

THE ROADS TO  
MODERNITY

THE BRITISH, FRENCH,  
AND AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENTS



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## 1. "SOCIAL AFFECTIONS" AND RELIGIOUS DISPOSITIONS

The British did not have *philosophes*. They had moral philosophers, a very different breed. Those historians who belittle or dismiss the idea of a British Enlightenment do so because they do not recognize the features of the *philosophes* in the moral philosophers—and with good reason: the physiognomy is quite different.

It is ironic that the French should have paid tribute to John Locke and Isaac Newton as the guiding spirits of their own Enlightenment, while the British, although respectful of both, had a more ambiguous relationship with them. Newton was eulogized by David Hume as "the greatest and rarest genius that ever rose for the ornament and instruction of the species,"<sup>1</sup> and by Alexander Pope in the much quoted epitaph: "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night; / God said, *Let Newton be!* and all was light." But Pope's *An Essay on Man* sent quite a different message: "The proper study of mankind is man" implied that materialism and science could penetrate into the mysteries of nature but not of man. In an earlier essay, the allusion to Newton was more obvious; it was human nature, not astronomy, Pope said, that was "the most useful object of humane reason," and it was "of more consequence to adjust the true nature and measures of right and wrong, than to settle the distance of the planets and compute the times of their circumvolutions."<sup>2</sup> While Newton received

the adulation of his countrymen (he was master of the Royal Mint and president of the Royal Society, was knighted, and given a state funeral), and his scientific methodology was much praised, he had little substantive influence on the moral philosophers or on the issues that dominated the British Enlightenment. (His *Opticks*, on the other hand, was an inspiration for poets, who were entranced by the images and metaphors of light.)<sup>3</sup>

John Locke, too, was a formidable presence in eighteenth-century Britain, a best-selling author and a revered figure. But among the moral philosophers he was admired more for his politics than for his metaphysics. Indeed, the basic tenets of their philosophy implied a repudiation of his. What made them moral philosophers rather than philosophers *tout court* was their belief in a "moral sense" that was presumed to be if not innate in the human mind (as Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson thought), then so entrenched in the human sensibility, in the form of sympathy or fellow feeling (as Adam Smith and David Hume had it), as to have the same compelling force as innate ideas.

Locke himself could not have been more explicit in rejecting innate ideas, whether moral or metaphysical. The mind, as he understood it, so far from being inhabited by innate ideas, was a *tabula rasa*, to be filled by sensations and experiences, and by the reflections rising from those sensations and experiences. The title of the first chapter of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was "No Innate Speculative Principles" (that is, epistemological principles); the second, "No Innate Practical Principles" (moral principles). Even the golden rule, that "most unshaken rule of morality and foundation of all social virtue," would have been meaningless to one who had never heard that maxim and who might well ask for a reason justifying it, which "plainly shows it not to be innate." If virtue was generally approved, it was not because it was innate, but because it was "profitable,"

conducive to one's self-interest and happiness, the promotion of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Thus, things could be judged good or evil only by reference to pleasure or pain, which were themselves the product of sensation.<sup>4</sup>

Locke's *Essay* was published in 1690. Nine years later, the Earl of Shaftesbury wrote an essay that was, in effect, a refutation of Locke. This, too, had its ironies, for this Shaftesbury, the Third Earl, was brought up in the household of his grandfather, the First Earl, who was a devotee of Locke and had employed him to supervise the education of his grandchildren. It was this experience that had inspired Locke's *Thoughts Concerning Education*—and inspired as well, perhaps, the pupil's rejection of his master's teachings.<sup>5</sup> Shaftesbury's essay, "An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit," was published (without his permission but to great acclaim) in 1699 and reprinted in 1711 in somewhat revised form in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. That three-volume work, reissued posthumously three years later and in ten more editions in the course of the century, rivalled Locke's *Second Treatise* (a political, not metaphysical tract) as the most frequently reprinted work of the time. The hundred-page essay on virtue was the centerpiece of those volumes.

Virtue, according to Shaftesbury, derived not from religion, self-interest, sensation, or reason. All of these were instrumental in supporting or hindering virtue, but were not the immediate or primary source of it. What was antecedent to these was the "moral sense," the "sense of right and wrong."<sup>6\*</sup> It was this sense that was "predominant . . . inwardly joined to us, and implanted in our nature," "a first principle in our constitu-

\* Shaftesbury's "moral sense" was very different from John Rawls's recent use of that term. For Shaftesbury it was an innate sense of right and wrong; for Rawls it is an intuitive conviction of the rightness of freedom and equality.

tion and make," as natural as "natural affection itself."<sup>7</sup> This "natural affection," moreover, was "social affection," an affection for society and the people, which, so far from being at odds with one's private interest, or self-affection, actually contributed to one's personal pleasure and happiness.<sup>8</sup> A person whose actions were motivated entirely or even largely by self-affection—by self-love, self-interest, or self-good—was not virtuous. Indeed, he was "in himself still vicious," for the virtuous man was motivated by nothing other than "a natural affection for his kind."<sup>9</sup>

