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## ADAM FERGUSON AND THE DANGER OF BOOKS

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### ABSTRACT

Throughout his career Adam Ferguson made a series of conservative political pronouncements on contemporary events. This paper treats these pronouncements as having a solid basis in his social theory and examines his place in the conceptual development of the tradition of British conservatism. It examines Ferguson's distinction between two forms of human knowledge: *book learning* of abstract science acquired from formal education and *capacity* acquired from practical experience in real affairs. Ferguson's empiricism leads to a series of sustained warnings against the danger of excessive abstraction to the pursuit of science and these concerns are extended into the social and political realm as he cautions against reliance on abstract philosophy and defends the superiority of practical politicians.

“We become students and admirers, instead of rivals; and substitute the knowledge of books, instead of the inquisitive or animated spirit in which they were written.”

—Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Essay: 206)

Much of the previous critical literature on the social and political thought of Adam Ferguson has considered his place, respectively, in the traditions of stoicism, civic republicanism and in the historical development of sociology.<sup>1</sup> The present paper represents an attempt to add depth to the critical appreciation of Ferguson's writings by examining his place in the conceptual development of the tradition of British conservatism. As a result, it treats Ferguson's conservative political pronouncements as having a solid basis in his social theory.<sup>2</sup> In particular it will concern itself with the tradition of conservatism, developed by Burke and perfected by Oakeshott, that stresses a distinction between different forms of human knowledge and the vital role of unarticulated 'practical' knowledge in human action. Students of the history of political thought are well familiar with the conservative doubts

about excessive rationalism and academic experts that are expressed in the writings of Edmund Burke. As a man of action and a professional politician, Burke made the case that politics is best left to those with experience in matters of state, and cautioned against reliance on the abstracted principles of political philosophers (Burke 1987: 35, 162). In what follows it will be demonstrated that Ferguson shared this scepticism about the value of *speculation* and makes a contribution to the development of conservative thought through his abiding concern about the potential ‘danger’ of *book learning*. In order to appreciate this conservative element in Ferguson’s work we must examine the central role played by epistemological concerns in his social theorizing.

#### KNOWLEDGE AND HUMAN NATURE

We should begin by noting that Ferguson does not disdain the theme of Enlightenment nor does he dismiss learning and a concern for the social function of knowledge from his work. Ferguson was by no means an unthinking conservative who distrusted innovation and philosophy. On the contrary, he placed the human pursuit of knowledge at the heart of his analysis of society. He believed that the exertion of mind in society was the “principal calling and occupation” of man’s nature (*Essay*: 33). Man is by nature an “artist” (*Principles I*: 200) “destined” (*Principles I*: 177) to act on the world around him and to improve his understanding from experience. The pursuit of knowledge as the key to understanding human psychology and its gradual advancement is, for Ferguson, a key factor in the development of social institutions and practices. Knowledge, he argues, is important in “every department of civil society” (*Essay*: 168) and history stands as an “accession of knowledge” (*Essay*: 33) to those who succeed, one that facilitates a gradual improvement in human society.<sup>3</sup> Indeed he placed this theme at the centre of his understanding of the aim of society, which he described as “knowledge, order, and wealth” (*Essay*: 175).

Ferguson argued that the human mind was “desirous of information” (*Principles I*: 271) and that, rather than being controlled by instinct, humans were destined to act from “observation and experience” (*Institutes*: 118). In going about our active lives our minds operate by drawing generalizations from past experience. The human mind acts as a system of classification that draws on experience to order human thought. We assign phenomena to mental classifications of “species or class” (*Institutes*: 88-9) in a manner that introduces order into our perception of the world. At this point Ferguson is referring to the psychological functioning of the human mind. He argues that all thought is classification and that all human minds operate in this manner. Differences between individuals arise, not from the operation of the mind, but rather from the acquired classificatory structures produced by experience and socialization that give form to our thoughts.

As a result of this psychological theory Ferguson adopts a distinct approach to the understanding of science. “Abstract science” represents a conscious attempt to “systematize our own thoughts” (*Principles* 2: 70). It is a conscious, formalized rendering of the mode of operation of the human mind. The process of generalization and classification from observation and experience that typifies the operation of the human mind is undertaken in a deliberate manner in an attempt to enlarge the understanding of the world around us.

