ABSTRACT

Although Adam Ferguson is regarded typically as a secular thinker, the larger frame of this thought may reflect his theism. After recounting, in summary fashion, elements of Ferguson’s life, the paper sets forth his embrace of standard doctrines of eighteenth-century natural theology, including the metaphysical basis between mind, activity, and moral happiness, as well as Ferguson’s treatment of an important theme of Christian belief – human sinfulness. Turning to Ferguson’s moral theory, it is argued that energetic and moralized activity, vigour, may be less an expression of ‘civic humanism’ than of Ferguson’s practical experience within the Scottish Church. More important, the very idea of vigorous exertion manifests, in Ferguson’s own view, the human reflection of the Divine. Even if Ferguson remains a secular thinker, there is reason to regard him as a man whose thought bears the marks of religious belief and institutional practice.

Key Terms: religion; vigour; moderation; sin; image of God

Despite his upbringing, his study of divinity, his chaplaincy, and his activity as a church elder, Adam Ferguson is regarded typically as a secular thinker.¹ This characterization is not without justification and, in the end, may prove correct, at least if secularity is determined by the content of one’s public compositions. Nonetheless, it would be strange to regard the work of a philosopher of Ferguson’s education and early vocation as bearing no marks of religious belief. Ferguson’s metaphysical outlook, at least as set forth in later writings (Principles of Moral

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*and Political Science, Manuscripts*, reflects eighteenth-century science but also manifests his belief in God as first cause and benevolent intellectual power. However, are there unnoticed religious influences in Ferguson’s earlier, and seemingly scientific, account of morals and society (*An Essay on the History of Civil Society*)? To construe him as a secular thinker has plausibility, but Ferguson’s secularity rests within a larger frame of belief and practice. To appreciate fully his thought, it is helpful to revisit elements of his outlook and experience. In so doing, one may come to a new comprehension of the overall salience of his consistent appeal to energetic activity – ‘vigour’, as he puts it in his greatest work, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Ferguson’s appeal to robust activity rests not only on his rudimentary metaphysical outlook but situates easily within his moderate form of Presbyterianism. Moreover, in several instances in his later writings, Ferguson contends that willed and vigorous exertion provides a human reflection of God. So even if Ferguson remains a secular thinker, there is reason to regard him as a man whose thought bears the marks of a perspective informed by religious belief and institutional practice.

Of course, it is also commonplace to interpret Ferguson’s account of energetic and moralized activity as suggesting civic humanism (or Stoicism). However, contrary to this prevailing view, the importance of action and vigour may owe as much to metaphysical and religiously moderate impulses, as they do to ‘civic humanism’. In his *Essay*, for example, vigour is distinguished from either public spirit or public virtue, and appears as both a pre-condition and quality of moral conduct (and as a characteristic of both individuals and societies). Whereas many Scottish moderates drew attention to the cultural and social aspects of belief, emphasizing conduct over doctrine, so does Ferguson prioritise energetic activity, both individual and societal, over propositional doctrine. These emphases may rest in part on humanism or Stoicism, but they may also gain force from Ferguson’s belief that energetic moral activity, or vigour, provides the human reflection of God.

In what follows I first recount, in summary fashion, elements of Ferguson’s life and their possible implications for his religious beliefs. I then illuminate his embrace of some of the standard doctrines of eighteenth-century natural theology. This allows a glimpse into the metaphysical basis, as Ferguson sees it, between mind, activity, and moral happiness. It also provides an avenue for considering Ferguson’s treatment of an important thesis of Christian theology – human sinfulness. In the next section, I turn specifically to Ferguson’s normative moral theory, focusing on the idea of vigour (or, more generally, energetic and moralized activity). This notion, perhaps one of Ferguson’s more original contributions to moral thought, is easily taken to be an expression of ‘civic humanism’. However, it may also be an expression of his own experience within the Scottish Church and, more interestingly, manifest the human reflection of the Divine.

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Several scholars—including Richard Sher (1985), Fania Oz-Salzberger (1995) David Allan (2006), Lisa Hill (2006), and Jeng-guo Chen (2008)—have suggested that Ferguson’s thought may have been shaped or influenced by his religious background or education. It is difficult to advance beyond generalities here, though specific examples retain their symbolic effect. For example, David Allan suggests that his father’s strict Calvinism may have so affected Ferguson that, later in life, he was ‘mortified to be asked by a professor to prepare snuff on the Sabbath because he knew that his father would strongly disapprove’ (Allan 2006: 2).

Ferguson’s actual beliefs are less than explicit; what we know emerges largely from the biographical work of the late Jane Fagg (1995). Reared within a strict Calvinist home with a Gaelic-speaking father who was a minister, the young Ferguson studied divinity at St. Andrews (with Archibald Campbell) and then at Edinburgh (with John Gowdie and Patrick Cuming, then with William Cleghorn). His close friends at Edinburgh were William Robertson, Alexander Carlyle and Hugh Blair. Ordained after completing three of his six years of study, he was appointed (1745) Deputy Chaplain to the 43rd Highland Regiment, ultimately becoming Chaplain of this Gaelic-speaking regiment the following year. It is from this stint that we have a record of one of his few sermons (Arbo 2011). The sermon expresses an ‘unapologetically moral and political energy’ and serves to encourage the men to combat (Arbo 2011: 897). However, around 1751 he stated that he would give up the Chaplaincy, writing to Adam Smith that he should be addressed as a ‘downright layman’, even as he would apply subsequently, and without success, for a position of parish minister. Yet on his father’s death (1754), he did not apply to the now vacant parish, even as he did apply two years later, in 1756, for an expected vacancy in Haddington. In 1757 he reports to Gilbert Eliot that he wishes to relinquish officially his chaplaincy and once done, he says, ‘I shall have little further connection with the Clergy of Scotland & be under no necessity of appearing in their Character …’ (Correspondence, I, Letter 14: 25).