This was not a Rousseauian idealization of human nature, of man before being corrupted by society. Nor was it a Pollyannaish expectation that all or even most men would behave virtuously all or most of the time. The moral sense attested to the sense of right and wrong in all men, the knowledge of right and wrong even when they chose to do wrong. Indeed, a good part of Shaftesbury's essay dealt with the variety of "hateful passions"—envy, malice, cruelty, lust—that beset mankind. Even virtue, Shaftesbury warned, could become vice when it was pursued to excess; an immoderate degree of tenderness, for example, destroyed the "effect of love," and excessive pity rendered a man "incapable of giving succour."<sup>10</sup> The conclusion of the essay was a stirring testament of an ethic that, by its very nature—the "common nature" of man—was a social ethic: "Thus the wisdom of what rules, and is first and chief in nature, has made it to be according to the private interest and good of everyone to work towards the general good; which if a creature ceases to promote, he is actually so far wanting to himself and ceases to promote his own happiness and welfare. . . . And, thus, Virtue is the good, and Vice the ill of everyone."<sup>11</sup>

The contrast, not only with Thomas Hobbes but with Locke as well, could not be more obvious.<sup>12</sup> Neither was explicitly named by Shaftesbury, perhaps out of respect for Locke, who was still alive when the essay was written (although

he had died by the time it was reissued). But no knowledgeable reader could have mistaken Shaftesbury's intention. In 1709 he wrote to one of his young protégés that Locke, even more than Hobbes, was the villain of the piece, for Hobbes's character and "base slavish principles" of government "took off the poison of his philosophy," whereas Locke's character and commendable principles of government made his philosophy even more reprehensible.

'Twas Mr. Locke that struck at all fundamentals, threw all order and virtue out of the world. . . . Virtue, according to Mr. Locke, has no other measure, law, or rule, than fashion and custom: morality, justice, equity, depend only on law and will. . . . And thus neither right nor wrong, virtue nor vice are any thing in themselves; nor is there any trace or idea of them *naturally imprinted* on human minds. Experience and our catechism teach us all!<sup>13</sup>

As Shaftesbury did not mention Locke in the "Inquiry," so Bernard Mandeville did not mention Shaftesbury in *The Fable of the Bees*—at least not in the first edition, published in 1714. But appearing just then, a year after Shaftesbury's death and at the same time as the second edition of the *Characteristics*, Mandeville's readers might well take it as a rebuttal to Shaftesbury's work. The subtitle, *Private Vices, Public Benefits*, reads like a manifesto *contra* Shaftesbury.<sup>14</sup>

The original version of the *Fable*, published in 1705 as a sixpenny pamphlet (and pirated, Mandeville complained, in a halfpenny sheet), consisted of some thirty verses depicting a society, a hive of bees, where everyone was a knave, and where knavery served a valuable purpose. Every vice had its concomitant virtue: avarice contributed to prodigality, luxury to industry, folly to ingenuity. The result was a grumbling but

productive hive, where “. . . every part was full of Vice, / Yet the whole mass a Paradise.” A well-intentioned attempt to rid the hive of vice had the effect of ridding it of its virtues as well, resulting in the destruction of the hive itself, as all the bees, “blest with content and honesty,” abandoned industry and took refuge in a hollow tree.<sup>15</sup>

Lest the moral escape his readers, Mandeville reissued the poem in 1714 with a prefatory essay, “The Origin of Moral Virtue,” and a score of lengthy “Remarks” amplifying lines of the poem; the editions of 1723 and 1724 added still other essays and remarks. In the enlarged version (now a full-length book), Mandeville elaborated upon his thesis. Self-love, which was reducible to pain and pleasure, was the primary motivation of all men, and what was generally called pity or compassion—the “fellow-feeling and condolence for the misfortunes and calamities of others”—was an entirely spurious passion, which unfortunately afflicted the weakest minds the most.<sup>16</sup> Moralists and philosophers, he conceded, generally took the opposite view, agreeing with the “noble writer” Lord Shaftesbury that “as man is made for society, so he ought to be born with a kind affection to the whole of which he is a part, and a propensity to seek the welfare of it.”<sup>17</sup> Mandeville’s conclusion was sharp and uncompromising:

After this I flatter my self to have demonstrated that neither the friendly qualities and kind affections that are natural to man, nor the real virtues he is capable of acquiring by reason and self-denial are the foundation of society; but that what we call evil in this world, moral as well as natural, is the grand principle that makes us sociable creatures, the solid basis, the life and support of all trades and employments without exception; that there we must look for the true origin of all arts and sciences, and that the moment evil ceases, the society must be spoiled if not totally dissolved.<sup>18</sup>

*The Fable of the Bees* profoundly shocked contemporaries, provoking a frenzy of attacks culminating in a ruling handed down by the grand jury of Middlesex condemning it as a “public nuisance.” Joining in the near-universal condemnation were most of the eighteenth-century greats—Bishop Berkeley, Francis Hutcheson, Edward Gibbon, Adam Smith. Smith expressed the general sentiment in pronouncing Mandeville’s theory “licentious” and “wholly pernicious.”<sup>19\*</sup>

