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British Intellectual History 1750–1950

edited by

Stefan Collini

Richard Whatmore

Brian Young



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Contents

| | |
|--|-----------------|
| <i>Preface</i> | <i>page</i> vii |
| General introduction STEFAN COLLINI | I |
| Presentation of <i>Economy, Polity, and Society</i> | 22 |
| Part I | |
| 1 Sociability and self-love in the theatre of moral sentiments: Mandeville to Adam Smith E. J. HUNDERT | 31 |
| 2 ‘That noble disquiet’: meanings of liberty in the discourse of the North DARIO CASTIGLIONE | 48 |
| 3 Language, sociability, and history: some reflections on the foundations of Adam Smith’s science of man NICHOLAS PHILLIPSON | 70 |
| 4 Adam Smith and tradition: the <i>Wealth of Nations</i> before Malthus RICHARD F. TEICHGRAEBER III | 85 |
| Part II | |
| 5 Economy and polity in Bentham’s science of legislation DAVID LIEBERMAN | 107 |
| 6 ‘A gigantic manliness’: Paine’s republicanism in the 1790s RICHARD WHATMORE | 135 |
| 7 Irish culture and Scottish enlightenment: Maria Edgeworth’s histories of the future MARILYN BUTLER | 158 |

- 8 Improving Ireland: Richard Whately, theology, and political
 economy 181
 NORMAN VANCE

Part III

- 9 Political and domestic economy in Victorian social thought:
 Ruskin and Xenophon 205
 JANE GARNETT
- 10 State and market in British university history 224
 SHELDON ROTHBLATT
- 11 Mr Gradgrind and Jerusalem 243
 DONALD WINCH
- List of contributors* 267
Acknowledgements 269
Index 270

1 Sociability and self-love in the theatre of moral sentiments: Mandeville to Adam Smith

E. J. Hundert

I

When the anthropologist Marcel Mauss was invited to give the 1938 Huxley Memorial Lecture, he chose for his subject ‘A Category of the Human Mind: the Notion of Person; the Notion of Self’.¹ Mauss thought that his contemporaries falsely believed that the idea of the self captured an innate human property, and that, due to this error, they subscribed to a socially divisive cult of the individual. He proposed that the conception of ourselves as unique is largely a historical artefact. Not only do other peoples hold very different notions of the self, but each conception is intimately connected to the specific ethical community to which persons belong. Mauss referred to ethnographic materials from North America, Australia and archaic Greece to show that in cultures where personhood is defined by kinship, descent and status, responsibility flows directly from family or clan membership, and neither love nor one’s conscience alone serve as justifications for action. Only with the emergence of a more abstract conception of a person, seen as the locus of general rights and duties, could individuals understand themselves as endowed with a conscience and inner life. It is this notion of the person as the possessor of a moral consciousness, as the source of autonomous motivation and something capable of self-development, that is the foundation of our own self-understanding.

We, Mauss’s current readers, are sceptical about there being any single narrative that could account for self-conceptions of the human subject, and we are more attentive than his contemporaries were to the impersonal nature of the forces that shape the individual’s consciousness. Unlike Mauss, we have good reason to think of human capacities as biologically rooted, emerging at developmentally critical moments in

I would like to thank Mark Glouberman and Mark Phillips for their helpful criticisms.

¹ Marcel Mauss, ‘A Category of the Human Mind: the Notion of Person; the Notion of Self’, trans. W. D. Halls, in Michael Crithers *et al.*, *The Category of the Person. Anthropology, Philosophy, History* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 1–25.

neurophysiological history. A conception of the self necessarily rests upon these processes, which function within histories so diverse that the indigenous psychology of other or earlier societies may be nearly inaccessible to us. Nevertheless, any plausible account of modern self-awareness must acknowledge Mauss's claim that an individualist mode of self-understanding has become distinctive of contemporary Western European cultures and their extensions in the Americas. These cultures are characterised on the one hand by role distance – the assumption that persons are in principle able to adopt or abandon roles with some freedom – and on the other by autonomy – the assumption of a capacity and responsibility to decide between actions and plans of life.

Mauss argued that the assumptions upon which modern self-understanding rests acquired much of their distinctive character during the eighteenth century. In this essay, I want to explore this insight by examining how a dominant conception of the person emerged from perplexity about moral agency in commercial society. I shall argue that through a century-long controversy ignited by the work of Bernard Mandeville about the effects of commerce on individual autonomy in commercial society, the stage-actor came to be taken as a representative individual within an altered public sphere – one in which theatrical practices shaped the language of morals, helping to form a distinctive and problematic conception of the modern moral subject.

