

The Liberal Civil Subject and the Social in Eighteenth-Century British Moral Philosophy

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Harnessed to so many theoretical paradigms, “the social” is a phrase that no longer conjures a common set of assumptions about society, culture, representation, or the methods by which we write history. Nevertheless, whether one uses the social to invoke an objective infrastructure that underwrites culture, as members of the *Annales* school did, or to suggest a gradual, continuously changing process that establishes threshold conditions for cultural and political events, as Marx and Tocqueville did, or to identify one in the series of relatively autonomous domains that compose modern life, as Niklas Luhmann tended to do, deploying the social as a noun automatically mobilizes certain theoretical claims implicit in the term’s grammatical status. It is possible to use the social as a noun phrase that designates an objectified abstraction because of a historical process that has made such abstractions seem as real as material entities. As a consequence of the general acceptance of what Thomas Nagel (1986: 3–27) calls a “view from nowhere,” which is organized from the standpoint of a nonparticipating, objectifying observer, it has become possible to think about social structures, relationships, and processes as entities, as relatively autonomous, and as sufficiently systematic to warrant scientific descriptions—which are systematic as well. Whatever individual theorists mean by the term, “the social” has become thinkable as part of the long history of reification that we call modernity.

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In this essay, I discuss one phase of this historical process: the forging of a link between philosophical theories about a specific objectified abstraction—human nature—and the legitimation of a new form of governmentality in early eighteenth-century Britain. This episode is relevant to the history of the social for three reasons. First, the endeavors of eighteenth-century British philosophers to theorize human nature constituted some of the earliest attempts to position a law-governed abstraction at the intersection between a providential order that was presumed to exist and the institutions of society. In so doing, philosophical theories about human nature advanced a *method* for studying what-can-be-seen through an abstract intermediary, which also functions as the implicit focal point of a disembodied, nonparticipating, and objectifying point of view that facilitates the basis for understanding (or acknowledging) what-cannot-be-observed (the “view from nowhere”). This method lies at the heart of all modern uses of the social to explain observable practices and relationships by reference not only to this point of view but also to an infrastructure that can only be theorized through the objectifying perspective that creates the mediating abstraction in the first place.

Second, experimental moral philosophers advanced a theory about the dynamics of human interaction that resembles the *content* of some modern theories about the social. According to this theory, individuals produce a secular code or semantic system in the process of living and working together, but the code that individuals collectively generate is said to be delimited by something that lies beyond both consciousness and individual human beings. For the eighteenth-century philosophers, this “something” was providential order, which was thought to manifest itself in human nature, among other places. For modern theorists, this “something” is comprehensible through one or more classificatory categories (class, race, gender) or one or more transindividual structures or processes (class relations, capitalism, urbanization), which are also comprehensible through interpretive categories.

Third, in theorizing that government emanates from human nature instead of being imposed on it, eighteenth-century moral philosophers implied that another abstraction, which Michel Foucault called governmentality, was as law-governed as human nature (and the providential order that informs it). This idea reemerges in one modern theory of governmentality which maintains that the ideal (liberal) state is not coercive but wields power indirectly by inciting the voluntary cooperation of individuals.¹

Before embarking on a more detailed account of eighteenth-century British

1. See Burchell 1991.

moral philosophy, I address two theoretical issues that help clarify the concept of the social more generally. The first concerns the migration of the term *social* from adjectival to nominal status. The second is the theoretical benefit that might accrue from positioning discussions of the social within a consideration of what Charles Taylor and others call “social imaginaries.” I suggest that identifying the social as one product of a specifically modern social imaginary helps illuminate some of the complexities that many theorists of the social have overlooked. These complexities include: (1) the relationship between interpretive abstractions, with their objectifying perspective, and the claims that can be made about and with these abstractions; (2) how modern uses of the social convey the theological connotations implicit in this concept’s providential predecessor.

Etymological Migrations

In Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *social* is almost always an adjective. Neither of the two definitions the latter gives for the noun illuminates modern usage: the first (“a companion, an associate”) is no longer current; the second (“a social gathering or a party”) is too narrow to capture the theoretical work performed by nineteenth- and (especially) twentieth-century analysts. However, if we pay close attention to the changes that the *OED* tracks in the adjective’s usage, we see how the appearance of *social* in certain contexts might have encouraged social scientists to nominalize the lowly adjective by appending the definite article *the*.²

From the Latin *socialis* or *socius*, meaning friend, ally, or associate, *social* came into the English language in the mid–sixteenth century as a modifier that described individuals’ ability to form relationships. In 1562 *social* was defined as “capable of being associated or united with others” (my emphasis) (*OED*, 2d ed.). In citing capability, this definition of *social* assumes that individuals are monads, which can—but do not have to—relate to other monads. In so doing, the 1562 definition departs from the Platonic idea, which assumed that human beings are integral parts of a greater whole, not isolatable units. When William Wollaston (*OED*, 2d ed.) referred to “man” as “a Social creature” in 1722, he elaborated the individualism implicit in the mid-sixteenth-century usage as well

2. This discussion of the etymology of *the social* draws upon entries from Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., and the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. All future references to the *Dictionary of the English Language* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* are abbreviated as *DEL* and *OED*, respectively.

