

THE KINGDOM OF FREEDOM IN THE GARDEN OF GOD:  
FERGUSON'S POSTULATES OF MORAL ACTION

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ABSTRACT

Similar to Immanuel Kant, Adam Ferguson links freedom of the will, the existence of God, and immortality to the possibility of moral conduct. We explore these three dimensions of Ferguson's thought across several of his works. Ferguson's account of these postulates of morality not only anticipates Kant but incorporates a religious sensibility that manifests an appeal to nature rather than scripture.

Keywords: Adam Ferguson; free will; existence of God; immortality; moral progress

The debate on free will is not only old but thorny, with implications both metaphysical and ethical. On this topic, the notable contribution of David Hume, not to mention the opposing perspective of Thomas Reid, has long been recognized by scholars of eighteenth-century Scottish thought. However, Adam Ferguson takes up the question in schematic yet interesting ways, drawing in part from the thought of Reid. Yet Ferguson's contribution is almost universally ignored.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, in the nineteenth century, the biographer John Small pointed out, 'In opposition to Hutcheson, who confound the Will with Desire, Ferguson first of all establishes Free-will as the subject and foundation of Moral Science' (Small 1864, 51). This striking observation points to an unnoticed

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similarity between Ferguson's account of morals and that of a more illustrious theoretician, Immanuel Kant. Ferguson calls on the same assumptions—freedom, immortality, and the existence of God—invoked by Kant as 'postulates' of morality. Ferguson makes clear that morality presupposes free will, and he suggests that the possibility of the moral life requires the existence of God and a life eternal.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant asserts that the knowledge of the moral law provides the basis for inferring that the will is free: duty presupposes a free will. In this *Critique* Kant suggests that a free will chooses rightly (5:29, 162), but in his work on religion, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant allows that a will may choose either good or evil. Such differences in treatment across these works (explored most notably by Paul Guyer 2006, chapter 6), need not hamper the general analogy that we set forth. The other two postulates (immortality, the existence of God) are not known by inference but serve as conditions for realizing the highest good, a reconciliation of moral worthiness and a happiness appropriate to that worth. However, happiness and moral worth are neither identical concepts or analytically linked (5:111, 229). When reason determines the will it does so irrespective of any material inducement. To attain genuine moral worth there must be 'Complete conformity of the will with the moral law,' but this 'holiness' (5:122, 238) is hardly possible in the material world, even though it is a necessary part of the highest good, the conjunction of morality and happiness. To attain such holiness requires that we postulate immortality, 'the presupposition of the existence and personality of the same rational being continuing endlessly' (5:122, 238). Since happiness must be proportioned to the agent's morality, then we must also postulate a 'cause adequate to this effect'—God (5:124, 240). Kant concludes, 'morals is not properly the doctrine of how we are to *make* ourselves happy but of how we are to become *worthy* of happiness. Only if religion is added to it does there also enter the hope of some day participating in happiness to the degree that we have been intent upon not being unworthy of it' (5:130, 244, italics original).

Kant's appeal to a naturalized religion mirrors that of Ferguson, but the similarities between the two thinkers do not establish that Kant had read Ferguson. Ferguson's major works (*An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy*, *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic*, *Principles of Moral and Political Science*) were quickly translated into German (Oz-Salzberger 1995, 131) and proved influential to several German thinkers (Bresky 1961, Kettler 1965, 4, 9–10 n1; Oz-Salzberger 1995). Fania Oz-Salzberger has described how many German scholars regarded Ferguson as articulating the common sense positions of Thomas Reid, a perspective of particular fascination to philosophers at the University of Göttingen (136, and see 229–256), not to mention the noted translator of the *Institutes*, Christian Garve (191). We know of no direct or explicit evidence that the sage of Königsberg

had read Ferguson's works though he would certainly have been aware of them and Ferguson's appeal to the historical progress of humanity would have held some appeal to Kant.<sup>2</sup> At best, one can assert that Ferguson's use of the ideas of freedom, immortality, and the existence of God provide an anticipation or analogy to their deployment in Kant's *corpus*.

The seriousness of Ferguson's approach to morals, which had particular appeal to Garve (Oz-Salzberger 1995, 194), is not matched by rigorous development. Nonetheless, over the course of a long life, Ferguson's views on these three ideas remain fairly consistent, even as emphases differ. In the introduction to his *Institutes of Moral Philosophy*, Ferguson affirms that the moral 'ought' not only assumes voluntary choice but that knowledge of our obligations requires 'pneumatics,' the study of mind or spirit, whether human or divine (*Institutes*, Intro, VII). Ferguson's *Institutes* makes clear to his students that the moral life requires knowledge of our nature (will), a recognition of God's existence, and the admission of immortality. To consider the uniqueness of Ferguson's outlook, we shall address the three postulates of morality, reversing the preferred order of Kant, and starting with the account of God's existence, turning next to immortality, then finally to an examination of Ferguson's notion of will. As we proceed we shall note developments as they occur across Ferguson's works and take into account whether his account of these postulates differs from that of Kant. The considerations set forth should illuminate how Ferguson's moral thought remains imbued with a religious sensibility that is both deep and sincere.

