Adam Ferguson as a Moral Philosopher

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Abstract
Adam Ferguson has received little of the renewed attention that contemporary philosophers have given to the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, most notably David Hume, Thomas Reid and Adam Smith. There are good reasons for this difference. Yet, the conception of moral philosophy at work in Ferguson's writings can nevertheless be called upon to throw important critical light on the current enthusiasm for philosophical ethics and applied philosophy. Eighteenth century 'moral science' took its significance from a context that modern philosophers who seek to be practically 'relevant' need, but lack.

It is generally acknowledged that the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, and their immediate successors, were hugely influential beyond the confines of Scotland, an influence that it is easy to trace in North America, Europe, and even Asia. But with the exception of David Hume, in the course of the 19th century they disappeared from intellectual purview almost everywhere, with astonishing speed, and in many cases almost without trace. The second half of the 20th century, however, witnessed a notable revival of interest, most especially in Thomas Reid and Adam Smith (as a philosopher). In a relatively short space of time, Reid has resumed his former significance for the philosophy of mind, as well as epistemology, and Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* has appeared in new editions and generated several full length studies.[1]

The same cannot be said of Adam Ferguson, a no less prominent figure in the same philosophical milieu and not much less influential

[1] Notable among a good many examples are Nicholas Wolterstorff *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (2001), Phillip de Bary *Thomas Reid and Skepticism* (2002), William C Davis, *Thomas Reid's Ethics*, (2006) Ryan Nichols *Thomas Reid's Theory of Perception* (2007), James R Otteson *Adam Smith's Market Place of Life* (2002), Samuel Fleischacker, *On Reading Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: A Philosophical Companion* (2004), Ryan Patrick Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue* (2009), Fonna Forman-Barzilai, *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy* (2010).

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in his day. It is true that some of his writings have appeared in new editions, but he has yet to become the subject of contemporary philosophical discussion. Why should there be this difference, and is it warranted?

Although he published other works, it is undoubtedly Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) that was his principal claim to intellectual distinction, both in his lifetime and for a number of decades thereafter.[2] To assess his enduring significance as a philosopher, therefore, it is to the *Essay* that we must first turn. There are a number of factors, however, which do not work in its favor in this respect. First, the language of the *Essay* is archaic in a way that the language of Ferguson's philosophical contemporaries generally is not. While Hume's vocabulary of 'impressions' and 'ideas', or Smith's concept of an 'impartial spectator' needs some translation for the modern reader, Ferguson's language seems to have fallen into complete disuse. Who now would write of 'rude' and 'polished' nations – or of 'national depravity' arising from an 'epidemical weakness of the head'? Secondly, Hume, Reid and Smith published short essays on recurrent philosophical topics, and their longer works can be excerpted to good purpose. The *Essay*, by contrast, is more 'all or nothing'. It is not impossible but it is certainly difficult, to extract any part of it that can be discussed as a free standing treatment of a specific topic. Thirdly, the general character of the Essay is not obviously philosophical as that term is currently understood. It has often been heralded as an important precursor of the social sciences, especially sociology, and though this claim about the history of ideas can be disputed as a matter of fact, it is undoubtedly true that the *Essay* is likely to strike the modern reader as an attempt at the explanation of social formation which really needs confirmation by the more rigorous empirical methods that came to be adopted after it was written. But perhaps the fourth obstacle is the greatest. The *Essay* is framed within a 'stadial' conception of social development consonant with a 'Whig' view of history that has long been abandoned. No one now believes (or so it is widely held) in the progressive march of history from primitive tribal beginnings to sophisticated political maturity in the way that Ferguson and most of his contemporaries did.

These obstacles are unquestionably important. It seems to me unlikely that the *Essay* will ever enter the contemporary canon of philosophical 'classics' on a par with Hume's *Treatise*, Reid's *Inquiry* or Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. At the same time, there is a

[2] Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) (ed.) Fania Oz-Salzberger, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), hereafter *Essay*.