In methodological terms Ferguson was a committed empiricist. This leads him, in the *Institutes*, to distinguish two forms of human knowledge that emerge as the human mind develops the deliberate pursuit of science: The first type of knowledge is knowledge of facts, and the second is knowledge of rules. Knowledge of facts is the knowledge drawn from experience and observation of phenomena, while knowledge of rules is knowledge of the mental classifications that our minds have generalized from this factual knowledge. This leads Ferguson to follow the conventional approach and identify two forms of method in science: “Analytic” which proceeds from the observation of fact to establish general rules, and “Synthetic” where we proceed from general rules to their particular application (*Institutes*: 3).

It is at this point that we begin to see an important distinction emerge in Ferguson’s analysis of the practice and function of science. He is keen to stress that though the human mind and science operate through both knowledge of facts and rules, human *practice* places a pre-eminent focus on facts. For Ferguson, knowledge of fact is prior to knowledge of rules. It therefore becomes the “first requisite” in the “conduct of affairs” (*Institutes*: 1). As he puts it: “Practice, or conduct of any sort, though regulated by general rules, has a continual reference to particulars” (*Institutes*: 2). Thus *speculation* is the establishment of general rules, while *practice* is the study of particular cases or the application of general rules to actual conduct. This distinction is further underlined when he refers to the distinction between history and science. History is a “collection” or narrative of facts, while “science” is a theory about the relation of those facts laid down in the form of generalizations from experience (*Institutes*: 2-4).<sup>4</sup>

Ferguson seems here to be making a point that is common to all of his Scottish contemporaries. He argues that the practice of science must be conducted strictly in line with empirical evidence. Although science is by its nature theoretical and composed of classifications and generalizations, these abstractions must be drawn from and strictly related to factual, experimental evidence if science is to be conducted in a rigorous manner. Ferguson notes that as scientific knowledge advances, the level of abstraction necessarily becomes more complex and, as a result, scientific discourse is rendered incomprehensible to most laypeople. The “language” of science becomes “abstruse and intricate” to the “vulgar” or uninitiated (*Principles* 1: 112). Such abstraction is still fundamentally based on the same model of the operation of mind that constitutes the thought processes of

all humans, but the level of discourse becomes accessible only to those experts who have devoted themselves to the pursuit of inquiry. According to Ferguson this opens science up to a series of dangers that may ultimately undercut the empirical foundations on which it is based. The first such danger is the obvious one of over-theorizing, of stretching generalizations beyond what the evidence warrants. In our desire to expand our knowledge we may become addicted to the process of abstraction and extend it beyond the empirical evidence. Thus Ferguson argues that we become the “dupes” of our own “abstractions” (*Institutes*: 65) and face the danger of confusing our abstractions for “matters of fact” (*Principles 2*: 264).<sup>5</sup> It is precisely this error that Ferguson attributes to social contract theorists who, in his view, shape their understanding of the nature of society to meet abstracted principles. As he puts it:

[T]he desire of laying the foundation of a favourite system, or a fond expectation ... have on this subject, led to many fruitless inquiries, and given rise to many wild suppositions. Among the various qualities which mankind possess, we select one or a few particulars on which to establish a theory, and in framing our account of what man was in some imaginary state of nature, we overlook what he has always appeared within the reach of our own observation, and in the records of history (*Essay*: 8).

Moreover, excessive attachment to abstraction has very dangerous practical consequences. Ferguson observes that: “Too much abstraction tends to disqualify men for affairs” (*Institutes*: 65). What he means by this is that the practical exercise of human social activity takes place in complex situations where a variety of circumstances interact. However, the tendency of abstract thinking is to separate out classifications and generalizations, rather than to view the entirety of the situation as an interdependent whole. Like Adam Smith, Ferguson worries that the development of theoretical investigations that apply his Synthetic method can lead philosophers to adopt “systems” (*Essay*: 21) to which they then become adherents.<sup>6</sup> Devotion to these abstracted systems leads the speculative thinker to apply its principles to all facets of experience, producing a desire to crowbar “the diversities of life” into “single points of view” (*Principles 1*: 289). As a result there is a danger that, as we pursue science, we can become wrapped up in our own abstractions. Excessive theorizing is a danger both to science itself and to the *capacity* of people to act in practical affairs. He argues: “Far fetched knowledge is not the most useful, either in the formation of theories, or in the conduct of life” (*Principles 2*: 458).<sup>7</sup>

One practical example that Ferguson provides of this danger is the error of excessive concern with the technical terminology of arguments. His example here is drawn from moral philosophy where he notes that we are in constant danger of mistaking for new discoveries what are in reality only definitional shifts made within the abstract arguments of philosophers: as a result we become the “Dupes

of Language” (*Manuscripts*: 243). The technical language of moral philosophy can become dangerously obfuscating when applied to actual human behaviour. Thus a speculative analysis may, through abstraction, reduce all acts of benevolence to acts of selfishness, but the value of this observation holds little reference to the actual motivations and behaviours of social actors. It represents a “mere innovation in language” rather than a “discovery of science” (*Essay*: 19). The target of this particular barb appears to be Mandeville, but the broader point belies an apprehension on Ferguson’s part about the danger of philosophy moving too far away from everyday life and the evidence upon which just reasoning about social issues must be founded.