Whether as tutor, professor, diplomat, or traveler, Ferguson’s long life reflected a vibrant energy. But there is nothing in his remaining deeds and activities that would suggest a retreat from his youthful education within the Church of Scotland. As Jane Fagg remarks, ‘Ferguson’s departure from the ranks of the clergy was not because he rejected the theology of the Church of Scotland. He was perfectly content to accept the Moderate version of Calvinism and was active for years as an elder promoting the Moderate cause in the General Assembly …’ (Fagg 1995: xxix). By 1762 William Robertson would write to Gilbert Elliot to say that Ferguson was ‘not now a practicing clergyman, and this had alienated from him a large body of the Edinburgh clergy’. Even so, Ferguson remained active in the Church, becoming a ‘ruling elder’—a minister who had no parish
and whose responsibilities, by the Act of 1722, required that he and others so
situated be,

Faithful in the discharge of their... offices, tender and circumspect in their
walk, punctual in their attendance upon ordinances, strict in their observation
of the Lord’s day, and regular in keeping up the worship of God in their
families.7

As ruling elder he participated regularly in the General Assembly, representing
a variety of parishes or presbyteries, including, in spring 1762, the Presbytery
of Cairston (Orkney), later North Isles, Currie, and for at least eleven years,
Dunkeld, along with participation in various synods and assemblies continuing
into the 1790s (Fagg n.d.).8

Even if he were not a practicing clergyman, it would be difficult to believe
his participation in governing bodies of the Kirk of Scotland could be sustained
without some assent to basic doctrines of Christianity.9 To do so without such
assent would require in Ferguson’s outlook a cognitive dissonance that we have
no reason to assume. Nonetheless, Lisa Hill points out that ‘at no point does
[Ferguson] describe himself as a Christian’ (Hill 2006: 45, note 245).10 Perhaps
he would not so describe himself because he had no need to do so. No one would
have thought Ferguson anything other than a believing member of the Kirk, and
his education and training would have betrayed nothing else.11 Just the same, in a
letter written in 1745, from Antwerp, while Deputy Chaplain, Ferguson recounts
visiting many churches including Notre Dame Church with its installation of a
Rubens painting that depicts, as Ferguson puts it, ‘Our saviour taking down from
the cross’ (Correspondence, I, Letter 1: 5).12

That Ferguson did not wish to be a clergyman tells us little about his valuation
of either the calling itself or the church more generally, even less as to whether
he had relinquished beliefs inculcated as a child. Given his friendships with other
moderate clergy, as well as his views on the possibility of individual and social
progress, there is no reason, on the other hand, to regard him as an orthodox
Calvinist, even though in 1774 he would write from Geneva to David Hume,
alerting him that, ‘I am now writing on the Very Spot where Calvin reformed
the reformed Churches this being the place of his house & Garden where we Live
& I feel the warmth of my Zeal sufficiently against all reprobates although I shall
not indulge it in this letter’ (Correspondence, I, Letter 70: 112).13

In his letters, as well as manuscript essays composed late in life, we find few
explicit references to religious belief or to scripture.14 If his letters are evidence,
then it appears that as Ferguson grew older his religious sensibility either grew
more acute or came more easily to expression. In correspondence written late
in life (after age 74), we find Christian references, as well as allusions to an
afterlife and to the reassuring presence of God. For example, in a letter of 1796 to
Alexander Carlyle, after composing strong words against the French Revolution,
Ferguson refers to the ‘Church and State now Contending with Antichrist himself in the form of Democracy & Atheism’ (Correspondence, II, Letter 322: 408). A year later, in 1797, writing to Joseph Black at the age of 75, Ferguson explains how his baths have helped him recover from a stroke, subsequently advising Black to inform a mutual acquaintance (Mr. Stuart) of the following: ‘Let him have something to do that will neither confine nor fatigue, & then mere existence in the Company of God is exquisite. I have learned of late to call him The Principle of Existence, & in this denomination he can never be away: but I do not understand that the French Chemists have yet admitted him among their Principles’ (Correspondence, II, Letter 330: 418). The next month he writes to John Macpherson, again on the subject of events in France, and he closes, perhaps for the first time in all of his letters, with the benediction, ‘God Bless you all . . .’ (Correspondence, II, Letter 331: 421). After his son Joseph died, at the age of 24 in Bengal, Ferguson writes again to Macpherson: ‘. . . when it is Gods Will we should die it is as good as to live Or rather as I am persuaded it is to enter on a new life. And thus reason is easily Satisfy’d although to Taste the draught is bitter’ (Correspondence, II, Letter 360: 465–66). In closing this letter Ferguson states, the ‘Intelligence that Conducts the Universe is here present & intimately know[s] what we think and do. May he never be Absent from our thoughts’ (Correspondence, II, Letter 360: 466). An appeal to the afterlife is found some years later, in 1814, when Ferguson writes to the eldest son of William Robertson, confessing ‘My way is now directed to the trackless Grave & there My course Should terminate but for the happy thought that there is somewhat after death to which this nursery & school of human life is no more than preparation or a prelude’ (Correspondence, II, Letter 409: 526). The call to an afterlife also features in an earlier letter of 1795 to John Johnstone, who is ill. Ferguson reassures him that he (Ferguson) is ‘fully persuaded we shall meet thereafter And know one Another’. To assuage any anxiety, he adds that ‘you never can for Moment be separated from him [God]’ (Correspondence, II, Letter 301: 375).

It is difficult to wrangle an unqualified judgment from this assemblage. However, John Brewer draws from Ferguson’s life and letters to conclude that he ‘remained a devoutly religious person’ (Brewer 2008: 17); that the religious references seem occasional need not detract from Brewer’s sympathetic assessment. To strengthen it, one might add that Ferguson labored on his own epitaph – though the final inscription was written by Sir Walter Scott – with each of four drafts including a line that testifies to having seen the ‘works of God’ (Correspondence, II, appendix O, pp. 587–89). It should not be surprising that Ferguson may have held to a faith that, in general, he excluded from his public works. A scholar attempting to enter into a general (albeit European) conversation about the nature of humanity and society might not set forth his thoughts in relation to explicit doctrines of faith. And yet all of Ferguson’s works make a clear place for
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Providence, and his later work, the *Principles*, includes repeated invocations of God’s governance, will, laws, goodness and perfection. It would be surprising if the public works were inconsistent with Ferguson’s faith or utterly bereft of even a link of inspiration. Although we shall not address the former question in a full way, there is a signal point (the idea of robust activity – vigour) at which Ferguson’s moral thought may draw inspiration from his religious outlook. Before turning to that, let us turn to religious propositions that Ferguson may have espoused.

