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PRIDE AND ORDER:

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For my parents

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Abstract

The emergence of modern social thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is often understood to have marked the end of an older vision of human beings as “political animals,” constituted against a social background and finding their highest goods in collective life. Breaking with this vision, the story goes, thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, Bernard Mandeville, and Adam Smith instead begin to take the atomistic, self-interested individual as the fundamental building block of their theories. Henceforth the theoretical task is to determine how such atomistic individuals can constitute a viable social order, regardless of whether the path revolves around the coercive power of the state or the invisible hand of the market. Or so this tradition has been remembered, both by its later social-scientific admirers and by critics from a wide range of political and ideological orientations.

In this dissertation, I argue for a different view of this history. Far from taking the atomistic individual as their descriptive starting point, these thinkers and their interlocutors are preoccupied with the ways in which human beings are all too social, fixated on status and relative position at the expense of their seemingly-objective interests. They are preoccupied, in other words, with the problem of pride: a kind of egoism that can only be understood against a social background, and which therefore cuts against the dichotomies — community and individual, norms and interests, altruism and egoism, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* — that structure so much later thinking about social life. This is not to say that atomistic individualism is altogether absent from their work. But atomism for them must be understood above all as a kind of moral project rather than a descriptive assumption. This project centers on a shift from egoism

understood as pride, a drive for superiority within a given and hierarchical social world, to egoism understood as self-interest, a form of atomistic maximization in quantitative and material terms. To its proponents, such a shift seems to offer the possibility of an escape from zero-sum positional struggle into a world where mutual benefit is at least conceivable.

There is a sense in which these early modern discourses are the ancestors of our own social theories, both economic and sociological, materialist and culturalist. But there is another sense in which the problem of pride has dropped out of our conceptual vocabulary altogether. The project of early modern individualism succeeded too well; the atomistic and self-interested individual, conceived as a moral possibility, was adopted as a bare descriptive assumption, resulting in the familiar set of dichotomies that seem to mark the limits of our own theoretical possibilities. The self-interested individual becomes the central premise or the central problem of social theory: alternately upheld as the necessary foundation for social inquiry or rejected in the name of the political animal, praised as the source of prosperity or denounced as corrosive of community. Examining more recent thinkers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and political stances, we will see that the absence of anything resembling pride can help point to some of the shortcomings of their theories, and indeed of this entire set of dichotomies. Without simply wishing to go back to a bygone conceptual world, I suggest that tracing its features can help point to some of what is missing in our own.

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Chapter I

Robinsonades

1.

We can begin with two passages, separated from each other by only a matter of months, from us by a century and a half. Each in its own way provides an entrance into our central problem.

In August 1857, Karl Marx began drafting the monumental critique of political economy that would eventually be published as *Capital*; his initial draft, abandoned the following year, became known posthumously as the *Grundrisse*. This is how the draft begins:

The object before us, to begin with, *material production*. Individuals producing in society — hence socially determined individual production — is, of course, the point of departure. The individual and isolated hunter and fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin, belongs among the unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth-century Robinsonades...

Defoe's novel had depicted Robinson Crusoe as a man raised in society, isolated only by his shipwreck upon the desert island; the "Robinsonades" of the political economists, by contrast, took the isolated individual as the historical starting point for their inquiries, and imagined all social bonds springing up from the interactions of such individuals. The error, Marx thought, was by no means accidental. It could instead be understood as the projection, backward into prehistory, of the nascent market order that economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo saw around them, an order "in preparation since the sixteenth century and making giant strides towards maturity in the eighteenth":

In this society of free competition, the individual appears detached from the natural bonds etc. which in earlier historical periods make him the accessory of a definite and limited human conglomerate. Smith and Ricardo still stand with both feet on the shoulders of the eighteenth-century prophets, in whose imaginations

this eighteenth-century individual — the product on one side of the dissolution of the feudal forms of society, on the other side of the new forces of production developed since the sixteenth century — appears as an ideal, whose existence they project into the past. Not as a historic result but as history's point of departure. As the Natural Individual appropriate to their notion of human nature, not arising historically, but posited by nature. This illusion has been common to each new epoch to this day.

On the contrary, Marx suggested, it was the socially bound and determined human being that stood at the origins of human life, and the supposedly free individual that was the recent historical product: “The more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole.” It was only in the eighteenth century that these social bonds came to “confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity”; the standpoint of the isolated individual, however, presupposes precisely the most developed forms of social relations. “The human being is in the most literal sense a *zoon politikon*,” Marx concludes, echoing Aristotle’s famous phrase, “not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.”¹

In July 1856, just over a year before Marx drafted these lines, Alexis de Tocqueville had published his final major work, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. Midway through the book, while discussing the ways in which the classes and corporate bodies of the French *ancien régime* had become fragmented and atomized over the course of the eighteenth century, Tocqueville stepped back to offer a typically lapidary observation:

¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, “Introduction,” 83-84.

Our fathers did not have the word *individualism*, which we have forged for our own use, because in their day there was no such thing as an individual who did not belong to a group and could see himself as standing absolute alone...²

Tocqueville was here returning to a theme that he had marked out two decades earlier in *Democracy in America*, where he had distinguished “individualism” from “egoism.”

Simple egoism, or “exaggerated love of self,” was “a vice as old as the world,” stemming from “blind instinct.” Individualism, by contrast, was “a recent expression arising out of a new idea,” not a primal urge but “a reflective and tranquil sentiment that disposes each citizen to cut himself off from the mass of his fellow men.”³

This new sentiment, Tocqueville suggested, was itself a reflection of the vast changes wrought by the growing equality of conditions, changes that marked the transition from an aristocratic to a democratic society. The older form of society had been fundamentally hierarchical, but this very hierarchy forced all of its members to understand themselves in relation to others. “Aristocracy linked all citizens together in a long chain from peasant to king. Democracy breaks the chain and severs the links.” The breakdown of the old hierarchies, and the dissolution of the old corporate bonds, creates a new class of individuals who owe nothing to their fellows and expect nothing from them in turn, who become “accustomed to thinking of themselves always in isolation and are pleased to think that their fate lies entirely in their own hands.”⁴

² Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution* 2.9, 91, emphasis in original.

³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* 2.2.2, 585.

⁴ *Democracy in America* 2.2.2, 586-87.

In explaining these developments, Marx gave primacy to the rise of the “capitalist mode of production,” Tocqueville to the rise of democracy; Marx understood them as the triumph of the narrow class interests of the bourgeoisie, Tocqueville as the triumph of the people as a whole (or at least of the majority governing in the people’s name). Yet in a broader sense, the greatest German radical of the nineteenth century and its greatest French liberal were looking back at the same history of the centuries preceding them, and they concurred in their verdicts.

What came before modern society, however understood, was a mode of life marked by ubiquitous and inescapable social bonds — one in which individuals could not help but think of themselves relationally, as members of communities larger than themselves. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries — what we will henceforth, following convention, call the “early modern” period — marked the breakdown of these bonds and of this mode of life as a whole. It was this historical epoch that for the first time saw the appearance of the isolated or atomistic individual: liberated, or perhaps banished, from all previous communal ties, and stepping out, or perhaps cast out, into a new and unfamiliar world.

2.

What Marx and Tocqueville describe is one of the central stories that we tell about the emergence of “modernity,” however we define it. Most fundamentally, it is an account of what one is tempted to call “real history” — of the material and cultural forces reshaping everyday life for everyone, across generations, countries, classes. But this story goes hand-in-hand with a related one about the history of social thought, about the ways

that observers (most often highly unrepresentative ones, to be sure) have tried to understand their own societies, and human societies in general. In fact, I think that it supplies the most common and most basic narrative that we have about the rise of modern social thought. In its bare outlines, it goes something like this.

Western social thought, from antiquity until the advent of the modern age, tended to imagine human beings as “political animals” constituted against a social background and finding their highest goods in collective life. The purest and most influential expression of such a view can be found in Aristotle’s depiction of the relationship of the human being to the city-state (*polis*):

It is evident from these considerations, then, that a *polis* is among the things that exist by nature, that a human being is by nature a political animal [*zoon politikon*], and that anyone who is without a *polis*, not by luck but by nature, is either a poor specimen or else superhuman....The *polis* is also prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually, since the whole is necessarily prior to the part. For if the whole body is dead, there will no longer be a foot or a hand...[for] everything is defined by its task and by its capacity....Anyone who cannot form a community with others, or who does not need to because he is self-sufficient, is no part of a *polis* — he is either a beast or a god.⁵

The basic unit of analysis is not the individual person but the political community.

Isolated from this communal background, one could hardly speak of a human being at all, for we can only fulfill our essential nature within it; it is in this sense that the community is “prior” to the individual.⁶ And by and large, Aristotle’s successors maintained this

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a1-30.

⁶ This does not mean that Aristotle sees the *polis* as *historically* prior to the individual. On the contrary, he suggests that “though an impulse toward this sort of community exists by nature in everyone, whoever first established one was responsible for the greatest of goods,” since it is only within a *polis* that humans can be “perfected” by law and justice (*Politics* 1253a30-33). The priority (and the “nature”) here is teleological rather than historical: it is not that humans always or originally live in *poleis* (the city-

view of the primacy of the community over the individual, and of the human being as an essentially social creature — from the Roman ethos of self-sacrificing virtue in the service of the *res publica*, through the synthesis of Aristotelianism and Christianity in the hands of Thomas Aquinas, even down through the supposedly amoral Machiavelli, whose *Discourses* reveal him to be an ardent republican in the classical mode. The very idea of the individual isolated from society remained, if not quite unthinkable, little more than a curious hypothetical, without much significance to social analyses or political ideals.

The great break with this tradition does not come until the seventeenth century, when Thomas Hobbes takes the epochal step of imagining humans “as if they had just emerged from the earth like mushrooms,” thereby reversing the relationship of individual and community.⁷ Henceforth individuals are taken to be fundamentally *atomistic*: this means both that each individual can be meaningfully analyzed independently of others, and that each pursues goals that are (at least logically) achievable regardless of how others fare.⁸ This atomistic individual becomes the basic building block for thinking about social life; any larger collective must be analyzed as a combination of such individuals

state, after all, being only one transient arrangement of political life), but that we are *meant* to live in them.

⁷ Hobbes, *De Cive* 8.1, 102.

⁸ Taylor begins his essay “Atomism” by describing it as “a vision of society as in some sense constituted by individuals for the fulfillment of ends which [are] primarily individual” (*Philosophical Papers*, II, 187); he elsewhere suggests that “we can describe as atomist views of the human good for which it is conceivable for man to attain it alone,” in which “what men derive from association in realizing the good are a set of aids only contingently, even if almost unfailingly, linked to this association” (*Philosophical Papers*, II, 292). Cf. the discussion of “abstract individualism” in Lukes, *Individualism*, 73-78.

and derived (whether conceptually or historically) from their purposes and actions. Likewise, the pursuit of material well-being — more commonly, *self-interest* — takes its place as the baseline human motivation, in part because material well-being is the emblematic good that can be enjoyed independently of others.

Once the atomistic individual becomes the basic unit of analysis, a new question poses itself: how can such individuals form a viable social order? This question, which the twentieth-century social theorist Talcott Parsons dubbed the “Hobbesian problem of order,”⁹ is not one that would have preoccupied any of Hobbes’s predecessors: for them, the existence of a social background to individual action was to be assumed rather than explained, and the fact that the highest goods were inherently (and not merely contingently) social gave each individual a ready motive to maintain this background. Yet it is a question that becomes pressing given the foundational premises of atomistic individualism.

Hobbes’s own version of the doctrine is rather austere. Although he makes passing references to the desire for “commodious living,”¹⁰ he understands self-interest first and foremost as the brute fear of violent death; accordingly, his solution to the problem of order centers on the *state*, which alone can muster the monopoly of coercive force necessary to prevent selfish individuals from killing one another. Hobbes’s successors, however, develop the doctrine in far-reaching ways. Their key move is to understand self-interest more expansively, not as bare survival but as the accumulation and consumption of wealth. And given this more expansive understanding of self-

⁹ See Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, esp. I, 89-94.

¹⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan* 13, 90.

interest, the entire political valence of the doctrine shifts. If luxury and avarice are vices, the eighteenth-century gadfly Bernard Mandeville suggests, these “private vices” nonetheless produce “public benefits” in the form of collective prosperity, without the active interference of the state.¹¹ The culmination of this movement comes with Adam Smith, the founder of modern economics, who softens the provocative tone of Mandeville’s paradox without altering its basic logic: in pursuing our individual self-interest, we are “led by an invisible hand” to increase the prosperity of society as a whole and thereby promote the common good.¹² What began as an exaltation of the state, in other words, has become an exaltation of the *market*. But whether order springs primarily from the coercive power of the state or the invisible hand of the market, the underlying premises remain the same.

If the emergence of modern social thought replaces the political animal with the atomistic individual, what are we to make of this shift? For many, it should be considered a major step forward, inaugurating the genuinely scientific examination of human social life. Leaving behind the romanticized and quasi-mystical vision of social wholes and collective purposes, we are for the first time able to analyze society dispassionately, as an amalgamation of individuals rationally pursuing their own interests and designs. Those who share this view tend to adopt a number of different claims from (what they perceive to be) the tradition of early modern individualism: that individuals must be the fundamental unit of analysis, that these individuals are atomistic, that they are rational, and that they are broadly self-interested. It is no coincidence that figures like Mandeville

¹¹ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*.

¹² Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* IV.ii.9, 456.

and Smith are considered founders of the discipline that will become known as economics, for the tenets of atomistic individualism are originally considered characteristic of economic analysis in particular. But as economics itself increasingly becomes regarded as the model of a successful social science, many come to believe that these tenets must underpin inquiry, not just into economic activity, but into all aspects of social life.¹³ In a sense, they provide the dominant paradigm for the contemporary social sciences as a whole.

From an early stage, however, this tradition has also come under attack from thinkers of a wide variety of political and intellectual persuasions. The first great reaction against it came in the wake of the French Revolution, from those thinkers — Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre, for instance — who are often remembered as the founders of conservatism as a political ideology. They stressed the dangerous and destabilizing effects of thinking about human affairs “stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction,”¹⁴ and insisted that humans could only be understood as members of communities, bound by shared histories, cultures, regimes, religions. “In my lifetime I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians...But as for *man*, I declare that I have never in my life met him; if he exists, he is unknown to me.”¹⁵ To give primacy to the abstract individual was more than a mere intellectual error, they

¹³ For an exhaustive and highly self-conscious work along these lines, see Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*. Less theoretically self-conscious examples of this general trend are too numerous to name.

¹⁴ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 151. Burke’s admiration for Adam Smith is one indication that the fault lines were more complicated than this stylized picture would indicate.

¹⁵ de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 53.

suggested; it tended practically to sweep away the historical ties that served as the only stable basis of political order.

More systematically, and stripped of some of the counterrevolutionary polemics, G.W.F. Hegel would advance a related vision. Beginning with his early essay on natural law, Hegel aimed (in the words of one of his present-day interpreters) to “replace atomistic basic concepts with categories that are geared to the social nexus between subjects,” thereby proceeding “not from the acts of isolated subjects but rather from the framework of ethical bonds, within which subjects always already move.”¹⁶ Human beings, he insisted, require not just material satisfaction but recognition by others, and accordingly it is not an acquisitive state of nature but a “struggle for recognition” that serves as the primal scene in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. And although he was by no means dismissive of the intellectual achievements of political economy, Hegel nonetheless sought to strictly delimit its proper boundaries. “Civil society” [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*], in which self-interested individuals instrumentally pursue their ends, is for him a necessary domain of modern life, but it is one that can be shown to have arisen historically, and which must be embedded in such ethical institutions as the family and the state. Today, neo-Hegelian critics insist on an ethic of “recognition” to supplement (or replace) the materialist bias of mainstream individualist liberalism.¹⁷ More broadly,

¹⁶ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 14; Honneth (like Hegel himself) takes Hobbes as emblematic of such atomistic theories. Another influential treatment which begins with Hegel’s 1802-3 essay on natural law (published in English as *Natural Law*) is Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*.

¹⁷ See especially Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”; Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*; Fraser and Honneth, *Recognition or Redistribution?* For an engagement with and critique of this literature, see Markell, *Bound by Recognition*.

something like this line of critique underlies all the multifarious theories insisting on the historical specificity and social construction of institutions, practices, and even the very notions of the individual and of nature.

Although such attacks first emerged (in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) from a broadly conservative and counterrevolutionary milieu, they did not remain limited to its orbit. Indeed, variants of them have become the common property of the political left, right, and center. Perhaps the most prominent strand has been the Marxist one: beginning with Marx's own (Hegelian-influenced) attacks on the "Robinsonades" of the political economists, Marxists have been inclined to take the intellectual tradition that we will be examining as merely a set of apologias (whether conscious or unconscious) forming part of the ideological superstructure of nascent capitalism.¹⁸ But other strands, with deeper roots in Nietzsche and Heidegger than in Hegel and Marx, could nonetheless converge on the same general indictment, worrying about the decay of humans' higher (generally, political) capacities amid the passive consumption and base self-interest characteristic of modern mass society.¹⁹ And to mention these (to varying degrees) secular philosophical critiques is not even the scratch

¹⁸ Perhaps the most sophisticated and thorough work in this vein, which remains of lasting interest, is Macpherson's *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. Cruder variants of such a view have been so standard as to be almost taken-for-granted among "vulgar" Marxists.

¹⁹ The *locus classicus* is Nietzsche's portrayal of the "last men" ("We have invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink") in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* ("Zarathustra's Prologue," §5; in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 128-31). Three works in this vein that may loosely be grouped together (notwithstanding the many intellectual and political divergences between their authors) are Arendt, *The Human Condition*; Strauss, *Natural Right and History*; Wolin, *Politics and Vision*. Such critics need not share Nietzsche's own form of romanticizing individualism, instead often trading it in for something like a return to the classical ideal of citizenship.

the surface of the many religiously-rooted strands, which see in this history an exaltation of the profane over the sacred and of Mammon over God.

In all these diverse reactions to the tradition of early modern thought that we will be examining — admiring and critical, left-wing and right-wing, secular and religious, philosophical and social-scientific, liberal and anti-liberal — we can nonetheless perceive a common underlying architecture. It centers on the notion that thinkers like Hobbes, Mandeville, and Smith took for granted the figure of the atomistic, self-interested individual as the descriptive starting point for their theories, which they attempted to build outward from this figure. Once this notion is in place, the familiar battle lines of modern social theory become visible. For one side, the discovery of the individual marks the beginning of the scientific treatment of human social life, or the first stirrings of liberation from the tyranny of the collective. For the other, the atomistic individual is not a discovery but a delusion of the (bourgeois, liberal, capitalist, or secular) Enlightenment, and the way forward must center on recovering the social and collective basis for individuality itself (whether this recovery is understood as repudiating the Enlightenment or transcending it).

Such battle lines bring with them a whole set of related dichotomies, which continue to structure the most basic ways that we think about the social world. Community and individual, norms and interests, altruism and egoism, value-rationality and instrumental rationality, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*: these remain the poles between which our social theories have persistently oscillated. At either pole, we are close to the pure types of *homo economicus* and *homo sociologus* (or *anthropologicus*). Both types are often judged inadequate, utterly removed from the motives and behavior

of real human beings: the former at risk of seeming sociopathic, indifferent to anything but immediate self-interest, the latter at risk of seeming “oversocialized,” mindlessly embodying the values of their community to a degree that no one ever truly does.²⁰ Yet we do not really depart from this underlying conceptual framework simply by splitting the difference, allowing (for instance) that self-interested actors need a thin layer of norms to smooth out the occasional problems of collective action, or that failures of socialization allow deviant individuals to fall into egoistic behavior.²¹ The basic set of dichotomies persists even if both poles are treated as ideal types, never entirely realized in practice.

In recent decades, a number of revisionist works have taken aim at the stylized history we have been laying out, aiming to show that the supposed apostles of atomistic individualism were very different from their conventional portrayals. Much of this scholarship has been of extremely high quality, and it would be foolish to dismiss it wholesale; the reader will see in what follows how often I have been aided, prodded, and inspired by many of these works. But at the broadest level of generality, we might say that this revisionist scholarship, too, tends to preserve the basic set of dichotomies just

²⁰ For representative critiques, see respectively Sen, “Rational Fools”; Wrong, “The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology.” For more on these social-scientific “types,” see the various works of Hollis, especially *Models of Man* and *The Cunning of Reason*; for a case study of how they have been mobilized to study democracy in particular, see Barry, *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy*. I should also mention Hollis’s brief but suggestive article “Economic Man and Original Sin,” which gestures at some of the themes which will preoccupy us.

²¹ For one characteristic treatment that takes rational self-interested action to be primary, but allows that non-self-interested norms must remain as an “unknown residual” (150) necessary to explain the existence of social order, see Elster, *The Cement of Society*.

described. Precisely because it aims to defend its subjects from the caricatures of their opponents, it often tends to focus in on, and rehabilitate, the other pole in their thought — showing, for instance, that Hobbes was not an amoral nihilist, but had a robust moral theory of his own, or that Adam Smith was not a dogmatic laissez-faire ideologue, but reserved a space for the regulation of self-interested action by the political community.²² While showing that these thinkers were not what their critics portrayed them to be, the effect is to make them appear more like the critics themselves: more communitarian, more open-ended in their conceptions of human psychology, more optimistic about human moral possibilities. Cold, unfeeling *Gesellschaft* is replaced by a warmer *Gemeinschaft*, and the atomistic individual itself largely vanishes from their thought, replaced by something closer to what the critics had wanted to see all along.

This sort of rehabilitation, I think, leads us to miss out on what is genuinely distinctive about these thinkers' intellectual project — the ways in which this entire set of dichotomies fails to capture the conceptual world in which they lived, and the ways in which they may be understood not merely to anticipate but also to challenge the social theories of their successors. For although, I will argue, the atomistic individual does not play the role in their thought that has been traditionally ascribed to it, as a foundational factual premise about the social world, it does play a role that may be no less significant. And although the traditional view of these thinkers is indeed misleading, its error is not to overstate their pessimism, but to understate it.

²² Of course, the specific slant of revisionist work depends on the thinker under examination. Thus revisionist work on Hobbes tends to emphasize the rights he reserves for the individual against the state, while revisionist work on Smith tends conversely to emphasize the rights he reserves for the state against the individual.

3.

What is the conceptual world, just alluded to, which these early modern thinkers inhabited? We can only hope to sketch it in the broadest of strokes; indeed, many would suggest that it is futile to look for some underlying unity among thinkers spanning centuries, countries, and traditions. Still, I think that we can trace a few of its lineaments, at least insofar as it contrasts with our own.²³

The traditional story we tell about the rise of modernity, as we have seen, concerns the dissolution of inherited social bonds — the demise of an older and more communal world in which the absence of social ties was inconceivable, and the coming of a new one which the premises of atomistic individualism seem more accurately to describe. Yet the world of our protagonists fits rather uneasily with either of these pictures.

On the one hand, it is (or remains) a world of intense social ties, ties that form the necessary background for any truly human individual life. The Robinson Crusoe figure, the isolated person pursuing purely individual goals, acquires a certain fascination in this period, but it is not as a description of anything fundamental about human existence. On the contrary, it remains taken for granted that the normal form of human life — normal both in the sense of historically typical and conceptually primary — is life in society.

²³ Thus I am not arguing for anything so rigid and sweeping as, for instance, Foucault's *epistemes* (on which see especially *The Order of Things* and *The Archeology of Knowledge*). I merely point to a few concrete ways in which the early modern conceptual world differed from our own, without claiming (or for that matter denying) that there is some foundational unity to it that is manifested in every domain and at every level of thought.

More than that, it remains taken for granted that the individual human personality is fundamentally social in origin: that it is only by living together that individuals acquire their own goals and purposes, and that humans are far more motivated by the goods to be found in collective life than by the mere material wants that could be satisfied in isolation.

On the other hand, it is a world far removed from the idyllic and organic forms of community that later observers have often perceived in (or projected upon) the premodern past. If it is a world (to return to Tocqueville's language) in which "individualism" is largely absent, it is nonetheless one in which "egoism" is ubiquitous, and for that reason it is a highly turbulent one. The fact that individual purposes originate in social life, and indeed are only conceivable within society, does not at all mean that they tend towards the common good. As Hobbes put it, although it is true that man was born "wanting" society — since "we seek each other's company at the prompting of nature" — nonetheless "it does not follow that he was born suitably equipped" to create lasting and stable societies.²⁴ Indeed, it is our intense investment in social life that makes us so prone to destabilize it: for egoism, confined within the arena of social life, can only take the form of a desire for sheer superiority over others.

It is precisely because egoism is such a central feature of the conceptual world of these thinkers that we are so prone to assimilate this world to our own. Yet the resemblance is deceptive, for the concept of egoism itself has for them a markedly different valence. We tend to think of egoism above all in the form of *self-interest*: as the pursuit of gains that are in some sense "real," or "out there" in the world. Self-interest

²⁴ *De Cive* 1.2n, 24-25; see below, chapter III, section 2.

need not always aim at wealth, or at gains that are strictly speaking material, but these are the prototypical goods on which all other uses of the concept are modeled (just as individual interests form the model upon which collective interests are based). To speak, for instance, of certain goods as representing political “interests” is to grant them a status equivalent to those that are literally material, to accord them an objectivity or “realness” that suggests that they are not mere delusions or peculiarities of our own psychology. And the ostensibly objective character of interests stands opposed not merely to the subjective but to the social, as the very contrast between norms and interests drives home: whereas norms stand for what society tells us we should value, interests stand for what we do in fact value. These connotations of self-interest have become so ingrained that we often take them to be features of egoism as such.

What else could egoism be, if not self-interest? There is, I would suggest, at least one important alternative — let us call it *pride*. This is admittedly something of a catchall term; as we will see, early modern thinkers referred to the set of propensities that we are describing with a variety of names (vanity, honor, envy, glory, *amour-propre*), and each usage has its own particularities. Likewise, we are dealing more with a set of shared preoccupations and themes than with a single unified doctrine, and much of the rest of this study will be devoted to tracing the various permutations and transformations of the concept. Yet I do think that there is an underlying commonality, at least enough that we can trace the concept in its broad lineaments.

For the inheritors of a Christian culture, of course, pride would be at the most basic level a religious concept: the first and foremost of the seven deadly sins, and the source of all the others; a turning away from God toward man, and thus a refusal to admit

one's own finitude.²⁵ Yet as we will see, the problem of pride was from the beginning understood to have social and political implications as well as strictly theological ones. Pride, Thomas Aquinas would suggest, is most fundamentally a will to “overstep” one's bounds, whatever they may be,²⁶ and this urge to overstep is evident as much in the drive for superiority over other human beings as in the refusal to humble oneself before God. Indeed, the political valence of the concept would persist, even in cases where the theological background that had given rise to it faded away.

For our purposes, the most important aspect of pride is its inherently social and relational character. Others of the deadly sins — gluttony, say, or sloth — are comprehensible even in isolation; in that sense, they are the antecedents of the atomistic drives that bulk so large in modern social thought. But pride by its nature presupposes the existence of another being, and is defined by its refusal to accord due respect to them (whether as a superior, in the case of God, or an equal, in the case of other human beings). This relational character comes through particularly strongly in the Latin version of the term, *superbia*, which literally means something like “aboveness”; Dante would capture it as well as anyone in his portrayal of the prideful man as one “who, through abasement of another, hopes for supremacy; he only longs to see his neighbor's excellence cast down.”²⁷ And if the atomistic accumulation of wealth serves as the prototypical form of self-interest, on which other uses of the term are modeled, it is this

²⁵ On the specifically theological dimensions of the problem of pride in early modern thought, see especially Cooper, *Secular Powers*.

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II.162.1; XLIV, 118-19; see below, chapter II, section 2.

²⁷ Dante, *Purgatorio* XVII.115-17.

bare desire for superiority which serves as the prototypical form of pride — to the point that even economic self-interest itself is seen as merely a disguised form of it. “Not even human beings, after all, would be lovers of money,” Augustine suggested, in a line of thought that will recur again and again, “unless they thought that the richer they were, the more superior they would be too.”²⁸

This essentially relational aspect of pride means that it can only operate in the medium of the social world, in which there are some agreed-upon standards for assessing status and relative position. In this sense it cuts against the familiar dichotomies of modern social thought. Egoism does not, by its logic, stand opposed to action guided by social norms, but rather presupposes the existence of norms to provide its standards and dictate its goals; likewise, individual egoism does not represent a simple break or withdrawal from communal life, but rather can only exist against the background of a social collective. As self-interest has come to dominate our conceptual landscape, we have come to conflate egoism with atomism and altruism with sociability, and correspondingly we have lost any language for talking about how human beings come to wrong one another besides that of instrumentality: we do wrong when we treat people as things, as means rather than ends in themselves. Pride, by contrast, is a sharply non-instrumental way of understanding how humans harm each other: to want to surpass, abase, or dominate the other requires precisely that they be viewed as a kind of peer.

One of the central features of self-interest, we have noted, is its putatively objective character: to qualify as an interest, a given good cannot be a mere quirk of

²⁸ Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram* XI.15.19; in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, I.13, 439.

individual psychology; it must somehow exist “out there” in the world, even if only in a metaphorical sense. Pride cannot lay claim to any objectivity existing outside, or behind, the social world; the ultimate goods it strives for (as opposed to the external markers of these goods) exist only in the consciousnesses of human beings, and would vanish in the absence of subjective awareness of their existence. Thus whatever objectivity the operations of pride possess is really a kind of intersubjectivity, the product of shared standards of value and rank.

It might seem that such standards are fairly obvious — superiority means more power, money, rank, and so on — and thus that prideful actors will behave much like the selfish maximizers of subsequent social science. Indeed, one recurring strand that we will examine understands pride as fundamentally a brute *libido dominandi* (in Augustine’s phrase), a violent desire for sheer physical domination of the sort found above all in the relationship between master and slave. But another recurring strand (again with roots in Augustine’s thought) develops the idea that because pride requires a social medium, its manifestations can vary greatly depending on the specific norms governing the social world. In a milieu that values piety or altruism or martial courage, the prideful will be alternately pious, altruistic, or courageous — or at least outwardly so. Those hoping to trace pride’s workings, on this line of thought, must be attentive on the one hand to history and culture (to track the wide variety of norms that have guided different communities across times and places) and on the other to psychological interiority (to notice the ways that egoism can mimic altruism, often unbeknownst even to the actors themselves). Unmoored from any universal and objective grounding “out there,” pride can come to seem entirely protean and elusive; it is “incredible,” Mandeville wrote,

“what strange, various, unaccountable, and contradictory Forms we may be shaped into” by it.²⁹ But at the same time, this malleability offers the prospect that pride itself might be capable of being shaped into the basis of a viable social order.

Thus prideful actors have some affinities not merely with *homo economicus* but with *homo sociologus* as well. Although they are egoistic, their egoism requires a social world, not merely in the trivial sense that it requires an arena in which to manifest its preexisting essence, but in the deeper sense that the very desires that constitute it depend on the norms and values of this world. As we will see, this straddling of what we might consider “economistic” and “sociological” accounts at times led the theorists of pride into ambivalences and contradictions. But there are other ways in which it helped them avoid the pitfalls of both their economistic and sociological successors; they neither naturalized “material interest” as the universal form of egoism, nor reduced human action to the mindless reading-off of social norms. Their conception of social action remained both fundamentally social and fundamentally action.

We have seen one sense in which pride is more protean and unfixed than self-interest, unfettered to any supposed objectivity existing outside the social world. But there is another important sense in which it is far more rigid and fixed than self-interest, precisely by virtue of the same quality. For self-interest, because it is defined in atomistic and material terms that make no intrinsic reference to the social world, is capable of mutual fulfillment. One person becoming more prosperous, or materially content, does not prevent others from doing the same; individual interests may thwart one another in practice, but they need not do so as a matter of logical necessity. Indeed, the central

²⁹ *The Fable of the Bees*, II, 90; see below, chapter VI, sections 4-6.

promise of economic life, conceived atomistically, is that it might offer an expansion of material possibilities that will lift all boats at once.

Pride, by contrast, is defined with reference to superiority in the social world, and thus it implies a fixed hierarchy in which each individual's gain is another's loss. In the "scramble for preeminence," as Adam Smith put it, "when some get up others must necessarily fall undermost."³⁰ Sociality, on this way of looking at things, is not the cure for the problems of egoism but the cause of them — for the world of pride, precisely insofar as it is social, is by the same token zero-sum. It is their consciousness of this zero-sum world that gives many of these thinkers their pessimism, and their desire to break out of such a world that gives them their moral project.

4.

It has been several decades since Albert Hirschman noted the role that the notion of "interest" played for many early modern thinkers: far from simply assuming self-interest as a baseline human motivation, they hoped that interest could help tame the unruly passions and divert their potentially destructive effects into the comparatively harmless channel of commerce.³¹ The implication of Hirschman's fertile suggestion, I think, is that the postulate of self-interest was far from the cynical and disenchanted description of human motivation that it is often taken to be. Self-interest was instead an ethical ideal that such thinkers urged on their audience, although they often did so in

³⁰ *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (A)vi.54, 351; see below, chapter VII, section 10.

³¹ Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*. The disagreements that I will periodically register with Hirschman's arguments should not conceal the debt that I, like anyone else working on these themes, owe to his work.

ways that were far from straightforward. The atomistic individual, we might say, is indeed present in their thought, but in a normative rather than a descriptive register.

If atomistic self-interest is an ideal, what is the problem it is meant to solve? Hirschman himself was inclined to see it as a solution to the irregularity and unpredictability of the passions in general. Instead of being swept-along willy-nilly by their various and conflicting passions, self-interested actors would learn to plan, prioritize, seek long-term fulfillment rather than the immediate satisfaction of desire. This is something like a story of the rationalization, or the disciplining, of the passions.

But I don't think that this can be the whole story, for the problem is more specific than the mere unruliness of the passions in some general sense. After all, a prideful world, a zero-sum world defined by status and hierarchy, is entirely predictable, and in its own way orderly. Each person has a simple goal, ascent to the top, a goal that is clear and unchanging enough that we might even be tempted to call it an "interest." As everyone pursues this goal, the result will be the continual formation or reformation of a new hierarchy, which will conform to a clear and strict logic of its own.³²

It is true that by this logic every person's desire conflicts with every other's, and the success of one person in fulfilling it implies the failure of another. The world is for that reason quite unattractive. But is it therefore *irrational*? Not in any straightforward way. The fact that not everyone can fulfill the desire for superiority does not entail the irrationality of this desire, any more than the fact that no one can live forever entails the

³² Cf. Lovejoy's discussion of the implications of the traditional doctrine of the Great Chain of Being, which saw the world as "a fixed set of ideal pigeon-holes," in which "it was not impossible for the inmate of one hole to transfer to a better one," but equally in which "no one can ever rise except at the cost of another's fall" (*The Great Chain of Being*, 245-46).

irrationality of the desire for self-preservation. In particular, it is very difficult to demonstrate the irrationality of pride according to any thin notion of instrumental reason, in which reason can only dictate the most efficient way to fulfill one's ends but cannot pass judgment upon the ends themselves.

If I have 15 and you have 20 — and it does not much matter what the 15 and the 20 here are taken to represent — must I judge this better than my having 10 and you having 5? This would seem to be the critical question in adjudicating between pride and self-interest, but it is not one that instrumental reason can answer. Economic thought has historically had a strong affinity for instrumental conceptions of rationality, in part because they seem to defuse the possibility of critiquing money-making in the name of higher ethical ideals. Yet the same quality that renders self-interest irrefutable by benevolence or charity similarly renders pride irrefutable by self-interest. The problem is trivial if one assumes that people as a matter of descriptive fact tend to be self-interested rather than prideful. If one lacks confidence in this assumption — if, like our protagonists, one assumes that as a matter of descriptive fact people tend to be prideful rather than self-interested — then the problem becomes acute. Pride may seem immoral, but the accusation that it is therefore irrational reflects an instinctive bias of economic reasoning that cannot really be justified under its own premises; likewise, constant invocation of “rational self-interest” as a mantra does not prove that there is anything uniquely rational about self-interest. We often think of “reason” and “rationality” as the master-concepts of the Enlightenment. But one of the striking aspects of the history that we will trace is how marginal a role the concept of reason actually plays, how little work it actually does.

Is there any universal consideration that would require that we care about our positions in absolute rather than relative terms, that we invariably prefer to have 15 rather than 10 regardless of how those around us fare?³³ There is one possibility that seems especially promising, and it centers on the concept of *physical need*. After all, even if instrumental reason is unable to arbitrate between all the different ends and values that human beings might have, it remains the case that each of us inhabits a body and that these bodies have certain irreducible and material needs that must be satisfied for us to keep on living. Whether or not self-preservation can be taken as a pure dictate of rationality itself — is suicide strictly speaking irrational? — this irreducible physical necessity nonetheless seems to offer the prospect of some objective and universal foundation.³⁴ (It is no coincidence that attempts to demonstrate some form of objectivity in the realm of ethics have since antiquity often relied on the analogy of ethics to medicine.³⁵) Just as important as the apparent universality of physical need, however, is

³³ For present purposes we may assume that the numbers already incorporate any ways in which relative positions materially impact absolute positions. Thus we might say, for instance, that being on the short end of an inequality is in itself likely to have further effects that damage the disadvantaged party even in absolute terms. Such effects, however, are perfectly comprehensible within the logic of atomistic self-interest. The real question is whether we must invariably prefer 15 to 10, even when these numbers are understood, for instance, as comprehensive indexes of material well-being that already incorporate the material effects of relative on absolute position. We will return to these issues in chapter VIII below.

³⁴ For a depiction of early modern natural law theories as invoking the principle of self-preservation in an attempt to answer a late-Renaissance resurgence of skepticism and relativism, see Tuck, *Philosophy and Government*.

³⁵ For one notable example, see the extended analogy in Plato's *Gorgias*, e.g. at 505a-b (in *Complete Works*, 849): "Socrates: Now, isn't it also true that doctors generally allow a person to fill up his appetites, to eat when he's hungry, for example, or drink when he's thirsty as much as he wants to when he's in good health, but when he's sick they practically never allow him to fill himself with what he has an appetite for? Do you also

its atomistic character: whether I have the food or shelter necessary to survive does not depend (at least as a matter of logic) on whether you do. This would seem to offer a universal grounding for self-interest: if moving from 10 to 15 offers increased prospects for the satisfaction of physical needs, it will have a justification that does not depend on my place within the social world at all. And if we further extent the notion of needs into a notion of wants, and move from survival to pleasure, the prospect becomes still more promising, for although it may only be contingently true that I will perish with 10 and survive with 15, it is far more plausible that continual improvement of my position in absolute terms will offer continually more expansive pleasures and satisfactions beyond bare survival.

The impulse to ground the economic realm on the body and its material needs — let us simply call it the “materialist” view — has been a recurring move, as we will see, in attempts to come to grips with the new world wrought by capitalism. Doing so offered the hope that the vast expansion of material production and consumption taking place around us — the raw material “moreness,” we might say, of this new world — was not merely different from what came before but better, objectively more rational, more pleasant, more fulfilling.³⁶ And it offered the hope that self-interest, understood as the

go along with this point, at least? *Callicles*: Yes, I do. *Socrates*: And isn't it just the same way with the soul, my excellent friend? As long as it's corrupt, in that it's foolish, undisciplined, unjust and impious, it should be kept away from its appetites and not be permitted to do anything other than what will make it better.”

³⁶ Thus it is often improvements in nutrition, mortality, population, and the like that bear most of the rhetorical weight in defenses of capitalism; see, e.g., Fogel, *The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death*. Critics of capitalism have often relied on the same argumentative framework, seeking to show that it necessarily entails immiseration in bare physical terms.

accumulation by individuals of the fruits of this vast material expansion, might stand validated as the form of action dictated by humans' very constitution as material beings, as opposed to all the uncertain and contentious drives governing the social world.

Yet although the attempt to ground the objectivity of self-interest on material need may seem more convincing than the attempt to ground it on bare rationality, we will see that it runs into its own set of difficulties. For one, the minimal imperatives of biological survival cannot easily be expanded into a broader notion of "wants" while preserving their universal and atomistic character, for early modern thinkers quickly noticed and highlighted how blurry the lines could become. They saw that the same economic expansion that improved the capacity to satisfy existing needs also created new needs that were felt with the same intensity as the old ones, and that these new needs must be considered social rather than strictly biological in nature. Thus Adam Smith, who was the most systematic opponent of the materialist account of economic life,³⁷ suggested that "necessaries" included "not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people" to lack.³⁸ The new forms of consumption proliferating in commercial society might be defensible, or even in cases admirable, but they had to be understood as forms of social behavior rather than biological imperatives. More broadly, wealth was not a mere colorless and neutral means for procuring a variety of material ends — it was a form of status and power in itself. For that reason self-interest constantly threatened to collapse into, or be revealed as, its own form of positional striving, not an alternative to

³⁷ See below, chapter VII, section 3.

³⁸ *Wealth of Nations* V.ii.k.3, 869-70.

pride but simply another species of it; in this vein Smith suggested that when “we pursue riches and avoid poverty...[i]t is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure, which interests us.”³⁹ The materialist view would take physical need as the basis and guarantor of self-interest, but the colossal edifice of modern economic life can hardly sit stably on such a minimal foundation.

5.

All this is to say that atomistic self-interest cannot claim primacy over pride according to any neutral set of terms: not as a self-evident description of how humans actually tend to behave, not as a dictate of sheer rationality, not as an imperative of biological preservation or pleasure. It can only claim to represent an alternative to pride, if indeed it can even claim that much. Likewise, a form of social life based around atomistic self-interest — whether or not we live in such a form today, whether or not it could ever exist at all — would not appear as a universal description of human history, or even as a linear development of a logic only nascent in earlier forms. Instead it would only appear as a striking alternative to other modes of life, whether we judged it better, worse, or simply different.

This sense of the *peculiarity* of the modern conceptual world is, I think, something of what Marx had in mind when he wrote the famous section of *Capital* on “the fetishism of the commodity and its secret,” a section descended from the passage of the *Grundrisse* with which we began. The logic of economic life under the capitalist

³⁹ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* I.iii.2.1, 50. For the prevalence of similar views in the eighteenth century, see Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature*, 207-15.

mode of production, he suggested, should not be seen as a continuation of the logics governing other modes, all of which in various ways understood economic production as a human activity. Instead it must be seen an inversion of them, one in which “the definite social relation between men themselves” takes on “the fantastic form of a relation between things.” Marx did not, to be sure, think of fetishism as simply an intellectual error; it was a necessary reflection of the “practical relations of everyday life” under capitalism, in which each object possessed at once a use-value related to human purposes and an exchange-value independent from them, and it would only vanish once these relations assumed “a transparent and rational form.” But at the same time he stressed the perversity of this logic, the “magic and necromancy” surrounding it, the reversal of the normal hierarchy of man and thing — for only according to this logic could exchange-value (in the form of capital) “suddenly [present] itself as a self-moving substance,” one whose expansion became a limitless “end in itself” and which its human possessor could only serve as “capital personified.”⁴⁰

Without wishing to dive into all of the intricacies of Marx’s own system, I think he was right to see the conceptual world of modern economic life as historically peculiar or even perverse. The attributes of Marx’s capital — an objective quantity “out there,” beyond or detached from the human social world, its pursuit a self-evident and limitless end — are quite similar to those of interest more broadly (perhaps unsurprisingly, given the extent to which money has served as the paradigm on which the notion of interest is based). The logic of self-interest is a fetishized logic, and Marx was in my view correct to see it as historically exceptional rather than typical. This is not to claim that we should

⁴⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 163-77, 247-57.

simply dethrone self-interest and replace it with pride, taking the latter instead of the former as the baseline human motive across all times and places; as already noted, the concept of pride itself is the product of a particular history and maintains a particular valence.⁴¹ It is just to say that we should not find it particularly surprising to find a notion of egoism that takes the social world as its medium — what truly demands explanation is how we acquired a notion of egoism that does not.

But to say that the world of atomistic interest is peculiar or aberrational is not to give any verdict about its attractiveness or its value. Certainly it looks dismal compared to Marx's "association of free men," working together in relations "transparent in their simplicity" as well as their harmony.⁴² Likewise it pales in comparison to any of the other visions of harmonious human community, whether projected onto the past or anticipated in the future, that have loomed so large in the history of modern social thought. I will not pass judgment on either the feasibility or desirability of any of these visions; this work is not a contribution either to utopian or to anti-utopian thought. I will merely suggest that such visions were not the relevant alternatives for the thinkers whom we will examine. The live alternative to the world of atomistic interest, for them, was not the harmonious community of equals but the prideful world of hierarchy and domination. We need not adopt these as our own alternatives. But only by trying to recall them can we understand the appeal of atomism, or if we prefer fetishism: it offered an escape from zero-sum

⁴¹ But for classic and suggestive anthropological works that portray something much like the logic of pride operating outside Christian Europe, see Mauss, *The Gift*; Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Are these works accurately describing the conceptual worlds of the societies they examine? Or are they imputing the authors' own conceptual worlds to their subjects? It is certainly beyond my expertise to answer this question.

⁴² *Capital*, 171-72.

positional struggle, and a set of terms in which mutual benefit was at least notionally possible.

Yet if atomism could not claim any validity in neutral terms — whether as historically typical, as conceptually primary, as uniquely rational, as biologically mandated — it could only be a kind of moral project, a remedy rather than a description. The protagonists of our story urged atomism, in other words, precisely because they did not assume it. To be sure, this was often an ambivalent project, for generally its proponents did not feel much genuine warmth for material interest as a motive. Hobbes's true admiration was reserved for the few “generous natures” who acted justly not from fear of corporeal punishment but from an internalized pride in being just; Smith's was reserved for those few who sought wisdom and virtue among their equals rather than wealth and status over their inferiors.⁴³ If they nonetheless fostered an ethic of atomism, an injunction to abstract ourselves from the social world and consider only our own material interests, it stemmed from a belief that although such an ethic paled next to the best versions of human sociability, it remained a lesser evil compared to the worst and far more prevalent versions. They did not assume, as many of their successors did, that the desire for superiority was ultimately destined to be transformed into an egalitarian form of reciprocal recognition. Pride in its malign form remained a constant possibility and a ubiquitous reality, both the most natural and perhaps the most lasting form that the need for recognition tended to take.

Whether true atomism was even possible was an open question; as noted, many in the period would suggest that the pursuit of material interest was simply a disguised or

⁴³ See below, chapter III, section 4; chapter VII, section 5.

transformed kind of status-seeking rather than an escape from it. Absolute gains constantly threatened to collapse back into relative positions, the positive-sum world into the zero-sum one.⁴⁴ But even if self-interest remained ultimately prideful rather than truly atomistic, it might still be worth pursuing, offering the hope of breaking out of a purely static form of hierarchy and channeling pride into the comparatively benign realm of production and consumption. As Keynes, much later, summed up this line of thought: “It is better that a man should tyrannize over his bank balance than over his fellow-citizens; and whilst the former is sometimes denounced as being but a means to the latter, sometimes at least it is an alternative.”⁴⁵

6.

At the most general level, what concerns us here is the relationship between philosophical anthropology and social theory — put more simply, between conceptions of human nature and conceptions of social order. It might seem a bit old-fashioned, not to say regressive, to take these as the central terms. After all, haven’t we moved beyond the notion of a fixed “human nature,” instead recognizing the ways that all such conceptions of nature are shaped by history, culture, language, politics? And haven’t we moved

⁴⁴ One contemporary illustration of the phenomenon: in absolute terms, the market return on investment will tend to be positive, meaning that investment markets are producing more absolute winners than losers — a positive-sum outcome. Yet precisely because absolute gains are the norm, for serious investors the real measure of importance becomes performance *relative* to the overall market return, or “alpha.” And as the head of one of the world’s largest hedge funds bluntly puts it: “Alpha is zero sum. In order to earn more than the market return, you have to take money from somebody else.” (Quoted in Cassidy, “Mastering the Machine,” 64.)

⁴⁵ Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, 374.

beyond a narrow focus on “order” as the highest political good, instead recognizing the necessity of creativity, disagreement, conflict, radical change? Yet taken in a broader sense (and setting aside the question of how extensive the “we” here really is), neither concept has been truly superseded. For the rejection of any notion of a fixed human nature is not a rejection of philosophical anthropology; it is simply a different philosophical anthropology, one characterized above all by *malleability* rather than fixity. And this malleability requires its own set of premises about the (historical, cultural, linguistic) constitution of human nature.⁴⁶ Likewise, the notion of social order can minimally refer to any set of regularities in social life, not merely to a rigid set of regularities enforced from the top down. Every vision of social life encourages some forms of conduct and discourages others: laissez-faire economics (for instance) enjoins the pursuit of individual self-interest while forbidding force and fraud, anarchism enjoins cooperation and mutual aid while forbidding hierarchy and exploitation, and each of them is to that extent fully a social order. In this broad sense, every social theory contains both an account of human nature and an account of social order, however implicit they might be.

The relationship between these two terms can be simple, and perhaps it usually is; the desired order may seem almost a logical consequence of the propensities attributed to individual actors. The traditional stories of the Hobbesian state and the invisible hand are of this kind. Fearful individuals, concerned above all to preserve their lives, entrust sovereignty to the all-powerful coercive state which alone can accomplish this task;

⁴⁶ For one interesting set of reflections by a leading “culturalist” on what such premises might be, see Sahlins, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*, esp. 43-51, 104-12; Sahlins, *What Kinship Is—And Is Not*, esp. 37-44.

acquisitive individuals, concerned above all to better their conditions, unwittingly collaborate to produce prosperity for everyone rather than just themselves. The typical communitarian-inflected alternative to these stories also shares this feature, with something like the functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons serving as a particularly stark example: society instills the normative values in individuals that are necessary for its own maintenance, and thus each (properly-socialized) individual cannot help but reproduce the overall social order.⁴⁷

Yet it follows from what has been said already that the story we are tracing must be more complicated, and the relationship between the two terms more vexed. For pride is in a sense defined by the refusal to know one's place, the desire to overstep one's allotted bounds whatever they might be, and thus a society of prideful actors cannot easily conform to any preexisting vision of harmonious order. This is not to say that it is complete impossible for them to do so; we will see, for instance, that the seventeenth-century French Jansenists (followed to some extent by Mandeville) were remarkably adroit in sketching how *amour-propre* itself could lead the prideful to form a society indistinguishable from the image of true charity.⁴⁸ But by and large it becomes a recurring problem to explain how prideful actors can form a viable social order, and for this reason our protagonists often had to go beyond philosophical anthropology to solve the problems of social theory. They could not, in other words, simply read off their visions of social order from their visions of human nature. What filled the gap varied:

⁴⁷ Indeed, this kind of fit between the individual and communal dimensions has been the prime *desideratum* for many social theorists (with Hegel being one classic instance).

⁴⁸ See below, chapter VI, section 2.

sometimes it remained a lacuna (as, I will argue, with Hobbes), sometimes it involved utopian political engineering (as with Rousseau), sometimes it rested on sweeping historical accounts of how a viable if fragile order had contingently emerged (as with Smith or Montesquieu). In any case the problem of order remained, for all of them, a problem.

Pride has in the intervening centuries largely dropped out of our conceptual vocabularies, replaced by the familiar dichotomies of community and individual, altruism and egoism, norms and interests. With the disappearance of the problem to which atomism had been a response, the valence of atomism itself could not help but change. What began as a remedy became an assumption; what had been a moderately hopeful vision of people as they might be became a cynical and disillusioned account of people as they are. The self-interested rather than the prideful individual became the premise and the problem, to be managed with the proper incentives or bridled with the proper communal values.

Something important, I will argue, was lost in this shift. Examining a set of more recent thinkers from a variety of intellectual and political orientations, we will see that all of their theories suffer precisely from the absence of anything resembling pride.⁴⁹ In different ways they tend to read their social theories back into their philosophical anthropologies, starting with a vision of desirable social order and then simply endowing their imagined human actors with whatever qualities are necessary to produce it. As a result their theories, unlike those of their early modern predecessors, are atomistic on a

⁴⁹ At present the only such thinkers treated at length are Hayek and Rawls, although I hope eventually to include a discussion of the sociological strand represented by Durkheim and Parsons, as well as the more recent “anti-normative” reaction against it.

descriptive level, populated by actors who have no inclination to overstep their allotted boundaries, who may be fervent about their individual interests or their communal values but would never struggle for superiority for its own sake.⁵⁰ Committed to models of social action that are missing essential aspects of how humans actually think and behave, they accordingly run into great difficulties explaining how their visions of social order might emerge or fail to emerge.

I do not suggest that we should simply go back, attempting to resuscitate the early modern vision in its entirety. As we will see, it was by no means a seamless vision, and it had its own share of tensions, contradictions, and difficulties. Still, I think that we might conclude that our own understanding of social life is far from a clear-cut improvement, and that it would benefit from a greater awareness of what it has left behind.

7.

The chapters that follow will attempt to sketch some of the outlines of what we might call the moral history of fetishism. I make no claim to offer a comprehensive portrayal of the thinkers examined here. Many central and much-discussed areas of their thought — Hobbes’s account of the social contract, say, or Smith’s critique of mercantilism — will be treated minimally or not at all, in part because others have already treated them better than I could hope to. I have instead picked out a single thread and tried to follow it through.

⁵⁰ On the ways in which not just “undersocialized” *homo economicus* but also “oversocialized” *homo sociologus* may be considered atomistic, see Granovetter, “Economic Action and Social Structure.”

This is a historically-minded study, but it is not quite history. Like anyone else working on these topics, I have benefited enormously from the great wave of contextualist intellectual history of the last half century; I have tried to emulate its resistance to whig history and its determination to respect the ways in which the past is alien to us. On the other hand I have not attempted to reconstruct my subjects' views in precisely the terms in which they themselves would have understood them, or to recreate their intellectual milieus in all of their historical richness. Nor have I hesitated to examine their thought in light of developments that they could not have known or foreseen, to draw out and sharpen the implications of currents that remain only partially developed in their actual work, and to juxtapose them with thinkers from very different times and places. Some of the arguments that follow are historical ones, arguing for specific lines of influence or relevant intellectual contexts, and I have tried to be clear when this is the case. But the dominant logic of this study is conceptual rather than historical, and it is unapologetically written from a vantage point in the present.

With these preliminaries aside, we can start to trace our central story. We set out sixteen hundred years ago, with the thinker who did the most to shape the terms in which this story would take place, St. Augustine of Hippo.

Chapter II

Two Faces of Pride

1.

We might suspect that something like pride, considered in its most general sense, has in fact been the most typical way for human beings to conceive of egoism. On this logic it is only relatively recently that the social world — the world governed by status and norms, prestige and hierarchy — ceased to be the default arena in which humans thought of themselves as pursuing their own goals. And on this logic it is our own contemporary conception — of individuals pursuing objective interests that exist somewhere “out there” in the world, each of them following a track that crosses the others’ only incidentally — that seems strange and parochial, calling out for an explanation. Whether this suspicion is well-founded, or whether it rests on an overly stylized dichotomy of traditional and modern society, it is not my purpose to consider here. But we should at least keep in mind the possibility that the notion of pride we are examining is simply one manifestation of a far more ubiquitous phenomenon.

Be that as it may, the concept of pride that we are considering was the product of a particular tradition, specifically a Christian tradition. It would be futile to try to trace every permutation and contestation of the concept of pride that occurred over the first sixteen centuries of Christianity. But pride owed its centrality to Christian understandings in large part to a single thinker, St. Augustine, and his (by no means unambiguous) portrayal of pride in the social world would shape the course of subsequent debates through our period.¹ In sketching the contours of

¹ Cf. Green, “*Initium omnis peccati superbia*,” 407: “Augustine was the most notable ancient defender of the doctrine that pride is the first and basic sin. Though he was not the first to state the idea, he gave it such amplification and emphasis as to make it characteristically his own, and to cause it to become a commonplace in all later theology.”

the problem of pride, therefore, we begin with Augustine. Our discussion will necessarily be a limited one, touching only on those aspects of Augustine's work that are relevant to our theme while neglecting many of his most central preoccupations. In highlighting a single strand of his depiction of life in the earthly city (the *civitas terrena*), we must abstract from the vast theological project in which it was contained.² We will see, however, that it was this strand that proved such a pervasive influence on the thinkers who are the primary subjects of this study.

2.

Pride is for Augustine the first sin in both a temporal and a conceptual sense. Its original manifestation was the Fall, first of the wicked angels and then of Adam and Eve, as he describes in the *City of God*: "the first evil act of the will, since it preceded all other evil acts in man, consisted rather in its falling away from the work of God to its own works than in any one work."³ Pride in all its forms always remains an affront to God, a turning away from what is superior to what is inferior:

Moreover, what but pride can have been the beginning of their evil will? — for "pride is the beginning of sin." And what is pride but an appetite for a perverse kind of elevation? For it is a perverse kind of elevation indeed to forsake the foundation upon which the mind should rest, and to become and remain, as it were, one's own foundation....Thus, to forsake God and to exist in oneself — that is, to be pleased with oneself — is not immediately to lose all being; but it is to come closer to nothingness....By striving after more, man is diminished; when he takes delight in his own self-sufficiency, he falls away from the One who truly suffices him.⁴

² For a general introduction to Augustine's life, milieu, and intellectual preoccupations, it is still difficult to surpass Brown's deservedly famous biography *Augustine of Hippo*.

³ *The City of God against the Pagans*, XIV.11, 604.

⁴ *City of God* XIV.13, 608-10.

Even after the fall, pride remains the “the origin of all sins”: “Why does wickedness abound? Because of pride. Treat the pride, and there will be no wickedness.”⁵

If the biblical account of the Fall is for Augustine the paradigmatic example of pride, a famous anecdote from the *Confessions* serves as a more modest example from his own life. In his adolescence, he tells us, he and a few other youths stole pears from a neighbor’s tree — an act whose symbolic echoes of Adam and Eve’s transgression are obvious. Looking back on the incident from middle age, he reflects that he did not even want the pears, and that his true motive for the theft was the thrill of transgression, combined with the illicit camaraderie he felt with his friends: “Alone I would not have committed that crime, in which my pleasure lay not in what I was stealing but in the act of theft.”⁶

The incident rewards closer examination, for it highlights two aspects of pride that remain mostly implicit in the account of the Fall in the *City of God*. The first is its intensely social nature. Pride in all its forms can only be a relational concept, the most fundamental relationship being that between the individual and God. But if every prideful act is implicitly a rejection of God, it need not be consciously so; we are prideful even when (or perhaps especially when) we are unmindful of God altogether. Something about pride seems to require peers for its emergence; it is surely significant that Genesis attributes the Fall not to a solitary Adam rejecting his maker but to the interplay between Adam, Eve, and the serpent. In hindsight, Augustine can

⁵ *In Ioannis Evangelium Tractatus* XXV.16, in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III.12, 444. Cf. *De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione et de Baptismo Parvulorum* II.17.27; *Works* I.23, 98: “Consequently, do not attribute to God the cause of any human sin. The cause of all human failings is, after all, pride.” Cf. also Letter 118.3.5; *Works* II.2, 113: “the first sin, that is, the first voluntary defect, is to rejoice over one’s own power...”

⁶ *Confessions*, II.ix.17, 34.

identify his act as an attempt to “viciously and perversely imitate” God, but he suggests that it was the social bond amongst his friends that was the immediate motive for his action — “alone I would never have done it.”⁷

In the story of the pears, it is friendship that serves as the impetus to prideful self-assertion. But this is not the only — or indeed the primary — form in which pride is entangled with human sociability.⁸ Above all, it is the desire for superiority over one’s fellows that defines pride in the social world. This characteristic is visible even in the term’s Latin etymology; as Aquinas was to note much later, “pride [*superbia*] is so named because thereby a man’s will aims above [*supra*] what he really is...he who wills to overstep [*supergradi*] his bounds is proud.”⁹ Pride is a refusal to know one’s place, and if pride in relation to God is defined by the refusal of humility, pride in relation to other humans is defined by the refusal of equality. “Now the human spirit,” Augustine writes, “thinks it has something great if it can lord it over its fellows, that is over other human beings.” Such a spirit wants “to be served by what is beneath it, while refusing to serve what is above it....But when it aspires also to lord it over those who are its natural equals, that is over other human beings, this is a case of altogether intolerable pride.”¹⁰

⁷ *Confessions* II.iv.14, II.iv.16, 32-33. This fellowship of youthful thieves might be considered a prefiguration of the bands of robbers that play a famous role in the *City of God*. Cf. *City of God* IV.4, 147-48, and XIX.12, 934.

⁸ Markus suggests (“Pride and the Common Good,” 251) that in his mature writings Augustine moves from a “hierarchical” model of pride to a “social” one, and from viewing it primarily as “a breach of the right order” to viewing it primarily as “the isolation of the self.” We might add that the primary mode of this isolation for Augustine lies not in attempting to withdraw from others, but in attempting to surpass them. For a fuller exploration of Augustine’s changing views regarding pride and self-love, see O’Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*.

⁹ *Summa Theologiae* II-II.162.1; XLIV, 118-19, translation emended.

¹⁰ *De Doctrina Christiana* I.23.23; *Works* I.11, 115-16.

Pride is therefore closely linked with envy (*invidia*), the other vice that Augustine considers especially satanic in character: “pride always gives birth to this, and never exists without this child and companion.”¹¹ Augustine insists that pride, “the love of one’s own superiority,” is the cause of envy, “the hatred of another’s good fortune,” rather than the other way around, but the connection between the two is clear: “anyone in love with his own superiority will envy his peers because they are treated as his equals, and his inferiors in case they should become his equals, and his superiors because he is not treated as their equal.”¹² Once human beings have lost our sense of equal humility before God, Augustine seems to suggest, there is nothing in our psychology that would lead us contentedly to accept equal status with others. The desires to catch up to those above us, to pull them down, to surpass them — all blur together indiscriminately. It is in this sense that we can understand Augustine’s statement that there is nothing “so social by nature, so unsocial by corruption” as the human race.¹³ After the Fall, humans’ natural sociability is not so much lost as it is warped. We do not simply withdraw from the social world into our own atomistic desires; rather, we remain intensely invested in a social world that becomes seen as a site of struggle.

If the intense sociality of pride is the first of its features thrown into relief by the story of the pears, Augustine hints at the second with his repeated insistence that the objects of his theft

¹¹ *De Sancta Virginitate* xxxi; *Works* I.9, 87. For the connection of both pride and envy with the devil, cf. *City of God* XIV.3, 585-86; XIV.11, 605.

¹² *De Genesi ad Litteram* XI.14.18; *Works* I.13, 438; translation emended. Dante would connect the two vices along similar lines: the prideful man is “he who, through abasement of another, hopes for supremacy,” while the envious one, “when he is outdone, fears his own loss of fame, power, honor, favor; his sadness loves misfortune for his neighbor.” *Purgatorio*, XVII.115-20.

¹³ *City of God* XII.27, 539, translation emended.

themselves mattered little to him. “I threw away what I had picked. My feasting was only on the wickedness which I took pleasure in enjoying.”¹⁴ Other sins — lust, gluttony, avarice — fix upon specific (and more or less tangible) entities “out there” in the world; in this respect they might be considered the antecedents of the atomistic interests so central to our contemporary models of social life. But pride lacks any such fixity in the physical world. It is defined not so much by any specific object of desire or mode of behavior as by the general desire to “overstep,” to return to Aquinas’s language.

Augustine emphasizes this point in the course of a broader argument against identifying sin with carnality. He cautions against reading Paul’s warnings about living “according to the flesh” literally, stressing that “flesh” refers to human nature in its entirety rather than the body specifically. More broadly, “those who suppose that the ills of the soul derive from the body are in error,” for it was not “corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful, but the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible.”¹⁵ The polemical force of this mind-over-matter account of sin is directed particularly against pagan virtue; by making pride rather than carnality the foundation of sin, he suggests that the physical self-abnegation of pagan philosophers and heroes remains no less sinful than more transparent forms of vice.¹⁶ “Sometimes, indeed, very obvious vices are overcome by other hidden vices, which are deemed to be virtues even though those who exhibit

¹⁴ *Confessions* II.vi.12, 31.

¹⁵ *City of God* XIV.2-3, 581-86.

¹⁶ On this aspect of Augustine’s argument as it relates to his polemic against Stoicism, see the perceptive remarks in Brooke, *Philosophic Pride*, 1-11.

them are ruled by pride and lifted up by a kind of ruinous complacency. But vices are to be considered overcome only when they are conquered through the love of God.”¹⁷

This argument for the primacy of pride was far from straightforward as an interpretation of scripture. Aside from the fact that Augustine’s favorite supporting passage came from a book whose canonicity was disputed,¹⁸ he had to contend with Paul’s suggestion that avarice, rather than pride, was the root of all evil. He resolves the difficulty in a way that will prove significant for our later story:

Rightly has scripture designated pride as the beginning of all sin, saying, *The beginning of all sin is pride* (Sir. 10:13). Into this text can be slotted rather neatly that other one also from the apostle: *The root of all evils is avarice* (1 Tim. 6:10) if we understand avarice in a general sense as what goads people to go for anything more greedily than is right.

Avarice in this general sense, of which the love of money is merely a particular species, can be considered a form of pride. And, in an argument that we will encounter repeatedly throughout this study, even the seemingly asocial accumulation of wealth springs ultimately from the prideful desire for superiority: “Not even human beings, after all, would be lovers of money, unless they thought that the richer they were, the more superior they would be too.”¹⁹

In Augustine’s conception, then, pride exists at a certain remove from the visible world of human behavior and the conventional moral labels attached to it. It has what Aquinas would call a certain *generalitas* — a “general pervasiveness” or “generic quality” — that makes it difficult

¹⁷ *City of God* XXI.16, 1075. Cf. *City of God* XIV.9, 602: “Some of these [citizens of the earthly city], with a vanity as monstrous as it is rare, are so entranced by their own self-restraint that they are not stirred or excited or swayed or influenced by any emotions at all. But these rather suffer an entire loss of their humanity than achieve a true tranquility.”

¹⁸ In the *Retractiones*, Augustine acknowledged the doubts concerning the prophetic status of Ecclesiasticus. See Green, “*Initium omnis peccati superbia*,” 413.

¹⁹ *De Genesi ad Litteram* XI.15.19; *Works* I.13, 439.

to identify in the external world with any precision.²⁰ While pride is the first sin, and many specific sinful acts spring from it, “not every wrong action is done with pride.”²¹ More disconcertingly, it is unique in its connection with virtuous conduct: “Any other form of sinfulness is, of course, found in the commission of bad actions, but pride lies in ambush for good actions in order to destroy them.”²² Pride can — but need not — underlie virtually any action we encounter in the social world.

The process of socialization teaches us which actions will be praised and which scorned, which considered virtuous and which vicious. But in doing so it gives the prideful every reason to conform to this public morality; for Augustine, the primacy of pride over carnal sin means that the reward of esteem often exceeds whatever brute rewards one would gain by breaking with public morality. This means that the external social world that is visible to us gives little indication of the inner godliness of the people inhabiting it. Following his rereading of Paul in the 390s, Augustine came to emphasize that salvation can only come through grace, not through any action of our own, and hence the impossibility of discerning the saved from the damned. We

²⁰ *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 162.2; XLIV, 122-23.

²¹ *De Natura et Gratia* 29.33; *Works* I.23, 241.

²² Letter 211.6; *Works* II.4, 22. Cf. Letter 118.3.22; *Works* II.2, 117: “...unless humility precedes and accompanies and follows upon all our good actions and is set before us to gaze upon, set alongside for us to cling to, and set over us to crush us down, pride tears the whole benefit from our hand when we rejoice over some good deed. We must fear the other vices in sinful actions, but pride even in good deeds. Otherwise we will lose, because of the desire for praise, those things that were done in a praiseworthy manner.”

might be tempted to believe that those who visibly appear to have “greater character or lesser sins” constitute the heavenly city, but any such confidence is unwarranted.²³

For this reason, the heavenly and earthly cities do not correspond strictly to any visible entities in the social world. “In this world, the two cities are indeed entangled and mingled with one another; and they will remain so until the last judgment shall separate them.”²⁴ It is this deceptiveness of the social world, and the disjuncture between outer conduct and inner motives, that gives rise to Augustine’s deep preoccupation with psychological interiority. Few thinkers have been more concerned with the good of friendship, but he suggests that even our closest friends must always remain unknown to us: “During our earthly journey we are wrapped around

²³ *Ad Simplicianum de diversis quaestionibus* I.ii.22, my translation. Augustine’s newfound fatalism in this period is vividly evoked in Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 139-50. On the development of his views on original sin specifically, see Sage, “Péché originel.”

²⁴ *City of God* I.13, 49. Cf. XX.7, 981: “God wished it to be kept a secret who belongs to the devil’s faction and who does not. In this world, this is indeed kept a secret; for it is uncertain whether he who now seems to stand firm will fall, and whether he who now seems to lie fallen will rise.” There has been a great deal of debate concerning the extent to which Augustine’s two cities can be identified with the present-day church and state. A long tradition beginning in the Middle Ages tended to strictly identify the two, thereby suggesting that the Catholic Church was the City of God and paving the way for a clericalism that stressed its role in sanctifying the state; for background on this tradition see Figgis, *The Political Aspects of S. Augustine’s ‘City of God,’* Ch. 5; Arquillière, *L’augustinisme politique*. For a convincing critique of this identification model, see Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, esp. 24, 34f, 120f. Commentators tend to agree that the two cities do not correspond neatly to the church and state (not least because Augustine lacks a real concept of the “state”), but that the visible church does bear a special relationship to the *civitas Dei* as its symbol, representative, or prefiguration. This general point is made by, *inter alia*, Figgis, *Political Aspects*, esp. 51, 68; Markus, *Saeculum*, Ch. 5; Martin, “The Two Cities in Augustine’s Political Philosophy.” A more recent work that does, however, tend to identify the visible church with the *civitas Dei* is Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, Ch. 12.

with flesh, through which our heart cannot be seen....we each carry our own heart along in the journey of our bodily life, and every heart is shut against every other.”²⁵

Nor is this uncertainty restricted to our knowledge of those around us. For the same reasons that we can never be sure of others’ true motives, we can never know the extent to which our own good qualities arise for a prideful desire for others’ esteem. This self-interrogating strain in Augustine reaches its height in Book X of the *Confessions*, where he admits the constant struggle against sin that he must wage even after his conversion. Following the First Epistle of John, he frames this struggle in terms of three temptations — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — which he glosses as carnal pleasure, curiosity, and vanity. It is this final temptation, he argues, that is the most insidious and harmful:

In temptations of a different sort I have some capacity for self-exploration, but in this matter almost none. It is simple to see how far I have succeeded in restraining my mind from carnal pleasures and from curious quests for superfluous knowledge...But how can we live so as to be indifferent to praise, and to be sure of this in experience? Are we to live evil lives, so abandoned and depraved that no one who knows us does not detest us?...In this matter I know myself less well than I know you. I beseech you, my God, show me myself so that to my brothers who will pray for me I may confess what wound I am discovering in myself.²⁶

We cannot even hope to overcome our pride by actively shunning the praise of those around us, for in doing so we are liable to “bolster a kind of private superiority” through this act of self-

²⁵ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* LV.9; *Works* III.17, 90. For Augustine’s reflections on the vicissitudes of friendship on earth, see Letter 130.2.4; *Works* II.2, 186: “Thus in no human affairs is anything dear to a human being without a friend. But where is such a friend about whose heart and character one can in this life have a certain confidence? For no one is known to another as each is known to himself, and yet no one is known to himself so that he can be confident about his own manner of life tomorrow.” On this theme cf. *City of God* XIX.5, 925-26.

²⁶ *Confessions* X.xxxvii.60-62, 215-16. The passage Augustine invokes here is 1 John 2:16.

denial: “Often the contempt of vainglory becomes a source of even more vainglory. For it is not being scorned when the contempt is something one is proud of.”²⁷

From all this, we can discern a rough outline of pride as manifested in the psychology of the individual. It is a desire for superiority over others that is nonetheless dependent on them; since it can only operate against a social background in which there are agreed-upon standards for measuring status and rank, its goals are established by others’ opinions and its success is contingent on their recognition. For this reason it can shade into pure interiority, in which pride is differentiated from true virtue only by inner motives rather than external action. Indeed, Augustine’s relentless self-scrutiny convinces him that there is no marker by which pride can reliably be identified at all.

3.

Yet the self-examination of a mind as brilliant and idiosyncratic as Augustine’s may give a rather misleading impression of the ways in which pride manifests itself in the human race as a whole. On a larger scale, then, what does a social order based on pride look like?

One important strand of Augustine’s thinking on this theme is evident from the very first page of the *City of God*, where he announces the themes of pride and humility that will weave throughout the work. After speaking of the efforts needed “to persuade the proud how great is that virtue of humility,” he turns to the earthly city: “that city which, when it seeks mastery [*dominari adpetit*], is itself mastered by the lust for mastery [*dominandi libido dominatur*] even

²⁷ *Confessions* X.xxxviii.63, 217.

though all the nations serve it.”²⁸ Augustine will return again and again to this *libido dominandi*, or “lust for mastery,” as a defining feature of the earthly city.²⁹ If pride is always for Augustine a desire for superiority, we might take *libido dominandi* to correspond to one pole of his conception of it, in which he is inclined to understand this superiority in brute and literal terms. Its chief manifestations are conquest, cruelty, and hedonism, which it pursues to such a degree as often to be indifferent to praise and esteem in the everyday sense. He treats Nero as the trait’s chief exemplar.³⁰

But the drive for brute mastery is, for Augustine, only one manifestation of pride in the world. He contrasts *libido dominandi* with a counterpart, *amor laudis*, the “love of praise,” glory, and honor. *Amor laudis* corresponds to the other pole of his discussion of pride, in which he is inclined to understand it as generic and malleable, mimicking the true virtues. In the *Confessions*, as we have seen, Augustine depicts it as an insidious drive that even he cannot

²⁸ *City of God* Preface, 3.

²⁹ He seems to have drawn the term from Sallust’s history of Rome; see *City of God* III.14, 111. I have followed Dyson’s translation of *dominandi* as “mastery” rather than our English relative “domination.” Translations of this key phrase vary widely, and as we will see, Adam Smith preferred to speak of the “love of domination.” But such a translation risks missing an important aspect of Augustine’s discussion, since “domination” in contemporary English almost always implies unjust or oppressive rule. By contrast, *dominium* and related terms in Latin are closer to the German *Herrschaft* in that they need not be pejorative. (Thus it would not be oxymoronic to speak of legitimate *dominium* any more than it was for Max Weber to speak of legitimate *Herrschaft*.) God, after all, is a *Dominus*; Augustine tells us that He instructed humans to rule (*dominari*) over animals, and after the Fall imposed similar relations of subordination within the human race as a necessary remedy for original sin. (See *City of God* XIX.15, 942–44.) What is objectionable about the *libido dominandi*, then, is not so much the bare fact of mastery or rulership as the lusting after (and reveling in) this position of superiority. We should occupy such roles with humility, Augustine thinks, understanding that they are simply a necessary evil; to take pride in them is to attempt to usurp the role of our true *Dominus*.

³⁰ *City of God* V.19, 224–25.

entirely escape. In the *City of God* and elsewhere, however, he makes clear that its classic exemplars are the great pagan heroes of republican Rome, and its prototypical manifestations are their feats of apparent temperance, courage, justice, and prudence.

Augustine's depiction of *amor laudis* is double-edged. On the one hand, he is keen to differentiate it from the true virtue of the Christian, and to that end insists on the essential vanity and fraudulence of apparent virtue motivated by the desire for praise:

Among all vain human objectives, the vainest is winning the praise of others. Many people reputed great in this world have achieved their manifold great deeds with a view to winning praise. They have been highly extolled in pagan civilizations, these heroes who sought glory not with God but in human estimation. For the sake of fame and glory they have lived prudently, bravely, temperately, and justly; they won praise indeed, but in attaining it they received their reward: vain men won a vain prize.³¹

He warns of “vices that in a sense border on and resemble the virtues, not truly so, but by a certain deceptive appearance” — vices whose similarity to virtue makes them difficult to name but essential to avoid. Such were the supposed virtues of the pagans, whose actions remained sinful, because performed from the wrong motives. And there is, of course, a strict criterion for separating the two, albeit not one discernible in this world. “Are you perhaps going to provide,” he mockingly asks his Pelagian opponent Julian, “some place between damnation and the kingdom of heaven for these persons who showed for their earthly fatherland a Babylonian love?”³²

³¹ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* CXVIII.12.2; *Works* III.19, 395. Cf. note 17 of this chapter.

³² *Contra Julianum* IV.3.20-26; *Works* I.24, 393-95, translation emended. The difficulty of distinguishing virtues from their neighboring vices, and the ability of the skillful orator to exploit this difficulty through rhetorical redescription (*paradiastole*) was a staple of classical theories of rhetoric and remained salient through the Renaissance; see especially Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Ch. 4. Augustine, of course, was himself trained as a rhetorician.

Elsewhere, though, Augustine aims to give *amor laudis* its due. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Book V of the *City of God*, where he offers his concluding assessment of the Roman Empire. While the previous four books had offered a relatively disillusioned view of Roman history, in this fifth book Augustine gives a somewhat more positive take, noting the feats of self-abnegation performed by the great Roman heroes. To be sure, this restraining of obvious vices for the sake of praise and glory still falls short of true Christian virtue, and the Roman exemplars were merely “less vile” than their fellows rather than truly holy.³³ Even Cato, to his discredit, sought honors for his austere civic virtue. But at the same time, there are two paths to gaining earthly esteem, and we must prefer those, like Cato, who used “virtuous means rather than deceitful intrigue to arrive at honor, glory and power.”³⁴ It is here that Augustine explicitly contrasts *amor laudis* and *libido dominandi*, making clear that the former must be considered the lesser evil, since the unsaved “are more useful to the earthly city when they have even that imperfect kind of virtue that they would be if they did not have it.”³⁵ And although the apparent virtues of the Romans may have sprung from the wrong motives, he argues that Christians may still profit “by considering what great things those Romans despised, what they endured, and what lusts they subdued.” Doing so, he suggests, is “useful to us in subduing pride,” for if the Romans did all these great deeds for a mere “earthly country which they possessed already,” how much more should Christians be willing to endure to gain the kingdom of heaven?³⁶

³³ *City of God* V.13, 213.

³⁴ *City of God* V.12, 210.

³⁵ *City of God* V.19, 22-25.

³⁶ *City of God* V.17, 218.

Beyond the virtues of individual Roman icons, what should we make of the empire as a whole? Augustine's views of the entire problem under consideration were shaped by his attempts to come to terms with Rome as a historical manifestation of the earthly city, and we will see that he is far from unequivocal in his verdict on it.³⁷ But a number of passages suggest that he takes the Roman Empire to be basically just, and indeed exemplary, as far as earthly kingdoms are concerned. In a few places he voices his preference for a world of small, peaceful states over large empires, but he typically qualifies such statements by adding that the Romans' conquests were the result of just wars necessitated by the incursions of their enemies,³⁸ and in a letter he is even willing to say that the Roman republic expanded through the "virtues" (and not merely the lesser vices) of the first Romans, "even though they did not have true piety toward the true God."³⁹ The discussion of *amor laudis* in Book V refers to the empire as the "reward" for the Romans' virtue, in terms markedly stronger than Augustine's typical providentialist statements that God gives kingdoms to good and evil men alike.

³⁷ Augustine's changing assessments of Rome and its history are discussed in Markus, *Saeculum*, Ch. 3. For Augustine's "intense ambivalence" toward the Romans, see Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 307. The classic study of Augustine's relationship to the classical culture that formed him is Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*.

³⁸ *City of God* III.10, 103-4; IV.15, 161-62. One "anti-imperialist" passage without such a qualification is *City of God* IV.3, 146-47.

³⁹ The passage is worth considering in full. See Letter 138.3.17; *Works* II.2, 235: "Hence, as long as we are on a journey away from there [the earthly city], we endure, if we cannot correct, those people who want to maintain, without punishing the vices, the republic that the first Romans established and increased by the virtues, even though they did not have true piety toward the true God, which could also have brought them by the religion of salvation to the eternal city. They nonetheless preserved a certain goodness of its own kind that was able to suffice for establishing, increasing, and preserving the earthly city. For in that way God showed, in the most wealthy and renowned empire of the Romans, the great value of civic virtues, even without the true religion, in order that it might be understood that, with this religion added, human beings become citizens of another city, whose king is truth, whose law is love, and whose limit is eternity."

By all these [praiseworthy] arts did they seek honor and power and glory, as by a true way. They were honored among almost all the nations, they imposed the laws of their empire upon many races; and they are glorious among almost all peoples to this day, in literature and history. They have no reason to complain of the justice of the highest and true God: “they have received their reward.”⁴⁰

There is irony here, particularly in light of the scriptural reference, but also a certain real appreciation.⁴¹ By ruling over such a wide expanse, the Romans served as worthy examples of worldly virtue to the world, and this is “why the one true and just God aided the Romans in achieving the glory of so great an empire; for they were good men according to the lights of the earthly city.”⁴²

Along with this relatively positive assessment of the empire goes a broader understanding of peace and social order. Early in the *City of God*, Augustine had considered the definition of a commonwealth (*res publica*) found in Cicero’s *De re publica*, according to which there can be no commonwealth (or even a “people” at all) without justice. At this early point in the work, he already suggests that true justice “does not exist except in that commonwealth whose Founder and Ruler is Christ,” and in Book XIX he goes back to Cicero’s definition to reiterate that by its standards there was never a Roman commonwealth, since true Christian justice was absent.⁴³

Later in the same book, however, he returns to the question:

⁴⁰ *City of God* V.15, 216. Cf. *City of God* V.18, 223: “It is thanks to that empire, so broad and enduring, so famous and glorious for the virtues of its great men, that those men received the rewards that they sought by their striving, and that we have before us such examples for our necessary admonition.”

⁴¹ Augustine cites Matthew 6:2: “Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.” (Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the Bible refer to the King James Version.)

⁴² *City of God* V.19, 225.

⁴³ *City of God* II.21, 76-80; XIX.21, 950-52.

