenty, for instance, in providing the necessaries or conveniences of life, shall be much greater by assigning to one, a certain sort of work of one kind, in which he will soon acquire skill and dexterity, and to another assigning work of a different kind, than if each one of the twenty were obliged to employ himself, by turns, in all the different sorts of labour requisite for his subsistence. (*System I* 1969, 288)

The principles behind the division of labor are "well known" and therefore occur naturally to all men. The division of labor best fulfills man's innate craving for improvement, industry, activity, for it is through the division of labor that such activity becomes skilled and productive. Rothbard credits Hutcheson with a breakthrough analysis of why the division of labor is fundamental to progress: "Francis Hutcheson stressed the importance of an advancing division of labour in economic growth . . . .

[R]eciprocal aid through mutually beneficial exchange [is] a prime example of the beneficence of nature. . . . Extended division of labour also connotes a more extended communication of knowledge” (1995, 421). The division of labor is an additional reason why Hutcheson thought commercial society superior in providing artistic pleasures. It is in more complex forms of society that “the arts of multitudes are communicated” because artists can singularly devote themselves to their pursuits.

Throughout this analysis, we have seen that the virtues most salient in commercial society are those that govern particular relationships. Industriousness enables men to provide for their families; comforts encourage them to become gregarious, flocking around the table with friends; increased social connections provide more opportunities to hone the moral sense; the arts improve the taste for the fitting or beautiful actions that men can perform in their daily lives. Despite his praise of calm universal benevolence, Hutcheson did not think that such special connections constitute a problem: “*Nature* constitutes many particular attachments and proper causes of loving some more than others” (*System I* 1969, 244). The causes of these attachments are “the *conjugal* and *parental relations*, and the other *tyes of blood; benefits conferred*, which excites a generous gratitude, tho’ we expect no more; *eminent virtues* observed; and the very relation of *countrymen*” (*System I* 1969, 244). These preferences Hutcheson described as “generous” because they are not motivated by self-interest (*System I* 1969, 244). They are “the affections which God has implanted in it” and cannot be eradicated (*System II* 1969, 185). Hutcheson believed that He implanted these affections for an important reason. Since most people cannot directly benefit mankind as a whole, they

can best serve society through these intimate connections: “But our *Understanding* and *Power* are limited, so that we cannot know many other Natures, nor is our utmost Power capable of promoting the Happiness of many; our Actions are therefore influenced by some *stronger Affections* than this general *Benevolence*” (*Essay* 2002, 188). Indeed, Hutcheson believed these particular attachments to be as necessary as the laws of gravity:

Benevolence. . . we may compare to that Principle of Gravitation, which perhaps extends to all Bodys in the Universe; but . . . increases as the Distance is diminished, and is strongest when Bodys come to touch each other. Now this increase of Attraction upon nearer Approach, is as necessary to the Frame of the Universe, as that there should be any Attraction at all. For a general Attraction, equal in all Distances, would by the Contrariety of such multitudes of equal Forces, put an end to all Regularity of Motion, and perhaps stop it altogether. (*Inquiry* 2008, 150)

Since human attachments are natural forces, they clearly constitute a God-given duty: “’tis plainly our duty to employ ourselves in these less extensive offices, while they obstruct no interest more extensive . . . . In doing so we follow nature and God its author, who by these stronger bonds has made some of mankind much dearer to us than others, and recommended them more peculiarly to our care and benevolence” (*Introduction* 2007, 83). We are designed to exhibit particular affections towards friends, family, and those known to be virtuous, because our human limitations work best within these concentrated spheres. These connections are commendable as long as they do not interfere with the greater good. To abolish them would be a great evil: “we must not therefore, from any airy views of more heroic extensive offices, check or weaken the tender natural affections, which are great sources of pleasure in life, and of the greatest necessity” (*Introduction* 2007, 83). Natural affections in “the several narrower



attachments of life will rather tend to compleat the beauty of a moral character, and the harmony of life” (*Introduction* 2007, 83).

For this reason, Hutcheson opposed the communism of Plato and St. Thomas More, affirming the private sphere as the most natural venue for benevolence, which he classified as an “imperfect right” (following the Ciceronian distinction between perfect and imperfect rights). Perfect rights “are of such a nature that the interest of society requires they should ever be maintained and fulfilled to all who have them, and that even by methods of force” (*System I* 1969, 257). Perfect rights are, in contemporary terminology, negative rights, and their violation would “make Men miserable” (*Inquiry* 2008, 184). Imperfect rights, on the other hand, are directed towards “positive Good” (*Inquiry* 2008, 184). They may be morally obligatory and “sacred in the sight of God and our own consciences,” but, for various reasons, they “must not be asserted by violence or compulsion” and instead should “be left to men’s honour and consciences” (*System I* 1969, 258). Imperfect rights include “the rights of the indigent to relief from the wealthy . . . the rights of friends and benefactors to friendly and grateful returns” (*System I* 1969, 258). These rights are of “so delicate a nature” that enforcing them by law would “furnish matter of eternal contention” (*System I* 1969, 258). The law is a blunt instrument, and cannot provide for all the subtle variations of the social affections. As a result, “imperfect rights are not matters of just force or compulsion” (*Introduction* 2007, 114). Opposed to these imperfect rights is a third category Hutcheson called “external rights,” of which “the doing, possessing, or demanding of any thing is really detrimental to the Publick in any particular instance, as being contrary to the imperfect Right of

another; but yet the universally denying Men this faculty . . . would do more Mischief than all the Evils to be feared from the use of this Faculty” (*Inquiry* 2008, 185). External rights are rights that an individual may not morally deserve, since they violate another’s imperfect rights; but these liberties must be granted on prudential grounds. An example is “the external right of the Miser to his useless Hoards,” which must be tolerated because “to take the Use of his Acquisitions, would discourage Industry” (*Inquiry* 2008, 188).

Once again, since the law is a blunt instrument, it cannot fix the exact point at which an external right may be revoked without affecting perfect rights: “besides, there is no determining in many Cases, who is a Miser, and who is not” (*Inquiry* 2008, 188).

Echoing Aristotle, he argued that mandatory sharing would eliminate the choice or intention necessary in virtue: “why should we exclude so much of the loveliest offices of life, of liberality and beneficence, and grateful returns; leaving men scarce any room for exercising them in the distribution of their goods?” (*System I* 1969, 322-323). Forcing men to labor for the public good would “deprive Industry of all the Motives of . . . Friendship, Gratitude, and natural Affection” (*Inquiry* 2008, 188). If charity were enforced by law, “liberality would then appear like paying a tax . . . and liberality would cease to be a bond of love, esteem, or gratitude” (*System I* 1969, 306). Furthermore, the exercise of virtues like generosity requires far more sensitivity than can be expected of government: “no confidence of a wise distribution by magistrates can ever” be as precise “as when each man is the distributor of what he has acquired among those he loves.

What magistrate can judge of the delicate ties of friendship, by which a fine spirit may be

so attached to another as to bear all toils for him with joy?” (*System I* 1969, 322). Unless virtue is freely chosen, it is no virtue at all.

Taylor argues that Hutcheson admitted these schemes’ “theoretical possibility of success” but thought “that, in the practical working of their implications, they were bound to fail simply because they ran counter to ineradicable and unchanging sentiments in human nature” (1965, 145). However, Hutcheson’s objections to “schemes of community” were more than just practical. He saw them as immoral for obliterating man’s free choice, his feelings of love, and his discretionary exercise of the moral sense.

Hutcheson also rejected excessive charity for those able to work. He wrote that “diligence will never be universal, unless men’s own necessities, and the love of families and friends, excite them” (*System I* 1969, 321). Men have a natural disposition for industry, but they may also experience inner conflict between this desire and their desires for ease. They face constant temptations to idleness—temptations that should not be multiplied. Hence “such as are capable of labour, and yet decline it, should find no support in the labours of others . . . . The most benevolent temper must decline supporting the slothful in idleness” (*System I* 1969, 321). Supporting those who simply choose not to work would provide a very powerful temptation. Therefore, when giving charity, one should consider “the dignity or moral worth of the objects” (*System I* 1969, 306).

### **Reforms to Correct Individualism**

As we saw above, Hutcheson believed that even such activities as conspicuous consumption evince man’s misdirected yearnings for the good and beautiful. An eternal

optimist about human nature, he hoped that such confused and imperfect activities would eventually lead man back to true virtue, by exposing him to social influence and by perfecting his sensitivity towards beauty. But, of course, this process may not work for all men, and some perhaps will sink into luxury, neglecting their duties to the poor, to their families, to their friends, or to their country. Hutcheson would not have warned of the dangers of luxury if he did not think them a real possibility.

The state, therefore, must influence its citizens to take their duties seriously. According to Hutcheson, government can regulate morals without violating natural liberty. Hutcheson's articulation of natural liberty may seem similar to Mill's harm principle—but unlike Mill, he believed that society and government have a role to play in guiding men towards the proper use of their natural liberty. Furthermore, as Daniela Gobetti notes, "Hutcheson's notion of harm . . . is much broader than Locke's" or those of other liberal theorists (1992, 134). Hutcheson was in favor of abridging natural liberty when it harmed others—but his definition of harm included societal consequences such as illegitimacy, not just direct tangible harm to individuals.

Hutcheson believed that instructing citizens about the proper use of their liberty is one important task for government. Hutcheson stressed that "proper laws about education" are vital in a good state (*System I* 1969, 323). Hutcheson also thought that the magistrate should have the power to instruct citizens in religious truth—though not the power to restrict the free exercise of religion or speech. He should be able "to form in his subjects dispositions of piety, love and resignation to God, of temperance towards themselves and just and beneficent dispositions towards their fellows," for "piety thus

diffused in a society, is the strongest restraint against evil” (*System II* 1969, 312). Piety inspires men with benevolence and restrains them from mistreating others. Hutcheson therefore argued that “it must naturally belong to such as are vested with power . . . to take care that such principles as lead to these most useful virtues be fully explained and inculcated upon the people” and that “all this may be done without any restraint or penalties inflicted upon men for different sentiments” (*System II* 1969, 312). Though his comments on this point are a bit vague, it appears he was discussing an established church (combined with freedom of conscience for other faiths), for he wrote that the magistrate should appoint “good men” who will “be provided and supported to take the leading” of men of their faith (*System II* 1969, 312). The state should thus have the power to support religion without interfering with its free exercise.

Of course, instruction also occurs in the private sphere. Hutcheson wrote: “let [individual] men instruct, teach, and convince their fellows as far as they can about the proper use of their natural powers” (*System I* 1969, 295). Often, then, the role of government is to preserve and encourage the instruction that already occurs in families or in society. Since children are chiefly educated “by parents united in a friendly partnership for their education,” it is important that this partnership be preserved (*System II* 1969, 156). Therefore, “’tis necessary that women from their childhood should be so educated as shall best prevent” adultery (*System II* 1969, 156). In fact, such education is useful for both sexes: “from our infancy, we should be enured to modesty and chastity” (*Introduction* 2007, 221).

In order to protect the instruction provided by the family, the state must sometimes criminalize behaviors that do not constitute direct assaults on life, liberty, or property. For instance, government has “a like right to prevent such ways of propagation as would make a proper education impracticable, by leaving the fathers uncertain . . . even tho’ the deluded mothers voluntarily yielded to the ensnaring solicitations” (*System II* 1969, 107). Illegitimacy undermines the natural educative function of the family, by depriving children of two parents committed to their upbringing, and is therefore a matter of public concern. Hutcheson lamented the fact that “the debauching [of] free citizens formerly innocent . . . is no civil crime” in many Christian nations (*System II* 1969, 180). Seduction should be a crime, even if the woman voluntarily submitted. Hutcheson also believed that both prostitution and adultery should be subject to criminal punishment (*System II* 1969, 176). For Hutcheson, “when a marriage is dissolved for such causes . . . such as adultery . . . the guilty party and the associate in crime deserve the highest punishments; as these injuries in marriage do greater mischief, and cause deeper distress than stealing or robbery, for which capital punishments are inflicted” (*Introduction* 2007, 224). Regarding procreation, “mankind as [organized into] a system have a like right to prevent any perversions of the natural instinct from its wise purposes, or any defeating of its end. Such are all monstrous lusts, and arts of abortion” (*System II* 1969, 107). The state must preserve the family by outlawing abortion or other perversions of the procreative instinct. Government must also promote respect for the dignity of the human person, or “a just veneration toward the dignity of our kind” (*System II* 1969, 110).

Therefore government can penalize actions that erode respect for human dignity, such as desecrating a corpse, even if such actions harm no one (*System II* 1969, 110).

In addition to moral education and criminal laws, Hutcheson believed that government could promote virtue by example: “where good instruction is provided, the next most effectual means for promoting all virtues publick and private is the example of those in supreme power” (*System II* 1969, 317). According to Hutcheson, “the virtues most necessary to a state next to piety, which excites to and confirms all the rest, are sobriety, industry, justice, and fortitude” (*System II* 1969, 317). The best way to ensure these virtues in politicians is through popular elections (*System II* 1969, 317). Hutcheson believed that “the populace in their elections, if they are truly free, always follow some appearance of virtue; and will seldom promote any but such as are of distinguished integrity” (*Introduction* 2007, 268). If free elections fail to promote men of virtue, then a censorial power should have the power to interfere. He wrote that “in every state a censorial power is of great consequence: that by it the manners of a people may be regulated” (*System II* 1969, 265). The censor should have “full power of degrading from all honours and offices men of infamous lives and dissolute conduct” (*System II* 1969, 265). The political system should be arranged so as to encourage virtuous statesmen.

Finally, the government could promote fortitude in its citizens through a militia: “the whole people should be trained to . . . military service” (*System II* 1969, 323). This institution would preserve military virtue among the people, for “military arts and virtues are accomplishments highly becoming all the more honourable citizens” (*Introduction* 2007, 270). Youth would serve in the army for a fixed term—Hutcheson suggested eight

years (*System II* 1969, 324-325). He believed that even such long terms would not interfere with commerce or industry, for “a sober virtuous people employed in arms for a few years, would in all little intervals of military service be exercising some industrious arts” (*System II* 1969, 325). Like many Scottish Enlightenment figures, Hutcheson supported a militia as a way to preserve civic virtue within the context of a liberal commercial republic.

### **Conclusion**

Terry Eagleton describes Hutcheson as “the finest kind of moralist, one who understands . . . that ethical discourse is an inquiry into how to live most enjoyably and abundantly” (2009, 31). One of Hutcheson’s own stated goals was to end the “foolish mismanagement of . . . philosophy” that had made it appear in “so austere and ungainly a Form” (*Inquiry* 2008, 10). He was alive to the “moral beauty of actions” and he hoped that appreciation of other forms of beauty—symphonies, architecture, theater, even the beauty of mundane objects like clothing or couches—could, by extension, sensitize us to the fitting and harmonious nature of virtuous character. Hutcheson did not object to the commodification of beauty or pleasure, for he believed that such commodification can have a salutary effect by introducing aesthetic appreciation into everyday life. He also believed that self-interested pursuits, such as the quest for wealth or for physical comforts, are compatible with virtue and perhaps can even lead us back to virtue through being performed in a social context.

In Hutcheson’s works, the reader finds few of the misgivings about commercial society that we will see in Smith or Ferguson. Smith’s sympathy for the dreary life of the



common worker hunched over his pin, or Ferguson's concern for the loss of public spirit in polished nations, is largely absent. Instead, we find faith in the power of economic and social progress to develop man's natural potential. Perhaps contemporary readers should not fault Hutcheson for his seeming indifference to such problems: his major works, authored forty to fifty years prior to the *Wealth of Nations*, may simply signal lack of knowledge about the problems that Scotland would encounter in its rapid industrialization and in its union with Great Britain. It is to the later writers that we must turn for a more hard-headed assessment of commercial society.

## CHAPTER TWO

### INDUSTRY, KNOWLEDGE, HUMANITY: DAVID HUME AND THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE OF COMMERCIAL SOCIETY

David Hume, in the popular imagination, was a skeptic, an iconoclast, a utilitarian, and a notorious atheist. His political thought has been described as “basically Mandevillian” (Michael Gill 2006, 233) as well as Hobbesian (Russell Hardin 2007, 105). Given the prevailing interpretation of Hume, one might expect that he aligned himself with the attack on virtue and taught that commercial society operates best through selfishness. But in fact, he referred to this school of thought as “the selfish system,” specifically criticizing Mandeville, Hobbes, and Locke as its proponents (*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* 2006, 83). He believed that, while self-interest is certainly a natural and even necessary passion, it must be counter-balanced by other passions and by the virtues in order to be contained within its proper sphere. A society cannot cohere through self-interest alone. While Hume rejected many of the civic humanist or traditional Christian virtues, he did not discard virtue altogether, instead adopting a philosophy in which virtue is constituted through social relationships. For Hume, the political philosopher’s task is neither to encourage unrestrained self-interest and self-love, nor to abolish them altogether in favor of a renewed civic devotion to the public realm. Rather, he was concerned with how, and under what conditions, commercial society might foster the social virtues.

### **“Corruption, Venality, Rapine”**

Hume, much less an optimist than Francis Hutcheson, believed that the better aspects of man’s nature can easily be overwhelmed by partiality or passion. Men are often selfish, and such selfishness is pernicious to both the individual and his society. He condemned self-absorption in the strongest terms, observing in “Politics as a Science” that “a man who loves only himself, without regard to friendship and desert, merits the severest blame; and a man, who is only susceptible of friendship, without public spirit, or a regard to the community, is deficient in the most material part of virtue” (*Essays Moral Political and Literary* 1985, 27). Hume criticized skeptics who questioned the very existence of public spirit: “when a man denies the sincerity of all public spirit or affection to a country and community, I am at a loss what to think of him” (*Essays* 1985, 84). Public spirit is not only a real, but a necessary sentiment, since “a PART” of virtue’s merit “arises from its tendency to . . . bestow happiness on human society” (*Enquiry* 2006, 13). He repeatedly condemned the selfish system of Hobbes and Mandeville. For instance, in *History of England* Hume concluded that Hobbes’ “libertine system of ethics” was fit only to “encourage licentiousness” (*History VI* 1983, 153).

Hume believed that individualism could poison our social relationships. For instance, competition for our individual self-interest causes resentment: “our antagonist in a law-suit, and our competitor for any office, are commonly regarded as our enemies; tho' we must acknowledge, if we wou'd but reflect a moment, that their motive is entirely as justifiable as our own” (*Treatise of Human Nature* 1969, 400). Unfortunately, such reflection is rarely effective enough to “entirely remove” this resentment towards our

competitors (*Treatise* 1969, 400). Hume alluded to zero-sum economic competition as a particularly bitter form of this phenomenon: if “two persons of the same trade shou’d seek employment in a town, that is not able to maintain both,” then the feelings between these two people will be marked by “hatred” (*Treatise* 1969, 431). But if these same two people were to “enter into co-partnership together,” then “love arises from their union” (*Treatise* 1969, 431). We often view others as a means to our own self-interest, and make their usefulness to us the criterion of our affections towards them. Thus “whoever can find the means, either by his services, his beauty, or his flattery, to render himself useful or agreeable to us, is sure of our affections” (*Treatise* 1969, 397). In practical terms, this usually means that we court the favor of the wealthy, for “nothing has a greater tendency to give us esteem for any person, than his power and riches; or a contempt, than his poverty and meanness” (*Treatise* 1969, 406).

Avarice, too, can corrupt and isolate men. The love of money is a powerful motive in human behavior: “no affection of the human mind has both a sufficient force and a proper direction to counterbalance the love of gain . . . . Benevolence to strangers is too weak for this purpose; and as to the other passions, they rather inflame this avidity” (*Treatise* 1969, 543). Avarice is problematic because it can obscure our natural sociability: “the avaritious man . . . [lives] without regard to reputation, to friendship, or to pleasure” (*Essay* 1985, 571). Since, as we shall see, Hume thought social relationships to be the primary teacher of virtue, such neglect of them leaves no opportunity for moral improvement.

Hume admitted that commercial society can encourage these vices of

competitiveness and avarice: “in most countries of Europe, family . . . is the chief source of distinction. In England, more regard is paid to present opulence and plenty. Each practice has its advantages and disadvantages . . . . Where riches are the chief idol, corruption, venality, rapine prevail” (*Enquiry* 2006, 54). He was aware that many writers saw commerce and luxury as “the source of all the corruptions, disorders, and factions, incident to civil government” (*Essays* 1985, 269).

Despite these misgivings, Hume was one of the foremost champions of what he called “civilized nations,” resisting calls from the civic humanist side to restore a more antiquarian form of government and virtue. He answered these critics on a number of points. First, he rejected the intrusion of abstract ideals into political life. He adopted a skeptical attitude towards reason, emphasizing the importance of custom and human nature in shaping a system of government. Commercial states thrive because they accorded with local circumstance and feeling—while proposed alternatives, dreamt up in isolation from local culture, are doomed to failure. Second, he argued that commercial societies might eventually correct some of their own problems—that self-love and self-interest, by leading men to improve the arts and seek a reputation in society, might eventually lead men back to virtue because of the sympathetic and humane influence of these pursuits. Third, he suggested policies to mitigate the individualist vices that potentially plagued commercial society.

### **Skepticism and Social Change**

Hume saw politics as an empirical science, not one that could be investigated through *a priori* rationality. Hume was skeptical about the limits of reason in general,

but he thought its role is particularly inappropriate in deciding questions of common life. Although Hume's attitude toward reason has been covered elsewhere (Donald Livingston 1984, Frederick Whelan 1985, John Danford 1990), it is worth reviewing here briefly, as it is relevant to his defense of the existing political and economic order.

Hume identified two types of reasoning: "all reasonings may be divided into two kinds, namely, demonstrative reasoning, or that concerning relations of ideas, and moral reasoning, or that concerning matter of fact and existence" (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* 1995, 49). The first type of reasoning includes mathematics, in which propositions can be proved through abstract arguments. The second type of reasoning, concerning the facts of human or physical existence, cannot be investigated in the same way. It is an experiential or empirical type of knowledge.

The definitions of demonstrative and moral reasoning are more complex than they appear at first glance, for two reasons. First, even though demonstrative reasoning is divorced from ordinary human life, it is still subject to human fallibility. As Hume wrote in the *Treatise on Human Nature*, "in all demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and infallible; but when we apply them, our fallible and uncertain faculties are very apt to depart from them, and fall into error" (1969, 231).

Second, Hume went on to clarify that moral "reasoning" is not really a type of reason at all, despite appearances to the contrary. We form ideas about existence in the following manner: "from causes which appear similar, we expect similar effects. This is the sum of all our experimental conclusions" (*Understanding* 1995, 50). Generalizing our experience of cause and effect does not require reason, for "*cause* and *effect* are

relations, of which we receive information from experience, and not from any abstract reasoning or reflection” (*Treatise* 1969, 117). We may conclude from repeated experience that fire causes heat, but we can advance no logical argument, separate from this experience, proving that this must necessarily be the case: “there can be no *demonstrative* arguments to prove, that those instances, of which we have had no experience, resemble those, of which we have had experience” (*Treatise* 1969, 137).

Moreover, our attempts to explain and to categorize our experiences are necessarily inferior to direct experience itself. Hume drew a distinction between impressions, or direct sensory experience of the world, and ideas, which are mental images of those impressions: “impressions are distinguished from ideas, which are the less lively perceptions of which we are conscious when we reflect on any of those sensations or movements above mentioned” (*Understanding* 1995, 27). Concepts such as “the color red” are merely mental abstractions from all of our observations of the color red, and are therefore less vibrant than the observations themselves.

Since we cannot prove anything about the processes of the external world, should we therefore lose all faith in its existence? No, for the principle of causation, while it cannot be logically demonstrated, is nonetheless a principle of judgment inherent in nature and universally accepted, and as such it needs no proof. Hume believed, just as Aristotle wrote in the *Metaphysics*, that “not everything can be proven . . . . They [human beings] should accept some statement for which they no longer require a reason. Such must be the basis of any argument and demonstration. It is the policy of assuming nothing that destroys discussion and indeed rationality in general” (1998, 89, 332).

Hume was no Aristotelian, and he was certainly skeptical towards the concept of a final cause because such a cause cannot be directly observed. But he followed Aristotle in accepting that if we are to attain understanding, we must first begin with certain axioms that cannot be proved, such as faith in so-called efficient causes, even if such acceptance appears irrational. Demanding perfect rationality would produce paradoxically irrational results: complete paralysis. Hume therefore condemned one type of extreme skepticism, in which “even our very senses are brought into dispute . . . and the maxims of common life are subjected to the same doubt as the most profound principles or conclusions of metaphysics and theology” (*Understanding* 1995, 159). This type of skepticism “depart[s] from the primary instincts of nature,” that is, our faith in an external world, and is therefore untenable (*Understanding* 1995, 161). If carried out consistently, “all human life must perish” (*Understanding* 1995, 168).

But a “more moderate” type of skepticism follows a different method:

To begin with clear and self-evident principles, to advance by timorous and sure steps, to review frequently our conclusions and examine accurately all their consequences—though by these means we shall make both a slow and a short progress in our systems—are the only methods by which we can hope to reach truth and attain a proper stability and certainty in our determinations.  
(*Understanding* 1995, 159)

Moderate skepticism therefore does not deny the existence of objective truth; it merely discovers this truth by proceeding cautiously from accepted principles and assumptions. Furthermore, it not only maintains faith in the external world, but actually prefers the evidence of custom and experience to the less appropriate testimony of abstract reason, at least when examining the human sciences: “we must therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in



the common course of the world” (*Treatise* 1969, 46). As Hume put it near the end of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, “philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected” (1995, 170). Reason is therefore necessary in order to “methodize” and “correct” the observations of common life, but it cannot be our point of departure. Thus the majority of our ideas about the world are formed not by abstract reason, but by custom, which “is the great guide of human life. It is that principle alone which renders our experience useful to us and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past” (*Understanding* 1995, 58).

To sum up: demonstrative reasoning is fallible and bears no connection to the actual facts of human existence; therefore, we should remain skeptical about its application to human society. Instead, we should examine human society through moral reasoning, that is, through accepting the principle of causation and then searching inductively for the effects of certain actions. Neil McArthur claims that in “Hume’s writing there is not a single passage where he explicitly extends his skepticism to the realm of politics” and that Hume conceded that systems of speculative politics have some merit (2007, 117). But Hume repeatedly stressed caution in political affairs: “general maxims in politics ought to be established with great caution,” since we cannot establish political maxims in the same way that a mathematician establishes a proof (*Essays* 1985, 366). “The only rule of government,” Hume wrote, “known and acknowledged among men, is use and practice: Reason is so uncertain a guide that it will always be exposed to

doubt and controversy” (*Essays* 1985, 495).<sup>1</sup> Political theorists must turn from theoretical propositions of political life to its facts, to its lived realities and complexities.

When examining the facts of political life, Hume came to the conclusion that all human beings share the same essential nature, but they are also influenced by local and national circumstances—or “variables,” to use the language of the contemporary social sciences. On the one hand, humans operate under the influence of similar passions and goals: “ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit—these passions, mixed in various degrees and distributed through society, have been, from the beginning of the world . . . the source of all . . . actions and enterprises” (*Understanding* 1995, 93). Because of these broad similarities across cultures and time periods, history reflects certain common tendencies: “Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English: you cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former most of the observations which you made of the latter. Mankind are so much the same in all times, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular” (*Understanding* 1995, 93). On the other hand, though human nature operates on fundamental principles, it is not perfectly predictable, for “we must not . . . expect that this uniformity of human actions should be carried to such a length as that all men, in the same circumstances, will always act precisely in the same manner, without making any

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<sup>1</sup> Hume often criticized existing political theories for their lack of connection to the actual facts of human existence. For instance, he leveled many criticisms against the idea of a social contract because he found little evidence that people had ever been aware of such a contract, tacit or otherwise. As he wrote in “Of the Original Contract,” “new discoveries are not to be expected in these matters. If scarce any man, till very lately, ever imagined that government was founded on contract, it is certain, that it cannot, in general, have any such foundation” (*Essays* 1985, 487).

allowance for the diversity of characters, prejudices, and opinions” (*Understanding* 1995, 95). Human beings are not automatons that will always act in the same way, but are individuals operating under different characteristics, emotions, and influences. Custom is one such influence. In his essay “Of National Character,” Hume noted that “each nation has a peculiar set of manners, and that some particular qualities are more frequently to be met with among one people than among their neighbors” (*Essays* 1985, 197). A people’s national character is shaped by many factors: government, the economy, occupations, foreign relations, and other factors (*Essays* 1985, 198). Since these factors differ across nations, each nation will exhibit different tendencies to certain behaviors.

Differences in national character do not disprove the idea that human nature is universal, because a shared national character merely reaffirms man’s social character: “the human mind is of a very imitative nature . . . . Where a number of men are united together into one political body, the occasions of their intercourse together must be so frequent, for defense, commerce, and government, that . . . they must acquire a resemblance in their manners” (*Essays* 1985, 202-203). National differences arise precisely because men share an underlying human propensity for social living, and they learn to adapt themselves to those around them. As Livingston observes, Hume believed that “the unchanging principles of human nature will manifest themselves concretely in qualitatively different ways” (1984, 218). Our primary instinct for society can lead that society to shape us in secondary ways, in ways that might not be primary aspects of our nature—or, as Gill puts it, for Hume “original concerns can evolve into concerns of different kinds” (2006, 238). Therefore, a political thinker must take into account these

national variations and cannot prescribe a single form of government for all peoples.

How do we ascertain what the character of a nation is? As Hume wrote in “Of The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” we can learn more from the evolution of a state than from its abrupt changes: “the domestic and the gradual revolutions of a state must be a more proper subject of reasoning and observation, than the foreign and the violent, which are commonly produced by single persons, and are more influenced by whim, folly, or caprice, than by general passions and interests” (*Essays* 1985, 112). Slow progress is more instructive than revolutions, because it reveals more about the nation’s citizens as a whole than about a small vanguard of people. We can therefore infer much about a national character—or about human nature in general—from its progress over time, from the customs that emerge as a result of the cooperation and consensus of millions of ordinary people.

Because the gradual evolution of a nation must be taken into account, we must pay attention to the traditions of a nation’s people when discussing appropriate political reforms. Hume therefore emphasized that the proper point of comparison for commercial republics would be alternatives feasible under modern circumstances. We may be able to imagine a superior society, but such a society constitutes an inappropriate standard unless it is adaptable to current conditions. In considering whether Great Britain would be better off as a republic, he stipulated that “the question is not any fine imaginary republic, of which a man may form a plan in his closet” but rather the kind of republic that could actually be established under national customs (*Essays* 1985, 52).

Keeping that stipulation in mind, could a civic humanist prescribe, say, the

Spartan form of government for a modern commercial state like Great Britain? Hume observed in “Of National Characters” that in England, “the people in authority are composed of gentry and merchants . . . . The great liberty and independency, which every man enjoys, allows him to display the manners peculiar to him” (*Essays* 1985, 207). The English had thus become accustomed to trade, liberty, and individuality. The ancient city-states operated under different circumstances: “they were free states; they were small ones; and the age being martial, all their neighbors were continually in arms” (*Essays* 1985, 259). They had to prize courage above individuality or private industry. But this emphasis on courage is difficult to sustain during everyday peaceable living: “courage, of all national qualities, is the most precarious: because it is exerted only at intervals . . . . Whereas industry, knowledge, civility, may be of constant and universal use, and for several ages, may become habitual . . . . If courage be preserved, it must be by discipline, example, and opinion” (*Essays* 1985, 212). Sparta was clearly a “prodigy” to anyone familiar with “human nature as it has displayed itself in other nations, and ages,” and its customs were “contrary to the more natural and usual course of things” (*Essays* 1985, 259). In order to instill the discipline and public spirit necessary to foster such a precarious virtue, the ancient republics had to sacrifice personal liberty. The ancients “were extremely fond of liberty; but seem not to have understood it very well” (*Essays* 1985, 408). The moderns have improved our understanding of liberty, for “human nature, in general, really enjoys more liberty at present, in the most arbitrary government of EUROPE, than it ever did during the most flourishing period of ancient times” (*Essays* 1985, 383). The commercial virtues exhibited by Great Britain, such as private industry,

are more dependable, and more appropriate to its people, than the artificially cultivated virtues of courage or self-sacrifice. Political reforms must maintain harmony with human nature, for “sovereigns must take mankind as they find them, and cannot pretend to introduce any violent change in their principles and thinking” (*Essays* 1985, 260). Any change, whether within or without commercial society, can perhaps adjust, but can never revolutionize, the people’s character.

Hume therefore opposed the “projectors”: intellectuals who sought to implement the imaginary governments they had designed in isolation. When creating a political body, “the judgments of many must unite in this work: Experience must guide their labour: Time must bring it to perfection” (*Essays* 1985, 124). Hume disliked Rousseau’s proposed state from *The Social Contract*, for as he privately wrote in a letter: “he himself told me, that he valued most his *Contrat Social*; which is as preposterous a judgment as that of Milton, who preferred the Paradise Regained to all his other performances” (*Life and Correspondence* 1983, 313). He also found fault with Harrington’s *Oceana*, for as he wrote apropos of Harrington in the sixth volume of *History of England*, “a perfect and immortal commonwealth will always be found as chimerical as that of a perfect and immortal man” (1983, 153). Harrington emerged from the unfortunate period around the English Civil War when “every man had framed the model of a republic; and, however new it was, or fantastical, he was eager in recommending it to his fellow citizens, or even imposing it by force upon them” (*History VI* 1983, 3). In his essay “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” Hume objected to *Oceana*’s lack of individual freedom: “OCEANA provides not a sufficient security for liberty” (*Essays* 1985, 515). Hume also criticized

Harrington's emphasis on social equality, arguing that "its *Agrarian* is impracticable. Men will soon learn the art, which was practiced in ancient ROME, of concealing their possessions under other people's name" (*Essays* 1985, 515). He argued in *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* that economic equality is unsustainable: "historians, and even common sense, may inform us, that . . . these ideas of PERFECT equality . . . are really, at bottom, IMPRACTICABLE . . . . Render possessions ever so equal, men's different degrees of art, care, and industry will immediately break that equality" (*Morals* 2006, 20). Equality is not only impossible, but "PERNICIOUS," for "if you check these virtues [art, care, and industry], you reduce society to the most extreme indigence; and instead of preventing want and beggary in a few, render it unavoidable to the whole community" (*Morals* 2006, 20). Policies so alien to human nature would only undermine its natural virtues.

We must be cautious about altering government, for "it is not with forms of government, as with other artificial contrivances; where an old engine may be rejected, if we can discover another more accurate and commodious, or where trials may be safely made, even though the success may be doubtful" (*Essays* 1985, 512). Existing government has proven itself empirically to be effective in local circumstances, while rash experiments could unleash negative consequences outweighing any disadvantages of the current regime. Perhaps we should rather bear those ills we have, than fly to others that we know not of. Moreover, since man's reason is fallible, man cannot be governed by reason alone, and the age and authority of government are part of what makes it effective in governing him: "an established government has an infinite advantage, by that

very circumstance of its being established; the bulk of mankind being governed by authority, not reason, and never attributing authority to any thing that has not the recommendation of antiquity” (*Essays* 1985, 512). This respect for authority is a proper attitude for mankind, because the intertwining of different generations, as well as man’s limited reason, means that the younger generation should defer to the stability of government:

Did one generation of men go off the stage at once, and another succeed, as is the case with silk-worms and butterflies, the new race, if they had sense enough to choose their government, which surely is never the case with men, might voluntarily, and by general consent, establish their own form of civil polity, without any regard to the laws or precedents, which prevailed among their ancestors. But as human society is in perpetual flux, one man every hour going out of the world, another coming into it, it is necessary, in order to preserve stability in government, that the new brood should conform itself to the established constitution . . . . Violent innovations no individual is entitled to make. (*Essays* 1985, 476)

No one person, or even one generation, could legitimately impose its wishes upon the rest of society. According to Livingston, Hume opposed “Cartesianism” in politics, that is, the attempt to remake politics in the image of a rational ideal. Hume opposed many of the abstract notions of Locke and the Whigs as well as “left-wing Cartesianism which included such thinkers as Jean Meslier, Morelley, the Abbe de Mably, and Rousseau” (1984, 278).

Thus Hume’s skepticism about abstract ideals in politics, his opposition to the projectors or political “Cartesians,” forms part of his response to the critics of commercial society. Commercial society, having evolved over time, is consistent with tradition and human nature—and the projectors ignore these considerations at their peril.



### **“Industry, Knowledge, Humanity”**

Commercial society was therefore firmly established and not amenable to radical change. But was Hume’s defense of it merely prudential? Did he believe it had to be accepted only out of convenience, and that it offered no uplifting moral or social effects? Hume, conceding the political utility of the selfish system, acknowledged that men in commercial society could be induced by their individual self-interest to serve the public good in the absence of better motives. He wrote in “Of Refinement in the Arts” that a magistrate is powerless to enact “a miraculous transformation of mankind, as would endow them with every species of virtue,” and so “very often he can only cure one vice by another . . . . Luxury, when excessive, is the source of many ills; but is in general preferable to sloth and idleness, which would commonly succeed in its place” (*Essays* 1985, 280). When men labor in order to afford luxury, they unwittingly benefit others by creating wealth and employment. In “Of Commerce,” Hume wrote that the government could conceivably motivate its citizens solely by public spirit, but “as these principles are too disinterested and too difficult to support, it is requisite to govern men by other passions, and animate them by a spirit of avarice and industry, art and luxury” (*Essays* 1985, 263). Wealth is beneficial to the state, for “the encrease and consumption of all the commodities, which serve to the ornament and pleasure of life . . . are a kind of *storehouse* of labour, which, in the exigencies of state, may be turned to the public service” (*Essays* 1985, 272). In “Of Money,” he concluded that luxury is therefore favorable to the state: “were the question proposed, Which of these methods of living in the people, the simple or the refined, is most advantageous to the state or the public? I

should, without much scruple, prefer the latter, in a view to politics at least” (*Essays* 1985, 293). Individuals’ pursuit of refined living distributes material advantages to government and the economy.

Jeffrey Church (2007) points out that Hume saw another political advantage to self-interest in large commercial states: their governments could draw upon a system of checks and balances, thus channeling ambition towards the public good.<sup>2</sup> In his essay “Of the Independency of Parliament,” Hume argued that government should be structured so that each branch’s self-interest also coincides with the public good: “we should always consider the separate interest of each court, and each order; and, if we find that, by the skilfull division of power, this interest must necessarily, in its operation, concur with the public, we may pronounce the government to be wise and happy” (*Essays* 1985, 43).

Anticipating the American founders, Hume argued that ambition should counteract ambition.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hume provided other reasons in favor of large states with limited government. Although he did defend small states in “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” it is clear that he also understood their disadvantages, and therefore preferred a large state with some decentralization to the local level. In the same essay, he noted some political advantages to be gained from larger states: “in a large government, which is modeled with masterly skill, there is compass and room enough to refine the democracy, from the lower people . . . to the higher magistrates” (*Essays* 1985, 528). Furthermore, in a large government “the parts are so distant and remote, that it is very difficult, either by intrigue, prejudice, or passion, to hurry them into any measure against the public interest” (*Essays* 1985, 528). As he noted in another essay, “Of Parties in General,” small states are prone to certain types of faction because of the closeness of the citizens: “personal factions arise most easily in small republics. Every domestic quarrel, there, becomes an affair of state” (*Essays* 1985, 158).

<sup>3</sup> Albert O. Hirschman argues that self-interest was first conceptualized as a useful restraint in the private sphere, before it was later found to be one in the branches of government as well. He writes that “the former principle [self-interest in the private individual] laid the intellectual groundwork for the principle of separation of powers” (1977, 30). He identifies the *Federalist Papers* as the first document to apply this principle to government, and argues that it found this principle acceptable because it had already been accepted it at the individual level. However, in Hume’s work, the two principles seem to be reversed.

Thus the self-interest of both citizens and politicians can, in some cases, serve the public good. The political sphere should even be structured in such a manner as to depend on this self-interest rather than on more admirable motives. Hume's condemnation of "the selfish system" would thus seem to be a mere rhetorical tribute to virtue, putting a pretty veneer on Hume's Mandevillean project of liberating self-interest and vice. Hardin, for instance, asserts that "the rudiments of his political theory are mostly those of Hobbes . . . . Hume and Hobbes share the view that universal egoism . . . can be channeled by the government to produce universal welfare" (2007, 2, 105). Similarly, Robert Manzer writes "Hume's conception of commercial society is the most radical manifestation of his efforts to turn political science towards exploiting men's self-interested passions" (1996, 346). Stephen Wulf argues that Hume endorsed commercial republics because they were most likely to foster "mitigated skepticism" in their inhabitants, but not because of any relation to virtue (2000, 98).

However, as Jeffrey Church argues (2007), Hume's concessions to the selfish system were partial. He ultimately believed it not only incomplete, but potentially destructive if taken to its logical conclusion. As we shall see, Hume believed that every man ought to be supposed a knave in politics, but also stipulated that he is not, nor should he be, a knave in his private capacity. Hume's example of the "sensible knave" showed that such private selfishness ultimately poses public consequences. Self-interest may have some salutary political effects, but self-interest alone is insufficient to maintain a society.

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Hume considered self-interest to be valuable in a system of checks and balances, but rejected it as a sufficient restraint on individuals.

Hume thought he had discovered mechanisms by which commercial society, even as it draws on such self-interest and self-love, might also re-direct these motives towards virtue. His conception of the virtues will be reviewed first, before then explaining how commercial society has specific advantages in encouraging them.

### Hume's Theory of Moral Sentiments

Hume believed man to be a social animal, and thought that “man, born in a family, is compelled to maintain society, from necessity, from natural inclination, and from habit” (*Essays* 1985, 37). Some virtues are direct consequences of our social natures: “the social virtues of humanity and benevolence exert their influence immediately by a direct tendency or instinct . . . . A parent flies to the relief of his child; transported by that natural sympathy which actuates him, and which affords no leisure to reflect” (*Morals* 2006, 88).<sup>4</sup> He discussed this type of virtue in his essay “Of the Original Contract,” in which he argued that people experience an “immediate propensity” for “love of children, gratitude to benefactors, pity to the unfortunate” (*Essays* 1985, 479). Our automatic fellow-feeling with those around us is what Hume called sympathy: “no quality of human nature is more remarkable . . . than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments” (*Treatise* 1969, 367). When we sympathize with others, their emotions “strike upon us in a lively manner, and produce an emotion similar to the original one” (*Treatise* 1969, 418). This universal human tendency naturally encourages virtues such as benevolence. We want to make the people around us happy, because their happiness is

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<sup>4</sup> For a complete discussion of the importance of sociability in Hume's moral thought, see Norbert Waszek (1988).

infectious. This category of virtue Hume therefore deemed “social virtue,” because it is rooted in our social nature.

Other virtues do not arise immediately from the human condition, but they develop inevitably as part and parcel of society. The “virtues of justice and fidelity” are different from the first type of virtue. This type of virtue does not proceed directly from our individual inclinations, but rather “arises from the whole scheme or system concurred in by the whole, or the greater part of society” (*Morals* 2006, 88). He compared this category of virtue to “the building of a vault, where each individual stone would, of itself, fall to the ground; nor is the whole fabric supported but by the mutual assistance and combination of its corresponding parts” (*Morals* 2006, 89). This second type of virtue Hume described as artificial, for in his essay “Of The Original Contract,” Hume noted that they “are not supported by any original instinct of nature, but are performed entirely from a sense of obligation, when we consider the necessities of human society, and the impossibility of supporting it, if these duties were neglected” (*Essays* 1985, 480). Men learn to concur with the principles of justice, property, and fidelity because they realize it is in society’s interest— and therefore their interest, for they naturally want to be a part of society—for everybody to follow these rules. Justice is promoted by man’s proper understanding of his own interest: “*self interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice*” (*Treatise* 1969, 551). These virtues are the product of moral reasoning, of reflection on society’s needs, not individual impulse.

