

Ferguson's Political Theology

The aim of this chapter is to better define the Christian character of Adam Ferguson's moral and political thought in preparation for deeper investigations of his thought in later chapters. Bearing in mind that we are not dealing with a systematic theologian but a Christian philosopher, this essay attempts to name moral and political theories *against* which Ferguson is most resistant and critical. Clarifying what he conceptually or practically opposes will share the benefit of highlighting what he positively favors as an alternative, his moral and political concerns being directed primarily at what seem to him perversions (and in some cases *inversions*) of Christian moral and political thought. Opposition to what I describe as three modern idealistic threats—determinacy, universality, and romanticism—will prop the canvas of this moral and political sketch. Precisely what is meant by each of these ideals will be treated extensively below, so I provide here only a few preliminary definitions. By “determinacy” I mean (generally) the necessary and uninterrupted forces of material cause and effect. “Universality” will refer to the human comprehension of reality and the application of universal principles to everyday existence as complete and totalizing. The type of “romanticism” referred to in what follows is more accurately the romantic seeds of freedom, sentiment, and novelty—overcoming of *telos* and custom in history—buried in fertile soils of the mid- to late-eighteenth century. Preliminary definitions carry certain limits, of course, so more flesh will need to be added to these skeletal definitions as the essay proceeds.

For determinacy, a brief rehearsal of early-modern natural law theory discussed intermittently throughout chapters 2 through 4 will furnish a starting point for outlining Ferguson's response to the theory's metaphysical implications. His critique of mechanistic natural law will also apply to our broader inquiry into commercial order. Similarly, for universality, the brand of determinacy emblazoned into modern imaginations sparked new optimism

over the mind's intellectual capacities. Determinacy helped established the conditions on which universality could kindle and enflame. Accounting for how this development came about will be an important goal in treating the second threat, as will its bearing on the overarching commercial question. Lastly, for romanticism, after we have noted the ways in which Ferguson is and is not a romantic, the inquiry will then focus on his critiques of two modern impulses: the sanctification of feeling and devotion to political novelty. At the conclusion of this essay, despite not having captured a thoroughgoing theological project, it will be possible to point toward certain theological commitments and in so doing offer a few examples of why Ferguson's thought is relevant to contemporary moral and political debates.

DETERMINACY

The observation that Newtonian physics furnished the eighteenth-century world a reinterpretation of natural law has become common to the point of axiomatic.¹ Prior to Newton, the story goes, natural law remained an expression of divine reason or will (depending on one's view) and treated most intelligibly as a metaphysical subject—"good," "truth," and "right," for example, being terms intrinsically transcendent yet imposing immanently binding powers behind the natural law. Law was considered "natural" in the sense that it corresponded essentially with the way things seemed to go in the natural world, describing nature though not contingent upon it. Early in the seventeenth century and several decades prior to the publication of Newton's *Principia*, Hugo Grotius described the Law of Nature as so unalterable "that it cannot be changed even by God himself."² The law of nature is permitted to authorize as it does because

1. The evidence of Newton's theoretical persuasiveness can be glimpsed as early as Locke and gains supportive momentum throughout the eighteenth century, especially in the Scottish Enlightenment, reaching its forceful climax in Kant. Gradual realization in the latter part of the eighteenth century that Leibniz had stumbled onto similar mathematical findings independently only further reinforced the explanatory prowess of Newtonian mechanics. As David Hume would attest, if Newton's theory could overcome the scrutiny of continental theorists, which by the mid-eighteenth century seemed to have already been achieved, "it will probably go down triumphant to the latest posterity." Adam Smith would have even fewer reservations. Isaac Newton, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (London: William Dawson & Sons, 1954); G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. R. Ariew and D. Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989); John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975); David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 121; Adam Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. I. S. Ross (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 91–105; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

were God to change or alter his Law it would lead to contradictions implicating divine character. The Creator is a God of order, not of disorder. Passages from Genesis 18, Isaiah 25, and Romans 2 further establish this point, for God himself “suffers his actions to be judged by this rule.”³

