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# *The Party of Humanity*

Writing Moral Psychology in  
Eighteenth-Century Britain

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# Chapter One

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## Introduction

### Some Paradoxes of Moral Psychology

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This is a book about the pain, pathos, and pleasures of moralizing—a topic that works deep into the terrain of moral psychology and out into the field of social relations. The book explores the anxious moral postures adopted by three eighteenth-century writers: Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, and David Hume. While these writers would not have seen themselves as part of a coherent tradition, they are all moralists whose texts raise common questions about moral life: What is the relation between the self and society? Where do moral judgments come from? How do they motivate and become normative for us? What is the role of the arts in securing those judgments? How do we obligate other people, entering into their concerns and—occasionally, when we need to—resisting the obligations they impose upon us?<sup>1</sup> The answers their texts explore are at once both broad and narrow, reflecting general features of human nature and the contours of a particular historical period.

The term *moralist* is one that Hume and his circle in provincial Calvinist Edinburgh would be astonished and perhaps amused to see next to his name. For in marked contrast to his London contemporaries, the “great Infidel” took himself to be a “scientist of man,” offering a description of the way human psychology works rather than recommending one particular course of action over another. For Pope and Johnson, description is a tool to be used for correction. Pope and Johnson ride the crest of a flood of public moral energy in London in the early part of the eighteenth century. Like many other writers of their time, they believed that literature is a moral instrument, a way of directly imposing obligation on other people.

The cultures of eighteenth-century Britain teem with moralists. In all spheres of human life and activity—from sexual relations and gender to art, finance, health, law, politics, and religious belief—moralists can be found proclaiming that things could or should be different from, and better than, the

way they are.<sup>2</sup> Few of these proclamations—even in a single sphere—coincide with each other to settle on a common diagnosis of what is wrong and how it should change. Instead, moralism is a rhetorical stance, a general mode of address. Given the range of conflicting moralisms, the eighteenth century seems not so much the Age of Reason as the age of reasons; it is less a time of universal standards than a time for factions, groups, and persons to invoke standards in order to obligate one another. The voices of eighteenth-century Britons echoing down to us today are voices of *should* and *ought*. Many writers adopted the voice of obligation unquestioningly and greedily; others turned ironic in giving advice. Even persons burdened by intense self-doubt adopted it. It seems they needed to, in order to be heard at all.

I have used the word *moralist* to describe writers who gave voice to the culture of obligation, but it is not a precise term. A better word would fall somewhere in between persuader, evaluator, invoker of norms, and obligator: a moralist is any person who sees that things could be different or better and argues from the convictions of a general standard—whether that standard is God, virtue, tradition, the public, common sense, reason, or truth. I use the word *normative* to cover the work of all such persons; as a group they include almost anybody who wrote or spoke about anything at all during the early and middle part of the eighteenth century. We can restrict the word *moralist* to anybody who is concerned specifically with how *people* can be better, different, or more perfect than they are. But this is hardly to narrow the field at all. The first few decades of the eighteenth century saw a massive increase in social consciousness and in awareness of the concept of the public. Along with this newfound social consciousness came a passion for observing other human beings and characterizing them. We might say that giving meaning to the human face (prosopopoeia) is the eighteenth century's most common trope and that persons are its most common unit of interest. Even Hume is a moralist in this sense, although he directs his descriptive powers toward others while reserving his normative energy for himself.

The premise of this book is that Pope, Johnson, and Hume—the three moralists—are practical psychologists whose moral impulses are inseparable from their social aims, projects, and networks. A further premise is that moral psychology in general presents us with a paradox (and that this paradox, of which we are only fitfully conscious, is painful). Moral psychology is closely connected to reasoning about social life. Reasoning about social life is closely connected to reasoning for personal or collective advantage. Moral psychology is therefore closely connected to self-interest. Yet the lifeblood of moral

ideals is the fiction that they can transcend the social. There are deep differences in the outlooks, temperaments, talents, and beliefs of the writers in this study; yet this paradox marks each of their intellectual lives. For the moment, I will put their specific differences aside to explain the method by which I hope to bring this paradox into focus. Most broadly, the method is naturalism, which in the field of ethics has revived self-interest theories of human motivation.

Ethical naturalism posits that our moral beliefs arise from facts about the way we are, not from a transcendental source. *Moral subjectivism*—the notion that there are features of our minds that give rise to moral behavior—is a late-seventeenth-century British invention; so too is the material theory of mind on which it rests. *Moral psychology* is the science of describing the features of our minds that are responsible for moral behavior; it developed as part of a broad empiricist philosophical outlook whose explanatory power has in recent decades become much greater. *Empiricist ethics* seeks to understand how psychology grounds different aspects of our moral lives, from our moral sentiments to our normative social codes; it seeks to understand how our norms and conventions of justice arise (or do not arise) from our intuitions about the right and the good. This larger project of moving from the mind to culture and back again has been the intellectual engine of empiricist ethics since the beginning: late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral philosophers developed moral psychology in part to explain individual moral choices and broad social norms under a single framework. Something like this unifying project is the subject of the most fruitful work going on right now in the philosophy of culture.<sup>3</sup>

In the last two decades, bolstered by advances in cognitive science and evolutionary biology—especially the branches of it that treat humans: sociobiology and evolutionary psychology—empiricism has achieved a new authority and prestige. This new synthesis of evolutionary biology and the brain sciences has powerfully extended the naturalist revolution begun by Locke, Hume, and the British moral sense philosophers. There are profound differences between old and new empiricist cognitive psychology, but between eighteenth-century moral psychology and evolutionary ethics there are distinct continuities.<sup>4</sup> These continuities may be explained in several ways. British empiricists such as Hobbes, Boyle, Locke, and Hooker can lay claim to having invented the scientific study of the mind within whose framework moral psychologists operate; in one Kuhnian scenario, they invented the paradigm that allows moral questions to be articulated in the idiom inherited by evolution-

ary ethics. But I favor a different explanation. Rather than seeing the science of moral psychology as an effect of Enlightenment ideology, I would argue that it picks out deep facts about the sources of morality, facts that the evolutionary synthesis is now able to explain and contextualize. On this view, empiricism turns out to have the right account of the sources of moral life. This view informs the readings in this book in ways that I will explain. It gives rise to a host of questions, consequences, and objections. But in general, I mean not only to explain the theory but also to adopt it as a guide.

Some overview of evolutionary naturalism is in order. “Selection thinking” is a broad tent, housing many different kinds of projects and schools of thought. Evolutionary hypotheses about human psychology are emerging from a growing body of work by geneticists, ethologists, psychologists, biologists, linguists, anthropologists, archaeologists, and social historians. These hypotheses are being codified, popularized, and explained by science writers, philosophers, and journalists. Until now evolutionary psychologists have been unified by their opposition to the overwhelmingly dominant “Standard Social Science Model” (SSSM) (Cosmides and Tooby 1992, 23ff). The SSSM argues for relatively few innate principles, a small core of human nature, and domain-general cognitive capacities; human cultures are infinitely variable, and all behavior is learned. Evolutionary psychology, by contrast, argues for many innate principles, a large core of human nature, and domain-specific cognitive capacities (Mithen 1996, 13–14). Included in the mental modules proposed and analyzed so far are language, “cheater-detection,” kin selection, reciprocal altruism, incest avoidance, color recognition, and many others. Now that evolutionary psychology is becoming more widely accepted in the social sciences, hypotheses about the content of these specific adaptive modules are proliferating and being tested.<sup>5</sup>

One set of questions has been central to evolutionary theory, as it was to the British philosophers: questions about the sources of our moral lives.<sup>6</sup> For both old and new empiricist traditions, enquiring into the sources of our moral lives runs the investigator directly up against some paradoxes of moral psychology. The main paradox is that morality seems to be closely connected to self-interest. This intuition can take many forms, some stronger and some weaker, some plausible, some ludicrous, some that seem to cut against the grain of our most deeply held values. The best way to explain it is to unravel some of the many threads that connect the two empiricist traditions of eighteenth-century moral thought and evolutionary ethics.