It would appear that Ferguson is making two related points. The first is a methodological concern that the pursuit of science should draw conclusions from the evidence of experience and not allow itself to float off into abstractions that provide coherent systems of argument, but which bear little relation to reality. His second point appears to be a more general one about the relation of science to the practice of everyday life. The scientific method, with its abstractions and generalizations, is indeed a vital part of the successful unfolding of human potential in a social context, however the “capacity” (*Essay*: 32) for successful action in society is dependent on a different form of human behaviour and knowledge. If we are to understand the origins and functioning of civil society we cannot allow ourselves to be fooled by abstractions such as social contract theories or great legislator explanations. Ferguson’s famous attacks on these approaches in the *Essay* are linked to his demand for the strict provision of empirical evidence. But they are also an expression of his recognition that the pursuit of abstract thought can often lead us to delude ourselves into accepting the product of our theorizing as fact. We become the “dupes” of our own “subtilty” (*Essay*: 12) by placing excessive importance on the results of speculative thought.

The potentially disastrous consequences of this error are particularly apparent in moral philosophy. The danger is that the science of man, when it moves away from the evidence of experience and substitutes abstraction for practical *capacity* in political decision-making becomes little more than a set of “visionary schemes” (*Principles 2*: 84). What is required for successful social action is not “schemes of perfection” that are “far above the reach of mankind” (*Principles 2*: 401), but rather a *capacity* to act in affairs drawn from the evidence of moral science and the pursuit of active participation in social life. People “conceive perfection” but are capable only of “improvement” (*Institutes*: 162-3). The realization of human potential occurs, not when we attain some abstracted vision of perfection, but rather in the gradual attainment of improvements from human action. It is the struggle to improve rather than the attainment of an ideal that marks the progress of humankind. This is significant for Ferguson because it implies that the knowledge required for success in *practice* is just as important to humanity as the attainment of abstract or idealized knowledge. Moral philosophy becomes irrelevant

as a guide to practical affairs when it becomes excessively abstract. The result is that the political actors who substitutes abstraction for *capacity* are a danger to the stability of their nation. One who “has gone forth in search of speculative melioration, or improvement, not absolutely required to the safety of his country, is to be dreaded as a most dangerous enemy to the peace of mankind” (*Principles* 2: 498-9).

#### THE DANGER OF BOOKS?

Ferguson believed that the growth of human civilization is a gradual train of “successive improvements” (*Essay*: 174) acquired by succeeding generations of individuals. More significantly he asserts that such improvements are made

without any sense of their general effect; and they bring human affairs to a state of complication, which the greatest reach of capacity with which human nature was ever adorned, could not have projected; nor even when the whole is carried into execution, can it be comprehended in its full extent (*Essay*: 174).

The various arts have their several progressions and the results of these interact to transform the shape of human knowledge and society. The significance of this is that the process of social change is accurately to be understood as the unfolding of the unintended consequences of human action. As Ferguson famously put it:

Every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design (*Essay*: 119).

In the terms of our earlier discussion, social change arises from the practical exercise of *capacity* and not from the designs of *speculation*.

Moreover, it is the individuals who apply themselves to practical matters who bring about the gradual improvement of the various arts of human life. Inventions and improvements are suggested from the experience of individuals familiar with their occupations. Where this becomes of particular interest for our present purposes is when we realize that this knowledge is not necessarily of the same form as that presented in the form of science and recorded in books.<sup>8</sup> Ferguson had already acknowledged the existence of what Michael Polanyi (1958) would later call “tacit knowledge” in the stress he places on the centrality of habit to human action. In his discussion of language he stresses the fact that the parts of speech used with ease by the “vulgar” (*Principles* 1: 43) can only be identified through much study and effort on the part of grammarians. There exists a form of human knowledge that is not attained from the deliberate pursuit of science or learning.

However, as the method of science is but a deliberate pursuit of the same operational principles as the human mind, Ferguson is able to conceptualize a form of unarticulated human knowledge acquired from action. Such knowledge is drawn from experience and held in a non-deliberative manner.

