

THE  
BURKE-WOLLSTONECRAFT  
DEBATE

SAVAGERY, CIVILIZATION, AND DEMOCRACY



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## INTRODUCTION

For more than two centuries, conservatism and feminism have been driving ideological forces in Western political thought. What concerns initially animated these two powerful modern theoretical perspectives? That is the fundamental question at the heart of this book. It is one that has proved very easy to ask and profoundly difficult to answer. This is not because I am the first to ask the question, of course; there has been no lack of discussion of these ideologies. Indeed, early on in the project I found that shelf upon shelf of anthologies, general histories, and textbooks were filled with ready responses to this basic query, all of them founded upon certain certainties. I soon realized, however, that any convincing approach to the problem would require a beginner's mind, one emptied of prefabricated answers and willing to return afresh to the earliest texts of modern feminism and conservatism.

Accordingly, this book focuses on the debate between Edmund Burke (1729–97) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) over the French Revolution. One leading scholar has rightly concluded that, from a contemporary perspective, Burke's writings and speeches constitute "the bible, and he the prophet" and "enduring philosopher of conservatism."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the author of a landmark study on Wollstonecraft notes simply that "she has become western feminism's leading heroine."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, while we have an extensive literature on the so-called Burke-Paine controversy,<sup>3</sup>

1. Isaac Kramnick, "Introduction," in *The Portable Edmund Burke*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), ix, xi.

2. Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

3. The long history of Burke versus Paine was captured as far back as forty years ago, in Ray Browne, ed., *The Burke-Paine Controversy: Texts and Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), and is the subject of R. R. Fennessy, *Burke, Paine, and the Rights of Man: A Difference of Political Opinion* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963); and Robert B. Dishman, *Burke and Paine on Revolution and the Rights of Man* (New York: Scribner, 1971).

this is the first book-length account of the clash between Burke and Wollstonecraft.

I am well aware that the attempt to answer my overarching question by framing the encounter between Burke and Wollstonecraft as one featuring canonical exemplars of “conservatism” and “feminism” is itself to invite censure on certain fronts. For one thing, both of these terms are, at the very least, linguistically anachronistic.<sup>4</sup> In addition, by party affiliation Burke was of course a Whig, not a Tory, and Wollstonecraft wrote at a time when no social movement existed to which she could affix her ideas. I am also deeply cognizant of the small library of scholarship, past and present, that rejects the label “conservative” as applied to Burke in favor of some other preferred nomenclature on more substantive grounds. So, too, there is a large body of literature on Wollstonecraft that, even when it identifies her as a feminist, subsumes her arguments under the rubric of some more conventional mode of interpretation, usually (though not exclusively) liberalism.<sup>5</sup>

Having acknowledged these historicist caveats, I want to explain why I am not overly troubled by them. Burke and Wollstonecraft may have *become* conservative and feminist icons only in the twentieth century, but that they *have* become such, indeed that this is the overwhelmingly predominant way of referring to them, is beyond dispute. Furthermore, as Conal Condren has argued, there are quite good reasons why thinkers like Burke and Wollstonecraft become canonical figures and their texts assume “classic” status, and why they subsequently march under occasionally anachronistic banners. Burke and Wollstonecraft wrote works spurred by a great political controversy, the French Revolution, and their writings were effectively deployed by contemporaries as resources in that political controversy. This deployment in turn led their authors to be recognized as authorities whose names and works were capable of being similarly used by successive generations of interpreters engaged in the political struggles of their own present. Finally, the rich ambiguity of such texts not only continues to make them fertile ground for exploitation in political debate, it also ensures that no particular interpretation of a given canonical authority can definitively close the hermeneutic circle, or foreclose future interpreters deploying the works for very different

4. The term “conservative” did not enter into Anglophone political discourse until the nineteenth century, and “feminist” only achieved popular currency in the twentieth.

5. For a discussion of this scholarship, see Chapters 2 and 5 in particular.

ends.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons, it is no wonder that Burke became a utilitarian liberal in the nineteenth century, a natural law conservative in the midtwentieth, and in the early twenty-first century seems well on his way, in some academic circles, to becoming an anti-imperial defender of cultural pluralism and difference. Similarly, it is not surprising that Wollstonecraft was long considered (and often still is) a “liberal feminist”—a term of ideological derision to those influenced by Marx or poststructuralism and of adulation to liberals themselves. In still other incarnations she has been read as a republican feminist, for both celebratory and damning purposes. Such are the predictable vicissitudes of political and ideological battles. My point is simply that, whether loved or hated, Burke is today predominantly understood *as* a conservative, and Wollstonecraft *as* a feminist of some sort, and their canonical names and classic texts are marshaled accordingly, within the framework of a given interpreter’s own political interests, just as surely as they were initially forged as weapons in an epic political struggle more than two centuries ago.

In making this last claim, I follow scholars like Condren, Sheldon Wolin, Richard Ashcraft,<sup>7</sup> and numerous others in the assumption that political theory emerges most poignantly and powerfully from great political controversy and conflict. If this is so, it is little wonder that the debate between Burke and Wollstonecraft gave rise to what we now understand as conservatism and feminism. After all, their disagreement focused on the meaning of the French Revolution, the conflict that scholars regard as foundational for the emergence of political modernity itself. As one historian of political thought has recently put it:

The French Revolution has been regarded by subsequent generations as the emergence of the modern political world. It comprised a paradigm shift that irrevocably changed the way in which we think about, speak of and therefore conduct our politics. . . . Conceptions of political legitimacy, human agency, historical

6. See Conal Condren, *The Status and Appraisal of Classic Texts: An Essay on Political Theory, Its Inheritance, and the History of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), chapter 9, especially 255–62, where Condren makes specific reference to the shifting modes of Burke interpretation to illustrate his general point.

7. See especially Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, exp. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Richard Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke’s “Two Treatises of Government”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

process and even time itself were fundamentally restructured by this cataclysmic event. . . . [But] . . . the Revolution did not exert this influence through establishing any agreed truths about politics: on the contrary, it generated—and continues to generate—heated opposition and disagreement.<sup>8</sup>

As the effective touchstone of modernity, the French Revolution has always been highly controversial and evocative of the deepest political passions, from joyous affirmation to unbounded fear and hatred. That this was true from the beginning can be seen by considering the immediate and enormous ripple effect it had on its neighbor, Great Britain. The “Revolution controversy,”<sup>9</sup> which provided the historical context for Burke and Wollstonecraft’s debate, was the occasion for what Alfred Cobban referred to as “perhaps the last real discussion of the fundamentals of politics” in Britain.<sup>10</sup> This discussion included such basic issues as the role of popular sovereignty, the legitimacy of monarchy, the desirability of private property, the theoretical basis and practical status of individual rights, and the relationship between religion and politics.

The British pamphlet war that took up the fundamental questions raised by the French Revolution lasted no more than a decade. It began shortly after the French adopted the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* in August 1789. A few months later, in November, Richard Price, the well-known Dissenting preacher, political reformer, and friend to Wollstonecraft, gave his famous speech to the Revolution Society in London, entitled *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*. In that speech Price attempted to defend the French Revolution chiefly by comparing its principles to those of Britain’s Glorious Revolution of 1688. Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in part a response to Price, appeared in 1790. Burke’s famous essay was the match that ignited the tinderbox, sparking a furious flurry of rejoinders from such thinkers as Paine, Joseph Priestley, James Mackin-

8. Iain Hampsher-Monk, ed., *The Impact of the French Revolution: Texts from Britain in the 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–2.

9. See especially Marilyn Butler, ed., *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Mark Philp, ed., *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); H. T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution, 1789–1815* (New York: Blackwell, 1985); Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); and Alfred Cobban, ed., *The Debate on the French Revolution, 1789–1800* (London: Nicholas Kaye, 1950), as well as Hampsher-Monk, *Impact of the French Revolution*.

10. Cobban, *Debate on the French Revolution*, 31.

stosh, and Catharine Macaulay. The first published reply to the *Reflections*, however, was Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke* (1790), which was available less than a month after Burke's essay appeared.

Burke never formally responded to any of his critics; instead, he replied through numerous public texts and private letters designed to expand, clarify, and refine his position. These included *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1795–97), and *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796), wherein his sworn enemies, including both Wollstonecraft and Paine, were specifically named. Burke also found support for his arguments in such journals as *The Antijacobin*. More important, his position gained a powerful ally in the British state, which became increasingly alarmed at the scope and depth of radical reforming zeal as the 1790s progressed, especially after Great Britain and France went to war in 1793. In 1794 twelve radicals, including John Horne Tooke, John Thelwall, and Thomas Hardy, a founding member and secretary of the London Corresponding Society, were arrested for high treason. In 1795 the Treasonable and Seditious Practices and Unlawful Assemblies Acts were passed, criminalizing certain public meetings and political discussions. In 1799 the LCS and other associations deemed dangerously radical were proscribed, and habeas corpus was suspended.<sup>11</sup>

These actions effectively put an end to the “Revolution controversy” and made Burke its posthumous de facto winner. Before the dissent was stifled, however, the radicals produced an extraordinary array of texts. These ranged from high-minded philosophical treatises like *Political Justice* (1793), written by Wollstonecraft's future husband, William Godwin, to popular weeklies edited by Thomas Spence and Daniel Isaac Eaton, which took fiercely anti-Burkean positions. These works advocated a dizzying variety of political and economic reforms.<sup>12</sup>

Like Burke, Wollstonecraft also expanded and sharpened her theoretical arguments as the French Revolution unfolded during the 1790s, until she died in 1797, the same year as Burke. Moreover, there is a fundamental continuity of themes between Wollstonecraft's direct reply to Burke in the first *Vindication* and the argument of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

11. See Hampsher-Monk, *Impact of the French Revolution*, 213, 263–64, 316–17.

12. For a measure of the achievement of the popular radical pamphleteers, see Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), chapters 1–4.

(1792), considered one of the cornerstones of modern feminism.<sup>13</sup> Thus, while the second *Vindication* was not written directly in response to Burke, insofar as it represents a deepening and broadening of the arguments first articulated in her earlier text, and addressed as it was to the French revolutionary, Talleyrand, in an endeavor to hold the French to what she understood as their theoretical principles, it can be read profitably as the second installment of her debate with Burke. Finally, it also makes good theoretical sense to read Wollstonecraft's little known *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe* (1794), as a contribution to the Revolution controversy and as a theoretical counterpoint to Burke's views about the genesis and trajectory of the Revolution. The text was written about the events of 1789 but from the perspective of one on the ground in Paris during the Terror of 1793. As such, it takes up precisely the same figures and events as the *Reflections*, yet it interprets them in light of subsequent history and thus attempts to explain the violent course of the Revolution in a way that mirrors Burke's later writings. As a counternarrative of the same events Burke interprets, aimed instead at defending the principles of the Revolution, which formed in part the foundation for the changes she advocated in the two *Vindications*, Wollstonecraft's *French Revolution* can be read as part of an ongoing dialogue, the final installment in a three-part reply to Burke. This is true irrespective of any narrowly construed understanding of Wollstonecraft's authorial intentions (or, for that matter, Burke's).

Against this backdrop, I began the present project with a deceptively simple set of questions, or perhaps even the same question asked in slightly different ways. First, what was the basis for Burke and Wollstonecraft's fundamental disagreement over the French Revolution? Second (or put differently), why had Burke so vehemently opposed the Revolution, even long before the Terror, and why had Wollstonecraft so steadfastly supported it, even during the Terror? Third (or yet again), what did the Revolution seem to *signify* in Burke and Wollstonecraft's theoretical imaginations, such that the man conventionally regarded as the founding father of modern conservatism would dedicate his life to stopping its spread, whereas the woman seen as the most important early feminist would literally risk hers to defend it?

13. In making this claim, I agree with Butler, who writes: "Wollstonecraft's [second *Vindication*] is not always seen as strictly a part of the Revolution controversy, yet its arguments clearly relate to the egalitarian and radical case she had already advanced against Burke" (*Burke, Paine, Godwin*, 74).

Little did I know that the attempt to answer these questions, which entailed the inevitable three-sided conversation between reader, primary text, and secondary literature, would lead into a vast interpretive wilderness from which I would emerge only after humbling lessons of dispossession. It was as if Burke and Wollstonecraft were conducting an argument about the French Revolution in a language in which they were both fluent but whose idioms remained foreign to my ears. Repeated attempts to unlock the meaning of their texts by recourse to the conventional theoretical skeleton keys on offer (e.g., Burke as a natural law theorist, Wollstonecraft as a liberal feminist) left me feeling frustrated.