But let us disregard this definition of a people and adopt another: let us say that a ‘people’ is an assembled multitude of rational creatures bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love. In this case, if we are to discover the character of any people, we have only to examine what it loves....According to this definition of ours, the Roman people is indeed a people, and its ‘property’ is without doubt a commonwealth.⁴⁴

By Cicero’s definition of a commonwealth, Augustine suggests, only the *civitas Dei* itself would qualify, since only there can we have true justice. (This is primarily a definitional rather than an empirical point; his claim is not so much that unbelievers can never act “justly” in the everyday sense as that a people who refuses to grant due acknowledgment to God is by definition unjust.⁴⁵) Some of his successors would stop there, drawing the moral that such justice was attainable on earth in a Christian commonwealth; this is the root of so-called “political Augustinianism” in the medieval period.⁴⁶ But Augustine himself never claims that true justice would be realizable in a nominally Christian state. After all, the Roman Empire had itself enjoyed Christian rulers for a century, and Augustine is notably reluctant (especially compared to other Christian writers like Eusebius and Orosius) even to attach much significance to the Christianization of the Empire; he gives no indication that the creation of a confessional

⁴⁴ *City of God* XIX.24, 960.

⁴⁵ O’Donovan suggests (“The Political Thought of *City of God* 19,” 60-61) that Augustine is unwilling to speak of a relative earthly justice (as he is willing to speak of a relative earthly peace) because justice, unlike peace, is for him an inextricably theological concept — justice must always involve “justification” in its theological sense, the forgiveness of sins.

⁴⁶ See note 24 of this chapter. Political Augustinianism in the middle ages is typically identified with the claims of the papacy against civil rulers. But as Figgis notes (*Political Aspects*, 86, 90), the interpretation of Augustine’s first definition of the commonwealth to require “a great Church-State” could be equally useful to Holy Roman Emperors eager to burnish their religious authority: “If you take the conflict between Popes and Emperors as a whole, what establishes itself is the influence of S. Augustine upon both sides, owing to the universal belief in the Empire as a Christian commonwealth, the embodiment of true justice, i.e. to the general repudiation of the second or minimizing definition (Augustine’s own) of a *respublica*.”

Christian state has altered the basic facts of Roman political life.⁴⁷ He therefore breaks with Cicero's definition of a commonwealth and offers a less stringent one, according to which Rome does indeed qualify.

This is not to say that Augustine entirely abandons any connection between Christian piety and earthly political justice; he holds on to an image of the just Christian statesman as a normative ideal for individuals. But although he of course prefers Christian to pagan rulers for any number of reasons, and strenuously resists the accusation that Christianity has made Roman earthly life worse, by the same token he offers little suggestion that Christianization as a social phenomenon (as opposed to the true piety of individuals) can or will make earthly life notably better.⁴⁸ The image of a genuinely just earthly commonwealth built upon true Christian piety is a

⁴⁷ Markus's *Saeculum* provides an extremely valuable discussion of the development of Augustine's views on all these issues. For Augustine's break from triumphalist views of Christian Empire see also Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress"; Fortin, "Augustine's 'City of God' and the Modern Historical Consciousness." Like the related problem concerning the extent to which the two cities can be identified with visible worldly institutions (on which see note 24 above), the question of whether Augustine thinks that true justice could be attainable in a present-day Christian state has provoked a fair amount of scholarly debate. For an argument that it could not, and thus that no present-day state, Christian or not, could be a "commonwealth" by Cicero's definition, see Deane's critique of McIlwain (*The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, 120f). For an argument that Augustine's second and less stringent definition is meant ironically, and thus that he calls for a Christian commonwealth that would meet the first definition, see Williams, "Politics and the Soul," esp. 59-60. A helpful discussion that mediates between these "realist" and "idealist" readings, while seemingly gravitating toward the former, is O'Donovan, "Political Thought." To my mind, Augustine's lukewarm reaction to the Christianization of the empire is a decisive piece of evidence supporting the "realist" reading.

⁴⁸ For Augustine's ideal of the Christian statesman, see esp. *City of God* V.26, 233-36, and the discussion in Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine*, esp. Ch. 6. Dodaro seems to accept that Augustine does not foresee this ideal leading to "significant moral progress in political or social life" (*Ecclesia and Res Publica*, 245). It is perhaps notable that much of the evidence for Dodaro's position comes from hortatory letters written to Christian magistrates, reinforcing the impression that Augustine saw the Christian statesman as a worthy model for individuals to strive for without necessarily taking it to be a large-scale solution to the problems of political life. I see little evidence in Augustine for Milbank's claim that "the realm

mirage, he suggests, and in a way the reasons for his refusal to accept it relate to the concerns about interiority that we have already traced. Any seemingly just or virtuous action can be the product of pride as much as true *caritas*, and the outside observer has no way of differentiating the two. A political order is above all a system of external behavior, of conduct in the social world; to demand that this conduct be rooted in the proper motives is to set an impossible task, for even if the demand were fulfilled we would have no way of knowing with certainty.⁴⁹ It is for this reason that he regards the Christianization of the empire with a certain ambivalence, since it gives the residents of the earthly city every incentive to simulate true piety.⁵⁰ And it is for this reason that justice largely drops out of the picture as a criterion for judging political life.

True peace, like true justice, is unattainable here on earth.⁵¹ But just as the earthly city has its own “imperfect kind of virtue,” so it has its own kind of peace, which is not to be shunned even by the citizens of the heavenly city:

Thus both kinds of men and both kinds of household make common use of those things which are necessary to this mortal life; but each has its own very different end in using them. So also, the earthly city, which does not live by faith, desires an earthly peace, and

of absolute dominium can progressively recede in time” with the temporal expansion of the church (*Theology and Social Theory*, 405).

⁴⁹ This opacity of individuals to each other results in the most searing dilemma that Augustine evokes in his portrayal of everyday political life, that of the judges who “can never penetrate the consciences of those upon whom they pronounce judgment” but are nevertheless compelled to perform their duties and even to torture innocents in attempting to arrive at the truth. “On the one hand, ignorance is unavoidable, and on the other, judgment is also unavoidable because human society compels it. Here, therefore...we certainly have an instance of what I call the wretchedness of man’s condition.” *City of God*, XIX.6, 926-28, translation emended.

⁵⁰ We can see some of this ambivalence in his discussion of Noah’s ark, into which every sort of creature was driven by temporal necessity, as a prefiguration of the post-Constantinian church: “For the nations have already filled the Church, and clean and unclean alike are, as it were, contained in the hull of the Church’s unity, until the appointed end is reached” (*City of God* XV.27, 692).

⁵¹ *City of God* XIX.27, 962-64.

it establishes an ordered concord of civic obedience and rule in order to secure a kind of cooperation of men's wills for the sake of attaining the things which belong to this mortal life. But the Heavenly City — or, rather, that part of it which is a pilgrim in this condition of mortality, and which lives by faith — must of necessity make use of this peace also, until this mortal state, for which such peace is necessary, shall have passed away.⁵²

At the end of Book XIX of the *City of God*, which offers his equivocal verdict on social order in general just as Book V does on Rome in particular, he returns to the theme, and gives this imperfect earthly peace a name:

A people estranged from God, therefore, must be wretched; yet even such a people as this loves a peace of its own, which is not to be despised. It will not, indeed, possess it in the end, because it does not make good use of it before the end. For the time being, however, it is advantageous to us also that this people should have such peace in this life; for, while the two cities are intermingled, we also make use of the peace of Babylon.⁵³

Augustine's social thought is famously dualistic, based upon the contrast between *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena*.⁵⁴ But it seems from all this that Augustine has built up a consistent — and to a certain degree optimistic — vision, based upon a dualism within the earthly city itself. We might say, in other words, that he offers us a hierarchy of three terms, in which the heavenly city occupies the highest place and the ugliest aspects of the earthly city the lowest; but in between sits a model of earthly life that remains fallen, yet nonetheless desirable in relative terms as well as attainable in practical ones. On the level of human motivation, we may imagine it in terms of an opposition between Christian *caritas* and *libido dominandi*, with *amor laudis* — a form of pride that is nonetheless capable of imitating true virtue — occupying the middle place. On the

⁵² *City of God* XIX.17, 945-46.

⁵³ *City of God* XIX.26, 961-62.

⁵⁴ His most famous depiction of the two cities is found in *City of God* XIV.28, 632: "Two cities, then, have been created by two loves; that is, the earthly by love of self extending even to contempt of God, and the heavenly by love of God extending to contempt of self." An important earlier discussion can be found in *De Genesi ad Litteram* XI.15.20; *Works* I.13, 439-40.

level of historical societies, we may imagine it in terms of an opposition between the heavenly city and the usual run of brutal regimes, with Rome — an empire founded upon the self-abnegating virtues of its heroes and spread through a series of just wars — in the middle.⁵⁵ On the level of social order in general, we may imagine it in terms of an opposition between the true peace that awaits the saved and the violent disorder characteristic of life on earth, with the “peace of Babylon” — an earthly peace that minimizes outright violence and coercion — in between. In each case, the highest good remains unattainable here on earth, or at least not fully or definitively attainable. But there remains a readily identifiable imitation of this good that it is possible to attain in the meantime, and which is far preferable to the widespread miseries characteristic of earthly life. This general vision provides one coherent account of pride in the world, and perhaps even offers a solution to it. But is it really Augustine’s vision?

4.

In some broad sense, we might attribute this rather neat three-part scheme to Augustine. It would be foolish to deny that he believed that the highest goods were attainable only through God and not in this world. And it would be equally foolish to deny that he nonetheless differentiated between different degrees of earthly fallenness, urging the pursuit of relative virtue, equity, and peace in even their inferior and worldly forms. To that extent the scheme is accurate. In practice, however, Augustine continually blurs the line separating the two lower terms, and perhaps erases it altogether. If we had hoped to catch hold of a form of earthly virtue that is different in kind from the lust for mastery, or a kind of earthly regime that stands as an

⁵⁵ If we attach great significance to Augustine’s “anti-imperialist” statements, we could instead identify this middle term with a world of small, peaceable and static societies.

alternative to violence and aggression, he repeatedly undercuts such hopes. This is not to say that he systematically develops an alternative theory in contrast to the stylized scheme we have presented. But it is to say that his final account of pride, of Rome, and of the earthly city in general remains equivocal and ambiguous, capable of being developed in more than one direction.

Regarding Rome, for instance, we have seen that he often distinguishes the Romans' comparatively virtuous love of praise from the outright lust for mastery, and attributes their empire to just wars of retaliation rather than mere plunder and conquest. Elsewhere, however, he muddies these distinctions, writing of "that lust for mastery which, among the other vices of the human race, belongs in its purest form to the whole Roman people."⁵⁶ He often projects this lust back into the early days of the Roman republic, resisting the attempts of historians like Sallust to read Roman history as one of republican virtue declining into imperial corruption, and instead insisting that Rome had been largely rotten from the beginning.⁵⁷ Even in Book V of the *City of God*, where we have seen that he offers his most positive assessment of the Romans, he hints that the famous virtue of the primitive Romans was ultimately inseparable from their drive for superiority and mastery:

This glory they loved most ardently. They chose to live for it, and they did not hesitate to die for it. They suppressed all other desires in their boundless desire for this one thing. In short, because they deemed it ignoble for their fatherland to serve and glorious for it to rule and command [*dominari atque imperare*], the first object of all their desire was freedom, and the second mastery [*dominam*]....Once they had achieved freedom,

⁵⁶ *City of God* I.30, 45.

⁵⁷ E.g. *City of God* II.17, 69: "Sallust says [of the early Romans], 'justice and goodness prevailed among them as much by nature as by law.' I take it, then, that the rape of the Sabine women was an instance of this justice and goodness." For other passages along these lines, see *City of God* III.13, 107; III.14, 111.

however, so great a desire for glory [*cupido gloriae*] then arose that liberty seemed to them too little by itself, unless they also sought dominion [*dominatio*] over others.⁵⁸

Augustine flirts here with what Machiavelli would suggest outright a millennium later — that conquest and subjugation were not extraneous to Roman virtue but essential to it. The love of praise and glory, once opposed to the lust for mastery, now seems to entail it.⁵⁹

Rome, Augustine tells us repeatedly, is a “second Babylon,” and thus the *pax Romana* is synonymous with the peace of Babylon.⁶⁰ But how are we to understand this peace? We have seen one conception of it already, in the notion that Rome was compelled (defensively, justly, virtuously) to impose its peace upon the nations that aggressed against it. In Book XVIII of the *City of God*, however, Augustine begins to narrate the history of the earthly city and of the two kingdoms, Babylon and Rome, that “have won a renown greatly surpassing that of all others.” And here his tone is markedly different:

The society of mortals, then, was diffused throughout all lands; and, despite all diversity of place, was linked by a kind of fellowship of common nature, even though each section of mankind pursued devices and desires of its own. In this condition, not everyone, and perhaps no one, completely attains what he desires, because not all men seek the same end; and so mankind everywhere is generally divided against itself, and when one part is

⁵⁸ *City of God* V.12, 207-8.

⁵⁹ Indeed, we might even see this instability reflected on the linguistic level; whereas praise-seeking is usually a “love” (*amor*) and mastery-seeking is a “lust” (*libido*), in the critical passage where Augustine seeks to distinguish the two, both become “desires” (*cupiditas*): see *City of God*, V.19, 223-26. We should be cautious in attaching too much significance to this vocabulary, since Augustine is elsewhere concerned to collapse the distinctions between these terms, suggesting that both *amor* and *cupiditas* can be either good or evil depending on their objects (XIV.7, 591-92), and similarly that “lust [*libido*] is the general name for desire [*cupiditas*] of every kind” (XIV.15, 613). Still, the usage might be significant insofar as Augustine recognizes (XIV.7, 592) the generally pejorative sense of *cupiditas*, and thus seems to blur the line separating the desires for praise and for mastery.

⁶⁰ For Rome as second Babylon, see *City of God* XVI.17, 725; XVIII.22, 848; XVIII.27, 856.

the stronger, it oppresses another. For the vanquished succumb to the victor, and inevitably prefer peace and survival at any price to power or even liberty.⁶¹

There is no talk of just war here, but only stronger and weaker, vanquished and victor. Rome, no longer exceptional, has been assimilated to Babylon and every other earthly regime.⁶² Notably, Augustine here uses “peace” (*pax*) to refer to the resolution of this state of affairs, in which the conquered submit to the will of the conquerors to ensure their own survival. This is not a peace that stands opposed to violence and coercion, but one constituted by it.⁶³

Augustine develops this line of thought in such a way as to strip the term “peace” of most of its positive content. All people strive for peace, including those who begin wars (since they merely “desire the present peace to be exchanged for one of their own choosing”) and bands of marauding robbers (“if only in order to invade the peace of others with greater force and safety”).⁶⁴ Indeed, there is little difference between their peace and the one imposed by rulers, since without justice, “what are kingdoms but great bands of robbers? What are bands of robbers

⁶¹ *City of God* XVIII.2, 822.

⁶² Cf. Williams, “Politics and the Soul,” 59-60 (commenting on Augustine’s second definition of a commonwealth): “There is a continuum between the ideal of classical politics and its antithesis, the tyrannies of the Orient; for without God’s justice, the one is merely on the way to becoming the other.”

⁶³ This conviction that coerced submission out of fear can constitute a viable form of peace may be linked to Augustine’s much-remarked endorsement of the religious coercion of heretics in the later decades of his life. Cf. Letter 185.6.21; *Works* II.3, 191 (translation emended): “Would anyone doubt that it is better to bring human beings to worship God by instruction than by the fear or the pain of punishment?...But, just as they are better who are guided by love, so there are many more whom fear corrects.”

⁶⁴ *City of God* XIX.12, 934. Cf. XV.4, 639: “Thus, it [the earthly city] desires earthly peace, albeit only for the sake of the lowest kind of goods; and it is that peace which it desires to achieve by waging war. For, if it conquers, and there is no one left to resist it, there will be peace, which the opposing parties did not have while they strove in their unhappy poverty for the things which they could not both possess at once.”

themselves but little kingdoms?”⁶⁵ Augustine’s “peace” comes to mean something that we would be more likely to understand as mere “order.” While there might be different kinds of peace, every state of affairs can be understood to embody some kind of peace, since even the most violent earthly strife still manifests the order of God’s creation. Hence “there can be peace without any war, but no war without some degree of peace,” since the individuals who wage war “could not exist at all if peace of some kind did not exist within them.”⁶⁶ The line between our middle and bottom terms, between the peace of Babylon and outright war, has been erased.

It is in this light that we must understand the following striking passage:

Thus, pride is a perverted imitation of God. For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and wishes to impose its own dominion upon its equals, in place of God’s rule. Therefore, it hates the just peace of God, and it loves its own unjust peace; but it cannot help loving peace of some kind or other...For no vice is so entirely contrary to nature as to destroy even the last vestiges of nature.⁶⁷

We might think that pride, in the form of *libido dominandi*, is the human drive that is most opposed to peace, and that the peace of Babylon (if it is any kind of peace at all) must consist of restraining or suppressing it. But here Augustine hints at the possibility of a different kind of peace — once again, something that we are more likely to call mere “order” — constituted by the unfettered operations of *libido dominandi*. Every operation of pride is “a perverted imitation of God” — the

⁶⁵ *City of God* IV.4, 147. Commentators have rightly called attention to Augustine’s qualification: it is only kingdoms without justice that are equivalent to bands of robbers. However, it is not clear that this materially changes the scope of Augustine’s claim, since he denies that there can be true justice in the earthly city. When discussing the goods of the earthly city, he tends to speak of peace and concord, but not justice, and thus the line between earthly commonwealths and robber bands remains a blurry one.

⁶⁶ *City of God* XIX.13, 939. Much of the force of this argument is clearly directed against the Manichaeans, as Augustine stresses that there is no active force of evil, but only a (never-absolute) privation of good. But while the philosophical and theological aspects of the argument have been widely noticed, its social and political implications have largely escaped attention.

⁶⁷ *City of God* XIX.12, 936.

language here echoes Augustine's story of the pears in the *Confessions* — but by the same token no operation of pride can avoid manifesting some form of God's created order. The peace of Babylon has come unmoored from even the imperfect kind of earthly virtue that seemed to be its foundation.

What about concord? If peace is the goal of the earthly city, and in some minimal sense its inevitable result, concord is its glue. We recall that in Augustine's definition, the bond unifying the members of a commonwealth is "a common agreement [*concordis communio*] as to the objects of their love," and similarly that he has attributed the turmoil of the earthly city to the fact that "not all men seek the same end; and so mankind everywhere is generally divided against itself."⁶⁸ So if peace has failed to provide us with a criterion for distinguishing good and bad in the earthly city, we might be tempted to substitute concord in its place — to conclude that harmony results from agreement about the things we desire, and strife from disagreement.

But in other works, Augustine undercuts this move as well. Mere agreement about the objects of desire by itself need not result in harmony as we would intuitively understand it, for in many cases these objects cannot be possessed jointly, and thus mutual desire for them produces competition rather than cooperation. This, he suggests, tends to be true of temporal goods in general:

For when the things we love are the sort of things we can lose against our will, we have no option but to toil for them in utmost misery. Even worse, in order to gain possession of them, we must devise wicked and unscrupulous schemes amid the bitter, restricting circumstances of this world, where everyone wants to grab those things for himself and to get in before someone else, or to snatch them away from others.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ *City of God* XIX.24, 960; XVIII.2, 822.

⁶⁹ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* VII.16; *Works* III.15, 126.

But it is above all true of pride's chief object of desire, namely status. For this good is zero-sum by definition; there can be no superiors without inferiors. In a passage written a few years before he began the *City of God*, Augustine remarks on the dismal "society" of the prideful, in what we might take as an ironic anticipation of his later definition of the commonwealth:

For all lovers of pride and worldly mastery, with its empty status and arrogant display, and all those spirits who value such things and seek their glory in the subjection of other men — all are bound together in a single society [*societas*]. For even though they often fight amongst themselves for the sake of these things, they are still hurled by the equal weight of their desires into the same pit, and joined together by the likeness of their mores and rewards.⁷⁰

In passages such as these, the concord of the earthly city comes to seem as empty as its peace. Its inhabitants may be unified in desiring temporal goods, and the consequence of everyone's pursuit of them is an order that we might in some sense call peace. But the mechanisms by which this comes about may look scarcely different from the miseries of the world at its worst.⁷¹ The world is a sea, he suggests at one point, in which "the perverse and depraved lusts of human beings have made them like fishes devouring each other," each hoping to capitalize on the misfortunes of the others. "No sooner has a big fish devoured a smaller one than it is devoured itself by one even bigger. You savage fish, you hunt a little one as your prey, but you will soon be the prey of a monster."⁷²

⁷⁰ *De Catechizandis Rudibus* XIX.31; my translation.

⁷¹ For Augustine's reflections on the miseries of earthly life in the *City of God*, see XIX.4-8, 918-31; XXI.14, 1072-73; XXII.22-23, 1153-59.

⁷² *Enarrationes in Psalmos* LXIV.9; *Works* III.17, 276-77. Augustine's concrete examples in this passage recall those that Mandeville will use many centuries later: "Does anyone hope to inherit property without at the same time desiring someone else's death? Or does anyone look to make money, except through someone else's loss? How many people there are who aspire to high rank, but only through the downfall of others!"

There is no suggestion in Augustine that this state of affairs is liable to change over the course of human history, or that the miseries of life on earth can be remedied in some significant and lasting way by political change or moral education. This is not to say that he lacks a philosophy of history; as Figgis remarks, “[n]o one who takes the Incarnation seriously can avoid some kind of philosophy of history.”⁷³ But insofar as he has one, its distinctiveness lies precisely in denying what has been the hallmark of philosophies of history since the eighteenth century — that is, the possibility of a fundamental transformation of the conditions of human life that is internal to world history. As Markus has shown, Augustine briefly joined his fellow Christians in hoping for such a transformation from the Christianization of the Roman Empire, but his mature reflections on history are defined by his rejection of this hope, and his view that “since the coming of Christ, until the end of the world, all history is homogenous...a blank of unknown duration, capable of being filled with an infinite variety of happenings.”⁷⁴ The problem of pride is not one that will be solved until the last judgment.

Modern commentators have debated the extent to which Augustine saw the possibility of a kind of “adequate” earthly politics outside the *civitas Dei*. Some, pointing to his conviction that the two cities will remain intermingled until the end of the world, suggest that he called for an earthly peace that would enable citizens of both cities to pursue their goals jointly and in relative harmony.⁷⁵ Others, viewing the two cities primarily as visible social units rather than invisible

⁷³ Figgis, *Political Aspects*, 34.

⁷⁴ Markus, *Saeculum*, 20-23. Cf. the works by Mommsen and Fortin referenced in note 47 of this chapter.

⁷⁵ Markus’s *Saeculum* is the classic work in this vein; the earlier works by Figgis and Deane may also be considered part of it. Markus has backed off some of his stronger conclusions in later works like *Christianity and the Secular*, most notably concerning the extent to which Augustine can be taken as a kind of proto-liberal pluralist. However, for my purposes little hangs on the

eschatological categories, emphasize the utter fallenness of politics without God, generally in the service of calling for a sacralization of earthly political life.⁷⁶ The first group emphasizes the minimal definition of the commonwealth that Augustine offers in contrast to Cicero's, as well as his more favorable references to the peace of Babylon; the second downplays these, and stresses the inadequacies of an earthly order without piety. In one sense the interpretation of Augustine offered here falls squarely in the first category, at least in rejecting (for reasons already stated) the possibility that the *civitas Dei* can serve as a social force offering any meaningful solution to the problems of political life. Augustine's minimal, "secular" political categories are in practical terms all we have to work with.⁷⁷ In another sense, however, each group touches on a real strain in Augustine's thought. At times he allows for the possibility that the earthly city might arrive at a social order that, if still fallen, is at least adequate for its own purposes; at other times he takes it away. When he does so, it is not so much to call for a sacralization of political life as for a rejection of it altogether.

question of whether Augustine's politics are liberal; what is important (and what I take Markus to have shown convincingly) is that his politics are anti-sacralist, denying that the *civitas Dei* can be attained or fully embodied by any present-day earthly institution.

⁷⁶ Examples include Williams, "Politics and the Soul," and in a more polemical vein, Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*. Milbank's desire to purge Augustine of anything that might seem to anticipate secularism or individualism leads him to downplay or ignore many of the aspects that we have been highlighting. Still, his sweeping conclusion that for Augustine "the merely practical, cut off from the ecclesial, is quite simply a realm of sin" (411) does represent one real strand of Augustine's thought.

⁷⁷ Aside from its merits as an interpretation of Augustine, this is clearly the view taken by the thinkers we will consider in the rest of this work. If medieval "political Augustinians" often aimed to instantiate the *civitas Dei* on earth, our thinkers are marked in part by their refusal to do so. E.g. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. 44, 419: "The greatest, and main abuse of Scripture, and to which almost all the rest are either consequent, or subservient, is the wresting of it, to prove that the Kingdome of God, mentioned so often in the Scripture, is the present Church, or multitude of Christian men now living..."

Are Augustine's rejectionist moments truer than his pragmatist ones? Is his inclination to erase the distinctions between better and worse forms of earthly life more genuine than his inclination to make such distinctions in the first place? There is no need to try to resolve these questions definitively. In many ways, his ambivalence is only appropriate for someone whose intellectual and spiritual temperament inclined him to retreat from political life but whose station necessitated that he participate in it. It is also worth emphasizing again that in focusing on Augustine's portrait of the *civitas terrena*, we are taking a highly restricted view, neglecting the fact that his chief concern was always with the *civitas Dei*. As he came to understand the latter as fundamentally transcendent, discontinuous even from the visible institutions representing it in everyday life, we can see how the various forms of life in the earthly city tended to blur together; from the perspective of eternity, it is hardly surprising that they often appeared flattened and indistinct.

Nonetheless, Augustine's portrayal of pride in the world remains the starting point for our discussion, as it was — whether directly, or filtered through a thousand years of Christian culture — for the thinkers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries whom we will consider. Its tensions are as important as its consistencies. We get from Augustine a depiction of pride as the fundamental drive of human social life, manifested above all in a striving for superiority and a tendency to overstep one's bounds, whatever they might be. But a social order based on pride could tilt in one of two directions, depending on which aspects of the concept one emphasized. Focus on pride as *amor laudis* — generic and insidious, concerned above all with the esteem of others — and we get an order that might externally be almost indistinguishable from one based on true virtue, one whose fraudulence and fallenness is only a function of the duplicitous inner motives of its participants. Such an order will enjoy a sort of peace and concord that are inferior

to those of the heavenly city but nonetheless a kind of passable imitation of it, far superior to the misery and strife that often characterize the earthly city. Focus on pride as *libido dominandi* — brutish and domineering, concerned with bare superiority however obtained — and we get an order almost indistinguishable from disorder and a peace almost indistinguishable from war. Far from ruling out violence and coercion, such an order is constituted by it, and its features endure only as long as the precarious victories of its inhabitants. Augustine's portrayal contained both of these elements, and he was never concerned to decide definitively the relationship between them. The problem of pride, with all of its inherent tensions, would be navigated by his successors.

Chapter III

The Passion to be Reckoned Upon

1.

Thomas Hobbes has often been considered the first distinctively modern political philosopher. Such designations, of course, must always be contestable and on some level arbitrary. Yet we have seen that there is a broad story about the development of modern social thought that is shared by a surprisingly wide range of ideological traditions, and a particular image of Hobbes has formed one enduring part of this story.

Its basic outlines, to reiterate, are relatively simple. Where the classical and medieval tradition embodied above all by Aristotle and his successors took the human being to be a *zoon politikon*, a “political animal” constituted by the broader community and finding its highest goods in collective life, Hobbes marks the great break with this tradition. His thought begins by considering human beings as isolated atoms, “as if they had just emerged from the earth like mushrooms,”¹ taking their goals to be purely (or at least predominantly) self-serving ones. When these atoms are considered in the state of nature, stripped of any communal bonds or social context, the result must be the famous “Warre...of every man, against every man,” in which life is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”²

Yet although these people are selfish, concerned above all with preserving their own lives, this very selfishness offers them a way out. The collective misery of the state of nature impresses upon them the need to contract amongst themselves, “to conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men...to submit their Wills, every one to his

¹ *De Cive* 8.1, 102.

² *Leviathan* 13, 88-89.

Will, and their Judgments, to his Judgments.” The irrevocable transfer of each individual’s powers to an absolute sovereign results in the “Generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speake more reverently) of that *Mortall God*” who alone can prevent the anarchy of the state of nature and is therefore owed (nearly) absolute obedience.³ In its broad strokes, this is the vision found in Hobbes’s core works of political theory — first in the *Elements of Law* (1640) and *De Cive* (1642), circulated as England descended into civil war, then most famously in *Leviathan* (1651), published after the execution of Charles I and the accession of Oliver Cromwell to the sovereignty.

Considered in this light, Hobbes would appear as the father of the tradition taking the atomistic and self-interested individual as its foundation. The lingering question becomes whether, and how, such individuals can create and sustain a functioning social order; this is what Talcott Parsons dubbed the Hobbesian “problem of order.”⁴ The political unpalatability of Hobbes’s absolute sovereign has led most of his successors to suspect that he went wrong somewhere, but the precise nature of his failure remains disputed.⁵ Perhaps his view of humans as egoists concerned only with self-preservation is correct, but even such egoists would elect for some form of liberal democracy rather than an all-powerful and potentially despotic state. Perhaps it is largely correct, but merely needs to be trimmed back in places to allow for some occasional human propensities to altruism and community. Or perhaps, as Parsons himself argued, the Hobbesian problem is irresolvable on the basis of egoism however conceived, and it

³ *Leviathan* 17, 120.

⁴ Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, esp. I, 89-94.

⁵ Some of the classic works that begin from roughly this image of Hobbes include Watkins, *Hobbes’s System of Ideas*; Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan*; Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition*; Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory*.

is only by considering humans as thoroughly social creatures whose behavior is regulated by the norms of their societies — a sort of return to the *zoon politikon* model — that we can explain the existence of order.

This view of Hobbes is not entirely wrong, but it is misleading, both about the problem confronting him and his solution to it. By reconstructing these, we may discover that Hobbes is not so easily dispensed with after all. We can begin doing so by returning to the first and fundamental Hobbesian move, the characterization of the human being as an egoistic individual rather than a political animal.

2.

Hobbes treats the question most extensively at the very beginning of *De Cive*, where he notes that most previous writers “assume or seek to prove or simply assert that Man is an animal born fit for Society, — in the Greek phrase, *zoon politikon*,” a claim that, despite its widespread acceptance, “proceeds from a superficial view of human nature.” If man loved his fellow men as such, he would love them all equally, without concern for honor or advantage. Yet a comparison of our words to our actions refutes such optimism. “Men’s purpose in seeking each other’s company may be inferred from what they do once they meet.” Business partnerships are oriented around profit, while political alliances stem more from fear than from love. But although we are used to thinking of these sorts of relationships as instrumental, the situation is no different in private life. At social gatherings, each person seeks to “come away with a better idea of himself in comparison with someone else’s embarrassment or weakness.” When swapping stories, each seeks to aggrandize himself, making up facts if necessary; even the supposedly high-minded gatherings of philosophers consist of each one lecturing the others as he seeks to prove himself

master. In each case, “what they primarily enjoy is their own glory and not society....These are the true delights of society; we are drawn to them by nature.”⁶

Two initial points are worth noting. A first is the appearance of the triad profit-fear-glory, here proposed as the motives underlying conduct in the economic, political, and social realms respectively. Hobbes’s first major work was his 1629 translation of Thucydides’s history of the Peloponnesian war, which had included the famous account of Athens acquiring its empire “overcome by three of the greatest things, honor, fear, and profit,”⁷ and he seems to have adopted the same triad here; we will encounter it again. Fear and profit involve other humans only incidentally, but honor or glory requires them intrinsically, since glory can only appear “in comparison with someone else’s embarrassment or weakness.” A second point is Hobbes’s insistence that we are drawn to the “true delights of society,” namely glory, “by nature.” We might wonder how different this really is from the doctrine that Hobbes is aiming to refute: if humans naturally seek pleasures that are intrinsically bound to social life, why can we not characterize them as social or political animals?

Hobbes continues: “every voluntary encounter is a product either of mutual need or of the pursuit of glory,” and thus every social interaction aims either at some advantage to oneself or “reputation and honor”. Once again, we have a dichotomy between “advantages” that are attainable through social life but external to it, and a set of goods (glory, reputation, honor) that are inherently social. Hobbes roots this distinction on a further one between the mind and the body: “Every pleasure of the mind is either glory (or a good opinion of oneself), or ultimately

⁶ *De Cive* 1.2, 21-23.

⁷ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* I.76, 44. I use Hobbes’s translation when quoting Thucydides throughout.

relates to glory; the others are sensual or lead to something sensual, and can all be comprised under the name of advantages.”⁸

Up to this point, Hobbes has treated both sides of the dichotomy with equal cynicism; both glory and advantage are forms of egoism, “a product of love of self, not of love of friends.” But he goes on to distinguish between them in their potentials to serve as a basis for social life: “no large or lasting society can be based upon the passion for glory. The reason is that glorying, like honor, is nothing if everybody has it, since it consists in comparison and preeminence.” The very feature that makes the pleasures of the mind inherently social makes them inherently destabilizing: they are thoroughly positional, locked in a zero-sum world in which one person’s gain is another’s loss.

The pursuit of advantage, too, has the potential to destabilize, since it can be “much more effectively achieved by Dominion over others than by their help.” Yet although Hobbes has been writing in terms of the dyad advantage-glory, we are now reminded that he had originally set out a triad, and that the sensual and instrumental side of his basic dichotomy does have a term that can serve as a principle of social order, namely fear. “One must therefore lay it down that the origin of large and lasting societies lay not in mutual human benevolence but in men’s mutual fear.”⁹

When *De Cive* was published in 1647 (after circulating in manuscript for several years), Hobbes added a series of notes explicating some of the more ambiguous or controversial passages. The first such note answered objections to his claim that “man is not born fit for society.” Hobbes emphasizes that he is not “denying that we seek each other’s company at the

⁸ *De Cive* 1.2, 23-24.

⁹ *De Cive* 1.2, 24.

prompting of nature,” or that everyone does in fact live in societies. But this kind of social inclination is not the same as being born fit for society, for civil societies require “good faith and agreement,” as well as an appreciation of their necessity. More to the point, “even if man were born in a condition to desire society, it does not follow that he was born suitably equipped to enter society. Wanting is one thing, ability another. For even those who pridefully [*per superbiam*] reject the equal conditions without which society is not possible, still want it.”¹⁰

This final claim can help us understand the meaning of Hobbes’s much-referenced denial of natural sociability, and its connection with the underlying problem of pride. It does not involve any portrayal of humans as atomistic or indifferent to each other, or even as interested in each other only for instrumental reasons. On the contrary, he takes us to be intensely (and naturally) preoccupied with the social world and our standing in it, for reasons that are partly instrumental but mostly intrinsic to the mind and its pleasures. The problem is not so much a lack of sociability as a defect in it. The same propensities that drive us toward the social world drive us to subvert it, for the desire for society is entangled with the desire for superiority that is inconsistent with any “long or lasting society.” Hobbes tends to refer to these propensities as “glory” or “vainglory,” but here he calls them by their more common name, pride.¹¹ The problem of order, for him, is ultimately the problem of pride; a world of atomists would have better prospects of establishing a viable society than the existing world of the prideful.¹²

¹⁰ *De Cive* 1.2n, 24-25, translation emended.

¹¹ He refers to pride in a similar fashion elsewhere in *De Cive* and *Leviathan*, where it describes the refusal to treat others as equals. See *De Cive* 3.13, 50; *Leviathan* 15, 107. On Hobbes’s various uses of “glory,” “vainglory,” and “false glory,” see Cooper, *Secular Powers*, 47f.

¹² Pettit accuses Hobbes of relying on an “implausible move” in his argument: “While he rightly marks the concern that we human beings feel for our standing relative to others, he proceeds on the assumption that this always takes the form of a desire for superior standing; he ignores the

These themes are most explicit in the opening pages of *De Cive*, but they are present throughout Hobbes's major works. (Shortly, we will consider the specific case of *Leviathan* in more depth.) The *Elements*, *De Cive*, and *Leviathan* each contain similar versions of an argument about why humans cannot live together harmoniously without coercive power, like bees and ants. In each version, Hobbes stresses the ways in which our distinctively human capacities prevent this kind of spontaneous harmony. For "creatures who live by sense and appetite alone, accord of feelings is so lasting that nothing but their natural appetite is needed to maintain it."¹³ But humans are preoccupied with the pleasures of the mind as well as sensual appetite, and their capacities for speech and private judgment plunge them into a world of positional competition.¹⁴ Reason gives them the belief that they are wiser than others, leisure the opportunity to compete for power, and speech the ability to deceive others in doing so. Most fundamentally, there is the fact of pride itself, for "man, whose Joy consisteth in comparing himselfe with other men, can relish nothing but what is eminent."¹⁵

fact that often we are content with the standing of equals." (*Made with Words*, 3; cf. 96, 149-50.) Pettit is right to highlight the importance of this assumption for Hobbes, but he is perhaps too quick in dismissing it. We will see that some form of Hobbes's view was shared by all the early modern thinkers under examination; in a way, it was precisely insofar as they held this view that they understood human beings to be prideful. While Hobbes's view may be wrong, its prevalence throughout the period might make us hesitate before rejecting it altogether, and might in fact lead us to reconsider the widespread contemporary belief that equality can always or straightforwardly serve as a satisfactory substitute for superiority.

¹³ *De Cive* 5.5, 71.

¹⁴ On Hobbes's understanding of the destabilizing effects of language, see Pettit, *Made with Words*, Ch. 6.

¹⁵ *Leviathan* 17, 119. Cf. *Elements* 1.19.5, 102: "amongst other living creatures, there is no question of precedence in their own species, nor strife about honor or acknowledgement... men aim at dominion, superiority, and private wealth, which are distinct in every man, and breed contention." *De Cive* 5.5, 71: "for man virtually nothing is thought to be good which does not give its possessor some superiority and eminence above that enjoyed by other men." Latin

If the pleasures of the mind all relate ultimately to glory, as Hobbes suggests in *De Cive*, then their world is a zero-sum one — a world of relative rather than absolute values, in which superiority is the only true good and “what all have equally is nothing.”¹⁶ This is the vision suggested by the striking passage in the *Elements* comparing life to a race, in which there is “no other goal, nor other garland, but being foremost”:

To consider them behind, is glory.
To consider them before, humility....
Continually to be out-gone, is misery.
Continually to out-go the next before, is felicity.
And to forsake the course, is to die.¹⁷

This, then, is at least a rough sketch of how Hobbes understands human social life. But in arguing against the view of Hobbes as an atomistic thinker, we might seem to have neglected the crucial piece of evidence favoring such a view: namely, his state of nature. It is not entirely surprising, after all, that he attributed some social propensities to the people he saw living in existing societies around him. But doesn't his philosophy rest on stripping away this veneer to arrive at the asocial individuals underneath it?

That Hobbes's state of nature is not a genuinely pre-social or atomistic one is a fact that has been most often noted by his critics. The *locus classicus* of such a view is Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, which accused Hobbes and his fellow philosophers of having “transferred to the state of Nature ideas they had taken from Society; They spoke of Savage Man

Leviathan 17, 259: “to man, nothing is so pleasant about his own goods as the fact that they are greater than other peoples’.” (When quoting from the English *Leviathan* I have cited Tuck's edition throughout, but citations from the Latin version refer to Malcolm's edition.)

¹⁶ *De Homine* 11.6, in *Man and Citizen*, 49.

¹⁷ *Elements* 1.9.21, 47-48.

and depicted Civil man.”¹⁸ Above all, Rousseau argued, they erred in endowing men in the state of nature with *amour-propre*, the “relative sentiment, factitious, and born in society,” which leads each to desire superiority over the others, rather than simple *amour de soi-même*, the self-preservation drive that is indifferent to relative status.¹⁹ A well-known and more recent example of the same charge can be found in C.B. Macpherson’s Marxian critique. Macpherson insightfully noted the social presuppositions that undergird Hobbes’s state of nature, but he suggested that “Hobbes assumed they were universally valid,” whereas in actuality they were “tenable only about...a certain kind of society,” namely a capitalist one.²⁰

On one level, these critiques represent a genuine disagreement. Hobbes is not without a sense of history, but we will see that he envisions stark limits to human malleability, and he must therefore be at odds with those inclined to view human nature as radically shaped and reshaped by historical development.²¹ On another level, however, they seem to misunderstand Hobbes, for he makes no claim that the state of nature is a pre-social one lacking bonds of any kind. When Hobbes refers to the presence in it of language and hierarchies of prestige, or families and confederacies, we need not be surprised. Rather, as S.A. Lloyd has suggested, the state of nature

¹⁸ *Discourse on Inequality* §5, in *The Discourses and Other Early Writings*, 132.

¹⁹ *Discourse on Inequality* note XV, 214.

²⁰ Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 18. His account of the state of nature (19-29) remains useful in highlighting its social background. On this theme (without the charge of unawareness on Hobbes’s part) see also Pettit, *Made with Words*, 98-100; Lloyd, *Morality in the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes*, 73-78.

²¹ In this respect he remains in some sense a Thucydidean. Cf. *The Peloponnesian War* 1.22, 14: “But he that desires to look into the truth of things done and which (according to the condition of humanity) may be done again, or at least their like, he shall find enough herein to make him think it profitable.” 3.82, 204: “And many and heinous things happened in the cities through this sedition, which though they have been before and shall be ever as long as human nature is the same, yet they are more calm and of different kinds according to the several conjunctures.”

is defined by the lack of one particular social bond: the obligations resulting from covenants.²²

When he considers humans in the state of nature “as if they had just emerged from the earth like mushrooms,” it is only in the specific sense that they have “grown up without any obligation to each other.”²³

Nor is he committed to the idea that the state of nature was ever an actual historical stage prior to the formation of societies. The *Elements* and *De Cive* show traces of a kind of stadial theory, in which the state of nature is identified with the “savage nations” of ancient Germany and the present-day Americas, but Hobbes grows steadily more tentative on the point, and in *Leviathan*, while continuing to take the “government of small Families” in the Americas as an instance of the state of nature, he allows that “it was never generally so, over all the world.”²⁴ It is precisely his restricted definition of the state of nature — as the lack of covenants, obligations, and the sovereign who can enforce them — that allows him not to insist on its historical reality. After all, his central political point is that the state of nature can recur in any time and place, and that whenever effective sovereignty collapses, no amount of social cohesion or civilizational

²² Lloyd, *Morality in Hobbes*, 74f.

²³ *De Cive* 8.1, 102. One source of confusion surrounding this passage is that the first English translation of *De Cive* (later included in the standard Molesworth edition) translated the phrase “*sine omni unius ad alterum obligatione*” as “without all kind of engagement to each other” (*English Works*, II, 109), thereby suggesting that the state of nature lacks social ties of any kind. The more literal translation of *obligatio* as “obligation” rather than “engagement” makes Hobbes’s meaning clearer. Similar passages elsewhere in his work reinforce this reading: “Considering men therefore again in the state of nature, without covenants or subjection one to another...” (*Elements* 2.3.2, 127); “And considering men again dissolved from all covenants one with another...” (*Elements* 2.4.1, 131); “...in the pure natural state, or before men bound themselves by any agreements with each other...” (*De Cive* 1.10, 28).

²⁴ *Leviathan* 13, 89. Cf. *Elements* 1.14.12, 73; *De Cive* 1.13, 30. In the Latin *Leviathan* (13, 195), Hobbes takes Cain’s murder of Abel out of envy as an instance of the war of all against all, thereby reinforcing the sense that intense social bonds form an integral part of the state of nature.

refinement can prevent it. Whereas Rousseau was to insist that the state of nature was a genuinely pre-social stage, and thus that once humans entered societies they could never return to it, Hobbes views the state of nature as perfectly compatible with most kinds of social ties, and correspondingly it functions for him as a perpetual possibility rather than an irrecoverable past.²⁵

The Hobbesian state of nature is not merely compatible with some forms of social life; it requires them. To see why, we may return to another charge leveled by Hobbes's early modern critics. Pufendorf and Montesquieu were among those who suggested that Hobbes was mistaken to characterize the state of nature as a state of war, even on his own premises. After all, if its inhabitants are for all practical purposes equal, and if their dominant passion is fear, wouldn't they be more inclined to shy away from each other than to fight? In such circumstances, Pufendorf suggested, "only fools or rash persons will unnecessarily enter a conflict where their

²⁵ Hobbes's break with Aristotle is often framed as if it were a debate about history — as if Aristotle thought that humans were political animals in the sense of having *always* been part of a *polis* or other social grouping, whereas Hobbes rejects this view because he thinks that humans were *originally* isolated individuals. But this is to miss the real issue at stake. On the one hand, we have just seen that Hobbes need not be committed to the historical reality of the state of nature. On the other, Aristotle himself seems willing to accept that human history began prior to the establishment of any *polis*: "Hence, though an impulse toward this sort of community exists by nature in everyone, whoever first established one was responsible for the greatest of goods" (*Politics* 1253a30). Their real disagreement is more conceptual than historical. The basic structure of Aristotle's thought is teleological, and it is in this sense that he takes humans to be political animals — not that they are always or inevitably part of a *polis*, but that that they are *meant* to live in a *polis* (see above, chapter I, note 6). The rejection of Aristotelian teleology is equally basic to Hobbes's thought, and thus he is unwilling to accept the validity of such claims about *teloi* in characterizing humans, although in a sense he would agree that humans can only achieve their fundamental purposes (albeit subjective rather than objective ones) in societies. Compare Aristotle's statement on the *polis*, that "while coming into being for the sake of living, it exists for the sake of living well" (*Politics* 1252b27), and Hobbes's discussion of the human need for society: "For infants need the help of others to live, and adults to live well" (*De Cive* 1.2n, 24).

blows are certain to be returned with equal force, and where the equal strength of both parties makes the outcome uncertain.”²⁶

This might be true if Hobbes, like his contemporary Grotius, viewed the goals of war as merely “the Preservation of Life or Limbs, and either the securing or getting [of] Things useful to Life.”²⁷ Such goals breed conflict only contingently, for instance in cases of competition for scarce resources. What makes Hobbes’s state of nature so distinctively unpleasant is a third goal, which Hobbes includes and Grotius does not: glory and its relatives (vainglory, honor, pride).²⁸ Thus Hobbes isolates the “three principall causes of quarrel” in human nature: “First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory. The first, maketh men invade for Gain; the second, for Safety; and the third, for Reputation.”²⁹ In slightly different terminology, we have the Thucydidean triad of profit, fear, and honor.³⁰ Yet the valence has shifted slightly: Thucydides’s

²⁶ *De Jure Naturae et Gentium* 2.2.8; II, 170. For related critiques see Filmer, *Observations Concerning the Originall of Government*, 2-3; Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* 1.2, 6.

²⁷ *The Rights of War and Peace* 1.2.3; I, 183.

²⁸ In a sense, the line of critique offered by Pufendorf et al is related to the argument put forth in the twentieth century by Foucault, who argues that Hobbes himself takes the state of nature to be one of “unending diplomacy...not a state of war but a play of presentations that allows us, precisely, to avoid war” (*Society Must Be Defended*, 92-93). Foucault, like his predecessors, seems to underestimate Hobbes’s conviction that some people will genuinely prefer war to peace for its own sake. On the whole, Foucault’s account suffers from excessive schematism in drawing ironclad distinctions between “philosophico-juridical” and “historico-political” discourse (111, 167f) and in attempting to confine Hobbes to the former. In noting Hobbes’s reliance on (and translation of) Thucydides — who himself fails to fit Foucault’s sweeping generalizations about premodern historical writing as mere “justification of power” (66f) — we have already seen that these categories were more permeable than they might seem. Hobbes’s own history, *Behemoth*, might serve as another piece of counter-evidence.

²⁹ *Leviathan* 13, 88.

³⁰ Several scholars have pointed out the influence of Thucydides on Hobbes’s account of the state of nature in *Leviathan*, although to my knowledge the initial appearance of the triad in *De*

“honor” is a comparatively defensive and static term, invoked by the Athenian ambassadors to explain why they were willing to defend all of Greece against the Persian invaders, while Hobbes’s “glory” is more active and aggressive, inciting struggles for recognition in the absence of any threat.

The presence of glory-seeking in the state of nature has perplexed some of Hobbes’s interpreters, who are inclined to view his philosophy in terms of the rational pursuit of material interests. The temptation is either to discount it as a slip, inconsistent with Hobbes’s fundamentally atomistic individualism, or to treat reputation as instrumental to material interest — after all, “Reputation of power, is Power,”³¹ so surely the pursuit of it ultimately serves a material purpose.³² Yet Hobbes himself insists explicitly that glory-seekers pursue domination for “their delectation only” and “farther than their security requires.”³³ Rather than explaining away Hobbes’s account of glory to make it fit the confines of his alleged atomistic individualism, we might better ask whether his evident preoccupation with glory should make us reconsider whether he was really such an atomist at all.

Hobbes does not claim that glory is the sole motive for conflict; as noted, “gain” and “safety” are also crucial. But glory nonetheless has a certain primacy in triggering conflict, for it is only the presence of some glory-seeking aggressors, combined with the impossibility of

Cive has gone unnoticed. See, e.g., Schlatter, “Thomas Hobbes and Thucydides”; Klosko and Rice, “Thucydides and Hobbes’s State of Nature.”

³¹ *Leviathan* 10, 62.

³² See Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition*, esp. 74, 86-87; Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan*, 14-20.

³³ *Leviathan* 13, 87-88.

knowing with certainty who they are, that unleashes the logic of anticipation that turns the state of nature into a war of all against all:

Also because there be some, that taking pleasure in contemplating their own power in the acts of conquest, which they pursue farther than their security requires; if others, that otherwise would be glad to be at ease within modest bounds, should not by invasion increase their power, they would not be able, long time, by standing only on their defence, to subsist.³⁴

Glory is not the only component of the war of all against all, but it is the *sine qua non*.

Understanding the centrality of pride can also help us make sense of another striking feature of Hobbes's account, his focus on the purely epistemic aspects of the state of nature.

Aside from any real interests at stake, he suggests, the very impossibility of defining terms objectively forces individuals to turn to a sovereign as arbitrator:

In the state of nature, where every man is his own judge, and differeth from other concerning the names and appellations of things, and from those differences arise quarrels, and breach of peace; it was necessary there should be a common measure of all things that might fall in controversy; as for example: of what is to be called right, what good, what virtue, what much, what little, what *meum* and *tuum*, what a pound, what a quart, &c.³⁵

We might be skeptical of such claims. Surely evaluative terms like good and evil are particularly prone to engender controversy, and thus Hobbes's repeated emphasis on their instability may be

³⁴ *Leviathan* 13, 88. This feature of Hobbes's account remains crucial to the realist theories of international relations that were inspired by him, perhaps suggesting that it is not merely a peculiarity of Hobbes's own thought or a residue of a pre-scientific worldview. As Mearsheimer writes of his own "offensive realism": "Security concerns alone cannot cause great powers to act aggressively. The possibility that one state might be motivated by non-security calculations is a necessary condition for offensive realism, as well as for any other structural theory of international politics that predicts security competition." (*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 414n8.)

³⁵ *Elements* 2.10.8, 188. Tuck lays particular stress on these epistemic aspects in arguing that Hobbes (like his contemporaries) was especially concerned to achieve a solution to the forms of skepticism and relativism that became prominent beginning in the late sixteenth century; see Tuck, *Philosophy and Government*, Ch. 7.

understandable, but is this really true of merely descriptive terms like pound and quart?³⁶

Theorists of spontaneous order, beginning with Hume a century later, offer a different solution centered on the concept of *convention*: when some agreement is needed, but we are faced with an indifferent choice of a number of equally valid possible agreements (as with units of measurement), we can tacitly settle on a mutually beneficial convention without needing the intervention of a coercive power.³⁷

We are free to prefer such an analysis to Hobbes's. But his rejoinder would likely be that no such choice can ever be truly indifferent, for pride infects all of our conduct down to the most trivial definition of terms:

For even apart from open contention, the mere act of disagreement is offensive. Not to agree with someone on an issue is tacitly to accuse him of error on the issue, just as to dissent from him in a large number of points is tantamount to calling him a fool; and this is apparent in the fact that the bitterest wars are those between different sections of the same religion and different factions in the same country, when they clash over doctrines or public policy. And since all the heart's joy and pleasure lies in being able to compare oneself favourably with others and form a high opinion of oneself, men cannot avoid sometimes showing hatred and contempt for each other, by laughter or words or a gesture or other sign. There is nothing more offensive than this, nothing that triggers a stronger impulse to hurt someone.³⁸

Disagreement is never innocent, because every claim and definition is at the same time a self-assertion.

³⁶ For one skeptical reaction to such purely "intellectual" descriptions of the sources of conflict, see Tricaud, "Hobbes's Conception of the State of Nature," 114.

³⁷ See especially Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* 3.2.2, 490; and the classic twentieth-century analysis in Lewis, *Convention*.

³⁸ *De Cive* 1.5, 26-27.

This attitude underpins his disillusioned view of philosophical and political debates as forums in which each participant merely seeks to display his greater eloquence and wisdom.³⁹ But above all it underpins his account of religious disputes, in which theologians and preachers overlay the simple core of Christianity (that Jesus is the Messiah) with a vast edifice meant sometimes to further their worldly interests and sometimes merely to flatter their pride. When Hobbes looks back on the history of the English Civil War in *Behemoth*, and surveys the turmoil wrought by the religious claims of the Presbyterians and the political claims of the parliamentarians, he is reluctant to allow for the possibility of innocent error or sincere conviction: “though it be not likely that all of them did it out of malice, but many of them out of error, yet certainly the chief leaders were ambitious ministers and ambitious gentlemen” motivated chiefly by envy of their superiors.⁴⁰ Many of their doctrines were straightforward bids for political power, but some, like the claims of private inspiration for their scriptural interpretations, were “nothing but pride of heart and ambition, or else imposture.”⁴¹ Pride permeates our beliefs, from the most minimal definitions of terms to the grandest claims of conscience.

³⁹ E.g. *De Cive* 10.15, 124-25: “There is no reason why anyone would not prefer to spend his time on his *private business* rather than on *public affairs*, except that he sees scope for his eloquence, to acquire a reputation for intelligence and good sense, and to return home and enjoy the triumph for his great achievements with friends, parents and wife.” Cf. *De Cive* 10.9, 122.

⁴⁰ *Behemoth* 1, 23.

⁴¹ *Behemoth* 1, 53.

3.

We have seen the extent to which the problem of pride is foundational to Hobbes's theory, both in the state of nature and in everyday social and political life. Yet it has sometimes been argued that this fixation on pride and glory is an artifact of Hobbes's early work, and that *Leviathan* abandons any reliance on a particular characterization of human psychology, instead moving to a value-neutral analysis based on the structural necessities facing all actors regardless of psychological makeup.⁴² If this is the case, we might be tempted to see the problem of pride as a sort of premodern residue that Hobbes abandoned in his mature and scientific work.⁴³

Some evidence can be marshaled for this view, but there is ultimately less to it than meets the eye. It is true that Hobbes alters his three causes of quarrel, from "appetite," "comparison," and "vanity" in the *Elements* to "competition," "diffidence," and "glory" in *Leviathan*.⁴⁴ However, this is more of a cosmetic than a fundamental change. Competition (inspired by "gain") is equivalent to appetite, and glory (inspired by "reputation") to vanity, so the only real change is that diffidence (that is, fear) has replaced comparison. We might speculate that Hobbes's experience of the civil war made him more keenly aware of the ways in which the

⁴² The classic interpretation along these lines is McNeilly, *The Anatomy of Leviathan*, Ch. 6. Malcolm, following McNeilly, likewise argues for a "de-psychologizing" of Hobbes's theory between *De Cive* and *Leviathan* ("Editorial Introduction," 18); for another recent application of the McNeilly thesis, see Foisneau, "Que reste-t-il de l'état de nature de Hobbes...?" A similar (but somewhat more cautious) argument is Tricaud, "Hobbes's Conception of the State of Nature," esp. 121-23.

⁴³ In this sense, the McNeilly thesis accords with the general argument of Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*. But whereas McNeilly seems inclined to see these conceptual shifts as a step forward, Strauss suggests that Hobbes was unsuccessful in erecting a scientific theory on top of the "moral basis" of his early work, which remained its true core.

⁴⁴ *Elements* 1.14.5, 71; *Leviathan* 13, 88.

logic of violence and uncertainty drew in even those concerned only with their own safety. A more likely and prosaic reason is that Hobbes simply realized that vanity and comparison were redundant, and replaced his original scheme with the one from Thucydides; indeed, rather than discarding the account of comparison altogether in *Leviathan*, he incorporated it into the account of glory. In any case, all of Hobbes's descriptions of the state of nature stress the same basic dynamic, driven by the facts that some (but not all) people seek glory and domination and that "we cannot tell the good and the bad apart," thereby instilling in everyone "the constant need to watch, distrust, anticipate and get the better of others."⁴⁵

It is also true that in *Leviathan* Hobbes alters some of his definitions in ways that make them less obviously relational. For instance, in the *Elements* glory springs "from the imagination or conception of our own power, above the power of him that contendeth with us," whereas in *Leviathan* it springs merely "from imagination of a mans own power and ability,"⁴⁶ and similar changes are evident in terms like joy and power.⁴⁷ But again such changes are not decisive, and elsewhere in *Leviathan* Hobbes writes in ways that are just as relational as those in his early writings.⁴⁸ It remains the case that "man, whose Joy consisteth in comparing himselfe with other men, can relish nothing but what is eminent," that virtue is a quality "that is valued for eminence;

⁴⁵ *De Cive* P.12, 11. Cf. *Elements* 1.14.3, 70; *De Cive* 1.4, 26; *Leviathan* 13, 88.

⁴⁶ *Elements* 1.9.1, 36-37; *Leviathan* 6, 42.

⁴⁷ For instance, Hobbes's statement in *De Cive* that "[e]very pleasure of the mind is either glory (or a good opinion of oneself), or ultimately relates to glory" (*De Cive* 1.2, 23) is not found in *Leviathan*, nor is the statement in the *Elements* that "power simply is no more, but the excess of the power of one above that of another" (*Elements* 1.8.4, 34).

⁴⁸ Here I am in agreement with Slomp, "Hobbes on Glory and Civil Strife," 182-83, a worthwhile essay that captures most of the central points from her *Thomas Hobbes and the Political Philosophy of Glory*.

and consisteth in comparison,” and that the value or worth of a man “is not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need and judgement of another.”⁴⁹ Power, even in *Leviathan*, retains some connection with “eminence,” and in *De Homine* — published seven years later — he states that power, “if it be not extraordinary, is useless; for what all men have equally is nothing.”⁵⁰

Hobbes’s own statements about *Leviathan* suggest that he took it to be centrally preoccupied with the problem of pride. In his verse autobiography, written near the end of his life, he calls the work a “refutation of ambition” (*ambitionis elenchus*).⁵¹ Its very title, in fact, should alert us to the importance of pride within it, as Hobbes suggests in a passage towards the end of Book II:

Hitherto I have set forth the nature of Man, (whose Pride and other Passions have compelled him to submit himselfe to Government;) together with the great power of his Governour, whom I compared to *Leviathan*, taking that comparison out of the last two verses of the one and fortieth of *Job*; where God having set forth the great power of *Leviathan*, calleth him King of the Proud.⁵²

The verse alluded to appears at the top of the book’s famous title page. In a sense he could not have foregrounded the theme more clearly.

If *Leviathan* therefore continues the basic outline of the problem found in Hobbes’s earlier works, the book nonetheless contains one shift of real importance to us. To grasp this shift, we must highlight one aspect of Hobbes’s discussion of glory that we have already seen. Insofar as glory leads its pursuers to seek battle “farther than their security requires,” for

⁴⁹ *Leviathan* 17, 119; 8, 50; 10, 63.

⁵⁰ *Leviathan* 10, 62; *De Homine* 11.6, in *Man and Citizen*, 49.

⁵¹ *Thomae Hobbes Malmesburiensis Vita Carmine Expressa*, line 249, in *Latin Works*, I, 94.

⁵² *Leviathan* 28, 220-21.

“delectation” rather than mere “conservation,”⁵³ pride and self-preservation often cut in opposing directions. The pleasures of the mind can lead the prideful to neglect or even abandon the very preservation of the body.⁵⁴

Hobbes is always well aware of this fact, even in his early works. Thus in the *Elements* he notes that “many a man had rather die” than acknowledge defeat by a rival, and that “life itself, with the condition of enduring scorn, is not esteemed worth the enjoying.”⁵⁵ In *De Cive*, he writes that there are “commands that I would rather be killed than perform,” such as executing one’s own parent, case in which “a son may prefer to die rather than live in infamy and loathing.”⁵⁶ Hobbes is similarly adamant that most people will be willing to disobey their sovereigns and be killed to ensure their own salvation, since “it is crazy not to die a natural death rather than to obey and die eternal death,”⁵⁷ and in a way the two cases are not so different; the pursuits of both glory and salvation reflect a kind of desire for immortality. As the ancient Romans showed, the longing for “honour in the eyes of posterity” can be extraordinarily potent

⁵³ *Leviathan* 13, 87-88.

⁵⁴ Lloyd has been the most systematic critic of the “preservation-centered” or “preservationist” interpretation of Hobbes; see her *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes’s Leviathan* (esp. 36f) and *Morality in Hobbes* (esp. 60f). For related arguments, see Holmes, “Hobbes’s Irrational Man,” in *Passions and Constraint*, 69-99; Olsthoorn, “Worse than Death.” However, none of these authors sharply distinguish between Hobbes’s various works in this regard, instead suggesting that Hobbes consistently rejects the preservationist view; for that reason, I think that both tend to underplay the genuinely preservationist passages in the *Elements* and *De Cive* and to miss the importance of their disappearance from *Leviathan*.

⁵⁵ *Elements* 1.9.6, 39; 1.16.11, 86.

⁵⁶ *De Cive* 6.13, 82-83. This passage echoes Aristotle’s discussion of Euripides’s Alcmaeon in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1110a26-29); we shall examine Aristotle’s influence on Hobbes more closely in the following chapter.

⁵⁷ *De Cive* 18.1, 235.

in leading men to face “unbelievable dangers,” and we cannot even claim that such renown is entirely vain, “because men have a present delight therein, from the foresight of it...”⁵⁸

But in the *Elements* and *De Cive*, such claims sit uneasily alongside arguments that the desire for self-preservation is inevitable and overpowering:

For each man is drawn to desire that which is Good for him and to Avoid what is bad for him, and most of all the greatest of natural evils, which is death; this happens by a real necessity of nature as powerful as that by which a stone falls downward.⁵⁹

There are two claims here, important to separate if only because they are so easily assimilated: that everyone pursues what is “good for him,” and that doing so involves avoiding death. We will return later to the question of how, or whether, the two claims relate to one another. What is important to note here is that Hobbes treats them as identical, or at least necessarily linked. He writes continually of the “necessity of nature” — the phrase, once again, is Thucydides’s, this time from the Melian Dialogue⁶⁰ — which dictates both that “every man doth in all his voluntary actions intend some good unto himself” and, more specifically, that he “strives...to defend his Body and whatever is necessary for its protection.”⁶¹

From these presuppositions several conclusions follow. The first is that failures of self-preservation are essentially failures of reasoning; if everyone’s ultimate goal is to stay alive, those who manifestly do not seem to be preserving themselves must simply be short-sighted

⁵⁸ *De Cive* 18.14, 247; *Leviathan* 11, 71.

⁵⁹ *De Cive* 1.7, 27. Cf. *Elements* 1.14.6, 71: “...necessity of nature maketh men to will and desire *bonum sibi*, that which is good for themselves, and to avoid that which is hurtful; but most of all that terrible enemy of nature, death...”

⁶⁰ *The Peloponnesian War* 5.105, 368 (and cf. 4.61, 263): “For of the gods we thinking according to the common opinion; and of men, that for certain by necessity of nature they will everywhere reign over such as they be too strong for.” The Greek phrase which Hobbes here translates as “necessity of nature” is *phuseôs anankaias*.

⁶¹ *Elements* 1.16.6, 84; *De Cive* 2.3, 34.

about how to achieve this goal. Pride is irrational, not merely immoral. And when observing those who are acting contrary to self-preservation, we can attribute actions to them on the basis of what they *should* have done to secure it. Thus Hobbes's account of the state of nature in the *Elements* relies heavily on the notion of self-contradiction: "seeing we intend always our own safety and preservation, we manifestly contradict that our intention" when we behave imprudently.⁶² Reason itself "dictateth to every man for his own good, to seek after peace" and escape the state of nature.⁶³

Likewise, in cases where the threat of death is so immediate as to make incorrect reasoning impossible, it follows that we can predict with total certainty how those faced with it will behave; each person is "not only *right*, but *naturally compelled*, to make every effort to win what he needs for his own preservation."⁶⁴ Fear of death is not merely one motive among others; it counts as a genuine impediment on our freedom to choose, different in kind from physical obstacles, but equally infeasible.⁶⁵ As a result, in cases where there is a stark imbalance of power, "as when we say that a weaker man cannot disobey a stronger man whom he has no hope of being able to resist," we can even claim that the weaker is *obliged* to obey the stronger merely by virtue of this imbalance.⁶⁶ In this sense, Hobbes's early works suggest a kind of purely structural theory in which (barring occasional failures of rationality) people's actions can be

⁶² *Elements* 1.14.13, 74; cf. *Elements* 1.14.12, 73.

⁶³ *Elements* 1.14.14, 74.

⁶⁴ *De Cive* 3.9, 48.

⁶⁵ *De Cive* 9.9, 111. Hobbes here distinguishes between "external and absolute" impediments, like chains, and "discretionary" [*arbitraria*] ones, like the fear of death, but he suggests that both are genuine impediments.

⁶⁶ *De Cive* 15.7, 175.

inferred from their power and position, without any reference to their subjective desires or psychological propensities.

Thus the early works present two seemingly contradictory images: one of humans as essentially prideful, willing to risk their very lives for honor or glory, the other as essentially fearful, dominated by the instinct of self-preservation. We can attempt to bridge the two images by positing that self-preservation is fundamental and that pride is merely short-sightedness. But this is an intuitively unsatisfying solution — surely few are so short-sighted as to be unaware that waging aggressive war can jeopardize their lives. Two options remain for bringing the theory into line, and we can see glimpses of both of them in *Leviathan*. In places, as we have seen, Hobbes reins in some of his more sweeping statements about pride, but this is not the main thrust of his revision. Instead, he largely abandons the notion that self-preservation is the overriding determinant of our actions.

It is easy to miss this change, for *Leviathan* still contains various statements that recall his earlier ones about the natural necessity of self-preservation; one typical formulation is that “of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some *Good to himselfe*.”⁶⁷ But with rare exceptions, such statements drop the connection between egoism and self-preservation; if humans always pursue things that are (or seem) good to them, there is no longer any concrete specification of what these goods might be.⁶⁸ The rest of Hobbes’s theory bears similar marks of

⁶⁷ *Leviathan* 14, 93. See also 14, 98; 15, 105; 19, 133; 25, 176; 27, 203.

⁶⁸ For exceptions, see *Leviathan* 15, 106; 18, 125. For a much later (if rather brief and ambiguous) statement of what seems to be the short-sightedness view, see the *Dialogue*, 116-17, in which the Philosopher says who commits suicide that “it is to be presumed that he is not *compos mentis*, but by some inward Torment or Apprehension of something worse than Death, Distracted.”

the shift. In *De Cive*, he links the state of war to the fact that humans “cannot divest themselves of the irrational desire to reject future goods for the sake of present goods,” thereby lending support to the short-sightedness account of risk-taking; such arguments are excised from the equivalent passage in *Leviathan*.⁶⁹ In the *Elements*, self-preservation is identified with rationality itself, so that it is “reason” alone that “dictateth to every man...to seek after peace,” whereas in *Leviathan* the injunction to seek peace consists “partly in the Passions, partly in his Reason.”⁷⁰

The fear of death ceases to count as a genuine impediment on our wills, as Hobbes for the first time specifies that only *external* obstacles impede our liberty, and moves to his notorious claim that “Feare, and Liberty are consistent.”⁷¹ Henceforth no earthly imbalance of power, however stark, can compel with the force of natural necessity. There remains one case, that of God, in which overwhelming power is sufficient in itself to create a right of dominion, but Hobbes no longer treats the power disparity between stronger and weaker men as analogous to the one between God and man.⁷² In any other case, regardless of how imminent the danger, we always have a choice, and it is no longer possible to infer actions solely from structural positions.

⁶⁹ *De Cive* 3.31-2, 55; *Leviathan* 15, 110-11. The passage from *De Cive* is also interesting in that it inverts the valence of the mind-body dichotomy that he uses elsewhere — here, the present-oriented pleasures of the body lead to war, and the future-oriented pleasures of the mind to peace.

⁷⁰ *Elements* 1.14.14, 74; *Leviathan* 13, 90.

⁷¹ *Leviathan* 21, 146. On Hobbes’s abandonment of the notion of “discretionary” or “arbitrary” impediments, see Hood, “The Change in Hobbes’s Definition of Liberty.” Hood argues (153) that Hobbes arrived at his “final definition of liberty” in 1646; Hobbes did not, however, amend his account of liberty (which included arbitrary impediments) for the second edition of *De Cive* in 1647. See also Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 127f; Skinner does not seem to think that this change entails any essential modification of the “preservation-centered” view of human motivation (cf. 36).

⁷² *Leviathan* 31, 246-47 (the equivalent passage to *De Cive* 15.7, 174-75). On this theme see Foisneau, *Hobbes et la toute-puissance de Dieu*.

From Hobbes's early claim that we inevitably avoid death "by a real necessity of nature as powerful as that by which a stone falls downward," we can track a shift that culminates in the years surrounding the publication of *Leviathan*) in Hobbes's replies to Bishop Bramhall in their debates on free will: "when a man is compelled, for example, to subject himself to an enemy or to die, he hath still election left him, and a deliberation to bethink which of the two he can best endure."⁷³ No amount of earthly force can conjure up the consent that is necessary for obligation: "May I not rather die if I think fit?"⁷⁴ The shift is already apparent in *Leviathan*, with far-reaching ramifications for Hobbes's political theory as a whole; later we will return to examine these ramifications more closely.

Commentators on Hobbes have often debated whether he was a psychological egoist — that is, whether he thought that humans were always and inevitably (as opposed to merely predominantly) selfish.⁷⁵ We might be tempted to take the changes we have been tracking as evidence that he was not, or at least that he eventually moved away from viewing humans as inevitably self-centered and opened up psychological space for the possibility of altruism. The general impulse might be sound, since Hobbes certainly seems to allow for the possibility (albeit rarity) of what we would normally consider altruistic behavior; he can only be considered a psychological egoist in the most bare and tautological sense.⁷⁶ But it would be misleading to take

⁷³ *Liberty and Necessity*, in *English Works*, IV, 264.

⁷⁴ *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, in *English Works*, V, 180. As we will discuss later, Hobbes's insistence on the freedom to choose death on a practical level is perfectly compatible with his insistence on a strong form of determinism on a metaphysical level.

⁷⁵ See, for instance, McNeilly, *The Anatomy of Leviathan*, Ch. 6; Gert, "Hobbes and Psychological Egoism"; Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory*, Ch. 2.

⁷⁶ For Hobbes's statements of what Gert terms "tautological egoism," see note 67 of this chapter.

Hobbes's rejection of the inevitability of self-preservation as a sign that he has adopted a sunnier view of human nature. The concept of "egoism" (and its stylized opposition to "altruism") is too broad to be of much use here, for both self-preservation and pride fall under its umbrella.

Humans may be considered equally egoistic (or not) whether they are primarily concerned to save their own skins or to conquer and dominate others, but it is the latter question that is critically important for Hobbes's theory.

We might therefore take Hobbes's shift as a sign of increased pessimism, or at least of a fuller reckoning with the theoretical implications of his original pessimism. If it opens up space in Hobbesian psychology, what fills this space is not primarily altruism but pride. As we have seen, a world of people concerned above all with preserving their lives would be significantly less violent and turbulent than the one that Hobbes actually envisions, and in dropping the necessity of self-preservation he has removed the main theoretical obstacle to this vision. Far from abandoning the problem of pride, *Leviathan* presents it in a more consistent and thus more troubling form.

4.

If Hobbes's theory necessarily presupposes *some* sort of social background, his recurring discussions of pride also seem to be set against a more specific backdrop: an honor culture, in which reputation is both the most sought-after good and the the most frequent source of strife. When Hobbes discusses vainglory, the prototypical example he has in mind is the duel, leading men (and it is specifically young men that Hobbes is thinking of) to kill one another "for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other signe of undervalue, either direct in their Persons, or by reflexion in their Kindred, their Friends, their Nation, their Profession, or their

Name.”⁷⁷ He likewise warns against the vendetta, which causes men to seek “Revenge without respect to the Example, and profit to come,” which is merely “a triumph, or glorying in the hurt of another, tending to no end.”⁷⁸ In these and similar passages, we can glimpse the milieu in which Hobbes spent his adult life; though of modest birth himself, he lived from the age of twenty onwards as a tutor and secretary to young noblemen, chiefly the Earls of Devonshire. For all that he is remembered as an icon of the burgeoning scientific modernity of the seventeenth century, the social world that shaped him was chiefly that of the late Renaissance aristocracy.⁷⁹

The class origins and social implications of Hobbes’s writings have been debated since their publication, but such debates were particularly pronounced in the middle of the twentieth century. While Marxists had often taken Hobbes (like Locke) as a herald of rising English capitalism, this view received its most thorough and sophisticated exposition from C.B. Macpherson, who proclaimed that “Hobbes’s morality is the morality of the bourgeois world and...his state is the bourgeois state,” and likewise that he “treated society as such as essentially a series of market relations.”⁸⁰ Macpherson’s verdict found an unlikely ally in the sharply anti-Marxist conservative Leo Strauss, who had earlier suggested that “the ideals set up in [Hobbes’s]

⁷⁷ *Leviathan* 13, 88. The duel is a constant preoccupation of Hobbes’s; see, among others passages, *Leviathan* 27, 207; 27, 211; Latin *Leviathan* 30, 531.

⁷⁸ *Leviathan* 15, 106; cf. *Elements* 1.16.10-11, 86.

⁷⁹ Thomas’s classic “The Social Origins of Hobbes’s Political Thought” remains well worth reading as an examination of this milieu. For a wider-ranging look at English honor culture in this period, see Thomas, *The Ends of Life*, Ch. 5.

⁸⁰ Macpherson, “Hobbes’s Bourgeois Man,” 175; Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 67. Marx himself had a more positive view of Hobbes than that of Macpherson and most other latter-day Marxists; see Freund, “Karl Marx, un admirateur discret de Thomas Hobbes.”

political philosophy are precisely the ideals of the bourgeoisie.”⁸¹ But whereas Macpherson was more inclined to take Hobbes’s theory as descriptively bourgeois, unselfconsciously assuming the conditions of the market as its universal presuppositions, Strauss took it to be normatively so. In his view, Hobbes self-consciously rejected the aristocratic ideals that he tarred as mere “vanity” in favor of fear, the ignoble principle of bare self-preservation, and it was this rejection that formed the “moral basis” of his thought.⁸²

Strauss’s view that Hobbes was the active champion of bourgeois ideals rather than their unwitting inheritor underlies his debate in the waning days of the Weimar Republic with Carl Schmitt, whose *The Concept of the Political* had attempted to recruit Hobbes as the champion of a thoroughly anti-liberal political theory. Such an attempt was impossible, Strauss warned Schmitt, because “Hobbes differs from developed liberalism only, but certainly, by his knowing and seeing *against what* the liberal ideal of civilization has to be persistently fought for.” His achievement was precisely “in an unliberal world...to lay the foundation of liberalism.”⁸³

On the other side, Keith Thomas provided a classic and more fine-grained account of the social origins of Hobbes’s thought, which cautioned that “no simple formula is adequate to convey” its complex mixture of “aristocratic, *bourgeois* and popular elements,” but on the whole

⁸¹ Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 118. See also Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 139: “Hobbes, indeed, is the only great philosopher to whom the bourgeoisie can rightly and exclusively lay claim, even if his principles were not recognized by the bourgeois class for a long time....He gives an almost complete picture, not of Man but of the bourgeois man...” For a view of Hobbes as “the bourgeois, or individualist political philosopher par excellence” from a thinker whose roots are in the analytic rather than the continental philosophical tradition, see Gauthier, *Logic of Leviathan*, 90.

⁸² *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Ch. 2. Macpherson sometimes hinted at a similarly “normative” view of Hobbes’s project; see *Possessive Individualism*, 105.

⁸³ Strauss, “Notes on *The Concept of the Political*,” 107.

suggested that its dominant ideals were those of an enlightened aristocrat.⁸⁴ It is fair to say that Thomas's perspective has found more favor with subsequent historians. But on the whole, the entire argument has faded away in recent decades, no doubt due partly to the waning of Marxism and anti-Marxism as a central axis of debate.⁸⁵ The wave of great historical scholarship of the last fifty years has been skeptical of labels like "bourgeois" or "liberal," understandably concerned that such terms are too laden with anachronistic baggage to be of much use in understanding figures (like Hobbes) to whom they would have been alien.

There is no need to resuscitate such debates in their entirety. But it is nonetheless worth making a few observations about them, and in particular attempting to set them within the framework of Hobbes's own theory and in his own terms. For the debates about the class character of his theory are not purely anachronistic and external to it; rather, they reflect a broader disagreement about what Hobbes's solution to the problem of pride may have been.

We have seen that from an early stage, Hobbes builds his theory around a triad of motives originally taken from Thucydides: honor, profit, and fear. The first term, honor (alternately described in terms of pride, glory, vainglory, or reputation), is uniquely destabilizing due to its positional and relative nature. In general terms, it is this honor that is the characteristic motive of the aristocracy.⁸⁶ The second term, profit (or gain, competition), might be taken as a

⁸⁴ "The Social Origins of Hobbes's Political Thought," 236.

⁸⁵ Although for more recent interventions, roughly supporting the perspectives of (respectively) Macpherson and Thomas, see Bray, "Macpherson Restored?"; Hamilton, "The Social Context of Hobbes's Political Thought."

⁸⁶ Macpherson suggests that even Hobbes's treatment of glory is characteristically capitalist, since it is "the desire to be recognized as a superior individual, not merely to share in the prestige customarily accorded to a superior rank or status." ("Hobbes's Bourgeois Man," 176; cf. 172-73.) This argument is not without plausibility, and as Bray reminds us (following the "political Marxism" of Brenner and Meiksins Wood), we should be wary of treating "aristocratic" and

drive for accumulation of resources existing “out there” in the world. Hobbes, like those after him, identifies it especially with the bourgeoisie of the “great capital cities” — “merchants, whose profession is their private gain...their only glory being to grow excessively rich by buying and selling.”⁸⁷ The social valence of the third term, fear (or diffidence), is murkier. It is certainly an ignoble motive — indeed, in a culture of military valor, it is *the* ignoble motive — but it is in another sense a potentiality within all people, however much it might be overpowered by pride.

This triad of motives sits atop a further dichotomy, between the mind and the body. However, the precise relation between these two sets of distinctions is far from clear. In *De Cive*, as we have seen, Hobbes identifies glory with the mind, and indeed claims that *every* pleasure of the mind “ultimately relates to glory,” and therefore that all other desires “are sensual or lead to something sensual.”⁸⁸ Elsewhere, though, he identifies all three motives (glory included) with the body, and suggests that the only true pleasure of the mind is the disinterested curiosity of the

“capitalist” as mutually exclusive terms. But Macpherson’s argument nonetheless suffers from the overly broad characterization of “egoism” that we have already discussed; in particular, he tends to treat any form of individual egoism as synonymous with capitalist self-interest. One must question whether the desire for recognition in pre-capitalist societies was necessarily limited to a static and communal desire to share in the prestige of a customary group, as he suggests, or whether this reflects an overly stylized view of such societies as embodying traditional and communitarian *Gemeinschaft*.

⁸⁷ *Behemoth* 3, 126. Cf. *Behemoth* 3, 142: “For I consider the most part of rich subjects, that have made themselves so by craft and trade, as men that never look upon anything but their present profit; and who, to everything not lying in that way, are in a manner blind...”

⁸⁸ *De Cive* 1.2, 23. A similar identification of the pleasures of the mind with pride can be found at *Elements* 1.10.3, 49: “those men whose ends are some sensual delight; and generally are addicted to ease, food, operations and exonerations of the body, must of necessity thereby be the less delighted with those imaginations that conduce not to those ends, such as are imaginations of honour and glory, which, as I have said before, have respect to the future: for sensuality consisteth in the pleasure of the senses, which please only for the present, and taketh away the inclination to observe such things as conduce to honour...”

philosopher: “for to a man in chase of riches or authority (which in respect of knowledge are but sensuality) it is a diversion of little pleasure to consider, whether it be the motion of the sun or the earth that maketh the day.”⁸⁹ In any case, there is one motive that is clearly identified with the body in all versions, and this is the concern for one’s bare survival. Taking the human race as a whole, Hobbes suggests, “the most part are too busie in getting food” to have time for any other business.⁹⁰ While this makes them particularly susceptible to the stratagems of ambitious politicians and preachers, Hobbes is actually more sanguine about the sensuous masses than about their ostensible superiors, in whom pride and ambition are far more common than genuine philosophical curiosity. If leisure is “the mother of *Philosophy*,” it is more often the case that those “who are the greatest nuisance to their country are those who are allowed the greatest leisure; for men do not usually compete for public office, until they have won the battle against hunger and cold.”⁹¹

Given all this, what can we say about Hobbes’s own solution to the problem that he has set forth? Does it spring from the mind or the body? Does it rely on potentialities within pride itself, or on other countervailing motives?

We can begin by making one observation that relates back to the debates about the “bourgeois” character of Hobbes’s theory. He accords little independent force to the motive of profit, or gain, and the role it plays for him is almost exclusively negative. (In this respect,

⁸⁹ *Elements* 1.9.18, 46. Cf. the scribal manuscript of *Leviathan* (quoted at *Leviathan* 45, 440): “other men that busie in the pursuit of power, honor and the meanes to satisfy and secure their animal appetites, have eyther no leasure, or no will to looke after any so remote a cause.” On curiosity as the distinctively human passion, see *Leviathan* 6, 42.