**NATURAL THEOLOGY AND A DOCTRINE OF SIN**

It is one thing to ask about Ferguson’s actual beliefs, for which specific testimony remains anecdotal but suggestive, but it is another to inquire as to evidence of a religious influence in his writings. We may approach this question by considering, within the eighteenth-century context, two categories of propositions that might function in his work: general propositions of natural theology and doctrinal propositions of faith. It is clear that Ferguson embraced most of the accepted propositions of natural theology, though there is much less manifestation of any acceptance of specific doctrines of Christianity. These subjects may be addressed in turn.

The propositions of natural theology would be the focus of inquiry in ‘pneumatics’, a science devoted to the spirit or soul, either of the human being or God. Much of what Ferguson states on this subject (whether in the *Institutes* or the *Principles*) appears commonplace at the time. The science of God focuses on three topics: the existence, properties, and governance of God. Ferguson maintains that there is universal belief in the existence of a Creator. However, he also purports to offer rational arguments for the existence of God, including a rudimentary argument from design, to which he appends the claim that we have a natural tendency to perceive purposeful order and to infer, thereby, an ordering being (*Institutes*, p. 124). God’s design or providence has implications, as we shall see, for the human being, but it is clear that Ferguson embraces unexceptional propositions of natural theology regarding God and God’s attributes. Moreover, Ferguson tends to uphold these as rational truths, apprehensible through natural reason.

The other subject of pneumatics is the soul of the human being whose existence is known by self-consciousness (*Institutes*, p. 49). Within the soul, or intellectual nature – as distinct from matter, which is ‘divisible and inert’ (*Institutes*, p. 119) – one discerns a natural propensity to activity. This proclivity is important to Ferguson’s overall outlook, with its emphases on action, improvement, and social development. Because of God’s providence – a subject well-canvassed by scholars (Hill 2006; Chen 2008) – the human being is set within a world fit for material as well as moral and intellectual progress. As the Scot puts it, ‘The best mariners are formed in boisterous seas’ (*Principles*, I,
p. 177). The significance of activity, or robust exertion (vigour), is a point to which we shall return.

For now, it is important to note that even in the case of immortality, there is an argument that turns on progressive activity. Distinguished by their starting points, the three arguments for immortality pivot from (a) the nature of soul, (b) ‘the state of the fact at death’ (Institutes, p. 119), or (c) principles of religion. Immortality could, in Ferguson’s view, be established from the nature of the soul (a) through a consideration of its indivisibility and the divisibility of matter, an argument not unique to Ferguson (and clearly compatible with scriptural distinctions, as in Romans chapter 8, between the way of flesh and the way of spirit). Since the soul is indivisible and since parts can be dispersed, then the soul contains nothing to disperse and therefore nothing to annihilate. So it follows, Ferguson maintains, that the soul is ‘physically immortal’ (Institutes, p. 120). The argument from the fact of death (b) would show only that life exits the body, not that the soul ceases to exist. Ferguson first sets aside any argument from principles of religion (c), returning to it once he has adumbrated God’s attributes (unity, power, wisdom, goodness and justice), all of which are apprehensible by reason. Given these properties, God would preserve intelligent creatures, especially since there is always room for additional minds that, unlike animal bodies, do not take up space. Moreover, a desire for immortality is instinctive ‘and is a reasonable intimation of what is intended by the author of this desire’ (Institutes, p. 136). Notably, Ferguson then adds two points related to the moral progress of the human being: our progressive development may continue beyond the mortal realm; and the desire for justice remains unfulfilled in this life. These claims for immortality are presented as vaguely rational rather than as principles of a particular religious outlook.

Ferguson presents his examinations of God and the soul as accessible to a natural reason. Turning from principles of a natural theology to doctrines particular to Christianity, it becomes difficult to find evidence in the public works of substantive Christian theses. However, any such lack does not mean that these doctrines have no place in Ferguson’s thought, nor does it imply that Ferguson did not espouse these beliefs.

The Christian doctrine of sin is worth considering not only because of its relevance to the Calvinist tradition in which he was reared but also because it relates to the twin ideas of activity and vigour. For many interpreters it is not so obvious that these sorts of propositions—those, for example, that declare a doctrine of sin, or set forth a pathway to salvation—even figure in Ferguson’s personal belief system, much less in his writings. For example, Lisa Hill exclaims, ‘But his repudiation of Scriptural authority, rejection of the Calvinist doctrine that salvation depends on the grace of God, denial of Special Providence and complete rejection of the concept of sin, original or otherwise, distances him from Christianity considerably’ (Hill 2006: 50). A few pages earlier, Hill writes, ‘Everything exists for a reason; nothing in the universe is truly evil for all of
the creation performs some positive role in the benign master plan’ (p. 48). In the subsequent paragraph she quotes from Ferguson’s *Institutes*, to assert ‘Complaints of moral evil’ in people, are likewise really ‘the symptoms of a progressive or improving nature’ (p. 48). However, Hill does not make clear where or how Ferguson ‘repudiates’ the authority of scripture. Moreover, her account may overstate the case that Ferguson rejects the concept of sin. His works do not offer a theory of sin but that omission does not entail a rejection of the concept. Nor would it entail that Ferguson’s published work does not, in some sense, take sin into account.

In her argument, Hill quotes from a section of Ferguson’s *Institutes* ‘The Goodness of God’. There Ferguson indicates that human nature is ‘fitted to a mixed scene’ and that any complaints of physical evil refer not to absolute evil but serve, instead, as ‘excitements to exert its [active] power’ (*Institutes*, p. 131). Unless there were evil – ‘apparent evils to be corrected’ – then there would be no point to activity, but happiness depends on active exertion, not on ‘the measure of conveniency’ (p. 131). Nonetheless, what about moral evil? Here Ferguson drops any reference to appearances and refers to real evil: ‘A being that perceives no moral evil, or no defect, could have no principle of improvement’ (p. 132). The ‘complaints of moral evil’ he maintains can be vanquished only by ridding humanity of imperfection or making persons ‘insensible of the imperfections they have’ (p. 132).