Let us begin with the first principle of empiricist ethics, the rejection of a transcendental source for morality and values. At the very beginning of his

*Enquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals*, Hume asks the question of which features of our psychologies give rise to moral actions and moral systems: “There has been a controversy started of late . . . concerning the general foundation of morals; whether they be derived from reason, or from sentiment; whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense; whether, like all sound judgment of truth and falsehood, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being; or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species” (E 170). Hume’s answer is that the general foundation of morality is the moral sentiments, an answer almost identical to the answer offered by evolutionary ethicists. But Hume and these later empiricists diverge in choosing their level of explanation. Hume wants to know what the moral sentiments are, how they work, and especially how they can be encouraged; evolutionary ethicists come at those questions by a historical, indeed evolutionary, explanation of where they came from. Evolutionists tell a fascinating story about the prehistory of the moral sentiments, how they evolved via reciprocal altruism, kin selection, and perhaps even group selection.<sup>7</sup> What evolutionary ethics has done most powerfully is to coordinate commonsense reflections on familiar human moral dilemmas with a workable set of scientific hypotheses. Furthermore, evolutionary ethics reaches back in time to address such eighteenth-century-style questions about sympathy and altruism as How does sympathy arise between people? Why are people moral? Why do sympathy and altruism always seem so much more fragile than selfishness? What are the limits of sympathy? Are there any limits to selfishness? The obvious conundrum is that while morality does not necessarily seem to be in our best interests, as a species we have developed complex canons of moral norms, institutions, and obligations.

In recent decades evolutionary theorists have begun to work out ingenious answers to these familiar questions. They argue that even the most genuinely moral sentiments can evolve out of an extreme methodological individualism. Here is an overview of this approach, as described by Barbara Smuts:

Evolutionary theory predicts that individuals will behave in ways that, on average, increase their own reproductive success. From this perspective, all individuals are selfish competitors. Yet, paradoxically, the formation of cooperative relationships is sometimes the most effective way to increase individual reproductive success. However, the genetic interests of individuals are not identical, and conflicts of interest perpetually endanger the survival of these relationships, particularly when they involve unrelated individuals. This familiar tension between individual self-interest and the well-being

of some larger social unit reflects the selection pressures that underlie all social life, both in humans and other animals. Thus, animals could not evolve stable, long-term, mutually dependent reciprocal, intimate relationships with non-kin without simultaneously evolving mechanisms to ensure that, on average, each member of the cooperating unit received benefits greater than she or he would receive if acting alone or in cooperating with others instead. (1997, 67–68)

Smuts is here referring to the selfish gene theory, as brilliantly popularized by Richard Dawkins (1976), and to its extension in moral theory by George C. Williams, Robert L. Trivers, William D. Hamilton, and Robert Axelrod. The selfish gene theory has spread rapidly over the last two decades, proving to be both successful and, for fascinating and important reasons, easily misunderstood. It is associated with a program of strict *adaptationism*, that is, the notion that genetic reproduction is an algorithm that has given rise to complex organismal design (Dennett 1995, 48ff). In moral theory, adaptationism has sponsored a set of arguments about how our moral systems arise from long-term self-interest through two mechanisms: kin selection and reciprocal altruism. These mechanisms are related but not identical. *Kin selection*, a theory first formulated by William Hamilton (1964), is the idea that genes can program their carriers to sacrifice themselves for other organisms who also carry copies of those genes—relatives, in short. If we take the “gene’s eye view,” we soon realize that genes do not particularly “care” about the organism that carries it. Nor do they care who spreads them. My genes are replicated just as efficiently if I sacrifice myself to save the lives of two siblings—each carrying roughly half of my genes—as they would be if I passed my genes to one child. They are also passed more effectively if I make sacrifices to ensure the well-being of that child. This is not to say, of course, that my survival is a matter of indifference to me or that the sacrifice is not hard: in an ingenious contribution to the theory of kin selection, Robert Trivers (1974) offered to explain why it is that parents and children, not to mention siblings, may experience profound conflicts and may overtly and subtly seek to manipulate each other to favor their own interests. But the very difficulty of the sacrifices and power of the conflicts may be tempered by the emotional compulsion I feel on behalf of relatives. The theory of kin selection suggests that morality gets started by piggybacking on family love (see Hamilton 1964; Wright 1994, chap. 7).

Meanwhile what compels us to cooperate with unrelated individuals? One well-known eighteenth-century answer, recently revived by James Q. Wilson (1993), is the moral sense. But this answer begs a further question: Where does the moral sense come from? The theory of *reciprocal altruism* suggests an answer. It describes how morality can extend even to people who are unrelated



to us, while predicting that our moral feelings for others will diminish in proportion to our degree of relatedness. George C. Williams describes the theory in a general way:

Simply stated, an individual who maximizes his friendships and minimizes his antagonisms will have an evolutionary advantage, and selection should favor those characters that promote the optimization of personal relationships. I imagine that this evolutionary factor has increased man's capacity for altruism and compassion and has tempered his ethically less acceptable heritage of sexual and predatory aggressiveness. There is theoretically no limit to the extent and complexity of group-related behavior that this factor could produce, and the immediate goal of such behavior would always be the well-being of some other individual, often genetically unrelated. Ultimately, however, this would not be an adaptation for group benefit. It would be developed by the differential survival of individuals and would be designed for the perpetuation of the genes of the individual providing the benefit to another. It would involve only such immediate self-sacrifice for which the probability of later repayment would be sufficient justification. (1966, 94–95)

The theory was developed with the help of two special tools—computer simulation and a thought experiment from game theory called “the prisoner's dilemma.” Robert Axelrod, a political theorist, has devised a complicated way of testing the reciprocal altruism hypothesis in a computer simulation that he convincingly claims models evolution. He has discovered that while selfishness may be tempting in the short run, in the long run the optimal social strategy is to cooperate initially, to reciprocate both cooperation and selfishness, and to punish noncooperators but forgive them when they repent (Axelrod 1984; Wright 1994, 191–202). The theory of reciprocal altruism will be the topic of chapter 5.

To put it mildly, these theories have been controversial. For they are easily misinterpreted (even by some mischievous biologists) to say something unpalatable, namely that all moral emotions are really self-serving, indeed that we adopt them cynically and insincerely.<sup>8</sup> Yet this misprision is also uncomfortably plausible: moral emotions are often closely connected to moral self-advertising; and moral beliefs seem to track self-interest rather than departing significantly from it. And this empiricist insight, far from being merely cynical, is genealogically close to several Copernican revolutions in moral thought—such as Freud's system—that predict that our moral systems derive from immoral impulses. First among these Copernican revolutionaries we can place a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British moral philosophers: Thomas Hobbes, Bernard Mandeville, Frances Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith. We can exclude Shaftesbury. To be a Coper-

nican revolutionary is to be something of a moral antirealist, someone who thinks that morality arises from facts about the way we are, and someone who thinks that insofar as our ideas track the best or the truth, it is because those categories too can be traced back to our psychologies.