⁹⁰ *Leviathan* 15, 109.

⁹¹ *Leviathan* 46, 459; *De Cive* 5.5, 72.

Strauss's reduction of Hobbes's triad to the dyad vanity-fear may have been justified.) At times, gain is grouped together with mere sensuality, to explain why its adherents are unable to understand their duties without indoctrination.⁹² More often, however, it is assimilated to pride, and the struggle for wealth is treated as simply another arena for positional competition. The desire for riches "may be reduced" to the desire for power, for "Riches, Knowledge, and Honour are but severall sorts of power."⁹³ Likewise, "Competition of Riches," like competition for honor or authority, "enclineth to Contention, Enmity, and War: Because the way of one Competitor, to the attaining of his desire, is to kill, subdue, supplant, or repell the other."⁹⁴ Those seeking riches call each other covetous, "a name used alwayes in signification of blame; because men contending for them, are displeased with one anothers attaining them."⁹⁵ While Hobbes is well aware that one of the benefits provided by life in society is "commodious living,"⁹⁶ he offers no suggestion that the economic realm might provide an escape from the world of zero-sum struggle. He is heir to an older tradition that views "avarice" and "ambition" as similar and linked phenomena.⁹⁷

⁹² E.g. *Leviathan* 30, 236-37, which speaks of those "whom necessity, or covetousnesse keepeth attent on their trades, and labour; and they, on the other side, whom superfluity, or sloth carrieth after their sensuall pleasures, (which two sorts of men take up the greatest part of Mankind,)," both of whom are "diverted from the deep meditation" which the learning of truth requires. Cf. *Behemoth* 1, 39.

⁹³ *Leviathan* 8, 53.

⁹⁴ *Leviathan* 11, 70; the passage heading is "Love of Contention from Competition."

⁹⁵ *Leviathan* 6, 41.

⁹⁶ *Leviathan* 13, 90.

⁹⁷ Cf. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 3.82, 205, discussing the anarchy of the civil war in Corcyra: "The cause of all this is desire of rule out of avarice and ambition, and the zeal of contention from those two proceeding."

Hobbes's historical account of the English Civil War reinforces this cynical take on the political consequences of profit-seeking. He must be considered among the very first adherents of the view that the war was a "bourgeois revolution," bitterly remarking that "the city of London and other great towns of trade, having in admiration the great prosperity of the Low Countries after they had revolted from their monarch, the King of Spain, were inclined to think that the like change of government here, would to them produce the like prosperity."⁹⁸ He attributes much of the rabble-rousing ministers' success in fomenting rebellion to the fact that "they did never in their sermons, or but lightly, inveigh against the lucrative vices of men of trade or handicraft...which was a great ease to the generality of citizens and the inhabitants of market-towns, and no little profit to themselves."⁹⁹ And he suggests more generally that the mercantile classes of the great cities will always tend to be "the first encouragers of rebellion"; if the "only glory" of the merchants is "to grow excessively rich," this is no less destabilizing than any other form of glory-seeking.¹⁰⁰ Such sentiments accord with other "anti-bourgeois" features of his theory — for instance, that he treats property itself as an artifact of civil society, alterable at will by the sovereign, rather than a natural right. What is more important for our purposes is that gain does not provide a solution to the problem of pride; it is simply another manifestation of it.

But what about pride itself? After all, to pursue honor or glory is ultimately to pursue the esteem of others. Yet there seems to be no reason why we must seek esteem only for our brute

⁹⁸ *Behemoth* 1, 3-4. He was already making this allegation while the war was still going on; see *Leviathan* 29, 225; and the equivalent Latin *Leviathan* 29, 507.

⁹⁹ *Behemoth* 1, 25.

¹⁰⁰ *Behemoth* 3, 126.

superiority over others, or our domination of them. Might we not instead pursue recognition for our morality or our virtue? Couldn't we imagine that pride itself might provide the solution to its own problem?

The possibility of "moralizing pride," as we might call it, was most saliently raised by Michael Oakeshott in his study of Hobbesian morality.¹⁰¹ There are many places in Hobbes's writings that suggest such a possibility. "Love of Vertue" can spring from "love of Praise," Hobbes tells us at one point in *Leviathan*, for "Desire of Praise, disposeth to laudable actions, such as please them whose judgement they value."¹⁰² In another place in the *Elements*, Hobbes suggests that compliance with the law can result from simple "fear of punishment," but equally from "vain-glory, and desire to be honored of men."¹⁰³ And in several places he considers the phenomenon of piracy: ancient pirates, although restrained only by the "Lawes of Honour" and not by any coercive force, nonetheless abstained from excessive violence because "their motive was to win glory but not to be blamed for sowing terror by being too cruel."¹⁰⁴

If these passages maintain a certain cynicism, and an implication that such conduct springs solely from a thirst for praise rather than any internal compulsion, elsewhere Hobbes is more admiring. When discussing the virtue of justice, a quality of people rather than actions, he

¹⁰¹ "The moral life in the writings of Thomas Hobbes," 339-44. Oakeshott himself was careful to specify that it was an undercurrent in Hobbes's thought rather than a primary theme, although later interpreters have sometimes been inclined to see it as the solution to the problem of Hobbesian morality. E.g. Lloyd, *Morality in Hobbes*, 248-52.

¹⁰² *Leviathan* 11, 71.

¹⁰³ *Elements* 2.6.10, 156. Hobbes's purpose in this passage is to contrast both merely external motives with the genuine "obedience and justice of the inward man."

¹⁰⁴ *Leviathan* 17, 118; *De Cive* 5.2, 69-70, translation emended. Once again he seems to have been drawing on Thucydides; cf. *The Peloponnesian War* 1.5, 3-4.

calls it “a certain Nobleness or Gallantnesse of courage, (rarely found,) by which a man scorns to be beholding for the contentment of his life, to fraud, or breach of promise.”¹⁰⁵ While this hint of a virtue ethics might seem jarringly un-Hobbesian, he makes clear that a few “generous natures” can really be found, whose morality springs from a genuine desire to be just rather than external compulsions or rewards. His foremost exemplar of this ideal was Sidney Godolphin, a friend who was killed during the civil war, and to whose brother Hobbes dedicated *Leviathan*: “For there is not any vertue that disposeth a man, either to the service of God, or to the service of his Country, to Civill Society, or private Friendship, that did not manifestly appear in his conversation, not as acquired by necessity, or affected upon occasion, but inhaerent, and shining in the generous constitution of his nature.”¹⁰⁶

Can moralizing pride be the solution? Hobbes sometimes holds out the possibility, nowhere more poignantly than at the beginning of the “Review and Conclusion” to *Leviathan*. There, he notes that some people have suggested that human nature makes it impossible to live in peace with one another, in a world whose business “consisteth almost in nothing else but a perpetuall contention for Honor, Riches, and Authority.” Hobbes himself might be considered one of these people, having suggested earlier in the book that “the Lawes of Nature...of themselves, without the terrour of some Power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our naturall Passions, that carry us to Partiality, Pride, Revenge, and the like.”¹⁰⁷ Yet here he offers a different reply:

¹⁰⁵ *Leviathan* 15, 104. The Latin version (15, 227-29) speaks of “a certain nobility [*generositas*] of soul” as being that which “usually makes true justice, and gives it its relish.”

¹⁰⁶ *Leviathan* Epistle Dedicatory, 3.

¹⁰⁷ *Leviathan* 17, 117.

To which I answer, that these are indeed great difficulties, but not Impossibilities: For by Education, and Discipline, they may bee, and are sometimes reconciled....There is therefore no such Inconsistence of Humane Nature, with Civill Duties, as some think. I have known cleernesse of Judgment, and largenesse of Fancy; strength of Reason, and gracefull Elocution; a Courage for the Warre, and a Fear for the Laws, and all eminently in one man; and that was my most noble and honored friend Mr. *Sidney Godolphin*; who hating no man, nor hated of any, was unfortunately slain in the beginning of the late Civill warre, in the Publique quarrel, by an undiscerned, and an undiscerning hand.¹⁰⁸

Sounding almost wistful, he hints that the molding of future Godolphins, rather than the terror of coercive power, might be enough to ensure peace.

But this is not his considered view. The most important passage on this theme comes earlier in the book, where he explicitly rejects the possibility that moralizing pride might offer a real solution:

The force of Words, being (as I have formerly noted) too weak to hold men to the performance of their Covenants; there are in mans nature, but two imaginable helps to strengthen it. And those are either a Feare of the consequence of breaking their word; or a Glory, or Pride in appearing not to need to breake it. This later is a Generosity too rarely found to be presumed on, especially in the pursuers of Wealth, Command, or sensuall Pleasure; which are the greatest part of Mankind. The passion to be reckoned upon, is Fear...¹⁰⁹

Pride cannot be counted on to take a moral rather than malicious form, for even among the prideful there are more pursuers of “wealth” and “command” than truly generous natures. Thus, just as fear provided “the origin of large and lasting societies,”¹¹⁰ so it must continue to be the “passion to be reckoned upon” as long as such societies remain.

¹⁰⁸ *Leviathan* Review and Conclusion, 483-84.

¹⁰⁹ *Leviathan* 14, 99. Here Hobbes echoes Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b10: “For the natural tendency of most people is to be swayed not by a sense of shame but by fear, and to refrain from acting basely not because it is disgraceful, but because of the punishment it brings.”

¹¹⁰ *De Cive* 1.2, 24, quoted above.

Hobbes puts his faith in fear as the glue of social order. But he does not put it in fear as such:

Of all Passions, that which enclineth men least to break the Lawes, is Fear. Nay, (excepting some generous natures,) it is the onely thing, (when there is apparence of profit, or pleasure by breaking the Lawes,) that makes men keep them. And yet in many cases a Crime may be committed through Feare.

Some kinds of fear may be themselves destabilizing: the fear of “fall[ing] into contempt,” which leads the honor-minded to seek revenge, or the “fear of Spirits,” which leads the superstitious to break the laws. In such cases, where “the hurt is not Corporeall, but Phantasticall,” the mere fact of fear cannot excuse the crime. “For not every Fear justifies the Action it produceth, but the fear only of corporeal hurt, which we call *Bodily Fear*.”¹¹¹

Once again we can see the importance of the dichotomy of mind and body. The pleasures of the mind are ultimately insatiable due to their lack of fixity in the physical world. The person under their sway is not content with any state of absolute well-being, but rather is determined that those around him “should value him, at the same rate he sets upon himselfe,” and thereby “endeavours...to extort a greater value” from them by force.¹¹² Nor will even such immediate recognition necessarily prove sufficient, for “there are those who, for reasons of pride and glory, would wish to conquer the whole world.”¹¹³ By contrast, the very physicality of the body — its mooring in a set of biological desires, above all the bare desire to keep living — makes it satiable in a way that the mind is not. Thus when isolating the passions that “disposeth men to obey a common power,” Hobbes points to “Desire of Ease, and sensual Delight,” along with “Fear of

¹¹¹ *Leviathan* 27, 206-7.

¹¹² *Leviathan* 13, 88.

¹¹³ Latin *Leviathan* 13, 191.

Death, and Wounds.”¹¹⁴ Along with this orientation toward the needs of the body, and away from the extravagances of the mind, goes a temporal orientation. Peace requires that humans not dwell on the past, and that when considering retribution for past wrongs, they “*look not at the greatnesse of the evill past, but the greatnesse of the good to follow.*”¹¹⁵ At the same time, they must not fixate on the life to come; while Hobbes does not expect that anyone will be indifferent to the fate of their soul, he stresses that salvation will be won precisely through obedience to one’s sovereign and to the laws of nature governing conduct in this world. The ethic of fear that he seeks to foster is a corporeal and this-worldly one.¹¹⁶

In this respect, those who view Hobbes as a “bourgeois” thinker touch on something real in this thought.¹¹⁷ As we have seen, his milieu was far from a bourgeois one; he had no particular

¹¹⁴ *Leviathan* 11, 70.

¹¹⁵ *Leviathan* 15, 106, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁶ For an insightful argument to this effect from a different angle, see Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan*, esp. Ch. 5. Lloyd (in *Ideals as Interests*) argues against Johnston that Hobbes does not aim to suppress religion and turn humans into corporeal-minded egoists, but rather to respect the legitimacy of their “transcendent interests” while providing them with a different understanding of such religious obligations. However, the difference between these two positions may not ultimately be so great. Regardless of Hobbes’s personal religious views, he certainly had no delusion that religion could be suppressed altogether; as he writes, its seeds “can never be so abolished out of humane nature, but that new Religions may againe be made to spring out of them” (*Leviathan* 12, 83). He is therefore compelled to provide a distinctive religious doctrine (whether sincere or not) rather than an outright attack on religion. Yet the practical upshot of his doctrine (as set out in the second half of *Leviathan*) is precisely to eliminate any cases in which religion might interfere with the imperatives of earthly political obligation. For that reason, his religious doctrines are perfectly compatible with the corporeal and this-worldly ethic that we have been describing.

¹¹⁷ In particular, Strauss’s argument in *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* may have been overstated in some respects — for instance, in positing a stark divide between Hobbes’s moral and scientific projects, or denying that moral conduct can ever spring from pride. But his account of Hobbes’s moral project — according to which vanity is the fundamental problem and fear the fundamental solution — is sound in its broad strokes.

sympathy for the bourgeoisie as a class, or for the market as fundamental arbiter of economic life. (To speak of Hobbes's attitude toward "capitalism" is surely anachronistic, and most of the statements adduced as evidence of his capitalist sympathies — like the reference to "commodious living" — are the sort of vague injunctions to prosperity that have been issued by thinkers of many different eras.) As Keith Thomas rightly recognizes, the man of generosity, while not "an essential part of Hobbes's political structure," nonetheless represents his ethical ideal, and this ideal is an "unmistakably aristocratic" one.¹¹⁸

Yet by the same token it is highly significant that this aristocratic ideal is denied any significant role in his political solution. The Earl of Clarendon's gibe, that Hobbes demonstrated an "extreme malignity to the nobility, by whose bread he hath always been sustained," in its own way neatly captures how the political upshot of his thought cut in opposite directions from its social origins.¹¹⁹ Politics cannot rely on a generosity "too rarely found to be presumed on," even among the class that lays claim to it, and must instead make do with baser materials. His solution to the problem of pride is bought at a high price, and not one that he envisions without ambivalence: a retreat from the pleasures of the mind to those of the body, from the glorious past or apocalyptic future to the worldly present, from the relative and positional to the physical and

¹¹⁸ "Social Origins," 204.

¹¹⁹ Hyde, *A Brief View and Survey...*, 181. Hobbes's anti-aristocratic leanings are more prominent in *Leviathan*, as he greatly expands his discussion of honor and goes out of his way to stress its arbitrary and constructed nature. It is also worth stressing that Hobbes's reliance on fear rather than generosity is not a mere statement of class snobbery, a recognition that the generous aristocrats are far outnumbered by the sensuous masses. On the contrary, his sympathies are more with the latter than the former, for he makes clear that the "generous natures" are far outnumbered by the maliciously prideful within the aristocracy itself. Cf. his attack on the "present gallantry" of the nobility (consisting of "[f]ine clothes, great feathers, civility towards men that will not swallow injuries, and injuries towards them that will") at *Behemoth* 1, 38.

absolute.¹²⁰ In some ways, this retreat is the fundamental move in the development of an atomistic conception of human life; we will see how Hobbes's successors elaborated on it.

One other aspect of Hobbes's solution is worth highlighting. Hobbes has traditionally been considered the seminal theorist of coercive power, progenitor of the notion that the state's primary function is to serve as a monopoly of violence. (Max Weber was to make this language famous, but the underlying conception is recognizably Hobbesian.) In this view, humans can never be made to comply with their obligations "without the terrour of some Power, to cause them to be observed,"¹²¹ and thus coercive force is the first and final word in political life. More recently, however, revisionist scholars have challenged this view. They stress that Hobbes sees humans as malleable, with the very objects of their passions being susceptible to redirection through the "particular education" they receive.¹²² They note the ways that he was engaged in a

¹²⁰ Hobbes and Machiavelli are sometimes grouped together as proponents of an egoistic ethic of self-preservation. (E.g. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, Ch. 1.) But we can see from the preceding discussion how different they are. Machiavelli may instruct rulers in preserving their state (*mantenere lo stato*), but this is far from an injunction to individual self-preservation and may often be opposed to it. For Machiavelli, the ultimate purpose of politics is to win glory, and preserving the state is merely a necessary condition for achieving this end; those who would like to preserve their own individual lives would be well advised to stay out of politics altogether. As Pocock notes (*The Machiavellian Moment*, 167), "the heart of the Machiavellian ambiguities" is that *virtù* involves exposing oneself to uncertainty as well as managing it: "On the one hand *virtù* is that by which we innovate, and so let loose sequences of contingency beyond our prediction or control so that we become prey to *fortuna*; on the other hand, *virtù* is that internal to ourselves by which we resist *fortuna* and impose upon her patterns of order..." Hobbes's frequent attacks on republican politics, on the plunder-based economies of ancient Athens and Rome (*De Cive* 13.14, 150), and on "the insatiable appetite, or *Bulimia*, of enlarging Dominion" in general (*Leviathan* 29, 230), could not be further from the ideals of Machiavelli's *Discourses*. If Machiavelli was the last great expositor of the classical ethos of glory, Hobbes was its first great modern critic. Or, in very broad strokes, we might say that politically speaking Machiavelli was a pagan and Hobbes was (in this respect, at least) a Christian.

¹²¹ *Leviathan* 17, 117.

¹²² *Leviathan* Introduction, 10; cf. *Leviathan* 8, 53.

politics of “cultural transformation,” aiming to reshape human subjectivity rather than assuming it as given, and point in particular to his fixation on reforming the universities and his desire that *Leviathan* be taught in them.¹²³

We can hear in these debates an echo of the questions we have just considered: is compliance to be won through fear and coercion alone, or through instilling “by Education, and Discipline” a new set of desires, and particularly a “Glory, or Pride” in acting in accordance with one’s obligations?¹²⁴ Equally, we can see both the merits and the limits of the revisionist view. Its particular strength, as we will discuss in more depth shortly, is that it captures the *moral* dimension of Hobbes’s project that is so frequently lost. But there is some danger of going too far in the opposite direction and losing sight of Hobbes’s very real pessimism. His canonical statements about the necessity of coercive power — that “Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all,” or that “the command of the *Militia*, without other Institution, maketh him that hath it Sovereign”¹²⁵ — are far from aberrational, and they stem from the same reasons that lead him to isolate fear as the passion to be reckoned upon.

Hobbes is not the “materialist” of his traditional image, viewing humans as mindless pursuers of bodily security, but neither is he an “idealist” who views them as infinitely malleable through education and custom. By putting the problem of pride at the center of his concerns, we

¹²³ The phrase “cultural transformation” is Johnston’s, in *The Rhetoric of Leviathan*. Other works in this vein include the previously-cited writings of Lloyd, Slomp, and Cooper. This scholarship is sometimes inclined to a rather sunny view of Hobbes’s ideological project; see Slomp’s suggestion that Hobbes foresees transformation “not through indoctrination but via rational discourse” (“Hobbes on Glory and Civil Strife,” 194) and the longer defense of roughly this point in Lloyd, *Morality in Hobbes*, 332-55.

¹²⁴ *Leviathan* Review and Conclusion, 483; *Leviathan* 14, 99.

¹²⁵ *Leviathan* 17, 117; *Leviathan* 18, 126.

can chart a path between these extremes. Pride exists in the mind, and must be mediated through beliefs and opinions; it exists in the social world, and must be mediated through norms and customs. For that reason, it is susceptible to some modification, and its reshaping through education is necessary. At the same time, pride is not devoid of content; in any form it must involve a desire for superiority. For that reason it is not infinitely malleable, and its reshaping through education is insufficient.¹²⁶ Beliefs are critically important for Hobbes, but he takes pride to lurk behind our assertions of belief; hence his refusal to believe that a mere liberal toleration on all sides could provide a solution to the clash of beliefs, or that education alone could succeed in taming them. To return to Augustine's terms, Hobbes tends to conceive of pride in terms of *libido dominandi*, a brute desire for superiority, and he correspondingly remains convinced that it must be answered with fear and force. If the very omnipresence and shapelessness of pride give it the potential to serve as a principle of order as well as chaos, this is a possibility that would await fuller exploration by others.

5.

Fear, then — and more specifically bodily fear, the fear of death — is Hobbes's considered solution to the problem of pride. It is not a particularly rarified or flattering solution,

¹²⁶ We can see both these currents at work in *Behemoth*, his last major political work. Hobbes insists that “the power of the mighty hath no foundation but in the opinion and belief of the people” (1, 16) and that mere coercive suppression of seditious doctrines can “convince no error, nor alter the minds of them that believe they have the better reason” (2, 62). He suggests that beliefs and opinions must always underlie coercive power: “For if men know not their duty, what is there that can force them to obey the laws? An army, you will say. But what shall force the army?” (1, 59) Yet he repeatedly stresses the political primacy of this coercive power, with frequent statements like “he that is master of the *militia*, is master of the kingdom” (2, 98; cf. 2, 80; 2, 102). These two currents need not contradict each other; rather, they reinforce the view that Hobbes was neither pure realist nor pure idealist.

and what tends to jump out at us is the cynicism involved in basing a political order on the fear of violent death. What this cynical quality can often mask, however, is that it is also a *moral* solution.

This moral aspect does not mesh easily with the common image of Hobbes as the ultimate disillusioned realist, and we will later explore the reasons for this disconnect. But it follows from our discussion so far that Hobbes cannot simply take people as they are, but rather must offer an account of how they should be. The real question is whether his theory offers the resources necessary to offer such a normative account, or whether his conclusions demand a morality that his premises cannot provide.

To see why this is so, we need to return to the status of the fear of death within Hobbes's theory, and in particular to the status of the injunction that we preserve our own lives. The basic form of this injunction is what Hobbes calls a "law of nature." His exact descriptions of the laws of nature vary,¹²⁷ but the definition offered in *Leviathan* is a useful place to start: "A LAW OF NATURE, (*Lex Naturalis*), is a Precept, or generall Rule, found out by Reason, by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same." A few features of this definition stand out: a law of nature is rational, and it enjoins us to preserve ourselves.¹²⁸ Moreover, it is binding: humans also have a "right of nature," which is "the Liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himselfe, for the preservation

¹²⁷ Lloyd, after examining the various definitions of the laws of nature throughout Hobbes's writings, surmises that the only real common denominator is that they are always found out through reason: *Morality in Hobbes*, 99-103.

¹²⁸ As Warrender and Lloyd have argued, the overall thrust of the laws of nature is to preserve the human race as a collective rather than any particular individual, but this operates in large part through a stricture that individuals preserve themselves.

of...his own Life,” but the laws of nature are commands rather than mere rights, “so that Law and Right, differ as much, as Obligation, and Liberty.”¹²⁹

At least, this is the impression we get from Hobbes’s initial definition. Later in *Leviathan*, after running through the content of the various specific laws of nature (that we keep our covenants, treat others as equals, and so on), Hobbes makes a striking and much-discussed remark:

These dictates of Reason, men use to call by the name of Lawes, but improperly: for they are but Conclusions, or Theoremes concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves; whereas Law, properly is the word of him, that by right hath command over others. But yet if we consider the same theorems, as delivered in the word of God, that by right commandeth all things; then are they properly called Lawes.¹³⁰

Here Hobbes seems to remove much of the binding force of the laws of nature, at least in a secular context. Unless considered “as delivered in the word of God,” he suggests, the laws of nature seem to be mere prudential dictates that advise us how to preserve ourselves rather than genuine commands that demand that we preserve ourselves.

There has been a long and vexed debate among Hobbes scholars about which of these is the correct interpretation of the laws of nature.¹³¹ We will eventually circle back to this debate, but before doing so we might attempt to circumvent it altogether. After all, it’s not clear why the binding force (or lack thereof) of the laws of nature need be a pivotal concern. If the upshot of the laws of nature is simply that we should preserve our own lives, weren’t we going to do this

¹²⁹ *Leviathan* 14, 91.

¹³⁰ *Leviathan* 15, 111.

¹³¹ See the thorough and helpful account of the laws of nature and the debates surrounding them in Lloyd, *Morality in Hobbes*, Chs. 3 and 4.

anyway? There seems to be no reason to demand special normative backing for such an intuitively obvious course of action.

There are several ways that self-preservation might free itself from the need for normative justification. The first would simply be that it is inevitable — if we are naturally compelled to preserve ourselves, it is beside the point whether we are also morally obliged to do so. We have already seen versions of this claim in Hobbes’s early statements that we avoid death “by a real necessity of nature as powerful as that by which a stone falls downward.”¹³² But equally, we have already seen that Hobbes retreats from this claim between *De Cive* and *Leviathan*, and in his writings of the 1650s he is keen to insist that we are always free to choose death no matter how immediate the danger.¹³³ Thus we need some sort of account of why we *should* preserve ourselves rather than a mere insistence that we always do so.

We might instead argue that self-preservation is uniquely rational, and thus that any failure to preserve ourselves is irrational, even if it is physically possible.¹³⁴ Again there is some support for this view, particularly in Hobbes’s early writings, where he suggests that failures to preserve oneself are mere short-sightedness or irrationality. But again we have seen that he retreats from such broad claims. We might take this shift as a sign of Hobbes grappling with the consequences of a relativism that was already visible as early as the *Elements*. There, in arguments that recur throughout his writings, he suggests that our use of moral terms is a projection of our desires, since everyone “calleth that which pleaseth, and is delightful to

¹³² *De Cive* 1.7, 27.

¹³³ See section 3 of this chapter.

¹³⁴ For self-preservation as a uniquely “rational desire” as opposed to our other “emotional desires,” see Gert, “Hobbes’s Psychology,” 163-64.

himself, GOOD; and that EVIL which displeaseth him,” and similarly dismisses the notion of a *summum bonum* or highest objective good, saying that “there is no such thing in this world, nor way to it, more than to Utopia: for while we live, we have desires, and desire presupposeth a farther end.”¹³⁵ But although he posits this primacy of subjective desire over objective order, in the early works he seems unwilling to draw out the intuitive implication: an instrumental notion of reason, according to which reason can tell us how to achieve whatever desires we might have but can never pass judgment on the content of these desires themselves. Thus he remains willing to speak as if death were indeed the objectively greatest evil, and the fear of death the most objectively rational desire.

By *Leviathan*, he has moved to a more thoroughly instrumental conception of reason. His suggestion that “the Thoughts, are to the Desires, as Scouts, and Spies, to range abroad, and find the way to the things Desired,” may be considered the ancestor of Hume’s famous claim that “[r]eason 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.”¹³⁶ As we have seen, in the *Elements* he was willing to claim that “reason therefore dictateth to every man for his own good, to seek after peace,” but in *Leviathan* he will say that man’s escape from the state of nature consists “partly in the Passions, partly in his Reason”:

The Passions that encline men to Peace, are Feare of Death; Desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a Hope by their Industry to obtain them. And Reason suggesteth convenient Articles of Peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement. These Articles, are they, which otherwise are called the Lawes of Nature...¹³⁷

¹³⁵ *Elements* 1.7.3-7, 29-30.

¹³⁶ *Leviathan* 8, 53; *Treatise* 2.3.3, 415. Cf. *Leviathan* 33, 261: “Reason serves only to convince the truth (not of fact, but) of consequence.”

¹³⁷ *Elements* 1.14.14, 74; *Leviathan* 13, 90.

Far from reason alone instructing us to leave the state of nature, Hobbes suggests here that our doing so depends on our possessing certain desires (for self-preservation and commodious living) and that reason merely offers up laws of nature to help us fulfill them. The clear implication is that there could be no purely rational refutation of someone who happened to lack these desires, or who valued other things (like glory) above them. It is no coincidence that Hobbes sees fit to add a new chapter to *Leviathan*, on the “difference of manners,” in which he elaborately examines the social consequences of various passions. “Competition of Riches, Honour, Command, or other power” lead to war, “Fear of Death, and Wounds” to peace, and so on.¹³⁸ The presence of this material, which does not appear in the *Elements* or *De Cive*, is one sign that Hobbes has lost his faith that rationality itself might enjoin peace or self-preservation; more has come to depend on the content of the specific desires that reason seeks to fulfill.

There might seem to be another way that self-preservation could be self-justifying. Even if avoiding death is not inevitable, or uniquely rational in and of itself, we might still view it a precondition for fulfilling all other desires that we might have. Hobbes certainly lends some credence to this view, describing life as a “perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death.”¹³⁹ And he suggests that amid all the disagreement of the world, nonetheless “all men agree on this, that Peace is Good, and therefore also the ways, or means of

¹³⁸ *Leviathan* 11, 70.

¹³⁹ *Leviathan* 11, 70.

Peace,” which are the laws of nature.¹⁴⁰ Perhaps, then, peace and preservation are a kind of lowest common denominator that everyone can agree on regardless of their other desires.¹⁴¹

Several points are worth noting about Hobbes’s insistence that “all men agree” on this point. One is that it reverses the usual priority he attaches to actions over words. Even those whose actions tend towards war, he suggests here, will not deny that peace is good, and this universal agreement is fundamental. His usual inclination, however, is to say that when our words and actions contradict each other, it is our actions that tell the truth. Thus when proposing, as “a Principle well known to all men by experience and which everyone admits,” that people unrestrained by a common power will naturally clash, he allows that “many do deny it.” Yet he insists that such deniers contradict themselves, for “they admit by their actions what they deny in their words.”¹⁴² Similarly, although many people claim that humans are social animals who genuinely love each other’s company, humans’ “true purpose in seeking each other’s company may be inferred from what they do once they meet.”¹⁴³ It is unclear, therefore, why the mere fact of verbal agreement on the value of peace should be of such significance.

Can we even assume such universal agreement? Hobbes’s use of phrases like “all men agree” to preface his claims is, as Quentin Skinner has noted, a classic bit of rhetorical maneuvering, and his reliance on such stratagems led his antagonist John Wallis to fume that Hobbes thought he could, “by a *Manifestum est*, save him[self] the trouble of attempting a

¹⁴⁰ *Leviathan* 15, 111.

¹⁴¹ See, e.g., Murphy, “Hobbes on the Evil of Death,” which defends Hobbes’s commitment to the thesis that “for every human agent, any state of affairs that includes that agent’s remaining alive is preferable to any state of affairs that includes that agent’s not remaining alive” (38).

¹⁴² *De Cive* P.9, 10.

¹⁴³ *De Cive* 1.2, 22.

Demonstration.”¹⁴⁴ Skinner directs his skepticism at the second part of Hobbes’s statement — from the fact that everyone agrees on the value of peace, it need not follow that they agree on the value of the means to this end — but the first part is also contestable. Peace may seem to us the most anodyne of goods, but Hobbes lived in a world which still contained real remnants of a martial ethos of glory, a world in which it might be presumptuous to assume universal agreement on the value of peace. At the very end of his life, his literary talents in decline, Hobbes completed a translation of Homer, and his *Iliad* contains the following depiction of Achilles’s decision whether to go to war against Troy:

My mother Thetis told me as my end,
That if I fight ’gainst Troy, ’twill be my lot
To die there, but that Fame would me commend.
But on the other side assured me,
That if ’gainst Ilium I warred not,
But back to Phthia went, my fate would be
Long time to live, and after be forgot.¹⁴⁵

His world was one in which some would still regard Achilles’s choice as a genuine dilemma.

For it is not entirely true that peace and preservation are a precondition for the fulfillment of all other desires. Insofar as peace requires submitting to a sovereign, and doing whatever is necessary for its maintenance, there are some desires that will be incompatible with it. In particular, the desires for glory, superiority, and domination can find no place in civil society; the law of nature forbidding pride mandates that we treat others as our equals. As Hobbes makes clear, these are among our most fundamental desires, and yet the very definition of civil society

¹⁴⁴ Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 381-82.

¹⁴⁵ *Homer’s Iliads* IX.402-8, in *English Works*, X, 103. (Hobbes’s edits to the poem mean that his line numbers do not correspond to those in standard editions.)

bars their fulfillment.¹⁴⁶ True glory-seekers would be better off taking their chances in the state of nature — where there would be at least a possibility of fulfillment notwithstanding the greater possibility of defeat and death — rather than accepting the definitive thwarting of their desires under a sovereign.

There is a final way to avoid the conclusion that Hobbes's theory needs a morality. This would involve accepting that self-preservation is not inevitable, or uniquely rational, or a logical precondition for all other desires. There is, in other words, no way to justify self-preservation to those whose pride outweighs their fear of death. Yet we could still argue that such people are exceedingly rare, and that they are not Hobbes's concern. On this view, Hobbes's theory is fundamentally empirical rather than normative; it starts from the factual observation that most people value living (and living commodiously) above all other goods, and offers laws of nature that serve as guidance for realizing these goals. There may be some people who do not share these values, or share them but not to the extent that Hobbes imagines, and for such people these laws of nature would not be binding. But why worry about them? It's simply a fact that most people are dominated by the pleasures of the body rather than those of the mind. If we lived in an alternate world where this were untrue, Hobbes's theory would lose its applicability; as is, at most its scope might have to be restricted slightly to account for the odd exception.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ In this vein, Oakeshott writes that Hobbes's commonwealth is appropriate only for "a creature content to survive in a world from which both honour and dishonour have been removed — and this is not exactly the creature Hobbes had been describing to us....The morality we have seen Hobbes to be defending is the morality of the tame man. It is still true that the greatest stimulus to the vital movement of the heart is the elation generated by being continuously recognized to be superior. But this greatest good must be foregone: pride, even when it does not degenerate into vain-glory, is too dangerous a passion to be allowed, even if its suppression somewhat dims the brilliance of life." Oakeshott, "Moral Life," 307, 339.

¹⁴⁷ A lucid statement of this kind of view is Sorrell, "Hobbes's Moral Philosophy," 132. Gauthier, Hampton, and Kavka seem to share something like it as well.

We can decide for ourselves whether this is an accurate depiction of the motives of actual human beings. But I hope that our previous discussion has shown that it is not an accurate depiction of Hobbes — or, if we prefer, that he thought of himself as inhabiting this alternate world where people did not reliably conform to the strictures of material interest. All of the views that we have been considering seek to render his theory empirical in character, by taking material interest to be a mere description for how humans inevitably behave, or rationally need to behave, or in any case do tend to behave. By focusing in on the problem of pride, we can see how far Hobbes is from any such view, for he generally takes pride rather than material interest as a more accurate description of human motivation. The fear of death must, for him, be the backbone of any viable social order, but as time goes on he becomes steadily more aware of its tenuousness, its lack of grounding in the bare descriptive realities of human life. While our obligations may, as he suggests, be grounded in self-preservation, the injunction to preserve ourselves must itself be a moral one.

Still, the precise character of this morality is maddeningly elusive. The debates surrounding the nature of Hobbesian morality were triggered largely by the work of Howard Warrender in the 1950s (although related arguments had been made earlier by A.E. Taylor and, in his own way, Leo Strauss).¹⁴⁸ Warrender (and Taylor) distinguished between Hobbes's theories of motivation and obligation; it may be the case that humans only comply with their obligations because they have a self-interested motive for doing so, but this does not explain the source of these obligations themselves. Something else is needed to explain why our obligations have a binding force, as opposed to any other action that we might perform from self-interested

¹⁴⁸ Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*; Taylor, "The Ethical Doctrine of Hobbes"; Strauss, *Political Philosophy*. For the contemporary debates around these arguments, see the essays collected in Brown, *Hobbes Studies*, as well as Nagel, "Hobbes's Concept of Obligation."

motives. While Taylor was inclined to see Hobbes's ethics as a deontology (of the kind more typically associated with Kant), Warrender emphasized Hobbes's claim that the laws of nature were only true laws when considered "as delivered in the word of God." More simply, Hobbes's laws of nature bind us *because* they are the laws of God.

It was this final claim that unsurprisingly attracted the most attention. For that reason, the Warrender thesis tends to be treated as part of the broader debates surrounding Hobbes's religious views, with most scholars looking with disfavor on his "divine command" interpretation of the laws of nature.¹⁴⁹ As Warrender himself sought to emphasize, however, the specifically religious aspect of the debate was of secondary importance, and his more central point is not so easily dispensed with.¹⁵⁰ The real problem is not so much to identify the specific normative backing of the laws of nature as to determine whether the laws of nature need *some* such backing, and whether Hobbes's theory contains the resources to provide it. Hobbes seems to erect his theory on a thoroughly egoistic basis, so that (from his time onward) he has been identified with the practice of basing morality on self-interest.¹⁵¹ It is often thought revealing, in this regard, that he begins his theory with rights rather than duties — self-preservation is first treated as part of the *right* of nature, the "liberty" we have to preserve ourselves, and only

¹⁴⁹ For more recent exceptions, see Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan*; Foisneau, *Hobbes et la toute-puissance de Dieu*.

¹⁵⁰ See Warrender, "A Reply to Mr. Plamenatz," esp. 89-91.

¹⁵¹ Skinner cites various seventeenth-century views to this effect as evidence against the Warrender thesis; see "The context of Hobbes's theory of political obligation," in *Visions of Politics*, III, 264-86, esp. 282-85.

secondarily as part of the *law* of nature, our “obligation” to do so.¹⁵² Insofar as we can count on humans to use their liberty to preserve themselves, this foundation might be unobjectionable. But insofar as they fail to do so, it comes to seem less and less adequate. Increasingly “men are not free *not* to exercise their right of nature,” as Richard Tuck puts it, and thus we are left with “a right which looks more like a duty.”¹⁵³ If self-preservation no longer suffices as a description, it must persist as an obligation. This is not to say that Hobbes *offers* a fully developed account of moral obligation, of the sort that Warrender and Taylor gestured at, but it is to say that he ultimately *needs* some such account.

The reason for this is not so much the possibility that individual interests will clash with those of the community, as when an individual’s survival depends on resisting the state. Although such clashes can of course be a problem, Hobbes is willing to tolerate them — even allowing that a criminal who resists justified punishment commits no injustice¹⁵⁴ — partly due to his sense that this sort of occasional resistance will tend to be manageable. The truly troublesome gap is not between individual and communal interests, but between bare egoism and material interest itself.

¹⁵² E.g. *Leviathan* 14, 91. Strauss is among those who view this move as an “epoch-making” innovation: hereafter “modern political philosophy takes ‘right’ as its starting-point, whereas classical political philosophy has ‘law’” (*Political Philosophy*, 155-56).

¹⁵³ Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, 130, 152. Tuck is one of the few scholars to take this aspect of the Warrender thesis seriously; he argues that Hobbes posits a truly unlimited right of nature in the *Elements*, but in *De Cive* and *Leviathan* limits this right so that only actions conducing to self-preservation are permitted. On the question of why Hobbes continues to emphasize this right even after it ceases to be a real right, Tuck suggests that otherwise he would have had to settle for “a more traditional account” based on “a primary law” (131). While this may be true as an expository matter, it only serves to further the impression that Warrender located a real problem, since this “more traditional account” was precisely what he and Taylor read into Hobbes.

¹⁵⁴ E.g. *Leviathan* 21, 151-52.

We have seen Hobbes suggest a notion of instrumental reason, according to which our thoughts are mere “scouts” of our desires, and similarly a minimal and perhaps tautological notion of psychological egoism, according to which every action aims at some good (however vaguely defined) for the actor. Such doctrines are usually identified with the further postulate of material self-interest — the notion that humans above all seek “material” goods in some form, whether mere bodily security or acquisition of property. There has unquestionably been an elective affinity between these kinds of views since the rise and spread of capitalism, so much so that instrumentalism and materialism are often treated as equivalent.

What Hobbes can remind us, however, is that they are in fact distinct, and that however unappealing we may find the conjunction of instrumental reason and material interest, a pure instrumentalism is in many ways more disturbing. The early Hobbes had portrayed pride as irrational, and it continues to appear this way to many people today. Isn't the really important thing how we stand in absolute terms — our safety, satiety, material prosperity — and isn't fixating on how we stand relative to others an unhealthy and irrational distraction? But a thorough instrumentalism undercuts any such move; by its lights, the desire for superiority is no more or less rational than the desire to stay alive. There can be no demonstration of the internal contradictions of pride, only a moral critique of it from outside. If Hobbes is both the first great theorist of instrumental reason and the first great champion of material interest, the two doctrines are pitched in very different registers: his instrumentalism an observation, his materialism an exhortation. The murkiness of the debates surrounding his theory of obligation stem from the difficulty (perhaps impossibility) of harmonizing the two registers. So long as the task of transforming pride into self-interest remains, we are faced with a gap between the kind of

behavior Hobbes's theory predicts and the kind it demands, and the problem of Hobbesian morality must in some sense remain a problem.¹⁵⁵

Still, the ambiguity of Hobbes's account may not be entirely accidental, for this slippage between registers may be itself part of his rhetorical strategy.¹⁵⁶ We have seen his cynicism about moral discourse, and his conviction that "whatsoever is the object of any mans Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth *Good*: And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, *Evill*."¹⁵⁷ Humans are not without moral urges, but he suggests that for most of us they are quite easily satisfied, as we are content simply to read our morality off of our desires. For that reason, the only effective moralism will play upon our desires, reshaping them rather than attempting to overpower them. If the mediocre moralist tells people what they *should* want, the superior moralist tells them what they *do* want, and how to get it; the former gives instruction on how to be good, the latter on how effectively to be bad. Hobbes's morality was one of withdrawal from the turbulent world of pride and position into the comparatively peaceful world of material interest, but he was savvy enough not to call it a morality. His tremendously successful gambit was to frame this moral project in terms of rationality and desire: to tell his readers that self-

¹⁵⁵ Even Lloyd's thorough and insightful recent reconstruction of Hobbesian morality, for instance, does not fully succeed in bridging this gap. For even if we accept her account of the content of Hobbesian morality, we must still show that Hobbes thinks that humans are equipped to comply with it. Lloyd suggests (*Morality in Hobbes*, 248-52) that moralizing pride provides the solution. Yet we have already seen that Hobbes rejects the viability of this solution, and thus the disconnect between the facts of human nature and the requirements of morality remains. In general, much of Hobbes's cynicism about human moral life drops out of Lloyd's account.

¹⁵⁶ On the theme of Hobbesian rhetoric, see especially Johnston, *Rhetoric of Leviathan*; Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*. On the "artful equivocation" of Hobbes's moral teachings, see Oakeshott, "Moral Life," 337. Oakeshott's essay remains valuable, above all for refusing to impose a false unity or coherence on its subject.

¹⁵⁷ *Leviathan* 6, 39.

preservation was their right, that “all men agree” it desiring it, and that they would have to be as disillusioned as him to attain it.¹⁵⁸ If not all agreed on these desires, if for some they were more a burden than a right, few seemed to notice, then or now. Packaged as selfishness, self-interest sold far better than it ever had packaged as duty.

¹⁵⁸ Sometimes this gambit is evident even in Hobbes’s definition of terms. For instance, he makes clear in places that the injunction to avoid needless cruelty is a moral one, so that the seventh law of nature forbids cruelty for being a “glorying in the hurt of another, tending to no end” (*Leviathan* 15, 106-7; cf. *Elements* 1.19.2, 100). Yet when he defines the passion of cruelty itself, Hobbes seems to rule out even the possibility that it could be gratuitous, defining cruelty as mere insensibility to others’ plight due to one’s own security: “For, that any man should take pleasure in other mens great harmes, without other end of his own, I do not conceive it possible” (*Leviathan* 6, 44).

Chapter IV

Prisoner, Sailor, Soldier, Spy

1.

We have seen how Hobbes became steadily less convinced that the fear of death could reliably govern human behavior. So far, we have been treating this as a *problem* for Hobbes, and in many respects it certainly was; he attributed much of the misery of the world to the fact that many people are governed by pride rather than fear, valuing glory over self-preservation. But the limited efficacy of fear was not merely an obstacle to be overcome, for his creative exploitation of its potential also became central to his political *solution*. In fact, much of the polemical force of *Leviathan* depended on the notion that no threat, no matter how potent, can ever dictate our behavior unequivocally, and that self-preservation must always reflect a choice on our part.

Hobbes's argument rests on the notorious doctrines that "Feare, and Liberty, are consistent," and therefore that "Covenants extorted by feare are valide."¹ Even when faced with extreme coercion up to the threat of death, he argues, we are still free to deliberate and, if we like, to choose death over compliance: "May I not rather die if I think fit?"² For that very reason, such coerced actions should be considered voluntary, and we can be held accountable for the obligations we incur by them.

Versions of these doctrines, at various stages of development, can be found in Hobbes's early works. In *Leviathan*, however, he makes use of them in a way that startled many of his readers. Combining them with a sweeping theory of tacit consent, according to which we may be understood to covenant through actions far short of express declaration, he examines the case of

¹ *Leviathan* 21, 146; *Leviathan* 14, 97.

² *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, in *English Works*, V, 180.

the man coerced into obeying a conquering power under threat of death, and concludes that “if he live under their Protection openly, hee is understood to submit himselfe to the Government.”³ At the time of the book’s publication in 1651, the political implications of this stance were not lost on his readers. Oliver Cromwell’s army had defeated the royalist forces loyal to the now-dead Charles I, and the revolutionary government of the Rump Parliament was effectively in possession of sovereignty throughout Britain. Hobbes had been known as an arch-royalist; he had, in fact, been living in French exile since 1640, when Parliament’s imprisonment of the staunchly royalist clergyman Roger Maynwaring led Hobbes to suspect that he himself might be in danger. Yet in this case Hobbes’s message to the English people was clear: by remaining in the country, they had in fact consented to the new government, and owed it the same loyalty they had given the Stuart kings. Flight or death, the alternatives to submission, were certainly unpalatable options, but they were real options, and by declining them the English had already made their choice.

By such arguments, Hobbes aligned himself with a group of thinkers — at the time serving as propagandists for the revolutionary regime, today remembered as theorists of *de facto* power — who had been arguing that the rebels’ possession of sovereignty legitimized their rule regardless of the original justice of their cause.⁴ Philosophically, Hobbes may retain some distance from a pure *de facto* theory: he never allows that might by itself makes right (except, as

³ *Leviathan* Review and Conclusion, 485.

⁴ Hobbes’s relationship to these thinkers (who included Anthony Ascham and Marchamont Nedham) was highlighted in a series of classic essays by Skinner, now collected as *Visions of Politics*, III, 238-86. On the precise ways in which Hobbes aligned with and diverged from them, see especially the running dialogue between Hoekstra and Malcolm: Hoekstra, “The De Facto Turn in Hobbes’s Political Philosophy”; Malcolm, “Editorial Introduction,” 65-82; Hoekstra, “*Leviathan* and Its Intellectual Context”; Malcolm, “A Response.”

we have seen, in the case of God), instead insisting that sovereignty is transferred not “by the Victory” alone, “but by the Consent of the Vanquished.”⁵ Yet politically the distance is negligible, for his theory of tacit consent is sweeping enough to make the consent of the vanquished inferable from the conqueror’s pacification of the territory. Soon after the publication of *Leviathan*, Hobbes returned to England and signaled his allegiance to the Commonwealth, thereby incurring the charges of disloyalty that would dog him after the restoration of the Stuarts.

Hobbes’s stance on the (retrospective) legitimacy of conquest was not simply an acknowledgement of political realities; it depended on his deeper conviction that even extreme coercion does not destroy the ability to commit to binding decisions. Yet this latter view appears obviously and utterly unpalatable. When an armed robber demands money from us, does our handing it over constitute a voluntary transaction that should be considered binding? Indeed, a generation later John Locke would appeal to our intuitions on this matter to argue against the legitimacy of conquest as a whole:

Should a Robber break into my House, and with a Dagger at my Throat, make me seal Deeds to convey my Estate to him, would this give him any Title? Just such a Title by his Sword, has an *unjust Conquerour*, who forces me into Submission. The Injury and the Crime is equal, whether committed by the wearer of a Crown, or some petty Villain.⁶

For Locke, the illegitimacy of the robber’s claim is so obvious as to need no justification, and the force of his argument is simply to convict the conqueror by analogy. But it is important to recognize that Hobbes would not challenge the underlying analogy. He would not, in other words, insist that there is something unique about political power that distinguishes it from mere organized crime; rather, he stands in a line of thinkers who see no essential distinction between

⁵ *Leviathan* 20, 141.

⁶ *Second Treatise of Government* §176; in *Two Treatises*, 385.

the two.⁷ His political conclusion about the legitimacy of conquest stands and falls with the underlying premise about the binding force of highway robbery.

Unsurprisingly, most scholars who have examined this aspect of Hobbes's position have viewed it as unfavorably as Locke did; the occasional brusque dismissals of his argument as "perverse," or as a "dismal failure," are representative of a general consensus more often manifested in silence.⁸ The commonsensical Lockean objection that extreme coercion renders consent meaningless seems so obvious as to make the issue scarcely worth discussing. Yet it is useful to examine Hobbes's argument here in more depth and consider the strongest possible objections to it, for we will find that it has a surprising resilience. In fact, it can help point to some of the limitations of the seemingly obvious Lockean view; if Hobbes's position remains ultimately untenable, it is not quite for the reasons that liberal intuitions might suggest.

⁷ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, 4.4, 147: "Justice removed, then, what are kingdoms but great bands of robbers? What are bands of robbers themselves but little kingdoms?" (Various of Hobbes's seventeenth-century critics attacked him, sometimes citing this passage of Augustine, for failing to distinguish commonwealths from criminal bands: see Ross, *Leviathan Drawn out with a Hook*, 14-15; Lawson, *An Examination of the Political Part of Mr. Hobbs his Leviathan*, 4-5, 12.) For a more recent view, see Tilly, "State Making and War Making as Organized Crime." Tilly argues that we should view the state as a protection racket rather than as a social contract; Hobbes would not see the two as mutually exclusive, since he takes the protection racket to be a rather unexceptional form of contract.

⁸ Pennock, "Hobbes's Confusing Clarity," 113; Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory*, 398. The only remotely sympathetic reference to Hobbes's position that I have been able to find is Finkelstein, "A Puzzle About Hobbes on Self-Defense," 340.

2.

Hobbes's argument that fear and liberty are consistent depends in turn on his definition of liberty as the mere absence of "externall Impediments of motion."⁹ This definition was a novel and polemical one in relation to the thicker theories of liberty espoused by Hobbes's opponents; Quentin Skinner calls it an "epoch-making moment" in the history of political thought, and we will soon return to examine it more fully.¹⁰ But Hobbes's account of liberty was not entirely without predecessors. In fact, to a surprising extent it was a development of the views of Hobbes's great *bête noire*, Aristotle.

At the beginning of Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle considers the question of voluntary (*hekousion*) and involuntary (*akousion*) action.¹¹ The question, he suggests, is important because of its implications for moral judgment: we can only be praised or blamed, and hence honored or punished, for voluntary actions. Aristotle's conclusion is that the only involuntary actions are those performed "under constraint or due to ignorance," and the criterion of "constraint" (*bia*) seems to offer a recognition that external coercion can render our actions

⁹ *Leviathan* 21, 145.

¹⁰ Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, xiv, 109. Skinner's book (which builds on the earlier *Visions*, III, 209-37) focuses on Hobbes as an opponent of republicanism, and various critiques have centered on this aspect of his argument; see, e.g., Collins, "Quentin Skinner's Hobbes and the Neo-Republican Project." But Skinner also provides the fullest overview of Hobbes's changing views on liberty.

¹¹ I focus on this section of the *Nicomachean Ethics* because it is the text to which Hobbes was clearly responding. The question of how Aristotle's argument here coheres (or doesn't) with the treatment of voluntary action in his other works is a complex one that is beyond our present purposes to answer. But on this question see Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will*, 27-48; Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame*, 259-63; Meyer, *Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 93-121; Klimchuk, "Aristotle on Necessity and Voluntariness."

involuntary.¹² But Aristotle goes on to offer a definition of constraint that is so narrow as to seem almost useless. The only action performed under constraint “is one in which the initiative or source of motion comes from without, and to which the person compelled contributes nothing.”¹³ As examples, he cites the person blown away by a wind or carried off by captors; actions “under constraint” are those in which the person involved lacks even the slightest physical capability to alter the result, failing to provide even “the initiative in moving the parts of the body which act as instruments.”¹⁴

What about less definitive constraints on our actions — those which exert pressure but leave us some bare amount of physical agency? Aristotle calls these “mixed” actions, neither entirely voluntary nor entirely involuntary. They are actions performed “through fear of a greater evil or for some noble purpose” that might seem undesirable, but are “chosen under given circumstances in return for certain benefits and performed on the initiative of the agent.”¹⁵ His examples of mixed actions are committing a base deed to save the lives of family members and — the example that Hobbes himself would return to — jettisoning cargo to prevent one’s ship from sinking. Such actions would seem to include most (if not all) everyday examples of coerced

¹² *Nicomachean Ethics* 1109b31-36. Aristotle distinguishes here between *bia*, which rules out physical agency and renders an action involuntary, and *ananke*, which allows physical agency and renders an action mixed. (He does not, however, rigorously distinguish the two terms along these lines throughout his writings.) I have used Martin Ostwald’s translation, but translators have variously rendered these terms as “force,” “constraint,” “duress,” “compulsion,” and “coercion,” sometimes translating *bia* and *ananke* with different words and sometimes not. The specific terminology adopted does not much matter so long as we preserve the distinction between the two, as Hobbes himself does; his equivalents to *bia* and *ananke* are “force” and “compulsion” respectively (see *Questions*, in *English Works*, V, 290-91).

¹³ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1110b16-17.

¹⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1110a15-16.

¹⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1110a4; 1110b3-4.

decision-making, and it is tempting to read Aristotle's language of "mixed" rather than fully "voluntary" action as excusing the conduct of such decision-makers. But he makes clear that mixed actions should be considered voluntary in their particular circumstances, and they share one key characteristic with voluntary actions: they are admissible for moral judgment.¹⁶ Even the threat of certain death does not annihilate our capacity for voluntary action and our accountability for such actions, and the proof of this is that there are some especially odious actions "which no man can possibly be compelled to do," even on pain of death.¹⁷ Where there is any amount of physical agency, there is always a choice.

Aristotle's account of voluntary action therefore seems unpalatable in many of the same ways that Hobbes's does.¹⁸ Like Hobbes, he is inclined to think that we can be held responsible

¹⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1110a13-20. Skinner takes Hobbes's conclusion that the sailor who casts his goods overboard acts voluntarily to be an "anti-Aristotelian" move, and more generally seems to take Hobbes's account as a rejection of Aristotle's (*Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 134; cf. *Visions*, III, 223). It is true that (in *Leviathan*, at least) Hobbes drops Aristotle's language of "mixed" action and treats such actions as entirely voluntary. But Aristotle already treats mixed actions as voluntary in the most important respects, and Hobbes's position therefore remains closer to Aristotle's than it might seem. Johan Sommerville notes that other writers of the period who argued for the validity of coerced contracts also cited Aristotle's example of the sailor (*Thomas Hobbes: Political Ideas in Historical Context*, 55), which suggests that Aristotle's "mixed" actions were widely taken to be voluntary or something close to it in Hobbes's time. For most present-day commentators on Aristotle, the striking aspect of his discussion in this section of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (particularly when compared to his other writings) is precisely how willing Aristotle is to see coerced actions as voluntary.

¹⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1110a26-27.

¹⁸ Hence the impulse to claim that Aristotle must not have been talking about voluntary action at all, on the grounds that he uses *hekousion* to refer to actions "which we would class as coerced, and not 'voluntary'" (Charles, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Action*, 61). Whatever the complications involved in translating *hekousion* and *akousion* (on which see especially Gauthier and Jolif, *L'éthique à Nicomaque*, II, 169-70), Meyer rightly objects that to decide in advance that *hekousion* cannot mean "voluntary" is to rule out the possibility that Aristotle might be using established terms in a surprising or controversial way (*Aristotle on Moral Responsibility*, 9-10). Rather than assuming what Aristotle must have meant on the basis of how "we" would

even for actions performed under extreme coercion. But the overall thrust of his thought mitigates the implications of this conclusion. While mixed actions are voluntary enough to be judged, he emphasizes the need to judge actions in their particular circumstances. Coercion does not render an action involuntary, or absolve an agent from moral judgment altogether, but it can certainly change the calculus of this judgment. We might absolve the robbery victim or the sailor of any blame, not because their actions were involuntary, but because they (voluntarily) acted as best they could given the circumstances.¹⁹ And insofar as the laws are guided by these processes of moral judgment,²⁰ societies can and do forbid various kinds of coercion that force agents to do things that may still be voluntary in Aristotle's minimal sense.

Most importantly, Aristotle is not a liberal, and for that reason he attaches little importance to the fact of voluntariness as such. His use of the term is so broad as to be almost physiological rather than moral: voluntariness is a necessary condition for judgment, but does not itself provide a strong criterion for such judgment. That is, "voluntary" tells us only that agents were physically capable of acting otherwise than they did, and the fact that even actions under extreme coercion are voluntary prevents it from being much of a guide for moral judgment.²¹ Voluntariness as such thus occupies a modest place in Aristotle's ethics, and most of the work of moral judgment falls to other criteria. Whether (and how much) we praise or blame agents depends on evaluations of their overall character, of the particular circumstances and outside

understand the terms he uses, we should instead be open to the thought that his understanding of them is sharply different from our own.

¹⁹ Cf. the helpful analysis in Nielsen, "Dirtying Aristotle's Hands?"

²⁰ Aristotle emphasizes this connection at 1109b30-34.

²¹ Aristotle's claim that animals and children, who lack moral responsibility, can nonetheless act voluntarily (1111a25-26) is a further indication that voluntary action is not central to moral judgment.

pressures facing them, of whether their actions was the result of deliberate choice or weakness of will, and so on. Later liberalism often took question of whether an action was voluntarily chosen to be the most important thing about it; Aristotle did not.

3.

Aristotle's theory of voluntary action forms the background for Hobbes's theory of liberty.²² In one important passage in *Leviathan*, he returns to Aristotle's example of the sailor who jettisons his cargo to avoid death:

Feare, and Liberty are consistent; as when a man throweth his goods into the Sea for *feare* the ship would sink, he doth it neverthelesse very willingly, and may refuse to doe it if he will: It is therefore the action, of one that was *free*... And generally all actions which men doe in Common-wealths, for *feare* of the law, are actions, which the doers had *liberty* to omit.²³

As Hobbes recognizes, the question is crucial because of its implications for political obligation. He distinguishes two processes by which political societies form: institution, in which individuals in the state of nature covenant among themselves to create a sovereign, and acquisition, in which individuals covenant with a conquering sovereign. But institution and acquisition confer identical rights of sovereignty, and both sorts of covenants are motivated by fear, whether of other individuals in the state of nature or of the conqueror. "In both cases they do it for fear: which is to be noted by them, that hold all such Covenants, as proceed from fear of

²² Hobbes treats the two qualities as synonymous, as he was eventually to make clear in his debate with Bramhall: "I do indeed take all voluntary acts to be free, and all free acts to be voluntary" (*Questions*, in *English Works*, V, 365).

²³ *Leviathan* 21, 146.

death, or violence, voyd: which if it were true, no man, in any kind of Common-wealth, could be obliged to Obedience.”²⁴ Fear must be consistent with liberty for our obligations to bind us.

Hobbes consistently argues throughout his writings that covenants extorted by fear are valid. Yet the particulars of his arguments change in revealing ways. In the *Elements*, for instance, he discusses voluntary and involuntary actions in the following terms: “Voluntary such as a man doth upon appetite or fear; involuntary such as he doth by necessity of nature, as when he is pushed, or falleth, and thereby doth good or hurt to another; mixed, such as participate of both.”²⁵ We can see that at this stage Hobbes still adheres to the Aristotelian language of “mixed” action, which will drop out of *Leviathan*. More important, however, are the dual claims that actions from fear are voluntary, but that actions from “necessity of nature” are involuntary. The difficulty is that elsewhere in the *Elements*, Hobbes argues that “necessity of nature maketh men to will and desire *bonum sibi*, that which is good for themselves, and to avoid that which is hurtful; but most of all that terrible enemy of nature, death.”²⁶ But if the fear of death is a “necessity of nature,” this would seem to make actions stemming from it involuntary, and therefore render covenants extorted by fear invalid.

Likewise, we have seen that in *De Cive* Hobbes suggests that fear of death itself can serve as an real impediment (albeit a “discretionary” rather than “absolute” one) on our liberty,

²⁴ *Leviathan* 20, 138-39.

²⁵ *Elements* 1.12.3, 62.

²⁶ *Elements* 1.14.6, 71.

which again might seem to render fear and liberty inconsistent.²⁷ Hobbes's explanation in *De Cive* for why coerced covenants are valid is revealing in this regard:

[A]m I obligated if, to save my life, I make an *agreement* with a highway robber to pay him a thousand gold pieces tomorrow, and to do nothing that might result in his arrest and arraignment? There are times when an *agreement* like that should be held to be invalid; but it will not be invalid simply because it was motivated by fear. For this would imply that the *agreements* by which men unite in civil life and make laws are invalid (for one's submission to government by another person is motivated by fear of mutual slaughter); and that one is not acting rationally in putting one's trust in an agreement with a captive on the price of his ransom.²⁸

What is striking about this passage is that the concept of liberty plays no role in it; Hobbes does not claim that the agreement with the highway robber is valid because we are free not to make it. His argument instead seems to be that we must act *as if* we were free not to make such agreements, and therefore honor them, because doing so is for our own good: if we treated ransoms as invalid, the robber would have no rational incentive to accept them, and would simply kill us instead. Thus the passage is actually consistent with the claim that we always act to preserve ourselves and lack any freedom to do otherwise.

By such arguments, Hobbes tries to thread the needle, claiming both that we have no choice but to avoid death *and* that covenants made to avoid death are binding. In *Leviathan*, as we have seen,²⁹ he settles on a simpler solution: he drops the premise that self-preservation is a natural necessity, and with it the notion that fear serves as any kind of impediment on our liberty.

²⁷ *De Cive* 9.9, 111; Hobbes's language in this passage is admittedly murky and seems to leave open the question of whether we can overcome such impediments: "Other obstacles are discretionary [*arbitraria*]; they do not prevent motion absolutely but incidentally [*per accidens*], i.e. by our own choice [*per electionem nostram*], as a man on a ship is not prevented from throwing himself into the sea, if he can will to do so."

²⁸ *De Cive* 2.16, 38-9.

²⁹ See above, chapter III, section 3.

Henceforth the binding force of covenants extorted by fear will rest on the claim that we are *free* to choose death if we prefer, rather than because treating them as binding is necessary for our preservation.

There is another change between *De Cive* and *Leviathan* that is significant but easy to overlook. In both books, Hobbes argues that natural liberty is simply the absence of obstacles to movement, so that the term can be applied with equal validity to natural bodies like rivers as well as humans.³⁰ But this would seem to imply that freedom is always a matter of degree, in that we are always somewhat free and somewhat unfree depending on the specific obstacles to our movement. In *De Cive*, in fact, Hobbes makes this point explicitly:

Every man has more or less *liberty* as he has more or less space in which to move; so that a man kept in a large jail has more *liberty* than a man kept in a small jail. And a man may be *free* in one direction but not in the other, as a traveller is prevented by hedges and walls from trampling on the vines and crops adjacent to the road.³¹

Even the prisoner is not unfree full stop; he simply has less liberty than someone with fewer obstacles to his movement.

This “quantitative” view of liberty might be philosophically tenable, but politically speaking Hobbes needs something more. The problem of liberty is for him crucially connected with the problem of political obligation: it is only through our free actions that we can bind ourselves with covenants and incur obligations, “there being no Obligation on any man, which ariseth not from some Act of his own; for all men equally, are by Nature Free.”³² But here a

³⁰ The difference, as we have seen, is that in *De Cive* he seems to accept that fear can serve as an internal obstacle, whereas in *Leviathan* only external obstacles count as restrictions on our liberty. See chapter III, note 71.

³¹ *De Cive* 9.9, 111.

³² *Leviathan* 21, 150.

quantitative view of liberty is clearly inadequate; it may be true that everyone is always to some extent free and to some extent unfree, but the critical question is whether we are free *enough* to bind ourselves. For that reason Hobbes needs a “binary” criterion of liberty that classifies people as simply free or simply unfree, at least for the purposes of covenanting.

The move to such a binary view is evident in his equivalent definition of liberty in

Leviathan:

LIBERTY, or FREEDOME, signifieth (properly) the absence of Opposition; (by Opposition, I mean externall Impediments of motion;) and may be applyed no less to Irrationall, and Inanimate creatures, than to Rationall. For whatsoever is so tyed, or environed, as it cannot move, but within a certain space, which space is determined by the opposition of some externall body, we say it hath not Liberty to go further. And so of all living creatures, whilst they are imprisoned, or restrained, with walls, or chayns; and of the water whilst it is kept in by banks, or vessels, that otherwise would spread it selfe into a larger space, we use to say, they are not at Liberty, to move in such manner, as without those externall impediments they would.³³

The criterion he has adopted is bare physical agency, the same one that Aristotle had used to demarcate involuntary actions from mixed and voluntary ones. We lack liberty when we cannot physically act otherwise than we do; in all other cases we are free, and this means that the only bonds that render us unfree are physical ones, like “walls, or chayns”.³⁴

This explains the special significance he attaches to physical bondage. There is no more talk in *Leviathan* of prisoners having varying degrees of freedom according to the size of their cells; prisoners are now one of the two chief examples of people who are unfree as such. The

³³ *Leviathan* 21, 145-46.

³⁴ Hobbes also distinguishes for the first time between having the liberty to do something and the power to do it, and this similarly supports the move to a binary view. It might seem that even in the absence of physical obstacles, we are always enmeshed in various kinds of freedom and unfreedom — the unobstructed person is free to walk around as she sees fit, but not to fly. But “when the impediment of motion, is in the constitution of the thing it selfe, we use not to say, it wants the Liberty; but the Power to move” (*Leviathan* 21, 146). This distinction allows him to preserve the notion that there are certain cases where we are free as such.

other such group — although for Hobbes, the two are ultimately the same — are the captives, “kept in prison, or bonds,” who are “commonly called Slaves”. Hobbes understandably views slaves as especially unfortunate, but by the same token they retain particular rights as compared with the “servants,” or “subjects,” who make up the rest of the population, for slaves “have no obligation at all; but may break their bonds, or the prison; and kill, or carry away captive their Master, justly...”³⁵ Slavery is an extension of the state of nature, and thus those in it retain their full natural right to defend themselves as they see fit.

We will soon return to the ambiguities of Hobbes’s discussion of slavery. For now, to sum up, we can say that *Leviathan* develops the account of liberty and obligation from Hobbes’s earlier works in three complementary ways. First, Hobbes moves from viewing liberty partly as a matter of degree to viewing it in almost entirely binary terms; we are unfree when physically restrained from doing something and free at all other times. Second, he abandons the idea that we are naturally compelled to preserve ourselves, and similarly that the fear of death can act as a genuine impediment on our freedom; choosing death becomes a real option.³⁶ Third, and springing from the previous two, he connects the validity of coerced covenants to their

³⁵ *Leviathan* 20, 141.

³⁶ For a related argument, see Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan*, which suggests that *Leviathan* displays a “new skepticism about men’s abilities to perceive and pursue their own interests in a rational manner” (98). While I agree with Johnston’s argument in its broad strokes, I would not frame the shift so sharply around the opposition of rational self-interest and irrationality. (A similar response would apply to Stephen Holmes, “Hobbes’s Irrational Man.”) As we have seen, it is not so much that Hobbes despairs in *Leviathan* of humans’ capacity to follow the dictates of reason as that he despairs of the possibility that reason alone could issue unequivocal dictates at all. Johnston stresses the negative and destabilizing effects of this shift, and these are certainly a central concern for Hobbes. But they are only half the story, for the move away from a deterministic psychology becomes central to his prescriptions for political stability. The binding force of political obligation comes to depend on the notion that choosing death is a real and viable choice, not merely a failure to perceive one’s rational self-interest.

voluntariness (rather than, for instance, the mere social utility of treating them as valid). It is precisely because fear and liberty are consistent that “submit or die” becomes a genuine choice, and thus one with the potential to bind us.

Why does Hobbes alter his theory in these ways? Internal considerations of theoretical consistency may suffice to explain the shift; the debate with Bramhall, in particular, forced Hobbes to clarify his entire position on liberty in ways that ramified throughout his work. Beyond such purely theoretical considerations, perhaps we might also speculate that the experience of the civil war and its aftermath impressed upon Hobbes the need for such an account. The early works had suggested a kind of deterministic realpolitik, reminiscent perhaps of Thucydides’s Melian Dialogue, in which the powerful “exact as much as they can, and the weak yield to such conditions as they can get,” without any need for an intervening psychology.³⁷ But the necessity of ensuring peace after the upheaval of the 1640s might have seemed to require a principle of permanent political subjection that would foster loyalty among the populace — on the logic that they themselves had freely agreed to their new rulers — rather than mere compliance.

4.

Postponing for a moment the *political* merits and demerits of Hobbes’s view, is it even conceptually coherent? Can such a minimal (and purely physical) view of liberty actually capture

³⁷ *The Peloponnesian War* 5.89, 365. (This is the phrase more famously translated by Richard Crawley as “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”) We recall that the very phrase “necessity of nature” that plays such a prominent role in Hobbes’s early accounts comes from this same section of Thucydides (see chapter III, note 60). Speaking somewhat schematically, we might say that Thucydides is the presiding influence on the deterministic moments in Hobbes’s account, just as Aristotle is the presiding influence on the moments of relative contingency.

anything important about the concept? Or does the very notion of liberty demand something thicker than what Hobbes gives it?

One potent line of attack against it can be found in Charles Taylor's well-known critique of minimal (what he calls "Hobbesian") theories of liberty:

Consider the following diabolical defence of Albania as a free country. We recognise that religion has been abolished in Albania, whereas it hasn't been in Britain. But on the other hand there are probably far fewer traffic lights per head in Tirana than in London.... Suppose an apologist for Albanian Socialism were nevertheless to claim that this country was freer than Britain, because the number of acts restricted was far smaller. After all, only a minority of Londoners practise some religion in public places, but all have to negotiate their way around traffic. Those who do practice a religion generally do so one day of the week, while they are held up at traffic lights every day. In sheer quantitative terms, the number of acts restricted by traffic lights must be greater than that restricted by a ban on public religious practice. So if Britain is considered a free society, why not Albania?³⁸

Aside from the Cold War-era depiction of Hoxha's Albania, some of the particulars of Taylor's account would have to be modified to fit Hobbes's argument. (For instance, Hobbes would not view traffic lights as genuine impediments on our freedom, since there is nothing physically preventing us from running them; something like a drawbridge would be a more Hobbesian obstacle.) Still, the basic point seems sound: no purely physical theory can draw the necessary distinctions between free and unfree societies without smuggling in some interpretive criteria to judge which kinds of impediments are actually important.

This attack on "Hobbesian" theories of liberty may indeed cut against some of Hobbes's heirs who want to espouse minimal and value-neutral accounts of freedom while still distinguishing between free and unfree societies. But the attack does not really cut against Hobbes himself, for in typical fashion he is willing to accept Taylor's argument head on:

³⁸ Taylor, "What's Wrong With Negative Liberty," in *Philosophical Papers*, II, 219.

There is written on the Turrets of the city of *Luca* in great characters at this day, the word *LIBERTAS*; yet no man can thence inferre, that a particular man has more Libertie, or Immunitie from the service of the Commonwealth there, than in *Constantinople*. Whether a Common-wealth be Monarchicall, or Popular, the Freedome is still the same.³⁹

Replace Hoxha's Albania with the Ottoman Empire — which carried much the same rhetorical force for seventeenth-century Englishmen — and the parallel is virtually exact. Hobbes is willing (indeed, happy) to give up any distinction between free and unfree regimes. He argues that the traditional Aristotelian language of degraded forms of government (tyranny, oligarchy, anarchy) simply refers to governments “misliked” by those discontented under them, and in general that “the name of Tyranny, signifieth nothing more, nor lesse, than the name of Sovereignty.”⁴⁰ Theories only slightly more nuanced than Hobbes's may fall prey to Taylor's critique, but his appears brute enough to escape it.

But there is another reason we might doubt the internal adequacy of Hobbes's theory, and it relates to the strict line he wants to draw between external impediments (which restrict our liberty) and mere mental states like fear (which do not). The notion of a physical impediment is rather unproblematic when treating natural bodies like water: the river has no choice but to flow up to the point where its banks confine it. But human beings bear a different relationship to physical impediments; when we can see that our way is impeded, we often alter our conduct accordingly. Hobbes seems to accept that we remain impeded even when we do not literally test the impediments, given the absurdity of the alternative — that the prisoner is only unfree when rattling the bars of his cage, but not when he gives up and goes to sleep for the night. Thus he

³⁹ *Leviathan* 21, 149.

⁴⁰ *Leviathan* Review and Conclusion, 486; 19, 130.

speaks of freedom as a lack of impediments to what one has “the will, desire, or inclination to do,” not what one is actively trying to do at any given moment.⁴¹

But this complicates Hobbes’s attempt to distinguish external impediments from fear and other internal ones, since it is often unclear where one ends and the other begins. Even purely physical impediments on action operate partly by producing beliefs about the nature of the obstacle — the prisoner is initially impeded by the bare impregnability of his cell and later by his belief that it is impregnable. But it sometimes becomes difficult to determine how such beliefs differ from fears, which are supposedly consistent with liberty. Suppose we find ourselves faced with a raging river that we will almost certainly drown in trying to cross: is what impedes us the river itself or our fear of drowning? Similarly, can Hobbes really believe that the prisoner held in a cell is unfree, but the hostage held by armed captors — who knows that she will be killed if she tries to escape — is merely deterred by fear and therefore free? Or, to return to the highway robber, can it really be the case that we can be held responsible if we hand over our money, but not if the robber simply overpowers us and takes it? In such cases, Hobbes’s seemingly intuitive distinction threatens to collapse into trivial and unconvincing hair-splitting.

⁴¹ *Leviathan* 21, 146. Admittedly, Hobbes is far from clear on this point. In one passage in the *Questions* (in *English Works*, V, 352), he seems to vacillate about whether impediment requires an active attempt or decision to do the impeded action, or merely an underlying “purpose” to do it. Yet Hobbes’s firm insistence that obstacles like walls, chains, or prisons restrict our liberty categorically (and not merely intermittently depending on when we are actually struggling against them) seems to require the broader criterion of “will, desire, or inclination” rather than active attempt. On this theme, Pettit writes that “Hobbes wants to say that if an external impediment is to take away an agent’s freedom as nonobstruction, then the agent must already be disposed to act in the manner obstructed, having already made a decision on what to do” (*Made with Words*, 136). But we must distinguish a disposition to act from a decision to act. Hobbes seems to suggest that the prisoner is unfree insofar as his *disposition* to escape is thwarted, but this need not involve a determinate *decision* to escape; he remains unfree so long as he would like to escape, even if he has given up actively attempting to do so.

Hobbes may not be able to answer this critique in an entirely satisfactory way, and we will see in particular how difficult he found it to make sense of the problem of slavery within the logic of his theory. Still, he may actually be able to answer it with regard to the problem he is really concerned about, the case of coerced *covenanting*, and for that reason his theory may be adequate for his political purposes. To see why, we must note one common feature of the various scenarios just described: the outcome is never in doubt. Whether we hold back at the river's edge or drown trying to cross it, we will not make it to the other side; whether the hostage stays put or is shot down, she will not escape any more than the prisoner will; whether we hand over our money or go down swinging, the robber will get it. "Your money or your life" is not simply an unpalatable choice; most of the time it is literally no choice at all, because even if we choose to sacrifice our life we will not actually hold on to our money.

But there are other cases in which the outcome is legitimately in doubt, and where even the unpalatable choices imposed by extreme coercion seem to be real ones. The captured spy, ordered on pain of death to reveal her fellow agents, faces a dismal choice, but one with real ramifications — if she withholds the information, their identities will indeed remain concealed. Such situations are why Aristotle and Hobbes both insist on the limits of bare coercion, and that there are actions which no one "can possibly be compelled to do" by any amount of force. And importantly for Hobbes, "submit or die" is such a choice in a way that "your money or your life" is not, for the simple reason that our allegiance, unlike our money, is not something external to us — if we die, it dies with us. By choosing death, we do indeed deny the conqueror any right of sovereignty over us.

This may seem like cold comfort, and generally speaking it is. Hobbes certainly expects that most people will, “to avoyd the present stroke of death,” submit to their conqueror.⁴² But at the same time he takes extremely seriously the possibility that they will not. The kind of imputed rationality that figures in the earlier works — in which we can attribute actions to people insofar as their rational self-interest would require such actions — largely drops out of *Leviathan*.⁴³ The choice to submit or die becomes a moment whose sharp moral and political consequences stem from its genuine contingency.⁴⁴ “He therefore that is slain, is Overcome, but not Conquered: He

⁴² *Leviathan* 20, 141.

⁴³ Thus, while Hoekstra correctly notes the importance of *tacit* consent to Hobbes’s theory, I do not think that what he calls *attributed* consent — the doctrine that “one *has* consented when one *ought* to have consented” (“De Facto Turn,” 69) — plays a significant role in *Leviathan*. (For a similar notion, see Hampton’s “healthy deliberation” model of rationality, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition*, 34-42.) We can distinguish the two concepts along these lines: tacit consent can be inferred *so long as* the agent does *nothing* inconsistent with consent, but attributed consent can be inferred *even if* the agent does *something* inconsistent with consent. In the conquest scenario, tacit consent could be inferred so long as the inhabitants of the conquered territory do not resist or flee, but attributed consent could be inferred even if they do resist or flee, as long as it would be rational for them to submit. By *Leviathan*, I do not think that Hobbes would allow the latter claim, since those whose sovereign has been toppled find themselves once again in the state of nature and regain their full natural right to act as they please. Thus when discussing the soldier who find himself in the clutches of the enemy, Hobbes says that he “may seek his Protection wheresoever he has most hope to have it; and may lawfully submit himself to his new Master” (*Leviathan* Review and Conclusion, 485), but not that he *must* or even *should* do either. The only remaining glimmer in *Leviathan* of the kind of attributed action that plays a larger role in the earlier works comes in Hobbes’s discussion of the infant’s obligation to its parent. See *Leviathan* 20, 140: “For it [the child] ought to obey him by whom it is preserved; because preservation of life being the end, for which one man becomes subject to another, every man is supposed to promise obedience, to him, in whose power it is to save, or destroy him.”

⁴⁴ To be sure, this is not a *metaphysical* contingency; Hobbes insists that all of our actions are determined by antecedent causes, even as he insists that this metaphysical necessity is consistent with free will (*Leviathan* 21, 146-47). But the choice is contingent for our purposes in that no set of purely external determinants can dictate how the person will act. Writing against Bramhall, Hobbes expresses this distinction by arguing that “in the same ship, in the same storm, one man may be necessitated to throw his goods overboard, and another man to keep them within the ship,” even though it is impossible that the same man in identical circumstances could act otherwise than he did (*Questions*, in *English Works*, V, 261). Even if our actions are always in

that is taken, and put into prison, or chained, is not Conquered, though Overcome...”⁴⁵ And although such distinctions might seem trivial, there are moments when they become highly consequential — nowhere more so than in the spectacular recent case that had embodied both of the scenarios that Hobbes mentions. After all, the late King Charles had been imprisoned, then executed, but never gave his acquiescence, remaining defiant even in his final speech on the scaffold: “I could hold my peace very well, if I did not think that holding my peace would make some men think that I did submit to the guilt as well as to the punishment.”⁴⁶ We have seen that Hobbes was willing to make his own peace with the Rump regime, and likewise to insist that those living in England were obliged to obey the new government. But perhaps we can also see a glimmer of his royalist sympathies in his refusal to accept that the king had ever handed over sovereignty, however rational it might have been for him to do so.⁴⁷ If the Rump had nonetheless acquired sovereignty after Charles’s death by the tacit acquiescence of the population, no legal fiction could disguise the injustice of the regicide itself.

5.

Hobbes’s theory thus seems able to evade the charge of simple conceptual incoherence. But what about its political repugnance? Surely coherence alone is not enough to recommend

some sense predetermined, there is nothing that makes them predetermined in the direction of self-preservation.

⁴⁵ *Leviathan* Review and Conclusion, 485.

⁴⁶ *King Charles His Speech Made upon the Scaffold...*, 4.

⁴⁷ Particularly striking is *Leviathan* 21, 154: “If a Monarch subdued by war, render himself Subject to the Victor; his Subjects are delivered from their former obligation, and become obliged to the Victor. But if he be held prisoner, or have not the liberty of his own Body; he is not understood to have given away the Right of Soveraigntie...”

Hobbes's account of liberty given the obvious sorts of Lockean objections it provokes. Even if there is some minimal sense in which coercion leaves us free to make unpalatable choices, wouldn't we rather live in a society that prohibits such coercion rather than one that treats the resulting choices as binding? Along similar lines, Gregory Kavka faults Hobbes for failing to distinguish between "forced" and "coerced" promises. Forced promises are those made "to avoid some evil or danger not created by the promisee," such as insecurity, illness, or poverty, and should be considered binding, since banning them "would just deprive them [the promisors] of one tool for making the best of a bad situation." Coerced promises, on the other hand, are those in which the promisee himself makes the threat with the goal of extorting the promise; we should not consider them binding, since doing so would simply incentivize the further use of coercion. Hobbes's account of sovereignty by acquisition fails because this, unlike institution, is a case of coerced rather than merely forced consent — the conqueror is responsible for the threat of violence in a way that the sovereign by institution is not responsible for the violence of the state of nature.⁴⁸

These objections can help us grasp the real political upshot of Hobbes's theory. For, regarding the first, Hobbes himself would not disagree. It is important to stress that his views about the validity of coerced covenants apply only "in the condition of meer Nature," or in cases "where no other Law...forbiddeth the performance" of the covenanted act.⁴⁹ "There are times when an *agreement* like that should be held to be invalid," he similarly writes in a passage from

⁴⁸ Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory*, 396. As we can see, Kavka's usage is rather different from Hobbes's already-mentioned distinction between "force" and "compulsion," which tracks Aristotle's own distinction between *bia* and *ananke*. See note 12 of this chapter.