There is, admittedly, something antiseptic in these formulations. However, in the *Principles* Ferguson introduces moral evil with a vocabulary hewing more closely to notions of sinfulness. In fact, section XVI, entitled ‘Of the Origin of Evil’, is one of only three sections or chapters in the two volumes of the *Principles* that begins with an epigraph, in this case five lines from the opening of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In providing this epigraph, Ferguson signals that he is responding to the problem of sin and disobedience to God, even if the response is secular rather than theological. As Ferguson proceeds he considers, first, how the human being, at the pinnacle of the system of nature, must make effort to progress and ‘is every where surrounded with occasions that require its [the] exertion’ of intellect (*Principles*, I, 176). So there are physical evils that the human being confronts but these, Ferguson suggests, are appropriate to his nature. In fact, without physical evils (or the evils committed by individuals) there would be no place for moral improvement.

Turning from physical to moral evil, Ferguson attests, ‘But the depravity of his [man’s] own nature, and the frequency of his crimes, are evils more real, and less reconcilable to the conception of a just and beneficent author’ (*Principles*, I, p. 180). The result of free will, such depravity is explained by Ferguson through a vocabulary of ‘error’ and ‘mistake’. These would seem to be the terms of a secular (or Enlightened) account, but the secular and muted tenor also reflects Occam’s razor. In fact, Ferguson suggests that there may be alternative explanations,
perhaps religious or scriptural: ‘Has not malice . . . a deeper root in human nature than mere error or mistake? It may have such a root; but if effort and mistake be sufficient to account, for the germ of this poisonous plant, we have no occasion to look for any root that is deeper. It is a maxim in reason, not to assume more causes than are existent in nature, and sufficient to explain the phenomena’ [(Principles, I, p. 181)]. He then argues that error and mistake may ‘lead to competition and strife, to injury and suffering’ and these result from a belief that the success of one means loss to the other (p. 181). However, Ferguson then proceeds to point out a ‘peculiarly dangerous’ error into which individuals may succumb: the ‘mistake of precedence’ (p. 182), the tendency to think only in comparative terms (‘in respect to rank, power, or wealth’, p. 182) rather than in terms of what is, by its nature, good or evil. How can the competition for precedence be forestalled? By understanding that genuine good is compatible with benefit to all rather than some.

Ferguson’s appeal to ‘precedence’ appears as a secular version of Biblical pride. However, the solution to such pride is knowledge that genuine good entails goodness for all (that the success of one does not harm others). Although his language is less than perspicuous, Ferguson is not asserting that knowledge is sufficient to overcome evil, only that it is necessary: if we can attain knowledge of the good, then the present state may give way to a better one ‘in which malice, in the progress of information, will be corrected; and every other evil disposition or habit, resulting from his ignorance or false apprehension will be suppressed’ (Principles, I, p. 182). However, the moral correction may also require a ‘reform’ of ‘dispositions and actions’ (p. 183).

In this account, Ferguson is not denying some notion of original sin even as his explanation of wrongdoing presents a secular approach. Nonetheless, the more general appeal to improvement hardly seems indicative of a Presbyterian mindset, steeped in Calvin’s Institutes.19 In this sense, Ferguson’s faith proves unorthodox even if genuine. And thus does his work as a whole form a moment within an ‘Enlightened’ world, at least if one takes Enlightenment to involve an appeal to a form of reason independent of the particular propositions of a faith (see Broadie 2001:113). That said, Ferguson’s perspective on action and vigour may draw inspiration from his experience with the Scottish Kirk and more interestingly from a basic tenet of Biblical belief. To broach these topics, we must first consider the defense of energetic action.

ACTION AND VIGOUR

Throughout his works Ferguson prioritizes the significance of action and robust endeavor (Oz-Salzberger 2008; Smith 2008). However, the appeal to activity may seem trivial and uninteresting: after all, since the human being is an agent, one would expect nothing less than activity! The interest and significance of Ferguson’s appeal rests in the way he suggests that the crucial feature of activity
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is, effectively, its character as moral, robust, and energetic. In his Essay, he utilizes a vocabulary of ‘vigour’ to demarcate this constellation of ideas; this term also features in several of his manuscript essays.\(^20\) We shall revert to this term often, but it should be recognized that this expression scarcely appears in his Principles, even though the general notion of robust moral engagement is not altogether absent from that work. The idea of vigour, as well as the less specific notion of energetic moral endeavor, serves as both a salient and original element of Ferguson’s thought. Given the importance of the general idea, it is intriguing that in several instances, in both Principles and Manuscripts, Ferguson seems to suggest that something like vigorous activity displays how the human being could be said to reflect the Divine. To consider this more fully, it is necessary to recount the metaphysical foundation of activity, connect activity to morality, and then delineate how robust activity crystallizes, in the Essay, as vigour.

All animals engage in activity but human beings possess a mind capable of self-consciousness, will, and intelligence, with the latter understood to include affective states (Principles I, pp. 64–67).\(^21\) Borrowing from Hobbes (and in terms equally redolent of Thomas Reid), Ferguson summarizes the capacities of mind in terms of cognitive powers (knowledge and its related operations) and active powers of choice and action (Principles I, p. 68). Unlike a being that lacks a principle of motion or change ‘in its own nature’ (Principles, I, p. 190), the human is the highest sort of progressive being and possesses the capacity to initiate change. What distinguishes the human as a progressive being is its intelligence and will (Principles, I, p. 190). In this way the progress of the human being consists in movement or change for something better – this is the principle of ‘ambition’.\(^22\) The human seeks and strives for improvement: ‘The very life of man is Action And Langour not to be endured’ (Manuscripts, p. 276). In this way, the human being is placed into circumstances that demand action.