However, though these virtues are based in social consensus rather than instinct, they are not unnatural in the sense of being fabricated or foisted upon mankind. Marcia

Baron is wrong to write that, for Hume, justice is a “noble lie” and that the artificial virtues are “not good in themselves” (1982, 541). Man is naturally both social and reasonable, and justice is an inevitable result of these qualities. As Hume argued, “if reason and forethought be also natural; then may the same epithet be applied to justice, order, fidelity, property, society. Men’s inclination, their necessities, lead them to combine; their understanding and experience tell them that this combination is impossible where each governs himself by no rule” (*Morals* 2006, 90). Justice is therefore based in both self-interest and sociability: sociability, because justice enables us to live in society, as our natures prefer; self-interest, because justice protects us from being harmed by other members of the society. Furthermore, Hume pointed out that these concepts could never be intelligible to mankind if we lacked the natural capacity to develop and understand them. Proponents of the selfish system had argued that moral distinctions were invented by politicians to subdue mankind; but Hume pointed out that “had nature made no such distinction, founded on the original constitution of the mind, the words HONOURABLE and SHAMEFUL . . . had never had place in any language; nor could politicians, had they invented these terms, ever had been able to render them intelligible” (*Morals* 2006, 33).

Property is an example of an artificial virtue that inevitably develops out of necessity to society. The idea of private property might at first appear totally unnatural: “what . . . reason, indeed, could writers ever give, why this must be MINE and that YOURS; since uninstructed nature surely never made any such distinction? The objects which receive those appellations are, of themselves, foreign to us; they are totally

disjoined and separated from us” (*Morals* 2006, 21). But experience and common sense soon teach us that private property is conducive to a healthier society, for “who sees not, for instance, that whatever is produced or improved by a man’s art or industry ought, for ever, to be secured to him, in order to give encouragement to such USEFUL habits and accomplishments?” (*Morals* 2006, 21). Perhaps we cannot logically prove that a man should have a right to an apple he has picked—it remains, after all, separate from his body—but we can understand from our experience that granting such a right is good because it encourages industry. Private property is not an arbitrary convention, for “there is this material difference between SUPERSTITION and JUSTICE, that the former is frivolous, useless, and burdensome; the latter is absolutely requisite to the well-being of mankind and existence of society” (*Morals* 2006, 23). Although abstract reason may lead us to believe that property should be distributed on the basis of merit instead of wealth or inheritance, a close examination of human nature shows that if people were to “assign the largest possessions to the most extensive virtue” they would run into difficulties, for “so great is the uncertainty of merit, both from its natural obscurity, and from the self-conceit of each individual, that no determinate rule of conduct would ever result from it; and the immediate dissolution of society must be the immediate consequence” (*Morals* 2006, 19). Private property, then, is the best, most natural way to promote the interests of human society. Even under feudalism, the development of private property was a natural progression: “the attachment, naturally formed with a fixed portion of land, gradually begets the idea of something like property, and makes the possessor forget his dependant situation, and the condition which was at first annexed to the grant. It seemed equitable,

that one who had cultivated and sowed a field, should reap the harvest” (*History I* 1983, 458).

Both types of virtue, then, are at bottom social virtues, since they arise either directly or indirectly from man’s social nature, from his desire to live in a healthy society. According to Hume, this emphasis on the social aspect of virtue “represent[s] virtue in all her genuine and most engaging charms, and makes us approach her with familiarity, ease, and affection” (*Morals* 2006, 73). Strong morals can help us gain what Hume called “the greater happiness” (*Morals* 2006, 74). Because morality is suggested by our natural instincts, Hume concluded that “virtue is an end, and is desirable on its own account, without fee and reward, merely for the immediate satisfaction which it conveys” (*Morals* 2006, 82). Contravening moral norms in particular circumstances, even if the action does not cause any great harm, violates our own instincts.

The desirability of virtue formed Hume’s reply to the “sensible knave,” who, like Hobbes’ Foole, “may think that an act of iniquity or infidelity will make a considerable addition to his fortune, without causing any considerable breach in the social union and confederacy” (*Morals* 2006, 75). Such a knave appears “sensible” because his arguments appear rational by the standards of abstract reason. After all, from a utilitarian point of view, if we could advance our own happiness through a vicious act that did not cause any demonstrable harm to others—through plagiarism, perhaps, or through a white lie—why should we not pursue such a course? Would it not contribute to the greater good? However, the knave’s arguments neglect the inherent value of virtue to the individual possessing it—a value we can perceive through experience. According to Hume, virtue



possessed an affective dimension that contributes to happiness: “inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct; these are circumstances, very requisite to happiness” (*Morals* 2006, 76). Unlike Hobbes, then, Hume did not appeal to self-interest alone in his answer to the prospective covenant-breaker. Since self-interest does not apply in every case—only in cases where the offender is likely to be caught, or the risks of being punished outweigh the benefits—the selfish system cannot furnish an effective answer to the sensible knave.<sup>5</sup>

Another point on which Hume disagreed with the selfish system is whether self-love comprises the totality of human motives. Hume wrote that “avarice, ambition, vanity, and all passions vulgarly, though improperly, comprised under the denomination of SELF-LOVE, are here excluded from our theory concerning the origin of morals . . . because they have not a proper direction for that purpose” (*Morals* 2006, 69). The distinction between virtue and self-love becomes obvious because of three considerations. First, self-interest and morality are clearly distinguishable because the latter is peculiar to a specific person, whereas the language of morality is general and accessible to all. According to Hume, pursuit of one’s self-interest or desires is particular to the individual, for “when a man denominates another his ENEMY, his RIVAL, his ANTAGONIST, his ADVERSARY, he is understood to speak the language of self-love, and to express sentiments, peculiar to himself, and arising from his particular circumstances and situation” (*Morals* 2006, 69). But morality is not peculiar to a

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<sup>5</sup> Unlike Hobbes, Mandeville did not seem concerned with preventing knaves from contravening the norms of justice. In the “Fable of the Bees,” he implied that even injustice can be profitable to a society, because it furnishes employment to lawyers and locksmiths.

situation, for “when he bestows on any man the epithets of VICIOUS or ODIIOUS or DEPRAVED, he then speaks another language, and expresses sentiments, in which he expects all his audience are to concur with him” (*Morals* 2006, 69). Self-interest and its attendant passions are idiosyncratic, whereas morality is universal. Hume thus rejected the nominalism inherent in the selfish system of Hobbes and Mandeville. For Hume, words of good and evil are *not* used simply with regard to the individual using them, and the language of morality is not a mask for our interests and desires. If this were true, it would not be generally intelligible, for “all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment” (*Understanding* 1995, 28).

Second, virtues are clearly not identical to self-love because they are appreciated by all people, even when they provide no tangible good to the person appreciating them. Hume pointed out, for instance, that at the theater we weep over unjust suffering, and “rejoice” at a happy ending, even though the characters are fictional and their situation cannot possibly provide any advantage to us (*Morals* 2006, 37). Hume also noted that we praise good qualities that a man possesses, even when they are useful only to himself. We extol a quality such as frugality when we see it in another man, even though a man’s propensity to save his own money cannot possibly help us. Hume argued that “as these advantages are enjoyed by the person possessed of that character, it can never be SELF-LOVE which renders the prospect of them agreeable to us, the spectators” (*Morals* 2006, 45). Humans, as discussed above, have a natural sympathy or fellow-feeling with others; they naturally enter into the sentiments of those around them, becoming uneasy when they witness people who are unhappy and becoming joyous themselves when they

contemplate the happiness of others. They are capable of a “disinterested benevolence,” that is, of wishing good to others even when their own self-interest is not affected by the situation, simply because their feelings are affected by it (*Morals* 2006, 86).

Third, morality can even lead us to act contrary to our own self-interest. For instance, take the example of the head of a family:

tho' it be rare to meet with one, who loves any single person better than himself; yet 'tis as rare to meet with one, in whom all the kind affections, taken together, do not overbalance all the selfish. Consult common experience: Do you not see, that tho' the whole expence of a family be generally under the direction of the master of it, yet there are few who do not bestow the largest part of their fortunes on the pleasures of their wives, and the education of their children, reserving the smallest portion for their own proper use and entertainment. (*Treatise* 1969, 538)

The head of a household spends more overall on his family than on himself, in spite of the fact that doing so detracts from his own selfish amusements. He may not sacrifice his entire property in one fell stroke, but, taken together, the amount of property he sacrifices for his wife, his children, his parents, his friends, and the poor, outweighs the percentage of his property spent on his own amusement. He does so because he is motivated by virtue: by benevolence and duty towards his family. Experience thus teaches that we can practice and appreciate virtue even when we gain no material good from it, or in fact lose material good from it. Hume therefore chided the selfish system for its lack of explanatory power. By attempting to explain a complex reality through a single principle, its supposedly hard-headed realism becomes as abstract and distanced from reality as any speculative system of politics.

Hume believed that the development of virtue is therefore distinct from, and even controls, self-love: “by such universal principles are the particular sentiments of self-love

frequently controlled and limited” (*Morals* 2006, 70). Self-regarding passions such as avarice can be prevented by our social passions and sympathy from reaching damaging extremes:

For as it is evident, that every man loves himself better than any other person, he is naturally impelled to extend his acquisitions as much as possible; and nothing can restrain him in this propensity, but reflection and experience, by which he learns the pernicious effects of that license, and the total dissolution of society which must ensue from it. His original inclination, therefore, or instinct, is here checked and restrained by a subsequent judgment or observation.  
(*Essays* 1985, 480)

Self-love may play an important role in Hume’s thought, as it is part of human nature, but it is moderated by our regard for others. Neither total preoccupation with self-interest nor total disinterestedness is desirable. Hume deplored either extreme, for “when a man of business enters into life and action, he is more apt to consider the characters of men, as they have relation to his interest . . . . When a philosopher contemplates characters and manners in his closet, the general abstract view of the objects leaves the mind so cold and unmoved . . . he scarce feels the difference between vice and virtue” (*Essays* 1985, 568). The man of business can be too self-interested, while the philosopher can be too disinterested. People should thus seek out “a just medium between these extremes” (*Essays* 1985, 568). Hume believed that few people occupied either extreme, for, as he wrote as early as the *Treatise of Human Nature*, “a traveller would meet with . . . little credit, who shou’d inform us of people exactly of the same character with those . . . in *Hobbes’ Leviathan*” (1969, 450).

For Hume, then, virtue is not simply defined by what is useful to ourselves. Qualities are considered meritorious when they either promote our own true interest, *or*

the interest of others: “every quality which is useful or agreeable to ourselves or others is, in common life, allowed to be a part of personal merit” (*Morals* 2006, 68). He taught a fourfold categorization of virtue, not a simplistic one: usefulness or agreeableness, either to society or to the person who possesses the virtue.

Because of Hume’s emphasis on the usefulness of virtue, he is often interpreted as utilitarian. Bentham himself wrote that reading Hume caused him to see “that utility was the test and measure of all virtue” (Stephen Darwall 1994, 60). Following suit, Terence Penelhum finds that Hume’s work “in many respects anticipates the later work of Bentham and Mill” (1992, 137). Hardin argues that Hume believed the virtues “are essentially utilitarian and have no moral standing in their own right. This view makes nonsense of those virtue theories in which the virtues are good in themselves” (2007, 20). Joseph Filonowicz claims that Hume moved away from the “sentimentalism” of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson and “towards utilitarianism” (2008, 236). Jordan Sobel describes Hume’s theory of right actions as a “utilitarian theory” that teaches people it is sometimes justified “to be unjust at heart—to be ready to lie and cheat and steal and in general to flout ‘rules of justice’ whenever general happiness can be furthered thereby” (1997, 61, 70). Darwall argues that Hume developed Hutcheson’s utilitarian theory further and therefore became “a crucial transitional figure in the development of utilitarianism” (1994, 60).

Yet Hume’s moral theory does not quite fit these characterizations. For Hume, utility itself is not the direct reason for our appreciation of virtue; rather, our aesthetic reaction to it is: “the eye is pleased with the prospect of corn-fields and loaded vine-

yards; horses grazing, and flocks pasturing” (*Morals* 2006, 11). It is this aesthetic satisfaction, derived from the sympathetic contemplation of usefulness and happiness, that forms the basis of moral sentiment. Hume described the moral faculty as a taste, because of its aesthetic and emotional component. He differed from utilitarian philosophers such as Bentham, who believed that morality could be assessed through a rational cost-benefit calculation. For Hume, our inherently pleasurable reactions—to the picturesque sight of plentiful pastures, or to a benevolent companion—are an important part of taste. Morality is not determined by reason alone, but instead by “some sentiment which it touches, some internal taste or feeling” (*Morals* 2006, 82). As Hume pointed out in his essay “Of The Standard of Taste,” taste, either in morality or art, could not be reduced to an equation: “to check the sallies of the imagination, and to reduce every expression to geometrical truth and exactness, would be the most contrary to the laws of criticism” (*Essays* 1985, 231).

Equating moral judgment with aesthetic taste was not, for Hume, a turn towards individual or cultural relativism, for he believed that aesthetic principles are universal: “the general principles of taste are universal in human nature” (*Essays* 1985, 243).<sup>6</sup> Hume believed that enduring poets such as Homer touch some fundamental principle in human nature, even if that principle cannot be discovered through *a priori* reasoning (*Essays* 1985, 243). In fact, for Hume taste is less idiosyncratic and fallible than reason,

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<sup>6</sup> However, the occasional fallibility of aesthetic taste should be evident from Hume’s own failure to appreciate Shakespeare: “if Shakespeare be considered as a MAN, born in a rude age, and educated in the lowest manner, without any instruction, either from the world or from books, he may be regarded as a prodigy: If represented as a POET, capable of furnishing a proper entertainment to a refined or intelligent audience, we must abate much of this eulogy” (*History V* 1983, 151).

since reason is unable to grasp the finer points of poetry. Hume believed that the same is true of morality, that reason alone could overlook the deeper truths of moral law. In his essay “Of Moral Prejudices,” he presented a situation in which an unmarried female philosopher wishes to have a child and educate him. She decides that the custom barring women from having children out of wedlock is simply a prejudice, indefensible through rational principles, so she conceives a child with her male friend. But her seemingly rational decision leads to an irrational result: the father agrees to a contract stating that he will leave her control of the child, but he comes to love both her and the child and sues in court for his paternal rights, creating a situation that perplexes the law courts (*Essays* 1985, 544). The ostensibly arbitrary rule against out-of-wedlock children thus serves important aspects of human nature—attachment to offspring, a peaceful environment for the child—even though its importance is not immediately discoverable to abstract reason. In fact, even prohibitions on murder might seem arbitrary if considered by reason alone: “’tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger” (*Treatise* 1969, 463). The wickedness of murder can only be seen when “you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action” (*Treatise* 1969, 520). In morality, therefore, we must trust our taste, and the customs shaped by that taste. This is why “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (*Treatise* 1969, 462). Not reason, but our higher passions for the good of others and for righteousness, must control our baser passions.

Hume’s sanguine faith in the universality of moral sentiments runs into an

obvious difficulty: that is, the variation in customs across cultures.<sup>7</sup> Yet Hume was confident that moral customs reflect a universal human nature expressing itself in different circumstances. Much of the variation can be explained by the fact that seemingly divergent customs express the same underlying virtue. Hume wrote that “many of the forms of breeding are arbitrary and casual; but the thing expressed by them is still the same. A Spaniard goes out of his own house before his guest, to signify that he leaves him master of all. In other countries, the landlord walks out last, as a common mark of deference and regard” (*Morals* 2006, 62). Furthermore, some examples of moral excellence clearly prevail across time periods and national cultures, just as Homer prevails as an example of poetic excellence across time periods and national cultures: “who admires not Socrates; his perpetual serenity and contentment, amidst the greatest poverty and domestic vexations?” (*Morals* 2006, 59).

For Hume, then, reason plays a limited role in our personal virtues, just as it plays a limited role in shaping political systems. Yet reason is not altogether absent from moral judgments. Reason reflects on our intuitions in order to “methodize” and “correct” them, to form them into a system: “philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected” (1995, 170). Reason evaluates the different goods suggested by our experience or intuitions—for instance, our feelings may simultaneously suggest that we should provide for our child but also give alms to the poor, and reason can help us to decide which goal takes priority and how to balance the two. We also use it to understand the facts of the situation before applying moral

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<sup>7</sup> See Daniel Carey (2006) for a detailed discussion of how the Scottish Enlightenment confronted the problem of cultural diversity.



judgment: “in moral deliberations we must be acquainted beforehand with all the objects, and all their relations to each other; and from a comparison of the whole, fix our choice or approbation” (*Morals* 2006, 79). We cannot follow our first impulses or passions, before we have thought about the situation, for “while we are ignorant whether a man was aggressor or not, how can we determine whether the person who killed him be criminal or innocent? But after every circumstance, every relation is known . . . the approbation or blame which then ensues, cannot be the work of the judgment, but of the heart” (*Morals* 2006, 80). Morality thus requires a combination of reason and sentiment: reason is the handmaid of affective moral judgments.

Hume’s moral system is therefore based in sentiment. Both the “natural” and “artificial” virtues are shaped, either directly or indirectly, by our natural, sympathetic attachments to those around us. Morality is therefore a taste, not a set of syllogisms, and we desire it for the inherent pleasure it provides. Hume largely rejected the selfish system because he believed that morality is real and objective, not merely a mask for our own self-interest.

#### Hume’s Virtuous Politics

As Church (2007) has noted, Hume’s rejection of the selfish system in his moral philosophy led him to reject it in much of his political philosophy as well. As discussed above, Hume thought self-interest could play a role in politics—but he also warned that self-interest alone can provide no satisfactory answer to the sensible knave; only an appreciation of virtue can do so. He also knew that commercial society’s critics alleged that markets and virtues are completely incompatible. Indeed, Hume himself had

acknowledged competitiveness and avarice to be possible dangers in such a system. In order to accept commercial society, therefore, Hume must have believed that such vices were not inevitable, and that such societies also contain the potential for virtue.

In order to understand how commercial society can avoid the extremes of individualism, we must first understand how and why it develops. In “Of Refinement in the Arts,” Hume argued that laws become more advanced once man has exercised his reason first in the “vulgar” arts of commerce and luxury: “laws, order, police, discipline; these can never be carried to any degree of perfection, before human reason has refined itself by exercise, and by application to the more vulgar arts, at least, of commerce and manufacturing” (*Essays* 1985, 271). But in another essay, “Of The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” Hume appeared to argue for a slightly different chain of events: “from law arises security: From security curiosity: And from curiosity knowledge. The latter steps of this progress may be more accidental; but the former are altogether necessary” (*Essays* 1985, 118). In this essay, then, Hume posited that government advances first, creating the security necessary for knowledge of the arts and sciences to flourish. Does this view of development conflict with the one described in “Of Refinement in the Arts”?

We must turn to Hume’s monumental *History of England*, a case study of development, in order to understand the chain of events linking commercial and political advancements. Hume charted England’s progress towards a modern commercial state. England, of course, was not always a bustling center of commerce, and so much of the first volumes was devoted to an England sunk in “ignorance and barbarism” during the

first stages of its history (*History II* 1983, 519). But after the eleventh century, “the sun of science, beginning to re-ascend, threw out many gleams of light, which preceded the full morning, when letters were revived in the fifteenth century” (*History II* 1983, 519). What led to this resurgence of interest in the arts and sciences? Hume mentioned various reasons, but then noted that “perhaps there was no event, which tended further to the improvement of the age, than . . . the accidental finding of a copy of Justinian’s Pandects, about the year 1130, in the town of Amalfi in Italy” (*History II* 1983, 520). Scholars began to study the science of jurisprudence once this work became available, improving academic learning.

Some aspects of this improved legal knowledge also influenced civil courts and government. This turn of events secured many political benefits in the long run. It strengthened the monarchy, culminating in the absolute power of the Tudor monarchs: “though the farther progress of the same causes begat a new plan of liberty, founded on the privilege of the commons, yet in the interval between the fall of the nobles and the rise of this order, the sovereign took advantage of the present situation, and assumed a power almost absolute” (*History IV* 1983, 384). While this may seem a disadvantage, it represented an improvement over the power of the lords, since, as Hume explained in “That Politics May be Reduced to a Science,” feudal-style nobility—in which each noble has nearly absolute power in his jurisdiction—is one of the worst forms of government, and hereditary monarchy one of the better ones. A centralized monarchy can at least standardize the laws: “the settled authority, which he [Henry VII] acquired to the crown, enabled the sovereign to encroach on the separate jurisdictions of the barons, and

produced a more general and regular execution of the laws” (*History IV* 1983, 385).

Furthermore, as the monarchs became stronger, they offered greater protections to the commoners in a conscious effort to check the nobles’ power. Henry VII passed a law allowing nobles to alienate their estates, which Hume suspected was an intentional act to strengthen the commons:

the most important law in its consequences, which was enacted during the reign of Henry, was that by which the nobility and gentry acquired a power of breaking the ancient entails, and of alienating their estates. By means of this law, joined to the beginning luxury and refinements of the age, the great fortunes of the barons were gradually dissipated, and the property of the commons increased in England. It is probable, that Henry foresaw and intended this consequence, because the constant scheme of his policy consisted in depressing the great, and exalting churchmen, lawyers, and men of new families, who were more dependant on him. (*History III* 1983, 77)

These political benefits, in turn, provided protection to further improvements in learning and art. All this was made possible by inheriting the art of jurisprudence, “which was also so necessary for giving security to all other arts, and which, by refining, and still more, by bestowing solidity on the judgment, served as a model to further improvements” (*History II* 1983, 521).

Most importantly, however, Henry VII’s law allowing for alienation of estates facilitated the rise of a middle class—which further improved the arts. England’s early history, Hume wrote, was marked by a “total want of a middling rank of men”—a defect that was corrected as England progressed (*History I* 1983, 174). “As agriculture improved, and money increased,” Hume wrote, men gradually discovered that lands could be better cultivated “where the farmer enjoyed a security in his possession” (*History II* 1983, 523). Thus was established a “middling rank” of landed gentry.

Furthermore, “the encrease of the arts” led the nobility to compete with each other in seeking “to excel in the splendour and elegance of their equipage, houses, and tables” (*History III* 1983, 76). In order to supply the nobility, “the common people, no longer maintained in vicious idleness by their superiors, were obliged to learn some calling or industry, and became useful both to themselves or others” (*History III* 1983, 76).

Because of Henry’s law, nobles were able to squander their estates in order to satiate their greed for novel luxuries: “by means of this law, joined to the beginning luxury and refinements of the age, the great fortunes of the barons were gradually dissipated, and the property of the commons encreased” (*History III* 1983, 77). Over time, then, a mercantile class sprang forth and joined the middling rank: “men of an inferior rank both acquired a share in the landed property, and created to themselves a considerable property of a new kind, in stock, commodities, art, credit, and correspondence” (*History III* 1983, 80).

Finally, the commercial and artistic improvements generated by the new middle class stimulated even more improvements in government. As the people became economically independent of the nobles, they advocated for political independence as well: “thus *personal* freedom became almost general in Europe; an advantage which paved the way for the encrease of *political* or *civil* liberty” (*History II* 1983, 524). In England, this increase of political liberty occurred when the commons began to assert their political privileges: “the habits of luxury dissipated the immense fortunes of the ancient barons . . . . The cities encreased; the middle rank of men began to be rich and powerful . . . . The farther progress of the same causes begat a new plan of liberty,

founded on the privileges of the commons” (*History IV* 1983, 384). And of course, as government became freer and more refined, it hindered commerce less, provided better protection in the form of police and justice, and thus gave rise to further improvements in the commercial and academic arts—all part of the cycle described above.<sup>8</sup>

We see, then, that the process Hume describes is not linear, but rather exists in a feedback loop—or, as McArthur called it, a “virtuous circle” (2007, 12). Development of the arts and commerce tend to go together, since as Hume remarked elsewhere, commerce and luxury are types of art: “the mechanical arts . . . commonly produce some refinements in the liberal . . . . The spirit of the age affects all the arts . . . . We cannot reasonably expect, that a piece of woollen cloth will be wrought to perfection in a nation, which is ignorant of astronomy” (*Essays* 1985, 270). These arts improve the government by refining men’s capacities, allowing them to develop a more sophisticated and reasonable system of law. Such an improved government then provides protection for the arts to develop even further, which subsequently provide more improvement to

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<sup>8</sup> This process of development did not occur perfectly or smoothly in England, and some of its initial development was based on accident or good fortune. One problem delaying this development was excessive government interference. In medieval England, the monarch wielded total power over commerce, and so “he was to be paid for a permission to exercise commerce or industry of any kind” (*History I* 1983, 480). Kings generally made extensive use of this power: “the men of Worcester paid 100 shillings, that they might have the liberty of selling and buying dyed cloth, as formerly: Several other towns paid for a like liberty. The commerce indeed of the kingdom was so much the controul of the king, that he erected gilds, corporations and monopolies . . . and levied sums for these exclusive privileges” (*History I* 1983, 480).

Another problem stymieing the rise of commerce was the lack of social status accompanying it. Hume observed in his essay “Of Civil Liberty” that “commerce . . . is apt to decay in absolute governments, not because it is there less *secure*, but because it is less *honourable*” (*Essays* 1985, 93). He therefore praised King Athelstan because “he passed a remarkable law, which was calculated for the encouragement of commerce . . . that a merchant, who made three long sea-voyages on his own account, should be admitted to the rank of a thane or gentleman” (*History I* 1983, 88). However, subsequent rulers did not follow his example, and the rise of the commons in England was slow in developing.

government. In England's case, learning improved through discoveries in the fifteenth century, which improved government, which in turn stimulated further improvements in learning and the arts. As Danford puts it, "what succeeded in transforming feudal society was, in the end, the progress of the arts, progress connected to the recovery of the arts of Roman jurisprudence, and specifically the spread of a taste for luxury or 'refinements in the arts'" (1988, 123).

This process of economic development is important because it also promotes moral development in several ways. As Hume argued in "Of Refinement in the Arts," "industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polished, and what are commonly denominated, the more luxurious ages" (*Essays* 1985, 271). To say that these characteristics together constitute an "indissoluble chain" is a bold claim, but Hume believed he had a number of arguments to support it. First, as commerce and the arts develop, they refine our capacity for language and reflection, eventually improving sympathy. Second, commerce is directly linked to a number of virtues such as frugality and industry. Third, the governmental improvement that accompanies refinements in the arts also increases sentiments of humanity and moderation. Fourth, the rise of the middle class makes virtue more easily attainable for those fortunate enough to join its ranks, since the middle class is best positioned to practice certain virtues. Finally, the social cooperation often brought about by commerce increases society's civilizing power over the individual; even as he initially pursues only his self-interest or self-love, he is gradually brought under society's power and begins to feel sympathy and benevolence.

First, the superior knowledge and education associated with commercial society refine the moral sentiments. Hume explained that as primitive societies develop language and abstract ideas, they develop their moral code: “language must soon . . . express a peculiar set of terms, in order to express these universal sentiments of censure or approbation, which arise from humanity . . . . Virtue and vice become then known; morals are recognized; certain general ideas are formed of human conduct and behavior” (*Morals* 2006, 70). Our capacity for language and thought allows us to abstract moral principles from our experience. In order to illustrate this process, Hume drew attention to the unmitigated passions of primitive man: “it seems certain, both from reason and experience, that a rude, untaught savage regulates chiefly his love and hatred by the ideas of private utility and injury, and has but faint conceptions of a general rule or system of behavior” (*Morals* 2006, 71). The savage man, for instance, behaves with fury towards his enemy in war, for “the man who stands opposite to him in battle, he hates heartedly, not only for the present moment . . . but for ever after; nor is he satisfied without the most extreme punishment and vengeance” (*Morals* 2006, 71). As Hume observed in his *History of England*, man in the first stage of development is capable of “the virtues of valour and love of liberty,” but those are “the only virtues which can have place among an uncivilized people, where justice and humanity are commonly neglected” (*History I* 1983, 15). He has not yet learned how to step outside his immediate emotional impulses.

Contrast these intense and selfish passions with the more sophisticated moral reflections of a civilized man: “but we, accustomed to society, and to more enlarged reflections, consider, that this man is serving his own country and community; that any



man, in the same situation, would do the same . . . and by these suppositions and views, we correct, in some measure, our ruder and narrower positions” (*Morals* 2006, 71).

Modern man treats his enemy in war with much more humanity and consideration because of his more advanced moral reasoning. As we saw in the discussion of Hume’s moral philosophy, morality requires some degree of abstract thought—not abstract speculative reason, but rather the ability to glean general rules from common life and from our intuitions, and apply them in various situations. Furthermore, it requires us to use reason insofar as we suspend judgment and consider all the facts of a situation. Sympathy, too, is based in feeling, but requires some degree of reflection. Sympathy is a form of “communication” between people and therefore requires us to step outside of our own feelings and into another’s ideas and circumstances (*Treatise* 1969, 367). The citizen of a developed nation can more easily adopt this attitude, because he is better able to reflect on the situations of other people. His advanced capabilities for language and reason allow him to “enlarge” his reflections and consider the complexities of the situation. He considers the fact that enemy soldiers are simply defending their country, just as he is doing, and though he continues to fight against them on the battlefield, he seeks no vengeance once the war is over or the soldier has been taken captive. He observes general rules even towards the enemy.

Liberal arts education plays a key role in cultivating our natural sympathetic and moral capabilities. Literature, history, and theater train us in distancing ourselves from our own interests and imagining the world from others’ perspectives. Thus Hume observed that “virtue, which is nothing but a more enlarged and more cultivated reason,

never flourishes to any degree, nor is founded on steady principles of honour, except where a good education becomes general” (*History I* 1983, 179). Given Hume’s attacks on rationalism, he clearly did not intend to equate it with virtue. Rather, by “enlarged and more cultivated reason,” he seemed to refer to reflection—that is, our ability to turn our powers of observation inwards, to search for the affective reactions that lead us to virtue, and to systematize them into intelligible principles. Such reflection is honed through practicing the aesthetic taste (which Hume saw as analogous to the moral taste), for observing and analyzing our reactions to beautiful objects can promote the same habits of observation necessary for the moral taste. For this reason, “good morals and knowledge are almost inseparable, in every age, though not in every individual” (*History I* 1983, 79). In his essay “Of The Delicacy of Taste and Passion,” Hume argued that “cultivating a taste in the liberal arts” will have the following result: “our judgment will strengthen by this exercise: We shall form juster notions of life” (*Essays* 1985, 6).

Industry, one of the links in Hume’s indissoluble chain—as well as another similar virtue, frugality—is directly encouraged by engaging in commerce. It encourages these virtues through providing an outlet for man’s active powers: “commerce . . . increases frugality, by giving occupation to men, and employing them in the arts of gain, which soon engage their affection, and remove all relish for pleasure and expence” (*Essays* 1985, 301). Because “there is no craving or demand of the human mind more constant and insatiable than that for exercise and employment,” men who lack challenging professions—such as landed gentry—are likely to find occupation in pleasures such as hunting or gambling, which waste money (*Essays* 1985, 300). But men

who engage in commercial pursuits are sufficiently busy already and need less entertainment. Commerce thus encourages frugality because it engages men in more complex pursuits, satisfying their need for purposive, future-directed activity. For the same reason, commerce also increases the virtue of industriousness. Hume wrote that “there has been a great improvement in morals since the reign of Henry VIII. And this improvement has been chiefly owing to the encrease of industry and of the arts, which have given maintenance, and . . . occupation to the lower classes” (*History III* 1983, 329). While industry and frugality are lower than the other-directed virtues like benevolence, they are still significant because of their relationship to human happiness as well as their tendency to increase knowledge and humanity—the other two parts of the chain.<sup>9</sup>

Third, the liberal governments associated with commercial societies are more just and moderate. Since different kinds of knowledge and art are interrelated, political knowledge must also be related to knowledge of refinements in the arts: “can we expect, that a government will be well modeled by a people, who know not how to make a spinning wheel, or to employ a loom to advantage?” (*Essays* 1985, 273). Refining moral reasoning through the arts makes men better capable of understanding the importance of neutral, generally applicable rules; a well-administered, limited government; and the principles of justice and equity. Commerce also encourages better government because it brings about the rise of a middle class: “where luxury nourishes commerce and industry, the peasants . . . become rich and independent; while the tradesmen and merchants acquire a share of the property, and draw authority and consideration to that middling

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<sup>9</sup> Hume argued in “Of Refinements in the Arts” that happiness consists of three elements: action, indolence, and pleasure.

rank of men, who are the best and firmest basis of public liberty” (*Essays* 1985, 277). As government becomes more moderate in its operations, it likewise influences its citizens to adopt such moderation in their private lives, for “knowledge in the arts of government naturally begets mildness and moderation, by instructing men in the advantages of humane maxims” (*Essays* 1985, 273). A more advanced government is therefore desirable not just for its effects on liberty or the nation’s material self-interest, but also because it promotes the virtues of humanity, moderation, justice, frugality, and industry.

Moreover, as the government of commercial society becomes more limited and more protective of personal liberty, it allows the virtues of the private sphere to flourish. Hume disputed the idea that martial vigor and sacrifice of private happiness constitute virtue, for “the ages of greatest public spirit are not always most eminent for private virtue” (*Essays* 1985, 25). Collective undertakings in fact tend to erode men’s virtue: “men are generally more honest in their private than in their public capacity . . . . Honour is a great check upon mankind: But where a considerable body of men act together, this check is, in a great measure, removed; since a man is sure to be approved of by his own party” (*Essays* 1985, 43). In private life, a dishonorable action is condemned; but in public life, a dishonorable action may be applauded by one’s fellow partisans because of their conviction that it serves the greater good. It is for this reason that in politics “every man ought to be supposed a *knave*” although this maxim is “false in fact” (*Essays* 1985, 43). A populace’s unflagging devotion to the public does not guarantee public happiness. Hume pointed out in “Of The Populousness of Ancient Nations” that ancient republics thrived on slavery, war, and violent factions—hardly a sign of well-developed social

virtues. Thus Hume agreed with the selfish system insofar as he believed that public spirit is a less reliable guarantor of happiness than private, voluntary cooperation.

This type of cooperation is preferable due to its roots in human nature—for it is natural, according to Hume’s philosophical system, for people to be more concerned with private than with public life. He observed in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that “distance diminishes the force of every idea . . . . When I am a few miles from home, whatever relates to it touches me more nearly than when I am two hundred leagues distant” (*Understanding* 1995, 65). Hume’s distinction between “lively,” sensational impressions and the “less lively” ideas or images of those impressions led to the dictum that people will naturally be more concerned with their immediate environments than with ideas. Therefore, “the breaking of a mirror gives us more concern when at home, than the burning of a house, when abroad, and some hundred leagues distant” (*Treatise* 1969, 475). We cannot have any direct physical experience of “mankind” or even “Great Britain,” but only with specific individuals who compose it and whose images we add together to form that idea. Thus we will naturally be more concerned with those specific individuals than with the public good: “there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to ourself” (*Treatise* 1969, 533). Just as physical nearness increases our interest in people, so too does nearness in our relationship. As Hume put it, “whoever is united to us by any connexion is always sure of a share of our love, proportion’d to the connexion, without enquiring into his other qualities” (*Treatise* 1969, 401). Moreover, people are unable to sustain intense emotional

attachments to large numbers of people. Polygamy, for instance, is problematic because even though it creates blood relationships, the affection normally inherent in these blood relationships is attenuated by the sheer number of them: “what attention, too, can it be supposed a parent, whose seraglio affords him fifty sons, will give to instilling principles of morality . . . into a progeny with whom he himself is scarcely acquainted, and whom he loves with so divided an affection?” (*Essays* 1985, 185).

Hume believed that this principle of human nature serves an important role, for “it is wisely ordained by nature, that private connexions should commonly prevail over universal views and considerations; otherwise our affections and actions would be dissipated and lost, for want of a proper limited object” (*Morals* 2006, 42). In other words, if we felt the same degree of benevolence equally for all people, we would become paralyzed; for how could we choose whom to benefit through our good offices? Thus our connection to private life—to our family, friends, and neighbors—gives us a natural object for our benevolence. Of course, this preference for family and associates must be limited to an extent; we must “correct these inequalities by reflection, and retain a general standard of vice and virtue” that allows us to behave correctly even towards strangers or foreigners (*Morals* 2006, 42). But abstract regard for the public will never completely prevail, for though these universal moral standards retain “a considerable influence,” our “heart takes not part entirely with those general notions, nor regulates all its love and hatred by the universal abstract differences of vice and virtue, without regard to self, or the persons with whom we are more intimately connected” (*Morals* 2006, 42).

The private sphere, therefore, serves an important moral role by focusing our

benevolent efforts. Wolin is wrong to assert that “Hume made no sharp distinction between government and society. Government was viewed as the instrument whereby . . . society’s purposes [were] executed” (1954, 1006). The public and private spheres have different purposes. Government ensures justice, or the artificial virtues, while society ensures the social virtues. As government becomes more sophisticated and accords more liberty to the private sphere, it therefore allows these virtues to thrive.

The rise of the middle class is a fourth commercial phenomenon conducive to virtue. According to Hume, a flourishing middle class has several important characteristics. A middle class tradesman is somewhat independent. He must attract customers, but he is not dependent on a single person or family, so the influence of these various customers is more diluted than, say, the influence of a nobleman on a servant, peasant, or retainer. Hume concluded that “as the new methods of expence gave subsistence to mechanics and merchants, who lived in an independent manner on the fruits of their own industry, a nobleman . . . retained only that moderate influence, which customers have over tradesmen, and which can never be dangerous” (*History IV* 1983, 384). This type of independence fosters virtue through allowing a man to retain his own moral agency: “an industrious tradesman is both a better man and a better citizen than one of those idle retainers, who formerly depended on the great families” (*History III* 1983, 76). Hume also argued, as did Aristotle, that the middle class has more leisure with which to cultivate virtue: “the Great are too much immers’d in Pleasure; and the Poor too much occupy’d in providing for the Necessities of Life, to hearken to the calm Voice of Reason” (*Essays* 1983, 546). The middle class, then, has more opportunity to become

wise and virtuous, because they are less distracted by pleasure and less preoccupied with obtaining basic necessities. A middle class man is also more connected to common life—that great source of human sympathy—for he “enters, with more Familiarity, into human Life: Every Thing appears in its natural Colours before him: He has more leisure to form observations” (*Essays* 1983, 548). A middle class professional becomes acquainted with all walks of life through his customers, and as a result knows their circumstances better, which is a major condition for sympathy. The middle class professions also require more cultivation of the intellect, for “there are more natural Parts, and a stronger Genius requisite to make a good Lawyer or Physician, than to make a great Monarch” (*Essays* 1983, 548). Since humanity and knowledge are connected, the superior education required for the middle class professions may better promote the former. Furthermore, the middle class has the means to engage in a wider range of virtues, for

Those, who are plac'd among the lower Ranks of Men, have little Opportunity of exerting any other Virtue, besides those of Patience, Resignation, Industry, and Integrity. Those, who are advanc'd into the higher Stations, have full employment for their Generosity, Humanity, Affability, and Charity. When a Man lyes betwixt these two Extremes, he can exert the former Virtues towards his *Superiors*, and the latter towards his *Inferiors*. (*Essays* 1983, 546)

They have opportunities for virtues traditionally associated with the poor: industry—to improve their condition through working, saving, and entrepreneurship—and patience, in order to accept their comparatively humble condition. But the middle class also has sufficient resources to exercise charity and generosity towards those less fortunate than themselves. Finally, Hume mentioned that the middle station is “more favourable to Happiness . . . . But as the Arguments, that prove this, seem pretty obvious, I shall



forbear insisting on them” (*Essays* 1983, 551). Thus the middle class—which only becomes considerable in a commercial society—has more opportunities for happiness and virtue than the other stations of life, though not every individual will take advantage of them.

Finally, commerce also draws men into more complex social relations, multiplying opportunities for them to discover sympathetic attachments and acquire the social virtues. As refinements are made in all the arts and sciences, man’s natural sociability is enhanced: “the more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become” (*Essays* 1985, 271). In a commercial state, people “flock into cities; love to receive and communicate knowledge; to show their wit or breeding; their taste in conversation . . . . Curiosity allures the wise; vanity the foolish; and pleasure both. Particular societies and clubs are everywhere formed” (*Essays* 1985, 271). Urbanization, education, and the formation of voluntary societies—three phenomena related to commerce—encourage interdependence rather than living in “that distant manner, which is peculiar to ignorant and barbarous nations” (*Essays* 1985, 271). People practice sympathy, the art of understanding the other person’s situation, more often. Their sympathy for other people’s feelings, as well as their natural desire for society, inspires them to become more humane, moderate, and agreeable.

Hume also argued that commerce could increase social ties across nations. In his essay “Of the Jealousy of Trade,” he argued that nations need not be jealous of each others’ prosperity, since a more prosperous neighbor could improve other nations’ economic positions through trade. He concluded the essay by remarking that “I shall

therefore venture to acknowledge, that, not only as a man, but as a BRITISH subject, I pray for the flourishing commerce of GERMANY, SPAIN, ITALY, and even FRANCE itself" (*Essays* 1985, 331). Hume was "certain, that GREAT BRITAIN, and all those nations, would flourish more, did their sovereigns and ministers adopt such enlarged and benevolent sentiments towards each other" (*Essays* 1985, 331). During England's medieval period, he noted, "commerce had not yet bound together the most distant nations in so close a chain," and so states then were prone to "violent revolutions and conquests" (*History I* 1983, 296). Commerce therefore engenders more interactions not just within nations, but between them. As a result, the international sphere becomes more restrained and less prone to violence.

In many ways, then, commerce can create conditions conducive to virtue, such as a considerable middle class and more complex social arrangements. But, of course, commercial society's critics argued that these very conditions also promoted vices such as vanity, avarice, and hypocrisy. Modern man "cannot live but in the opinion of others," and so he wears the mask of whichever qualities he thinks will impress others and further his own self-interest. The supposed advantages of commercial society might therefore be accompanied by disadvantages that erase any benefits. Hume, as we saw above, certainly recognized that commercial society can be beset by "corruption, venality, [and] rapine." According to Hume, however, these vices need not be nearly as fatal as the critics suggest. Self-interest and self-love are pursued through social cooperation in commercial society and can therefore be tempered by further sociability, which channels our potential vices towards better pursuits.

As Robert Manzer (1996) and Andrew Sabl (2006) point out, Hume believed that the desire for approval could motivate our moral reflections. The desire to be well-regarded by those around us inspires us to engage in those moral reflections all the more earnestly. In a passage worth considering in full, Hume explained how the desire for a good name reinforces our pursuit of virtue:

Another spring of our constitution, that brings a great addition of force to moral sentiments, is the love of fame; which rules, with such uncontrolled authority, in all generous minds, and is often the grand object of all their designs and undertakings. By our continual and earnest pursuit of a character, a name, a reputation in the world, we bring our own deportment and conduct frequently in review, and consider how they appear in the eyes of those who approach and regard us. This constant habit of surveying ourselves, as it were, in reflection, keeps alive all the sentiments of right and wrong, and begets, in noble natures, a certain reverence for themselves as well as others, which is the surest guardian of every virtue. (*Morals* 2006, 71-72)

The love of fame in “barbarous” nations may lead men into war or partisanship; but in commercial nations, those motivated by “vanity” instead try to demonstrate their wit and breeding through conversation or other civilized pursuits. As they pursue a reputation through these social channels, they are often forced to reflect on how they appear to those with whom they interact, thus internalizing society’s norms. The fact that vanity forms the initial motivation for such behavior does not negate the behavior’s moral potential, for, as Hume noted in his essay “Of The Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature,” “vanity is so closely allied to virtue, and to love the fame of laudable actions approaches so near the love of laudable actions for their own sake, that these passions are more capable of mixture, than any other kinds of affection; and it is almost impossible to have the latter without some degree of the former” (*Essays* 1985, 86). Desire to be loved and admired by others, far from being automatically a vice, increases society’s influence over us and

thus urges us to adopt society's moral code.