⁴⁹ *Leviathan* 14, 97-98.

De Cive that we have already seen, and such times are precisely when “a civil law forbids it by making what is promised illicit.”⁵⁰ More generally, what we have been examining is merely Hobbes’s theory of *natural* liberty; he fully accepts that societies will enact their own varying versions of the “liberty of subjects” — what we would call the *civil* liberties enjoyed under the law.⁵¹

Hobbes’s point is not that since coercion is still compatible with some kind of natural liberty, societies should accept its legitimacy. His point is rather that there is no metaphysical line separating coercion from non-coercion, or acceptable from unacceptable forms of it. As Aristotle had suggested that the only truly involuntary actions are those in which we lack even the physical capacity to act other than we do, so Hobbes suggests that the same criterion demarcates the point where our natural liberty ends. But if natural liberty is compatible even with extreme coercion, the implication for Hobbes (as it was for Aristotle) is that societies cannot hope through their laws to enact some naturally-given standard of freedom, since any attempt to do so consistently will have to permit many actions that anyone (Hobbes as well as his opponents) would recognize as incompatible with a decent life. In other words, the fact that we retain our natural liberty even when faced with the armed robber tells us that natural liberty cannot be our standard of legitimacy. If highway robbery is wrong, it is not because it violates a metaphysical canon of human freedom, but because it represents a form of coercion that we find

⁵⁰ *De Cive* 2.16, 38-39.

⁵¹ Various critics, noting these two distinct dimensions of liberty — liberty being on the one hand a lack of impediment and on the other a lack of obligation — have viewed this as an inconsistency that Hobbes tried but failed to remedy; see, e.g., Pennock, “Hobbes’s Confusing Clarity”; Douglass, “Hobbes’s Changing Account of Liberty.” But sheer parsimony aside, it is not entirely clear why using liberty in two different senses need be a problem for Hobbes’s theory. Nor has it been adequately shown that Hobbes ever tried to reduce the two to a single unified dimension, much less failed to do so.

morally unacceptable — not because it forces its victims to act involuntarily full stop, but because it coerces them into (voluntary) choices that no one should be forced to make. Where such lines will be drawn, and which precise forms of coercion transgress them, are civil — or as we might say, social and political — questions.

Why might it be helpful to take this view? To answer this question, we can return to Kavka's distinction between forced and coerced actions. What the distinction presupposes is that however ubiquitous the pressures may be that make people choose lesser evils, we can nonetheless sharply separate those pressures that we are responsible for from those that we are not. Thus, poverty or illness are mere background conditions upon those suffering from them, and do not implicate the third party who strikes an agreement with the sufferers that they would not have made absent such conditions. It is only when our individual actions actually create their predicament that we are acting coercively and therefore illegitimately. Hence the reason that the conqueror's ultimatum is illicit, for the threat to the lives of the conquered would not exist were it not for his action, whereas the sovereign by institution simply offers his subjects a way out of a state of nature that is not his doing.

Kavka's distinction reflects some of the central preoccupations of the broader Lockean critique of Hobbes, and he is right to suggest that Hobbes does not recognize it. But it would be more accurate to say that Hobbes rejects it, and his reasons for doing so are worth exploring. On the immediate point about conquest, the logic of his theory does indeed undercut any sharp distinction between acquisition and institution. The conqueror may wield the immediate force that leads his subjects to submit, but it is not quite right to say that he alone creates the threat facing them, for if he fails to gain undisputed sovereignty they will find themselves back in the state of nature, simply facing violence from a different source. More importantly, it is not quite

right to say that the sovereign by institution bears no responsibility for the predicament of the individuals who cede their power to it. The sovereign, after all, was himself previously an individual (or individuals) in the state of nature, and as such bears some small fraction of the responsibility for the violence of this state. This responsibility crucially does not depend on whether the sovereign was one of the wicked whose vainglory forces others to defend themselves. For one of Hobbes's primary claims is that the logic of the state of nature is one in which every individual inevitably coerces every other regardless of their intentions; the fact that everyone is fundamentally equal in strength, and that "we cannot tell the good and the bad apart," means that their very presence is enough to instill "the constant need to watch, distrust, anticipate and get the better of others."⁵² Just as the conqueror does not bear sole responsibility for the coercive pressure on individuals, so the individuals themselves do not lack any responsibility for it.

Lockeans wish to draw sharp lines between free and coerced action, between those coercive pressures created by our actions and those that are the mere preexisting background for our actions. Hobbes's insight is that such neat demarcations are impossible, for this apparently preexisting background is actually something that each of us continually makes and remakes — sometimes by action and sometimes by inaction; sometimes consciously and sometimes not; sometimes by our bare presence or our attempts to look after ourselves.

This aspect of Hobbes's vision was noticed very clearly by C.B. Macpherson, and although he may have been mistaken to suppose that Hobbes simply "treated society as such as essentially a series of market relations," nonetheless market coercion is one of the clearest

⁵² *De Cive* P.12, 11.

examples of the phenomenon that Hobbes has in mind.⁵³ The most typical way that Locke and his successors have tried to distinguish freedom from coercion is by drawing a line between violence and voluntary exchange, the political and the economic spheres. The law of nature grants each person “an uncontrollable Liberty, to dispose of his Person or Possessions” while forbidding him “to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions,” and we can clearly identify such harm by the presence of “force, or a declared design of force upon the Person of another.”⁵⁴ Force and fraud are illicit, but all other means for pursuing our interests are permissible; so long as we do not physically coerce others, we are not responsible for whatever background conditions force them to strike a deal.

Hobbes points to the murkiness of these lines; he reminds us that violence is not the only form of coercion, and that exercising power over others need not require “a sedate settled Design, upon another Mans life.”⁵⁵ More often, we coerce others through our infinitesimal contributions to the background conditions that register as impersonal forces rather than individual threats, and through our honest attempts to fend for ourselves given these conditions; it by no means contradicts this to point out that those we coerce are often simultaneously coercing us. Once we

⁵³ *Possessive Individualism*, 67. While Hobbes’s theory is not (pace Macpherson) modeled on market conditions in general, he does show himself strikingly aware of the coercive force of the market, in a way that we might associate more with the nineteenth than the seventeenth century. See, e.g., the attack on merchants for “making poor people sell their labor to them at their own prices; so that poor people, for the most part, might get a better living by working in [the prison and poorhouse] Bridewell, than by spinning, weaving, and other such labor as they can do” (*Behemoth* 3, 126). He sees no qualitative distinction between the things we do to avoid violence and those we do to avoid starvation, instead suggesting that a person’s being “destitute of food, or other thing necessary for his life” excuses his actions just as much as the “terror of present death” does (*Leviathan* 27, 208). Cf. Thomas, “Social Origins,” 233-36.

⁵⁴ Locke, *Second Treatise* §6, §19; in *Two Treatises*, 270-71, 280.

⁵⁵ *Second Treatise* §16; in *Two Treatises*, 278.

recognize the ubiquity and imperceptibility of coercion, those exercising it no longer appear akin to the criminal who has “declared War against all Mankind, and therefore may be destroyed as a *Lyon* or a *Tyger*, one of those wild Savage Beasts, with whom Men can have no Society nor Security.”⁵⁶ Instead, they seem more like the people of Hobbes’s state of nature, each of whom contributes in some way to its misery — some out of active malice, most out of necessity — but to whom politics offers “a possibility to come out of it” collectively.⁵⁷

This would not entail an end to coercion and an enactment of some true form of freedom, for the whole thrust of Hobbes’s argument is to show the impossibility of such a decisive solution. Freedom and coercion for him are not mutually exclusive, and those of us lucky enough to avoid death or bondage live our lives in the gradations of the two. Our choices are generally lesser evils, for “the estate of man can never be without some incommmodity or other,”⁵⁸ but they are no less freely chosen for having been made against a backdrop of necessities imposed upon us. We help create this backdrop, and therefore to a certain extent we can reshape it, determining where among the gradations we will live. But nature will not be of much help in this process, since it tells us only that we are always free and always coerced. What mixture we arrive at is a matter for political life to determine.

⁵⁶ *Second Treatise* §11; in *Two Treatises*, 274.

⁵⁷ *Leviathan* 13, 90. Hobbes denies that his gloomy portrayal “accuses man’s nature”: “The Desires, and other Passions of man, are in themselves no Sin. No more are the Actions, that proceed from those Passions, till they know a Law that forbids them” (*Leviathan* 13, 89).

⁵⁸ *Leviathan* 18, 128.

6.

The merits of Hobbes's theory, both conceptual and political, are therefore far greater than they might initially appear. Yet points of tension remain, and in what follows we will focus on three such points in particular.

The first concerns slavery. We have seen that slaves, held captive "in prison, or bonds," are for Hobbes the prototypical examples of people who are unfree. Indeed, they (and other prisoners similarly kept in physical bondage) are the *only* people who are truly unfree, for anyone who "hath corporall liberty allowed him" must be understood to have tacitly consented to continued subjection. Those who have consented in this manner should be considered "servants," not slaves, and therefore owe their masters their same allegiance as all other subjects. Thus, although the practical situation of slaves is grim, juridically speaking they actually hold *more* rights than servants or other subjects, for they alone retain their full and original right of nature, and therefore "have no obligation at all; but may break their bonds, or the prison; and kill, or carry away captive their Master, justly."⁵⁹

The force of this argument was directed primarily against Hobbes's domestic opponents, those republicans who were apt to refer to *themselves* as slaves.⁶⁰ Those who have read the "books of Policy, and Histories of antient Greeks, and Romans," Hobbes complains, "conceive an opinion, that the Subjects in a Popular Common-wealth enjoy Liberty; but that in a Monarchy

⁵⁹ *Leviathan* 20, 141; cf. *Elements* 2.3.3, 128; *De Cive* 8.4, 103-4.

⁶⁰ For Hobbes's attack on these doctrines, see Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*. Other scholars have questioned whether republicanism was so central a target for Hobbes's political project as Skinner suggests; see, for instance, Collins, "Quentin Skinner's Hobbes." For present purposes it is sufficient that republican claims about slavery were *one* of Hobbes's targets.

they are all Slaves.”⁶¹ Hobbes’s definitions aim to undercut this polemical use of the term: if we take liberty in its proper sense, as “freedom from chains, and prison, it were very absurd for men to clamor as they doe, for the Liberty they so manifestly enjoy.”⁶² This misuse of the language of slavery, he argues, is really a bid for power: “what they are demanding in the name of *liberty* is not *liberty* but *Dominion*,” and the oppression due to which they consider themselves slaves is merely their failure to be honored as much as those “whom they think they excel in virtue and ability to govern.”⁶³ A modern reader, aware of the vast gulf separating these English republicans from the contemporaneous victims of the Atlantic slave trade — and of how often their claims to freedom presupposed unfettered power over their wives, children, servants, and sometimes their literal slaves — might be inclined to think that Hobbes has a point.

Not all uses of the term, however, are polemical misuses, for Hobbes recognizes that there are others who we “ordinarily and without passion” call slaves, whom the term correctly describes. Hobbes primarily has slavery in the ancient world (Greek, Roman, and Hebrew) in mind, but of course he is also writing at a time when the Atlantic slave trade was in full swing. And from this angle his theory’s implications are sharp: if the slaves of the New World are in fact slaves, then each one retains “a right of delivering himself, if he can, by what means soever,” whether by escaping or by killing his master.⁶⁴ To apply the term “slave” is to recognize a full right of insurrection.

⁶¹ *Leviathan* 29, 225-26.

⁶² *Leviathan* 21, 147.

⁶³ *De Cive* 10.8, 121; *Elements* 2.8.3, 169.

⁶⁴ *Elements* 2.3.3, 128.

But it is here that Hobbes's sharp distinction between fear and physical impediments causes difficulties. After all, the reality of slavery (whether in the ancient world or the Americas) was rarely one in which slaves were literally kept in chains for the entirety of their lives. It was rather fear, the constant threat of violence, that was the most ubiquitous source of compliance. Yet by the logic of Hobbes's theory, this would suggest that even those universally recognized to be slaves were in fact "servants" instead. The moment that one is freed from literal shackles and ordered to work on pain of death, compliance would constitute a form of tacit consent and therefore void one's right of nature. Once again, a question of enormous political importance seems to depend on a distinction that is too flimsy to bear it: can anyone really think that a slave's right of rebellion could depend on whether they are kept in line by chains or whips?

Hobbes grapples with this problem throughout his writings, but never in an entirely unambiguous or consistent way. Although the language sometimes varies, the basics of his account remain the same throughout: a sharp distinction between those trusted with corporeal liberty and those kept in bondage, according to which the former have tacitly consented and incurred political obligations and the latter have not. In the *Elements*, he notes that the Romans lacked distinct names for these two groups, "but comprehended all under the name of *servus*; whereof such as they loved and durst trust, were suffered to go at liberty...the rest were kept chained, or otherwise restrained with natural impediments to their resistance."⁶⁵ In *De Cive*, he distinguishes "workhouse slaves" (*ergastuli*) from slaves as such (*servi*), and claims that such workhouse slaves

are not included in the definition of *slaves* given above, because they serve in order to avoid beatings, not on the basis of an agreement. Hence if they run away, or kill their *Master*, they are not acting against the natural laws. For confinement in bonds [*vinculis*

⁶⁵ *Elements* 2.3.3, 128.

ligare] indicates a presumption on the part of the man who binds him that he is not adequately held by any other bond of obligation [*obligatione*].⁶⁶

We might already see a certain ambiguity in the claim that *ergastuli* remain free from obligation because they serve “to avoid beatings” rather than from an agreement — isn’t this a fear rather than a physical impediment? But in the early writings, Hobbes still considers fear to be a genuine constraint on liberty akin to other “natural impediments,” which mitigates the ambiguity. Also striking in the *Elements* and *De Cive* is Hobbes’s insistence that these categories are reversible rather than permanent; thus a “servant that is no longer trusted,” who is “thrown into chains, or is deprived of his physical liberty in any way, is released from the other obligation, the one that depends on agreement.”⁶⁷ He will not longer make this point explicitly in *Leviathan*, although it seems to remain an implication of his broader arguments about the limits of political obligation.

More importantly, we have seen that in *Leviathan* Hobbes comes to view fear as consistent with liberty rather than as an impediment on our liberty. Strictly speaking, this should entail that all slaves whose compliance stems from fear of violence are servants and therefore obliged to obey their masters. But Hobbes resists drawing this conclusion. He writes, for instance, that “Slaves that work in Prisons, or Fetters,” lack obligation because they “do it not of duty, but to avoyd the cruelty of their task-masters.”⁶⁸ Such a contrast between acting from genuine duty and acting merely to avoid violence does not fit easily with the rest of his theory of obligation, which holds that the latter is just as binding as the former, but here Hobbes seems unwilling to let go of the notion that there is some key difference between the two. Later, he

⁶⁶ *De Cive* 8.4, 103-4.

⁶⁷ *Elements* 2.3.7, 130; *De Cive* 8.9, 105.

⁶⁸ *Leviathan* 20, 142.

contrasts “Domestique Servants,” who covenant with their masters “for hire, or in hope of benefit,” and “to whose service the Masters have no further right, than is contained in the Covenants made betwixt them,” with “those that are absolutely in the power of their Masters, as Slaves taken in war, and their Issue, whose bodies are not in their own power, (their lives depending on the Will of their Masters, in such manner as to forfeit them upon the least disobedience,) and that are brought [sic] and sold as Beasts.”⁶⁹ Yet once again, this contrast between the explicit contracts of servants and the hereditary subjection of slaves remains silent on whether such subjection can be imposed by fear as well as physical bondage.

Pushed to its literal extreme, Hobbes’s theory would threaten to undercut any attempt to theorize slavery at all, reducing it to just another form of tacit acquiescence extorted by fear, indistinguishable from all other kinds of political subjection. Hobbes (wisely if perhaps not quite consistently) avoids this extreme, insisting on the distinctiveness of slavery as an institution, and by extension on the distinctive rights attached to those caught in it.⁷⁰ But he never fully grapples with the problems posed by slavery for his broader theory. Simple chronology may partly explain this neglect: Hobbes came of age at the very dawn of British empire, and had little

⁶⁹ *Leviathan* 45, 447.

⁷⁰ Some commentators, noting the limited applicability of Hobbes’s strict (physical restraint) definition of slavery, have suggested that his entire account of slavery is simply a kind of legal fiction, designed to show that all those whom we might consider slaves are actually servants bound to obedience. See Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 117, 246; Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 68. But once we recognize Hobbes’s willingness to relax this definition, and allow that genuine slavery might be enforced by threats of violence rather than outright imprisonment, we can see why he seems to have envisioned it existing in a durable and institutionalized form. While he never says so explicitly, this would hold out the possibility that the slaves of the New World are indeed Hobbesian “slaves,” with all this implies.

exposure to colonial issues except for a brief period in the 1620s.⁷¹ The great expansion of the slave trade in the British colonies, in which slavery became a pillar of their economic life, took place in the decades after *Leviathan* was written, the second half of the seventeenth century.⁷² Whereas British thinkers a generation or two younger than Hobbes, like Locke, might be compelled to grapple more fully with the questions posed by slavery — whether in an apologetic or critical mode — such questions remained more theoretical than practical for him. Still, we can see the difficulties that the issue posed for him even on a theoretical level, and perhaps these difficulties may explain some of his reticence.⁷³

7.

A second point of tension concerns religion. We have seen how forcefully Hobbes insists that we are accountable for the things we do to avoid punishment, just as much as for all of our other voluntary actions. This, however, would seem to raise the stakes considerably in cases of religious persecution: if our sovereign orders us, on pain of death, to follow an alien religion, Hobbes's premises would seemingly prevent us from citing this threat of punishment by way of extenuation, and we would have to consider ourselves responsible for our apostasy. But as Hobbes recognizes, this consequence would be a recipe for perpetual turmoil, since in cases

⁷¹ For Hobbes's early involvement with the Virginia Company, see Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes*, 53-79. As Malcolm remarks, however, "the striking thing is that Hobbes' involvement in the Virginia Company should have left, as it seems to have done, so few traces on his later life" (75) after the Company's dissolution in 1624.

⁷² For the development of slavery in the British colonies over the course of the seventeenth century, see Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery*, 217-76.

⁷³ I have examined Hobbes as a theorist of slavery at greater length in an as-yet-unpublished manuscript, provisionally titled "Hobbes, Slavery, and Rebellion."

where our sovereign orders us to do things that jeopardize our salvation, “it is crazy not to die a natural death rather than to obey and die eternal death.”⁷⁴ Whereas normally his doctrines on fear and liberty aim to secure social order, here they threaten to do the opposite. And his worries in the early writings about the potential conflict of temporal and spiritual duties were amply confirmed during the civil war, for which he placed primary blame on the Presbyterians and Puritan sectaries insisting on their private claims of conscience. Hence his claim that it is “impossible a Common-wealth should stand, where any other than the Sovereign, hath a power of giving greater rewards than Life; and of inflicting greater punishments, than Death.”⁷⁵

Hobbes’s theology aims to mitigate such conflicts as much as possible, by insisting that the only things necessary for salvation are “two Vertues, *Faith in Christ*, and *Obedience to Laws*.”⁷⁶ As long as we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, all further doctrinal points are irrelevant, so we should not balk at obeying a Christian sovereign who happens to belong to a different confession; moreover, the fact that civil obedience is a central tenet of Christianity means that disobedience could never conduce to our salvation. Still, this irenic theology cannot entirely eliminate the conflict between temporal and spiritual duties. “Jesus is the Christ” may be an article of faith common to all Christians, but what if our sovereign is not a Christian and orders us to deny even this? It will not do to claim that we were coerced into doing so, for Hobbes has made clear that we could always have chosen death instead. Is there no choice, then, but to disobey an infidel sovereign?

⁷⁴ *De Cive* 18.1, 235; cf. *Elements* 2.6.5, 147.

⁷⁵ *Leviathan* 38, 306-7; cf. *De Cive* 6.11, 80.

⁷⁶ *Leviathan* 43, 403.

In the *Elements* and *De Cive*, Hobbes reluctantly answers in the affirmative. No one can reasonably be asked to obey their sovereign at the price of damnation, for “if a man cannot assure himself to perform a just duty, when thereby he is assured of present death, much less can it be expected that a man should perform that, for which he believeth in his heart he shall be damned eternally.” He quickly aims to minimize the subversive implications of this concession, however: the only permissible form of disobedience is for the Christian “without resistance to lay down his life” and accept martyrdom, not to actively resist the sovereign.⁷⁷

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes resolves the problem in a different — and historically speaking, more significant — way. He does so by drawing a strict distinction between inner faith and outward action. We may externally obey the infidel’s command without jeopardizing our salvation, so long as we maintain the proper internal state of belief:

What if wee bee commanded by our lawfull Prince, to say with our tongue, what wee beleieve not, must we obey such command? Profession with the tongue is but an externall thing, and no more then any other gesture whereby we signify our obedience... This we may say, that whatsoever a Subject, as Naaman was, is compelled to in obedience to his Sovereign, and doth it not in order to his own mind, but in order to the laws of his country, that action is not his, but his Sovereigns; nor is it he that in this case denyeth Christ before men, but his Governour, and the law of his countrey.⁷⁸

This argument might come at the cost of some inconsistency. Specifically, the claim that the action of the Christian who falsely swears “is not his, but his Sovereigns” seems to reverse the logic of representation that Hobbes has laid out elsewhere, according to which it is the subject

⁷⁷ *Elements* 2.6.14, 159. Cf. *De Cive* 18.13, 245.

⁷⁸ *Leviathan* 42, 343-4. Hobbes’s advocacy of external obedience in such cases was one of the points that his critics seized upon and lampooned; such critics included Eachard (on whom see Bowles, *Hobbes and His Critics*, 154-55) and Whitehall (on whom see Bowles, *Hobbes and His Critics*, 180-81). There remains one case, for Hobbes, in which a subject may be required to accept martyrdom rather than obey the infidel: if he is “a Pastor lawfully called to teach and direct others, or any other of whose knowledge there is a great opinion” (*Leviathan* 45, 452).

who is the “Author of all the Actions, and Judgments of the Sovereigne.”⁷⁹ Yet on another level this move does reflect his deep preoccupation with the difference between interiority and exteriority, the private and the public. As Locke was famously to do in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, Hobbes insists that true faith cannot be coerced, for “the inward *thought*, and *beleef* of men...are not voluntary, nor the effect of the laws, but of the unrevealed will, and of the power of God; and consequently fall not under obligation.”⁸⁰ Both thinkers therefore suggest that religious coercion can never be effective in eliciting the faith necessary for salvation. But from this premise Hobbes draws a conclusion that is precisely the opposite of Locke’s injunctions against coercion. The very fact that religious coercion can only produce external compliance rather than genuine belief, Hobbes argues, means that it is simply *irrelevant* with regard to salvation. We can therefore set aside our qualms and profess the state religion publicly, confident that it will not affect our prospects in the afterlife.

Inner belief may not be voluntary, but in a strange way Hobbes suggests that it is free. “A private man has alwaies the liberty, (because thought is free,) to beleeeve, or not beleeeve in his heart,” even though publicly he may have to profess the beliefs mandated by his sovereign.⁸¹ It is only “the secret thoughts of man,” however, that are free to “run over all things, holy, prophane,

⁷⁹ *Leviathan* 18, 124. Cf. *Leviathan* 42, 389: “He cannot oblige men to beleeeve; though as a Civill Sovereign he may make Laws suitable to his Doctrine, which may oblige men to certain actions, and sometimes to such as they would not otherwise do, and which he ought not to command; and yet when they are commanded, they are Laws; and the externall actions done in obedience to them, without the inward approbation, are the actions of the Sovereign, and not of the Subject, which is in that case but as an instrument, without any motion of his owne at all; because God hath commanded to obey them.”

⁸⁰ *Leviathan* 40, 323.

⁸¹ *Leviathan* 37, 306. We recall that Hobbes generally treats the free and the voluntary as synonymous; see note 22 of this chapter.

clean, obscene, grave, and light, without shame, or blame,” for the moment we express them verbally, they become public actions liable to praise or punishment.⁸² Similarly, Hobbes draws a now-familiar distinction between the worship performed by private individuals and public worship, which “a Common-wealth performeth, as one Person.” But whereas later liberalism often took this to be the dividing line separating free from unfree worship, Hobbes suggests that even the worship of private individuals is only free “in secret,” for “in the sight of the multitude, it is never without some Restraint, either from the Lawes, or from the Opinion of men; which is contrary to the nature of Liberty.”⁸³ Once again we can see his awareness of the varied spectrum of pressures that shape human action; freedom cannot simply be identified with the absence of state-backed coercive force, for private communities have their own ways of ensuring compliance. (And once again this preoccupation fit well with his experience of the civil war and its aftermath, in which the state came to serve as a bulwark protecting toleration against the Presbyterians and others striving to impose religious uniformity.) For this reason, he views the truly important line between private and public to be the one separating thoughts from actions rather than civil society from state. Our outward religious performances, he seems to suggest, are never truly “private,” but on the contrary are always shaped by pressures from those around us — so why shouldn’t the sovereign be the one to shape them?

If Hobbes always argues that we are responsible for the actions we perform out of fear, his discussion of obedience to the infidel makes clear that it is responsibility of a very particular sort. The effect of his argument is to drive a wedge between legal and political judgment on the

⁸² *Leviathan* 8, 52.

⁸³ *Leviathan* 31, 249. Cf. *Elements* 2.6.10, 156, where Hobbes contrasts true faith and justice with the “dead works” that proceed both from “fear of punishment” and from “vain-glory, and desire to be honoured of men.”

one hand and moral and religious judgment on the other. Our actions here on earth, he suggests, are always the product of external pressures of various sorts, whether the blunt force of the laws or the more insidious social dynamics of private life. So long as we have the physical ability to act otherwise, there is no naturally-given line dictating which of these pressures invalidate our legal responsibility for our actions; there are only the contingent political lines that individual societies have created for themselves.

Yet Hobbes seems to understand that there is something unsatisfying about this solution, if not philosophically then at least emotionally. Perhaps we can accept that here on earth we can only be held accountable for how we act in relation to the laws, regardless of what kinds of pressures were applied to us or what our own inner beliefs and desires might have been — but shouldn't there be some place where these are taken into account? It is the world to come that increasingly fills this need, and the last judgment is where all the thicker notions of moral responsibility that have been evacuated from earthly political life receive their due.⁸⁴ Here the

⁸⁴ This is an argument about what Hobbes's theory *does*, and as such it does not depend on any particular view about what his own private beliefs may have been. The last judgment plays this role in his theory, in other words, regardless of whether he actually believed in it. Such a distinction between Hobbes's public expressions and private beliefs is, I think, very much in keeping with the spirit of his theory. By the same token, however, the weight he puts on this distinction is surely relevant to the question of his own private beliefs or lack thereof. This is not to say that Hobbes necessarily *was* an atheist (notwithstanding the term's rather different uses in the seventeenth century) or even a non-Christian. But it is to say that he shows himself keenly aware that even a nonbeliever would have every incentive to conform to Christianity publicly. See, e.g., his defense of himself in *Six Lessons to the Professors of the Mathematics*, in *English Works*, VII, 350: "Do you think I can be an atheist and not know it? Or knowing it, durst have offered my atheism to the press?" The question of what exactly Hobbes believed is likely unanswerable, but at the very least Hobbes himself suggests the possibility of a disconnect between private belief and public expression. One need not believe in esotericism as a general interpretive philosophy to recognize that there are circumstances where it unquestionably applies — early modern religious heterodoxy being foremost among them. For the controversy over Hobbes's own beliefs, see the debates between Martinich (*The Two Gods of Leviathan*) and Curley (especially "Calvin and Hobbes") in the 1990s, and the more recent debate between

priority of action over belief, outer over inner, is reversed. Human governors must focus on “the external acts and profession of Religion” rather than “the inward *thought*, and *belief* of men,” for “God onely knoweth the heart,” but at the last judgment we will face Christ, “who never accepteth forced actions, (which is all the Law produceth,) but the inward conversion of the heart.”⁸⁵ And here the human governors themselves will for the first time face judgment for their iniquitous actions that were unpunishable on earth.

Hobbes’s sharp distinction between inner faith and outer confession has sometimes been viewed as one of his most momentous innovations. In his Nazi-era study of Hobbes, Carl Schmitt called this moment the “rupture” that laid the groundwork for modern individualism and liberal neutrality — “the seed of death that destroyed the mighty leviathan from within,” albeit still awaiting cultivation by the “liberal Jew” Spinoza.⁸⁶ Even if Hobbes still granted earthly priority to outer confession over inner faith, the public over the private, Schmitt suggested that the very fact of drawing these distinctions ensured the eventual supremacy of the private individual.

We might treat Schmitt’s assertion of novelty with some skepticism; there are few of Hobbes’s dichotomies that cannot already be found in Augustine.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the uses to which Hobbes puts these dichotomies are undeniably important. And although Hobbes’s

Martinich (“Interpreting the Religion of Thomas Hobbes”) and Collins (“Interpreting Thomas Hobbes in Competing Contexts”).

⁸⁵ *Leviathan* 40, 323; *Leviathan* 42, 390.

⁸⁶ Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 55-57. Schmitt refers specifically to the passage at the end of Chapter 37, cited in note 81 of this chapter.

⁸⁷ Peterson’s famous attack on Schmitt’s political theology alleged its incongruity with Augustinian Christianity more broadly. See Peterson, “Monotheism as a Political Problem,” in *Theological Tractates*, 68-105, as well as Schmitt’s wounded reply, *Political Theology II*.

religious doctrines are often treated in relative isolation from the rest of his thought, as if he simply possessed a fully-formed theology with only an incidental relation to his political theory, we can see that his increasingly assertive reliance on the inner-outer distinction progressed in tandem with the development of his more strictly political views on coercion, freedom, and responsibility. In *Leviathan*, he came to stress that if coercion were truly ubiquitous in earthly life, it must be compatible with our freedom to act and our responsibility for our actions. Yet although these assertions helped shore up political order in the case of conquest, they threatened to destabilize it in the case of religious dissent. What Schmitt viewed with such dismay as the rupture creating modern liberalism, we might equally view as Hobbes's solution to a problem created by his insistence that fear and liberty are consistent.

8.

We can discern a final point of tension in one of the most famous and controversial passages in *Leviathan*. In the notes answering critics that he wrote for the publication of *De Cive*, Hobbes had quoted Psalms 14:1: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." His point there was that atheism should be considered a form of imprudence (that is, folly) rather than outright injustice, since the atheist has violated no covenant with the God whose existence he has not recognized.⁸⁸ In Chapter 15 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes returns to the figure of the Foole. But the discussion here has no parallels in his earlier works, for this Foole's folly is not limited to atheism:

The Foole hath sayd in his heart, there is no such thing as Justice; and sometimes also with his tongue; seriously alleaging, that every mans conservation, and contentment, being committed to his own care, there could be no reason, why every man might not do what he thought conduced thereunto: and therefore also to make, or not make; keep, or

⁸⁸ *De Cive* 14.19n, 164.

not keep Covenants, was not against Reason, where it conduced to ones benefit. He does not therein deny, that there be Covenants; and that they are sometimes broken, sometimes kept; and that such breach of them may be called Injustice, and the observance of them Justice: but he questioneth, whether Injustice, taking away the feare of God, (for the same Foole hath said in his heart there is no God,) may not sometimes stand with that Reason, which dictateth to every man his own good; and particularly then, when it conduced to such a benefit, as shall put a man in a condition, to neglect not only the dispraise, and revilings, but also the power of other men.

The Foole questions whether there is any reason to fulfill our promises when it does not suit our interests to do so — for instance, when there is no chance of discovery or punishment. And although the Foole's reasoning applies to any sort of injustice down to the pettiest of crimes, Hobbes particularly has in mind the case of unjust rebellion, where the perpetrators expect to end up in possession of sovereignty and the impunity that comes with it.

The Kingdome of God is gotten by violence: but what if it could be gotten by unjust violence? were it against Reason so to get it, when it is impossible to receive hurt by it? and if it be not against Reason, it is not against Justice: or else Justice is not to be approved for good. From such reasoning as this, Successful wickedness hath obtained the name of Vertue: and some that in all other things have disallowed the violation of Faith; yet have allowed it, when it is for the getting of a Kingdome.

Yet this “specious reasoning,” Hobbes tells us, “is neverthesse false.”⁸⁹

Hobbes frames his reply to the Foole in terms of prudence rather than morality, in line with the general rhetorical strategy that we have already discussed. He argues in terms of rational expectations: it may be that injustice can sometimes serve our interests, but we cannot expect it to serve our interests consistently. Even if the Foole's injustice may sometimes lead to prosperity when “some accident which he could not expect, arriving, may turne it to his benefit; yet such events do not make it reasonably or wisely done.” By demonstrating to his fellows that he has no intention of living with them cooperatively, he invites them to kill him or cast him out; even if his injustice goes unperceived, “it is by the errours of other men, which he could not foresee, nor

⁸⁹ *Leviathan* 15, 101-2.

reckon upon,” and therefore irrational regardless of its retrospective success. And even the successful rebel by his very example sets a precedent for others to try to unseat him in turn.⁹⁰

From the time of *Leviathan*’s publication onward, Hobbes’s reply has struck many of his readers as unsatisfactory. In particular, his framing of the argument purely in terms of prudence seems to beg the important questions: even if it is generally true that crime doesn’t pay, is there anything that can dissuade us from it when we know with near-certainty that it will? Can we really expect that the shoplifter, who sees the store clerk step out for a cigarette, will be deterred by the prospect that she will be discovered and cast out of society? Twentieth-century scholars who approached Hobbes through the lens of rational choice and game theory were particularly inclined to see the Foole passage as the origin of the free rider problem and its associated dilemmas of collective action.

In reaction, more recent scholars have tended to offer deflationary readings, emphasizing the modesty of the problem that Hobbes poses for himself and his relative success in answering it. Hobbes does not intend to demonstrate that crime can never pay; he intends primarily to demonstrate the foolishness of outright rebellion, in which the argument from unintended consequences is stronger, in part because there is little chance of going undetected. “For of them that are the first movers in the disturbance of Common-wealth,” Hobbes warns, “very few are left alive long enough, to see their new Designes established...which argues they were not so wise, as they thought they were.”⁹¹ And as Kinch Hoekstra has argued, Hobbes’s language suggests — and his revisions to the Latin version of the passage make clearer — that his

⁹⁰ *Leviathan* 15, 102-3.

⁹¹ *Leviathan* 27, 205.

predominant concern is with those who openly and flagrantly advocate injustice: the Foole who says that there is no justice “with his tongue” and not merely “in his heart.”⁹²

Such skepticism has been welcome, and we would do well not to read the reply to the Foole as the fulcrum determining the overall success or failure of Hobbes’s project. Yet it is nonetheless striking that Hobbes introduces the passage for the first time in *Leviathan*, for it tracks some of the other novel aspects of the book that we have already noted. Viewing the issue in this light suggests that the Foole’s challenge remains a genuine problem for Hobbes, and one which he takes quite seriously rather than dismissing out of hand.

We have seen the peculiar kind of responsibility that Hobbes comes to rely on in *Leviathan*. He argues that we are free “to make, or not make” covenants, even when faced with coercion up to the threat of death, and that is precisely our freedom that gives these covenants their binding force. The choice to submit or die becomes a moment of genuine contingency, but by the same token all political responsibility becomes concentrated upon this single moment. Once we choose to submit, we are bound absolutely, with all the stringent consequences that follow, for as long as our sovereign remains able to protect us. If our “freedom” at this moment might plausibly seem hollow — for although we may be offered a choice, it is only barely a choice — Hobbes suggests that this is irrelevant. Any thicker notions we might have about what moral responsibility means are evacuated from political life and deferred to the world to come.

The Foole presses on this attenuated form of political responsibility. It is no coincidence that he is also an atheist; having “said in his heart there is no God,” he neither fears divine punishment nor hopes for divine reward. Without these compensations, he plausibly asks how

⁹² Hoekstra, “Hobbes and the Foole.” Other deflationary readings can be found in Tuck, *Hobbes*, 79, 121-22; Pettit, *Made With Words*, 64; Lloyd, *Morality in Hobbes*, 296-325.

such extensive obligations can be derived from such a minimal form of freedom. We may be free at the moment of submission “to make, or not make” covenants, but aren’t we equally free “to keep, or not keep” them subsequently? Even accepting that the act of submission is voluntary, hasn’t Hobbes already shown us how bare and minimal a notion the voluntary is? Under the threat of immediate death, we accepted submission as a lesser evil, but why should we continue to accept it absent this threat? The threshold between nature and artifice, anarchy and civil society, is supposed to be impermeable and absolute — but given the ethical murkiness surrounding the initial act that took us across this threshold, why shouldn’t we carry the instrumental and opportunistic attitude of the state of nature with us into civil society?⁹³ Hobbes may be trying to have it both ways, relying on a razor-thin notion of freedom to explain why our act of submission is voluntary while implicitly appealing to a thicker notion to explain why this voluntary act binds us permanently. The Foole points to this equivocation, and although Hobbes can give reasons for not airing such doctrines publicly, it is not clear that he has a solution to the underlying problem.⁹⁴

⁹³ Although the original English version of the passage (15, 102) suggests that the Foole’s reasoning is folly both in civil society and, at times, in the state of nature (when “one of the parties has performed [their side of the covenant] already”), the Latin version makes clear that Hobbes really has in mind those who adhere to such reasoning within a commonwealth (15, 225).

⁹⁴ Thus, although Hoekstra convincingly shows that Hobbes’s *reply* addresses the case of the “Explicit Foole,” who openly (by word or deed) proclaims such doctrines, rather than the “Silent Foole” who tacitly subscribes to them, this is not quite the same as showing that “the challenge itself is that of the Explicit Foole” (“Hobbes and the Foole,” 624). If, as Hoekstra recognizes, “Hobbes lapses into unwonted opacity when the matter is explicitly raised” because “he is not eager to emphasize that he shares certain premises with the Silent Foole” (653n73, 638), this might simply confirm our suspicion that he does view the Foole’s doctrines in any form as a potentially serious threat. Also relevant is the 1663 critique leveled by William Lucy, who complained that Hobbes “attempt’s one proposition, and, by shuffling and changing the Tearmes, prove’s another,” which may have prompted Hobbes to revise the Latin version to make it more clearly about the Explicit Foole (quoted in Hoekstra, 624). While supporting Hoekstra’s

Nor is it clear that Hobbes has much confidence that the threat of the Foole's doctrines can be easily resolved or contained. It has not generally been noticed that Hobbes returns to this threat later in *Leviathan*. When discussing how crime and discord arise, he points to their origins in our observation of the usual ways of the world:

as when men from having observed how in all places, and in all ages, unjust Actions have been authorised, by the force, and victories of those who have committed them; and that potent men, breaking through the Cob-web Lawes of their Country, the weaker sort, and those that have failed in their Enterprises, have been esteemed the onely Criminals; have thereupon taken for Principles, and grounds of their Reasoning, *That Justice is but a vain word: That whatsoever a man can get by his own Industry, and hazard, is his own: That the Practice of all Nations cannot be unjust: That Examples of former times are good Arguments of doing the like again;* and many more of that kind...⁹⁵

These are recognizably the Foole's doctrines. Yet here they seem less the self-evident folly of a few deviants than the usual practice of "potent men" in "all places, and in all ages." Their self-confidence is indeed "Vain-glory" and pride, "a foolish over-rating of their own worth" and a "false opinion of their own Wisdome," but Hobbes has already suggested that nothing is more typical of human beings than such vices.⁹⁶ In passages like these we can see some of Hobbes's utopianism — his occasional suggestions that his principles are not hardheaded descriptions of the world as it is but prescriptions for a kind of order that has thus far been unattainable.⁹⁷ But

argument about the force of Hobbes's reply, Lucy's reaction also demonstrates that the threat posed by the Silent Foole is not merely an anachronistic imposition.

⁹⁵ *Leviathan* 27, 204.

⁹⁶ *Leviathan* 27, 205.

⁹⁷ Later, after once again dismissing those who maintain "that Justice is but a word, without substance," Hobbes seems to acknowledge that "there has not hitherto been any Commonwealth, where those Rights [of sovereignty] have been acknowledged, or challenged." But he replies (*Leviathan* 30, 232) that such skeptics "argue as ill, as if the Savage people of America, should deny there were any grounds, or Principles of Reason, so to build a house, as to last as long as the materials, because they never yet saw any so well built. Time, and Industry, produce every day new knowledge....So, long time after men have begun to constitute Commonwealths,

the effect of taking Hobbes's theory in this light is to cut it off from history, which becomes conceived as mere power politics. Thus he advises sovereigns to avoid demanding that the justice of their acquisitions of power be recognized, "when there is scarce a Common-wealth in the world, whose beginnings can in conscience be justified."⁹⁸ The relevance of these worries was obvious: Hobbes himself was preparing to return to England to live under the revolutionary regime, whose "Unjust actions" he was arguing to be legitimated — if not quite "authorised" — "by the force, and victories of those who have committed them," mediated only by a thin veneer of tacit consent. The problem was not one that he himself could escape.⁹⁹

The reference to "Cob-web Lawes" in this passage is also new to *Leviathan*, and it too reflects some of the book's innovations. By insisting on our freedom in the face of overwhelming force — and even our freedom to choose death if necessary — Hobbes points to the fragility of political order. The "Artificiall Chains, called *Civill Lawes*," are the underpinning of this order: "These Bonds in their own nature but weak, may neverthelesse be made to hold, by the danger,

imperfect, and apt to relapse into disorder, there may Principles of Reason be found out, by industrious meditation, to make their constitution (excepting by externall violence) everlasting." Cf. *Leviathan* 31, 254, where Hobbes worries that "considering how different this Doctrine is, from the Practise of the greatest part of the world... I am at the point of believing this my labour, as uselesse, as the Common-wealth of *Plato*," before placing his hopes in the possibility that "one time or other, this writing of mine, may fall into the hands of a Sovereign, who will... convert this Truth of Speculation, into the Utility of Practice." On this theme cf. Tuck, "The Utopianism of *Leviathan*."

⁹⁸ *Leviathan* Review and Conclusion, 486.

⁹⁹ Thus, in the "Foole" passage Hobbes attacks Sir Edward Coke for arguing that in cases where "the right Heire of the Crown be attainted of Treason," yet succeeds to the throne through the death of the monarch, then "*eo instant* the Atteynder be voyd" — which, Hobbes remarks, simply gives the heir an incentive to "kill him that is in possession, though his father" (*Leviathan* 15, 102). It is obvious why such reasoning makes Hobbes uneasy, yet it would nonetheless seem to be one implication of the *de facto* side of his own theory. This only furthers the impression that the Foole raises problems that Hobbes can only sweep under the rug rather than fully solve.

though not by the difficulty of breaking them.”¹⁰⁰ But to make such bonds hold fast is always a tenuous accomplishment, for danger alone can be a remarkably fragile deterrent. Hobbes has already arrived at the gloomy views that he was to voice in *Behemoth* — his conviction that “the power of the mighty hath no foundation but in the opinion and belief of the people,” and his bitter recollection of the rebel army made up of “London apprentices, who...for want of judgment, scarce thought of such death as comes invisibly in a bullet, and therefore were very hardly to be driven out of the field.”¹⁰¹ Fear must serve as the basis of political order, but he has come to see how flimsy fear can be.

Thus there remains a kind of disconnect in Hobbes between what his theory demands and what he sees around him. Humans should be fearful, but they are prideful; they should justly obey the laws, but they vainly seek domination over each other; they should value their objective interests or at least their very lives, but they are willing to sacrifice them for the flimsiest of motives. Morality and justice remain on one side, human nature and history on the other, and it is difficult to see how to bridge the gap — at least so long as we conceive humans as fundamentally prideful, and pride as fundamentally a brute *libido dominandi*. Hobbes had tied the bonds of obligation as tightly as he possibly could — so tight that only the body itself giving way could release us from them — but no purely external bond could be tight enough to prevent someone like the Foole from slipping out.

Yet two possible solutions present themselves. Perhaps human beings are not so prideful after all, but rather are concerned above all with their own atomistic interests, with safety and

¹⁰⁰ *Leviathan* 21, 147.

¹⁰¹ *Behemoth* 1, 16; 3, 114. Cf. *Behemoth* 1, 59: “For if men know not their duty, what is there that can force them to obey the laws? An army, you will say. But what shall force the army?”

material contentment. If not a particularly exalted view, it would nevertheless be enough for Hobbes, for these sorts of interests can (at least in principle) be harmonized and mutually attainable. Or perhaps pride itself is not merely a brute drive for domination, but rather something far more protean and ambiguous; in this case, it might be made consistent with the requirements of morality, at least in the proper circumstances. We will now see how these possibilities were developed in the decades that followed.

Chapter V

Spontaneous Order

1.

Few of Hobbes's readers, from his own time onward, have looked favorably on his solution. Those inclined to share his authoritarian politics tended, like Robert Filmer, to "praise his building but mislike his foundations,"¹ suspecting (with some reason) that the rights of the individual are an unpromising starting point for grounding the unfettered power of the ruler.² Yet such explicitly reactionary (and, typically, explicitly religious) critiques have been comparatively rare. Far more common has been the inverse: those who accepted many of (what they took to be) Hobbes's philosophical foundations while rejecting his political conclusions. After all, hasn't history demonstrated that an all-powerful sovereign is just as dangerous as no sovereign at all, so that even purely self-interested individuals would be better served by some kind of limited government? To think the contrary, Locke famously suggested, is "to think that Men are so foolish that they take care to avoid what Mischiefs may be done them by *Pole-Cats*, or *Foxes*, but are content, nay think it Safety, to be devoured by *Lions*."³ In this way Hobbes's own premises have been invoked to soften his absolutism into a liberal constitutionalism.

¹ Filmer, *Observations Concerning the Originall of Government*, "Preface" (no page number).

² Filmer was a contemporary example of this reaction; we have already seen that Schmitt (although generally admiring of Hobbes) was a more recent example. Whether their suspicions were justified is a complex question; for a history of rights theories that stresses precisely their usefulness for grounding authoritarian political conclusions, see Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*.

³ *Second Treatise*, §93; in *Two Treatises*, 328, emphasis in original. Locke's editor Laslett, who argues generally that the importance of Hobbes to Locke's work has been much overstated, suggests in his note to this passage that it is "much more likely to refer to Filmer" than to Hobbes. This is unpersuasive, however, since Locke's argument in this passage is that it would be irrational to establish an absolute monarch at the moment "when Men quitting the State of Nature entered into Society," and Filmer (unlike Hobbes) rejects the entire state of nature

But we should not imagine that the reaction against Hobbes was driven solely by these sorts of calculations about the costs and benefits of various forms of government. Perhaps even more crucial were a set of developments that deprived government itself (along with other such purely political concepts) of their traditional primacy in understanding the social world. For Hobbes, as we have seen, one consequence of the problem of pride is that spontaneous social cohesion (of the sort enjoyed naturally by animals like bees and ants) is impossible; pride infects every aspect of human life, from the grandest affairs of state to the most prosaic day-to-day interactions, rendering even our basic language and moral judgments radically unstable. Sovereignty is necessary not merely for its intuitively “political” functions but also to provide the basic epistemic stability that makes everyday life possible.

His eighteenth-century successors (and particularly the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment) remained preoccupied by what we have followed Parsons in calling the Hobbesian problem of order, but they developed a different solution to it, the upshot of which was greatly to diminish the importance of sovereign will to the creation of order. Many kinds of stable orders, they suggested — languages, moral rules, customs, agreements — can grow up locally and gradually through the practices of individuals, without conscious direction from on high. David Hume’s example of two people rowing a boat, who fall tacitly into a rhythm without any explicit agreement or exchange of promises, suggested a mechanism for the formation of conventions ranging from language to morals to money.⁴ Central to this mechanism was the

construct. Locke argues similarly elsewhere against attempts to ground absolutism on state of nature reasoning (§137, 359-60); once again this would constitute an argument against Hobbes but not against Filmer. Cf. Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan*, 355-56.

⁴ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.2.2, 490. Cf. Lewis, *Convention*; Sugden, “Spontaneous Order”.

notion of unintended consequences.⁵ Hobbes was certainly aware that individual actions can ramify in unintended ways, but for him this phenomenon was almost exclusively negative — the classic example being the way that individual desires in the state of nature (even innocuous ones) combine to create the war of all against all.⁶ His successors, by contrast, came to stress the positive side of unintended consequences. If not all of the benefits of social life were the conscious creation of the sovereign, the implication was that many of them were not the conscious creation of any single will at all; as Adam Ferguson put it, “nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.”⁷

The most striking implications of this view were in the economic realm. Its best-known formulations are Bernard Mandeville’s depiction of the “private vices” underlying the “public benefits” of modern society, and Adam Smith’s still more famous vision of the individual “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention,” both remembered as canonical descriptions of the market’s transformation of individual selfishness into collective prosperity.⁸ In the context of a rapidly developing European commercial society, the intellectual

⁵ Except where it seems necessary to distinguish the two, I use “unintended consequences” to mean consequences that are both unintended and unanticipated by the actor, although of course an action can have consequences that are anticipated without being its primary intention. For disaggregations of the phenomena often grouped together under this label, see Merton, “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action”; Vernon, “Unintended Consequences”.

⁶ Indeed, later scholars have often viewed Hobbes’s state of nature as epitomizing the doctrine of unintended consequences in its negative form — as a prisoner’s dilemma or related collective action problem.

⁷ Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 3.2, 119. Ferguson attributes the notion to Cardinal de Retz’s *Memoirs*; although the *Memoirs* contain various statements of a similar flavor, I have thus far been unable to find any passage that appears to be Ferguson’s direct source.

⁸ Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*; Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, IV.ii.9, 456.

trajectory of the period seems clear: Hobbes, the great theorist of the coercive and top-down order of the state, is supplemented and partially supplanted by Smith and other theorists of the voluntary and decentralized order of the market.

More broadly, what appears to supersede Hobbes is a theory of spontaneous order. The phrase “spontaneous order” is not used by the thinkers of the period; it was instead popularized by F.A. Hayek, the leading twentieth-century champion of this tradition. Yet Hayek’s gloss does encapsulate the typical story that we tell about the history of modern social thought. Hayek was, of course, most famous as an economist, and his affinity for the eighteenth-century Scots was not accidental. The market was certainly for him the emblematic example of spontaneous order, and his interest in these topics sprang largely from his search for intellectual resources to help fight what he saw as the inexorable spread of socialism and statism. But in the last decades of his life, he sought to move beyond economics proper to develop the thought of his predecessors into a comprehensive social theory, and this theory centered on a notion of spontaneous order that was not limited to the market.

Hobbes figures centrally in the story that Hayek tells about modern social thought; he is, along with Descartes, one of the two chief villains. They are the founders of what he calls “constructivist rationalism,” which is “a conception which assumes that all social institutions are, and ought to be, the product of deliberate design.”⁹ Despite its “inability to conceive of an effective co-ordination of human activities without deliberate organization by a commanding intelligence,” the doctrines of constructivist rationalism have enjoyed a success that is “probably

⁹ Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, I, 5. Other unflattering references to Hobbes can be found at *Law*, I, 9, 33; *The Constitution of Liberty*, 111, 269, 345n8.

due to their great appeal to human pride and ambition.”¹⁰ If pride is the great sin of Hobbes and the rationalist tradition, humility — the willingness to reject “the *hubris* of reason”¹¹ — is the great virtue of Hayek’s favorite thinkers. From Mandeville onward, their paradoxical and deflationary insight was that “the whole order of society, and even all that we call culture, was the result of individual strivings which had no such end in view, but which were channelled to serve such ends by institutions, practices, and rules which also had never been deliberately invented but had grown up by the survival of what proved successful.”¹² Their view had enjoyed a fleeting ascendance, but had itself been steadily superseded since the nineteenth century by the resurgent forces of constructivist rationalism — this time flying Marx’s flag rather than Hobbes’s, but still recognizably the same error.

This is not the place to scrutinize Hayek’s views on the intellectual history of the period; in a sense, the rest of this study will be spent exploring that history. But it may be useful to examine his own social theory — a theory that he presents as a “restatement and revindication” of the insights of his predecessors.¹³ Such an examination suggests that the gap between Hayek and his predecessors was far wider than he was aware, for reasons deeply related to the erasure of pride from our collective conceptual landscape. It suggests, as well, that the historical sketch we have just given is incomplete if not actively misleading — presenting Hobbes as too easily superseded, and the problems he opened up as too easily solved.

¹⁰ *Constitution*, 229, 112.

¹¹ *Law*, I, 33.

¹² *New Studies*, 253.

¹³ *Constitution*, 49. The book’s opening line reads (47): “If old truths are to retain their hold on men’s minds, they must be restated in the language and concepts of successive generations.”

2.

What is a “spontaneous order,” and what exactly is “spontaneous” about it? For the moment, we must postpone examining this question in depth, but it is worth highlighting an initial ambiguity in the concept. The very language of spontaneity suggests that such an order is what will occur naturally so long as its elements are left alone, and not disturbed by outside intervention. But what constitutes being left alone, and what kinds of intervention should be thought to come from “outside”? Particularly, in the context of a *social* order, does spontaneous order simply describe whatever results from the combination of myriad individual actions — or does it describe, more strongly, the combined result of *uncoerced* individual actions? We will see that Hayek is not entirely consistent on this point, but he clearly inclines towards the latter view. Towards the beginning of his magnum opus, *The Constitution of Liberty*, for instance, he warns that whereas in the past, “the spontaneous forces of growth, however restricted, could usually still assert themselves against the organized coercion of the state,” we are now approaching “the point where the deliberately organized forces of society may destroy those spontaneous forces which have made advance possible.”¹⁴ He thus sets up a dichotomy between coercion (here identified with the state) and spontaneity (apparently identified with everything outside of state control). This means, however, that his understanding of spontaneous order depends crucially on his understanding of coercion.

When *The Constitution of Liberty* was published in 1960, its theory of coercion was one of the points that came under the most sustained attack. What was most notable about these

¹⁴ *Constitution*, 89-90. In this work, Hayek generally refers to “spontaneous forces” and similar phrases rather than “spontaneous order,” the one exception (230) being an echo of Michael Polanyi’s usage. The language of spontaneous order becomes more prominent in his writings beginning in the 1960s.

attacks was that they came largely from writers who shared Hayek's general classical-liberal political sympathies, most notably his student Ronald Hamowy.¹⁵ They charged, as one put it, that his view of coercion was both too narrow and too wide.¹⁶ It was too narrow, in that Hayek argued that general and impartial laws were non-coercive, which could open the door to wide-ranging state action; the mere fact that a law was general and abstract was no guarantee that it would be unintrusive. His view was too wide, on the other hand, in that he argued that coercion need not be restricted to physical force, which could open the door to viewing large segments of everyday action (and particularly economic action) as coercive. These critiques provide the first point of contact with our previous discussion, for we will see that the debate between Hayek and his critics relates closely to the one between what we have called the Hobbesian and Lockean accounts of coercion.

Hayek announces at the beginning of the *Constitution* that the work is concerned with “that condition of men in which coercion of some by others is reduced as much as is possible in society,” which he labels “a state of liberty or freedom.”¹⁷ Already we might detect a certain ambiguity: if a state of freedom is merely one in which coercion is reduced “as much as possible,” but not eliminated entirely, does this mean that every state embodies freedom to varying degrees, so that no condition can be described as free or unfree as such? We recall that Hobbes had himself confronted this question, quietly shifting from a “degree” to a “binary”

¹⁵ Hamowy's initial critique was “Hayek's Concept of Freedom”; he later expanded and reiterated it (often verbatim) in “Freedom and the Rule of Law in F.A. Hayek” and “Law and the Liberal Society.” Other notable libertarian critiques of Hayek's theory of coercion were Watkins, “Philosophy”; Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty*, Ch. 28.

¹⁶ Watkins, “Philosophy,” 41-42.

¹⁷ *Constitution*, 57.

concept of freedom between *De Cive* and *Leviathan* — at least when it came to describing individuals as free or unfree, since he insisted that such language was inappropriate for describing political societies. Hayek initially seems willing to accept a degree concept of freedom, writing that freedom describes “a state which man living among his fellows may hope to approach closely but can hardly expect to realize perfectly.”¹⁸ The implication seems to be that societies are free precisely to the extent that they minimize coercion.

Yet a degree concept of freedom ultimately proves just as inadequate for Hayek as it did for Hobbes, albeit for different reasons. For Hayek *does* wish to distinguish between societies that are free and unfree as such (as suggested by the very title of his final major work, *The Political Order of a Free People*).¹⁹ Gladstone’s England and Stalin’s Russia were not simply two qualitatively similar points on a spectrum of freedom; the former, Hayek wants to maintain, was actually a free society in a way that the latter was not. For this reason he seems to revert tacitly to a binary concept of freedom, as at the point later in the *Constitution* when he defines liberty as the “absence” of “the more severe forms of coercion.”²⁰ While this definition might initially appear similar to the previous one — in both, Hayek maintains that some forms of coercion will persist even in a state of freedom — it differs in a key respect, for here he suggests liberty means the outright “absence” of severe coercion, and not simply the reduction “as much as is possible” of coercion in general. By doing so he can rescue the distinction between free and

¹⁸ *Constitution*, 59.

¹⁹ This book is, at least, the final one in which Hayek’s authorship is unquestioned, since many Hayek scholars suggest that his protege and editor W.W. Bartley may have written large portions of *The Fatal Conceit*, the final book published under Hayek’s name in his lifetime.

²⁰ *Constitution*, 206. In Hayek’s reply to Hamowy, he emphasized the “degree” criterion at the expense of the “binary” one; see “Freedom and Coercion,” 28.

unfree societies. The difficulties, as we will see, come in specifying the requisitely “severe forms” of coercion that differentiate a state of freedom from one of unfreedom.

Another aspect of Hayek’s view is still more relevant to the issues that we have been discussing. Hobbes, we recall, drew no distinction between the human and non-human worlds when discussing liberty: the freedom of a river is the same as that of a person — a lack of physical impediments to motion — and correspondingly the coercive nature of such impediments does not depend on whether they are manmade. Historically speaking, Hobbes’s view has been relatively anomalous; it has been far more common to restrict coercion so that it refers only to the intentional coercion of one human by another — Locke’s “sedate settled Design, upon another Mans life.”²¹ Hayek is in some respects open to blurring the boundary between human and non-human; his later work, we will see, relies on a concept of spontaneous order that he views as equally applicable to natural and social formations, and in fact depends on a reduction of humans to virtually non-cognitive beings. But with respect to coercion, at least, Hayek is a thoroughgoing Lockean, so much so as to deny that physical possibilities have anything at all to do with freedom:

“[F]reedom” refers solely to a relation of men to other men, and the only infringement on it is coercion by men. This means, in particular, that the range of physical possibilities from which a person can choose at a given moment has no direct relevance to freedom....Whether he is free or not does not depend on the range of choice but on whether he can expect to shape his course of action in accordance with his present intentions, or whether somebody else has power so to manipulate the conditions as to make him act according to that person’s will rather than his own.²²

²¹ *Second Treatise*, §16; in *Two Treatises*, 278.

²² *Constitution*, 60-61; cf. 66.

A person trapped inside a box could not properly be called unfree unless someone else had put him there. More strongly, coercion is the result not merely of human action but of *intentional* human action; it requires “both the threat of inflicting harm and the intention thereby to bring about certain conduct.”²³

Once again these moves serve to buttress the distinction between free and unfree societies. If the restrictions that the outside world imposes on our range of action were taken as coercive, or even if only those restrictions resulting from other people’s actions (regardless of intention) were so taken, then coercion would appear ubiquitous in every society. By limiting coercion to the intentional coercion of one person upon another, Hayek can maintain that some (free) societies can eliminate or at least greatly reduce it. In fact, in the one area where even he sometimes suggests that a measure of brute coercion is unavoidable in a free society — the state’s legal authority backed by its monopoly of violence — he downplays the coercive potential of a liberal legal order precisely by assimilating its laws to those of the natural world. Provided that laws are abstract and impersonal, specifying only general rules and not dealing with particular persons or actions, he argues that they are no different from natural obstacles, and that this impersonality “deprives them largely of the evil nature of coercion”:

At least insofar as the rules providing for coercion are not aimed at me personally but are so framed as to apply equally to all people in similar circumstances, they are no different from any of the natural obstacles that affect my plans. In that they tell me what will happen *if* I do this or that, the laws of the state have the same significance for me as the laws of nature; and I can use my knowledge of the laws of the state to achieve my own aims as I use my knowledge of the laws of nature.²⁴

²³ *Constitution*, 200.

²⁴ *Constitution*, 210; cf. 72, 221.

As Hayek himself was aware, this striking view is crucial to his overall project: “The conception of freedom under the law that is the chief concern of this book rests on the contention that when we obey laws, in the sense of general abstract rules laid down irrespective of their application to us, we are not subject to another man’s will and are therefore free.”²⁵ It was also one of the chief targets of Hayek’s libertarian critics, who pointed out both the difficulty of stipulating what kinds of laws are truly impersonal as well as the possibility that even abstract laws might call for a despotic regulation of private life.²⁶ In assimilating the laws of the state to the laws of nature, however, Hayek was simply drawing out the implications of his self-consciously anti-Hobbesian view of coercion as one particular person’s intentional coercion of another.²⁷

Law is not the only arena where a broadly Lockean view of coercion is foundational to Hayek’s project. Defining coercion as personal and intentional is equally important to Hayek because of its implications for economic life, for it allows him to argue that economic power is non-coercive in nature:

Even if the threat of starvation to me and perhaps to my family impels me to accept a distasteful job at a very low wage, even if I am “at the mercy” of the only man willing to employ me, I am not coerced by him or anybody else. So long as the act that has placed me in my predicament is not aimed at making me do or not do specific things, so long as the intent of the act that harms me is not to make me serve another person’s ends, its

²⁵ *Constitution*, 221.

²⁶ See the critiques of Hamowy and Watkins, cited in note 15 of this chapter. Hayek was at least aware of the first difficulty, even if he never really resolved it. See *Constitution*, 317: “...classification in abstract terms can always be carried to the point at which, in fact, the class singled out consists only of particular known persons or even a single individual. It must be admitted that, in spite of many ingenious attempts to solve this problem, no entirely satisfactory criterion has been found...”

²⁷ That Hobbes is a particular target is made explicit when Hayek argues (against the Hobbesian definition of liberty as mere “absence of external impediments”) that restraint necessarily “presupposes the action of a restraining human agent” (*Constitution*, 66).

effect on my freedom is not different from that of any natural calamity — a fire or a flood that destroys my house or an accident that harms my health.²⁸

Hayek is not quite willing to deny that economic power can ever be coercive. A few rare instances of complete dependence offer the possibility for exercising capricious power over others; Hayek mentions the owner of the only spring during a drought, an employer in a period of acute unemployment, or a manager in a mining town where no other jobs are available. But such instances “would, at the worst, be rare exceptions in a prosperous competitive society.”²⁹ And it is precisely the impersonality of economic relations that renders them non-coercive: participants may end up exerting far-reaching power over the actions of others, but their *intention* is simply to do the best that they can for themselves, not to exercise power over any particular person. An employer’s interests might require that there be some person in desperate straits willing to work for menial wages, but whether that person is Smith or Jones is purely incidental.

A great deal thus comes to depend on the mental state of the potential coercer, as Hayek’s language drives home — the coercer is one who consciously “manipulate[s] the conditions” around me, through actions “aimed at me personally,” in ways that “maliciously” frustrate my aims.³⁰ But although malicious intentions may be necessary, they cannot be sufficient, for not every attempt to coerce is successful. What about the other side, then — the intended target of coercion? What conditions allow us to say that they have actually been coerced?

²⁸ *Constitution*, 204.

²⁹ *Constitution*, 203-4. Hayek seems chiefly concerned with the potential that the stronger parties in such cases will make extra-contractual demands on the weaker; it is not clear whether he would allow that any contract could itself be coercive, except in cases of force or fraud.

³⁰ *Constitution*, 61, 210, 200.

Coercion differs from brute physical force, Hayek makes clear, in that it involves choice and action. Yet it has a strange relationship to choice, for it requires that we choose while simultaneously not really choosing:

It is not that the coerced does not choose at all; if that were the case, we should not speak of his “acting.”...Coercion implies, however, that I still choose but that my mind is made someone else’s tool, because the alternatives before me have been so manipulated that the conduct that the coercer wants me to choose becomes for me the least painful one....Though the coerced will still do the best he can do for himself at any given moment, the only comprehensive design that his actions fit into is that of another mind.³¹

Or, as he puts it elsewhere, coercion involves conditions being “so shaped by another person as to leave one only that choice prescribed by the other”; its evil is that it “eliminates an individual as a thinking and valuing person and makes him a bare tool in the achievement of the ends of another.”³² In this revulsion at the thought of humans being used purely as means to others’ ends, we can see some of his Kantian inheritance.³³ Such talk of the individual as the “thinking and valuing” locus of a “comprehensive design” does not, however, sit easily with the philosophical anthropology of his later works, to which we will return shortly.

Hayek must try to walk a fine line here, for he does not wish to allow that the mere restriction of choice constitutes coercion. To allow that freedom shrinks along with the options available to us would, he thinks, bring us back to a Hobbesian “identification of freedom with power,” which can be used to license wide-ranging intervention into private life in the name of expanding the options available to individuals. “Whether or not I am my own master and can follow my own choice,” he insists, “and whether the possibilities from which I must choose are

³¹ *Constitution*, 199-201.

³² *Constitution*, 71.

³³ Hayek’s debts to Kant have been emphasized in Gray, *Hayek on Liberty*.

many or few are two entirely different questions.”³⁴ Similarly, he wishes to differentiate coercion from mere “influence” or the altering of the incentives facing an actor, for conflating the two would once again render large portions of private (and particularly economic) conduct coercive: “We still call a man’s decision ‘free,’ though by the conditions we have created he is led to do what we want him to do, because these conditions do not uniquely determine his actions but merely make it more likely that anyone in his position will do what we approve.”³⁵ If coercion for Hayek requires a physical act of choice, it also requires that the choice be “uniquely determined,” the options not merely paltry but literally reduced to one.

We might wonder what reason there is to hang on to the language of “choice” in such a situation. More importantly, we might wonder what kind of situation could actually fulfill this stringent criterion. The most obvious situation that Hayek seems to have in mind is something like the highway robber confronting us with a loaded gun; he remains broadly Lockean in seeing this as the emblematic scenario in which coercion renders us unfree. Yet it is not clear that even this scenario fulfills the criterion of unique determination — at least if we recall Hobbes’s insistence it leaves us two options, compliance and death, rather than one. In Hayek’s unwillingness to take such choices as real ones, we can perhaps detect one sign of the broader shift from the mental landscape of the seventeenth century to that of the twentieth. For Hobbes, the fact that people could genuinely choose death over life, whether for the sake of glory or salvation, was not merely a notional possibility but a reality to be confronted. For the social scientists of the twentieth century, it had become absurd to take such manifestly irrational conduct as a real option, and so Hayek can view the robber’s loaded gun as uniquely determining

³⁴ *Constitution*, 65, 68.

³⁵ *Constitution*, 138n8.

the actions of those faced with it. In any case, whatever the difficulties of the unique determination criterion, the underlying logic of Hayek's theory drives him to adopt it. Only when coercion is identified with a choice that is simultaneously not a choice can he avoid the Hobbesian view that fear and liberty are consistent.

3.

So far, we have been treating Hayek as an adherent of the broadly Lockean view of coercion. But there is one way in which he departs from the Lockean tradition, and it is this departure that accounts for much of the libertarian criticism of his theory. While Lockeans have insisted that coercion requires certain mental states (above all, the intention to coerce particular persons), they have also tended to identify coercion with a particular *means*: "force, or a declared design of force upon the Person of another" that threatens "to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions."³⁶ Hayek, by contrast, rejects this identification; while coercion "will usually be some threat of bodily harm to his person or his dear ones, or of damage to a valuable or cherished possession, it need not consist of any use of force or violence."³⁷

³⁶ Locke, *Second Treatise*, §19, §6; in *Two Treatises*, 280, 271. For an attack on Hayek from precisely this perspective, see Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty*, Ch. 28. Philosophical work on coercion in recent decades, while in many ways recognizably Lockean, has tended to soften this criterion in ways similar to Hayek, arguing that while coercion generally requires a conscious threat, this threat need not involve physical force. For one influential example, see Nozick, "Coercion".

³⁷ *Constitution*, 205; cf. 202: "the threat of physical force is not the only way in which coercion can be exercised." Elsewhere, however, Hayek does differentiate the "threat of coercion" from "actual and unavoidable coercion," in the course of arguing that a liberal legal order's threats of coercion (as punishment for lawbreaking) are far less pernicious than the actual kind (*Constitution*, 209). This distinction makes little sense unless Hayek is here identifying coercion with actual force; if we accept (as he elsewhere does) that coercion can and generally does take the form of a threat, then we can hardly distinguish threatening coercion from exercising it. (To threaten to threaten to do something is simply to threaten to do it.)

In a way, Hayek's refusal to identify coercion with physical violence reflects some of his broader philosophical preoccupations — particularly the deep subjectivism that is a hallmark of the Austrian economic tradition. The equation of coercion and force depends on the notion that there is something brute and irreducible about bodily security, so that threats to it determine our actions uniquely and ineluctably; in this we can hear an echo of the view that self-preservation is a “necessity of nature,” which Hobbes entertained before ultimately rejecting. (Lockeans typically extend the irreducible character of physical safety to include the security of one's property, as well, although the justification for doing so is not always clear.) Hayek and his fellow Austrians, by contrast, insist (in a conviction ultimately derived from Kant) that there are no brute facts, and that even the most basic sense-data are shaped by the creative power of the human mind. This was the root of Hayek's critique of behaviorism; there can be no simple relationship of stimulus and response, he argues, for even the stimuli themselves depend on prior acts of interpretation.³⁸

Such claims might seem too abstract to have much of an effect on concrete political issues, but their relevance can be stated more intuitively. There is nothing unique about violence as a stimulus that mandates compliance as a response, for even what we call “brute” violence is not truly brute. Coercion involves threatening consequences that are so unpleasant as to generate compliance, but this means that coercion depends on the mentality of its intended target; which consequences are unpleasant enough to make compliance the lesser evil will vary according to person and circumstance. The fear of physical harm is widespread enough that Hayek is willing to treat it as definitionally coercive, but equally coercive are other cases that do not involve the

³⁸ For Hayek's critique of behaviorism, see *The Sensory Order*, 25-30, *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, 44-52. Cf. Gray, *Hayek on Liberty*, 4-7, 16-17; Caldwell, *Hayek's Challenge*, 270f.

threat of violence, as “when the knower of an evil secret blackmails his victim” with it.³⁹ Some of Hayek’s critics in the Austrian tradition, like Hamowy and Rothbard, complained about the subjectivism inherent in this view — its implication that coercion is, to a certain extent, in the eye of the beholder — but they failed to grasp how deeply rooted this subjectivism was in his thought.⁴⁰ His rejection of an invariable, objective standard of coercion is of a piece with his rejection of similarly invariable and objective standards in other realms, like prices: just as he insists that there is no objectively “just price” aside from the one that actually gets paid, so there is no objectively coercive threat aside from the one that actually coerces.⁴¹

Yet Hayek cannot fully come to grips with the implications of this subjectivist view — at least not while preserving his desire to delimit coercion, to prevent it from appearing “an all-pervasive and unavoidable phenomenon.” He notes that to some degree, coercion might seem to permeate “all close relationships between men,” for even such prosaic figures as “a morose husband, a nagging wife, or a hysterical mother may make life intolerable unless their every

³⁹ *Constitution*, 204.

⁴⁰ Hamowy, “Law and the Liberal Society,” 288-89; Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty*, Ch. 28.

⁴¹ Hayek attempts to limit this subjectivism with the qualification that he is “concerned with coercion that is likely to affect the normal, average person” (*Constitution*, 205). Yet the implications of this proviso depend heavily on how we understand the “normal, average person”. For instance, a threat of papal excommunication would qualify as extremely coercive if directed against a believing Catholic, but not at all coercive if directed at anyone else. So do we take the average person to be a Catholic? Does this depend on the time and place under consideration? Would this mean that such a threat would qualify as coercive when directed against a Catholic living in a Catholic-majority country, but not one living in a Catholic-minority country? Or are we considering whether such a threat would coerce the average person if she *were* a Catholic? (And is the average person “he” or “she,” anyway?) In any case, we can see from this example that some measure of subjectivism and variability remain, even accounting for Hayek’s proviso.

mood is obeyed.”⁴² He cannot allow such examples to constitute morally significant forms of coercion, though, for the same reason that he cannot allow economic life to involve coercion except in rare and exceptional cases; he similarly rejects John Stuart Mill’s belief that there is a “moral coercion” inherent in “the pressure that public approval or disapproval exerts to secure obedience.”⁴³ In each case, to treat these forms as genuinely (or at least “severely”) coercive would open the door to potentially extensive intrusion in private life by the state.

But as Hayek’s critics emphasized, his subjectivist departures from the strictly Lockean view meant that he could not really hold this line. He wants to claim that the threat to withhold something is only coercive if it jeopardizes what is “crucial to my existence or the preservation of what I most value.” A hostess who will only invite me to her party on the condition that I conform to a dress code is not coercing me, and neither is a merchant who will only sell me an item at a particular price. The owner of the only spring during a drought, however, who will only sell water at an extortionate price, is in fact acting coercively.⁴⁴ It was here that Hamowy in particular pressed him: isn’t “the preservation of what I most value” an unacceptably subjective criterion? If I value social standing above all else, and failing to appear at the hostess’s party will jeopardize it, then doesn’t her demand to conform to the dress code carry coercive power? And

⁴² *Constitution*, 205. Among the opponents that Hayek specifically targets here (205-6n6) — those who do stress the ubiquity of coercion in everyday (and particularly economic) life) — is Hale, whose “Coercion and Distribution in a Supposedly Non-coercive State” is perhaps the leading twentieth-century example of a broadly Hobbesian view of coercion.

⁴³ *Constitution*, 214. Hayek is willing to relax these restrictions on the scope of coercion when it suits his political aims, as in his attack on labor unions, where he insists (*Constitution*, 393) that “even so-called ‘peaceful’ picketing in numbers is severely coercive,” a sort of coercion “which in a free society no private agency should be permitted to exercise.”

⁴⁴ *Constitution*, 203.

what, on the other hand, entitles us to say that the owner of the spring is acting coercively? Hasn't Hayek himself shown that there is no such thing as a just or reasonable price outside of what the market will bear? If so, how can we say that any price that the spring owner chooses to charge is coercive, even if the only alternative to paying it is dying of thirst? Isn't it just another voluntary contract, not different in kind from the one that the poor laborer agrees to in the knowledge that he will otherwise starve?⁴⁵

Hayek was never able to answer this critique entirely persuasively; in his reply to Hamowy, he maintains that there is some essential difference separating the drought example from the everyday ultimatums so ubiquitous to social life, but that "the exact distinction may be difficult to state."⁴⁶ He wants to argue that crisis situations, where people's very lives are at stake, demand a suspension of the pursuit of self-interest — but he cannot quite pin down how to separate such situations from normal economic life, much of which depends on the motivating force of the threat of starvation or immiseration. In Hayek's conviction that the spring owner is obliged not to extort those at his mercy, we can detect the remnant of an older tradition, something like the "moral economy" described by E.P. Thompson, with its notions of just prices and communal obligations.⁴⁷ But this was not a tradition that he could assimilate; on the contrary, in normal circumstances it was one that he devoted great effort to overturning.⁴⁸ The

⁴⁵ "Hayek's Concept of Freedom," 29; he reiterated this critique in his later essays.

⁴⁶ "Freedom and Coercion," 29.

⁴⁷ Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century."

⁴⁸ The vacuity of all notions of "social" or "distributive" justice, and the general inapplicability of moral concepts to economic outcomes, was a constant theme of Hayek's writings; see especially *Constitution*, 156-64; *Law*, II, 67-78.

general impetus of his thought was to undercut any objective standard by which we might judge certain economic situations as unjust or coercive.⁴⁹

Hobbes had suggested that where there is any physical capacity to act otherwise, there is always a choice, and thus that freedom and coercion are perfectly compatible. Hayek aims to avoid this conclusion, insisting that freedom and coercion are mutually exclusive. But this forces him to draw the line between the two somewhere within the realm of actions where we are capable of acting otherwise, to insist that coercion only properly describes the choice that is no choice. His critics honed in on just how permeable this line could be.

In attempting to show why the coerced choice is not really a choice, why it differs from the everyday choice of lesser evils so much as to be considered qualitatively distinct, he falls back on a moral vocabulary rather distinct from his normal one. Freedom involves being one's "own master," a person able "to change his own life or to decide what to him is most important," whereas coercion is an evil because it thwarts the individual's capacity to act according to a "coherent plan" or "comprehensive design" (terms that otherwise rarely carry positive connotations for Hayek).⁵⁰ In doing so, however, he sets the standard for freedom higher than he

⁴⁹ A related ambiguity can be found in Hayek's advocacy of state-provided "security against severe physical privation, the assurance of a given minimum of sustenance for all," but not "the assurance of a given standard of life, which is determined by comparing the standard enjoyed by a person or group with that of others" (*Constitution*, 376). Hayek at points suggests that this minimal provision will be more expansive than simply the calories necessary to avoid literal starvation, but the line which differentiates it from a "given standard of life" is hard to discern.

⁵⁰ *Constitution*, 68, 71, 201. Hayek's examples of self-mastery here are revealing: the "poor peasant or artisan" is more free, he claims, than the "general in charge of an army or the director of a large construction project," notwithstanding their greater power (68). It is striking that Hayek here seems to identify freedom with self-employment and unfreedom with subordination within an organization, despite the fact that he generally wishes to insist that the employment contract is perfectly compatible with freedom.

can meet, for our self-mastery and plans of life can be thwarted (and often are) by any number of forces besides the intentional threats against particular persons that he wishes to delimit as coercion. If being at the mercy of circumstance, unable to formulate or execute a comprehensive design, is unfreedom, then such unfreedom would come to seem tremendously widespread.

Avoiding this conclusion requires a more minimal standard of freedom — one that he is sometimes inclined to adopt elsewhere — in which someone is free so long as “conditions do not uniquely determine his actions but merely make it more likely that anyone in his position” will act in a certain way.⁵¹ But this, in turn, poses the opposite problem for Hayek, making unfreedom negligible rather than ubiquitous. For Hobbes (like Aristotle before him) demonstrates how easily the weaker condition is fulfilled, since nothing short of physical incapacitation can truly determine our actions uniquely.⁵² By one standard unfreedom is too widespread, by another too rare; either way Hayek cannot successfully delimit it in the way that his theory demands.

In his later writings, Hayek criticizes the traditional distinction between “natural” and “artificial” phenomena, arguing that it elides the existence of “a distinct third class of phenomena,” those described by Ferguson (in a phrase Hayek often quotes) as “the result of human action but not of human design.”⁵³ The insistence on classifying everything as either naturally-given background or intentional design, he argues, neglects the ways in which the

⁵¹ *Constitution*, 138n8.

⁵² Watkins picked up on the political implications of this problem (“Philosophy,” 42): “Hayek rightly points out that a man who acts under coercion still chooses to act: a man who does what he is told at gunpoint still chooses to do it and he does it for his own good reasons, namely to stay alive.... The trouble with this is that it seems to apply equally to many employer-employee situations.” (This manifestly absurd implication, Watkins suggested, was a reason to scrap the underlying theory of coercion.)

⁵³ Hayek quotes this phrase of Ferguson’s, for instance, at *Law*, I, 20.

greatest achievements of civilization (and above all those of the market) are created but not *intentionally* created by human action. But although Hayek stressed this point with regard to the positive side of unintended consequences, we can see how little he ever applied it to the other side of the problem — to those ways in which individual actions can ramify in unintended ways to increase human misery, ranging from the Hobbesian state of nature to the prisoner’s dilemma. His account of coercion, in particular, depends entirely on the dichotomy of natural and artificial in its most rigid form. Coercion is paradigmatically “artificial,” defined by its intentionality, as the conscious manipulation of a particular person to subsume them into another’s comprehensive design. And when examining those seemingly-coercive phenomena that do not conform to this strict definition, those that threaten or thwart us without being the intentional implementation of a single malicious individual design, Hayek can only assimilate them to the laws of nature, the paradigmatically “natural.” Ironically enough, he is particularly blind to those coercive forces that are the result of human action but not of human design.⁵⁴

The debate between Hayek and his critics was in many ways an intramural Lockean one, the two sides bound together by a set of shared premises. Both shared a conviction that the definition of coercion must be strictly delimited, so that it did not spill over into wide-ranging areas of private life.⁵⁵ (Particularly economic life; the primary axis of debate was the critics’

⁵⁴ Cf. Watkins, “Philosophy,” 44-45. Once again, Hayek’s more concrete political and economic views occasionally led him to relax these strict distinctions. For instance, when discussing inflation, he insists (*Constitution*, 418) that “inflation is never an unavoidable natural disaster...though the division of responsibility may be spread so wide that nobody is alone to blame.”