#### ON THE BELIEF IN THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Despite his upbringing, theological training, and service to a moderate Presbyterianism, one finds scant mention of propositions of religious belief in Ferguson's works. To infer from this paucity of references that Ferguson moved away from belief in Christian doctrine would be premature (Fagg 1995, xxix; Brewer 2008, 17; Heath 2015, 57–60). Nor is it obvious that Ferguson abandoned the idea of sin, as some have suggested (L. Hill 2006, 48–50; cf. Heath 2015, 61–63). Even so, Ferguson treats religious belief in naturalistic terms, a feature that has been described well (see chapter 6 of J. Hill, 2017). At various moments, Ferguson even treats varieties of religious belief as superstitions. In his foremost work (*An Essay on the History of Civil Society*), notable for its omission of any focused discussion of religion, he declaims of superstition that, 'It has yielded only to the light of true religion, or to the study of nature, by which we are led to substitute a wise providence operating by physical causes, in the place of phantoms that terrify or amuse the ignorant' (*Essay* 89–90). Despite his public embrace of natural religion, Ferguson's perspective is neither antithetical to or inconsistent with a continued faith.

Like others in the eighteenth century, Ferguson utilizes the apparent facts of design and order to conclude that God exists. The so-called ‘argument from design’ looms large in Ferguson’s thinking, though he does not always treat it as an *argument*. In the *Institutes*, Ferguson approaches the topic from a Baconian perspective: inductively considered, the belief in God is ubiquitous (*Institutes* III.I.I, 122). To explain this universality of belief, Ferguson attests to two possibilities: ‘The belief of god being universal, cannot depend on circumstances peculiar to any age or nation, but must be the result of human nature, or the suggestion of circumstances that occur in every place and age’ (*Institutes* III.I.II, 123; see also *Principles* I.II.XV, 163). Having given two options, Ferguson opts for both! The circumstances of the physical world suggest purposive elements or features, and as individuals perceive an end or direction so do they infer a designer. One might think of this as a two-step process in which there is a perception of a basic fact (where such ‘facts’ are prior to any rule or law, *Institutes* Intro.I, 1) and then an inference to a designer. However, the perception of design (purpose) generates, without logical transition, the belief in a designer, and in this way the belief in God is natural: ‘we can assign no reason for our belief, but that we are so disposed by our nature’ (*Institutes* III. I.II, 24). The perceived fact that entities work toward specific ends causes us to believe that the entities were designed to work in this way: from perceived order we naturally infer an orderer. Thus, Ferguson concludes, ‘No argument is required to prove, nor can argument have any effect to refute, where nature has determined that we shall continue to believe’ (*Institutes* III.I.II, 124).

Effectively, Ferguson has appropriated Hume’s naturalistic response to his own skeptical argument regarding induction. Just as Hume observes that we are naturally disposed to reason from the past to the future (‘Nature will always maintain her rights’ EHU, V.I), so does Ferguson assert that we are naturally inclined to believe there is a divine orderer if we find purposive actions in unintelligent things. Yet Ferguson’s contention ignores how Hume’s appeal to nature does not settle the rational doubt admitted so agreeably by Hume. Indeed, Ferguson’s account ignores two of Hume’s subsequent charges, set forth in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Even if one discerns an order in some item or thing, that recognition does not allow an inference to an ordering mind unless one can first know that mind is the only principle or means of bringing about order (DNR, Part II, 50). Secondly, that a designing mind is needed for some part of the universe does not tell us that a designer is needed for the whole (Part II, 51).

In his later work, *Principles*, Ferguson comes to recognize a distinction between purposive part and ordered whole. Ferguson reiterates the natural belief in a designer at least for the organs of animals and other parts of the whole (*Principles* I.II.XV, 165) but he adds that the perceptions that are formed of parts may be expanded by ‘the learned’ to the system of nature as a whole

(I.II.XV,166). This expansion from part to whole may not 'be obvious to every beholder' (I.II.XV, 166), and because it is not recognizable by all, it follows that this inference is not instinctual.

Ferguson moves further away from the purely instinctual claim in one of his manuscript essays. In 'Of Cause and Effect/Ends and Means/Order Combination and/Design' (1799), Ferguson states that the inference from order to God's design presupposes some element of goodness in the effect: 'It is only when Good is apparent that the interposition of Mind or Intention can be inferred from the mere Effect. Goodness of Effect however is in a considerable degree evidence of Choice or Intention in the Cause' (*Manuscripts* XIII, 123). This condition of beneficial effect may have served as a tacit assumption in Ferguson's earlier works, but once rendered explicit it points to how interest in arguments from design arises from the fact that we discern benefit in some effect. The passage also suggests another revision: Ferguson no longer takes the inference to a designer to be instinctual but probabilistic: 'Goodness of Effect' offers a 'considerable degree [of] evidence' of a designing mind.