But surely there exists some contingency or flexibility in the Law of Nature—must everything be so rigidly prescribed? No, not necessarily, and Grotius says as much when he contends that “in reality there is no change in the unalterable law of nature, but *only in the things appointed by it*, and which are liable to variation.”⁴ The law of nature is therefore conceived as an authority, not as a uniform determinant of what does and does not occur or what shall or shall not be performed; it sets parameters to the possible—where an action is performed and how far it might be carried out, for example—but cannot control the action undertaken. This is why, explains Grotius, things are “allowed by the law of nature, not absolutely, but according to a certain state of affairs.”⁵ Unalterable as it may be, then, the law of nature is at once resolute and permeable, generic and particular, liberating and restrictive. Specific states of affairs, which for Grotius are governed by the Law of Nations, illustrate perfectly how the law of nature authorizes jurisprudence that avoids universal codifications best formulated contextually according to an actual state. Before a law can be considered binding it must first be considered right or truthful, a “dictate of right reason showing the moral turpitude or moral necessity of any act from its original agreement or disagreement with a rational nature.”⁶ But that is not all. Not only must an act agree or disagree with the right, but each act “is either forbidden or commanded by God, the author of nature.”⁷ Thus, for Grotius, the law of nature derives its authority from natural right, which is itself an expression of God's authority as author of nature.

Grotius' differentiation between what the natural law *commands* and what the natural law *determines* is in the latter part of the seventeenth century, particularly after publication of Newton's *Principia*, blended into new philosophic formulae. Accounting for this change, one possible explanation is that natural law became theoretically identified with laws of physics, and indeed Newton claimed rather confidently in his Preface to have “cultivated

2. Hugo Grotius, *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*, trans. A. C. Campbell (London: M. Walter Dunne, 1901), book I, chapter 1, section x.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.* By “moral necessity,” Grotius means simply that “the laws of nature must always bind us.”

7. *Ibid.*

mathematics so far as it regards philosophy.”⁸ This mathematical study of nature and its laws fundamentally altered the way natural law was comprehended. Language of mechanism came to replace the organic unity of the natural law seen in its parts and whole, in its universality and particularity, in its transcendence and its immanence. Scrutiny was leveled most stubbornly upon the perfections of creation, where God sent forth the world with such order that powers generating and sustaining this order were eligible for quick identification and comprehensive description. From this newly erected rational platform humanity could scrutinize all the principles, rules, and forces establishing existence. Newton’s mathematical vision subsequently relegated the unseen powers of the world to descriptive analysis of cause and effect: such-and-such a phenomenon is explained by formula “X,” and so therefore the variables of formula “X” identify both the cause and rationale of the phenomenon under consideration. Determinacy and necessity were thus embedded within the very texture of the natural law.

Philosophers were coming to terms with the implications of Newton’s mechanistic world picture as late as the mid-eighteenth century, ruminating once again over the perennial opposition between necessity and freedom. Laws of nature impose determinacy on reality by categorically disallowing states of affairs to be in any way other than they are, the present state being simply the effect of a seemingly infinite chain of prior causes. This raises the obvious question of whether there is any room for contingency, spontaneity, newness, creativity, or basic human liberty. Hume famously rekindled Scottish fascination with this seasoned dilemma on Newtonian terms. Both in his *Treatise on Human Nature* and later in the *Enquiries*, he maintains that while matter is always uniformly determined by cause-and-effect relationships, human beings remain susceptible to the determinants of nature because “man is everywhere the same” and “we acknowledge a uniformity in human motives and actions as well as in the operations of the body.”⁹ Each person’s will is directed by passions that animate it. Interpreting and understanding human action presupposes certain degrees of uniformity and regularity. Predictability helps ensure rational consistency. Every will has some passion or motivation behind it rendering the effects of some prior cause. “Liberty,” quips Hume, is not entirely unlike “chance, which is universally allowed to have no existence.”¹⁰ He thus employs descriptions of material cause and effect to close

8. Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, trans. Robert Thorp (London: 1777); see first sentence of Preface.

9. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 83–84. See also *Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 399–422.

the already narrow window for metaphysical freedom. From here he applies determinacy to other academic subjects, like history and political economy, and allows for material mechanisms to describe metaphorically how each is configured around certain causal relationships. Add to this the determinist leanings of other eighteenth-century theorists, and the perception that the spirit of the age favored physical determinacy is vouchsafed.