To early critics of sociobiology, the strong resemblance between the self-interest theories of altruism and eighteenth-century moral philosophy is evidence of flaw and ideological taint. This critique has been mounted most seriously by the philosopher Philip Kitcher, writing against what he calls “pop sociobiology” (by which he means not just its popular manifestations but the whole sociobiological enterprise) (1985, 396, 399). And indeed, the parallels are stunning. The following statement could have been written as a paraphrase of Richard Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene* (1976):

Men are naturally selfish, unruly creatures, what makes them sociable is their necessity and consciousness of standing in need of others’ help to make life comfortable: and what makes this assistance voluntary and lasting are the gains on profit accruing to industry for services done to others, which in a well ordered society enables every body, who in some thing or other will be serviceable to the publick, to purchase the assistance of others. (Quoted in Horne 1978, xi)

On the other hand, evolutionary psychologists would probably reject the strong dualism of this next statement, for it misses the most important fact about human moral psychology, which is that people really are moral, altruistic, unselfish, and so on.

What renders [man] a sociable animal, consists not in his desire of company, good nature, pity, affability, and other graces of a fair outside; but that his vilest and most hateful qualities are the most necessary accomplishments to fit him for the largest, and according to the world, the happiest and most flourishing societies. (Mandeville 1989, 53)

Both are quotations from the writings of Bernard Mandeville. Meanwhile, evolutionary psychologists would strongly agree with both of the following statements, the first from Hobbes, the second the opening words of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth onely in death. And the cause of this, is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power: but because he cannot assume the means to live well, which he hath at present, without the acquisition of more. (Hobbes 1991, 90)

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness neces-

sary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion. (Smith 1982, 9)

The first passage exhibits a concern with status, whose importance evolutionary psychologists have uniformly emphasized: “Status is central to all complex mammal societies, humanity included. To say that people generally seek status, whether by rank, class, or wealth, is to sum up a large part of the catalogue of human social behavior” (E. O. Wilson 1998, 170). The second points to the striking paradox of moral psychology on the naturalist view, namely that selfishness and altruism are of a piece.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than becoming suspicious of this coincidence, we should perhaps see it as evidence of an ongoing human obsession with the scandal of self-interest. Perceiving ourselves to be self-interested is by turns troubling and liberating; perceiving others to be self-interested is just shocking. Evolutionary psychology can even help us understand these responses. Believing in our own disinterestedness is often a highly useful strategy: in order to pursue our own ends most effectively, we need to be able to convince other people that we are disinterested. But in a famous set of experiments, the psychologist Leda Cosmides (later with John Tooby) demonstrated that people reason most effectively about violations of the social contract when they suspect they are being cheated. She posits that we have a “cheater-detection” module by which we enforce social contracts (1992b, 163–228). So in the game of social contracts, successful players pursue a strategy in which they receive just a little bit more in benefit than they pay out in cost. But if our fellow social animals are scanning for signs of just such shady accounting, we should develop (evolve) ways of fooling their cheater-detection modules. And here a key evolutionary psychological use of the unconscious comes into play: the most effective way to convince our fellow social animals that we have their best interests in mind is to believe, whole-heartedly and without conscious guile, that we *do* have their best interests in mind. We thus relegate knowledge of our self-interest to our unconscious, where it cannot be exposed or unmasked by others. So prized is this suppression that unmasking it is risky, bringing either social benefit or social disgrace. On the one hand, we value people who can expose the self-interest of people who are more socially successful than we are. We are repeatedly scandalized to discover that other people are self-interested. Our shock is, of course, a social strategy. It suggests that we ourselves couldn’t possibly be self-interested. On the other hand, those who too zealously or greedily expose other people are dangerous to us. Richard Alexander, a prominent

evolutionary biologist, has even proposed that we are evolved to resist thinking of ourselves as self-interested and will condemn theorists who offer such a dismal picture of the human animal (1987, 31–32).<sup>10</sup> Finally, those who come off the worst in all this are the morally self-righteous exposers who can be shown to be self-interested. Alexander Pope is one such figure. He made a career out of exposing other people, yet an entire tradition of Pope criticism has been devoted to unmasking his self-interest, with generation after generation of critics newly scandalized.

We have now begun to sketch the outlines of moral psychology from an empiricist standpoint: it is a psychology adapted to an environment in which hardships are not natural objects but other people. It is also a psychology in which values closely track personal and collective interests: values arise from conflicts and confluences of interest, never becoming fully abstracted from them. But now we must turn to a second tradition, that of ethics itself. This tradition developed in response to the nascent empiricist program, and the founding intuition of post-Kantian ethical theory is that ethics depends on a strict separation of values from interests. On this dominant way of thinking, ethics and moral psychology have nothing to do with each other; the field of ethics has developed largely by cordoning itself off from all empiricist and self-interest theories of moral psychology. In the early part of the twentieth century, G. E. Moore famously argued against the “naturalistic fallacy,” claiming that there is no relation between “what we ought to do” and “what we do do” (May, Friedman, and Clark 1996, 1–2; M. Johnson 1996). Twentieth-century moral philosophy has handled moral psychology by resolutely invoking the fact/value distinction, separating the naturalist (“is”) from the normative (“ought”) and arguing that moral agency (the subject of ethics) consists solely in the normative demands that we make upon ourselves. Of course this distinction was also drawn by Hume, who saw the problem set by moral sense philosophy as being not so much how self-interest leads to altruism as it is how the atomistic impressions in our head can recommend one course of action over another (see T 469). The Kantian tradition has answered this empiricist conundrum by asserting that facts do not and cannot give us an adequate purchase on values.

Such an argument has recently been forcefully made by Christine Korsgaard, who has produced the most intense and profound meditations on Enlightenment philosophy since Ernst Cassirer. Like John Rawls, she has concentrated on updating Kant’s moral philosophy. In her magnificent interpretation of Kant, moral obligation, and indeed all human values, arises from our capacity for autonomous self-reflection. Autonomous self-reflection is a

product of human social life, a tenet that brings Kant so far into the mainstream of eighteenth-century moral philosophy, which holds that we regulate our conduct according to social norms. But Kant rejects what I call at points in this book “the spectator morality of the Enlightenment” and takes a crucial further step: we have the capacity to obligate ourselves through the process of reflection; the moral law may originate in sociability, but we make the law count for ourselves. A human being enters the domain of the moral law within by reflecting on the choices she faces.

Korsgaard repeatedly calls herself a “naturalist,” a moral philosopher whose insights fit into emerging paradigms in evolutionary psychology.<sup>11</sup> She invokes the canonical moral philosophical distinction between facts and values, between the anthropology of morals and moral agency. But by naturalism she means only the former. The normative is quite a separate matter, and the fact that the source of moral obligation can be found in the natural world is little more than an irrelevant curiosity: “We are social animals so probably the whole thing has a biological basis” (1996, 9). The brief story she tells about how the roots of conscience can be found in our aggressive impulses turned inward resembles nothing so much as an eighteenth-century parable of civilization emerging from the state of nature:

The world of social animals is characterized by elaborate structures of hierarchy and domination. Although the ability to dominate does have to do with strength and prowess, it is not related to it in an obvious way. When two animals battle for dominance, the battle may be highly ritualized, and often the losing party is not at all injured. It is a battle of wills.