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danger of overlooking, and hence underestimating, a measure of common philosophical ground between Ferguson and his contemporaries, and thereby missing the degree to which some of his intellectual endeavors are of continuing philosophical interest. To identify what this is, I begin by uncovering something of this common ground. I then identify an interesting problem that may be detected in his *Essay*. This will, I think reveal an aspect of Ferguson's conception of the moral philosopher that bears directly on a matter of considerable contemporary philosophical interest and importance.

1.

It was Gladys Bryson's seminal study *Man and Society*[3] that first prompted renewed interest in philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment beyond Hume, after almost a century of general neglect, especially in the United States. Bryson chose Ferguson as an especially notable representative of the school (which included Hume), while acknowledging some difficulty in accommodating Reid within it. This is because, for Bryson (as the title of her book indicates), the Scottish moral philosophers were essentially students of human nature in its social aspect. From this perspective, Hume's writings on religion, politics, history and economics are more central to the project of his great philosophical contemporaries, than are the arguments about skepticism which command such attention nowadays, and which provide the focus for Reid's careful philosophical analysis. Bryson, in other words, is in large part interested in the Scottish philosophers as proto-social scientists, and read in this light, it might be thought, it can hardly be expected that their writings should have enduring philosophical interest. Yet, the title of her second chapter is 'Ferguson's *Moral Philosophy*' (my emphasis) and she ends it by quoting his conviction that 'it is of far more importance to know the condition to which we ourselves should aspire, than that which our ancestors may be supposed to have left'.[4] History, it seems, matters chiefly insofar as it is morally illuminating. In this conviction, Ferguson was at one with the other philosophers in his circle, believing with them that the inquiry in which they were engaged was a normative one. This is true even of Hume, despite his strictures in the *Treatise* about 'is' and 'ought'. His essay on

[3] Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century*, (Princeton University Press, 1945).

[4] Ibid., 51–2.

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'superstition and enthusiasm', for example, identifies these two social phenomena as corrupted forms of religion, and (with Smith) he identifies 'the monkish virtues' as perversions of morality. It is this normative aspiration that warrants the use of the 18th century term 'moral science' and marks it off from the social scientific enterprise to which it may (or may not) have given rise.

'Moral science', of course, has an antiquated ring to it, and this might suggest that what Ferguson and his times meant by 'moral philosophy' is not what is meant by the expression today. This is true only to an extent, as it seems to me. There is no doubt that Ferguson, in common with his Scottish contemporaries Kames, Miller, Robertson and others, subscribed to a 'grand narrative' in which human history moved though a natural evolution, from savagery to civility. Moreover, this evolution has identifiable stages – first hunting and fishing, then pastoral and agricultural, eventually commercial and industrial societies. The process is accompanied by a corresponding development of social and political institutions, and it can properly be regarded as progressive because a society with markets, finance houses, colleges, factories, political assemblies and so on, is a better one in which to live than a society that is largely governed by tribal tradition and has not developed beyond subsistence farming. In short, Ferguson's *Essay*, like Kames's *Sketches*, sees civil society (which is to say human civilization) as the outcome of a progressive evolutionary development.

Grand narratives of this kind are now unfashionable, and play little part in contemporary moral philosophy (though, thanks in part to Nietzsche, the 'genealogy' of morality does make an important appearance from time to time). To describe the *Essay* as an exercise in evolutionary history may seem to confirm rather than undermine its quasi-social scientific status, and set it at some remove from what we now think of as philosophy. And yet, somewhat contrary to its title, there is reason to hold that the *Essay's* conception of the development it recounts cannot be historical, strictly speaking. That is to say, describing these as 'stages in a natural evolution of society' cannot be the same as saying that they are identifiable periods in an empirically recordable historical sequence. There are three main reasons for thinking this. First, the later stages in the evolution do not leave the former wholly behind, and neither Ferguson nor his contemporaries could have believed that they did. Commercial/industrial societies have moved beyond subsistence farming, certainly, but they have not abandoned food production; they still have fishermen and farmers. Secondly, Ferguson expressly allows for cultural decline. Indeed he devotes the last two parts of the