Ferguson neatly captures the notion of different forms of knowledge in the following passage from the *Principles*:

Accessions of power in us are sometimes termed skill, and consist in the knowledge of means that may be employed for the attainment of our end: they are also termed a sleight or facility of performance; and are acquired by mere practice, without any increase of knowledge. The first is the result of science; the second is the result of habit. And there are few arts or performances of moment, in which it is not requisite that both should be united (*Principles I*: 227-8).<sup>9</sup>

It is the thrust of Ferguson's argument that one of the unintended consequences of active engagement by humans is that their "faculties" are sharpened from "use" (*Principles I*: 201). If human invention is deployed to its greatest extent in dealing with practical challenges, if it finds a focus and application in dealing with the facts of a particular situation, then the accession of knowledge gained by individuals in the pursuit of their everyday endeavours is vital to the cumulative growth of human knowledge and the success of human action. As Ferguson puts it, the "active" life provides more challenges than are met with in "study however abstruse" (*Principles I*: 267). It is here that we begin fully to realize the danger to which Ferguson is alluding. When science and learning begin to be recorded in books, when education in the teaching of knowledge acquired by others is believed to be the hallmark of human achievement, there is a real danger that we will turn away from the accessions of knowledge to be gained from an active life of practical engagement. In so doing regard for the knowledge of the records of *speculation* will overwhelm the attainment of *capacity* from *practice*.

Ferguson is clear that

[a]fter libraries are furnished, and every path of ingenuity is occupied, we are, in proportion to our admiration of what is already done, prepossessed against further attempts. We become students and admirers, instead of rivals; and substitute the knowledge of books, instead of the inquisitive or animated spirit in which they were written (ECS: 206).<sup>10</sup>

The danger is that as learning accumulates we spend more time acquiring knowledge from books than in applying ourselves to invention. This, according to Ferguson, means that we are inferior to those who wrote the books: he argues that "the object of mere learning is attained with moderate or inferior talents" (*Essay*: 206). Thus where we content ourselves with learning what others taught it is probable "that even our knowledge will be less than that of our masters" (*Essay*: 206).

In the *Principles* he returns to the same point and argues that the true indication of the vigour and health of a society is not the high achievements it has attained in the past so much as it is the spirit of application and invention that is to be seen in its people in the present. A civilization may have attained an impressive degree of scientific sophistication, but if it rests on its laurels, if it contents itself with acquiring knowledge from books rather than from active engagement, then it opens the door to a slow decline. Ferguson's point is that a society that lacks accumulated knowledge in the arts and sciences, yet whose people are possessed of the active and ambitious character from which accessions of *capacity* actually arise, is the arena that "carries forward the mind" (*Principles I*: 297). Humans "profit by the task which they themselves perform, more than by mere information, or instructions received from abroad" (*Principles I*: 298). Thus a learned and civilized society may also be a stagnant society, and this stagnation may be the first step towards a declining society. The progress of knowledge can be seen in every condition of an active society. As Ferguson would have it:

The source of improvement is open to man from the first and the rudest efforts of his own ingenuity; and is shut only in the last, when he ceases to act for himself, or begins to acquiesce in the enjoyment of what is supplied to him by the ingenuity of others (*Principles I*: 298).

#### THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

It would appear that Ferguson is distinguishing between two forms of knowledge: knowledge gained from education, or *book learning*, and knowledge secured from active exertion, which he terms "capacity" (*Essay*: 32). It is *capacity*, knowledge gained through active exertion and applied in practical affairs, that is the chief medium of human improvement and the characteristic of a flourishing civilization. Human improvement comes not from the study of books, but from active engagement in life. Ferguson, in Stoic mode, argues that "the activity of life" is "the school of wisdom and virtue" (*Principles I*: 178). And this idea of society as a school is returned to again and again in his writings.<sup>11</sup>

For Ferguson this knowledge is infinitely preferable to that acquired from study and *book learning*. He notes:

Society itself is the school, and its lessons are delivered in the practice of real affairs. An author writes from observations he has made on his subject, not from the suggestion of books; and every production carries the mark of his character as a man, not of his mere proficiency as a student or scholar (*Essay*: 169).