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as the ethical burden introduced by this individualism. In the second sentence of Wollston's passage, what initially seems to be a definition ("man is a Social creature") proves to imply judgment, when Wollston yokes the adjective *social* to the noun *Society*, which he uses in Johnson's sense of "company": "a single man, or a family, cannot subsist, *or not well*, alone out of all Society" (my emphasis) (*DEL*, 4th ed.).

Later in the 1720s, Joseph Butler drew out the complexities inherent in conceptualizing individuals as monads charged with ethical choice. In 1729 Butler (*OED*, 2d ed.) explained that "the nature of man considered in his . . . social capacity leads him to a right behaviour in society." This sentence suggests that by the late 1720s, social had come to seem like one attribute of an objectified abstraction—human nature—viewed as given to all individuals by God. As one among several God-given capacities, moreover, "social capacity" could only actualize human nature's virtuous potential if the individual exercised this capacity and controlled the others, including the capacity for what contemporaries called "self-love."³

By 1785 the connotations of divine provenance in Butler's "nature of man" had been minimized by Thomas Reid's ascription of "social" and "solitary" to "operations of the mind" (*OED*, 2d ed.). By opposing this pair of mental "operations," Reid not only naturalized capacities that had once been thought of in theological terms. He also offered a picture of a mind whose dynamics could be conceptualized in isolation from ethical considerations. In Reid's objectified "mind," the social "operation" is an object of study in its own right, regardless of the context in which an individual lives, the motives that inspire behavior, and the consequences that actions produce.

In the 1840s, the objectification implied by Reid's reference to mental operations was taken to another level when *social* began to appear in noun compounds that were themselves secular abstractions. Charles Bray's 1841 reference to "Social Reform" (*OED*, 2d ed.) and Archer Polson's 1845 invocation of "Social Economy" (*OED*, 2d ed.) reveal that what was first conceptualized as an ethical capacity of a nature given by God, then as the property of a naturalized mental operation, had been liberated altogether from individual humans. The migration of *social* from its adjectival relation to an abstraction that implicitly invoked God, to an integral position in a noun-compound detached from human agents, suggests the twin processes of alienation and reification that modern uses of the

3. "Self-love" is the central emotion represented by Bernard Mandeville in *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) and discussed by Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* (1722–24).

social assume: in order to imagine that “social reform” and “social economy” are relatively autonomous secular projects or areas of analysis, one must conceptualize “reform” and “economy” as separable from the individuals who engage in these activities, as amenable to scientific (rather than theological) analysis, and as relatively concrete projects or objects of study. This conceptualization, in turn, was only possible once “society” came to be understood not from a particular participant’s point of view, but as an objective order with its own regulated dynamics. These mid-nineteenth-century compound nouns thus convey the atomism implicit in the adjectival uses of *social* since the mid–sixteenth century, but in such a way as to isolate not the individual human being but activities that human beings collectively pursue as expressions of the regulations of society. These mid-nineteenth-century noun-compounds thus signify the autonomy and materiality of abstractions that have been separated from human actors. At the same time, they also imply that the dynamics of what were once considered God-given human capacities or mental operations had come to be considered sufficiently lawful in their own right to be conceptualized as parts of the large, objectified process that was populated by its own abstract actors and that particular individuals could describe but not judge. This complexity is indicated by Polson’s definition of “Social Economy” as the study of the “*laws* which directly consult the health, wealth, convenience or comfort of *the public*” (my emphasis) (*OED*, 2d ed.).

When modern theorists use *social* as a noun, they draw upon the theoretical assumptions captured in Polson’s definition. These assumptions include: (1) that a relatively autonomous and objectified society exists; (2) that the dynamics of this objectified set of practices or structures are lawful and, when manifested in institutions and practices, amenable to systematic analysis; (3) that this domain of sociality both informs the institutions that its dynamics help explain and, in turn, refers to some invisible but law-abiding system; and (4) that aggregates, which are also abstractions (the public, labor), constitute the agents of more foundational abstractions like the social. Since the mid–nineteenth century, these aggregates have most often been constructed so as to be amenable to representation in the languages of quantification and classification (enumeration and statistics). Constructing these aggregates and translating them into forms that can be represented in numbers or statistics has been the characteristic work of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century social scientists.