The central concerns of eighteenth-century moral discourse – sociability and self-love – emerged from a shift in moral psychology first begun within a theological context: the sceptical doctrines associated with the Huguenot Pierre Bayle, and the Augustinian rigorism of La Rochefoucauld and late seventeenth-century French Jansenist divines, particularly Pierre Nicole.² Both groups anatomised forms of moral behaviour with the aim of demonstrating that a person's apparent practice of Christian virtue in no way provided an observer of these acts with knowledge about underlying motives. Since apparently virtuous acts were rewarded by public approbation, it was in the obvious interest of the vicious to mime the conventional signs of Christian piety. The majority of men acted according to socially prescribed conventions of propriety not because of their moral content, but in the expectation that such behaviour would win approval. Moreover, given that virtue could reasonably be understood as one of the masks available to fallen men in their pursuit of selfish interests, the difference between virtue and vice would have

² On this tradition, see Nannerl Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 283–311, and Dale Van Kley, 'Pierre Nicole, Jansenism and the Morality of Enlightened Self-Interest', in Alan C. Kors and Paul Korshin, eds., *Anticipations of the Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, 1987), pp. 69–85.

nothing to do with behaviour. Instead, the distinction between an act which stemmed from selfish desire and one whose source was Christian charity would, of necessity, be visible only to God as He inspected each human heart.

From these arguments two unsettling consequences followed. First, it was assumed that the great majority merely feigned Christian commitments while being, in reality, driven by self-love. Yet the fact that their behaviour was in principle indistinguishable from that of true Christians challenged the conventional assumption that believers who feared hell and yearned for salvation were more powerfully motivated toward virtuous action than were pagans, Jews, or atheists. Bayle drew the obvious conclusion: anyone, atheist or believer, could make a good subject, since civil conduct required no more than outward conformity to standards of propriety enforced by social pressure and underwritten by law. Civic rectitude required no spiritually enriched conscience.³ Second, Pierre Nicole argued, just as the selfish wants of individuals could be harnessed to politically beneficial ends, so too could competing economic interests be made to obey similar constraints. Social utility and communal benefit could be understood as unintended consequences of historically domesticated forms of self-aggrandisement. The seemingly anarchic tendencies of the scramble for wealth, for example, revealed themselves at a deeper level to be structured social regularities attending the common pursuit of material gratification. Accordingly, expressions of self-regard could best be understood, not simply as examples of the propensity of Adam's heirs to sin but, again paradoxically, as features of the practices by virtue of which egoism had been locally disciplined.⁴

Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1723 and 1728) transposed this mode of moral argument into a secular instrument of social understanding.⁵ The

³ See the contemporary English translation of Pierre Bayle's *Pensées divers sur le comète* [1683], *Miscellaneous Reflections on the Comet* (1708), pp. 212–25.

⁴ See particularly, Pierre Nicole, 'Of Grandeur', and 'Of Christian Civility', in *Moral Essayes, Contain'd in severall TREATISES on many important duties* (1696), pp. 83–128 and 137–49. See too the Huguenot Jacques Abbadie, *The Art of Knowing Oneself: Or, An Inquiry into the Sources of Morality* (Oxford, 1695), pp. 126–87, and Jacques Esprit, *Discourses on the Deceitfulness of Human Virtues* (London, 1706), preface and pp. 37–8.

⁵ All references placed parenthetically in the text refer to the volume and page number in the edition of F. B. Kaye, *The FABLE of the BEES: or, Private Vices, Public Benefits. By Bernard Mandeville. With a Commentary Critical, Historical, and Explanatory by F. B. Kaye*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1924). For Mandeville's relationship to the theory of the passions in seventeenth-century Augustinian moral reflection, see Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature* (Baltimore, 1961), lectures III–V and Laurence Dickey, 'Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility in Mandeville's Social and Historical Theory', *Critical Review*, 4, 3 (Summer, 1990), pp. 387–431. For a comprehensive account of Mandeville's eighteenth-century identity, see E. J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's 'Fable': Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge, 1994).

book's notorious maxim, 'Private Vices, Publick Benefits', encapsulated Mandeville's thesis that contemporary society is an aggregation of persons driven by passions for gain and approbation – passions which necessarily bind individuals together neither by shared civic commitments nor by moral rectitude but by the fetters of envy, competition, and exploitation. Only passions can move one to act, he argued, and the object of any passion can be nothing other than one's own perceived interest or pleasure. Mandeville, re-shaping his French ideological inheritance, gave prominence to the role of the demands of the social environment in governing the passions of all social actors into expressive conjunctions of judgement and feeling whose local embodiments could only be realised within the established conventions of sociability within a given public sphere.

In the societies that Mandeville focused upon, persons were not merely driven by the universal appetites for authority and esteem: in the metropolitan centres of European commerce, outward displays of wealth were widely accepted as a direct index of social power. 'People, where they are not known,' he observed,

are generally honour'd according to their Clothes and other Accoutrements they have about them; from the riches of them we judge of their Wealth, and by their ordering of them we guess at their Understanding. It is this which encourages every Body . . . to wear Clothes above his rank, especially in large and populous cities where obscure men may hourly meet with fifty strangers to one acquaintance, and consequently have the pleasure of being esteemed by a vast majority, not as what they are, but what they appear to be (I: pp. 127–8).