Foremost, then, this book is an attempt to translate the language of political argumentation that I think most fundamentally structures the conflict between Burke and Wollstonecraft over the meaning of the French Revolution, with the goal of opening up the meaning of their debate for us. Nevertheless, the pages that follow make no claim to show *the* political philosophy of Burke confronting *the* political philosophy of Wollstonecraft. I readily accept that there are multiple ways of reading these two thinkers, and multiple contexts for framing their works. Similarly, it is not my intention to provide a synoptic overview of everything that Burke and Wollstonecraft ever wrote, or to synthesize the various strands of their work under the flag of coherentism. This book has very little to say, for example, on the question of Burke's writings on India, and engages Burke on Ireland and America only insofar as these writings directly intersect, in my view, with his interpretation of events in France. So, too, I do not provide an analysis of Wollstonecraft's early novels and pedagogical works, or the later travelogue of her experiences in Scandinavia and her unfinished novel, *Maria*.

While what follows does not seek to establish itself as the only legitimate way of reading Burke and Wollstonecraft, then, or even of reading Burke and Wollstonecraft against each other, neither is it an arbitrary interpretation. As J. G. A. Pocock has argued, the political languages that become matters of theoretical interest to later interpreters are not confectations; rather, they must be established empirically, that is to say, with evidence.<sup>14</sup> In one sense, this means that historians of political thought act

14. See J. G. A. Pocock, "Languages and Their Implications: The Transformation of the Study of Political Thought," in Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 25–26; and Pocock, "The Concept of a Language and the *métier d'historien*: Some Considerations on Practice," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 19–38.

like archaeologists, uncovering and recovering various linguistic contexts in which previous political arguments were conducted. As interpreters of such conversations, however, they must also be attuned to the complex interaction between discursive contexts and individual uses of language. The goal is not simply to be a linguistic archaeologist, but rather to find ways of understanding how particular deployments of political language modified the contexts they were originally situated within, and how some of those modifications led to the creation of entirely new languages of politics. That is to say, we have to recognize how some “moves” within a discursive context may not have simply modified the old linguistic paradigm but revolutionized it in unanticipated ways.<sup>15</sup>

Following such methodological advice, this book argues that the Burke-Wollstonecraft debate is best understood as an extended argument articulated within the unique linguistic parameters established by the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Of course, like “conservatism” or “feminism,” “Scottish Enlightenment” is an *ex post facto* term of art that serves as shorthand for a complex intellectual movement; it was a term first coined in 1900, not one used during the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup> However, while Adam Smith, David Hume, Adam Ferguson, William Robertson, John Millar, Lord Kames, James Beattie, James Fordyce, Dr. John Gregory, and the rest only earned the moniker “Scottish Enlightenment” posthumously, there is no question that they saw themselves as a coherent group engaged in a common intellectual project, that of articulating a “Science of Man” based on a broadly unified, self-consciously shared set of theoretical presuppositions that culminated in a distinctive political language.<sup>17</sup>

As this book demonstrates more thoroughly than has been done to date, Burke was a fellow traveler in this effort, and both the Scots and Burke recognized that they were taking part in a shared intellectual endeavor. At the same time, while it is clear that Wollstonecraft did not identify these thinkers as a coherent group, I show that she was very well acquainted with their arguments, had a profound understanding of their intellectual project and the language it was articulated in, and was deeply influenced by it. Thus, while we frequently have to guess at what Wollstonecraft dis-

15. Pocock, “Concept of a Language,” 21, 30–31, 34.

16. See Alexander Broadie, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

17. See *ibid.*, 1–2, and N. T. Phillipson, “The Scottish Enlightenment,” in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 19–40, especially 20–21.

cussed with Price, Priestley, or the other members of the radical Dissenting circles in which she moved, proof of the imprint of Scottish Enlightenment ideas on her thinking is marked by deep and abundant empirical tracks in her texts.<sup>18</sup>

Specifically, my argument is that the clash between Burke and Wollstonecraft over the meaning of the French Revolution developed from a Scottish Enlightenment language of politics structured broadly around “moral sense” philosophy and the closely connected historical narrative of a “civilizing process” in which the Scots understood that moral sense to be embedded. The Scottish Enlightenment’s approach to the topics of moral philosophy and history produced a distinctive, clearly identifiable language that provided the discursive scaffolding for the Burke–Wollstonecraft debate.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, I am not saying that Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft were simply mouthpieces for Scottish Enlightenment ideas. Rather, I am arguing that both thinkers took certain Scottish Enlightenment arguments as their clay, and transformed that clay in very distinct and idiosyncratic ways in the course of developing their own theoretical constructs. Both writers freely adapted, melded, criticized, and fundamentally transformed certain broadly shared Scottish Enlightenment ideas and the language in which they were articulated, from their own theoretical perspectives and for their own particular political ends, which were those of repudiating or defending the French Revolution.

My central contention is that viewing Burke’s and Wollstonecraft’s texts about the French Revolution from the perspective of their appropriation, deployment, and transformation of a language of politics specific to the Scottish Enlightenment enables us to uncover the stakes of their debate. To put this suggestively, perhaps it is only by showing the depth of Burke’s and Wollstonecraft’s debt to the Scottish Enlightenment, and making clear how both thinkers fundamentally transformed that language of politics for their own purposes, that we can really understand what they ultimately disagreed *about*.

Thus my answer to the series of questions with which I began the project, which takes here the form of a promissory note that the rest of the book aims to make good: the debate between Burke and Wollstonecraft about the French Revolution rested on what was ultimately a profound

18. At the same time, I argue that the extent to which Price, Priestley, and others known to Wollstonecraft were themselves familiar with Scottish Enlightenment ideas, and thus represented an additional conduit for those ideas to reach her, has been overlooked by most scholars. See Chapter 3.

disagreement about the relationship between democracy and civilization. For Burke, I argue, the French Revolution spelled the birth of a thoroughgoing democracy that encompassed both public and private spheres, a development that he interpreted literally as the end of Western civilization and its reversion to savagery. For Wollstonecraft, conversely, only such thoroughgoing democracy as she believed was promised by the French Revolution could mark the transition from savagery to civilization; for her, democratization was inseparable from, indeed analogous to, the civilizing process itself. If I am right, this means that modern conservatism and feminism emerged out of dialogic disagreement about deep democracy and whether it was synonymous with “savagery” or “civilization.” Modern conservatism was born in white-hot hostility to deep democracy, understood as the end of civilization, whereas modern feminism was not simply about the extension of the “rights of man” to women in the public sphere, but rather about the spread of democracy into all aspects of human existence, which was equivalent to the spread of civilization.

The thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment originated and developed the idea that history was a story of stadial movement in which all societies naturally passed through four stages—hunting, herding, farming, and commerce—a developmental process that simultaneously tracked a cultural arc from “savagery,” through “barbarism,” to “civilization.” “Civilization” was not just a marker of material improvement for the Scots but also a normative judgment about the moral progress of society. Pocock has described the Scots’ perception of society as a developmental process culminating in polite modes of social interaction, or civilized manners, as perhaps “the greatest change wrought by Enlightenment in the field of social and historical thought.” “Manners” were the linguistic key to the Enlightenment historical narrative, in which eighteenth-century writers detailed the fate of the Latin provinces after the decline and fall of Rome, through the long, dark Christian millennium of “barbarism and religion,” into the light of modernity. The fundamental theme of this new Enlightenment historiography was precisely the emergence of a shared civilization of manners and commerce, from which sovereign European states grew.<sup>19</sup>

19. See J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, *Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–2, 19–20, 24 (quotation at 19); and Pocock, “Virtues, Rights, and Manners: A Model for Historians of Political Thought,” in his *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth*

Chapter 1 provides a basic sketch of the central approach, themes, and conclusions drawn by Scottish Enlightenment historiography. It also articulates the Scots' equally important commitment to what can broadly be called "moral sense" philosophy and stresses its connection to the Scots' historical narrative. The opening chapter is not meant to be a synoptic overview of every aspect of the Scottish Enlightenment, a tremendously complex intellectual movement that has been the subject of any number of scholarly monographs in intellectual and social history. Rather, it functions heuristically as a means of orienting the reader to the Scots' central concerns with respect to two areas in particular, moral philosophy and history, and especially to the vocabulary in which those concerns were expressed. If we want to understand the debate between Burke and Wollstonecraft, I submit that we must first become broadly conversant with Scottish Enlightenment discourse on these two topics, which provided the linguistic ammunition for their clash.

The rest of the book examines the Burke-Wollstonecraft debate in an alternating, dialogic fashion. Chapters 2, 4, and 6 focus on Burke's arguments, while Chapters 3, 5, and 7 take up Wollstonecraft's. In the remainder of this Introduction, I want to give the reader an overview of my argument concerning each of these thinkers.

With respect to Burke, I stress his reliance on, and simultaneous transformation of, Scottish Enlightenment historiography for his understanding of the French Revolution. As Pocock has previously shown, Burke did not simply adopt the Scots' historical narrative in its entirety as a means of interpreting the Revolution's significance; rather, he modified their four-stages thesis in crucial ways.<sup>20</sup> Rightly or wrongly, Burke interpreted his Scottish friends as arguing that the mode of economic production *drove* the progressive development of natural moral sentiments and their expression in increasingly refined social manners. Against this, Burke offered an idealist and institutional inversion of the four-stages account. In Burke's

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*Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 37–50. See also Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

20. For Pocock's view of Burke, see "The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution," in his *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 193–212; his introduction to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), vii–lvi; and his "Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm: The Context as Counter-Revolution," in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 3, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), 19–43.

view, modes of economic production were necessarily embedded in a rich soil of natural moral sentiment that was nurtured by two institutions, the nobility and the church.<sup>21</sup>

At this point, however, my argument fundamentally diverges from Pocock's, who stops short of developing a critical line of inquiry with respect to Burke. Specifically, why did Burke focus on the nobility and the church, and the worldview that they perpetuated, with its emphasis on the "spirit of nobility" and the "spirit of a gentleman"? And how exactly did Burke believe that these two institutions nurtured natural moral sentiments in such a way as to civilize the masses?

To answer these questions, one must grapple with the close connections between Burke's historical analysis of the French Revolution and his moral theory, especially as the latter was set forth some thirty years earlier in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and other writings from that period. These are texts that Pocock wholly neglects in his often brilliant reading of Burke. Nevertheless, the need to discuss the relationship between Burke's aesthetics<sup>22</sup> and the broader epistemological presuppositions of his moral theory<sup>23</sup> for his interpretation

21. See Pocock's introduction to Burke's *Reflections*, xxxii–xxxiii; his "Political Economy of Burke's Analysis," 197–99; and his "Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm," 31–34.

22. The first attempt to relate Burke's aesthetic and political thought was Neal Wood, "The Aesthetic Dimension of Burke's Political Thought," *Journal of British Studies* 4, no. 1 (1964): 41–64. An important early statement is found in Isaac Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). More recently, see especially Linda M. G. Zerilli's excellent *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Stephen K. White, *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1994). Iain Hampsher-Monk, "Rhetoric and Opinion in the Politics of Edmund Burke," *History of Political Thought* 9, no. 3 (1988): 455–84, discusses Burke's aesthetics in conjunction with the classical rhetorical tradition. Recent years have seen an explosion of work on Burke from the perspective of literary criticism. See especially Frans De Bruyn, *The Literary Genres of Edmund Burke: The Political Uses of Literary Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Ronald Paulson *Representations of Revolution, 1789–1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Steven Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of Language: The French Revolution as Linguistic Event* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988); and Terry Eagleton, "Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke," *History Workshop Journal* 28 (1989): 53–62.

23. For the importance of Scottish Enlightenment moral philosophy for Burke, see especially Rodney W. Kilcup, "Reason and the Basis of Morality in Burke," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (1979): 271–84; and Frans De Bruyn, "Edmund Burke's Natural Aristocrat: The 'Man of Taste' as a Political Ideal," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 11, no. 2 (1987): 41–60. See also the introductory essay in Burke, *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. Ian Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, *The Problem of Burke's Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 50–71; and Frederick

of the French Revolution has become increasingly apparent. But scholars who have discussed Burke's early writings on aesthetics and moral philosophy have not placed them in the context of his reinterpretation of the Scottish Enlightenment historical thesis.<sup>24</sup>

Just as striking, little attention has been given to the arguments of Burke's *Abridgment of the English History* (1758) and *Account of the European Settlements in America* (1757),<sup>25</sup> or the ways in which these two texts resonate with both his overarching moral theory and narrative of history and thus with his later understanding of the French Revolution. Yet, if we want to understand Burke's interpretation of that event, I think we must focus our attention in a new way on the intersection of Burke's moral and aesthetic categories and his unique revision of Scottish Enlightenment historiography. These interpretive modalities meet most profoundly in

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Dreyer, "The Genesis of Burke's *Reflections*," *Journal of Modern History* 50 (September 1978): 462–79. The initial work connecting Burke to Scottish Enlightenment moral theory was John A. Lester Jr., "An Analysis of the Conservative Thought of Edmund Burke" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1942).