The subsequent sentences reveal another insight: 'If to this [viz., the claim that intention can be inferred from beneficial effect] be joined a combination of means appearing to have no other connection than their joint cooperation in producing a Good Effect [then] The Evidence of mind or Intention is as compleat As Reality in the case presented could have furnished' (*Manuscripts* XIII, 123). If the effect is wrought through a series of causes operating jointly and these causes have no other connection to one another except their contribution to the effect, then we have evidence of design that is 'as compleat' as anything reality might present. Here Ferguson appeals to disparate entities or elements cooperating to produce an effect which is not otherwise part of the purpose or intention of these disparate entities. The 'means' to which Ferguson refers are material things or their elements, each with an end or purpose independent of that of any other. If these elements nonetheless cooperate to produce a good effect, then this successful interaction suggests a designer. This appeal to complex orders should not surprise given Ferguson's interest in what would otherwise be regarded as spontaneous or unintended effects (Heath 2009; L. Hill 2006, 101–121). In fact the complexity attests to how the inference remains not only empirical and probabilistic but as tight or 'compleat As Reality ... could have furnished,' requiring no further evidence than that of the good effect and the complexity of the means (see also *Manuscripts* XXVII, part 1, 223).

Ferguson offers three distinct explanations for the relevance of God to the moral life, two of which stem directly from the idea of God as designer. Consider first how the perception of design in nature provides a moral model for the human being. For example, in the *Principles*, in elaborating on how the learned apprehend the design of God in creation, Ferguson remarks that in the recognition of this design, 'man is finally let into the secret of his own destination'

(I.II.XV, 166). The destination to which Ferguson refers is the attainment of moral knowledge delivered not through divine declaration but ‘by means of the order established in his [God’s] works’ (I.II.XV, 166–167). In God’s design one detects wisdom and benevolence. Benevolence is the ‘fundamental law of moral wisdom’ (II.II.I, 110), so ‘It is supremely agreeable to perceive, in the works of nature, the marks or expressions of wisdom and goodness, on which we may rely for the happy disposal of all things’ (II.II.II, 20). Our own activity may replicate these virtues as a limited approximation to God: When the human becomes active and benevolent then, ‘His beauty and excellence is a participation, however faintly obtained, of that wisdom and goodness which constitute the splendor and majesty of the works of God’ (II.I.III, 29). As individuals apprehend in the system of nature the purposive and benevolent ends of providence, so may they glean a sense of how to live both individually and socially. What the account fails to demonstrate is whether individuals could learn these lessons elsewhere, without any appeal to divine design.

A second and complementary thesis declares how God’s creation provides conditions for moral progress.

Society, in which alone the distinction of right and wrong is exemplified, may be considered as the garden of God, in which the tree of knowledge of good and evil is planted; and in which men are destined to distinguish, and to chuse, among its fruits (*Principles* I.III.X, 268)

As providential designer, God has placed us in a garden in which we are challenged to learn and to progress (see Chen 2008, 176–178). To accomplish providential ends, God elects to rely on human beings to actively engage, learn, and progress, both as individuals and within communities. In this manner, individuals function as secondary causes that mediate between God’s creation and divine ends. Providence and the human will work in tandem (Chen 2008, 185). In one of the manuscript essays, Ferguson approaches this theme by considering a hypothetical scenario:

If the Almighty were to operate merely by Acts of Will without the intervention of Secondary means The Intelligent Creature would have no resources but that of Prayer to the Almighty for Interposition in Obtaining the end or purpose in View. If he wanted a Tree he must pray to have it full grown in his land and if Prayer is the only Support to his faculties on this Earth (*Manuscripts* XIII, 124).

However, instead of events occurring via the continual intervention of God, the material world is so created that the human being, blessed with natural tendencies of self-preservation, sociability, and ambition (or improvement), must not only

overcome challenges but learn to act morally. That God has placed us in a garden in which we progress implies that the world is fitted to our activity and ethical progress and designed to provide both physical and moral challenges (*Institutes* III.II, 130–131). Ferguson attests that, 'A being that perceived no moral evil, or no defect, could have no principle of improvement' (III.II, 132). The natural and the social provide the human being with circumstances for intelligent activity, occupation and labor: 'The Scene is fitted to him in a peculiar degree by calling forth the exercise of faculties that profit by exertion and Habit by affording occasions of research And experience that extend his information and correct his Errors' (*Manuscripts* XIII, 125; see also XXI, 183). As Ferguson affirms, the 'vicissitudes to which human affairs are exposed' provide circumstances for learning and improvement but also for mistakes and poor choices (*Principles* I.III.XIII, 314). The idea that the world is fitted to us has another implication: we progress morally in so far as we respond to the scene in which we are placed. Such a view runs the risk of acquiescence to the status quo but it also steers away from a idealized conception of autonomous choice in which one chooses the circumstances and conditions of self-realization and individual growth.

Of course, one might object that the vicissitudes to which Ferguson appeals, along with any beneficent effects, could be explained in terms of a naturalistic explanation shorn of divine design, just as Hume explained in his *Dialogues*. Even if Ferguson ignores, as he clearly does, the possibility that patterns and order might emerge without providential foresight, his larger point is that the world that emerges affords us a suitable venue for moral progress. That the world is fitted to moral progress does not entail that we *do* progress, only that the circumstances are arranged so that progress is realistically feasible. If there exists a fit between these circumstances and some final moral truth, then it is not altogether obvious how a naturalistic perspective, including that of Hume, could explain this fitness.