Activity is essential to happiness: ‘Labour is to man a source of enjoyment, and to the faculties with which he is furnished a principal means of improvement’ and we are forever ‘surrounded with occasions that require its [intelligent power] exertion’ (Principles, I, pp. 175, 176). However, happiness is identical with moral merit in that each designates the same state or character of the person. Moral qualities or virtues (such as temperance, justice, wisdom and benevolence) are good in themselves and through their effects – even as the consequential benefits are less a matter of the agent’s concern than a manifestation of Providence. Whereas David Hume suggested that our moral qualities are either ‘agreeable or useful’ to ‘self or to others’ (Treatise, III.II, p. 601), Ferguson does not adopt any such structure, dismissing any notion of happiness as allied with pleasure or pain. Without obstacles or evils, whether physical or moral, one could not make sense of the human being as an active being capable of moral improvement (Principles, I, p. 175). In fact, in the Essay, Ferguson remarks as to how, ‘the most respectable attributes of his nature, magnanimity, fortitude, and wisdom,
carry a manifest reference to the difficulties with which he is destined to struggle’ (Essay, 48).

Even in his earlier work, the Institutes, Ferguson states that happiness depends ‘on the degree of ardour and affection he exerts’ (Institutes, pp. 131–2). As this statement suggests, it is important to recognize how easily Ferguson slides from a discussion of activity to a consideration of a kind, degree, or intensity of action. Although any action requires exertion, Ferguson’s appeal to the necessity of struggle and labour pushes him, in the Essay, to rely on the distinct notion of ‘vigour’ to communicate the necessity of avid, fervent, and energetic action. (Sometimes Ferguson does not employ the term itself, referring only to exertion or struggle, but in these cases it is hard to resist the conclusion that he is assuming the same notion as that expressed by ‘vigour’.)

Ferguson suggests that this energy of spirit may be found in rude societies or in civilized and ‘be turned to a variety of purposes’ so that it ‘renders disorder itself respectable’ (Essay, pp. 107, 105). However, some of his language suggests that genuine vigour attaches to proper ends. One way of considering Ferguson’s account of vigour is that it is a disposition oriented to certain kinds of ends, including in the broadest sense the ends of self- and societal preservation. In this sense the savage may prove vigorous even if his ends are not those that we might endorse. But a developed vigour attaches itself to good character and devotes itself to a good society. In Ferguson’s estimate both private and public moral character rest on vigour (Essay, 189). It is necessary, therefore, to grasp the functional roles of vigour (moral and political) and to sketch its conceptual contours.

What is the function of vigour? Ferguson regards vigour as having both a moral and political function. In the public realm, vigour is required in order to preserve freedom, property, and ‘the rights of the mind’ (Essay, p. 161; see also p. 200 and p. 212). However, vigour is distinct from public spirit. In fact, Ferguson’s moral (and political) outlook rests on complementary ideas, the idea of a public orientation (public spirit) and that of individual vigour.2 Ferguson refers to various motivations that help secure liberty, including ‘liberal sentiments’, a desire for the ‘preservation of public manners’ and the necessity of ‘attention or effort’ (Essay, p. 212). Further on the same page he suggests that the greatest danger to liberty is a lack of vigour. Similarly, when he states that a national spirit requires ‘vigorous, public-spirited, and resolute men’ (p. 213), he is not waxing redundant but suggesting the importance of at least two distinct qualities or dispositions, that of vigour and that of public spirit. Thus it is that Ferguson wants those in the governing ranks to have the ‘talents for the council and the field’ (p. 215).

In the case of private action, an individual without vigour is prone to seek ease, pleasure, and frivolous pursuits, all of which will prove inimical, over time, to the sort of challenges and ‘oppositions’ required for moral improvement (Essay, p. 170; see also pp. 232, 245–6). In this sense, Ferguson not only regards vigour
as one measure of all activity, but essential to the moral life. This does not entail that each and every moral act must be a vigorous one, only that in general and for the most part, one’s moral actions should manifest vigour. A quality of action, vigour is neither virtue nor passion, even if it is a disposition that should be used morally. Thus, Ferguson admits that ‘personal spirit and vigour’ allow individuals to distinguish their character (Essay, p. 188). The relevance of vigour to moral character is easy to see if we imagine its deficit. As an intuitive illustration, one may imagine those good and decent individuals who nonetheless lack, what one might call, moral backbone – vigour! It is not so much that such persons manifest weakness of will (failing to do what they know that they ought to do) than that they are irresolute and hesitant. Such persons shy from discerning or deducing an ethical consequence (whether it be intellectual or behavioral), and they have no eagerness to act alone, and are often unwilling to act at all unless they have achieved mental certainty on an issue or problem.

An attribute of mind, and not simply restless physical energy, vigour is an essential condition of political freedom and moral character. But what is it? In the earliest stages of society, an exertion of vigour suggests that ‘every consideration, but that of his object, is forgotten’ (Essay, p. 23). In this primitive state of society, vigour, as a form of energy and verve, is not constrained within moral ends. Once constrained, vigour may suggest a resolute focus and determination rather than a blind and single-minded pursuit. The person of vigour is not easily dissuaded. In this sense, vigour conveys strength, as when one ‘overawe[s]’ or ‘resist[s] with fortitude’ (Essay, p. 28). It is perhaps for this reason that vigour develops by ‘contending with difficulties’, not by relaxing (Essay, p. 242). But vigour is not simply physical strength but steadfastness. For example, Ferguson wisely points out that if a law, or set of laws, is to secure liberty, then vigour is required: ‘without vigour to maintain what is acknowledged as a right, the mere record, or the feeble intention, is of little avail’ (Essay, p. 160). It is not simply that law must be enforced, requiring a coercive power, but that there must be a willing energy to do so and to act on the understanding of what the law is intended to do.

There lies within Ferguson’s steady appeal to vigour a subtle undercurrent: vigour relates to integrity. This relation can be glimpsed more clearly if one thinks of integrity not in terms of honesty but in terms of wholeness. A vigorous person has ideals and acts to secure them and to hold to them steadfastly but with energy. Someone else may have ideals and yet be indifferent, a tendency which Ferguson takes to be in opposition to vigour. Such insouciance often leads to the sort of easygoing dispassion by which one comes to ‘relax the nerves on which the force of a private and public character depends’ (Essay, p. 189). Insofar as vigour relates to integrity, then so does true vigour relate to morality and serve as a quality of moral action. To be vigorous is not simply to be moral but to be steadfast, strong, and resolute; to be other than vigorous is to
be changeable, weak, and hesitant. In this way, integrity becomes a matter not simply of conviction but of resolute practice.