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Essay to this subject. 'Polished' nations can include within them the seeds of their own destruction, and the example of Rome is never far from his mind. The Fall of Rome marked the end of a highly advanced society, and it did not usher in a better world. Thirdly, as Gladys Bryson observes 'dates and actual time sequences seem to be of little importance' to Ferguson's project.[5] This is revealed especially in the fact that Ferguson thinks it possible to find contemporary and not merely historical evidence of early stages in the evolutionary process. 'Thucydides', he tells us, 'notwithstanding the prejudice of his country against the name of Barbarian, understood that it was in the customs of barbarous nations he was to study the more ancient manners of Greece'.[6] A few paragraphs later he draws an analogy between social and individual development. When we can no longer recall what we ourselves were like at an early stage in life 'we must have recourse to the nursery' and take the children we find there as 'a representation of past manners'. Since the children we observe must be present in the nursery, 'past' here cannot mean historical past, but rather, 'earlier stage'.

Ferguson is in fact engaged in what Dugald Stewart, with Hume's *Natural History* in mind, later called 'conjectural history'. We cannot fail to be curious, Stewart thinks, about how modern institutions and accomplishments arose, but we often lack historical evidence.

> In this want of direct evidence, we are under a necessity of supplying the place of fact by conjecture; and when we are unable to ascertain how men have actually conducted themselves upon particular occasions, of considering in what manner they are likely to have proceeded. . . When we cannot trace the process by which an event has been produced, it is often of importance to show how it may have been produced by natural causes.[7]

What is the value of demonstrating historical possibilities? The answer is that in them we discern an abstract pattern of social evolution that has wider application than a narrative of contingent historical events would have. This pattern is illuminating, but it is neither inevitable nor irreversible in the way that naïve historical determinism is generally taken to imply. Though Ferguson's 'history' may give a contrary impression, the move from a 'rude' to a 'polished' society is a pattern that can in principle be observed over almost

[5] Ibid., 41.
[6] *Essay*, 80.
[7] Dugald Stewart, *Selected Philosophical Writings* (ed.) Emanuele Levi Mortera, (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2007).

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any stretch of time. What Ferguson aims to recount is a dynamic, not a diachronic process. The life of a human being is a progressive evolutionary development bounded by the cradle and the grave. At any given time, obviously, there will be individuals at different stages of this development. And so it is with human societies:

> If we are asked . . . where the state of nature is to be found? We may answer, It is here; and it matters not whether we are understood to speak in the island of Great Britain, at the cape of Good Hope or the Straits of Magellan. . . . In the condition of the savage, as well as in that of the citizen, are many proofs of human invention . . .If the palace be unnatural, the cottage is no less so . . .[8]

2.

Ferguson's main interest, then, is not historical, as this is generally understood now. The historical approach, he tells us in the *Essay*, would incline us to trace developments back to 'a distant antiquity of which no record remains, nor any monument preserved'. We should rather, he says, attend 'to the character of our species' (*Essay* : 11). In itself, though, this does not show that his conjectural history is 'philosophy' in the modern sense. Indeed his attempt to abstract from recorded history might be taken as still further evidence of his social scientific ambitions. This is not as clear as might be supposed, however. The study of civil society and its evolution, he tells us, is the province of 'pneumatics'. This outmoded term is a forerunner of the modern expression 'philosophy of mind', and refers to a systematic study of the intellectual rather than physiological dimension of human nature. Though pneumatics can be expected to yield what Ferguson is willing to call 'physical laws', it must be conducted in acknowledgement of the fact that 'we can learn nothing of [human] nature from the analogy with other animals' (ibid). The reason is that two characteristics set human beings apart – their essential sociability and their use of language. Other animals, of course, go about in groups, but it is distinctive of human beings that 'they have apprehended a good of the community, as well of the individual', and 'that while they practice arts, each for his own preservation, they institute political forms and unite their forces for common safety'.[9]

[8] *Essay*, 14.

[9] Adam Ferguson, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (1769), (London: Routledge/Thoemmes, 1994), 239–40.