The best writers are those who draw on their own active exertions in society rather than dwell on the interpretation of what was written in the past. Society is the school from which we acquire our individual sums of knowledge, but it is also the best school for letters. Writing and study may indeed become a distinct “trade” (*Essay*: 171) but they are best performed by those engaged in an active life.<sup>12</sup>

The target of Ferguson’s ire here is scholasticism or “monastic retirement” (*Essay*: 171) more generally. Indeed, as Lehmann (1930: 93) notes, the attack extends to the “intellectualism” of his fellow Enlightenment thinkers.<sup>13</sup> He argues that knowledge in general, and science in particular, declined during the scholastic era as the pursuit of knowledge moved away from active exertion in society and replaced *capacity* with the knowledge of books and doctrine. The “jargon of technical language” and the “impertinence of academical forms” (*Essay*: 171) created a moribund system that slowed the improvement of knowledge. The attainments of people came to be identified with “the mere attainments of speculation” (*Essay*: 171). Instead of studying and participating in the world around them, philosophers became obsessed with literary study. While much may be gained from a familiarity with the knowledge accrued by past civilizations, we cannot allow this admiration to ossify our own pursuit of knowledge from active exertion in the scene in which we find ourselves. Ferguson writes:

Men are to be estimated, not from what they know, but from what they are able to perform; from their skill in adapting materials to the several purposes of life; from their vigour and conduct in pursuing the objects of policy, and in finding the expedients of war and national defence (*Essay*: 33).

It is from the contentions and ‘bustle’ (*Essay*: 33) of an active life that we are to draw true inspiration and to secure “useful knowledge” from the “living impressions of an active life” (*Essay*: 34). The best place in which to learn or acquire *capacity* is an active scene where human ability and ingenuity are tried and invoked by the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The best sailors, as Ferguson notes, are those who have experienced “boisterous” seas (*Principles 1*: 177).

Ferguson is not here suggesting that we abandon all study of past human achievements; rather “the examples and the experience of former and better times” (*Essay*: 171) should be used as a touchstone and source of inspiration for our own active innovation. For Ferguson the past is great not for its own sake but for the “accession of knowledge” (*Essay*: 33) it bestows on successive generations. The examples of the past are precisely that: examples, and not absolute and eternal standards to be preserved at all costs. Yet Ferguson was also well aware of the human tendency to intellectual snobbery. The educated often look down on the knowledge and *capacity* of men of practice. He sneeringly refers to the “pedantry and scholastic pride” (*Essay*: 77) that students of the classics often express when they see as a badge of vanity their knowledge of the songs of everyday folk from a

dead civilization while viewing as vulgar the everyday folk of their own civilization precisely because they lack such *book learning*. For Ferguson active attempts in the arts are to be preferred to secure attainments. Knowledge and literature drawn from other civilizations are worth nothing unless they are absorbed by an active and engaged civilization. He lauds the Greeks because their cultural achievements were the result of an “active life” (*Essay*: 33) rather than a process of learning from others. It was this active life that Ferguson believed bred a blossoming civilization.

If our intellectual powers “draw” their “first breath” from society (*Principles I*: 268) and build to a form of *capacity* that cannot be attained from mere study, then we are presented with a distinct relationship between forms of human knowledge. One example of this is Ferguson’s analysis of language. He argues that language is alive, that it is in a constant process of alteration and improvement from use. When we record language in books we “arrest” (*Principles I*: 45) the fleeting nature of its gradual evolution. As a result, though books act to preserve and communicate knowledge they also, to a certain degree, freeze the living organism that is language. Where this becomes interesting is in the study of literature. Some great texts, his examples are Shakespeare and Milton, secure particular linguistic forms from change. The popularity of these authors, and our admiration for certain of their turns of phrase ossify the forms of linguistic expression. This in itself is not a problem so long as the active use and evolution of the language continues in everyday life, but should admiration for and education in the classics replace use as the chief medium for the communication of language, then the seeds of decline are sown.

A similar theme can be seen in Ferguson’s references to his own pedagogical methods.<sup>14</sup> He begins the *Principles* with a preface that explains that the book is a written record that complements the teaching of his course and the headings previously published for student use (*Principles I*: v). Ferguson points out that he lectured from headings and quite deliberately did not record his lectures in a written form. His reasoning behind this was that by lecturing from headings he provided his students with a firsthand experience of active thought. The delivery of lectures became a process of thinking through the headings that invited the students to follow the active train of his thought in a manner that engaged them with living knowledge. The arguments were thus presented as active thought processes rather than the more formalized rendering in the written version. It is clear that Ferguson viewed this educational technique as an attempt to re-create the active learning that functions in the acquisition of *capacity* from practical application. His aim was to educate individuals in such a way as to form their character for active life. As he puts it elsewhere:

The parade of words, and general reasonings, which sometimes carry an appearance of so much learning and knowledge, are of little avail in the conduct of life. The talents from which they proceed, terminate in mere ostentation, and

are seldom connected with the superior discernment which the active apply in times of perplexity (*Essay*: 31-2).