These etymological changes allude to what has been called the rise of modern abstraction, that complex series of theoretical and institutional developments by which the old conceptualization of society as one or more normative orders grasped from the standpoints of participants (the political polity, the Christian

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societas) was gradually replaced by a non-participant-based understanding of one or more law-governed domains (the economy, the political), which were interpreted as objective and thought to be organized by their own characteristic dynamics.⁴ As society came to be viewed as a complex of law-governed, objectified domains, these domains were conceptualized from the standpoints specific to each (i.e., those of production and distribution), even though advocates for these points of view represented the perspectives as Nagel's objectifying views from nowhere. The perspectives and the domains they organized were also represented—for the purposes of analysis—as agent- or objectlike abstractions. When they are treated as such—as agents or as objects of analysis in their own right (as the social often is)—these abstractions carry with them connotations of both the standpoint articulated and the objectifying view from nowhere that is theoretically represented. To understand abstractions like the social, which populate the objectified domains of modern society, and to grasp the historical provenance of this abstraction in particular, it is helpful to turn to what Taylor and others have referred to as the social imaginary of modern societies.

The Social and Social Imaginaries

In theorizing the concept of a social imaginary, Taylor follows Cornelius Castoriadis (1987: 143), who uses the term to refer to “the final articulations the society in question has imposed on the world, on itself, and on its needs, the organizing patterns that are the conditions for the representability of everything that the society can give to itself.”⁵ In its most basic sense, the concept of the social imaginary refers not to particular representations or actions but to the foundational assumptions about what counts as an adequate representation or practice in the first place. Thus defined, the social imaginary is a concept that modern analysts use to describe the most foundational conceptual conditions of possibility for a society's operation, even if the society in question lacks a theoretical formulation that describes its operation in the abstract for its participants.

Let us turn to a specific example. Elsewhere I describe one component of modern Western societies' social imaginary as the reliance on the concept of the modern fact (Poovey 1998). The modern fact is an epistemological unit rather than a content. It links individual claims about specific observations with generaliza-

4. For discussions of the history of abstraction, see Poovey 1995: 25–54; Lefebvre 1991: 229–91; and Williams 1977: 55–71.

5. Craig Calhoun initially alerted me to Castoriadis's influence on Taylor. See Calhoun's essay in this issue.

tions about “larger” or “deeper” principles that presumably lie behind the observed phenomena. The modern fact thus anchors an epistemology that assumes a syntagmatic relationship between the part and the whole, an ordered universe of natural objects, and a dichotomy between the observing subject and the object that is observed. While this way of knowing the world now seems like common sense, the kind of reasoning implicit in the modern fact was developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when it was institutionalized as a mode of writing particular to one occupational group (Italian merchants in their capacity as bookkeepers). In the seventeenth century, members of another social group, the British natural philosophers who bonded together as the Royal Society, appropriated the epistemological assumptions implicit in the modern fact to authorize another set of social behaviors—that is, to convince the king that the knowledge they produced about the natural world was reliable because nonsectarian. During the next century, the assumptions and representational practices associated with the modern fact were gradually taken up by increasing numbers of theorists and lay people as the method associated with this epistemological unit—the scientific method—gained more general cultural authority. While the way of thinking associated with the modern fact continued (and continues) to vie with other explanatory paradigms, it gained sufficient ascendancy by the end of the eighteenth century to be considered the dominant social imaginary of all western European societies that embraced the principles of scientific knowledge.

Taylor helps illuminate the general principles behind this specific example, although his brief exposition can also benefit from the kind of elaboration I offer here. Taylor stresses, for example, that a social imaginary is not simply a theory developed by specialists. Instead it is at least partly generated by ordinary people for use in everyday life, and it reveals itself in stories, myths, and commonplaces as well as theoretical narratives. According to Taylor (2000: 1), a social imaginary “is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society.”⁶ Taylor (20) also helpfully points out that a social imaginary is not simply descriptive; it also has a normative or prescriptive function, which guides the evaluation of practices as well as the practices themselves.

It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other; the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up social life. This incorporates some

6. In this essay I discuss Taylor’s paper “Modern Social Imaginaries,” delivered in August 2000 at the New Social Imaginaries conference in Montreal. A revised version of that paper is included in this issue.

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sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. This understanding is both factual and “normative”; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what mis-steps would invalidate the practice.

Because they align description with prescription, social imaginaries also perform a legitimating function: “the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”

Taylor’s understanding of social imaginaries, which is explicitly indebted to Benedict Anderson’s notion of imagined communities, has affinities with the concept of ideology, which also attempts to explain representations and collective practices by reference to a more capacious abstraction. Unlike most uses of ideology, however, Taylor’s treatment of social imaginary does not hold that there is a preexisting foundation on which society’s representations and practices rest, nor does it suggest that one could identify this foundation as independent of the representation created by ideology. Instead, as I understand Taylor’s account, social imaginaries are self-authenticating (if not self-generating); they produce the terms by which they can be understood in producing the conditions in which some understandings count more than others. While a theorist can identify the imaginary that governs a given society’s representations and practices, he or she cannot be said to reveal a “deeper” truth in doing so. In making some explanatory paradigms (and not others) available and credible in the first place, a particular social imaginary makes theoretical statements about “deeper” causes possible, but does not stipulate that there are truths that lie outside the imaginary that produces them.