Mandeville consolidated a revolution in the understanding of the relationship between motives and acts by viewing commerce and sociability as reciprocal features of the dynamics of self-regard. He sought to comprehend the consequences of the behaviour of persons for whom opportunities for consumption and display encouraged forms of self-presentation that were the vehicles through which they established their social identities.

Mandeville argued that if moral judgements were in fact nothing other than expressions of feeling (passion), then the operative traditions of Christian moral psychology could not be enlisted to explain the status and workings of human desire. These judgements had to be set in a different problem-space from the one typically assumed by Mandeville's contemporaries. He placed the expression of supposedly moral sentiments in the context of responses to opportunities for the satisfaction of self-interest. Social action could be conceived in terms of an individual's search for pleasure and the success with which he managed to satisfy his desires. Since these desires had self-regard as their foundation, and since,

crucially, this self-regard depended upon public approbation, Mandeville could explain why persons so often spoke and acted in ways which appeared moral: in so doing they would garner public rewards. He further argued that both speech and action are most usefully understood instrumentally. Behaviour in public was a species of performance designed to win approval; in the final analysis public behaviour consisted in a series of performances whose success depended upon no genuine moral standard, but on how well a social actor could satisfy his desires within the given regime of rewards and punishments.

Mandeville, then, effectively redescribed the scene of moral activity. Contrary to what was typically believed, the civil arena was not populated by rationally endowed, undivided consciousnesses enquiring into those choices which directly affected their own souls and the good of their community. The moral agent anatomised in *The Fable* was, in effect, an inter-subjectively defined, socially situated participant in a communal drama: a person driven by passions who of necessity competes in a public market for marks of esteem. This individual's desires alone form the premises of his practical reasoning, while the material and symbolic rewards of the social order to which he belongs become constituent features of his own identity. In this world, personality is discontinuous with Christian moral commitment, social standing and identity are distributed through the mechanisms of the market, and character is nothing more than an artefact crafted by role-players within theatrical forms of social exchange.

The initially French inflection given to the Augustinian language of morals served Mandeville's critical purpose of exposing the irreducible gap between natural impulse and virtuous action without abandoning the rigorous moral rhetoric shared by many of his critics. By speaking in their language, he could satirically pose as an advocate of the most severe ethical standards, and then, from an elevated rhetorical position, insist that 'it is impossible that . . . mere Fallen Man . . . could be sociable . . . without Hypocrisy' (I: pp. 348–9). This mock-Augustinian stance further enabled Mandeville to situate the distance between motive and act within a theatrical perspective. He placed in a commercial context the ancient insight that actions on the stage and in society each have as part of their content the possibility of being both performed and understood as features of a role, and then he showed how the meaning of these performances can never be transparent – an actor's explicit professions notwithstanding – since roles are filled by persons who must, as a condition of success, perform them in certain socially specified ways. Not only do public acts invite, but they also always demand interpretation by members of the audience, who by their responses alone certify an agent's success or failure. As in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), to which

Mandeville compared his own unmasking efforts (II: p. 6), actors may play the roles of criminals, who themselves play roles as ‘gentlemen’, ‘merchants’ and ‘ladies’ before an audience meant to read its own values into these impostures.

II

The ancient, originally Stoic figure of the *theatrum mundi*, the world seen as a stage, had been employed for centuries to expose the artificial boundaries placed upon acceptable public behaviour. The theatrical metaphor was a rhetorical device employed to unmask worldly ambition and pretence. For Jacques, in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, the reminder that ‘all the world’s a stage’ served the traditional function of recalling to individuals the fact that they were subject to the scrutiny of a higher power into whose care their souls were entrusted. Within the conceptual ambit of the theatre persons could be viewed as puppets in a drama of which they remained unaware – unwitting actors who inhabited roles which had an illusory, because merely mundane, significance. For Shakespeare, the metaphor of the world as a stage served as an instrument of social intelligibility in the restricted though important sense of reasserting the central Christian doctrine of the spiritual role-nakedness of all persons.

Mandeville’s purposes in emphasising the theatricality of public life differed significantly. Theatricality serves him as a conceptual instrument for the examination of modern consciousness, not merely as a convenient metaphor for human relations derived from the language of the playhouse. He employed theatricality to emphasise the distance between genuine knowledge and mere appearance in the minds of social actors themselves more than to expose the vanity of human aspirations from a celestial perspective. Mandeville argued that an environment had arisen in which features of one’s identity previously thought to be essential and enduring had become mere markers distinguishing practices of display and role distance that could be altered or discarded when they came into conflict with contemporary forms of economic opportunity.