Ferguson's resistance to this spirit of determinacy takes several trajectories. We shall see in chapter 3 that the best way to describe his account of freedom is dialectical: freedom is best expressed in rightful limitations and rightful limitations are best expressed in freedom, belonging to one another as each makes the other intelligible to itself. Unbound freedom is not unlike the irrational thought of playing football without sidelines or field judges, or of a swim meet without starting guns or lane assignments—actions require a defined place and convention for performing *something* rather than *anything*. On the social plane, "limitations" refer to physical and political laws establishing concrete human domains; "limitations" are referred to in the eighteenth century as natural laws. For Ferguson, the jurisdiction of natural law (understood in the Grotian sense) sets the parameters within which every state of affairs cogently obtains but underdetermines what must or must not be the case in every such state of affairs. Law's scope is decided by the general contours of nature and, most importantly, by nature's Author. Nature is a *creature*, after all, and as a creature it expresses something about the character of its Artificer. "All of nature is connected," Ferguson explains, "and the world itself consists of parts, which like the stones of an arch, mutually support, and are supported."¹¹ This order of nature "consists in movements" that counteract, disturb, regulate, and balance one another; appearing to humankind as though nature repeatedly oscillates between being at peace with itself, and being at war. Yet "what seems to be irregular is the perfection of order," so any disturbance introduced to this oscillation is but part of nature's exquisite form. Nature has an integrity, an internal coherence. If one wishes to say it is governed by "laws" that would be fine with him, so long as the description did not abolish meaning or violate the Author's character.

Early sections of the *Principles of Moral and Political Science* argue repeatedly that although not everything is within one's freedom to choose, each nevertheless has distinguishable options from which to decide. So, for example, one cannot choose which society to be born into, but afterward may choose

10. Hume, *Enquiries*, 96.

11. Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (New York: Garland, 1978), 18.

who to make friends with or keep company. What sets man apart from other animals is that he possesses a mind “intimately conscious of itself, as it exists in thought, discernment, and will.”¹² In section thirteen of chapter II of the *Principles*, moreover, determinacy is countered by positive appeal to the truth of metaphysical freedom. Freedom is implicitly acknowledged in the fact of each being *conscious* of her freedom. If one is conscious of one’s freedom, believing it to be the case that one’s actions bear the mark of contingency is evidence for being free in reality. Putting even greater distance between himself and Hume, he asserts that “effect is correlative to cause, and they are inseparable; but there may be existence without any cause external to itself, as there may be will without any cause but the mind that is willing.”¹³ The mind, not the passions, energizes and directs the will; it is “the cause of its own determination.” Therefore “it is absurd,” as he sharpens the rhetoric, “to consider volition as an act of necessity, not of choice.”¹⁴ Philosophical clarity on this question was made opaque by the employment of “mechanical imagery” to describe how existence formally operates. In point of fact, will is by definition the “direction of mind” and therefore allows only such determinacy as might allow for meaningful expressions of human freedom. “Discernment and freedom are essential to intelligent beings.”¹⁵

“Mechanical imagery” has also been misapplied to divine providence. “The consideration that infinite power must have preordained the operations of will, and that these operations therefore cannot be free, is an argument taken from a collateral subject,” says Ferguson; an idea that would seem to undermine the fact that we are conscious of freedom. By “collateral subject” he means (presumably) that of divine omniscience. Human beings cannot know with any certainty what divine omniscience is like or to what it ultimately extends. We *do* have a notion of our own freedom, however, and this seems more reliable of the pair. This is not to say that God’s knowledge is somehow limited, for it includes “whatever may result from the source of contingency” and “his almighty providence is sufficient to control the effects of such freedom.”¹⁶ Ferguson’s proposal departs slightly from Augustinian compatibility of divine foreordination and human freedom in its suggestion that necessities of divine foreknowledge would still be perfect even if that knowledge allowed for certain “contingencies.” God sees in the “eternal Now,” but our consciousness of

12. *Ibid.*, 48.

13. Ferguson, *Principles*, 153.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 154.

freedom must imply that we are not self-deceived. Freedom must therefore survive as a provision in foreknowledge itself.

Were we not free, how could humanity be held responsible for its actions? Determinism dissolves any form of moral or legal culpability into meretricious innocence. Similar problems of culpability arise in instances where motive and will are causally equivocated; if passions empower will, then those passions motivating the will become the objects of blame, not the action or actor. On this Aristotelian view one can always declare after committing a wrongful act that "I'm not yet the kind of person who can avoid X or positively perform Y" and escape guilt. Motive determines will to the erasure of fault. "[H]ow absurd," remarks an annoyed Ferguson, "for the fatalist to plead that he is not accountable for having committed a bad action; under pretence that his intention itself, which was the motive or cause of such action, was bad!"¹⁷ Therefore neither humanity nor the reality it inhabits is wholly determined by material causes or divine foreknowledge.