Love of fame only becomes the vice of vanity when it is excessive. Desire for approval can be kept within appropriately moderate boundaries through a well-rounded set of virtues—and, since Hume thought commercial societies could inculcate moderation, perhaps they would influence men to keep their vanity restrained. The brief autobiography that Hume penned from his deathbed, “My Own Life,” serves as an example of such moderate self-love. One quality that prevented this desire for admiration from turning vicious was high-mindedness: Hume could bear lack of public applause for his writings because he knew their true worth. For instance, he noted that his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* “came unnoticed and unobserved into the world,” yet he also argued that it was “of all my writings, historical, philosophical, or literary, incomparably the best” (*Essays* 1985, xxxvi). He also closed the work with this statement: “I cannot say there is no vanity in making this funeral oration of myself, but I hope it is not a misplaced one; and this is a matter of fact which is easily cleared and ascertained” (*Essays* 1985, xli). Thus we see that Hume's vanity was combined with the Aristotelian virtue of high-mindedness, that is, a wise understanding of one's worth. As Hume wrote of this virtue in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, “nothing can be more laudable than to have a value for ourselves, when we really do have value . . . nothing is more useful to us in the conduct of life, than a due degree of pride, which makes us sensible of our own merit, and gives us a confidence and assurance in all our projects and enterprizes” (1969, 647). According to Hume, vicious vanity consists in “such an importunate and open demand of praise and admiration, as is offensive to others . . . a

sure symptom of the want of true dignity and elevation of mind . . . . For why that impatient desire of applause, as if you were not justly entitled to it, and might not reasonably expect that it would for ever attend you?" (*Morals* 2006, 65). In addition to high-mindedness, "My Own Life" also showed how Hume's vanity was tempered by sociability and courage. His first work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, "fell *dead-born from the press*," but Hume, "being naturally of a cheerful and sanguine temper . . . very soon recovered the blow" (*Essays* 1985, xxxiv). Hume stated that throughout his life, in fact, "even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper, notwithstanding my frequent disappointments" (*Essays* 1985, xl). The ability to forge ahead in the face of difficulty also helped Hume's wounded pride: when a volume of *History of England* was poorly received, he nonetheless "resolved to pick up courage and persevere" (*Essays* 1985, xxxvii). Hanley argues that Hume's autobiography shows how we may "ennoble self-love if not mortify it" (2002, 684). But for Hume, self-love need not be ennobled or mortified, only kept in its proper place. Excessive self-love in the absence of virtue—not self-love itself—is problematic.

Avarice, however, seems to be a more serious vice—after all, Hume himself thought that it could isolate men from society by dulling concerns for anything other than the increase of their estates. Hume provided no easy answers to this problem, but he did point out that avarice is not always such an isolating passion. In many men, avarice is instead related to ambition or desire for approval: "avarice is commonly nothing but a species of ambition, and is chiefly incited by the prospect of that regard, distinction, and consideration, which attends on riches" (*History III* 1983, 73). Men strive to acquire

money because they want to gain the affection and admiration of those around them. But why do riches lead to such admiration in the first place? According to Hume, attraction to the well-off can be explained through the principle of sympathy. Wealth and power tend to bestow the means of attaining pleasure to their possessor, and contemplating the possessor's pleasure in turn gives pleasure to the spectator: "power and riches . . . give rise to love . . . by means of a sympathy with that . . . satisfaction, which they produce in the person, who possesses them" (*Treatise* 1969, 432). While this tendency can undoubtedly lead to corruption, its very cause—sympathy—might also furnish something of a corrective. We tend to sympathize with particularly strong emotions, and so dire poverty excites our pity: "when the misery of a beggar appears very great, or is painted in very lively colours, we sympathize with him in his afflictions" (*Treatise* 1969, 435). Sometimes, then, sympathy can overcome avarice by leading us to pity the unfortunate. Avarice can be problematic, but the solution is not to eradicate its cause, which is concern for the opinion of others. The increased sociability and interdependence of men in commercial society may very well go further towards curbing avarice than a more unnatural solution, for commercial society brings us in closer contact with the poor, allowing us to develop sympathy with them as well as with the rich.

Though Hume saw avarice as a genuine cause for concern, he was less concerned about another vice, hypocrisy, often invoked by commercial society's critics. There are, of course, some situations in which people mask their true opinions: "the open declaration of our sentiments is call'd the taking off the mask, as the secret intimation of our opinions is said to be the veiling of them" (*Treatise* 1969, 201). The latter method

might be denounced as hypocritical; but according to Hume, it could be desirable in some situations. For instance, when we feel disdain for a person, concealing that sentiment is the better choice: “a secret intimation of anger or contempt shews that we still have some consideration for the person” (*Treatise* 1969, 201). Masking our dislike for a person is actually better than expressing it openly, because it demonstrates some consideration for the person’s feelings. Furthermore, Hume excused the regrettable tendency to proclaim respect for moral laws while failing to live up to them. Openly expressing contempt for moral law is despicable, because doing so is a conscious decision. *Acting* contrary to moral law is more understandable, because it may proceed from moral weakness and not from conscious disrespect for the rules. Thus Hume concluded that “a fault in words is commonly more open and distinct than one in actions, which admit of many palliating excuses, and decide not so clearly concerning the intention and views of the actor” (*Treatise* 1969, 203). What some critics might call hypocrisy is really, as La Rochefoucauld said, a sort of tribute to virtue—a respect for others’ feelings and for moral standards. When considering all the possible vices besetting human nature, Hume seemed to have thought hypocrisy a relatively minor one. Hypocrisy is a social lubricant that often makes interactions less painfully honest—and anything that brings men further into society and its civilizing potential was, for Hume, a good thing.

### **Hume’s Idea of the Perfect Commonwealth**

Hume was mindful of human weakness and thought that, in politics at least, every man ought to be supposed a knave. But a society of knaves, even sensible ones, cannot subsist. He therefore hoped that commercial society, through its industry and knowledge,

would also foster sentiments of humanity that would restrain men in their private capacities (even if they could never quite be trusted in their public capacities). Though Hume seemed to maintain great faith in this process, he recognized that it would never entirely eradicate human vice. For this reason, he thought that government reforms such as militia service and an established church could help, either by inculcating virtues that might otherwise be left out of the process, or by strengthening civil society.

Hume's cautious attitude towards change did not rule out change altogether. He believed that the magistrate "may attempt some improvements for the public good" as long as he is careful to "adjust his innovations, as much as possible, to the ancient fabric, and preserve entire the chief pillars and supports of the constitution" (*Essays* 1985, 513). As Stewart points out, Hume's political caution did not render him "complacent or resigned"; rather, he did endorse certain reforms, and sought to change popular opinion as a necessary precursor to such reforms (1992, 315). In order to understand how Hume thought reform should proceed, we should consider one of his favorite reformers, Alfred, who "framed a body of laws; which, though now lost, served long as the basis of English jurisprudence, and is generally deemed the origin of what is denominated the COMMON LAW" (*History I* 1983, 78). This momentous occasion accorded with existing customs, for "the similarity of these institutions to the customs of the ancient Germans . . . prevents us from regarding Alfred as the sole author of this plan of government; and leads us rather to think, that, like a wise man, he contented himself with reforming, extending, and executing the institutions, which he found previously established" (*History I* 1983, 78-79). Reforms should be carefully tailored to tradition.



He also pointed out that many well-intentioned reforms, such as laws providing for public charity, can have unintended effects:

Of all sciences there is none, where first appearances are more deceitful than in politics. Hospitals for foundlings seem favourable to the encrease of numbers . . . but when they open the door to every one, without distinction, they have probably a contrary effect, and are pernicious to the state. It is computed, that every ninth child born at PARIS, is sent to the hospital; though it seems certain, according to the common course of human affairs, that it is not a hundredth child whose parents are altogether incapacitated to rear and educate him. The great difference, for health, industry, and morals, between an education in a hospital and that in a private family, should induce us not to make entrance into the former too easy and engaging. (*Essays* 1985, 400)

According to Hume, a law aimed at helping the poor is “one of the circumstances in government, which humanity would most powerfully recommend to a benevolent legislator; which seems, at first sight, the most easily adjusted; and which is yet the most difficult to settle . . . as to attain the end without destroying industry” (*History III* 1983, 331). Reforms intended to help the poor and promote benevolence may actually have deleterious effects on virtue, for they could discourage some people (Rousseau comes to mind) from caring for their own families. Geoffrey Marshall is therefore incorrect to write that “no radical reformer would find any hindrance to his programme in Hume’s ethical theory” (1954, 250). Hume’s cautious approach to politics, as well as his embrace of industriousness, led him to be skeptical of public charity.

One of Hume’s suggestions for mitigating individualism—an established church—already existed in Great Britain. As Will Jordan notes, Hume thought that “our sentiment of humanity can be bolstered when religion unites believers under a shared set of principles and beliefs” (2002, 694). Hume’s case for religion should not be overstated—he thought that religion should be moderate and tolerant, teaching useful

principles such as “love thy neighbor” while avoiding excessive enthusiasm. He thought that “interested diligence of the clergy is what every wise legislator will study to prevent” and therefore hoped that the established church would “bribe their [the clergy’s] indolence” by providing them with guaranteed salaries instead of forcing them to attract their own flock through exciting sermons on hellfire (*History III* 1983, 135). But he did think that an established religion provides social cohesion as well as basic moral lessons.

Despite his overall bias towards existing establishments, Hume proposed some possible reforms to the British constitution in his essay “The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth.” First, “the plan of CROMWELL’S parliament ought to be restored, by making the representation equal, and by allowing none to vote in the county elections who possess not a property of 200 pounds value” (*Essays* 1985, 526). Second, certain reforms should also take place in the House of Lords: “the Bishops and SCOTCH Peers ought to be removed: The number of the upper house ought to be raised to three or four hundred: Their seats not hereditary, but during life: They ought to have the election of their own members” (*Essays* 1985, 527). The Church ought to be deprived of its political influence, while the House of Lords’ seats ought not to be hereditary but elected.

According to Hume, these changes would attract men of considerable merit and ability to the government. This would form a natural aristocracy to serve as a barrier against the monarch and keep the government limited. And, as noted above, Hume believed that an advanced and limited government promoted virtue by according a greater role to the family and society.

Another potential reform that Hume discussed was decentralization. In the

“perfect commonwealth” he outlined, freeholders and householders of a county meet in the parish church to choose county representatives, who then meet to choose county magistrates and senators (*Essays* 1985, 516). While this may appear similar to Harrington’s plan in *Oceana*, Hume’s intentions differed from Harrington’s. Hume explained his preference for small, local deliberative bodies thusly:

If the people debate, all is confusion: If they do not debate, they can only resolve; and then the senate carves for them. Divide the people into many separate bodies; and then they may debate with safety, and every inconvenience seems to be prevented. Cardinal de RETZ says, that all numerous assemblies, however composed, are mere mob, and swayed in their debates by the least motive. This we find confirmed by daily experience . . . . Separate this great body; and though every member be only of middling sense, it is not probable, that any thing but reason can prevail over the whole. (*Essays* 1985, 523)

Citizen deliberation is an effective check upon government, for without it, the senate will make decisions in flagrant disregard of popular will; but Hume also believed that men, when they deliberate in their public capacities, are likely to get carried away by the spirit of faction or party. The solution is to let the people deliberate in smaller bodies, in which emotions are less intense and power is less likely to corrupt. Hume’s vision of deliberation, then, decentralizes rather than intensifies the power of the public sphere. It allows for men to be kept in check by their acquaintances and neighbors.

Like many Scottish Enlightenment figures, Hume was intrigued by the idea of a citizens’ militia, which he proposed in this essay as a possible reform. In a perfect commonwealth, Hume said, “the militia is established in imitation of that of SWISSERLAND . . . . It will only be proper, to make this addition, that an army of 20,000 men be annually drawn out by rotation, paid and encamped during six weeks in the summer, that the duty of a camp may not be altogether unknown” (*Essays* 1985, 520).

Hume thus suggested that compulsory military service should be part of any perfect commonwealth. Clearly, Hume did not mean to establish a Spartan state by this policy, since the drafted men would only serve for six weeks—not the eight years proposed by Hutcheson’s militia plan—and would be compensated. But the draft would acquaint ordinary citizens with the duties of military life and thus prevent serious relaxations in national or military spirit. Hume therefore believed that minor reforms could preserve the public spirit of a commercial society. Citizens need not be drafted into indefinite compulsory service, nor deprived of luxury to retain their Spartan toughness, but rather could serve brief terms in a citizen-army.

Establishing limited government, decentralized power, and compulsory military service were three reforms that Hume thought could strengthen virtue and combat individualism. Limited government, by allowing commerce and liberty to flourish, would encourage the virtues natural to commercial society. Devolving some power to the local level would engage the common people in their communities, strengthen their public spirit, and allow them to choose virtuous representatives. Militia service would prevent the virtues of courage and national spirit from weakening too much. These first two reforms were in keeping with the spirit of commercial society, with its emphasis on liberty and civil society rather than coercion. The last reform, however, would introduce an element more alien to commercial society—that is, self-sacrifice and martial virtue. Hume’s proposed militia is therefore his only concession to the civic humanists’ concern for public spirit over the “social virtues” of family and community. John Robertson argues that Hume’s loyalty to the militia reform evinced his “faithful[ness] to the

essentially civic institutional principle” (1985, 212). However, given that this proposal is the only civic humanist element in his political thought, his faithfulness may be very much in doubt.

### **Conclusion**

Hume, priding himself on his realistic assessment of human nature, granted that every man ought to be supposed a knave in the political sphere, and that political institutions ought to be structured in such a manner as to enable politicians’ self-interest to work towards the common good. However, were this supposition of knavery true in private life, society could not subsist, for sensible men would choose injustice whenever a cost-benefit analysis indicates an act of injustice to be low-risk. Self-interest is only socially salutary, therefore, when it points beyond itself by enticing men into situations where they are likely to be influenced for the better. Commercial society can do this through several phenomena, such as urbanization, that force men to seek the company of others even in pursuing their self-interest, which brings them under society’s influence and can impart habits of self-reflection. Like Hutcheson, Hume believed the progress of the arts to be morally significant because of the concomitant improvements in taste and sensitivity. Finally, the material conditions of commercial society—its creation of a middle class and of more intellectually stimulating forms of employment—can challenge men to think beyond their own immediate interests.

Despite Hume’s usual hard-headedness, he seemed curiously optimistic about the civilizing power of commerce. While he acknowledged and addressed criticisms of its individualism, his own criticisms of it were muted and scattered throughout his work.

His main suggestion of reform was his militia proposal, but it was a minor one compared to Hutcheson's or Ferguson's. Hume had faith that his "indissoluble chain" would eventually enhance virtue in commercial societies.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE ROAD TO VIRTUE AND THE ROAD TO FORTUNE: ADAM SMITH AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF COMMERCIAL SOCIETY

Adam Smith is simultaneously known as one of the architects of the “system of natural liberty”, as he called it, and one of its most perceptive critics. He expressed many misgivings about commercial society even in the *Wealth of Nations*—which Karen McCreadie designates as the “capitalist manifesto” (2009, 53)—particularly about the division of labor and the ruthlessness of the mercantile class. Yet he nonetheless continued to advocate it. Smith’s advocacy may seem a Mandevillean ploy to maximize wealth and liberty through society’s exploitation of selfishness. But in fact, Smith believed that commercial societies contain conflicting tendencies, both towards individualism, on the one hand, and towards a stronger civil society that can restrain the individual, on the other. Political reforms—particularly education, a militia, and various policies directed at religion—can be instrumental in lessening commercial society’s individualist tendencies and in tilting it towards the direction of virtue.

#### **“The Masters of Mankind”**

Smith was intimately aware of commercial society’s critics, especially Rousseau. In a 1756 letter to the *Edinburgh Review*, he discussed Rousseau’s criticisms and quoted three passages from Rousseau’s *Second Discourse*. Smith identified Mandeville as an

influence on Rousseau: “the second volume of the Fable of the Bees has given occasion to the system of Mr. Rousseau” (*Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence* 1982, 250). However, he did not think them morally equivalent, for he denounced Mandeville’s “corruption and licentiousness” while praising Rousseau for exhibiting “all the purity and sublimity of the morals of Plato, and . . . the true spirit of a republican” (*Correspondence* 1982, 250-251). Why compare Rousseau to Mandeville, when the two arrived at such radically different conclusions? Both commercial society’s critics and its “selfish system” supporters agreed on one main issue, that commercial society operated through the mechanism of ruthless individualism.

The first passage Smith quoted dealt with the issue of inequality and labor. For Rousseau, the modern world is beset by many evils: “property was introduced, labour became necessary, and the vast forests of nature were changed into agreeable plains, which must be watered with the sweat of mankind, and in which the world beheld slavery and wretchedness begin to grow up and blossom with the harvest” (*Correspondence* 1982, 251). With the advent of property and industry, toil and economic inequality become widespread, and all for an illusory happiness that will never match man’s original innocence. Both rich and poor are enslaved by this universal mandate to toil: the poor are enslaved by their economic masters, and the rich by the ceaseless quest for more.

The second passage dealt with the subject of hypocrisy. According to Rousseau, commercial society “inspires all men with a direful propensity to hurt one another; with a secret jealousy . . . . It often assumes the mask of good will . . . with opposition of interest; and always with the concealed desire of making profit at the expence of some



other person” (*Correspondence* 1982, 252). As society becomes more complex, people’s interests begin to clash. Competition for customers or positions brings them into conflict. But such conflict is rarely recognized, for people conceal their selfish motives with a dishonest veneer of sociability. Commercial society thus brings inauthenticity, in addition to its material disadvantages such as inequality and toil.

Smith next reproduced another passage, in which Rousseau identified man’s separation from his early, self-sufficient state as the source of commercial society’s ills. The advent of society ensures that each man now “cannot live but in the opinion of others” (*Correspondence* 1982, 253). While man was once independent, he is now subject to the whims of society: “the savage lives in himself; the man of society, always out of himself” (*Correspondence* 1982, 253). This dependence is a servile one, enslaving man to the whims and fashions of society. Rousseau believed that the individual in modern society is a *de facto* slave, not a free man.

Smith’s 1756 letter pre-dated both of his major works. One could argue that his thinking changed in the years between the letter and the *Wealth of Nations*, his seminal work on the free market. Perhaps he overcame his youthful enthusiasm for Rousseau and embraced all the realities of commercial society. And yet, the criticisms he considered in the letter resurface throughout his career. For instance, he famously denounced the destructive effects of labor in commercial society. Under the division of labor, the laborer’s understanding is “confined to a few very simple operations,” such as placing pins in paper all day (*Wealth* 1981, 781). By spending the greater part of his day in such employment, the laborer becomes incapable of “conceiving any generous, noble, or

tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life” (*Wealth* 1981, 782).<sup>1</sup> He eventually “becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become” (*Wealth* 1981, 782). The division of labor degrades the common laborer most of all, but it can also affect those in the more refined professions. Smith wrote that “a certain reserve is necessary when we talk of . . . our own studies, our own professions. All these are objects which we cannot expect should interest our companions in the same degree . . . . It is for want of this reserve, that the one half of mankind make bad company to the other. A philosopher is company to a philosopher only” (*Sentiments* 1982, 33-34). The separation of professions ensures that most people now have separate interests. Those who cannot avoid talking of those specialized interests must find companions among their own professions only. People in commercial society are thus isolated from each other, focused on their particular and often trivial specializations.

The negative effects of the division of labor may be an unintended consequence—but there are also business owners who intentionally inflict harm on their workers. Many of them conspire to lower wages below the market rate: “masters too sometimes enter into particular combinations to sink the wages of labour even below this rate” (*Wealth* 1981, 84). Workers often react “by a contrary defensive combination . . . who sometimes too, without any provocation of this kind, combine of their own accord to raise the price of their labour . . . . In order to bring the point to a speedy decision, they have always recourse to the loudest clamour, and sometimes to the most shocking violence and

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<sup>1</sup> Mandeville had written that the workers “become likewise so narrow-soul’d, that it is a pain for them even to think of things that are of uncommon extent” (1988, 320).

outrage” (*Wealth* 1981, 84). These worker protests provoke a contrary reaction in the business owners, who bring in the civil magistrate to quash the uprising. Consequently, the workers “very seldom derive any advantage from the violence of these tumultuous combinations” (*Wealth* 1981, 85). The inequality of commercial society gives rise to literal class warfare, which rarely resolves in favor of the worker.

Smith also concurred with Rousseau that the struggle for riches and status can coarsen our moral sentiments. According to Smith, “place, that great object which divides the wives of aldermen, is the end of half the labours of human life; and is the cause of all the tumult and bustle, all the rapine and injustice, which avarice and ambition have introduced into the world” (*Sentiments* 1982, 57). Avarice and ambition are intractable problems in human nature, for “avarice and ambition in the rich, in the poor the hatred of labour and the love of present ease and enjoyment, are the passions which prompt to invade property, passions much more steady in their operation, and much more universal in their influence” (*Wealth* 1981, 709). Smith argued that “this disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition . . . is . . . the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments” (*Sentiments* 1982, 61). It is because we despise the poor that “the mere want of fortune, mere poverty, excites little compassion . . . We despise a beggar, and though his importunities may extort an alms from us, he is scarce ever the object of serious commiseration” (*Sentiments* 1982, 144).

But how do the rich attain such an elevated position in our eyes? As Smith asked, “is it by knowledge, by industry, by patience, by self-denial, or by virtue of any kind?”

(*Sentiments* 1982, 53). No, but simply by a trick of human nature that leads us to adore our social superiors. According to Smith, “that kings are the servants of the people, to be obeyed, resisted, deposed, or punished, as the public conveniency may require, is the doctrine of reason and philosophy, but it is not the doctrine of Nature” (*Sentiments* 1982, 53). Even in a democratic era, the weddings and births of royal families retain an irrational fascination, a fascination that appears unrelated to any identifiable service they perform for society. Indeed, Smith thought the rich and powerful, “the masters of mankind,” tend to be selfish: “all for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind” (*Wealth* 1981, 418).<sup>2</sup> The masters of mankind rarely display much compassion for the rest of society, for “the great never look upon their inferiors as their fellow-creatures” (*Sentiments* 1982, 55). Thus Smith agreed that our desire to emulate the rich could lead us to commit injustice, court corruption, and become indifferent to the sufferings of the poor.

There is an additional problem with ambition besides its corruption of our moral sentiments: it can also fail to make us happy. Rasmussen (2008) argues that Smith essentially saw the promise of commercial society as illusory. Indeed, some passages in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* would lead us to think so. They echo the third passage he quoted from Rousseau by lamenting the way in which we sell our birthright—our freedom—and enslave ourselves to others’ opinions, in order to gain favor and riches that will never really make us happy. Smith discussed “the poor man’s son, whom heaven in

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<sup>2</sup> Noam Chomsky uses this quote in particular to portray Smith as a “socialist” who thought “the invisible hand . . . will destroy the possibility of a decent human existence” (1996, 19).

its anger visited with ambition” (*Theory* 1982, 181). In order to “obtain the conveniencies which these [riches] afford, he submits in the first year, nay in the first month of his application, to more fatigue of body and more uneasiness of mind than he could have suffered through his whole life from the want of them” (*Theory* 1982, 181). Because of his ambition, the poor man’s son “serves those whom he hates, and is obsequious to those he despises” (*Theory* 1982, 181). He torments himself and represses his true feelings, all for “the idea of a certain artificial and elegant repose which he may never arrive at, for which he sacrifices a real tranquility that is at all times within his power, and which, if in the extremity of old age he should at last attain to it, he will find in no respect preferable to that humble security and contentment which he had abandoned for it” (*Theory* 1982, 181). Smith summed up the situation with the devastating observation that “the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for” (*Theory* 1982, 185). In commercial society, the desire for wealth and position leads people to deceive others—and even to deceive themselves about the happiness they think wealth will bring.

Smith also noted that military spirit tends to decay in more advanced nations. He wrote that “in the progress of improvement the practice of military exercises, unless government takes proper pains to support it, goes gradually to decay, and, together with it, the martial spirit of the great body of the people, as the example of modern Europe sufficiently demonstrates” (*Wealth* 1981, 786-787). Such a decline is problematic because “the security of every great society must always depend, more or less, upon the martial spirit of the great body of the people” (*Wealth* 1981, 787). But even more

problematic is the effect of cowardice upon the individual characters of the citizens. For Smith, “a coward . . . evidently wants one of the most essential parts of the character of a man. He is as much mutilated and deformed in his mind, as another is in his body, who is either deprived of some of its most essential members, or has lost the use of them” (*Wealth* 1981, 787). Cowardice is such a major character flaw that “even though the martial spirit of the people were of no use towards the defence of the society, yet to prevent that sort of mental mutilation, deformity, and wretchedness, which cowardice necessarily involves in it . . . would still deserve the most serious attention of government” (*Wealth* 1981, 787). Those who lack the virtue of courage remain unfulfilled in their nature as human beings.

It may appear, then, that Smith’s misgivings about commercial society were as serious as Rousseau’s and perhaps even necessitated solutions as radical as the *Social Contract*. Indeed, some scholars have thought so. William Ophuls, for instance, writes that “as a believer in the classical model of virtue, which enjoined a heroic command of the self, he opposed the self-indulgent values of economic man . . . . Smith was paradoxically anti-economic at heart, anticipating in his own work much of the later critique of bourgeois political economy” (1997, 39).

At the other end of the spectrum, several scholars argue that Smith was willing to tolerate such evils for their material benefits. For instance, Mark Blaug credits Smith with establishing the Mandevillean view as the dominant one in political economy: “it was Smith’s achievement to shift the burden of proof and to create the presumption that decentralized atomistic competition does in some sense maximize social welfare” (1997,

60). Lisa Hill argues that Smith emphasized “private interest, contingent values, personal liberty, the priority of rights over duties, prudence over beneficence, and wealth over virtue” (2006, 89). Joseph Cropsey believed that Smith sought economic liberty only “for the sake of effecting the relaxation of ecclesiastical authority” and liberating man’s passions, not for any virtuous reason (1957, 98).

But, though Smith was sensitive to the problem of individualism, he also answered both Rousseau’s criticism and “the selfish system” by outlining a role for society’s moral influence over the individual. Smith rejected the system-building of both Mandeville and Rousseau by defending a relational morality—one that might even flourish in the freedom and complexities of commercial society.

Dennis Rasmussen notes that Smith answered Rousseau’s critique in three key ways: that the division of labor increases standards of living even for the poor and that its negative effects could be corrected through education; that man’s concern for the opinions of others in commercial society is “actually a *good* thing, for this concern can act as the very basis of moral conduct;” and that commercial societies enjoy greater liberty and security (2008, 12-13). But Rasmussen neglects some other important aspects of Smith’s reply: his justification of private life and “perfect rights” in opposition to Rousseau’s glorification of an all-powerful public sphere; his theory of spontaneous order as a warning to the “man of system;” and his suggestion of reforms other than public education.

Ryan Patrick Hanley is another scholar who has written about Smith’s answers to these criticisms. Hanley argues that “Smith himself anticipated several of the ills that

capitalism's critics continue to insist on today" but nevertheless supported the system because it created material benefits and liberty (2009, 4). According to Hanley, Smith provided a remedy for these ills by exhorting men to practice the virtues he outlined in Part VI of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, "Of the Character of Virtue," added in the 1790 edition. He sought to combat the selfishness, restlessness, duplicity, and mediocrity of commercial society by teaching the virtues of prudence, magnanimity, and benevolence.<sup>3</sup> Hanley's analysis explains why these virtues were so important to Smith, as they correct the problems of commercial society identified by Rousseau. But how, specifically, would they be inculcated? Of course, moral texts such as Smith's own would be instrumental, but Smith also thought that commercial society itself might foster some of the conditions important for the flourishing of these virtues—a fact that Hanley does not thoroughly explore.

James Otteson argues that, in Smith's moral philosophy, commercial society is the social form likely to lead to these virtues: "open markets will . . . provide incentives to create conditions where benevolence can grow" because "frequent contact and familiarity with others produces natural affection" (2002, 303). However, Otteson does not attempt to reconcile this positive assessment with Smith's critiques of it. He therefore does not explain the means by which commercial society can encourage these tendencies towards benevolence rather than towards individualism.

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<sup>3</sup> Prudence combats the problem of restlessness and duplicity by drawing on a man's natural self-love. A prudent man's vanity and self-interest are channeled towards proper, healthy pursuits, and so he becomes "efficient and honorable," capable of enjoying "tranquility, authenticity, friendship, and a moderate love of ordinary life" (2009, 126). Magnanimity combats the problem of mediocrity by drawing on a man's natural desire to be praiseworthy. A magnanimous man's desire for praiseworthiness leads him towards self-command and greatness. Finally, benevolence combats selfishness and individualism by drawing on our natural purpose: "only in beneficent activity do we find our fullest flourishing" (2009, 183).



Charles Griswold's synthesis of Smith's moral and economic thought is perhaps the best. Like Otteson, he catches the potentially positive role of commerce in Smith's thought: "Smith thinks that commerce should be included among the properly structured institutions and practices that help to sustain the moral character of citizens" (1999, 265). Griswold argues that it can sustain moral character through two main mechanisms: the civilizing potential of persuasion (a skill needed for barter and exchange), which requires us to look at the world from another person's perspective; and the probity and responsibility necessary in order to be an effective proprietor of one's own labor power. However, he misses the fact that impersonal market interactions can sometimes exert a moderating influence on behavior. He also thinks that the driving mechanism of the market is "systematic self-deception" about whether bettering our condition will make us happy—and that because of this collective deception, "such a society is therefore inclined to private, though not necessarily public, unhappiness" (1999, 263). As we shall see, Smith thought such deception is a common but not inevitable aspect of the struggle for self-improvement.

### **Spontaneous Order and Social Change**

For Smith—one of the first to articulate stadial theory—commercial society is the product of a long process of social evolution. Ronald Hamowy argues that the concept of social evolution serves as an organizing principle in Smith's thought: "the moral rules by which we live, the laws relating to property which structure our notions of private possession, the very framework of our political institutions, all have a social origin; they are each the product of spontaneously generated orders shaped by the principle of

evolution” (1987, 16). While he wanted to correct commercial society’s failings, he also urged a certain amount of caution. Commercial republics are in keeping with human nature as it has unfolded in history, and so we should be careful about altering them, as the alternatives may turn out to be unnatural impositions. For Smith, the drastic changes sought by the projectors would be anathema to a stable political society.

Smith examined Great Britain’s transition to the commercial stage as an example of stadial theory in practice. Though he obviously wrote less about England’s transition from feudalism than did Hume, he still touched on the subject in the *Wealth of Nations*. During the Middle Ages, Smith wrote that “the towns were chiefly inhabited by tradesmen and merchants,” while landowners and farmers lived in the country (*Wealth* 1981, 397). Merchants and tradesmen at the time were very poor, and their profession dishonorable. Yet despite the low condition of the merchants, “it appears evidently, that they arrived at liberty and independency much earlier than the occupiers of land in the country” (*Wealth* 1981, 399). How could this be the case? Smith, like Hume, pointed to the monarchs’ intentional efforts to strengthen the lower people: “the king . . . being jealous of the power of the nobles, found it to be his interest to weaken their power and therefore released all their villains and those more especially who were least dependent and could be most easily freed from their authority. These burghers were such” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 256). The burghers gained certain privileges, such as control of their town’s revenues, that allowed them to better their condition.

As the towns grew rich, they gradually lifted the country out of poverty as well, for three reasons: first, they provided a market for the country’s produce; second, they

purchased some of the uncultivated land in the country, which they put to more profitable use than did the small farmers or country gentlemen; and third, “commerce and manufacture gradually introduced order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals” (*Wealth* 1981, 412).<sup>4</sup> Smith did not elaborate on this point, but deferred to Hume’s explanation. Once both domestic and foreign commerce improved, they “gradually furnished the great proprietors with something for which they could exchange the whole surplus produce of their lands, and which they could consume themselves without sharing it either with tenants or retainers” (*Wealth* 1981, 418). The nobles, therefore, “for the gratification of the most childish, the meanest and most sordid of all vanities . . . bartered their whole power and authority” (*Wealth* 1981, 419). Their tenants and retainers became independent because the nobles preferred to spend money on luxuries than on dependents. The nobles were now “no longer capable of interrupting the regular execution of justice” (*Wealth* 1981, 421). “Having sold their birthright . . . for trinkets and baubles, fitter to be the play-things of children than the serious pursuits of men,” the nobles lost their political and social power (*Wealth* 1981, 421). A “regular government” was now established, since the aristocracy no longer had the power to thwart its operations (*Wealth* 1981, 421). Thus “a revolution of the greatest importance

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<sup>4</sup> Smith therefore concluded that “the commerce and manufacture of cities, instead of being the effect, have been the cause and occasion of improvement” (*Wealth* 1976, 422). However, Smith also wrote that for a country’s wealth to depend “very much upon their commerce and manufactures” is “contrary to the natural course of things” (*Wealth* 1976, 422). Capital resulting from trade and manufacturing “is all a very precarious and uncertain possession, till some part of it has been secured and realized in the cultivation and improvement of its lands” (*Wealth* 1976, 426).

Vivienne Brown (1994) and John Dwyer (1998) argue, based on these passages, that Smith preferred a largely agrarian economy to one based in commerce or manufacturing. According to them, Smith believed that civic virtue was best protected by small farmers. But Smith did not consider morality or sympathy to be the sole domain of the yeomanry. Moreover, he opposed the Physiocrats, who thought that national wealth was derived from agriculture alone.

to the publick happiness, was in this manner brought about by two different orders of people, who had not the least intention to serve the publick,” that is, by the childish nobles and the merchants who acted “from a view to their own interest” (*Wealth* 1981, 422). Neither class had any “knowledge or foresight of that great revolution, which the folly of the one, and the industry of the other, was gradually bringing about” (*Wealth* 1981, 422). The commercial stage, then, evolved largely outside of political control.

We see from this example, then, the complex interplay between government and society in the progress of a nation. Attempts at political control may achieve their desired effect in the short term, but they are filtered through and appropriated by different orders of society, which leave their own influence on the laws. Moreover, the members of government are themselves products of society. In general, because government evolves with society, it comes to embody society’s values and can even serve as an embodiment of society’s “impartial spectator.” Much of Smith’s moral philosophy depends on this concept of the impartial spectator, which will be reviewed more thoroughly in a later section. The impartial spectator represents the internalized moral system that we glean from society, and is the means by which we judge both our own conduct and that of others. We imagine what an impartial member of our own society would say when judging the conduct, and this imagined spectator forms the basis of our moral judgment. The impartial spectator also leads us to develop sympathy, or fellow-feeling, with others, as we imagine their circumstances. According to Smith, this impartial spectator shapes laws and institutions as well as our own personal conduct, because judges and magistrates function as a kind of impartial spectator, enforcing society’s norms.

For Smith, rights are an outgrowth of this social process. In his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Smith adopted the natural law tradition that men have rights pertaining to three different roles—as an individual, as a member of a family, and as a member of a state (1982, 7).<sup>5</sup> Smith’s account of the origins of these rights differed markedly from that provided by other liberal theorists. Smith used the Lockean example of apple-picking to illustrate the right of property, but he justified this right not through man’s natural right to life, but through appeal to the impartial spectator: “we may conceive an injury was done one when an impartial spectator would be of opinion he was injured, would join with him in his concern . . . . This would be the case in the abovementioned circumstances [if one man were to steal the apples another had picked]” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 17). As Samuel Fleischacker writes, “Locke’s silent forest, devoid of all human beings but one lone apple-seeker . . . becomes in Smith’s hands a place where there are already at least three notational people: the apple-picker, one who would do injury to the the apple-picker, and an impartial spectator to decide between the two” (2004, 187). But why would the impartial spectator concur that the apples are rightful property? According to Smith, “the cause of this sympathy or concurrence betwixt the spectator and possessor is, that he enters into his thoughts and concurs in his opinion that he may form a reasonable expectation of using the fruit” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 17). A man who

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<sup>5</sup> A man can be injured in his rights as an individual if he is injured “1<sup>st</sup> in his person; or 2<sup>nd</sup>, in his reputation; or 3<sup>rd</sup>ly, in his estate” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 8). A man can be injured in his rights as a family member if he is “deprived of his wife or she is ill treated . . . or when he is deprived of his son, or his son does not act with proper regard to him” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 7). Finally, when considered as a member of society, “a magistrate may be injured by disobedience or a subject by oppression” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 399). A member of a state may also be injured in his rights if “one behaves disrespectfully and without due honor to one that is dignified with an office or a title,” or “if one who has no just right assumes any title of nobility,” which is an affront to those who have not unjustly usurped a title, and also an affront to the rightful nobility (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 8).

acquires property forms expectations about enjoying it. We enter into these reasonable hopes because we, too, would feel the same way, and we sympathize with him when they are disappointed.

Smith invoked the impartial spectator to explain nearly every type of law, not just property rights. Punishment of a criminal stems from sympathy with the victims: “in all cases the measure of the punishment to be inflicted on the delinquent is the concurrence of the impartial spectator with the resentment of the injured” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 104). For instance, adultery is punishable by law because of “sympathy with the jealousy of the husband,” not in order to save society from “spurious children” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 438). Female and male adultery receive differential punishment because “it is men who make the laws with respect to this,” and so they experience more natural sympathy with an aggrieved husband than with an aggrieved wife (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 147). Sympathy with the victim, then, dictates whether the crime is worthy of punishment. The impartial spectator also determines the extent of punishment demanded by the victim’s situation. The death penalty is justified when the spectator’s feelings support it, for “if the injury is so great as that the spectator can go along with the injured person in revenging himself by the death of the offender, this is the proper punishment” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 104).

Punishment, according to Smith, is not a purely utilitarian act. He pointed out that people are reluctant to enforce punishments for crimes that do not result in visible harm to persons, even when they do affect public utility. For instance, Great Britain’s government decided that the exportation of wool was not in the public’s interest, and so it enacted punishments for exporting wool; but neither jury members nor informers could

be found to ensure punishment for the exporters. Smith concluded that “those crimes which are punished chiefly from a view to the publick good” and not from any tangible injury to an individual cannot conjure sympathy from the spectator (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 104). Smith also gave the example of careless acts that could result in death, such as firing a pistol into a crowded street. The public would be best served by punished these acts just as harshly as if they did result in death, in order to deter them. Yet “such crimes are by the laws of every country more slightly punished than if some mischief has ensued” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 485). Those types of crimes are not punished severely because “resentment [on the part of the spectator] never rises to any great pitch unless some injury be actually done” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 485). Without a victim with whom to sympathize, the people’s feelings are not strong enough to call for strict punishment, even though such punishment could aid public utility.

In addition to determining rights and punishments, sympathy is also responsible for inheritance laws. Citizens have the right to make a will, which is legally binding, in order to dispose of their property after death. But as Smith pointed out, “a testament supposes him to dispose of a right when properly speaking he can have none himself” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 466). A person who no longer exists cannot logically be said to have any human rights. Smith, however, had argued in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that “we sympathize even with the dead” (1982, 12). Therefore, when a dead man has left a will, “we enter into his dead body, and conceive what our living souls would feel if they were joined with his body, and how much we would be distressed to see our last injunctions not performed” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 467). Though the dead man himself has

no feelings, we project our own onto him through imagination, and in doing so we feel compelled to honor his wishes.

The sympathy that we experience through the impartial spectator is thus responsible for our view of rights, for punishment of crimes, and for inheritance laws. Government plays the role of the impartial spectator in these matters because it operates according to clearly defined rules and it can function as a suitably disinterested party to disputes, since no man can be judge in his own cases. The impartial spectator operates best as an aggregate of many members of society—that is, when it reflects not the idiosyncratic judgment of one person, but the collective accumulation of many judgments over time. A magistrate restrained by laws, which embody this type of accumulation, is the best impartial spectator on matters of justice. Smith referred to the “magistrate in his place who acts in the character of an impartial spectator” when deciding punishment for crimes (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 104). The best judges or legislators are therefore those who are less personally concerned; for instance, Smith argued that adultery from *either* the husband or the wife became cause for separation in the Middle Ages because “the clergy were much more impartial judges. The former legislators were husbands and consequently a party concerned; but as the priests were not husbands, not being allowed to marry, they were the best qualified that could possibly be for the office of judge in the matter” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 147). Smith praised the clergy for bringing more impartiality to the marriage laws and carrying out the spectator role more accurately.

The state’s role as impartial spectator, however, is not consciously formalized



through a social contract.<sup>6</sup> Rather, “the principles on which this allegiance are really founded are those of authority and of public or general utility” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 321). Authority can be based on characteristics such as age, wisdom, strength, wealth, or birth (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 321). The principle of respect for authority “is fully explained in the Theory of moral Sentiments [sic], where it is shewn that it arises from our sympathy with our superiours being greater than it is with our equals or inferiours: we admire their happy situation, enter into it with pleasure, and endeavour to promote it” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 401). Authority is at its strongest when based on some combination of factors, for “if government has been of a long standing in a country . . . and be at the same time in the hands of a man of great abilities, authority is then in perfection” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 402). We form an emotional attachment to our political leaders, and to the laws made by our ancestors, that goes beyond merely respecting their utilitarian functions.

There are always limits, however, to the obedience that a citizen owes to government. Smith endeavored to ascertain when citizens may have a legitimate right of resistance to the government. Such an assessment was difficult because “tho the

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<sup>6</sup> Because of his emphasis on the spontaneous ordering of political community, Smith rejected the notion of social contract. Smith argued that government began in the age of shepherds, because in that period, “arts and manufactures are not known and there is hardly any luxury amongst mankind, the rich man has no way of spending the produce of his estate but by giving it away to others, and these become in this manner dependent on him” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 202-203). Government “arose, not as some writers imagine from any consent or agreement . . . but from the natural progress which men make in society” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 207). The idea of an original contract defies common sense, because common sense dictates that a person cannot be a party to a contract unawares. And most people do not agree that government is founded on contract, for the doctrine “is confined to Britain and has never been heard of in any other country” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 316). Even within Great Britain, if one were to ask “a common porter or day-labourer why he obeys the civil magistrate, he will tell you that it is right to do so, that he sees others do it, that he would be punished if he refused to do it, or perhaps that it is a sin against God not to do it” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 403).

sovereign may be resisted, it cant [sic] be said that there is any regular authority for doing so . . . nor is it or can it be ascertained what abuses justify resistance. No laws, no judges, have or can ascertain this matter, not formed any precedents whereby we may judge” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 325). As government arises organically from the progress of a society, that society’s particular customs should have weight in deciding right. Since most communities have no traditions that dictate the right to resist, exercising such a supposed right must be approached with great caution. Furthermore, preservation of the community would be threatened by such an uprising. Smith criticized Locke because “it is a rule laid down by Mr. Locke as a principle that the people have a right to resist whenever the sovereign takes their money from them without their consent” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 323). Smith objected that subjects “must agree to give up a little of their right” and submit to improper taxes, because “it is better to submit to some inconveniences than make attempts against it” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 324, 435). Right of resistance should therefore be seldom exercised, since there are no traditions that can guide citizens on the subject, and submitting to some indignities preserves the public peace.<sup>7</sup>

Smith, therefore, saw government as a product of society’s moral traditions (in the form of the impartial spectator) and authority. It was for these reasons that he opposed the intrusion of constructive rationalism into politics. He criticized the “spirit of system,”

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<sup>7</sup> Smith did admit that citizens had some right to resist government, since “no authority is altogether unlimited” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 434). Governments that “grossly abuse” their powers can and should be resisted (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 434). But such a right cannot be determined in advance, through abstract principles. Rather, a right to resist is justified when an impartial spectator could assess the situation and sympathize with the resisters. For instance, “the folly and cruelty of the Roman emperors make the impartial reader go along with the conspiracies formed against them” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 434).

in which parties “propose . . . to new-model the constitution, and to alter, in some of its most essential parts, that system of government under which the subjects of a great empire have enjoyed, perhaps, peace, security, and even glory, during the course of several centuries” (*Sentiments* 1982, 232). The spirit of system, according to Smith, often mixes with true public spirit and compassion, that is, with a real sympathy for those citizens who suffer under the current system. However, it is ultimately distinct from public spirit. Smith argued that “the man whose public spirit is prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence, will respect the established powers and privileges even of individuals, and still more those of the great orders and societies” (*Sentiments* 1982, 233). This social order he “cannot annihilate without great violence,” and so his genuine love of humanity will abhor the chaos and suffering that disruption would cause. The truly public-spirited man will become a reformer rather than a revolutionary: “he will accommodate, as well as he can, his public arrangements to the confirmed habits and prejudices of the people” (*Sentiments* 1982, 233). But the man who is motivated more by the spirit of system than by benevolence is disposed to revolution rather than to reform. Smith wrote that the

man of system, on the contrary, is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamored with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it. He goes on to establish it completely and in all its parts, without any regard either to the great interests, or to the strong prejudices which may oppose it. He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces on a chess-board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature may chuse to impress upon it . . . [The man of system strives] to erect his own judgment into the supreme standard of

right and wrong. It is to fancy himself the only wise and worthy man in the commonwealth. (*Sentiments* 1982, 233-234)

The man of system, regarding himself as higher than his fellow-citizens, substitutes an untested design of his own making for the relational process of moral persuasion and negotiation.