By the early eighteenth century the *theatrum mundi* had emerged as an enabling device with which Epicurean radicals like Mandeville could analyse the gulf between the detached observer of the world and the mass of men who remained imaginatively ensnared by the world’s public rituals. ‘The Wise Man’, in John Digby’s 1712 rendition of Epicurus, ‘shall reap more Benefit, and take more Satisfaction in the public Shews, than other Men. He there observes the different Characters of the Spectators; he can discover by their looks the effect of the Passions that moves ’em, and amidst the Confusion that reigns in these places . . . he has

the Pleasure to find himself the only person undisturb'd'.⁶ Mandeville adopted this perspective, aggressively so. He conceived of the false beliefs of his contemporaries as distorting ideological residues generated by commercial society's tacit conventions. The wise man becomes a student of this society by virtue of his ability to stand aloof from those public spectacles through which these myths are enacted. 'To me', Mandeville said,

it is a great Pleasure, when I look on the Affairs of human Life, to behold . . . what various and often strangely opposite Forms the hope of Gain and thoughts of Lucre shape Men, according to the different Employments they are of, and Stations they are in. How gay and merry does every Face appear at a well-ordered Ball . . . [but we must] . . . examine these People . . . as to their Inside and the different Motives they act from' (I: pp. 349–50).

A prominent line of eighteenth-century moral argument regarding the theatricality of public life derived from the conventions of the London stage. Both the procedures and objectives of this theatre were effectively articulated into aesthetic principles by the critic John Dennis.⁷ Dennis argued that the theatre should be understood as at once entertaining and moving, yet essentially harmless and even possessing the potential for moral instruction. Because the passions evoked in the theatre are inspired under conditions in which the audience remains aware of its self-imposed distance from the dramatic action, even the arousal of painful feelings could be controlled and so rendered pleasurable. This view depended upon a strict conceptual distinction between the passions derived from Descartes, who understood passions as physiological humours prone to excitement, either from external sources or from will and cognition, both of which could be controlled by reason. Thus even the evocation of sadness in the playhouse was capable of producing pleasure in the spectator, so Descartes argued in *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). For 'when passions are only caused by the stage adventures which we see represented in the theatre, or by other similar means which, not being able to harm us in any way, [they] seem pleasurably to excite our soul in affecting it'.⁸

Writers on aesthetics and students of the stage could, then, accept a modern mechanist account of the relationship of the passions to the actions of the human body associated with Harvey (whose discoveries helped to place the heart as the site of the passions) as well as with

⁶ John Digby, *Epicurus's Morals* (1712), p. 52.

⁷ John Dennis, *The Advancement and Reformation of Poetry*, in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker, 2 vols. (Baltimore, 1939–45), vol. I.

⁸ René Descartes, *Philosophical Works*, trans. E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1911), I, p. 373. See too Dennis, *The Advancement and Reformation of Poetry*, p. 364. For the conceptual dilemmas attendant to this view, see Anthony Levi, *French Moralists. The Theory of the Passions, 1585–1649* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 238–99, and Susan James, *Passion and Action* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 85–123.

Descartes, while at the same time retaining a classical understanding of theatrical engagement, an understanding which stressed the power of consciousness to discipline feelings. Just as contemporary guides to manners took the passions to be 'Nature's never-failing Rhetoric', contemporary artists and critics concentrated on the representation of the passions as the crucial element in the portrayal of character.⁹ A true 'painting of the passions' was taken to be the highest praise one could bestow on any attempt to depict the vicissitudes of human nature. The dramatic artist's business was to know the best way of representing each passion so as to make the audience respond appropriately. An intricate set of rules, laid out in theatrical guidebooks and treatises which together formed the first systematic body of writing on the theory and practice of acting in the West, provided for artists and their audiences the affective conventions through which the passions could be portrayed.¹⁰ So popular was the London stage that Hume was moved to quip that the public was more excited by the prospect of a great actor's performance 'than when our prime minister is to defend himself from a motion for his removal for impeachment'.¹¹ Here, in Europe's most commercially successful form of public entertainment,¹² the focus was on theatre as performance rather than drama conceived as literature, with plays primarily regarded as vehicles for the actor's virtuosity. Indeed, the details of facial aspect, gesture and tone of voice, which Garrick, the greatest actor of his day, put forward as the essential elements of his *Essay on Acting* (1744), had already begun to be catalogued in the *Thesaurus Dramaticus* (1724), a guide to the 'poetical beauties' of the English stage, published shortly after Mandeville's *Fable*.

The abbé Du Bos's seminal work on aesthetics, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting* (1719), became the authoritative statement of aesthetic principles associated with the stage during the first half of the eighteenth century.¹³ For Du Bos, each passion has its particular natural

⁹ Brewster Rogerson, 'The Art of Painting the Passions', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 14, 1 (1953), pp. 68–94. See too, Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1970), pp. 38–65.

¹⁰ See Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre* (Ithaca, 1984), pp. 112–40; Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark, Del., 1988), pp. 58–115, and William Worthen, *The Idea of the Actor: Drama and the Ethics of Performance* (Princeton, 1984), ch. 2.

¹¹ David Hume, 'Of Eloquence', *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford, 1963), p. 100.

¹² John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination. English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1997), pp. 357–83.