Neither of the two accounts limned above are similar to the reasoning that Kant employs in postulating the existence of God. For Kant, God exists to ensure that happiness is secured and proportioned to those who achieve moral goodness. However, Ferguson proposes a third thesis that does conform to Kant's postulate. The Scot explains that since 'man's instinctive desire of distributive justice is not fulfilled in this life' (*Institutes* III.VI.III, 137), then God will ensure justice in the life hereafter. The concern with justice is reiterated in the *Principles* where Ferguson treats eternal justice as 'a symptom or [sic] earnest of the moral government of God' (*Principles* II.II.VII, 160). Only the presence of God and the promise of immortality can repair the cracks between morality and justice. Thus, as his predecessor, Shaftesbury, pointed out, 'there can be nothing more fatal to Virtue, than the weak and uncertain Belief of a future Reward and Punishment. For the stress being laid wholly here, if this Foundation come to fail, there is no further Prop or Security to Mens Morals' (Shaftesbury, *Inquiry*, III.3, 39–40). As

the saying goes, ‘as the call, so the echo’: those who do good in this life must receive justice, those who do evil punishment.

When Kant offers his postulate of God’s existence he does so because of the radical divorce between moral action and happiness: ‘there is not the least ground in the moral law for a necessary connection between the morality and the proportionate happiness of a being belonging to the world as part of it and hence dependent on it’ (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:124–125, 240). The fact that happiness relates to our desires and inclinations informs Kant that duty and happiness are divergent concepts. As the end of a hypothetical imperative, happiness relates to ‘Power, riches, honor, even health and that complete well-being and satisfaction with one’s condition’ (*Groundwork* 4: 393, 49).

However, one may rightfully ask why Ferguson should have reason to demand some reconciliation of morals and justice? After all, unlike Kant, Ferguson makes sustained attempts to identify moral goodness with happiness: ‘It appears,’ he writes, ‘that the definitions of virtue and happiness are the same’ (*Institutes* IV.III.VI, 159). Each may be attributed simultaneously to the same individual: the person who is morally good is happy and the genuinely happy person is so because of moral qualities. Happiness stands for ‘the most Perfect State of Enjoyment’ and moral goodness for the ‘sum of most Estimable Qualities’ (*Manuscripts* VI, 71; see also *Institutes* IV.III.IV, 156 and section V 158). That state of enjoyment is not to be identified with pleasure, for Ferguson seeks to defeat any identification of happiness with pure hedonism or with the mere satisfaction of desires (*Essay* 44, 51). In his essay on civil society Ferguson elaborates how happiness and goodness are linked together by human nature. Happiness emerges from a natural disposition to seek challenges and risks (*Essay* 45), to devise and execute plans (46), and to employ our minds and bodies to pursue ends (51). But as vigorous activity, happiness also requires, in Ferguson’s estimate, virtues of ‘magnanimity, fortitude, and wisdom’ (48). Since our activities concern both the self and society then not only self-preservation (54) but a benevolent attachment to the whole (55) prove crucial to happiness. Benevolence may, ‘in thought, at least, make us feel a relation to the universe, and to the whole creation of God’ (54).

So, if there is a contingent relation between moral goodness and happiness, why should the morally good person be all that concerned with justice, either now or in the hereafter? If the morally good are happy, as Ferguson maintains, then why would the good person desire anything more? Interestingly, in another of his manuscript essays (‘Of Happiness and Merit’) Ferguson describes how ‘vulgar language’ (*Manuscripts* VI, 71) admits a distinction between happiness and desert, thereby allowing us to assert, ‘That a Person is not so happy as he deserves to be or that he is more so than he deserves’ (71). That we entertain these notions is attributed to ‘one [of] the difficulties which Nature has laid in our Way’ (71) to encourage us to exercise our reason lest we assume that moral



merit must receive material fortune (72). (A similar point is intimated in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (51) when Ferguson notes that those who live by 'amusement' are often regarded, though mistakenly, as 'the most happy.')

That common language would manifest this disjunction between goodness and reward may reveal how we are continually challenged to distinguish happiness from the sort of ease (pleasure, amusement) that may derive from goods external to our own active character. But it also discloses how the happiness of the morally good may be insufficient to quash the urge to have our moral slates fully discharged of unmerited rewards or injustices.

In fact, one reason that Ferguson might appeal to divine justice is that acts of injustice need rectification (but justice has less need of rewards). In the *Principles*, Ferguson admits, 'The right is firm upon its own foundation, and needs not the prop of extraneous reward; while the wrong seems to call for interposition, to prevent, repel, or repair its effects' (*Principles* II.II.VII, 160). This statement occurs within a paragraph devoted to how goodness merits reward, and evil warrants punishment, an overall equation that is part of 'the moral government of God.' Ferguson could be read as reaffirming that moral goodness is its own reward but that injustice demands, for both victim and perpetrator, an additional and appropriate response to be furnished through the moral government of God (even as an injustice done to a good person need not challenge that person's happiness).

