

INTRODUCTION

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As a citizen Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) was an active participant in the political contests of the eighteenth century; as a philosopher he was engaged in debate with the greatest minds of his age; as a moralist, he sought to rekindle the fading flame of an ethos more ancient than modern; and as a scholar he forged new pathways in the study of society. These themes and others are the subject of this second volume devoted to scholarly reassessments of his life and thought. In the first volume (*Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature*) contributors focused on Ferguson's life as scholar, teacher and citizen, assessed his contributions to history and historiography and reconsidered his conceptions of action and of providential progress. The essays in this volume address the background, nature and context of Ferguson's social and political thought. The first two papers gauge how Ferguson's comprehension of contemporary society reflects his Highland background. Subsequent essays turn to his relations with David Hume and Adam Smith, revisit the contours of Ferguson's political thought and plumb new understandings of his account of social development and his notion of unintended social order. Historians, philosophers and political scientists engage these topics with an eye to the breadth of Ferguson's work. Although the spotlight shines brightest on his most renowned book, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), other works are illuminated, including his *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (1792), *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (1769) and manuscript essays and correspondence. As with the first volume, the papers included in this second collection will be of interest to historians of ideas, scholars of the eighteenth century, philosophers and social and political theorists.

Ferguson's works display breadth, intelligence and seriousness of moral purpose. As a theorist of society, politics and morals, he begins with the fact that human beings are born in society. We are sociable creatures, blessed with a complex nature of sometimes countervailing motives. Affected by circumstance and history, individuals and societies undergo progress and improvement. The development of society is often an unintended process in which far-sighted calculative

reason plays a relatively limited role compared to that of sentiment, instinct or experience. Yet quiescence is not Ferguson's prescription, at least not for a life lived freely or a society governed happily. Drawing from Stoic themes, he sets forth a description of human nature in which active engagement is both natural and essential. Vigour, integrity and command are often identified by Ferguson with virtue itself. Yet it remains clear that he understands virtue to refer as well to other qualities of character. For the chief end of life is a happiness constituted not by pleasure but by wisdom, courage, benevolence and self-control. Without vigour, there is moral lassitude and the risk of national decline and the loss of liberty; without the qualities of virtue, a narrowness of outlook, a loss of any spirit of society and the risk of corruption. Even though the human being has an impulse to improvement, Ferguson recognizes that a society may regress rather than progress. Despite the possibility of progress, the human being remains as imperfect as his creations and achievements.

Ferguson's critical perspective emerges from his theory of society and his experience of the changes brought to Scotland by the advent of political and economic modernity. Political standards and institutions must be justified in relation to the nature of the human being. However, the human being cannot be understood apart from a comprehension of society and the circumstances of the particular society in which one lives. It follows that Ferguson's political considerations are neither simple nor unambiguous. In some cases (as in his discussion of the merits of the division of labour) the best judgment requires a balancing of advantages and disadvantages, weighing divergent goods against a consideration of varied contingencies. Ferguson's thought reminds us, therefore, that experience has significance, as do the particularities of time and place. Bearing these twin truths in mind, how might Ferguson's own Highland background have affected his work? The first two essays in this volume take up this topic in sympathetic and unique ways.

Life and Works

Reared along the frontier of the Scottish Highlands and a speaker of Gaelic, Ferguson lived most of his life among Lowlanders. In the opening essay, 'Ferguson the Highlander', Michael Fry explores Ferguson's Highland roots, the circumstances of his youth, and his service as chaplain to the Black Watch, the 43rd Highland Regiment. Fry details how Ferguson's entrance into modern culture did not entail the loss of his Highland identity. In fact, Fry contends, his Highland roots drew Ferguson to the poetry of James Macpherson's *Ossian*. In these poems, Ferguson found an appealing depiction of heroic virtue that supported his own outlook. Even if fictive, the verses of *Ossian* could convey, as Ferguson himself suggests, a spirit and identity to a people or nation. As Fry explains,

Ferguson acknowledges the progress of modernity, but also admits its shortcomings, thereby serving as sympathetic ‘witness’ to the qualities and gifts of a noble Highland society long eclipsed.