¹³ J.-B. Du Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur peinture*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1719; second revised edition, 1732); English translation, 1748. On Du Bos's importance, see D. G. Charleton, 'J.-B. Du Bos and Eighteenth-Century Sensibility', *Studies in Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 266 (1990), pp. 151–62.

expression, tone and gesture, which ‘rise, as it were mechanically within us’.¹⁴ The principal merit of the drama, he argues, consists in the imitation of just those objects which excite our passions. It is the specific business of the actor to revive these passions within himself in order more effectively to convey their natural signs to the audience. Spectators are moved in the theatre when ‘artificial’ (as opposed to naturally occurring) passions are aroused; and in providing the best representation of the ‘symptoms and nature’ of the passions, drama serves as a vehicle of moral instruction and emotional refinement. The inherently distancing conditions of the theatre, however, ensure that the spectator’s pleasure ‘is never attended with those disagreeable consequences, which [would] arise from the serious emotions caused by the [dramatic] object itself’.¹⁵ Like Dennis, and in a manner similar to Shaftesbury in the *Characteristics* (1711), Du Bos claimed that an enlightened ‘public’ can properly assess the value of a spectacle because its sentiments are refined by education and experience to form a kind of sixth sense, *le sentiment*.¹⁶ Audiences are thus enabled to form disinterested judgements, particularly about those powerfully moving expressions of emotion which could not effectively be conveyed in words.¹⁷ ‘The spectator therefore preserves his understanding, notwithstanding the liveliest emotion. He receives the impression of the passions, but without . . . falling into extravagances.’¹⁸ The view expressed here is virtually identical to Addison’s in *The Spectator*, where he claims that a modern public, a ‘Fraternity of Spectators’, is composed of ‘every one that considers the World as a Theatre, and desires to form a right Judgement of those who are actors in it’.¹⁹ These ‘impartial spectators’, Addison added, are able to ‘consider all the different pursuits and Employments of Men, and . . . will [be able to] find [that] half [of] the[ir] Actions tend to nothing else but Disguise and Imposture; and [realise that] all that is done which proceeds not from a Man’s very self is the Action of a Player’.²⁰ The polite, theatrical presentation of self demanded in the everyday life of the modern civic realm stood in constant but not disabling tension with the requirements of morality.

III

Mandeville agreed that an individual’s character could best be understood as a distinct amalgam of discrete passions. But one must always bear in mind that he was a physiological materialist who denied that the passions were subject purely to rational control, either on the stage or in

¹⁴ Du Bos, *Réflexions*, III, p. 179; see too, I, p. 10. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II, p. xxii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxi. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, III, pp. xiii and xvi.

¹⁹ *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1965), no. 274. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 370.

the street. Indeed, one of Mandeville's primary purposes was to expose this view as an example of the 'Practical Part of Dissimulation' (II: p. 77) and hypocrisy which the doctrines of politeness of Addison and Shaftesbury were meant to conceal.²¹ Mandeville insists that members of the *beau monde* in commercial societies could never adhere to the codes of polite intercourse promoted by Addison, Steele, Shaftesbury, and Du Bos while at the same time remaining morally independent and cognitively undeluded agents. These persons are required to adopt highly stylised public personae as they regularly confront virtual strangers whose approbation they seek, especially in the widening public spaces whose rituals had become the subjects of popular art and in strictly commercial settings like the London Exchange, where material interest alone formed a social bond, promoting civilised intercourse amongst persons with otherwise incommensurable habits and beliefs.²²

Mandeville was quick to notice (II: p. 39) that members of the enlarged public at London's theatres themselves provided a microcosm of a novel social universe, in which people who had recently risen from obscurity by successful speculation could pretend to elevated status.²³ When Mandeville's adversary William Law attacked the moral impropriety of the stage, he observed that the patrons at London's theatres were convinced of their right to judge a play as it was being performed,²⁴ a point famously made again by Samuel Johnson in mid-century,²⁵ and typified by Boswell, for whom the theatre was the exemplary site for the practised

²¹ See, especially, Lawrence Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994).

²² Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, Letter 6. See *Fable*, I, p. 343, where Mandeville claims that traders would have no more civility 'than Bulls', had not interest brought them together.

²³ John Dennis, *A Large Account of the Taste in Poetry* (London, 1702), in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, I, p. 293. See too, for example, the comments about the social composition of London audiences by Henri de Valbourg Misson, *Mémoires et observations faites par un voyage en Angleterre* (The Hague, 1698), pp. 63–4; Harry W. Pedicord, 'The Changing Audience', in Robert D. Hume, ed., *The London Theatrical World, 1660–1800* (Carbondale, Ill., 1980), pp. 239–46; Leo Hughes, *The Drama's Patrons. A Study of the Eighteenth-Century London Audience* (Austin, Tex., 1971), pp. 97ff.

²⁴ William Law, *The Absolute Unlawfulness of Stage-Entertainment Fully Demonstrated* (1726), p. 9.

²⁵ In a prologue of 1747, spoken by Garrick when he began his career as manager of Drury Lane, Johnson wrote:

Ah! let not Censure term our Fate our choice
The Stage, but echoes back the publick Voice.
The Drama's Laws the Drama's Patrons give
For we that live to please, must please to live.