If this is true, as Ferguson clearly believed it is, then our estimation of people must be based, as we noted before, not on what they know, but on what they are able to perform. The contents of their minds are revealed in their *capacity* for action and not in their ability to acquire and communicate academic forms. This is brought into clearer relief when Ferguson distinguishes between “Men of speculation” and “Men of ability”:

Men of speculation also are apt to mistake their own abstraction for realities; and should find their talents misplaced in the midst of affairs that have reference to circumstances indefinitely varied and minute. Their merit lies in discourse rather than action; and they may appear with advantage, where general knowledge is to be displayed in language, without the trial of practice and application to the production of real effects. Men of ability in conduct are often deficient in discourse; and the eloquent, on the contrary, often descend from their eminence, when brought to the test of ability in any of the more difficult scenes of action (*Principles 1*: 136).

Success in affairs is based on *capacity* and not on *book learning*. In “affairs”, Ferguson notes, there is nothing “abstract, or free from its particularities” (*Principles 1*: 106). He distinguishes the two types of thought by referring to them as “abstraction” and “imagination” (*Principles 1*: 106-7). Abstract thinkers produce generalizations and apply abstract Synthetic principles to real life situations. As a result, according to Ferguson, they are aware only of those facets of situations that are relevant to their theoretical models. They have only a partial view of the scene before them. On the other hand, the man of *capacity* applies “imagination”, and considers all of the aspects of the situation before deciding on a course of action (*Principles 1*: 106-7). By refraining from abstract thought and drawing on practical knowledge people of *capacity* have a truer picture of the scene before them and, as a result, are better suited to make successful decisions in practical affairs. So Ferguson, like Burke, believed that people of action are to be preferred to people of speculation in the conduct of affairs because the knowledge they possess and their mode of approaching decisions are more likely to produce successful results than those of speculative thinkers raised on theories and books.<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that philosophy has no place in public life, rather it is to note that people educated in philosophical principles should confine themselves to acting in a practical manner in the circumstances in which they find themselves.<sup>16</sup>

We can even see this line of argument in Ferguson’s famous doubts about the social consequences of the division of labour. He was well aware that part of the advantage of the division of labour is that it focussed individual attention and produced specialists who had greater knowledge in their particular fields than that

attained by generalists. Indeed Ferguson does not refer to the division of labour, instead preferring the phrase “separation of arts and professions” (*Essay*: 172) to indicate the significance of the application of attention to different subjects. However, one of his greatest fears is that the intellectual faculties of most of humankind will be constricted by the extension of the division of labour. His eloquent description of the mentally stunted labourer in an industrial society is contrasted to the “savage” whose capacities are broader than his more “civilized” counterpart (*Essay*: 88, 173-5; *Manuscripts*: 145). The savage is a person of *capacity* who acts in a broad variety of situations to secure his survival, while the modern labourer has her attention restricted to some one simple action such that she becomes incapable of acting with *capacity* in other fields of endeavour. The knowledge of the specialist is bought at the expense of limiting attention to the task at hand. In the case of many labourers the skill acquired will be a simple physical operation that will require little application. As a result the *capacity* of the labourer to act, or even to understand, beyond her own narrow field is radically reduced. Ferguson’s particular Republican concerns with the decline of politics and martial spirit are a manifestation of the fear that lack of *practice* will produce a decline in *capacity* among the whole of the population, leaving us bereft of individuals capable of acting successfully in defence of the nation in the practical scenes of life. If we give up our political and military roles to professionals, then we will see a gradual withering of the capacities necessary to undertake these functions in the population at large. The result is the danger of both political despotism and invasion from abroad.

#### SOME QUALIFICATIONS

For all of Ferguson’s doubts about the potential dangers of *book learning* we should also be clear that he does not dismiss out of hand the value of abstract speculation or learning from books. He is clear that written knowledge in the form of books is vital for preserving and “communicating” (*Principles 1*: 296) knowledge of the past. Indeed in his own writings he makes constant reference to the authority of books written by others. Part of his project of constructing a conjectural history of civil society is based on the comparison of the evidence of historical records with those of travellers’ descriptions of newly encountered societies in other parts of the world. He is clear that books “retain the knowledge of what has ceased to be spoken for many ages past” (*Principles 1*: 47). If communication is an integral part of humankind’s natural sociability, then the communication of experience in the form of books is a vital linguistic expression of a key facet of human nature.