24. For a valuable exception, see Luke Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Colonial Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). As the title suggests, however, its focus is only tangentially on the French Revolution. Moreover, Gibbons offers a very different, and highly sympathetic, reading of the interconnected role of Burke's aesthetics and historical imagination in his political theory, to which the present book might be seen as counterpoint. See also Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), which takes its lead from Burke's aesthetics and touches lightly on the Scots' historical narrative. Furniss's book is a fascinating reading of the *Enquiry* against the *Reflections* using Derridean deconstructive tools for the purpose of offering a complex rendering of Burke in the vein of Marx, that is, as a "bourgeois ideologist." This methodological approach and set of theoretical investments are very different from my own. For an argument that begins with Adam Smith's political economy, follows Pocock in connecting Burke to Scottish Enlightenment historiography, and discusses the connection between Burke's aesthetic and moral theory and Smith, see Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). It should be noted that while Winch and Furniss broadly work the same intellectual turf, their conclusions are very different. More important, as their titles indicate, both scholars are centrally interested in Burke's relationship to political economy; for reasons I make clear throughout this book, I am not.

25. The chief exceptions concerning the latter text are F. P. Lock's outstanding biography, *Edmund Burke*, vol. 1, 1730–1784 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chapter 5; C. P. Courtney, *Montesquieu and Burke* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963); T. O. McLoughlin, "Edmund Burke's *Abridgment of English History*," *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* 5 (1990): 45–59; and Michel Fuchs, *Edmund Burke, Ireland, and the Fashioning of the Self* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1996). Regarding the former, see in particular Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland*, chapter 7; as well as Lock, *Edmund Burke*, chapter 5; and Fuchs, *Edmund Burke*, chapter 4, which also connect the *Account* to its Scottish Enlightenment context in their own ways.

Burke's assessment of the nobility and church's importance and the consequences of their respective demise, including the steps subsequently taken by the revolutionaries to democratize the moral and political landscape.

In this light, Chapter 2 seeks to recover the roots of Burke's moral philosophy and theory of history and demonstrate their connection to the Scottish Enlightenment. By looking at the broader historical context, as well as considering Burke's private correspondence and book reviews for the *Annual Register*, I begin by showing that he was a friend to, or acquaintance of, several of the leading Scots and demonstrate his explicit commitment to their broadly shared moral philosophy, historiography of a civilizing process, and overarching goal of establishing a "Science of Man." I focus particularly on Burke's epistemological presuppositions in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and his other early writings, and their relation to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, James Beattie's philosophy of "common sense," and the links between Burke, William Robertson, and Adam Ferguson.

In Chapter 2, I also show that as early as the *English History and Account of the European Settlements in America*, Burke was already developing a unique and dynamic understanding of historical change, the central focus of which was the noneconomic bases for the cultivation and transformation of innate "morals" into civilized "manners" over the course of European history. In Burke's narrative of history, too, one moves from savagery, through barbarism, to civilization. Unlike the Scots' story, however, Christianity and feudal chivalry, and their institutional guarantors the church and nobility, play the central roles in the civilizing process. The remaining two chapters on Burke describe *how* he believed the nobility and church transformed natural moral sentiments into historically developed manners in a way that culminated in European civilization, and *why*, in turn, he believed that civilization came completely undone with the French Revolution and devolved into morally, politically, and socially repugnant "savagery."

Chapter 4 offers an interpretation of Burke's most famous work, the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in light of the previous contextual rereading of his moral theory and understanding of history. I argue that the *Reflections* represents an extraordinary weaving together of the moral philosophy, social theory, and historical arguments of the Scottish Enlightenment with the themes Burke had articulated in the *Enquiry*, *History*, and *Account*. In the *Reflections*, Burke argued that the church and nobility were the institutional purveyors of fear, on the one hand, and voluntary

acquiescence in inequality and servitude, on the other. Together, by acting as the institutional embodiments of the principles of the “sublime” and “beautiful,” respectively, Burke believed that these two institutions provided for the polishing of natural moral sentiments into appropriately deferential political and social manners, and created the requisite level of “habitual social discipline” necessary for “a people” to emerge, a beneficent “natural aristocracy” to govern, and civilization to flourish. By destroying these two institutions, the French revolutionaries obliterated the balanced alchemy of fear and love, sublimity and beauty, that had underwritten European civilization, and unleashed in their stead a world of fearless, untamed savagery.

In Chapter 6, I focus on the substantive nature of the “savagery” that Burke saw ensuing in the wake of the old European regime’s collapse. In particular, I chart Burke’s apocalyptic post-*Reflections* vision of democracy as a social, sexual, and cultural revolution aimed at leveling natural distinctions. Like the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, Burke was convinced of the validity of a “moral sense” traceable to human nature and vital to the continuing progress of civilization. He therefore dreaded the threat to civilization posed by a total revolution that perverted and destroyed this instinctive affective sense and the various hierarchical relations derived from it. I show that Burke, in his later writings, decried what he saw as the revolutionaries’ systematic attempt to break down natural authority relations within the family and to promote adultery and sexual promiscuity, a skyrocketing divorce rate, the legal equality of nontraditional families and their offspring, and an explosive growth in popular entertainment of all sorts, especially via the print medium. At the same time, I demonstrate how Burke drew explicit connections between this egalitarian revolution in morals and manners, the advent of political democracy, and the collapse of “civilization” into “savagery.”

Burke consistently maintained that the French revolutionaries were introducing a new system of democratic manners precisely to accommodate and support their new scheme of democratic politics. Thus the collapse of civilization was signified for Burke by a politically engaged *hoi polloi*, ranging from tavern keepers and clerks to liberated women. His was a vision in which the masses had torn themselves free from their fealty to the natural aristocracy and lost all habitual social discipline, a nightmare vision of political equality echoed and reinforced by willful social, sexual, and cultural leveling in the private sphere. For Burke, it was

thus thoroughgoing democracy that was synonymous with savagery and signaled the literal end of Western civilization.<sup>26</sup>

Mary Wollstonecraft's argument precisely inverted Burke's. Wollstonecraft simultaneously engaged in her own attempt to transform Scottish Enlightenment moral philosophy and historiography, but in an effort to defend the French Revolution as the first step toward thoroughgoing democracy and thus true civilization. While Wollstonecraft's links to the Scots have been partially developed, especially in an important piece by Jane Rendall, no scholar has established this relationship systematically. Moreover, Wollstonecraft's entire body of work on the French Revolution has yet to be read as an extended reply to Burke formulated in the reworked idiom of the Scottish Enlightenment language of politics.<sup>27</sup> My goal is to

26. As I make clear in Chapter 6, this conclusion also makes my interpretation of Burke fundamentally different from Pocock's. My conclusion shares most in common with Don Herzog's outstanding book on the rise of modern conservatism, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). However, while I am very much in agreement with Herzog's broad thesis about the historical relation between conservatism and democracy, I disagree with him on crucial issues of interpretation with respect to Burke. Herzog wants to explain what he suggests is a basic difference in the types of theoretical arguments Burke made before and after the outbreak of the French Revolution: "Before 1789, Burke is a child of the Scottish enlightenment, devoted to free trade, a quaintly mechanistic psychologist devoted to unpacking the principles generating our judgments of the sublime and the beautiful; after 1789, he discards such lines of argument" (22). Herzog maintains that for Burke, these types of arguments represented "the sort of early enlightenment sentiment that he ruthlessly squelched after 1789" (46). It should be clear where we differ. My view is that Burke not only remained a child of the Scottish Enlightenment, as it were, but recast the Scots' historical thesis as his chief means of interpreting the French Revolution's meaning. Moreover, he did so specifically from the standpoint of his own earlier arguments concerning the sublime and the beautiful.

27. The first discussion to connect Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* to Scottish Enlightenment historiography is Jane Rendall's excellent article, "'The grand causes which combine to carry mankind forward': Wollstonecraft, History, and Revolution," *Women's Writing* 4, no. 2 (1997): 155–72. On Wollstonecraft's historical narrative and the Scots, see also Anna Neill, "Civilization and the Rights of Woman: Liberty and Captivity in the Work of Mary Wollstonecraft," *Women's Writing* 8, no. 1 (2001): 99–119, reprinted in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788–2001*, ed. Harriet Devine Jump, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2:418–35. For a suggestive precursor, see Gordon Spence, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Theodicy and Theory of Progress," *Enlightenment and Dissent* 14 (1995): 105–27, especially 124. The first discussion of Wollstonecraft's relationship to Scottish Enlightenment moral philosophy is Carol Kay, "Canon, Ideology, and Gender: Mary Wollstonecraft's Critique of Adam Smith," *New Political Science* 15 (1986): 63–76. Other scholars have suggested, but not developed, Wollstonecraft's links to the Scots. See G. J. Barker-Benfield's monumental *Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Sylvana Tomaselli's introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The*

establish Wollstonecraft's links to both Scottish historiography and moral philosophy, and, more important, to examine the theoretical relevance of Wollstonecraft's revolutionary transformation of Scottish Enlightenment arguments.

In Chapter 3, I argue that Wollstonecraft engaged in a sustained critique of Scottish Enlightenment moral theory, particularly of the central theoretical role the Scots allocated to women in their effort to define and defend the emerging eighteenth-century "culture of sensibility." In this chapter I look at the Scots' view of women, as articulated by writers like James Fordyce, John Gregory, and other popular moralists, as well as by Adam Smith and David Hume, all of whom Wollstonecraft criticized extensively. I contend that Wollstonecraft's critique hinged on denying the Scots' assumption of the naturalness of the moral sentiments and the social manners derived from them, together with her denial of the historical role the Scots saw women as playing based on their natural aptitude for "common sense," or sensibility. The chapter also shows that it was Wollstonecraft's extensive work for Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review*, from 1788 to 1792, that led her fundamentally to reevaluate her initial understanding of the discourse of common sense or sensibility, as well as the broad historical narrative within which the Scots had embedded it.

In Chapter 5, I consider both of Wollstonecraft's *Vindications*. I argue that in her direct reply to Burke's *Reflections*, her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), Wollstonecraft attempted to deconstruct Burkean moral theory, the historical arguments used to justify it, and the defense of church and nobility adduced to buttress it, by using the discursive tools that she had derived from the Scottish Enlightenment and reinterpreted. Wollstonecraft linked Burke's *Reflections* to the moral theory of his earlier *Philosophical Enquiry*, which she rightly understood as built upon the moral intuitionism of "sympathy," "common sense," and "sensibility." Her critique of Burke's *Enquiry* was therefore also a basic reevaluation of Scottish moral philosophy, one that stressed the socially constructed nature of both morals and manners. In this way Wollstonecraft contested Burke's reification of the old European regime. She argued to the contrary that

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*Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Macmillan, 1992); and Chris Jones, "Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindications* and Their Political Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 42–58.

the *ancien régime*'s system of manners was an artificial and pernicious code of social mores developed in an oppressive, hierarchical institutional context fatal to the development of reason and thus to moral and civic virtue. Wollstonecraft took issue with Burke's conviction that social, political, sexual, and other inequalities were part of the natural order of things, and argued that all such hierarchies had to be wholly razed and reconstructed on the basis of democratic equality.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft turned her attention specifically to how the old European system of manners had affected women, and urged a "revolution in female manners" as part of what she saw as the democratic emancipatory potential of the French Revolution. Wollstonecraft used the tools of critical reason and eighteenth-century associational psychology to analyze the social construction of womanhood under the hierarchical institutions governing Europe. The plight of women appeared to her a particularly onerous example of an immoral system of manners, an aristocracy of sex in which men dominated the church, the nobility, the family, and educational institutions. She argued that all of these institutions acted together to produce and reproduce the artificial hierarchies and gross inequalities that oppressed women but were nevertheless defended as the products of moral "nature" and civilized manners by Burke and others. Far from arguing simply for an extension of standard liberal rights to women, Wollstonecraft's "revolution in female manners" necessitated the thorough democratization of political, economic, social, and gender relations. Virtue in both the public and private spheres for women and men alike, and thus real civilization, could be achieved in no other way.