In eliminating ideology’s dichotomy between surface and depth—and between subjective delusion and the objective understanding offered by experts—Taylor’s concept allows us to conceptualize social imaginaries as a feedback loop. In this loop, all of the elements inform one another, so that causation flows in multiple directions simultaneously. Thus, particular representations can influence institutional practices and vice versa, and explanatory paradigms that depend on abstractions can also be said to derive their power partly from the concrete images and stories these abstractions purport to explain. Because it describes a recursive structure rather than a dichotomy, Taylor’s account allows us to connect the theoretical formulations that experts produce with the common understandings that ordinary people generate in living together. We can conceptualize this relationship temporally, as if images pass from theory to common sense (or vice versa), or spatially, as if the images produced by one group of social partici-

pants are variants of the images produced by another. It is impossible to know whether the temporal account is more accurate than the spatial account—or even to be certain that these are not just two ways of viewing a process whose complexities can be theorized only in temporary isolation from their unfolding in time and space. Since we know that the terms in which we conceptualize a given social imaginary are generated by the practices that institutionalize its assumptions, all we can know is that the claim to know helps create the conditions in which (some kinds of) knowledge is accorded truth-value.

To be fair, Taylor does not emphasize the self-authenticating nature of individual social imaginaries as much as I have, nor does he detail the recursive dynamic that I associate with the self-authenticating nature of this concept. I have emphasized self-authentication in seeking to liberate the concept of social imaginary from the dichotomies generally associated with ideology. This is important because it enables us to conceptualize dichotomies, such as the split between “objective” and “subjective,” as products of a particular social imaginary, not a natural relation between terms that somehow stand outside a society’s way of understanding and organizing itself.

Even as Taylor’s concept would benefit from being further distinguished from most uses of ideology, I think that it would also help to embellish it with the internal differentiation that Raymond Williams has introduced into the concept of ideology. Rather than viewing ideology as homogeneous, and therefore totalizing, Williams discriminates among the emergent, dominant, and residual ideologies that may coexist in a single society. At any given moment, the dominant ideology must compete with new collective understandings that are just beginning to gain credibility as well as with lingering traces of old ideological formations (Williams 1977: 121–27). Combining Taylor’s idea of social imaginaries with Williams’s model of competing ideologies encourages us to think of a society’s social imaginary as an ensemble of ideas and practices, including germs of models that will eventually assume greater definition as well as understandings that belong to older conceptualizations of social relations.⁷

Taylor (2000: 1) does suggest that social imaginaries are plural geographi-

7. That Williams’s discussion seems compatible with Taylor’s is clear from the latter’s discussion of the various stages in “the long march” from idea to social imaginary. According to Taylor (2000: 24), it is “a process whereby new practices, or modifications of old ones, either developed through improvisation among certain groups and strata of the population . . . ; or else were launched by elites in such a way as to recruit a larger and larger base. . . . Or alternatively, a set of practices in the course of their slow development and ramification gradually changed their meaning for people, and hence helped to constitute a new social imaginary.”

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cally. Emphasizing the synchronic multiplicity of geographically separated social imaginaries helps prevent us from generalizing the social imaginary a particular theorist or citizen inhabits (and whose terms he or she necessarily uses) to all of the societies on earth. When imagined as synchronically and geographically plural, the concept of social imaginaries even suggests the limitations of the abstraction *modernity*. The existence of multiple, coeval social imaginaries implies that there is no single way of being modern. It also suggests that we need further clarification about the relationship between the development of particular social imaginaries—including those characterized by ever-more-finely discriminated levels of abstraction—and the term *modernity*, which is intended to characterize a general phase of historical and epistemological achievement.

However we think about the limitations of generalizing modernity, we can use Taylor's concept of social imaginaries to clarify how abstractions like *the social* function within societies that have embraced the epistemology of the modern fact. According to Taylor, the social imaginary that fosters such secular abstractions rests on two more foundational abstractions: an ideal of order and a normative image of human nature. The distinctive modern accomplishment, Taylor contends, has been to separate the former from its Platonic predecessor and to secularize the latter. As part of the reworking of these old categories, the modern social imaginary casts social order as exclusively deriving from and also benefiting human beings, who are by nature capable of relationship but required to create and maintain the affiliation that sustains monadic individuals. In Taylor's (2000: 61) succinct phrase, (Western) modernity is characterized by an "ideal of order as mutual benefit." As part of this ideal of order as mutual benefit, second-order analytic categories like the social have been generated to explain how the more foundational abstractions—such as order and human nature—"naturally" produce the precise relationship (of mutual benefit, ideally) that characterizes society. In so doing, the social plays the role for the modern theorist that Providence did for philosophers of an earlier age: it explains why this relationship is necessary or natural, not arbitrary or simply a projection of wishful thinking.⁸