Quoted in James J. Lynch, *Box Pit and Gallery: Stage and Society in Johnson's London* (Berkeley, 1953), p. 204. For the audience as a participant in theatrical performances, see Dane Farnsworth Smith and M.L. Lawhon, *Plays About the Theatre in England, 1737–1800* (Albuquerque, 1953).

display of the states of feeling of 'a gentlemen in disguise'.²⁶ In *On the Profession of a Player* (1770), Boswell argued that the role-playing that he found so liberating had been refined into an art through the cultivation by professional actors of the capacity for 'double feeling'. When Boswell went to a packed Drury Lane Theatre to see Garrick play *Lear*, followed by a rendering of George Coleman's popular comedy *Polly Honeycomb*, he testified how, for both actor and spectator, performance had come to be understood as a discontinuous series of heightened moments of affective engagement, directed to spectators prepared by their emotional expectations and theatrical habits to respond in a similar fashion. 'I kept myself at a distance from all acquaintances', Boswell reports, 'and got . . . into a proper frame. Mr Garrick gave the most satisfaction . . . I was fully moved, and shed an abundance of tears. [Then at] the farce . . . I laughed a good deal.'²⁷

Encounters in the theatre offered a model for the rehearsal of public expression, where members of the audience could conceptually remove themselves from their companions, and then, in imaginative isolation, experience those states of feeling whose appropriately performed outward signs were evidence of a distinguished sensibility. Shortly before Boswell saw Garrick, the narrator of *Tom Jones* commented upon the virtual homology between acting practices and social perception when he departed from the telling of his hero's story to reflect on the colonisation of public discourse by theatrical metaphors. The 'comparison between the world and the stage', Henry Fielding wrote,

has been carried so far and become so general that some . . . words proper to the theatre and which were at first metaphorically applied to the world are now indiscriminately and literally spoken of both: thus stage and scene are by common use grown as familiar to us, when we speak of life in general, as when we confine ourselves to dramatic performances; and when we mention transactions behind the curtain, St James's is more likely to occur to our thoughts than Drury-Lane.²⁸

Mandeville, who was Fielding's primary critical target, adhered to the ancient view of a necessarily hostile relationship between theatricality and moral intimacy, and held that individuals would become divided personalities as the social pressures of civil society required them to adopt the strategic poses of actors in public life. But he denied that public histrionics were necessarily destructive of the modern political body and its social fabric, on the grounds that a genuine sense of duty could hardly be

²⁶ Leo Damrosch, *Fictions of Reality in the Age of Hume and Johnson* (Madison, 1989), pp. 73–9.

²⁷ James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal*, ed. Frederick Pottle (New Haven, 1950), p. 27. For other examples of this type of response, see Hughes, *The Drama's Patrons*, pp. 136–7.

²⁸ Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* VI, 1.

expected of persons whose professions of intent were always mediated by increasingly artful masks of propriety. Instead, Mandeville celebrated theatrical relations as inherent attributes of political and economic life in advanced societies. The management of appearances lay at the heart of the self-governance of egoists, notably members of the monied and educated classes, who 'conform to all Ceremonies that are fashionable', and who 'make a Shew outwardly of what is not felt within, and counterfeit what is not real'.²⁹ Mandeville's view was that the envy and emulative propensities characteristic of commercial societies had become the propulsive features of civil life. In nations shaped by commerce, men regarded themselves as consuming and displaying animals, creatures whose enlarged appetites are governed by the need for esteem within an expanding world of marketable goods.

Mandeville's understanding of social action as theatrical rests on the assumption that commercial societies are distinguished by the encouragement given their members to conduct their lives with studied self-misrepresentation. The modern reign of fashion was at once an instrument of and spur to such deceptive practices, depending as it did upon an explosion of mobile wealth and its associated ideology of manners. Social actors, most especially those recently propelled into the higher orbits of society, were seen repeatedly to conceal their intentions, because the exposure of self-regarding purposes would make their achievement impossible. From this perspective, hypocrisy emerged in Mandeville's vision as a defining feature of human conduct in advanced societies, especially in the commercial metropolis, where opportunities for personation were virtually endless.

The awareness of others as beholders complicit in accepting the necessity of representing themselves as their fellows wish to see them engendered in eighteenth-century moral argument a shared perspective on the sources of conduct. In the language that Addison and Shaftesbury did so much to fashion, persons of refinement were both actors and spectators in relation to their own lives, lives that could be reduced to itineraries shaped by the techniques of politeness for the private monitoring of one's public persona. This language expressed the legitimation anxieties of a disenchanting audience seeking to normalise the relations of persons conscious of the gulf between inherited moral standards and contemporary requirements for social success. This is one reason why philosophers like Hume, who employed the same language, often expressed perplexity about identity and moral agency, and so strenuously devoted their intel-

²⁹ Bernard Mandeville, *An Enquiry into the Origins of Honour, and the Usefulness of Christianity in War* [1732] (reprinted London, 1971), pp. 162 and 189.