Ferguson’s doubts are not really about the value of books themselves, or indeed about the pursuit of abstract theorizing. Rather what concerns him is that reading books and abstract thought may come to crowd out participation and *capacity*.

We are left with knowledge in the form of “mere speculation” (Kettler 2005: 148) when we really need both this and the tacit knowledge gleaned from *practice*. The knowledge gleaned from an active life takes a different form from that learnt from books, and the two must complement each other in the successful pursuit of human action. One area where Ferguson displays his interest in the melding of the two forms of knowledge is in his discussion of education. We noted before that he believed the best mode of education is the sharing of active thought. By stimulating the minds of his students to active exertion, he hoped to avoid the dangers of rote learning and an unthinking admiration for the work of past thinkers. He extends this view by arguing that the proper role of education is not really the dissemination of knowledge—it is instead the formation of “character” (*Essay*: 34). What he means by this is that it is not so much the content of books that students should absorb and take away from the classroom with them as it is the attitude of critical thought and a desire to pursue ‘good’ and ‘truth’ through active engagement.<sup>17</sup> As part of his attack on scholasticism he attacked learning in retreat and the reliance on familiarization with canonical texts. His point was that one might be intimately familiar with the details of classical texts and abstract theories, and yet be incapable of acting a meaningful part in the scenes of everyday life. For example a scholar may be intimately familiar with the details of a historical battle, but be incapable of applying the lessons of this knowledge to the actual field of battle. A well-shaped education provides students with the mental outlook and character that facilitates successful action in the real world.

It is also worth noting that Ferguson does not completely denigrate the role of the “retired” student (*Principles 1*: 281). Instead he notes that the knowledge of abstract science is of great use to society so long as it is disseminated and applied by people of practice and character. Thus the discoveries of scientists spread across the globe and are put to work in the active scene of life: “The suggestions of individuals pervade entire societies of men; spread over nations, and descend to subsequent ages however remote” (*Principles 1*: 281). As a result the recluse “investigating the laws of nature, which relate to the concerns of men, is no less employed for his country than the most active of its servants; or than those who are most occupied in discharging the functions of state” (*Principles 1*: 269). Abstract knowledge must be coupled with practical *capacity* if it is to be of use in the active sphere of human life. The danger lies, not in the pursuit of science, but in the failure to appreciate that science and academic learning are only one form of human knowledge. Application to practical affairs requires a different form of knowledge from that necessary to the retired pursuit of abstract science. Similarly if we substitute knowledge of the literary productions of the past for experience gained from participation in present affairs, then we risk losing the very spirit and character with which the records of past events are imbued.

If human institutions are indeed the result of human action, but not the product of human design, then this observation brings with it the awareness that the species

of knowledge that is of significance in social change cannot solely be the result of retired speculation and abstract philosophy. The conclusion drawn from this by Ferguson is the same as that later drawn by Burke and Oakeshott: Social change is a gradual process, and political reform ought properly to be undertaken in a careful and conservative manner by those with practical experience gained from political participation.

#### CONCLUSION

How significant, then, are Ferguson's conservative concerns about the danger of *book learning*? In terms of situating Ferguson's thought in the broader history of ideas it seems clear that his conservative pronouncements on practical politics are supported by an important epistemological strand in his writings. This strand of thought has resonances with later epistemological writings by the likes of Polanyi and Oakeshott, who also believed that the significance of practical knowledge had distinct political connotations. Moreover Ferguson's conservatism intersects with the more commonly observed Stoic and Republican strands in his thought to provide a further justification for his support of an active and engaged citizenry as essential for a healthy society. His fear of entrusting political decisions to abstract thinkers demonstrates what Kettler calls his "intellectual's concern for practice" (Kettler 2005: 175), but more importantly it reveals an appreciation of the unarticulated wisdom acquired from the practical experience of politics. This provides a link between his conservative epistemology, his preference for 'realism' in political decision-making and his support for Republican participation.

From the qualifications that we observed it might be thought that Ferguson is guilty of back-peddalling slightly in attacking abstract scholars and then admitting the social utility of their discoveries. However his admission of the contribution made by retired students is qualified by his desire that their discoveries should be disseminated through the work of a class of practical citizens able to combine the discoveries of science with an appreciation of the practicalities of the social world. Ferguson's main concern is that these are distinct tasks that involve different forms of knowledge. The danger of books to this process is that we may become mere admirers of an intellectual canon drawn from the past, leaving us disposed against the active pursuit and application of virtue and knowledge in our own lives. The inevitable result of this, Ferguson feared, would be intellectual and moral stagnation coupled with a potentially disastrous desire to apply abstract thought as a suitable criterion for practical decision-making.

