CHAPTER I

An Eighteenth-Century Scene of Thought: Some Philosophers

I

It is a commonplace of intellectual history that Hobbes left his philosophical successors with a particular challenge: that humanity was inherently neither benevolent nor sociable, but adopted social arrangements precisely to limit individuals’ natural tendency to selfishness. (“No Species of Animals,” Hobbes’ disciple Mandeville wrote, “is, without the Curb of Government, less capable of agreeing long together in Multitudes than that of Man.”)¹ For a hundred years and more after the publication of Leviathan British philosophers took up this challenge implicitly or explicitly, in its own terms or in terms proposed by them, directly or tangentially. One outcome of the tradition that Hobbes set in motion was a moral psychology (which Stephen Darwall calls “empiricist moral sentimentalism”)² that English writers of the Romantic period in turn responded to—implicitly or explicitly, in its own terms or in terms proposed by them, directly or tangentially.

Thus Francis Hutcheson turned on Hobbes and other “old Epicureans” like him, to say “that we have not only Self-Love,”

but benevolent Affections also towards others, in various Degrees, making us desire their Happiness as an ultimate End, without any view to private Happiness: That we have a moral Sense or Determination in our Mind, to approve every kind Affection either in our selves or others, and all publicly useful Actions which we imagine do flow from such Affections, without our having a view to our private Happiness, in our Approbation of those Actions.³

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Hutcheson’s 1730 inaugural lecture at the University of Edinburgh, “On the Natural Sociability of Mankind,” was a similar attempt “to enquire whether the seeds of perhaps all the virtues, or at least inducements to every kind of virtue, are found in our nature” rather than in some coercive social structure of the kind Hobbes imagined.⁴

This was a case of rebuttal by redefinition. Moral behaviour still stood in close relation to society, but benevolence and sociability were now seen as natural instincts rather than cultural prescriptions. But this assertion of an instinct for good over evil and sociability over selfishness brought with it and helped build an idea of society, the mind, and their relation that was profoundly influential in eighteenth-century England and the Enlightenment at large.

Hobbes’ first great antagonist, John Locke, initiated the debate concerning the “publicly useful” in moral psychology. “No Man,” he wrote,

scapes the Punishment of their Censure and Dislike, who offends against the Fashion and Opinion of the Company he keeps, and would recommend himself to. Nor is there one of ten thousand, who is stiff and insensible enough, to bear up under the constant Dislike, and Condemnation of his own Club. He must be of a strange, and unusual Constitution, who can content himself, to live in constant Disgrace and Disrepute with his own particular Society.⁵

In essence this also remains a chastened or elevated version of Leviathan. The “particular Society” that surrounds an individual, rather than a voluntary compact between like-minded moral sensibilities, acts as a curb on human behaviour and a form of social control. In his correspondence Hume gives us a graphic example of one individual (Lord Marchmont) being condemned by “his own club,” and another (Hume himself) escaping the same fate. “About three weeks ago he was at the play,” Hume wrote:

where he espied in one of the boxes a fair virgin, whose looks, air, & manner made such a powerful & wonderful effect upon him, as was visible to every beholder. His raptures were so undisguised: His looks so expressive of passion: His enquiries so earnest, that every body took notice of it. He