Even in the wake of the Terror, Wollstonecraft sought to defend the French Revolution as a positive step forward in the civilizing process. I take up her argument to that effect through a reading of *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe* (1794), the focus of Chapter 7. Armed with a firm belief in the social construction of character and a political commitment to democratic equality, Wollstonecraft rewrote the Scottish Enlightenment's entire history of manners in a way that denied their theoretical and historical connection to supposedly natural moral sentiments. She fundamentally refashioned the Scots' arguments by denying the central claim of the four-stages historical thesis, that the "polished" state of European manners that had accompanied the advent of commercial society marked an advance over earlier stages of the civilizing process. In this way

Wollstonecraft fully transformed the Scottish Enlightenment language of politics into a democratic defense of the French Revolution and a rejoinder to Burke.

Wollstonecraft's argument was complex. While she denied the Scottish and Burkean naturalization of the political, social, and economic status quo, Wollstonecraft agreed with the Scots that beneficial intellectual and technological progress had occurred with the advent of commercial society. Wollstonecraft went much further, however, and argued that the development of rational egalitarian principles, combined with the technological means of their transmission, could be used to radically transform the Old Regime in Europe.

Like Burke, Wollstonecraft was not surprised that the French Revolution produced the Terror, and she expected that the radical democratic transformation it foretold would not proceed peacefully. Rather than blame "nature," however, Wollstonecraft explained the Revolution's violent turn as the outcome of the radical inequality that prevailed in France and throughout Europe and was fatal to moral and civic virtue. Wollstonecraft believed that equality was the necessary prerequisite for developing the distinctively human capacity for reason sufficiently to control the passions and develop virtuous character. Consequently, she explained the French Revolution's violence, while refusing to justify it, as the predictable consequence of underdeveloped character in the context of the *ancien régime's* many artificial social hierarchies. But she remained steadfast in her belief that intellectual and technological progress could eventually reshape both the public and private spheres on the basis of equality, the tragic violence of the Terror notwithstanding.

In my reading, then, Wollstonecraft's writings on the French Revolution were themselves truly revolutionary, insofar as they transformed elements of an already existing language of politics for her own, fundamentally different, theoretical purposes. By placing her writings in the context of their relationship to Scottish Enlightenment moral philosophy and history, we can see precisely how Mary Wollstonecraft made one of the most consistent arguments for the radical extension of democratic equality in the history of Western political thought.<sup>28</sup>

28. My conclusion here about Wollstonecraft's commitment to deep democracy is broadly consonant with that of Virginia Sapiro, in her pathbreaking work on Wollstonecraft as a political theorist, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), a book to which I am greatly indebted, as well as with that of Barbara Taylor. However, the paths Taylor, Sapiro, and I take to this broadly

Thus I argue that if modern feminism began with Mary Wollstonecraft, it began in an attempt to link the progress of civilization with the march of democracy. Moreover, Wollstonecraft made this revolutionary claim to counter the argument of the father of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke, that democracy and savagery were synonymous.

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shared conclusion about Wollstonecraft's understanding of the relationship between feminism and democracy are very different. Taylor emphasizes the religious context of Wollstonecraft's thought; conversely, I am stressing the role of the secular in Wollstonecraft's moral philosophy and historical narrative, and I rest my analysis directly upon those secular sources. More recently, however, Taylor has briefly suggested the importance of Scottish Enlightenment moral theory for Wollstonecraft in "Feminists Versus Gallants: Manners and Morals in Enlightenment Britain," in *Women, Gender, and Enlightenment*, ed. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 30–52. Sapiro does not discuss the Scottish Enlightenment at all.

In the past thirty years, a number of scholars have demonstrated the unique intellectual contribution made by a group of like-minded eighteenth-century Scots who were closely affiliated, both personally and professionally, and self-consciously unified around an identifiable theoretical project. The basic goal of the Scottish Enlightenment was to establish what David Hume, one of its leading lights, termed a “Science of Man” applicable to the increasingly complex commercial societies of Europe. The Scots sought a scientific understanding of individual ideas and beliefs as the key to understanding their social world and its historical development.<sup>1</sup> They aimed,

1. See especially N. T. Phillipson, “The Scottish Enlightenment,” in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 19–40, especially 20; see also Phillipson, “Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment,” in *City and Society in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Paul Fritz and David Williams (Toronto: Hakkert, 1973), 125–47. In addition to a wide variety of primary sources, what follows intentionally relies on works that provide a broad overview of Scottish Enlightenment ideas, in order to elaborate the general conclusions scholars have drawn with respect to the Scots’ thinking about moral philosophy and history. In this regard, I am deeply indebted to Christopher J. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). Other general studies from which I have benefited include Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945); Jane Rendall, ed., *The Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment, 1707–1776* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978); Louis Schneider, ed., *The Scottish Moralists on Human Nature and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Alexander Broadie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Historical Age of the Historical Nation* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001); Broadie, ed., *The Scottish Enlightenment: An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1997); Broadie, *The Tradition of Scottish Philosophy: A New Perspective on the Enlightenment* (Savage, Md.: Barnes & Noble 1990); Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Anand C. Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment: A Social History* (Totawa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1976); David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Ronald Hamowy, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Theory of Spontaneous Order* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987); R. H. Campbell and Andrew S. Skinner, eds., *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1982); Peter Jones, ed., *The ‘Science of Man’ in the Scottish Enlightenment: Hume, Reid, and Their Contemporaries* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989); M. A. Stewart, ed., *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); George E. Davie, *The Scottish Enlightenment and Other Essays* (Edinburgh:

that is, to provide an empirical account of human mental processes as the first step in analyzing human social arrangements and their development over time.<sup>2</sup> Various scholars have described this project as an attempt to study “man and society,” “human nature and society,” or “social man.”<sup>3</sup> Such phrases suggest the Scots’ shared commitment to studying moral philosophy as the essential prerequisite for any full-fledged narrative of social interactions and the ways in which these interactions changed over time.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter provides a broad sketch of the Scots’ approach to two closely entwined issues, moral philosophy and social history, the two components of the Scottish Enlightenment that would do the most to create the Scots’ distinctive language of politics and thus the most important for Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft. What follows, therefore, moves along two closely related but analytically separable axes, the first focused on the Scots’ understanding of individual moral psychology and the second on the ways in which they understood social interaction over the course of history. These twin concerns provided the basic linguistic building blocks that Burke and Wollstonecraft would appropriate and meld into radically antithetical interpretations of the French Revolution.

### “Moral Sense” Philosophy

When it came to the study of moral philosophy, the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment began with John Locke and Isaac Newton. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke had systematized sensationalist psychology by denying the existence of innate ideas and conceiving the human mind instead as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which impressions were stamped. This argument in turn rested on Newtonian assumptions, a fact that Sir Isaac is said to have recognized by famously declaring Locke the first Newtonian philosopher. Like Locke’s *Essay*, Newton’s own *Optics* (1704), which offered an empirical account of the physiology of perception, proved highly influential in the eighteenth century. Unlike his earlier *Principia* (1687), which was written in Latin and remained untrans-

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Polygon, 1991); Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Scottish Enlightenment,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 58 (1967): 1635–58; and Arthur Herman, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001).

2. See Phillipson, “Scottish Enlightenment,” 20–21.

3. The phrases are those of Bryson, Schneider, and Chitnis, respectively.

4. See Rendall, *Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment*, especially chapter 3, 96–101.

lated for forty years, the *Optics* was in English, and readily accessible to a wider audience. Consequently, Newton's notion of the "sensorium," or the termination of all nerve endings in the brain, together with Locke's theory of the blank slate, revolutionized a number of fields in the eighteenth century, and set the parameters of debate on moral philosophy for the Scottish Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup>

Early on in this story, the third earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), grandson of Anthony Ashley Cooper, felt compelled to respond to the far-reaching implications of Locke's ideas. In the wake of his son's degenerative illness, Cooper, who was Locke's political patron, had charged Locke with the education of his grandson. But the young Shaftesbury rebelled against the philosophy of the man he called his foster father, believing that the early eighteenth century was endangered by a moral relativism that threatened social order and from which Lockean epistemology offered no escape. What Shaftesbury attempted to provide was a naturalistically grounded or nontheological basis for ascertaining moral certitude.<sup>6</sup>

In the revised version of *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions and Times* (1714), published the year after his death, Shaftesbury bequeathed to the eighteenth century a response to this problem that would have tremendous influence: the notion of an innate moral sense. At the same time, Shaftesbury's insistence on a common human nature had the unintended consequence of effectively universalizing this sense, enabling it to inhabit those outside the aristocracy, to whom he had originally intended to limit it.<sup>7</sup>

Shaftesbury's idea of an inner faculty responding to moral phenomena, much as other senses perceived physical phenomena, became extremely important for Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), who, along with Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun and Gershom Carmichael, Hutcheson's teacher and predecessor at Glasgow, is often referred to as the father of the Scottish Enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> Hutcheson developed Shaftesbury's response to Lockean sensationalist psychology by combining it with the teachings of Carmichael

5. See G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2–6; and Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 4. For a general discussion, see Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

6. See Barker-Benfield's discussion of Shaftesbury in his *Culture of Sensibility*, 105–19. For a detailed discussion, see Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

7. See Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, 105–19.

8. On Hutcheson, see T. D. Campbell, "Francis Hutcheson: 'Father' of the Scottish Enlightenment," in Campbell and Skinner, *Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment*,

in an effort to counter Thomas Hobbes's and Bernard Mandeville's arguments that all human action was a form of ethical egoism. Hutcheson set forth his conclusions in such works as *An Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), *Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (1747), and *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755).

Hutcheson built upon Shaftesbury's basic idea by arguing that human beings took immediate pleasure in certain behaviors and exhibitions of character that afforded them no advantage, and that their will was not involved in this process. As a corollary to this nonconsequentialist claim, Hutcheson maintained that the evaluation of moral qualities could not rest principally on reason, since in his view reason could point only to causal relations; it could not provide the basic rules of moral approval or disapproval. Rather, the mind had a number of "senses," or affective predispositions to accept certain ideas, that operated independent of human will and the utilitarian categories of pleasure and pain.<sup>9</sup> He believed that among these was, as Shaftesbury had argued, a "moral sense" by which people perceived virtue and vice in themselves and others. By such arguments, Hutcheson's system of ethics placed morality on a nonrational, instinctive footing rooted in a constant and uniform human nature.<sup>10</sup>

This last point became one of the central presuppositions on which the Scottish Enlightenment was based. Internal variations notwithstanding, the Scots all followed Hutcheson in building their moral philosophy on the assumption that human beings shared a common nature. Scholars have insisted on the pervasiveness of this view within the Scottish Enlightenment, and its fundamental importance to the Scots' theorizing. Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the fact that all of the social theorists of the Scottish Enlightenment believed in the constancy of human nature.<sup>11</sup>

There was a great deal of internal wrangling among the Scots on other fundamental epistemological questions, however, seen clearly in the ideas

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167–85; and James Moore, "The Two Systems of Francis Hutcheson: On the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment," in Stewart, *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 37–59.

9. See Campbell, "Francis Hutcheson," 167–70; and Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 158–60.

10. See Broadie, *Tradition of Scottish Philosophy*, 92–95; Schneider, *Scottish Moralists*, xxi–xxii; and Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 158–59.