It was in 1745, while still a student of divinity at Edinburgh, that Ferguson was appointed chaplain to the 43rd Highland Regiment, joining it in September, a few months after the British defeat at the Battle of Fontenoy. A legend emerged that, in fact, Ferguson was not only present at that battle but had sought, in the heat of the fighting, to forsake his chaplaincy to join the fray! As Bruce Buchan points out in ‘Adam Ferguson, the 43rd, and the Fictions of Fontenoy’, the doubtful tale of Ferguson’s battlefield actions incorporates mythical elements that nonetheless manifest truths about his Highland background. And the facts of the battle reveal another fiction as well – that warfare can be, in any real sense, ‘civilized’. It remains true, however, that Ferguson admired the modern rules of war, just as he maintained that a citizen army would be the best means for preserving the virtues essential for a genuine civilization. Committed to the idea of civilization, with its commerce, arts and law, Ferguson worried that its benefits might themselves become fictional if they served to conceal the loss of virtue, in particular, the hardy sort exhibited by the Highlander.

Ferguson and Philosophy

Ferguson’s thought bears the influence of classical authors (the Roman Stoics in particular), his own Christian outlook, and a number of modern thinkers. The influence of Cicero may be discerned in Ferguson’s observation that human nature includes an innate quality of sociability – a desire to be part of a group, clan or social whole. The inclination to society is a thesis found in the works of Lord Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson, as well as in the texts of earlier theorists of natural law such as Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf, not to mention the Baron de Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws*. In setting forth his claim of sociability, Ferguson seeks to rebut Thomas Hobbes’s contention that society is but an instrument to satisfy our selfish motives. In Ferguson’s estimation, self-interest should not be construed in a narrow manner: One’s genuine interests include benevolence to others.

Ferguson’s account of human nature aims also at Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s portrayal of the primitive human as more animal than person. It is not simply the substance of Rousseau’s description but its suppositional nature that rangles the Scot. For Ferguson, the qualities of the human being (or the practices of some remote society) are not a matter of conjecture but of fact. From the texts of classical authors, reports from travellers and from his own introspection, Ferguson elicits an account of human nature that he employs as the basis of a natural history of humanity. Even if Ferguson does not fully forswear supposi-

tional elements in his own theory, he aspires to an account grounded in the real and complex nature of the human being. It is in this sense that *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* relies on empiricist assumptions.

Thus, a set of epistemic postulates underlies Ferguson's natural history of society. In his *Institutes* (a reformulation of his lectures, published just two years after the *Essay*), Ferguson outlines an epistemic program that not only affirms the possibility of knowledge but suggests its wide scope. Knowledge, he maintains, may be about either facts or rules. Knowledge of fact may include perceptual knowledge, though Ferguson does not construe perception to involve – as René Descartes, John Locke and Hume had each suggested – some idea or image mediating between self and world. Rather, to perceive is to perceive objects in the world, a conclusion similar to that found in the full-throated realism of Thomas Reid. As for our knowledge of rules, this is derived, in Baconian fashion, from an inductive examination of facts. Such rules, or laws of nature, may be either physical or moral. True moral judgments have a clear, almost common-sensical objectivity not reducible either to a moral sense or, as Adam Smith argued, a psychological process of sympathy. Moving beyond the project of the *Essay*, the scope of knowledge expands further. All rational perceivers may recognize in creation a purpose and design sufficient to establish that God exists. As this suggests, Ferguson accepts the very sort of teleological argument that David Hume attacks in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. In Ferguson's estimation, the system of the universe, its very order of being, reflects the intelligence of God who has constructed the world *for* human beings.

Less a pure philosopher than a social theorist and moralist, Ferguson is nonetheless a friend of the two greatest philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, Hume and Smith. If Ferguson's philosophical engagement does not approach the systematic heights or analytic depths achieved by his friends, it may be affirmed nonetheless that he 'met them on equal terms, quarreled with and supported them and sometimes helped to shape not only their ideas, but those of equally impressive, later figures'.¹ Each of the three philosophers rejects social contract theory and each refuses to deflate human motivation to the currency of egoism. Ferguson also exhibits some of the eighteenth-century fascination with the status of sentiment and morals. However, he does not accept Hume's claim (in *A Treatise of Human Nature*) that moral judgment rests on sentiment or feeling (even if he does allow, albeit vaguely, an association of sentiment with the recognition of moral good or evil). And, as noted below, he objects to how Smith utilizes, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the idea of sympathy to establish an impartial standard of morals.

Hume proved to be a great benefactor to the younger Ferguson. In 1757 Hume vacated his post as Keeper of the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh, creating thereby a vacancy to which Ferguson was appointed immediately. And it

was Hume whose subsequent efforts to situate Ferguson in a university position finally succeeded on the third attempt, securing for him the chair in Natural Philosophy at Edinburgh.² In 1767, some eight years after Ferguson attained a professorial post, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, was published. Despite their friendship, however, Hume did not react favorably to the *Essay*. The reasons for Hume's negative evaluation provide the subject of two distinct but complementary essays.