Smith's stadial theory thus emphasized the mutual evolution of society and government. Political attempts to direct society's path usually fail—as when the feudal kings tried to aggrandize their own power by raising the commons—because it is society's mores and actions that shape government, not the other way around.

Government plays its role best when it defends and strengthens these existing mores.

Therefore, Smith would caution against sudden changes to commercial society. Its critics, such as Rousseau or Fletcher, may want to see its features abolished and replaced with characteristics of the earlier stages of history, such as the Greek city-states. But to do so is to revolt against some of our most deeply-rooted sentiments.

### **Character of Commercial Society**

It is clear that established societies have an advantage over those constructed by design. But does commercial society offer any special advantages, or must people only resign themselves to its faults because it happens to be prevailing form? While Smith's acceptance of existing establishments probably played a role in his attitude towards commercial society, that attitude was also more complex than just grudging resignation. He believed that even self-interest in commercial nations is pursued in a social and hence a potentially moralizing context. Such a civilizing influence is by no means a bygone conclusion—after all, flaws such as stupidity and cowardice are also likely to result, and

for this reason Smith called for government policies to strengthen commercial society's more positive tendencies. But in order to understand how it can have positive tendencies at all, we must first review Smith's moral philosophy.

### Smith's Moral Psychology

Smith opened *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* with the observation that man's nature leads him—at least on some occasions, even if only in limited and guarded ways—to care about his fellow man: “how selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it” (1982, 9). According to Smith, human beings are capable of sympathy—a word that originally meant pity, or the ability to feel others' sorrows, but which “may now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever” (*Sentiments* 1982, 10). Sympathy is not the exclusive domain of particularly sensitive or moral people, but is a universal tendency of human nature: “this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they may perhaps feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it” (*Sentiments* 1982, 9).

We conceive sympathy because humans are imaginative creatures. We cannot directly access others' experiences through our sensations, for “though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers” (*Sentiments* 1982, 9). It is “by the imagination [that] we place ourselves

in his situation . . . and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them” (*Sentiments* 1982, 9).

It is through this sympathetic imagination that we first learn moral standards. As children, we observe the behavior of others and learn what makes us feel satisfied or indignant. Thus “our first moral criticisms are exercised upon the characters and conduct of other people” (*Sentiments* 1982, 112). We gradually realize that others perform the same evaluations of our behavior, and we begin to imagine how our behavior makes others feel: we soon “learn that other people are equally frank with regard to our own. We become anxious to know how far we deserve their censure or applause” (*Sentiments* 1982, 112). A child first formulates rudimentary moral standards and applies them to others, before applying them to himself.

This process of internalization creates a specific method of moral judgment. When we judge our own conduct, “we endeavour to imagine our own conduct as we imagine any fair and impartial spectator would examine it” (*Sentiments* 1982, 110). That is, in order to understand how our behavior measures up to our society’s standards, we imagine what a disinterested member of our society might say upon observing our behavior. In doing so, we divide ourselves in two, into the spectator and the agent:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it, it is evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and the judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation . . . . The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself, and of whose conduct, under the character of a spectator, I was endeavouring to form some opinion. (*Sentiments* 1982, 113)

The agent represents our conduct as it actually is, while the spectator is the product of imagination, and judges us as we imagine society shall judge us.

Imagination again enters into our moral judgments when we judge the conduct of a person other than ourselves, for “nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned” (*Sentiments* 1982, 22). In order to understand the behavior or feelings of others, we must picture ourselves in their place: “the spectator must, first of all, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance . . . . He must adopt the whole case of his companion; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded” (*Sentiments* 1982, 21). When sympathizing with a beggar, for instance, we must recall the sensation of hunger and imagine ourselves to be suffering it; we must imagine what it would be like to wear his dirty clothes, to suffer cold, to endure the humiliation of accosting strangers, to be friendless and alone. In order to sympathize effectively, we must picture every last detail as vividly as possible. We then judge that person’s behavior as proper depending on the extent to which we can enter into and sympathize with it. Smith wrote that both of these phenomena—judgment of self and others—share the same mechanism:

The principle by which we naturally either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, seems to be altogether the same with that by which we exercise the like judgments concerning the conduct of other people. We either approve or disapprove of the conduct of another man according as we feel that, when we bring the case home to ourselves, we either can or cannot entirely sympathize with the sentiments and motives which directed it. And, in the same manner, we either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, according as we feel that, when we place ourselves in the situation of another man . . . we either can or cannot entirely enter into and sympathize with the sentiments and motives which influenced it. (*Sentiments* 1982, 109-110)

In other words, we approve of behavior with which we—or other members of our society—can sympathize. For instance, if we are evaluating the conduct of a man who is reacting against a social slight, we imagine how we might feel in his place; if his reaction is disproportionate to what we can sympathize with, then we condemn his behavior. Similarly, if evaluating one of our own actions, we imagine what an impartial spectator might feel in observing it; if our behavior is disproportionate to what he might sympathize with, we feel condemned.

Of course, such a detailed process of imagination requires time and effort—and so we learn to rely on abstract mental shortcuts in the absence of such effort. We do not take the time to imagine the circumstances of every passing stranger, but “we know that if we took the time to consider his situation . . . we should, without doubt, most sincerely sympathize with him” (*Sentiments* 1982, 18). We can thus develop a mental construction even in the absence of developing real sympathetic feelings. Smith referred to this mental construction as “conditional sympathy” (*Sentiments* 1982, 18). This conditional sympathy helps us adhere to the standards of our society and respect the feelings of others. Smith gave an example in which we pass by a stranger dressed in mourning. Since the man is unknown to us, we probably will not take the time to imagine his situation; but we know that we would feel sorrow if we did so. We therefore would not engage in inappropriate behavior around this stranger, such as laughing boisterously, since our conditional sympathy restrains us and makes us aware of his sorrow. Mandeville had written that such a mental construction “is only an Imitation of Pity; the Heart feels little of it” (1988, 257). However, though conditional sympathy may not



conjure up strong feelings, it nonetheless moderates our behavior, resulting in greater consideration of others.

This process of mental abstraction, however, can only take place once we have experienced sympathy firsthand in other situations. Moral actions cannot be discovered by *a priori* reason. Smith wrote that “it is altogether absurd and unintelligible to suppose that the first perceptions of right and wrong can be derived from reason” (*Sentiments* 1982, 320). Those first perceptions are derived from “immediate sense and feeling” (*Sentiments* 1982, 320). Reason is not entirely absent from this process: “reason is undoubtedly the source of the general rules of morality, and of all the moral judgments which we form by means of them” (*Sentiments* 1982, 320). Reason systematizes our experiences in order to formulate the general rules, for “the general rule . . . is formed, by finding from experience, that all actions of a certain kind, or circumstanced in a certain manner, is disapproved of” (*Sentiments* 1982, 159). We must reason in order to figure out why a particular situation makes us feel a certain way, and what characteristics stimulate similar reactions across situations; we must reason in order to apply the general rules of morality to the complexities of the world; but reason is not the original source of moral judgments.

In addition to rejecting reason as the foundation of morality, Smith also rejected the idea that morality is, or should be, founded upon utility. T.D. Campbell maintains that Smith’s moral thought amounts to “a form of utilitarianism,” and that Smith endorsed commercial society, political liberty, and other institutions because they ultimately contribute to the “production of happiness” (1971, 205). However, Smith’s

moral thought is based on the inherent value of virtue, not its utility in an overall political and social scheme. We desire a virtuous character for its own worth, because we cannot abide the thought of having an unlovable character. Smith's thought, as Hanley (2009) argues at length, is therefore closer to virtue ethics than to utilitarianism.

### Smith's Social Philosophy

Can any particular social and political structure encourage moral development on the individual level? A reader of Smith might be tempted to say that, in his philosophy, virtue is completely dictated by society, and hence there is no trans-social standard that might be used to evaluate different societies. Indeed, Fleischacker worries that Smith's philosophy "veers dangerously close to relativism" (2004, 52). But Smith himself clearly did not think that virtue was arbitrary or relative; he condemned Hobbes' "pernicious doctrine" that without government "there could be no virtue, and consequently it too was the foundation and essence of virtue" (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 398, 397).

All human beings share a social nature—a universal tendency that is not disproved, but rather substantiated by, the varieties of cultures they inhabit, for this ability signifies their ability to be influenced by those around them. Man "can subsist only in society [and] was fitted by nature to that situation for which he was made" (*Sentiments* 1982, 85). This social nature gives rise to an impartial spectator that internalizes their society's norms. Societies can therefore be judged by the extent to which they are conducive to the development of this impartial spectator. A society that emphasizes education and more enlarged viewpoints develops impartiality best; and government with checks and balances, government that is based on the rule of law, gains

more of the objectivity and justice it needs in order to be impartial. Moreover, morally superior societies would seem to be those that encourage the exercise of this spectator, through frequent socialization and through cultivating the process of sympathetic imagination.

We can thus evaluate commercial societies using these standards suggested by Smith's moral philosophy. Commercial society, for Smith, is decidedly a mixed bag; as we can see from his criticisms of it, he worried about its potential to isolate men through competition, to contract the worker's moral imagination until he could no longer think of moral duties, and to concern men only with their own narrow interest and not with courage. But it also contains the potential to attain the societal standards of moral excellence described above. First, the repeated interactions of commercial society, by reminding us of the impartial spectator, can encourage the actual exercise of the spectator. Secondly, the complex interdependent relations of the market, by eliminating the abject personal dependence of previous stages of history, can give rise to virtues such as responsibility and probity. Third, by forcing man to enter society in order to satisfy his self-interest and self-love, commercial society may gain the opportunity to redirect these urges towards what is genuinely praiseworthy. Fourth, by allowing a space for civil society to flourish, it may also allow that civil society to practice the social virtues such as benevolence. These advantages often require public attention in order to gain sufficient strength, and they may not surface in every commercial society. But their presence disproves the notion that commercial society is inherently and universally individualistic.

As mentioned above, a society that encourages frequent social interaction is one that might be considered morally superior due to its development of the impartial spectator. The importance of sociability in moral development is therefore worth discussing a bit more fully, before assessing the types of social relationships likely to be found in commercial society. Moral development is impossible except in a social context, for, as Smith stated, “were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place . . . he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conducts . . . than of the beauty and deformity of his own face” (*Sentiments* 1982, 110). It is through observing others, learning which of their behaviors we approve of—and which of our behaviors they approve of—that we develop our moral intuition. According to Smith, “it is thus that the general rules of morality are formed. They are ultimately founded upon experience of what, in particular instances, our moral faculties, our natural sense of merit and propriety, approve, or disapprove of” (*Sentiments* 1982, 159). The accumulation of social experiences provides knowledge to be synthesized into moral law.

Furthermore, only society can keep our behavior and thoughts in line with that moral law once we have learned it. Smith argued that solitude is likely to give us an unrealistically high opinion of our own virtues, while socializing with others keeps us honest:

In solitude, we are apt to feel too strongly whatever relates to ourselves: we are apt to over-rate the good offices we may have done, and the injuries we may have suffered: we are apt to be too much elated by our own good, and too much dejected by our own bad fortune. The conversation of a friend brings us to a better, that of a stranger to a still better temper. The man within the breast, the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct, requires often to be

awakened and put in mind of his duty, by the presence of the real spectator.  
(*Sentiments* 1982, 159)

Human company awakens the “man within the breast,” the impartial spectator who judges the morality of our actions. For this reason, “society and conversation, therefore, are the most powerful remedies for restoring the mind to its tranquility . . . . Men of retirement and speculation, who are apt to sit brooding at home over either grief or resentment . . . seldom possess that equality of temper which is common among men of the world” (*Sentiments* 1982, 23). Society puts our own cares in perspective by reminding us how they appear to other people. In solitude, we cannot learn morality; in solitude, we become self-indulgent and forget the moral lessons we have learned.

For Smith, commerce may very well increase the social relationships needed to keep us moral. Much of society is initially based in need, for “man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren” (*Wealth* 1981, 26). In commercial society, increasing specialization forces us to interact with more people in order to satisfy those needs: “without the assistance and cooperation of thousands, the very meanest person in a civilized country could not be provided, even according to, what we very falsely imagine, the easy and simple manner in which he is commonly accommodated” (*Wealth* 1981, 23). Commercial society is more economically complex. To make even a relatively inexpensive coat, thousands of people must interact: the merchants who buy the wool, the day laborers who participate in making each part of the coat, and so on. Thus the denizens of commercial society meet more people and rely on their cooperation, gaining more opportunities for the exercise of the impartial spectator and for the moderation of our own self-love.

Even when the company of others is not specifically directed to a moral purpose—even when it concerns only trivial or neutral matters—it nonetheless activates this spectator: “the conversation of a friend brings us to a better, that of a stranger to a still better temper” (*Sentiments* 1982, 159). Strangers are an even better reminder of the impartial spectator than friends or family, who may not always be impartial towards us. They inspire us to restrain the sentiments that do not facilitate an easy sympathy, thus aiding the virtue of moderation. Neatly reversing Catholic condemnations of worldly affairs, Smith praised “the wise and just man who has been thoroughly bred in the great school of self-command, in the bustle and business of the world” and who “almost becomes himself that impartial spectator” (*Sentiments* 1982, 146).

Another social advantage of commerce is that it allows people to act upon local knowledge. For instance, Smith wrote that “every individual is continually exerting himself to find out the most advantageous employment for whatever capital he can command” (*Wealth* 1976, 454). In so doing, he usually chooses to invest it close to home. There, “he can know better the character and situation of the persons whom he trusts” (*Wealth* 1976, 454). Perhaps in time these economic exchanges would even engender sympathy that was absent at first, for as Smith wrote, “Commerce . . . ought naturally to be, among nations, as among individuals, a band of union and friendship” (*Wealth* 1981, 493). We strive to know better the character of our associates, in order to ascertain whether they are trustworthy, and in doing so we cultivate bands of union and friendship.

Commerce also liberates people from traditional relationships of dependence,

which helps to strengthen their moral faculties. Fleischacker argues that increased independence “is a political, not a moral, consequence of the free market” in Smith’s thought (2004, 56). But in fact, Smith demonstrated ways in which it does lead to greater moral understanding. For example, he compared the character of independent English laborers to that of the more dependent French. He noted that “in Paris the regulations concerning police are so numerous as to be comprehended in several volumes. In London there are only two or three simple regulations. Yet in Paris scarce a night passes without somebody being killed, while in London, which is a larger city, there are scarce three or four in a year” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 486). More voluminous laws or stronger government cannot by themselves stop disorder, for “those cities where the greatest police is exercised are not those which enjoy the greatest security” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 332). Rather, “the nature of the manners of the people and their different manner of life occasions a vast difference in this respect” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 332). The French upper class maintains more servants, who are often fired or turned out of doors, and then forced to support themselves through petty crime (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 332-333). Former servants of the rich are unable to adopt an honest living, as they have become accustomed to idleness and luxury by their former masters (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 333). But in England, the working poor labor for manufacturers, and “the manufactures give the poorer sort better wages than any master can afford; besides, it gives the rich an opportunity of spending their fortunes with fewer servants, which they never fail of embracing” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 333). Businessmen would rather reinvest capital in their businesses than maintain a large number of household servants. As a result, the

English working poor are financially independent and maintain their own households. Meanwhile, the merchant, like the laborer, is also more independent than a servant or serf: “indirectly, perhaps, he [the rich man] maintains as great or even a greater number of people than he could have done by the antient method of expence . . . . He generally contributes, however, but a very small proportion to that of each” (*Wealth* 1981, 420). Because of the complexity of commercial enterprises, the merchant is dependent upon no particular person: “though in some measure obliged to them all [his customers], he is not absolutely dependent upon any one of them” (*Wealth* 1981, 420). Such independence is a moral as well as a political benefit, for “nothing gives such noble and generous notions of probity as freedom and independency” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 333). Being forced to monitor one’s own conduct brings the impartial spectator into view more frequently, thus acquiring prudent habits. Smith observed that

in mercantile and manufacturing towns, where the inferior ranks of people are chiefly maintained by the employment of capital, they are in general industrious, sober, and thriving . . . in those towns which are principally supported by the constant or occasional residence of a court, and in which the inferior ranks of people are chiefly supported by the spending of revenue, they are in general idle, dissolute, and poor. (*Wealth* 1981, 335)

Therefore, “commerce is one great preventive” of disorder due to its encouragement of individual initiative and responsibility (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 333). Although man is a social animal, interdependence rather than dependence is the best model of social interaction.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Feminist scholar Edith Kuiper takes Smith to task because “Smith argues—obviously incorrectly—that full independence is . . . a sign of maturity,” implicitly denying relations of dependency within the family (2002, 79). But despite Smith’s language of “independency,” the actual relations he describes are interdependent, for he acknowledges that “all the members of human society stand in need of each others assistance” (*Sentiments* 1982, 85).



It may be objected that these interdependent relationships originate in self-interest and hence cannot have any moral significance. Smith himself recognized in a notorious passage that self-interest drives economic exchange: “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest” (*Wealth* 1981, 27). But for Smith, this observation did not carry the moral condemnation that others seemed to think it should. Rejecting “the futile mortifications of the monastery,” Smith vigorously defended the innocence of caring for one’s own life, health, and property (*Sentiments* 1982, 134). Some degree of self-interest is vital in order to sustain life: “benevolence may, perhaps, be the sole principle of action in the Deity . . . but whatever may be the case with the Deity, so imperfect a creature as man, the support of whose existence requires so many things external to him, must often act from many other motives” (*Sentiments* 1982, 305). Benevolence cannot accomplish this task, not only because it is an often fragile sentiment, but because others cannot know our needs as well as we do: “every man is, no doubt, by nature, principally recommended to his own care; and as he is fitter to take care of himself than of any other person, it is fit and right that it should be so” (*Sentiments* 1982, 82).

Moreover, self-interest necessarily drives exchange relationships because “he has not time . . . to do this [obtain their good will] upon every occasion” (*Wealth* 1981, 26). Sympathy, as it is dependent upon knowledge of circumstances and a long process of imagination, takes time, and “in civilized society he stands at all times in need of the cooperation and assistance of great multitudes, while his whole life is scarce sufficient to gain the friendship of a few persons” (*Wealth* 1981, 26). Thus the complexity of

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commercial society does render self-interest rather than sympathy an important motive in most interactions.

Though self-interest is necessary and innocent, its role is—and ought to be—limited. If the “selfish and original passions of human nature” are given full rein, then “the loss or gain of a very small interest of our own, appears to be of vastly more importance . . . than the greatest concern of another with whom we have no particular connexion” (*Sentiments* 1982, 135). Self-interest must be controlled and limited by sympathy if society is to subsist, for otherwise men would always prefer their own interests even at the expense of injustice to others. It should be clear from the very first sentence of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that Smith rejected the “selfish system,” which he referred to as the “splenetic . . . systems” (*Sentiments* 1982, 127). Unlike Mandeville, Smith thought that sympathy is a passion distinct from self-interest—and that this distinction must be understood if it is to function as an effective check on selfishness. According to Smith, “sympathy . . . cannot, in any sense, be regarded as a selfish principle” (*Sentiments* 1982, 317). Smith acknowledged that sympathy “arises from bringing your case home to myself, from putting myself in your situation” (*Sentiments* 1982, 317). Judgments are, to a certain extent, necessarily self-centered: “we may judge of the propriety or impropriety of the sentiments of another person by their correspondence or disagreement with our own” (*Sentiments* 1982, 19). However, “this imaginary change is not supposed to happen to me in my own person and character, but in that of the person with whom I sympathize” (*Sentiments* 1982, 317). We step outside of our own person as far as possible and project ourselves into the person of another.

Thus it is possible that “a man may sympathize with a woman in child-bed; though it is impossible that he should conceive himself as suffering her pains in his own proper person” (*Sentiments* 1982, 317). Sympathy requires an imaginary change of place, and so takes us out of our own private worlds.

Even our obsession with the feelings of the rich and famous is sometimes a disinterested passion. Smith wrote that “our obsequiousness to our superiors more frequently arises from our admiration for the advantages of their situation, than from any private expectations of benefit from their good-will. Their benefits can extend but to a few; but their fortunes interest almost every body” (*Sentiments* 1982, 52). We are interested in wealthy people’s lives “because mankind are disposed to sympathize more entirely with our joy than with our sorrow” (*Sentiments* 1982, 50). The wealthy, the famous, the talented, the well-born, the beautiful—their lives seem so full of joy that people gain pleasure from observing them, even though they usually gain no material advantage from doing so. This phenomenon persists in the contemporary world, where people devouring celebrity gossip magazines cannot possibly expect to further their own self-interest by reading about the wealthy. Thus, even one of the greatest problems in human nature—our tendency to sympathize more with the rich—is not caused by self-interest.

Self-love, like self-interest, is to a degree understandable, but must be kept moderate. According to Smith, “though it may be true . . . that every individual, in his own breast, naturally prefers himself to all mankind, yet he dares not look mankind in the face, and avow this preference. He feels that in this preference they can never go along

with him” (*Sentiments* 1982, 83). Therefore, “when he views himself in the light in which he is conscious that others will view him, he sees that to them he is but one of the multitude in no respect better than any other in it . . . . He must . . . humble the arrogance of his self-love, and bring it down to something others can go along with” (*Sentiments* 1982, 83). It is through his desire for society that man learns to moderate the passion of self-love, since he knows that others will not sympathize or accept it in its untamed form.

At this point, critics such as Rousseau might point out that man’s social dependence on others is precisely the problem. Man seeks social esteem, and so he hypocritically feigns virtues that he does not truly possess, all the while serving his own *amour-propre*. But Smith argued that our knowledge of moral standards inspires us to emulate them, not merely to appear to do so. According to Smith, men seek to be worthy of love. It is an inherent principle of human nature that “man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love” (*Sentiments* 1982, 113). Such a desire ensures that men will rarely pretend to possess nonexistent virtues, since they would be ashamed to know their true unworthiness. Undeserved applause merely pains rather than pleases us: “the man who applauds us . . . for actions we did not perform” offers “no sort of satisfaction from his praises” because we ourselves know that we did not earn it (*Sentiments* 1982, 115). Our desire not only to be loved, but to be worthy of that love, ensures the smooth functioning of society, for “the first could only have prompted him to the affectation of virtue, and to the concealment of vice. The second was necessary in order to inspire him with the real love of virtue” (*Sentiments* 1982, 117). Man’s constitution leads him to internalize a

desire for authentic goodness, not merely for its appearance.

Smith illustrated this principle famously in Part III of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. He noted that, were China to be obliterated, a man in Europe might express sorrow, but would nevertheless sleep undisturbed that night. In contrast, the same man would doubtlessly lose sleep over a minor accident to himself, such as the loss of his little finger. Smith then posed the question: “To prevent, therefore, this paltry misfortune to himself, would a man of humanity be willing to sacrifice the lives of a hundred million of his brethren, provided he had never seen them?” (*Sentiments* 1982, 137). He concluded that the answer was no, that a man would not sacrifice unseen millions to save his own little finger, because he would be restrained by the “inhabitant of the breast” (*Sentiments* 1982, 137). Smith’s conclusion was not based in naïve idealism, but rather in a realistic assessment of man’s self-love. Man seeks to be worthy of love, and this desire compels him to model his behavior in the manner that society dictates as worthy. Men become virtuous not for the love of an abstract ideal, but for “a stronger love, a more powerful affection . . . the love of what is honorable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters” (*Sentiments* 1982, 137). Self-love, then, can eventually lead man beyond the self, by teaching him that the best way to love himself is to make that self worthy of love through internalizing moral norms such as respect for others. That self-love forms a motive for many commercial interactions is therefore not inherently dangerous, for “self-love may frequently be a virtuous motive of action” (*Sentiments* 1982, 309). .

Self-love only becomes the vice known as vanity when it develops one of two

characteristics: “he is guilty of vanity who desires praise for qualities which are either not praise-worthy in any degree, or . . . who desires praise for what indeed very well deserves it, but what he perfectly knows does not belong to him” (*Sentiments* 1982, 309). Both of these tendencies are certainly vices; but, of all the vices Smith condemned in commercial society—selfishness, stupidity, cowardice—vanity seems to have mostly escaped his ire. According to Smith, “notwithstanding all its groundless pretensions . . . vanity is almost always a sprightly and gay, and often a very good-natured passion . . . . Even the falsehoods of the vain man are all innocent falsehoods, meant to raise himself, not to lower other people” (*Sentiments* 1982, 257). The vain man clearly cares what others think, or else he would not seek their applause. Therefore the vain man, though guilty of vice, is an eager participant in society, and as such is subject to social influence. Society has the potential to redirect his love of praise to more genuine and honest goals: “the great secret of education is to direct vanity to proper objects. Never suffer him to value himself upon trivial accomplishments. But do not always discourage his pretensions to those that are of real importance. He would not pretend to them if he did not earnestly desire to possess them” (*Sentiments* 1982, 259). Even when self-love is perverted into vanity, it retains its ability to bring men to the social virtues.

Related to self-interest and self-love is the desire to better one’s condition—a motive that some commentators have assumed issues solely from greed and is therefore at odds with the sympathetic feelings propounded in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. According to Otteson, there is “no reason to believe that the desire to better one’s condition, on which much of the analysis in *WN* is predicated, necessarily bears any

significant relationship to other people” (2002, 195). Yet Smith noted that the natural propensity to barter—part of the desire to better one’s condition—is probably “the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech” (*Wealth* 1981, 25). The reference to speech and reason is a significant one, for these qualities are essential in Smith’s moral philosophy. Smith argued that the internalization of moral standards is predicated on speech, on “communication with our own species” (*Sentiments* 1982, 110). Speech, as Aristotle had observed centuries before Smith, allows humans to express approval and disapproval. Speech and reason thus enable us to form moral judgments via the impartial spectator. But as soon as we develop the capacity for sympathy, we notice that “our propensity to sympathize with joy is much stronger than our propensity to sympathize with sorrow” (*Sentiments* 1982, 45). We give ourselves over much more readily to joy at a friend’s wedding, than to sorrow at a funeral. It is for this reason that “we make parade of our riches, and conceal our poverty” (*Sentiments* 1982, 50). In other words, we wish to become rich in order to win more attention and share our joy with others, and to cease burdening others with our poverty and sorrow. Thus Smith explicitly wrote that “bettering our condition” is motivated by a desire “to be observed, to be attended to, to be taken note of with sympathy” (*Sentiments* 1982, 50). The desire to better our condition, then, is rooted in our natural sympathetic tendencies, which are in turn rooted in reason and speech. We wish to bring joy rather than sorrow to others, by leading them to a sincere sympathy with our own joy. So we barter and save to improve our material condition, for good fortune and generosity are the most obvious methods of imparting pleasure to those around us.

The desire to better one's condition thus emerges as an aspect of man's social nature—a fact that is often referenced throughout Smith's works. For instance, he set forth public opinion as an influence on spending: “to reduce very much the number of his servants, to reform his stable from great profusion to great frugality, to lay down his equipage after he has once set it up, are changes which cannot escape the observance of his neighbours, and which are supposed to imply some acknowledgement of preceding bad conduct” (*Wealth* 1981, 348). Smith also mentioned that the desire to better one's condition encompasses social aspirations, such as the desire to become “a gentleman” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 492). Though the desire to spend money or acquire social rank is certainly not benevolent, and can be a source of corruption, it is nonetheless caused by man's social instincts.

Because of its roots in the desire for social approval, the desire to better one's condition can—and sometimes is—brought into line with pro-social behavior. In the quest for riches, the poor man must exhibit virtue, because “probity and prudence, generosity and frankness” are the best traits to have in attracting business and saving money (*Sentiments* 1982, 55). In bettering his condition, he “must acquire superior knowledge in his profession, and superior industry in the exercise of it. He must be patient in labour, resolute in danger, and firm in distress” (*Sentiments* 1982, 55). For this reason, “in the middling and inferior stations of life, the road to virtue and that to fortune, to such fortune, at least, as men in such stations can reasonably expect to acquire, are, happily in most cases, very nearly the same” (*Sentiments* 1982, 63). Smith concluded that “in such situations, therefore, we may generally expect a considerable degree of virtue;



and, fortunately for the good morals of society, these are the situations of by far the greater part of mankind” (*Sentiments* 1982, 63). Some of the dangers of individualism, then, may be largely confined to the upper classes. The lower classes, while perhaps often falling short of moral perfection, can nonetheless come to exhibit a “considerable degree” of virtue.

But what about the “deception” (*Sentiments* 1982, 183) that Smith thought attends the desire to better one’s condition—that is, the illusory happiness promised by riches? After all, one cannot deny the power of his passage about “the poor man’s son.” Griswold, Rasmussen, and Hanley all interpret it as an indictment of commercial society’s illusory promises, though they think Smith saw such illusions as necessary and ultimately beneficial to society as a whole. Fleischacker takes issue with this harsh assessment “because if Griswold is right . . . there would remain a very serious moral gap between Smith’s moral and his economic views” (2004, 104). But Fleischacker resolves the discrepancy by reading the passage primarily as “a traditional moralist’s warnings against the temptations of excessive ambition” (2004, 106). This may in fact be one among many of its intended meanings—Smith’s writing is rich and multifaceted, or, as Vivienne Brown calls it, “dialogic”—but, for its most immediate purpose, we should look to its chapter title, “Of the Effect of Utility upon the Sentiment of Approbation.” In the section, Smith argued that it is not utility itself, but the idea of utility, that pleases us. He remarked on the fact “that this fitness, this happy contrivance of any production of art, should often be more valued, than the very end for which it was intended” (*Sentiments* 1982, 179). We love to contemplate order, ingenuity, or effort for their own sake, more

so than we value the ends they are supposed to achieve. Smith then transitioned to the story of the “poor man’s son” by observing that “nor is it only with regard to such frivolous objects that our conduct is influenced by this principle; it is often the most secret motive of the most serious and important pursuits of both private and public life” (*Sentiments* 1982, 181). In other words, we love the contrivance itself—the striving, the formulating of complicated plans and strategies, the little victories won along the way—more than we love the end result we are supposedly working for, the indolence or ease that we claim the successful enjoy. The story of the poor man’s son may be a warning against excessive ambition, but it is also a reminder that human nature is made for purposeful effort and not for indolence. The “deception” lies not so much in thinking that we will be happier through striving to better our condition, but in becoming attached to the end result rather than to the process itself.

As Smith stated near the end of the famous passage, the desire to better our condition appears deceptive when viewed through a “splenetic philosophy, which in time of sickness or low spirits is familiar to every man [and which] thus entirely depreciates those great objects of human desire” (*Sentiments* 1982, 183). But we rarely view it in such a light. Smith, adopting the first-person plural and thus including himself among those who favorably view such pursuits, noted that “in better health and in better humour, we never fail to regard them under a more agreeable aspect” (*Sentiments* 1982, 183). A pessimist might easily accept the assertion that a beggar is happier than a king, but in the course of ordinary life most people see bettering one’s condition as a normal, healthy

human desire.<sup>9</sup> And it is in fact salutary for an individual to strive to better his condition. As Smith observed in another passage in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, “man was made for action, and to promote by the exertion of his faculties such changes in the external circumstances both of himself and others, as may seem most favourable to the happiness of all” (1982, 106). In order to be happy, he must “call forth the whole vigour of his soul, and strain every nerve,” not sun himself indolently by the side of the road (*Sentiments* 1982, 106). If such a picture of indolence is what inspires him to strain every nerve in action, then so be it; but it is the action, and not the indolence, that is the true fulfillment of his nature. Ultimately, such striving also benefits the spiritual and intellectual condition of society, for this is the impulse that leads people “to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life” (*Sentiments* 1982, 183). Ambition can thus “ennoble” the human condition—not merely contribute to its material comfort.

Hypocrisy, another vice in the tale of the “poor man’s son,” can, in the right sort of society, avoid its vicious connotations. Hypocrisy can refer to the pretense of attitudes

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that Smith’s comment about the beggar echoes a passage from St. Augustine:

I noticed a poor beggar; he was fairly drunk, I suppose, and was laughing and enjoying himself . . . . I thought of how I was toiling away, spurred on by my desires and dragging after me the load of my unhappiness and making it all the heavier by dragging it, and it seemed to me that the goal of this and all such endeavors was simply to reach a state of happiness that was free from care; the beggar had reached this state before us, and we, perhaps, might never reach it at all . . . . No doubt the beggar’s joy was not true joy; but it was a great deal truer than the joy which I, with my ambition, was seeking. (*Confessions* 2001, 108).

Smith did not share Augustine’s disregard for worldly success. While Augustine rejected “a glory that was not in You” (2001, 108) and therefore abandoned his secular academic career, Smith, taking the opposite view, rejected “the futile mortifications of the monastery” (*Sentiments* 1982, 134). Smith praised “all the heroes, all the statesmen and lawgivers, all the poets and philosophers” as superior to the “monks and friars” (*Sentiments* 1982, 134). For Smith, then, ambition and action are desirable and only a “splenetic philosopher” such as Augustine would denigrate the active life.

or feelings that we do not possess, and such inauthenticity is sometimes appropriate. For instance, “the man who has received great benefits from another person may, by the natural coldness of his temper, feel but a very small degree of the sentiment of gratitude. If he has been virtuously educated, however . . . [then] though his heart is not warmed with any grateful affection, he will strive to act as if it was” (*Sentiments* 1982, 162). In other words, his feelings may not be particularly strong, but the impartial spectator tells him that they should be, and so he acts in accordance with how a person in his situation should feel. The same may be true even in more intimate relationships—for instance, with a wife who does not feel affectionate towards her husband, but who strives to perform her marital role as if she did. Smith admitted that “such a friend, and such a wife, are neither of them, undoubtedly, the very best of their kinds” (*Sentiments* 1982, 162). After all, we want our friends—and especially our spouses—to love us fervently, not just perform an abstract duty. But “though not the very first of their kinds . . . they are perhaps the second” (*Sentiments* 1982, 162). The fact that they try to benefit the other person, even when they are not naturally moved to do so, proves the importance of the relationship. What some call “hypocrisy” can be a sign that we place others’ feelings above our own—that we do not abandon others simply because we do not always *feel* like helping them. Hypocrisy can therefore be a form of the “conditional sympathy” that Smith discussed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: that is, acting according to a mental construct of sympathy, even in the absence of sympathetic feelings.

There are other situations in which people might conceal their feelings, especially those feelings that are least likely to inspire sympathy in others. We are least able to

sympathize with the “unsocial passions”: bodily sensations, idiosyncratic passions, and ugly emotions such as anger (*Sentiments* 1982, 27-38). It is therefore natural and proper for people to restrain their expression of these feelings, since others cannot easily enter into them. In contrast, what Smith called the social passions are infectious and should be expressed often: “generosity, humanity, kindness, compassion . . . all the social and benevolent affections, when expressed in the countenance or behavior even towards those who are not peculiarly connected with ourselves, please the indifferent spectator” (*Sentiments* 1982, 39). Lying somewhere in between these two types of passions—those with which we easily sympathize, and those with which we do not—are what Smith called the selfish passions. According to Smith, “grief and joy, when conceived upon account of our own private good or bad fortune, constitute this third set of passions” (*Sentiments* 1982, 40). They meet with less universal approval than benevolence or agreeableness, but they are more easily understood than anger or attraction or any other unsocial feeling. In a civilized nation, the unsocial and selfish passions are thus concealed for good reason. Such concealment actually facilitates society by encouraging people to express the sentiments that others can more easily share and that form more profound connections between people.

At any rate, Smith thought that the more pernicious forms of hypocrisy would be less likely in commercial society than in other forms of society. He wrote that a “savage . . . is in continual danger” and “can expect from his countrymen no sympathy or indulgence for . . . weaknesses” (*Sentiments* 1982, 205). Therefore, “among civilized nations, the virtues which are founded upon humanity, are more cultivated than those

which are founded upon self-denial and the command of the passions. Among rude and barbarous nations, it is quite otherwise, the virtues of self-denial are more cultivated” (*Sentiments* 1982, 204-205). Because the “civilized” nation is more humane and benevolent, people’s feelings are indulged more, and they become more open about them. But the “barbarous” nation, demanding self-control, is necessarily characterized by less honesty: “a polished people being accustomed to give way, in some measure, to the movements of nature, become frank, open, and sincere. Barbarians, on the contrary, being obliged to smother and conceal the appearance of every passion, necessarily acquire the habits of falsehood and dissimulation” (*Sentiments* 1982, 208). In a sense, then, commercial society is actually more natural than the preceding stages. In commercial society, people are less constrained by material conditions and have more freedom to express their feelings.

### **Reforms to Correct Individualism**

Smith thought that government could play a role in supporting commercial society’s virtuous rather than vicious potential. However, before we can review his suggested reforms—which may seem rather mild for the task at hand—we must first review his political philosophy, which, as most scholars agree, contains a “strong presumption against government activity beyond its fundamental duties” (Jacob Viner 1927, 219).<sup>10</sup> Smith questioned Rousseau’s proposition that a strong political

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<sup>10</sup> Hamowy approvingly quotes Viner on this point, though he notes some “specific government intrusions into the market” that Smith supported, such as luxury taxes, temporary monopolies, and regulation of interest rates (1987, 21). Similarly, Griswold notes that Smith did not oppose all government intervention, but thought that “those who would have it do so are required to show why it should in this particular instance, for how long, in precisely what fashion, and how its intervention will escape the usual dangers” (1999, 295). Fleischacker, who argues that Smith’s political philosophy “is broad enough to include practically all the tasks that modern welfare liberals, as opposed to libertarians, would put under

community, such as that of ancient Sparta, would more effectively ensure the good life. While government can help mitigate the problem of individualism, it should do so with a light touch.

Vivienne Brown argues that, according to Smith, “moral excellence is an intensely private form of behavior” because it can be performed only between individual persons (1994, 208). Benevolence—for Smith, the highest form of virtue—can only be directed towards actual men and their circumstances, not towards mankind in the abstract. Smith wrote that “our regard for the multitude is compounded and made up of the particular regards which we feel for the different individuals of which it is composed” (*Sentiments* 1982, 89). Even the impartial spectator can only be an aggregate of social norms we have extracted from actual experience with others. When we ourselves function as spectators to others, experience becomes even more vital, for a man endeavoring to sympathize with another must “bring home to himself every little circumstance . . . and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded” (*Sentiments* 1982, 21). Thus, to conceive a proper degree of sympathy, we must observe something about the other person’s circumstances. Smith conceptualized sympathy as a series of concentric circles, extending outwards from ourselves and gradually weakening with each successive movement away from this center. In his model, sympathy is strongest with our immediate families, a bit weaker with our extended families, and weaker still with our coworkers, neighbors, and friends (*Sentiments* 1982, 219). According to Smith, this

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government purview,” also points out that a major implication of Smith’s thought is that “where government does need to act, it should operate as much as possible through markets” (2004, 234, 276).

tendency exists to ensure that we focus on those whom we have the greatest ability to help. When discussing the phenomenon of patriotism, for instance, he wrote:

We do not love our country merely as a part of the great society of mankind: we love it for its own sake, and independently of any such consideration. That wisdom which contrived the system of human affections . . . seems to have judged that the interest of the great society of mankind would be best promoted by directing the principal attention of each individual to that particular portion of it, which was most within the sphere both of his abilities and understanding. (*Sentiments* 1982, 229)

Like Hume, Smith pointed to polygamy as an example of affection so divided as to become meaningless: “the affection of the husband must here [in polygamy] be greatly divided, not only amongst his wives but amongst their children . . . and consequently can not be very strong with regard to any particular one” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 151).

Because of the relational nature of benevolence, it is most germane to civil society; government’s primary role is to administer justice, protect “perfect rights,” and perform public works. Smith followed Kames in distinguishing between justice, on the one hand, and the social virtues, on the other. Justice “may be extorted by force” (*Sentiments* 1982, 79). Justice punishes those who violate the rights of life or property. Its rules are absolute and universal: “the rules of justice may be compared to the rules of grammar” (*Sentiments* 1982, 175). It is a relatively straightforward task for a third party to define and enforce neutral rules for justice. But in contrast, the other virtues, such as benevolence, are comparable to writing style rather than grammar, for they are “loose, vague, and indeterminate, and present us rather with a general idea of the perfection we ought to aim at, than afford us any certain and infallible directions for acquiring it” (*Sentiments* 1982, 175). The other virtues depend upon imagination and experience, not



abstract rationality. They can only be applied with a great deal of individual sensitivity; they flourish best when freely given, for “nobody imagines that those who might have reason, perhaps, to expect more kindness, have any right to extort it by force” (*Sentiments* 1982, 81). The distinction between justice and social virtues in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* corresponded to the distinction between perfect and imperfect rights that Smith adopted in *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. Perfect rights pertaining to commutative justice are strict entitlements, while imperfect rights, which involve distributive justice, are not: “a beggar is an object of our charity and may be said to have a right to demand it; but when we use the word right in this way it is not in a proper but in a metaphorical sense” (1982, 9).

Given Smith’s generally limited view of government’s role, he thought that reforms should be narrowly tailored to achieve their ends and that they should be adapted, as much as possible, to the existing body of laws and social norms. Moreover, its actions should fall into either the category of ensuring justice or the category of public works. He suggested a small number of reforms that he thought could meet these requirements.

Smith believed education to be paramount in a commercial republic, since otherwise commercial society might corrode the moral sentiments necessary for its own proper functioning. Education stimulates the ability to step outside of one’s immediate preoccupations and imagine oneself in another’s circumstances—not to mention the ability to process our experiences and extrapolate general rules. For this reason, education inculcates conditional sympathy by teaching men the right behaviors to

maintain even in the absence of natural feelings: “if he has been virtuously educated, however . . . [then] though his heart is not warmed with any grateful affection, he will strive to act as if it was” (*Sentiments* 1982, 162). Education is also the most effective way to ensure that the potentially vicious motives are re-directed towards virtue. Smith even went so far as to call this kind of re-direction the “great secret” of education: “the great secret of education is to direct vanity to proper objects. Never suffer him to value himself upon trivial accomplishments. But do not always discourage his pretensions to those that are of real importance. He would not pretend to them if he did not earnestly desire to possess them” (*Sentiments* 1982, 259).<sup>11</sup>

Smith therefore proposed a plan of public education: “the education of the common people requires, perhaps, in a civilized and commercial society, the attention of the publick” (*Wealth* 1981, 784). He proposed that the public could establish “in every parish or district a little school, where children may be taught for a reward so moderate, that even a common labourer may afford; the master being partly, but not wholly paid by the publick” (*Wealth* 1981, 785). The government could create incentives for people to send their children to these schools, such as “giving small premiums, and little badges of distinction, to the children of the common people who excel” (*Wealth* 1981, 786).