This construal does not sit easily with some of Ferguson's considerations (in the *Institutes*) that point to a more general distinction between happiness and justice. In that earlier work, Ferguson insists that the good person should receive 'additional rewards' that go beyond the happiness that attaches to moral goodness: 'Hence the universal belief, that wicked men are to receive additional punishments, and good men additional rewards, in a future state' (*Institutes* III.III, 137). The justice bestowed by God is an impartial justice, 'rendering every part subservient to the good of the whole, and calculating the whole for the preservation of its parts; but precluding every part from any enjoyment in what is pernicious to the whole' (*Institutes* III.VI.II, 134–5). That there is this universal belief in divine justice does, perhaps, relate to Ferguson's contention, noted above, that ordinary language allows a distinction between happiness and desert. If this 'vulgar' distinction challenges us to consider how the moral life yields happiness without external reward, it also points to how our own estimate of reward cannot approach the perspective of God. From our perspective we are on good ground in linking morals and happiness but only the Divine can mete out full and complete justice. It is the recognition of this gap between the human and the divine vision that leads us to think that God will enact a justice that 'render[s] every part subservient to the good of the whole.' Because we cannot attain the divine perspective we easily fall prey to a vulgar distinction; the temptation to make this distinction constitutes a continual challenge that may, nonetheless,

stimulate a fuller consideration of conduct and reward and how God alone may attain the proper equivalence.

In his appeal to the existence of God Ferguson locates complete justice, thereby fulfilling the goodness of the moral life, but he also indicates how in creating a fitting garden for our development God's wisdom and benevolence become manifest. In setting forth these moral implications, Ferguson offers a portrayal of the moral life that is, in a real sense, profoundly religious. Without postulating propositions of faith, Ferguson testifies to a world that reveals the goodness of God and calls all persons to a similar kind of activity and goodness.

#### OF THE BELIEF IN THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

According to Ferguson, it has been 'generally supposed' (*Institutes* III.VI.III, 135) that the soul survives the death of the body, for the desire for immortality, similar to the belief in God, is instinctual (*Institutes* III.VI.III, 136). At the same time, however, Ferguson points out a metaphysical basis for immortality, namely, a sharp distinction between two substances. The animal and material is 'divisible and inert' but intellectual or mental nature is 'indivisible and active' (*Institutes* II.IV.I, 119). Since the soul, as intellectual nature, is metaphysically distinct from materiality it 'may exist apart' (*Institutes* II.IV.II, 120). Since the soul cannot be dissolved into parts, it must be 'physically immortal' (*Institutes* II. IV.II, 120). At death the material body is extinguished but the soul lives on, for 'the world of spirits may, without inconvenience, increase for ever' (*Institutes* III.III, 136).

What is the purpose of immortality? In the *Institutes*, Ferguson notes two reasons, one of which we have noted: immortality provides the basis for the application of God's righteous governance to all. But he also hints at another reason: immortality of spirit allows for the 'progress of man's intelligent nature' (*Institutes* III.III, 137). As Ferguson relates in later essays, given that happiness is a feature of intellect or mind, so is mind alone blessed with fundamental value (matter has value only in relation to mind; see *Manuscripts* VII, 77–78). Yet the progress of intelligent being is the same as happiness (*Manuscripts* XVII, 162) but happiness is moral goodness. So immortality allows for the progress of the individual's moral nature. The idea of moral progress, developed more fully in the *Principles*, indicates how Ferguson's conception of immortality is analogous to that of Kant.

In his later work, the *Principles*, Ferguson introduces a chapter devoted to the 'future state' of the soul with the cautionary remark that he will explore 'regions of conjecture, so far as they are open to mere reason, without any supernatural aid' (I.III.XIV, 317). Two considerations suggest immortality, the first of which requires insight into God's overall providential design and the admission that immortality is not a self-evident certitude. The idea of immortality

influences human conduct precisely because it is but a 'prospect' (I.III.XIV, 318) whose uncertainty encourages activity in this life. A definitive end to life would yield an expectation that would 'check [one's] enterprise' just as the certain prospect of life after death might 'encourage [one's] procrastination' (I.III.XIV, 318). Ferguson's argument is not about moral motivation, that the prospect of an immortal reward *motivates* moral action, for this is an argument that Ferguson rejects (*Principles* I.III.XIV, 334). Rather, Ferguson's point is precisely that God's design is to encourage activity, a chief characteristic of our intellectual nature. A condition for that activity is that we focus not on the future but the present (I.III.XIV 318–19).