8. Here the comments of Fredric Jameson (1981: 323) are illuminating. Jameson argues that the most fully theorized version of the social—historical materialism—makes the same assumption about necessity that providentialism did: "The idea of Providence is the distorted anticipation, within the religious and figural master-code, of the idea of historical necessity in historical materialism. . . . This concept is . . . simply the enabling presupposition of the historian herself, and [it] governs the form with which historiography endows the events of the past, the things that have already happened once and for all. The concept of historical necessity is simply the assumption that things happened the way they did because they had to happen that way and no other, and that the business of the historian is to show why they had to happen that way."

The concept of the social, like the commonplace images and stories to which it is related and with which it competes, ultimately functions to legitimate social arrangements that are no longer seen as resting on a providential ground.⁹

It is important to acknowledge the legitimating function that such abstractions play. According to John Finnis (1980: 43), a historical crisis in legitimacy (and faith) provoked theorists like Hugo Grotius and Samuel von Pufendorf to elaborate the work of mid-fourteenth-century writers like Francisco Suárez and Gabriel Vázquez into a theory of natural law. It is this theory of natural law that anchors our modern secular abstractions. In Taylor's account of Grotius and his contemporaries, the particular conceptualizations of order and human nature that eventually came to organize a new social imaginary were elaborated in a rather specialized conversation among theorists trying to rethink the legitimacy of governments and the rules of peace in the wake of the Religious Wars (Taylor 2000: 3). This conversation drew upon and reformulated not only the work of Suárez and Vázquez but also older theological ideas about relations between idealism and civil society (Pinkstock, in press). And from it emerged the modern idea that social order emanates from the human nature it also serves—an idea that gradually began to influence the terms of other discussions intended to legitimate other activities, such as the spread of Western commerce or the printing press's dissemination of secular knowledge.

Taylor's account of the modern social imaginary helpfully positions this ensemble of ideas and practices in relation to three large historical "events." Following Jacques Lezra (1997: 35–76), I place *events* in quotation marks to designate the mixed nature of these concepts/institutions: each "event" is both an analytic abstraction (and thus a product of the historical process I am describing) and a set of institutions and practices that materialize that abstraction and thus make descriptions of it credible. In Taylor's narrative, the three "events" that simultaneously accompanied and could be explained by the emergent modern social imaginary were the consolidation of "the economy," the appearance of what Jür-

9. This is true even when the analyst's specific use of the social is highly critical of modern social relations or when the point of the social-historical account is to show how modern social relations are *not* mutually beneficial. Thus, Marxists emphasize that the economic relations of production systematically enslave some individuals for the advantage of others; for many Marxists, capitalism exists on the horizon of the social. In this account, however, the tendencies Adam Smith attributed to human nature are simply being transferred to another abstraction (capitalism), which presumably still articulates "natural" human proclivities. "Mutual benefit" is obviously not achieved under capitalism, but the animating idea of Enlightenment models of mutual benefit is being carried forward by capitalism because this system allows for the expression of what Smith (1937: 13) described as individuals' "natural" inclination to "truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another."

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gen Habermas has called the “public sphere,” and the codification of the practices and outlooks of democratic self-rule, which Foucault calls “liberal governmentality” (Taylor 2000: 25).

Temporally, the consolidation of the economy constitutes the first of these large historical “events.” In seventeenth-century England, in the wake of the civil war, ordered life and work were seen as newly important to individuals’ ability to achieve self-realization and serve God, and commerce was viewed as crucial to domestic and religious peace. Gradually, using imagery generated by merchants and political theorists, common individuals began to think of daily production and consumption, as well as the nation’s prosperity and strength, in terms of an “economy.” According to Taylor (2000: 19): “Instead of being merely the management, by those in authority, of the resources we collectively need, in household or state, the ‘economic’ [began to define] a way in which [individuals] are linked together, a sphere of coexistence which could in practice suffice to itself, if only disorder and conflict didn’t threaten.”¹⁰

The images, theoretical paradigms, and institutions that composed the economy had attained sufficient visibility and regularity by the end of the seventeenth century to help fill the vacuum left by the obliteration of absolute monarchy in England. As John Brewer (1995a) has argued, the civil war, the Commonwealth, and the Protectorate virtually destroyed the court culture that had once represented itself as the legitimating ground of the British nation. Charles II and James II tried to resurrect the monarchy’s old glory but did not succeed, and, under the rule of the house of Hanover, the prestige of the court deteriorated even further. At the same time, because of royal cupidity and the Reformation’s repudiation of images, the Church also lost the public credibility and economic power essential to legitimate its rule. As a consequence, the basis of the nation’s authority and the new dynasty’s novel compound of rule by party politics and rule by finance needed to be justified to early-eighteenth-century Britons.