CIVIC HUMANISM, VIGOUR, AND RELIGION

What is there in Ferguson’s appeals to exertion and to vigour that might relate to religion? Much of recent scholarship has adumbrated a civic humanist interpretation of Ferguson’s work, and it is tempting to assimilate active exertion and vigour into this analysis. Any such interpretation relies typically on the illuminations of J.G.A. Pocock who construes Ferguson as a Scottish Machiavellian who utilizes a notion of virtù to express both social solidarity and primitive energy (1975: 501). Pocock’s view is often restated. For example, Fania Oz-Salzberger contends that Ferguson’s ‘message’ was that ‘Citizens’ virtue and political activism’ were essential to a strong society (1995: 111). According to Oz-Salzberger, civic virtue was, essentially, ‘willful action for the public good’ (195: 113). No doubt the humanist interpretation recognizes the obvious relevance of Ferguson’s appeal to energetic activity. As a last example, Oz-Salzberger concludes, in a more recent study, that Ferguson offers, in the Essay, a ‘derivation of man’s political person from his natural restlessness’ (2008: 153). It is not my concern to debate directly the civic humanist interpretation, which is not without some justification. Nonetheless, the humanist interpretation focuses on language rather than on intentions or conceptualizations: it is not obvious that Ferguson employs a discourse of virtue with civic humanist ideals in mind. It is not, therefore, a foregone conclusion that Ferguson embraces any civic humanist notion that ‘the human personality... [i]s fully expressed only in the practice of citizenship’ (Pocock 1983: 235).

Are there other sources for Ferguson’s appeal to vigour? It is not implausible to consider how a practical influence on Ferguson may have sustained his interest in vigour and robust action. The influence in question would have been his identification and engagement with Presbyterian moderates. As Thomas Ahnert has pointed out, ‘Moderates stressed the importance of conduct rather than doctrinal truth for religion’ (2011: 81). A full participant in the moderate faction of Scottish Presbyterianism, Ferguson would have assented to the emphasis on deeds, conduct within society, rather than on propositional or doctrinal debates.

Perhaps therefore, the appeal of vigour had foundation not only in Ferguson’s metaphysics and morals but also in his experiences within the Church of Scotland. For the Church was now moving to act within society rather than remain apart, and its members would also need to act within the Kirk, as Ferguson regularly did as an elder (Clark 1970: 207). The moderates had their own experiences of standing firm and contesting their opponents if they were to achieve success (whether on the question of ministerial patronage, or on issues in the wider society, such as the debate over a Scots Militia). There also was a deeper question of doctrine
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and the freedom to believe. Vigour was essential to a freedom that could easily be abrogated through the sovereign’s enforcement of doctrinal or theological belief. Perhaps with the memory of the execution of Thomas Aikenhead in mind, Ferguson attacks explicitly the very idea of prosecuting someone for atheism.\textsuperscript{30}

In other instances, Ferguson writes against the misuse and misappropriation of religious belief:

> It has become a proverbial expression, that the abuse of the best things becomes the worst; and this, no doubt, has been verified in the abuse of religion. Though in the proper use of it, the highest and most beneficial attainment of human nature, in the abuse, it has become the source of great evil; a bar to knowledge and freedom of thought; a source of rancour, malice, revenge, and cruelty, beyond any other principle of depravation incident to the mind of man. (\textit{Principles}, I, p. 170; see also II, pp. 100, 320)

That Ferguson may have felt influence from his own experience is speculative. However, apart from experience, Stoicism, or even civic humanism, there remains another source of possible inspiration for Ferguson’s appeal to vigour, the first book of the Bible: ‘And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... So God created man in his own image...’ (Genesis 1: 26–27).\textsuperscript{31}

In several instances Ferguson compares how robust activity, exertion and attainment—the very sorts of endeavor crystallized in the notion of vigour—might approach or resemble the Divine.

In the first volume of the \textit{Principles}, Ferguson recounts how the atheist contends that human toil and trouble reveal that God either lacks wisdom and goodness or doesn’t exist at all. To rebut the atheist, Ferguson suggests, one must conjure a scene ‘in which every desire were at once gratified without delay, difficulty or trouble’, but such a scene would mean that human activity would have no point. On the contrary, ‘the good to be gained is not an exemption from labour, but the improvement of his intellectual faculties, and an approach to the resemblance of that being whose good is beneficence and wisdom ...’ (\textit{Principles}, I, pp. 178–79; see also, \textit{Manuscripts}, p. 229). In other words, such improvement requires exertion and struggle, energetic moral action—whose paradigm is vigour—so as to live in the image of God.

Such a view is not isolated but can be found in another of Ferguson’s manuscript essays where he draws a more explicit analogy between human ‘Exertions and Attainments’ and that ‘Personality & Intelligence’ of God: ‘His [human] Powers are Derived from the great Source of Existence and of Power but his Exertions & Attainments are his own & in this alone probably consists any Analogy to that Personality & Intelligence of which the order of Nature gives a Perception in the Being of its Self Existing Author’ (‘Distinction of Value and its Source in Existence’, \textit{Manuscripts}, p. 79). Here Ferguson links the will to ‘Exertions & Attainments’, all of which would be achieved, morally,
by vigorous activity. Averse to communicating his faith Ferguson nonetheless urges others to exert themselves so that their lives might mirror more closely the Divine. In the subsequent paragraph Ferguson elaborates that ‘the human mind is essentially Active [so] Certain Modes of Activity constitute its most Perfect and Happiest State’ (p. 79). In this sense energetic but morally constrained activities, exemplified in vigorous action, constitute the happiest condition. In another essay, ‘Of the Things that Are or May Be’, Ferguson describes how intelligent nature (the human being) has been ‘condemn[ed] to pass through the Scenes which are acted in this Moral Life’. In other words, Ferguson asks, why is it that the human being must encounter ‘continual occasions of exertion’ (Manuscripts, p. 183) and thus expend effort and labor and power to achieve moral merit? His response unites the fact of human choice with the projects carried out by choice: one must elect and perform to completion one’s activities in order to have merit and happiness. Ferguson then concludes: ‘It is in this if in Any Respect we are entitled to say that man is formed after the Image of God and hence it is that he is placed with Propriety in the Garden of God...’ (Manuscripts, p. 230).