⁵⁵ And not only private life; delimiting coercion was also essential to Hayek’s political project, a liberal political order that was more extensive than a mere night-watchman state while remaining non-socialist. We have already noted Hayek’s attempts to understand the legal system as non-coercive so long as its laws are abstract and impersonal. But Hayek also rests his argument for the legitimacy of government services beyond mere law and order on the distinction of coercive

allegation, and Hayek's denial, that his theory would render many aspects of market relations coercive.) Beyond this conviction lay another, that coercion must always be illicit or at least morally suspect, so that any phenomenon involving coercion could only be justified as a lesser evil to prevent still-greater coercion.⁵⁶

The disagreements stemmed largely from Hayek's tentative steps away from the standard Lockean view; he rejected its crudely mechanistic psychology, its insistence on the uniquely coercive status of force, and its identification of the interests susceptible to coercion with the mere security of body and property. His critics noted the destabilizing effect that these moves would have on the broadly Lockean political orientation that all of them shared; once freed from its identification with brute force and material interests, there was no way to delimit coercion properly, to differentiate it from a state of freedom. In their own ways, both sides were right, Hayek about the philosophical flaws of the standard view and his critics about the political implications. What prevented either side from achieving a fully coherent solution was their unwillingness to return to the view that Locke had combatted and largely replaced: Hobbes's

and non-coercive functions. "Only the coercive measures of government need be strictly limited," he argues, which clears the way for the provision of government services that nonetheless do not constitute socialist interference in the economy (*Constitution*, 374). One point of tension, however, is visible in Hayek's description of these services as ones "where coercion does not enter or does so only because of the need of financing them by taxation" (*Constitution*, 332). Other libertarians would press on the importance of that last proviso, most notably in Nozick's analogy of taxation to forced labor in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*; once again the effect of emphasizing the coercive nature of taxation would be to weaken Hayek's attempt to differentiate a liberal order from a socialist one in qualitative terms.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., *Constitution*, 71-72; Hamowy, "Hayek's Concept of Freedom," 30. For Hayek's vacillations on whether coercion is always illicit, see Kukathas, *Hayek and Modern Liberalism*, 149-51; I believe, however, that even his occasional suggestions that coercion can be licit rely on justifying it as a lesser evil minimizing overall coercion.

vision of coercion as ubiquitous, not incompatible with freedom but rather entangled with it, in a relationship only given coherence by political life.

4.

We have examined the Hayek's theory of coercion as such length because coercion is for him the converse of spontaneous order, something like its photographic negative. (Or at least, this is how he generally speaks of it; we will soon examine the exceptions.) We can see this relationship in Hayek's description of what it means to "interfere" with a spontaneous order:

The aim of interference thus is always to bring about a particular result which is different from that which would have been produced if the mechanism had been allowed unaided to follow its inherent principles....Interference, if the term is properly used, is therefore by definition an isolated act of coercion, undertaken for the purpose of achieving a particular result...⁵⁷

To interfere is to coerce, and hence the absence of coercion implies by definition that the order is functioning unimpeded. For that reason the difficulties with his theory of coercion carry over into his theory of order.

Still, for the moment let us set aside these difficulties and examine the theory of spontaneous order itself — a theory that he sets forth primarily in his final major works, the three volumes of *Law, Legislation and Liberty*.⁵⁸ After all, however much conceptual trouble Hayek may have had in defining coercion, he certainly has a rough and ready notion of what it looks like, and a similar notion of how an uncoerced order functions. Let us then momentarily assume

⁵⁷ *Law*, II, 129.

⁵⁸ These three volumes are often referred to by their individual titles (*Rules and Order*, *The Mirage of Social Justice*, and *The Political Order of a Free People*).

away the existence of those forms of coercion that Hayek took to be significant, and look more closely at the kind of order that arises in their absence.

Such a procedure is made more plausible when we recall the political and historical stakes of Hayek's theory. For all the range of Hayek's work, in many ways it was all written in response to a set of twentieth-century problems — above all the rise of state socialism in the Second World and social democracy in the First. For that reason, he tended to identify the dichotomy of coercion and spontaneous order with that of government and market, or state and civil society.⁵⁹ He is, of course, aware that coercion may be exercised by private individuals — after all, the potential for such private coercion is why he insists on the necessity of a state monopoly of force — but he is not much concerned to analyze the psychology underlying it or the mechanisms of its operation. The paradigmatic form of coercion is state interference with the market mechanism, and there is a consequent temptation to take spontaneous order as whatever happens without the top-down interference of the state.

Hayek's encounter with state socialism marked his thinking in another important way. We have seen that Hayek conceives of his theory as a kind of critique of pride. “The *hubris* of reason manifests itself in those who believe that they can...positively master the social process,” he suggests, and the doctrines of constructivist rationalism owe their political success to “their great appeal to human pride and ambition.”⁶⁰ Hayek's contrary lesson is that, “[h]umiliating to human pride as it may be,” the progress of civilization is largely the result of accident rather than

⁵⁹ For one example, see the previously cited *Constitution*, 89-90.

⁶⁰ *Law*, I, 33; *Constitution*, 112.

conscious design.⁶¹ Or, as he summed it up in the final line of his final major work: “*Man is not and never will be the master of his fate: his very reason always progresses by leading him into the unknown and unforeseen where he learns new things.*”⁶² Like so many of the thinkers we will consider, his project is one of unmasking pride, in this case behind the rationalistic pretensions of the social planner.

But Hayek always viewed the problem of pride through this twentieth-century lens, and as a result he tends to identify pride with the claim to superior *knowledge*. He cut his teeth, after all, during the socialist calculation debate, which revolved around the claims of central planners to be able to achieve a comprehensive view of the economy and thus to allocate resources more rationally than the market could. Hayek’s contribution was to insist that the amount of knowledge necessary for the task was greater than any human mind could assimilate, and could only be coordinated by the decentralized mechanism of the price system.⁶³ The formative experience of this debate, however — and the fact that Hayek continued to battle against technocratic claims of expertise through the rest of his life — resulted in what we might call an “epistemologization” of the whole problem for him. The evils caused by pride and ambition simply *are*, for him, the evils of constructivist rationalism: the claim (particularly by those in power) to be able to “positively master the social process” through superior knowledge and remake the entirety of society according to a single uniform design. For that reason, he has great difficulty conceiving of a kind of pride that does not take the form of a claim to superior

⁶¹ *Constitution*, 81.

⁶² *Law*, III, 176, emphasis in original.

⁶³ See especially “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” in *Individualism and Economic Order*, 77-91.

knowledge, or that does not have any such rationalistic and comprehensive social aims. He has similar difficulty conceiving of pride as an attribute of anyone aside from state planners and their intellectual enablers, his occasional disparaging references to the “envy” of the lower classes notwithstanding.⁶⁴ If coercion is largely identified with the state’s interference, pride is largely identified with the state’s knowledge claims. In this respect he was typical of an era in which pride had been mostly forgotten as a foundational model of human action.

What, then, are the characteristics of the order that arises “spontaneously” in the absence of such outside intervention? Hayek’s vision of spontaneous order involves several elements that need not always go together,⁶⁵ and we will later have to assess its overall coherence. But the general thrust of this vision is always to minimize the role that intentional or purposeful human action plays in securing order. His initial and minimal definition of order is any set of elements whose relationship is stable enough to be predictable: order is “*a state of affairs in which a multiplicity of elements of various kinds are so related to each other that we may learn from our acquaintance with some spatial or temporal part of the whole to form correct expectations concerning the rest.*”⁶⁶ Order as such can be divided into “made” order (*taxis*) and “grown” order (*kosmos*), the latter of which is properly spontaneous order. While *taxis* by definition involves intentional human design, this is not true of *kosmos*; to drive home this point, Hayek argues that the concept of spontaneous order is equally applicable to human and non-human orders. A

⁶⁴ See, e.g., *Constitution*, 155, 449-50.

⁶⁵ For disaggregations of the various phenomena that Hayek’s spontaneous order seems to combine, see Gray, *Hayek on Liberty*, 33-34; Kley, *Hayek’s Social and Political Thought*, 111-31.

⁶⁶ *Law*, I, 36, emphasis in original.

society is composed of individual human beings in a manner generically similar to the way that a crystal is composed of individual atoms or an organic compound is composed of individual molecules.⁶⁷

It might seem implausible to assimilate human and non-humans orders in this way: a human being, after all, can choose (at least to a certain extent) how she will participate in a society, whereas a molecule cannot choose how it will participate in a compound. But the thrust of Hayek's whole social theory is to minimize this difference, to render the participants in spontaneous social orders as non-cognitive and unwillful as possible. While he must allow that a social order only comes into being through the actions of its human elements, he insists on the primacy of action rather than thought, habit rather than curiosity, tacit rather than explicit knowledge, rule-following rather than rule-making:

Man acted before he thought and did not understand before he acted. What we call understanding is in the last resort simply his capacity to respond to his environment with a pattern of actions that helps him to persist.⁶⁸

Hayek allows that this view might seem reminiscent of behaviorism and pragmatism, doctrines that he has persistently opposed. Indeed, it does not square easily with his earlier depiction of the individual as "a thinking and valuing person" capable of formulating a "comprehensive design."⁶⁹ But here he must present humans as passive followers of rules whose overall purpose they do not understand, preoccupied with the immediate interests at hand rather than any broader design.

⁶⁷ *Law*, I, 35-40.

⁶⁸ *Law*, I, 18.

⁶⁹ *Constitution*, 71, 201.

With this sort of individual as the building block, Hayek goes on to offer an evolutionary account of the development of human practices and institutions. This evolutionism is central to his notion of spontaneous order, since it locates the origins of society in the unintended consequences of myriad individual actions rather than in a single uniform plan. Yet his determination to minimize the role of cognition and will in this process gives his evolutionism a striking slant. Evolutionary accounts as such do not require any strict limitations on the consciousness or intentionality of the individuals who participate in them; we can easily imagine a process in which one set of unintended consequences leads to conscious reforms and adoptions of new practices, which in turn lead to a new set of unintended consequences, and so on.⁷⁰ For Hayek, by contrast, the primary motor of human social evolution is a process of pure blind selection, in which human goals and purposes play virtually no role:

“Learning from experience,” among men no less than among animals, is a process not primarily of reasoning but of the observance, spreading, transmission and development of practices which have prevailed because they were successful – often not because they conferred any recognizable benefit on the acting individual but because they increased the chances of survival of the group to which he belonged....rules come to be observed because in fact they give the group in which they are practiced superior strength, and not because this effect is known to those who are guided by them.⁷¹

Hayek suggests elsewhere that a group “prevailing over others” need not involve literal military victory, and can involve its attracting members of other groups by its success. But even in such cases, “the members of the more successful group will often not know to which peculiarity they

⁷⁰ Evolutionary accounts of society based on game theory provide an example at the opposite extreme from Hayek, building up an evolutionary process from the interactions of self-conscious, strategic, purposively rational actors.

⁷¹ *Law*, I, 18-19.

owe their success, nor cultivate that trait because they know what depends on it.”⁷² And although Hayek goes some way in qualifying his statements — man did not understand *before* he acted, learning is not *primarily* a process of reasoning, practices *often* develop without any of their benefits being recognized — he provides no discussion of cases in which humans might arrive at some understanding of their practices, even if it is only *ex post facto*.⁷³

Thus, on Hayek’s account, the individuals who conform to a rule of conduct will generally have little if any understanding of the social function that it serves; still less is such an understanding the reason for their conformity to it. Because individuals are unable to grasp the functions and benefits of their social practices, there is no clear reason why any of them would ever consciously exchange one rule or practice for another. And because, on these premises, it becomes difficult to see why an individual would ever adopt a new practice, the only mechanism that remains to explain the emergence and spread of such practices is blind selection. In this way he is able to assimilate human to non-human spontaneous orders, for the distinctive attributes of the human elements that make up a social order play virtually no role in its operation. In both physical and social orders, we can attribute purpose to the individual elements only in the functional sense “that their actions tend to secure the preservation or restoration of that order,” but not in the subjective sense of “an awareness of purpose” on the part of the elements themselves.⁷⁴

⁷² *Law*, I, 169n7; cf. *Law*, III, 159: “...rules which he did not deliberately choose but which have spread because some practices enhanced the prosperity of certain groups and led to their expansion, perhaps less by more rapid procreation than by the attraction of outsiders.”

⁷³ Elsewhere, Hayek is agnostic on the problem; see *Law*, II, 16: “It is of little significance for our present purpose whether such general rules came to govern opinion because the advantages to be gained from observing them were recognized, or because groups who happened to accept rules which made them more efficient came to prevail over others obeying less effective rules.”

⁷⁴ *Law*, I, 39.

This insistence on the essentially unthinking and habitual character of actors in spontaneous orders lends a certain implausibility to Hayek's entire discussion. Is it really conceivable that any human beings could be so incurious, so unambitious, as the theory requires them to be? Part of the problem is that Hayek suggests a stark binary of habitual rule-following and constructivist rationalism, as if the only alternative to blind non-cognitive reaction were a kind of highly developed syllogistic deduction from explicit and rationalistic premises. There is an excluded middle here, of course, and it contains a great deal of the social action of the actual world: the realm of willing, striving, experimenting, scheming, guessing right or wrong, pretending to an unearned authority, believing one's own pretense, and so on.⁷⁵ The question is not whether humans are capable of *knowing* correctly and definitively the functions, causes, and consequences of our practices; the question is whether we can avoid trying to find them out and acting on our conclusions.

This would imply that the evolution of practices will likely be as much (or more) a matter of conscious adoption of those practices which are perceived to have been successful as it will be a matter of blind selection between groups adhering to different practices. To take one example, the development of certain hygienic standards would be likely to occur not simply because those

⁷⁵ At one point, Hayek identifies his contrast between purposive action and rule-following with Weber's distinction between instrumentally-rational (*zweckrational*) and value-rational (*wertrational*) action (*New Studies*, 85n14). Although Hayek suggests that virtually all actions will combine elements of the two, the argument nonetheless points to the limits of his binary, for Hayekian rule-following would appear to have little in common with Weberian value-rational action. For Weber, value-rational action in its classic form involves the self-conscious adoption of an unconditional morality by actors aware of the broader social world but nonetheless choosing to disregard the consequences of their actions. Such self-aware choice of transcendent moral ends is precisely one of the things denied to Hayekian rule-followers, whose behavior seems closer to what Weber calls "traditional" action, "determined by ingrained habituation," and which he views as lying "very close to the borderline of what can justifiably be called meaningfully oriented action" (*Economy and Society*, 25).

who adhered to these standards were more likely to survive (or conquer), but rather because a perception that adherents tended to remain healthier would lead to the conscious adoption of them. Of course, there is nothing to suggest that reflection would necessarily produce the correct response — someone might very well notice that rain came after she slaughtered a goat and conclude that goat sacrifice is necessary to propitiate the rain god. But at the same time, there is nothing to suggest that the process of reflection must be confined to immediate reaction to the situation at hand; it may be that the same person, having become convinced of her own unique insight into the cosmos, will use this apparent knowledge to claim power and authority within her community, with any number of further consequences. What is important for our purposes is simply that we cannot even correctly describe human social development unless we grasp the ways in which it differs from non-human development — unless, in other words, we reckon with the phenomena of human intention, reflection, and willing. Hayek must minimize all such phenomena because of the difficulty they cause for his central dichotomy: which of them should we consider spontaneous products from “inside” the system, and which artificial interventions from “outside”? The result, however, is that his depiction has an air of unreality; by quarantining pride in the constructivist social planner, he renders everyone else so unwillful and incurious as to be scarcely human.

5.

These problems persist when Hayek moves from general reflection on human evolution as such to consider more concrete political and historical problems. Among his chief tasks in his later works is to give an account of the kind of law that is compatible with a spontaneous order, and in particular to counter the legal positivism (embodied by Hobbes) that would view all law as the

creation of a sovereign will. In the *Constitution* he had proposed that law, to be non-coercive, must be abstract and impersonal, but in *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* he particularly focuses on the English common law as the ideal of an organically grown legal system.

The key attribute of such a system is that it regards law as found rather than made. In this regard, Hayek argues, the common law retains the characteristics once attributed to all law, before the rise of constructivist rationalism:

[L]aw existed for ages before it occurred to man that he could make or alter it. The belief that he could do so appeared hardly earlier than in classical Greece...In the form in which it is now widely held, however, namely that all law is, can be, and ought to be, the product of the free invention of a legislator, it is factually false, an erroneous product of that constructivist rationalism which we described earlier.⁷⁶

Such a claim might seem implausible on its face. What was, for instance, Hammurabi doing, a thousand years before classical Greece, if not consciously making or altering laws? But Hayek dismisses such a suggestion:

[A]ll early “law-giving” consisted in efforts to record and make known a law that was conceived as unalterably given....[Early “law-givers”] did not intend to create new law but merely to state what law was and had always been. But if nobody had the power or the intention to change the law, and only old law was regarded as good law, this does not mean that law did not continue to develop. What it means is merely that the changes which did occur were not the result of intention or design of a law-maker.⁷⁷

Hayek’s insistence on taking seriously such lawgivers’ claims about what they were doing is not without merit. By doing so, he avoids a crude “realism” that would take these claims as mere ideological legitimization behind which rulers cynically pursued their own interests. This sort of reductionism has real difficulty explaining how those in power understood their own interests, if

⁷⁶ *Law*, I, 73.

⁷⁷ *Law*, I, 81.

not in terms of the values of their societies, and how they alone were immune to the ideology that was so effective in legitimating their actions to the rest of the population.

But in avoiding this sort of error, Hayek goes equally far to the opposite extreme, in the process gliding over a number of complications. It may be true, for instance, that all ancient lawgivers thought that their task was simply to bring human law into accordance with an immutable *divine* law — though even this may not always have been true — but it in no way follows that they had neither “the power or the intention” to alter existing *human* law, or that they viewed themselves as simply making explicit the already existing civil laws of their societies. (The enormous importance attached to the figure of the lawgiver in antiquity itself suggests that these societies did not subscribe to the Hayekian view of lawgiver as glorified stenographer.) And even if we reject the crude instrumentalist picture in which ideology is mere window dressing for underlying self-interest, it remains somewhat credulous to assume that lawgivers’ claims to be explicating a preexisting law were the entire story, and that they lacked any broader aims or goals for their actions.

We can detect similar tensions in Hayek’s discussion of the English common-law judge, his model for the kind of law-making that is consistent with the preservation of grown order. By this point in Hayek’s historical narrative, the law-giving ruler has ceased to represent the humble instrument of spontaneous order, and has instead become the villainous embodiment of constructivist rationalism; it is the judges who have come to represent the reactive and conservative mentality that renounces any broader intention than to preserve the existing equilibrium. Of course, in a dynamic situation, preservation requires change, and therefore the judge is forced in practice to create new law in order to maintain the old order. But Hayek is keen to stress that “even when in the performance of this function he creates new rules, he is not a creator of a new order but a

servant endeavoring to maintain and improve the functioning of an existing order.”⁷⁸ The common lawyer is “more an unwitting tool, a link in a chain of events that he does not see as a whole, than a conscious initiator,” and thus he “will, when he has to interpret or apply a rule which is not in accord with the rest of the system, endeavor so to bend it as to make it conform with the others.”⁷⁹ New law is indeed made in such system, but without any conscious design to do so; “[t]he task will be regarded as one of discovering something which exists, not as one of creating something new, even though the result of such efforts may be the creation of something that has not existed before.”⁸⁰

Is this a normative ideal of how the common law should operate, or a historical description of how it did? Hayek seems to take it as the latter, but his account reads instead like a restatement of the stylized depictions of the common law set forth by Hobbes’s great seventeenth-century opponents, Edward Coke and Matthew Hale.⁸¹ In taking their theoretical idealizations of the common law for its historical reality, Hayek renders himself doubly vulnerable — not merely to the philosophical objections of a Hobbes or a Bentham, who argued for the continuing juridical necessity of sovereign power to underwrite the common law system, but also to the historical objections that the system was neither so organic in origins nor so successful at adapting

⁷⁸ *Law*, I, 119.

⁷⁹ *Law*, I, 66; cf. 69: “he [the lawyer] is as likely to become simply the instrument through which changes he does not understand work themselves out as the conscious creator of a new order....whether we want it or not, the decisive factors which will determine that [social] evolution will always be highly abstract and often unconsciously held ideas about what is right and proper, and not particular purposes or concrete desires.”

⁸⁰ *Law*, I, 78.

⁸¹ In describing the common law as a process of gradualist change rather than preservation of immemorial custom, Hayek seems closer to Hale than to Coke. For the contrast between the two, see Postema, “Classical Common Law Jurisprudence,” 168-76.

to new circumstances as its champions would claim.⁸² Above all he is nearly blind to the relation of law and power, the capacity of law to serve as an instrument by which people pursue their own aims. He can mention in passing the existence of certain forms of “discrimination by law which had crept in as a result of the greater influence that certain groups like landlords, employers, creditors, etc., had wielded on the formation of the law,”⁸³ but it remains the case for him that this sort of influence is largely tangential to the law’s main aspect as a universal and neutral framework for everyone’s pursuit of their interests. (At least so long as it takes the form of abstract rules, not the particular commands of the redistributionist state.) Despite Hayek’s great admiration for Adam Smith, the line of thought that led Smith to view law and government “in every case as a combination of the rich to oppress the poor” would always remain alien to him.⁸⁴

The problems in Hayek’s discussions of the law are analogous to those in his evolutionism more generally. In each case, organic growth requires each individual to forsake pursuit of their own aims (except, as we will see, within narrowly constricted bounds), even to forsake any conscious attempt to remake the world around them, and instead passively to conform to “the way things are done.” It requires, in other words, that we assume a generalized willingness to know one’s place, a stance of humility rather than pride — an assumption which can only seem plausible if we accept the identification of pride with modern rationalism and which appears blatantly unhistorical once we reject this identification.

⁸² For critiques of the historical accuracy of Hayek’s depiction of the common law (critiques whose antecedents can be found particularly in the pioneering work of Maitland), see Hamowy, “F.A. Hayek and the Common Law”; Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, 254-61.

⁸³ *Law*, I, 141.

⁸⁴ *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (A)iv.23, 208.

One way out, of course, would be for Hayek to abandon the notion that he is offering a historical or descriptive theory, and instead to adopt a strictly normative view: spontaneous order is what *would* happen if humans behaved as they should. In places, he seems inclined to adopt such a view, as when he discusses the value of viewing spontaneous order as a utopian ideal:

It is not to be denied that to some extent the guiding model of the overall order will always be an utopia, something to which the existing situation will be only a distant approximation and which many people will regard as wholly impractical. Yet it is only by constantly holding up the guiding conception of an internally consistent model which could be realized by the consistent application of the same principles, that anything like an effective framework for a functioning spontaneous order will be achieved. Adam Smith thought that “to expect, indeed, that freedom of trade should ever be entirely restored in Great Britain is as absurd as to expect an Oceana or Utopia should ever be established in it.” Yet seventy year[s] later, largely as a result of his work, it was achieved.⁸⁵

But this is not a move he can make without sacrificing the basic framework of his theory, for if spontaneous order is simply an ideal that has never before existed and that we may only hope to realize in the future, in what sense can it genuinely be considered “spontaneous”? He can allow that spontaneous orders have only been imperfectly realized through history, but he cannot give up a basic claim to historicity, a notion that there are really-existing grown orders threatened by the coercive encroachment of the state. For that reason he cannot offer a thoroughgoing critique of pride, as Hobbes had; he must instead simply erase it from most of human history and social life.

Where, on such a view, does novelty come from? If human action aims merely at persistence, adaptation, and preservation, how does anything happen? In a way, this was a critique that Nietzsche had already leveled against the social evolutionism of his own day (particularly as propounded by Herbert Spencer). Nietzsche’s genealogy shared some common features with social

⁸⁵ *Law*, I, 64-65; cf. 42, where Hayek claims that order (and thus spontaneous order) “may be a matter of degree.” We can recall the similar tension between the view of liberty as a degree and binary concept.

evolutionary theories, notably in the centrality they attached to struggle and in their denial that the current function of an institution indicates that it was designed for that particular purpose. But he complained that such theories place “‘adaptation’ in the foreground, that it to say, an activity of the second rank, a mere reactivity,” meaning that “one overlooks the essential priority of the spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, form-giving forces that give new interpretations and directions, although ‘adaptation’ follows only after this.”⁸⁶ We need not accept unconditionally Nietzsche’s own grandiose and cryptic alternative, the heroic individual whose will to power imposes new values upon the world *ex nihilo*. Yet the basic point is apt, for in a world governed entirely by habit, adaptation, and rule-following, nothing would ever really happen; the only source of novelty would be an exogenous shock such as a natural disaster. Indeed, Hayek himself accepts some version this point, for he recognizes that spontaneous order requires rule-breakers as well as rule-followers. “The freedom that will be used by only one man in a million,” he writes, “may be more important to society and more beneficial to the majority than any freedom that we all use,” for it is only the experiments of the bold or fortunate that open up the possibilities that will subsequently govern the rest of the population.⁸⁷ Progress depends on innovation, so it is actually “often desirable that rules should be observed only in most instances and that the individual should be able to transgress them when it seems to him worthwhile to incur the odium which this will cause.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *On the Genealogy of Morals* 2.12, 79.

⁸⁷ *Constitution*, 83, cf. 96-98. Nietzsche’s influence on Hayek has been stressed in Robin, “Nietzsche’s Marginal Children,” although I am somewhat skeptical that Nietzsche’s influence on Hayek and his fellow Austrians was so great as Robin portrays it.

⁸⁸ *Constitution*, 123.

Here we can see some of Hayek's tacitly ambivalent relationship to tradition.⁸⁹ He generally extolls the unquestioning adherence to inherited rules, and denigrates the desire to innovate according to some purportedly rational standard; he notes that civilization can only function because its members "show a regularity in their actions that is not the result of commands or coercion, often not even of any conscious adherence to known rules, but of firmly established habits and traditions."⁹⁰ Yet he frequently allows that his own preferred set of rules — above all, the norms of the market — in fact cut against the inherited morality of much of the population. We have already seen his attack on the norms of the old moral economy, like just prices and fair wages; he saw their revival under the banner of socialism as "strictly an *atavism*, based on primordial emotions."⁹¹ By persistently describing such norms as "primordial emotions" or "innate instincts," he seeks to deny them the status of traditional rules, as when he insists that mere "instinct or intuition do not entitle us to reject a particular demand of the prevailing moral code," i.e. the code of the market.⁹² But the obvious question is: prevailing for whom? Might not such instincts and intuitions constitute the really prevailing moral code for most people, even today?⁹³

⁸⁹ Many commentators have noted the tension between the rationalist and traditional strands in Hayek's thought. See, *inter alia*, Gray, *Hayek on Liberty*, 137-39, 152-53; Kukathas, *Hayek and Modern Liberalism*, 201-15; Kley, *Hayek's Social and Political Thought*, 158.

⁹⁰ *Constitution*, 123.

⁹¹ *Law*, III, 165, emphasis in original; cf. 169.

⁹² *Law*, III, 167.

⁹³ Hayek attributes the resurgence of this atavistic morality to the fact that "an ever increasing part of the population of the Western World grows up as members of large organizations," whereas in the past the population consisted "chiefly of independent farmers, artisans and merchants and their servants and apprentices" (*Law*, III, 164-65). One might question both the demographic portrayal (along with its claim that the views of masters and servants converged) and the suggestion that Hayekian market morality was ever widely shared throughout even the population of Western Europe alone.

In his more pessimistic moments, Hayek is inclined to concede the point; at such moments he must fall back on a kind of constructivist rationalism of his own, urging that the accreted statist institutions of the messy existing world be reordered according to a rational blueprint.⁹⁴ In any case, even if market morality were triumphant in the present day, he makes clear that it originally constituted an infringement on prevailing moral codes, and thus that capitalism could only come about through the actions of a few rule-breakers.

But if Hayek recognizes that change can only occur “by some individuals breaking some traditional rules and practicing new forms of conduct,” he can only accommodate such rule-breakers by drastically constricting their range of action. After all, the rule-breakers he has in mind are not the rebel, the prophet, or the conqueror, but the merchant, the inventor, and the entrepreneur. Thus the story must be a whiggish one in which the violation of traditional norms is identical with the “evolution of individual freedom and a development of rules which protected the individual”:

There can be little doubt that from the toleration of bartering with the outsider, the recognition of delimited private property, especially in land, the enforcement of contractual obligations, the competition with fellow craftsmen in the same trade, the variability of initially customary prices, the lending of money, particularly at interest, were all initially infringements of customary rules — so many falls from grace. And the law-breakers, who were to be path-breakers, certainly did not introduce the new rules because they recognized that they were beneficial to the community, but they simply started some practices advantageous to them which then did prove beneficial to the group in which they prevailed.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ See, for instance, his insistence that the accumulated power of organized labor must be dismantled (*Constitution*, 403): “The path is still blocked, however, by the most fatuous of all fashionable arguments, namely, that ‘we cannot turn the clock back.’ One cannot help wondering whether those who habitually use this cliché are aware that it expresses the fatalistic belief that we cannot learn from our mistakes, the most abject admission that we are incapable of using our intelligence.”

⁹⁵ *Law*, III, 161.

Here Hayek falls back on some broad form of self-interest (“practices advantageous to them”) as the motive for rule-breaking. But why do the rule-breakers seek advantage only through recognizing others’ property, enforcing contracts, market competition, and the like? Why not through force and fraud, coercion and manipulation? He must rule out such forms of rule-breaking by a criterion which remains obscure; he does not so much label them morally illegitimate as pretend that they do not exist. Similarly, he insists that “the recognition of property preceded the rise of even the most primitive cultures,” and that “all that we call civilization” has been “made possible by the delimitation of protected domains of individuals or groups.”⁹⁶ Such a view can hardly survive contact with the historical record — which tells us that a great deal of what we call civilization has been made possible precisely by expropriation, conquest, and enslavement — but it is central to his understanding of spontaneous order, in which even rule-breaking must be confined to innovation within the broader rules of the market.

Near the very end of *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Hayek attempts to give some psychological grounding for his account of rule-following and rule-breaking, and he does so by invoking a motive that is central to our study: the desire for esteem. It is this desire that undergirds the adherence to moral rules: “All morals rest on the different esteem in which different persons are held by their fellows according to their conforming to accepted moral standards.” Esteem-seeking, he notes, is inherently positional in nature: “*Morals presuppose a striving for excellence and the recognition that in this some succeed better than others,*” so that those “who observe the rules are regarded as better in the sense of being of superior value compared with those who do not.”⁹⁷ It might therefore seem that rule-breakers are the despised

⁹⁶ *Law*, I, 108.

⁹⁷ *Law*, III, 171, emphasis in original.

elements of society, those who have either lost or forsaken the competition for esteem. Yet Hayek is unwilling to accept this implication. On the contrary, he argues, “the success of an innovation by a rule-breaker...has to be bought by the esteem he has earned by the scrupulous observation of most of the existing rules.”⁹⁸ Only the model citizens of a community have the standing “which legitimize[s] experimentation in a particular direction” and brings about cultural evolution.⁹⁹

Hayek cannot really ground his ideal of spontaneous order on habit and intuition, for our habits and intuitions may be sharply opposed to the norms of the market. He cannot really ground it on self-interest, for the pure opportunistic pursuit of self-interest cannot be confined by the restraints of liberal legality. So he comes to rely on esteem as a kind of *deus ex machina* — a mechanism mandating general conformity to the rules, and guaranteeing that even those who disobey them will do so only within narrow and morally innocuous bounds. The thought of grounding order upon esteem or recognition is far from baseless, and we will soon see how thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries pursued its implications. In the form that Hayek envisions it, however, esteem cannot support spontaneous order any more than habit, intuition, or self-interest could. The problems in his account can be understood historically: it is not typically the flourishing members of a society who go to its margins or break its rules, and innovation has often come from the desperate or the ostracized rather than the well-fed and the admired. But the problems can also be understood conceptually, for the early modern conversation around pride drives home how protean and variable the desire for esteem can be,

⁹⁸ *Law*, III, 167; cf. 171: “The conscientious and courageous may on rare occasions decide to brave general opinion and to disregard a particular rule which he regards as wrong, if he proves his general respect for the prevailing moral rules by carefully observing the others.”

⁹⁹ *Law*, III, 204n48.

and how little it can be bound reliably to morally innocuous forms of conduct. If this positional desire for standing can be made into a foundation of social order, it cannot do so in the rote and automatic way that Hayek suggests.

Hence we can see that however much Hayek's theory may involve a critique of pride, it more fundamentally requires a denial of pride. The individuals who make up a spontaneous order are unreflective, ruled by habit, content in their place, and staying within their individual tracks. Even their ambition, whether in the form of self-interest or esteem-seeking, is tacitly bounded by a set of norms that channel it into healthy innovation rather than wanton destruction. These characteristics are not moral injunctions; they are inscribed upon Hayekian actors at the level of description, so that pride appears merely as a destructive recent innovation of modern rationalism. Quarantined in the single form of rationalist state interference, pride is erased from the rest of human social life.

It is through unintended consequences that the actions of such individuals are transformed into spontaneous order. Hayek persistently casts himself as the inheritor of the early modern theory of unintended consequences, and builds his theory around its central insight: that social phenomena arise not from the successful implementation of any single person's will but from the unpredictable interplay of a variety of individual goals and actions, none of which can ever be implemented entirely as foreseen. In Hayek's hands, however, the doctrine of unintended consequences becomes something rather different from what it was for his predecessors. For Hayek treats this insight as if it entailed a second and much stronger one: that the individuals whose actions produce social order through unintended consequences act *without any broader design or overarching goal* beyond unreflective habit or immediate self-interest. Without ever saying so, and most likely without noticing, he goes beyond the point that human action is

necessarily incomplete and contingent (a point which in itself is uncontroversial, indeed nearly axiomatic) to offer a more tendentious characterization of the actors themselves.

The doctrine of unintended consequences itself suggests no such thing: it applies equally to the most unreflective habits of the peasant and to the most grandiose designs of the ruler. The idea that social order springs from the interplay of many wills rather than the implementation of one will is distinct from any characterization of the reflectiveness, ambition, or purposefulness of these many wills. And when we examine the great Scottish theorists of unintended consequences whom Hayek took himself to be reviving, we can see that it was often prideful wills that they had in mind. One concrete example appears in Hume's *History of England*, where he describes a "revolution" which produced "many beneficial consequences; though perhaps neither foreseen nor intended by the persons who had the chief hand in conducting it."¹⁰⁰ But although the language recalls Hayek's, the revolution of which Hume speaks is Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church and dissolution of the monasteries — a set of sudden and state-imposed "violent innovations in religion" which must surely violate every one of Hayek's strictures.¹⁰¹ Hume was no radical, and generally preferred gradual and organic reform, but his point about unforeseen consequences was that they were genuinely unforeseeable. Gradual change need not be healthy and violent innovation need not be catastrophic; Henry VIII's actions would appear beneficial in retrospect, notwithstanding "the violence of changing so suddenly the whole system of government" as he did.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ *History of England*, III, 207.

¹⁰¹ *History of England*, III, 227. The contrast between Hume and Hayek here has been noted by Yenor, "Spontaneous Order and the Idea of Religious Revolution," 114.

¹⁰² *History of England*, III, 220.

Hayek was fond of quoting Adam Ferguson's maxim that "nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design." Yet the passage from which Hayek drew the maxim drives home the distance between them. For Ferguson, unintended consequences were pervasive not because humans were governed by habit, tradition, or immediate interest, but on the contrary because they were so inclined to form grand designs: "Men, in general, are sufficiently disposed to occupy themselves in forming projects and schemes: but he who would scheme and project for others, will find an opponent in every person who is disposed to scheme for himself."¹⁰³ It is precisely the ubiquity of such "projects and schemes," Ferguson suggests, which ensures that few of them will succeed as intended. As a result, the phenomenon of unintended consequences is not simply characteristic of the market and other such spontaneous orders; Ferguson takes it to govern the entire history of the world, from its most harmonious to its most brutal. This history is one of turmoil, in which unintended benefits occur precisely in the transient moments when prideful actors check one another. Freedom, when it appears, is a consequence of this struggle rather than a precondition for it:

The pretensions of any particular order, if not checked by some collateral power, would terminate in tyranny...In their way to the ascendant they endeavor to gain, and in the midst of interruptions which opposite interests mutually give, liberty may have a permanent or a transient existence...Liberty is maintained by the continued differences and oppositions of numbers, not by their concurring zeal in behalf of equitable government.¹⁰⁴

This vision has been passed down to us in its defanged form: the individual pursuit of self-interest sufficiently hemmed in by a shared respect for the underlying rules of the game.

¹⁰³ *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* 3.2, 119; we have already seen Hayek quote the maxim at *Law*, I, 20.

¹⁰⁴ *Essay* 3.2, 124-25.

Ferguson imagined it in terms closer to Machiavelli's: a competition for power and glory as well as wealth, waged between groups as well as within them, with no assurance that the parties will respect any particular set of ground rules and no guarantee that their struggle will ultimately make all of them (or even any of them) better off.¹⁰⁵ Hayek can cast his favored order as spontaneous only by projecting the qualities required to produce it back onto the individuals who make it up. His predecessors, having a less constricted and therefore less sanguine view of human nature, were correspondingly less confident that human beings could spontaneously produce a decent social order. The problem of order remained, for them, a problem.

6.

“[W]hy,” Hobbes lamented at one point in his debate with Bishop Bramhall, “did he without need bring in this strange word, spontaneous?”¹⁰⁶ The word, Hobbes suggested, was crucially ambiguous: although it “signifieth nothing else in Latin (for English it is not) but what is done deliberately or indeliberately without compulsion,” Bramhall (like the scholastics who coined it) took advantage of its obscurity “to give it any signification he please,” without regard for consistency.¹⁰⁷ The spontaneous could be synonymous with the voluntary — and we have seen how broad a category the voluntary was for Hobbes — or it could be restricted to those voluntary actions that were uncoerced; in neither case did it add anything of value to the debate.

¹⁰⁵ This entire chapter of the *Essay*, titled “The History of Subordination,” particularly recalls Book I (Chs. 2-4) of Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*. Pocock has called Ferguson's *Essay* as a whole the “most Machiavellian” work of the Scottish Enlightenment (*The Machiavellian Moment*, 499).

¹⁰⁶ *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, in *English Works*, V, 91.

¹⁰⁷ *Questions*, in *English Works*, 350-51.

The point remains equally pertinent today. For we have seen that Hayek's dichotomy of spontaneous and constructed depends on a stylized yet unstated background, one that locates pride almost exclusively in the rationalist and coercive interference of the state. When pride is quarantined in this way, "spontaneous" comes to label everything else — the humble, habitual, unthinking, unplanned, and non-coercive activities of the rest of society. If we reject this background, however, and return to something like the early modern view of the problem, the language of spontaneity ceases to make much sense. If scheming, planning, aspiring, competing, coercing, and dominating are capacities belonging to all human beings, and if attempts to implement conscious designs upon the world are constants of human social life, then how are we to say which of them are truly spontaneous?¹⁰⁸

"The errors of constructivist rationalism," Hayek suggests at one point, "are closely connected with Cartesian dualism, that is with the conception of an independently existing mind substance which stands outside the cosmos" in order to design it.¹⁰⁹ Similarly he disparages the "authoritarian conception of order" which imagines "that order can be created only by forces outside the system (or 'exogenously')," and which neglects the possibility of "an equilibrium set up from within (or 'endogenously') such as that which the general theory of the market endeavors to explain."¹¹⁰ Yet we might wonder whether Hayek has fully escaped these errors himself. A full rejection of this kind of political Cartesianism would seem to imply that it simply does not make sense to speak of any kind of human action as taking place "inside" or "outside" a

¹⁰⁸ On the emptiness of Hayek's notion of spontaneity, see especially Kley, *Hayek's Social and Political Thought*, 111-31.

¹⁰⁹ *Law*, I, 17.

¹¹⁰ *Law*, I, 36.

given social order; all of it — up to and including the designs of the most grandiose social planner — must be considered “endogenous”. This, however, is not the implication that Hayek draws. Instead, he preserves the premise that there is some form of human action that is external to the social order, only adding that such action is pernicious and unable to substitute for the organic activities of grown order. In a peculiar way his mistake is to accept constructivist rationalism’s understanding of itself at face value, merely inverting its positive and negative valuations. If the great rationalists perhaps believed themselves capable of adopting a standpoint outside of their social world in order to critique it, Hayek seeks to convict them of the same; what for them was superstition and unthinking tradition become for him tacit knowledge and organic action, while what for them was detachment and objectivity become for him artificiality and alienation. It would perhaps be more fruitful to conclude that both sides have it wrong — that the intuitive spatial metaphors that take the social world to have a “top” and a “bottom,” an “inside” and an “outside,” lead us astray; that acting artificially or exogenously is not merely undesirable but impossible.

Is it possible to give the notion of spontaneity any concrete analytical content? Hayek is eager to stress that spontaneous order is a value-neutral and descriptive concept, not a term of approbation. We have already seen his minimal definition of order in general, as any “*state of affairs in which a multiplicity of elements of various kinds are so related to each other that we may learn from our acquaintance with some spatial or temporal part of the whole to form correct expectations concerning the rest.*”¹¹¹ It would follow that spontaneous order can refer to any set of predictable regularities that arise from within a system rather than being imposed from without, and thus that the term need not refer only to beneficial or desirable orders. He similarly

¹¹¹ *Law*, I, 36, emphasis in original.

warns against the naturalist fallacy of inferring that the results of the process of cultural evolution are ipso facto good.¹¹² In fact, he suggests that the entire dichotomy between “natural” and “artificial” phenomena is misleading, since phenomena that are the result of human action but not human design can be placed on either side of the ledger; spontaneous social order is not to be exalted for being “natural”.¹¹³

But however much he might claim to reject any value-laden understanding of spontaneity, it still persists tacitly in his thought. Although, for instance, he rejects the language of “natural” and “artificial,” his analysis completely preserves the basic moral standpoint that is the basis for the dichotomy; spontaneous order embodies all those positive qualities that are traditionally ascribed to the natural, and constructivist rationalism all those negative qualities traditionally ascribed to the artificial. Similarly, he is certainly not committed to the notion that every social force that triumphs is thereby good; his famous worries about the “road to serfdom” are sufficient evidence to the contrary. But when dealing with the spread of phenomena of which he disapproves — from the rise of state planning to the growth of labor unions — he tends to cast them as springing from coercive *interference* with the process of cultural evolution rather than as *products* of that process itself.¹¹⁴ Cultural evolution remains for him a linear process with

¹¹² See *Law*, I, 24, and most explicitly *The Fatal Conceit*, 27 (although as mentioned in note 19 of this chapter, the extent of Hayek’s authorship of that book is debated).

¹¹³ *Law*, I, 20.

¹¹⁴ He makes such a point explicitly in *The Fatal Conceit*, although it must be taken with all the caveats attached to that work: “Recognizing that rules generally tend to be selected, via competition, on the basis of their human survival-value certainly does not protect those rules from critical scrutiny. This is so, if for no other reason, because there has so often been coercive interference in the process of cultural evolution” (20). Regardless of whether Hayek or Bartley is primarily responsible for this specific passage, it does reflect his broader unwillingness to see coercion as a part of the evolutionary process itself.

higher and lower forms, in which higher forms remain morally praiseworthy even when they are toppled by lower ones. This general attitude underlies his disparagement of collectivist morality as a pernicious “atavism” in which “long-submerged innate instincts have again surged to the top.”¹¹⁵ In like manner he suggests that a less developed but militarily superior society “may displace a more highly civilized one” — as when conquering barbarians “imposed in feudal ages upon the urban population a law which had survived from a more primitive stage of economic evolution.”¹¹⁶ By viewing such pernicious historical developments as steps backwards rather than forwards in the evolutionary process, he can preserve a generally whiggish worldview in which the process itself is beneficial when unhindered.¹¹⁷

Nor can Hayek ultimately maintain his minimal and value-neutral definition of order as mere discernible regularities. By this definition, virtually any state of affairs would constitute a spontaneous order; there are discernible regularities even in the midst of a riot or a civil war. This was the point that Augustine had made in saying that there can be “no war without some degree of peace,” since even a state of Hobbesian anarchy requires some basic coherence in the

¹¹⁵ *Law*, III, 165.

¹¹⁶ *Law*, III, 202n39.

¹¹⁷ On the extent to which Hayek’s evolutionism is or is not value-neutral, see especially the debate between Caldwell and Angner: Caldwell, “The Emergence of Hayek’s Ideas on Cultural Evolution”; Caldwell, *Hayek’s Challenge*, 295, 356-57; Angner, “Did Hayek Commit the Naturalist Fallacy?”; Caldwell and Reiss, “Hayek, Logic, and the Naturalist Fallacy”; Angner, “Response to Caldwell and Reiss”. I agree broadly with what Angner calls the “weak normative reading,” namely that although Hayek does not believe that every result of the evolutionary process is ipso facto good, his evolutionism is not value-neutral and he does think that the results of social evolution tend to be beneficial. Other works making related points include Gray, *Hayek on Liberty*, 152-53 (in the “Afterword” to the third edition, repudiating his earlier position at 119-21); Kukathas, *Hayek and Modern Liberalism*, 103-5, 201-15; Kley, *Hayek’s Social and Political Thought*, 111-31; Buchanan, *Freedom in Constitutional Contract*, 25-30.

individuals who constitute it.¹¹⁸ But Hayek is unwilling to accept these implications, and thus he seems to abandon his initial definition only a few pages after offering it, insisting that “not every regularity in the behavior of the elements does secure an overall order.” Some regularities of conduct “could produce only disorder”: a rule, for instance, that all individuals should attempt to kill or flee from those they encountered, would result in “the complete impossibility of an order in which the activities of the individuals were based on collaboration with others.”¹¹⁹ The slippage in this passage between “overall order” and “order based on collaboration with others” is revealing, and indicates some of the largely implicit moral content of his notion of order.

Likewise, Hayek notes that individuals might follow some of the rules necessary to produce social order out of their own spontaneous desires, but that this is by no means true of all of the rules:

[T]here will be still others which they may have to be made to obey, since, although it would be in the interest of each to disregard them, the overall order on which the success of their actions depends will arise only if these rules are generally followed.¹²⁰

Thus spontaneous order cannot, contrary to what Hayek sometimes seems to imply, arise solely from the kind of rules that every member of a society learns to follow tacitly and subconsciously; there still remains the necessity of coercion to force individuals to obey certain rules of order. Furthermore, Hayek goes on to argue, there is no necessary connection between the spontaneity of the overall order and the spontaneity of the rules themselves:

[W]hile the rules on which a spontaneous order rests, may also be of spontaneous origin, this need not always be the case....The spontaneous character of the resulting order must therefore be distinguished from the spontaneous origin of the rules on which it rests, and

¹¹⁸ *City of God* XIX.13, 939; cited in chapter II, note 66.

¹¹⁹ *Law*, I, 44.

¹²⁰ *Law*, I, 45.

it is possible that an order which would still have to be described as spontaneous rests on rules which are entirely the result of deliberate design.¹²¹

The upshot is that we are not to understand spontaneous order, at least in the social context, as a purely descriptive label for any self-sustaining set of regularities that arises without outside intervention. Genuinely spontaneous order implies other qualities; although these are only vaguely specified, they seem to involve some degree of peace, prosperity, and social harmony. The creation of such an order, in turn, rests both on coercion and often on the deliberate design of social rules.

Whatever the merits of this vision of social order might be, by adopting it Hayek effectively empties the concept of “spontaneity” of any real analytical content. The polemic against constructivist rationalism becomes far murkier, for if spontaneous order requires coercion, intervention, and design, what separates it from its opposite? If the market is the canonical example of spontaneous order, what exactly is spontaneous about it, and if some forms of intervention are required to create and maintain it, why not others? This was precisely the attack that Karl Polanyi leveled against Hayek’s mentor von Mises: “Laissez-faire was planned, planning was not.”¹²² It was the imposition of the market order that was artificial, rather than the collectivist measures by which “[s]ociety protected itself” against “the ravages of this satanic mill.”¹²³

But Polanyi himself could not break free of that “strange word” any more than his opponents. “The countermove against economic liberalism and laissez-faire,” he insists, “possessed all the unmistakable characteristics of a spontaneous reaction.”¹²⁴ In a way he and

¹²¹ *Law*, I, 45-46.

¹²² *The Great Transformation*, 147.

¹²³ *The Great Transformation*, 80, 77.

¹²⁴ *The Great Transformation*, 156.

Hayek are mirror images of each other, both symptomatic of the erasure of pride from our understanding of the social world.¹²⁵ Both can see pride only in the rationalist desire to impose a single totalizing design on society, differing solely on whether planning or laissez-faire is the design in question. Both valorize the habitual, the everyday, the organic, differing solely on whether this involves is self-interest within the market or self-defense against it. And though some of Polanyi's claims evoke the tradition we are tracing — his argument for the priority of "social recognition" over mere "want-satisfaction," his insistence that "man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships" — he understands them in way that renders them far less troubling for social life. Man "acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets" — to safeguard, but not to strive, to supplant, to expand, to overreach, for these are qualities that Polanyi associates with the market fundamentalism that he aims to combat.¹²⁶ For that reason, the problem of order ceases to be a real problem for him, except when tranquil pre-capitalist *Gemeinschaft*, his own vision of spontaneous order, is subjected to the ravages of capitalism's satanic mill.

Spontaneous order of whatever kind was not the solution to the problem of pride, for pride itself could rightfully lay claim to spontaneity. Custom, habit, social cohesion — these were outcomes rather than explanations; not alternatives to pride but phenomena whose existence among the prideful had to be explained. How could this be done?

¹²⁵ What makes this symmetry even more striking is that Hayek seems to have adopted his language about the spontaneous order of the market from none other than Polanyi's brother Michael; see *Constitution*, 230. The relationship of the Polanyi brothers, whose philosophical casts of mind may perhaps have been more similar than their sharply different political leanings would suggest, is a fascinating subject that would reward further investigation.

¹²⁶ *The Great Transformation* 160, 48.

Chapter VI

Moralism and Materialism

1.

The decades that followed the appearance of Hobbes's major political works saw his ideas taken up and debated widely — his conclusions generally rejected, his premises often tacitly accepted.¹ It is beyond the scope of our present investigation to examine all the ways in which those aspects of Hobbes's thought that have preoccupied us may have resonated and mutated in the half-century following his death. Instead, it may be useful to open a window onto this history by looking backward, from the vantage point of a figure who served as the closest analogue to Hobbes in the next century. For the role that Machiavelli filled in the sixteenth century and Hobbes in the seventeenth — the notorious immoralist, whose scandalous doctrines served as a reference point for his contemporaries and successors — was occupied in the eighteenth by the Anglo-Dutch polemicist Bernard Mandeville.

Three centuries after Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* rose to public notoriety, its author is chiefly remembered today as a figure from the prehistory of economic thought.² His instantly-famous paradox — that “private vices,” correctly managed, could be turned into “public benefits” — is considered an early expression of what Adam Smith was to make famous as the

¹ The most recent and thorough study of seventeenth-century reactions to Hobbes is Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan*. Earlier worthwhile examinations of Hobbes's reception include Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan*; Goldie, “The reception of Hobbes”; Malcolm, “Hobbes and the European Republic of Letters,” in *Aspects of Hobbes*, 457-545.

² The publication history of the *Fable* is somewhat complicated: its earliest incarnation, the poem “The Grumbling Hive,” appeared in 1705; the first volume of the *Fable*, expanding on the poem, appeared in 1714. The work did not achieve widespread attention, however, until it was reissued along with “An Essay on Charity and Charity-Schools” in 1723; the second volume of the *Fable* followed in 1729.

“invisible hand,” and Mandeville himself is generally presented more as a polemical precursor to Smith than as a major theorist in his own right.³ The private vice in this account of Mandeville’s scheme is greed (or, more neutrally, economic self-interest) and the public benefit is prosperity; understood in this way, positive and negative reactions to Mandeville tend to break down along the lines of supporters and critics of laissez-faire economics.⁴

The eighteenth-century reaction to the *Fable* was strikingly different. To begin with, the work’s reception was almost uniformly hostile, since even those who were profoundly influenced by Mandeville, like Smith, tended to concede nothing more than that his system “in some respects bordered on the truth.”⁵ And to be sure, some of Mandeville’s opponents took issue with his defense of luxury and his (largely implicit) vindication of England’s emerging commercial society. Yet many of Mandeville’s most prominent critics were in fact defenders of commercial society and its associated forms of economic behavior. What they objected to in the “private vices, public benefits” scheme was not the claim that commercial behavior was beneficial, but rather the claim that it was vicious. For them Mandeville was threatening not so much for his empirical doctrines about luxury and prosperity but for what they perceived as a

³ For a version of this view, in a work generally distinguished by its unconventional and unwhiggish approach to the history of economic thought, see Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, 18-19. Innumerable other examples of this view could be supplied.

⁴ The question of whether Mandeville’s strictly economic thought can be considered truly ‘free market’ or proto-laissez-faire as opposed to mercantilist and interventionist need not concern us here. Classic statements of the laissez-faire view Kaye, “Introduction”; Rosenberg, “Mandeville and Laissez-Faire.” The classic statement of the contrary view is Viner, ‘Introduction to Bernard Mandeville, *A Letter to Dion*’, in *Essays on the Intellectual History of Economics*, 176-88.

⁵ *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* VII.ii.4.14, 313. Dr. Johnson, who half-jokingly called Mandeville his “old tutor,” made sure “always loudly to condemn the Fable of the Bees, but not without adding, ‘that it was the work of a thinking man’”; see Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*, 115-16.

corrosive and ultimately nihilistic moral philosophy that would deny humans even the possibility of acting virtuously.⁶

These divergent reactions are not accidental, for they reflect the nature of Mandeville's project. "His critical importance," André Morize suggested over a century ago, "is that, in this fertile period of development, he represents the decisive moment when the French Epicurean and skeptical current merges with English economic doctrines" — when the philosophy of Montaigne and Bayle joins the scientific political economy of Petty and North, and the old French ideas are given "a new significance that renders them unrecognizable."⁷ Part of Mandeville's achievement was to take the rich moral psychology of the French tradition — with its depiction of the subtle and varied manifestations of human egoism in the social world — and transpose it from seventeenth-century court society to eighteenth-century commercial society, thereby using it to explain emerging forms of economic behavior. Thus we may say that the divergent criticisms of Mandeville reflect unease both with the philosophical framework he inherited from his French predecessors and with his empirical claims about the commercial society to which he applied it.

But how are we to understand the relationship between these two strands? Istvan Hont has noted the "elective affinity" that many early modern thinkers detected between the "feigned

⁶ Mandeville felt compelled to defend himself from this charge (for instance at *Fable*, II, 336) by stressing that he merely thought virtue was rare, not impossible. Whether this defense holds water, as we shall see, is debatable.

⁷ Morize, *L'Apologie du Luxe au XVIII^e Siècle*, 69, my translation. For a similar judgment see Dickey, "Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility in Mandeville's Social and Historical Theory," 395. Dickey's valuable essay treats many of the same themes as our discussion here, although — as suggested below — I believe he ascribes undue coherence to Mandeville as a historically-grounded heir to the French moralists and thus neglects much of the "materialist" strand in his work.

morality” of commercial society and its “utilitarian sociability.”⁸ In this vein, most interpreters of Mandeville have taken his appropriation of the moralist tradition as a relatively straightforward and unproblematic one, notwithstanding the apparent incongruity of using a philosophy rooted in the ascetic Augustinianism of the Jansenists to glorify luxury and self-interest.⁹ On one level, the existence of such an affinity is undeniable; Mandeville himself was only the starkest example of the ways that what we might loosely call “moralism” and “materialism,”¹⁰ like Augustinianism and Epicureanism more broadly, often made for unlikely bedfellows in this era.¹¹

But surface affinities can conceal deeper contradictions, and in what follows I will suggest that we can detect throughout the *Fable* the presence of oppositions stemming from the tension between Mandeville’s philosophical sources and his empirical subject matter. While often only implicit in the *Fable* and only occasionally noticed by its critics, these tensions can help explain why the moralist Mandeville has been almost forgotten while the materialist Mandeville has endured. They can also illustrate the ways in which the discourse around pride, so evident in figures like Augustine and Hobbes, was transformed, challenged, and in certain ways supplanted over the course of the eighteenth century.

⁸ Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, 50.

⁹ See, e.g., Kaye, “Introduction”; Dickey, “Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility”; Horne, *The Social Thought of Bernard Mandeville*; Hundert, *The Enlightenment’s Fable*. For a view of Mandeville as fundamentally split between a number of strands and lines of thought, see Monro, *The Ambivalence of Bernard Mandeville*, although the ambivalence that Monro describes in his useful book does not align precisely with the split that I am suggesting.

¹⁰ I use the labels “moralist” and “materialist” more as convenient shorthands than as rigorous analytical descriptors, and do not claim that either side of Mandeville matches up precisely to all the connotations that either term might evoke. I hope that the ways in which I see these labels as useful will eventually become clear.

¹¹ On the convergence of Augustinianism and Epicureanism in the period, see Lafond, “Augustinisme et épicurisme au XVII^e siècle,” in *L’homme et son image*, 345-68; Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, 48-57; Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, 127-30.

Most immediately, grasping the side of Mandeville's thought that was lost when he was posthumously adopted as proto-laissez-faire economist — a side that likely *had* to be lost in order for such an adoption to be possible — can help us gain a fuller understanding of him as a historical thinker. Yet the story is not simply, or at least not solely, one of vulgarization by whiggish economists, and likewise the moral is not necessarily that by viewing him historically we can recover a Mandeville who is more nuanced and therefore more adequate for our own political moment. Both sides of Mandeville's thought, his moralism as well as his materialism, have important — yet sharply divergent — legacies in the later history of the social sciences. It is surely significant that for the man typically seen as the cock crowing to announce the dawn of European capitalism, these two problems did not always seem distinguishable, let alone opposed. Yet by the same token it is revealing to examine the difficulties into which Mandeville fell in his effort to keep the two united under the roof of a single overarching philosophy. In any case, understanding Mandeville's two faces may help us clarify for ourselves both the presuppositions and the limitations of the social theories that we have inherited from him. What appear as mere cracks in the edifice of his work have, in the intervening centuries, widened into fissures — the same fissures that divide our own sharply divergent ways of viewing the social world.

2.

To get a better sense of what I have called the “moralist” and “materialist” sides of Mandeville's thought, let us begin by returning to one prominent critic of the *Fable*. Adam Smith, despite his aforementioned debts to Mandeville, devoted a section of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to refuting Mandeville and his predecessor La Rochefoucauld, whose systems he deemed “licentious.” (We will examine Smith's relation to Mandeville more closely in the next

chapter.) The consequence of Mandeville's thesis, Smith suggested, would ultimately be to "take away altogether the distinction between vice and virtue."¹² Some variant of this charge was frequently made against Mandeville, and although he denied it repeatedly, it clearly touched on something deeply rooted in his thought.¹³ But what are the implications of claiming that Mandeville sees no difference between virtue and vice? With only slight simplification, we might say that this can be taken to mean two distinct things: that virtue is vice, and that vice is virtue.

Virtue is vice: this is the project that Mandeville inherited from the seventeenth-century French moralists.¹⁴ Both explicitly Augustinian Jansenists like Pascal and Nicole and their comparatively secular counterparts like La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyere were preoccupied with the notion that egoism or self-love (*amour-propre*) can lie at the root of every human

¹² *Theory* VII.ii.4.6, 308. For varying accounts of Smith's relationship to Mandeville, see Hundert, *Enlightenment's Fable*, 219-36; Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 57-89; Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*. See also below, chapter VII, section 4.

¹³ Mandeville would insist that he clearly distinguishes virtue (based on rational self-denial) from vice (based on indulgence of the passions), and that he similarly differentiates conduct with a virtuous motive from conduct that is vicious but beneficial (e.g. *Fable*, I, 48-49; I, 87). This, however, raises the further question of whether he actually believes that any conduct meets his criterion of virtue, since he suggests in places that all moral conduct is rooted in pride rather than rational self-denial (e.g. I, 51). After all, if all conduct is vicious by his definition, then there is little force in theoretically distinguishing between vice and a hypothetical virtue.

¹⁴ I have adopted the conventional label "moralist" to refer to a somewhat heterogeneous set of thinkers who would not, of course, always have seen themselves as part of a unified project. Space does not permit more than a cursory examination of them, and for the student of seventeenth-century French thought their differences will appear as important as their similarities, but for present purposes I believe that they can all be usefully contrasted with what I call the "materialist" strain in Mandeville. The best single-volume treatment of these thinkers in English remains Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*; Force's *Self-Interest before Adam Smith* and Moriarty's recent trilogy of books (*Early Modern French Thought*, *Fallen Nature*, *Fallen Selves*, and *Disguised Vices*) are also helpful for background on this tradition.

action, no matter how seemingly virtuous or self-sacrificing. “Self-interest speaks all manner of tongues and plays all manner of parts, even that of the disinterested,” wrote La Rochefoucauld, meaning that our “virtues are, most often, only vices disguised.”¹⁵ Society arises out of the varied manifestations of this fundamental egoism. “We have established and developed out of concupiscence admirable rules of polity, ethics, and justice,” Pascal wrote, “but at root, the evil root of man, this evil stuff of which we are made is only concealed; it is not pulled up.”¹⁶

What is the mechanism by which vice comes to imitate virtue? We might think of reasons that an egoist would be eager to convince others of her good intentions for purely instrumental reasons, in order to achieve other goals. Indeed, the moralists sometimes described *amour-propre* in this way, as in the following maxim of La Rochefoucauld:

It might seem that self-love is fooled by goodness, and that it forgets itself when we work for the advantage of others. But this is taking the safest road to achieve one’s ends; it is lending at interest under the pretext of giving; ultimately, it is winning others over by subtle and delicate means.¹⁷

¹⁵ La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, no. 39 (10), epigraph (3).

¹⁶ Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 211 (69). (I have followed Krailheimer’s edition in using the Lafuma numbering for the *Pensées*.)

¹⁷ *Maxims*, no. 236 (47), translation emended. It is not clear, however, that it even makes sense to differentiate “material” or “vulgar” forms of self-interest from the desire for esteem when discussing La Rochefoucauld, as we might for later figures. Force rightly points us to La Rochefoucauld’s roots in Versailles court society, in which “a person’s interest is this person’s position within a scale of hierarchy and prestige” (*Self-Interest before Adam Smith*, 176). In such a setting it becomes difficult to speak of some form of self-interest (such as wealth) independent of social standing. Indeed, La Rochefoucauld’s prefatory note to the fifth edition of the *Maxims* cautioned that “the word *Intérêt* does not always mean the interest concerned with material goods, but most often means the interest concerned with glory or honor” (2). On the expansive meaning given to “interest” by the French moralists more generally, see Moriarty, *Fallen Nature*, 191-96. On the other hand, Hirschman is no doubt right to suggest that the very fact that La Rochefoucauld felt compelled to issue this warning indicates that for the average reader “the term ‘interest’ had [already] started to take on the more restricted sense of economic advantage” (*The Passions and the Interests*, 39).

But crucially, the moralists did not generally view the goodwill of others as merely a means to some other end; rather, the desire for esteem itself was for them perhaps the strongest and most important of human drives.¹⁸ La Rochefoucauld himself made this point, suggesting that there are “more people without self-interest than without envy,” while Pascal insisted that “whatever possession [man] may own on earth, whatever health or essential amenity he may enjoy, he is dissatisfied unless he enjoys the good opinion of his fellows.”¹⁹ The desire for esteem provides the mechanism by which egoism can produce such apparently non-egoistic behaviors as religious asceticism, martial valor, and even suicide. Furthermore, the desire for esteem from others typically becomes internalized as a desire for self-esteem, with the result that we can never truly know whether our own actions are the product of charity or self-love.

More systematically, Pierre Nicole noted that *amour-propre* can imitate true charity out of fear or self-interest, but that the ability to explain human behavior from these obvious forms of egoism is quite limited. It is only the “desire to be loved” that allows *amour-propre* to produce the variegated social world that we see around us:

[T]here are many occasions in which neither fear nor self-interest is involved, and it is often quite easy to distinguish what is being done out of fear of other men or out of vulgar self-interest from what is done out of charitable impulse; but this is not the case when it comes to the pursuit of men’s love and esteem. This inclination is so cunning and so subtle, and at the same time so pervasive, that there is no action into which it cannot creep; and it knows so well how to assume the appearances of charity that it is almost impossible to know clearly what distinguishes the two...²⁰

¹⁸ The classic study of this frequent theme in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought is Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature*.

¹⁹ *Maxims*, no. 486 (87); *Pensées*, no. 470 (151).

²⁰ Nicole, “Of Charity and Self-Love,” 374. For more in-depth treatments of Nicole, see Van Kley, “Pierre Nicole, Jansenism, and the Morality of Enlightened Self-Interest”; Bouchilloux, “La Pensée Politique de Pierre Nicole”; Weber, “Le ‘commerce d’amour-propre’ selon Pierre Nicole.”

In certain ways, Nicole's discussion here is highly reminiscent of a passage from Augustine's *Confessions* that we have already seen, in which Augustine invoked the three temptations listed in the First Epistle of John — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — and suggested that it was the last which proved most resistant to self-examination. "In temptations of a different sort I have some capacity for self-exploration, but in this matter almost none....how can we live so as to be indifferent to praise, and to be sure of this in experience?"²¹

But however similar the general point may be, the three motives that Nicole invokes here are not Augustine's three biblical temptations. Fear, self-interest, and the desire to be loved: these are versions of the Thucydidean triad (fear, profit, honor) that Hobbes had adopted into his own triad (diffidence, competition, glory).²² We are at the meeting point of Augustinian Christianity and Hobbesian realism, and Nicole is well aware of the resemblance:

[I]f the person [i.e. Hobbes] who said that men are born in a state of war and that every man is by nature the enemy of all others had said this only to show the disposition of men's hearts toward one another, without claiming that this was legitimate and just, what he said would correspond to truth and experience as much as his actual contention is contrary to reason and justice.²³

Nicole distances himself from Hobbes through the questionable contention that Hobbes actively endorsed the war of all against all, but he recognizes that on a descriptive level their analyses share a deep kinship.²⁴

²¹ Augustine, *Confessions* X.xxxvii.60-62, 215-16. See above, chapter II, note 78.

²² Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* I.76, 44; Hobbes, *Leviathan* 13, 88. See above, chapter III, section 2.

²³ Nicole, "Of Charity and Self-Love," 371.

²⁴ Some scholars have differentiated Hobbes from various of the French moralists by suggesting that he takes self-preservation to be the fundamental human drive and views all other desires as derivative of it, whereas they view vanity or pride as equally (or still more) fundamental. (For such an argument regarding Pascal, see Lazzeri, *Force et justice dans la politique de Pascal*, 14-

Yet if the basic typology is the same, Nicole's "desire to be loved" (and likewise the *amour-propre* described by the French moralists more generally) has a rather different valence than Hobbes's depiction of glory, honor, and pride. For Hobbes, as we have seen, the passion for glory is a violent and destabilizing one upon which "no lasting society can be based."²⁵ Although he sometimes notes the possibility of a moralized form of pride that would seek recognition for virtuous conduct rather than brute superiority, he nonetheless tends to see pride in terms of a violent struggle for recognition, its archetypal manifestations being the duels waged by vainglorious young men.²⁶ Nicole and his contemporaries understood pride as a more subtle and variegated force, one underlying not merely the conduct of the obviously vainglorious, but also that of the supposedly virtuous — indeed, one that could potentially underly any kind of conduct whatsoever. In a moral-psychological sense this was perhaps a more pessimistic vision, as even Hobbes's "generous natures" were unmasked as mere egoists and sinners. But in a concrete political sense it was more optimistic, offering the prospect that pride itself, tamed and harnessed in myriad ways, could serve as the foundation of social order rather than as a perpetual threat to it.

Expanding the scope of *amour-propre* in this way also meant expanding the areas of the social world in which its operations could be investigated. If Hobbes was in some sense a strong gender egalitarian, denying any significant innate differences between men and women, he nonetheless tended to discuss women only insofar as they were socially indistinguishable from

22; for such an argument extended to Nicole, see Bouchilloux, "Pensée Politique de Nicole," 198-99.) But if the reading of Hobbes given in the preceding chapters is right, it would suggest that Hobbes is not so far from them in this respect after all.

²⁵ Hobbes, *De Cive* 1.2, 23.

²⁶ See above, chapter III, section 4.

men — as isolated individuals in the state of nature, as sovereign queens, as Amazon warrior bands, and so on. By treating pride above all as a desire for martial glory, he in practice tended to see it as an attribute of ambitious (typically aristocratic) young men. For the French moralists, by contrast, *amour-propre* in its various forms became a common attribute of all social strata; correspondingly women, as occupants of distinct social roles, became an object of fascination for someone like La Rochefoucauld in a way that they never were for Hobbes. (It is perhaps not coincidental that the Jansenist movement was noted for the unusual influence of women within it, or that the less explicitly religious strands of moralist thought tended to flourish in the libertine environments of the court and the salon.)

The conceptual transformations found in the writings of the moralists likely had something to do with their own intellectual formation, and something to do with the society in which they lived. The foremost thinkers in this tradition were either outright Augustinians or deeply marked by Augustinianism; they brought with them Augustine's deep concern with psychological interiority, and with the deceptive quality of apparently virtuous worldly action.²⁷ Religiously devout Augustinians had their own obvious reasons to care about the state of their souls — after all, it was only those who acted from true charity rather than dissembling *amour-propre* who were saved — but the circumstances of French political life may have reinforced this emphasis on interiority even for their comparatively irreligious counterparts. For while Hobbes

²⁷ For an argument against viewing Nicole as a secularizing figure, and emphasizing how many of his characteristic themes could already be found in Augustine himself, see Weber, "Le commerce d'amour-propre." The case of La Rochefoucauld is more complicated; from his earliest readers onward, there has been lively debate about the religious commitments (or lack thereof) of his work. But at the very least his thought was deeply shaped by Augustinian currents, whether or not he accepted all of their theological commitments. See Sellier, "La Rochefoucauld, Pascal, Saint Augustin"; Lafond, *La Rochefoucauld*; Moriarty, *Disguised Vices*, 253-75.

was writing against the backdrop of the turbulence of the English Civil War, his French successors were faced with the vigorous and ascendant monarchy of Louis XIV.²⁸ The task at hand was not so much to diagnose the sources of evident political collapse as to unmask what was hidden behind the glittering facade of a thriving court society.

Before turning to Mandeville, we should note (somewhat schematically) a few features of the moralists' project that will prove relevant for our discussion. First, it is most fundamentally concerned with human motives rather than human behavior. While the moralists were of course aware of all the mundane forms of self-love that were conventionally understood as vice, they were particularly interested in those forms that were conventionally understood as virtue — asceticism, courage, self-sacrifice, and so forth. Thus their critique had to be not of the behavior itself but of the motives underlying it, and it was precisely because such behavior received social approval that the desire for esteem or praise came to figure so centrally in their account.

Second, on the moralist account, Mandeville's maxim "private vices, public benefits" is true by definition. At least, this is the case if we abandon the idea of a true charity accessible through God's grace and view all human conduct as the product of a vicious self-love — a move already hinted at by La Rochefoucauld and subsequently followed by Mandeville.²⁹ The logic is

²⁸ The unrest of the Fronde, while contemporaneous with the English Civil War, was nowhere near it in scale or consequence (as La Rochefoucauld, who participated in the revolt, knew firsthand).

²⁹ Both writers included disclaimers that their analyses applied only to humans "in nature," not to those saved by divine grace. But it is fair to say that neither La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* nor Mandeville's *Fable* displayed much interest in the operations of the grace whose existence they professed to accept. (Indeed, Keohane notes that some of La Rochefoucauld's more theologically-minded contemporaries objected to his appropriation of Jansenist ideas for worldly purposes; see *Philosophy and the State*, 307.) As just mentioned in note 27, La Rochefoucauld's own theological commitments were ambiguous, but at the very least he could plausibly read as arguing for the essential viciousness of all human action.

simple: if self-love is a vice, and all actions originate in self-love, then *a fortiori* all beneficent actions originate in self-love, and are thus vicious. It was in this respect that Smith argued that Mandeville aimed to destroy the distinction between vice and virtue.

But this points to a third feature of the moralist account: on its own it can only be a moral-philosophical doctrine without immediate relevance to concrete social analysis. The very fact that Mandeville's paradox becomes true by definition deprives it of any real empirical bite: it may be true that all public benefits originate in some form or other of private vice, but the more important practical question is which specific private vices we might expect, and which specific public benefits. More generally, the claim that all human action is egoistic does not lead in itself to any particular view of how humans will tend to behave; it is rather a philosophical stance on how we should view any such behavior.

In particular, the desire for esteem that was so central to the moralists does not in itself entail any behaviors of its own. Simpler passions such as hunger or lust have specific physical objects that allow us to predict the ways that they will manifest themselves, at least to a certain extent. But the desire for esteem, as Arthur Lovejoy notes, is "wholly indeterminate with respect to the modes of behavior that may result from it," since the specific content of the actions it inspires will depend on precisely which things happen to be esteemed by its intended audience.³⁰ These social norms governing esteem, in turn, may vary widely according to time, place, and culture; even within the social world familiar to the moralists, the qualities admired in the court at Versailles was far different from those admired in the Jansenist abbey of Port-Royal.³¹ Thus

³⁰ Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature*, 93.

³¹ Pascal was perhaps most forceful of the French writers in stressing the mutability of human nature and the variety of human goals; see, e.g., *Pensées*, no. 630 (209): "There is nothing that

the moralist account of human nature can only be turned into a genuine social theory if supplemented by a sociohistorical account of the values governing self-love.

3.

Vice is virtue: this was the strand that pointed forward to economics and its characteristic mode of social analysis. The main thrust of this strand was to show that various forms of apparently-vicious behavior had beneficial unintended consequences for society at large. It may be slightly misleading to identify this project (which I will call “materialist” for reasons that I hope will become clear) with the claim that vice is virtue, at least on the terms that Mandeville sets for himself: he is keen to insist that virtue is a matter of intention, and that the fact that conduct is unintentionally beneficial does not make it virtuous.³² But this line of thought presents a clear contrast to the moralist project of unmasking vice behind virtue, and the differences between the two are worth spelling out in more depth.

First, it is essentially concerned with behavior rather than motives. Whereas the moralists were particularly interested in the *origins* of behaviors conventionally understood as *virtuous*, the materialist project is instead interested in the *effects* of behaviors conventionally understood as *vicious*. The result is to diminish much of the impetus for examining the motives underlying such

cannot be made natural. There is nothing natural that cannot be lost.” Cf. Moriarty, *Early Modern French Thought*, 126-36.

³² See especially *Fable*, I, 87: “Men are not to be judg’d by the Consequences that may succeed their Actions, but the Facts themselves, and the Motives which it shall appear they acted from.” The sincerity of this doctrine has been doubted — most notably by Kaye, who claimed that Mandeville’s moral “rigorism” was essentially extraneous to his thought, the fundamental tone of which was empirical and utilitarian (“Introduction,” lii-lvi). If Mandeville’s real doctrine is utilitarian rather than rigorist, as Kaye suggests, it would in fact be fair to gloss it as suggesting that “vice is virtue.”

conduct. For the moralists, what was interesting was precisely the gap between motives and behavior: how, for instance, apparently altruistic conduct could spring from egoistic motives. For obvious reasons, this sort of investigation ceases to be of much interest when examining transparently selfish actions, and the intuitive move is simply to read off the motive from the behavior.

Second, whereas on the moralist account the claim that private vices create public benefits is true by definition, on the materialist account it becomes a matter of empirical inquiry. Of course, one might posit an outright theodicy in which *every* misdeed and misfortune ultimately contributes to the greater good, and in his more provocative moments Mandeville sometimes comes close to this sort of theodicy. But the more plausible claim is that some specific forms of private vices lead to some specific kinds of public benefits, and the task becomes to determine when and how this occurs. Greed, of course, has from Mandeville's time onward been taken as the classic example of such a beneficial vice.

Third, the desire for esteem — which played such a central role in the moralist account — largely drops out of the materialist one. If pride was for the moralist the most important of the seven deadly sins, the materialist tends to focus instead on the others — chiefly greed, but also gluttony, sloth, lust. Whatever psychological oversimplification results from this move may be offset by the fact that it provides a way of getting around the indeterminacy of the moralist view of human nature. Whereas pride may, as already mentioned, lead to virtually any behavior that happens to be esteemed, these other motives have more definite and material objects, leading to a vision of human nature that is more tractable for the purposes of practical analysis. The materialist's imagined agent has a determinate set of wants ("preferences"), typically for some concrete object or sensation rather than for a nebulous good such as esteem; these preferences

prescribe specific and intuitive behaviors that are balanced through some calculus of want-satisfaction. From an aggregate of these individual calculuses we can arrive at a vision of the society as a whole and the unintended benefits or harms (generally understood in similarly material terms) that arise out of individual actions.

We might usefully understand the difference between these two projects in terms of a distinction that was to become prominent in twentieth-century social theory. This is the contrast between what Talcott Parsons called “normative order” and “factual order,” or what Jürgen Habermas called “social integration” and “system integration.”³³ In either case the distinction turns on whether social order is achieved by harmonizing actors’ intentions through social or communicative processes — most obviously, through reaching some kind of shared understanding about what to do — or whether it is achieved through the unintended consequences of actions that occur behind the backs of the actors involved. (Smith’s “invisible hand” has been taken as the classic example of the latter.) Mandeville has traditionally been taken exclusively as a theorist of the second kind of order — indeed as its prototypical theorist, the man who suggests that sociability is altogether unnecessary, since all public benefits will come about through unintended consequences. But we will see that Mandeville is equally concerned with the first kind of order; he never suggests that a society can survive without a sociability that goes beyond the mere pursuit of brute interests, and in fact sociability itself is chief among the “public benefits” whose origins he wishes to unearth.

More broadly, we might say that the *Fable* is centered on two main problems. The first is the problem of unintended consequences, exemplified by the relationship between personal

³³ Parsons, *Structure of Social Action*, I, 91-92; Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, II, 117.

luxury and communal prosperity. Passing from Mandeville through Smith's *Wealth of Nations* to later inheritors like Hayek, it became a central problematic of economics as a social-scientific discipline.³⁴ The second, however, is the problem of social norms. Here the line of descent goes through Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and Durkheim to Parsons, in whose hands it would become a central problematic of postwar sociology. What would come to appear as mutually exclusive ways of analyzing the social world remain united in Mandeville, coexisting uneasily under the overarching rubric of "private vices, public benefits." As already suggested, it may be revealing — of the era more than the man — that he rarely distinguished between these two strands, or viewed them as opposed in the way that his various successors would come to do. In fact, it will be my contention that both strands are deeply embedded enough that it would be a mistake to claim that one or the other represents the "true" Mandeville.

On the other hand, Mandeville's own descriptions of his project do implicitly suggest that he was aware of its dual nature. In his preface to the *Fable*, he states the goals of the work as follows:

That in the first Place the People, who continually find fault with others, by reading [the work], would be taught to look at home, and examining their own Consciences, be made ashamed of always railing at what they are more or less guilty of themselves; and that in the next, those who are so fond of the Ease and Comforts, and reap all the Benefits that are the Consequence of a great and flourishing Nation, would learn more patiently to submit to those Inconveniences, which no Government upon Earth can remedy, when they should see the Impossibility of enjoying any great share of the first, without partaking likewise of the latter.³⁵

Here Mandeville distinguishes between two distinct goals: first, to reveal (by "examining their consciences") the hidden vice behind the sanctimony of the ostensibly virtuous, and second, to

³⁴ This is the lineage that Hayek himself wished to draw; see *New Studies*, 249-66.

³⁵ *Fable*, I, 8.

demonstrate the necessity of certain obvious vices (“inconveniences”) to produce “a great and flourishing nation.” We can see that one of these is essentially a moral-philosophical claim about human psychology, while the second is essentially an empirical claim about the unintended consequences of human behavior. He echoes this dual account of his project elsewhere.³⁶ Nor did this basic split go unnoticed by his critics. “Is it not very inconsistent,” David Hume asked, “for an author to assert in one page, that moral distinctions are inventions of politicians for public interest; and in the next page maintain, that vice is advantageous to the public?”³⁷

There is, of course, no inherent contradiction in pursuing both such projects simultaneously. For all of his philosophical importance, Mandeville remained in many ways a polemicist who defined himself first and foremost against the views of his opponents. Both of these strands buttressed his larger point that vice was inevitable and necessary to human society, by casting doubt either on the very possibility of true virtue or on its ability to provide the benefits to which inhabitants of modern commercial societies were accustomed. Yet we will see that the two strands ultimately imply two very different visions of human nature and human society, and that the tensions between them are visible throughout the *Fable*.

³⁶ Most notably in the vindication of the *Fable* towards the end of Part I (I, 229-30). It is true, however, that in Part II of the *Fable*, Mandeville’s self-assessments became more “moralist” in our terms — that is, more focused on the moral-psychological as opposed to the empirical aspects of his project (see especially II, 102; II, 356). The likely reason for this shift, in my view, is that in the course of defending himself against critics Mandeville quietly dropped many of his more provocative empirical claims about the benefits of specific forms of brute vice, and retreated to the relatively safer ground of portraying himself as purely an ascetic Christian moralist. On this shift see also Hundert, *Enlightenment’s Fable*, 175-76. For the view that the differences between the two parts of the *Fable* are stark enough to make them two philosophically distinct works, see Tolonen, *Mandeville and Hume*, 41-102.

³⁷ “Of Refinement in the Arts,” in *Essays*, 280. The charge of inconsistency was at least as old as Hutcheson’s *Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees* in 1725.

4.

Mandeville begins the *Fable* proper with “An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue,” one of the work’s most notorious sections and one which betrays a clear debt to his French predecessors. The most important point of influence is the central role that Mandeville attaches to the desire for esteem, or pride, in the operation of morality. But whereas the moralists had predominantly focused on the ways that pride causes esteem-seekers to obey existing moral norms, in the “Enquiry” Mandeville goes farther to suggest that it is only due to the desire for praise that such norms exist at all. Morality began at a determinate moment, which he describes as follows:

Lawgivers and other wise men...observing that none were either so savage as not to be charm’d with Praise, or so despicable as patiently to bear Contempt, justly concluded, that Flattery must be the most powerful Argument that could be used to Human Creatures....Having by this artful way of Flattery insinuated themselves into the Hearts of Men, they began to instruct them in the Notions of Honour and Shame...³⁸

More simply, “the moral Virtues are the Political Offspring which Flattery begot upon Pride.”³⁹

Morality owes to pride not merely its origin but also its continued existence, since only through pride can anyone ever act in accordance with moral norms. Even the person who has internalized these norms to such an extent that he no longer seeks (and may even avoid) actual praise from others, “must confess, that the Reward of a Virtuous Action, which is the Satisfaction that ensues upon it, consists in a certain Pleasure he procures to himself by Contemplating on his own Worth” — and thus is a form of pride and self-flattery.⁴⁰ These

³⁸ *Fable*, I, 42-43.

³⁹ *Fable*, I, 51.