The press—the primary instrument of the emergent public sphere—helped supply these legitimating terms in images of politeness and a civilizing process of exchange appropriate to the new economy of paper credit and party politics. Periodicals like the *Spectator* enabled a newly empowered “public” to imagine itself as a single entity, whose rules were those of polite and rational discourse and whose legitimacy was founded not on the king or Church but on its members’ ability to disagree without overt conflict. This public, as Brewer, Habermas, and

10. I also describe various components of the consolidation of “the economy” in Poovey 1998: 1–143.

others have emphasized, came to self-understanding not merely through elite individuals reading philosophical theories in formal educational settings but also through the larger literate populace discussing news and other matters in coffee-houses and over tea (Brewer 1995a: 344). The resulting “polite culture of the public sphere” functioned to constitute and instruct “a body of arbiters of taste, morality, and policy” (Brewer 1995a: 344; Habermas 1989: 57–88). As suggested by the mixed nature of the three large concepts/institutions Taylor identifies, the public sphere was partly constructed by the shared understandings and images of itself that were generated through print and conversation, and partly by the institutions that enabled these ideas about politeness to circulate and acquire social prestige. This public sphere generated a new sense of public order and of the public nature and accountability of political behaviors. “With the modern public sphere comes the idea that political power must be supervised and checked by something outside,” Taylor explains (2000: 29). “What was new, of course, was not that there was an outside check, but rather the nature of this instance. It is not defined as the will of God, or the Law of Nature (although it could be thought to articulate these), but as a kind of discourse, emanating from reason and not from power or traditional authority.”

This public sense of authority legitimated by rational discourse permeated a society of individuals conceptualized as both interchangeable and newly unique. The individuals who composed the public sphere seemed to contemporaries both more public and more private than ever before (as we have seen in eighteenth-century definitions of *social*). On the one hand, the new emphasis on commerce and public participation in politics placed a burden on individuals to perform socially, in the glare of the publicity they consumed and generated. On the other hand, the new emphasis on personal freedom and the sanctity of everyday life urged a new valuation of privacy and the elaboration of what Habermas (1989: 151–59) calls the sphere of intimacy. In the new social imaginary, publicness and privacy were actually two sides of a single coin. Periodicals like the *Spectator* provided rules for the individual’s most solitary behaviors, such as how to make morally instructive extracts from books, but, because they were promoted in print, these rules brought the sphere of intimacy into the glare of public norms. Books of correspondence, as well as the innumerable letters printed in popular periodicals, generated the paradoxical image of a sphere of privacy simultaneously enforced by and evacuated of the very autonomy that was supposed to insulate it from the public.¹¹ The paradoxical formation of the sphere of intimacy had

11. John Brewer (1995b: 13) notes that “the first series of the *Spectator*, which consisted of 555 essays issued between March 1711 and December 1712, included 250 such letters.”

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a particularly powerful effect on women (see discussion below), but for men too it was arguably one of the most prominent and inescapable features of this new social imaginary.

Scottish Moral Philosophy and the Liberal Civil Subject

The admittedly overly schematic narrative I have just provided is intended to remind readers of the kind of story that uses “the modern ideal of order as mutual benefit” to distinguish modern societies from their predecessors and contemporary rivals. To make this narrative less schematic would require not only more historical detail but also a continuous emphasis on the way that various standpoints and abstractions were created to explain and legitimate the institutions and practices that materialized this ideal. This dimension of historical narratives is the one most frequently omitted, but without it we too often imagine that a narrative of the past provides a vantage point somehow superior to our analytic object, instead of thinking of our analytic terms as themselves products of a historical process. In the space remaining, I can offer only a brief description of what I take to be a critical phase in the rise of modern abstraction: in this phase, philosophers began to elaborate a new theory of governmentality by reworking their understanding of providential order, which was the predecessor of the social; they reworked providential order, in turn, by developing an understanding of human nature that entailed the nuanced dynamics of such abstractions as *desire*, *social capacity*, and *self-love*. I intend my brief account of this elaboration as a contribution to other scholarly work on this process, which I encourage interested readers to consult.¹²

During the first half of the eighteenth century, British moral philosophers began to justify the mode of government inaugurated by the Glorious Revolution with theoretical accounts of human nature that stressed human beings’ natural tendency to benefit one another as they advanced their own interests.¹³ Initially, philosophical accounts of human nature referred this natural tendency to God’s design, although, as the *OED*’s exemplary quotations reveal, conceptualizing