Another incentive might involve examinations or licensing for certain professions: “the public can impose upon almost the whole body of the people the necessity of acquiring

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<sup>11</sup> Smith seemed to think that moral philosophy should form a significant part of any good curriculum. He criticized the universities for discarding ancient philosophy, which had previously taught man of his place in the human community and had considered man “not only as an individual, but as the member of a family, of the state, and of the great society of mankind” (*Wealth* 1981, 771). Modern theology, then dominant in the universities, made human duties and moral philosophy subordinate to logic and ontology (*Wealth* 1981, 772).

those most essential parts of education, by obliging every man to undergo an examination or probation in them before he can obtain freedom in any corporation, or be allowed to set up any trade” (*Wealth* 1981, 786). Smith’s proposal would operate through a variety of means: government funding, incentives, and requirements. Children would be given a partially subsidized education and encouraged to attend, while people of all ages would have to pass an examination to set up a trade or business. Thus a “civilized and commercial society” poses problems for the common worker because of the division of labor, but that same society is able to attain the level of wealth and sophistication necessary to undertake a system of public education.<sup>12</sup>

For Smith, education bears a complex relationship to religion. Thanks to early education, the common people are better able to read the Bible: “by it [education] they learn to read, and this gives them the benefit of religion” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 540). Smith also recognized that education of adult commoners would fall to the responsibility of churches: “the institutions for the instruction of people of all ages are chiefly those of religious instruction” (*Wealth* 1981, 788). Specifically, most common people—unlike

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<sup>12</sup> In an early draft of the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith argued that knowledge is improved through being divided into specialized pursuits:

Let any ordinary person make a fair review of all the knowledge which he possesses concerning any subject that does not fall within the limits of his particular occupation, and he will find that almost every thing he knows has been acquired at second hand, from books, from the literary instructions which he may have received in his youth, or from the occasional conversations which he may have had with men of learning. A very small part of it only, he will find, has been the produce of his own observations or reflections. All the rest has been purchased, in the same manner as his shoes or his stockings, from those whose business it is to make up and prepare for the market that particular species of goods. It is in this manner that he has acquired all his general ideas concerning the great subjects of religion, morals, and government, concerning his own happiness or that of his country. His whole system concerning each of those important objects will almost always be found to have been originally the produce of the industry of other people, from whom either he himself or those who have had the care of his education have procured it in the same manner as any other commodity, by barter and exchange for some part of the produce of their own labour. (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 574)

the rich and well-educated—would likely be attracted to austere religious sects:

In every civilized society, in every society where the distinction of ranks has once been completely established, there have been always two different schemes or systems of morality current at the same time; of which one might be called the strict or austere; the other the liberal, or if you will, the loose system. The former is generally admired and revered by the common people: The latter is more commonly esteemed and adopted by what are called people of fashion. (*Wealth* 1981, 794)

The division between rich and poor is not just economic—there are also religious and cultural divisions between them, with the rich attracted to more lenient churches, and the poor to the strict. Smith explained this division by noting that “the vices of levity are always ruinous to the common people” (*Wealth* 1981, 794). Alcoholism or illegitimate offspring demolish a workman’s meager savings, potentially impoverishing him for life or even driving him to crime. Astute laborers therefore understand the danger of excess and are drawn to a religion that discourages it. Such a religion not only teaches moral norms but also provides a further, more powerful restraint in the form of a small society devoted to practicing and reinforcing them. Smith wrote that “a man of low condition, on the contrary, is far from being a distinguished member of any great society . . . . His conduct is observed and attended to by nobody, and he is therefore very likely to neglect it himself, and to abandon himself to every sort of low profligacy and vice” (*Wealth* 1981, 795). Society’s influence—and the civilizing power of self-love—is re-activated when he joins a church: “he never emerges so effectually from this obscurity, his conduct never excites so much the attention of any respectable society, as by his becoming the member of a small religious sect” (*Wealth* 1981, 795).

In order to retain this salutary restraint on vice among the poor, while preventing

it from turning to fanaticism, Smith recommended some potential reforms. First, instituting religious toleration and dis-establishing the church would mean that “the teachers of each little sect, finding themselves almost alone, would be obliged to respect those of almost every other sect” (*Wealth* 1981, 793). Even the strictest of moralists would have to practice tolerance. Second, widespread education would function as “the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition,” ensuring that sects would remain free of these species of false religion (*Wealth* 1981, 796). Third, “the state, by encouraging, that is by giving entire liberty to all those who for their own interest would attempt, without scandal or indecency, to amuse and divert the people . . . would easily dissipate, in the greater part of them, that melancholy and gloomy humour” (*Wealth* 1981, 796). Music, visual arts, and plays would inspire men with good humor and temperament, preventing them from becoming too extreme in their austerity. In this way—through religious pluralism, education, and freedom of public diversion—the state might allow religion to restrain the morals of the common people without itself becoming a danger.

In addition to educational policies, Smith suggested some other ideas aimed at helping the poor. For instance, taxes or tolls can be strategically structured in such a manner as to relieve the poor: “when the tolls upon carriages of luxury, upon coaches, post-chaises, &c. is made somewhat higher in proportion to their weight, than upon carriages of necessary use, such as carts, wagons, &c., the indolence and vanity of the rich is made to contribute in a very easy manner to the relief of the poor, by rendering cheaper the transportation of heavy goods” (*Wealth* 1981, 725). Smith also criticized

aspects of Great Britain's Poor Laws, particularly the "settlement provision" that required a parish to give relief to any poor person who had lived there more than forty days. Because of this provision, most parishes harassed any poor men who tried to settle there—particularly those with families, since they were more expensive to support—in order to prevent them from gaining the necessary forty-day residency. Smith condemned such removals as "an evident violation of natural liberty and justice" that "cruelly oppressed" the poor (*Wealth* 1981, 157).

Finally, Smith indicated that a militia might be warranted in order to preserve individual courage, for, as we saw, he thought "a coward . . . evidently wants one of the most essential parts of the character of a man. He is as much mutilated and deformed in his mind, as another is in his body, who is either deprived of some of its most essential members, or has lost the use of them" (*Wealth* 1981, 787). Despite his confidence in the superior efficiency of professional standing armies over the spontaneous mobilization of common citizens, he nevertheless thought that government must show some sort of concern about the military abilities of those common citizens: "even though the martial spirit of the people were of no use towards the defence of the society, yet to prevent that sort of mental mutilation, deformity, and wretchedness, which cowardice necessarily involves in it . . . would still deserve the most serious attention of government" (*Wealth* 1981, 787). To correct this deficiency, "government" should "take proper pains to support . . . the practice of military exercises" outside the standing army and thus ensure that "every citizen has the spirit of a soldier" (*Wealth* 1981, 786). Smith therefore thought that, in this instance at least, society should sacrifice efficiency for the sake of

cultivating virtue: that is, train and raise a citizens' militia in addition to the standing army, rather than focus resources on the standing army alone. In a letter regarding Alexander Carlyle—a militia supporter who hated Smith's support of standing armies—Smith wrote, “he fancies that because I insist that a Militia is in all cases inferior to a well-regulated and well-disciplined standing army, I disapprove of Militias altogether. With regard to that subject, he and I happened to be precisely of the same opinion” (Hill 2006, 179). Smith supported militias, but not for their salutary effect on the public so much as for their salutary effect on the individual. They may be inefficient and largely useless for national defense, but they preserve individuals' virtuous faculties.

### **Conclusion**

Murray Rothbard writes that “the *Wealth of Nations* is like the Bible; it is possible to derive varying and contradictory interpretations from various—or even the same—parts of the book” (1995, 435). Rothbard, disappointed with Smith for not being more consistently *laissez-faire*, does not intend the comparison as a compliment—and goes on to call the work “a huge, sprawling, inchoate, confused tome, rife with vagueness, ambiguity and deep inner contradictions” (1995, 435). But he may be onto something about Smith's attitude towards commercial society. Smith saw in it multiple and divergent potentialities. While he agreed with Rousseau that certain individualist tendencies posed a real problem, he also did not think all of these tendencies inevitable, pointing out the ways in which the complex interdependent relationships of commercial society also contain the possibility of social influence. Education—both formal education and the “sentimental education” offered by society—must direct the vanity and

ambition of commercial society to proper ends.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE ADAM FERGUSON PROBLEM: THE TENSIONS IN FERGUSON'S SOCIAL THOUGHT

In 1766, Hume wrote of Adam Ferguson's forthcoming book, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, that he did not think it "fit to be given to the Public, neither on account of the Style nor the Reasoning; the form nor the Matter" (*Letters of David Hume* 1932, 12). Hume's negative verdict may seem mystifying, given not only the success of this particular book but of Ferguson's career in general. He occupied the prestigious chair of moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh—a hard-won achievement, as he had worked his way up from librarian to chair of natural philosophy before finally attaining chair of moral philosophy. He later became known as author of the popular *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (1783), though nowadays it has been eclipsed by Edward Gibbon's history of Rome.

Yet, as Jack Russell Weinstein notes, Ferguson always did have an uneasy relationship with his fellow Scots. Not only did Hume criticize his work, but his relationship with Smith also seemed distant and strained, with Smith eventually accusing him of plagiarism (2009, 89). Perhaps Ferguson's life experiences set him apart. He was a clergyman for nine years, while Hutcheson and Millar completed only brief stints in the

Church. (Neither Hume nor Smith seems to have pursued a religious vocation, and the image of Hume haranguing sinners from a pulpit is an incongruous one). He was also the only one of his colleagues to see military action.<sup>1</sup> He was even raised in a different linguistic and cultural milieu, the mountainous Scottish Highlands, where Gaelic was spoken and where most families still eked out a living though farming or herding. Though these personal differences may have made it hard for his academic friends to sympathize with him, it is more likely that the main differences between him and Hume (as well as the others) were intellectual. As we shall see, his work was more conflicted—both about commercial society and human nature as a whole—than that of his fellow Scots.

Scholars have puzzled over the many tensions in Ferguson's political thought. Lisa Hill depicts a Ferguson whose conservative love of order was at odds with his desire for activism. She wrote that, in Ferguson's thought, the good polity "should be kept vital by an alert, factious, fractious, and active populace. Yet, in terms of his ultimate commitments, Ferguson does not find much room for these desiderata . . . . It is also likely that his desire for order was more powerful than he was prepared to acknowledge, causing him to sacrifice other key values such as self-determination (anti-imperialism) and political activism" (2009, 123). Louis Schneider writes of the paradoxical

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<sup>1</sup> Ferguson served as chaplain to the Black Watch Regiment during the Jacobite Rebellion. Sir Walter Scott recounts the following story of his service: "Dr. Adam Ferguson went as chaplain to the Black Watch, or 42<sup>nd</sup> Highland regiment, when that corps was first sent to the Continent. As the regiment advanced to the battle of Fontenoy, the commanding officer, Sir Robert Monro, was astonished to see the chaplain at the head of the column, with a broadsword drawn in his hand. He desired him to go to the rear with the surgeons, a proposal which Adam Ferguson spurned. Sir Robert at length told him that his commission did not entitle him to the post which he had assumed. 'D—n my commission!' said the warlike chaplain, throwing it towards his colonel" (John Gibson Lockhart 1837, 287). Unfortunately, this colorful story appears apocryphal.

“dialectic of success” that haunts Ferguson’s work: namely, his insight that while working towards certain political ends is necessary and desirable, the attainment of said ends is often self-defeating (1995, xv). The Roman republic, to which Ferguson devoted his most massive work, is one example of the dialectic of success. Striving for conquest fostered Rome’s courage and virtue; but, once made, those very conquests created prosperity (resulting in luxury and corruption) and power (which tempted ambitious men), ultimately undermining the republican virtues that the conquests had initially stimulated. Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson credit Ferguson with having “reinterpreted the tension between republicanism and liberalism as a conflict between political and individual autonomy and rights,” in other words with having identified the friction between negative and positive liberties (1998, 176).

Schneider, Kalyvas, and Katznelson, however, overlook the fact that these tensions in Ferguson’s political thought reflect tensions that he thought to be rooted in human nature. (Hill catches many of these psychological tensions but, as we shall see, does not account for their full significance in his philosophy). Ferguson, like the other Scots, believed in natural human impulses—but unlike Hutcheson, he did not merely issue an exhaustive list of these principles and assume that they would work together more or less harmoniously. He was more pessimistic, pointing out the ways in which these impulses work towards contradictory ends. These tensions are potentially destabilizing not only for the individual, but also for the polity, which must ultimately rely on individuals for its maintenance. It is in commercial society—albeit a particular

kind of commercial society, one with a strong militia—that different instincts can achieve at least an uneasy truce and therefore contribute to a balanced, virtuous personality.

### **Relaxations in the National Spirit**

It has been said that Ferguson’s Highlander roots gave him a unique perspective on commercial society (Michael Fry 2009). Coming from a “ruder” culture (to use his terminology), he would have had a keener sense of what is lost in more polished nations. In his writing, he certainly praised rude ages much more than, say, Hume, who dismissed the ancient city-states with the cutting observation that “these people were extremely fond of liberty, but seem not to have understood it well.” Ferguson lamented the loss of antique virtue: “if the savage has not received our instructions, he is likewise unacquainted with our vices. He knows no superior, and cannot be servile; he knows no distinctions of fortune, and cannot be envious; he acts from his talents in the highest station which human society can offer, that of the counselor, and the soldier of his country” (*Essay* 1995, 186).

These vices—servility, envy, and lack of martial spirit—Ferguson castigated throughout his career. He believed preoccupation with material self-interest leads to envy. If men were to strive for virtue, they would have no need to envy each other, for all men might be equally virtuous and happy: “among things of absolute value, are to be reckoned chiefly the habits of a *virtuous* life . . . the good qualities which form the best condition of human nature; and which they, who possess them, enjoy the more that others partake of the same blessings” (*Principles of Moral and Political Science II* 1975, 74). Riches and reputation, however, are often satisfactory only when they elevate us above

others: “among the advantages merely *comparative*, on the contrary, we may reckon *precedence*, and *superiority*, whether of *riches* or *power*; and in a word all the circumstances, in respect to which the *elevation* of one is *depression* to another” (*Principles II* 1975, 75). To focus on them as our supposed interest causes us to become unhappy with our position, whatever it may be: “there is a degree . . . in which we suppose that the care of ourselves becomes a source of painful anxiety and cruel passions; in which it degenerates into avarice, vanity, or pride; and in which, by fostering habits of jealousy and envy, of fear and malice, it becomes as destructive of our own enjoyments, as it is hostile to the welfare of mankind” (*Essay* 1995, 52). Thus he criticized societies in which men are taught “to smile without being pleased, to caress without affection, to wound with the secret weapons of envy and jealousy, and to rest our personal importance on circumstances which we cannot always with honour command” (*Essay* 1995, 39). He thought the poor to be particularly exposed to this vice: “circumstances, especially in populous cities, tend to corrupt the lowest orders of men . . . . An admiration of wealth unpossessed, becoming a principle of envy” (1995, 186). He rejected mere stupidity or ignorance as the chief problem facing the poor. “Ignorance is the least of their failings,” and instead they should beware the corrupting effects of envy, especially as it leads to crime (1995, 186).

Such preoccupation he also thought to be servile and unbecoming of free men: “we have sold our freedom for titles, equipage, and distinctions . . . . We see no merit but prosperity and power, no disgrace but poverty and neglect” (*Essay* 1995, 40). Ferguson, acknowledging his own affinity for Stoicism, admitted that he “may be thought partial to

the Stoic philosophy” (*Principles I* 1975, 7).<sup>2</sup> He often argued that inner freedom consists in independence from one’s immediate circumstances: “happiness has its seat in the temper, or is an agreeable state of the mind,” not a state of external fortune (*Principles II* 1975, 58). Attachment to riches, to comfort, to status, to power, even to one’s own life, compromises this freedom and reduces the individual to spiritual slavery. Unfortunately, he believed that preoccupation with self-interest had indeed reached such levels in many commercial nations. Lord Kames, noticing Ferguson’s disapproval of individualism, summarized the themes of the *Essay* as follows: “it has a further aim, which is to wean us from selfishness and luxury, the reigning characteristics at present of all commercial nations, and to restore the manly passions” (Norbert Waszek 1988, 143).

While individualism may be spiritually servile, it can also lead to literal slavery—that is, the defeat and subjection of a nation. Ferguson titled an entire section of his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* “Of Relaxations in the National Spirit, Incident to Polished Nations,” in which he argued that the individualist pursuits of commerce can compromise public spirit. Commercial societies attain opulence through the separation of professions—what Smith termed the division of labor. Ferguson endorsed this separation in the ordinary course of life, for “by separating the arts of the clothier and the tanner, we are the better supplied with shoes and with cloth” (*Essay* 1995, 230). But he believed that the military constitutes an important exception to this general trend towards

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<sup>2</sup> See Jean Hecht (1975), Norbert Waszek (1988), David Kettler (2005), David Raynor (2009), Lisa Hill (2009), and Vincenzo Merolle (2009), who all interpret Ferguson as a Stoic. Throughout the *Principles* and *Institutes*, Ferguson often quoted Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, and also referred to contemporary Stoics as one of his influences: “even in modern times, and at the distance of many ages . . . this [Stoic] sect has been revered by those who were acquainted with its real spirit, Lord Shaftesbury, Montesquieu, Mr Harris, Mr Hutchison, and many others” (*Principles I* 1975, 8).

specialization. To create a “disparity between the soldier and the pacific citizen,” to make the military a separate profession reserved for the experts, is “an attempt to dismember the human character, and to destroy those very arts we mean to improve” (*Essay* 1995, 232, 230). It is certainly possible for an individual to fulfill his nature without knowledge of either shoes or cloth; but not without courage or public spirit, which are best learned by taking up arms. When every man pursues his own separate interests and profession, and he is never brought into the company of his fellows to work for the common good, “society is made to consist of parts, of which none is animated with the spirit of society itself” (*Essay* 1995, 218). Because of such separation, individualism had reached such a pitch that “to the modern, in too many nations of Europe, the individual is every thing, and the public nothing” (*Essay* 1995, 56). The state ultimately undermines its own ends if, guided by a mistaken focus on efficiency and preservation, it maintains only professional soldiers and allows individual citizens to neglect their duties in this regard. The community cannot subsist without political virtue: “where-ever the state has, by means that do not preserve the virtue of the subject, effectually guarded his safety; remissness, and neglect of the public, are likely to follow” (*Essay* 1995, 263).

Because of his admiration of public virtue, Ferguson also rejected the idea of allowing political checks and balances to replace virtuous statesmen and citizens. He thought that “if individuals think themselves secure without any attention or effort of their own” because of “a distribution of power and office” then “the national vigour declines” (*Essay* 1995, 223). Political institutions are only as good as the men who

comprise them: “nations consist of men; and a nation consisting of degenerate and cowardly men, is weak; a nation consisting of vigorous, public-spirited, and resolute men, is strong” (*Essay* 1995, 225). Therefore nations should never “proceed, in search of perfection, to place every branch of administration behind the counter, and come to employ, instead of the statesman and warrior, the mere clerk and accountant” (*Essay* 1995, 225). Hume was quite willing to accept the selfish system in political life—though not in private life—because of his distrust of political actors. But Ferguson believed that political institutions, however skillfully contrived to draw on the self-interest of politicians, are useless unless they both foster and are supported by virtue.

We can see, then, that Ferguson rejected what he called the “selfish philosophy” because he thought the public cannot be supported by private vice alone (*Essay* 1995, 14). He also attacked it on a number of other grounds. First, its claims to originality rest on “a mere innovation in language” in which the words “self-love” and “interest” are expanded to cover the entire range of human behavior (*Essay* 1995, 14). Ferguson thought such linguistic imprecision impractical, for “it is certainly impossible to live and to act with men, without employing different names to distinguish the humane from the cruel, and the benevolent from the selfish. These terms have their equivalents in every tongue” (*Essay* 1995, 15). Men must draw distinctions in the course of ordinary life, and, in fact, Ferguson pointed out that the selfish philosophers themselves draw such distinctions when they “pretend to detect the fraud by which moral restraints have been imposed, as if to censure a fraud were not already to take a part on the side of morality” (*Essay* 1995, 33). He therefore argued, given the demands of a human nature that cannot



treat of such generalities, that it is necessary “to confine the meaning of the term *interest* to its most common acceptance, and to intimate our intention of employing it in expressing those objects of care which refer to our external condition and the preservation of our animal nature” (*Essay* 1995, 15). Unless interest has a specific definition, it is absurd to claim it as paramount: “without explaining what interest means, we would have it understood as the only reasonable motive of action with mankind” (*Essay* 1995, 14). Such generalities were anathema to Ferguson; in a discussion of whether all human virtues ought to be understood as species of wisdom, he wrote, “it is not necessary, nor perhaps even expedient, thus to force the attributes of human nature, under single appellations” (*Principles II* 1975, 40). Ferguson was too keenly aware of the complexities of human nature to dismiss them with a pat formula.

Such was Ferguson’s semantic quarrel with the selfish philosophy. More importantly, though, he reproached it for mistaking the pursuit of self-interest with true care of the self. Proper self-care consists in “rendering that life a worthy object of care” (*Essay* 1995, 13). “He who remembers that he is by nature a rational being, and a member of society” must understand that truly caring for himself involves care of these faculties as well, “that to preserve himself, is to preserve his reason, and to preserve the best feelings of his heart” (*Essay* 1995, 53). Pursuit of self-interest cannot constitute happiness; instead, “it should seem, therefore, to be the happiness of man, to make his social dispositions the ruling spring of his occupations; to state himself as the member of a community, for whose general good his heart may glow with an ardent zeal” (*Essay* 1995, 54). The good society is not the one that simply allows for the maximization of

self-interest, but rather one that encourages man to work for the common good of some community.

### **Nations Stumble Upon Establishments**

It is worth asking how such a good society can be created. For Ferguson, the answer does not lie in human ingenuity. Perhaps more than any of the other Scottish philosophers, Ferguson elucidated the concept of spontaneous order. His observation that “nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design” (*Essay* 1995, 122) has been oft-quoted and even adapted into an essay title by Friedrich Hayek. Since Ferguson’s theory has been thoroughly covered elsewhere (Ronald Hamowy 1987, Hill 2006), it need only be reviewed briefly here.

Ferguson, like Hume and Smith, explained Great Britain’s transition from feudalism to commercial society in terms of spontaneous order, depicting it as an outcome planned by none of the main actors. He wrote that the king tried to “extend his own authority, by rescuing the labourer and the dependent from the oppression of their immediate superiors” (*Essay* 1995, 132). While the monarchs “protected the people, and thereby encouraged the practice of commercial and lucrative arts, they paved the way for despotism in the state; and with the same policy by which they relieved the subject from many oppressions, they increased the powers of the crown” (*Essay* 1995, 132). Eventually, though, when “the people . . . could avail themselves of the wealth they acquired, and of the sense of their personal importance . . . this policy turned against the crown” (*Essay* 1995, 132). The monarchy was unwittingly undermined by its own

efforts, and a free commercial society, not an absolute despotism, was the result.

Significantly, despite his praise of small militant republics, Ferguson singled out Great Britain as the country in which circumstance “has carried the authority and government of law to a point of perfection, which they never before maintained in the history of mankind” (*Essay* 1995, 166). Spontaneous order rather than conscious design by a founder had resulted in the perfection of government.

What is the principle that causes industries, nations, constitutions to spring forth without a rational plan to guide them? It is human instinct that gives rise to these institutions: “they arise, long before the date of philosophy, from the instincts, not from the speculations, of men” (*Essay* 1995, 122). Even the most sophisticated establishments are the expression of instinct:

The artifices of the beaver, the ant, and the bee, are ascribed to the wisdom of nature. Those of polished nations are ascribed to themselves, and are supposed to indicate a capacity superior to that of rude minds. But the establishments of men, like those of every animal, are suggested by nature, and are the result of instinct, directed by the variety of situations in which mankind are placed. Those establishments arose from successive improvements that were made, without any sense of their general effect; and they bring human affairs to a state of complication, which the greatest reach of capacity with which human nature was ever adorned, could not have projected; nor even when the whole is carried into execution, can it be comprehended in its full extent. (*Essay* 1995, 182)

By “instinct,” Ferguson meant that “man is directed by his propensity to an end” (*Principles I* 1975, 61). Man’s instincts drive him towards certain purposes, while the means are left to his discretion. As he works towards these individual purposes, he naturally brings about an even higher purpose without necessarily intending to do so. By working towards self-preservation, for instance, men appropriate private property, which eventually causes them to create laws and institutions for its protection: “he who first

said, 'I will appropriate this field: I will leave it to my heirs,' did not perceive, that he was laying the foundation of civil laws and political establishments" (*Essay* 1995, 122).

Since social and political establishments are too complex to be comprehended by any single intellect, it follows that there should be a bias in favor of existing establishments. Ferguson asked "to what government we should have recourse, or under what roof we should lodge?" and concluded emphatically that "the first answer, no doubt is *The present!*" (*Principles II* 1975, 496). No single projector can hope to establish a better system, for "no constitution is formed by concert, no government is copied from a plan" devised by a "single projector" (*Essay* 1995, 123, 134). David Kettler writes that Ferguson's political caution compelled him to adopt an attitude of "Stoic indifference" towards the insoluble problems of commercialism (2005, 285). Despite the faults of commercial nations, their economic and political systems had evolved due to the individual instinctive decisions of millions of ordinary people. Ferguson, with all his misgivings about this stage, appeared reluctant to second-guess them by suggesting a superior design. He often emphasized that "human nature nowhere exists in the abstract" and, true to his self-acknowledged debt to Montesquieu, that every nation has its own "spirit" that may not be amenable to transplanted designs (*Principles II* 1975, 419). Perhaps because of his commitment to spontaneous order, Ferguson was more politically conservative than many of his colleagues. While his contemporary John Millar supported the American and even French Revolutions, Ferguson opposed the American Revolution and authored a stern reply to Richard Price's pro-American pamphlet *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*.

Even his enthusiasm for Sparta, which he (quoting Xenophon) praised as “the only state in which virtue is studied as the object of government,” was tempered by an awareness that its customs would be unsuited to the character of polished peoples (*Essay* 1995, 159). Ferguson included an imaginative section in the *Essay*, in which a modern man transported to Sparta described his experience in the strongest terms: “the misery of the whole people, in short, as well as my own, while I staid there, was beyond description. You would think their whole attention were to torment themselves as much as they can” (1995, 196). Spartan laws, however admirable, would not be palatable to modern tastes. And without its laws, men could hardly hope to emulate its character. Ferguson wrote that “Sparta alone” had learned, by “an equal division of wealth, to prevent the gratification of vanity, to check the ostentation of superior fortune, and, by this means, to weaken the desire of riches” (*Essay* 1995, 158). Without imposing the extreme remedies of Lycurgus, modern polished nations could never entirely root out such vanity and ostentation, for “it is certain, that we must either, together with the commercial arts, suffer their fruits to be enjoyed, and even, in some measure, admired; or, like the Spartans, prohibit the art itself” (*Essay* 1995, 245). Ferguson therefore had much need of cultivating Stoic acceptance of these ills, since his philosophy made a “projecting spirit” of extreme remedies (such as the total prohibition of commerce) anathema.

### **Commerce and the Contradictions of Human Personality**

Ferguson’s acceptance of the commercial stage, however, appeared to be more than mere resignation. He also conceded that it provides grounds for the resolution of

two pairs of contradictory impulses: benevolence and animosity, as well as novelty and stability. Since man finds his purpose through the passions and instincts, the simultaneous development of these different passions is conducive to the development of human personality, enabling man to live fully and perhaps even virtuously.

#### Ferguson's Moral Philosophy

Ferguson's social thought runs into an obvious difficulty, which is that his approval of commercial society, with all its passions and ambition, forms an exception to his generally Stoic outlook in moral philosophy. According to Ferguson, the Stoics condemned all passions, not merely those that are extreme or disordered: "the passions were proscribed in the schools of antient philosophy, not merely upon this ground of their excess, but upon the ground of their incompatibility also with the model of perfection" (*Principles I* 1975, 130). For the ancient Stoics, virtue consists "of choice alone . . . not of fluctuating emotion" (*Principles I* 1975, 130). But Ferguson dissented, instead characterizing the passions as necessary. As we saw above, he believed that man is guided towards ends by instinct; he called these instincts, "exhibited in different circumstances . . . the passions" (*Principles I* 1975, 128). The passions, "being necessary, in one degree or another, must, upon the supposition of a just affection, and a just degree of sentiment, be acknowledged to be just also" (*Principles I* 1975, 128). These passions "excite the proper exertions" needed to achieve our ends (*Principles I* 1975, 128). In Ferguson's example, a mother's feeling of alarm, upon seeing her child approach a fire, prompts her to act quickly and decisively to keep him away from it, thus serving the purpose of protecting him. For Ferguson, the passion is legitimate as long as

it “retains this measure of propriety” (*Principles I* 1975, 128). In fact, the passions are salutary even when they do not retain such a measure of propriety and justice. Ambition, “one of the most powerful motives of action in human nature,” is useful “even in its present, too frequently erroneous course” because “it serves to engage men in never-ceasing pursuits which, though aimed at a mistaken end, nevertheless occasion the improvement of faculties” (*Principles I* 1975, 239).

Thus in keeping with his Scottish colleagues—and with his own belief in spontaneous order—Ferguson believed that certain operations escape rational control. Man’s instincts and passions are necessary in order to guide him towards ends that he might not otherwise have discerned or pursued with vigor. The ends of human action are given by nature rather than design, and we can only apprehend these ends through the passions. Hence Ferguson grudgingly endorsed even vicious passions, such as misguided ambition. But this contradicts Ferguson’s Stoic sympathies, in which man’s goal should be the cultivation of *apatheia*.

For Kettler, Ferguson’s incomplete commitment to Stoicism resulted from the conflict between his own personal beliefs and his social function as an apologist for the status quo. University professors in eighteenth century Scotland were “bound to the ruling group by ties of friendship and dependence” and had to reconcile “the humanistic tradition in which they gloried” with “the demands of the reality which they respected” (2005, 98). This posed a problem for Ferguson the Stoic because “the social order which Ferguson, as ideologist, sought to bolster displayed some characteristics demanding attitudes not readily assimilable to the Stoic types of passiveness [because] a commercial

society depends on a spirit of enterprise, ambition, and astute pursuit of personal interest” (2005, 163). In Kettler’s reading, Ferguson was led astray from Stoicism due to his need to overcome the cognitive dissonance inherent in his professional position—that of being at once a critic and a beneficiary of commercial society. However, Kettler’s reading is contradicted by the details of Ferguson’s own life. Two of Ferguson’s political pamphlets—the one on the militia and the other on the theater—were published before he became an academic at all. Both pamphlets display some of the attitudes that Kettler thought to be a function of his social privilege as a professor—acceptance of economic inequality, endorsement of passions—and hence call into question the Marxist explanation of the anti-Stoic elements in Ferguson’s thought.

Hill, on the other hand, sees no tension in this particular aspect of Ferguson’s thought. She writes that “Ferguson is a disciple of Roman, not Greek Stoicism. The former placed less emphasis on resignation, with a greater stress on the active powers and the performance of duties associated with citizenship” (2006, 138). But some of Ferguson’s statements are questionable even from the standpoint of Roman Stoicism. As Ferguson himself often noted, the Roman Stoics often compared carrying out one’s social duties to playing a theatrical part or even to playing a game (*Principles I* 1975, 7). In this metaphor, we can see in that they sought to perform necessary external actions with little emotional involvement. Thus Epictetus even went so far as to prohibit feelings of sympathy: “when you see anyone weeping in grief because his son has gone abroad, or is dead, or because he has suffered in his affairs . . . it’s not the accident that distresses this person, because it doesn’t distress another person; it is the judgment which he makes



about it . . . . [D]on't reduce yourself to his level, and certainly do not moan with him. Do not moan inwardly either" (*Enchiridion* 16). Reason, not feeling, should be sovereign: "one must ensure, therefore, that the impulses obey reason . . . and that they are calm and free from every agitation of spirit" (Cicero *On Duty* 1991, 40).

Furthermore, while the Stoics did sanction striving on behalf of the common good, Ferguson understood them to abjure the pursuit of personal pleasure or wealth. For instance, he invoked the authority of Epictetus to justify contentment with one's station: "I am in the station which God has assigned me, says Epictetus . . . . Is not the appointment of God sufficient to outweigh every other consideration? This rendered the condition of a slave agreeable to Epictetus, and that of a monarch to Antoninus. This consideration renders any situation agreeable to a rational nature, which delights not in partial interests, but in universal good" (*Institutes of Moral Philosophy* 1994, 169).<sup>3</sup> Cicero, whose book *On Duty* Ferguson also praised, wrote that "nothing is more the mark of a mean and petty spirit than to love riches" (1991, 27).

It may be pointed out that the Stoics taught "two concepts of morality," as Norbert Waszek has argued—one for the wise, and a less demanding version for the average man (1984, 600). But even the "imperfect" or "middle" duties of the Stoics are still quite demanding. The "middle duties" discussed by Cicero throughout *On Duty* are indeed achieved by many, but not by all: "many achieve them by the goodness of their

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<sup>3</sup> "Remember that you must behave in life as at a dinner party. Is anything brought around to you? Put out your hand and take your share with moderation. Does it pass by you? Don't stop it. Is it not yet come? Don't stretch your desire towards it, but wait till it reaches you. Do this with regard to children, to a wife, to public posts, to riches, and you will eventually be a worthy partner of the feasts of the gods. And if you don't even take the things which are set before you, but are able even to reject them, then you will not only be a partner at the feasts of the gods, but also of their empire. For, by doing this, Diogenes, Heraclitus and others like them, deservedly became, and were called, divine." (*Enchiridion* 15)

intellectual talent, and by their progress in learning” (1991, 105). They include duties to the city and to family, not the commercial pursuits sanctioned by Ferguson.

In order to understand this difficulty in Ferguson’s thought, it is worth considering how the eighteenth-century Stoic revival generally differed from classical Stoicism. According to Charles Taylor, the ancient Greek and Roman Stoics understood the cosmos through reason: “for the Stoics too rationality is a vision of order . . . . One can say that, because the Stoic sage comes to love the goodness of the whole, and because this vision is the fulfillment of his nature as a rational being, he responds to each new event with equal joy as an element of the whole” (1989, 126). Interest in this Stoic philosophy abounded in eighteenth-century Great Britain. Hutcheson translated Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*; the third Earl of Shaftesbury kept a private diary modeled on the *Meditations*; and even non-Stoics such as Hume and Smith felt compelled to engage with this philosophy.<sup>4</sup> But Taylor identifies a key development in Shaftesbury’s Stoicism that sets it apart from the classical doctrine: “the internalization, or we might say ‘subjectivization’ of a teleological ethic of nature” (1989, 256). In other words, we access the cosmic order and attain our *telos* not through reason or through “the intrinsic loveability of the object” but rather through “certain inclinations implanted in the

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<sup>4</sup> In the first edition of the *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith included a chapter titled “Of the stoical philosophy,” in which he wrote that the Stoics “teach us to aim at a perfection altogether beyond the reach of human nature” (*Sentiments* 1982, 60). While Waszek (1984) and Nussbaum (2000) nonetheless interpret Smith as a Stoic, Griswold (1999) and Fleischacker (2004) refute this view. Hume’s verdict was harsher than Smith’s, describing Stoicism as “a more refined system of selfishness” in which we “reason ourselves out of all virtue as well as social enjoyment” (*Understanding* 1995, 54).

subject” (1989, 256). In Shaftesbury’s Stoicism, we turn inwards and contemplate our own affections as a guide to right action.<sup>5</sup>

Shaftesbury was confident that this inward turn would reveal an inclination towards disinterested benevolence as our highest pleasure, and hence as the highest good ordained by providence. At times, Ferguson seemed confident of this too. After all, he wrote that “the happiness of man” is “to state himself as the member of a community, for whose general good his heart may glow with an ardent zeal” (*Essay* 1995, 54). At the same time, however, such an emphasis on emotion can undermine Stoic goals. It is not clear that disinterested benevolence would be the only emotion unearthed by this inward turn; passions such as ambition, love of gain, or selfishness might surface as well, at least in some men. Ferguson himself recognized a number of warring impulses in human nature—and hence it is in Ferguson’s work, more than in Shaftesbury’s, that we begin to see the tensions and limitations of modern “emotivist” Stoicism emerge.

Thus, while Ferguson idealized the heroic detachment and self-sacrifice of the Roman Stoics, in practice he accepted that a society encouraging a balance of man’s different passions is likely to be the best accommodation for human nature. As Ferguson wrote, man “is happy therefore to fulfill the destination of nature,” to satisfy his various urges such as “industry” and “social affection” (*Principles II* 1975, 61). Ferguson admitted that “to such a being, it were vain to prescribe retirement from the cares of human life”—and while he used this insight as an argument against the Epicureans, one

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<sup>5</sup> Ferguson’s Scottish colleagues also thought morality is discovered through turning the inward gaze on the affections, though unlike Shaftesbury or Ferguson, they did not try to fit this methodology into a Stoic philosophy.

might point out that it applies equally well to Stoic detachment from the passions (*Principles II* 1975, 59).

### Ferguson's Social Philosophy

Ferguson portrayed man as beset by two main sets of passions: sociability and hostility (or benevolence and animosity), and novelty and stability. Benevolence and animosity are two impulses in an uneasy relationship. Man is naturally “disposed to opposition . . . . [H]e loves to bring his reason, his eloquence, his courage, even his bodily strength, to the proof” (*Essay* 1995, 24). Unlike Augustine, Ferguson did not think men fight only for the sake of peace; they take a spirited pleasure in the fight itself. This tendency can obviously be at odds with their social impulses, which have a different end—not opposition, but cohesion. Sociability drives men into community, which is a perennial feature of human life: “mankind are to be taken in groups, as they have always subsisted” (*Essay* 1995, 4). Ferguson alluded to Rousseau when he criticized an author who, “with a force of imagination,” had depicted “the progress of mankind from a supposed state of animal sensibility, to the attainment of reason, to the use of language, and to the habit of society” (*Essay* 1995, 5). Ferguson thought it impossible to disengage social or linguistic abilities from the human condition, for it is in the fulfillment of these capacities that human nature fulfills its purpose. Sociability is closely related to man’s benevolent impulses, as these can be expressed only in society—and it is these that constitute man’s chief happiness: “the mere exercises of this [benevolent] disposition are, on many accounts, to be considered as the first and principal constituent of human happiness. Every act of kindness, or of care, in the parent to his child; every emotion of

the heart, in friendship or in love, in public zeal, or in general humanity, are so many acts of enjoyment and satisfaction” (*Essay* 1995, 53).

Hostility and sociability, despite their apparent opposition, are intimately intertwined. Sociability itself often gives rise to hostility. It is subject to the “dialectic of success” discussed by Schneider—it brings us together, but in doing so, it creates opportunities for strife as well as benevolence and hence can be undermined by its own success. As social organizations become denser and more complex, they bring men into conflict. Regarding commercial society, Ferguson wrote that “it is here indeed, if ever, that man is sometimes found a detached and solitary being,” because here “he has found an object which sets him in competition with his fellow-creatures” (*Essay* 1995, 19). Thus “the mighty engine which we suppose to have formed society, only tends to set its members at variance” (*Essay* 1995, 19). The social impulse has both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies—while it initially pulls men together into community, this very community also allows the expression of man’s hostile and competitive nature, which can ultimately weaken the bonds of society.

At the other end of the spectrum, hostility can also give rise to sociability. According to Hill, Ferguson’s “highly original work in the area of conflict theory . . . is partly responsible for his modern reputation as ‘Father of Sociology’” (2006, 123). Ferguson explored how love of one’s associates, or in-group, is often solidified through hostility to those outside the group: “it is vain to expect that we can give to the multitude of a people a sense of union among themselves, without admitting hostility to those that oppose them” (*Essay* 1995, 25). It is perhaps for this reason that Ferguson described

happiness as being a “member of a community,” not a member of *the* cosmopolitan community of mankind (*Essay* 1995, 54). Hostile sentiments towards outsiders are necessary for the very existence of political conventions: “without the rivalship of nations, and the practice of war, civil society itself could scarcely have found an object, or a form” (*Essay* 1995, 24). Such hostility animates citizens through their passions, gives them an object for their activities, and forces societies to define themselves and codify customs in response to existential threats. Hostility, when it serves the common good in this manner, becomes a species of benevolence: “sentiments of affection and friendship mix with animosity; the active and strenuous become the guardians of their society; and violence itself is, in their case, an exertion of generosity as well as of courage” (*Essay* 1995, 25). Thus “war itself, which in one view appears so fatal, in another is the exercise of a liberal spirit” (*Essay* 1995, 25). Put even more succinctly, “what seems to divide the species tends also to unite them” (*Principles I* 1975, 33). Thus benevolence and hostility, while usually in tension, are sometimes intertwined closely enough that one could not be uprooted without affecting the other—which is, perhaps, why Ferguson thought that separating the profession of the soldier and the citizen is “an attempt to dismember the human character” (*Essay* 1995, 232). The interplay between these tendencies is responsible for human community itself. Ferguson, like Rousseau, seemed to worry that “national hatreds will die out, but so will love of country” (1987, 5).

Another tension inherent in human nature is that between novelty and stability. Ferguson wrote that man is “at once obstinate and fickle” (*Essay* 1995, 7). The typical man “complains of innovations, and is never sated with novelty. He is perpetually busied

in reformations, and is continually wedded to his errors” (*Essay* 1995, 7). He wants excitement, improvement, novelty, but is reluctant to sacrifice his ease or his routines to get it. Such a tension may appear untenable, but, like that between hostility and sociability, it is a part of civilization itself. Men constantly seek novelty, for “progress itself is congenial to the nature of man . . . . [W]hatever checks it, is distress and oppression; whatever promotes it, is prosperity and freedom” (*Principles I* 1975, 249). Gradual progress, particularly that which proceeds organically from society and is not externally imposed, is one way for man to enjoy novelty while also enjoying some semblance of stability: “if he dwell in a cave, he would improve it into a cottage; if he has already built, he would still build to a greater extent. But he does not propose to make rapid and hasty transitions; his steps are progressive and slow” (*Essay* 1995, 7). Both projectors and moralists are dissatisfied with this scene: “if the projector complain he is tardy, the moralist thinks him unstable; and whether his motions be rapid or slow, the scenes of human affairs perpetually change in his management: his emblem is a passing stream, not a stagnating pool” (*Essay* 1995, 7). The moralist wishes man to remain in a bygone golden age; the projector wishes him to move faster into a perfectly just and utopian future. But despite these complaints, the interplay between these instincts cannot be resolved once and for all through fixing a medium between the two, for “he may be agitated too much, as well as too little; but cannot ascertain a precise medium between the situations in which he would be harassed, and those in which he would fall into languor” (*Essay* 1995, 210).

The instability of human personality creates an equally unstable political realm. Like his fellow Scots, Ferguson embraced a stadial theory in which one social form is succeeded by another.<sup>6</sup> Despite his nostalgia for the ancient city-states, he recognized that human nature does not allow these states to stand still. Rather, like any political body, they grow and change—or are destroyed—and give rise to something new. Hostility and sociability, novelty and stability, may not be absolutely incompatible, but in practice one usually becomes ascendant as a society favors one or the other, thus leading to decline as it ceases to fulfill human nature. Commercial society, despite its many faults, is the form most likely to approach continuity (though, in this changing world, no society can attain permanent stability without constant vigilance and maintenance).

First of all, it best reconciles the impulses towards both novelty and stability. True political order neither freezes man in time (as would the moralist) nor imposes a change for which he is not yet ready (as would the projector). Rather, it creates arrangements within which man is free to act and change at his own pace, driven by instinct rather than decree. Political order is not “the good order of stones in a wall . . . properly fixed in the places for which they are hewn” (*Essay* 1995, 268n). Instead, “the order of men in society, is their being placed where they are properly qualified to act” (*Essay* 1995, 268-269n).

Commercial nations adhere to this rule insofar as they secure to each man his property and calling—a space in which he can express his own capacity for action. Ferguson stressed repeatedly the importance of man’s economic autonomy. He wrote

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<sup>6</sup> Ferguson, however, was usually less precise than his colleagues in characterizing the different ages. Instead of using a schema of four ages with each one titled by its means of subsistence, he referred to “rude ages” (apparently encompassing both “savage” and “barbarous” nations) and “polished ages.”



that “the commercial arts, therefore, are properly the distinctive pursuit or concern of individuals” (*Principles I* 1975, 244). He even went so far as to say that this liberty is unlikely to be abused: “commerce, if continued, is the branch in which men committed to the effects of their own experience, are least apt to go wrong” (*Essay* 1995, 143). The commercial arts deserve such autonomy because they are particularly well-suited as outlets for both man’s active and passive nature. On the one hand, they provide him with suitable employment, for “the invention and practice of arts . . . have unquestionable value, in the exercise they furnish to the active power and intelligence of man” (*Principles I* 1975, 249). Ferguson agreed with Hume that “there is no craving or demand of the human mind more constant and insatiable than that for exercise and employment” (*Essays* 1985, 300). In commercial society, the separation of professions allows each man to find employment suitable for his talents: “in the progress or result of commercial arts, employments are adapted to all the varieties of disposition, capacity, or genius. Separate departments are opened for the different descriptions of men” (*Principles I* 1975, 250).