Resisting the determinacy latent in "mechanical imagery," Ferguson posits instead a God of wisdom whose will is not exhausted or comprehended by the laws of nature. Human action contains a wild surplus of meaning that once performed discharges a multitude of consequences uncontrollably into the world that often "discover a meaning as an effect discovers a cause."¹⁸ All action emerging from divine government is ripe with significance and power. If semblances of ingenuity or innovation are detected in any human accomplishment "the wisdom of God," not the person or species, is to be credited.¹⁹ God is envisaged as coming alongside the mind, supplying it with virtues and needed insight. So, human action upheld by divine wisdom would seem to open certain contingencies, suggesting a more "organic" and less mechanistic government of reality.²⁰

Ferguson therefore rejects material determinacy on much the same grounds as Grotius. The laws of nature are *authorities*, not comprehensive physical determinants. In saying what is or is not the case, the laws of nature also define what can and cannot be the case. After Newton, the laws of nature and the divine will are more or less equivocated, and the resulting brand of determinacy contains two crucial implications for eighteenth-century thought. On the one hand, equivocating divine will with natural law enshrines any event

17. *Ibid.*, 155.

18. *Ibid.*, 38.

19. *Ibid.*, 53.

20. Ferguson can be seen throughout the *Principles* to draw upon "organic" imagery deliberately opposed to "mechanistic." See especially Part I, chapter 3, section xiv and Part I, chapter 1, section i.

or idea as God-breathed. Newton's German counterpart, Gottfried Leibniz, had suggested that because God could do no other than create the best of all possible worlds this world must in fact be the best possible, for "if the smallest evil that comes to pass in the world were missing in it, it would no longer be this world."²¹ This is possible because God has "ordered all things beforehand once for all, having foreseen prayers, good and bad actions, and all the rest."²² The "pre-established harmony" of the universe presumes all experienced evils to be a necessary part of God's original creative act. And we will see in chapter 2 why Scottish theorists were inclined to accept the basic material determinacy, or "pre-established harmony," of Western history, and parse it into four eras of commercial innovation. Determinacy was transposed retrospectively onto the narrative of history itself, reinterpreting it as a saga of material and rational progress.

When the purposes of God were conflated with the natural law and the story of history retold as a narrative of material progress, it is perhaps inevitable that God's intentions would soon be considered *in terms of* material progress. Commercially speaking, as will be seen in chapter 4, determinacy was so fundamental to market logic in the eighteenth century that the laws of nature were identified with the express will of God. Economic man functions in such-and-such a way, as do the patterns that result over a period of time, and therefore when supported by the great history of economic innovation even the injustices and evils of the market are sanctified by ends the market pursues. Indeed, the professional study of modern economics itself has become in the modern age a study of models comprised essentially of variables. Use of the word "variable" is a bit of misnomer, of course, since economic models depend on conceptualizing even indeterminate signifiers to get explanatory equations off the ground. Modern economics dismisses indeterminacy, in other words, because as an essentially mathematical discipline it is premised on fixed and determined variables of commercial information, actions, and events.²³ It is precisely this brand of determinacy that disallows spontaneity, uniqueness, altruism, nonconsumptive political action, and other potential defeaters to the "triumph of determinacy" that Ferguson opposed so adamantly.²⁴ He opposed it, I suggest, because determinacy draws upon a *pagan*, not a Christian conception of human existence; an alien political theology that confuses how the world

21. G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrar, trans. E. M. Huggard (London: Routledge, 1952), 128.

22. *Ibid.*

23. The developing field of Behavioral Physics proves rather troubling in this regard; as though human action could be predictable enough to fit within alphanumeric variables of mathematical certainty.