12. See McKeon 1987: xiii–xviii and 26–28; Kramnick 1999: 189–90, 204–5; and Siskin 1988: 67–1147.

13. It should be noted that moral philosophy was not the only kind of writing that sought to discriminate among kinds of feelings or to delineate a descriptive-normative relationship among feelings. In imaginative writing, novelists and poets also developed these discriminations, and a modern reader would be hard-pressed to decide which kind of writing was more influential. Indeed, the recursive nature of the relationship between moral philosophical texts and novels or poetry is a good example of the internal dynamics of a social imaginary.

human capacity as an articulation of the providential order embedded in the nature of man cleared the way for marginalizing, then dispensing with, the providential explanation altogether. The kind of naturalization we saw in Reid's reference to "operations of the mind" (*OED*, 2d ed.) was arguably facilitated by the philosophical elevation of new abstractions—including, centrally, *human nature*—to an intermediary position between behaviors that could be observed and the providential order that was presumed to inform them. Using secular abstractions to think about what could not be seen but was assumed to exist, as well as about the observable behaviors the abstractions theoretically explained, laid the groundwork for thinking about interpretive abstractions apart from the original providential scheme. This was partly true because foundational abstractions such as human nature were amenable to—indeed called out for—the kind of theoretical elaboration that generated additional abstractions. By illuminating the dynamic relationship between derivative and foundational abstractions, theorists enabled people to understand how these abstractions functioned, either as articulations of God's order or as orderly (and relatively autonomous) entities independent of a providential framework. Thus, as theorists such as Francis Hutcheson, Adam Ferguson, George Turnbull, David Hume, and Adam Smith began to elaborate how "the social capacity" worked, they helped their contemporaries imagine that such a capacity actually existed, experience their own emotions as expressions of (or impediments to) "the social capacity," and seek institutional guarantees for the regular expression of this capacity by as many people as possible.

The foundational abstraction in which early-eighteenth-century philosophers anchored their defenses of liberal governmentality was not completely new at the turn of the century, but, as Roger Smith (1995: 94–95) has observed, human nature had never before received the kind of attention the moral philosophers paid it. Human nature served the same explanatory function as the sixteenth-century idea of natural law, but, as the difference between the two terms suggests, focusing on human nature meant supplementing the idea of law, which could be said to originate outside of individuals, with reflections on human subjectivity, which was experienced as originating within the individual. This shift from an abstraction that refers to concrete relations or external necessity to one that conjures internal experience informed the general project the British moral philosophers undertook: to explain why individuals could be counted on to produce a mutually beneficial society in the process of gratifying themselves.

To explain why individuals could be trusted to govern themselves—and why, as an extension of this mutually beneficial self-government, the party- and market-governed character of the new British nation was legitimate—philoso-

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phers began to conceptualize the dynamics of interiority more precisely than ever before, both distinguishing, as we have already seen, among various “capacities” (the “social capacity,” the “capacity for self-love,” and so on) and charting the relationships among these capacities (as in Pope’s *Essay on Man* [3.318]: “Self-love and Social [are] the same”). In order to discriminate among the feelings that had once been classified according to broad theological categories like “good” and “evil,” British moral philosophers appropriated a variant of the apparently nonjudgmental method that natural philosophers had developed to study the particulars of the natural world. This method, which depended upon observation and experiment, had enabled natural philosophers such as Robert Boyle to argue that the knowledge they produced was “objective,” in the sense of nonsectarian. Appropriating this method allowed moral philosophers to argue that the observations they made about the dynamics of subjectivity were as reliable—because as systematic—as the observations about nature for which natural philosophers had already established social credibility. Because they were making claims about the “moral” domain, the eighteenth-century philosophers were understandably less eager to disavow judgment than their natural philosophical counterparts, but what we might call interested judgments were represented by the moral philosophers as unbiased descriptions of realizable norms. We see this characteristic coincidence of description and normative prescription in Hutcheson’s comment that the “*moral sense*,” which every individual supposedly possesses, reveals the “*End or Design*” of God’s plan even in behaviors that are not self-evidently moral. In other words, according to Hutcheson (1969: xvi–xvii), the moral sense enables us to intuit “what is required of us by the Author of our nature” to realize God’s plan, even when our ocular sense perceives no order and no plan at all.

The complete title of Hume’s *Treatise* exemplifies the use of the natural philosophical method to support the descriptive/normative elaborations of the capacities that compose “human nature”; the work is titled *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*. Yet, as Hume also suggested, only the establishment of a reciprocal relationship between the two variants of philosophy could authenticate the common project of finding informing principles, whether one sought those principles in nature or in “man.” “As the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences,” Hume (1984: 43) declares, “so the only solid foundation we can give to this science itself must be laid on experience and observation.” Even when Hume replaces *experience* with the narrower term *experiment*, as he does in the last paragraph of his introduction, it is not clear how he intends to move from

observation of discrete particulars to their informing principles *except* by assuming that such systematic principles exist. In other words, as Hume famously observed, we must take for granted that order exists before we can ascribe order to what we actually see, and this ascription of order to what we see follows our ability to create and elaborate systematic abstractions. Mediating abstractions such as human nature legitimate this foundational assumption—and paradoxically help make it a commonplace—because they can be elaborated systematically and in relation to other abstractions like *providential design* and *social capacity*.