Of all these separate professions, there is no reason for the merchant or manufacturer to feel greatly inferior to the lawyer, professor, or journalist. Ferguson singled out business as a pursuit worthy to challenge most natures: “we are soon tired of diversions that do not approach to the nature of business, that is, that do not engage some passion, or give an exercise proportioned to our talents” (*Essay* 1995, 50). Ferguson wrote that the “general reflections, and . . . enlargement of thought” may be present “even in manufacture” where the “genius of the master, perhaps, is cultivated” (*Essay* 1995,

183). Overseeing a business is intellectually challenging because “the direction of a work requires the enlargement of knowledge” (*Principles I* 1975, 251). The narrow-minded bourgeois so derided by Rousseau is, in fact, exercising his rational capacities, striving to make his mark on the world, experiencing the excitement of profit and loss. Though it is a far cry from the active life of the statesman, the commercial life is sufficiently challenging for most men. As Hill puts it, Ferguson thought that “the market economy is an outlet for our creative and restless urges” (2006, 95).

At this point, even if one concedes that commerce may be individually advantageous, “it may be asked, what does the species gain in the result of commercial arts, and at the expense of so much invention and labor” (*Principles I* 1975, 248). Ferguson, implying that few people raise this objection in the course of common life, wrote, “this problem is likely to occur only in speculative men in some advanced state of the very arts, of which the value is brought into question” (*Principles I* 1975, 248). But Ferguson was one “speculative man” who thought that he could justify the importance of commerce to civilization, as well as to the individual: “we may nevertheless justify the efforts of mankind to multiply their accommodations, and to increase their stores” (*Principles I* 1975, 249). He admitted that “the effect of mere wealth, unattended with education, or apart from the virtues of industry, sobriety, and frugality” would not be a good one (*Principles I* 1975, 254). It would be no benefit for a civilization to become rich overnight, with no work on the part of its citizens. It is through individuals exercising their faculties that commercial society acquires its peculiar benefits:

But, in the use of these means, the industrious are furnished with exercises improving to the genius of man; have occasion to experience, and to return the

offices of beneficence and friendship; are led to the study of justice, sobriety, and good order, in the conduct of life. And thus, in the very progress with which they arrive at the possession of wealth, form to themselves a taste of enjoyment, and a decency of manners, equivalent to a conviction that happiness does not consist in the measure of fortune, but in its proper use. (*Principles I* 1975, 254-255)

In the commercial stage of society, individuals often develop their talents and capacities for enlarged reflections; acquire the means of performing benevolent offices; and develop a decent and moderate disposition that helps them to understand wealth in its proper context. As men develop their diverse talents, society as well as the individual is enriched: “in the bustle of civil pursuits and occupations, men appear in a variety of lights, and suggest matter of inquiry and fancy, by which conversation is enlivened, and greatly enlarged” (*Essay* 1995, 183).

In addition to its affinity for man’s progressive nature, commerce is also a realm in which man’s incrementalism—his bias towards existing institutions, the slow pace of his efforts—finds expression. The desire for a stable stockpile of goods spurs commerce in the first place: “the mechanic and commercial arts took their rise from the love of property, and were encouraged by the prospects of safety and gain” (*Essay* 1995, 171). Moreover, as a man’s business, his property, or his conveniences grow, so too does his attachment to them. Ferguson wrote that “the sum of attainments, when actually made, should become familiar . . . and become to the possessor . . . a necessary of which he cannot bear to be deprived” (*Principles I* 1975, 249). A man’s instinct for hoarding, for establishing a home and a property to which he can be attached, finds expression through commerce. Such attachments spur him to further protect his freedom. Ferguson explained that “the commercial and political arts have advanced together” because “a

people, possessed of wealth, and become jealous of their properties, have formed the project of emancipation” (*Essay* 1995, 261). Men vigorously repel any attacks on their rights when those rights safeguard their livelihoods and estates. Such assertion of rights is, for Ferguson, neither selfish nor morally neutral, since he thought that “liberty is a right which every individual must be ready to vindicate for himself” and praised “that firm and resolute spirit, with which the liberal mind is always prepared to resist indignities, and to refer its safety to itself” (*Essay* 1995, 266). A courageous willingness to defend one’s liberty and property is itself a political virtue. Thus we can see why “these arts have been in modern Europe so interwoven, that we cannot determine which were prior in the order of time” (*Essay* 1995, 261). The commercial and political arts “act and re-act upon one another” because commerce secures property, property secures individual rights, and individual rights further secure commerce.

Ferguson never explicitly addressed how commercial society could furnish active employment—or property—to the day laborers engaged in mind-numbing, repetitive tasks, even though he acknowledged the intellectual disparities brought about by industrialization: “in manufacture, the genius of the master, perhaps, is cultivated, while that of the inferior workman lies waste” (*Essay* 1995, 183). However, he did think that the lower classes could practice activity through striving to better their condition, as well as patience in adapting themselves to the admittedly slow (or perhaps nonexistent) changes to their condition. He enquired rhetorically, “What is the lesson of reason then to the poor man . . . who enquires what, in the situation which providence has assigned to him, is required to be happy?” (*Principles I* 1975, 61). Ferguson’s answer to this poor

man was “be diligent, industrious, and frugal” (*Principles I* 1975, 61). The poor man must practice the virtues of a true Stoic, for “every individual is enabled to avail himself, to the utmost, of the peculiar advantage of his place; to work on the peculiar materials with which nature has furnished him; to humour his genius or disposition, and betake himself to the task” given to him (*Principles I* 1975, 424). Even the poor, in Ferguson’s view, may benefit from the twin active and passive natures of commerce. The poor have the opportunity to strive to better their condition, through being diligent, industrious, and frugal; but they must also resign themselves to providence and be content with their task in life, however small.

The other major tension—man’s hostility and sociability—also comes closest to a satisfactory resolution in polished nations. In rude ages, social connections are intense, but are constantly threatened by disruption from the many conflicts that characterize such an age. According to Ferguson, the men of Europe’s bygone ages were “generous and faithful where they had fixed an attachment; implacable, forward, and cruel, where they had conceived a dislike” (*Essay* 1995, 107). People depended on tribes or clans, which often defended them through violent means: “laws were imperfect, and ill executed . . . . What are now become suits at Law, were then Quarrels decided by the Edge of a Sword” (*Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* 1756, 5-6). Members of a nation were brutal towards outsiders as well as towards each other: “in war, the hostilities they practiced were often unnecessarily destructive; and the servitude to which they destined their captives was altogether unfounded on any principle of justice. So that, what we have to learn from the example they have set in these particulars, is rather what we ought

to avoid” (*Principles II* 1975, 295). In polished nations, however, the police is improved, wars are less frequent, and men live more closely together. Ferguson lauded this progress, stating that “a state of greater tranquility hath many happy effects” (*Essay* 1995, 219). Even when war does erupt, “parties are, almost in the very heat of a conflict, ready to listen to the dictates of humanity or reason” (*Principles II* 1975, 295).

As men interact more freely with each other even in commercial or self-interested pursuits, their benevolent instincts can be activated. Man is designed such that “even to behave ill, he must be in society; and if he do not act from benevolence, he will act from interest to over-reach, or from ambition to command his fellow creatures, or from vanity to be admired, even by those whom he neither esteems nor loves” (*Principles II* 1975, 59). Of all these motives, the passion for distinction is the strongest: “the general disposition to excel, next to interest, is the most ordinary, and even more than interest, a powerful motive to action, and occasion of the greatest exertions incident to human nature,” though it can also be the occasion of pride and vanity (*Principles I* 1975, 125). But, while man often enters society for the sake of self-love, the very exposure to society can breed affection: “even while the head is preoccupied with projects of interest, the heart is often seduced into friendship; and while business proceeds on the maxims of self-preservation, the careless hour is employed in generosity and kindness” (*Essay* 1995, 37).

And yet, despite their greater safety and tranquility, commercial societies have not entirely abolished hostility—a change that would be neither possible nor desirable, for “if we have not mistaken the interests of human nature, they consist more in the exercises of freedom, and in the pursuits of a liberal and beneficent soul, than in the possession of

mere tranquility, or what is termed exemption from trouble” (*Principles II* 1975, 508).

The separation of professions provides opportunities for men to test their abilities against each other: “the trials of ability, which men mutually afford to one another in the collisions of free society, are the lessons of a school which Providence has opened for mankind, and are well known to forward, instead of impeding their progress in any valuable art, whether commercial, elegant, or political” (*Principles II* 1975, 508). The “collisions” of men in a free society, as they vie with each to distinguish themselves, allow them to express their competitive spirits and hone their abilities.

It may be pointed out that Ferguson wrote of hostility’s cohesive role when directed at a foreign enemy, not when citizens direct it at each other. But hostility can operate constructively within, as well as without, a nation. Ferguson wrote that “in this divided state of the world incompatible interests are formed, or, at least, apprehended; and the members of different societies are engaged in opposite sides; affection to one society becomes animosity to another” (*Principles I* 1975, 33). One might imagine a number of lesser societies with opposing interests: sports teams playing against one another, or businesses competing in the same market. While Rousseau might deplore such competition, Ferguson believed that it serves useful civic purposes. Anticipating Federalist 10, Ferguson argued that this difference of opinion and interests preserves liberty by ensuring that men will not combine into a single totalitarian mass: “in assemblies constituted by men of different talents, habits, and apprehensions, it were something more than human that could make them agree in every point of importance; having different opinions and views, it were want of integrity to abstain from disputes:

our very praise of unanimity, therefore, is to be considered as a danger to liberty” (*Essay* 1995, 267).

Of course, this social and economic competitiveness, if carried to an extreme, runs the risk of making man a “detached and solitary being.” But, as we shall see, Ferguson thought that a citizens’ militia could preserve the public spirit and courage necessary to channel some of that hostility towards a cohesive national goal. Reviving the military spirit, “joined with British Integrity and Patriotism . . . would be a sure Foundation to the Virtues of Public Life” (*Militia* 1756, 42).

### **The Militia and the Common Good**

Ferguson, the lone Highlander and soldier among his Scottish Enlightenment brethren, was also its most vigorous advocate for a militia. As we saw above, he deplored the separation of the soldier from the citizen—but he thought that such separation is not an inevitable or necessary feature of polished nations. He believed that both “the numbers and wealth of a people” *and* “the national virtues” are vital to society (*Essay* 1995, 146). “Human society has great obligations to both,” and it is false to pretend that society must choose between the two, for “they are opposed to one another only by mistake” (*Essay* 1995, 146). Commerce and the convenience it brings need not cause laxness of spirit. Ferguson observed that even a man who is normally comfortable can endure hardship on some occasions: “men, whose fortunes indulge them in the possession of every convenience, and in the enjoyment of every pleasure, can nevertheless forego them with ease, in the hardships of hunting or war” (*Principles I* 1975, 221). Men can tolerate hardships “where the privation is not supposed to degrade,



or any way to affect their station” (*Principles I* 1975, 222). Hence if serving one’s country were to be made honorable, even the most pampered would bear the difficulties of military life.

Despite his many criticisms of the polished nations, he acknowledged that “corruption, however, does not arise from the abuse of commercial arts alone; it requires the aid of political situation” (*Essay* 1995, 255). Fixing the political situation, then, may prevent the servility associated with polished nations; and it is chiefly through his militia scheme that he proposed to make the political change necessary for such prevention, and to “mix the military Spirit with our civil and commercial Policy” (*Militia* 1756, 3).

In order to make military service more widespread and respected, Ferguson proposed several reforms. First, “every restraint should be taken away by which the people are hindered from having or amusing themselves with arms” (*Militia* 1756, 16). Even laws prohibiting poaching should be repealed. He also suggested that prizes should be given for marksmanship: “to the profession of poaching, we may join the frequent practice of shooting at a mark, where the prize as a badge of honour and emulation might animate our people” (*Militia* 1756, 17). Through taking up arms as a hobby, the people will learn to use them properly, making them ready to take them up in service of their country; but, more importantly, their use will be seen as honorable and skillful. And if men “value themselves upon the use of . . . arms,” they shall learn the virtue of courage (*Militia* 1756, 20). Ferguson believed such daily habits to be more vital to virtue than some distant prospect of war, or temporary training in a camp: “I consider every man as deriving military spirit more from the use of arms, and the emulation revived in the

country, than from the stated practice . . . which we dignify with the name of military discipline” (*Militia* 1756, 30).

Ferguson, however, acknowledged that even with such martial habits diffused throughout the people, an effective militia requires organization and order. There must be an institution for citizen-soldiers, as distinct from the standing army, in order to accustom them to military regulations and commands. But how can society offer inducements to join this militia? Simply requiring all men to serve fixed terms is anathema to a liberal society: “the entire force of military law cannot be applied here, because we do not propose to give up our liberties” (*Militia* 1756, 30). In times of great exigency, “we shall be obliged to compel the people to take their turns in this service,” but in peacetime, both the carrot and stick, rather than the stick alone, are best employed (*Militia* 1756, 32). The best way to induce service is through attaching “marks of respect” to such service (*Militia* 1756, 37). He therefore proposed the following measures: “that every gentleman, who has served in the rank as colonel, shall rise in his turn to the several degrees of superior rank . . . that rank in the militia shall be equal, in all respects, to that which is acquired in the standing army . . . that military rank should give precedence equal with titles of nobility . . . [that militia soldiers should] be first in every county list, and have the place of honour in voting at all elections” (*Militia* 1756, 38-41). Finally, men of high rank should be drafted into the militia, in order to make the honor of this position clear: “if . . . persons of a certain estimation alone are pointed at, such an order will be understood as a call unto a station of repute and credit” (*Militia* 1756, 49).

Despite this plan's central importance in Ferguson's thought, it has received relatively little attention from scholars. Hill criticizes the "restrictive nature of his militia scheme" while Raynor characterizes it as "backward looking" and "socially conservative" (Hill 2009, 123; Raynor 2008, 72). Kalyvas and Katznelson barely discuss it, dismissing it as "a quite traditional cultural solution" (Kalyvas and Katznelson 1998, 178). Both Hill and Raynor have in mind its favoritism towards nobles. But it seems the main purpose of drafting noblemen is to enhance the luster of military service. While Ferguson did lament the fact that military service had fallen to the hands of "the least reputable class of people," it is not clear that he referred to economic class (*Militia* 1756, 53). After all, he acknowledged that commoners are to serve in the militia and specified certain honors that are to be given to them. Furthermore, the poaching laws that Ferguson criticized were not class-neutral. Roy Porter calls Great Britain's Game Laws a "savagely" attack on the poor because "no one without an estate of 100 pounds a year was allowed to kill game (not even on his own land)" (1990, 137). Repealing such laws would certainly have been a boon to the poor, even if that was not Ferguson's main intention. Ferguson's militia plan is therefore no less egalitarian than Fletcher's (in which rich and poor were also to be accorded differential treatment). In fact, by allowing commoners a route to nobility, it may have proved more leveling. Shakespeare's Henry V declared courage an equalizing virtue ("he to-day that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile"), but, the rhetoric of poets notwithstanding, England's military was a stratified one. Victor Davis Hanson writes that the British army "saw no need until the eleventh hour either to dismantle the tactics of a bygone age or to substitute merit for

birth as the chief criterion for career advancement” (2002, 321). Perhaps Ferguson’s plan would have alleviated these inequalities and made the British militia into something approaching a real “band of brothers.”

Moreover, Ferguson’s plan is far more accommodating to modern tastes insofar as it relies much less on compulsion and indoctrination. Kalvyas and Katznelson’s criticism seems to rest on an image of militias as inherently traditional and reactionary. But Ferguson’s plan, operating more through incentives than through conscription, is a fairly liberal and modern version of this institution. It is an attempt at reconciling his civic humanist concern for courage and public spirit with his recognition of the negative liberties and specialization necessary for a polished commercial nation. Ferguson himself had no desire to adopt anachronistic institutions, because the character of a bygone age is different from that of the present one: “our Ancestors were a People, in many Respects, different from what we are now” and therefore their institutions are not always “applicable to our present Case” (*Militia* 1756, 5).

The militia was Ferguson’s pet project, his great hope for the salvation of commercial society. But he also indicated a few other reforms that he thought potentially effective. He wrote that “it has been proposed to prevent the excessive accumulation of wealth in particular hands, by limiting the increase of private fortunes, by prohibiting entails, and by with-holding the right of primogeniture . . . . It has been proposed to prevent the ruin of moderate estates, and to restrain the use, and consequently the desire of great ones, by sumptuary laws” (*Essay* 1995, 157). For Ferguson, “these different methods are more or less consistent with the interests of commerce, and may be adopted,

in different degrees, by a people whose national object is wealth” (*Essay* 1995, 157).

Though Ferguson never championed these policies himself, he clearly thought them possible and perhaps useful in a commercial nation.

### **Conclusion**

Ferguson deplored the servility, envy, and cowardice that can accompany commercial society, but he also admitted its potential benefits in reconciling different aspects of the human personality and thus attaining moderation. The separation of professions furnishes employment for man’s progressive nature, allowing him to develop not only his own faculties, but to contribute to knowledge and manners at a societal level. The acquisition of property gives him a stable resting place, which gives him a stake in defending his liberty. The secure environment created by polished nations allows for freer exercise of his sociable tendencies—which, even if motivated by self-interest or self-love, can stimulate his natural sympathy. Meanwhile, the conflicts of interest generated by the market can provide a space for the controlled expression of his competitive nature. Such competitiveness can be prevented from tearing the social fabric apart if some degree of public spirit is also maintained in the citizenry—hence Ferguson’s suggestion of a modern militia to foster courage and patriotism.

There is, however, a difficulty in Ferguson’s solution. His approval of the passions conflicted with his Stoic philosophy, creating one of the most insoluble tensions in his thought. It was perhaps responsible for much of his dissatisfaction with commercial society—for, while his Stoicism dictated love of gain to be servile, his understanding of the passions led him to sanction man’s natural instinct for bettering his

condition. Hume and many of the other Scots, who did not have such divided loyalties, probably saw his work as confused—and, rightly, as a criticism of their own more optimistic views of commercial society. Hill argues that “more than any of his Scottish contemporaries, [Adam Ferguson] was conscious of the public dangers posed by the emergence of the ‘commercial spirit’”—and, while she may have overlooked John Millar in this assessment, the fact remains that Ferguson was indeed less sanguine than Hutcheson, Hume, or Smith (2006, 165).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PETTY TRAFFIC OR INTIMATE COMMUNICATION?

#### JOHN MILLAR AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF COMMERCIAL SOCIETY

John Millar, who graduated from the University of Glasgow, was one of Adam Smith's star students. He and Smith maintained a lifelong friendship, and Smith even entrusted Millar with the education of his heir and cousin, David Douglas. Lord Kames, another influential figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, engaged Millar as tutor to his own son. These men's recommendations helped earn Millar the position of chair of civil law at the University of Glasgow, where he attracted many students and made the university renowned as a school of law. Millar's two major works were also highly popular in his own time—James Madison owned *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771), and *Historical View of the English Government* (1787) was later praised by John Stuart Mill.

Yet nowadays Millar is one of the most neglected figures of the Scottish Enlightenment. There is little secondary literature on Millar, and he is almost completely eclipsed by his more famous colleagues such as David Hume and Adam Smith. This silence is particularly surprising because Millar wrote much about family life and relationships between the sexes, a topic usually ignored by the more famous Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. Given the contemporary interest in gender studies, one might expect to see a resurgence of scholarly attention to Millar. Millar certainly differs from

today's feminists—for instance, he thought differences between men and women are innate—but he believed that these unique feminine qualities were important, and he hoped they would become more valued in commercial society. He was also concerned with other vulnerable groups such as children and servants, and passionately opposed slavery of any kind. Millar's work is therefore original, exhibiting ideas and concerns that were not always shared by other Scottish philosophers, and is highly compatible with current sentiments on the status of women, children, and workers. The small amount of literature on Millar can mostly be divided into two opposing camps. On the one hand, scholars such as Ronald Meek, George Watson, and William Lehmann interpret him as an economic determinist who believed that material conditions, like the distribution of wealth, constitute the driving engine of historical progress. Lehmann states that “if one were to attempt to characterize Millar's basic philosophy of history, society and politics by a single phrase, the most apt one would probably be ‘evolutionary naturalism;’ though we should quickly want to add that his evolutionary naturalism takes on so nearly mechanistic a character . . . that ‘economic determinism’ . . . comes a close second” (1960, 122). For Lehmann, Millar anticipated “the secularization, the rationalization, the naturalization and the socialization” of nineteenth-century thinkers such as Marx and Weber (1960, 124). Similarly, Meek describes Millar's theory of history as “*a*, if not *the*, materialist conception of history” (1971, 10). The *Columbia Encyclopedia* states that Millar “was one of the earliest advocates of the view known today as economic determinism, and in his *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* he advanced the view that all social relations, even relations between the sexes, are determined by the economic



organization of society” (1963, 300).

And according to these scholars, Millar saw economic development as unequivocally positive. They argue that Millar believed commercial society to be the most advanced stage of society, and that it offered considerable benefits—namely, liberty and equality—over the previous three stages. Albert O. Hirschman credits him with “an engaging sociological analysis” of how mercantile self-interest facilitates political liberty (1977, 89). Watson writes that for Millar, “liberty . . . and the very search for liberty, need rich men, and not a few of them. And since not everybody can be rich, one may say that liberty needs inequality of condition in order to seek and achieve equality before the law” (1993, 54). Richard Olson also writes that, for Millar, a major benefit of commercial society is that “women thus reach their highest status and enjoy virtually the same liberties as men” (1998, 92). In this strand of the literature, Millar emerges as a precursor to contemporary social science or sociology. It portrays him as preoccupied with material conditions: with the means of production or distribution of wealth as the cause of social change, and with the concrete economic and political benefits created by those material changes.

But other scholars stress Millar’s moralism, concentrating on his relationship to the natural law or civic humanist tradition. J.G.A. Pocock states that “virtue and corruption are Millar’s organizing categories” (2003, 502). The progress of commercial society produces “the distraction of the personality, less through the temptations of luxury than by the confusions and alienations of the moral identity” (2003, 503). In other words, Millar feared that commercial society would bring balkanization, isolating

individuals by profession, class, or social group and eroding the potential for a unified moral outlook. Similarly, Michael Ignatieff argues that Millar ultimately rejected commercial society because of its corruption of individual morals. Millar, according to Ignatieff, adopted the “civic humanist vocabulary” of civic virtue and corruption (1983, 321). Millar also believed that “the moral problem of commercial society lay in the impoverishment of social relations in the family sphere, not in the injustice of the economic sphere” (1983, 339). For Millar, the breakdown of the family—not inequality and exploitation, as most civic humanists thought—causes the decline of civic virtue. But personal corruption, unlike economic injustice, cannot be remedied by law, and hence “the civic republican strain in Millar delivered him up, paradoxically, to a thorough-going fatalism about the effectiveness of political reform in regenerating manners” (1983, 340). By concentrating on the private sphere rather than public virtue, Millar “reduce[d] the old civic humanist language to an innocuous moralism” (1983, 342). Millar thus displayed an inconsistent civic humanist discourse: he was concerned with the relationship between politics and virtue, but sermonized about licentiousness instead of proposing concrete civic humanist reforms such as agrarian laws.

Was Millar a civic humanist decrying the individualism of a doomed society, or a social scientist for whom value-laden categories like “corruption” held no meaning? In reality, Millar was more complex than his portrayal in the literature would indicate. The view of Millar as a determinist is incomplete, for he was certainly concerned with the mores of the people—not just with their material conditions—and with the potentially corrupting influence of commerce on those mores. But he also did not believe such

corruption to be inevitable. He supported commercial society because it could lead to greater sociability and compassion for the vulnerable. However, Millar also taught that the evolution of commercial society is path dependent, shaped by a country's prior history and culture, and so positive outcomes require particular conditions. I will first explain Millar's critique of the possible dangers of commerce before explaining why he resisted the political changes proposed by some civic humanists and how he thought commercial society could, under certain circumstances, redeem itself without the need for those changes.

### **The “Petty Traffic” and “Debauchery” of Commercial Society**

As Ignatieff observes, Millar was no starry-eyed optimist on the subject of commercial society. Like Rousseau or the civic humanists, he excoriated its immorality, selfishness, cowardice, and competitiveness, as well as its failure to liberate the slave and the laborer. He was also hesitant about the power of commerce to provide remedies to such evils. Millar believed that in many cases, the private sphere would not automatically correct the problems, nor would the public sphere be able to intervene effectively.

For Millar, one major disadvantage of commercial society is its tendency to provoke lust through greater interaction between men and women: “the free intercourse of the sexes . . . in opulent and luxurious nations . . . gives rise to licentious and dissolute manners” (*Ranks* 2006, 151). Such depravity is most common among the rich, but the poor eventually learn to imitate the class that is speciously termed their “betters”: “in the natural course of things, the dissipated manners of the rich are, by the force of example,

communicated to the lowers orders” (*Historical View* 2006, 770). Such habits are even more destructive among the poor than among the rich, where they sometimes result in “common prostitution” (*Historical View* 2006, 770). Unlike most philosophers today, Millar did not see sexual freedom as a desirable tool of self-actualization or expression. Rather, he believed that it coarsens our moral sentiments and wreaks havoc on the family. He wrote, in a passage worth quoting in full:

Some benevolent philosophers have indulged the pleasing speculation, that the faculties and virtues of mankind are universally improved by the progress of the arts and sciences . . . . To this flattering and perhaps generally well-founded hypothesis, the circumstance now suggested appears to form a remarkable exception. Nothing can be more inconsistent with the finer feelings of the heart; nothing more incompatible with the order of society; nothing more destructive of those bands which unite men together . . . than debauchery and dissolute manners. The indiscriminate voluptuousness of the one sex cannot fail to produce a still greater depravity of the other, by annihilating the female point of honour, and introducing universal prostitution. The rank of women is thus degraded; marriage becomes hardly the source of a peculiar connection; and the unhappy child who is born in a family . . . is doomed to suffer the fatal consequences of their jealousy and discord. The effect of their negligence, in such a situation, may easily be conceived, when we consider the hard fortune which is commonly experienced by the issue of illegitimate correspondence. (*Historical View* 2006, 771-772)

He argued that promiscuity erodes our sympathy for others by dulling the delicate sensibilities of the heart, such as romantic love and friendship within the family.

Marriage is no longer cherished as a special institution, but rather becomes one more relationship in a long string of dalliances. Children in particular suffer, because their parents’ bond is weakened by “jealousy and discord.” Illegitimacy increases; but more importantly, even children born in a marriage are treated more and more like illegitimate children, as their parents are torn apart by jealousy and divorce.

Millar went on to argue that only strong families, not universal benevolence, can

properly nurture children:

Nature has wisely provided, that the education and even the maintenance of the human offspring, should not depend upon general philanthropy or benevolence, deduced from abstracted philosophical principles; but upon peculiar passions and feelings, which have a more powerful and immediate influence on the conduct of mankind: and, when these passions are weakened, these feelings destroyed, we shall in vain expect their place to be supplied by general views of utility to mankind, or particular interpositions of the legislature. (*Historical View* 2006, 772)

The familial bond has been ordained by nature in order to focus our affections and nurturing: “the conjugal, the parental, and filial relations give rise to various modifications of sympathy and benevolence, which, in their range are not the most extensive, but which operating in a sphere adapted to the limited capacities of a human heart, are exerted in such directions as are most conducive to the great purposes of human nature” (*Historical View* 2006, 765). Nothing can replace the intense devotion of a parent. Like Aristotle, Millar implied that parental affection comes from a sense that “this is my own”; and therefore if everybody in a society is a parent to every child, then nobody is. If the family disintegrates under the licentiousness of commercial society, there would be no satisfactory substitute. “Particular interpositions of the legislature” could never replace the family.

Commercial society also tends to diminish the capacity for noble and generous actions. Men in commercial society adhere better to the virtue of justice—which Millar defined as staying out of other people’s business and causing them no harm—but this negative virtue does little to encourage the higher virtues. The two often spring from different motives: “that a man should be induced to a constant observance of the rules of justice, nothing further is commonly requisite than to understand his own pecuniary

interest; but before he can become eminently generous or benevolent, he must resolve to sacrifice that interest to the good of others” (*Historical View* 2006, 777). In other words, justice often flows from a proper understanding of self-interest, from the knowledge that our interests are best served when we agree not to harm others in exchange for not being harmed ourselves; but benevolence goes against that very self-interest. The two virtues, therefore, do not always increase together.

It is true that a commercial state multiplies social relationships, which can increase benevolence by increasing our friendships and connections, but sometimes these social relationships are too shallow to do so: “this intercourse is often little more than a petty traffic, which aims merely at the purchase of reciprocal good offices; or when it proceeds from better motives, it is the offspring of a subordinate, and in some measure a speculative humanity, which in the case of any serious distress, contents itself with weeping and lamenting over the afflicted, but never thinks of sacrificing any great interest to afford him relief” (*Historical View* 2006, 778). In other words, much of the socializing in commercial society is simply a “petty traffic” of polite but trivial interactions such as buying and selling, hiring and firing. Even when interactions become more profound, they do not always occasion great effort on behalf of others, but are restricted to pity and sympathy instead of action. The very word “benevolence,” composed of *bene* and *volens*, implies wishing rather than doing well. Of course, some people in commercial society may donate comparatively small sums to the poor, for “a limited and regulated charity is perfectly consistent with the manners of a refined and polished people,” but “the higher exertions of benevolence are out of the question”

(*Historical View* 2006, 781). The average man in commercial society is prudent, just, kind, sober, industrious; he pays his taxes, harms no one, feels sincerely regretful for others' misfortunes, perhaps even gives ten percent of his income regularly to his church or a chosen charity—but the sublime self-sacrifice of a St. Francis or a St. Clare is unthinkable for him. Such a situation may be largely tolerable—after all, every age of society has its advantages and disadvantages—except for the fact that self-interested justice cannot by itself sustain society. If “the strict observance of the rules of justice proceeds chiefly from considerations of interest,” then “where many persons are tempted in conjunction to the same acts of injustice . . . and where the delinquents are so numerous, and of such rank as in some measure to keep one another in countenance,” then “they should give way to the immediate impulse of their passions” (*Historical View* 2006, 784). If justice is purely self-interested, it will be jettisoned when it no longer serves self-interest. Millar was thus an opponent of what he called “selfish maxims” (*Historical View* 2006, 782). His portrait of the enlightened self-interest of “the trader and capitalist” was accompanied by concerns that such self-interest, if not strengthened by other virtues, may eventually undermine the “public benefits” it initially creates (*Historical View* 2006, 722-723).

Along with this distaste for self-sacrifice comes a decline in martial virtue. In commercial society, “the improvement of arts and manufactures, by introducing luxury, contributes yet more to enervate the minds of men, who, according as they enjoy more ease and pleasure at home, feel greater aversion to the hardships and dangers of a military life” (*Ranks* 2006, 230). Thus “the bulk of a people become at length unable or unwilling

to serve in war” (*Ranks* 2006, 230). They do not wish to sacrifice their luxuries and leisure even for the sake of their country’s defense. This “decay of the military spirit in the modern commercial nations” cannot be easily remedied through a militia, for “the difficulty of enforcing regulations of this nature, so as to derive much advantage from them, must afford sufficient evidence that they are adverse to the spirit of the times” (*Historical View* 2006, 753, 752). As we have seen, Hutcheson, Hume, Smith, and Ferguson all indicated varying degrees of support for the militia, but Millar was more skeptical, pointing out that such requirements are difficult to enforce and contradict the prevailing ethos.

Competition and envy are also rampant. In commercial society, “the pursuit of riches becomes a scramble, in which the hand of every man is against every other” (*Historical View* 2006, 778). Every man is “attentive to his own advancement,” and so “he is vexed and tormented by every obstacle to his prosperity, and prompted to regard his competitors with envy, resentment, and other malignant passions” (*Historical View* 2006, 778). The universal desire to better one’s own condition creates envy and resentment. Even though most men observe the rules of justice and do not harm their competitors, they still exhibit few friendly or benevolent feelings towards them. They cannot help but begrudge their rivals for standing in the way of success.

Another serious injustice of commercial society is that it fails to abolish slavery. Millar was concerned with many forms of servitude, such as the virtual subjugation of the coal-miners in Scotland, but for him “the slavery established in our colonies is an object of greater importance” (*Ranks* 2006, 277). He thought it ironic that commercial society,



which tends to lead to more enlightened and free governments, allows for such an injustice: “it affords a curious spectacle to observe, that the same people who talk in a high strain of political liberty, and who consider the privilege of imposing their own taxes as one of the unalienable rights of mankind, should make no scruple of reducing a great number of their fellow-creatures into circumstances where they are not only deprived of property, but almost of every species of right” (*Ranks* 2006, 278). Obviously, Millar did not believe that material conditions of success lead inexorably to liberation, for he was well aware of the horrific servitude remaining in the United States.

Even though many commercial societies do not allow *de jure* slavery, they still often degrade the common laborer. Indirectly referencing Adam Smith, Millar observed that “the workmen belonging to a manufacture are each of them employed, for the most part, in a single manual operation” (*Historical View* 2006, 732). Many a laborer “employs his whole labour in sharpening the point, or in putting on the head of a pin!” (*Historical View* 2006, 736). Because of their focus on one trivial task, “it is hardly possible that these mechanics should acquire extensive information or intelligence” (*Historical View* 2006, 732). Millar went even beyond Smith in describing the horrors of such a degraded intelligence: “they are apt to acquire a habitual vacancy of thought, unenlivened by any prospects, but such are derived from the future wages of their labour, or from the grateful returns of bodily repose and sleep. They become, like machines” (*Historical View* 2006, 732). Smith had written that the worker becomes “as stupid and ignorant as it possible for a human creature to become,” but Millar went one step further and argued that workers become *less* than human, that they are reduced to mere cogs in a

machine. Furthermore, society may not provide a natural corrective. Socializing with their peers would not enlarge the workers' mind, or render them more sympathetic and humane, because they generally socialize with other workers like themselves: "they can draw but little improvement from the society of companions, bred to similar employments, with whom, if they have much intercourse, they are most likely to seek amusement in drinking and dissipation" (*Historical View* 2006, 732). The corruption of the worker is likely to further contribute to the corruption of the family, since the urban laborer may prove better than the peasant at attracting a mate: "the pin-maker, who commonly lives in a town, will have more of the fashionable improvements of society than the peasant . . . . Should they both be enamoured of the same female, it is natural to suppose, that he would make the better figure in the eyes of his mistress, and that he would be most likely to carry the prize" (*Historical View* 2006, 736). The capitalists' quest to better their own conditions has human costs—that is, turning the worker into a mere automaton seeking self-preservation and pleasure, and, by extension, corrupting those who depend on him.

### **A Projecting Spirit**

Despite these problems, Millar nonetheless cautioned against hasty change. Millar's synthesis of the Tory and Whig viewpoints is essential in understanding his caution. He wrote that the Tories adhered to the principle of authority, and the Whigs to the principle of utility (*Historical View* 2006, 801-802). However, these two principles are not mutually exclusive.<sup>1</sup> The authority of government can serve a useful purpose, for

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Millar noted that previous authors had framed Tory principles in Whig terms, though they were less open about it: "the more liberal part of the tories have now caught universally the mode of reasoning

“those feelings of the human mind, which give rise to authority, may be regarded as the wise provision of nature for supporting the order and government of society” (*Historical View* 2006, 807). Mankind has a natural disposition to “pay respect and submission to . . . a superiority of rank and station,” and also has a “propensity . . . to continue in those modes of action to which he has long been accustomed” (*Historical View* 2006, 807). These tendencies to respect authority are useful because they restrain “that wanton spirit of innovation which men are apt to indulge in their political reasonings” (*Ranks* 2006, 285). This spirit of innovation is dangerous because “the institutions of a country, how imperfect soever and defective they may seem, are commonly suited to the state of the people by whom they have been embraced” (*Ranks* 2006, 285). For Millar, “no system, be it ever so perfect in itself, can be expected to acquire stability, or to produce good order and submission, unless it coincides with the general voice of the community” (*Historical View* 2006, 589). Therefore, “he who frames a political constitution upon a model of ideal perfection, and attempts to introduce it into any country, without consulting the inclinations of the inhabitants, is a most pernicious projector, who, instead of being applauded as a Lycurgus, ought to be chained and confined as a madman” (*Historical View* 2006, 589). No government, even a monarchy, can exist unless it receives tacit support from the people and is suited to its people’s way of life.

Millar believed that most historical founders actually framed their laws in accordance with existing tradition: “those patriotic statesmen . . . were at great pains to

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employed by their adversaries, and are accustomed to justify . . . monarchical power . . . not by asserting that it is the inherent birthright of the sovereign, but by maintaining that it is necessary for the suppression of tumult and disorder” (*Historical View* 2006, 805). Perhaps he wrote with Hume in mind.

accommodate their regulations to the situation of the people . . . . All the ancient systems of legislation that have been handed down to us with any degree of authenticity, show evident marks their having been framed with such reasonable views” (*Ranks* 2006, 87). The greatest founders were therefore not motivated by “a projecting spirit” (*Ranks* 2006, 87). A projector who designs a government in solitude ignores the wishes of that community, establishing himself and his design as superior to those wishes. Such an assertion of superiority can only be delusional, the sign of a madman rather than a true philosopher or statesman.

If such a madman were to succeed in his designs, the results would most likely be disastrous. Millar argued that in every system, “the different parts have an intimate connection with each other. As it is dangerous to tamper with the machine, unless we are previously acquainted with the several wheels and springs of which it is composed, so there is reason to fear, that the violent alteration of any single part may destroy the regularity of its movements, and produce the utmost disorder and confusion” (*Ranks* 2006, 285). Millar’s metaphor of government as a machine, he clearly saw it as more complex than that—not as a mechanistic device that could be designed (or taken apart) by any one person, but more as a symbiotic relationship in which all parts were interconnected. Fiddling with one part causes unforeseen disruptions in the whole organism.

Moreover, revolutions in political and economic systems are dangerous because striving for perfection is inherently dangerous: “we are not, however, to dream of perfection in any human workmanship” (*Historical View* 2006, 703). Aspiring to an

impossible standard sets us up for disappointment. Even the supposedly admirable political systems of the past—such as Sparta or republican Rome—had problems, for “Roman patriotism” was marred by the fact that “the same people who discovered so much fortitude and zeal in establishing and maintaining the freedom of their capital, made no scruple in subjecting the rest of their dominions to an arbitrary and despotical government” (*Historical View* 2006, 14). Furthermore, these systems were accommodated to their circumstances. Millar pointed out that “the celebrated republics of Greece and Rome . . . were established among a handful of people inhabiting a narrow district” (*Historical View* 2006, 569). In such close-knit societies, people could easily develop affection for each other and their city. Attempting to force that kind of relationship in a different society would be unnatural and dangerous. We must be realistic about the circumstances in which we live. Laws must be suited to a people’s “progress in manufactures and commerce, their increase in opulence, and their advances in luxury and refinement” (*Historical View* 2006, 703).

Human nature also does not allow us to go back in time. Society cannot simply return to an earlier developmental stage—such as the Rome or Sparta idealized by Rousseau—because continuous improvement is a part of human nature. According to Millar, “one of the most remarkable differences between man and other animals consists in that wonderful capacity for the improvement of his faculties” (*Ranks* 2006, 143). Man is “never satisfied with any particular attainment; he is continually impelled by his desires from the pursuit of one object to that of another; and his activity is called forth in the prosecution of the several arts which render his situation more easy and agreeable”

(*Ranks* 2006, 143). It is through this natural thirst for improvement, for an increasingly pleasant and convenient living situation, that “manufactures, together with commerce, are at length introduced into a country” (*Ranks* 2006, 143). The commercial age, though it comes last in human development, is nonetheless the result of man’s innate nature. Man naturally desires change, improvement, comfort, personal liberty, knowledge—and commercial society is the best supplier of these desires.

Millar was certainly not opposed to all innovations, for even the authority of government no longer serves society’s best interests if that government reaches a certain level of oppression. For instance, he supported the Glorious Revolution, the American Revolution, and (initially) the French Revolution. He also believed that riots, or “clamour and tumultuary proceedings,” on the part of the urban mercantile class can play a valuable role in restraining government interference in the economy: “the voice of the mercantile interest, never fails to command the attention of government” (*Historical View* 2006, 727-728). Society can reach a point at which continuing with an old custom or system would be more disastrous than change. Millar wrote that “when the machine is out of order, it must be taken to pieces; and in the repairing and cleaning of the wheels and springs, there must be some interruption and derangement of its movements” (*Historical View* 2006, 638). If society no longer functions as it should, if it is “out of order,” then change becomes necessary. But even during such times, change should be narrowly tailored to achieve its results with the least amount of disruption and violence: “when a general reformation of government has become indispensable, it must be conducted according to the exigency of times and circumstances . . . . It is part of

prudence and of justice, in those cases, to adopt such measures as are likely to produce the end in view with the least possible hardship” (*Historical View* 2006, 638-639). For this reason, Millar eventually revised his view of the French Revolution, admitting that many of the changes introduced by the revolutionaries went too far. These criticisms led his nephew, John Craig, to write that Millar “treated with the utmost contempt all assertion of metaphysical Rights” (*Ranks* 2006, 69).

In addition to being modest, innovations must start with the mores of the people, because political and economic systems spring from the people. According to Millar, institutions “are only susceptible of those general improvements, which proceed from a gradual reformation of manners, and are accompanied by a correspondent change in the conditions of society” (*Ranks* 2006, 285). Legislative decrees cannot alter manners or underlying social conditions—at least, not in any immediate way. Thus, while Millar supported many political revolutions and riots against unjust policies, he was more circumspect about social revolutions.

Millar therefore believed legal solutions to commercial society’s problems are inherently limited. Laws—any kind of laws—are an outgrowth of society’s character and circumstances. The circumstances shaping these systems are not necessarily limited to the material, such as the size of the state or its economic development, but also include mores. And since mores are often taught by the family or by private relationships, the civic humanist solutions—such as militia service or agrarian laws—often fall short of effective renewal.

Lisa Hill designates Adam Ferguson as chief critic of the Scottish

Enlightenment's optimism towards progress: "more than any of his Scottish contemporaries, [Ferguson] was conscious of the public dangers posed by the emergence of the 'commercial spirit'" (2006, 165). But Ferguson at least trusted in the potential of political reform, particularly in his own militia proposal. Millar appears to be an even more challenging figure, due to his conviction that the problems of commercial society lay beyond the reach of the law.

### **Feminine Virtues of Commercial Society**

Thus Millar saw serious problems with commercial society, such as selfishness, mediocrity, slavery, and the breakdown of the family. Yet he also argued against comprehensive political reform as a possible solution and even voiced positive support for commercial society on occasion—for instance, praising the "prosperity and happiness" of Great Britain (*Historical View* 2006, 12). Was his defense mere cowardice or fatalism, inspired by the fear that revolution could lead to something even worse?

The answer to this question lies in Millar's complex view of commercial societies. He believed that such societies contain contradictory tendencies. In the first three historical stages, societies follow a fairly set path. In these ages, political liberty is seldom known, because people are more concerned with mere survival, and have not yet begun "to exert those sentiments of liberty which are natural to the mind of man, and which necessity alone is able to subdue" (*Ranks* 2006, 237). They are also unaware of the finer points of morality: primitives are "too little acquainted with the dictates of prudence and sober reflection, to be capable of restraining the irregular sallies of passion" (*Historical View* 2006, 35). But in the commercial age, societies begin to face several



possible paths. For instance, commercial society contains features that can lead either to liberty or to despotism:

In England, therefore, as well as in the other European countries which have made considerable progress in arts and manufactures, we may discover the operation of two principles which had an opposite political tendency; the independence and opulence acquired by the lower classes of people, which tended to produce a popular government; and the introduction of mercenary armies for the purpose of national defence, which contributed to extend and support the power of the crown. (*Historical View* 2006, 494)<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, commercial nations empower the mercantile classes, which usually leads to these classes advocating for a more popular government. On the other hand, they require standing armies, which can result in a strengthened government and a less vigorous populace. The possibility of despotism in a commercial state presented a serious problem for Millar, who like many of the Scots believed that independence and liberty allow people to better exercise their moral faculties.