Both Nietzsche and Freud believed that morality and the special character of human consciousness emerged simultaneously in the evolution of our species. Since I have grounded morality in the special character of human consciousness—in particular, in its reflective nature—I take these accounts to be harmonious with my view. Both also believed that the special character of human consciousness arose when the impulse to dominate—the will to power, or the aggressive instincts—were deprived of any outlet and turned against the self. An intelligent, wilful animal, held captive and punished by others, was not permitted to be aggressive. And having nothing else to dominate it, it turned these instincts inward, and learned to dominate itself. And in that way reflective distance and the autonomy that goes with it came into being. (1996, 157–58)

For Kant, reason sets the laws of morality, just as it does the laws of mathematics; and the task for the rational individual is to find out what those laws are and to freely choose to be bound by them. The two tests that human beings should apply to moral choices to find out whether they meet the criteria

of reason are the Categorical Imperative: “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature,” (1981, section 421, p. 30), and the Formula of Humanity: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means” (1981, section 429, p. 36). And here is the paradox of moral psychology in its most extreme form: elaborate theories of justice and fairness arise from the dominance behavior of intelligent, willful, aggressive animals. Pressed to a Kantian extreme, the paradox posits a distinct split between selfishness and altruism, between the needs of the individual and the demands of humanity.

Perhaps because of the reflective psychology that Korsgaard identifies as the ground of ethics, and perhaps because self-interest theories are uncomfortable, dualism underlies most ethical systems. We should consider the possibility too that dualism underlies some interpretive systems, especially when other people’s motives are at issue. To understand the role of moral postures in the lives and works of these writers, we could take one of two approaches. We could either try to explore their values from the inside out, taking their testimony about what motivates them at face value, or we could override their testimony in favor of explanations they might reject. The first method would roughly correspond to historical reconstruction, the second to critical—especially psychoanalytic or deconstructive—exposure. Both approaches would yield limited but very real insights into the claims of social life. The first approach would look at experience from the first-person perspective, while the second would import an interpretive framework. This is a distinction, to use a distinctly modern vocabulary, between the phenomenology of morals and the anthropology of morals, between what compels us and the reasons that we are compelled, between the two questions “Why am I moral?” and “Why are people moral?”<sup>12</sup> The paradox of moral psychology is that both approaches could be true, but each would yield a vastly different result.

Let me try to convey what this distinction puts at stake. All human actions can be described under two aspects. Anger has both a phenomenological and a descriptive aspect. So do sexual desire, beauty, pain, pride, and guilt. Usually there is some distance between the two aspects, a distance that may trouble us when we become aware of it. Who among us likes to think that when we get married and have children we are marching lockstep with our generation to death, as Nietzsche said? What distinguishes moral psychology is that the distance is unusually wide and that we find it more than usually disturbing.

The theory of naturalism that I am outlining (and endorsing) here is, by

contrast, antidualist. It seeks to locate moral psychology and ethics on a unified plane. Naturalism recognizes that humans need, for various psychological reasons, to posit a split between the feelings our values give us and descriptions of why our values motivate us. It presumes, nonetheless, that there is no such split, but rather that moral psychology and moral agency are unified. Because the normative and the descriptive seem to diverge, a naturalistic analysis seeks to bring them back together under a unified field. There are many complications, such as the fact that we are inclined to separate the normative “ought” from the descriptive “is” in our own case but to disallow that distinction in the case of others. On the naturalist view, even extreme self-sacrificing behaviors are in our long-term self-interest, but we have elaborate defenses against allowing our moral consciousness to be penetrated by thoughts of any motives other than the ones we set for ourselves. Naturalism refers to a hope, as much as a method, for uniting diverse aspects of moral psychology together under a single explanatory framework.

At most points in this book, especially in the three chapters on Pope, we will not have to go far to find evidence of the paradox of moral psychology. The people in my study—writers and their characters—confront familiar dilemmas in social life: sexual desire, gender identity, family relations, trade, patronage, friendship, cheating, ambition, cooperation, status, rivalry, shame, trust, betrayal, even insanity. They respond by developing a practical ethics, shaped in first-person questions about what is best for them to do, and a moral stance on why others too should conform. Often their moral beliefs are drawn from wider religious or moral doctrines. Yet even then they can be explained naturalistically. From the perspective of naturalism, moral postures are not abstract—human beings use them as frequently as they use their senses of sight and hearing—but they can only be grasped in relation to specific social situations and other people. We can locate the moral sentiments—and their close cousin, moral aggression—in some practical need and in the deep self-interest from which those emotions grow. Naturalism helps us treat moral stances as social strategies: by following their track, we can explore the web of social practices and relations, and the way some people have found to navigate this web by obeying the practical demands of their social identities.

Moves in the game of moral objectivity, a game played ferociously and reverentially by Pope and others, can be placed in a broader social context of the desire for status and conflict over the control of resources. Pope repeatedly adopts postures of moral objectivity to extend his interests, using those postures as moves in a game of social domination. Yet even as he asserts the power

to obligate, this moralist guiltily conceals the traces of his manipulations. A moralist fitfully and ambivalently identifying with a correcting perspective on his own impulses is a familiar and remarkable figure in post-Augustinian sacred and secular moral writing (including psychoanalysis). While in much homiletic literature the moral stance is self-reflexive, in the eighteenth century it becomes assimilated to the genre of satire: at those moments when the moralist identifies most fully with a corrective power, he claims the right to peer into the naked soul of man. The moralist both points towards the stringency of normative ethics and strips the fictions from the social world.

Naturalism, too, would seem to be a stripper of fictions.<sup>13</sup> In its popular modes, it holds out that very hope. It flirts with cynicism and reductionism; it is exhilarating and dangerous; it opens the possibility of a comically melancholy style at the same time that it threatens to lapse into mere raving. And in this it resembles nothing so much as that dark twin of Enlightenment moralizing, eighteenth-century satire. Consider a widely read book by Robert Wright called *The Moral Animal* (1994). Wright takes familiar facts of social life, namely that we are animals caught in a cross weave of status hierarchy and reciprocal altruism—status-seeking, debt, trade, friendship, and trust—and explains the evolutionary logic behind them. At its worst, the book tells “just-so” stories outlandish enough to garner tremendous press attention for the book. His procedure: take any “feature of human nature” and look for the evolutionary logic behind it. If you can think of environmental circumstances in which adopting that behavior would maximize genetic fitness, you’ve got yourself a neat evolutionary explanation. Many writers have published lists of “features of human nature,” but Wright’s has an undeniably sensationalist cast. He nominates the tendency of men to see women as either virgins or whores, infidelity in both sexes but especially in men, status-seeking, lying out of self-justified motives, infanticide, sibling rivalry, rape, low self-esteem among criminals, and an intense thirst for gossip.