The assumption that principles of order exist and can be described was essential to the entire moral philosophical project because the ability to produce systematic knowledge was what made moral philosophy a science, and the claim to explain why individual behaviors would guarantee social order anchored the philosophers' bid for social authority. Various philosophers suggested ways to raise the assumption that order exists to the level of explicit knowledge: Smith invoked the observable but "invisible hand" of the market as well as "sympathy"; Hutcheson described a "moral sense" that functions like one of the five physical senses; Hume used the analogy of billiard balls to endorse an inflexible model of "association"; and Turnbull cited mathematical reasoning as proof of an orderly universe. Aside from Hume, all of these philosophers invoked providential design as the source of order. Only later in the century, as the science of man was divided into more specialized, nontheological practices, did the providential narrative have to compete with the naturalized explanations that eventually displaced it.

While the explanatory content of the moral philosophers' early-eighteenth-century claims was eventually displaced by other explanatory paradigms, their foundational assumption persisted. The idea that the orderly dynamics of philosophical abstractions refer to existing principles of order has proved more resilient than any particular account of that order. This is the assumption, in fact, that informs modern invocations of the social, which attempt to explain observable institutions and practices by reference to some invisible but determining "logic," "structure," or "dynamic." Combined with the epistemology epitomized by the modern fact, this assumption of an underlying order lies at the heart of the modern social imaginary. If we did not collectively assume that such order exists—no matter what we call it—no systematic organization of knowledge (i.e., no science) would be credible, no observations about the past could purport to predict the future, and our ability to create and differentiate abstractions would have no explanatory power.

If we turn from philosophical discussions of abstractions like human nature to the accounts and practices of ordinary individuals, we find an even more nuanced rendering of the modern social imaginary's internal complexities. Capturing this internal complexity seems a desirable goal of contemporary accounts of the past not because it reveals some deeper explanatory truth that the moral philosophers could not see but because these philosophical formulations constitute only one part of a social imaginary. The other part was produced—and lived—by people positioned at different points in the hierarchy of eighteenth-century British society. By examining the practices of the individuals who were marginalized by the theorists' writings, we obtain a more textured image of the modern social imaginary: the work of these marginalized individuals often constitutes the anomalies that philosophical writing is intended to smooth over. This is certainly true of women of virtually all social ranks in the early eighteenth century. As Paula McDowell (1998: 285–301) and others have observed, the rise of domestic norms, which played a central role in legitimating the institutional arrangements that stabilized eighteenth-century market society and the public sphere, functioned to stigmatize or even outlaw the activities of women who did not conform to what emerged as a cultural norm.

An examination of the activities and writing of women in this period enriches our chronicle of the rise of modern abstraction. The moral philosophers' efforts to discriminate abstractions such as *the social capacity* and *desire* helped construct a normative picture of human nature that relegated women to a single set of social functions: child rearing and moral governance. Not all women accepted this assignment however. Particularly in the first decade of the eighteenth century, as McDowell (1998: 176–79, 180–82) has demonstrated, women not only participated actively in the print industry as authors, booksellers, and publishers; they also articulated a community-oriented sense of self that did not conform to the philosophers' norm of an individualized self naturally directed to the mutual benefit of the community. By the same token, even after the domestic component of the modern social imaginary began to seem natural, some women continued to question or even defy it openly. We only have to look at the late-eighteenth-century writing of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays to see that alternative opinions were still possible. If social imaginaries were internally self-consistent and self-policing, or if philosophers were the only ones whose formulations counted, then it would have been impossible for anyone to voice—or even imagine—such radical critiques.

Of course, even a critique as radical as Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) deployed abstractions to explain a "human nature" that seemed to her to have been misrepresented by the philosophers. Like the philosophers she scorned, Wollstonecraft advanced her critique by means of abstractions, and she did so at least partly to defy the philosophers' claims that women were incapable of making generalizations. Willing to question virtually every other social and intellectual convention of her day, Wollstonecraft was not willing to disturb what had by then become a cornerstone of her society's social imaginary: authoritative knowledge-production depends on and proceeds by means of abstractions that mediate between what everyone can see and what everyone believes. Wollstonecraft believed that to change our understanding of these abstractions would be to alter the institutions in which we live because it would reveal the truth about the order God had written into the world. Wollstonecraft's confidence is not so different from the enthusiasm of modern theorists, as they replace providential order with other abstractions like the social. With every claim to identify a law-abiding abstraction that explains what-can-be-seen by reference to what cannot, we reinscribe the social imaginary that positions the human capacity to imagine order at the foundation of society itself.

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