Mandeville’s was a spirited but futile attempt to abort the social ethic that was the distinctive feature of the British Enlightenment. That ethic derived neither from self-interest nor from reason (although both were congruent with it) but from a moral sense that inspired sympathy, benevolence, and compassion for others. Thus, where Locke, denying any innate principles, looked to education to inculcate in children the sentiment of “humanity,” “benignity,” or “compassion,”<sup>20</sup> Shaftesbury rooted that sentiment in nature and instinct rather than education or reason. “To compassionate,” he wrote, “i.e., to join with in passion. . . . To commiserate, i.e., to join with in misery. . . . This in one order of life is right and good; nothing more harmonious; and to be without this, or not to feel this, is unnatural, horrid, immane [monstrous].”<sup>21</sup>

Two years after the publication of the expanded version of

\* Smith was offended not only by Mandeville’s amorality, his refusal to distinguish between vice and virtue, but also by his mercantilist views, which were a by-product of that philosophy. Because there was no natural moral sense and thus no natural harmony among men, Mandeville assumed that the government had to intervene to convert “private vices” into “public benefits.” Mandeville is sometimes taken to be an apologist for capitalism, but it was mercantilism that was the logical deduction from his philosophy.

the *Fable*, Francis Hutcheson entered the debate with *An Inquiry Concerning the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, reissued the following year with *Virtue or Moral Good* replacing *Beauty and Virtue*. The subtitle of the original edition gave its provenance: *In Which the Principles of the Late Earl of Shaftesbury Are Explained and Defended, Against the Author of the Fable of the Bees*. It was here that Hutcheson first enunciated the principle, "The greatest happiness for the greatest numbers."<sup>22</sup> Unlike Helvétius and Jeremy Bentham, who are often credited with this principle and who rooted it in the rational calculations of utility, Hutcheson deduced it from morality itself—the "moral sense, viz. benevolence."<sup>23</sup>\* These words, "moral sense" and "benevolence," appear as a refrain throughout the book. The moral sense, Hutcheson repeatedly explained, was antecedent to interest because it was universal in all men. "Fellow-feeling" could not be a product of self-interest because it involved associating oneself with such painful experiences as the suffering and distress of others. So, too, the "disposition to compassion" was essentially disinterested, a concern with "the interest of others, without any views of private advantage."<sup>25</sup> It was also antecedent to reason or instruction. Like Burke later, Hutcheson warned of the frailty of reason: "Notwithstanding the mighty reason we boast of above other animals, its processes are too slow, too full of doubt and hesitation, to serve us in every exigency, either for our own preservation, without the external senses, or to direct our actions for the good of the whole, without this moral sense."<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere he explained that reason was "only a subservient power," capable of determining the

\* Bentham himself variously attributed this principle to Montesquieu, Barrington, Beccaria, and Helvétius, "but most of all Helvétius." Smith mistakenly attributed the origin of the "moral sense" to Hutcheson rather than Shaftesbury.<sup>24</sup>

means of promoting the good but not the end itself, the innate impulse to good.<sup>27</sup>

"Benevolence," compassion," "sympathy," "fellow-feeling," a "natural affection for others"—under one label or another, this moral sense (or sentiment, as Smith preferred) was the basis of the social ethic that informed British philosophical and moral discourse for the whole of the eighteenth century. The generation of philosophers that followed Shaftesbury qualified his teachings in one respect or another, differing among themselves about the precise nature and function of the moral sense. But they all agreed that it (or something very like it) was the natural, necessary, and universal attribute of man, of rich and poor alike, the educated and uneducated, the enlightened and unenlightened. They also agreed that it was a corollary of reason and interest, but prior to and independent of both.

In his two sermons on "Compassion," Bishop Butler explained that reason alone was not "a sufficient motive of virtue in such a creature as man"; it had to be joined with compassion, which was "a call, a demand of nature, to relieve the unhappy, as hunger is a natural call for food" (the "unhappy" including the "indigent and distressed").<sup>28</sup> There was no contradiction, he insisted, between man's benevolence and self-love, between "public and private affections," because both were integral to his nature and essential to his happiness. "There is a natural principle of benevolence in man, which is in some degree to society what self-love is to the individual."<sup>29</sup> For the philosopher Thomas Reid, it was "common sense," not reason, that was the unique quality of the "plain man." If man had been endowed only with reason, the race would soon have been extinct. Fortunately, reason was complemented by the "benevolent affections," which were "no less necessary for the preservation of the human species than the appetites of hunger and thirst."<sup>30</sup> So, too, Adam Ferguson made "fellow-feeling" or "humanity" so much

an "appurtenance of human nature" as to be a "characteristic of the species."<sup>31</sup>

Even Hume, who had a notably unsentimental view of human nature, believed in a "sentiment," a "moral sense," a "moral taste" common to all men.<sup>32</sup> Pain and pleasure were related to that moral sense, insofar as vice was conducive to pain and virtue to pleasure. It was a fallacy of philosophy, ancient as well as modern, he observed, to regard reason as the main motive or principle of human behavior, for reason alone could never prevail over the will and passions or provide the incentive for virtue. The final book of *A Treatise of Human Nature* opened with a section entitled "Moral distinctions not derived from reason," followed by another, "Moral distinctions derived from a moral sense."<sup>33</sup>