⁴⁰ *Fable*, I, 57.

conclusions largely restate (albeit in a more polemical form) the account of human psychology developed by the moralists.

But Mandeville develops this discourse in notable ways. For one thing, as Dickey notes, he historicizes it, turning an account of the operation of *amour-propre* in seventeenth-century France into an account of the development of pride across time and space.⁴¹ But equally important, as Hundert suggests, is Mandeville's attempt to make the moralist account of human nature scientific by grounding it on a "thorough-going naturalistic anthropology."⁴² Whereas the moralist discussion of *amour-propre* and the passions tended to be impressionistic and aphoristic, with few pretensions to scientific rigor, Mandeville discusses humans in essentially mechanistic and naturalistic terms influenced by the materialist philosophies of Hobbes and Gassendi. This means that every passion must for him be grounded in some aspect of humans' corporeal nature.

It is because of this naturalism that Mandeville develops his theory in ways that will prove crucial for our purposes. For the moralists, there was no clear distinction in kind between pride and the more sensuous passions. Yet on the terms of a materialistic anthropology, the notion that humans can act not merely in pursuit of sensuous goods but also immaterial goods like esteem becomes more complicated and perplexing. Thus Mandeville's account of the "Origin of Moral Virtue" focuses heavily on the moment when humans are tricked into substituting "imaginary" pleasures for "real" ones:

[I]t is not likely that any Body could have persuaded them to disapprove of their natural Inclinations, or prefer the good of others to their own, if at the same time he had not shew'd them an Equivalent to be enjoy'd as a Reward for the Violence, which by so doing they of necessity must commit upon themselves. Those that have undertaken to civilize

⁴¹ Dickey, "Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility," esp. 387-88.

⁴² Hundert, *Enlightenment's Fable*, 37.

mankind, were not ignorant of this; but *being unable to give so many real Rewards as would satisfy all Persons for every individual Action, they were forc'd to contrive an imaginary one*, that as a general Equivalent for the trouble of Self-denial should serve on all Occasions, and without costing any thing either to themselves or others, be yet a most acceptable Recompenſe to the Receivers.⁴³

This “imaginary reward” is, of course, praise. The critical episode in the story of how “Savage Man was broke,”⁴⁴ and humans became moral and social beings, is the moment that they were convinced to seek the purely ideal pleasure of esteem rather than natural sensuous pleasures. Mandeville is frequently caustic in his mockery of human folly in sacrificing the real to the imaginary: “the great Recompenſe for which the most exalted Minds have with so much Alacrity sacrificed their Quiet, Health, sensual Pleasures, and every Inch of themselves, has never been any thing else but the Breath of Man, the Aerial Coin of Praise.”⁴⁵ Pride is “the Sorcerer, that is able to divert all other Passions from their natural Objects.”⁴⁶

We must clarify the sense in which pride is “imaginary” for Mandeville. He does not mean by this that the passion itself is weaker than the sensuous passions, or even that it is artificial in the sense of being created by life in society. Pride and shame, “in which the Seeds of most Virtues are contained, are Realities in our Frame, and not imaginary Qualities.”⁴⁷ They have attendant physical symptoms, like other passions, and the pleasures and pains associated with them are in that sense “real.” In Part II of the *Fable*, Mandeville develops this point further by claiming that both pride and shame are simply manifestations of “self-liking,” an over-

⁴³ *Fable*, I, 42, emphasis added.

⁴⁴ *Fable*, I, 46.

⁴⁵ *Fable*, I, 54-55.

⁴⁶ *Fable*, II, 96.

⁴⁷ *Fable*, I, 67.

valuation of one's own worth that is implanted in human nature alongside "self-love," the desire for self-preservation.⁴⁸ (Rousseau, himself a keen reader of Mandeville, would draw a similar distinction between *amour-propre* and *amour de soi-même* in the *Discourse on Inequality*.) Mandeville introduces self-liking both to develop a naturalistic, ethically neutral way of discussing the theologically-laden concept of pride, and also to stress that the desire for esteem is a fundamental rather than adventitious part of human nature.⁴⁹

Thus pride and shame are themselves "real" and natural; they are "imaginary" only in the sense that their object is an incorporeal one. Although "Shame is a real Passion, the Evil to be fear'd from it is altogether imaginary, and has no Existence but in our own Reflection on the Opinion of others."⁵⁰ As noted, Mandeville generally refers in contemptuous language to this tendency to dwell in the ideal world of others' opinions, and there are specific evils (like Hobbes, he thinks particularly of dueling) that in his view would be alleviated if humans would reflect on the unreality of pride and focus instead on their real interests. Yet for all this, we must remember that in the broader framework of his theory the move from real to imaginary is a crucial and necessary one, for it is only through the imaginary pleasures of flattery and esteem that humans are able to obey moral norms and live together socially.

⁴⁸ *Fable*, II, 130.

⁴⁹ The distinction between self-love and self-liking in Part II, however, seems not so much a fundamentally new vision of human nature as a refinement of concepts that are both inchoately present even in Part I. For that reason I am not fully persuaded by Tolonen's view that Part II marks a "decisive turn" away from the materialist "Hobbism" of Part I, and a "whole-hearted shift in emphasis from self-love to self-liking" (*Mandeville and Hume*, 84-85). The power of pride to subdue bodily desires, as we have seen, plays a central role in Mandeville's argument from the beginning, and the associated tension between moralism and materialism is visible throughout his work rather than being resolved definitively one way or the other.

⁵⁰ *Fable*, II, 95.

But regardless of whether the realm of the imaginary is judged positively or negatively, introducing the distinction between real and imaginary proves to be a critically important move for Mandeville's broader theory. By doing so he separates out pride, and with it the entire world of reflection, esteem-seeking, and norm-following, and sets it against the "real" drives — those that are sensuous, unreflective, and relatively independent of norms. This, in turn, raises the further question of the relative power of these two sets of drives.⁵¹ Are we to take humans as being primarily motivated by the imaginary or the real, as primarily esteem-seekers or sensuous utility-maximizers?

Mandeville generally follows his French predecessors in stressing the overwhelming power of pride and its ability to subdue all the sensuous and natural passions: "The Greediness we have after the Esteem of others, and the Raptures we enjoy in the Thoughts of being liked, and perhaps admired, are Equivalents that overpay the Conquest of the strongest Passions."⁵² Those under the spell of self-liking "are deaf to the loudest Calls of Nature, and will rebuke the strongest Appetites that should pretend to be gratify'd at the Expence of that Passion."⁵³ As a result "there is no Danger so great...nor any manner of Death so terrible" that it cannot be faced

⁵¹ Framing the issue in this way allows us to sidestep certain issues that have been prominent in the scholarly debates about Mandeville. For instance, commentators since Kaye have dwelt on the issue of whether Mandeville's rigorism was genuine — that is, did he actually believe that any gratification of a passion is vicious and that true virtue consists only in self-denial? But our discussion need not take a position on this question — the issue is simply the relative power of the passion of pride as against the sensuous passions, regardless of whether the indulgence of these passions is judged by rigorist or non-rigorist standards. Humans will be judged as equally vicious (or not) whether we take them to be esteem-seekers or sensuous maximizers, since both visions involve the indulgence of one or the other set of passions.

⁵² *Fable*, I, 68.

⁵³ *Fable*, II, 136.

with the aid of pride; “no good Offices or Duties...nor any Instances of Benevolence, Humanity, or other Social Virtue” that cannot be produced from it.⁵⁴ In such passages the material and sensuous aspects of human existence seem to fade into the background, and humans are presented as creatures who are shaped primarily by the imaginary world of norms and opinions in which they come to dwell.

Yet elsewhere, Mandeville seems to give precedence to the sensuous pleasures. Indeed, the very rhetoric of “real” and “imaginary” might be taken to tilt the balance in advance in favor of the sensuous, by presenting it as a somehow more fundamental and non-negotiable part of human life. While the prominence of the sensuous drives may diminish during Mandeville’s discussions of pride and honor, elsewhere they are very much in the foreground, as he devotes much of the *Fable* to the ways that humans gratify the more mundane vices of greed, lust, gluttony, and so forth. He gives this focus its most explicit expression in the crucial “Remark O,” which deals with “real pleasures.” Here “real” comes to mean not merely “material” but also “actual” — that is, real (material) pleasures are the ones that people actually pursue. And in this discussion Mandeville abandons any exploration of the ways in which vice can imitate virtue, instead dwelling upon the brute hypocrisy of the seemingly virtuous and the universality of sensuous pleasure-seeking. While elsewhere Mandeville is content to show that the adherence to ascetic or self-denying moral norms is motivated by pride rather than disinterested virtue, here he dismisses the notion that these norms are actually adhered to at all:

I expect to be ask’d why in the Fable I have call’d those Pleasures real that are directly opposite to those which I own the wise Men of all Ages have extoll’d as the most valuable. My Answer is, because I don’t call things Pleasures which Men say are best, but such as they seem to be most pleased with; how can I believe that a Man’s chief Delight is in the

⁵⁴ *Fable*, II, 64-65. For more examples of this general theme, cf. I, 213-14; II, 74-75.

Embellishments of the Mind, when I see him ever employ'd about and daily pursue the Pleasures that are contrary to them?⁵⁵

After describing at great length the hedonism and pleasure-seeking to be found even among the supposedly virtuous, he concludes: “the real Pleasures of all Men in Nature are worldly and sensual, if we judge from their Practice.”⁵⁶ Here and elsewhere, Mandeville presents a far more skeptical view about the power of pride to restrain the sensuous passions, of the imaginary to control the real.

“I don’t call things Pleasures which Men say are best, but such as they seem to be most pleased with”: it was to be an influential move in the history of the social sciences. Indeed, the great Chicago School economist George Stigler, one of Mandeville’s foremost latter-day admirers, cited this passage as an early example of the “revealed preference” approach — the notion that the social scientist need not be concerned with motives, since these can simply be inferred unproblematically from behavior.⁵⁷ Nothing could be further from Mandeville’s position in his moralist moments: he exhaustively details how pride creates a gap between inner motive and outward conduct, transmuting selfishness into apparent self-renunciation, and he stresses that it is only by noticing this gap that we can understand the conduct itself. But the brute

⁵⁵ *Fable*, I, 151.

⁵⁶ *Fable*, I, 166. The phrase “in nature” is liable to mislead us here: we might take it to mean that Mandeville is saying only that the pleasures of humans in the state of nature are sensual, whereas the pleasures of humans in society might not be. But he immediately clarifies that “nature” here stands in contrast not to “society” but to “grace”: “I say all Men *in Nature*, because Devout Christians, who alone are to be excepted here, being regenerated, and preternaturally assisted by Divine Grace, cannot be said to be in Nature” (*ibid.*, emphasis in original). This, as noted above, was a disclaimer also to be found in La Rochefoucauld. Thus Mandeville’s claim that all men “in nature” prefer sensual pleasures applies to everyone outside of the (perhaps nonexistent) ranks of the saved.

⁵⁷ Stigler, *The Theory of Price*, 68.

behaviorism on display in his discussion of “real pleasures” is not a momentary slip; it reflects a deep-seated (if only sporadically evident) strain in Mandeville’s thought.

5.

One revealing discussion of these issues comes in Part II of the *Fable*. Cleomenes, Mandeville’s spokesman in the dialogue, has just finished drawing up a “Portrait of a complete Gentleman,” apparently well-mannered and virtuous in every respect, before demonstrating the prideful roots of every aspect of his conduct. The message, as before, is that all moral and social virtues are (or at least can be) the result of the desire for esteem. But Horatio, the foil to Cleomenes, is unsatisfied with this explanation. If all humans are naturally prideful, and pride by itself can produce this sort of virtuous character, he asks, then why does it not do so more often? Why are there so few virtuous people to be found in the world?

If Pride could be the Cause of all this, the Effect of it would sometimes appear in others...why is it so very seldom, that many Virtues and good Qualities are seen to meet in one Individual?⁵⁸

Horatio’s question touches on a difficulty in the moralist discourse on pride. Essentially the problem is this: if we take the desire for esteem to be the strongest of all human drives, able to reshape and overrule all other natural passions, and if it is virtuous conduct in accordance with social norms that receives esteem, then we would expect that prideful human beings would nearly always act in accordance with such norms. In fact, it becomes difficult to understand why human behavior frequently diverges so widely from these norms — in Horatio’s terms, why virtuous conduct (whether genuine or feigned) is so rare. To return once more to terms that were to become prominent in twentieth-century social theory, prideful actors run the risk of seeming

⁵⁸ *Fable*, II, 75.

“oversocialized” — mindless norm-followers whose behavior embodies the dominant values of their society to a degree that real human behavior rarely if ever does.⁵⁹

There are at least two possible ways of resolving this difficulty. One is to suggest that the economy of esteem is more complicated than the simple account above would suggest: that it is not virtuous conduct alone that receives esteem, or that the norms governing human behavior are multiple rather than unitary. This solution preserves the premise that humans are fundamentally social creatures whose action is governed above all by pride and the desire for esteem. The other solution is to drop the notion that pride is the overriding determinant of human behavior, and to suggest that humans typically fail to live up to the dictates of moral norms because their desire for esteem is overruled by more immediate and pressing desires. Whereas the first line of argument remains within the “moralist” horizon by maintaining the centrality of pride, this second line of argument corresponds to the “materialist” outlook by stressing the dominance of the real over the imaginary.

Cleomenes’s reply to Horatio pursues both of these solutions. He lists “several Reasons” why “so few Persons...ever arrive at any thing like this high pitch of Accomplishments.” In the first place there is the fact that “Men differ in Temperament,” in the second that these natural temperaments are varyingly “check’d or encourag’d by Education.” A third factor is “the different Perception Men have of Happiness, according to which the Love of Glory determines them different ways...So that, tho’ they all love Glory, they set out differently to acquire it.”⁶⁰ In other words, Cleomenes explains the prevalence of vice through a mixture of both material factors (such as temperament, which for him is purely a matter of physiology) and social ones

⁵⁹ Cf. Wrong, “The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology.”

⁶⁰ *Fable*, II, 75-76.

(such as education and differing conceptions of the good). Horatio, unsatisfied, continues to press the point, and Cleomenes lists more reasons why virtuous behavior is so rarely found:

[I]n some perhaps the predominant Passion [pride] is not strong enough entirely to subdue the rest: Love or Covetousness may divert others: Drinking, Gaming may draw away many, and break in upon their Resolution; they may not have strength to persevere in a Design, and steadily to pursue the same Ends; or they may want a true Taste and Knowledge of what is esteem'd by Men of Judgment; or lastly they may not be so thoroughly well-bred as is required to conceal themselves on all Emergencies...⁶¹

In this response Cleomenes seems to give greater precedence to the sensuous, by emphasizing the ways in which baser desires thwart the pursuit of esteem; he also attributes vice to a deficiency in the passion of pride in relation to the sensuous passions. But later in the same dialogue, Cleomenes elaborates still further on these themes:

[T]hose we call Shameless, are not more destitute of Pride than their Betters. Remember what I have said of Education, and the Power of it; you may add Inclinations, Knowledge, and Circumstances; for as Men differ in all these, so they are differently influenced and wrought upon by all the Passions. There is nothing that some Men may not be taught to be ashamed of. The same Passion, that makes the well-bred Man and prudent Officer value and secretly admire themselves for the Honour and Fidelity they display, may make the Rake and Scoundrel brag of their Vices and boast of their Impudence.⁶²

Here, he seems to reverse what was said in the previous response: the vicious are “not more destitute of pride” than the virtuous; rather, they are simply governed by different norms of pride and shame.⁶³

What is notable about this discussion is how much Cleomenes (and thus Mandeville) vacillates between the two lines of argument discussed above. At times he is inclined to view

⁶¹ *Fable*, II, 77.

⁶² *Fable*, II, 90.

⁶³ Later, Cleomenes suggests that humans are differently endowed in terms of pride, but that this is a social rather than natural fact: “I am convinced that the difference there is in Men, as to the Degrees of their Pride, is more owing to Circumstances and Education, than any thing in their Formation” (*Fable*, II, 122).

human behavior primarily as a set of varied manifestations of pride and esteem-seeking; at other times he suggests a view in which pride is relatively ineffectual in most people and easily overturned by the more immediate and sensual drives. The reader is left uncertain about the relationship and relative strength of the real and the imaginary, and the ambivalence of this whole discussion suggests that perhaps Mandeville was uncertain about it himself.

6.

This is not to say that such ambivalence is fatal to Mandeville's theory. In itself, there is no contradiction in suggesting that both material and social drives play some role in constituting human behavior in society, and it may even be a virtue to avoid a one-sided explanation that places all weight on one or the other side of the scales. Nonetheless, Mandeville's ambiguity on this point is important, for we arrive at very different visions of the social world depending on how much weight we attribute to each set of drives.

A social world made up of fundamentally prideful actors is characterized, above all, by multiplicity and contingency. This, as already noted, is due to the indeterminate nature of pride; it can take on virtually any form depending on the norms by which it is governed. "It is incredible, what strange, various, unaccountable and contradictory Forms we may be shaped into" by pride, Mandeville tells us, and thus there is "no Atchievment good or bad, that the human Body or Mind are capable of, which it may not seem to perform."⁶⁴ Prideful actors may be warlike or peaceable, lavish or ascetic, pious or libertine. Although they are egoists on Mandeville's terms, in many cases their behavior may not appear self-interested in any intuitive sense.

⁶⁴ *Fable*, II, 90.

One important implication of this view is that human behavior is in a deep sense historically and culturally constituted. The norms directing the operations of pride, and with them the agent's conduct, vary widely across time and space: "the fear of Shame in general is a matter of Caprice, that varies with Modes and Customs, and may be fix'd on different Objects, according to the different Lessons we have receiv'd, and the Precepts we are imbued with."⁶⁵ Thus, any social theory that aims to understand or predict the behavior of prideful actors must have an eye to culture and history.

A social world made up of fundamentally sensuous-minded actors, on the other hand, is far less varied and contingent. Such agents have a set of fairly determinate wants, which they can satisfy in ways that are somewhat variable but nonetheless limited. (Hunger can be slaked by bread as well as by brisket — but it cannot be slaked by art or love or prayer.) The actor's behavior will be determined by the attempt to satisfy these wants according to the external constraints facing her. Such behavior will be "self-interested" in an intuitive sense, and thus fairly predictable given knowledge of the external constraints.⁶⁶ History and culture become

⁶⁵ *Fable*, II, 95.

⁶⁶ Of course, we must be careful not to underestimate how varied the modes of satisfying even unreflective desires like hunger can be. Nor should we deny that there are in fact interesting histories to be written centered on the development of such modes of satisfying basic needs — "materialist" history in whatever form remains a fertile analytical tool. But however varied the historically-constituted ways of satisfying hunger (for instance) may be, nonetheless they are fundamentally more constrained and limited than the modes of satisfying pride. Any such mode of food consumption, for example, will be constrained above all by the imperative to provide individuals with enough calories to sustain them physically from day to day; analogous constraints could likely be provided for other physical needs. Yet it is difficult to think of any such constraint upon the operations of the desire for esteem; its protean nature means that it can encourage many kinds of behavior that bear no obvious relation to the imperatives of social reproduction. Thus it is fair to say that the behavior of prideful actors remains far less predictable, given a knowledge of the material constraints facing them, than the behavior of sensuous-minded actors.

relatively unimportant on this view; at most they are worth examining to gain knowledge of the constraints on individual action, but they are essentially exogenous to the actor and exert little influence on her desires themselves. Preferences, in the language of two of Mandeville's leading twentieth-century heirs, are "stable."⁶⁷

Characteristically, we can detect elements of both these visions in Mandeville. On the one hand, he argues against the existence of a single rational *summum bonum* by proclaiming a strong form of cultural relativism:

[O]ur Liking or Disliking of things chiefly depends on Mode and Custom...In Morals there is no greater Certainty [than in aesthetics]...What Men have learned from their Infancy enslaves them, and the Force of Custom warps Nature, and at the same time imitates her in such a manner, that it is often difficult to know which of the two we are influenced by.⁶⁸

If the general sentiment was already a familiar one from the skeptical tradition, in Part II of the *Fable* Mandeville goes further than his predecessors by offering a conjectural history of the development of human society from its earliest beginnings. By highlighting the enormous difference between "Man in his Savage State" and man "as a Member of a Society and a taught animal,"⁶⁹ and by outlining the gradual and spontaneous development not merely of social institutions but of the human personality itself, he buttresses the vision of humans as historically

⁶⁷ See Stigler and Becker, "De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum." While Stigler and Becker are not pure "materialists" in that they allow for desires for social distinction, fashion, and so on, they are adamant that human behavior should always be viewed as the product of "utility maximizing with stable tastes," in contrast to "approaches based on custom and tradition" (82). It can readily be seen that the stable preferences approach is the heir to the "real pleasures" strain in Mandeville's thought.

⁶⁸ *Fable*, I, 330.

⁶⁹ *Fable*, I, 205.

and culturally constituted on a deep level, with aims and desires that are far more the product of custom than of nature.

But although Mandeville never explicitly repudiates this relativism, he frequently undercuts it elsewhere in the *Fable*. One such passage is the previously-discussed chapter on “real pleasures,” with its sweeping conclusion that all people are first and foremost concerned with “worldly and sensual” pleasures. Another revealing example comes in his discussion of luxury and frugality in “Remark Q.” Here as elsewhere, Mandeville seems to arrive at his argument negatively, according to the doctrine that he wants to refute. Whereas he formulates his most full-blown defense of cultural relativism in order to refute Shaftesbury and other proponents of a *summum bonum*, here he is concerned to refute those admirers of the Dutch Republic who argued that England should emulate its austerity and frugality. In order to do so, Mandeville (himself, of course, a native of Holland) argues that the Dutch were forced into frugality rather than adopting it by choice. It was only because of external constraints — the expense of war with Spain, overpopulation of the land, heavy taxes — that the Dutch arrived at their famous frugality, he suggests. Therefore the English, not subject to such constraints, should feel no need to emulate them.⁷⁰

Thus in his attempt to vindicate luxury and refute frugality, Mandeville slips into a sort of structural determinism in which desires are fixed and only constraints are mutable:

Men are never, or at least very seldom, reclaimed from their darling Passions, either by Reason or Precept, and...if any thing ever draws ‘em from what they are naturally propense to, it must be a Change in their Circumstances or their Fortunes.⁷¹

⁷⁰ *Fable*, I, 187.

⁷¹ *Fable*, I, 182. To be sure, it is not inconsistent for Mandeville to say that the passions are unaffected by reason; he always argues that action must spring from one or another passion. But in this discussion the passion of pride seems to drop out of the picture, and with it the regulation of action by norms (“precept”).

He has previously stressed the power of pride to suppress all the sensuous passions and to overcome virtually any obstacle. If pride is able to make people courageous or pious or even suicidal, one might reasonably ask Mandeville, why is it not sufficient to make them frugal? But he does not want to concede the point, for his goal is to show that frugality is not merely unwise but impossible. Therefore he rejects the notion that mere norms are sufficient to inculcate austerity: “to make a Nation generally frugal, the Necessaries of Life must be scarce, and consequently dear...let the best Politician do what he can, the Profuseness or Frugality of a People in general, must always depend” on structural and material factors.⁷² Here and elsewhere, his argument implicitly undercuts his claims about the cultural specificity of norms and goals.

In his discussions of nature and custom, Mandeville betrays some of the same tensions that were found in his discussion of the real and imaginary. The tensions are related, for the relevance or irrelevance of history and culture to human behavior is a direct function of the relevance or irrelevance of pride: only insofar as conduct takes place in the ideal world of norms and customs do history and culture become crucial for comprehending it. As before, we can see that these divides correspond broadly to the moralist and materialist sides of Mandeville’s thought.

7.

As a social critic, Mandeville’s fundamental theme was hypocrisy. Indeed, it is difficult to come up with a thinker who was more exhaustive in investigating and exposing hypocrisy.⁷³

⁷² *Fable*, I, 183.

⁷³ On the theme of hypocrisy in Mandeville see Runciman, *Political Hypocrisy*, 45-73.

Taken as polemic, Mandeville's basic point regarding hypocrisy is intuitive and needs little further elaboration: despite all their pretenses to the contrary, the ostensibly virtuous and the ostentatiously moralistic are just as selfish as everyone else. Their morality and piety are a sham; "of Virtue or Religion there is not an hundredth Part in Reality of what there is in Appearance."⁷⁴ But what is the appearance in this scheme, and what is the reality? On closer inspection, it becomes evident that there are two somewhat distinct kinds of hypocrisy that figure prominently in the *Fable*.⁷⁵

The first is what we might label "refined" hypocrisy. It is found among those who are by all appearances virtuous — that is, whose behavior conforms to moral norms — and it resides in the gap between the agent's professed and actual motives for such behavior. The basic drive underlying refined hypocrisy is pride: because virtuous behavior receives esteem, the prideful behave virtuously while feigning disinterested motives. And because refined hypocrisy is essentially a matter of motives rather than behavior, detecting it requires subtle and probing investigation of human psychology. We can see all these facets of refined hypocrisy in Mandeville's description of the self-examination of Cleomenes, his spokesman in Part II of the *Fable*:

Cleomenes seemed charitable, and was a Man of strict Morals, yet he would often complain that he was not possess'd of one Christian Virtue, and *found fault with his own Actions, that had all the Appearances of Goodness; because he was conscious, he said, that they were perform'd from a wrong Principle*. The Effects of his Education, and his

⁷⁴ *Fable*, II, 340.

⁷⁵ Dickey seems to have something similar in mind when he suggests that there are "two dimensions" of hypocrisy in Mandeville ("Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility," 412). My distinction between refined and brute hypocrisy is somewhat different, however, from Mandeville's own later distinction between "malicious" and "fashionable" hypocrisy and from Runciman's related distinction between "first-order" and "second-order" hypocrisy. See Mandeville, *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour*, 201-2; Runciman, *Political Hypocrisy*, 51-56.

Aversion to Infamy, had always been strong enough to keep him from Turpitude; but this he ascribed to his Vanity, which he complain'd was in such full Possession of his Heart, that he knew no Gratification of any Appetite from which he was able to exclude it. Having always been a Man of unblameable Behaviour, the Sincerity of his Belief had made no visible Alteration in his Conduct to outward Appearances; but in private he never ceas'd from examining himself.⁷⁶

One important aspect of refined hypocrisy that this passage suggests (and one highly reminiscent of the French moralists) is that it need not be conscious. When the socialization process is successful, the desire for esteem gives way (at least in large part) to the desire for self-esteem, meaning that actors may frequently behave virtuously even when doing so does not win praise from those around them. Refined hypocrites may genuinely wish to behave virtuously, and even believe that they are doing so, even though their conduct originates in a prideful desire to think well of themselves. Thus Mandeville speaks of “that strong Habit of Hypocrisy, by the Help of which, we have learned from our Cradle to hide even from our selves the vast Extent of Self-Love.”⁷⁷

In contrast to this is what we may label “brute” hypocrisy. While refined hypocrisy is characterized by the gap between professed and actual motives, brute hypocrisy is characterized by the gap between professed and actual behavior — “the Disagreement between the Words and Actions of Men.”⁷⁸ And whereas refined hypocrisy involves the conformity to moral norms out of selfish motives, brute hypocrisy involves the failure to conform to such norms at all. Because brute hypocrisy is a matter of behavior rather than motives, exposing it does not require any refined psychological investigation; it simply requires calling attention to the publicly visible

⁷⁶ *Fable*, II, 18, emphasis added.

⁷⁷ *Fable*, I, 135.

⁷⁸ *Fable*, II, 348.

failure of the self-righteous to live up to their professed ideals. It is in this regard that we may understand Mandeville's fixation on the sensual indulgences of the clergy and the high-and-mighty, and the gap between those pleasures "which Men say are best" and those which "they seem to be most pleased with."⁷⁹ Brute hypocrisy accounts for the fact "that the Theory of Virtue is so well understood, and the Practice of it so rarely to be met with."⁸⁰

As before, there is nothing inherently contradictory about the coexistence of these two forms of hypocrisy. Both buttress Mandeville's basic point that hypocrisy is universal and necessary for society;⁸¹ all humans are sinners, he suggests, either because they fail to live up to their ideals or because they live up to them out of pride. Moreover, he suggests that in many cases the two forms of hypocrisy blend together. Such is the case with the well-mannered behavior characteristic of the "Beau Monde": the refined gentleman is given nearly unlimited license to indulge his appetites, provided that he conforms to a set of relatively unobtrusive social norms.

But as before, the two forms have significantly different implications for how we perceive the social world. If refined hypocrites behave in accordance with moral and social norms, whatever the content of these norms may be, brute hypocrites merely pay lip service to these norms while indulging in sensual pleasures. As we saw with regard to pride and the sensuous passions, much comes to depend on the weight attributed to each set of factors. What proportion of humans are refined hypocrites and what proportion brute hypocrites? This is not a

⁷⁹ *Fable*, I, 151.

⁸⁰ *Fable*, I, 168.

⁸¹ He notes that "it is impossible we could be sociable Creatures without Hypocrisy" (*Fable*, I, 349).

question that Mandeville ever asks; he is content simply to argue that they are all hypocrites of one kind or the other. In general he relies on a sort of principle of maximum uncharitability, burrowing down psychologically as far as necessary — but only as far as necessary—to convict his targets of vice. When he can indict the bishop for carrying on with the chambermaid, he does so; it is only when there is no chambermaid to be found that he focuses in on the more psychologically complex operations of vanity and pride. (Among his other contributions to social science, he may have inaugurated the venerable procedure of explaining as much as possible with reference to brute self-interest, then using norms as a kind of *deus ex machina* to plug whatever explanatory gaps remain.) Given his recurrent focus on the baser failings of the ostensibly righteous, however, the reader could be forgiven for coming away with the impression that the vast majority of humans are brute hypocrites.

8.

We began this chapter with the image of Mandeville as proto-economist that has been the most enduring legacy of the *Fable*. We may now return to this image in order to examine the extent to which Mandeville may properly be viewed as a specifically economic thinker at all. Is the economic Mandeville solely an anachronistic imposition, or does it reflect something real and important about his project?

We may begin by noting the obvious fact that an enormous amount of the *Fable* (more specifically, Part I of the *Fable*) deals with what we would intuitively understand as economic phenomena. These are not limited to the subject matter of what had already emerged as the discipline of political economy — the balance of trade, the composition of the labor force, and so forth. Mandeville also investigates in detail the newly emergent forms of vice characteristic of

England's nascent commercial society: the mundane duplicity involved in everyday commercial transactions, the ways that the impersonality of the money economy helps conceal the predation and degradation involved in economic life, the spur to conspicuous consumption provided by the anonymity of cities.

In these and other respects, we can see the ways in Mandeville's scheme of private vices and public benefits is centrally (although far from exclusively) economic in nature. Thus the image of him as economic thinker is not purely anachronistic. But this raises a further question that is more important for our purposes: how are we to understand economic behavior in terms of the two strands of Mandeville's thought that we have been tracing? To be sure, he takes various forms of greed, or what we often label "economic self-interest," to be perhaps the most important private vices insofar as they create public prosperity. But are we to take this economic interest as a sensuous or a social passion? Is its object a real or an imaginary one? Is it a product of nature or of culture? In other words, does Mandeville understand it in materialist or moralist terms?

One plausible view would read Mandeville as suggesting that economic interest is simply the most recent in a succession of historically situated forms of pride.⁸² Whereas actors in previous societies sought esteem through martial valor, piety, honor, and the like, the breakdown of these sets of norms means that economic status becomes the principle means by which agents seek esteem. On this account, Mandeville's account of economic motivation is deeply "moralist" in nature: he takes the true object of economic interest not to be the material rewards that are most immediately pursued, but rather the imaginary reward of esteem that results from them, and he takes the forms of esteem-seeking to be dictated by historically-given social norms. This is the

⁸² Such a view is suggested by Dickey, "Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility," 406-8; Hundert, *Enlightenment's Fable*, 34.

understanding of economic motivation, as we will see, that was systematically developed by Adam Smith; its twentieth-century inheritor was the economic sociology of Karl Polanyi and his successors, with its vision of an economy “embedded” in broader social relationships.

There is a great deal in the *Fable* to support placing Mandeville within this tradition. It is worth noting, to begin with, that the seemingly-simple concept of “economic interest” appears nowhere in his work, and that his view of economic behavior is more complicated than the notion that people typically strive to increase their wealth. Typical of his era, Mandeville instead differentiates the behaviors that we would label economic interest into avarice (the tendency to save money) and prodigality (the tendency to spend it on goods). If the archetypical figures of subsequent economic thought are the profit-maximizing entrepreneur and the rational wage-earner who saves some of his income while consuming the rest, the equivalent figures of Mandeville’s thought are the miser, who saves pathologically while consuming as little as possible, and the prodigal heir, who fritters away his fortune on sensual pleasure-seeking. Both are treated with scorn, their behavior understood as highly perverse, if not irrational. Yet Mandeville stresses that society can only prosper through the combination of avarice and prodigality, and not through the sort of frugality that lies in between the two extremes:

Frugality is like Honesty, a mean starving Virtue, that is only fit for small Societies of good peaceable Men, who are contented to be poor so they may be easy...I would compare the Body Politick (I confess the Simile is very low) to a Bowl of Punch. Avarice should be the Souring and Prodigality the Sweetning of it.⁸³

Elsewhere, Mandeville differentiates between “diligence” and “industry,” suggesting that the “thirst after gain” is not found uniformly throughout the population:

A poor Wretch may want neither Diligence nor Ingenuity, be a saving Pains-taking Man, and yet without striving to mend his Circumstances remain contented with the Station he

⁸³ *Fable*, I, 104-5.

lives in; but Industry implies, besides the other Qualities, a Thirst after Gain, and an Indefatigable Desire of meliorating our Condition.⁸⁴

These passages are relevant for our discussion insofar as they show that Mandeville has no notion of a kind of straightforward “self-interest” that is the natural mode of human economic behavior. Rather, economic behavior varies according to temperament, inclination, and social station; prosperity springs from the harmonious interplay of these varied behaviors rather than from conformity to some uniform standard of economic rationality.

Similarly, we have already seen that Mandeville aims to dissect the vices underlying all modes of behavior and all social strata, not merely those engaged in the pursuit of economic gain. He devotes much of his attention to analyzing the self-denying and self-sacrificing behavior of the ascetic and the man of honor. Sometimes he treats such behaviors as simply instrumental and cunning ways of pursuing one’s interests in material terms. But more frequently he explains such behavior by suggesting that the imaginary pleasure of esteem is more powerful than the material pleasures of sensual indulgence; thus “material interest” often comes to play a secondary role in his account of human motivation.

Indeed, in places he suggests explicitly that the desire for wealth is simply one mode of esteem-seeking, concerned more with status hierarchies than with material rewards. This is evident in his discussion of why “those who pretend to undervalue, and are always haranguing against, Wealth, are generally poor and indolent.” He suggests that professed contempt for wealth is simply a matter of sour grapes, born out of the fact that poverty is held in contempt:

They act in their own defence: no body that could help it would ever be laugh’d at; for it must be own’d, that of all the Hardships of Poverty it is that, which is the most intolerable....In the very Satisfaction that is enjoy’d by those, who excel in, or as

⁸⁴ *Fable*, I, 244.

possess'd of things valuable, there is interwoven a spice of Contempt for others, that are destitute of them...⁸⁵

Here Mandeville suggests that considerations of status and esteem are centrally constitutive of the desire for wealth. However, it is also worth noting the implication he draws from this argument: because all humans seek esteem, and wealth brings esteem with it, therefore all humans would prefer wealth to poverty. Thus, he argues, anyone who professes to be indifferent to wealth is insincere. While the logic of the argument is grounded in moralist considerations, its effect is precisely to universalize the motive of economic interest.

A related ambiguity can be found in Mandeville's discussion of why most people aim to improve their social status. He suggests that if "impartial Reason [were] to be Judge between real Good and real Evil," it is doubtful "whether the Condition of Kings would be at all preferable to that of Peasants." How then to explain the prevalence of ambition and social striving? He answers:

The Reason why the generality of People would rather be Kings than Peasants is first owing to Pride and Ambition, that is deeply riveted in human Nature, and which to gratify we daily see Men undergo and despise the greatest Hazards and Difficulties. Secondly, to the difference there is in the force with which our Affection is wrought upon as the Objects are either Material or Spiritual. Things that immediately strike our outward Senses act more violently upon our Passions than what is the result of Thought and the dictates of the most demonstrative Reason...⁸⁶

Characteristically, Mandeville suggests two different explanations. The first is moralist: "pride and ambition," the desire for the imaginary reward of esteem, which leads humans to disregard considerations of material benefits and harms ("real good and real evil"). But Mandeville also provides a second, more sensuous and naturalistic, explanation: that humans seek material

⁸⁵ *Fable*, II, 115.

⁸⁶ *Fable*, I, 316.

rewards because their natural constitution predisposes them to prefer “material” objects to “spiritual” ones. The two visions of human nature here are in tension, if not outright contradiction. Whereas Mandeville generally suggests that the imaginary and reflective considerations of pride are more powerful than our immediate and unreflective physical urges, here he reverses the hierarchy. It remains difficult to tell, however, which of the two explanations — one grounded in pride and the imaginary, the other in the sensuous and real — he takes to be more fundamental in understanding material interest.

This tension — a constantly recurring one throughout the *Fable* — suggests that although the “moralist” interpretation suggested above represents one real strain of Mandeville’s thought, it is not the only strain. We cannot, in other words, simply take economic interest in its moralist sense, as one historically contingent form of pride, for elsewhere Mandeville does indeed naturalize and universalize it. The effect of doing so is to ground the economic realm upon the materialist categories (real, natural, sensuous) rather than the moralist ones (imaginary, social, prideful).

In places, the sensuous passions, rooted in physical need, come to appear as the foundational elements of human society: “that every Body is obliged to eat and drink, is the Cement of civil Society.”⁸⁷ Pride recedes into the background, and economic interest takes its

⁸⁷ *Fable*, II, 350. Cf. Mandeville, *Free Thoughts*, 146, in which he seems to ground the existence of civil society solely on humans’ reciprocal material wants, in contrast to the account given in the “Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue”: “Men are naturally selfish, unruly, and headstrong Creatures, what makes them Sociable is their Necessity and Consciousness of standing in need of each others Help to make Life comfortable; and what makes this Assistance Voluntary and lasting are the Gains or Profit accruing to Industry for Services done to others, which in a well ordered Society enables every Body, who in some thing or other will be Serviceable to the Publick, to purchase the Assistance of others. And as all the Conveniencies, and chief Comforts of Life depend, in a great measure, on the Labour and Services of others, so he that is able to purchase most of them, is in the vogue of the World, reckoned the most happy.”

place as the primal force that, in its variegated manifestations, constitutes the social world: “To me it is a great Pleasure, when I look on the Affairs of human Life, to behold into what various and often strangely opposite Forms the hope of Gain and thoughts of Lucre shape Men, according to the different Employments they are of, and Stations they are in.”⁸⁸

To be sure, Mandeville never renounces his arguments about the fundamental role of pride in human society. But his focus on this theme comes and goes, as required by his polemical purposes. When seeking to discredit the very possibility of virtue as the basis for society, he largely abandons the notion, so fundamental elsewhere, that human behavior can be shaped in profound ways by historically constituted norms. All humans everywhere, he suggests, seek their “real pleasures,” whether they admit it publicly or not; those who do not devote themselves to sensuous indulgence are simply prevented from doing so by external constraint. The clear implication is that these facts are the product of nature, not of culture — of humans’ basic constitution, not of contingent norms and practices.⁸⁹

But whatever Mandeville’s views about the universality or particularity of economic behavior may have been, the closing passages of the *Fable* indicate the general shape of the

⁸⁸ *Fable*, I, 349.

⁸⁹ In this regard it is notable that when discussing “Remark O,” the chapter on “real pleasures” that has been so important for our discussion, Dickey seems to read into the text a level of historicism that is not actually there. To support his interpretation that Mandeville views economic interest as simply a historicized form of pride, Dickey glosses “Remark O” as arguing that “the age-old antithesis between individual pleasure and social morality changed” during the seventeenth century as a new commercial and acquisitive ethos emerged (“Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility,” 407). However, “Remark O” makes no such historical claim; it argues that “the real Pleasures of all Men in Nature are worldly and sensual,” but contains no suggestion that this is a historically contingent fact (*Fable*, I, 166). If the argument of this chapter is correct, it is in fact highly significant that Mandeville does not historicize his claims at this point in the *Fable*. (Mandeville does later include a temporal qualification of these claims [I, 245], albeit an extremely minimal and cursory one.)

society that he saw emerging around him; it is perhaps significant that his major work ends with a prolonged ode to money, an invention “more skillfully adapted to the whole Bent of our Nature, than any other of human Contrivance.”⁹⁰ The French moralists had spoken of society as a reciprocal commerce of debts and services, but the economic language was largely metaphorical. Their point, which Mandeville echoes elsewhere, was that economic transactions were only one of the forms of commerce by which the social world functions — just as often the debts and credits were paid in affection, esteem, hatred, self-renunciation, loyalty.⁹¹ But here, the economic language ceases to be metaphorical, and the social commerce of reciprocal services comes to be identified with the literal commerce of economic transactions. There is nothing besides money that is “so absolute necessary to the Order, Oeconomy, and the very Existence of the Civil Society”:

[F]or as this is entirely built upon the Variety of our Wants, so the whole Superstructure is made up of the reciprocal Services, which Men do to each other....To expect, that others should serve us for nothing, is unreasonable; therefore all Commerce, that Men can have together, must be a continual bartering of one thing for another....Money obviates and takes away all those Difficulties, by being an acceptable Reward for all the Services Men can do to one another.⁹²

Money’s role as universal medium, as ubiquitous and essential as speech, is not an eternal fact of nature; Mandeville notes that it is only in “a large polite Nation,” populous, prosperous and impersonal, that it comes to fulfill this role.⁹³ But it is telling to compare the account of money as universal equivalent here at the end of the *Fable* to the “Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue”

⁹⁰ *Fable*, II, 353.

⁹¹ E.g. La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, no. 83 (18); and, in the *Fable*, I, 78; I, 222.

⁹² *Fable*, II, 349.

⁹³ *Fable*, II, 350.

at the beginning, in which Mandeville placed not money but praise in the analogous role of “general equivalent” for the hardships of social cooperation.⁹⁴ We have seen that praise was of interest to Mandeville as an “imaginary reward” that would serve, in lieu of “real rewards,” as recompense for the pains of self-denial. But here this imaginary reward drops out of the picture, and Mandeville’s vision implies its replacement by the real reward, money, as the cement of commercial society.

Similarly, Mandeville had devoted great energy to dissecting the phenomenon of honor, the central principle of social distinction during the epoch that was drawing to a close in his lifetime. His discussion, as we have seen, frequently stresses the overwhelming power of pride to shape the behavior of the man of honor against all material incentives. Yet the *Fable* ends with a denial of Horatio’s claim that “upon noble Minds that despise Lucre, Honour has a far greater Efficacy that Money,” to which Cleomenes replies:

[N]othing is more universally charming than Money; it suits with every Station; the high, the low, the wealthy, and the poor: whereas Honour has little influence on the mean, slaving People, and rarely affects any of the vulgar; but if it does, Money will almost every where purchase Honour...⁹⁵

Mandeville’s thought has its origins in the subtle psychological dissection of honor, piety, and self-renunciation first put forward by the moralists. Yet he ends the *Fable* with a dismissal of the relevance of such considerations. It is money, not honor or pride, that is the efficacious force in society, among “the high, the low, the wealthy, and the poor” alike. While the statement may be taken as a sociohistorical claim about the changing mores connected to the rise of commercial

⁹⁴ *Fable*, I, 42; see section 4 of this chapter.

⁹⁵ *Fable*, II, 354.

society, it is nonetheless in keeping with that strand of his thought which prioritizes the real, the sensuous, and the natural over the imaginary, the prideful, and the acquired.

This strand of Mandeville's thought is the one that has endured, at least among his self-proclaimed heirs. Mandeville came to be remembered as the early herald of laissez-faire, his scheme of private vices and public benefits nothing more than a gratuitously polemical version of the invisible hand. The side of his dichotomies that came from the moralists, the side that gave his work its psychological depth and ethical bite, was largely forgotten. What remained was nature without culture, sensuousness without pride, desires without norms, materiality without reflection, behavior without motives, society without history. The vision was one of sensuous maximizers, unbound by norms, cultures, histories, concerned only with material goals, faced only with material constraints; society consisted only of the sum of their atomistic pursuits. Such a vision had little interest in private vices beyond material egoism, or public benefits beyond material prosperity. It can be said fairly that this vision was faithful to one side of Mandeville's thought — but only to one side.

9.

Does it follow that we must strive to put Bernard Mandeville together again? That by reconnecting his materialist legacy with its moralist origins we can arrive at more humane, more astute, or more nuanced ways of thinking about our own social world? Or does the eventual split between the two strands of his project indicate a fundamental incoherence in the project itself? These are somewhat larger questions than I can attempt to answer here. Nonetheless it may be useful, by way of conclusion, to return once more to the eighteenth-century debates that surrounded the *Fable*.

Mandeville had many clumsy critics but also a few shrewd ones, none perhaps shrewder than David Hume. In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals*, Hume included an appendix “Of Self-Love,” in which he drew on Bishop Butler’s critiques of egoism to examine those philosophical systems (Epicurus’s and Hobbes’s as much as Mandeville’s) that located selfishness at the root of every action. Hume began by distinguishing two kinds of such theories. The first kind, “which is utterly incompatible with all virtue or moral sentiment” and “can proceed from nothing but the most depraved disposition,” is based on the following principle:

...that all *benevolence* is mere hypocrisy, friendship a cheat, public spirit a farce, fidelity a snare to procure trust and confidence; and that while all of us, at bottom, pursue only our private interest, we wear these fair disguises, in order to put others off their guard, and expose them the more to our wiles and machinations. What heart one must be possessed of who professes such principles, and who feels no internal sentiment that belies so pernicious a theory, it is easy to imagine...

Such a claim, Hume believed, was clearly belied by our everyday experience of non-instrumental forms of benevolence and public-spiritedness; it failed even as a bare description of human behavior. Yet he also noted “another principle, somewhat resembling the former,” which was the basis of the second kind of self-love theory:

...that, whatever affection one may feel, or imagine he feels for others, no passion is, or can be disinterested; that the most generous friendship, however sincere, is a modification of self-love; and that, even unknown to ourselves, we seek only our own gratification while we appear the most deeply engaged in schemes for the liberty and happiness of mankind.

This sort of theory would not deny the existence of unselfish behavior; it would merely attempt, “by a philosophical chymistry,” to explain every passion or action as self-love transformed.

Hume had more than one objection to even this weaker version of the “selfish hypothesis,” but his most immediate was that it would have little practical effect on moral judgment. Even if we agree to view every action as a form of self-love, this simply means that we will now regard as virtuous those whose self-love directs them in beneficent ways, and regard

as vicious those whose self-love directs them in malicious ways. In its weaker and more plausible form, the selfish hypothesis becomes little more than a tautology, and thus “not so material as is usually imagined to morality and practice.”⁹⁶

In his attack on the first kind of thinker, who due to a “depraved disposition” sees only brute selfishness everywhere, Hume clearly had Mandeville in mind. Yet as we have seen, in his moralist moments Mandeville was something more like the second kind. He is not blind to the everyday facts of altruism and self-abnegation, but he attempts to explain them as a set of transformations of pride and an internalized desire for approval. Thus in some ways he straddles the two forms of self-love theories.

But if Hume may not have been entirely right about Mandeville, his general point remains sound. For Mandeville’s Augustinian forebears, the selfish hypothesis was freighted with real import: they inhabited a mental world containing at least the possibility of true charity and divine grace, and the line between *charité* and *amour-propre* divided the saved and the damned. Lumping together all action without grace as so many forms of selfishness made philosophical and polemical sense as a way of insisting on the fallenness of the world and the necessity of Christian salvation.

For Mandeville and his successors, however, the possibility of grace ceased to be more than a notional gesture, and with it the contrast between self-love and charity faded away. In the absence of such a contrast, set against an implied background of heaven and hell, the upshot of the selfish hypothesis ceased to be clear: was it an empirical claim about the concrete ways that

⁹⁶ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, §247-250, in *Enquiries*, 295-97. Other eighteenth-century critics of egoism similarly argued that its claim was ultimately a semantic one with little practical impact on moral judgment. See, for instance, Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, Sermon XI, §7, in *Five Sermons*, 47; Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* 1.2, 19-20.

humans tended to behave, or a philosophical claim about what all such forms of behavior essentially are? This is the ambiguity that ran throughout Mandeville's work, and which ultimately led him onto the horns of the dilemma that Hume located: a choice between falsehood as an empirical claim or emptiness as a philosophical one.

Mandeville occupied a transitional point between his Christian predecessors and his social-scientific successors. If the immediate possibility of divine grace was absent from his work, much of the Christian moral vocabulary for discussing human behavior remained; indeed, it was from this inherited vocabulary that Mandeville's arguments derived their power to sting. He started from a standpoint that allowed for the possibility of a transcendent source of human action and morality, then proceeded to systematically deny such transcendence — showing that no action could occur unless it gratified some internal desire of the agent, and that no moral norm could rely on any sanction beyond the immanent social uses which it had arisen to fulfill.

Mandeville's successors developed less ethically-laden ways to talk about this essential worldliness of human social life. What he would explain with reference to self-love, they would explain with reference to rationality; what he would see as gratifying a vice, they would see as gratifying a preference. Yet these changes may have been more cosmetic than substantive, and it is not clear that they ever succeeded in extricating the overall project from the horns of Hume's dilemma. If Mandeville ended up stranded somewhere between falsehood and tautology, in this respect he was no worse off than those who followed him.

Chapter VII

Struggles for Recognition

1.

If the road to a thoroughly atomistic and materialist vision of human life had begun to open up in the eighteenth century, Adam Smith was not among those who went down it. Although contemporary readers tend to think of Smith in terms of intellectual beginnings — as “the father of economics,” to cite one ubiquitous description — in another sense he can be considered the last great exemplar of the tradition we have been tracing. Far from reifying the economy into a distinct realm governed by its own natural laws, he developed an account of economic relations as simply one among many social realms in which prideful humans pursued standing and precedence. He did so more systematically than his predecessors, no doubt partly because the set of premises that had seemed intuitive to an Augustine or a Hobbes had already begun to take on the air of implausibility, standing in need of explicit defense. Seen from this angle, the entirety of Smith’s work takes on a different appearance, altering not merely the picture of Smith as economist, but as psychologist, political theorist, historian. Instead of attempting to give a synoptic view, perhaps the most direct way into these themes is to begin with a largely neglected area of his thought: his gloomy reflections on slavery and history.

Although traces of these reflections can be found throughout his published works, Smith presented them most fully in the lectures that he delivered as a professor at Glasgow in the early 1760s.¹ “We are apt to imagine that slavery is entirely abolished at this time,” he introduced the

¹ We know the substance of these lectures (posthumously published as the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*) from two different sets of notes made by attendees in separate years, and when reading them we must bear in mind the usual caveats about unpublished lecture notes. However, the fact that both sets of notes contain the same substantive version of the account of slavery, as

subject in his lectures of 1763, “without considering that this is the case in only a small part of Europe....It is indeed almost impossible that it should ever be totally or generally abolished.”² If the opening claim might strike us as curious — were even the most provincial of his students completely unaware of the flourishing contemporary slave trade? — it is Smith’s second claim, about slavery’s inevitability, that gives his theory of history its strikingly pessimistic slant. Accounting for it requires a closer examination of his underlying assumptions about history.

Like many of his contemporaries, Smith was an adherent of the “four stages” theory of historical development, in which changes in the prevalent mode of subsistence correspond to changes in sociopolitical organization. Small groups of hunter-gatherers, on this theory, are succeeded by shepherds and herders, then farmers, with the process culminating in modern commercial societies.³ On Smith’s account, the most dramatic change in this progression comes in the transition from hunting to pastoral societies, for it is here that property arises, and with it economic inequality and real government.⁴ Once some can acquire permanent property in livestock, inequality will become pronounced, and the haves will require central government to protect their property against the have-nots.⁵ Alongside this pervasive inequality comes

well as the many echoes of these notes found in the *Wealth of Nations*, suggests that the lectures as they have been passed down to us are broadly faithful to what Smith actually said. (I have regularized some of the note-takers’ idiosyncratic spelling when quoting from the *Lectures*.)

² *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (A)iii.101, 181. (Subsequent citations to the *Lectures* refer to this volume; I cite the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres* by their full title.)

³ On the four stages theory see especially Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*.

⁴ *Lectures* (A)iv.7, 202.

⁵ *Lectures* (A).iv.21, 208: “the age of shepherds is that where government first commences. Property makes it absolutely necessary....Laws and government may be considered in this and indeed in every case as a combination of the rich to oppress the poor, and preserve to themselves the inequality of the goods which would otherwise be soon destroyed...”

dependence, as the rich soon come to command large numbers of retainers and acquire their own political bases of power. In such a context, the weakness of (nominal) central sovereigns forces them to entrust judicial power to these private masters and local notables. Slavery thus begins as a kind of legal strengthening of preexisting relations of dependence (which will prove important insofar as Smith treats slavery's persistence as closely linked to the existence of conditions of *de facto* dependence). In any case, the institution is therefore "universal in the beginnings of society."⁶

While Smith's claim that slavery becomes "universal" in the pastoral stage is striking, what gives his theory of history its distinctively pessimistic slant is his further suggestion that subsequent political and economic development tend only to perpetuate and even exacerbate it. The establishment of free republican governments provides no solution, for in a republic the "persons who make all the laws...are persons who have slaves themselves," and therefore "will never make any laws mitigating their usage."⁷ In fact, the much-vaunted liberty of the ancient republics was inextricably tied to the severity with which they treated their slaves: "The freedom of the free was the cause of the great oppression of the slaves."⁸ It is actually under arbitrary governments that this oppression is most likely to be mitigated, for absolute monarchs have greater ability and willingness to interfere in the property of their subjects, and may therefore ease the condition of slaves (whether out of compassion or simply in order to weaken the

⁶ *Lectures* (A)iii.117, 187.

⁷ *Lectures* (A)iii.102, 181.

⁸ *Lectures* (A)iii.103, 182. Smith's acquaintance Dr. Johnson would famously and caustically point to a similar paradox among his American contemporaries: "how is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?" Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (entry for Sept. 23, 1777), 632.

masters).⁹ But “although the authority of the sovereign may go a considerable way in the mitigating of the condition of slaves, yet it never has and can never proceed so far as to abolish slavery altogether,” for in these societies “the greatest part of the riches of the subjects consists in slaves” and abolition would lead to general insurrection by the masters.¹⁰

The growth of wealth and refinement will similarly worsen the condition of slaves. Greater opulence increases the ratio of slaves to freemen, thereby requiring ever more severe repression to prevent uprisings; it also increases the gap between the master’s condition and that of his slaves, reducing the compassion he can feel towards them. Thus in ancient times, slavery was harsher among the opulent Romans than the barbaric German tribes, while in Smith’s own day, it was most brutal in the highly profitable New World sugar colonies; as a general rule, it is “much more tolerable...in a poor and barbarous people than in a rich and polished one.”¹¹

Poverty and arbitrary government offer no real escape from the institutions of bondage that become “universal” in the early stages of history, while wealth and political liberty only worsen them. As a result, Smith must call into question the value of historical progress itself:

The more society is improved the greater is the misery of a slavish condition; they are treated much better in the rude periods of mankind than in the more improved. Opulence and refinement tend greatly to increase their misery. The more arbitrary the government is in like manner the slaves are in the better condition, and the freer the people the more miserable are the slaves; in a democracy they are more miserable than in any other. The greater the freedom of the free, the more intolerable is the slavery of the slaves. Opulence and freedom, the two greatest blessings men can possess, tend greatly to the misery of this body of men, which in most countries where slavery is allowed makes by far the greatest part. A humane man would wish therefore if slavery has to be generally established that these greatest blessings, being incompatible with the happiness of the

⁹ *Lectures* (A)iii.104, 182; (A)iii.114-15, 186-87. Cf. *Wealth of Nations* IV.vii.b.54, 587.

¹⁰ *Lectures* (A)iii.115-16, 187.

¹¹ *Lectures* (A)iii.105-10, 182-85.

greater part of mankind, were never to take place.¹²

We are quite far from the optimistic visions, often attributed to the Enlightenment, in which freedom, wealth, and general happiness progress hand-in-hand.¹³ On the contrary, it is only the “freedom of the free,” and likewise their wealth and well-being, that increase with historical development; for the unfree the process brings only increased misery.

So far we have been speaking the language of interests, implying that slavery will persist because of masters’ interests in upholding it. But in a broader sense Smith rejects any such notion; he is in fact the most famous exemplar of the Enlightenment critique of slavery as not merely immoral but inefficient, cutting against the economic interests of the master as well as the moral rights of the slave.¹⁴ How, then, to explain the masters’ continued reliance upon it? Smith could simply have noted (as he does elsewhere) that agents are short-sighted and not always aware of the most efficient course of action. But this is not the argument that he makes:

[T]hough as I have here shown their [the masters’] real interest would lead them to set free their slaves and cultivate their lands by free servants or tenants, yet the love of domination and authority and the pleasure men take in having every thing done by their express orders, rather than to condescend to bargain and treat with those whom they look upon as their inferiors and are inclined to use in a haughty way; this love of domination and tyrannizing, I say, will make it impossible for the slaves in a free country ever to recover their liberty.¹⁵

This is the earliest and fullest description of the “love of domination” that comes to figure so prominently in Smith’s discussion of the psychology underlying slavery. A clear echo of

¹² *Lectures* (A)iii.111-12, 185.

¹³ This point has been well made in what is perhaps the only work to examine the broader implications of Smith’s account of slavery from the *Lectures*: Forbes, “Sceptical whiggism, commerce, and liberty,” 200-1.

¹⁴ See especially *Lectures* (A)iii.111, 185; *Wealth of Nations* III.ii.9, 387.

¹⁵ *Lectures* (A)iii.114, 186.

Augustine's *libido dominandi*, with all its undertones of original sin, it appears in various forms throughout his work.¹⁶ Smith always stresses that the trait naturally tends to win out over humans' "real interests."

Although it is the weakness of government and the prevalence of dependence that make slavery "universal in the beginnings of society," it is "the love of dominion and authority over others [that] will probably make it perpetual" despite the end of these conditions. As a result, slavery exists and will continue to exist nearly everywhere; only in "a small part of Europe" has it been abolished. But the "circumstances which have made slavery be abolished in the corner of Europe in which it now is are peculiar to it." The end of slavery was an exceptional event that cannot be accounted for within the natural development of human societies dictated by the four stages theory.¹⁷

This account of the natural tendency toward "universal" and "perpetual" slavery challenges many of the common assumptions about Smith's thought. Among these, of course, are the notions that he espoused a broadly optimistic view of historical development in which freedom, wealth, and well-being progress simultaneously, and that he saw commercial Europe as the most advanced manifestation of this natural progression. His account here, by contrast, suggests that the natural tendency of human societies places these goods at odds with one another, and that Europe is an aberration from the natural course of development due to its own "peculiar" circumstances.

Aside from its historical implications, the account of slavery also raises fundamental

¹⁶ In the equivalent passage of the 1766 lectures, for instance, Smith refers instead to "that tyrannic disposition which may almost be said to be natural to mankind"; *Lectures* (B)135, 452.

¹⁷ *Lectures* (A)iii.103, 181; (A)iii.117, 187.

questions about Smith's understanding of human nature and motivation. While recent scholarship has pushed back against the traditional image of Smith as apostle of self-interest and midwife of *homo economicus*, it has generally done so by rehabilitating a warmer and more appealing side of his thought, the Smith of sociability, sympathy, and sentiment.¹⁸ Yet the *libido dominandi* to which Smith here ascribes so much importance seems to contradict both these sides of his thought, both the cool rationality of the *Wealth of Nations* and the warm sociability of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, presenting humans as naturally inclined towards behavior that is at once economically irrational and strikingly unsocial.

We might be tempted to dismiss Smith's views here as a merely a strange residue of Christian moralism, at odds with the general tenor of his work. Still, I hope that our discussion to this point has made plausible the notion that these broadly Augustinian themes are central to the emergence of modern social thought, not a mere residue of an obsolete and parochial intellectual milieu. In fact, I will suggest in what follows that the argument just traced points the way to a fuller picture of Smith's work in its underlying unity: that sympathy and self-interest, for him, can only be rightly understood against the background of pride and domination, and modern commercial society against the background of slavery and dependence.

2.

To understand Smith's suggestion that the "love of domination" tends to overpower our "real interests," we must first examine his conception of economic interest itself, and its

¹⁸ An exemplary work in this vein is Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments*, esp. 7-51. Rothschild rightly stresses Smith's distance from any kind of atomistic view of human social life. But I will suggest here (as I have throughout this study) that the implications of this distance are different and less benign than they might seem.

relationship to other forms of human behavior. The drive for greater wealth is closely related — though, as we will see, not identical — to what he calls the desire to “better our condition,” and thereby acquire “not only the necessities, but the conveniencies and elegancies of life.”¹⁹ But how does this drive relate to the others that govern human social life?

One influential line of thought on this topic is worth sketching, for it explicitly or implicitly underlies much of what is written about Smith and, for that matter, about the relationship between economics and politics in general. In the previous chapter we referred to a broadly “materialist” strand in Mandeville’s work, one taking humans as above all creatures of material wants and sensuous desires. The line of thought that concerns us here is closely related to this materialist strand. Empirically, it need not take material wants and desires as the dominant features of human motivation; conceptually, however, it nonetheless uses them to anchor its definition of economic life.

On this theory, economic drives are fundamentally *unique*, dissimilar from all other drives governing human social life, and this uniqueness arises from the fact that they alone originate in humans’ status as beings subject to physical needs. All humans, after all, need food, clothing, and shelter to survive, regardless of any other circumstances in which they find themselves. Procuring these necessities is therefore a minimal requirement for self-preservation in which every person must engage.²⁰ Yet people do not want to settle for this minimal standard

¹⁹ *Wealth of Nations* III.ii.12, 405; other references to the desire to “better our condition” in the book are at III.iii.31, 343; II.iii.36, 345; IV.v.b.43, 540; IV.ix.28, 674. While Smith distinguishes the behaviors of frugality (saving money) and prodigality (spending it), he emphasizes that at root the desire for money is no different from the desire for purchasable goods; see *Lectures* (A)vi.145-46, 384. It is thus possible to speak of a unified notion of “economic interest” in his work, in a way that it is not for someone like Mandeville (see above, chapter VI, section 8).

²⁰ Smith notes this obvious fact, for instance at *Lectures* (A)vi.8-12, 334-35. Cf. Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees*, II, 350: “that every Body is obliged to eat and drink, is the Cement of civil

(they come to prefer meat to berries, or cloth to animal skins). They therefore devote their efforts to meeting these needs in an ever more pleasurable or efficient manner, and their production and consumption patterns become increasingly elaborate, moving (in Smith's terms) from "necessities" to "conveniencies." Nevertheless, the foundation of this edifice of consumption remains the necessitous nature of human beings. The economy is most fundamentally the domain of self-preservation; this makes the desire to better one's condition, the guiding principle of economic behavior, "the endless impulse always to add to the means of preservation."²¹

Of course, the satisfaction of these refined and elaborate desires requires cooperation with other people, and interpersonal contact means that humans become subject to any number of other social forces. Nevertheless, economic activity remains on this theory fundamentally atomistic and asocial. It is based on the wants and needs that anyone, even the proverbial person on the desert island, would have, and the only criteria by which objects are recommended to us are pleasure and usefulness, both of which are just as valid for the person on the desert island as for the one in society. While in practice each person may need the cooperation of others to meet his or her desires, this is because of their instrumental capacities to satisfy wants rather than their intrinsic status as human beings. In principle there is no reason that a team of industrious robots could not suffice just as well.

This view would not — or at least need not — deny the existence of other motives

Society." Or Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 156): "life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself."

²¹ Cropsey, *Polity and Economy*, 71. Cropsey, who provides the most thorough and substantive interpretation along these lines, takes Smith's thought to be broadly Hobbesian, except with "the substitution of the desire to better one's condition for the fear of violent death as the crucial passion of man" (72).

existing alongside the asocial drive for economic consumption. Humans in society become involved in innumerable other relationships that dictate desires and behaviors of their own, and there is no reason that the economic drive rooted in material self-preservation should invalidate these other factors. Yet on this theory there must remain a sharp divide between the economic sphere and the political sphere, between the realm guided by atomistic want-satisfaction and the realm guided by the multitude of ways in which humans interact with one another *qua* humans.

The identification of a separate economic realm stemming from physical necessity in which atomistic individuals come together in instrumental relationships of production and consumption dates, in modern times, at least as far back as Pufendorf.²² We have already seen traces of it in Mandeville, while Karl Polanyi envisioned it emerging fully-formed in Townsend's 1786 *Dissertation on the Poor Laws*.²³ Probably the most canonical formulation of this notion, however, is Hegel's identification of "civil society" as a distinct realm grounded on the "system of needs."²⁴ And once state and society, or politics and economics, are marked as qualitatively different domains, it requires only a short step to see them as conflicting or even irreconcilable, raising the possibility of the withering away of politics foreseen (whether with hope or despair) by later thinkers ranging from Marx to Arendt. Less dramatically but more ubiquitously, this kind of dichotomy is often manifested in the contrast between economics as a realm of rationality and predictability — governed by ineliminable, material, and therefore

²² See Hont, "The Language of Sociability and Commerce," in *Jealousy of Trade*, 159-84.

²³ Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 116-21, esp. 120: "The biological nature of man appeared as the given foundation of a society that was not of a political order. Thus it came to pass that economists presently relinquished Adam Smith's humanistic foundations, and incorporated those of Townsend."

²⁴ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* §182-208, 220-39.

rational needs — and politics as one of irrationality, variability, and folly.²⁵

The general scholarly tendency has been to assimilate Smith into this line of thought, placing him in the tradition of thinkers who implicitly or explicitly distinguished politics from an asocial economic realm based on need. In older works, this tendency often led to the view that Smith subordinated the political to the economic, thereby enshrining atomistic self-interest and material need as the key human motivations at the expense of all other capacities, and perhaps paving the way for Marx's anti-politics.²⁶ More recent scholarship has rehabilitated Smith's politics and cut against the notion that he subordinated polity to society or economy.²⁷ Yet in general, this revisionist work has been content to carve out a larger role for politics vis-à-vis economics without questioning the underlying distinction between political and economic motivations on which the older scholarship rested. Similarly, although recent work has dethroned economic self-interest from its privileged place in Smith's psychology, this work often continues to speak as if there is some discrete force known as "economic interest" that is tempered or thwarted by other motives. If the caricature of the *homo economicus* has been dispelled, a sort of *homunculus economicus* continues to lurk in the background.²⁸ As a result the dichotomy

²⁵ The identification of the economic realm with the material dimension persisted well into the twentieth century. Robbins, in arguing against this identification in his 1932 *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*, suggested that it remained a commonplace in his day. In the next chapter, we will critically examine the efforts of Robbins and others to purge economics of its connection with the material dimension.

²⁶ See especially Cropsey's *Polity and Economy* and his later "Adam Smith and Political Philosophy." For an overview of more recent examples see Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*, 6n13.

²⁷ Classics of this scholarship include Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics*; Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator*. See also Winch, "Adam Smith: Scottish Moral Philosopher as Political Economist."

²⁸ See, for instance, the generally helpful analyses of Holmes, "The Secret History of Self Interest," in *Passions and Constraint*, 42-68; Mehta, "Self-Interest and Other Interests."

between an economy based on asocial need-satisfaction and a politics based on sociability persists, even if the weight accorded to these two spheres has changed.²⁹ It is this underlying dichotomy that we must challenge in what follows.

3.

Smith's descriptions of the psychology underlying economic behavior are fairly vague in the *Wealth of Nations*, consisting primarily of bland references to the "desire of bettering one's condition." But a closer examination of the *Theory* and *Lectures* demonstrates that Smith does not view economic drives as rooted in simple need-satisfaction. Nor does he see economic relationships as asocial forms of cooperation into which atomistic individuals enter in order to satisfy these needs.

To begin with, Smith argues that humans are capable of meeting their needs for food, clothing, and shelter independently, without entering into cooperative relationships or a division of labor.³⁰ Necessity therefore cannot serve as the explanation for economic relationships. Smith instead argues that these relationships spring up due to the unique human "propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another," a disposition "which originally gives occasion to the division of labor." But what is the basis of this disposition? In the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith claims that it is "probable" that it is "the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and

²⁹ For exceptions, some of which touch on points made here, see, *inter alia*: Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments*; Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith*; Lewis, "Persuasion, Domination and Exchange"; Kalyvas and Katznelson, "The Rhetoric of the Market."

³⁰ *Lectures* (A)vi.12, 335. In rejecting the notion that sheer survival requires interpersonal cooperation, Smith is in a sense following Rousseau's argument in the *Discourse on Inequality*.

speech.”³¹ In the *Lectures*, however, he is more explicit:

If we should enquire into the principle in the human mind on which this disposition of trucking is founded, it is clearly the natural inclination every one has to persuade. The offering of a shilling, which to us appears to have so plain and simple a meaning, is in reality offering an argument to persuade one to do so and so as it is for his interest. Men always endeavor to persuade others to be of their opinion even when the matter is of no consequence to them.³²

The “trucking disposition” so basic to economic activity is not rooted in natural need, but in sociability, the desire to persuade that humans have even when there is no immediate interest at stake. We may even say that it is in some sense a political capacity, since Smith in turn grounds both the desire to persuade and the faculty of speech itself on the uniquely human “desire of real superiority, of leading and directing.”³³

This social disposition may be the basis of the division of labor, but it still does not entirely explain the phenomenon of “economic interest” in the sense of progressively greater consumption drives. How can we explain the human desire to move from “necessaries” to “conveniencies”? Is it because these objects possess more usefulness in providing for basic needs, or confer greater pleasure in doing so — in a word, because of their greater utility?³⁴

Smith makes clear that they do not. In the *Lectures*, he argues that it is not the greater utility of these consumption objects, but rather their aesthetic qualities, that “leads men into

³¹ *Wealth of Nations* I.ii.1-3, 25-27.

³² *Lectures* (A) iv.56, 352.

³³ *Theory of Moral Sentiments* VII.iv.25, 336. Smith may have been influenced here by Mandeville, who had argued that “the first Design of Speech was to persuade others” rather than “to make our Thoughts known to others” (*Fable*, II, 289).

³⁴ While Smith uses the term “utility” in a way that is consistent with the term’s present-day meaning in colloquial English, his usage does not correspond precisely to the more abstract technical usage in economics.

customs with regard to food, clothing, and lodging which have no relation to convenience and are often contrary to the ends proposed to be supplied by those things.”³⁵ In the *Theory*, he famously argues that it is the well-contrived appearance of utility, rather than actual utility, which leads people to pursue power and wealth. Though they seem to provide more “means of happiness,” power and riches are in reality “enormous and operose machines contrived to produce a few trifling conveniences to the body...which in spite of all our care are ready every moment to burst into pieces, and to crush in the ruins their unfortunate possessor.” In terms of the satisfaction of genuine needs, in “easy of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for.”³⁶

This view of economic motivation as fundamentally aesthetic suggests that more elaborate consumption does not actually provide increased satisfaction of basic human needs, but it does not necessarily dispel the view of economic drives as atomistic. Objects of consumption may recommend themselves to us on the basis of their aesthetic qualities — either their intrinsic beauty (as in the *Lectures*) or their well-contrived appearance of utility (as in the *Theory*) — but the desert island dweller can be swayed by these aesthetic qualities as much as anyone else; if economic behavior is motivated by *perceived* utility, however deceptive, we might still see it as an asocial drive. The aesthetic view of consumption, however, is not Smith’s last word on the

³⁵ *Lectures* (A)vi.16, 337. He gives an analogous account of language in the *Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages*. While noting that language must have begun from a desire to satisfy “mutual wants” (*Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*, 201), he suggests that aesthetic considerations quickly superseded utilitarian ones in driving linguistic development, so that it is not functionality but “love of analogy and similarity of sound, which is the foundation of by far the greater part of the rules of grammar” (*Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*, 211).

³⁶ *Theory* IV.1.8-10, 182-85.

subject.

For in the same section of the *Theory*, Smith suggests that the deceptive appearance of utility is not a function of an object's inherent qualities, but rather a distortion created by life in society:

To one who was to live alone in a desolate island it might be a matter of doubt, perhaps, whether a palace, or a collection of such small conveniencies as are commonly contained in a tweezer-case, would contribute most to his happiness and enjoyment. If he is to live in society, indeed, there can be no comparison, because in this, as in all other cases, we constantly pay more regard to the sentiments of the spectator, than to those of the person principally concerned, and consider rather how his situation will appear to other people, than how it will appear to himself.³⁷

It is thus humans' social nature, not their necessitous animal nature, that is at the root of the pursuit of wealth. This observation points the way to Smith's broader account of economic motivation.

For although Smith of course recognizes that humans have basic requirements for self-preservation that must be met regardless of social circumstances, for him (as again for Rousseau) participation into society causes a radical shift in human psychology. In a hypothetical state of nature (which, Smith emphasizes, is nothing more than a thought experiment), courses of action and objects of consumption could still recommend themselves to us on the basis of their utility:

[S]o far as the sentiment of approbation arises from the perception of this beauty of utility, it has no reference of any kind to the sentiments of others. If it was possible, therefore, that a person should grow up to manhood without any communication with society, his own actions might, notwithstanding, be agreeable or disagreeable to him on account of their tendency to his happiness or disadvantage.³⁸

Such a person's entire attention would be occupied with "the external bodies which either

³⁷ *Theory* IV.1.8, 182.

³⁸ *Theory* IV.2.12, 192.

pleased or hurt him.” But “[b]ring him into society, and all his own passions will immediately become the causes of new passions. He will observe that mankind approve of some of them, and are disgusted by others.”³⁹ It is this experience of social approval and disapproval that leads people to judge according to moral worth, rather than mere utility, and to experience pride and shame.

Once in society, the desire for approbation — or, as we might (somewhat anachronistically) call it, the desire for *recognition* — comes to regulate all human conduct. We might be tempted to draw a line between what Smith calls the “selfish” drives and the “social” or “unsocial” ones, between those that are active even for the desert island dweller and those that presuppose the existence of other people.⁴⁰ But once in society, Smith makes clear, these qualities take on a very different character, aiming first and foremost at recognition rather than bodily pleasure:

[W]hatever may be the tendency of those virtues [of prudence], or of the contrary vices, with regard to our bodily ease and security, the sentiments which they naturally excite in others are the objects of a much more passionate desire or aversion than all their other consequences...to be amiable, to be respectable, to be the proper object of esteem, is by every well-disposed mind more valued than all the ease and security which love, respect, and esteem can procure us...⁴¹

We therefore cannot say that there is a sharp line between selfish drives and social or unsocial drives. In society, all three come to be regulated by the sentiments of others, and all three aim at esteem or recognition.⁴² Nor (as the just-cited passage shows) can we reduce this desire for

³⁹ *Theory* III.1.3, 110-11.

⁴⁰ Smith distinguishes the three types of drives at *Theory* I.ii.3, 34-43.

⁴¹ *Theory* VI.ii.2.12, 297-98.

⁴² *Theory* VI.concl.1, 262: “Concern for our own happiness recommends to us the virtue of prudence: concern for that of other people, the virtues of justice and beneficence...Regard to the

recognition to the material benefits that it brings, thus reducing social drives to material drives; it is desired for its own sake regardless of its utility.⁴³

It is in this light that we must understand the basis of the motive of economic interest.

The desire for wealth does not primarily aim at increased satisfaction of physical wants; rather, it is just another form of recognition-seeking:

Though it is in order to supply the necessities and conveniencies of the body, that the advantages of external fortune are originally recommended to us, yet we cannot live long in the world without perceiving that the respect of our equals, our credit and rank in the society we live in, depend very much upon the degree in which we possess, or are supposed to possess, those advantages. The desire of becoming the proper objects of this respect, of deserving and obtaining this credit and rank among our equals, is, perhaps, the strongest of all our desires, and our anxiety to obtain the advantages of fortune is accordingly much more excited and irritated by this desire, than by that of supplying all the necessities and conveniencies of the body, which are always very easily satisfied.⁴⁴

The same point is made more explicitly and rhetorically in Book I of the *Theory*:

[I]t is chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of mankind, that we pursue riches and avoid poverty. For to what purpose is all the toil and bustle of this world? What is the end of avarice and ambition, of the pursuit of wealth, of power, and preheminance? Is it to supply the necessities of nature? The wages of the meanest laborer can supply them....From whence, then, arises that emulation which runs through all the different ranks of men, and what are the advantages which we propose by that great purpose of human life which we call bettering our condition? To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which we can propose to derive from it. It is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure, which interests us. But vanity is always founded upon the belief of our being the object of attention and approbation.⁴⁵

sentiments of other people, however, comes afterwards both to enforce and to direct the practice of all those virtues.”

⁴³ Cf. *Theory* I.i.2.1, 14: “But both the pleasure [of mutual sympathy] and the pain [of its lack] are always felt so instantaneously, and often upon such frivolous occasions, that it seems evident that neither of them can be derived from any such self-interested consideration.”

⁴⁴ *Theory* VI.i.3, 212.

⁴⁵ *Theory* I.iii.2.1, 50. This passage seems to stand in some tension with the “deception thesis” found in Part IV of the *Theory* and discussed above. That wealth does not satisfy basic human

The motive behind economic advancement has little to do with the perceived utility of wealth; its real root is vanity. It aims not at increased want-satisfaction in absolute terms, but with an enhancement of social status relative to others.⁴⁶

This passage is also the only point in the *Theory* where Smith refers to the desire of “bettering our condition,” to which he links “all the toil and bustle of this world,” the pursuit not merely of wealth but also of power and preeminence. And it is this that allows us to connect the account of sympathy and esteem-seeking in the *Theory* to the account of self-interest in the *Wealth of Nations*.

The fullest account of the desire to better one’s condition in the *Wealth of Nations* comes when Smith raises the question of why the principle of frugality seems to predominate in most people, leading them to save more money than they spend. He answers:

[T]he principle which prompts to save, is the desire of bettering our condition, a desire which, though generally calm and dispassionate, comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave...An augmentation of fortune is the means by which the greater part of men propose and wish to better their condition. It is the means the most vulgar and the most obvious; and the most likely way of augmenting their fortune, is to save and accumulate some part of what they acquire...⁴⁷

The desire of bettering our condition is not inherently an economic drive; it relates to all the manifold ways in which humans hope to improve their situations. In practice, the desire tends to manifest itself in the drive for wealth, as wealth is “the most vulgar and the most obvious” means of bettering one’s condition. In turn, the drive for wealth tends to manifest itself in the principle

needs better than a humble fortune is “so obvious,” Smith says here, “that there is nobody ignorant of it.”

⁴⁶ This theme was a recurring one in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought. Cf. Lovejoy, *Reflections*, 207-15.

⁴⁷ *Wealth of Nations* II.iii.28, 341-42.

of frugality, since saving and accumulating is “the most likely way” of increasing one’s fortune. But far from being a unique drive rooted in material need, the economic self-interest that is so foundational to the *Wealth of Nations* is simply the most widely prevalent of a larger set of recognition-seeking behaviors.

We should also observe — a point that we will treat in more depth later — that Smith’s explanation for why the desire for wealth is the predominant way of bettering one’s condition describes only the conditions found in modern commercial societies. In such societies, economic advancement is “the most obvious” way of gaining esteem, and frugality “the most likely” method of economic advancement. But the conditions that make this the case are far from socially or historically universal, and in different circumstances other modes of conduct will be more obvious and prevalent ways of bettering one’s condition.⁴⁸

“Not the ease, or the pleasure,” but “the vanity”; not “the necessities and conveniencies of the body,” but “our credit and rank in the society we live in.” Smith is far more explicit than his predecessors in framing the contrast between his own view and the materialist one, in arguing that economic behavior belongs to the social realm *and not* the atomistic realm of material need. It is precisely because of this explicit quality that we might suspect that an important intellectual shift was already occurring. A century earlier, La Rochefoucauld had found it necessary to warn his readers that he used *Intérêt* to mean “the interest concerned with glory or honor” more often than “the interest concerned with material goods,” a sign that the word’s meaning had begun to take on the connotation that he wished to reject.⁴⁹ Although Smith repeatedly denies that economic

⁴⁸ Cf. Force, *Self-Interest*, 47, 246-47, 261-62.

⁴⁹ La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, prefatory note, 2; the implication of this statement is pointed out by Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, 39. See above, chapter VI, note 17.

accumulation springs from considerations of material utility, we might likewise take his denials themselves as signs that such a view was becoming something close to a commonplace. Whereas the ancients could run together “avarice” and “ambition” as similar phenomena, and Hobbes could casually suggest that the desire for riches “may be reduced” to the desire for power,⁵⁰ Smith insists on his claims as if they were counterintuitive, in need of explicit argument. Perhaps we should therefore take him as the last and most systematic representative of a waning tradition.

4.

Smith’s account of vanity and recognition-seeking bears a strong resemblance to Rousseau’s in the *Discourse on Inequality*, a work that Smith reviewed at length in 1755.⁵¹ It is true that Smith rejects the notion of a historical state of nature populated by asocial individuals; his history begins with “savage” hunters already living in small groups.⁵² But he accepts Rousseau’s basic point about the crucial importance of life in society for the development of human moral psychology: that it is only in society, by observing the sentiments of others, that humans can become self-conscious, developing the notions of right and wrong and of pride and shame. As we have seen, Smith argues that the hypothetical person who grew up in isolation

⁵⁰ See above, chapter III, note 93.

⁵¹ See “A Letter to the Authors of the *Edinburgh Review*,” in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, 242-54. For more on Smith’s relationship to Rousseau, see Force, *Self-Interest*; Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society*; Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society*.