Commerce also creates contradictions in the social realm. According to Millar, “men who live in the same society, or have any intercourse with one another, are often linked together by ties of sympathy and affection; as, on the other hand, they are apt, from opposite interests and passions, to dispute and quarrel” (*Historical View* 2006, 730).

In commercial society, as people interact more, they develop their capacities for sympathy and cultivate more friendships. At the same time, though, their closer interactions create more opportunities for disagreement and dispute. They are led to

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<sup>2</sup> In explaining how the English commoners reached “independency and opulence,” Millar, like Hume and Smith, credited the role of the monarchy, which “gave an early consequence to the lowers orders of the inhabitants; and, by uniting their interest with that of the king, in opposing the great barons, disposed him to increase their weight and importance in the community” (*Historical View* 2006, 425). But Millar believed this protection of the common people began much earlier than did Hume. Millar also drew greater attention to the role of England’s geography in facilitating commercial liberty.

compete with one another, and experience envy as they witness some of their friends attain better fortune—thus creating the resentment that Millar deplored.

Faced with these opposing tendencies—between liberty and despotism, between greater moral harmony and chaos—which of them prevails? Millar believed that each developing society takes a different path based on its unique character and conditions—an early form of “path dependence” theory. He wrote that changes “were, in each country, accommodated to the peculiar state of society, and therefore exhibited very different combinations” (*Historical View* 2006, 438). In England, for instance, liberty rather than despotism resulted from commerce, due to the people’s “growing spirit of independence,” which was strengthened by the Protestant opposition to the Catholic monarchs (*Historical View* 2006, 440). This attitude led them to place restrictions on the Crown and create a limited government.

Similarly, a commercial society can attain a vigorous morality, rather than selfishness and ruthless competition, if the character of the people properly facilitates the former. As we shall see, Millar thought that commercial nations could avoid corruption if certain conditions are met. First, meaningful rather than shallow social connections would increase society’s moral influence over the individual. Second, Christianity and the legacy of chivalry could preserve respect for women, which would allow women to attain both respect and freedom in commercial society. This in turn might lead to a greater appreciation of feminine virtues such as compassion and humanity, which would lead to a gentler, more liberated society. Third, a country must reach the commercial stage gradually. Finally, a society that provides educational opportunities—both formal

and informal—could prevent the degeneration of the laboring classes.

For Millar, then, it is important to analyze social relationships in depth in order to see how they ultimately influence behavior. Like most Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, Millar believed that commerce multiplies social relationships. A medieval farmer met few people outside his family and small village; a modern merchant meets thousands throughout his life. This is a significant fact because society inculcates moral reasoning, beginning in childhood: “the good or bad behaviour of those who live in society with us, their virtues and vices, cannot fail very early to excite our attention, and to interest our feelings; while we soon perceive that these persons exercise a similar judgment upon us; and this leads us to reflect upon our own conduct, to regard our own actions in the light in which they appear to others” (*Historical View* 2006, 741). In commercial nations, this positive influence of society is strengthened: “by living much in society, and maintaining an intimate correspondence, they are also led . . . to accommodate their behaviour to the disposition and temper of their company” (*Historical View* 2006, 777-778). Accordingly, “while in this manner, they improve in the arts of civility and politeness,” they also “can hardly fail to cultivate their social feelings, by participating in the pleasures and pains of each other, and by mutual endeavours promote the former, and to relieve or soften the latter” (*Historical View* 2006, 778). These social feelings also dispose people to develop general standards of morality: “by a more intimate communication among the members of society, the manners of mankind are softened, their social dispositions are awakened, and they feel more and more an attraction which leads them to conform their behavior to the general standard” (*Historical View* 2006, 751). In other words, increased

socialization does not merely render people more polite or pleasant, but can also affect their deeper sentiments. If people form meaningful connections—an “intimate communication”—instead of “petty traffic,” they become more compassionate and humane.

Sociability in commercial nations also encourages the virtue of temperance, for “though debauchery in drinking may for a long time maintain its ground in those countries where it has once been firmly rooted, we have reason to expect that after a certain pitch of improvement in arts and sciences, it will be expelled from every country” (*Historical View* 2006, 763). Millar believed that “the advancement of knowledge contributes . . . to supply a fund of ideas, productive of continual amusement” (*Historical View* 2006, 763). “The powers of imagination and reflection” are enough to “enliven conversation” without the need for intoxication (*Historical View* 2006, 763). In commercial society, then, “the use of the bottle is rendered subordinate to the correct enjoyment of social intercourse” (*Historical View* 2006, 763). People come together to discuss ideas or engage in imaginative speculation together, and can interest each other without debauchery. Friendship and profound conversation therefore take the place of meaningless dissipation.

Commercial countries therefore are characterized by increased social complexity. People associate not just to provide for their basic needs, but in order to share ideas, receive education, or cooperate in commercial enterprises. This complexity can sometimes promote virtue by advancing our sympathy and knowledge.

Furthermore, it also has the positive effect of raising the status of women. In

order to understand how the status of women has progressed over time, Millar examined their status in each of the four stages of history. In the age of the hunter-gatherers, women are not highly valued. Primitive men live such a harsh life that they have little time for attention to pleasures, such as sex or romance: “he finds so much difficulty, and is exposed to so many hardships in procuring mere necessaries, that he has no leisure or encouragement to aim at the luxuries and conveniencies of life” (*Ranks* 2006, 93). They are also not refined enough to understand modesty, which only arises with a civilized people: “among all men who have made any considerable advances towards refinement, sentiments of modesty are connected with the intercourse of the sexes” (*Ranks* 2006, 102). For a civilized man, “after the violence of passion has subsided, and when the mind returns to its usual state of tranquility, its former emotions appear, in some measure, extravagant” (*Ranks* 2006, 102). He reflects on how these passions must appear to others, and decides that “an open display of them will be extremely offensive to others” (*Ranks* 2006, 103). The virtues of modesty, chastity, and discretion therefore proceed from these reflections, and “the dictates of nature, in this respect, are inculcated by the force of education; our own feelings are continually gathering strength by a comparison with those of the people around us” (*Ranks* 2006, 103). Modesty is a natural impulse, but it requires thought in order to be noticed and developed. It is unknown in the first stage of society—and without modesty to restrain his passions, the primitive simply gratifies them as he sees fit. He has no reason to delay the fulfillment of these desires or sublimate them into higher pursuits.

For early man, then, relationships with women are based in animal instinct, and

only attain permanence due to the necessity of caring for children: “it is true that, even in early ages, some sort of marriage . . . has been almost universally established . . . . When a child has been produced by the accidental correspondence of his parents, it is to be expected that . . . they will be excited to assist one another in making some provision for his maintenance” (*Ranks* 2006, 95). Either way, he does not know the heightened pleasure of delayed gratification, or the sublime experience of romantic love. As a result, he does not have a high or idealized view of women. Primitive associations between men and women, since they are based in lust, necessity, and the physical superiority of men, subject women to the animal needs of men: “we accordingly find that, in those periods, the women of a family are usually treated as the servants or slaves of men. Nothing can exceed the dependence and subjection in which they are kept, or the toil and drudgery which they are forced to undergo” (*Ranks* 2006, 107). In the first age of history, men have little use for women except for sex, childbearing, or drudgery. They lack the leisure for cultivating romantic love.

The status of women begins to improve in the age of shepherds. This is an age in which the necessities of life are far easier to obtain: “being thus provided with necessaries, he [the shepherd] is led to the pursuit of those objects which may render his situation more easy and comfortable; and among these the enjoyments derived from the intercourse of the sexes claim a principal share, and become an object of attention” (*Ranks* 2006, 123). For the first time, people begin to take relations between the sexes seriously. A woman is not simply a source of brute physical pleasure, a supplier of children, and a domestic slave; rather, she becomes a source of more refined enjoyments.

Romantic love begins to grow because gratification often becomes delayed, for “those affections which are not dissipated by variety of enjoyment, will be the purest and strongest” (*Ranks* 2006, 124).

In the age of agriculture, people form permanent settlements and acquire property in land. As a result, they also become more jealous and warlike, as they now need to defend their territory. Because of rampant distrust, “it was not to be expected that these opulent chiefs, who maintained a constant opposition to each other, would allow any sort of familiarity to take place between the members of their respective families” (*Ranks* 2006, 135). Women retire indoors, for their own safety as well as for the honor and integrity of their families. Strangers rarely interact with them: “the young knight, as he marched to the tournament, saw at a distance the daughter of the chieftain by whom the show was exhibited; and it was even with difficulty that he could obtain access to her” (*Ranks* 2006, 136). Women become mysterious, distant, and chaste. Gratification of one’s desires, if it happens at all, is likely to require a prolonged period of effort, even more so than in the peaceful age of shepherds. The agricultural age, then, is a period of “great respect and veneration for the female sex” (*Ranks* 2006, 137). Women “who adhered to the strict rules of virtue, and maintained an unblemished reputation, were treated like beings of a superior order” (*Ranks* 2006, 138). In Europe’s feudal age, knights adopted a chivalric code that emphasized deference to and protection of women: “the love of God and of the ladies was one of the first lessons inculcated upon every young person who was initiated into the military profession” (*Ranks* 2006, 138). This code was immortalized in medieval romances and madrigals. Paradoxically, then, the

martial tendencies of the agricultural age increase appreciation of women, because these martial tendencies necessitate feminine seclusion and bring masculine passion and admiration to a fever pitch.

However, in the commercial age this seclusion begins to dissipate. In this age, “from the cultivation of the arts of peace, the different members of society are more and more united, and have occasion to enter into a greater variety of transactions for their mutual benefit” (*Ranks* 2006, 143). A more peaceful society means that families need not guard their members, particularly their female members, as vigilantly as before. Greater interaction is even necessary for the purpose of commerce, as some women begin to help the family business or “engage in other employments” outside the home (*Ranks* 2006, 150). Women are no longer shrouded in mystery, and instead become easily acquainted with men: “the men and women of different families are permitted to converse with more ease and freedom, and meet with less opposition to the indulgence of their inclinations” (*Ranks* 2006, 144). As a result, women “become less frequently the objects of . . . romantic and extravagant passions” (*Ranks* 2006, 144). In the modern age, women are no longer regarded as angels, but as human beings.

But the loss of their exalted status does not signal a return to the drudgery of the hunter-gatherer age. As men become more intimately acquainted with women, they gain a newfound appreciation of their unique feminine qualities. In commercial society, women “are more universally regarded upon account of their useful or agreeable talents” (*Ranks* 2006, 144). Men “are necessarily led to set a value upon those female accomplishments and virtues which have so much influence upon every species of



improvement, and which contribute in so many different ways to multiply the comforts of life” (*Ranks* 2006, 144). Women are capable of virtues and skills that are particularly well-suited to increasing the comforts of commercial society—and this does not go unnoticed.

What are the distinctive feminine virtues that men learn to respect in this age? According to Millar, woman’s natural role as the caregiver for children imbues her with qualities suited to that role: “loaded by nature with the first and most immediate concern in rearing and maintaining the children, she is endowed with such dispositions as fit her for the discharge of this important duty” (*Ranks* 2006, 144). For instance, women “are led, in a particular manner, to improve those feelings of the heart which are excited by these tender connections, and they are trained up in the practice of all the domestic virtues” (*Ranks* 2006, 145). A life centered on the family also endows them with “modesty and diffidence,” and as a result “their affections are neither dissipated by pleasure, nor corrupted by the vicious customs of the world” (*Ranks* 2006, 145). Because of woman’s “peculiar delicacy and sensibility,” she can aid her husband “by dividing his cares, by sharing his joys, and by soothing his misfortunes” (*Ranks* 2006, 144). Although women rarely display courage, which Millar defines as the willingness to venture into danger, they are capable of greater fortitude—the ability to bear pain with equanimity—than men are (*Historical View* 2006, 749). They are also less strong than men, but nonetheless display great “skill and dexterity” (*Ranks* 2006, 144).

Thus Millar thought that sexual differences lead to unique feminine virtues. Women tend to be more sensitive to others’ emotions, since they care for the emotional

needs of their families. They learn to cheer their families and soothe them in misfortune. Since they spend much of their lives in the domestic sphere rather than venturing into worldly enterprises, they are also more diffident and modest around strangers; as a result, they are less prone to corruption. A life devoted to the needs of others teaches them to endure their own pain with dignity and forbearance. Overall, then, women may lack physical strength and courage, but for this very they exhibit a host of softer, gentler virtues.

In the previous ages of history, these qualities are little appreciated. In the hunter-gatherer age, women are subjugated to provide for men's needs. Men lack the leisure necessary to appreciate women's more delicate qualities. In the shepherds' age, people begin to value women's chastity and beauty, but these are but the first steps towards civilization and refinement. In the agricultural age, women are worshipped but not understood. Men rarely meet with women outside their families, and so they admire them from afar, as Dante did Beatrice, without fully appreciating their thoughtful conversation, their agreeableness, or their admirable fortitude. Only in the commercial age do women become "neither the slaves, nor the idols of the other sex, but their friends and companions" (*Ranks* 2006, 144). People often socialize in mixed company, at salons or coffeehouses or balls, and so women's qualities gain a wider and more appreciative audience.

Of course, if increased familiarity between the sexes leads to debauchery, then all these positive developments will be for naught. Indeed, Millar thought promiscuity and divorce to be two of the greatest threats not only to the status of women, but to the

continued viability of commercial society. However, these tragedies are not inevitable. Sexual immorality had been forestalled in many European commercial nations due to the twin influences of Christianity and of chivalry's legacy. Millar wrote that "in these countries, the authority obtained by the clergy after the establishment of the Christian religion, and the notions which they endeavoured to inculcate with regard to abstinence from every sensual gratification, have concurred with the influence of the former [chivalric] usage and laws, not only to exclude polygamy, but in a great measure to prevent the dissolution of marriage by voluntary divorce" (*Ranks* 2006, 155).

Christianity prevented both widespread promiscuity and divorce: "the Christian religion, by exalting the merit of restraint . . . in relation to the sexual correspondence, has contributed, no doubt, to retard a general relaxation of manners. In particular, the authority of the church . . . was exerted to render marriage an indissoluble tie" (*Historical View* 2006, 771). Religion—not just the Christian religion—can also play a role in preventing other vices such as injustice, for "religion bestows her aid . . . [to] the rules of justice . . . by representing what is infamous among men, as offensive to the Deity" (*Historical View* 2006, 773).

These Christian mores have found support from "the vestiges which remain of the refined sentiments" of chivalry, which urge respect for women and thus prevent coarse usage of them (*Historical View* 2006, 771). Millar wrote that "in the other countries of Europe, the manners of chivalry were more firmly rooted, and acquiring stability from custom, may still be observed to have a great deal of influence upon the taste and sentiments even of the present age" (*Ranks* 2006, 141). "The great respect and

veneration for the ladies” still leads to “their being treated with a degree of politeness, delicacy, and attention, that was unknown to the Greeks and Romans . . . this has given an air of refinement to the intercourse of the sexes” (*Ranks* 2006, 142). Due to the impact of Christian chivalry, “many disorders, therefore, which were felt in the luxurious ages of Rome, have thus been avoided” (*Ranks* 2006, 155). Some of the commercial countries have therefore reached a mean between the misogyny of the hunter-gatherer age, and the idolatry of the agricultural age: “civilized society exhibits a medium between these two extremes” (*Historical View* 2006, 767). Women can take on new freedoms and escape the confining pedestals of the middle ages, but habits of deference towards them, as well as their Christian prohibitions against immorality, prevent them from being enslaved by men’s lusts.

What kind of Christianity exerts the best restraint? Millar, like most Scots—not just Scottish intellectuals—rejected Catholicism. He lamented the monopoly that this church had once held over Christianity: “the Christian religion had been reduced into a monopoly, under the authority of a governor” (*Historical View* 2006, 502). Like all monopolies, the Church was bloated and inefficient. Competition emerged as the best guarantee of true religion: “to dissolve the company altogether, and to lay the trade entirely open, was at length suggested as the most effectual means for promoting laudable industry, for discouraging unfair practices, and for communicating an equal benefit to a whole people” (*Historical View* 2006, 502). Unlike Hume, Millar did not support an established church in order to bribe the indolence of the clergy. Religious monopolies do encourage the clergy’s complacency and laziness, but this is precisely what Millar did not

want, preferring instead a “laudable industry” and better access for all people.

Examining the different Protestant sects that arose in the wake of the Reformation, Millar concluded that the Presbyterians and the Independents (pejoratively called Puritans) seemed best calculated to achieve these goals. Because they did not regard a clergyman as an intermediary between his people and God, they confined his role to these functions: “to preserve good order in the public exercise of religious worship, to inspect the behavior of the people under his care, and to instruct them in the great duties of morality and religion” (*Historical View* 2006, 505). These functions he performed scrupulously—if not from sincerity, then out of fear that he would be replaced otherwise, for “they were capable of gaining great influence and respect” only by “their attention to the duties of their profession” and were completely “dependent upon their employers,” that is, the people (*Historical View* 2006, 505). Christianity thus functions as a more effective check upon individual behavior when there is competition among the sects.

Ignatieff implies that Christianity and chivalry are poor restraints in Millar’s thought because they are “vestigial survivals from ruder ‘modes of subsistence’” (1983, 340).<sup>3</sup> But though they are vestiges of an earlier age, they are not just primitive anachronisms. According to Millar, history continues to shape the future—for instance, England’s “spirit of independence” cultivated in its struggles with kings continued to

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<sup>3</sup> Ignatieff is right in identifying a tone of fatalism and despair that often creeps into Millar’s writings on commercial society. However, Millar’s negative tone doesn’t mean that he lost all hope. His writing on earlier forms of society is, if anything, even more negative: he described the hunter-gatherer age as sunk in “poverty and barbarism,” the shepherds’ age as characterized by “animosities and quarrels,” and the agricultural age as “incompatible with any regular distribution of justice” (*Ranks* 2006, 116, 125, 134). He showed little nostalgia for the ideal of the independent, simple yeoman: “the farmer, employed in the separate cultivation of his land, considers only his own individual profit” (*Historical View* 2006, 727). He condemned those moralists who “in declaiming against the vices of their own times, have been led to exalt the merit of distant ages” (*Historical View* 2006, 746). For Millar, commercial society may be the worst state of society—except for all the others. If it offers humanity no hope, then no society appears to do so.

preserve liberty in Millar's own time. For Millar, tradition is not merely dead matter, weighing like a nightmare upon the brains of the living. Rather, it is a vital part of the present, influencing the mores of the people. Its positive elements should be preserved and transmitted to future generations, while its negative elements, such as misogyny, should be gradually reformed. For this reason, Millar considered Europe's chivalric heritage to be "a valuable improvement" despite its roots in "the extravagance of Gothic institutions and manners" (*Ranks* 2006, 142).

However, this legacy is unlikely to exist in countries that develop too quickly. Ancient Rome, for instance, "passed very suddenly from poverty and barbarism to immoderate wealth and luxury" (*Historical View* 2006, 770). Its sudden economic development was precipitated by "the great wealth imported from the conquered provinces" (*Historical View* 2006, 769). Passing quickly from austerity to luxury meant there was no intervening moderate stage, in which modesty would usually be developed: "between these two extremes, there seems to have passed no interval which was calculated to refine and exalt the passion between the sexes" (*Historical View* 2006, 770). Without this stage of development, "they had acquired no previous habits, to prevent them from sinking into . . . gross debauchery" (*Historical View* 2006, 770). Sudden good fortune is likely to result in luxury and sexual immorality, as there is no extended agricultural period in which self-restraint is enforced. The habits of previous stages are necessary in order to preserve good order, and they must be given time to adapt to new developments in history.

It is possible, under these conditions, for commercial society to increase the status

and freedom of women without descending into a general immorality that ultimately revokes that status and sends them back into prostitution and slavery. When women are valued in commercial society, and their feminine qualities respected, they in fact exert a positive influence that leads to greater sensitivity and compassion. Societies in which women gain higher status are also societies in which children and servants tend to be treated more sympathetically.

In the hunter-gatherer age, a father claims total dominion over the lives of his children: “the jurisdiction and authority which, in early times, a father exercised over his children, was of the same nature with that of a husband over his wife” (*Ranks* 2006, 157). Though a father naturally loves his children, “this disposition, in the breast of a savage, is often counteracted by a regard to his own preservation, and smothered by the misery with which he is loaded. In many cases he is forced to abandon them entirely, and suffer them to perish by hunger, or be devoured by wild beasts” (*Ranks* 2006, 158). Moreover, he sometimes reacts towards them with rage and violence, for in this age people have not yet learned restraint: “in a rude nation, every one is apt to abuse that power which he happens to possess” (*Ranks* 2006, 157). The idea that a patriarch should wield complete power over his children remains influential even after the hunter-gatherer age passes, for as Millar noted, this doctrine was espoused as late as Sir Robert Filmer’s 1680 treatise *Patriarcha* (*Ranks* 2006, 175). But as society advances towards the commercial age, this idea fades in influence, and the father’s power becomes more moderate. The commercial man, “being often engaged in the business and conversation of the world, and finding, in many cases, the necessity of conforming to the humours of those with whom he

converses . . . becomes less impatient of contradiction, and less apt to give way to the irregular sallies of passion” (*Ranks* 2006, 169). Because moderation becomes the general standard in society, “the common effects of opulence and refinement will at the same time dispose the father to use his power with greater moderation. By living in affluence and security, he is more at leisure to exert the social affections, and to cultivate those arts which tend to soften and humanize the temper” (*Ranks* 2006, 169). Thus as social life becomes more diverse, people acquire the more feminine qualities of deference and softness. Men cease to dominate their children with violence, instead coming “to avoid equally the excess of severity and of indulgence” (*Ranks* 2006, 170). This just and temperate parental authority is one of society’s greatest guarantees of morals. In commercial nations, “the laws of the magistrate are in a great measure confined to the rules of justice,” and so “further precautions are necessary to guard the morals of the inhabitants” (*Ranks* 2006, 176). One of these precautions is simply to allow parents the authority to educate their own children: “the authority of parents ought to be such as may enable them to direct the education of their children, to restrain the irregularities of youth, and to instill those principles which will render them useful members of society” (*Ranks* 2006, 176).

A similar trend often occurs with the power of a master over a servant. In the first ages, slavery is a state of “unlimited subjection” (*Ranks* 2006, 245). A slave is usually acquired through war, and is treated like a “beast of burden” who must be kept in check with “severe discipline” (*Ranks* 2006, 254). In the agricultural age, slavery persists in the form of “the slavery of the villains” (*Ranks* 2006, 268). Christianity improves their



condition, but does not abolish bondage altogether: “the spirit of this religion, which considers all mankind as children of the same Father . . . [teaches] the opulent and the proud to consider those who are depressed with labour and penury as creatures of the same species, to treat them with mildness and humanity . . . . But it does not seem to have been the intention of Christianity to alter the civil rights of mankind” (*Ranks* 2006, 264). Christianity initially taught masters to be compassionate towards their underlings, but not to endow them with political rights. Ultimately, the serfs were freed in commercial nations because it was in the king’s interest to protect them. The monarch endeavored to “protect the villains possessed by his barons, and to raise them to such a condition as might render them less dependent upon their masters,” in order to weaken the barons (*Ranks* 2006, 268). Meanwhile, “he found means of deriving some revenue from the people of that class” (*Ranks* 2006, 268). As the lower orders began to engage in industry, they enriched the nation and proved to be more useful free than bonded. They were gradually freed of all dependence on the rich, for, while a merchant “says that he is obliged to his employed, or his customers,” in reality “he does not feel himself greatly dependent upon them. His subsistence, and his profits, are derived not from one, but from a number of persons” (*Historical View* 2006, 487). The lower orders thus break their dependence on the rich and “shake off their ancient slavish habits” (*Historical View* 2006, 487). This tendency to free the lower orders is common in commercial nations, for “the farther a nation advances in opulence and refinement, it has occasion to employ a greater number of merchants, of tradesmen and artificers, [who] . . . become thereby more independent in their circumstances” (*Ranks* 2006, 237).

Although much of this liberation proceeded from considerations of interest, Millar also argued that commercial society reduces prejudice towards the lower orders: “the advancement of commerce and the arts, together with the diffusion of knowledge, in the present age, has of late contributed to the removal of many prejudices, and been productive of enlarged opinions” regarding slavery (*Ranks* 2006, 279). He cited recent court cases in both England and Scotland that recognized the rights of black slaves. He concluded that “this last decision, which was given in 1778 . . . condemns the slavery of the negroes in explicit terms, and . . . may be accounted an authentic testimony of the liberal sentiments entertained in the latter part of the eighteenth century” (*Ranks* 2006, 280). Slavery therefore persisted in the colonies, but Millar was hopeful that the tide of public opinion was turning against it, and that declining levels of prejudice and cruelty might eventually abolish it.

For Millar, the liberation of the slaves and the serfs in Europe was of great import for human morality. He wrote that “slavery is not more hurtful to the industry than to the good morals of a people. To cast a man out from the privileges of society, and to mark his condition with infamy, is to deprive him of the most powerful incitements to virtue” (*Ranks* 2006, 273). Slavery ultimately corrupts the morals of both slave and master, for “what effects, on the other hand, may we not expect that this debasement of the servants will produce on the temper and disposition of the master? In how many different ways is it possible to abuse that absolute power with which he is invested? And what vicious habits may be contracted by a train of such abuses?” (*Ranks* 2006, 273-274). Slavery teaches masters to act without restraint, and slaves to abandon hope of social approval or

acceptance. Ending slavery, if it can be accomplished, improves the mores of the people.

The common worker, like the slave or servant, can in some cases be uplifted by commercial society. While the division of labor does exhibit some terrible effects on the laborer, these can eventually be counteracted by education: “the progress of science and literature and of the liberal arts, among the higher classes, must on the other hand contribute to enlighten the common people, and to spread a degree of the same improvements over the whole community” (*Historical View* 2006, 733). According to Millar, people naturally desire “to admire and to imitate their superiors; and the fashions, opinions, and ways of thinking, adopted by men of high rank, are apt to descend very quickly to persons of inferior station” (*Historical View* 2006, 733). When education is valued by the upper classes, “schools and seminaries of education” are widely introduced (*Historical View* 2006, 733). When these schools become common, “different sorts of instruction are brought into a common market, are gradually cheapened by mutual competition, and, being more and more accommodated to the demands of society, become, as far as it is necessary, accessible even to the poor” (*Historical View* 2006, 733). Educational institutions, like religion, must be allowed to compete. The result is that “in commercial countries, the important accomplishments of reading, writing, and accounting, are usually communicated at such easy rates, as to be within the reach of the lower orders” (*Historical View* 2006, 733). Thus, while commercial society opens a rift between owners and laborers, “there is no reason to suspect that the former will abuse their superiority . . . . It is plainly the interest of the higher ranks to assist in cultivating the minds of the common people” (*Historical View* 2006, 737).

The dissemination of education, assuming it actually reaches the lower classes, can exert a morally uplifting effect on the worker, for “a certain degree of information and intelligence, of acquaintance with the good or bad consequences which flow from different actions, and systems of behaviour, is necessary for suggesting proper motives to the practice of virtue” (*Historical View* 2006, 737). It accomplishes this because educated people “have acquired habits of observation and reflection . . . [and] have been taught to set a high value upon character and reputation, and are able to discover that such conduct is no less conducive to their own interest, than to that of others” (*Historical View* 2006, 738). Knowledge can make people “sober and industrious, honest and faithful, affectionate and conscientious in their domestic concerns” (*Historical View* 2006, 737). Thus formal education can help preserve the laborer’s faculties, allowing him to partake in the increased humanity and sympathy that come with improvements in the arts.

Furthermore, Millar pointed out that popular literature can improve the worker. Thanks to the printing press, novels, stories, books, and newspapers are widely disseminated. Millar admitted that “the publications likely to fall into the hands of the common people will be . . . probably, not the best calculated for conveying instruction” (*Historical View* 2006, 733). However, even the simplest literature “cannot fail to enlarge the imagination of the readers beyond mere professional objects, and even to communicate, perhaps, something of the opinions which prevail among the higher classes, upon the great popular topics of religion, morality, and government” (*Historical View* 2006, 733). An adventure novel may not be particularly educational, but if it

excites the worker's imagination, helps him to step outside of himself and experience others' emotions and experiences, it can enable him to become more sympathetic; and if it contains a moral lesson, it can even provide him with an education of sorts.

### **Conclusion**

Millar's view of commercial society was a complex one, and anticipated the contemporary idea of "path dependence." Millar was, as Ignatieff argues, concerned with the potentially corrupting effect of commerce on personal virtue. But, although he saw few satisfactory political solutions to these problems, he did not believe all commercial societies to be doomed. Certain circumstances could encourage the rise of liberty, independence, and strong social mores. If social interactions are meaningful—that is, if they allow for the exchange of ideas or sympathy rather than just the "petty traffic" of buying and selling—they can exert a great deal of positive influence on the individual, encouraging him to become more humane and temperate. If a country maintains Christian mores—strengthened by sectarian competition rather than an established monopoly—it may forestall the possible destruction of family life by the forces of modernity. A legacy of chivalry may work in tandem with Christianity to preserve respect for women and for the family. Women's more compassionate temper can thus gain a wider influence and encourage more liberal sentiments towards children, servants, and slaves. Just as Christianity and chivalry could preserve the unique virtues of women, so too could education preserve the common laborer. If a country allows for several competing sources of education and literature, then knowledge becomes accessible to the poorer members of society and prevents the degradation of their moral faculties often

caused by the division of labor. Finally, a slow path to modernization prevents a society's traditional values from being shocked and utterly overwhelmed by the new conditions, which then allows them to adapt rather than die out.

These positive developments are by no means inevitable. Millar is often considered a determinist, but his emphasis on the centrality of cultural attitudes—rather than the inevitable influence of the economic base—calls this characterization into question. Two societies may both be commercial societies, identical in their level of development or their political structures, and yet adopt different paths, one towards virtue and lasting freedom, the other towards numerous vices that ultimately necessitate greater government intervention and erode liberty. Some of the factors influencing these respective paths, such as the presence of a strong Christian heritage, are unrelated to the forces and relations of production. Moreover, Millar's studies were always guided by normative concerns. While he sought to describe the conditions influencing social change, he was always interested in the moral dimension of these changes, assessing the virtues and vices of every stage of history. His "facts" and his "values" were not conceptualized as separate parts of his analysis, but rather as a seamless whole.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Millar's work is his seeming indifference to countries that do not happen to be swept along this fortuitous path. But his lack of solutions for these countries should not be confused with a lack of sympathy. Millar's rhetoric actually implies that Scotland may not meet the conditions for a healthy commercial society. While it did enjoy a legacy of Christianity and chivalry, its economic development was much more rapid than England's—which he thought to be a

liability. Millar was not safely ensconced in Lucretius' tower, enjoying his pleasant distance from the suffering outside. Rather, he was a man grappling with the fate of his own society—and therefore he doubtless hoped that future generations could devise solutions for such societies, even if he himself was unwilling to play projector.

## CONCLUSION

Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and John Millar were close associates with one another, both through their university connections and through the more intimate bonds of friendship. It should come as no surprise, then, that they shared many of the same ideas. More interesting is the way in which those shared ideas contributed to the eighteenth-century debate over the role of the individual. Through their intuitionist moral philosophy, they critiqued aspects of the Enlightenment project—its concept of reason, its individualism, and its mechanistic approach to social and political change—while simultaneously defending rights, limited government, and commerce from a different perspective.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, they showed that these phenomena need not be excessively individualistic. While commercial society liberates the pursuit of self-interest through individual rights and market autonomy, the inherently social nature of rights and markets can, at least under certain conditions, open new spaces for the

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of an “Enlightenment project”—and, indeed, the very concept of “the Enlightenment”—is a contested one. Traditionally, scholars took the Enlightenment to be a monolithic entity with a single rationalist program (Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer 1972, William Ophuls 1997, Isaiah Berlin 2001). Revisionist scholars question not just the existence of an Enlightenment project but also the existence of any coherent, well-defined intellectual movement that we can designate as the Enlightenment (James Schmidt 2000). However, many scholars now steer a middle course, recognizing the existence of an Enlightenment while also acknowledging diversity and dissent within the movement. John Robertson (2005) and Gertrude Himmelfarb (2005) draw attention to the national variations in the Enlightenment, emphasizing the differences between the French, American, British, Scottish, German, and Italian Enlightenments. Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), Mark Hulliung (1994), Christian Delacampagne (2001), and Robert Bartlett (2001), among others, broadly identify the Enlightenment’s project as the attempt to formulate a rationally justifiable basis of morality, independent of religion and tradition, but also recognize that this project was always the subject of contention, dialogue, and re-interpretation by its own adherents. This last school of thought is the one in which I situate this dissertation.



expression of man's social and sympathetic nature. They framed this argument in a number of ways, but four main types of response emerge across their work.

First, they questioned whether some aspects of individualism are genuine problems at all. This response was most evident in Hutcheson and Hume, the strongest champions of commercial society, who thought that even conspicuous consumption or luxury could inspire an individual's virtue by sensitizing him to the beautiful and the fitting. But nearly all of the Scots engaged in this argument to some degree. Hume and Smith's analysis of vanity and hypocrisy, for instance, indicated that these vices can have a salutary effect by subjecting men to greater social influence, while Ferguson's understanding of competitiveness emphasized its positive role in social cohesion.

Second, they pointed out that commercial societies exhibit conflicting tendencies. Commerce can bring benefits in the wake of its problems—and not just the material benefits of wealth or liberty, but also intangible benefits that can ultimately exert moral influence over the individual. Hutcheson and Hume, for instance, pointed to improvements in the arts that they thought to be related to commercial improvement, and which they believed could develop the moral sense or taste. Smith drew attention to how markets can multiply the number of social ties held by each individual and can also alter the nature of those ties in the direction of greater interdependence.

Third, some of them analyzed when and why commercial society's more positive tendencies might win out in the end. Millar identified a set of conditions—such as gradual economic development and a legacy of chivalrous and Christian mores—that he believed might help to forestall the vices he so deplored. While some of the conditions

he described lie outside of governmental control, his work nonetheless pushed back against the assumption that commercial society inexorably leads to atomistic selfishness.

Fourth, they suggested government policies that might nudge commercial society in the direction of virtue. Except for Millar, all of them supported a citizens' militia. They also agreed that policies directed at religion might help strengthen its moral restraints on the individual, though they disagreed on what those particular policies should be. Education and family policy were also areas of special concern.

These responses, as well as their place in the wider context of the Scots' moral and political philosophies, must now be considered more fully.

### **Moral Philosophy**

Bernard de Mandeville had written that virtue consists in a "rational ambition of being good" (1988, 260). Though the sincerity of Mandeville's interest in virtue may be doubted, many Enlightenment thinkers and their forefathers really believed that rationality can dust away the old cobwebs of mysticism and unveil a new, progressive morality. Rene Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Nicholas de Condorcet, Gottfried Leibniz, Christian Wolff, and others all pursued alarmingly abstract and disembodied philosophies meant to guide human life. The entry on "Natural Right" in Diderot's *Encyclopedia* had introduced the concept of a "general will" that can be ascertained through reason alone: "the general will is in each individual member of mankind a pure act of the understanding, which reasons in the silence of the passions" (Diderot 1755). Mandeville's work implied that if these philosophers were correct—if dispassionate rationality must dictate our behavior—then no one could hope to be called moral.

Perhaps this is why the Scots attacked Mandeville so vigorously—not necessarily because they believed his satire sincere, but because he took this tendency to its logical conclusion, and Enlightenment thinking distilled into such pure form was easiest to attack.

The Scots solved this dilemma by disputing the exalted role of rationality. They were unanimous in rejecting reason as the basis of moral judgments—but by “reason,” they meant a particular cultural conception, namely, Enlightenment reason. The Enlightenment, following the lead of influential seventeenth-century thinkers, defined reason in two related ways: deductive reasoning and instrumental rationality. Descartes had concluded that only deductive reasoning, or construction of logical syllogisms, is a valid way of establishing truth. Political philosophers such as Hobbes had defined reason in terms of instrumental rationality, as the calculation of the best method for reaching a given end—an end *not* given by reason but prior to it. These definitions are similar insofar as they regard reason as a tool for assessing consistency. This is the version of reason accepted by the Scots, as when Hume defined it either as the faculty for “adapting means to ends” (*Treatise* 1969, 226) or as “demonstrative reasoning, or that concerning relations of ideas” (*Understanding* 1995, 49). In contrast, Socrates had defined reason, or *logos*, as a part of the soul which “is always entirely directed toward knowing the truth as it is” (*Republic* 581b5). He defined it as distinct from skill, or *techne*. Similarly, for Aristotle, reason consists of “the faculties by which the soul expresses truth” (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI.1139b15). Aquinas retained the classical definition of reason as a capacity of soul that perceives truth, while stipulating that this capacity stems from

being made in the image of God: “the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil . . . is nothing else than an imprint on us of the divine light” (*Summa Theologica* Question 91). In all three definitions, reason discerns essences—the nature of good and evil, and the properly ordered ends of beings. Charles Taylor summarizes the difference between the modern and ancient conceptions of reason as follows: “reason is no longer defined in terms of a vision of order in the cosmos, but rather is defined procedurally, in terms of instrumental efficacy, or maximization of the value sought, or self-consistency” (1989, 21).

The Scots, accepting the modern rather than the ancient conception of reason, believed it an insufficient guide for human life. Their critique of reason, though it does not pertain to the classical conception of reason, effectively exposes the inadequacies of Enlightenment reason. Once the concept of reason had been degraded from its ancient form to its modern version as deductive reasoning or instrumental rationality, it ceased to exercise any genuine connection to common life. It even became dangerous because moral law, unmoored from the natural restraints of human nature and guided only by instrumental rationality, can sanction any number of destructive acts. Hume described reason as “wholly inactive,” unable to direct or inspire action (*Treatise* 1969, 458), and he emphasized that life is guided by certain first principles that cannot be logically demonstrated, such as faith in an external world and belief in the reliability of customary experience. Similarly, Ferguson wrote of the insufficiency of reason: “we can no more become affectionate to our friend, in the mere search of wisdom, than we can in search of our interest” (*Principles II* 1975, 40).

The Scottish philosophers agreed that moral judgment begins with intuitions.<sup>2</sup>

Hume and Hutcheson believed these intuitions to be implanted directly by nature.

Hutcheson spoke of a “moral sense,” which he defined as “that *Conscience* by which we discern what is graceful, becoming, beautiful, and honourable in the affections of the soul

. . . By this sense, a certain turn of mind or temper, a certain course of action, and plan of life is plainly recommended to us by nature” (*Introduction* 2007, 35). Hume spoke of a

moral taste, or “some sentiment which it touches, some internal taste or feeling” (*Morals* 2006, 82). Hume thought that people have an aesthetic appreciation of useful virtues

such as agreeableness or benevolence. Smith and Millar taught instead that moral

intuitions are mediated by society—in other words, we do have some basic impulses like sociability, which lead us to internalize our society’s more complicated moral standards.

These standards then become second nature. We come to imagine an “impartial

spectator” who represents a normal and disinterested member of our society, and we use

this spectator to judge either our own conduct or that of others. We observe his

sympathies and reactions in order to discern whether conduct is in accordance with

society’s moral standards.

This is not to say that rationality plays no role in the Scots’ moral philosophy. It does evaluate the goods suggested by the various intuitions when they conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> The Scots’ account of moral intuitions has been borne out by modern psychology. For instance, there is evidence that moral disapproval first develops in infants, who obviously have little use of reason. Hamlin, Wynn, and Bloom (2007) showed infants figures that exhibited “helping” behavior and figures that exhibited “hurting” behavior. The infants preferred the figures that exhibited “helping” behavior. Greene et al (2008) found that distracting the conscious mind during moral judgments resulted in less utilitarian reasoning and more emphasis on benevolence and respect for others. The authors of the study theorize that non-utilitarian moral judgments are “automatic emotional responses” (2008, 1144). The Scots, pre-dating positivist social science, made empirical assertions about human nature in the course of their moral philosophies—and many of these assertions seem to have been accurate.

Hutcheson, for instance, wrote that “reason can only direct to the means; or compare two ends previously constituted by some other immediate powers” (*System I* 1969, 58). Ferguson, unlike his colleagues, sometimes spoke of “wisdom” as consisting in a “discernment of ends,” but acknowledged that in moral matters, benevolent affections suggest the end and reason only discerns the means: “in questions of the first kind, relating to right and wrong, conscience is the arbiter . . . . Benevolence will lead us to aim at effects which tend to the good of mankind; and a principal object of deliberation in such cases is to distinguish with judgment, in what we may actually serve our fellow-creatures” (*Principles II* 1975, 332, 344). Reason also abstracts from these intuitions to reach general rules. It reflects on our intuitions in order to “methodize” and “correct” them, to form them into a system: “philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected” (Hume *Understanding* 1995, 170). Or, as Smith wrote, “reason is undoubtedly the source of the general rules of morality, and of all the moral judgments which we form by means of them” (*Sentiments* 1982, 320). But reason is posterior to intuition and experience—it does not perceive truth on its own, and is only “the slave of the passions” rather than their master.

The Scots often stressed the importance of “reflection” in moral reasoning. By reflection they seemed to have meant introspection—in other words, laying aside one’s interests in order to observe one’s intuitions and actions impartially. Thus Hutcheson equated reflection with the internal senses: “those powers or determinations of the mind, by which it perceives or is conscious of all within itself, its actions, passions, judgments, wills, desires, joys, sorrows, purposes of action . . . some celebrated writers call

consciousness or reflection” (*Introduction* 2007, 27). Hume wrote that you can only discern moral disapproval when “you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action” (*Treatise* 1969, 520). He praised the more “enlarged reflections” of commercial society, in which people reflect on others’ feelings as well as their own (*Morals* 2006, 71). For Smith, reflection means that “the passions themselves” must “be the object of his thoughts” (*Sentiments* 1982, 110). Ferguson spoke of “general reflections, and . . . enlargement of thought” (*Essay* 1995, 183). Millar wrote of “habits of observation and reflection” as essential to moral judgment, implying that reflection is a kind of observation (*Historical View* 2006, 738). Reflection is not a cold rational analysis—it involves bringing one’s feelings and interests down to a pitch where they can be honestly contemplated and observed.

In this intuitionist or “emotivist” account, sympathy is closely allied to virtue. Hutcheson wrote that because of our sense of sympathy, “all our affections and passions . . . seem naturally contagious” (*System I* 1969, 20-21). He distinguished between the sympathetic sense and the moral sense: “sympathy could never account for that immediate ardour of love and good-will which breaks forth toward any character represented to us as eminent in moral excellence” (*System I* 1969, 48). Our tendency to sympathize more with good people than with bad presupposes some sense of virtue—something higher than just contagious feelings. Sympathy can, however, lend support to the moral sense, as it creates “a secret bond between us and our fellow-creatures” that inspires us to seek their happiness as well as our own (Hutcheson *Remarks* 1750, 15). Hume similarly defined sympathy as the capacity to “receive by communication” others’

sentiments (*Treatise* 1969, 367). Smith, while agreeing with his predecessors on the importance of sympathy in moral judgment, disagreed as to its mechanics. As Samuel Fleischacker writes, Smith “understands sympathy as an act of the imagination, rather than of the senses” (2004, 12). It is through an internalized impartial spectator that we imaginatively project ourselves into others’ circumstances and develop sympathy. Millar accepted Smith’s refinement of the concept, succinctly summarizing moral development as follows: “the good or bad behavior of those who live in society with us, their virtues and vices, cannot fail very early to excite our attention, and to interest our feelings; while we soon perceive that these persons exercise a similar judgment upon us; and this leads us . . . to regard our own actions in the light in which they appear to others” (*Historical View* 2006, 741). Ferguson adopted both definitions, allowing that sympathy can be either “merely instinctive . . . a contagion of sentiment” or “a conception of the occasion or cause” (*Principles II* 1975, 123). Thus the Scots thought that emotional responses to others are either automatic, or become second nature due to our sociability and interdependence. These emotional responses enable us to evaluate our own behavior from the perspective of others, by imagining how our behavior makes others feel, as well as form the affective attachments necessary for some virtues such as benevolence.