24. A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), chapter 7.

participates in the life of God. It is not enough to say forthrightly that creation is given perfect license to be what it is—it must also give account for how it fails to exist in the *right way*. “Providential deism,” as Charles Taylor has defined the period in question, might refer to an *emerging* school of thought in the long eighteenth century, but he mistakenly assumes it to be the *dominant* view of eighteenth-century philosophy and theology.²⁵ To better understand how this version of determinacy found support and migrated into commercial theory more broadly, we turn our attention to the next conceptual “resistance” on which Ferguson sets his sights: Universality.

UNIVERSALITY

When I suggest Ferguson resists universality I certainly do not mean to imply that he rejects universals or that he is not a realist; he undoubtedly is. Universals are real and objects in existence refer to them—or depending on one’s view, are supported by them—when truth claims are under consideration. Belief in the existence of God, for example, is thought to be universal.²⁶ “Principles” of universality, on the other hand, are truths that do not depend upon human comprehension to be authoritative. Principles contain ideas that operate like axioms, anchoring and integrating other ideas to which they relate. But their truth is not person-dependent. Ferguson has no problem with the objective existence and authority of universals; indeed they are necessary. His concern is rather with *claims* of universality, as in the presumption to have achieved universal scope. His critique of universality is therefore largely epistemic in orientation—the principles adhere in reality but the hurried claiming and application of unjustified principles should be resisted.

The spirit behind Ferguson’s resistance to empirical certitude was later given a more penetrating and critical focus by Hegel, in whom we can see the persistence of Ferguson’s reservation. The *Phenomenology* begins by treating consciousness in much the way Ferguson has treated the more generic concept of mind, as something to *apprehend* but not to *comprehend*.²⁷ Sense-certainty,

25. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), part III. See also *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press, 2007).

26. “The belief of the existence of God has been universal,” Ferguson claimed in one of his lectures, “and cannot depend on circumstances peculiar to any age or nation, but must result of human nature, or the suggestion of circumstances that occur in every place and age.” See *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (New York: Garland, 1978), part III, sections 1 and 2.

27. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 58. In our review of Hegel we are concerned here only with his critique of what we have called

Hegel explains, might appear the richest and truest kind of knowledge, but on reflection we find that “this very certainty proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest truth.”²⁸ Sense perceptions are not immediate truths chiseling away at the mind’s *tabula rasa*. “An actual sense-certainty is not . . . pure immediacy, but an instance of it.”²⁹ For Hegel, universals are located in the *particular*, where essence and instance synthesize to open the universal door. Sense certitude is never immediate but always mediated—universals colored with a particular hue. History is the site of this dialectic as it tells the story of incarnate universality. Ferguson would affirm the historical site of this dialectic perhaps, but would resist the eschatological implications Hegel’s historical “spirit” conveys. As we have referred to its eighteenth-century mode, at any rate, universality represents a perspective claiming rational completeness in a world teeming with incompleteness, ambiguity, tension, and paradox.

Anyone who has lived long enough to grasp the paradoxical balance of intelligibility and confounding chaos in the created order, with its seasons and vicissitudes, is aware “he cannot define knowledge, nor tell what it is to know, any more than he can tell what it is for the mind to exist.”³⁰ In its pithiest formulation, skepticism calls into question claims of noetic certitude on the grounds that “knowledge” is itself unknowable. One cannot describe adequately even what it means “to know,” and so one’s conception of things is described alternatively in terms of “ideas” forming images, types, or copies resembling originals. Challenging our understanding of what ideas are and how they are acquired is the limitation of language’s reliance on analogy and metaphor, in which representation of “impressions” of originals can only draw upon illustrations of how original ideas are “copied” intellectually. In short, “we cannot have knowledge of a subject if we have not any notion of it.”³¹ Behind every piece of knowledge are notional preconditions that make knowledge possible—grammatical rules, linguistic customs, logic, and so forth. These preconditions are equal parts linguistic and conventional.

In his most focused treatment of knowledge, “On Knowledge in General,” Ferguson seems to have a mind to reject the whole fledgling project we have come to call modern epistemology. The theoretical impetus to explain comprehensively the mind and its content is essentially mistaken, he thinks,

“universality”—the claiming of rational certitude and absolute rational scope—not the doctrine of universals within Hegel’s vast system.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ferguson, *Principles*, vol. I, 70.