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Yet more importantly 'men continue their works in progression through many ages together: they build on foundations laid by their ancestors; and in a succession of years, tend to a perfection in the application of their faculties'.[10]

The key point is that human beings are rational animals. Their rationality expresses itself primarily in a constant inclination to search out or invent ways of improving the conditions of life. This inclination to improvement – which Ferguson calls 'Ambition' – is at its most powerful in society and extends both in aim and in consequence far beyond the life of the individual. The 'history' of civil society is thus a 'rational' process. By stressing this feature of humanity, Ferguson is at the same time rejecting the idea that society is to be thought of as a compact among individuals. In this respect he shares Hutcheson's objection to Hobbesian egoism, namely that human beings are naturally sociable, and do as a matter of fact care about each others' welfare and opinion.

> The wailings of the infant, and the languors of the adult when alone; the lively joys of the one, and the chearfulness of the other, upon the return of company, are a sufficient proof of [sociability's] solid foundation in the frame of our nature.[11]

But Ferguson goes a step further. He contends that belonging to an identifiable social group is itself a motive for the individual.

> Men are so far from valuing society on account of its mere external conveniencies, that they are commonly most attached where those conveniencies are least frequent.[12]

Human beings, then, are unlike all other animals. They apply their energies to improving the lot of the group as a whole, both immediately and extended over time. And they do so most energetically, not (as egoists suppose) when social prosperity offers the individual the greatest rewards, but when the welfare of the whole is at stake.

The fact that the inclination to improvement is inherently social and extends over time has an interesting outcome. Human 'ambition' necessarily gives rise to unanticipated results, and often it is these that are of the greatest value from the point of view of human well being. I shall call this Ferguson's doctrine of unintended consequences. It is widely regarded as his most distinctive contribution to moral and social philosophy, and the basis upon which he has been hailed as a

[10] *Essay*, 10.
[11] *Essay*, 22.
[12] *Essay*, 23.

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founding figure in sociology. His frequently quoted statement of the doctrine (in the *Essay*) runs as follows.

> Mankind, in following the present sense of their minds, in striving to remove inconveniencies, or to gain apparent and contiguous advantages, arrive at ends which even their imagination could not anticipate, . . . The forms of society are derived from an obscure and distant origin; they arise, long before the date of philosophy, from the instincts, not from the speculations of men . . . . Every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.[13]

Later he summarizes the same thought by saying 'Men . . . by a species of chance, arrive at [conditions] more favorable to human nature than what human wisdom could ever calmly devise'.[14]

We might summarize Ferguson's account of the 'pneumatics' of civil society in the following propositions.

- Human beings are by nature rational agents, whose rational agency is expressed primarily in 'Ambition', i.e. a deep inclination to improvement.
- Human beings are also socially oriented, with the result that individual 'Ambition' is generally directed towards society at large and into the future.
- This socially motivated impulse to improvement generally leads to consequences that were neither foreseen nor intended, but that nonetheless bring greater benefits than any conscious plan could have secured.

As abstractions from human experience, both historical and contemporaneous, these propositions seem reasonably well attested to my mind, but they generate this puzzle. If it is true that we are necessarily blind to the future, so that the most beneficial improvements in human life, though the result of human action, are not the execution of any human design, how can Ambition be rational? Surely if Ferguson's doctrine of unintended consequences is correct, then our inclination to improvement, however deep it may lie in our nature, is not a rational one?

[13] *Essay*, 119.
[14] *Essay*, 225.

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The puzzle is intensified by the fact that Ferguson's ultimate purpose, as Bryson's quote from the *Essay* indicates, is not simply philosophical explanation for its own sake, but for the sake of the practical guidance we can derive from it. He states this even more plainly at the outset of the *Principles*, in a passage that explicitly contrasts history and philosophy.

> In treating of Man, as a subject of history, we collect facts, and endeavour to conceive of his nature as it actually is . . . In treating him as a subject of moral science, we endeavour to understand what he ought to be. . . . It is evident that the subjects being connected, we cannot proceed in the second, but upon the foundations which are laid in the first.[15]

But if the principle of unintended consequences is a fact of human life, how can it lay a foundation for practical projects of improvement?

3.