In the same chapter Ferguson also proposes a second consideration indicative of immortality. Just as we suppose a continuance of material things as they pass from one form to another (*Principles* I.III.XIV, 320–21), so may we suppose that the intelligent realm may continue, reflecting a 'design to preserve through unlimited periods, natures of which the essence is permanent, and qualified for indefinite variety of fluctuations' (I.III.XIV, 322). This argument is distinct from that set forth in the *Institutes* in which Ferguson moves from the nature of immateriality to its indestructibility. Here he refers to the design of the creator who seeks 'to preserve what is created' and for whom 'the energy of Eternal Power, in creating and preserving, is the same' (I.III.XIV, 322). Just as bodies are preserved through various transformations, so is intellectual nature preserved, yet the 'world of spirits' is not circumscribed by space and may increase without ceasing (I.III.XIV, 324).

What is the relation of this second argument to morality? Immortality provides a condition for progress after the demise of the body:

It has been observed, that the author of nature appears to delight in variety; and we may now add, not merely in the variety of description, that may serve to distinguish quiescent natures; but, in the variety of steps, also, incident to the progress and continued existence of one and the same being (*Principles* I.III.XIV, 324).

Successive transitions are apparent in the natural world (for example, Ferguson appeals to the development of a butterfly from an egg, I.III.XIV, 324–25), but in the mental realm these same transitions continue only with the assumption of immortality. The individual may progress through the natural body and die but then the intelligent soul will continue, 'furnished with other organs of perception and other means of communication with minds like his own' (I.III.XIV, 329). As this occurs the intelligent mind will attain greater understanding of the 'order of things' which God has 'destined' them to encounter (I.III.XIV, 329). In this way the future 'will be fitted to moral agents; and, like the present, be a state of rewards and punishments' (I.III.XIV, 334).<sup>3</sup>

FREE WILL AND RESPONSIBILITY

As Kant recognized, the fundamental problem of morality is freedom. One's duty is recognized and legislated by practical reason, but reason itself must be capable of free choice. Ferguson also recognizes the significance of free will in almost all of his works. In the introduction to the *Institutes* he affirms, 'Moral philosophy is the knowledge of what ought to be, or the application of rules that ought to determine the choice of voluntary agents' (*Institutes* Intro. V, 9). Even in the *Essay* Ferguson alludes to the will: 'If men must go wrong, there is a choice of their very errors, as well as of their virtues' (*Essay*, 244). In his *Principles* and in the manuscript essays, Ferguson revisits the theme of moral choice, pointing out that it not only differentiates the human from the animal (*Manuscripts* V, 49–50) but that it is 'Characteristic of Intelligent Being to be the artificer of his own Condition & to be vested with a choice in detail among particulars' (*Manuscripts* XX, 177). The will has a divine analogue, at least as Ferguson describes the matter in his later manuscripts: 'His [the human's] Power are Derived from the great Source of Existence & of power but his Exertions & Attainments are his own & in this alone probably consists any Analogy to the Personality & Intelligence of which the order of Nature gives a Perception in the Being of its Self Existing Author' (*Manuscripts* VII, 79).

What evidence does Ferguson provide for free will? Unlike Kant, who inferred freedom from the knowledge of our moral duties, Ferguson locates free will in an act of self-consciousness: 'man is conscious of his power to choose among the objects that occur to him; and is conscious of the considerations on which, in any particular instance, he has made his choice' (*Principles* I.II.XIII, 152). The intellectual soul not only has the capacity of cognition and will but a reflective aspect: 'This principle we term his [human] intelligence or mind, intimately conscious of itself, as it exists in thought, discernment, and will' (*Principles* I.I.V, 48). The idea that the mind is conscious of its will receives a general endorsement in the *Institutes* (I.II.II, 49). Kettler suggests that Ferguson may have regarded Hume's skeptical arguments as 'an affront to man's dignity' (Kettler 1965, 109). Ferguson's claim that the person is introspectively conscious of the will challenges Hume's contention that such self-reflection yields only a 'false sensation or seeming experience' (EHU VIII, fn 1). Ferguson takes the presence of a will to be akin to the knowledge of our own existence: 'the Evidence of Liberty is the same with that of our Existence' (*Manuscripts* XXVI, 217; see also XXVII 213). In this respect Ferguson appears to draw from Thomas Reid who accepts as a first principle of common sense that a self, the 'I,' exists (*Intellectual Powers* 269 and 272) and possesses 'some degree of power over [its] actions' (273).

If the mind is conscious of the will, then what is the will of which mind is conscious? Some of Ferguson's characterizations prove unhelpful, as when he states, 'Volition is the act of will in free determinations' (*Institutes* I.II.XIII, 79).

Yet in the same context Ferguson suggests that the free will is a motivated will in which the motives are not 'forced': 'The motives from which we chuse, do not destroy our freedom; for to act from motives not forced upon us, to be willing, voluntary, and free, in any action, are synonymous terms' (*Institutes* I.II.XIII, 79). Under this brief characterization—and there is little else to assist us, at least in the *Institutes*—the will would be free or unforced in instances in which a motive is not a reaction to circumstances into which one has been coerced (as when one is motivated to relinquish one's wallet to a thief) or a motive otherwise 'external' to one's true self (as when one possesses sentiments and feelings that one wishes to overcome or defeat).

