

## CHAPTER 3

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### *“A More Virtuous Age”*

#### Hume on Property and Commerce

David Hume believed that commercial nations tend to be “both the happiest and most virtuous” (E-RA, 269). This belief challenged the tide of ancient and medieval thought that had by and large cast commerce in a negative light. No one, including Hume, disputed the fact that commerce feeds on and fuels avaricious tendencies, but the traditional arguments against mercantile activities ran more deeply. Aristotle pointed to the story of Midas, who starved before a heap of gold; the unfettered pursuit of wealth would distort means and ends, and thus lead citizens away from achieving virtue and wisdom. It was permissible for artisans and merchants to set prices to cover their costs and a reasonable profit in order to maintain their place in the polity, but it would be unethical to exceed these limits. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas went further and maintained that merchants, by their incessant pursuit of gain, violated the golden rule: to buy low and sell high necessarily involves deception. Usury was also deemed unethical; idle funds should be lent to those who were in need, with no expectations of interest payments. Aquinas recognized some exceptions, but the legal recognition of lending with interest, for the most part, only came about in the late sixteenth century.

As capitalism took hold in early modern Europe, the scholarly analysis of commerce and trade also became more favorable.<sup>1</sup> Although he was not the first to do so, Bernard Mandeville, in his *Fable of the Bees* (1714), famously demonstrated that the pursuit of wealth and power has the potential to generate modern prosperity.<sup>2</sup> It was the pursuit of “private vices,” he argued, that enabled “public virtues.” By emphasizing the beneficial consequences of luxury consumption, in direct defiance of both religious doctrine and sumptuary laws, Mandeville significantly recast the debate. Bishop Butler and Francis