⁵² The closest thing to a “state of nature” moment in Smith, in his account of the formation of hunter societies, already presupposes humans living in groups. See *Lectures* (A)i.27, 14: “If we should suppose 10 or 12 persons of different sexes settled in an uninhabited island, the first method they would fall upon for their sustenance would be to support themselves by the wild fruits and wild animals which the country afforded.”

would still be able to judge his own behavior according to the advantage or disadvantage it procured him, but these would be mere judgments of taste without moral content; he could feel neither pride nor shame, merit nor guilt, for “[a]ll such sentiments suppose the idea of some other being.”⁵³ But “[b]ring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. It is placed in the countenance and behavior of those he lives with.”⁵⁴ Only here can he examine his own behavior in light of how he imagines it must appear to those around him. Smith’s contrast between the person raised in isolation and humans in society is well captured by Rousseau’s contrast between savage and sociable man: “the Savage lives within himself; sociable man, always outside himself, is capable of living only in the opinion of others and, so to speak, derives the sentiment of his own existence solely from their judgment.”⁵⁵

Smith would also accept — but, as we will see, in a modified and less moralized form — Rousseau’s corresponding distinction between *amour de soi-même*, the “natural sentiment which inclines every animal to tend towards its self-preservation,” and *amour-propre*, the “relative sentiment, factitious, and born in society, which inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else.”⁵⁶ The two agree that it is a form of this latter sentiment, “the ardent desire to raise one’s relative fortune less out of genuine need than in order to place oneself above others,” that serves as the motive for economic advancement in commercial society.⁵⁷

⁵³ *Theory* IV.2.12, 193.

⁵⁴ *Theory* III.1.3, 110.

⁵⁵ Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* §57, in *Discourses*, 187.

⁵⁶ Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* Note XV, in *Discourses*, 214. As we have seen, Mandeville had drawn a similar distinction between “self-love” and “self-liking”; see above, chapter VI, section 4.

⁵⁷ Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* §27, in *Discourses*, 171. Not coincidentally, this passage — like the just-cited contrast between savage and sociable man — is among the passages of the

The distinction between *amour de soi-même* and *amour-propre* is in fact a useful way of understanding the difference between the theory that sees economic self-interest as a form of need-satisfaction and the theory that sees it as a form of recognition-seeking. On the former view, economic behavior is built upon *amour de soi-même*, the self-preservation drive found even in the state of nature, whereas social and political behavior is built upon *amour-propre*, the recognition drive governing conduct relative to other people. On the latter view, shared by Rousseau and Smith, *amour de soi-même* sets a minimal standard of self-preservation that every human must meet, but virtually all behavior in society beyond this minimal threshold — economic as well as political — is dictated by *amour-propre*.

In his 1755 review of the *Discourse on Inequality*, Smith argues that Rousseau's system bears deep yet tacit similarities to that of Mandeville.⁵⁸ By the time we get to the *Theory* a few years later, Rousseau is no longer mentioned by name, but Smith devotes a section of the work to rebutting Mandeville and La Rochefoucauld, whose systems he deems "licentious."⁵⁹ The connection is a telling one, both for Smith's divergences from La Rochefoucauld and Mandeville and for his unacknowledged debts to them.⁶⁰

What makes the two thinkers "licentious," for Smith, is their contention that all seemingly-virtuous action is performed from vanity and the love of praise. As we have already seen, the

Discourse that Smith translated in his review of the work (*Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, 252-53).

⁵⁸ *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, 250.

⁵⁹ *Theory* VII.ii.4, 306-14. In the final edition Smith removed La Rochefoucauld's name from the chapter at the request of one of the moralist's descendants; see *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, Letter 199, 238-39.

⁶⁰ For other accounts of Smith's relationship to Mandeville, see above, chapter VI, note 12.

notion that any such action *could* originate in *amour-propre* was one implication of the Augustinian moral psychology developed by Jansenists like Pascal and Nicole. And although both La Rochefoucauld and Mandeville coyly insisted that they, like true Augustinians, held out the possibility of true *charité* accessible through grace of God, they could easily be read as suggesting that all human action *was* (and not merely *could be*) the product of self-love. Such a claim, Smith suggests, would “take away altogether the distinction between virtue and vice.”⁶¹

Yet Smith allows that Mandeville’s theory “in some respects bordered on the truth.”⁶² More generally, although he was eager to differentiate himself from this tradition, he stands in a more complicated relationship to it than his attack on “licentious systems” might suggest. Smith’s attack on Mandeville has two main strands, one concerning his definition of terms and the other concerning his description of moral psychology. First, he disputes Mandeville’s contention that any action in which self-love or the desire for praise plays a role can therefore be labeled vicious — for vanity properly called, Smith argues, refers only to the love of *undeserved* praise. “The man who desires esteem for what is really estimable, desires nothing but what he is justly entitled to,” and this cannot rightly be labeled a vice.⁶³ More broadly, true virtue consists not, as Mandeville had suggested, in “complete self-denial” of the passions, but rather in restraining them to a manageable level, and to call these moderated passions vicious is a mere semantic trick.⁶⁴

Smith’s second charge is that Mandeville has not merely mislabeled many forms of virtue

⁶¹ *Theory* VII.ii.4.6, 308.

⁶² *Theory* VII.ii.4.14, 313.

⁶³ *Theory* VII.ii.4.8-9, 309-10.

⁶⁴ *Theory* VI.ii.4.11-12, 312.

as vice, but has misdescribed human moral psychology by overlooking the role of conscience. For the “licentious” thinkers, virtue is merely a mask that humans put on in public to win esteem and then take off again in private when it no longer serves a purpose. But when the socialization process is successful, Smith emphasizes, we do not merely act according to social norms to gain recognition from the actual spectators around us; we also internalize these norms and become the spectators and judges of our own behavior. We seek “not only praise, but praiseworthiness,” and base our conduct on what would earn the praise of a fully-informed and impartial spectator, regardless of the actual opinions of those around us.⁶⁵ Virtue is more than a mask, because its dictates become internalized as duties.

These two moves, Smith believes, allow him to rescue the distinction between virtue and vice from the “licentious” thinkers. Given Mandeville’s notoriety, it certainly made rhetorical sense for Smith to highlight the distance separating them. Yet the differences between them are perhaps not as deep as Smith insists. For instance, in accusing Mandeville of neglecting the role of conscience, and the possibility that norms could be internalized, Smith seems to misrepresent his predecessor. As we have seen, Mandeville is perfectly willing to allow that norms can be internalized; he simply claims that even acting according to an internalized norm remains a form of vanity, for the person who does so “must confess, that the Reward of a Virtuous Action...consists in a certain Pleasure he procures to himself by Contemplating on his own Worth.”⁶⁶

More broadly, what Smith shares with both Mandeville and the French moralists is a sense of the critical role of esteem-seeking in motivating conduct and establishing norms. While

⁶⁵ *Theory* III.2.1, 114.

⁶⁶ *Fable of the Bees*, I, 57; see above, chapter VI, note 40.

Smith denies the suggestion that seemingly-virtuous conduct aims simply to *gain* esteem, he accepts that virtue aims to *deserve* it, and that our ideas of the kind of conduct that deserves esteem can originally be derived from nothing but our experience of what does in fact gain it.⁶⁷ All moral conduct therefore remains a matter of *amour-propre* in the minimal Rousseauian sense of “living outside oneself,” for even the most perfect virtue contains “some reference, though not to what is, yet to what in reason and propriety ought to be, the opinion of others.”⁶⁸ What Smith presents, therefore, is a sort of demoralized Mandevillian account of human behavior — that is, one which accepts that social behavior in general and virtue in particular spring from esteem-seeking, but which takes this as a bare descriptive fact about human psychology rather than proof of man’s essential viciousness.

But although we can see from this account how all social behavior is for Smith ultimately rooted in the quest for recognition or esteem, it might seem that we have failed to explain the specific phenomena with which we started, economic self-interest and the love of domination. After all, the *Theory* describes how the sympathy mechanism allows humans to make moral judgments, and how these judgments create social norms that become internalized as private guides for conduct.⁶⁹ It thus explains how esteem-seeking can produce virtue. But this bare

⁶⁷ Smith states this explicitly in a passage inserted into the second edition of the *Theory* (and later replaced in the sixth). Although the “tribunal within the breast...can reverse the decisions of all mankind...yet, if we enquire into the origin of its institution, its jurisdiction we shall find is in a great measure derived from the authority of that very tribunal, whose decisions it so often and so justly reverses” (*Theory* III.1.12, 129). Smith suggests that the “tribunal within the breast” originates in the child’s discovery that our “natural desire to please” and win esteem from everyone is impossible to realize in practice, and that our conduct must therefore be regulated by something deeper than the contingent sentiments of those around us.

⁶⁸ *Theory* VII.ii.4.10, 311.

⁶⁹ As outlined in the first four parts of the *Theory*, a character or action receives approbation (or, in our usage, recognition) according to the propriety of its motives, the benefit it confers on

account would seem to suggest that the natural endpoint of the socialization process would be a beneficent society based on mutual good-will. How, then, can we explain the prevalence of behaviors that are acknowledged not to be virtuous — of vanity, domination, avarice, and ambition?

5.

Smith's solution to this puzzle lies in what he refers to, in his final 1790 revision of the *Theory* in 1790, as "the corruption of our moral sentiments." The focus on vanity becomes more prominent in this revision, and the tone more pessimistic. Yet we will see that the bleak account of human society that Smith gives in the last year of his life can be viewed less as a radical shift than as an elaboration on themes already present in his thought.

The bulk of Smith's account of the sympathy mechanism in the *Theory* explains how recognition-seeking can instill virtue in what we might call the "horizontal" relationships between equals. In such relationships it is virtuous conduct that gains esteem, and esteem-seekers therefore strive to act virtuously. "Our rank and credit *among our equals*...depend very much upon, what, perhaps, a virtuous man would wish them to depend entirely, our character and conduct, or upon the confidence, esteem, and good-will, which these naturally excite in the people we live with."⁷⁰ But alongside these horizontal relationships exist "vertical" relationships based on unequal rank, power, and wealth. For Smith the corruption of moral sentiments lies in

others, its conformity to the rules regulating propriety and merit, and the beauty provided by its apparent utility. Smith summarizes these four criteria at *Theory* VII.iii.3.16, 326.

⁷⁰ *Theory* VI.i.4, 213, emphasis added. As Phillipson has argued, these sorts of relationships correspond to the sort of voluntary and face-to-face interactions characteristic of institutions like the clubs and civic associations of eighteenth-century society; see Phillipson, "Adam Smith as Civic Moralist," 198.

the distorting effect that vertical inequalities have upon the operation of sympathy and approbation. It is this corruption that causes people not only to seek recognition through unvirtuous means, but also to gain it successfully through such means, and it is this that accounts for ambition and avarice as prevalent modes of esteem-seeking.

The basis for the corruption of sentiments lies in the fact that “our propensity to sympathize with joy is much stronger than our propensity to sympathize with sorrow.”⁷¹ People accordingly seek higher social status, believing that this will bring them greater esteem: “[t]he rich man glories in his riches, because he feels that they naturally draw upon him the attention of the world.” But unlike the mistaken belief in the greater utility of wealth, this belief is no delusion, for the wealthy and powerful really do receive more approbation than their social inferiors:

The man of rank and distinction...is observed by all the world. Every body is eager to look at him, and to conceive, at least by sympathy, that joy and exultation with which his circumstances naturally inspire him. His actions are the objects of the public care. Scarce a word, scarce a gesture, can fall from him that is altogether neglected....Every calamity that befalls them, every injury that is done them, excites in the breast of the spectator ten times more compassion and resentment than he would have felt, had the same things happened to other men. ⁷²

But it is not merely that we sympathize more strongly with the wealthy and powerful; we sympathize with them in a qualitatively different manner. The calculus of propriety and merit that regulates our judgments of equals, Smith suggests, ceases to apply to our superiors, with the result that esteem no longer attaches to virtue alone. Inordinate ambition can acquire “a certain

⁷¹ *Theory* I.iii.1.5, 45.

⁷² *Theory* I.iii.2.1-2, 50-52. Cf. *Wealth of Nations* I.xi.c.31, 190: “With the greater part of rich people, the chief enjoyment of riches consists in the parade of riches, which in their eyes is never so compleat as when they appear to possess those decisive marks of opulence which nobody can possess but themselves.”

irregular greatness” even when it is both extravagant and unjust; “[h]ence the general admiration for heroes and conquerors, and even for statesmen, whose projects have been very daring and extensive, though altogether devoid of justice.”⁷³ Success can sway even the impartial spectator, “cover[ing] from his eyes, not only the great imprudence, but frequently the great injustice of their enterprises,” with the result that a “wicked and worthless man of parts often goes through the world with much more credit than he deserves.”⁷⁴

This tendency, according to Smith, nonetheless has two beneficial consequences for social and political life. The first is its role in promoting social stability, as our great and even irrational admiration for the successful teaches us “to submit more easily to those superiors, whom the course of human affairs may assign to us.”⁷⁵ Here we can see a clear echo of the distinction between utility and authority which Smith took from Hume and which figures prominently in the *Lectures*. While one motive for entering and remaining in civil society is the benefit that government confers to individuals, this is not, as Locke and others had argued, the only motive. Alongside it is the fact that “every one naturally has a disposition to respect an

⁷³ *Theory* III.6.7, 173-74. Cf. *Theory* VI.i.16, 217: “The violence and injustice of great conquerors are often regarded with foolish wonder and admiration’ as opposed to the contempt felt for petty criminals, whose action differs only in scale.”

⁷⁴ *Theory* VI.iii.30, 252; VI.i.16, 217. Compare Smith’s discussion of Louis XIV, where he notes that it was not through his superior virtue that the monarch became the most admired prince of his time, but through his “air, his manner, his deportment,” and his “elegant and graceful sense of his own superiority.” “Compared with these...no other virtue, it seems, appeared to have any merit. Knowledge, industry, valour, and beneficence, trembled, were abashed, and lost all dignity before them” (*Theory* I.iii.2.4, 54).

⁷⁵ *Theory* VI.iii.30, 253.

established authority and superiority in others, whatever they be.”⁷⁶ Nor can this “obsequiousness” be reduced to yet another consideration of utility, such as a prudent decision to throw in one’s lot with the powerful, because it “more frequently arises from our admiration for the advantages of their situation, than from any private expectation of benefit from their goodwill.”⁷⁷ The result is that rulers command an allegiance that is greater than what, strictly speaking, they deserve. “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.” In practice, only the most grievous injustices can overcome this propensity to obey and provoke resistance; even after being driven to this point, the people are quick to forgive and forget.⁷⁸ Yet although this obedience may be the result of superficial and corrupted sentiments, it is nevertheless highly beneficial in maintaining social order.

The second beneficial consequence of this tendency to admire the rich and powerful is that it prompts ambition and thereby spurs people to action, setting in motion the business of the world. It might seem paradoxical that the same principle should lie behind both obedience and ambition. But sympathy, the capacity to put ourselves in others’ places, helps resolve this apparent contradiction. When we picture ourselves in the situation of the great, “in those delusive colours in which the imagination is apt to paint it,” we admire them and defer to them; at the

⁷⁶ *Lectures* (A)v.119, 318; at *Lectures* (B)12-13, 401, Smith explicitly connects the principle of authority to the account of the distinction of ranks given in the *Theory*. Cf. *Wealth of Nations* V.i.b.12, 715.

⁷⁷ *Theory* I.iii.2.3, 52.

⁷⁸ *Theory* I.iii.2.3, 53.

same time, we desire ourselves to be so admired, and strive to reach their station.⁷⁹ The resulting struggle for place and distinction has both its benefits and its dangers: it is responsible on the one hand for “all the tumult and bustle” in the world, on the other for “all the rapine and injustice.”⁸⁰

In the chapter titled “of the corruption of our moral sentiments,” added to the 1790 version of the *Theory*, Smith criticizes more explicitly the tendency to admire wealth and power, and emphasizes that it is the reason that recognition-seeking generally fails to inculcate virtue:

To deserve, to acquire, and to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind, are the great objects of ambition and emulation. Two different roads are presented to us, equally leading to the attainment of this so much desired object; the one, by the study of wisdom and the practice of virtue; the other, by the acquisition of wealth and greatness.

But it is the latter model that is more “gaudy and glittering...forcing itself upon the notice of every wandering eye.” As a result it is

but a small party, who are the real and steady admirers of wisdom and virtue. The great mob of mankind are the admirers and worshippers, and, what may seem more extraordinary, more frequently the disinterested admirers and worshippers, of wealth and greatness....It is scarce agreeable to good morals, or even to good language, perhaps, to say, that mere wealth and greatness, abstracted from merit and virtue, deserve our respect. We must acknowledge, however, that they almost constantly obtain it; and that they may, therefore, be considered as, in some respect, the natural objects of it.⁸¹

Thus Smith is ultimately not so far from the Mandevillian vision of a society built upon vanity. He has sought to establish, against Mandeville, that it is only the desire for undeserved esteem, and not the desire for esteem as such, that can be labeled vain, thereby conceding that virtue is

⁷⁹ *Theory* I.iii.2.2, 51.

⁸⁰ *Theory* I.iii.2.8, 57. A more unambivalently negative assessment comes at *Theory* III.3.31, 149: “The great source of both the misery and disorders of human life, seems to arise from over-rating the difference between one permanent situation and another.”

⁸¹ *Theory* I.iii.3.2-4, 62. The final sentence of this passage is sufficient to show that Smith does not consistently identify what is “natural” with what is desirable.

rooted in esteem-seeking while insisting that it can remain virtue nonetheless. But if it is only a small minority who seek and confer esteem through the deserving means of wisdom and virtue, while “the great mob of mankind” do so based on wealth and greatness, then it appears that vanity is the main engine of society after all.⁸²

Smith repeatedly stresses in this chapter that the desire for wealth and the desire for power are linked manifestations of the same phenomenon; there is no distinct “economic interest” that is qualitatively different from other forms of social or political interest. Both avarice and ambition are forms of vanity, of the attempt to gain recognition not through wisdom and virtue but through the corrupting vertical relations of power and dependence: “The objects of avarice and ambition differ only in their greatness. A miser is as furious about a halfpenny, as a man of ambition about the conquest of a kingdom.”⁸³

This insistence on the essential similarity of power-seeking and wealth-seeking cuts both ways. On one level, it undercuts those champions of modern commercial society who would argue that economic self-interest represents a fundamentally more rational mode of behavior than the pursuit of power or glory. But by the same token, it undercuts those critics of commercial society who would seek to uphold ancient martial virtue against modern commerce: the desires for power and glory may not be any less rational than the desire for wealth, but neither are they any less vain. It is this that differentiates Smith’s position from traditional republican critiques of modern “corruption.”

The account in the *Theory* focuses primarily on the operations of sympathy under the

⁸² Cf. Force, *Self-Interest*, 47, although (as noted below) it is not merely “civilized” or commercial behavior that Smith sees as rooted in vanity.

⁸³ *Theory* III.6.7, 174.

conditions of modern commercial society. These are conditions in which political power is separated from economic power, in the sense that economic relations of production and distribution are no longer identical with political relations of direct dependence, and wealth is esteemed for its own sake independently of its association with political power. In these conditions the desires for power and for wealth appear to be distinct and become regulated by distinct behaviors.

But this account of the operation of vanity under modern conditions does not imply that vanity neatly breaks down into historically constant categories of “political interest” and “economic interest.” Since vanity refers, for our purposes, to any form of recognition-seeking through vertical relationships governed by power rather than horizontal relationships governed by virtue,⁸⁴ its concrete manifestations will vary according to sociohistorical circumstances, depending on the forms of conduct that happen to be esteemed and the power relations that happen to govern social life. If there is a common denominator for these diverse modes of recognition-seeking, however, it is the drive for superiority over others.

Furthermore, we should not make the mistake of reducing this lust for superiority to yet another consideration of utility — to the idea that humans seek power over others in order to further their own political or economic interest. If anything, the causal relationship runs the other way. We have seen that “to be observed, to be attended to,” “to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind,” are the ultimate objects of all political or economic interest.⁸⁵ And since, as Smith

⁸⁴ This usage is close to, but slightly broader than, the definition given at *Theory* VI.iii.36, 255-56, where vanity (as opposed to pride) is defined as the attempt by an agent to receive approbation that he himself knows that he does not deserve. I use it more generally to refer to esteem-seeking through undeserving means, whether or not the agent understands them as undeserving.

⁸⁵ *Theory* I.iii.2.1, 50; I.iii.3.2, 62.

has claimed, asymmetrical relations of power and dependence really do confer recognition — albeit in a form that would be unsatisfactory to the wise and virtuous — human conduct will naturally tend toward the establishment and maintenance of these relations of power.

All this exposition is by way of explaining the “real interest” and the “love of domination” with which we started. I have first tried to argue against one intuitive way of thinking about these concepts that Smith’s language sometimes seems to suggest. This is the view that economic interest is “real,” because it is “natural,” because it is derived from the absolute biological needs that every human necessarily has, whereas the *libido dominandi* is “artificial” or “unnatural,” because it is derived from drives relative to other humans which are only the product of contingent and irrational social and political arrangements. By this logic, the move from an economy structured around domination and dependence to one structured around economic self-interest would be the story of nature triumphing over artifice, of humans’ rational (because natural) drives finally liberated from their irrational (because artificial) drives, of the economy liberated from politics. On this account, the only surprising thing about the end of relations of direct dependence in Europe is that it did not happen sooner, that politics proved so tenacious in trumping nature for so long.

As I have argued, however, these firm distinctions between “rational” and “irrational” interests, “natural” and “artificial” desires, “economic” and “political” motives, cannot be maintained. For Smith, self-interest and the love of domination are not opposites but cousins. They are both forms of vanity — of the tendency, rooted in human corruption, to seek recognition through vertical relations of superiority. This is not, of course, to paint Smith as a relativist who saw no distinction between the two; he clearly deplored the love of domination as a more malicious and repugnant form of vanity. It is merely to say that both are in one sense

“artificial,” in that they only arise in society, and in another sense “natural,” in that they are natural manifestations of recognition-seeking within society. We may even say that both are “rational,” insofar as all “rational self-interest” for Smith ultimately boils down to recognition-seeking, and relations of power and dominance really do confer esteem among the bulk of humankind. (If we can speak of a “true” form of self-interest in Smith’s moral theory, in the sense of “correct” rather than “natural,” it would be wisdom and virtue rather than economic advancement.) This explains the persistence of domination as a mode of economic behavior; in effect it offers a more direct path to the same corrupted form of recognition that economic self-interest strives for.

But this makes the issue of Europe’s emergence from domination to self-interest a more complicated one. This transition cannot be explained as the triumph of nature over artifice, or rationality over irrationality; in fact, it cannot be explained by recourse to Smith’s view of human nature at all.

6.

Given these philosophical foundations, the only explanation that Smith can give for the emergence of commercial society is a historical one. Because his view of human nature suggests that the natural and stable endpoint of the recognition drive is a slave society based on relations of domination, it is history rather than philosophy or anthropology that must bear the burden of explanation for modern European commercial society. In this regard it is unsurprising that Smith’s great unfinished project, on which he worked for at least the last three decades of his life, was a historical account of the development of law and government. While he never completed this work, we can see its general contours from the *Lectures* and, especially, Book III

of the *Wealth of Nations*, in which he aims to explain the historical rise of commercial society.⁸⁶

Smith's history is — and must be — a story of contingency. Just as in the *Lectures* he notes that the end of slavery in Western Europe was due to circumstances that “are peculiar to it,” so in the *Wealth of Nations* he describes the development of modern Europe as an “unnatural and retrograde” inversion of the “natural order of things.”⁸⁷ To say that the story is contingent is not to say that it is utterly arbitrary. Istvan Hont, for instance, has suggested that Smith's grand narrative is one of “liberty gained, lost and regained,” in which luxury and commerce first bring about the collapse of the ancient republics but later midwife the birth of commercial society and modern liberty out of feudalism.⁸⁸ But many unforeseeable circumstances, on Smith's telling, combined to bring about the end of feudalism, and his narrative does not fit neatly into the neat developmental categories of the four stages theory of history.

In particular, Smith believes that “the natural order” of economic development ordains the primacy of agriculture over manufacturing, the country over the city: “As subsistence is, in the nature of things, prior to conveniency and luxury, so the industry which procures the former, must necessarily be prior to that which ministers to the latter.”⁸⁹ In a healthy development pattern, then, the growth of cities and the manufacturing sector will always remain proportionate to the subsistence afforded by agriculture. But because of the “manners and customs which the nature of their original government introduced,” medieval Europe took a different path,

⁸⁶ Smith first describes his proposed discourse on law and government in the original 1759 edition of the *Theory* (*Theory* VII.iv.37, 342).

⁸⁷ *Lectures* (A)iii.117, 187; *Wealth of Nations* III.i.9, 380.

⁸⁸ Hont, “Adam Smith's history of law and government as political theory,” 165.

⁸⁹ *Wealth of Nations* III.i.2, 377.

developing an urban manufacturing sector that far outstripped its rural agriculture.⁹⁰ Europe's uniqueness lay in this inverted course of development, and for Smith's interlocutors the Physiocrats, the continent's economic woes could be traced to the imbalance between manufacturing and agriculture. Part of Smith's polemical purpose in the *Wealth of Nations* was therefore to insist, against Quesnay and his followers, that Europe must live with its unnatural order rather than attempt to reverse it by sweeping and systematic reforms.⁹¹

Yet reading Smith's history of Europe in the *Wealth of Nations* in conjunction with the theory of slavery from the *Lectures* suggests a stronger conclusion: that Europe's unnatural development was not for him merely an unfortunate yet ineradicable fact, but a positive good. For if it is only the "peculiar" circumstances of European history that explain its divergence from the gloomy predictions of the *Lectures*, it is hard not to connect these circumstances with the "unnatural and retrograde" path described in the *Wealth of Nations*. We will see, in fact, that it is precisely to this inverted path that Smith attributes the end of slavery and direct dependence in Europe and the emergence of commercial society. While the four stages theory of history in its broad outlines may account for the emergence of trading slave societies such as Athens and Carthage, it is not clear that it can explain the emergence of full-fledged commercial society at all.⁹²

⁹⁰ *Wealth of Nations* III.i.9, 380.

⁹¹ For Smith's critique of Physiocracy see *Wealth of Nations* IV.ix, 663-88. See also Hont, "Adam Smith and the Political Economy of the 'Unnatural and Retrograde' Order," in *Jealousy of Trade*, 354-388.

⁹² Such a view might seem to stand in tension with one famous quotation attributed to Smith: "Little else is requisite to carry a state to the highest degree of opulence from the lowest barbarism, but peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice; all the rest being brought about by the natural course of things. All governments which thwart this natural course, which force things into another channel, or which endeavour to arrest the progress of society at a

If modern society is for Smith a historical aberration, how does he explain it? Medieval Europe, in his portrayal, was in many ways recognizable as a slave society conforming to the theory of history in the *Lectures*. It was the product of the conquest of the Roman Empire by Germanic shepherd societies, whose tribal leaders “acquired or usurped to themselves the greater part of the lands,” resulting in most of the territory falling into the hands of a few great proprietors.⁹³ Such inequality of property “would, in a country where agriculture and division of land was introduced but arts were not practiced, introduce still greater dependence than amongst shepherds.”⁹⁴ The subsequent introduction of primogeniture and entails prevented these great estates from being divided up, ensuring the perpetuation of this inequality.

Primogeniture and entails were economically inefficient and contrary to the “natural law of succession” that all children should receive an equal share. Their institution could be attributed to the fact that in the chaotic conditions of medieval Europe, there was no clear separation of political and economic power:

[W]hen land was considered as the means, not of subsistence merely, but of power and protection, it was thought better that it should descend undivided to one. In those disorderly times, every great landlord was a sort of petty prince. His tenants were his

particular point, are unnatural, and to support themselves are obliged to be oppressive and tyrannical.” (Stewart, “Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith,” 322.) It is worth noting, first, that this quotation is not preserved in any of Smith’s surviving writings, but rather is quoted by his friend Dugald Stewart from a manuscript that has not survived; and second, that Stewart dates the manuscript to 1755, well before either the jurisprudence lectures or the *Wealth of Nations*. It therefore seems to me that the views set forth in latter writings should take precedence if they seem to conflict with his statement here. In any case, I do not think that there is any conflict strictly speaking: Smith here suggests that the “highest degree of opulence” will occur naturally in the absence of “oppressive and tyrannical” government, but does not state any particular confidence that oppressive and tyrannical government will tend to be absent throughout history.

⁹³ *Wealth of Nations* III.ii.1, 381-82.

⁹⁴ *Lectures* (A)iv.116, 245.

subjects. He was their judge, and in some respects their legislator in peace, and their leader in war. He made war according to his own discretion, frequently against his neighbours, and sometimes against his sovereign.⁹⁵

Needless to say, this situation was not conducive to economic improvement. Security was a more pressing concern, and besides, the great landlords tended not to have the required inclination and abilities, the “exact attention to small savings and small gains.”⁹⁶ As for the tenants, Smith notes, “[t]hey were all or almost all slaves,” although “their slavery was of a milder kind than that known among the antient Greeks and Romans.”⁹⁷ With no hope for gain, the serfs had no interest in increasing productivity, resulting in general economic stagnation. This was a classic illustration of the fact that “the work done by slaves...is in the end the dearest of any,” but the institution nonetheless persisted for a familiar reason:

The pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors. Wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen.⁹⁸

Smith here restates the central conflict between economic interest and the love of domination first found in the *Lectures*.

On Smith’s telling, the moral, economic, and political ills of medieval Europe all stemmed from the same cause, the prevalence of direct political and economic dependence. This dependence resulted, on a moral level, in the domination and oppression of the serfs and tenants;

⁹⁵ *Wealth of Nations* III.ii.3, 382-83.

⁹⁶ *Wealth of Nations* III.ii.7, 385.

⁹⁷ *Wealth of Nations* III.ii.8, 386. Despite the fact that serfs enjoyed some limited rights, Smith classifies them as slaves; this suggests that he sees the essential aspect of slavery not as the use of arbitrary and unlimited power but as the existence of legal structures of permanent personal dependence.

⁹⁸ *Wealth of Nations* III.ii.9-10, 387-88.

on an economic level, in the stagnation of agriculture and manufacturing; on a political level, in the disorders caused by a host of “petty princes” with armies of retainers and dependents at their command.⁹⁹ In such circumstances there was no real separation of political from economic power, as economic structures of production and distribution were identical with political and legal structures of rule. By the same token, the solution to this predicament, in which the bulk of the population lived “almost in a continual state of war with their neighbours, and of servile dependency upon their superiors,”¹⁰⁰ had to center upon the end of unfree labor and direct dependence. The establishment of civil government, in which the sovereign no longer competed with rivals commanding private armies of dependents, was linked with the establishment of commercial society, in which a freed urban and agrarian workforce ended the economic stagnation of the slave economy.

How did this come about? In the *Lectures*, Smith gives an account of the end of feudalism centered on the concurrence of interests between king and clergy, both of whom had an interest in weakening the great lords by “set[ting] the slaves at liberty.”¹⁰¹ In the *Wealth of Nations*, however, he sets aside this account, and instead explains the end of feudalism by emphasizing other features that distinguished Western Europe from the typical slave society — foremost among them, the quasi-independent cities that were a legacy of antiquity. Much of this

⁹⁹ Cf. *Lectures* (A)vi.6, 333: “the disorders in any country are more or less according to the number of retainers and dependents in it...” And feudal lords were not the sovereign’s only rivals; Smith also mentions the similar structures of power and dependence centered on the Catholic Church, which “may be considered as the most formidable combination that ever was formed against the authority and security of civil government, as well as against the liberty, reason, and happiness of mankind” (*Wealth of Nations* V.i.g.24, 802-3).

¹⁰⁰ *Wealth of Nations* III.iv.4, 412.

¹⁰¹ *Lectures* (A)iii.118-21, 188-89.

story is one of mutual political interest: monarchs and city-dwellers joined forces against the feudal lords, and monarchs emancipated and granted privileges to the cities in order to undercut the nobility. Freed from royal and lordly exactions, and “secure of enjoying the fruits of their industry,” this new bourgeoisie turned to manufacturing, creating the outsized urban manufacturing sector that was the source of Europe’s “unnatural and retrograde” path. In time, the comparative opulence of the cities helped to build up the agrarian sector as well, both by furnishing an increased market for its produce and by creating a merchant class who were eager improvers of the land.¹⁰² Yet all these developments still did not remedy the fundamental dependence problem that made government “too weak in the head and too strong in the inferior members.” Even after feudalism theoretically subordinated the lords to the king, “they still continued to make war according to their own discretion, almost continually upon one another, and very frequently upon the king; and the open country still continued to be a scene of violence, rapine, and disorder.”¹⁰³

An additional causal factor was needed, and Smith famously argues that commerce and manufactures supplied it, introducing “order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals, among the inhabitants of the country.” They did so by allowing the great lords to spend their money on goods rather than on men, thereby ending the relations of direct personal dependence that were the source of their power. This change in consumption patterns ended both relations of legal bondage over serfs and of *de facto* dependence over retainers and tenants at will: lords dismissed their retainers in order to spend their money on

¹⁰² *Wealth of Nations* III.iii.7-14, 401-6; III.iv.1-3, 411.

¹⁰³ *Wealth of Nations* III.iv.9, 418.

luxury goods, and financed these purchases by granting their tenants long leases that made them independent in practice. Thus the great lords “were no longer capable of interrupting the regular execution of justice, or of disturbing the peace of the country.”¹⁰⁴

Smith had already touched upon this phenomenon in the *Lectures*, but there he does not analyze the motive for this epochal shift in consumption patterns.¹⁰⁵ In the *Wealth of Nations*, however, he supplements the bare historical description with a vivid psychological account of the lords’ motivation:

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. As soon, therefore, as they could find a method of consuming the whole value of their rents themselves, they had no disposition to share them with any other persons. For a pair of diamond buckles perhaps, or for something as frivolous and useless, they exchanged the maintenance, or what is the same thing, the price of the maintenance of a thousand men for a year, and with it the whole weight and authority which it could give them...thus, for the gratification of the most childish, the meanest and the most sordid of all vanities, they gradually bartered their whole power and authority.¹⁰⁶

It has frequently been remarked that Smith’s history of Europe demonstrates that he is not an economic determinist, and that he gives considerations of political interest a great deal of causal

¹⁰⁴ *Wealth of Nations* III.iv.4, 412; III.iv.11-15, 419-21.

¹⁰⁵ *Lectures* (A) iv.157-59, 261-62.

¹⁰⁶ *Wealth of Nations* III.iv.10, 418-19. For an overview of the literature analyzing Smith’s account here in terms of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, or from baronial and ecclesiastical to central government, see Salter, “Adam Smith on Feudalism, Commerce, and Slavery.” Salter also argues that the Book III story relates solely to the effects of commerce in ending the *de facto* dependence of tenants at will, not the legal subjugation of serfs, and that it cannot therefore be described as an account of the end of slavery in Europe (“Adam Smith on Feudalism,” 231-33). But although there are clearly important distinctions to be drawn between serfs, retainers, and tenants at will, part of the argument here has been that Smith tends to group such statuses together in key respects due to their common attribute of direct personal dependence on a master. In Book III, he describes the breakdown of these relations of dependence in such a way as to include all three categories, thereby attributing to commerce both the end of legal slavery and *de facto* personal dependence.

force in explaining historical developments.¹⁰⁷ Yet this bare statement does not go far enough, for the solution to the dependence problem that Smith ultimately identifies is not intelligible as a story of interest, whether economic or political, at all. It is vanity, in Smith's final telling, that ends feudalism. Indeed, Smith takes pains to specify that the lords turned to luxury goods not due to the perceived utility of these items, but solely in order to deprive their dependents of any share of their wealth. It is thus some form of the corrupted drive for superiority that accounts for the pivotal episode in the emergence of commercial society.

This aspect of Smith's account has sometimes been criticized as overly moralistic and psychologically implausible. In his eagerness to excoriate the lords, it is alleged, Smith departs from the assumption of rational self-interest that drives the rest of his theory and overemphasizes their collective irrationality.¹⁰⁸ But if there is moralism here, it is fundamental rather than incidental to Smith's overall view of human nature, for it is vanity, rather than rational self-interest, that is the true constant in his account of human moral psychology. Similarly, on some level Smith clearly believes that the landlords' conduct is contemptible — it is “folly” and “the most childish vanity,” as opposed to the “much less ridiculous” motive of the merchants who “acted merely from a view to their own interest”¹⁰⁹ — but as we have seen, this does not make it unintelligible, unnatural, or even (strictly speaking) irrational.

What is exceptional about the Book III story is not that it portrays humans as capriciously seeking superiority for its own sake, independent of any real “interest,” but that it describes this

¹⁰⁷ See, e.g., Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals*, 81-82; Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics*, 163-64; Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator*, 181-85.

¹⁰⁸ See especially Stigler, “Smith's Travels on the Ship of State”; Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, 105.

¹⁰⁹ *Wealth of Nations* III.iv.17, 422.

behavior as ending in failure. Generally speaking, Smith sees relations of domination and dependence as stable and self-perpetuating due to the power and authority resulting from human corruption. Book III describes the peculiar set of circumstances that prevented this from happening in modern Europe: how the contingent conditions created by the barbarian conquest of an extensive city-based empire led to a series of power struggles between king, clergy, and nobility; how these struggles gave rise to an emancipated bourgeoisie who created an outsized urban manufacturing sector; and how this growth of manufactures and commerce created conditions in which vanity and the love of domination could finally become self-defeating, dissolving the very relations of dependence and subordination in which they had their origin.

If the particular history in Smith's account is highly contingent, we might nevertheless say that Smith's understanding of human nature dictates that his account must take something like the form that it does — that it must be a history of unintended consequences. Since Smith believes that the struggle for recognition will naturally tend to coalesce around relations of domination and direct dependence, he must therefore explain why it does not take this form in modern Europe, and why recognition-seeking in economic relations tends toward the pursuit of material wealth rather than direct domination and authority. The fact that all human action must be internal to the broader framework of recognition-seeking — and thus that this history cannot take the form of the triumph of rationality over irrationality, or nature over artifice — suggests that on the level of moral psychology it can only be a history of the transformation of vanity due to its own operations rather than the replacement of vanity by some external and superior principle.

7.

If the problems of medieval Europe, on Smith's account, all stemmed from the prevalence of unfree labor and direct dependence, the dissolution of these structures was therefore the prerequisite for both civil government and the commercial economy. Smith describes these developments in terms of two linked processes to which he returns again and again.¹¹⁰ Prior to the rise of commerce, manufactures, and luxury, he stresses, the only way for a man of great fortune to use his wealth was to spend it on servants and retainers who then had to "obey his orders in war, and submit to his jurisdiction in peace."¹¹¹ Economic power thus became identical with political power, and these *de facto* relations of dependence often shaded into *de jure* relations of servitude. But in a "more refined and cultivated age," the wealthy spend their money on goods rather than men due to the sort of seemingly irrational calculus that we have just seen.¹¹² The rich no longer have anyone wholly dependent on them for support, but as Smith notes in the *Theory*, this does not mean that their expenditure stops going to their inferiors:

though the sole end which they propose from the labors of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessities of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants...¹¹³

Although the new mode of consumption is originally motivated by the desire to avoid sharing anything with one's inferiors — once again intelligible as a form of the corrupted recognition

¹¹⁰ See especially *Wealth of Nations* III.iv.11, 419-20. But see also, in the *Wealth of Nations*, V.i.b.7, 712; V.i.g.22-25, 800-4; V.iii.2-3; 908; and in the *Lectures*, (A)i.116-19, 50-51; (A)iv.7-9, 202; (A)iv.124-25, 248; (A)iv.157-58; 261; (B)20-21, 405; (B)34-5, 410; (B)50-51, 416; (B)59-60, 420.

¹¹¹ *Wealth of Nations* V.i.b.7, 712.

¹¹² *Lectures* (A)117-18, 50.

¹¹³ *Theory* IV.1.10, 184-85.

drive for superiority — it does not end the poor's dependence on the rich; each poor laborer can survive only through the money spent by his superiors. But this dependence takes on a very different form in an advanced economy, becoming *depersonalized*. A wealthy man in modern Europe “maintains a great or even a greater number of people than he could have done by the antient method of expense,” but he provides only a small proportion of the subsistence of each individual. “Though he contributes, therefore, to the maintenance of them all, they are all more or less independent of him, because generally they can all be maintained without him.”¹¹⁴

This depersonalization of economic relations is a consequence of the division of labor, in which every consumption object (like the famous example of the woolen coat) is produced by vast networks of workers. The result is that “without the assistance and cooperation of many thousands, the very meanest person in a civilized country could not be provided” with even the most basic goods.¹¹⁵ Conversely, the product of the labor of each person becomes similarly spread among innumerable consumers.

Modern society is thus characterized not by relations of economic independence — for this would apply only in a sort of Rousseauian state of nature in which each person supplied all

¹¹⁴ *Wealth of Nations* III.iv.11, 420.

¹¹⁵ *Wealth of Nations* I.i.11, 22-23: “The woolen coat, for example, which covers the day-labourer, as coarse and rough as it may appear, is the produce of the joint labour of a great multitude of workmen. The shepherd, the sorter of the wool, the wool-comber or carder, the dyer, the scribbler, the spinner, the weaver, the fuller, the dresser, with many others, must all join their different arts in order to complete even this homely production. How many merchants and carriers, besides, must have been employed in transporting the materials from some of those workmen to others who often live in a very distant part of the country!” As Marx noted with slight exaggeration (*Capital*, 475n33), this “famous passage” is “copied almost word for word” from Mandeville; see *Fable*, I, 169-70.

of his or her own needs — but by depersonalized relations of *interdependence*.¹¹⁶ It is this sort of interdependence that defines commercial society:

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.¹¹⁷

A properly commercial society thus consists not merely of the presence of trade, but of these two linked processes — the end of relations of personal dependence and the thorough establishment of the division of labor, which forces each person to become “in some measure a merchant.” The distinctive feature of such a society is not so much the expansion of commerce itself as the generalization of wage labor. Yet as we have seen, the very existence of a commercial society properly called (as opposed to a mere trading slave society) must be considered something of a historical aberration.

Only in commercial society does there exist a clear distinction between the economic and political spheres. In earlier societies, there is no separation between the two: the master-slave relationship has both economic and political components, and even among the non-slave population, economic and political relations tend to fuse when there is no other use for wealth than to support direct dependents.¹¹⁸ When a landlord's laborers are also his subjects and

¹¹⁶ Cf. Rasmussen, *Problems and Promise*, 142-50. Less convincing is the description of Smith's theory of history as one in which “society progresses as a result of people's innate abilities and propensities rather than through a series of accidents” (95).

¹¹⁷ *Wealth of Nations* Liv.1, 37.

¹¹⁸ Cf. *Wealth of Nations* V.iii.61, 931, where Smith notes an additional way that the Roman slave economy produced dependence. Since all productive labour was done by slaves, the

soldiers, political considerations will tend to take precedence over economic. But when spending becomes spread among thousands of producers, each of whom has thousands of other sources of income, economic relationships become separated from political ones:

This manner of laying out one's money is the chief cause that the balance of property confers so small a superiority of power in modern times. A tradesman to retain your custom may perhaps vote for you in an election, but you need not expect that he will attend you to battle.¹¹⁹

This is not to say that there is no relation between political and economic power. Wealth can (and often does) become a means to political power, but it is not itself political power, and economic relations of production and distribution are no longer coextensive with political relations of rule:

Wealth, as Mr. Hobbes says, is power. But the person who either acquires, or succeeds to a great fortune, does not necessarily acquire or succeed to any political power, either civil or military. His fortune may, perhaps, afford him the means of acquiring both, but the mere possession of that fortune does not necessarily convey to him either.¹²⁰

The contrast with Hobbes's assimilation of wealth and power, a century earlier, is revealing. Yet far from assuming an analytic distinction between politics and economics, Smith's account of commercial society is in large part a history of the emergence of a separate economic sphere.

8.

It is only in commercial society that economic advancement comes to the fore as the prevalent mode of recognition-seeking. We might be tempted to understand this as economic

plebeians had no way to support themselves than by accepting loans from the rich, and these debts were then used to purchase votes in the elections.

¹¹⁹ *Lectures* (A)i.118, 50.

¹²⁰ *Wealth of Nations* I.v.3, 48.

interest finally “liberated” from the irrational forces of ambition, pride, and so forth. But as I have suggested, this is a misleading way to understand the change, insofar as it suggests a reified economic interest distinct from other recognition-seeking behaviors. It would be more accurate to say that Smith’s history explains how the transhistorical fact of vanity — that is, recognition-seeking through external superiority — comes to be predominantly expressed in economic interest rather than war, domination and all the other more malicious ways in which humans seek superiority over others.¹²¹

But what is the mechanism for this change? If economic behavior in commercial society becomes defined primarily by the drive for productivity and gain rather than power and authority, is this shift primarily psychological or structural, more the result of changing norms or changing institutions? Is it about the rise of a “spirit of commerce” that values economic efficiency over the exercise of power, or about institutional changes in economic relations that make such domination impossible?

Clearly, these are not mutually exclusive options, and both must play a part. The ways in

¹²¹ In many ways this story is similar to the one traced by Hirschman in *The Passions and the Interests*. While not expressed in terms of passions and interests, it is similarly about the ways in which a set of potentially destructive human capacities come to be expressed in the comparatively constructive drive for economic advancement. Hirschman, interestingly, does not see Smith himself as a part of this story, instead arguing that he puts an end to it by “collapsing these other passions into the drive for the ‘augmentation of fortune’” and proposing a reductionist psychology in which all other passions merely “feed into the economic ones” (*Passions*, 108-9). Yet the passage that Hirschman cites in support of this conclusion (*Theory* I.iii.2.1, 50, cited in note 45 of this chapter) does not support this conclusion. It claims that economic interest is part of the recognition drive, but not that it is the *only* form of behavior that satisfies this drive; Smith in fact suggests here that recognition-seeking results in the pursuit of “power” and “preeminence” as well as wealth. This is more than a textual quibble insofar as Hirschman’s argument is representative of the common claim that Smith explains economic behavior by radically simplifying human psychology. On the contrary, I have tried to argue, Smith is keenly aware of the ways in which recognition-seeking can result in destructive behavior, and he explains its manifestation in economic interest not through psychological reductionism but as part of a historical account of norms and institutions.

which the drive for esteem manifests itself will necessarily depend on societal attitudes, on which behaviors and stations happen to be esteemed. A thorough explanation of commercial behavior would therefore need to account for any number of psychological propensities and social norms that would require a study in their own right: the decline of the classical disdain for economic activity, the growing esteem for wealth for its own sake, the increased social mobility that makes such wealth accessible to larger portions of the populace, the anonymity created by urbanization and migration which causes consumption to become a proxy for social status, and so on.

But with regard to our central dichotomy between interest and domination, Smith gives clear priority to institutional structures over psychological norms. He does not, in other words, believe that a new spirit of commerce has caused humans to value profit over power. Instead, he attributes these changes in economic behavior to the simple fact that the commercial economy has ended relations of direct political and economic dependence, giving the love of domination no outlets within the normal course of economic interaction.¹²²

Smith makes clear that where economic relations remain characterized by unfree labor and direct dependence, the *libido dominandi* rears its head even among the most commercial nations of Europe. This is most evident in the colonies, where slavery persists despite its

¹²² Smith is not blind to the fact that power still plays a role in economic relations in commercial society; see, for instance, his discussion of labor conflicts, in which the “tumultuous combinations” of workers confront the tacit collusion of masters (*Wealth of Nations* I.viii.11-14, 83-85). He does, however, differentiate such phenomena from the direct dependence and domination of the pre-commercial economy, and one might legitimately argue that he underestimates the continued scope and importance of power and force in the commercial economy.

economic inefficiency.¹²³ Smith argues that the misdeeds of the English and Dutch East India Companies, which occupy the fused economic and political roles of merchant and sovereign, are virtually a structural feature of their position: “They acted as their situation naturally directed, and they who have clamored the loudest against them would, probably, not have acted better themselves.”¹²⁴

But the persistence of domination is not solely a product of colonialism, for Smith also sees it in the economy of the British coal and salt mines, “the only vestiges of slavery which remain among us.” While the use of unfree workers in the mines drives up the price of labor enough to cut into the masters’ profit, Smith suggests that even these thoroughly commercial mine owners will never agree to transition to free labor for a familiar reason:

This immoderate price of labour in these works would soon fall if the masters of them would set their colliers and salters at liberty, and open the work to all free men...But this the masters of coal works will never agree to. The love of domination and authority over others, which I am afraid is natural to mankind, a certain desire of having others below one, and the pleasure it gives one to have some persons whom he can order to do his work rather than be obliged to persuade others to bargain with him, will for ever hinder this from taking place.¹²⁵

We are not therefore to imagine that the spirit of commerce has overcome the love of domination. Where humans can command outright instead of having to persuade, where they can

¹²³ Smith suggests that the free and commercial English treat the slaves in their sugar colonies more harshly than the absolutist French, conforming to the proposition (first seen in the *Lectures*) that a free government is harsher on slaves than an arbitrary one; see *Wealth of Nations* IV.vii.b.54, 587.

¹²⁴ *Wealth of Nations* IV.vii.c.107, 641. Cf. *Wealth of Nations* V.ii.a.7, 819: “No two characters seem more inconsistent than those of trader and sovereign. If the trading spirit of the English East India company renders them very bad sovereigns; the spirit of sovereignty seems to have rendered them equally bad traders.”

¹²⁵ *Lectures* (A)iii.126-30, 191-92.

exercise superiority directly in their economic relations instead of using these relations as an indirect means for social advancement, they will do so:

For though management and persuasion are always the easiest and the safest instruments of government, as force and violence are the worst and the most dangerous, yet such, it seems, is the natural insolence of man, that he almost always disdains to use the good instrument, except when he cannot or dare not use the bad one.¹²⁶

The development of the commercial economy is thus not about the growth of a rational, profit-maximizing spirit of commerce so much as the unintended and fortuitous structural changes that separate political from economic relations and put the latter out of reach of the “bad instruments” of force, violence, and domination.

9.

So far, we have been discussing the emergence of economic interest solely in relation to one other drive, the “love of domination and authority.” These are two different forms of vertical economic relations, one governed by force and the other (at least on Smith’s telling) by relative consent. In Smith’s frequent analogy of economic behavior to speech, they correspond to relations governed by command and those governed by persuasion. Yet Smith also mentions another form of speech related to exchange, begging, and a corresponding third drive with the potential to govern economic relationships, benevolence. This sets up a sort of tripartite conception of economic relationships: they can be governed by domination, interest, or benevolence, corresponding to the speech acts of commanding, persuading, and begging. Where, then, is benevolence in Smith’s account?

Smith’s most famous statement concerning economic interest explicitly rules out

¹²⁶ *Wealth of Nations* V.i.g.19, 799.

benevolence as a motive for economic transactions:

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 interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.¹²⁷

This statement has often been taken as a timeless and incontrovertible fact about human nature, but we can see from our previous discussion that it in fact rests on contingent sociohistorical conditions. The basic framework of persuasion that it assumes, in which we talk to others of their advantages in order to “interest their self-love in [our] favour,” requires an economy that is no longer structured around unfree labour and direct dependence, for lacking these conditions people will always choose to command rather than persuade. It is also a contingent fact that in commercial society “self-love” — an echo of the multivocal *amor sui* and *amour-propre*, which traditionally could refer equally to the desires for wealth, power, glory, or righteousness — takes the form of economic interest. (In fact, the Jansenists had emphasized, nothing was more natural than for *amour-propre* to assume the guise of *charité* in order to win recognition and esteem.) But if the “interest” side of the statement is contingent, we might ask, why not the “benevolence” side? Why is it that benevolence plays no role in economic transactions?

In answering this question we should first note one important feature of Smith’s notion of benevolence, namely that it is a local phenomenon based on familiarity and face-to-face contact. This aspect is made most explicit in Section VI of the *Theory*, which was added to the 1790 revision. Universal benevolence directed at all other humans may be an admirable goal, Smith notes, but it is hardly practicable. “To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension; the

¹²⁷ *Wealth of Nations* I.ii.2, pp. 26-27.

care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country.”¹²⁸ Accordingly, humans’ actual benevolence and affection are directed towards those with whom we are most familiar. Affection is “nothing but habitual sympathy,” and consequently benevolence is circumscribed to those with whom we have frequent and personal relations.¹²⁹ It is partly for this reason that members of pastoral communities, who all live together out of necessity, have larger kinship networks united by benevolence than citizens of commercial countries where families disperse and much of one’s life is lived among strangers.¹³⁰

But one of the characteristics of economic relations in commercial societies is that they are depersonalized due to the extension of the division of labour. As workers, participants in a commercial economy produce goods that go out to thousands of people with whom they have no contact, and as consumers they purchase goods made with the labour of thousands of similarly anonymous people. The end of economic relations of direct personal dependence creates large and anonymous networks of economic interdependence, and “what is properly a commercial society” comes to exist only in these conditions.

One widely-neglected aspect of Smith’s famous line about the benevolence of the butcher and baker is that he does not take this absence of benevolence for granted. He recognizes that many human relationships are in fact structured around benevolence, and that certain economic

¹²⁸ *Theory* VI.ii.3.6, 237.

¹²⁹ *Theory* VI.ii.1.7, 220. Smith here seems to come close to committing an error that later interpreters of his thought have often been accused of — that is, conflating sympathy with benevolence. (For more on this error and its relation to “Das Adam Smith Problem,” see Raphael, *Adam Smith*, Ch. 5.) Hence Campbell’s complaint (*Smith’s Science of Morals*, 182) that Smith here seems to ignore the fact that close contact might increase hatred rather than affection.

¹³⁰ *Theory* VI.ii.1.12-23, pp. 222-23.

transactions operate through the auspices of friendship or humanity. Why, then, can benevolence not serve as a basis for everyday economic interaction? In the “Early Draft” of the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith attempts to answer this question:

*So necessitous is his [man's] natural situation that 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.*¹³¹

This statement would seem to refute much of what was argued in the early parts of this chapter. It suggests that economic relationships and participation in the division of labour are necessary consequences of humans’ basic physical needs, and thus that economic behavior is in some sense built upon the atomistic *amour de soi-même* after all. It therefore suggests that the absence of benevolence in economic relations must be an ahistorical fact of human social life stemming from our “natural situation.”

But Smith, perhaps recognizing these consequences of his original formulation, revised the sentence for the published edition of the *Wealth of Nations*. In its final form it reads:

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.¹³²

This seemingly innocuous sentence is arguably one of the most important in Smith’s work. It is here that he connects the apparently timeless fact about economic relationships, that they rely on self-interest rather than benevolence, to a contingent fact about “civilized society,” that it involves participants in networks of interdependence involving “great multitudes,” and that these networks will extend far beyond the limits of friendship or even bare acquaintance.

¹³¹ “Early Draft of Part of *The Wealth of Nations*,” in *Lectures*, 554–81 at 571, emphasis added.

¹³² *Wealth of Nations* Lii.2, 26, emphasis added.

We might therefore say that Smith adds another category to the tripartite schema, that of economic relationships. If the domination corresponds to relations between superiors and inferiors, and benevolence corresponds to relations between friends, then self-interest corresponds to relationships between strangers. In pre-commercial societies, he seems to suggest, these modes of behavior may all exist, due largely to the fact that economic relationships are personal and fused with social and political relationships. These relationships can take place among members of tight-knit kinship or social groups, stemming from “mutual love and affection,”¹³³ but given the pervasive inequality and dependence of pre-commercial society they will more often take place between superiors and inferiors, stemming from domination and authority. And these modes of interaction correspond to the modes of recognition-seeking that Smith sees as underlying all economic behavior — benevolence to the ideal horizontal relations in which recognition-seeking inculcates virtue, domination to the more common and corrupted vertical relations in which it fails to do so.

It is in commercial society that these various modes of interaction converge on the single mode of economic interest, on persuading rather than commanding or begging. This occurs primarily as a result of the transformation described earlier, from an economy structured around relations of personal dependence to one structured around networks of impersonal interdependence — relations which, because they no longer personal, are beyond the scope of benevolence, and because they no longer dependent, are beyond the reach of domination. Smith accounts for the absence of benevolence from everyday economic life with reference of the same processes that account for the end of dependence and domination.

¹³³ *Theory* II.ii.3.2, 86; cf. note 129 of this chapter.

This is not to imply that Smith bemoans the lost benevolence of the pre-commercial economy. This economy, for him, was above all defined by slavery, domination and dependency, and whatever benevolence it might have contained was far outweighed by its injustice. He might instead have seen the contrast between the two in terms similar to Montesquieu's:

The spirit of commerce produces in men a certain feeling for exact justice, opposed on the one hand to banditry and on the other to those moral virtues that make it so that one does not always discuss one's interests alone and that one can neglect them for those of others.¹³⁴

As we have seen, Smith would have seen this change less as the result of a 'spirit of commerce' than of the institutional structures in which social striving and recognition-seeking operate. But he would likely have agreed with Montesquieu about the convergence of economic behavior on norms of exact justice between banditry and humanity, or domination and benevolence, "upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation."¹³⁵

If Smith is undoubtedly on the side of the "moderns," he still is not without a certain regret for the things that were lost with the emergence of an impersonal commercial society. Just as Hobbes saw the reign of bodily fear as a kind of lesser evil, standing in opposition both to the pride and vainglory that were so widespread and to the rare sense of justice of the few "generous natures,"¹³⁶ likewise self-interest stands for Smith in a similar place between a ubiquitous love of domination and a much rarer benevolence. The corruption of human moral sentiments makes self-interest worth endorsing as a lesser evil — but that, for Smith, is all that it can be.

¹³⁴ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* 20.2, 338-39.

¹³⁵ Smith, *Theory* II.ii.3.2, 86.

¹³⁶ See above, chapter III, section 4.

10.

What is the view of Smith's overall system that is suggested by his reflections on vanity and domination? One feature already suggested is the weight that he attaches to history and contingency. We cannot take his understanding of modern society to be a mere extension of the anthropology suggested by the famous first chapters of the *Wealth of Nations*. The "propensity to truck and barter" may explain the presence of some minimal division of labor across all societies, but it cannot explain the rise of properly commercial society. More broadly, what Smith suggests (joining other eighteenth-century thinkers like Montesquieu) is that the problems of pride and social order can only be solved *historically*. There is no atemporal solution to them, whether through Augustinian grace or Hobbesian fear; there are only the complicated and tenuous ways in which existing societies have provisionally solved them throughout history.

A second feature of Smith's system is its highly paradoxical character. In line with the importance Smith attaches to the distinction between efficient and final causes, he likewise attaches great importance to the disjuncture between individual motives and social consequences.¹³⁷ This disjuncture is perhaps most obvious in his account of the end of feudalism, in which the masters' vain attempt to perpetuate their superiority ends up undercutting it. But the commercial society that results from the end of feudalism remains characterized by the same paradox to which it owes its origin.

This paradoxical aspect of commercial society, expressed by the famous metaphor of the "invisible hand," is most famously set forth in a celebrated passage of the *Wealth of Nations*:

[E]very individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the publick interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestick to that of foreign

¹³⁷ On the distinction between efficient and final causes, see especially *Theory* II.ii.3.5, 87; cf. Campbell, *Smith's Science of Morals*, 205-20.

industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.¹³⁸

Yet the metaphor of the invisible hand has frequently been misunderstood, for there is nothing particularly paradoxical about it when it is understood conventionally in terms of absolute wealth. Smith seems to say here that when we pursue our own interest we also further the public interest, and the intuitive reading is to understand “interest” in both cases as the absolute increase of wealth. When individuals get richer the society as a whole gets richer, and although the unintended consequence may be *incidental* to the intended one, it is not *opposed* to it. Public benefit results from the successful pursuit of private interest, not (as in the story of the vanity of the feudal lords) the futile pursuit of private vice.

Understood in this way, the supposedly disconcerting paradox of the invisible hand becomes in fact rather reassuring. Indeed, it becomes a device for moral reconciliation to modern economic life. After all, the collective consequences of individual self-interest may originally be unforeseen, and its public benefits originally unintended, but there is no reason that they must remain so. The fact that they are only unforeseen by (by not actually opposed to) individual intentions means that is nothing preventing individuals from comprehending the unintended consequences — perhaps under the influence of political economists like Smith — and adopting them as part of our own intentions. This would mean (and no doubt it has meant for many people) that we rest assured in the knowledge that our own self-interested actions are indeed morally admirable, that there are no fundamental conflicts between individual and communal

¹³⁸ *Wealth of Nations* IV.ii.9, 456.

actions. Hegel seemed to have something like this in mind when he wrote of Smith and the other political economists as representing a key stage in the process of reconciliation to modern life, defusing the conflict between the champions of “virtue” (like Shaftesbury) and “the way of the world” (like Mandeville):

The individuality of the “way of the world” may well imagine that it acts only for *itself* or in its own interest. It is better than it thinks, for its action is at the same time an implicitly universal action....The purpose of its being-for-self, which it imagines is opposed to what virtue is in itself, its shallow cunning, as also its finespun explanations which know how to demonstrate the presence of self-interest in every action — all these have vanished...¹³⁹

More simply, Joan Robinson described this line of thought as an “ideology to end all ideologies, for it has abolished the moral problem” of economic life.¹⁴⁰

But recalling Smith’s idea that economic interest is first and foremost a form of recognition-seeking lets us see that the invisible hand is indeed built upon a paradox, and that its operation is for Smith always a matter of thwarted vanity. (Or, put differently, that modern economic actors are not so different for him from the foolish feudal lords.) In absolute terms, of course, every individual can further his or her own interest and simultaneously further the public interest; indeed, the notion that economic advancement in absolute terms is not zero-sum is perhaps the central idea underlying commerce.

Yet self-interest for Smith only superficially aims at an absolute increase in material goods, and more fundamentally aims at a relative gain in social status. And status, of course, is a

¹³⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* §392, 235, emphasis in original. Cf. Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology*, 107-11.

¹⁴⁰ Robinson, *Economic Philosophy*, 53.

“positional” good, or one that is zero-sum by definition.¹⁴¹ “[I]n this generall scramble for preeminence, when some get up others must necessarily fall undermost,”¹⁴² and in “the race for wealth, and honours, and preferments,” someone must finish last regardless of their absolute speed.¹⁴³ On an aggregate level, therefore, the pursuit of economic gain will always be futile in terms of the goal that it sets for itself.¹⁴⁴ It is the vain pursuit of relative (social) gain that ends up creating absolute (material) gain, a corrupted and ultimately futile form of recognition-seeking that creates the opulence of modern society. Commercial man seeks status but instead produces prosperity, and the irony here echoes Smith’s account of the origins of commercial society itself.

¹⁴¹ On positional goods, see especially Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth*.

¹⁴² *Lectures* (A)vi.54, 351. Cf. *Lectures* (B)219, 492: “Every one is fond of being a gentleman, be his father what he would. They who are strongest and in the bustle of society have got above the weak, must have as many under as to defend them in their station; from necessary causes, therefore, there must be as many in the lower stations as there is occasion for. There must be as many up as down, and no division can be overstretched.”

¹⁴³ *Theory* II.ii.2.1, 83. Recall that the metaphor of the race was also a central one in Hobbes’s *Elements of Law* (1.9.21, 47-48); see above, chapter III, note 17.

¹⁴⁴ This does not, of course, prove that it would be irrational for any individual to engage in this pursuit; for this conclusion we need Smith’s further notion that true happiness consists in wisdom and virtue rather than mere wealth and greatness.

Chapter VIII

Capitalism and Envy

1.

Does any of this story still matter? What we have been tracing, after all, is a confrontation between rival philosophical anthropologies — between a view of human nature as fundamentally prideful, marked by a striving for superiority within the malleable terrain of a specific social world, and one of human nature as fundamentally self-interested, dominated by the seemingly irreducible and asocial material wants of the body. The rise of early modern political economy is often thought to involve a decisive triumph of the second vision. But we have seen that the story is far more complicated: that the philosophical anthropology invoked by the founders of this tradition remained more Augustinian than utilitarian, and that the shift to the atomistic dimension of material interest was more an inchoate and ambivalent moral project than a confident assumption about human nature.

Yet it might be thought that the entire confrontation has been transcended, and that all such philosophical anthropologies are themselves obsolete. If the materialist view grew in prominence from the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, the development of economics and its affiliated social sciences since then has been marked by a rejection (at least on the level of explicit theorizing) of all such stringent claims about human nature.¹ Properly value-neutral social science, the argument goes, should not assume any necessary characteristics of human

¹ This is somewhat different from a second kind of rejection of the notion of a fixed human nature, of the kind found (in various ways) in traditions like Marxism, pragmatism, post-structuralism, and culturalist social science. This second kind of rejection rarely makes any claims to value-neutrality, and its distaste for the phrase “human nature” seems to be primarily a terminological preference rather than a substantive one. For these traditions, as already noted, share a certain kind of philosophical anthropology; it is simply one characterized above all by *malleability* rather than fixity. See above, chapter I, section 6.

desires except for the formal qualities (such as the consistency of preferences) that define rationality itself. We need not, and should not, take material wants to be more fundamental or more powerful than sociability; in fact, we need not base our inquiries on any such characterizations at all. Economics has no necessary connection to the specifically material dimension of human life; its field of study should instead be understood as the rational pursuit of one's ends under conditions of scarcity, whatever the content of those ends might be.² Both sides of the confrontation of philosophical anthropologies can be seen as equally antiquated from the standpoint of modern value-neutral social science.

In some sense this view must contain an element of truth. Certainly there is little hope of simply resuscitating the tradition we have been tracing (or for that matter its opponent) in anything like its classic form. Given how richly theological was the intellectual soil from which it sprang (and notwithstanding the secularizing inclinations of many of its protagonists), we might reasonably wonder whether it could survive absent this theological background. And there is certainly no use belittling the concrete achievements of the social sciences that took themselves to be liberated from this entire set of debates.

But one of the recurring arguments of this study has been that the questions that preoccupied the earlier thinkers we have discussed may not be so antiquated or so easily shirked off. By way of a coda, it may therefore be useful to examine the most important work of Anglo-American political philosophy of the last century — a work by no means reducible to economics

² See especially Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*. It might be thought that the postulate of "scarcity" retains some connection with the material dimension, but since time is itself a scarce resource, all actions can be understood to take place under conditions of scarcity. Robbins's *Essay* builds on decades of theorizing within the Austrian tradition; on the development of this tradition in an increasingly formal and subjectivist dimension — away from its founder Menger's insistence on the necessarily objective and material character of needs — see Caldwell, *Hayek's Challenge*, Chs. 1-5.

or its affiliated disciplines, but one nonetheless deeply indebted to their achievements. For in light of our discussion so far, it is hard not to be struck by passages like the following:

The parties do not seek to confer benefits or to impose injuries on one another; they are not moved by affection or rancor. Nor do they try to gain relative to each other; they are not envious or vain. Put in terms of a game, we might say, they strive for as high an absolute score as possible. They do not wish a high or a low score for their opponents, nor do they seek to maximize or minimize the difference between their successes and those of others. The idea of a game does not really apply, since the parties are not concerned to win but to get as many points as possible judged by their own system of ends.³

In its broad outlines, the argument of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* has become familiar.

Parties situated behind a veil of ignorance — abstract representatives of all the people who might inhabit a society across generations, not knowing their own personal attributes, social positions, or even their conceptions of the good — meet in what Rawls calls the “original position” to bargain on the principles that will govern their society. The parties aim to secure the best possible position for themselves, but absent any information about which concrete person they will end up being, they can only strive to maximize their index of primary goods, those “things which it is supposed a rational man wants whatever else he wants.”⁴ In such circumstances, Rawls argues, the parties will agree to his two famous principles of justice: the first guaranteeing equal basic liberties for each person, the second stating that social and economic inequalities are only permissible if there is fair equality of opportunity and if such inequalities maximally benefit the least advantaged members of society.⁵ This final stipulation — that the only just inequalities

³ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 144-45. Unless otherwise specified, all citations from the *Theory* refer to the original (1971) edition.

⁴ *Theory*, 92.

⁵ I paraphrase the main thrust of principles that Rawls sets out in slightly different forms throughout his works. In the original version of the *Theory*, his initial formulation is at 60 and his

are those in which everyone, and particularly the least advantaged, share in the gains — is what Rawls labels the “difference principle.”⁶

In Rawls’s characterization of primary goods as purely neutral means for achieving any set of ends, and his conviction that overarching conceptions of the good can be firmly excluded by the veil of ignorance, we can see some of his own aspirations (albeit limited aspirations, as we will see) to value-neutrality. But although Rawls generally hopes to rely on a minimal conception of rationality that, “with the exception of one essential feature, is the standard one familiar in social theory,” he consistently insists on this one “special assumption”: that “a rational individual does not suffer from envy.”⁷ The rationality of the parties in the original position, in other words, is of a fundamentally atomistic (or “mutually disinterested”) kind. When bargaining behind the veil of ignorance, they aim solely to maximize their allotments in absolute terms,⁸ but they take no interest in the allotments that others receive, and thus are indifferent to the relative distribution of primary goods — at least so long as the inequalities in this distribution “do not exceed certain limits.” This helps explain the distinctive shape of the negotiations in the original position, with each party refraining from trying “to gain relative to

final summation is at 302-3; for Rawls’s last formulation of the two principles, see *Justice as Fairness*, 42-43.

⁶ The difference principle has generated a vast literature. For useful overviews of issues relating to it, see Van Parijs, “Difference Principles”; Pogge, *John Rawls*, 106-20.

⁷ *Theory*, 143. By “social theory” Rawls seems to have meant primarily neoclassical economics and game theory. Eventually, he will simply state that he understands rationality “in the way familiar from economics” (*Justice as Fairness*, 87).

⁸ I will speak of the parties’ allotments or index of primary goods, although strictly speaking what the index measures is their lifetime expectations of primary goods rather than the goods themselves.

one another,” each one “not concerned to win but to get as many points as possible.” As he later puts it, they “desire wealth,” but they do not “desire to be wealthy” in any comparative sense.⁹

Nearly every part of Rawls’s theory has received sustained critical attention over the last half-century, but his exclusion of envy from the original position has attracted surprisingly little. In some sense this neglect is simply one piece of evidence for one of the broader arguments of this study, proof positive of how inessential pride and its related proclivities have come to seem to the central questions of political philosophy. But there are more specific reasons for this neglect as well. One possible reason relates to Rawls’s own presentation, for he himself treats the exclusion of envy as a secondary part of the theory, an analytical device that simplifies the bargaining process without distorting its results. He does eventually return to the topic of envy, but only as an ex post facto condition of stability: provided that envy does not prove too widespread in a fully-realized society, he suggests, we can justify ignoring it in the original position. The resulting impression is that envy is one of the many tangential issues nibbling at the edges of the theory, but not a central one for its overall success or failure.

Another possible reason is that both Rawls and his opponents could agree on the desirability of excluding envy. After all, envy is seen as a vice, “generally regarded as something to be avoided and feared,” and therefore “the choice of principles should not be influenced by this trait.”¹⁰ Critics on the right had long charged that envy was the hidden motive behind egalitarianism, and would level the accusation against Rawls in turn; Rawls and his allies (along with their own stricter egalitarian critics on the left) accordingly defended themselves by trying

⁹ *Theory*, 143-45; “Fairness to Goodness,” in *Collected Papers*, 273.

¹⁰ *Theory*, 530.

to show that egalitarian principles could be derived from premises that took no account of envy at all.¹¹ The result, however, was to help obscure some of the fundamental questions about the role — perhaps even the *proper* role — of envy. Rawls and his critics could agree that any proper theory of justice should deny envy a foundational role, even if they disagreed about whether Rawls’s own theory succeeded in doing so; the question of *whether* envy should be denied such a role remained unasked.¹²

For what Rawls and his critics call “envy” is shorthand for the entire set of concerns about status and relative position that have preoccupied us thus far, and the debates about its role (or lack thereof) in critiques of the market are really debates about whether these concerns can or should have any continued relevance to the world of modern capitalism. The questions raised by envy (or pride, *amour-propre*, vanity, and so on) are therefore fundamental to the operation of any society characterized by growing material abundance on the one hand and growing social inequality on the other. Rawls’s difference principle is one attempt to square this contradiction. But in many ways Rawls was simply expressing, with characteristic lucidity and precision, a line of thought as old as capitalism. “Among the savage nations of hunters and fishers,” Adam Smith had written at the beginning of the *Wealth of Nations*, there is great equality, as “every individual who is able to work, is more or less employed in useful labor,” but by the same token there is miserable poverty. “Among civilized and thriving nations,” by contrast, there is vast inequality, as many people who “do not labor at all” nonetheless consume ten or a hundred times as much as

¹¹ For attacks on Rawls and egalitarianism along these lines, see Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, esp. 239-46; Walsh, “Rawls and Envy.” For defenses, see Young, “Egalitarianism and Envy”; Norman, “Equality, Envy, and the Sense of Injustice.”

¹² An exception, which we will return to, is the case of what Rawls calls “excusable envy.” See section 6 of this chapter.

members of the laboring classes. Yet the material abundance of such societies is so great that even the poorest workman “may enjoy a greater share of the necessities and conveniences of life than it is possible to any savage to acquire.”¹³

Rawls’s difference principle is effectively a formalization of this line of thought,¹⁴ and its key presupposition is that it is possible for us to separate relative from absolute status judgments. In terms of their relative social position, the worst-off members of a prosperous and unequal society are indeed *worse* off, having gone from a position of equality to a place at the bottom. But in absolute or material terms, the terms of Smith’s “necessaries and conveniences of life,” they are better off — or at least they must be better off for the inequalities to be justified.¹⁵ The difference principle (in its simplest form, without any of the qualifications that Rawls eventually inserts around it) specifies that the second dimension is the only relevant one, that the way to determine the justice of an inequality is to cordon off the relative and focus on the absolute. It is a principle of relative distribution whose effect is to circumvent all the specifically *relative* aspects of distribution, for they become relevant only insofar as they affect absolute statuses.

¹³ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, “Introduction and Plan of the Work,” 10. For a similar line of thought from a century earlier, see Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, esp. §39-41, 296-97.

¹⁴ For the view that something like this is Rawls’s “fundamental argument” for the difference principle, independent of the argument based on the original position, see Barry, *Theories of Justice*, 213-34.

¹⁵ Of course, a long line of critics has questioned whether the gains of “civilization” represent an improvement even in absolute terms. Similarly, many would question whether the worst-off under the current global economic regime have reaped any material benefit from it at all. However compelling these questions may be in practice, they do not pose any particular theoretical problem for Rawls; his reply would simply be that if the critics’ doubts are correct, then these inequalities are unjust, full stop. It is only the combination of absolute gain and relative loss that his theory has trouble dealing with.

Reconciliation to modern society, with its characteristic combination of prosperity and inequality, thus requires division — of absolute and relative, objective and subjective, material and social. But are we so divided? Can we or should we be? The importance of envy for Rawls is that it threatens to collapse these divisions, washing away absolute gains in the zero-sum tide of relative rises and falls. As the absolute dimension recedes and the relative one comes to the fore, the contradiction between absolute abundance and relative deprivation threatens to become irresolvable.

Rawls has often been caricatured as utterly insensitive to these sorts of considerations — a mere apologist for American Cold War capitalism, attentive only to bourgeois liberties and material gains. While we will see that there is a grain of truth to this view, what his treatment of envy drives home above all is his great self-awareness concerning his project and its limitations. Both Rawls's account of envy and his attempts to grapple with it are more subtle, interesting, and revealing than his critics (and for that matter many of his supporters) have acknowledged. This is not to say that they are successful. But even if, as I will argue, Rawls never really solves the problem of envy, his attempts to do so are instructive, both for the light they shed on his own theory and as an entryway into the larger questions that it continues to pose for our own societies. On the one hand he is heir to an entire modern social-scientific tradition of thinking about (or rather, not thinking about) these questions; on the other hand he is too theoretically self-aware to be blind to the weaknesses of this tradition. It is precisely because of his ambiguous position that he is useful as a guide through this terrain, for by examining his theory we may arrive at some provisional conclusions about the present-day relevance or irrelevance of the history that we have traced.

2.

Although Rawls removes envy from the original position, we have already noted that he does not ignore it entirely; instead, he adopts what he calls a “two-step procedure”. To begin, he attempts to resolve the bargaining problem in the original position on the assumption that the parties are not envious. Next, he examines the final outcome of the bargaining, the well-ordered society, to determine whether envy will pose a practical threat to its stability, and concludes that it will not.¹⁶ The aim of this second step of the procedure is to remove any pressing impetus to include envy in the original position (why include it if it won’t matter anyway?) and we should therefore begin by briefly examining this part of the argument.

Rawls suggests that there are three conditions for outbreaks of envy. First, there is the subjective psychological condition itself, rooted in “a lack of self-confidence in our worth combined with a sense of impotence.” Second, the less fortunate must frequently be “forcibly reminded of their situation,” and third, they must feel that there is “no constructive alternative to opposing the favored circumstances of the most advantaged.” The well-ordered society, he goes on to argue, will prevent these three conditions from occurring. For one thing, the public conception of justice assures each individual of his or her intrinsic worth: all enjoy equal liberties, and inequalities are justified not by notions of moral desert but by the knowledge that they are to everyone’s advantage. For another, although “in theory the difference principle permits indefinitely large inequalities in return for small gains to the less favored, the spread of income and wealth should not be excessive in practice, given the requisite background institutions.” Furthermore, society is likely to divide into “noncomparing groups” that meet primarily on the level playing field of political life and public affairs, and the rich “do not make

¹⁶ *Theory*, 530-31.

an ostentatious display of their higher estate,” since jealousy and spite fade away along with envy. Finally, the egalitarian nature of a well-ordered society give the least-advantaged ways to improve their lot and thus provides constructive alternatives to envy.¹⁷

What are we to make of these arguments? Of course, to anyone inclined to a roughly Augustinian view of human moral psychology, any theory that predicts the withering-away of pride and envy under the right social conditions will seem far-fetched. But rather than simply dismissing Rawls’s claims in light of a rival account, we should attempt to examine them within the terms of his own theory. It is admittedly hard to evaluate their strength in this regard, simply because it is hard to conceive of what a well-ordered society would entail in practice. (Does it look much like our own existing societies, minus some of their most glaring defects, or would it be radically different from them?) But on the whole, although it is possible to imagine conditions that might instantiate his optimistic claims, it is fair to say that all of them seem rather implausible if taken to refer to anything resembling the societies and institutions that we currently inhabit.

Perhaps the most striking example is Rawls’s confidence about the ease of restraining inequality in a market economy; as he puts it elsewhere, “in a competitive economy (with or without private ownership) with an open class system excessive inequalities will not be the rule.”¹⁸ Such a sanguine view may have seemed plausible when Rawls published the *Theory* in 1971, but the marked increase in global economic inequality ever since calls into question any tidy conclusions about the tendency of markets toward equality, even if we allow that the

¹⁷ *Theory*, 535-37.

¹⁸ *Theory*, 158.

societies in question are not well-ordered by Rawls's standard.¹⁹ Of course, we might define a "competitive" economy and an "open" class system as those which do not generate excessive inequalities, but in this case the argument becomes tautological, unmoored from any of the historical or social-theoretic findings that Rawls took to anchor his views.²⁰ It is likewise hard to accept the notion that economic classes will divide into discrete and private groups that meet primarily as equals in public fora — surely even in a well-ordered society, rich and poor continue to meet in a variety of contexts that make apparent their different lots in life. And even if we allow that the rich are no longer motivated by jealousy or spite (and wasn't this supposed to be a conclusion rather than a premise of the argument?) the mere fact that they have a variety of conceptions of the good will likely lead some to engage in what might plausibly be construed as "ostentatious display."

¹⁹ On the rise in economic inequality since the 1970s, see Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, along with the massive critical literature it has already spawned. For present purposes we need not intervene in the theoretical controversies around Piketty's thesis; it is enough for our argument that the empirical evidence he presents cuts against the notion that there is any inherent tendency for markets to mitigate or restrain inequality.

²⁰ There is a related problem with Rawls's attempts to explain distributive justice as a matter of pure procedural justice — that is, one in which the "social system is to be designed so that the resulting distribution is just however things turn out" (*Theory*, 275), rather than this distribution being measured against an independent standard of justice. Pure procedural justice may accurately describe a view like Nozick's, which holds that any outcome of legitimate market processes is equally just, but Rawls would not accept such a conclusion. Instead, he defines the "social system" so that it includes various "background institutions" whose function is to mitigate the negative effects of market processes (*Theory*, 274-84); thus any distributive outcome of the social system (including background institutions) is equally just. But since one task of the background institutions seems to involve correcting the market distribution so that it accords better with an independent criterion of justice, the whole argument has a whiff of tautology. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls restates his position in a way that raises more questions than it answers, stating that the principles of justice "incorporate an important element of pure procedural justice" so that "within appropriate limits, whatever distributive shares result are just" (282).

All this is merely to suggest that even within the terms of Rawls's theory and even within his well-ordered society, envy may remain a larger problem than he allows, and a great deal may come to rest on the question of just how much envy is too much. Whether or not we find his rather casual arguments here plausible, at the very least they are hardly definitive enough to warrant closing the door on the subject altogether. And if the second step of the "two-step procedure" is unsuccessful or at least inconclusive, there is good reason to go back and scrutinize the first.

3.

This would mean that we cannot simply evaluate envy as an *ex post facto* criterion of stability; instead, we must question its exclusion from the original position in the first place.²¹ Why, in other words, are we justified in treating the parties in the original position as focused only on their absolute indices of primary goods rather than the relative distribution of primary goods? We might in fact challenge Rawls's use of the two-step procedure by bringing into play some of the same arguments that he levels against utilitarianism. One of Rawls's criticisms of utilitarianism is that even if it can ultimately protect liberties through ad hoc additions to the theory, the parties would prefer to "secure their liberties straightaway" by guaranteeing them in the original position "rather than have them depend upon what may be uncertain and speculative actuarial calculations."²² But if the parties are legitimately worried about the harmful effects of inequality, as Rawls suggests that they are, we might similarly ask why they would not take into

²¹ The only critique of which I am aware that argues for including envy in the original position is Tomlin, "Envy, Facts, and Justice," a worthwhile treatment that overlaps in some respects with my own.

²² *Theory*, 160-61.

account the relative distribution of primary goods, and institute protections against inequality in the original position, rather than trusting in the ultimate features of a well-ordered society.