lectual energies to discover those features of a self possessing undistorted moral sentiments.³⁰ Mandeville's *Fable* articulated the assumptive background against which this language developed, as Hume acknowledged when he named Mandeville as one of 'the late philosophers in England, who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing'.³¹

Mandeville's significant ideological accomplishment in this regard consisted in providing an argument about the centrality of the passions that effectively set the terms in which the eighteenth-century language of sociability addressed the problem of moral autonomy by considering the prospect that the modern self had acquired the opinions of others as part of its content. After encountering *The Fable*, intellectuals of the next two generations were obliged to confront the claim that reason's essential practical role consists in answering those questions which the passions provide the only motives for asking. If reason's purpose is to prescribe means for the achievement of the ends set by the passions, and if this same reason judges those means only in terms of their instrumental power, then, as Mandeville insisted, any plausible account of morals would have to be undertaken within the context of a hierarchy of desires. An epistemology of sense impressions and ideas, founded upon a notion of an internal theatre of sensations and wedded to a psychology of analytically distinct passions, shaped in the eighteenth century a conception of personality moulded solely through interaction with the objects it encounters. Within this conceptual space, in which the person is conceived of as a strictly arranged ensemble of dispositions and sentiments and the social actor understood as motivated by his schedule of preferences, actions may plausibly be considered in terms of the divided personality's need to establish an 'outward appearance' for the approval of others, while simultaneously attempting to satisfy its hidden impulses. When Hume asserted 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',³² he distilled this precept into a philosophical principle, and drew from it an account of the development of morals founded upon the intersubjective, histrionic relationships Mandeville had located at the heart of commercial sociability. 'In general', Hume wrote,

the minds of men are mirrors to one another . . . not only because they reflect each other's emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may often be reverberated . . . Thus the pleasure which a rich man receives from

³⁰ See especially David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1955), I.iv.7, where Hume gives his famous account of personal identity as nothing but a heap of perceptions. At the same time, at *Treatise* I.i.5, Hume continues to speak of 'self, or that individual person', of whose actions and sentiments each of us is intimately conscious. ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xvii. ³² *Ibid.*, III.iii.3.

his possessions being thrown upon the beholder, causes a pleasure and esteem; which sentiments again, being perceived and sympathized with, increase the pleasure of the possessor; and being once more reflected, become a new foundation for pleasure and esteem in the beholder . . . But the possessor has also a secondary satisfaction in riches arising from the love of esteem he acquires by them, and this . . . secondary satisfaction of vanity becomes one of the principal recommendations of riches, and is the chief reason we either desire them for ourselves or esteem them in others.³³

Beginning his enquiry from the spectator's point of view, and presuming along with Mandeville that the individual's judgements are governed by the compound of his passions, Hume not only views the self as a kind of theatre, 'where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away',³⁴ but also argues that the individual's limited sympathies for the welfare of others can both be furthered and fully explained in terms of an essentially self-interested beholder's responses to the postures and demands of his fellows. Hume saw in the theatre and its audience the model of contemporary European culture, an arena where individuals are obliged to interact with others in order to secure public approbation, and in which they may advance their private ambitions only by respecting the rules of civility.³⁵

For Adam Smith, similarly, social life of necessity resembles a masquerade,³⁶ despite the discreditable ends for which social actors ply their talents.³⁷ For the approbation and disapprobation of oneself which we call conscience is a mirror of feeling – a social product that is an effect of each of us judging others as a spectator while finding others as spectators judging us. We then come to judge our own conduct. In opposition to the 'indulgent and partial spectator' of Mandeville's 'licentious system',³⁸ Smith argued that 'we examine it as we imagine an impartial spectator would',³⁹ as an agent who is, 'by definition someone who is not acting'.⁴⁰ Smith sought to show that unlike the social actor of Mandevillian provenance who merely seeks applause, the man of genuine self-command could be governed not by the desire for praise but by the standard of praiseworthiness itself. Yet most men, the ambitious or deferential in Smith's account, are moved, although to different outcomes, by the universal desire to dominate the scene where 'the abstract idea of a perfect

³³ *Ibid.*, II.ii.5. ³⁴ *Ibid.*, I.iv.6.

³⁵ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1975), V.ii.180.

³⁶ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), VII.2.4.10. Hereafter, *TMS*.

³⁷ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford, 1976), p. 124. ³⁸ *TMS*, VII.2.4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, III.4.6.