In a thorough and original study, 'Why Did David Hume Dislike Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*?', David Raynor canvasses numerous points of disagreement – stylistic and substantive – that might have led Hume to regard the *Essay* unfavourably. Raynor notes how Hume must have been disappointed by Ferguson's omission of the function of religion and religious belief in the development of society. Moreover, Hume would have disapproved of Ferguson's praise of Sparta, disliked his affection for Stoicism, and rejected his claim that imaginative conjecture has no place in social theory. In laying out these and other reasons for Hume's dislike of Ferguson's greatest work, Raynor calls our attention to a neglected review of the *Essay*. Appearing in 1767, in the short-lived journal *Mémoires littéraires* (edited by Edward Gibbon and Georges Deyverdun), this anonymous but thoughtful review expresses numerous opinions compatible with Hume's positions. In highlighting this compelling article, Raynor also offers a new and plausible suggestion: that Hume himself may have contributed to the review.

In 'Hume as Critic of Ferguson's *Essay*', Vincenzo Merolle offers a complementary but distinct assessment. Hume's reaction to Ferguson's *Essay* probably stemmed, Merolle maintains, from a significant difference in outlook between the two men. A philosopher of the Enlightenment, Hume failed to grasp that Ferguson's project was an anthropological and historicist enterprise. Apart from this difference in perspective, and Hume's preference for philosophical analyses, Ferguson's embrace of straightforward, if not moralistic, judgments would rest uneasily with Hume's sceptical conclusions about knowledge, metaphysics and morals. These differences may have fuelled Hume's disappointment at the first great product of the friend whose professorial post had been attained in large part thanks to Hume's persistence.

Hume and Ferguson remained friends, but Ferguson and Smith did not enjoy consistently happy relations. Philosophically, Ferguson rejected Smith's appeal to sympathy and the impartial spectator, contending that these phenomena could not explain moral standards without presupposing them. In 'The Two Adams: Ferguson and Smith on Sympathy and Sentiment', Jack Russell Weinstein examines this philosophical disagreement but also points out the several ways in which their moral outlooks were in agreement. Weinstein recalls how in one of Ferguson's unpublished dialogues one of the characters, General Clerk, offers an abusive

dismissal of Smith's moral theory and its reliance on sympathy. Weinstein suggests that Clerk – whose criticisms of sympathy appear contradictory – may not, in fact, be a voice for Ferguson's own views. Even if Ferguson did not welcome Smith's concept of sympathy or the impartial spectator, sections of the *Essay* reveal, Weinstein argues, that he and Smith share common theses regarding the behavioural and institutional consequences of the interaction of reason and sentiment.

Political Thought

Ferguson's political thought has been variously described, but two of the most important, and seemingly contrary, interpretations are the 'civic humanist' and the liberal. Some scholars have sought to ally his political thought with one mode of what is called the republican interpretation of eighteenth-century thought.³ Since Ferguson employs the language of virtue and worries over the perils of the polished age of commerce, the civic humanist appellation is not without some justification. Such an interpretation does not, of course, require that Ferguson have read the works of specific thinkers (Niccolò Machiavelli, for example). Rather, the civic humanist account concentrates, sometimes quite generally, on Ferguson's language. However, a vocabulary of 'virtue' need not entail civic humanist *conceptions*, and it is not obvious that Ferguson employed a discourse of virtue with 'civic humanist' ideals in mind. Ferguson's discourse may rely as much on Highland aspirations and Christian education as it does humanist ideals. For example, it is not readily apparent that Ferguson's thought agrees, in any clear and unambiguous way, with the civic humanist specification that 'the human personality ... [i]s fully expressed only in the practice of citizenship'.⁴

No doubt Ferguson is committed to the idea of virtue and to active engagement in society, just as he is concerned with how specialization may risk a blinkered perspective (not to mention the separation of citizenship from national defence, as witnessed in the rise of professional armies). These considerations are consistent, however, with another characterization of Ferguson's political thought – as classical liberal. His is a liberalism that reflects the contingencies of history and circumstance, not a theoretical liberalism drawing sustenance from a doctrine of rights or purporting some appeal to utility. Developing out of history, amidst the competing interests and oppositions of individuals and parties, liberty is established by law and preserved by the integrity and vigour of free citizens. Even if nations have distinct ends, liberty remains a condition for living well and for realizing the qualities of humanity, including classical liberal virtues such as industry and liberality.