Hutcheson criticized Hume for rejecting the idea of benevolence as the primary, innate faculty. But Hume did accept the idea of sympathy as the "chief source of moral distinctions," and the source in particular of "the public good," "the good of mankind."<sup>34</sup> And while he did not give it quite the character of an innate sense, he did make it a common trait of all men. "The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations; nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible. As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature."<sup>35</sup> As if to appease Hutcheson, in a later book, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume made much of the idea of benevolence, using the word synonymously with sympathy and criticizing the "selfish system of morals" of Hobbes and Locke, which failed to recognize that "general benevolence" or "disinterested benevolence"—that is, benevolence divorced from personal relations and affec-

tions—was an essential quality of human nature. It was evidently so, Hume argued, in animals, the inferior species; how could it not be in man, the superior species?<sup>36</sup> For himself, he found the sentiment of benevolence so well founded in experience that he could assume it "without further proof." It was not, to be sure, an innate quality of human beings, as Hutcheson would have it, but it was a "tendency" that had virtually the same effect. "It appears that a tendency to public good, and to the promoting of peace, harmony, and order in society does, always, by affecting the benevolent principles of our frame, engage us on the side of the social virtues." And again, more eloquently: "There is some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for human kind; some particle of the dove kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and serpent."<sup>37</sup>

The most nuanced statement of this creed, and the most influential, appeared in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Today (except among scholars) Smith is identified almost entirely with the *Wealth of Nations*. In his own time, he was as well known, at home and abroad, as the author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Published in 1759, *Moral Sentiments* went through four editions before *Wealth of Nations* appeared in 1776, and another edition a few years later. So far from being superseded by the later work, the earlier one remained in the forefront of Smith's consciousness, as in that of his contemporaries. He devoted the last year of his life to revising and expanding *Moral Sentiments*, not to bring it into accord with the later book but to strengthen the message of the earlier one. The most important change was the addition of the chapter, "Of the Corruption of Our Moral Sentiments, Which Is Occasioned by This Disposition to Admire the Rich and the Great, and to Despise or Neglect Persons of Poor and Mean Condition."

The opening sentences of *Moral Sentiments* set its tone and theme:

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. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others when we either see it or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. . . . By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation . . . we enter, as it were, into his body and become in some measure the same person with him.<sup>38</sup>

"Pity," "compassion," "benevolence," "sympathy"—Smith used the words almost, but not quite, synonymously, to denote those elemental qualities of human nature that constitute our moral sentiments. "Hence it is that to feel much for others and little for ourselves, that to restrain our selfish and to indulge our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature."<sup>39</sup> And hence it is, too, that man finds his own satisfaction in indulging those benevolent affections. In being virtuous, man is fulfilling his own nature for his own sake. "Man naturally desires not only to be loved, but to be lovely. . . . He naturally dreads not only to be hated but to be hateful. . . . He desires not only praise but praiseworthiness. . . . He dreads not only blame but blameworthiness."<sup>40</sup> And again: "We desire both to be respectable and to be respected. We dread both to be contemptible and to be contemned."<sup>41</sup>

It is the "positive" virtues elicited by the sense of "fellow-feeling" that Smith elevated over what he called the "negative" virtues of justice. And it is this that distinguishes Smith from the older "civic humanist" tradition.<sup>42</sup> That tradition,

deriving from the Renaissance and espoused by the Commonwealthmen in the seventeenth century, regarded public affairs and political integrity as the essence of virtue. For Smith, the public realm, governed by the principle of justice, was of secondary importance compared with the private realm, where the sentiments of sympathy and benevolence prevail.

Though the mere want of beneficence seems to merit no punishment from equals, the greater exertions of that virtue appear to deserve the highest reward. By being productive of the greatest good, they are the natural and approved objects of the liveliest gratitude. Though the breach of justice, on the contrary, exposes to punishment, the observance of the rules of that virtue seems scarce to deserve any reward. There is, no doubt, a propriety in the practice of justice, and it merits, upon that account, all the approbation which is due to propriety. But as it does no real positive good, it is entitled to very little gratitude. Mere justice is, upon most occasions, but a negative virtue, and only hinders us from hurting our neighbor.<sup>43</sup>

Anticipating a common misinterpretation of his views, Smith refuted yet again the idea that sympathy was rooted in self-love. Sympathy cannot be regarded as a "selfish principle," for it comes not by imagining oneself in another's piteous condition, but imagining the other in it. Thus, a man might sympathize with a woman in childbirth, although he cannot conceive himself suffering her pains in "his own proper person and character."<sup>44</sup> Nor can sympathy be sufficiently accounted for by reason. Reason was, to be sure, the source of the general rules of morality, but it was "altogether absurd and unintelligible to suppose that the first perceptions of right and wrong can be derived from reason." Virtue "necessarily pleases for its own



sake," and vice "as certainly displeases," not because of reason and reflection but because of "immediate sense and feeling."<sup>45</sup>

If reason and interest played a secondary role in the moral schema of these philosophers, so did religion. They either found the source of morality outside religion, or, like Shaftesbury, in "natural religion"; or they invoked orthodox religion, as Bishop Butler did, as an ally of morality. In either case, there was a conspicuous absence of the kind of animus to religion—certainly nothing like the warfare between reason and religion—that played so large a part in the French Enlightenment. Newtonianism, which might have been expected to foster an extreme skepticism, did not have that effect. Newton's God did not merely set the universe in motion; He was a living, active agent in it. "He is *always* and *everywhere*. . . . He is all eye, all ear, all brain, all arm, all force of sensing, of understanding, and of acting."<sup>46</sup> And the *Principia*, it was generally agreed, provided ample evidence of God's providential design for the universe. Newton himself, while denying the trinity (as Locke also did), and going to great pains to correct the Bible on the basis of astronomical calculations, was (as Voltaire, his greatest admirer said) a believing Christian, not a deist.\*