All of these phenomena can be grouped under the heading of dominance relations.<sup>14</sup> Under this heading too, Wright places moralizing itself. Much as Nietzsche did in the *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Wright locates the origins of morality in competition over the control of resources. From conflicts of interest come moral self-righteousness, along with a tendency to deceive ourselves about our own moral failings; from confluences of interest come moral approval. Moral realism, the notion that our moral views correspond to the way things really are, is itself a powerful tool in the game of moral objectivity. Wright’s thesis is a familiar one in the evolutionary analysis of human moral life. As he puts it succinctly elsewhere, “Our moral evaluations of people are



often subordinate, by design, to our social agendas” (Wright 1996). In fact, Wright’s prose owes much of its rhetorical life to eighteenth-century satire, from his inviting us to get an overview of our crazy species by adopting the detached pose of an alien anthropologist from Mars, to the attempt to think through human nature in terms of animal nature. Surely here he is thinking of Book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels* and of Mark Twain’s *Letters from the Earth*:

In a small group (a group, say, the size of a hunter-gatherer village), a person has a broad interest in deflating the reputations of others, especially others of the same sex and similar age, with whom there exists a natural rivalry. . . . Expect [this derogation of others] to reach high volume when two people are vying for something that there’s only one of—a particular woman, a particular man, a particular professional distinction. . . . The keen sensitivity with which people detect the flaws of their rivals is one of nature’s wonders. It takes a Herculean effort to control this tendency consciously, and the effort must be repeated on a regular basis. Some people can summon enough restraint not to talk about their rivals’ worthlessness; they may even utter some Victorian boilerplate about a “worthy opponent.” But to rein in the perception itself—the unending, unconscious, all-embracing search for signs of unworthiness—is truly a job for a Buddhist monk. Honesty of evaluation is simply beyond the reach of most mortals. (1994, 268–69).

But now a certain familiar double vision sets in. We can admit to finding an explanation powerful while also standing back from it to investigate the cultural interest it provokes at a particular moment in time. The naturalist thesis about moral life has a definite form with a distinguished history in both sacred and secular thought. The urge to get outside of human moral systems and to anatomize them has been intellectually sanctioned in different periods of history. It has also been forcefully condemned (this dialectic has played out most recently in the public opposition between the “two cultures” of science and the humanities, between proponents of the scientific method and inventors of “Science Studies”). Evolutionary naturalism is only the latest in a long line of attempts to socialize the transcendent while transcending the social: a naturalist—since the seventeenth century an experimenter, but once, perhaps, a prophet—looks down on human society from a great height and finds that human ideals have a strongly social character. He hopes for a Pisgah sight. Since the Enlightenment, judgments with this form have been an effective instrument of secularization, wielded most trenchantly by David Hume, “*le bon David*,” who on his deathbed prided himself on being almost “more detached from Life” than it is possible for any person to be (1932, 1:7). Judgments with this form are also a standard satirist’s tool.

This study, in short, is in the peculiar methodological position of offering

up a naturalist explanation of writings by people who themselves offered up their own (eighteenth-century versions of) naturalist explanations of the world around them. It should be clear by now that this is no coincidence, for there are at least two resonances between evolutionary psychology and eighteenth-century rhetoric. From Enlightenment moral philosophy, evolutionary psychology inherits a unifying ethos, addressing the relation of the individual to social norms; of sub-individual, to individual, to supra-individual entities; of genes to gene complexes, to modules, to persons, to culture. And from eighteenth-century satire, it inherits a passionate, rebellious, disruptive way of talking about the self in society and about the complicated motives of human moralizing. Both resonances help us understand how in the small, personal culture of British letters in the early eighteenth century, moralism came to be twinned with its opposite, cynicism.

### The Normative Power of Art

These are some of the themes that will recur in the following chapters. But the texts in this study insist on a second order of concern: besides being psychologically and morally complex, they are aesthetically complex, a fact that at once makes naturalism more appealing and sets powerful limits on it. Let me take each of these claims in turn. The aesthetic complexity of these texts makes naturalism more appealing because eighteenth-century aesthetics, like evolutionary psychology, gropes toward a theory of the unity of moral psychology while claiming to transcend mere intuition about the relationship between an individual and culture. In their philosophically explicit forms, moral psychology, the aesthetic, and social theory are eighteenth-century European inventions; to trace the origins of one concept is to find it entangled, at its roots, with the other two. Historically, aesthetics stands in a foundational relationship to the other two concepts: eighteenth-century British culture assigned the task of making sense of human social life to its emerging aesthetic sphere. Artists and theorists met this challenge with gusto, transmuting the raw material of social life into innovative narratives and new media. The most sophisticated stories about human sociability, including such diverse topics as gender, nation, rank, unequal distributions of wealth and power, and what Wordsworth called “the increasing collection of men in cities,” were handled in poems, paintings, novels, and by prose nonfiction writers using the language and idiom of art.

Meanwhile every British moral philosopher, including Hobbes, Locke, Mandeville, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Kames, Hume, Burke, and Smith, was

obsessed with a single question: how to reconcile private interest with public benefits, two points of view seemingly in conflict with each other. Increasingly, they turned to aesthetics as the best explanatory tool, making it an instrument—as the scientific method has since become—of both reduction and of synthesis, a way of traveling into the human psyche and out again into the world. To borrow a term coined by E. O. Wilson (1998), aesthetic theory was their instrument of consilience. Through these developments, aesthetic culture became the primary forum for social abstraction, the means by which concepts of society were represented back to its members. Perhaps in some other time and place the main forum would have been religion or science, but to use John Barrell’s phrase, the “value-languages” (and indeed the political languages) of Georgian culture were spoken in the idiom of art (Barrell 1986, 12).<sup>15</sup>

The analogy to evolutionary psychology lies not only in the fact that evolutionary psychology is suffused with Enlightenment explanatory idealism. Nor does it lie, entirely, in the fact that analyses in evolutionary psychology are, for the time being, more aesthetic than scientific; that is, they are narratively compelling but explanatorily vague. The analogy encompasses these two facts but goes beyond them. Both eighteenth-century aesthetics and evolutionary psychology are conceptual modes of inquiry that attempt, in E. O. Wilson’s words, “to explain phenomena by webs of causation across adjacent levels of organization” (1998, 189). Adjacent levels of organization comprise everything from the inner workings of the mind to the most complex social forms. Both methods are instruments of reduction and of synthesis, preoccupied by the question of the relationship between the individual and culture and by the hope of finding underlying regularities in human nature. Both methods purport to help us understand the way human beings characteristically react to their surroundings, especially when their surroundings include other human beings reacting to them. They promise to help us trace feelings and actions back into the minds of the people who experience them and to piece together a story about large-scale social formations, especially, perhaps, in the eighteenth century, when people believed that such moral emotions as sympathy were the cement of society. Both come into being in response to an earlier order of mystification and credulity against which they proclaim themselves to be instruments of demystification, detachment, and objectivity. Finally, and most importantly, both are centered on the problem of self-interest.

The very strength of the analogy, however, points to the limits of naturalism. For to some extent, naturalism hopes to deliver on promises first made

by eighteenth-century moral philosophy to establish the unity of moral psychology and to find a ground from which to explain the individual in relation to the group. Yet as David Bromwich writes, works of art in this period draw sustenance by putting these questions always into play: “A motive for great writing throughout [the modern period] has been a tension, which is felt to be unresolvable, between the claims of social obligation and of personal autonomy. That these had to be experienced as rival claims was the discovery of Burke and Wordsworth. Our lives are lived today and our choices are made in a culture where any settlement of the contest for either side is bound to be provisional. There is nothing to approve or regret in such a situation; it is the way things are; and in a time like ours, it is what great writing lives on” (1989, vii).