With these two interpretations in mind, it seems promising to recast Ferguson's political thought as embedded in or derivative of his social theory. This strategy is consistent with Ferguson's explicit assertion, in his *Principles*, that all

subjects have a descriptive and a normative component. The institutions and norms that should demand our allegiance must be understood and advocated in light of a general understanding of society and with an eye to particular circumstances. In her essay, 'A Complicated Vision: The Good Polity in Adam Ferguson's Thought', Lisa Hill draws upon Ferguson's social theory in order to situate his political vision between the civic humanist and liberal conceptions. Ferguson offers us a liberalism that draws from Stoic influences, takes root in the forces of spontaneous growth, and does not recoil from the recognition of the good and ill effects of modernity. Progressive and conservative, idealist and realist, the tensions and apparent inconsistencies in his political thought reflect his theory that society is a result of unintended or spontaneous ordering forces whose outcomes may not be unequivocally good. So even if the institutions of the state emerge spontaneously, Hill explains, the maintenance of a good polity requires vigilance. However, since Ferguson does not specify fully the form of active citizenship, Hill wonders whether his appeal is less to political than to social and cultural engagement. Nonetheless, his overall vision incorporates a cautious approach to political reform, with an appeal to gradual progress rather than radical innovation.

Ferguson's ambivalence about modernity is also featured in Michael Kugler's account, 'Adam Ferguson and Enlightened Provincial Ideology in Scotland'. Ferguson's political thought, he contends, must be understood in its moral and historical context. Modern commercial culture, increasing specialization, expanding state bureaucracies and colonial empires create opportunities but threaten the independence of individuals and societies. Individual and communal good require the more rudimentary virtues of courage and strong affection. Drawing from his Highland background, knowledge of Stoicism, and awareness of the geographic and cultural distance of Scotland from the cities of Europe, Ferguson sought to defend a robust conception of moral character (filtered through Christian learning) and to preserve a sense of regional independence, exemplified in the federative union of Great Britain. If an infusion of martial vigor seemed essential to the preservation of a good society, it is also true that towards the end of his life, in witness to the French Revolution, Ferguson came to wonder whether vigour and zeal could ensure the good polity that he still desired.

Social Theory

Ferguson's *Essay* is his foremost contribution to the emergence of social science and the study of society. A society is a grouping of individuals who desire to interact together in generally beneficial ways and whose actions incorporate common assumptions and reliable expectations about one another. Of course, since actual societies differ in norms, practices and modes of interaction, these variations,

Ferguson realizes, require explanation. Some of this diversity is explored in his characterizations of societies as rude (savage, barbarian) or civilized (polished or commercial). Although Ferguson is often associated with stadial theorists, his articulation of social change and diversity does not include any exact account of specific stages of social development or any specification of the mode of transition from one stage to another. Even so, the characteristics of a savage state are distinct from those of barbaric and polished societies.

In his essay, “But art itself is natural to man”: Ferguson and the Principle of Simultaneity, Christopher J. Berry reminds us how Ferguson sometimes employs language redolent of elements of stadial theory. However, as Berry keenly discerns, there is something unique in Ferguson’s theory of societal development. In his *Principles* he states explicitly that among three types of human activity – commerce, politics and fine arts – there is no temporal priority. Rather, these types of activity emerge and develop simultaneously, a manifestation of our human nature and our tendency to seek improvements. Ferguson differs, then, from a stadial theorist such as John Millar⁵ who takes the subsistence arts to antedate the political and the fine arts. Commerce is not unique to polished societies and political activity is but a reflection that human beings are found in groups with varying forms of stratification. In Ferguson’s view, the fine arts do not emerge only at some late stage of society but are practiced throughout. As Berry explains, although some activities may distract from or inhibit others, none is to be suppressed and all possess equal value. In this sense, Ferguson does not privilege the political over the commercial or the fine arts.

As has been noted above, Ferguson often refers to how complex social states – institutions, norms and complex patterns of conduct – may emerge slowly and in a spontaneous or unintended fashion. That social phenomena might emerge without being a product of design or explicit contract is a matter of some interest among eighteenth-century thinkers (including Hume and Smith). Yet Ferguson’s remarks on these phenomena are often brief and undeveloped. In the last essay of the collection, ‘Ferguson and the Unintended Emergence of Social Order’, Eugene Heath reconstructs the framework of Ferguson’s theory of the unintended emergence of social order. He shows that although Ferguson does not postulate some mechanism of unintended coordination, there is a coherent set of explanatory principles that illuminates how Ferguson could assume that complex social patterns may have come about without being designed by human agents. Heath suggests that Ferguson includes moral standards among the unintended patterns that emerge within society. In delineating this account, he appeals to Ferguson’s pluralistic view of human nature, including the pivotal role of ambition. The framework described, Heath argues, provides some grounding for Ferguson’s progressivist view of the development of society.