Shaftesbury set the tone early in the century by calling for a "good humored religion," which would descend from the "higher regions of divinity" to "plain honest morals."<sup>48</sup> That

\* Newton was also for many years a zealous alchemist (and perhaps remained a crypto-alchemist for much of his life). His biographer is reminded of Nietzsche's astute observation, two centuries later: "'Do you believe then that the sciences would ever have arisen and become great if there had not beforehand been magicians, alchemists, astrologers and wizards, who thirsted and hungered after abscondite and forbidden powers?'"<sup>47</sup>

good humor was exhibited in the famous account of his conversation with a friend about the multitude of sects in the world. "All wise men are of the same religion," they said. What was that religion? one lady asked. "Madam," Shaftesbury replied, "wise men never tell."<sup>49</sup> (This witticism has since been attributed to many other wise men, including Hume. Winston Churchill, who was fond of quoting it, cited a character in Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Endymion*.)

Hume was the most skeptical of the philosophers. His essay on miracles (prudently deleted from the *Treatise of Human Nature* but printed later in the *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*) earned him the common appellation of "atheist." He was not, in fact, an atheist—an agnostic, perhaps, or even a deist. While he was critical of the philosophical basis of natural religion ("natural theology," he called it), he did not discard the creed itself. And although he was fearful of "zealotry," he was remarkably tolerant of "enthusiasm." After the publication of the final volume of the *Treatise*, he published an essay on "Superstition and Enthusiasm," characterizing both as corruptions of true religion but very different in their nature and effects. Whereas superstition was favorable to priestly power, enthusiasm was even more opposed to religious hierarchy than was reason itself. Enthusiasm started, to be sure, by producing the most cruel disorders in society, "but its fury is like that of thunder and tempest, which exhaust themselves in a little time and leave the air more calm and pure than before." Thus, superstition was "an enemy to civil liberty" and enthusiasm "a friend to it." The Quakers, for example, started as enthusiasts and became "very free reasoners," as did the Jansenists in France, who kept alive in that country "the small sparks of the love of liberty."<sup>50</sup> (Like so many of his contemporaries, however, he was less than tolerant of Catholics.)

It was for good reason that the *philosophes* found Hume insufficiently atheistic, while he found them excessively dog-

matic. Edward Gibbon, recalling his visit to Paris in 1763, was disturbed by "the intolerant zeal" of the *philosophes*, who "laughed at the skepticism of Hume, preached the tenets of atheism with the bigotry of dogmatists, and damned all believers with ridicule and contempt."<sup>51</sup> The following year, a friend of Hume's living in Paris reported to an English correspondent that "poor Hume, who on your side of the water was thought to have too little religion, is here thought to have too much."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Hume had enough religion to support the church establishment, in part as a corrective to zealotry, but also because the belief in God and immortality had a salutary effect on people's lives. Those who tried to disabuse the people of that belief, he conceded, "may, for aught I know, be good reasoners, but I cannot allow them to be good citizens and politicians."<sup>53</sup> In his *History of England* (the most popular of his works in his own time), he went so far as to argue that "there must be an ecclesiastical order and a public establishment of religion in every civilized community."<sup>54</sup> He was especially taken with the Church of Scotland, accepting with pleasure his appointment as patron to that church and using his influence to advance the views and careers of the Moderates—Christian Stoics, as they thought of themselves—who aspired to reconcile faith and secular ethics, Christianity and commerce.<sup>55</sup>

If Hume was the most skeptical of the philosophers of that generation, Bishop Butler was the least skeptical. Yet Hume was respectful of Butler and regarded his *Analogy of Religion* as the most serious theological work of the century.<sup>56</sup> The *Analogy* was a sober critique of deism and a sophisticated defense of theism. Butler's God, "the intelligent Author of nature and natural Governor of the world,"<sup>57</sup> was the God of revelation as well as nature. He was, moreover, the God who not only created the universe—this the deists conceded—but actively intervened in it, which they denied. He was also the

God who provided the final sanction for morality. Butler agreed with the other philosophers that neither reason nor self-love was a sufficient basis for virtue, but he disagreed with them in attributing virtue to an innate moral sense. It was religion that was the source of the "strongest obligation to benevolence" and that brought together reason and self-love in the pursuit of that virtue.<sup>58</sup>

Even Hutcheson, who followed Shaftesbury most closely in asserting the primacy of the moral sense, conceded that man is as he is because God created him so. Hutcheson did not derive the moral sense from God; instead, he derived God, as it were—a benevolent God—from the moral sense. Since the happiness of man consisted in a "universal efficacious benevolence," it followed that God was "benevolent in the most universal impartial manner."<sup>59</sup> A firm believer in religious toleration, Hutcheson did not extend that toleration to the atheist who denied "moral providence" or the citizen who denied the "moral or social virtues"; both were so hurtful to the well-being of the state that they should be restrained by the force of a magistrate.<sup>60</sup>