In practice what this means is that individual works of art often contradict and falsify aesthetic theory. All of the authors in this study seek to obligate other people, but they confront the limits of art as an instrument of obligation, indeed of social explanation. They share the concerns of aesthetic theory but resist its mandate to clarify, discovering how intransigent and opaque their medium can be. This is a practical rather than a metaphysical claim: I am not claiming on behalf of aesthetic formalism that eighteenth-century art should not be read as an instrument of moral instruction or sociological explanation; indeed, some of these authors would like nothing better than for their art to be so read. There is nothing essential to art that makes it fail in these ways, but it repeatedly does so anyway. It fails, most poignantly, despite a powerful promise made by the very moral philosophical tradition that invented ethical naturalism: perhaps to ease the burden of having unlocked the secret of human self-interest, these moral philosophers promise that art can soothe conflicts between aggressive social animals by binding individuals to the group. Art, this tradition claims, is the first among instruments of moral obligation, and the most effective. This tradition will be most familiar to readers of work in eighteenth-century studies as “the culture of politeness”; I will call it the “Party of Humanity,” adapting a phrase from David Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) in which he articulates its key elements.

In late twentieth-century Britain and America, the idea that art has a normative power has become commonplace and obviously politicized. The range of competing claims is breathtaking. Art refines, ameliorates, and cures diseases of the body and soul. Art can make us more tolerant and liberal; it can gladden us and challenge us to expand our emotional capacities. Art can provide a sense of identity for politically marginalized groups. Alternatively, art can give rise to politically marginalized groups in the first place by corrupting

our common heritage. It can lead people astray. It can make us lose control of our bodies and emotions; it can ruin our symbols and ironize our values. So pervasive is the idea of art's normative power, so deeply entrenched in the collective psyche of the dominant classes, that we are only fitfully aware of its power over us.

While many other cultures, especially the Greek, have held strong views about art's normative power, the idea first became commonplace in England of the eighteenth century. What did the idea of art's normative power mean then? Thanks to a massive effort in scholarship by such English and American writers as John Brewer, Catherine Gallagher, Terry Castle, John Barrell, Jill Campbell, Ann Bermingham, Michael McKeon, Frances Ferguson, Jonathan Lamb, John Mullan, Ann Van Sant and many others, we can begin to specify. "Our modern idea of 'high culture' is an eighteenth-century invention," writes John Brewer, and I might add that high culture as a separate sphere of activity and influence supports self-conscious reflection about art's normative power (1997, xvi).<sup>16</sup> The idea took many forms, but up until speculations on the sublime initiated by Edmund Burke, one narrative was dominant: art fits the individual to the social order by playing on her moral sentiments to render her more virtuous, sympathetic, and altruistic. (My choice of the female pronoun is deliberate here, since this tradition resolutely genders its subject of obligation female.)

This story about the moralizing power of the aesthetic originated with Shaftesbury and Addison, who rebelled against the rationalism of such neo-classical theorists as Boileau and Rapin to center aesthetic theory on human psychology.<sup>17</sup> Art, or anyway the experience of art, has a normative power that, when directed towards society, fosters public virtue. Shaftesbury wrote: "The admiration and love of order, harmony, and proportion, in whatever kind is naturally improving to the temper, advantageous to social affection, and highly assistant to virtue, which is itself no other than the love of order and beauty in society. In the meanest subjects of the world, the appearance of order gains upon the mind and draws the affection towards it" (1964, 1:279). Certain genres like the heroic painting and the epistle were thought more likely to have these beneficent moral effects; others, like the conversation piece and the novel, were initially suspected of playing on the wrong sentiments; still others, like satire, were thought to laugh or lash people into a social mood.

The effects on subsequent aesthetic theory have been massive. Theorists of the sublime acknowledged this narrative by reversing the priority it gave to the collective over the individual: "The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human," wrote Thomas

Weiskel ([1976] 1986, 3). Kant and Coleridge inherited the tradition and rejected its practical morality, arguing that our cognitive responses to art are interesting for what they can tell us about human psychology quite apart from their ethical, moral, or political effects (the Kantian view will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2). Formalist new critics of the twentieth century inherited the Kantian tradition through Coleridge, but it has now all but died out under the pressure of critique from the followers of Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jürgen Habermas. Some of these followers have revived the idea of art's moral efficacy in the service of (small-l) liberal moralism; others have accused the Kantian tradition of smuggling (large-L) Liberal bourgeois universalism into a doctrine of aesthetic disinterest; still others have concentrated on reconstructing the true (negative) effects of aesthetically induced social pressure on people in the past.<sup>18</sup> More generally, these theorists have found stories about the moralizing power of art congenial to their methodological collectivism, their emphasis on the pressure society puts on the individual.

An example will illustrate the Shaftesburian tradition. Joseph Wright of Derby's "Three Spectators Viewing a Gladiator by Candlelight" (1765) (fig. 1) is one of a set of "moral pictures" in which Wright experimented with the conventions of history painting by privatizing them, making contemporary civic and national virtues the topic of self-consciously aesthetic reflections (another is the "Academy by Lamplight" [1769]). In his excellent book *Painting for Money*, David Solkin presents the "Three Spectators" as an orthodox example of the empiricist position that "the central mission of culture itself" is the civilizing process (1993, 169). Solkin quotes Hume, but he might have quoted anybody from Shaftesbury to Kames to Adam Smith: "A cultivated taste for the polite arts,' [Hume] had written in the early 1740's, ' . . . improves our sensibility for all the tender and agreeable passions'—passions that elsewhere Hume described as those of 'generosity, humanity, compassion, gratitude, friendship, fidelity, zeal, disinterestedness, liberality, and all those other qualities which form the character of the good and benevolent'" (1993, 169). A cultivated taste for the polite arts, in other words, is normative from the perspective of the group, becoming an instrument through which culture exerts its hold on us.

The moralizing power of the aesthetic depends on an empiricist psychological tradition going back to Locke and Descartes in which the boundary between aesthetic perception and ordinary perception is especially thin. To the empiricists, perception is a two-stage process: a person perceives some object and brings it under a concept or judgment. To take a very short line, empiri-

Image not available.

Figure 1. Joseph Wright of Derby, *Three Persons Viewing "The Gladiator" by Candlelight* (1765). Private collection; permission to reproduce conveyed by Tate Britain, London. Photo courtesy of Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

cists often use theatrical metaphors in their epistemology, describing subject/object relations as relations between a beholder or spectator and a multiplicity of objects. Hume makes this theatricality explicit in his famous “the mind is a kind of theater” metaphor. Descartes in his treatise *Of the Passions of the Soul* (1649), Smith in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and Burke in his treatise on the sublime and the beautiful, all assume it. Descartes saw wonder (*l'admiration*) as the first of the passions and the most simple. Other passions, such as hatred and love, are complex, involving some judgment of the object at hand. These complex emotions depend causally on the prior passion of wonder, which is a distinctly amoral passion, not involving judgments of good and bad. He describes *wonder* as something unwilled, a feeling that just jumps up and catches at you: “When the first encounter with some object surprises

us, and we judge it to be new, or very different from what we knew in the past or what we supposed it was going to be, this makes us wonder and be astonished at it. And since this can happen before we know in the least whether this object is suitable to us or not, it seems to me that wonder is the first of all the passions. It has no opposite, because if the object presented has nothing in it that surprises us, we are not in the least moved by it and regard it without passion” (1989, 52). Descartes limited his remarks to facts about our cognitive capacities, so how and why in the eighteenth century were there so many attempts to derive the moral part of human social life (values, in short) from this first, minute aesthetic transaction?