11. See Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, especially 68–70; Broadie, "What Was the Scottish Enlightenment?" in his *Scottish Enlightenment: An Anthology*, 19–22; Bryson, *Man and Society*, 114–47; Schneider, *Scottish Moralists*, xxi–xxv; and Rendall, *Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 96–101.

of one of the two central figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume (1711–76). It is impossible to do justice here to the complexity of Hume's moral philosophy, its enormous influence, or the library of secondary literature it has spawned. My goal is simply to point out certain of its leading features in order to understand Hume's importance for establishing the central terms of debate for much of the rest of eighteenth-century philosophical argument, and for the Scottish Enlightenment in particular.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas Hutcheson had attempted empirically to ground a revamped form of Christianity on the concept of an innate moral sense, Hume used the same empiricist tools to reach very different conclusions. In both cases, the goal of establishing a science of morality based on the assumed uniformity of human nature was the same. So too was the ostensible method; as the subtitle of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40) indicated, his was "an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects." Hume differed from Hutcheson, however, in the unprecedented extent to which he was willing to press that method, and in his unwillingness to transcend the narrow compass of its conclusions. Hume analyzed such fundamental concepts as the existence of an external world, cause and effect, and an individuated self, from a ruthlessly experiential perspective. In each case he found reason impotent, and he argued that on close empirical inspection human certainty dissolved, proving in the end to be nothing more than the effect of an association of ideas upon the imagination and the accumulated weight of custom and habit.<sup>13</sup> Of course, for Hume, as for the rest of the Scots, the very universality of human nature nevertheless made human behavior predictable, or amenable to scientific understanding, and he famously argued in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) that history's chief use was as a record of the universal propensities of said nature.<sup>14</sup> In this sense Hume's aim remained that of understanding the underlying forces that animated human conduct, notwithstanding the fact that in the process the irrational roots of such behavior were exposed by the harsh winds of skepticism.<sup>15</sup>

As all dabblers in philosophy know, Immanuel Kant later claimed that Humean skepticism had awakened him from his dogmatic slumber. To

12. A useful starting point, in addition to the material on Hume in the general overviews I have cited, is N. T. Phillipson, *Hume* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

13. See *ibid.*, 35–52; Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 58–60; Bryson, *Man and Society*, 121–30; Rendall, *Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 96–101.

14. See especially Broadie, *Scottish Enlightenment: Historical Age*, 61–64.

15. Broadie, "What Was the Scottish Enlightenment?" 3–31, especially 20–21; and Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 68–70.

Kant, Hume seemed to have dispensed not simply with any innate moral sense as the basis for knowing God's will, and the obligations derived from it, but with God himself. If Hutcheson, despite his intentions, might be accused of tending toward Deism, Hume appeared to be an outright infidel and atheist, one who undermined universally valid moral principles entirely in his purportedly scientific examination of morality.

Enter the second leading figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Smith (1723–90). Smith was a fellow traveler in the attempt to develop a science of morals as a branch of the science of man. He was also a good friend of Hume's, a former student of Hutcheson, and the author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759).

Smith's argument in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was in large part built upon a fundamental disagreement with his friend Hume over the question of the source of our moral obligations.<sup>16</sup> Like Hutcheson, Hume had argued that benevolence was one of the animating passions in human nature. Unlike Hutcheson, however, Hume believed that it was a mistake to see benevolent action as the product of an innate moral sense. Instead, Hume explained moral approval as an expression of our ability sympathize with, or take part simultaneously with others in, the happiness generally following from benevolent action. Thus virtue was a matter of artifice and rested upon the ability of individuals to take sympathetic pleasure in the happiness of society at large. Hume's view was utilitarian, because sympathy, as the source of moral approval or disapproval, was ultimately linked to the pleasure or pain, and thus the aggregate social happiness or unhappiness, resulting from a given action.<sup>17</sup>

Like Hume, Smith focused on the concept of sympathy as the key to moral philosophy, but his view of it was very different from Hume's. As T. D. Campbell reminds us, in order to understand their disagreement we would do well to recognize Smith's goals in writing *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as they relate to the broader Scottish Enlightenment project of establishing a science of man. Smith's argument was indeed a reply to Hume, but not of the sort moral philosophers have come to expect. Smith did not set out to devise an answer to what we, in retrospect, would see as

16. See D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, eds., "Introduction," in Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), 10.

17. *Ibid.*, 11–13; and Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 160–65. As with Hume, so with Smith—the secondary literature is vast. I have benefited particularly from T. D. Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1971). More recently, see especially Charles L. Griswold Jr., *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

the most pressing philosophical problem Hume left to the eighteenth century, namely, the need to establish a nontheological basis for defending moral judgments. Rather, Smith, like the rest of the Scots (including Hume himself), was attempting to ground social morality scientifically by examining its roots. From this perspective, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was an attempt empirically to analyze human nature with the goal of explaining the origin and function of *existing* moral rules. If we bear this in mind, we will not make the mistake of confusing Smith's goal of describing the process of making moral judgments with an argument principally aimed at defending specific moral judgments against others. In other words, we will not confuse Smith's attempt to describe what "is" with an attempt to define what "ought" to be morally binding. While this is never an absolute distinction, Smith's chief concern in the *Moral Sentiments* was with the origin and function of moral judgments, not the criticism of certain moral judgments as opposed to others. His "scientific" aim was to explain as wide a variety of social phenomena as possible with the smallest number of explanatory concepts; like a contemporary social scientist, Smith sought a parsimonious theory, and sympathy proved to be the independent variable that yielded it.<sup>18</sup>

How did this process occur, according to Smith? "By the imagination," he argued, "we place ourselves in [another's] situation . . . we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him." Sympathy was thus predicated on the ability of human beings to change places with others through an act of imagination.<sup>19</sup> As Campbell explains, for Smith sympathy was a type of feeling *with* another that gave rise to a feeling *for* him or her. It is important not to confuse the latter feeling, which Smith called "sentiment," with sympathy itself, which is the condition that gives rise to it; moral sentiments derive from sympathy, not vice versa. Smithian sympathy refers to the prior act of an agent putting him- or herself in the place of another and imaginatively feeling what the other feels.<sup>20</sup>

Smith's disagreement with Hume concerned the origin and function of sympathy in the formation of existing moral judgments. Contrary to Hume, Smith defined sympathy very broadly as "our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever," and insisted that it depended first and foremost not on the *consequences* of particular actions but rather on our understanding of the

18. See Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals*, 18–22, 87–89.

19. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.1.2, p. 9.

20. See Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals*, 94–97.

*motives* of the actors involved. The point here is the role played by affect in providing the fundamental basis for shared sympathetic response, and thus (as Smith would have it) for the common moral sentiments of approval and disapproval. Smith believed that uniform affective responses were woven into the fabric of a universal human nature. For this reason, “whatever is the passion which arises from any object in the person principally concerned, an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of his situation, in the breast of every attentive spectator.” As opposed to Hume, then, for Smith utilitarian consequentialism gave way to what was innate or natural as the ultimate arbiter of morality and justice. Originally, people approved of another’s moral judgment and the action derived from it to the extent that it was seen “not as something useful, but as right, as accurate, as agreeable to truth and reality: and it is evident that we attribute those qualities to it for no other reason but because we find that it agrees with our own.” In sharp contrast, “the idea of the utility of all qualities of this kind, is plainly an after-thought, and not what first recommends them to our approbation.”<sup>21</sup>

Smith believed that the source of social morality was universally shared passions activated by external sensations.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, he argued that “it is altogether absurd and unintelligible” to believe “that the first perceptions of right and wrong can be derived from reason.” To the contrary:

These first perceptions, as well as all other experiments upon which any general rules are founded, cannot be the object of reason, but of immediate sense and feeling. It is by finding in a vast variety of instances that one tenor of conduct constantly pleases in a certain manner, and that another as constantly displeases the mind, that we form the general rules of morality. But reason cannot render any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable to the mind for its own sake. . . . Nothing can be agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake, which is not rendered such by immediate sense and feeling.<sup>23</sup>

21. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.1.4–5, p. 10, and I.i.4.4, p. 20. For Smith’s explicit rejection of Hume’s notion that utility is the ultimate cause of sympathetic response, see part IV. See also Raphael and Macfie, “Introduction,” 13–14; and Campbell, *Adam Smith’s Science of Morals*, 116–19.

22. On the pervasiveness of this theme for the Scots, see John Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions: An Interpretation of Adam Smith and Scottish Enlightenment Culture* (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 1998).

23. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, VII.iii.2.7, p. 320.

It is not that reason is nonexistent or without purpose; it simply cannot form the basis of moral judgments, which are rooted in affect.

This point is fundamental to the understanding of Smith's moral theory. As Smith put it, while man was "naturally endowed with a desire of the welfare and preservation of society," it was nevertheless the case that "the Author of nature has not entrusted it to his reason to find out that a certain application of punishments is the proper means of attaining this end; but has endowed him with an immediate and instinctive approbation of that very application which is most proper to attain it." Thus, when it came to promoting her "favorite ends," nature has "endowed mankind . . . with an appetite for the means by which alone this end can be brought about, for their own sakes, and independent of their tendency to produce it." Specifically, Smith informed his readers, "self-preservation, and the propagation of the species, are the great ends which Nature seems to have proposed in the formation of all animals."<sup>24</sup>

Smith's focus on the primacy of affect over reason was a fundamental feature of Scottish Enlightenment thinking about moral philosophy more generally. Even Hume, who disagreed entirely with Hutcheson's notion of a moral sense, was unmistakably in agreement with both Hutcheson and Smith on the weakness of reason relative to the passions. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he famously quipped that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."<sup>25</sup> This shows the very great extent to which the Scots not only shared a commitment to applying the experimental or empirical method to moral philosophy and the belief in the uniformity of human nature, but also agreed on the relative weakness of human reason.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, one might say that while Smith's response to Hume ostensibly rejected the notion of a God-given moral sense as urged by Hutcheson, Smith nevertheless managed to reach a conclusion strikingly similar to that of his former teacher. In Smith's account, innate feelings were the necessary prerequisites for shared sympathetic response. Without such natural responses to conditions, human beings would be incapable of feeling what others felt, and (by definition) sympathetic fellow feeling could

24. *Ibid.*, II.i.5.10, p. 77.

25. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), II.iii.3, p. 415.

26. See, for example, Rendall, *Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 99–100; Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 156–57; and Schneider's introduction to *Scottish Moralists*, xvii.

not occur. So, while Smith denied Hutcheson's moral sense in favor of sympathy, sympathy, in the end, rested not on Humean utility but rather found its way back to nature and the instinctive responses of ordinary individuals to moral phenomena. For Smith, the mutual sympathy or "concord" sufficient for achieving "the harmony of society" thus emerged from a complex social interaction rooted in affect, in which the individual actor and the social spectator sought common ground. The actor, or the person immediately affected, could "only hope to obtain this by lowering his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him"; that is, the actor must "flatten" the "sharpness" of the passion's "natural tone." Simultaneously, "the spectator must, first of all, endeavor, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer" in order to "render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded."<sup>27</sup> For Smith, this simultaneous lifting and flattening of natural affect between actor and spectator jointly produced shared communal mores and moral codes.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of the Scottish Enlightenment, there was one other historically important response to Hume's heretical *Treatise of Human Nature*. This was the so-called common sense school of moral philosophy, which we might profitably see as the high-water mark of the Scots' general recourse to instinct and feeling over reason. The idea of common sense was initially articulated by Lord Kames (1696–1782) in his *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1751) and was later developed by him at some length in his *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774). In the *Essays* Kames argued that Hume's utilitarian version of sympathy was too weak a principle to control human appetites and passions. At the same time, he insisted that human beings had a moral sense that could not be reduced to Hutche-

27. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.4.6–8, pp. 21–22.

28. Particularly in the much-revised third part of the 1790 edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith's "attentive spectator" was transformed from an external to an internal phenomenon, the "impartial spectator" or "man within the breast." This character was not a flesh-and-blood human being with real interests but a disembodied ideal type who manifested the "normal" reactions of an "ordinary" person upon observing the behavior of others. Nonetheless, the spectator was empirical in the sense that he represented the internalization of the correct social consensus concerning the moral propriety or impropriety of a given action when viewed by those with a sufficient degree of self-command. See Campbell, "The Impartial Spectator," in his *Adam Smith's Science of Morals*, 127–45.

sonian benevolence, a disposition that Kames argued was incapable of explaining the necessity of justice. Rather, Kames argued in his *Sketches*, human beings have a common moral sense of justice.<sup>29</sup>

The leading intellectual light of Scottish common sense philosophy was Thomas Reid (1710–96), who in 1764 replaced Smith as chair of moral philosophy at Glasgow. Its two other leading figures, Dugald Stewart (1753–1828) and (especially) James Beattie (1735–1803), would do much to popularize Reid's thought.

Hume was the dominant figure in Reid's intellectual world, and the specific task Reid set himself was to refute Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*. To this end, in 1764 he published the complex and technical *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, which he had begun in 1739, the year Hume's *Treatise* was published.