31. Ibid., 74.

“and hence the scepticism of ingenious men.”³² The mind’s inexplicability resonates with the eighteenth-century discipline of “pneumatics,” which when defined by its etymological roots signifies something akin to “*spirit of the mind*.” Immaterial, intangible, and incomprehensible, when made the direct object of study the mind shrouds itself in mysteries. Now, of course, there is no sense in denying the reality of knowledge *en toto*, particularly if everyone were cautious “neither to admire nor condemn what they do not know.”³³ The epistemic complication Ferguson wishes to avoid is the claim to have *explained* the mind’s complexities; our methods should seek only to “investigate and to apply, not to explain, the laws of conception and will.”³⁴

Ferguson opposes undue rational optimism inasmuch as it appears as a recurrent theoretical proviso of the period, and to grasp the force of his reservation more completely, we can summarize with three concepts: rational immediacy, noetic certitude, and the exaltation of ideals.³⁵ The first, rational immediacy, relates to impressions made upon the mind through experience. Material experience leaves an immaterial mark on the perceiving mind. The second, noetic certitude, supposes that one’s beliefs are held naturally with complete certitude. These conclusive beliefs are then leveled definitively upon reality in ways expressed by the third theme, as an exaltation of ideals. Certitude precipitates the eventual consecration of ideals, replacing the governing order of reality with the intellectual principles achieved through scientific evaluation of experience. The three conceptual themes are therefore collaborative. Ferguson’s response to this joint subordination of metaphysical authority to rational comprehension is most sharply addressed in his treatment of the “fundamental law of morality” in chapter two, part two of the *Principles*.³⁶ The moral significance and effect of this subordination was what Ferguson found most problematic and helps explain his positive attempt to underscore the metaphysical, and indeed *religious*, character of morality.

Eighteenth-century moral philosophy concentrated on the interior constellation of affections causally enlivening morality. Beginning with Shaftesbury’s invention of the Moral Sense and continuing through Hutcheson, Smith, and Hume, moral authority became ever more narrowly defined by

32. *Ibid.*, 76.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. The transition Ferguson opposes is what at least one modern commentator has referred to as the dissolution of reality into subjectivity. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

36. As will be seen, the argument is also reiterated in several sections of the *Essay*.

intellectual capacities or faculties, the moral “sense” itself becoming but a super-added function similar to that of smelling, tasting, or touching. Moral deliberation thus became a natural, inferentially immediate function; learned from birth, ingrained by society, and refined by attention to public perception. At the time of Ferguson’s appointment to the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh, both Smith and Hume had already sought to reduce morality to a conceptual singularity—“fellow-feeling” and “sympathy” respectively. In Smith’s case we have but to note that his text on moral philosophy is cast in terms of a *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which seems to suggest the subject and object of morality are one and the same. Hume’s *Treatise* and *Enquiries*, and to a lesser extent his *Essays*, elevate the passions to the highest plane of moral theorizing. Smith and Hume’s mistake, at least on Ferguson’s view, was to understand sentiment and reason as separable, one as capable of moral evaluation and the other as amoral. Emphasizing sentiment led Smith and Hume to devote most of their attention to development of a reenvisioned virtue ethic naturally framed in terms of habits and customs. What raises alarm on this account is the extreme internalization of moral authority and privileging of human judgment. As will be seen later in this essay, affections furnish the spring sunlight that nurtures a budding romanticism.

For Ferguson, on the other hand, *benevolence* is the fundamental law of morality. All virtues that have ever been named, especially the classical virtues of wisdom, fortitude, temperance, and justice, converge at a conceptual starting point of ultimate meaning—benevolence. He often refers to benevolence as though largely synonymous with “goodness,” or a “good-will” (its etymological root), since the “greatest good incident to human nature is the love of mankind.”³⁷ This love serves as the platform for all the other virtues and aids each person’s attempt to observe them in their conduct. “Benevolence, therefore, may in some degree be considered as a principle of wisdom, of fortitude, and temperance; and . . . we cannot greatly err, in assuming it the fundamental or primary object of moral law.”³⁸ Establishing love as the chief moral good of humankind and the unity of the virtues, we perceive already the beginnings of a thoroughly Christian, and perhaps more acutely Augustinian, account of ethics.³⁹

37. Ferguson, *Principles*, vol. I, 110. The reader may find it initially peculiar that Ferguson refers to the “greatest good” as love of mankind, rather than the love of God. Why he does not need to refer to love of God in this passage will become clear later.

38. *Ibid.*, 111.