A closer examination of Ferguson's conception of 'moral science' will reveal an answer to this question, one that confirms his classification as a moral philosopher. The modern connotations of 'science' are especially misleading in understanding 'moral science'. This now dated term was both novel and widely used in the 18th century, but by Ferguson's account it is distinguished by being a kind of 'science' that is not in the business of producing new knowledge. Indeed, when it comes to the study of our moral nature, Ferguson expressly says that 'whoever pretends to tell us of anything new, or that is not of our own minds, has mistaken his subject, or would mislead us from it.' Moral education is necessarily self-education. 'Questions may be stated, and a method proposed; but . . . to succeed in the study of mind, every reader must perform the work for himself . . . The learner of moral wisdom is himself the witness to be cited in evidence of the truth.'[16] The result of such study is practically valuable because it enables us to make greater use of our powers. 'Whoever is successful in the study of his own nature, as he may lay the foundations of a happy choice in the exercise of his will, so he may lay the foundations of power also, in applying the laws of his nature to the command of himself'.[17]

[15] Adam Ferguson, *Selected Philosophical Writings* (ed.) Eugene Heath, (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2007), 99–101.
[16] Ibid., 101.
[17] Ibid., 100.

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Moral science, then, is systematic reflection on what it is to be a human being. Unlike chemistry, say, it is not a collaborative endeavor with cumulative results, and its practical value accrues only to the person who engages in it. What a teacher of moral science (like Ferguson himself) can do, is bring attention to facts that we know but often overlook, and uncover illuminating analogies between aspects of experience that in themselves are wholly familiar. In this way the study of moral 'science' enables us to clarify our purposes and strengthen our ability to accomplish them. Acting repeatedly in the light of this increased self-understanding generates habits of thought that make us more effective agents.

The general point can be applied to Ambition in particular. Ambition is the pursuit of excellence. It underlies all human progress and social development, yet 'personal qualities' not social institutions are its 'genuine object'. While we have a natural ability to discern excellence, and a natural tendency to favor it, our judgment of what truly is excellent may be distorted by conventional habits of thought, and our vigor in pursuing can become deadened by the uncritical adoption of conventional ways of behaving. The purpose, and the effect, of a good moral education is to remedy both defects. It does so by presenting us with recurrent facts about history, society and human nature abstracted into principles.

How does this help with the problem of unintended consequences? In the *Principles*, Ferguson confesses to being a Stoic. The Stoics 'conceived life under the image of a game at which the entertainment and merit of the players consisted in playing attentively and well, whether the stake was great or small'.[18] Action, in short, is best when it is motivated by enthusiasm for participation in the affairs of life, and guided by adherence to principles of excellence. The contrast, I take it is, is with moral systems (like utilitarianism) that conceive of morally good conduct as action that is based on long range goals and calculated consequences, and aimed at the general welfare. Ferguson's contention that the most socially beneficial institutions are 'not the execution of any human design', if true, makes this alternative approach to rational action profoundly mistaken. It can only be pursued (and even then fruitlessly) if the free agency of individuals is subordinated to social control. But this is either ineffective or destructive.

> Men, in general, are sufficiently disposed to occupy themselves in forming projects and schemes: but he who would scheme

[18] Ibid., 102.

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> and project for others, will find an opponent in every person who is disposed to scheme for himself. Like the winds, that come we know not whence, and blow whithersoever they list, the forms of society . . . arise . . . from the instincts . . . not from the speculations of men.[19]

Ferguson's observations on this point follow from his rejection of a common conception according to which a political action is rational insofar as it aims to bring about beneficial ends based upon relevant empirical knowledge of causes. Ferguson accepts, affirms in fact, that 'knowledge is important in every department of civil society, and requisite to the practice of every art'.[20] But he holds that 'a system of learning may arrive from the bustle of an active life. Society itself is the school, and its lessons are delivered in the practice of real affairs'.[21] Though 'it is peculiar to modern Europe', and even more so to our own times, one might add, 'to rest so much . . . on what may be learned . . . from the information of books',[22] no amount of empirical research can supply a deficiency of practical experience. That is why the modern connotations of the word 'science' are so inappropriate to Ferguson's concept of 'moral science'. But does his Stoic alternative fare any better? What reason is there to think that if individuals 'play the game' to the best of their abilities, over time society as a whole will benefit maximally, and hence progress will be made? Ferguson's answer emerges most plainly in his discussion of the causes of social decline.