Reid's theory began with sensations, which he argued were natural signs, and the role they played in perception. Individuals might misread signs, Reid argued, in which case their perceptions might be false; but the signs themselves were unfailingly accompanied by a notion or conception of the object's existence. This argument in turn was accompanied by a belief that objects existed, although they might be misperceived. Experience might therefore lead one to have a false understanding of a sensation, but this was very different from doubting, as Hume did, that the external world existed at all. In a manner similar to Hutcheson's, Reid attempted to show that our various beliefs about the existence of the self, the external world, and God were in some sense shared by all people and embodied in all languages. He concluded that such shared ideas could not possibly be explained in Humean terms simply as the products of experience. Although Reid admitted that some human powers were habits acquired by use, exercise, and study, he believed that the most important were natural and universal, or rooted in a shared "common sense." He concluded that the intuitive transhistorical truth of common sense provided the basis for morality, science, and religion.<sup>30</sup>

29. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 161–62, 167–69.

30. For an in-depth philosophical study, see S. A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960). For more general treatments, see especially Broadie, "The Common Sense Reaction," in his *Tradition of Scottish Philosophy*, 105–18. See also Davie, "The Social Significance of the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense," in his *Scottish Enlightenment and Other Essays*, 51–85; Bryson *Man and Society*, especially 130–36; Phillipson, "Scottish Enlightenment," 37–40; and Rendall, *Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 98–99.

Reid's work offered a serious and complex answer to Hume. Through his student Dugald Stewart, it would exert a great deal of influence in both Scotland and America in the nineteenth century. In the event, however, Reid's answer to Hume proved too esoteric and cumbersome to carry much popular weight, besides which Reid was notoriously gracious and respectful to his adversary, and this alone could be seen as giving the patina of legitimacy to what many saw as blasphemous and dangerous ideas.

It would be left to James Beattie, professor of moral philosophy and logic at Marischal College, Aberdeen, to answer Hume in the vigorous manner required to uphold religious orthodoxy. Beattie popularized Reid in an attempt to counter the fears of moral anarchy raised by Humean skepticism. For him, it was an all-out literary war with his nemesis, the revolt of the provincial from Aberdeen against the urbane Edinburgh intellectual.<sup>31</sup> The vehicle for this frontal assault was Beattie's *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth: in Opposition to Sophistry and Skepticism* (1770).

Beattie was accused not simply of popularizing Reid's work but of vulgarizing it in an ad hominem attack on Hume; indeed, this is the prevailing scholarly opinion of his contribution to the history of ideas.<sup>32</sup> Despite this assessment, however, Beattie's *Essay* was enormously popular. He became one of Scotland's most famous thinkers, read in salons throughout Britain and beyond, studied by students at university, celebrated by churchmen and even by the king and queen themselves. He received a large royal pension, an honorary degree from Oxford, and an allegorical painting by Reynolds that was apparently his most valued possession. It portrayed Beattie as the defender of truth against the twin devils of Hume and Voltaire—all of this notwithstanding the fact that Beattie considered metaphysical inquiry, and in fact the whole process of analytical thought, both painful and morally counterproductive. He believed that such endeavors tended to undermine men's most deeply held beliefs, sow the seeds of doubt and anxiety, and make them incapable of decisive action.<sup>33</sup>

31. On Beattie in particular, in addition to the material previously cited, see N. T. Phillipson, "James Beattie and the Defense of Common Sense," in *Festschrift für Rainer Grunther*, ed. Bernhard Fabian (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1978), 145–54. Phillipson's piece gives a vivid sense of the combination of personal animosity and fear of intellectual inferiority animating Beattie's attack on Hume (see especially 150–52).

32. See Grave, *Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense*, 5; Phillipson, "Beattie and the Defense of Common Sense," 151–52; Bryson, *Man and Society*, 134; and Rendall, *Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 99.

33. See especially Phillipson, "Beattie and the Defense of Common Sense," 145, 151, 153–54. See also Rendall, *Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 99.

## The Scottish Enlightenment Historical Narrative: From “Savagery” to “Civilization”

### *Sociable Presuppositions*

Scottish Enlightenment moral philosophy led inevitably to an investigation of human social interaction. As Christopher Berry argues, Scottish social theory can be understood, in large part, as a critique of the natural jurisprudential approach, with its associated concept of a state of nature.<sup>34</sup> Adam Ferguson’s (1723–1816) *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) in particular is often singled out as important for understanding Scottish Enlightenment social theory. As Ferguson, the erstwhile chair of moral philosophy at Edinburgh, put the Scots’ fundamental claim, “Mankind are to be taken in groups, as they have always subsisted.”<sup>35</sup> While this is a view that goes back to the ancients, the Scots would ultimately use it as the basis for a new historical thesis with profound theoretical implications.

Ferguson argued that while some philosophers, like Hobbes and Rousseau, imagined the departure of mankind from some presocial state of nature, this was entirely specious. The principles of science required one to proceed from the empirical observation of normal phenomena, and in the case of human beings, society *was* their natural state and always had been. Scottish Enlightenment thinkers believed that the evidence on this score was overwhelming. They also used empiricism introspectively as a basis for their social theory (just as they had for their moral theory), and their assumption that human nature was uniform likewise validated introspection as evidence of human beings’ innate sociability.<sup>36</sup>

That people had always lived in groups implied, for Ferguson, that if one were asked where the state of nature was to be found, one could answer that it was here, there, and everywhere.<sup>37</sup> It was therefore absurd to speak of artifice as distinguished from nature. Since man “has in himself a principle

34. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 23.

35. Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 10.

36. See Bryson, *Man and Society*, 44; and Berry, *Social History of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 23–24.

37. “We may answer, It is here; and it matters not whether we are understood to speak in the island of Great Britain, at the Cape of Good Hope, or the Straits of Magellan. While this active being is in the train of employing his talents, and of operating on the subjects around him, all situations are equally natural. . . the highest refinements of political and moral apprehension, are not more artificial in their kind, than the first operations of sentiment and reason.” Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 14.

of progression, and a desire for perfection, it appears improper to say, that he has quitted the state of his nature, when he has begun to proceed; or that he finds a station for which he was not intended, while, like other animals, he only follows the disposition, and employs the powers that nature has given.”<sup>38</sup>

The task that Ferguson and the Scots set themselves, then, was to trace how human beings in such natural social groups developed a second nature in the move from “rude” to “civil” society, the latter state in some sense a convention, but a convention that was entirely natural to human beings, as “art itself is natural to man.”<sup>39</sup> Broadly speaking, this aim was shared by all of the social theorists and historians of the Scottish Enlightenment. They rejected contractarian notions of an asocial state of nature as both empirically false and unduly individualistic. Since the natural condition of human life was social, it simply would not do to adduce some extrasocial or extratemporal fiction as a means of establishing political legitimacy. Likewise, the Scots believed that “natural rights” had to be discussed within the context of natural sociability; they could not be divorced either conceptually or normatively from social existence.<sup>40</sup>

Hume articulated this view in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, where he responded to contractarian assumptions regarding individualism and voluntary consent as the bases for political legitimacy by retorting that all existing governments were in fact the products of force legitimized by the accretion of time. Such “prescription,” or habitual acceptance of power, filtered through imagination, custom, and habit, gave just title alike to confiscated property and governments originally founded on violence and usurpation. Social and political arrangements and their history thereby enabled a second nature to emerge, from which moral and political obligations as well as ideas of justice were derived.<sup>41</sup> Over time, Hume argued, the passions that provided the blunt impulse to enter societies were molded into virtue, an artificial construct that made for political and social stability, and could be judged by the ultimate standard, utility.<sup>42</sup> In this way Hume’s philosophical skepticism gave way to historically rooted utilitarianism and in no way implied political radicalism, but rather a quietist, “skeptical” Whiggism.<sup>43</sup>

38. *Ibid.*, 14.

39. *Ibid.*, 14, 12.

40. See Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 30–33.

41. *Ibid.*, 33–37.

42. See Phillipson, *Hume*, 35–52, and his “Scottish Enlightenment,” 29–31.

43. See Duncan Forbes, *Hume’s Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

Indeed, while scholars have subsequently come to associate political conservatism most closely with Hume, Smith's politics were very close to Hume's,<sup>44</sup> and the political thought of the Scottish Enlightenment as a whole was decidedly not radical. There were, of course, some who favored moderate reform, particularly John Millar (1735–1801)<sup>45</sup> and even the notable exception in Dugald Stewart, the great chronicler and popularizer of Scottish Enlightenment ideas.<sup>46</sup> As with Hume and Smith, however, the Scots' largely unified defense of existing social and political arrangements was based on a number of broadly shared theoretical presuppositions about their philosophical meaning and purpose that largely buttressed the status quo.

In this regard, Ronald Hamowy has argued that the most important sociological contribution made by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers to the history of ideas was the notion of “spontaneously generated social orders.”<sup>47</sup> The Scots argued that the social arrangements under which human beings lived were of such complexity that they simply could not have resulted from deliberate rational planning. They arose, instead, as the unintended consequence of innumerable individual actions that evolved slowly over many generations. These individual actions were themselves driven largely by instinct, friendship, loyalty, and habit. As Hamowy argues, the idea that enormously intricate social arrangements were not the conscious products of rational human agency and planning was revolutionary. It is most frequently identified with Adam Smith's “invisible hand” and the unfettered market economy, but this is somewhat misleading. In fact, the Scots did not limit the notion of spontaneously generated social order to economic life, but used it to describe systems of morals, language, legal systems, and governments themselves.

Ferguson wrote, concerning the last of these, “No constitution is formed by concert, no government is copied from a plan.” Rather, “every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble

44. See Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), especially 170–71, 175–77. See also Duncan Forbes, “Sceptical Whiggism, Commerce, and Liberty,” in *Essays on Adam Smith*, ed. Andrew S. Skinner and Thomas Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 179–201.

45. For Millar as a Foxite “New Whig,” see especially Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 191–97; for the ways in which this ultimately distinguished him from Smith, see Duncan Forbes, “‘Scientific’ Whiggism: Adam Smith and John Millar,” *Cambridge Journal* 7, no. 11 (1954): 643–70.

46. See Herman, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*, 270–73.

47. See Hamowy, *Scottish Enlightenment*.

upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.”<sup>48</sup> Such remarks led Ronald Meek to conclude that Ferguson’s writings were easily the most theoretically advanced formulation of the law of unintended consequences in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>49</sup> While most clearly formulated by Ferguson, and most memorably applied by Smith, this emphasis on unintended consequences and the demotion of “purposive rationality” was fundamental to the Scottish Enlightenment writ large.<sup>50</sup>

*The Four-Stages Historical Thesis: From “Savage” to “Civilized” Manners*

The Scots’ study of human sociability led inevitably to the study of history, understood as the record of innately social human beings interacting over time, shaping their moral sentiments in the process. That individual moral judgments and social arrangements were not predominantly the products of reason did not imply that social and historical development was incapable of explanation. To the contrary, the purpose of Scottish Enlightenment historiography was precisely to provide a “scientific” explanation of progress in individual moral capacities, and to unravel the developmental puzzle of human societies. The Scots asked how the complex and unintended machinery of human relationships changed over time, and they pondered the consequences of these changes at both the individual and the social levels. In their account, history evinced patterns amenable to explanation; history was a narrative of cause and effect, reason and consequence, rooted in contiguity, relations of temporal priority, and constant conjunction, a tale of moral as well as material progress.<sup>51</sup> The most important Scottish historians engaged in unraveling these patterns, apart from Hume, Smith, and Ferguson, were William Robertson (1721–93), principal of the College of Edinburgh from 1762 until the time of his death, John Millar, professor of civil law at Glasgow University for forty years, Lords Monboddo (1714–99) and Kames, and Dugald Stewart.

Like their moral theory, the Scots’ historical views rested on the Newtonian bases of empiricism and comparison. On both counts they were heavily influenced by the relatively recent interaction of Europeans with other

48. Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 120, 119.

49. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, 150.