To answer this question, we need to revisit the question of how Enlightenment philosophers, particularly empiricists, conceived of obligation. When Enlightenment philosophy invented the view that moral obligations arise from features of our psychology (ethical naturalism), they set off a debate that continues until this day about which features and how morality arises from them. Hume was the first full-blown ethical naturalist. He rejected reason as a source of moral values, finding instead that our moral values spring from our sentiments:

Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Willful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You can never find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. (T 468–69; quoted in Korsgaard 1996, 50)

Hume thought that our peculiar disposition of sentiments made us especially vulnerable to moral manipulation; being an empiricist, the metaphors he used for how this manipulation works on us were overwhelmingly audiovisual. Christine Korsgaard explains:

Hume compares the theoretical philosopher to an anatomist and the practical philosopher to a painter. The business of the anatomist is to explain what causes us to approve of virtue; the business of a painter is to make virtue appealing. And Hume styles himself a theoretical philosopher: his aim is to reveal the elements of the mind's 'anatomy' which make us approve and disapprove as we do. . . . The practical philosopher is a preacher or a Mandevillian politician. His task is to get people to behave themselves in socially useful way, and he is prepared to use “all helps from poetry and eloquence.” (1996, 52; quoting E 5)<sup>19</sup>



The best way to understand Hume's stance is to sketch the Kantian revision of it. For both Hume and Kant, norms arise from facts about the way we are, especially the deep fact that we are social animals. Most words and concepts for virtue are "other directed," encouraging altruism towards others; here again is Hume's list of the "agreeable passions": "generosity, humanity, compassion, gratitude, friendship, fidelity, zeal, disinterestedness, liberality." The Kantian, we recall, looks at how these norms are generated by a process of reflection within the individual consciousness. The Humean sees norms as given by society, and sees them as penetrating us through our senses, getting all the way into us. By society we are encouraged to practice greater kindness, selflessness, and so on, to join what Hume calls the "party of humankind, against vice and disorder" (E 275). But resistance has shadowed the Party of Humanity since it was formed. Korsgaard's reference to the Mandevillian (i.e., cynically manipulative) politician is fascinating. For it reminds us that there have always been politicians who have encouraged people to add their help to the general pool (their spokesman might have been the third Earl of Shaftesbury). But just as surely there have been others, like Mandeville, who have been inclined to expose those appeals on the grounds that seemingly altruistic politicians can use them as a cover for their self-interest.<sup>20</sup>

These philosophical concepts are sketchy and imprecise, but they give some insight into questions people were asking about the psychology of obligation. When we turn to the texts in this study, the picture of an intense personal and artistic struggle emerges. All of its themes are linked, and to separate them, as we must, is to create false oppositions. In the foreground of this struggle are local issues about obligation, and in the background are vast problems about sociability: since none of the writers in this study faces these questions in the form given by moral philosophy (except Hume, whose personal struggle yields surprising results for his theoretical reflections), answers to these questions will come from interrogating their practical moral identities. Their moral identities take concrete rather than abstract forms: these sorts of questions arise because these writers face social conflicts. The rhetoric of the Party of Humanity raises questions about moral and social identities in a form that people have found deeply compelling, if not binding, even to the present. Yet it is too limited, because it seeks to foreclose quickly on the answers, failing to account adequately for people's resistance to it. Testimony from the writers in this study will show that they are drawn to the form of the questions but find, often against their will, that they cannot easily settle them.

What makes the rhetoric of the Party of Humanity most compelling is that it articulates a troubling and exhilarating division between the rationally re-

flective self and the pressures of a social role; what causes it to fail is that it pretends illegitimately to have healed that division and made it less troubling. For the moralists in this study, the intuition that there is a split between the reflective self who chooses “between the rival claims of rival desires” and the social role that people seem to inhabit more blindly becomes, at many points, ironic, satiric, sentimental, discursive, anxious, and pleasurable—but never easy (MacIntyre 1984, 48). The form of moral reasoning this division suggests is, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, the canonical form that moral reflection takes up until today: “It is in this capacity of the self to evade any necessary identification with any particular contingent state of affairs that some moral philosophers . . . have seen the essence of moral agency. To be a moral agent is, on this view, precisely to be able to stand back from any and every situation in which one is involved, from any and every characteristic that one may possess, and to pass judgment on it from a purely universal and abstract point of view that is totally detached from all social particularity (1984, 31–32).

In some of the chapters that follow, the disparity between rationally reflective self and the social role will express itself as comic play, in others as a stubborn posture against the pressures of religious fanaticism, in still others as a conduit to economic and emotional reciprocity. Although the split may be rooted in epistemology and even theology, its branches are social and moral.

How does the Party of Humanity claim to resolve these questions? What shape has that resistance taken? Let us return to Joseph Wright’s painting. Solkin has good cause to read the painting as a straightforward statement of the moralizing power of the aesthetic. Wright was a follower of Shaftesbury’s, and he represents things largely from the empiricist point of view, seeing values as something art puts into us. The painting’s narrative unfolds over time, moving from the Gladiator to the drawing of him on the right. The narrative progression follows the path of enlightenment, at least for the two fashionably, though conventionally dressed gentlemen sitting over the candle (Solkin 1993, 224). For surely their gaze has produced the drawing as an objective correlative of their aestheticized perception. They are artists not by any sublime or unsociable action, but by being imitators: while they have not created the Borghese Gladiator, they have re-created him by the simple and passive act of perceiving. An empiricist aesthetic is committed to the aesthetic position that meaning resides not in the object but in its viewers, who make up the meaning of the work as they encounter it. Yet as many critics of the empiricist aesthetic, including Kant, have noticed, its radical relativism smuggles in an ideal

viewer, or standard or norm of taste, a standard that must go beyond empirical observation. Here the ideal viewer is created by his encounter with ancient art and by extension with the painting of it. He is unsublimed, demasculinized, attentive, kindly, cooperative, and self-effacing, living the aesthetic “dream of reconciliation” (Eagleton 1990, 25). There is no Samuel Johnson “talking for victory” among this group of men.

There is another candidate for ideal viewer, in a more Kantian sense: the only one who seems shut out of the circle of light is the older man sitting to the left. Solkin writes, “From his position the elderly gentleman hardly seems capable of seeing anything at all of the statue that rests on the table between his arms—yet surely he knows it already, as an image clearly fixed within the storehouse of his mind. Paradoxically, then, his impaired vision . . . implies a degree of enlightenment greater than that yet possessed by his two companions, who seem determined to profit from his guidance. If he is giving them a lesson on the principles of art, he is also leading them along the well-worn path of custom—teaching them to embrace the values sanctioned by the authority of experience, and to know themselves as part of an established social order” (1993, 220). He teaches, in short, less about the gladiator than about the social value of self-consciousness and of reflective distance from the very object that gives rise to their train of associations. He moves the source of authority from outside to inside, from experience to reflection.