> Men frequently, while they study to improve their fortunes, neglect themselves; and while they reason for their country, forget the considerations that most deserve their attention. Numbers, riches and the other sources of war, are highly important: but nations consist of men; and a nation consisting of degenerate and cowardly men, is weak; a nation consisting of vigorous, public spirited and resolute men is strong. . . Virtue is a necessary constituent of national strength.

The picture is plain. Our best hope of progressive improvement over the long term lies in educating a free citizenry and thereby exploiting both the natural inclination to improvement and the natural inclination to sociability. Accordingly, the task of the educator is to encourage self-knowledge and a refined understanding of excellence. This

[19] *Essay*, 119.
[20] *Essay*, 168.
[21] *Essay*, 169.
[22] *Essay*, 33.

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is wisdom, moral philosophy's ancient goal. The inculcation of 'Wisdom' in individuals is the means by which 'Ambition' is allied to 'Capacity' for the good of the whole.

Ferguson's language is undoubtedly archaic, and sometimes unattractive to modern ears. He happily uses epithets that have either fallen out of use, or now have negative overtones, and when he speaks of 'Man' and 'men' it is fairly plain that he is not using the word as an inclusive pronoun. For all these reasons it is easy to relegate his *Essay* to the curiosities of intellectual history. Yet his account of the relation between human agency, moral education and social well being is an interestingly coherent one, and a large part of this interest lies in its providing a foil for an important development in contemporary philosophy – namely the rise of 'applied philosophy'.

4.

In the 18th century, what Ferguson meant by 'moral science' also went by the name of 'practical ethics'. Under this alternative label it can be said to have undergone a major revival in the second half of the 20th century. 'Practical ethics', 'philosophical ethics', or just 'ethics' is inspired by the belief that both the canonical texts and characteristic methods of philosophy can be brought to bear on moral issues and practical problems to good effect. From one perspective, this development can be said to have been a spectacular success, as evidenced by the huge number of college courses, PhD theses, books, journals, research institutes and academic conferences that it has called into existence. All of these are in one way or another devoted to introducing a philosophical dimension to public debates about the moral dimensions of social and political policy on a wide range of questions. For this very reason, however, their mere existence, albeit in large numbers, cannot be the sole criterion of success. The key question, obviously, is the extent to which they have actually influenced public debate and social policy, and whether they have done so beneficially.

Applying this criterion of success, however, is at the very least exceptionally difficult. This is not just because it would require extensive empirical research of a highly specific kind that no one is in a position to conduct. There are also important conceptual obstacles. How are we to trace the distinctive influence of philosophical books and papers in the political processes of a democratic society, processes that invite and involve the expression of every shade of opinion and every kind of constituency? Even if it were possible to identify

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academic publications that arrived at clear conclusions on specific themes, and whose publication was followed by policy decisions of an appropriate kind taken shortly thereafter, there would remain this counterfactual question; might the same decisions have been taken anyway? And there is then the issue of assessing the longer term consequences of such decisions (over what period?), and determining the extent to which they proved beneficial (to whom?). Besides, it does not take much familiarity with the history and practice of philosophical inquiry to realize that characteristically it raises more questions than it settles, and, like intellectual inquiry in general, thrives far more on disagreement than agreement. Indeed, without serious disagreement, intellectual debate and inquiry would stop. Accordingly, if politicians did turn to philosophers for advice, they would not find any very clear consensus, except on those matters (the injustice of slavery, for example) about which people in general have ceased to debate.

The main point to be made here, however, is that these largely insuperable difficulties are just what Ferguson's skepticism about the practical value of 'the information of books' would lead us to expect. Even to set out on such an attempt at assessment is to subscribe implicitly to the conception of political action that he rejects – the belief that intellectual inquiry – of any kind – is a valuable guide to political progress or social improvement. If the role, value and relevance of 'practical ethics' as it has been revived in contemporary philosophy depends upon this conception of political rationality, then however widespread and prominent it may be in colleges and universities, and however socially 'relevant' it is held to be (in contrast to more arcane subjects) it must in fact be declared an idle exercise.