50. See Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 39–47.

51. Berry’s discussion of these themes is outstanding. *Ibid.*, chapter 3.

cultures, a process that had commenced in earnest during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Scots had at their disposal new evidence from missionaries, the travel logs of Cook and other European adventurers, and the experience of colonists to aid their own historical research. Their goal was to chart a comprehensive theory of history by tracing the stages of human development through a comparative analysis of differently situated contemporary societies. Their investigations were often breathtaking in scope and sometimes involved searching for a race of men with tails (Monboddo) and pondering whether orangutans had the faculty of speech. In every case, however, the Scots believed that their analyses would demonstrate the pattern of cause and effect on human nature and that their avowedly scientific research would surpass earlier historical studies, which they saw as rudimentary and limited in scope.<sup>52</sup>

In focusing on the comparative method, the Scots quite consciously took their lead from Montesquieu. When it came to the study of history and society, Millar regarded Montesquieu as akin to Lord Bacon, who pointed out the appropriate road, whereas Adam Smith was analogous to Sir Isaac Newton, who put theory into practice.<sup>53</sup> Montesquieu shared with the Scots the notion of a uniform human nature, and they greatly admired his attempt to relate government and laws to climate, economy, social institutions, and “manners,” or modes of social interaction, through comparative analysis, a fact Dugald Stewart noted admiringly in his discussion of *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748).<sup>54</sup>

But Montesquieu’s method was also somewhat different from the Scottish historians’, and they believed that their work marked an improvement over his. For one thing, they argued, Montesquieu put far too much emphasis on the role of purely physical factors like climate in the historical process. For another, Montesquieu was not interested enough in the changes that took place in societies over time and never developed a specific, dynamic, progressive historical analysis of the engines driving those changes.<sup>55</sup> “Progress” for Montesquieu meant something akin to the simple passage of time, whereas the concepts of dynamism and normative progress animated Scottish historical inquiry.

52. See Rendall, *Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 123–27; Bryson, *Man and Society*, 78–113; and Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 52–73.

53. See Chitnis, *Scottish Enlightenment*, 93. For the importance of Bacon to the Scots, see also Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 52–54.

54. See Bryson, *Man and Society*, 90–92.

55. See Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 78–82; Rendall, *Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 124; Chitnis, *Scottish Enlightenment*, 95–96; Spadafora, *Idea of Progress*, 266.

Their strong claims to scientific method notwithstanding, in many instances the evidence required to fill in the gaps of a fully empirical theory of history was lacking. In these cases the Scots relied on educated guesswork, which is why their approach is often called “natural,” “philosophical,” or (as Stewart most revealingly dubbed it) “theoretical” or “conjectural” history. The Scots believed that history, as a branch of the science of man, could be based on certain fundamental and unvarying principles, or a minimum set of explanatory variables. Since human nature was assumed to be constant, the Scots were free to extrapolate across cultural contexts and to spin a narrative tale of social development over time and space. Understood in this way, lack of evidence was not an insurmountable impediment. Stewart insisted that travelers’ reports should serve as landmarks to speculation, and that sometimes *a priori* conclusions could confirm seemingly incredible facts.<sup>56</sup> For example, Ferguson argued that in Arab clans and Native American tribes one could “behold, as in a mirror, the features of our own progenitors; and from thence we are to draw our conclusions with respect to the influence of situations, in which, we have reason to believe, our fathers were placed.” Such “rude nations” provided a “representation of past manners, that cannot, in any other way, be recalled.”<sup>57</sup>

The Scots’ theoretical problem, of course, was how to account for widespread contemporaneous social and cultural variation in a manner consistent with their fundamental theoretical presupposition about human nature and their implicit denial of cultural relativism. Their solution to this problem was to argue that comparative empirical analyses, when combined with *a priori* conjecture, yielded the conclusion that human social development occurred in stages.<sup>58</sup> Specifically, human societies passed through four distinct phases of development: the primitive, the pastoral, the agricultural, and the commercial—or hunting, herding, farming, and commerce. At the same time, these four stages tracked an arc of cultural development that passed through three phases of “manners,” or modes of social interaction, from savagery, through barbarism, to civilization.<sup>59</sup>

The first published version of the four-stages theory in Scotland was Sir John Dalrymple’s *Essay Towards a General History of Feudal Property in*

56. See especially Broadie, “What Was the Scottish Enlightenment?” 25–28; see also Broadie, *Scottish Enlightenment: Historical Age*, 67–75; and Bryson, *Man and Society*, 83–92.

57. Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 80.

58. See Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 74–90.

59. On the four-stages theory, see especially Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*. See also Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 91–119; and Rendall, *Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 123–27.

*Great Britain* (1757). This was followed shortly by an elaboration in Lord Kames's second edition of *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1758) and his *Historical Law Tracts* (1758), and would later be fully developed in his *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774). But both Dalrymple and Kames were members of Adam Smith's circle, and moreover, as Ronald Meek has shown, a strong case can be made that the thesis actually originated in Scotland with Smith himself, and that Dalrymple and Kames got their ideas from him.<sup>60</sup> At any rate, it is with Smith that the theory received its most thorough articulation.

From contemporaneous student notes, we know that Smith propounded a sophisticated version of the four-stages argument in his lectures on jurisprudence to moral philosophy classes at Glasgow in 1762–63.<sup>61</sup> He introduced the theory in his discussion of the origin of property rights. Before anything else about property relations could be discussed, Smith maintained, "it will be proper to observe that the regulations concerning them must vary considerably according to the state or age society is in at that time." Smith then went on to discuss the nature of the four stages and the processes that led from one to another. As the mode of subsistence changed, he argued, so did the "laws and regulations with regard to property," as well as the form of government. Smith even went so far as to claim that "in a certain view of things all the arts, the sciences, law and government, wisdom, and even virtue itself tend all to this one thing, the providing meat, drink, raiment, and lodging for men."<sup>62</sup> Smith would fully develop this argument in *The Wealth of Nations*, in essence an extended discussion of the actual functioning of a society that had reached the commercial age, the fourth stage of development, with the highest level of social complexity.

One need only remember Smith's critical remarks concerning the division of labor in *The Wealth of Nations* to be reminded that the Scots did not uncritically embrace commercial society. But Smith's position was representative of the Scottish Enlightenment's overall understanding of this relationship, inasmuch as he believed that on balance commercial society was a highly beneficial development, both economically and morally. As concerns the latter, this can be seen as far back as *The Theory of Moral*

60. See Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, 99–130; and Rendall, *Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 125.

61. See Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982).

62. *Ibid.*, i.27, p. 14; i.33, p. 16; vi.20, p. 338.

*Sentiments*, as can the nascent textual formulation of the four-stages argument itself.

In that earlier work, Smith argued that “the style of manners which takes place in any nation, may commonly upon the whole be said to be that which is most suitable to its situation.”<sup>63</sup> An inattentive reader might conclude that Smith’s position was a form of uncritical historicism *cum* cultural relativism, but he was actually far from a position of such “scientific” detachment in the face of widely varying social and cultural forms. Smith went on to argue that while moral sentiments were inflected by particular customs in such a way that custom could warp natural human instincts, it could not entirely “pervert” them. However, it was precisely the difference between rude peoples (savages and barbarians) on the one hand, and the polite, civilized, or polished peoples of commercial society on the other, that particular social customs or manners in the former groups sometimes sanctioned conduct that, when considered from the more elevated plane of the present, was “destructive of good morals,” and “shock[ed] the plainest principles of right and wrong.” That is, the normative problem with savages and barbarians, from Smith’s perspective, was that they sometimes exhibited “manners” that perversely cut against the grain of the natural moral sentiments. In fact, one of Smith’s criticisms of his own time was that while such practices as the abandonment of infants might have begun “in times of the most savage barbarity,” where they were “more pardonable,” they were sometimes inappropriately carried forward into later historical stages, thereby retarding the civilizing process in important respects. While such a practice “prevails among all savage nations,” Smith concluded that it was ultimately immoral, socially dangerous, and unacceptable: “When custom can give sanction to so dreadful a violation of humanity, we may well imagine that there is scarce any particular practice so gross which it cannot authorize.”<sup>64</sup>

Smith developed his normative defense of economic progress more fully in *The Wealth of Nations*. In this work he famously connected the advent of commercial society with overall material improvement, arguing that commerce was a rising tide that lifted all boats. He did this in part through striking comparisons between “civilized” Europeans and their “barbarian” and “savage” counterparts in other parts of the world. Smith argued that “the poverty of the lower ranks of people in China far surpasses

63. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, V.2.13, p. 209.

64. See *ibid.*, V.2.14–15, pp. 209–10.

that of the most beggarly nations in Europe.” Indeed, the Chinese in port cities were “eager to fish up the nastiest garbage thrown overboard from any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome food to the people of other countries.” Elsewhere he remarked approvingly, in an echo of Locke, that a common day laborer in Britain had a more luxurious life than an American Indian sovereign or “an African king, the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages.”<sup>65</sup>

As these remarks suggest, Smith saw the effects of commercial society as far more than simply material. At the most basic level, of course, Smith maintained that moderate wealth was normatively preferable to poverty; people ought to prefer it and embrace it, given the choice. While the material benefits of commercial society were desirable, however, they were not its principal beneficial consequence. More important, with respect to Europe, Smith argued, “commerce and manufactures gradually introduced order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals.” Smith called these “by far the most important of all their effects.”<sup>66</sup>

At other points in *The Wealth of Nations*, even while arguing against the immoral violence and economic folly attending the colonial conquest of the Aztec and Inca by Spanish *conquistadors*, Smith concluded that these imperial adventures did indeed have civilizing effects upon the people who endured them: “In spite of the cruel destruction of the natives which followed the conquest, these two great empires are, probably, more populous now than they ever were before: and the people are surely very different; for we must acknowledge, I apprehend, that the Spanish creoles are in many respects superior to the ancient Indians.” Before their contact with commercial societies, Smith contended, “it seems impossible, that either of those empires could have been so much improved or so well cultivated as at present, when they are plentifully furnished with all sorts of European cattle, and when the use of iron, of the plough, and of many of the arts of Europe, has been introduced among them. But the populousness of every country must be in proportion to the degree of its improvement and cultivation.”<sup>67</sup> In Smith’s view, then, in the case of both the

65. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), I, I.viii.24, pp. 89–90, and I, I.i.11, p. 24.

66. *Ibid.*, I, III.iv.4, p. 412.

67. *Ibid.*, II, IV.vii.b.7, pp. 568–69.

Aztec and Inca, the introduction of commercial society, albeit violent, marked an important advance in the civilizing process in several respects, not the least of which was population density, understood not simply in numerical terms but as a marker of normative progress.<sup>68</sup>

As Ronald Meek has shown, there is a good deal of evidence in the work of Smith's fellow Scottish Enlightenment thinkers to support the conclusion that they were the most important theoretical forerunners of historical materialism.<sup>69</sup> Unlike Karl Marx, however, the Scots saw the stages of history as evincing both intellectual *and* moral, as well as material, progress. They lauded the progressive steps from "rudeness" to "refinement" in the passage of societies from "infancy" to "maturity," which they viewed as a move to a more "polished" state of civilized existence.

In "A View of the Progress of Society in Europe," for example, the long opening essay in the *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769), William Robertson explicitly connected commercial society and refined manners, and specifically located them at the end point of a history of moral progress that led societies from benighted savagery, through barbarism, to the promised land of civilization. Robertson argued that "the progress of commerce had considerable influence in polishing the manners of the European nations, and in leading them to order, equal laws, and humanity."

Commerce tends to wear off those prejudices, which maintain distinction and animosity between nations. It softens and polishes the manners of men. It unites them, by one of the strongest of all ties, the desire of supplying their mutual wants. It disposes them to peace, by establishing in every state an order of citizens bound by their interest to be the guardians of public tranquillity. . . . In proportion as commerce made its way into the different countries of Europe, they successively turned their attention to those objects, and adopted those manners, which occupy and distinguish polished nations.<sup>70</sup>

68. Thus Broadie concludes: "There is no doubt that Smith believed that the four stages were stages in progress or improvement in the lives of people, where what is at issue is not just material progress but also progress in terms of the cultural values that are embodied in our lives." *Scottish Enlightenment: Historical Age*, 76.

69. See Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*; see also Spadafora, *Idea of Progress*, 270–320; and Chitnis, *Scottish Enlightenment*, chapter 5.

70. Published as William Robertson, *The Progress of Society in Europe*, ed. Felix Gilbert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 63, 67. Some scholars have argued, against

For Robertson, then, commercial society brought with it not only material prosperity but also peace between nations, internal political stability and order, fairer laws, and, ultimately, progressive refinements in human relations, or polished manners.

Likewise, N. T. Phillipson has emphasized that although Hume's historical work did not rely on the four-stages thesis per se, his thinking about the development of civilization was shaped by a deep belief in the civilizing powers of commerce that were in the process of transforming western Europe. Hume held that commerce naturally tended to promote social order, dispel factiousness and warfare, stimulate refinements in the arts, and increase sociability and gentility. But in order for commerce to flourish, there had to be a prerequisite level of social stability. Having rejected the idea that either reason or the moral sense could be the basis for civilization, Hume instead saw political power, as embodied in constitutional authority, as the guarantor of property and security. Only when society allowed people to take political authority for granted would respect for property and a system of justice become habitual, thus enabling commerce, and ultimately civilization, to evolve and flourish.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, despite disagreement in the realm of moral philosophy, for Hume as for the other Scots, the development of commercial society was inextricably linked to the taming of the passions and the promotion of socially acceptable and beneficial moral standards.