It would seem that at the very heart of Ferguson’s moral thought, in his appeal to energetic activity or vigour, there rests a basic appeal to the creation of man by God. Through robust or vigorous activity one constructs a life that reflects, however distantly, one’s Maker. Ferguson’s appropriation of the analogy from the book of Genesis need not entail that Ferguson had no Stoic influences on his thought, or that he felt no attraction to the vocabulary of civic humanism. However, Ferguson sets forth the analogy towards the last quarter of his life, at a time when he has a more synoptic sense of his own work. Perhaps he comes to appreciate how one of his most significant ideas expressed his own belief that the human being is made in God’s image. Along with his Providentialism, his experience within the Kirk, and his associations with moderate literati, it is this conception of the human being that seems to inform Ferguson’s perspective and to assist in framing his overall outlook. However, the works that he produced need not be considered as surreptitiously, or tacitly, religious, thus to be mined for previously unnoticed elements of faith. What emerges is simpler. In the overall frame of Ferguson’s thinking lodges a Biblical belief that the human being was created in God’s image and that each individual, therefore, has a special and significant place, as well as a signal if not sacred responsibility.

REFERENCES

NOTES

1 As in David Kettler (1965): ‘Ferguson’s thought was fundamentally secular—and certainly not Christian . . . ’ (p. 131). Vincenzo Merolle also treats Ferguson as a secular thinker, contending both that he appropriates a Stoic cosmology (2006: xv–xix) and that his greatest work, the Essay, is ‘unaffected by religiosity’ (p. xix). However, Lisa Hill offers a nuanced characterization of Ferguson as expressing a ‘Christian-Stoic’ theology in which God’s overall design governs the laws and operations of the natural and social world (Hill 2006: 43–56). Richard Sher contends that Ferguson and other Scottish moderates adopted Francis Hutcheson’s ‘Christian-Stoic principles most enthusiastically and completely’ (1985: 177; see also, 324–328).

2 Throughout the essay, we preserve the English spelling of ‘vigour’, which is how it appears in Ferguson’s works.

3 On stoicism, see Merolle (2006).

4 Richard Sher suggests ‘that several of the concepts for which the Scottish Enlightenment generally and Adam Ferguson in particular are best known today among social scientists had Presbyterian or Calvinist foundations’, among which he mentions success and righteousness, the identity of the individual with the whole, and the moral and religious importance of society (Sher 1985: 43). Oz-Salzberger also notes how Ferguson’s ‘thought was shaped by his Presbyterian background and classical education’ (1995: vii). Lisa Hill claims that his overall thought ‘must be understood in relation to his Christian-Stoic beliefs about design, purpose and destination’ (Hill 2006: 44). And Jeng-guo Chen believes that the secular case is typically overstated, even as he points out that Ferguson ‘hardly touches on issues of original sin, revelation or redemption’ (Chen 2008: 171). Chen also maintains that ‘one cannot fully appreciate Ferguson’s critique of civil society unless one comprehends the religious aspect of his thought, specifically that of providence’ (p. 171).

5 She even speculates that ‘it is possible he might have remained in the ministry, as Alexander Carlyle did, had he succeeded in getting the church at Haddington’ (Fagg 1995: xxix).

*Scotts Magazine*, May 1767, volume xxxix, p. 12, as quoted in Fagg, ‘Adam Ferguson: Ruling Elder’.

The information on Ferguson as ‘ruling elder’ comes from Jane Fagg’s unpublished essay, ‘Adam Ferguson: Ruling Elder’.

It is equally hard to figure out how such activity could continue if as George Hill writes to Lord Melville, Ferguson has ‘I am afraid, too great an aversion to the Church to accept of an office which would require him to resume the dress and the station of a Clergyman’ (*Correspondence*, II, Appendix C, p. 544).

However, in the *Sermon in the Ersh Language* Ferguson refers to ‘the glad tidings of salvation through Jesus Christ’ and at another point affirms, ‘Nor are we less happy in our religious establishment. We have Moses and the prophets, the gospel of Christ, and the writings of his apostles put into our hands with freedom to peruse them; there to learn our duty and with our own eyes perceive what God requireth of us’ (Arbo 2011: 902 and 904, respectively).

That Ferguson was able to secure a university chair suggests that he was regarded as a Christian. See Jane Fagg’s account (1995: xxx–xxxii).

The expression in this phrase is the original. Throughout the letters and the manuscripts one encounters unusual usages such as this one. As for the painting, it is probably Rubens’ *The Descent from the Cross* (1612). Finally, Fagg points out, in her unpublished essay (on Ferguson as ruling elder), that during the period when he was married and a ruling elder, it is a ‘mystery’ as to where his ‘family actually attended church’ (Fagg n.d.: 8).

One should not assume that Ferguson’s zeal overheated: Hill points out that Ferguson is ‘openly critical of orthodox religion whenever the subject arises’ and ‘he is explicit in his preference for natural religion’ (2006: 45).


In this respect it is worth noting that in the last paragraph of his introduction to the *Principles*, Ferguson articulates explicitly that his audience is all ‘mankind’: ‘The Author is sensible that a work of this sort, to be properly executed, ought to be calculated, not for any particular class of readers, but for mankind’ (*Principles*, I, p. 10).

Ahnert points out that the more orthodox theologians tended to take these truths as rationally provable (Ahnert 2004: 238). See also Stewart (2003).

The lines are these: ‘. . . What in me is dark/Illumine; what is low, raise and support;/That, to the height of this great argument, I may assert eternal Providence;/And justify the ways of God to men’ (as quoted in *Principles*, I, p. 172). The other chapters with epigraphs, both in Greek, are vol I, III.i (p. 209) and volume II, I.viii (p. 84).

A similar argument is made in the essay, ‘Of the Things that Are or may be’ (*Manuscripts*, pp. 221–242, esp. pp. 228–229). A more sophisticated and contemporary version of the argument for moral improvement may be found in Swinburne (1977).

‘Let it be a fixed point, then, that men are such as is here described, not by vicious custom, but by depravity of nature. The reasoning of the Apostle, that there is no salvation for man, save in the mercy of God, because in himself he is desperate and undone, could not otherwise stand’ (Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii, pp. 250–51).