Whatever disagreements Hutcheson and Hume had about the precise nature of the moral sense, Adam Smith was a great admirer of both. Some commentators have suggested that Smith was at best a deist like Hutcheson, at worst a skeptic like Hume.\* Whether as deist or skeptic, he displayed in his writings a tolerance toward religion and a benign view of it

\* A letter written by Smith while Hume was dying is sometimes taken as evidence that he shared Hume's views: "Poor David Hume is dying very fast, but with great cheerfulness and good humor and with more real resignation to the necessary course of things than any whining Christian ever died with pretended resignation to the will of God."<sup>61</sup>

typical of most of his colleagues. If he did not make of religion the source of morality, he did regard it as a natural ally of the morality inherent in man. Reason and religion had equal but separate functions, reason providing the general rules of right and wrong, and religion reinforcing those rules by the commands and laws of the deity. In acting in accord with those rules and giving them the reverence they deserved, the individual cooperated with the deity and advanced the plan of Providence. Indeed, those rules were the "vicereagents of God within us," carrying with them the this-worldly sanctions of rewards and punishments—the "contentment" that came with following the rules, and the "inward shame and self-condemnation" that came with violating them.<sup>62</sup>

Even the belief in immortality, Smith said, was inspired not only by our weaknesses, our hopes and fears, but also by our noblest and best motives, "the love of virtue . . . and the abhorrence of vice and injustice." Religion thus enforced the natural sense of duty. This is why great confidence was placed in the probity of religious men—provided that the natural principles of religion were not corrupted by "the factious and party zeal of some worthless cabal," and provided, too, that the religious person recognized as his first duty the fulfillment of all the obligations of morality, putting justice and benevolence above the "frivolous observances" of religion.<sup>63</sup> It might have been Burke explaining why religion was a more certain support of morality than reason or philosophy. "Religion, even in its rudest form," Smith said, "gave a sanction to the rules of morality, long before the age of artificial reasoning and philosophy. That the terrors of religion should thus enforce the natural sense of duty was of too much importance to the happiness of mankind for nature to leave it dependent upon the slowness and uncertainty of philosophical research."<sup>64</sup>

Smith was a prudent man and it may be that these quali-

fied testimonials to religion veil his own skeptical disposition. In the final edition of *Moral Sentiments*, he added a section on prudence, explaining that the prudent man was always "sincere" but not always "frank and open." He always told the truth, but not always the whole truth. Above all, he respected "with an almost religious scrupulosity all the established decorums and ceremonials of society." Among those eminent men throughout the ages who had failed to observe those decorums, and had "thereby set a most pernicious example" to their admirers, Smith included his own contemporaries Swift and Voltaire.<sup>65</sup>

These reflections on prudence may have been prompted by an episode that haunted Smith for many years. Hume, shortly before his death, asked Smith to see to the publication of a book over which he had long labored, and left him a small legacy for that purpose. The book was the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which even like-minded friends had urged Hume not to publish because it denied the validity not only of revealed religion but of natural religion as well. Smith felt obliged to tell his best friend on his deathbed that he could not honor his request, giving some feeble reason for his refusal. (To the publisher he explained that he thought the "clamor" provoked by the *Dialogues* would hurt the sale of the new edition of Hume's works.) Perhaps to ease his conscience, Smith appended to Hume's *My Own Life*, published the following year, a tribute concluding with an epitaph adapted from the *Phaedo*: "Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit." That eulogy, Smith later observed, "brought upon me ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain."<sup>66</sup> It also brought him a less than panegyric obituary in the *Times*,

which recalled his "labored eulogium on the stoical end of David Hume."<sup>67</sup>

Hume died in 1776. That same year, the *Wealth of Nations* was published. Toward the end of that book, in a section on education, Smith made some observations about religion which were both prudent and practical. The state, he explained, had an interest in the education of the young, because the more educated they were, the less liable they were to those "delusions of enthusiasm and superstition" which, in backward countries, were the occasion for dreadful disorders. He quoted a long passage in Hume's *History of England* defending the proposal that the state pay the clergy of Dissenting sects, on the grounds that if clerics were left to their own resources, they would be more vigorous in promoting their own sects and more inclined to infuse their religion with superstition and delusion. Indolence rather than energy was the desideratum, and that could be achieved by paying the clergy a fixed salary. Smith amended Hume's proposal by pointing out that zeal was dangerous only if there were a few sects in society. If there were many sects, no single one would be strong enough to disturb the public order. Each sect, surrounded by so many adversaries, would find it expedient to respect the others and make concessions for their mutual benefit. In time, their doctrines would be largely reduced to a "pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture, or fanaticism." This, Smith observed, is what wise men had always sought, and it could be achieved without the intervention of positive law, which itself tended to be influenced by superstition and enthusiasm.<sup>68\*</sup>

\* Smith's argument recalls Voltaire's almost half a century earlier: "If one religion only were allowed in England, the government would very pos-

Religious sects were also valuable in promoting a distinctive ethos.