Can practical ethics escape this unfortunate conclusion by being interpreted as an exercise in Ferguson's 'moral science'? After all, Ferguson was himself a Professor of Moral Philosophy and published his lectures in college textbooks. Indeed, this can be said to his principal purpose. David Allan notes that 'the practice of moral philosophy was not only a professional obligation for Adam Ferguson during his career as a university teacher. . . . it was the intellectual foundation for all of his far-reaching inquiries about man and society'. Importantly, though, he goes on to record 'the sheer ubiquity and importance of moral philosophy in eighteenth-century Scotland's intellectual life, as well as in the re-development of the Scottish universities' that was then taking place.[23] Both the ubiquity

[23] David Allan, *Adam Ferguson*, (AHRC, Aberdeen, Centre for Irish Scottish Studies, 2006), 42.

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and the role of the universities made it possible for Ferguson and his fellow professors to regard their classes in moral philosophy as playing a key role in the education of citizens, and in particular in the education of civic leaders, most notably the clergy. Ferguson's conception of 'moral science' was especially well suited to this role. Unlike, for example, Hume's distinction between the 'anatomist' and the 'painter' which effectively divorces 'science' and 'rhetoric',[24] leaving 'practical ethics' an exercise in the latter, Ferguson thinks moral inquiry and moral education are necessarily integrated. It was a model that was transported, almost intact, to the United States of America. As President of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) in the Revolutionary period, John Witherspoon, himself an Edinburgh graduate, steered the college very effectively in the direction of educating civic leaders for the new republic. To this end, and as President of the college, he reserved the capstone course in Moral Philosophy for himself. It was a model that was emulated widely by emergent American colleges for several decades thereafter.

In both cases, the effective pursuit and hence educational value of 'moral science' depended crucially on the special social circumstances prevailing. In sharp contrast, the circumstances in which the contemporary revival of practical ethics has taken place are radically different in a number of important respects. One is the sheer size of the context. Applied philosophers teach and publish in a scholarly world comprising millions of teachers and students, in thousands of colleges and universities, in hundreds of different countries. Secondly, compared with vocational and semi-vocational subjects such as law, business, medicine, economics and psychology, applied philosophy is a minority subject in the institutions where these philosophers teach, and enjoys nothing of the centrality that moral philosophy had in the 18th century curriculum. Thirdly, any claim that philosophy might now make to 'practical' education is both overshadowed and rivaled by the rise of technical subjects and professional schools of a kind unknown to Ferguson and Witherspoon. Fourthly, and most importantly perhaps, the dominance of popular democracy as an ideal makes a class of 'civic leaders', such as Ferguson and Witherspoon expected to educate, a political impossibility. Contrary to Habermas's influential picture of modern politics being conducted in a public sphere of 'communicative action', in modern democracies politicians are successful to the

[24] David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), (ed.) Tom L Beauchamp, (Oxford University Press, 1999), Chapter 1.

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extent that they command public opinion.[25] That opinion need not be in any way well informed or rationally deliberated, and is usually more effectively commanded by advertizing campaigns than by policy documents.

The conclusion to be drawn is this. Ferguson's conception of 'moral science' provides us with an interesting and coherent account of how philosophical inquiry and moral education can be integrated. Its educational potential, however, can only be realized in societies that are structured in certain ways. The recent return of 'practical ethics' as a notable part of the philosophical curriculum marks an aspiration to make philosophy socially valuable, in something like the way that Ferguson believed it could be. There is, though, this all important difference; it aims to do so in a wholly altered world. Ferguson's contemporary philosophical relevance, therefore, lies in his providing a framework within which some fundamental questions arise. One of these relates to the rationale of 'applied' philosophy. But if Ferguson is correct, a deeper and more wide ranging issue arises. How are citizens in mass democracies to be educated in the civic virtues that are essential to stable, free and just societies? And where should that education take place? It is not in any way obvious what the answers to these questions are.

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[25] See 'Public Opinion and the Public Sphere', in Emden, C.J. and Midgley, D., *Beyond Habermas: democracy, knowledge and the public sphere*, (New York: Berghan Books, 2013).

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