The term “envy” itself may be a barrier to answering this question — and not only because it can refer to a whole set of propensities that we have seen other thinkers refer to by other names (say, pride, vanity, or *amour-propre*). More than that, to label the concept under discussion “envy” is already to tilt the tables against it, since doing so implies an assumption that on some level this quality is irrational or immoral. If the desire to maximize one’s index of primary goods in relative terms is “envy,” why isn’t the desire to maximize it in absolute terms “avarice” or “greed”? As we will see, Rawls does in fact differentiate envy proper from both resentment and “excusable” envy, neither of which he regards as vices. But it may be more useful at this stage to drop these labels altogether, and simply to think in terms of a concern for *relative* allotments of primary goods, on the one hand, and a concern for *absolute* allotments, on the other. One is tempted, in light of the language we have been using throughout this study, to call the first of these “pride” and the second “self-interest.” But in keeping with the thought that a less moralized terminology might help us clarify the role of these concepts within Rawls’s own theory, for now let us simply call the first “relativism” and the second “absolutism” (begging the reader’s pardon for the fact that such labels diverge somewhat from the usually meaning of these terms).²³

Thus the question becomes: why are we entitled to treat the parties in the original position as absolutists but not relativists? Rawls does not give a single answer; his discussion instead suggests a range of overlapping considerations. We might usefully separate out three different lines of thought that seem to be inchoate in it.

²³ This is similar to the usage found in Sen, “Poor, Relatively Speaking.”

The first concerns simple feasibility. If the parties aim only at maximizing their absolute allotments of primary goods, it is possible to have a fairly clean rational choice problem that might yield a determinate outcome. Likewise, once the parties settle on the difference principle, Rawls suggests that “the comparative ease with which it can be interpreted and applied” is one of its advantages over the principle of utility.²⁴ If, however, the parties are concerned not only with their own allotments but with everyone else’s allotments as well, these questions become messy and perhaps irresolvable, since they require us to estimate exactly how much any change to any one party’s index will affect all the other parties’ satisfaction with their own indices. Hence there is an obvious reason for ignoring relativism and other psychological propensities such as attitudes toward risk: “Without rather definite information about which configuration of attitudes existed, one might not be able to say what agreement if any would be reached.”²⁵

This argument, however, is not particularly compelling by itself. After all, we might easily respond that if the rational choice procedure requires simplistic and erroneous assumptions in order to arrive at an answer, then so much the worse for the procedure; as Rawls himself writes in another context, it is “irrational to advance one end rather than another simply because it can be more accurately estimated.”²⁶ The fact that ignoring relativism makes our analytical task easier is only compelling if we have some other good reason suggesting that we are justified in ignoring it.

But by lumping envy together with particular attitudes toward risk and other “special psychologies,” Rawls points to a second and related argument for excluding it. The original

²⁴ *Theory*, 320.

²⁵ *Theory*, 530.

²⁶ *Theory*, 91.

position is a device of abstraction: it is designed to screen out all of our particular and contingent qualities, leaving behind only those that are universal. The particularities of each person's psychological makeup are "imagined to be behind the veil of ignorance along with the parties' knowledge of their conception of the good," in the same way as the particularities of their physical being and historical circumstances.²⁷ If relativism is this sort of particular or contingent fact about specific human beings, it will be ruled out by the veil of ignorance.

The difficulty is that Rawls wants to characterize the original position in a way that rules out relativism but not absolutism. If the parties cannot know whether they care about the relative value of their allotment, how can they know that they care about its absolute value? Rawls's answer is that although the veil of ignorance rules out all knowledge of particular facts about oneself, it still permits knowledge of "the general facts about human society."²⁸ The question of what counts as such a "general fact" is, as Rawls recognizes, a "very difficult" one, although he does not seem to have fully appreciated just how vexed it is.²⁹ Regardless, he takes absolutism as a general rather than a particular fact, so that the parties behind the veil of ignorance can safely assume that "that they prefer more rather than less primary goods" in absolute terms.³⁰

In the original version of the *Theory*, Rawls seems convinced that this follows from the very definition of primary goods. These goods — "rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth," and self-respect — are "things that every rational man is presumed to want"

²⁷ *Theory*, 530.

²⁸ *Theory*, 137.

²⁹ *Theory*, 142. On the problems with Rawls's notion of "general facts," see Wolff, *Understanding Rawls*, 72-73, 119-32.

³⁰ *Theory*, 93.

as all-purpose preconditions for any other desires he might have.³¹ Rawls is careful not simply to reduce the list to income and wealth, but it is evident that these are the paradigm primary goods on which the others are modeled. His confidence that primary goods can serve as neutral means for any sort of end seems informed by an underlying picture of the liquidity and universality of money as means of exchange — income and wealth, he writes elsewhere, are “all-purpose means (having an exchange value) for achieving directly or indirectly a wide range of ends, whatever they happen to be.”³² Likewise, the very notion of a quantifiable index of primary goods is relatively straightforward for income and wealth, but much less so for other goods — particularly, as we will see, the crucial good of self-respect.³³

In his later works, Rawls revises his account of primary goods to scale back the scope of his claims. He accepts, as Thomas Nagel and others had argued,³⁴ that the primary goods metric cannot serve as a truly neutral baseline for all conceptions of the good, and thus that the very choice of what counts as a primary good relies on certain moral presuppositions.³⁵ He also

³¹ *Theory*, 62; for similar formulations see 92, 142, 253, 260.

³² “Social Unity and Primary Goods,” in *Collected Papers*, 366; cf. *Political Liberalism*, 326; *Justice as Fairness*, 58-59. For Rawls’s broader defense of the universal desirability of wealth and its neutrality between conceptions of the good, see “Fairness to Goodness,” *Collected Papers*, 271-73.

³³ In “Social Unity and Primary Goods,” Rawls avoids the problem of aggregating the various primary goods into an index by using what he calls the “simplest form” of the two principles of justice, in which income and wealth serve as proxies for all of the other goods distributed according to the difference principle (*Collected Papers*, 363; cf. *Theory*, 532). This, I believe, is simply an unusually explicit statement of his usual procedure, for it is difficult to imagine how the difference principle would operate in practice for any goods other than income and wealth.

³⁴ Nagel, “Rawls on Justice”; cf. Barry, *The Liberal Theory of Justice*, 116-27.

³⁵ See especially *Political Liberalism*, 308: “What are to count as primary goods is not decided by asking what general means are essential for achieving the final ends which a comprehensive empirical or historical survey might show that people usually or normally have in common. There may be few if any such ends; and those there are may not serve the purposes of a

renounces the notion that liberties can usefully be quantified or maximized in the way that wealth can,³⁶ and generally removes the economistic language in which he had originally presented the original position.³⁷ Yet for all this, the basic contours of the problem facing the parties in the later works remains the same: they still want more rather than fewer primary goods in absolute terms (whether this is described in the language of “maximization” or not),³⁸ and they still remain unconcerned with their allotments in relative terms.³⁹

4.

In taking absolutism as a general fact and relativism as a particular one, Rawls’s *Theory* shows the influence (and his later works still bear the traces) of a roughly economic conception

conception of justice. The characterization of primary goods does not rest on such historical or social facts. While the determination of primary goods invokes a knowledge of the general circumstances and requirements of social life, it does so only in the light of a conception of the person given an advance.” An earlier version of this passage which makes the contrast with the *Theory* more explicit can be found in “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,” *Collected Papers*, 314; see also “Social Unity and Primary Goods,” *Collected Papers*, 370; “The Priority of Rights and Ideas of the Good,” *Collected Papers*, 455-57.

³⁶ *Political Liberalism*, 331-34.

³⁷ He similarly abandons the claim from the *Theory* that the “theory of justice is a part, perhaps the most significant part, of the theory of rational choice” (16).

³⁸ Rawls notes that “[e]ven if in most cases the index does not approximate very accurately what many people most want and value as judged by their comprehensive views, primary goods will surely be regarded by all, or nearly all, as highly valuable in pursuing those views” (*Political Liberalism*, 188-89). But if the parties in the original position are to decide on the difference principle rather than something like a universal social minimum, it seems necessary for them to assume not merely that *some* primary goods are preferable to *none*, but that *more* are preferable to *fewer* more generally.

³⁹ Rawls makes no changes to his original account of envy in the revised edition of the *Theory* (123-25, 464-74), and likewise closely follows the *Theory*’s account in *Justice as Fairness* (87). The subject is not really discussed in *Political Liberalism*, but the one passing mention of excusable envy (284) does not suggest any significant revisions.

of rationality.⁴⁰ Rawls's book was written in the wake of the postwar flourishing of neoclassical economics and game theory, and their influence is manifest in many of its features, from the characterization of the original position as a bargaining problem to the use of maximin to justify the difference principle. This is not to say that Rawls adopts such concepts wholesale or uncritically; rather, he makes strategic use of them. His key intuition is that rational and self-interested individuals may be used to generate a genuine theory of justice if placed under the right kinds of constraints; as we will see, he makes clear that these constraints are just as important to the device of the original position as the characterization of the parties. For all that, however, the parties themselves resemble nothing so much as the atomistic maximizers of postwar economics and its auxiliary fields, each one a kind of identical *homo economicus* given a central (if circumscribed) place at the center of the theory.⁴¹

Strictly speaking, there is nothing in this tradition dictating that the rational maximizer must be an absolutist rather than a relativist. As we have already noted, twentieth-century economics was keen to emancipate itself from any such strong psychological assumptions, instead defining its field of study as the rational pursuit of one's ends under conditions of scarcity, whatever those ends might be.⁴² "Utility" became a purely formal and empty category,

⁴⁰ We have already noted Rawls's remark in the *Theory* that his conception of rationality is "the standard one familiar in social theory" (143), by which he seems to have meant economics and its affiliated disciplines; in *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls simply states that he understands rationality "in the way familiar from economics" (87).

⁴¹ They are identical because "since the differences among the parties are unknown to them, and everyone is equally rational and similarly situated, each is convinced by the same arguments. Therefore, we can view the choice in the original position from the standpoint of one person selected at random.... Thus there follows the very important consequence that the parties have no basis for bargaining in the usual sense" (*Theory*, 139).

⁴² Again, the classic exposition of this idea in the Anglo-American tradition is Robbins's *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*. This supposed agnosticism about motives

no longer corresponding to any concrete entity such as physical pleasure; in this sense, the utility-seeker might be concerned to maximize status rather than income, or to maximize income out of deeper concerns about status. Yet by and large, this professed ecumenicism remained only a theoretical gesture, aimed at claiming the mantle of value-neutral science; it had little practical influence on research, which continued to proceed on the assumption that rationality meant maximization of income and profit in absolute terms.⁴³

There were perfectly understandable reasons for this neglect. The distinction between absolutism and relativism, after all, will often have little practical significance for the behavior of economic actors “in the wild,” as it were. Such actors can generally only choose between different bundles of goods for themselves, not between different overall distributions for themselves and others; likewise, in most cases the behavior of actors aiming to maximize their incomes relative to others will look exactly the same as that of actors aiming to maximize their incomes in absolute terms. Increasing reliance on the theory of “revealed preference,” which eschews any treatment of motives except insofar as they are inferable from behavior, similarly contributed to an impatience with such questions: if actors appear to be maximizing their income or profit, why not simply say that this is what they’re doing, rather than looking for nebulous qualities like status or self-esteem lurking behind their apparent behavior? In these and other ways, and notwithstanding its claims to value-neutrality, economic theory tended tacitly to bolster the absolutist view, enshrining the concern to maximize one’s wealth in raw and material

helps explain why Rawls, as we have seen (*Theory*, 143), views his exclusion of envy as an additional feature not found in the standard model of economic rationality itself.

⁴³ One economist, surveying the scanty literature on the subject in the mid-1980s, concluded that “it is perhaps an understatement to say that the economics profession as a whole has shown little interest in the idea that people are deeply concerned about their relative standing in hierarchies.” See Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond*, 37; his book represents a notable exception to this trend.

terms as the baseline motivation of economic actors. And although the rise of behavioral economics in recent decades has helped resuscitate aspects of the relativist view, such inroads have not coincidentally relied on less conventional kinds of data: laboratory experiments on “ultimatum games,” for instance, which show that participants tend to reject what they regard as unfair distributions even if doing so harms them in material terms, or examinations of the murky research on human happiness.⁴⁴

If the absolutism of the parties in the original position reflects a broadly economic conception of rationality, the difference principle itself reflects Rawls’s engagement with twentieth-century welfare economics. At one point in the *Theory*, Rawls contrasts the difference principle with what he calls the “principle of efficiency,” by which he means the principle of Pareto efficiency applied to the basic structure of society.⁴⁵ (Any given change is a Pareto improvement, the principle states, if it makes someone better-off without making anyone worse-off; a state of affairs is Pareto-optimal if no Pareto improvements to it are possible.) Yet the contrast that Rawls draws between the two principles risks obscuring the resemblance between them, for in some ways the difference principle is simply a restricted form of the Pareto principle. Pareto is notoriously lax and indifferent to moral considerations: any status quo is “optimal” so long as *anyone* is better-off under it than under the alternatives, so that slavery (for

⁴⁴ There is a vast literature on ultimatum games, beginning with Güth et al, “An Experimental Analysis of Ultimatum Bargaining.” For examples of the use of happiness research to support a broadly relativist view, see Frey and Stutzer, “What Can Economists Learn From Happiness Research?”; Luttmer, “Neighbors as Negatives.” Much of this data must be treated with caution; see, e.g., Skidelsky, “What Can We Learn From Happiness Surveys?”

⁴⁵ *Theory*, 66.

instance) is optimal if slaveowners would be made worse-off by its abolition.⁴⁶ The difference principle maintains the basic thought behind Pareto: that there might be some changes whose moral desirability is incontestable, namely those which benefit everyone, or at least benefit some while harming no one.⁴⁷ Its key departure is to remove Pareto's "indeterminateness...by singling out a particular position from which the social and economic inequalities of the basic structure are to be judged" — that is, by specifying a single group, the least advantaged, whose standpoint is the decisive one.⁴⁸

What is the content of "better-off" and "worse-off" here, or "benefit" and "harm"? It may seem pointless even to ask the question; surely having more is better and having less is worse. But to be consistent with their professions of value-neutrality, both Pareto and the difference principle must understand better-off and worst-off subjectively: people are better-off when, and only when, they consider themselves better-off. Rawls seems at one point to accept this view:

⁴⁶ As is common in the literature, I use "Pareto" as shorthand for the concept of Pareto efficiency or optimality. I do not thereby mean to suggest anything about the views of the historical Vilfredo Pareto, whose own political and intellectual orientation was very far from the rather complacent productivism suggested by his namesake concept.

⁴⁷ Must an inequality actively benefit the least advantaged to be permissible, or is it sufficient that it not harm them? Rawls tries to sidestep this question with his assumption of "close-knitness," which holds that any given change in anyone's position must either raise or lower everyone else's, and thus that there are no neutral inequalities (*Theory*, 80). But he allows that there may be cases where this assumption does not hold, and in these cases the difference principle can be interpreted in both a more and a less egalitarian direction. The less egalitarian view, closer to the Pareto principle and suggested by Rawls's discussion of the "lexical difference principle" (*Theory*, 83), would permit any amount of inequality so long as it does not actively harm those lower on the ladder. But Rawls's discussion sometimes suggests a second view, in which inequality — being in itself merely a necessary evil, put up with for the sake of the least advantaged — should thus be reduced as far as possible whenever it does not actively benefit them. For a useful discussion of these two strands, see Van Parijs, "Difference Principles," 205-8.

⁴⁸ *Theory*, 75.

glossing the difference principle's requirement "that each person benefit from permissible inequalities," he defines "benefit" to mean that it is "reasonable" for each person "to *prefer* his prospects with the inequality to his prospects without it."⁴⁹ If the principles take subjective preferences as the relevant criteria, though, then they will potentially have to take relativism into account (or any other tendency shaping these preferences in a widespread or pervasive way). This would not involve establishing two separate measures, one determining whether individuals are "really" better- or worse-off and the other whether they "feel" better- or worse-off. There can only be one measure, for these subjective feelings are the only grounds on which to make the determinations of benefit and harm in the first place. If people feel that a given inequality makes them worse off, then it *does* make them worse off, regardless of how it affects their allotments of material goods.

This is not, however, the way that Pareto has generally been applied, nor is it the way that Rawls applies the difference principle. We will later discuss the moral considerations that might underlie this refusal to understand benefit and harm subjectively. But a simpler reason is the one that Rawls had used to justify his original exclusion of envy: without fairly precise knowledge about relativism's strength and scope, the principles become murky and indeterminate. (If a given group experiences slight material gains but the rest of the population gains significantly more, how are we to assess their benefit or harm? Does it vary according to how relativist we think each individual in the group is? Or do we impute an aggregate level of relativism to all of them? And where are any of these numbers supposed to come from?) Far simpler to stick to the

⁴⁹ *Theory*, 64, emphasis added. But even here there is some ambiguity. Must the least advantaged actually prefer the existence of the inequality to its non-existence? Or must it merely be "reasonable" for them to prefer their "prospects" with it (defined in some non-subjective way) to their prospects without it?

absolute and material dimension, taking benefit and harm in their most straightforward form. If this is a shortcut, it is one that has become so ingrained that most treatments of Pareto simply proceed as if the absolute dimension were the only conceivable one.⁵⁰ Thus it becomes possible to speak, for instance, of someone irrationally rejecting a Pareto improvement — an idea that is simply incoherent on the subjective understanding, according to which the very fact that anyone rejects it is proof that it was not a Pareto improvement at all.

Rawls, for his part, makes clear that there are other goods beyond material ones, most notably the primary good of self-respect. But this only makes his own treatment of the problem more revealing. For self-respect is “perhaps the most important primary good” — and yet it does not normally appear in the index of primary goods at all, since including it would introduce “an unwelcome complication” in the application of the difference principle.⁵¹ We will return to this striking fact. For now we can simply conclude that Rawls’s intellectual debts to economics give an absolutist cast to the difference principle, in much the same way that they do to his characterization of the parties in the original position.

⁵⁰ Nozick, in stating his suspicion that “envy underlies [Rawls’s] conception of justice,” provides one example of this sort of use of the Pareto principle (*Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 229): “the difference principle, applied to the choice between either *A* having ten and *B* having five or *A* having eight and *B* having five, would favor the latter. Thus...the difference principle is inefficient in that it sometimes will favor a status quo against a Pareto-better but more unequal distribution.” We have already seen (in note 47 of this chapter) that this is not self-evident as a reading of the difference principle. Regardless, the more egalitarian reading of the difference principle would simply deny that the first distribution is actually a Pareto improvement over the second, since it takes being on the short end of an inequality to be a harm in itself.

⁵¹ *Theory*, 440, 546.

5.

Robert Nozick, in his famous critique of Rawls, highlighted “the *strangeness* of the emotion of envy.” Isn’t there something mysterious, he asked, some puzzle to be unraveled, in preferring “that others not have their better score on some dimension,” rather than being pleased for them or simply unconcerned?⁵² Rawls, for all his differences from Nozick, seems to share this sense of envy’s strangeness. For both, and indeed for the various others who have entered the lists on their respective sides, absolutism is intuitive and unproblematic, a baseline motive that needs no particular investigation. It is relativism that represents a departure from the norm and demands an explanation, relativism that is psychologically peculiar at best and morally discreditable at worse. Hence the reason that absolutism is present in the original position while relativism is absent, and hence the reason that this aspect of Rawls’s exhaustively-scrutinized theory has largely escaped scrutiny.

But if the historical argument of this study has been at all plausible, it would suggest that this has it precisely backwards: that it is relativism which, historically speaking, has a stronger claim to generality, and that it is our own exhaustive focus on absolutism that seems particular or even parochial. Consider, once again, all the conceptual infrastructure that must be in place for absolutism even to make sense. There is the assumption of atomistic individualism: that every individual’s status can be specified independently of every other’s, and that if they impinge on one another they do so only in specific and contingent ways. (It is not the fact that A is rich that makes B poor, either conceptually or empirically; A is separately rich and B is separately poor.) There is the assumption of a universal index by which these statuses can be set beside one another. (It is not that C is a farmer and D a fisherman, without any way of relating the two; each

⁵² Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 240, emphasis in original.

of them *have* something that can serve as a common denominator to compare their situations.) Perhaps most importantly, there is the assumption of the quantifiability of this index; indeed, it is not clear that there would be anything left of absolutism without quantifiability. Rawls's and Nozick's favored metaphors are indicative of all these assumptions: Rawls's parties striving "for as high an absolute score" as they can, "not concerned to win but to get as many points as possible"; Nozick's individuals defined by their possession of better or worse "scores" across a variety of discrete and differentiated "dimensions."

Absolutism is a specifically modern ethos, hard to imagine in a world that had never known capitalism. We have already noted the ways in which money seems to provide the template for Rawls's broader notion of primary goods. More generally, I suspect that it is only when the use of money becomes ubiquitous to everyday life that the underlying assumptions of absolutism can seem commonsensical. Money is possessed, without having any intrinsic connection to the individuals who possess it; it is liquid, serving as the common denominator by which all other goods can be measured; it is inherently quantified and endlessly accumulable.⁵³ The increased centrality of money to everyday life has gone hand-in-hand (historically, if not conceptually) with a vast expansion of productive capacities, one that has swept away the mental landscape of the old Malthusian world. This expansion makes absolutism seem even more intuitive: it becomes possible to imagine all material goods being endlessly reproducible and accumulable in their own right, all nonetheless possessing an underlying money value and thus capable of being assimilated into a single index.

⁵³ At least in theory. In everyday life, practices surrounding the use of money itself may diverge interestingly from these assumptions; see especially Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money*.

By the late twentieth century, these historical changes had been achieved with a finality that often made them pass unnoticed, so that the new absolutist world could be mistaken for the default form of human social life. (Indeed, if its assumptions were originally associated with the rise of capitalism, the Cold War showed that they need not be inherently capitalist at all; a broadly absolutist and productivist ideology was common to both the United States and the Soviet Union, even if their particular strains of it differed.) Go back a little further in time, and the shift becomes visible as historical process rather than settled fact; indeed, in some sense it was the central theme of the great nineteenth- and twentieth-century social theorists. We can think of Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, in which "the definite social relation between men themselves" takes on "the fantastic form of a relation between things," and his description of capital as money detached from the world of human uses so that its self-reproduction becomes a limitless "end in itself."⁵⁴ Or Weber's vision of how ascetic Protestantism "helped to build that mighty cosmos of the modern economic order" in which "the outward goods of this world gained increasing and finally inescapable power over men, as never before in history."⁵⁵ Or Polanyi's account of "the divorce of the economic motive from all concrete social relationships which would by their very nature set a limit to that motive."⁵⁶ We do not need to accept all the particulars of any of their theories. But from all of them we can get some sense, however inchoate, of the great historical shifts that made absolutism appear intuitive and relativism surprising.

⁵⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 165, 253.

⁵⁵ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism*, 120-21.

⁵⁶ Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 57.

Go back a little further still, and we enter the world whose conceptual landscape we have been trying to reconstruct, one in which it is relativism that appears as the baseline assumption and absolutism which demands explanation. Adam Smith's insistence that "it is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure" that leads us to pursue our economic interest can stand as a late manifestation of a mental world that was already beginning to fade — its decline evidenced, as we have seen, by the very fact that Smith felt the need to insist on a notion that his predecessors often took as simple fact.⁵⁷ We do not need to go over all of the features of this world once again, except to reiterate that its assumptions are hardly more optimistic than those that replaced them. We often evoke this sense of the lost primacy of social life in tones of romantic nostalgia, imagining a warm and communitarian *Gemeinschaft* giving way to a cold and unfeeling *Gesellschaft*, but relativism does not require any such nostalgia and may indeed undercut it. Rousseau's society built upon *amour-propre*, each of its members motivated by "the ardent desire to raise one's relative fortune less out of genuine need than in order to place oneself above others," is just as much a portrait of the relativist world as the more idyllic communities of a Burke or a Hegel are.⁵⁸ From the perspective of Rawls's theory, the relevant issue is relativism's generality, not its desirability.

⁵⁷ See above, chapter VII, section 3.

⁵⁸ In his *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, Rawls shows himself revealingly resistant to this strain in Rousseau's thought, insisting that this malicious form of *amour-propre* is simply an "unnatural, or perverted" version of a healthy and natural *amour-propre* that is concerned with equality and reciprocity (*Lectures*, 198-200). This view is not indefensible; Rawls here follows the interpretations of Dent and Neuhaus, in addition to (somewhat strangely) reading Rousseau through the lens of a passage from Kant's *Religion* written four decades later (for which see below, chapter IX, section 1). To my mind, however, it is belied by Rousseau's explicit description of *amour-propre* as "a relative sentiment, factitious, and born in society" (*Discourse on Inequality*, Note XV, in *Discourses*, 218). In any case, it may not be surprising that Rawls found Rousseau's more pessimistic depictions of *amour-propre*

Generality is also different from universality, or inevitability. We do not need to insist that the quest for status is “natural” in whatever sense, much less biologically hardwired.⁵⁹ Nor do we need to insist that it is historically invariable or immune to social alteration. No doubt relativism can be modified (and perhaps it might even be eliminated) given certain social or historical conditions, but the same might equally be said of absolutism. The question from the standpoint of the original position is whether relativism is basic enough, and widespread enough, to qualify as a “general fact about human society.” Or rather: given that absolutism does apparently qualify as such a fact, the question is simply whether relativism is significantly less fundamental. I have argued that wherever we set the bar for such general facts, it is impossible to set it plausibly in a way that includes absolutism but excludes relativism. And if this is so, then the second of Rawls’s arguments for excluding envy, the argument from its particularity, cannot work.

6.

But Rawls has another argument. He notes that he excludes envy “for reasons both of simplicity and moral theory,” and to this point we have emphasized the first strand.⁶⁰ The original position, however, is not solely a device of abstraction, designed to strain out the

uncongenial; he likewise seeks to minimize the role of pride and vainglory in Hobbes’s thought (*Lectures*, 49-51).

⁵⁹ As noted previously, recent decades have seen an upsurge of interest in the relativist view within the social sciences, especially in behavioral economics and evolutionary psychology. While much of this work has been stimulating, our argument does not require that we accept all of its conclusions, particularly the sometimes-voiced suggestion that its findings reveal the transhistorical nature of humans’ biological or cognitive makeup.

⁶⁰ *Theory*, 530.

particular and leave behind the universal. It is also a self-consciously moral device, designed “to make vivid to ourselves the restrictions that it seems reasonable to impose” on principles of justice, and thus to “leave aside those aspects of the social world that seem arbitrary from a moral point of view.”⁶¹ Rawls makes clear that the device “already includes moral features and must do so,” even if he has “divided up the description of the original position so that these elements do not occur in the characterization of the parties” themselves.⁶² In *Political Liberalism*, he develops this point in a new vocabulary:

Two different parts of the original position must be carefully distinguished. These parts correspond to the two powers of moral personality, or what I have called “the capacity to be reasonable” and “the capacity to be rational.” While the original position as a whole represents both moral powers, and therefore represents the full conception of the person, the parties as rationally autonomous representatives of persons in society represent only the rational... The reasonable, or persons’ capacity for a sense of justice, which here is their capacity to honor fair terms of social cooperation, is represented by the various restrictions to which the parties are subject and by the conditions imposed on their agreement.

And he explicitly warns against imagining that the original position is supposed to be “morally neutral” or to rely solely on “a conception of rational choice as understood in economics or decision theory.”⁶³

These remarks suggest a third argument for excluding relativism from the original position. Doing so is not a constraint of the rational, but a constraint of the reasonable; relativism should be excluded not because it is particular or contingent, but because it is immoral. For all that Rawls’s project relies on an implicit social theory and historical narrative, after all, he is first and foremost a moral philosopher rather than a social theorist or a historian, and thus it need not

⁶¹ *Theory*, 18, 15.

⁶² *Theory*, 585.

⁶³ *Political Liberalism*, 305, 306n21.

be inconsistent for him to exclude propensities (even quite widespread propensities) that are morally undesirable. Most of us are prone to relativism, Rawls might allow, just as we are prone to be partial to our own interests — but just as the original position is designed to save us from our own partiality, so it also serves to save us from our relativism.⁶⁴ And isn't it better this way? Envy is immoral, after all, because it is "collectively disadvantageous," leading us to seek losses for others even when it does us no good.⁶⁵ Perhaps it isn't really possible to show that relativism is inconsistent with a value-neutral notion of instrumental rationality. But why insist on value-neutrality? Rawls is clear, after all, that "desires for things that are inherently unjust...have no weight."⁶⁶ And isn't it intuitively clear that a desire to inflict harm for its own sake falls into this category, and that we should wish others to be successful when it does not affect us in any way?

But what does it mean to say that the status of others "does not affect us"? This is a deceptively difficult question to answer. In one sense, if our relative position genuinely didn't affect us, there would be no reason to discuss the issue in the first place — the fact of envy is a way in which it *does* affect us. Thus the real question seems to be something like: when is it morally desirable to *treat* the status of others as not affecting us, and thus to treat any actual ill effects as a problem with us rather than with the situation itself?

⁶⁴ This, I think, would be Rawls's response to the critique raised by Tomlin ("Envy, Facts, and Justice," 108): "Rawls excludes envy from the original position on the basis that it is a vice. I say that it should be included on the basis that it is a fact (and Rawls appears to accept that it is). All negative feelings produced by inequality — so long as they are facts — must...be included regardless of whether they are vices or not." In my view, ruling out vices from the original position is not so inconsistent with Rawls's account of it as Tomlin suggests. Thus to argue for the inclusion of relativism in the original position, we can't simply concede that it is a vice while arguing that it is a general enough fact, as Tomlin does; instead we need to show that (in some cases at least) it isn't a vice at all.

⁶⁵ *Theory*, 532.

⁶⁶ *Theory*, 261; cf. 31.

The simplest answer would be the economistic one: that the only relevant criterion is our material index of wealth, and that any form of relativism constitutes envy in the morally objectionable sense. Rawls, for all the economistic features of his theory that we have already seen, is unwilling to accept such a crude answer. He in fact specifies two morally permissible forms of relativism that do not fall under his strictures against envy proper — cases, that is, in which a concern for inequality and relative status is neither irrational nor immoral. The first is if someone feels that an inequality is the result of “unjust institutions, or wrongful conduct,” in which case what they feel is not properly called envy but rather the moral feeling of *resentment*. The second is if someone’s disadvantage is “so great as to wound his self-respect,” in “circumstances where it would be unreasonable to expect someone to feel differently.” In this case, the feeling is what Rawls calls *excusable envy*.⁶⁷

The distinction between resentment and excusable envy is noteworthy in its own right. Resentment is relativism directed against an unjust inequality; excusable envy is relativism directed against an inequality that harms our self-respect. This distinction requires that there be some class of inequality that harms the self-respect of the disadvantaged (triggering excusable envy) without being unjust (triggering resentment). And yet the logic of the difference principle would seem to undercut any such distinction. The principle, we recall, holds that the only just inequalities are those that benefit the least advantaged, and thus that any inequality that harms

⁶⁷ *Theory*, 533-34. On the political implications of these concepts in the contemporary American context, see Green, “Rawls and the Forgotten Figure of the Most Advantaged.” Green reads Rawls as arguing for a kind of “reasonable envy” that is distinct from both resentment and excusable envy (134-35), although I think that all of Green’s examples of reasonable envy fall into one of these other two categories.

them is unjust *ipso facto* (regardless of whether it stems from injustice in any other way).⁶⁸ In this light, excusable envy would always turn out to be reducible to resentment. Rawls's distinction between the two makes more sense, however, when we notice that "the necessary impersonal comparisons are made in terms of the *objective* primary goods."⁶⁹ Thus an inequality that harms our objective interests triggers resentment, while an inequality that merely harms our self-respect triggers excusable envy. (Objective primary goods are not simply material ones, since they include such things as liberty of conscience; really, they seem to encompass all primary goods except self-respect.) The distinction is another sign of the ways in which Rawls, despite describing self-respect as "the main primary good,"⁷⁰ tends not to treat it as a real primary good at all.

In any case, Rawls is certainly aware of the ways that inequality can have harmful effects even on the objective primary goods. Such harms may take a variety of forms; broadly speaking, inequality can never be neutral in its effects on any positional good (that is, any scarce good whose possession depends on relative position).⁷¹ But perhaps the most obvious way that economic inequality can cause objective harm is in its effects on political life, and this is the potential harm that Rawls treats most extensively. We have already seen Rawls specify that the rational individual is free of envy only so long as inequalities "do not exceed certain limits," and elsewhere he writes that "there is a maximum gain permitted to the most favored on the

⁶⁸ See especially *Theory*, 62: "Injustice, then, is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all."

⁶⁹ *Theory*, 532, emphasis added.

⁷⁰ *Theory*, 534.

⁷¹ Pogge, among others, has called attention to the difficulties that positional goods pose for the difference principle. See Pogge, *Realizing Rawls*, 198; Pogge, *John Rawls*, 116-17.

assumption that, even if the difference principle would allow it, there would be unjust effects on the political system and the like.”⁷² Although generally reticent about the ways in which existing liberal democracies fall short of his well-ordered society, he notes that such regimes have historically proven willing to tolerate economic disparities “that far exceed what is compatible with political equality.”⁷³ And he warns that equality of opportunity is “put in jeopardy when inequalities of wealth exceed a certain limit; and political liberty likewise tends to lose its value, and representative government to become such in appearance only.”⁷⁴

Yet although Rawls is certainly aware of such harms, he wants to circumscribe their implications for his overall theory. His persistent language of “limits” that must not be exceeded suggests that these harms can be safely ignored so long as inequality does not become extreme, as though economic distributions only begin to affect the political system once a certain threshold has been crossed. Framing the issue this way also raises the problem of identifying the requisite threshold, and Rawls admits that “where this limit lies is a matter of political judgment guided by theory, good sense, and plain hunch,” about which “the theory of justice has nothing specific to say.”⁷⁵ Similarly, figuring out when the difference principle has actually been violated

⁷² *Theory*, 143, 81. This once again suggests that he imagines the difference principle being applied simply in terms of income and wealth — since strictly speaking these unjust political effects should be counted as harms to the disadvantaged that are internal to the difference principle.

⁷³ *Theory*, 226.

⁷⁴ *Theory*, 278.

⁷⁵ *Theory*, 278.

becomes a messy and equally indeterminate process, belying his previously-expressed confidence about the principle's ease of application.⁷⁶

A more plausible view, and one which would avoid these problems, would be to suppose that such effects exist in varying degrees all along the spectrum — that although the spillover from economic into political life need not always be pathological, it is never absent. But Rawls has his own reasons for avoiding such a view. One of the central doctrines of his theory is that the two principles are in a “lexical order” in which the first takes priority over the second; political liberty, in other words, takes priority over economic advancement, and “liberty can be restricted only for the sake of liberty.”⁷⁷ This priority rule is meant to forbid trades of liberty for prosperity, undertaken in the hope that “by giving up some of their fundamental liberties men are sufficiently compensated by the resulting social and economic gains.”⁷⁸ But if we took economic inequality to have pervasive effects on the political liberty of the disadvantaged, however slight these effects might sometimes be, then any such inequality would violate Rawls's priority rule. The logic of the difference principle, after all, is that the parties accept inequality in exchange for greater absolute prosperity — but if the least advantaged are thereby diminishing their own political liberty, then they are striking precisely the kind of bargain that Rawls's theory forbids. For that reason he must insist that inequality does not diminish liberty in any way until it exceeds some specified limit.

⁷⁶ For the difficulty of identifying violations of the difference principle, see *Theory*, 372; compare his earlier claim for its ease of application at 320.

⁷⁷ *Theory*, 302.

⁷⁸ *Theory*, 62.

Rawls does accept that economic deprivation can have wide-ranging effects on other areas of one's life, leading to an "inability to take advantage of one's rights and opportunities as a result of poverty and ignorance, and a lack of means generally." But he tries to accommodate this within his theory by drawing a distinction between "liberty" proper and the "worth of liberty." Everyone has the same basic liberties specified by the formal requirements of equal citizenship, yet these formally equal individuals may vary widely in terms of their practical "capacity to advance their ends":

Freedom as equal liberty is the same for all; the question of compensating for a lesser than equal liberty does not arise. But the worth of liberty is not the same for everyone. Some have greater authority and wealth, and therefore greater means to achieve their aims. The lesser worth of liberty is, however, compensated for, since the capacity of the less fortunate members of society to achieve their aims would be even less were they not to accept the existing inequalities whenever the difference principle is satisfied.

And so the overall system serves "to maximize the worth to the least advantaged of the complete scheme of equal liberty shared by all."⁷⁹

This distinction, as we can see, is meant to reconcile the difference principle with the doctrine of the priority of liberty, suggesting that the inequalities generated by the former do not violate the constraints imposed by the latter. The argument, designed to thread this needle, may as a result be overfine. Why should we assume that the parties in the original position would be more concerned with their formal liberty than with its practical value? As Norman Daniels argued in response, any considerations that would make the parties choose equal formal liberty would likely militate in favor of equal worth of liberty as well (and likewise, any considerations favoring unequal worth of liberty would militate in favor of unequal formal liberty).⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *Theory*, 204-5.

⁸⁰ Daniels, "Equal Liberty and Unequal Worth of Liberty," a worthwhile examination of the problems with this distinction.

But we can discern another implicit assumption in Rawls's discussion that would serve to circumvent all such worries. This is the assumption that the worth of liberty follows the same trajectory as the absolute index of primary goods regulated by the difference principle — or, as his later discussion in *Political Liberalism* suggests, perhaps the worth of liberty simply *is* the index of primary goods.⁸¹ The underlying thought is that even the worst-off members of a wealthier society have greater means and opportunities to use their liberty and advance their conceptions of the good than members of a poorer society. Just as the poorest members of a prosperous but unequal society still have greater absolute wealth than they would have in a hypothetical state of primitive equality, likewise the worth of their liberty increases in absolute terms (even if it remains less than everyone else's). Not only do growth-producing inequalities not diminish the liberty (proper) of the least advantaged, they actually “maximize” the worth of their liberty. The argument, if successful, would defuse any tension between inequality and freedom.

7.

The argument has serious difficulties, however, and they stem from some of the absolutist features of Rawls's theory that we have already noted. The worth of liberty metric, like the primary goods metric that underlies it, is an attempt to impose commensurability and

⁸¹ *Political Liberalism*, 326: “But rather than counting these and similar obstacles as restricting a person's liberty, we count them as affecting the worth of liberty, that is, the usefulness to persons of their liberties. Now in justice as fairness, this usefulness is specified in terms of an index of the primary goods regulated by the second principle of justice... When this principle is satisfied, however, this lesser worth of liberty is compensated for in this sense: the all-purpose means available to the least advantaged members of society to achieve their ends would be even less were social and economic inequalities, as measured by the index of primary goods, different from what they are.”

quantifiability upon a varied set of items. There are various freedoms that serve various purposes, yet Rawls nonetheless hopes to capture all of their values in a single measure, and believes that this measure increases in lockstep with the absolute index of primary goods. (Once again, the general contours of the argument persist in *Political Liberalism*, even as Rawls renounces the notion that liberty proper can be quantified or maximized.)

Rawls is aware, of course, that the term “liberty” can refer to a wide-ranging and perhaps incongruous set of things. Following Benjamin Constant, he often distinguishes between the “liberty of the ancients” and the “liberty of the moderns,” between political participation on the one hand and personal freedom on the other.⁸² He hopes to show that we do not have to choose between the two, and that a well-ordered society will realize both forms without requiring any significant tradeoffs between them. Still, it is fair to say that Rawls is much more a “modern” than an “ancient,” for his treatment of liberty tends to emphasize the capacity to pursue an individual conception of the good over the capacity for political agency. The emblematic kind of freedom for him is the religious believer’s ability to follow their conscience without interference, not the active citizen’s ability to exert influence on the society around them. He notes that “classical liberalism” held “that the political liberties are of less intrinsic importance than liberty of conscience and freedom of the person”⁸³ — and although he is reluctant to endorse this view outright, he ultimately acquiesces to it.⁸⁴

⁸² See *Theory*, 201, 222; “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,” *Collected Papers*, 307; “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” *Collected Papers*, 391-92; *Political Liberalism*, 5, 206, 299; *Justice as Fairness*, 2, 143.

⁸³ *Theory*, 229.

⁸⁴ Rawls’s treatment of this question is strikingly indirect and equivocal. He tends to mention reasons why *others* have prioritized personal over political liberty, refraining from explicitly endorsing such arguments but at the same time saying nothing to refute them. In the *Theory*,

Now, if freedom is conceived as the liberty of the moderns, the capacity to pursue an individual conception of the good, it is plausible (although hardly incontestable) that its worth tends to be higher for members of a prosperous and unequal modern society. Religious believers may enjoy additional protections in a constitutional democracy that compensate for their relative economic deprivation; those devoted to art may find greater opportunities for cultivating their talent and taste that would not be available in a less prosperous society. In such cases, Rawls's confidence that the worth of liberty would increase in conjunction with economic development has a certain logic to it.

Is the same thing true of political liberty, the liberty of the ancients? Rawls wants to suggest so, that history is a progressive story in which political liberty increases along with broader social development; at the very least, for reasons already noted, he needs to maintain that it is not a story of decline. It is difficult to piece together much of a historical narrative from the *Theory*, but we do get occasional glimpses of a narrative reminiscent of traditional Whig history, or perhaps twentieth-century modernization theory. In the "earlier stages" of history, Rawls suggests, societies are governed by the "general conception" of the principles of justice, in which *all* primary goods (including liberty) can be distributed unequally if doing so is to everyone's advantage; only in the later stages do they come to be governed by the "special conception," in which liberty must be equal and only socioeconomic goods can be unequally distributed.⁸⁵ The

compare the various passages at 201, 229-30, 233, and 247; see also *Political Liberalism*, 299, 330. For Rawls's most straightforward statement on the issue, see *Justice as Fairness*, 143: "Justice as fairness agrees with the strand of the liberal tradition (represented by Constant and Berlin) that regards the equal political liberties (the liberties of the ancients) as having in general less intrinsic value than, say, freedom of thought and liberty of conscience (the liberties of the moderns)."

⁸⁵ *Theory*, 293, 62.

underlying thought is that there is a certain level of material prosperity and social development that must be attained before the universal exercise of liberties is even possible:

It is only when social conditions do not allow the effective establishment of these rights that one can acknowledge their restriction. The denial of equal liberty can be accepted only if it is necessary to enhance the quality of civilization so that in due course the equal freedoms can be enjoyed by all.⁸⁶

Therefore “[i]n many historical situations a lesser political liberty may have been justified” if required “to transform a less fortunate society into one where the equal liberties can be fully enjoyed.”⁸⁷ Such passages suggest that political freedom, rare and unevenly enjoyed in earlier historical stages, becomes generalized and eventually universalized with economic progress. (This story of progressive inclusion fits well, of course, with the typical ways in which the United States and other Western democracies tend to understand their own history.)

In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls is somewhat less sanguine. Responding in part to Daniels’s critique, he writes that it is necessary to “treat the equal political liberties in a special way” by “guaranteeing the fair value” of these rights through proactive measures. Noting the ways in which “those with relative greater means can combine together and exclude those who have less,” he also registers his uncertainty “that the inequalities permitted by the difference

⁸⁶ *Theory*, 542. Rawls modifies aspects of this section in his later writings, but he does not renounce the core idea of the quoted passage, which remains with only minor stylistic changes in the revised version of the *Theory* (475). The original version of the *Theory* had gone on to argue that “as the conditions of civilization improve, the marginal significance for our good of further economic and social advantages diminishes relative to the interests of liberty” (542). This claim vanishes from the revised version, and in *Political Liberalism* he notes that “the notion of marginal significance is incompatible with the notion of a hierarchy of interests” on which he generally relies; instead, he should have spoken of the marginal changes “reflected in the gradual realization of the social conditions which are necessary for the full and effective exercise of the basic liberties” (371n84). These shifts do not, I think, alter the basic historical narrative that Rawls offers us.

⁸⁷ *Theory*, 247.

principle will be sufficiently small to prevent this” without additional steps being taken. While he does not go into great detail about what such steps might be, he does suggest that the kind of guarantee he has in mind would involve ensuring “that everyone has a fair opportunity to hold public office and to influence the outcome of political decisions,” along with “fair and equal access to the political process.”⁸⁸ (He also no longer mentions historical situations in which unequal liberty in accordance with the “general conception” may have been justified, instead simply limiting his principles to “reasonably favorable conditions” in which equal liberty for everyone is feasible.⁸⁹) For all this, however, his later writings do not much alter the basic narrative suggested by the *Theory*. Ensuring the fair value of political liberty may pose special challenges for a modern liberal democracy, but there is no suggestion that it is an impossible challenge, or that any other kind of society did or could offer better prospects for political liberty.

In this respect, and despite his occasional use of Constant’s language, Rawls has little of the sense of history that infused the work of Constant and his eighteenth-century predecessors, little of the sense of tradeoffs or of incommensurable values. For Constant, there were compelling historical reasons why active participation in collective life had been specifically the liberty of *the ancients*, and likewise why freedom of commerce and conscience had become specifically the liberty of *the moderns*. If he insisted on the continued need for a form of political freedom, he equally insisted that liberty as it had existed in the ancient republics was

⁸⁸ *Political Liberalism*, 327-28; cf. 357-63.

⁸⁹ *Political Liberalism*, 297; *Justice as Fairness*, 101. (But see also the discussion of “burdened societies” in *The Law of Peoples*, 105-13.) The upshot is that his political conception of justice “may not apply to all societies at all times and places”: see “The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus,” *Collected Papers*, 492; cf. “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” *Collected Papers*, 389-90.

irrecoverable. Rawls is not entirely without a sense of fundamental tradeoffs; in his later writings, he comes to emphasize (following Isaiah Berlin) that “there is no social world without loss.”⁹⁰ And of course, there is a kind of pluralism that is crucial to his later works, namely that of the plurality of reasonable comprehensive doctrines held by citizens. Still, he cannot allow any real tradeoffs among the primary goods themselves. Not all primary goods will be universally attainable in every stage of society, but all of them will be attainable in a well-ordered society that has reached the requisite stage of historical development.

There are deep-seated reasons why Rawls’s theory does not contain (and indeed cannot accommodate) this kind of historical loss among the primary goods. One reason stems from the nature of the choice facing the parties in the original position. For beyond their ignorance of their conceptions of the good, which prevents them from deciding between incommensurable values, they “do not know to which generation they belong or, what comes to the same thing, the stage of civilization of their society.”⁹¹ Even when they could agree that certain goods or values were compelling enough to count as interests behind the veil of ignorance, they would have no way of resolving cases in which some goods were only attainable in historical circumstances that ruled out others — for they have no idea which set of circumstances they will inhabit, and thus need to decide on principles that will hold for *every* generation. The choice situation in the original position therefore requires that there be some kind of society that will enable the full enjoyment of all primary goods at once.

⁹⁰ “The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good,” *Collected Papers*, 462; cf. “The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus,” *Collected Papers*, 477.

⁹¹ *Theory*, 287; cf. 137.

The manner in which Rawls conceives of political liberty also works to preclude any sense of historical loss. He tends to identify political participation with the kinds of rights enjoyed by citizens of modern constitutional democracies — above all the rights to help determine one’s representatives and to hold public office oneself.⁹² This rather formal conception of participation helps explain the Whiggish tone of his history in the *Theory*. If political liberty simply means possessing the rights of a modern democratic citizen — and not the varied and often-informal ways that inhabitants of other kinds of societies have affected political decisions — then it is hardly surprising that this liberty seems rare in the “earlier stages” of history and to reach its apex in modern democracies. More than this, though, emphasizing rights rather than practical capacities means that Rawls conceives the “fair value” of political liberty solely in terms of its equal distribution rather than its scope. (This is equally true of most of the critics who have debated the tenability of his guarantee of fair value.) So long as “citizens similarly gifted and motivated have roughly an equal chance of influencing the government’s policy and of attaining positions of authority,”⁹³ it does not matter whether this chance is equally large or equally small.

For Constant, by contrast, the central and irrecoverable aspect of the liberty of the ancients was not the right to participate but the practical capacity to shape the world around us:

The share which in antiquity everyone held in national sovereignty was by no means an abstract presumption as it is in our own day. The will of each individual had real influence: the exercise of this will was a vivid and repeated pleasure. Consequently the ancients were ready to make many a sacrifice to preserve their political rights and their share in the administration of the state. . . . This compensation no longer exists for us today. Lost in the multitude, the individual can almost never perceive the influence he exercises.

⁹² But see also the discussion of decent hierarchical societies in *The Law of Peoples*, 62-78.

⁹³ *Justice as Fairness*, 46.

Never does his will impress itself upon the whole; nothing confirms in his eyes his own cooperation.⁹⁴

The force of Constant's argument is primarily sociological and historical rather than formal or legal. What had changed since antiquity was not only or even primarily a loss of equality (for of course, as Constant recognized, the relative equality of their citizens required the vastly greater inequality between citizens and slaves). More than that, it was "the changes brought by two thousand years in the dispositions of mankind" — the historical shifts through which modern societies had become comparatively wealthy, stratified, sprawling, populous, full of new pleasures and pursuits, all of which tended to weaken both the capacity and the desire for active citizenship.⁹⁵ Above all, perhaps, was the sheer fact of size; material and technological progress sustained ever-larger populations and bound them into ever-greater units, leaving each individual "lost in the multitude" of a newly impersonal society, however equal they might be.⁹⁶ If Rawls is adamant that citizens cannot be allowed to sell their political birthright for the sake of prosperity, Constant was convinced that they already had, and should give up trying to reclaim it in its classical form.

Is something like Constant's story plausible? Must progress in one dimension go along with decline in another? Rawls might reply that we can discern historical progress even in terms of Constant's ancient liberty, once we allow that any such liberty must be "compatible with a

⁹⁴ Constant, *Political Writings*, 316.

⁹⁵ Constant, *Political Writings*, 317.

⁹⁶ Rawls, for his part, seems to assume the impersonal modern state as the horizon of his theory. See *Political Liberalism*, 330: "assigning a central place to political life is but one conception of the good among others. Given the size of a modern state, the exercise of the political liberties is bound to have a lesser place in the conception of the good of most citizens than the exercise of the other basic liberties."

similar system of liberty for all.”⁹⁷ Whatever political capacity the citizens of the ancient republics might have enjoyed, in other words, must be balanced against the incapacity of their (vastly more numerous) non-citizens; once slaves, women, metics, and other out-groups are counted, perhaps even the minute capacity of the typical resident of a large modern nation-state exceeds that of the typical Athenian. Still, this sort of reply does not entirely get Rawls off the hook, since Athens and its rivals are hardly the only possible basis for comparison. To demonstrate continued progress along each dimension of liberty, Rawls would have to extend the argument to encompass all other previous societies dating back to prehistoric bands of hunter-gatherers, likely a hopeless task.

The point here is not to romanticize the ancient city-states or any other form of society. The point is simply to show the difficulty of defining liberty in such a way that socioeconomic development causes it to increase (or even hold steady) in every relevant dimension. The difference principle carves out a historical trajectory of increased prosperity, inequality, scale, abundance, differentiation; if the parties know any “general facts about human society,” they know this much. Rawls separates out liberty and its worth, attempting to insulate the former from this trajectory while assimilating the latter to it; the problems he runs into reflect deeper problems with the absolutist requirements of commensurability and quantifiability. It becomes hard to avoid the conclusion that in important respects Rawls’s two principles cut against each other, that the historical trajectory of the difference principle need not increase (and may actively diminish) some salient forms of liberty. If this is so, history takes on precisely the shape that Rawls wants it to avoid, an extended exchange of freedom for prosperity. All this is simply to

⁹⁷ *Theory*, 302. Rawls never explicitly formulates such a reply, but various pointed comments suggest that he might endorse it: see *Justice as Fairness* 143n9; *The Law of Peoples* 29n27, 52n66.

suggest one way that the parties in the original position might rightly feel that even the seemingly incontestable material improvements specified by the difference principle do them real harm.⁹⁸

8.

So far we have only considered the effects of inequality and prosperity on political liberty, one of Rawls's "objective" primary goods. But Rawls makes another crucial move by including self-respect among his list of primary goods—indeed, as we have seen, it is "perhaps the most important" or "the main" primary good. While introducing self-respect creates a number of complications for his theory, Rawls understandably feels that he cannot do without it; he writes that he added it in response to objections to his "failure to consider the relevance of status."⁹⁹ He also feels that some concern for status and self-respect is universal enough to penetrate the veil of ignorance, for the fact that certain kinds of disadvantage lead to a loss of

⁹⁸ The harm here, however, need not be the result of inequality itself. After all, Constant's story of the contraction of political capacity under modern conditions does not apply solely to the worst-off; in a large-scale and impersonal modern society, even those close to the top might have little concrete capacity to shape political life. It is size rather than stratification that plays the central role in Constant's story: as a society expands, the political capacity of each of its members will correspondingly shrink, even if it could somehow preserve complete material equality. Thus there are two different mechanisms by which the kind of material progress specified by the difference principle might have harmful effects on political liberty. The first is the vitiation of its value to the worst-off due to increased inequality, which Rawls is aware of and attempts to address with his guarantee of the fair value of the political liberties. The second is the vitiation of its value to everyone due to increased scale and impersonality, which Constant highlights but which Rawls does not consider. Concern about the first kind of harm would provide one reason for the parties to be specifically *relativist*; concern about the second, however, need not involve relativism but rather would depend on other dispositions, such as a preference for political liberty over other primary goods. I thank Erin Pineda for driving home to me the importance of this distinction.

⁹⁹ *Theory*, x.

self-esteem is one of “the general facts of moral psychology.”¹⁰⁰ Although “the parties in the original position take no interest in each other’s interests, they know that in society they need to be assured by the esteem of their associates,” and therefore they “would wish to avoid at almost any cost the social conditions that undermine self-respect.”¹⁰¹ (Here and throughout, Rawls tends to run together status and self-respect, presumably on the logic that how we view ourselves depends heavily on how others view us.)

Yet the precise role of self-respect within Rawls’s theory is hard to figure out. As we have seen, Rawls generally proceeds on the assumption that self-respect will not figure into the index specified by the difference principle. He does sometimes suggest the possibility of including it, but makes clear that this would be an *ad hoc* measure and that the details of its integration cannot be specified in the original position. Self-respect could be included in “a variety of ways...consistent with the difference principle,” and its precise weighting should be decided “in view of the general features of the particular society and by what it is rational for its least favored members to want” after the veil of ignorance is partially lifted.¹⁰² Elsewhere, he suggests that to deal with the problem of envy “we can if necessary include self-respect” in the index, but adds that this would represent “an unwelcome complication” in the theory.¹⁰³

Rawls’s reluctance to include it is understandable, for doing so would raise a number of problems that we have already canvassed. Just how important is self-respect, what kinds of disadvantages harm it, and by how much? Must we ascribe a single psychology of self-respect to

¹⁰⁰ *Theory*, 181.

¹⁰¹ *Theory*, 338, 440.

¹⁰² *Theory*, 362.

¹⁰³ *Theory*, 546.

everyone, or can we allow for some amount of variation? Self-respect is closely related to relativism, and all the reasons that led Rawls to exclude relativism from the original position likewise make it difficult for him to deal with self-respect. He offers a familiar language of “limits,” as when he says that the nature of self-respect “limits the forms of hierarchy and the degrees of inequality that justice permits.”¹⁰⁴ But as before, it seems just as plausible to suppose that inequalities affect self-respect all along the spectrum, and not just when they pass some unspecified threshold.

Integrating self-respect also risks changing the valence of the difference principle entirely, making it much more egalitarian than Rawls wants to allow. Rawls criticizes strict egalitarianism, which would insist upon complete or near-complete equality in the distribution of all primary goods, by suggesting that (unlike his own theory) it “conceivably derives” from envy: “this conception of equality would be adopted in the original position only if the parties are assumed to be sufficiently envious.”¹⁰⁵ But strict egalitarians could easily reply that their views differ from Rawls’s merely in degree. After all, Rawls does allow that *some* inequalities harm the self-respect of the worst-off, in which case their relativism is excusable. Strict egalitarianism may simply result from a somewhat higher estimation of the effects of inequality on self-respect, which would suggest that most or all of what Rawls calls envy is similarly excusable. This might push us toward something like the view of G.A. Cohen, who notes that he has “no quarrel” with the difference principle itself, but argues for a strict egalitarianism that is internal to the

¹⁰⁴ *Theory*, 107.

¹⁰⁵ *Theory*, 538-39.

principle, concluding that “there is hardly any serious inequality that satisfies the requirement” that it sets.¹⁰⁶

We have already noted that self-respect for Rawls often seems to stand in for, or shade into, the related but not identical concept of status. In a broader sense, self-respect is the main point of contact between Rawls’s theory and the questions that have preoccupied us throughout this study. Rawls’s notion of envy, of course, is very close to what others would call pride or *amour-propre* — but we have seen that Rawls understands envy as a vice that will play a negligible role in a well-ordered society. Self-respect is the only avenue by which a concern for one’s standing among others — a *non-instrumental* concern, a concern for one’s standing for its own sake — play a role even in a well-ordered society and even in Rawls’s ideal theory. He hopes to limit the potentially destabilizing effects of including this propensity, in part by making a familiar move: by treating the concern for status as originally and naturally a desire for equality, and only secondarily (and pathologically) as a desire for superiority.¹⁰⁷ This is, in a sense, the most basic move in the liberal attempt to domesticate pride, to turn the arena of positional striving into one in which everyone is reciprocally “assured by their esteem of their associates.” Yet it is worth returning to some of the features of status that we have already canvassed, for they help shed light on the ambiguous status of self-respect in Rawls’s account.

The first is the “generality” or “generic quality” that Aquinas wrote of, the lack of intrinsic ties to any particular visible behavior or institution.¹⁰⁸ It was precisely this lack of fixity

¹⁰⁶ Cohen, *If You’re An Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?*, 124; cf. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 33-34.

¹⁰⁷ See note 58 of this chapter for Rawls’s reading of Rousseau along these lines.

¹⁰⁸ See above, chapter II, note 20.

— the notion that pride could underly equally all the wildly different modes of conduct that were visible in the social world — that preoccupied the seventeenth-century French moralists. But this lack of fixity has a different consequence for Rawls. In his later writings, perceiving the problems that a purely subjective understanding of self-respect could pose for his theory, Rawls attempts to anchor his treatment of self-respect more solidly in the objective realm by emphasizing that he is concerned with the “social bases of self-respect,” not with self-respect as a subjective attitude.¹⁰⁹ We cannot, in other words, hope to distribute self-respect itself according to the difference principle; we can only hope to distribute justly the objective goods that underly it. But what are these objective goods? Status and self-respect are harder to “locate,” so to speak, than the other primary goods. Liberties, for him, refer to the civil and political rights recognized by the state; income and wealth, to the distributions of material goods resulting from the market and its background institutions. But status and self-respect might spring either from political position or from economic rank, or for that matter from something else entirely.¹¹⁰ We will see that Rawls is well aware of this unfixed quality of status, its lack of anchoring in any one specific institutional location. In fact, he hopes to solve the problem of envy by taking advantage of precisely this feature.

Our earlier discussion also suggests another feature of status that sets it apart from the other primary goods and that will prove important for Rawls. To comprehend it, we must first examine a seemingly-unrelated argument that he uses to illustrate the distinction between envy and resentment:

¹⁰⁹ *Justice as Fairness*, 60.

¹¹⁰ Considerations of race and gender, for instance, are rarely present in the *Theory*, but of course legal rights and income levels are hardly the only relevant dimensions of inequality that might affect self-respect.

Suppose first that envy is held to be pervasive in poor peasant societies. The reason for this, it may be suggested, is the general belief that the aggregate of social wealth is more or less fixed, so that one person's gain is another's loss. The social system is interpreted, it might be said, as a naturally established and unchangeable zero-sum game....In this case, it would be correct to think that justice requires equal shares. Social wealth is not viewed as the outcome of mutually advantageous cooperation and so there is no fair basis for an unequal division of advantages.¹¹¹

In a zero-sum world, in other words, strict egalitarianism is the only just distribution. The difference principle depends on the possibility of constantly increasing the total material wealth to be divided, so that those who lose out in relative terms can still gain in absolute terms. For that reason, the principle would seem to operate only in a society characterized by continuous economic growth; without growth, there are no absolute gains to compensate the relative losers and therefore all apparent envy is in fact justified resentment.¹¹² This is the zero-sum mental world from which our modern absolutist concepts emerged and from which they seemed to offer an escape. Perhaps it is also the world to which we are returning; the threat of ecological crisis has led some to suggest that we can no longer rely on the promise of absolute growth to reconcile

¹¹¹ *Theory*, 539.

¹¹² Rawls eventually came to deny this assumption. He holds that the economic life of a well-ordered society must be "productive and fruitful," in the sense that its members must be made better off through cooperation ("Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," *Collected Papers*, 323; cf. "Reply to Alexander and Musgrave," *Collected Papers*, 234). But he suggests that this requirement is compatible with Mill's idea of a "just stationary state" which does not have real economic growth (*Justice as Fairness*, 63-64, 159; cf. "Fairness to Goodness," *Collected Papers*, 276; *The Law of Peoples*, 107). It is hard to assess the plausibility of Rawls's claims here given our lack of historical acquaintance with any existing just stationary state; certainly, the difference principle seems canonically to describe the historical experience of a society characterized by continuous growth. In any case, even if we concede the plausibility of the concept, such a society would likely have a much harder time justifying inequalities under the difference principle, given the constant possibility of simply redistributing some of the (no-longer-growing) accumulation of wealth from the haves to the have-nots.

us to inequality. If the future will be one of scarcity rather than abundance, then material equality is the only just distribution.¹¹³

But the material dimension is not the only relevant one. For one crucial feature of status, we recall, is that — unlike absolute wealth — it is zero-sum by definition. It is nonsensical to speak of a higher absolute status compensating for a lower relative status, and this means (in the terms of Rawls's theory) that the only just distribution of status is strict equality. Even in a world characterized by continuous material gains, everyone must possess the same self-respect regardless of how they fare otherwise.¹¹⁴ If status is in one sense more unfixed than the other primary goods, not being directly linked to any one social location, in another sense it is more fixed, in that its absolute "amount" cannot be increased, let alone maximized (and indeed, the awkwardness of such phrases indicates the difficulty of even conceiving of it in quantitative terms).

Taking these two features in conjunction, we can better appreciate the importance of a striking and under-remarked passage that appears near the end of the *Theory*.¹¹⁵ "Suppose," he begins by imagining, "that how one is valued by others depends upon one's relative place in the distribution of income and wealth":

In this case having a higher status implies having more material means than a larger fraction of society. Thus not everyone can have the highest status, and to improve one person's position is to lower that of someone else. Social cooperation to increase the conditions of self-respect is impossible. The means of status, so to speak, are fixed, and

¹¹³ See, e.g., Cohen, *If You're An Egalitarian*, 112-15.

¹¹⁴ In "Social Unity and Primary Goods," Rawls suggests that the "social bases of self-respect" are among the primary goods for which an unequal distribution is permissible (*Collected Papers*, 363). I am inclined to view this as a momentary inconsistency, since Rawls is clear elsewhere that self-respect must be distributed equally.

¹¹⁵ *Theory*, 545-46. The quotations in the remainder of the paragraph are drawn from this passage.

each man's gain is another's loss. Clearly this situation is a great misfortune. Persons are set at odds with one another in the pursuit of their self-esteem. Given the importance of this primary good, the parties in the original position surely do not want to find themselves so opposed.

Status, Rawls recognizes, can only be zero-sum. And if status depends on economic position, this could potentially have dramatic effects on the permissible arrangements of economic life:

[I]f the means of providing a good are indeed fixed and cannot be enlarged by cooperation, then justice seems to require equal shares, other things the same. But an equal division of all primary goods is irrational in view of the possibility of bettering everyone's circumstances by accepting certain inequalities.¹¹⁶

Since self-respect is a good for which the only just distribution is strict equality, then any other good that serves as the basis for self-respect must likewise be distributed equally. Thus if status and self-respect depend on "one's relative place in the distribution of income and wealth," disparities in income and wealth would have to be leveled entirely. But this solution seems manifestly "irrational" to Rawls, since it forecloses the possibility of "bettering everyone's circumstances by accepting certain inequalities."

The doctrine of the priority of liberty is meant to solve this problem. The proper solution, Rawls concludes, is "to support the primary good of self-respect as far as possible by the assignment of the basic liberties that can indeed be made equal," thereby relegating the economic dimension to "a subordinate place."¹¹⁷ Or, as he puts it just before this:

[I]n a well-ordered society the need for status is met by the public recognition of just institutions, together with the full and diverse internal life of the many free communities of interests that equal liberty allows. The basis for self-esteem in a just society is not then

¹¹⁶ In the revised edition of the *Theory*, Rawls silently removes these two sentences (478). However, he continues to express similar thoughts elsewhere in his later writings: see "Social Unity and Primary Goods," *Collected Papers*, 374; *Political Liberalism*, 281-82, 329.

¹¹⁷ *Theory*, 545-46.

one's income share but the publicly affirmed distribution of fundamental rights and liberties.¹¹⁸

It is only by stressing a non-economic basis for self-respect, a political and moral status that all citizens possess equally, that we can escape the requirements of strict material egalitarianism.¹¹⁹

Put another way, societies of the kind that Rawls takes as his horizon — modern, liberal, democratic, market-based — rest on the two legs of (formal) political equality and economic inequality.¹²⁰ Yet it is the first of these legs that must bear the lion's share of the weight. Given both the importance and the peculiar nature of self-respect — the fact that it is both the main primary good and that it must be distributed equally — these sorts of societies can only achieve justice so long as status is derived from the political dimension in which equality exists rather than the economic dimension in which it does not. Provided that the members of such societies think of themselves first and foremost as equal citizens, then some degree of mutually beneficial economic inequality will be permissible. If, however, members come to think of themselves in terms of their economic positions, then any virtually any inequality will have malign effects on self-respect that will render it unjust. It is no exaggeration, then, to say that the doctrine of the

¹¹⁸ *Theory*, 544.

¹¹⁹ Cf. *Justice as Fairness*, 131-32. On this point see the helpful discussion in Shue, "Liberty and Self-Respect."

¹²⁰ Cf. *Theory*, 61: "these principles presuppose that the social structure can be divided into two more or less distinct parts, the first principle applying to the one, the second to the other. They distinguish between those aspects of the social system that define and secure the equal liberties of citizenship and those that specify and establish social and economic inequalities." I say "market-based" rather than "capitalist" because Rawls repeatedly insists that his theory is compatible with both capitalism and market socialism. See *Theory*, 258, 271-74, 280; *Political Liberalism*, 298, 338.

priority of liberty is necessary if the basic shape of modern societies, with their characteristic combination of prosperity and inequality, can be defended.

9.

Rawls is today remembered as the most important representative of the “distributive paradigm” in political philosophy, responsible for turning issues of material distribution into the central axis of philosophical debate.¹²¹ Yet if Rawls is especially concerned with distributive issues, and with the extent and limits of justifiable inequality, we can see that this is only (and somewhat paradoxically) because in his theory “distributive justice as frequently understood, justice in the relative shares of material means, is relegated to a subordinate place.”¹²² It is only because the inhabitants of his well-ordered society are not centrally concerned with material inequalities that such inequalities are permissible in the first place; as material distribution becomes more and more important as a locus of status and identity, the range of just distributions shrinks down toward bare equality.

Soon after the *Theory*’s publication, H.L.A. Hart noted the shakiness of the doctrine of the priority of liberty if it is thought of as a choice that the parties in the original position would rationally have to make. After all, if it is simply a fact that we prize freedom over economic gain, we would never be tempted to make the kinds of bargains that the doctrine forbids, and thus it is superfluous. If, on the other hand, we might at various times and for various reasons want to strike such bargains, it is hard to see why the parties could rule out the possibility from behind

¹²¹ The phrase “distributive paradigm” comes from Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, esp. 15-38. For a similar categorization of Rawls, see Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 10.

¹²² *Theory*, 546.

the veil of ignorance. Rather than a universal stipulation of rational self-interest, Hart suggested, the doctrine should be read as a sign that Rawls has “a latent ideal of his own” that tacitly underlies it: the ideal of the “public-spirited citizen” who would not tolerate exchanging political life “for mere material goods or contentment.”¹²³

Our discussion lends support to this intuition from another angle. Rawls does not assume that humans necessarily *do* value the political realm over the economic, or absolute position over relative, but rather that they *must* do so if any kind of material inequality can be justified.¹²⁴ In this sense, he remains closer than most latter-day thinkers to the moral project that underlay early modern atomism. The denial of envy for Rawls, much like the critique of pride for Hobbes or Smith, must ultimately be a moral imperative rather than a descriptive assumption.

Still, the status of atomism in Rawls’s theory is far from straightforward or unambiguous, and the ambiguity here may reflect the ways in which our own mental landscape differs from the early modern one. If Rawls’s justification for atomism is in the last instance moral, this line of argument is present in the *Theory* only as an undercurrent, uneasily intertwined with his more well-known arguments couched in the language of rational choice. It is only upon close inspection that the denial of envy appears to be a consequential and contestable move; Rawls is generally content to present it as a bland dictate of rationality, and the lack of

¹²³ Hart, “Rawls on Liberty and Its Priority,” 554; see more generally 551–55. Rawls took Hart’s criticisms extremely seriously, and altered his theory in various ways to attempt to deal with them; he did not, however, fully assent to this specific point. See especially *Political Liberalism*, 370.

¹²⁴ Hence I think that Rawls is more self-aware than many of his critics would allow. See, for instance, Barry, *The Liberal Theory of Justice*, 32, critiquing the “archaic quality of Rawls’s liberalism”: “For Rawls, the obstacles to the achievement of equality of self-respect lie entirely in legally-prescribed inequalities of civil and political rights.... That equality of self-respect may be as much or more hindered by inequalities of wealth or power apparently does not occur to him.”

attention paid to this part of the theory is evidence that such a presentation seems intuitively plausible to most of his readers. In his later works, Rawls would become more explicit about the moral presuppositions of his project, but he remains inclined to see these presuppositions in terms of the constraints imposed on the parties in the original position (the “reasonable”) rather than the characterization of the parties themselves (the “rational”); he never fully faces up to the ways in which the parties themselves are moral constructions in their own right. The rational and self-interested absolutist striving for as high a score as possible, immune from envy and prizing liberty over wealth — this is a moral ideal, but in ways that run deeper than Rawls is willing to acknowledge. In this sense he vacillates between the older conception of atomism and the commonplace contemporary one, between understanding it as answer to the problem of pride and as default mode of human existence.

Rawls’s theory is an attempt, perhaps the most powerful attempt, to reconcile the moral tensions and contradictions of modern market society. The ambivalence he demonstrates in doing so is testament more to his self-awareness about the difficulties of this project than of any incoherence particular to him. It is beyond the scope of our present discussion to render a verdict on whether Rawls’s attempt is ultimately successful. Still, I am left wondering about the fit between the actors that Rawls’s theory requires and the world that it imagines. However abstractly and atemporally Rawls may lay out the logic of the difference principle, what it describes is the creation and operation of something like Weber’s “mighty cosmos of the modern economic order.” Perhaps it was not the Puritans who built this cosmos, as Weber thought, nor his “last men” who currently inhabit it. But could it possibly be anything like the people of Rawls’s well-ordered society, content with the public recognition of their equal status as citizens and grateful for the blessings of steadily increasing prosperity? Would anyone work so hard for

something that is universally recognized not to matter? The dynamism that the difference principle gestures at, and the growth that it demands, may indicate that the principle describes a very different sort of person — someone closer perhaps to the relativists whom Rawls has banished from his theory. If so, Rawls's well-ordered society would seem to be built on a contradiction, its justice dependent on denial of its animating drive. And if so, this might be one indication that capitalism has not yet left behind the problem of pride.

Chapter IX

Beyond Pride?

1.

If atomism began as a moral project, in some sense it succeeded too well. What originated as a remedy became a premise, the cure assumed and the malady forgotten. The self-interested individual, concerned to maximize some quantity “out there” in the world, and its opposite, the value-giving community providing a check upon pure individualism, took their places at the two poles of modern social thought.

It would be simplistic, of course, to suggest that the handful of thinkers we have examined bore the primary responsibility for this shift. No doubt these intellectual currents could only resonate because they tracked with changes in everyday life that made atomism seem more plausible as a description of human relations. We need not delve here into all the vexed questions about the relationship of intellectual history to “real” history, about how the thought of a few highly unrepresentative individuals relates to the lived experiences of everyone else, except to say that we have been taking their work as (to adopt the language of a social scientist) neither purely an independent nor a dependent variable: neither actively remaking their societies from some Archimedean point (the timeless vantage of the Philosopher, say), nor passively registering the underlying tectonic movements of their societies with the precision of a seismograph. In any case it stands to reason that the moral project of atomism met a ready audience because the world was genuinely beginning to feel more atomistic: less confined within longstanding personal relations and local hierarchies, more anonymous, impersonal, and transitory. It likewise stands to reason that self-interest became hegemonic as a way of understanding egoism because the model it proposed intuitively captured the experience of life in a nascent capitalism. When every person

had become incorporated into the money economy, it is hardly surprising that money's attributes — quantified, endlessly accumulable, equally useful in theory for every sort of purpose — came to shape the most basic ways that individuals understood their own ends.

Even in this new world, the set of propensities that we have been calling pride never fully vanished from philosophical thinking about social life. Yet their valence changed significantly, in ways that have endured until the present day. Two works written in the period of transition give a window into these shifts.

The first comes from Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, published in 1793, where he spoke of “a self-love which is physical and yet *involves comparison*”:

[O]nly in comparison with others does one judge oneself happy or unhappy. Out of this self-love originates the inclination *to gain worth in the opinion of others*, originally, of course, merely *equal worth*: not allowing anyone superiority over oneself, bound up with the constant anxiety that others might be striving for ascendancy; but from this arises gradually an unjust desire for acquire superiority for oneself over others. — Upon this, namely, upon *jealousy* and *rivalry*, can be grafted the greatest vices of secret or open hostility to all whom we consider alien to us. These vices, however, do not really issue from nature as their root... Hence the vices that are grafted upon this inclination can also be named vices of *culture*, and in their extreme degree of malignancy (where they are simply the idea of a maximum of evil that surpasses humanity), e.g. in *envy*, *ingratitude*, *joy in others' misfortunes*, etc., they are called *diabolical vices*.¹

The propensity to derive one's self-worth from comparison with others is primordial and innate, but its natural form is to seek only equality rather than superiority. Pride in the sense that we have been discussing it must be considered a perversion of the drive's original egalitarian form.

In the next decade Hegel would provide a contrasting but not entirely dissimilar view, in the famous section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on “lordship and bondage.” It was here that he laid out the logic of the violent struggle for recognition: self-consciousness “exists only in being acknowledged” by another, and thus each person attempts “to supersede the *other*

¹ Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* 6:27, 51, emphasis in original.

independent being in order thereby to become certain of *itself* as the essential being.” The result must be “a life-and-death struggle” which ends with the victor as master and the vanquished as slave.² And yet this situation remains unstable and transitory, unbearable certainly for the slave but unsatisfactory even for the master, for the outcome is “a recognition that is one-sided and unequal”:

[T]he object in which the lord has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one. He is, therefore, not certain of *being-for-self* as the truth of himself. On the contrary, his truth is in reality the unessential consciousness and its unessential action.³

The form of recognition coerced from the slave cannot truly satisfy the master’s need for confirmation from another, precisely because it is not freely given by an equal. Pride is ultimately self-defeating, for the very act of rendering another other inferior prevents their subjugation from satisfying it, and thus pure domination cannot be a stable form of social relation even on the master’s own terms.⁴ The inegalitarian form of the recognition drive proves to be a preliminary and inadequate version of the egalitarian form. Hegel’s mature social thought accordingly finds no room for pride, instead confining egoism to the atomistic (and decidedly not

² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* §178-89, 111-15, emphasis in original. On this section cf. Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology*, 53-63.

³ *Phenomenology of Spirit* §191-92, 116-17, emphasis in original.

⁴ Although for a contrary reading of Hegel, see Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 108-13. While we should not exaggerate Hegel’s idealism to the point of imagining that he thought all forms of domination simply collapse out of their own conceptual incoherence, I am nonetheless skeptical that we can derive much analysis or explanation of their stability from Hegel’s account. It is telling that he never returns to the subject of slavery after this early section of the *Phenomenology*; although he must have been aware of its continued ubiquity around the world, he could easily explain this away with recourse to a stadial theory of history in which it was symptomatic of backward stages rather than modernity itself. On these issues see Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*.

prideful) individualism of civil society, built around the satisfaction of needs rather than the pursuit of status.

Pride may be a perverted form of an originally egalitarian recognition drive, as for Kant, or it may be an undeveloped form of an ultimately egalitarian one, as for Hegel, but in either case the effect is to make pride secondary and equal recognition primary, to treat the latter as natural either in the sense of an origin or in the sense of a *telos*. Some version of this move has become commonplace, so much so that to deny it is sometimes treated as a peculiarity or even a simple error.⁵ What Adam Smith called the “unsocial” current in the human personality fades away, replaced by the familiar binary of social and asocial. Recognition becomes almost by definition recognition of equality, a cure for hierarchy rather than a cause of it, invoked (in something like the way that we saw with Rawls’s notion of self-respect) to buttress equal standing in the face of proliferating inequality and difference. Sociability becomes the necessary remedy for the ills of an atomistic world.

It is not my intention to suggest that this notion is simply *wrong*: that pride can never give way to a contentedness with equal standing, or that the inegalitarian form of the recognition drive will inevitably prevail over the egalitarian form. Such a claim would involve questions that are far too large for the scope of this study. I would merely suggest that the early modern thinkers we have examined are not unaware of the line of thought sketched in different ways by Kant and Hegel — rather, they reject it, and in a sense the problem of pride that preoccupied them consisted precisely of this rejection. They have a pessimistic view of human psychology

⁵ For one example that we have already seen, see Pettit’s discussion of the “implausible move” in Hobbes’s thought (*Made with Words*, 3; see above, chapter III, note 12): “While he rightly marks the concern that we human beings feel for our standing relative to others, he proceeds on the assumption that this always takes the form of a desire for superior standing; he ignores the fact that often we are content with the standing of equals.”

not in the sense that they take humans to be perpetually preoccupied with their own interests (as we have seen, they do not), but in the sense that they take the prideful desire for superiority as a perfectly stable (and indeed utterly ubiquitous) form of sociability. It may be that they were wrong in this. But I think that we should at least take this aspect of their thought seriously, and not simply dismiss it as a relic of an outdated theological background or an undeveloped ancestor of our own views. Taking it seriously might suggest that there are real blind spots in our own common ways of thinking about these questions: that atomism is not the only source of our problems, and correspondingly that the mere turn from the individual to the social may not solve them; that sociability as such may not provide the resources that many seem to expect from it, and that it was in fact its inability to provide these resources that provided the initial impetus for atomism.

For its proponents, the politics of recognition is a necessary corrective to the narrowness of the politics of material interest; for its detractors, it is a distraction from the pressing concerns of the politics of material interest. Historically speaking, as we have seen, both of these views have it backwards: the politics of material interest was developed as an escape, or if one prefers a distraction, from the politics of recognition. Noticing this does not give us any immediate answers to our own political problems. But perhaps it is a useful place to start as we try to think them through.

2.

Modern social thought emerged within, or perhaps emerged from, a prideful world: one built around hierarchy rather than equality, relative positions rather than absolute allotments, status rather than material interest. Did we ever really leave this world?

This is again a larger question than we can truly hope to answer here. One recurring line of thought, in some ways the central narrative of the classics of nineteenth- and twentieth-century social theory, would suggest that we did leave it — that atomistic concepts are only appropriate, indeed necessary, for analyzing a modernity that has itself become increasingly atomistic. Maine's status and contract, Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity: these are some of the great images of rupture used to evoke the disintegration of an older and closer-knit world.⁶ We can take it as a story of progress or of decline, or as something more ambiguous. In any case this account would suggest that self-interest supersedes pride in our thinking about social life because it also supersedes it in the world at large, that we have become more like the people our concepts describe.

One might alternately suppose that less has changed than meets the eye — that is it not so much our basic propensities that have altered than the objects toward which they are directed. The line of thought stretching from Augustine to Adam Smith might suggest that it is an illusion to think that the social world could ever cease to be a prideful one, and that pride's potency is evident precisely in its capacity to foster the illusion that we have freed ourselves from it. Modern social life, and above all the economic realm that is its engine, is on this account just another forum in which human beings pursue status, recognition, and superiority, unique only in its tendency to conceal from them that this is what they are doing. Atomism could never accurately describe a world of human beings.

We can decide for ourselves which of these views is more plausible. Perhaps on some level it is an irresolvable question, one of the constitutive ones for thinking about how our world

⁶ The case of Polanyi is more ambiguous: his famous image of the “disembedding” of the economy from the surrounding society may be taken to describe either an actual and traumatic historical process, or a founding delusion of laissez-faire ideology.

relates to what came before it. Still, I am inclined to believe that if pride is taken at its most basic level, as the need to overstep the boundaries set by any given social theory and any given social order, the problem it poses will always be with us. All the more reason, then, to pay renewed attention to its past, for earlier eyes may have seen it more clearly than ours can.

A Note on Citations

When citing works that are available in a variety of editions — primarily but not exclusively those from before the twentieth century — I have tried to provide citations that refer both to a uniform location in all editions and a specific page number in the edition listed in the bibliography. In general, any reference that appears after the work's title but before the comma refers to a uniform chapter or section reference, while any reference that appears after the comma refers to a specific page number. For instance, "*City of God* I.13, 49" refers to Book I, Chapter 13 of Augustine's *City of God* in all editions, and page 49 of the Dyson edition listed in the bibliography. Likewise, "*Elements of Law* 1.14.6, 71" refers to Part 1, Chapter 14, Paragraph 6 of Hobbes's *Elements of Law* in all editions, and page 71 of the Tönnies edition listed in the bibliography. While I have not been able to follow this policy universally, I hope that it will make it easier for readers using various editions to follow along with the argument.

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