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 the one may 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 commonly more esteemed and adopted by what are called people of fashion.<sup>70</sup>

The "liberal" or "loose" system, favored by "people of fashion," was prone to the "vices of levity"—"luxury, wanton and even disorderly mirth, the pursuit of pleasure to some degree of intemperance, the breach of chastity. . . ." The "strict or austere" system, generally adhered to by "the common people," regarded such vices, for themselves at any rate, with "the utmost abhorrence and detestation," because they knew—or at least "the wiser and better sort" of them knew—that these vices were almost always ruinous to them; a single week's dissipation could undo a poor workman forever. This is why, Smith explained, religious sects arose and flourished among the common people, for they preached the system of morality conducive to the welfare of the poor.<sup>71</sup>

If Smith's views on religion were dictated, at least in part, by prudence, it was public as well as personal prudence that

possibly become arbitrary. If there were but two, the people would cut one another's throats. But as there are such a multitude, they all live happy and in peace."<sup>69</sup> *The Federalist* later made much the same observation: "A religious sect may degenerate into a political faction in a part of the Confederacy; but the variety of sects dispersed over the entire face of it must secure the national councils against any danger from that source."

he had in mind. He may have been, in public, better disposed to religion than he was privately inclined to be. But he genuinely believed in the moral and social utility of religion. And the utility not only of natural religion, and not even of the religion of the established church, which might be thought to be a valuable instrument of public order and stability, but the religion of those Dissenting sects which, in the name of a purer, more rigorous faith, inspired a stricter, more austere morality. In this respect, Smith was perhaps more appreciative of religion than even those of his colleagues who had official positions in the established churches—Bishop Butler, most notably, or the Moderates in the Church of Scotland.

The year 1776 was truly an *annus mirabilis*, in the history of the British Enlightenment no less than in the history of the American republic. It saw the publication of two works recognized as classics in their own time, as in ours: *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* and the first volume of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Edward Gibbon was not a moral philosopher, but he was a moral historian, and his great work was a notable contribution to the British Enlightenment. His friend Hume wrote to him shortly after the first volume appeared (and only a few months before his own death) warning him that he might be tainted by the same charges that had been levelled against himself. Commending Gibbon for having displayed a “very prudent temperament,” Hume feared that the last two chapters of the book would create a “clamor” against him. “The prevalence of superstition in England,” he predicted, “prognosticates the fall of philosophy and decay of taste; and though nobody be more capable than you to revive them, you will probably find a struggle in your first advances.”<sup>72</sup>

In fact, the book defied Hume’s prediction and was suc-

cessful far beyond the expectations of Gibbon or his publisher. The first edition of one thousand copies was exhausted in a few days, as were two other printings that quickly followed, in spite of the fact that those chapters proved to be every bit as provocative as Hume had said. While some reviewers and readers hailed the work as a masterpiece, others vilified the author as an atheist. The chapter introducing the subject of Christianity was deceptively entitled “The Progress of the Christian Religion, and the Sentiments, Manners, Numbers, and Condition of the Primitive Christians.” But the progress of Christianity, as Gibbon described it, was synonymous with the progress of superstition, in evidence of which he adduced the belief in miracles, the doctrine of immortality, the afterlife that consigned unbelievers to eternal hell, and the suspension of the laws of nature for the benefit of the church. Paying tribute to the primitive Christians whose faith was buttressed by personal virtues, Gibbon observed that their lives were purer and more austere than those not only of their pagan contemporaries but also of their “degenerate successors.” He spoke ironically of a church that became more outwardly splendid even as it lost its internal purity; and of the poor who had cheerfully to contemplate the promise of future happiness in the kingdom of heaven, while the rich were content with their possessions in this world.<sup>73</sup> Recounting the persecution endured by the early Christians on the part of the Romans, he concluded the following chapter with the “melancholy truth which obtrudes itself on the reluctant mind”: that the Christians, in the course of their own dissensions, had “inflicted far greater severities on each other than they had experienced from the zeal of infidels.”<sup>74</sup>

In his *Memoirs* written many years later, reflecting upon the enormous success of his work—“my book was on every table and almost on every toilette”—Gibbon bitterly recalled the accusations of impiety: “Had I believed that the majority of

English readers were so fondly attached even to the name and shadow of Christianity; had I foreseen that the pious, the timid, and the prudent would feel, or affect to feel, with such exquisite sensibility, I might, perhaps, have softened the two invidious chapters, which would create many enemies and conciliate few friends." Fortunately, he added, those clamorous voices were not persuasive.<sup>75</sup> And there were other voices to salve his wounded ego, not only Hume but Smith, who assured him, after the publication of the final volumes: "I cannot express to you the pleasure it gives me to find that by the universal assent of every man of taste and learning, whom I either know or correspond with, it sets you at the very head of the whole literary tribe at present existing in Europe."<sup>76</sup>

It is difficult to characterize Gibbon's variety of unbelief, if it was that. It has been said that his skepticism was that of a historian rather than a theologian.<sup>77</sup> In the first of the "invidious" chapters, Gibbon himself suggested this: "The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted in a long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings."<sup>78</sup> The historian and the theologian, however, were not so neatly distinguished, the skepticism of the one inevitably informing the other. Moreover, Gibbon's skepticism was not the familiar defense of primitive Christianity in contrast to the later, corrupt church; it was the miracles and superstitions of Christianity at its very inception that he took to be the source of the evil. Nor was it only the Catholic Church, or, indeed, any church, that he objected to; he was equally critical of the natural religion of modern deists and Dissenters, who hoped to preserve the form of religion without its substance, faith without revelation. This was one of his criticisms of Joseph Priestley,

who, in turn, rebuked Gibbon for mocking the idea of the afterlife.