This is no doubt why, in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith acknowledged the influence of Hume's arguments about the relationship between commerce and manufacture, on the one hand, and good government and individual liberty and security, on the other.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Hume argued that with the advent of commercial society an insensible moral revolution had taken place, whose parameters he discussed in his essay "Of Refinement in the Arts" (1752). Hume contended in this essay that "*industry, knowledge, and humanity*, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found . . . to be peculiar to the more polished and, what are commonly denominated,

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Meek, that the Scots gave no particular cause priority in their discussion of social change; others have denied that Adam Smith (for example) was a materialist at all, while still others have gone so far as to maintain that the Scots were essentially idealists. Such criticisms are briefly canvassed in Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 117nn15–16, and his chapter 8, "Reading the Scottish Enlightenment," 185–99. I have tried to bear these criticisms of Meek in mind in what follows.

71. Phillipson, *Hume*, especially 15–16, 32–34, 48–52.

72. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I, III.iv.4, p. 412.

the more luxurious ages.” In the broadest sense, “knowledge in the arts of government naturally begets mildness and moderation” in social behavior, or manners, thereby producing greater “humanity.” According to Hume, such humanity was “the chief characteristic which distinguishes a civilized age from times of barbarity and ignorance.” Conversely, “treachery and cruelty, the most pernicious and most odious of all vices, seem peculiar to uncivilized ages.” Hume held it a moral truism that “every man would think his life or fortune much less secure in the hands of a MOOR OR TARTAR, than in those of a FRENCH OR ENGLISH gentleman, the rank of the men the most civilized in the most civilized nations.”<sup>73</sup>

Similarly, and despite his fear that modern commercial society would undermine civic virtue (especially in the martial sense), Adam Ferguson clearly believed that the successive stages of social development were part of a positive natural progression, analogous to that of an individual human being as he passed from infancy to maturity. “In the human kind, the species has a progress as well as the individual.” Ferguson saw this progress as the work of many ages, the accumulated effect of humans’ unique capacity for intellectual development, whereby they “tend to a perfection in the application of their faculties, to which the aid of long experience is required, and to which many generations must have combined their endeavors.”<sup>74</sup>

Ferguson’s paternalism and social anthropomorphism were hardly unique among the Scots, though he gave them perhaps their best-known expression. They are clearly evident, for example, in Robertson’s *History of America*, where he writes:

As the individual advances from the ignorance and imbecility of the infant state to vigor and maturity of understanding, something similar to this may be observed in the progress of the species. With respect to it, too, there is a period of infancy, during which several powers of the mind are not unfolded, and all are feeble and defective in their operation. In the early stages of society, while the condition of man is simple and rude, his reason is but little exercised, and his desires move within a very narrow sphere. Hence arise two remarkable characteristics of the human mind in

73. David Hume, “Of Refinement in the Arts,” in Hume, *Political Essays*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 107, 109, 112–13.

74. Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 10.

this state. Its intellectual powers are extremely limited; its emotions and efforts are few and languid. Both these distinctions are conspicuous among the rudest and most unimproved of the American tribes.<sup>75</sup>

Both Phillipson and Karen O'Brien contend that Robertson's unfinished depiction of European empire in the Americas was one that wed stadial history to a particular providential theoretical understanding, such that humanity would eventually become unified under the auspices of new networks of commerce and communications emanating outward from Europe.<sup>76</sup> Robertson's study of empire in the New World was a story of how Europe had achieved the "commercial-imperial stage," and how superior European minds had exported themselves to other parts of the globe.<sup>77</sup> For this reason, it has been powerfully argued that in the unfinished portion of his manuscript dealing with North America, Robertson's unwavering commitment to inexorable stadial progress supported the later European conclusion that the Native Americans faced a brutal choice—assimilate or perish.<sup>78</sup> Such a stark dichotomy leads J. G. A. Pocock to conclude, "It is necessary, therefore, to read the *History of America* as a classical text in what we used to call 'imperialism' and presently term 'colonialism.'"<sup>79</sup>

Finally, the close connection between commercial society and the progressive improvement of natural morals into increasingly refined social manners is starkly evident in the work of John Millar, who was a student in Smith's moral philosophy classes at Glasgow.<sup>80</sup> In the revised edition of *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1779), Millar set forth a largely materialist approach to the question of social development and traced how

75. Robertson, *History of America*, in *Works*, ed. Dugald Stewart (Edinburgh, 1840), 819, quoted in Berry, *Social History of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 92.

76. See N. T. Phillipson, "Providence and Progress: An Introduction to the Historical Thought of William Robertson," in *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, ed. Stewart J. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 55–73; and Karen O'Brien, "Robertson's Place in the Development of Eighteenth-Century Narrative History," *ibid.*, 74–91.

77. Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 163.

78. See Bruce Lenman, "'From Savage to Scot' via the French and the Spaniards: Principal Robertson's Spanish Sources," in Brown, *Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, 209.

79. J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 4, *Barbarians, Savages, and Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 190.

80. See Meek's discussion of Millar in *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, 160–73. For Millar's relationship to Smith, see 107–8.

changes in the mode of production influenced manners, laws, and government. Then, in a passage of extraordinary clarity, Millar summed up the general findings of the historians of the Scottish Enlightenment.

When we survey the present state of the globe, we find that, in many parts of it, the inhabitants are so destitute of culture, as to appear little above the condition of brute animals; and even when we peruse the remote history of polished nations, we have seldom any difficulty in tracing them to a state of the same rudeness and barbarism. There is, however, in man a disposition and capacity for improving his condition, by the exertion of which, he is carried on from one degree of advancement to another; and the similarity of his wants, as well [as] of the faculties by which those wants are supplied, has every where produced a remarkable uniformity in the several steps of his progression. . . . By such gradual advances in rendering their situation more comfortable, the most important alterations are produced in the state and condition of a people: their numbers are increased; the connections of society are extended; and men, being less oppressed with their own wants, are more at liberty to cultivate the feelings of humanity: property, the great source of distinction among individuals, is established; and the various rights of mankind, arising from their multiplied connections, are recognized and protected: the laws of a country are thereby rendered numerous; and a more complex form of government becomes necessary, for distributing justice, and for preventing the disorders which proceed from the jarring interests and passions of a large and opulent community. . . . There is thus, in human society, a natural progress from ignorance to knowledge, and from rude to civilized manners, the several stages of which are usually accompanied with peculiar laws and customs.<sup>81</sup>

This was the essential Scottish Enlightenment arc of historical progress: from the rudeness and simplicity of savagery, through barbarism, to the polished and complex world of refined manners and civilized social arrangements. The advent of commercial society led to material improvement in the lives of individuals, the rise of personal and political liberty, justice

81. John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, 3d ed. (London: J. Murray, 1779), 3–5.

under the rule of law, and normatively preferable modes of social interaction, or refined manners. The division of labor drove material advances, and freedom to choose one's occupation arose as an unintended but positive consequence of the move from feudal agrarianism to urban commerce. So, too, laws became abstract and universal, first in the service of securing a stable commercial environment, by guaranteeing the validity of promises between strangers through the enforcement of contracts, the extension of credit, and uniform tax and tariff policies. The effect was to create a legal code that was less capricious and variable, and on the whole more just, than that of feudal agrarian society. On balance, then, the Scots saw commercial society as the normative as well as the material culmination of the civilizing process.<sup>82</sup>

The Scottish Enlightenment's historical narrative was in turn based on a broadly Lockean empirical psychology in which individuals and societies were seen as moving from the concrete and narrow to the abstract and complex. The story of the progressive development of property relations was therefore also the story of development in human thinking and emotional sensitivity, as well as in social complexity. The hunter-gatherer, focused on mere survival, had a limited range of experiences and consequently a limited range of ideas. So too the ideas formed among primitive herdsmen, who had crudely developed notions of property at best, were much simpler than those of the agrarian stage, where the earth was cultivated and property rights in land and its produce were claimed. In short, the ideas of "savages" and "barbarians" were necessarily narrower, predicated as they were on few external stimuli. As modes of production changed, experiences broadened, notions of property and other ideas became more abstract and sophisticated, a system of ranks built on fortune and birth emerged, and a government of impartial justice and an impersonal rule of law developed to protect liberty and property.<sup>83</sup> All of these changes broadened the range of human experience and enabled what most Scots (apart from Hume) saw as some form of a moral sense to be tamed and refined into modes of social interaction, or "manners," that became increasingly "civilized" over the course of the four stages.

82. Here and in the paragraph that follows, my conclusions are particularly indebted to Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, chapter 5.

83. Berry argues that in this sense the mode of subsistence and its connection to immediacy or abstraction were fundamental for the Scots. While the Scots nowhere said that the mode of production was the *sole* cause of the specific form of social institutions, it was clearly the manner in which property was organized that gave coherence to the formal organization of power in law and government, and to social interaction as evidenced by manners. *Ibid.*, 114.

The political theory of the Scottish Enlightenment has become a central focus of the so-called Cambridge school in general<sup>84</sup> and of J. G. A. Pocock in particular,<sup>85</sup> whose own interpretation has culminated in several chapters on Scottish historiography in his multivolume work on Gibbon, *Barbarism and Religion*.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Pocock's work is its insistence on the fundamental importance of the language of manners to the eighteenth century, and of the key role played by the Scots in defining and defending the discourse within which that term was central. According to the argument, the basic problem for eighteenth-century political thinkers was how property in land should be related to property in goods or capital. Defenders of the republican or civic humanist tradition assumed that landed property was the necessary prerequisite for the autonomy and leisure that enabled citizens to cultivate moral and civic virtue. So long as it was conceptualized in this purely classical sense, however, older, public-spirited "virtue" could not be reconciled with the new world of self-interested "commerce."<sup>87</sup>

Into this breach stepped the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, whose goal, according to Pocock, was to reconcile commercial society and a redefined concept of virtue with the aid of the new notion of "manners." In this view, the Scots reconciled wealth and virtue by arguing that the ancient citizen was a morally underdeveloped being on at least two counts. While relying on the unpaid work of slaves or serfs because he lacked the credit and cash to pay wage laborers, he was simultaneously deprived of the multiple social relationships that only an advanced commercial society could deliver. However, because of the Scots' epistemological presuppositions concerning the necessary relationship between manifold experiences and complex ideas, they believed that it was precisely the rich web of social relationships created by commercial society that progressively tamed, transformed, and refined the "savage" (and later, "barbarian")

84. See especially Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

85. The best short discussion is J. G. A. Pocock, "Cambridge Paradigms and Scotch Philosophers: A Study of the Relations Between the Civic Humanist and the Civil Jurisprudential Interpretation of Eighteenth-Century Social Thought," in Hont and Ignatieff, *Wealth and Virtue*, 235–52.

86. See especially volume 2 of *Barbarism and Religion, Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

87. See especially Pocock, "Virtues, Rights, and Manners: A Model for Historians of Political Thought," in his *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 37–50.

natural moral sentiments into softer, more “polished,” more “polite” modes of social interaction—what they called the manners of civilized society. Pocock thus cast the Scots’ four-stages historical thesis as a remarkable reworking of old republican themes that marked the creation of a brand of “commercial humanism” in which, at long last, virtue and commerce could be reconciled, so long as virtue could be redefined as the practice and refinement of civilized manners.<sup>88</sup>

Over the course of the following chapters, we will see the great extent to which Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft were familiar with the Scottish Enlightenment discursive paradigm that envisioned this particular relationship between natural moral sentiments and their expression in historically evolving systems of manners that became increasingly civilized over time. Indeed, I will argue that both Burke and Wollstonecraft began their respective interpretations of the French Revolution by taking up the Scottish Enlightenment argument that European societies should be understood as animated by naturally occurring moral sentiments moving in an ever more civilized direction. Of course, what each took the Revolution to signify was profoundly different. In order to understand why this should be the case, we will need to focus simultaneously on Burke’s and Wollstonecraft’s fundamental reshaping of Scottish historiography, as well as on their deep familiarity with, and opposite reactions to, Scottish moral philosophy. This is the project of the next two chapters.

88. *Ibid.*, 48–50.