In the process of rejecting Mandeville’s definition of virtue as a “rational ambition of being good,” the Scots also rejected his rigorism—his tendency to equate self-interest or self-love with vice. The desire for comfort, for wealth, or for praise, they said, is not necessarily a vice; these impulses must simply be moderated by other-directed virtues and channeled into socially appropriate pursuits, not eradicated altogether.



Hutcheson stressed the “*universality* of these Desire for Wealth and Power,” which is “as naturally fit to gratify our *Publick Desires*, or to serve *virtuous Purposes*, as the *selfish ones*” (*Essay* 2002, 19). Wealth and power are morally neutral tools that can serve either good or bad ends; the pursuit of them is only vicious if the ultimate purpose for which they are sought is vicious. Similarly, Smith vindicated the pursuit of self-interest and the desire to better one’s condition. The pursuit of self-interest is natural and necessary for material beings such as ourselves: “benevolence may, perhaps, be the sole principle of action in the Deity . . . but whatever may be the case with the Deity, so imperfect a creature as man, the support of whose existence requires so many things external to him, must often act from many other motives” (*Sentiments* 1982, 305). As we shall see later, the Scots also thought that the particular structures of commercial society can enable self-interest to point beyond itself by involving its pursuer in social communities; but for now it is enough to point out that they did not censure self-interest or self-love itself as inherently vicious.

The Scots’ emphasis on sympathy led to a softer, gentler moral philosophy, one accommodating of human needs and weaknesses. Rationalism, in their view, was an inhuman ideal, overriding the relational aspects of morality and knowledge—the ways in which our shared social world is our source of both. Similarly, both the selfish system and civic humanism modeled rationalism by accepting a single ideal—either the self or the city, either abstract individual rights or an abstract common good—to which all other relationships are subordinated. In distinction to these traditions, the Scots stressed the “social virtues,” that is, virtues governing interpersonal relationships, such as

benevolence, humanity, and agreeableness. Even Ferguson, the Scottish Enlightenment's lone champion of military virtue, emphasized its relationship to the social virtues. Hostility is a legitimate human drive because it facilitates the formation of communities, which are the highest human good. He therefore praised the "benevolent disposition" which is expressed in "every act of kindness, or of care, in the parent to his child; every emotion of the heart, in friendship or in love, in public zeal, or in general humanity" (*Essay* 1995, 53). Interestingly, the social virtues are those usually associated with women (in contrast to the manly, *thumotic* virtues of courage, justice, or self-denial). In Smith's own words, "humanity is the virtue of a woman" (*Sentiments* 1982, 190). Millar was the most explicit about this shift in the valuation of qualities, pointing out that the feminine virtues become more highly valued in commercial society than in the previous stages. The Scots can thus be seen as anticipating a feminist "ethic of care" in their rejection of the rationalist aspects of the "Enlightenment project."

Another consequence of the Scots' intuitionist account was a devaluation of justice. The ancient philosophers had believed justice to be the source of the other natural virtues. Socrates explained that justice cultivates the other virtues because the just man "sets his own house in good order and rules himself; he arranges himself, becomes his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts" (*Republic* 443d3). Aristotle, while dividing justice into different kinds such as commutative and distributive, taught that justice as such "is regarded as the highest of all virtues . . . Justice in this sense, then, is not a part of virtue but the whole of excellence or virtue" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1129b30). But the Scots considered the amiable virtues to be prior in time, since they

arise more intuitively than the virtue of justice, which requires more reflection. Justice is, in Hume's designation, an "artificial virtue." While it is necessary for a healthy society—and in that sense is "natural," since sociability is natural—it also is not immediately recommended by our feelings in the same manner as love for a child, or pity for the suffering. Perhaps because of its lack of intuitive appeal, both Smith and Millar depicted it as a lower, less commendable virtue than the others. Smith reduced it to a purely negative obligation, commutative justice: "we may often fulfill all the rules of justice by sitting still and doing nothing" (*Sentiments* 1982, 82). Millar, also taking justice to mean commutative justice, wrote that it was merely a *quid pro quo* agreement not to harm others in exchange for not being harmed ourselves: "that a man should be induced to a constant observance of the rules of justice, nothing further is commonly requisite than to understand his own pecuniary interest" (*Historical View* 2006, 777). The Scots largely accepted the concept of justice as "a mean between . . . doing injustice without paying the penalty and . . . suffering injustice without being able to avenge oneself" (*Republic* 359a6).

However, there is a sense in which their concept of justice is not completely divorced from man's more praiseworthy, sympathetic tendencies. Hume, despite according justice the status of an "artificial virtue," nonetheless argued for its underlying connection to the social instincts: "men's inclination, their necessities, lead them to combine; their understanding and experience tell them that this combination is impossible where each governs himself by no rule" (*Morals* 2006, 90). Smith showed how conditional sympathy, through the "inhabitant of the breast," would restrain a man from

doing harm to a distant Chinese nation, even if he could further his own self-interest by committing such harm (*Sentiments* 1982, 137). Following the rules of justice is not always a matter of self-interest, but of sympathy. Thus justice, “when carried to a certain delicacy of attention . . . can scarce ever fail to be accompanied with many other virtues, with great feeling for other people, with great humanity and great benevolence” (*Sentiments* 1982, 218). Millar wrote that, on many occasions, “mankind are induced to abstain from injustice by the feelings of humanity, which dispose them to avoid hurting their neighbors” (*Historical View* 2006, 773). Moreover, justice facilitates benevolence by removing threats from human society and hence facilitating interactions. Hume implied that just and orderly administration of government allows a safe space for the social virtues to flourish, as when he praised “the degree of humanity, clemency, order, tranquility, and other social virtues, to which, in the administration of government, we have attained in modern times” (*Morals* 2006, 90). Ferguson likewise lauded the enforcement of justice in polished nations, stating that “a state of greater tranquility hath many happy effects” such as the lessened possibility of social interactions becoming disrupted by violent conflict (*Essay* 1995, 219). The magistrate cannot enforce “benevolence” but he can prepare a way for it through justice: “all the magistrate can do in this matter is, by shutting the door to disorder and vice, to endeavour to stifle the ill disposition of men; and by securing the paths of integrity and marking them with considerations of distinction and honour, to facilitate and encourage the choice of virtue, and to give scope to the best dispositions which nature has furnished” (*Principles I* 1975, 419). Thus the social and unsocial virtues, despite their distinct taxonomy, mutually

reinforce each other: our negative duties are strengthened by our sympathetic aversion to suffering and our desire to embody the qualities promoted by society, while our positive duties to benevolence are facilitated by a just society in which people can socialize more freely with little fear of harm.

Religion, like reason, is not an independent source of moral law for the Scots; the best it can do is validate and strengthen our existing moral inclinations. Hutcheson believed that “we must therefore search accurately into the constitution of our nature, to see what sorts of creatures we are; for what purposes nature has formed us; what character God our Creator requires us to maintain” (*Introduction* 2007, 24). Hutcheson designated the moral sense as a God-given trait; but self-examination, not revelation, is what allows us to discover this moral sense and thus to know God’s will for us. Hume, much less devout than Hutcheson, believed that moral reasoning on its own can reach truth, though religion is a valuable constraint for those who do not reach virtue in such a disinterested way: “men reason not in the same manner you do, but draw many consequences from the belief of a divine existence and suppose that the Deity will inflict punishments on vice and bestow rewards on virtue beyond what appear in the ordinary course of virtue” (*Understanding* 1995, 156). Smith explained the fundamentals of his moral philosophy in Parts I and II of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* while reserving his discussion of how “they are justly regarded as the Laws of the Deity” for Part III, implying that moral judgments can be made without His direct interference, since “He has made man . . . the immediate judge of mankind” (*Sentiments* 1982, 130). Smith praised “pure and rational religion,” (*Wealth* 1981, 793), that is, a religion based less in

revelation than on universal principles of humanity and moderation. Ferguson, though a minister, quoted Scripture only in his first work, *The Morality of Stage-Plays Seriously Considered*. Millar, like his predecessors, appeared to think morality possible without religion, as he never relied on theological arguments in his own work. However, like Smith, he thought traditional Christianity necessary for its practical effects. He stressed its role in preventing both widespread promiscuity and divorce: “the Christian religion, by exalting the merit of restraint . . . in relation to the sexual correspondence, has contributed, no doubt, to retard a general relaxation of manners. In particular, the authority of the church . . . was exerted to render marriage an indissoluble tie” (*Historical View* 2006, 771).

The Scots’ attenuated views of reason, justice, and religion are problematic in some ways. Alasdair MacIntyre criticizes the Scots for failing to answer “the question of precisely which of our desires are to be acknowledged as legitimate guides to action, and which on the other hand are to be inhibited, frustrated, or re-educated; and clearly this question cannot be answered by trying to use our desires themselves as some sort of criterion” (1984, 48). Of course, the Scots themselves would offer reason as a fail-safe for finding the right action when our desires are ambiguous or conflicted. But can the Enlightenment concept of instrumental reason—which perceives means but not ends—suffice in such a situation? After all, wouldn’t reason have to know the proper *telos* or end of mankind in order to ascertain the correct path? Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer declare instrumental rationality powerless to perform any substantive assessment: “enlightened reason is as little capable of finding a standard by which to

measure any drive in itself, and in comparison with all other drives, as of arranging the universe in spheres" (1972, 91).

The Scots relied on the legacy of Christianity to provide much of the missing guidance in their philosophical system. While they deplored its contribution to intolerance and superstition throughout history, and they believed that educated men can often perceive moral truth without it, they also acknowledged the utility of some of its specific commandments for controlling individualism in the general population. Hume, in his essay "Of Moral Prejudice," defended its taboo on premarital sex as one that ultimately provides a stable and peaceful environment for children. In "Of Polygamy and Divorces," he similarly concluded that lifelong monogamy with no possibility of divorce is the best form of marriage. Smith acknowledged that, while freethinking may be fine for the rich or educated, the poor and ignorant need the restraint of religion: "there have been always two different schemes or systems of morality current at the same time; of which one might be called the strict or austere; the other the liberal . . . . The former is generally admired and revered by the common people: The latter is more commonly esteemed and adopted by what are called people of fashion" (*Wealth* 1981, 794). Smith explained this division by noting that "the vices of levity are always ruinous to the common people"—so, for prudential reasons, the poor should follow more rigorous religious precepts (*Wealth* 1981, 794). Millar, the latest of these thinkers, urged the importance of Christian dogma in forestalling the destruction of the family. But the Scots provided little advice relevant to a future of widespread secularism and religious pluralism, in which Christian commandments such as lifelong marriage would be

questioned. In fact, they unwittingly contributed to this future through their fondness for “pure and rational religion,” that is, a Christianity with relaxed prohibitions and a diminished sense of the supernatural. Smith seemed to think that the elite could practice this religion while commoners could maintain a stricter faith, better adapted to the conduct demanded by their situation. Yet, as Millar pointed out, elite attitudes are often emulated by the lower classes: “in the natural course of things, the dissipated manners of the rich are, by the force of example, communicated to the lower orders” (*Historical View* 2006, 770). Therefore Smith’s concept of two styles of religion, each appropriate to a different station in life, may be ultimately unsustainable. The Scots sought a difficult balancing act by trying to keep some of Christianity’s particular prohibitions while jettisoning its claims to supernatural authority, its sense of the miraculous, and reliance on revelation as an independent source of truth. As we shall see, this complicated attitude towards Christianity also dictated a conflicting set of recommendations regarding state policy towards religion.

### **Political Philosophy**

For the Scots, political philosophy is secondary to moral philosophy and must be shaped by its dictates. Hutcheson opened his *Introduction* with the statement that “Moral Philosophy, which is the art of regulating the whole of life, must have in view the noblest end . . . . Moral Philosophy therefore must be one of these commanding arts which directs how far other arts are to be pursued” (2007, 23). Their intuitionist account of moral reasoning led to skepticism about hasty political or social change. All five warned



that political and social traditions may not immediately disclose their wisdom to rational scrutiny. Hutcheson wrote that “violent changes are attended with many dangers and some considerable evils” (*System II* 1969, 270). Hume warned of the danger of imaginary republics: “the question is not any fine imaginary republic, of which a man may form a plan in his closet” (*Essays* 1985, 52). Similarly, Smith castigated the “man of system,” who “seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces on a chess-board” (*Sentiments* 1982, 233-234). Millar thought “that wanton spirit of innovation” dangerous because “the institutions of a country, how imperfect soever and defective they may seem, are commonly suited to the state of the people by whom they have been embraced” (*Ranks* 2006, 285). Millar pointed out that the Scots’ defense of tradition was really a synthesis of Tory and Whig thinking: “the more liberal part of the tories have now caught universally the mode of reasoning employed by their adversaries, and are accustomed to justify . . . monarchical power . . . not by asserting that it is the inherent birthright of the sovereign, but by maintaining that it is necessary for the suppression of tumult and disorder” (*Historical View* 2006, 805).

The Scots were certainly not Tories in all respects. On the contrary, they embraced progress as a necessary impulse of human nature. Because “there is no craving or demand of the human mind more constant and insatiable than that for exercise and employment,” men will naturally formulate new inventions and improvements (Hume *Essays* 1985, 300). Ferguson lauded progress as a necessary feature of human society: “progress itself is congenial to the nature of man . . . . Whatever checks it, is distress and

oppression; whatever promotes it, is prosperity and freedom” (*Principles I* 1975, 249). Thus the Scots were generally enthusiastic about progress—but thought this progress should proceed organically, in accordance with those traditions shaped by a people’s sentiments and character. As Hume wrote in “Of The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” we can learn more from the evolution of a state than from its abrupt changes: “the domestic and the gradual revolutions of a state must be a more proper subject of reasoning and observation, than the foreign and the violent, which are commonly produced by single persons, and are more influenced by whim, folly, or caprice, than by general passions and interests” (*Essays* 1985, 112). The Scots were the first to articulate fully a four stages theory in which social change proceeds gradually, aided by complex and often uncontrollable circumstances. Their four stages theory was a kind of systems theory, in which social systems are viewed as self-organizing and irreducibly complex.

For the Scots, the transition from feudalism to commercial society in Great Britain provided an example of how systems theory works in practice. All of the thinkers studied here, except for Hutcheson, analyzed the transition and largely agreed on the driving mechanisms, emphasizing the role of the monarchy in encouraging commerce and protecting the common people. Their explanation differed from that of their contemporaries—for instance, Andrew Fletcher—who mostly pointed to the role of technology and the fall of Constantinople. Hume drew attention to how one of Henry VII’s laws, which permitted nobles to alienate their estates, unwittingly redistributed wealth by allowing the nobles to squander their estates on new luxuries provided by the commoners and artisans. Smith echoed Hume’s emphasis on monarchical interference:

“the king . . . being jealous of the power of the nobles, found it to be his interest to weaken their power and therefore released all their villains and those more especially who were least dependent and could be most easily freed from their authority. These burghers were such” (*Jurisprudence* 1978, 256). Then the common people began to engage in commerce and the arts, and the nobles, “for the gratification of the most childish, the meanest and most sordid of all vanities . . . bartered their whole power and authority” (*Wealth* 1981, 419). Then, as Ferguson pointed out, these newly-rich commoners began to advocate for liberty: when “the people . . . could avail themselves of the wealth they acquired, and of the sense of their personal importance . . . this policy turned against the crown” (*Essay* 1995, 132). Millar, while arguing that the monarch’s protection of commerce began much earlier, agreed on its instrumental role. Thus the king’s protections, intended to weaken the nobles’ power (and aggrandize his own), became part of a chain of events that he could not have foreseen. Commerce and the arts flourished, and a middle class arose and advocated for more political liberties. Economic development, political development, and the mores of the people progressed together.

Although aided by the monarch, this development proceeded largely independent of him—indeed, even reaching an outcome he fought against, namely, the rise of the commons, the English Civil War, and a limited monarchy. The process became self-regulating through a feedback loop, in which improvements in the arts stimulated improvements in government, which in turn stimulated further improvements in the arts, beginning the process anew. The Scots’ novel analysis of transition therefore supported

their belief in society as a self-regulating system, which must be allowed to develop organically.

Because of their emphasis on the organic evolution of political communities, they arrived at conceptualizations of liberal doctrines different from those of other Enlightenment figures. For instance, they adhered to a social conception of rights. This is not to say that they followed the feudal tradition in which rights inhered in social bodies, with estates belonging to families, commons belonging to entire villages, and the rights of fealty existing only in a symbiotic relationship between lord and vassal. The Scots, apart from a few references to natural law tradition (such as in the first lecture of Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*), firmly believed in individual rights. However, they believed that these individual rights cannot be formulated in abstraction from their social and historical context. Hutcheson thought that rights stem from a natural sense of fairness: we decide on the proper pursuits for ourselves, then our moral sense points out that we must grant the same liberty to others. Since it is society that best develops the moral sense, we can best understand individual liberties by examining which ones society is willing to grant. Hume believed that individual property rights may not be immediately recommended by our sentiments, but that they evolve to suit the needs of peaceable social living, for as he asked rhetorically, "who sees not, for instance, that whatever is produced or improved by a man's art or industry ought, for ever, to be secured to him, in order to give encouragement to such USEFUL habits and accomplishments?" (*Morals* 2006, 21). For Smith, property rights are conferred by the impartial spectator. As Fleischacker writes, "Locke's silent forest, devoid of all human

beings but one lone apple-seeker . . . becomes in Smith's hands a place where there are already at least three notational people: the apple-picker, one who would do injury to the apple-picker, and an impartial spectator to decide between the two" (2004, 187). Even individual rights are thus relational insofar as they depend either on the sympathetic reaction of the spectator or on the needs of society. Just as "were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place . . . he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conducts . . . than of the beauty and deformity of his own face" (*Sentiments* 1982, 110), so too do rights make no sense outside of the society that develops them. Ferguson, somewhat less colorfully, reaffirmed that man can develop only within a relational context: "man is indebted to society for every exercise of his faculties" (1975, 269).

Limited government, like the rights it protects, serves a larger role in society than mere protection of individual license. A well-constructed limited government should allow civil society to thrive. Because of the nature of sympathy, we experience it most strongly with people we know—with family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Hutcheson compared sympathy to the force of gravity, which strengthens upon closer approach—and which, he pointed out, is necessary for the orderly operation of the universe (*Inquiry* 2008, 150). Hume, too, believed this to be an innate principle of human nature because our immediate "impressions"—such as our contact with people we actually know—are more lively than our "ideas"—mental abstractions of those impressions, such as the mental abstraction of "mankind" as a whole. Hume thought this principle serves an important social role, for "it is wisely ordained by nature, that private

connexions should commonly prevail over universal views and considerations; otherwise our affections and actions would be dissipated and lost, for want of a proper limited object” (*Morals* 2006, 42). Millar echoed his predecessors when he wrote that “the conjugal, the parental, and filial relations give rise to various modifications of sympathy and benevolence, which, in their range are not the most extensive, but which operating in a sphere adapted to the limited capacities of a human heart, are exerted in such directions as are most conducive to the great purposes of human nature” (*Historical View* 2006, 765). In private life, sympathy and personal knowledge enable us to perform our duties. In public life, sympathy is a less effective restraint because it is harder to develop it with the great mass of our fellow-citizens. It is for this reason that in politics, though not in private life, “every man ought to be supposed a knave” (Hume *Essays* 1985, 43). The Scots, in contrast to the civic humanists, thought a powerful political sphere likely to corrupt individuals because of its elevation of courage or partisanship over interpersonal, sympathetic relationships.

### Commerce

Perhaps the most significant effect of a limited government is its impact on commerce. The Scots stressed again and again that monopolies, tariffs, excessive taxation, and other such interventionist economic policies discourage commerce. They therefore associated limited and moderate governments with commercial societies.

Their attitude towards commercial society was a complicated one, and it varied among these different thinkers. Hume seemed to think that commerce almost invariably led, through an “indissoluble chain,” to improved sentiments of humanity. Similarly,

Hutcheson seemed to think that a nearly infallible “moral sense” would guide man, even amidst wealth and temptations to luxury, towards benevolence. Smith was more ambivalent, pointing out that commerce, despite its positive tendencies, may erode courage and imagination “unless government takes proper pains to support it” (*Wealth* 1981, 786-787). Ferguson believed that commercial society strikes an often satisfactory balance between different human impulses, but that a militia is absolutely necessary to maintain this balance. Millar, the least confident about commercial society’s ability to support a virtuous populace, believed that there are nonetheless specific mechanisms by which it might avoid a terrible fate.

Despite these individual differences, however, large areas of agreement emerge. First, nearly all of them exhibited concern for the potentially enervating effects of commerce. Smith condemned a coward as “mutilated and deformed in his mind,” but thought that such cowardice is the natural result of commercial development: “in the progress of improvement the practice of military exercises . . . goes gradually to decay, and, together with it, the martial spirit of the great body of the people, as the example of modern Europe sufficiently demonstrates” (*Wealth* 1981, 786-787). Ferguson titled an entire section of his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* “Of Relaxations in the National Spirit, Incident to Polished Nations”—but the subject recurs throughout his work, from his early pamphlet on the militia to his last work, the *Principles*, in which he warned that even in more peaceful times nations should not “neglect preparations for their own defence” (*Principles II* 1975, 502). Millar wrote of the “decay of the military spirit in the

modern commercial nations,” to which he thought there were no easy remedies (*Historical View* 2006, 753).

Second, Smith, Ferguson, and Millar feared that the division of labor might render the common worker incapable of his social and familial duties. Smith thought the worker “becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become” (*Wealth* 1981, 782). Ferguson likewise thought that “circumstances, especially in populous cities, tend to corrupt the lowest orders of men . . . . An admiration of wealth unpossessed, becoming a principle of envy” (*Essay* 1995, 186). Millar went even beyond Smith or Ferguson in describing the horrors of such degraded faculties: “they are apt to acquire a habitual vacancy of thought, unenlivened by any prospects, but such are derived from the future wages of their labour, or from the grateful returns of bodily repose and sleep. They become, like machines” (*Historical View* 2006, 732).

Third, avarice, selfishness, and luxury were deplored in some form by all of these thinkers. Hutcheson condemned a luxury that perverts the moral sense and tempts men to neglect their duties: “luxury, in this notion of it . . . lavishes out mens fortunes, and yet increases their keen desires, making them needy and craving; it must occasion the strongest temptations to desert their duty to their country and friends” (*Introduction* 2007, 268-269). Hume condemned the deleterious effects of avarice on the social virtues: “the avaritious man . . . [lives] without regard to reputation, to friendship, or to pleasure” (*Essays* 1985, 571). Smith spoke of “all the tumult and bustle, all the rapine and injustice, which avarice and ambition have introduced into the world” (*Sentiments* 1982, 57). Ferguson lamented the fact that “we have sold our freedom . . . . We see no merit but



prosperity and power, no disgrace but poverty and neglect” (*Essay* 1995, 40). Millar argued that in commercial society, “the pursuit of riches becomes a scramble, in which the hand of every man is against every other” (*Historical View* 2006, 778).

However, their analysis of commercial society did not end with this catalogue of vices. They believed that commerce may also have more constructive tendencies, such as the direct promotion of certain lower-order virtues like industriousness; the interpersonal cooperation required by markets, which may facilitate the practice of the social virtues; and the wide-ranging, diverse connections fostered by the modern economy. In commercial society, self-interest and self-love are pursued by entering into the market, becoming a part of large cooperative economic enterprises, or by promoting oneself in academic and artistic societies. While neither self-interest nor self-love is itself commendable, pursuing them in social contexts subjects the individual to the civilizing influence of society and potentially activates his sympathetic tendencies. His inner impartial spectator also becomes more regular in its operations as it gathers experiences from wider and more varied contexts.

Commerce increases the number of social ties linking the average person to others. Smith wrote that “without the assistance and cooperation of thousands, the very meanest person in a civilized country could not be provided, even according to, what we very falsely imagine, the easy and simple manner in which he is commonly accommodated” (*Wealth* 1981, 23). Economic organization becomes more complex, and hence each person interacts with more people. A craftsman no longer inhabits a workshop with just one or two apprentices. The laborer now goes into a factory where

work is divided among hundreds of other workers to whom he is now exposed—not to mention the cooperation of managers, owners, merchants, and consumers needed to sustain an enterprise of this scale. Urbanization and widespread education, two other phenomena of an advanced society, also multiply social contacts. According to Hutcheson, the advanced technology and knowledge in large commercial republics enables communication: “the inventions, experience, and arts of multitudes are communicated; knowledge is increased, and social affections more diffused” (*System I* 1969, 289). Echoing Hutcheson, Hume wrote that citizens of a commercial society “flock into cities; love to receive and communicate knowledge; to show their wit or breeding; their taste in conversation . . . Curiosity allures the wise; vanity the foolish; and pleasure both. Particular societies and clubs are everywhere formed” (*Essays* 1985, 271).

The wider interactions of commercial society may be less deep than those of an agricultural society, in which people tend to be dependent on family, clan, church, or lords for their survival, and hence are more invested in these relationships. Millar scornfully described commercial relations as a “petty traffic” of market exchanges, but his colleagues thought the very weakness of these interactions can be a strength. Robert Putnam, in his work on social capital, writes of “weak ties”—relationships with acquaintances, rather than with family or best friends—as “bridging” ties because they tend to link us to people different than us. They bridge across different classes and cultures, resulting in a more diverse society, which the strong “bonding” ties of blood do not usually do. But long before Putnam, the Scots were pointing out these advantages, and more. Smith pointed out the moderating influence of interactions with strangers: “the

conversation of a friend brings us to a better, that of a stranger to a still better temper” (*Sentiments* 1982, 159). A stranger, being more impartial, is a better embodiment of the impartial spectator than a family member, and can thus inspire us to moderate our emotions for the sake of others. Millar likewise argued that the society of acquaintances exerts a moderating influence, for the commercial man, “being often engaged in the business and conversation of the world, and finding, in many cases, the necessity of conforming to the humours of those with whom he converses . . . becomes less impatient of contradiction, and less apt to give way to the irregular sallies of passion” (*Ranks* 2006, 169). One’s family often submits to or indulges one’s passions, but strangers require more conformity of temper.

Weak ties also spur us on to gain a better reputation—which, though one of the supposed vices decried by Rousseau, can actually become an aid to virtue under the conditions of modern society. Love of fame is not much motivation in a close-knit society, in which we are already known (and probably approved of, or at least tolerated). But in a more complex society, we must learn to distinguish ourselves to people who might otherwise be indifferent. Moreover, when the love of fame does surface in “rude” ages, it often demands either violent or superstitious actions because those are the actions valued by such societies. Throughout history, then, those seized by the thirst for glory have been led to kill others on the battlefield, to persecute other religions, and to practice the “monkish virtues” of solitude or mortification. But in commercial society, love of fame leads its followers into the social realm. They “flock into cities . . . to show their wit or breeding; their taste in conversation . . . Particular societies and clubs are

everywhere formed” (*Essays* 1985, 271). In doing so, they enter into relationships that may activate the impartial spectator. Hume wrote that a “spring of our constitution, that brings a great addition of force to moral sentiments, is the love of fame” (*Morals* 2006, 71). Love of fame can promote habits of introspection and self-regulation necessary to bring moral sentiments into view: “by our continual and earnest pursuit of a character, a name, a reputation in the world, we bring our own deportment and conduct frequently in review, and consider how they appear in the eyes of those who approach and regard us. This constant habit of surveying ourselves, as it were, in reflection, keeps alive all the sentiments of right and wrong” (*Morals* 2006, 71-72). Similarly, Hutcheson described the sense of honor as “a strong incitement to every thing excellent and amiable” because “it gives a grateful reward to virtue” (*System I* 1969, 26). Smith went so far as to designate this impulse as “the great secret of education,” which “is to direct vanity to proper objects” (*Sentiments* 1982, 259). Thus even when self-love becomes the vice of vanity or *amour-propre*, it can still lead back towards virtue. Hence commercial society might civilize the love of fame—not simply by abolishing it in favor of self-interest, as Hirschman thought these philosophers sought to do, but rather by directing it into social channels that may then inspire moral sentiments.

Moreover, the more people we meet with in life, the more we may hone our inner impartial spectator—for the impartial spectator represents an objective member of our society, and the more people we know, the better we can approach objectivity, discarding the idiosyncrasies of our family or close friends. As a child grows and continues to observe his inner reactions to different moral situations, he is able to abstract from these

situations in order to reach general moral laws. It stands to reason, then, that these mental abstractions become more sophisticated as more situations are presented for reflection, as they would be in a more complex society—or as more data is presented for processing by our innate human software, so to speak. Hutcheson thought that socialization brings the moral sense closer to objectivity: “as we improve and correct a low taste for harmony by enuring the ear to finer compositions; a low taste for beauty, by presenting the finer works, which yield a higher pleasure; so we improve our moral taste by presenting larger systems to our mind” (*System I* 1969, 60). Hume argued that wider social ties enable us to become impartial, to the point of sympathizing even with an enemy in war: “but we, accustomed to society, and to more enlarged reflections, consider, that this man is serving his own country and community; that any man, in the same situation, would do the same . . . and by these suppositions and views, we correct, in some measure, our ruder and narrower positions” (*Morals* 2006, 71). An enlarged society promotes enlarged reflections due to the greater availability of fodder for one’s reflections.

Another asset of these weak ties is that they promote interdependence rather than the abject dependence of peasants, servants, or retainers under feudalism. Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Scots wanted to eliminate personal dependence, but thought that market relations and the division of labor, not the state, cause men to become dependent on such a large number of people that they rely on no single relationship. Smith wrote that every consumer is indebted to thousands for each item he purchases: “without the assistance and cooperation of thousands, the very meanest person in a civilized country

could not be provided, even according to, what we very falsely imagine, the easy and simple manner in which he is commonly accommodated” (*Wealth* 1981, 23). Similarly, no merchant relies on any one consumer. As Millar pointed out, the demise of feudalism meant that the formerly dependent lower classes are now effectively independent—they do rely on their customers, but not on any one customer, and their customers rely on them too. While a merchant “says that he is obliged to his employed, or his customers,” in reality “he does not feel himself greatly dependent upon them. His subsistence, and his profits, are derived not from one, but from a number of persons” (*Historical View* 2006, 487). Liberation from the old bonds of dependence encourages responsibility and virtue, for Smith thought that “nothing gives such noble and generous notions of probity as freedom and independency” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 333).

Thus the Scots thought pursuit of self-interest and self-love has the potential to facilitate virtue through facilitating socialization, interdependence, and weak ties—an argument that might appear superficially similar to Tocqueville’s concept of “self-interest rightly understood,” in which “the interest of each is to be honest.” But there are important differences between the Scots and Tocqueville. While “self-interest rightly understood” collapses self-interest and virtue (or at least some virtues such as honesty and justice) into a single construct, the Scots vigorously maintained a distinction between the two. They consistently depicted virtue as disinterested, and criticized the selfish system for reducing all passions into disguised forms of self-interest (which they preferred to define in material terms only). For the Scots, self-interest is, at its most basic level, an innocent passion, even a useful one—but it becomes morally significant only

when it transcends itself by leading its adherents into society and inspiring disinterested virtues such as benevolence. To take Smith's example of a man who theoretically has the power to destroy China, he would choose not to exercise this power not because of any motive of material self-interest, but by "the love of what is honorable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters" (*Sentiments* 1982, 137).

Of course, the power of society to effect such moral conversions is not an absolute one, and the Scots are vulnerable to criticism for their apparent faith in such a process. The Scottish Enlightenment's emphasis on weak ties is particularly vulnerable—for weak ties, as their name indicates, can be a weakness despite their many positive effects. Though frequent and wide-ranging social contacts can help our inner "impartial spectator" become more impartial, weak ties can never replace strong ties. The Scots believed that we naturally experience more sympathy with the people closest to us—and that this tendency is right and good, because these are the people particularly entrusted to our care. They may not have harbored any nostalgia for old feudal and clan dependencies, but they did give special attention to the family as the primary institution of sociability. Hume, for instance, wrote: "man, born in a family, is compelled to maintain society from necessity, from natural inclination, and from habit" (*Essays* 1985, 37). They wanted the family to perform its socializing and educative functions well, and thought no institution but the family could completely take over these functions. For instance, Smith urged a system of partially public education in *Wealth of Nations*, but in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* he had previously expressed the stipulation that public education is no replacement for the family: "domestic education is the institution of

nature; public education, the contrivance of man. It is surely unnecessary to say, which is likely to be the wisest” (1982, 222). Education begins at home; and if anything is lacking in this domestic education, then schools are likely powerless to offset such a great loss. It is therefore vital that nothing is lacking in the sentimental education offered by the family. Similarly, Millar warned that when familial affections decay, “we shall in vain expect their place to be supplied by general views of utility to mankind, or particular interpositions of the legislature (*Historical View* 2006, 772). Millar, unlike his fellow Scots, drew attention to the family’s vulnerable situation in a market-driven society replete with weak ties. He wrote that frequent exposure to the world, especially when combined with declining respect for Christian sexual mores, makes marriage less of a “peculiar connection” (*Historical View* 2006, 772). In today’s society, when many people become more emotionally connected to their friends than to their siblings or cousins, weak ties often seem to be crowding out the strong ties of family—and Millar’s ominous predictions may seem to merit our attention.

Moreover, weak ties are less able to provide for the needy. A family connection or an intense friendship may inspire generosity to a person in need; but a stranger, even one who conjures our sympathy, is unlikely to persuade us to part with more than a few dollars. Ferguson lamented the increasingly impersonal and interested nature of relationships in a society in which “man . . . has found an object which sets him in competition with his fellow-creatures, and he deals with them as he does with his cattle and soil, for the sake of the profits they bring” (*Essay* 1995, 19). Millar noted that justice (as understood by the Scots) seems ascendant over benevolence: “a limited and regulated



charity is perfectly consistent with the manners of a refined and polished people,” but “the higher exertions of benevolence are out of the question” (*Historical View* 2006, 781). The Scots themselves recognized that commerce often brought inequality and inhuman working conditions in its wake. In such a situation, the need for love and concern should be all the more urgent.

### Reform

In order to exploit commercial society’s potential for good rather than vice, the Scots proposed several reforms that they thought would mitigate its selfish tendencies. One reform that Hutcheson, Hume, Smith, and Ferguson embraced was a citizens’ militia—though their proposals differed vastly in the particulars. Hutcheson proposed that men should be required to serve eight-year terms; Hume, only six weeks. Smith never elaborated on how a militia ought to operate, only that it was warranted in order to preserve courage: “even though the martial spirit of the people were of no use towards the defence of the society, yet to prevent that sort of mental mutilation, deformity, and wretchedness, which cowardice necessarily involves in it . . . would still deserve the most serious attention of government” (*Wealth* 1981, 787). Ferguson’s militia plan was the most detailed. It would repeal the poaching laws, sponsor contests for marksmanship, accord certain privileges and honors to anyone volunteering for the militia (such as titles of nobility for those achieving rank), and would compel those of a certain social status to enlist. Millar, the lone dissenter on this issue, warned that “decay of the military spirit in the modern commercial nations” cannot be easily remedied through a militia, for “the difficulty of enforcing regulations of this nature, so as to derive much advantage from

them, must afford sufficient evidence that they are adverse to the spirit of the times” (*Historical View* 2006, 752). But Ferguson’s suggestions, which rely little on force and more on incentives to participation, might prove more realistic than the others’. His militia, though it may be civic humanist in its intentions, operates through methods compatible with a liberal state.

The Scots seemed divided about one reform that seems an obvious solution to the problem of individualism: public welfare. After all, if the citizens of a commercial society are determined to be selfish, then the only way to ensure care of their less fortunate brethren is through taxation and public programs. (Indeed, Great Britain’s Poor Laws eventually expanded in the late eighteenth century). Yet Hutcheson and Hume vigorously attacked such an idea on a number of points. Hutcheson adopted an Aristotelian argument regarding the importance of choice in virtue, arguing that if charity were enforced by law, “liberality would then appear like paying a tax . . . and liberality would cease to be a bond of love, esteem, or gratitude” (*System I* 1969, 306). They also pointed to unintended effects of such programs. For instance, Hume wrote that “of all sciences there is none, where first appearances are more deceitful than in politics. Hospitals for foundlings seem favourable . . . but when they open the door to every one, without distinction, they have probably a contrary effect, and are pernicious to the state” (*Essays* 1985, 400). Ferguson did not oppose poor relief on principle, but did not think that a government policy could properly be called moral or could affect individualism: “in whatever manner public provision is to be made for the necessitous poor, whether by Hospitals and places of public reception, or by distributing the supplies of necessity to the

private habitations of those who are entitled to receive them, is a question rather of public oeconomy and good policy, than of moral duty” (*Principles II* 1975, 373). He also warned that the country ought not to “encourage any person able to work in the expectation that he may be idle, and yet receive gratuitous charities” (*Stage-Plays* 1757, 24). Smith remained largely silent on the issue of public charity. He mentioned some minor policies that he thought would help the poor—certain kinds of taxation, and reforming the settlement provision of the Poor Laws—but never voiced any opinion about the wisdom of comprehensive poor relief programs.

The Scots’ reluctance to endorse such programs may be partially explained through their understanding of perfect and imperfect rights, and social and unsocial virtues. Their natural law distinction between perfect and imperfect rights implied that, while public charity could be warranted in many cases, it should not be conceptualized as a right. Hutcheson summarized perfect rights as those which may be assured “even by methods of force,” while imperfect rights must “be left to men’s honour and consciences” (*System I* 1969, 258). Imperfect rights include “the rights of the indigent to relief from the wealthy” (*System I* 1969, 258). Smith, following the views of his tutor, wrote that “a beggar is an object of our charity and may be said to have a right to demand it; but when we use the word right in this way it is not in a proper but in a metaphoricall sense” (*Jurisprudence* 1982, 9). This distinction between perfect and imperfect rights, while not unique to the Scots, finds a parallel in their unique distinction between justice and the social virtues (or the artificial and natural virtues). As we saw above, the Scots’ conception of justice refers chiefly to commutative justice, not distributive justice. They

differentiated very strictly between justice, which only remedies tangible injuries between individuals, and all other virtues, which are true virtues in the sense of being excellent qualities. The social virtues are conducive to building and maintaining relationships; justice, on the other hand, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for relationships. As Millar wryly noted, “a fond husband expects more from his wife than merely that she will not steal from him” (*Historical View* 2006, 781). Since social relationships of love or charity are governed more by the heart than by reason, they cannot be systematized and enforced: while “the rules of justice may be compared to the rules of grammar,” the rules of relationships are “loose, vague, and indeterminate, and present us rather with a general idea of the perfection we ought to aim at, than afford us any certain and infallible directions for acquiring it” (*Sentiments* 1982, 175). Because of the difficulty in ascertaining them, as well as the importance of personal relationship for them to find their fullest flourishing, there can be no corresponding perfect right for a third party to enforce these duties.

Both Smith and Millar supported a system of public education. Smith urged that “the education of the common people requires, perhaps, in a civilized and commercial society, the attention of the publick” (*Wealth* 1981, 784). He proposed that the public could establish “in every parish or district a little school, where children may be taught for a reward so moderate, that even a common labourer may afford” and offer incentives for attendance: “giving small premiums, and little badges of distinction, to the children of the common people who excel” (*Wealth* 1981, 785-786). Similarly, Millar wrote that society should provide a variety of educational opportunities: “different sorts of

instruction are brought into a common market, are gradually cheapened by mutual competition, and, being more and more accommodated to the demands of society, become, as far as it is necessary, accessible even to the poor” (*Historical View* 2006, 733). Both hoped that education would counteract the negative effects of the division of labor.

For the Scots, education is not only the responsibility of formal institutions. As Smith pointed out, “domestic education is the institution of nature”—hence one major educational policy is simply to respect and to strengthen parental rights. Hutcheson wrote that children are chiefly educated “by parents united in a friendly partnership for their education” and, in order to preserve this friendly partnership, he proposed criminal sanctions for adultery and seduction (*System II* 1969, 156). Millar thought the law should not interfere with parental authority: “the authority of parents ought to be such as may enable them to direct the education of their children, to restrain the irregularities of youth, and to instill those principles which will render them useful members of society” (*Ranks* 2006, 176).

The Scots also thought that religion is a major teacher of moral values. Therefore, they all paid attention to what they thought state policy towards religion should be, since a nation’s religion invariably influences the people’s mores. But they disagreed both as to the specifics and the goal of the policy. Hutcheson and Hume both supported an established church; Smith and Millar supported disestablishment and complete religious toleration. Hutcheson supported establishment so that the magistrate can “form in his subjects dispositions of piety, love and resignation to God, of temperance towards

themselves and just and beneficent dispositions towards their fellows,” for “piety thus diffused in a society, is the strongest restraint against evil” (*System II* 1969, 312). Hume, on the other hand, thought that “interested diligence of the clergy is what every wise legislator will study to prevent” and that religious establishment increases tolerance because it “bribe[s] their [the clergy’s] indolence” by providing them with guaranteed salaries (*History III* 1983, 135). Smith promoted dis-establishment and religious liberty chiefly because he thought it would increase tolerance and moderation within each sect: that “the teachers of each little sect, finding themselves almost alone, would be obliged to respect those of almost every other sect” (*Wealth* 1981, 793). Meanwhile, Millar supported the same policies because he wanted to make ministers more industrious. In discussing the “monopoly” of religious establishment, he wrote that “to dissolve the company altogether, and to lay the trade entirely open, was at length suggested as the most effectual means for promoting laudable industry, for discouraging unfair practices, and for communicating an equal benefit to a whole people” (*Historical View* 2006, 502). Thus Hutcheson and Millar both wanted to increase piety, but supported opposite methods of attaining it. Hume and Smith were more concerned with moderation and toleration, but again, they diverged as to the best way to promote the desired outcome.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The Scots’ analysis of commercial society is incomplete in many ways. Their concepts of reason and justice, which many readers have found unsatisfying, may constrain their understanding of the virtues that are lost in more polished ages. They also overlooked some of the social problems of their own day—for instance, Hutcheson and

Hume paid scant attention to the plight of the common laborer, and only Millar pointed out that families may be weakened by the “petty traffic” of commercial society. Moreover, they did not anticipate many of the developments, technological or otherwise, in our society today—and these developments complicate any attempt to apply their analysis to the contemporary world. Television and the Internet, for instance, may facilitate sympathy beyond one’s immediate community by showing images of, and allowing conversation with, people across the world. At the same time, these technologies, by reducing face-to-face interactions, might erode the social influence that the Scots thought could be exerted by markets, urbanization, and other phenomena associated with commercial society. The rise of online retailing, Facebook, text messaging, and blogs make it possible to purchase all the necessities of life, keep informed of one’s friend’s activities, and debate ideas, all without ever hearing an actual human voice. The effect of these technologies on social life—and on the imagination or taste that the Scots thought necessary for moral reasoning—is still unknown to us, and goes beyond what the eighteenth-century Scots could have predicted.

But the Scots’ philosophy need not specifically address these issues in order to be relevant. Joseph Cropsey described the problem of individualism as “the lasting problem of freedom” (1957, xii). Nobody, not even the brilliant minds of the Scottish Enlightenment, can—or should—claim to have resolved this lasting problem. The Scots themselves stressed that political life is a process of ongoing evolution and negotiation by all the members of society—not just by intellectuals dictating solutions to the masses. Rather than look to the Scots for concrete solutions, we should look to them for

conceptual tools that help us to understand our own situation. Is a society and economy structured in such a way that even the pursuit of self-interest brings individuals into a social context? Does a society encourage the exercise of the impartial spectator, and what is the moral content internalized by that spectator? What kinds of government policies, appropriate to our culture, can mitigate the problem? The Scottish Enlightenment can shed light on both our problems and our strengths, clarifying the work that we have left to do.



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