Gibbon, then, was a thoroughgoing skeptic—a skeptic, however, not an atheist. Atheism was too dogmatic, too enthusiastic, to satisfy either the historian or the citizen. Like Shaftesbury, he had no use for the breed of "enthusiastical atheists."<sup>79</sup> Gibbon's comment on the *philosophes*, who "preached the tenets of atheism with the bigotry of dogmatists,"<sup>80</sup> has been attributed to the elderly Gibbon rather than the young author of the *Decline and Fall*. Yet even in his earlier days he had little sympathy with them. On the rare occasions when he cited the *Encyclopédie*, he did so disapprovingly, and he did not think it important enough to buy the work for his own library.<sup>81</sup> It has been suggested that he was misrepresented by later Victorian commentators who tried to appropriate him for their own secular rationalism.<sup>82</sup> If he did not quite have the "quasi-religious sensibility" that this historian attributes to him, he did have a spirit of skeptical tolerance that made the latitudinarianism of the Church of England much more congenial to him than atheism. So far from wanting to disestablish the church, he came to distrust the fanaticism of the rebels against the church more than that of the religious believers.

That Gibbon was an eminent member of the British Enlightenment is not now in doubt. But he himself felt the need to reassure his readers of his confidence in that Enlightenment. He realized that his theme, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, could well be taken as an object lesson for his own time. Would not the high civilization of modernity fall prey to the same forces of darkness that had overtaken the high civilization of antiquity? His answer was unequivocal: the achievements of civilization would not be lost. "We may therefore acquiesce," he closed the third volume, "in the pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased and

still increases the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue of the human race."<sup>83</sup>

It is interesting, especially by contrast to the situation in France, to see how far some of the representatives of the British Enlightenment could go in "naturalizing" religion without repudiating religion itself, and how far others could go in rejecting even that natural religion without rejecting the church itself—indeed, how far even the clerics among them could go without jeopardizing their standing in the church. Many years ago, the historian H. R. Trevor-Roper traced this tolerant attitude back to the seventeenth century with the emergence of Arminianism and Socinianism, the first celebrating free will, religious toleration, and the lay control of the church; the second applying secular, critical reason to religious texts and problems. Both were heresies of the right, Trevor-Roper said (disputing the conventional view of Socinianism as a heresy of the left), and both contributed to an Enlightenment forged in an atmosphere not of "ideological revolution and civil war" but "ideological peace and rapprochement."<sup>84</sup>

More recent historians have endorsed this view. J. G. A. Pocock explains that there was no hue and cry in England about "*Ecrasez l'infâme*" because there was "no *infâme* to be crushed." The Anglican Church, turned Erastian in the seventeenth century in response to Puritanism, regarded rational religion as supportive rather than subversive of clerical authority, and the church was sufficiently latitudinarian to accommodate the likes of Gibbon. Thus, there was no "Enlightenment project" in England, as there was in France, designed to discredit religion, to disestablish the church, or to create a civil religion in its stead.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Roy Porter, refuting "the rise of modern paganism" theory of Peter Gay,

finds that the Enlightenment in England throve "*within piety*." "There was no need to overthrow religion itself, because there was no pope, no inquisition, no Jesuits, no monopolistic priesthood."<sup>86</sup> J. C. D. Clark has gone further in extending this latitudinarianism to Methodists and Evangelicals as well as to mainstream Anglicans, all of whom subscribed to a "political theology" that was supportive of both church and state.<sup>87</sup>

But something more than latitudinarianism and tolerance were responsible for the very different intellectual climate in Britain. There was no oppressive church or dogmatic theology to rebel against, to be sure, but neither was there a new authority or ideology to incite rebellion. In France, reason was that authority and ideology, a reason so paramount as to challenge not only religion and the church but all the institutions dependent upon them. Reason was inherently subversive, looking to an ideal future and contemptuous of the deficiencies of the present, to say nothing of the past—and disdainful also of the beliefs and practices of the uneducated and lowborn.

The British moral philosophy, on the other hand, was reformist rather than subversive, respectful of the past and present even while looking forward to a more enlightened future. It was also optimistic and, in this respect at least, egalitarian, the moral sense and common sense being shared by all men, not merely the educated and wellborn. And it had no quarrel with religion itself—with a benighted or antisocial religion, to be sure, but not religion per se. It could even tolerate, as Shaftesbury and Hume did, enthusiastic religion, thus opening the door to the most enthusiastic religion of the time, Methodism.

This was the England that Montesquieu encountered early in the eighteenth century. The English, he said, "know better than any other people upon earth how to value, at the same

time, these three great advantages—religion, commerce, and liberty.”<sup>88</sup> And it was the England that Tocqueville rediscovered more than a century later: “I enjoyed, too, in England what I have long been deprived of—a union between the religious and the political world, between public and private virtue, between Christianity and liberty.”<sup>89</sup>