Ferguson's discussion in the *Principles* is only slightly more helpful. Ferguson admits that the individual may have passions or inclinations that incline him this way or that, but these do not themselves will the action: 'He may even feel passions of fear or hope, constraining him to chuse what he is willing to avoid; but is conscious that his being willing or unwilling, in any particular instance can proceed from no cause but himself' (I.II.XIII, 152). This characterization follows that of Reid who takes the will to be an effect either of the person or some other being. And when a person effects his own will then is that person free (*Intellectual Powers*, 328–9). Indeed, Reid allows motives to influence but not to effect the will (335). Similarly, Ferguson admits the presence of motives but denies that motives determine choice. To think that a motive determines the mind is to imagine the mind in terms of 'mechanical imagery' so that 'in the midst of its motives, [it is] conceived as a tennis ball impelled at once in many directions, while it can move but in one direction' (I.II.XIII, 153). However, it is the will that directs; to regard the will as directed by one of its motives would, in Ferguson's estimate, impose a mechanical image onto a non-physical event.

In some of his later manuscript essays, Ferguson continues this line of thought, suggesting that the very idea of 'motive' or 'impulse' is figurative only and not appropriate to the mind (*Manuscripts* XXVI, 218). Instead, he suggests, we should use the language of 'objects': 'The Conscious Process is that the mind Conceives an Object and after comparing different Objects makes its choice' (XXVI, 218). In his appeal to the language of 'object' (the intentional object of the mind), also present in the *Principles* (I.II.XIII, 152), Ferguson employs Reid's analysis of intentionality and its distinction between the mind, perception, and the object perceived (*Intellectual Powers*, 139–140). Ferguson rejects Hume's account of causality as constant conjunction (*Essays* XIII, 122) and contends that the very idea of causal connection is derived from introspection into the mind and will: 'We learn the Connection of Cause & Effect from the Experience of Intention & Will preceeding the Act that ensues' (*Manuscripts* XXVI, 217). We glean the notion of cause and effect from consciousness of will and action, even though *their* relation should *not* be understood as cause and effect! Ferguson admits the paradox: 'And we took the notion of Cause & Effect from Intention

& Execution. We return the Gift in the Figurative Motive: to the connection of Will & its Objects' (*Manuscripts* XXVI 218).

In his appeal to the language of objects and in his rejection of any strict appeal to the causal power of motives alone, Ferguson offers an account of the will as a self-conscious and rational choice among various objects: The mind surveys these objects and in choosing to act on some plan, idea, or action determines the will. Unlike in the case of particular motives, which may be forced via circumstances or externalization, the mind is forced only when the *person* is forced, presumably by coercive acts which delimit the possible objects under consideration. Yet Ferguson seems, in one passage, to suggest that rational evidence is forced, so that rational thought is itself forced.

Every person knows that, if he is detained or drawn along by force, he has no choice, and is not responsible for the consequences: That, if a fact be made evident to him, he has no choice, and must know or believe it to be true; all he can do is to examine the evidence, and abide by the effects. But if he be offered a price for his house, though more than the value, he has a choice, and may reject or accept of the offer at pleasure. In the former instances, he was constrained by force, or by evidence, and is not accountable: But in this he acts for himself, and may be to blame (*Principles* I.II.XIII, 156).

Ferguson's expression elides *force*—a forced will—with a class of mental phenomena that are not willed. However, that some mental states are not subject to the will need not entail that these states are coerced. One plausible re-interpretation is that certain acts of the mind are not themselves willed, even though they may contribute to a willing. For example, that something is present to one's consciousness may not 'admit of a question' (*Principles* I.II.III, 78), just as in some instances of perception the 'evidence of perception is unquestionable' (I.II.III, 82). Similarly, Ferguson treats some occasions of inference as passive in the sense that it is the set of premises 'which leads to infer the conclusion' (I.II.III, 86). In these cases, there is no place for the will, so it is not up to the individual to choose or decide that something is present to consciousness or that one perceives some phenomena or not.

With this interpretation in hand, we may conclude that to will freely is to will as a self and in light of the objects that occur to the mind, whether presented as phenomena of nature or materiality, courses of action, plans, or engagements of various kinds. Such a summation remains general and vague, but it indicates how, for Ferguson, the will is neither a motive or simply an approved motive. Some of the vagueness stems from Ferguson's wariness about any artificial separation of understanding, will, and memory (*Principles* I.II.VI, 98); thus he takes the 'unity of a subject' (*Principles* I.II.VI, 99) to be an element crucial to

the conceptualization of the will as one of the 'operations and functions of one and the same intelligent power' (I.II.VI, 98). To will freely is to will as a self, but it is not to act on some propelling motive (the language of mechanics) so much as it is for the self or mind to direct and approve any motives that may *contribute* to the realization of some object. The unified self must incorporate not only the intentional object but connect the object to the past (I.II.VI, 101). In this sense, the willing agent is a progressing agent attentive to the future but cognizant of the past, understood in terms of both the present situation and circumstances now eclipsed. If this progressive being evaluates the prospects of the future in light of the present and past, then the evaluation may be more or less full or complete, more or less rational. These evaluations, essential to the will, are symptomatic of the dynamism and progress that Ferguson holds characteristic of individual and society. The will is an essential part of or basis for the natural propensity to improvement that Ferguson so often emphasizes (*Essay*, 12–13). In this way there is a close relation between the will, ethical choice, and this natural tendency of the human being.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