⁴⁰ T. D. Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals* (London, 1971), p. 102.

and happy state' is being staged.⁴¹ This is the theatre where one's naturally formed moral capacities meet the temptations of fortune. Here persons meet not for common action directed by common ends, but to expose themselves to 'the public admiration', either by playing or by competing for roles; and in this public space admiration is bestowed only to the extent that one's role allows for visibility: 'To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency and approbation.'⁴² Men require mirrors, for without society, a man 'could no more think of his own character . . . than of the beauty or deformity of his own face', and the only mirror in which he can view his character 'is placed in the countenance and behaviour of those he lives with'.⁴³ Smith argued that if

[w]e begin . . . to examine our own passions and conduct, and to consider how these must appear to [others] . . . [w]e suppose ourselves the spectators to our own behaviour, and endeavor to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct.⁴⁴

With their Scots colleague Adam Ferguson, who worried that moderns in polite societies 'rate our fellow-citizens by the *figure* they are able to make' and thereby 'lose every sense of distinction arising from merit',⁴⁵ Hume and Smith concurred that the abiding problem posed by commercial sociability was to show how individuals could be thought of as moral if they were irreducibly prideful and vain, and that the dynamics of commerce depended upon the encouragement of these disturbing natural propensities. They confronted the possibility that, as Smith put it, 'society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection; and though no man in it should owe any obligation, or be bound in gratitude to any

⁴¹ *TMS*, I.3.2.3. It is worth noting that Smith devoted much greater attention to self-command in the final 1790 edition of the *TMS*, showing how this attribute was becoming more powerfully threatened as commercial society enlarged. ⁴² *Ibid.*, I.3.2.1 and 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, III.1.3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, III.1.5. Compare, Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, etc.*, ed. John M. Robertson, 2 vols. (London, 1900), I, p. 257, where the mind is referred to as 'a spectator or auditor of other minds'. See, too, Jonah Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, 1981), pp. 243–55, and Joseph J. Spengler, 'Smith Versus Hobbes: Economy Versus Polity', in F. R. Glahe, ed., *Adam Smith and The Wealth of Nations* (Boulder, Colo., 1978), p. 43, who points out that the 'invisible hand' was compared by Fontenelle in *Pluralité des mondes* (1686), a work Smith knew, to 'that of an Engineer who, hidden in the pit of a French Theatre, operated "the Machines of the Theatre" in motion on the stage'. For the role of the theatre in Smith's larger project, see Charles Griswold, Jr, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1998), ch. 1.

⁴⁵ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), ed. Duncan Forbes (Edinburgh, 1966), p. 352.

other, it may still be upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices, according to agreed valuation'.⁴⁶ They confronted, in other words, the possibility that in commercial societies, where social standing and public identity depended so intensely upon the opinion of others, one's moral autonomy always threatened to be compromised, since practical reason had few defences where beliefs were decisively shaped by economic contingency. As Hume conceded, the Mandevillian figure, 'a sensible knave', after taking the measure of the way in which human affairs are conducted, has grounds to think 'that an act of iniquity or infidelity will make a considerable addition to his fortune without causing any breach in the social union'.⁴⁷ And Smith, as Nicholas Phillipson points out elsewhere in this volume, while seeking to defeat Mandeville's challenge, grew increasingly sensitive to the frailty of the judgements of 'the man of self-command' when confronted with the praise and blame of the self-interested actors with whom he must live. A few 'wise men' belonging to a 'select . . . small party' may resist the approbation of 'the great mob of mankind', Smith wrote in the final, 1790, edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*; but most persons seeking their fortune in society 'too frequently abandon the path of virtue', since the applause they naturally seek is so rarely offered for virtues made unfashionable in the world of commercial exchange.⁴⁸

The founders of the new political economy, for whom Mandeville's *Fable* posed the major obstacle in their attempt to articulate the moral legitimacy of commercial society,⁴⁹ were thus faced with the argument that character itself was in essence a social artefact rather than the expression of moral virtue, a construct existing in an intersubjective space circumscribed by the demands of others and within which a person's public identity was of necessity devised. Once this challenge was addressed in the idiom of the passions which *The Fable* elevated into a dominant vocabulary amongst post-Protestant (or post-Augustinian) intellectuals, persons could be understood, not as individuals who establish their authenticity by responding to an inner voice, but as players pressured by circumstance and goaded by opportunity to perform so as to elicit that public approbation demanded by their dominant passions. Kant, who praised Mandeville as one of the philosophers who discovered the principles governing the 'constitution of society',⁵⁰ drew the appropriate conclusion from these premises when lecturing to his students for the last time. 'The more civilised men become', he observed, 'the more

⁴⁶ *TMS*, II.2.3.2. ⁴⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, XI. ii. 232. ⁴⁸ *TMS*, I.3.3.

⁴⁹ Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty. An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 57–90.

⁵⁰ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. T. K. Abbott (London, 1909), Part I, Book I, ch. 1, 'Of the Principles of Pure Practical Reason', p. 129.

they become actors. They want to put on a show and fabricate an illusion of their own persons.⁵¹ The language of an efflorescent London stage, and of naturalistic theories of acting first crafted in Britain, ideally suited the purposes of intellectuals intent on comprehending what they understood to be a culturally transformed society, one in which personation was required for public identity. And until the eighteenth-century vocabulary of the passions was succeeded by a new, Romantic language of the emotions – a language in which the self could be conceived as existing apart from its enacted relationships, and persons could understand themselves as moved by integrated patterns of feeling which shape a unique identity – the theatrical plasticity of the self that helped to shape eighteenth-century reflections on commercial modernity would retain its central place on the horizon of social understanding.

⁵¹ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague, 1974), pp. 14–15. Translation amended.