The value of mind (over inert matter) is emphasized more strongly in the manuscript essays. There Ferguson states that material has value only in relation to mind (*Manuscripts*, pp. 78, 91, 183–4).

Ambition is ‘the consciousness or perception of an improvable state, and ... the effort to operate upon it for the better’ (*Principles I*, p. 200). Although this disposition operates in a variety of spheres, Ferguson maintains that there is a ‘genuine’ object of ambition, namely, moral qualities (*Principles*, I, p. 236), whose attainment embodies the true end of the human being. Distinct from David Hume or Adam Smith’s conception, Ferguson articulates a conception of ambition that relies less on audience or spectator than on a standard of excellence within a field of endeavor. Thus it is a circumscribed notion of genuine or proper ambition that concerns Ferguson—aspiration to moral achievement. Nonetheless, even when ambition is not aimed toward its true end, it remains a powerful and generally beneficient propensity, and even if ‘aimed at a mistaken end [which may include distinction or honor], [it may] nevertheless occasion the improvement of faculties ...’ (*Principles*, I, p. 239). The role of ambition is highlighted in Gordon Graham’s recent essay (Graham 2013: 516–519).

These ideas are often confused, if not fused. In this context, it is worth pointing out that Ronald Hamowy discerned this confusion in his essay of 1986. In a footnote, Hamowy takes note of how another scholar confused ‘ ‘martial fervor’ with public-spiritedness and an active involvement in public affairs’ (1986: 66, fn 19).

Craig Smith points out, ‘In the *Essay*, Ferguson returns again and again to the idea that vigorous activity in serious ‘business’ is the hallmark of moral worth’ (2008: 164). In one of his later essays, ‘Of Statesmen and Warriors’, Ferguson writes of how men have differing ‘measures’ of vigour, adding that a commander’s vigour may be ‘breathed in the Ranks’ (*Manuscripts*, p. 37). Of course, the idea of breath is redolent of the Stoic assumption that reason is infused into the material world so as to order its elements to beneficent ends. But it is also a reminder of the breath of the Holy Spirit. as in John 20:22, ‘And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost’.

In this sense, vigour is akin to Ferguson’s notion of ‘ambition’, itself a trait with a proper end as well as alternative employments. There is a sense in which activity, including the vigorous, must be focused—if it is to contribute to happiness or the moral life—on some kind of ‘business’ rather than ‘amusement’ (with ‘business’ concerned with important ends, including interests and duties). See *Principles II*, pp. 88–89.

Similarly, Ferguson lauds the legal ideal of *habeus corpus* and in so doing he indicates how such a law presumes more than an understanding of its literal meaning, it requires ‘the whole political constitution of Great Britain, a spirit no less than the refractory and turbulent zeal of this fortunate people’ (*Essay*, p. 160). Ferguson’s claim implies that vigour itself—a disposition of character—finds coherence within the manners and practices of the society. However, the point is not simply that the law is situated within a tradition of behavior and conduct (the ‘political constitution’) but that the tradition includes expectations of attention, energy, and resolution (a ‘refractory and turbulent zeal’).

See, for example, Gabriele Taylor’s illuminating essay on integrity (1981).

In his later work (the *Principles*) Ferguson hardly uses the term, ‘vigour’, often resorting to the vocabulary of ‘activity’ or ‘active powers’. (The term is also employed in the *Manuscripts*, e.g. p. 6, p. 267). This terminology might seem drawn from Thomas Reid,
but Reid’s conception of active powers is one of causation and focuses on the types of actions that fall within our will. Reid writes: ‘It is of the highest importance to us, as moral and accountable creatures, to know what actions are in our own power, because it is for these only that we can be accountable to our Maker, or to our fellow-men in society . . . ’. (Reid, Inquiry and Essays, p. 307.) However, the sort of activity to which Ferguson appeals is not radically different from his appeal to vigour in the Essay on the History of Civil Society. So it is not as if Ferguson’s idea of activity or vigour derives from the thought of Thomas Reid. (On this topic, see also Smith 2008: 159).

29 ‘Two alternatives were open to the Church in the middle of the eighteenth century. Either it could retreat into its shell, or it could frankly recognize its new relationship to society by seeking to establish its own independence and freedom of action while at the same time interpenetrating and when necessary criticizing society from within’ (Clark 1970: 204–5).

30 Ferguson’s vehemence comes through in this manuscript passage (even with the lack of punctuation): ‘The Priesthoods Usurpation The degrading Fears of mean Superstition The Antipathy of different Sects the Zealots Fury and the Court which Baseness would pay to Heaven by vengeance on its Reputed Ennemies of God who cannot have an Ennemy in Being are Evils to be dreaded from its abuse. And render human Judicature the least unfit [the most unfit] for Tryal of Atheism or impiety. In Questions on this Subject no discretion can be safely left to Judge or jury and the definition of the overt Acts to which Conviction may be Attacked is Singularly difficult. Experience Shows that Courts established for such Tryal degenerate into mere Inquisition adopting Forms that prove a Snare to Innocence and are only then Supposed Successful when they multiply Victims to the fury of Zealots and the Usurping Arrogance and Interests of Priests. Such are the Evils which would attend the Prosecution of Atheism itself as a Crime and object of Penal Law’ (‘On Cause and Effect/Ends and Means/Order Combination and/ Design’, in Manuscripts, p. 128). On the case of Thomas Aikenhead, hanged for blasphemy in 1697, see Graham (2008).

31 John Calvin explains that it is in virtue of the soul that the human is created in God’s image. However, with sin the human being is alienated from God and as a result the image of God is ‘so corrupted, that any thing which remains is fearful deformity’ (Calvin, Institutes, I.XV.4, p. 164). Ferguson has moved away from this Calvinist construal, but he nonetheless links the idea of activity and exertion to the human being as image of God.

32 At the close of his essay, ‘Distinction of Value and its Source in Existence’, Ferguson concludes, ‘But here also Is God, And the Storms which in moments of Superficial thinking may incline us to Doubt Proclaim Him more loudly than does any provision that is made for Indulgence of Safety in the lower Forms of Life’ (Manuscripts, p. 89).

33 Ferguson employs the phrase ‘garden of God’ in the Principles (I, p. 268) but there the expression refers explicitly to society: ‘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’.
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