When he stated that the free will was the 'subject and foundation' of Ferguson's moral science, John Small made a prescient affirmation but there was more to be said. For this same moral science offers reasons to think that there is a God and an arena of immortality for justice and moral progress. Each of these assumptions—will, God, immortality—is linked to Ferguson's steady appeal to progress and activity: the will is not only necessary for morals but incorporates an idea of a rational choice that may seek improvement over time. The conditions of our worldly activity provide a place for happiness, continued challenge, and the hope if not expectation of justice. These conditions also demand an awakening of reason that allows, as has been suggested of both Hume and Adam Smith (Chen 2013, 147), a critical mode of thought that remains independent of specific religious beliefs, even as it demonstrates a steady religious sensibility—a disposition to attend to the world in ways that open the individual to sources of explanation that move beyond the empirical and sensory. Ferguson's thought expresses this religious sensibility and provides an analogue to the work of Kant. Yet there remain two additional ways in which Ferguson's thinking anticipates Kant.

God provides an eternal framework for the development of humanity, endowing individuals with a progressive nature that may lead to the development of all. This overall development is spontaneous even as individuals choose freely and intelligently their paths and prospects in their local surroundings. That Ferguson places such emphasis on the unintended emergence of social patterns

offers but another resemblance to Kant who also sought to conceptualize the larger and unintended progression of society within the presupposition of free will: if history ‘considers the play of the freedom of the human will *in the large*, it can discover within it a regular course; and that in this way what meets the eye in individual subjects as confused and irregular yet in the whole species can be recognized as a steadily progressing though slow development of its original predispositions’ (‘Idea for a Universal History,’ 8:17, 108, italics original).

A second and notable similarity between Ferguson and Kant emerges in their perspectives on a moral ideal. In a chapter devoted to ‘the Progress of Moral Apprehension’ Ferguson pauses in summation:

And thus, we may conclude, the highest point to which moral science conducts the mind of man, is that eminence of thought, from which he can view himself as but a part in the community of living natures; by which he is in some measure let into the design of God, to combine all the parts together for the common benefit of all; and can state himself as a willing instrument for this purpose, in what depends on his own will; and as a conscious instrument, at the disposal of providence, in matters which are out of his power (*Principles* I.III.XIII, 313).

The highest point of moral science is, in fact, a moral ideal in which the individual can perceive himself as part of God’s overall design in which all work freely for the common good. Such an ideal is to influence thought and action. In these respects, Ferguson’s appeal bears comparison to Kant’s understanding of a ‘moral world’ in which there is a full relation between moral beings and a generalized happiness.

I call the world as it would be if it were in conformity with all moral laws (as it **can** be in accordance with the **freedom** of rational beings and **should** be in accordance with the necessary laws of **morality**) a **moral world**. This is conceived thus far merely as an intelligible world, since abstraction is made therein from all conditions (ends) and even from all hindrances to morality in it (weakness or impurity of human nature). Thus far it is therefore a mere, yet practical, idea, which really can and should have its influence on the sensible world, in order to make it agree as far as possible with this idea (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 808/B 836, 678–79, boldface original).

In light of the fact that both Ferguson and Kant treat the moral life as implying larger claims about the status of human beings and our relation to God, it is not altogether surprising that each would also appeal to a moral ideal that might influence conduct within the world that God has created.



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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One exception to this omission is Jeng-Guo Chen’s discussion of providence and free will (2008, esp. pp. 184–186). However, the absence of scholarly attention to this topic is not without justification. Ferguson’s remarks on the will are abbreviated and much of the literature (for example, Kettler, 1965, L. Hill 2006, Allan 2006, Heath and Merolle 2008 and 2009, McDaniel 2013, Graham 2013, or J. Hill 2017) focuses on Ferguson’s moral, social, and political thought.

<sup>2</sup> Oz-Salzberger writes, ‘Ferguson’s “conjectural history” had an important effect on German historians, most demonstrably . . . on the influential [Isaak] Iselin. The immense moral importance of an account of human history from its earliest stages was an insight used by Lessing, Kant, Schiller, and later Hegel. Ferguson did not invent this idea, but he was clearly one of its greatest representatives for German readers’ (136). For further discussion on Scottish philosophy and German thought, see Kuehn (1987). On Garve and Kant, see Klemme (2018).

<sup>3</sup> David Kettler contends that this argument 'must have made [Ferguson] uneasy because it conflicts so strongly with principles to which he was drawn'. In Kettler's estimate the argument places the highest value on contemplation, differentiates between "philosophers" and "ordinary men," and fuses a classical conception of virtue into a Christian appeal to immortality (Kettler, 175). Even if this last claim bears truth, the first two seem less plausible, for there seems to be no incongruity between Ferguson's specific appeal in this chapter of the *Principles* and his general considerations as to how the intellectual possesses value and is fully active, or to how progress is emblematic of both the individual and the species.

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