39. For an excellent review of Augustine’s political ethics, see Eric Gregory’s *Politics and the Order of Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

He treats “applications” of the moral law as if it were a scientific exercise. This “science” of morality “abstracts from local forms and observances” and “becomes in the mind a principle of extensive benevolence, by which the individual states himself as part in the order of nature, and entirely devoted to the will of its Author.”⁴⁰ It is worth noting that “science” is nowhere defined by Ferguson as the embodiment of scientific *method*, but rather as a lens through which to clarify perception of the created order. Skepticism chastens science only lightly, for it is to him “the highest attainment of created intelligence and nearest approach to a communication with the supreme Creator.”⁴¹ As a discipline it “contemplates the form of beauty,” putting one in touch with the substance of creative brilliance. *Moral science* is applied to reality, seeing as it is vastly “more obvious to most men than even the qualities of mind itself.”⁴² If this reductive science is applied subjectively rather than objectively; that is, if we apply moral interrogation strictly to the interior moral life, then moral “science” becomes precisely what Hume insists—a “science of man.” Sentiments, affections, passions, and other internally nonrational powers are now cultivated in the scientific Petri dish. Whether such interior powers are “approved” or “disapproved” thus becomes a serious moral problem. What sorts of criteria, for example, can measure the moral worth of affective powers? Why do we praise or blame others for what they do?

The challenge of accounting for moral approbation persists throughout the eighteenth century, and Ferguson is quick to demonstrate just how many voices have given credence to it. Clark, Shaftesbury, Kames, Smith, and Hume are all shown to have occupied themselves with this question of why we are inclined to praise or blame others, and for what reason. Ferguson thinks it should not matter whether we find another’s conduct morally pleasing or odious, but whether certain actions are in fact either *right* or *wrong*. “Mankind are not agreed” on what actions are to be praised or blamed, and “they differ no less in what they admire than in what they enjoy.”⁴³ According to his interlocutors, virtues and the approbation resulting from them are reflected in an action’s congruence with excellence or perfection. Yet, he rejoins, “mankind are not agreed on this subject,” for “the idea of perfection no doubt may be associated with subjects divested of merit.”⁴⁴ His concern is that ideal standards of perfect virtue will be wrongly assigned to actions that are, in truth, largely or entirely

40. *Ibid.*, 113.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, 134.

44. *Ibid.*

immoral. “External actions” may result from any number of internal conditions of mind variously “different in different instances” and therefore not universal. The reason why “there is not any certain rule of approbation or disapprobation respecting the manners or behavior of men” is that “the same physical action in one instance applauded as a virtue, in another instance is reprobated as a crime; or rather . . . where the physical action is the same, the moral action is altogether different and is an object of approbation or disapprobation, corresponding to that difference of the moral quality.”⁴⁵ There is often an enormous chasm, as it were, between what an action really accomplishes and what one *thinks* an action accomplishes. What is in one place commended as an act of bravery might in another place receive condemnation for foolishness, and Ferguson gives examples of how widely and frequently this ethical tension has appeared in history, but the problem is not merely one of moral reality and faulty perceptions.

The moral content of an action is mostly formed by the general customs of a people, such that what is “mannerly” in one place might be an “offense” in another. Local context is imperative to moral ascription. The tension introduced by this turn to contextual assessment vexes us because “we are not qualified to perceive in what manner the moral action . . . should be differently *understood*, or in what manner the same moral action should result from physical performances extremely different.”⁴⁶ Attributes admirable or detestable may vary greatly from place to place and from person to person; people may simply have different opinions on the commendations due an action when many “actions of men are considered more as *expressions* of what they mean or intend, than as operations materially beneficial or hurtful.”⁴⁷ In either case, whether considering the consequences or the intentions of an act, complications are induced by misinterpretation. For Ferguson, however, regardless of how intentions or consequences are interpreted, the truly benevolent agent does whatever *bene-fits* the world around him, since it is in fact “beneficent to treat every person in the manner which he himself conceives to be beneficial or kind.”⁴⁸ Opinion does not alter the rightness or wrongness of an act, which altogether overrides what anyone may think of it, because differences of opinion “will be equally found not to affect the original or the essential distinction of moral right and wrong.”⁴⁹ This distinction leads him to the

45. *Ibid.*, 138.

46. *Ibid.*, 140.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, 141.

49. *Ibid.*