The recent critical synthesis of the Shaftesburian tradition suggests that it relies on a moral version of epistemological induction, deriving the general from the particular.<sup>21</sup> But if we look closely at the painting, it begins to seem less a propaganda sheet for the Party of Humanity than an allegory of the individual’s conflicted relation to the group. There are some uncomfortable aspects of the painting that should raise doubts about the moralizing power of the aesthetic to override the individual’s insistence on his uniqueness and inviolability. Subtle signs of distinction begin to emerge. On the face of it, we can’t tell which of the two younger men on the right has done the drawing, but we might guess that it is the one with his back to us. Why? Two reasons: first if spectators are supposed to “identify-in” to this painting, as the force of culture argument demands, we would probably identify most closely with the person who most mimics the stance of the beholder. Tellingly, this figure’s face is the most obscured, a fact that points us in the direction of Catherine Gallagher’s influential argument, loosely in the Party of Humanity tradition, about how fictions invite us to identify with characters: by referring to “nobody,” they become an invitation to “imagine in detail” (1994, esp. 167–74).

More importantly, this beholder is also the only figure whose right hand is hidden from us. All the other figures hold some long object, such as a sword, a candle, or a table edge, so we can only imagine that he holds his own long object, perhaps a pencil or pen.

The fact that we credit his right hand with the drawing leads us to reconsider the whole problem of hands. They are instruments of individuation, indeed of the division of labor: scientist, artist, soldier, and—as the hand on the table might suggest—property owner or merchant. Left hands, too, are important. Only two appear, and one is conspicuously missing: the rationalist elder statesman or merchant with the hooded eyes has arranged his two hands in a pose that mimics that of the gladiator. His left hand is raised and placed in a territorial way on the pedestal, imitating the strong thrust of the gladiator's left hand into space. But now that we see the left hand as an instrument of aggression, territoriality, assertion of dominance, we see that the artist on the right has not shown the gladiator's left hand in his drawing; he has either deleted it altogether, or he has chosen to draw the statue from the only perspective from which it would be impossible to see the thrust into space, namely the odd angle just below the statue's right shoulder. It is almost as if the artist figure is resisting the older man's claim on him; in fact, the painting looks less like what Solkin calls an experience of "that sense of fellow-feeling which is the basis for society" (1993, 216) and more like an allegory of the ways that people resist each other's pressure.

As the writers in this study attest, joining the Party of Humanity is hard. And the reasons they give are diverse. Hume, like Joseph Wright, sees maleness as an obstacle, or at least that seems to be the meaning of a passage in which he specifically excludes from the realm of the moral any feelings of rivalry, vanity, avarice, or ambition, and self-love. He does think, however, that if people can render their rivalrous judgments in a sufficiently neutral tone, they "touch the principle of humanity" and get to join its party:

When a man denominates another his enemy, his rival, his antagonist, his adversary, he is understood to speak the language of self-love, and to express sentiments, peculiar to himself, and arising from his particular circumstances and situation. But when he bestows on any man the epithets of vicious or odious or depraved, he then speaks another language, and expresses sentiments, in which, he expects, all his audience are to concur with him. He must here, therefore, depart from his private and particular situation, and must chuse a point of view, common to him and others: He must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string, to which all mankind have an accord and symphony. If he means, therefore, to express, that this man possesses qualities, whose tendency is pernicious to society, he has chosen this common

point of view, and has touched the principle of humanity, in which every man, in some degree, concurs. (E 272)

Having synthesized an emerging aesthetic and moral tradition, Hume needed to find a way to make it stick. Hume the anatomist, the scientist of man, offers some free advice to the painter, to the Mandevillian politician, and most especially to the satirist. What the painter, the Mandevillian politician, and the satirist learn, however, is that touching the principle of humanity by finding the right objective tone in which to express universal judgments is just as hard as joining the Party of Humanity. The drive toward disinterestedness is an aesthetic problem that refers to a deep moral problem.<sup>22</sup> Pope and Johnson, especially, intuit the moral problem underlying the aesthetic one. But here naturalism diverges from its eighteenth-century moral philosophical predecessor, for if art helps us see that joining the Party of Humanity is hard, naturalism can help us sort out why. Evolutionary psychologists speculate that humans have evolved to resist general calls for indiscriminate beneficence: such calls are manipulative, putting pressure on us to make altruism mistakes by paying out a little more than we get back (Alexander 1987, 102–3). The more general principle is bound to be controversial.<sup>23</sup> But again, nothing normative follows from it: joining the Party of Humanity is hard because the person, if left free to choose, will draw the limits of collective identity at the edge of her own reflective individuality.

### Outline of Chapters

Charles Simic has written “Poetry proves again and again that any single overall theory of anything doesn’t work. Poetry is always the cat concert under the window of the room in which the official version of reality is being written” (quoted in Burt 1998, 6). At the center of this book is Alexander Pope, a poet for whom reality is the cat concert under the window, and poetry the official version trying to get itself written. The first three chapters of this book form a complete section, loosely under the rubric of the art of obligation, and can be read on their own. The purpose of these chapters, which focus intensely on *The Dunciad* and on early and late character sketches, is to reinterpret moral authority as a set of social strategies. Pope’s poems can best be read as a social record—a record of debt, obligation, and beyond all else, the desire for status. Pope designed his poems to circulate socially in order to record grievances, reward friends, undermine enemies, and generally get his side of the story out there. His poems are acts of gossip, revenge, self-justification, patronage, flir-

tation, alliance building, and debt repayment.<sup>24</sup> But in seeking to obligate people in and around his social world, Pope repeatedly runs up against the limits of art's normative power.

From the single author focus of the first three chapters, chapters 4, 5, and 6 broaden out to consider local aspects of a problem in Enlightenment thought that I call "spectator morality," or the way tropes of exposure govern social regulation and moral agency. Chapter 5, on Samuel Johnson's *Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage*, examines Johnson's quest to find a way to secure obligation through, alternatively, sympathy and the moral command. The *Life of Savage*, which Johnson's friend James Boswell called "one of the most interesting narratives in the English language" (1934, 1:165), raises certain questions about moral life: What is virtue? What is vice? Can they ever be wholly separated? What can we do to be more moral? Is there such a thing as opting out of the system of morality altogether? Is it possible to be an amoralist?<sup>25</sup> This chapter argues that Johnson develops a standard of morality for Savage that is quite different, more naturalistic, and far less demanding than the one he develops for himself and promotes in his moral writing elsewhere. The minimal standard he invents for Savage is that morality comes from having to take other people's interests into account, which means that insofar as we admit the perspective of other minds, we are already moral. All we have to do to admit the perspective of other minds is to take part in an economic system of exchange. Savage, meanwhile, seeks to frustrate even these minimal requirements, leading Johnson to press home the psychological question: What does it take to be *homo economicus*?

The concept of spectator morality is spelled out more fully in chapter 6, on Hume's theory of pride and its relation to eighteenth-century theories of motivation and inwardness. Finally, chapter 7 examines testimony from three writers, Hume, Thomas Warton, and William Cowper, about religious feeling in an increasingly secular age. Across the century, these writers pose versions of a single question: Can intensely private, even painful beliefs be penetrated by social forces?