The question as to whether Ferguson's fears were warranted is another matter. This aspect of his thought clearly fits with Burke's prescient concerns about the possible course of the French Revolution—of which Ferguson himself was a sceptical opponent. It also fits comfortably with the commonplace idea that the

Scottish Enlightenment was a more cautious movement than its French counterpart when it came to using the claims of science and reason to urge political reform. At the same time Ferguson was clearly not advocating some sort of glorified philistinism or unthinking conservatism. Indeed intellectual intolerance and stubborn adherence to systems of thought are two of the possible dangers that he identifies as arising from *book learning*. The well-worn image of the cloistered academic engaged in sterile intellectual discourse within a received canon has become a stereotype precisely because it has a degree of truth to it. Similarly, the belief that trained philosophers would make the best rulers is an idea at least as old as Plato, and it is easy to see how the two might naturally come together in the wake of the Enlightenment's admiration for science and thirst for social reform.

If we consider that Friedrich Hayek and Michael Oakeshott would later develop the Burkean line of argument (albeit with idealist accretions in Oakeshott's case) in response to the 'rationalism' of twentieth-century socialists and totalitarians, it may be that Ferguson stands vindicated as having identified an abiding political problem. This problem is namely the potential danger that admiration for the abstract knowledge of science can lead to neglect of other forms of knowledge and ossify into dogmas that prevent, or indeed pervert, effective action in the arena of practical political decision-making. If Ferguson saw his position as having the twin roles of popularizing and applying abstract ideas in real world situations, and shaping the character of the next generation of decision-makers to ensure the disinterested pursuit of virtue, then we see his attitude to books as being that of a means to these higher ends. *Book learning* and abstract philosophers have their place, but for Ferguson, as for later conservatives, that place is nowhere near the real political process where *capacity* is a surer source of wisdom.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of these views see respectively Merolle (2005), Pocock (1975) and MacRae (1969).

<sup>2</sup> W.H. Lehmann (1930: 145), in describing Ferguson's political views, refers to him as a "philosophical conservative" whose outlook is that of a "political realist". Similarly his biographer Jane Fagg (1995: xlvi, lxxxii) notes his generally conservative politics and opposition to the French and American Revolutions.

<sup>3</sup> Ferguson begins his *History of Rome* by noting that mankind may "profit" from the study of history because to know the past is to "know mankind" (Rome: 10).

<sup>4</sup> Of course Ferguson himself goes on to blur this distinction by producing a form of theoretical history that attempts to plug gaps in the narrative of historical record by conjecture from other evidence.

<sup>5</sup> Here Ferguson follows the well-worn Enlightenment path of championing Newton over Descartes by arguing that the desire to plug gaps in our knowledge leads us to over-extend our arguments. He notes: "When we do not perceive a cause, we are apt to imagine one, and thus substitute imagination to supply the defect of our knowledge" (*Principles* 1: 117). See Lehmann (1930: 171) for a complete list of the errors to which Ferguson believed social science was open.

<sup>6</sup> For Smith on the danger of systems see (1984: 185; 1982: 47). Ferguson was well aware

that his apparent predilection for Stoicism left him open to precisely this charge and was quick to assert that he was “not conscious of having warped the truth to suit any system whatever” (Principles 1: 7).

- <sup>7</sup> A point recognised by Kettler (2005: 108) who attributes it to Ferguson’s attempt to counter Hume’s arguments on epistemology.
- <sup>8</sup> Both Michael Polanyi (1958) and Michael Oakeshott (1991) stress that successful human action depends largely on the application of both “express” and “tacit” knowledge, both “technical” and “practical” knowledge.
- <sup>9</sup> Ferguson’s argument here is almost identical to that later made famous in Michael Oakeshott’s description of practical and technical knowledge (1991: 12).
- <sup>10</sup> A point recognised by Lehmann who relates Ferguson’s rejection of “substituting books for life, libraries for social laboratories, literary orthodoxy for social experience, and generally the orthodoxy of books for social reality” (1930: 170).
- <sup>11</sup> See also (Principles 1: 269; Manuscripts: 283-87). The recurring image is noted by Lehmann (1930: 54).
- <sup>12</sup> This aspect of Ferguson’s thought leads Kettler (2005: 170, 175) to view him as “an intellectual” rather than a philosopher. His concern was with the practical use of knowledge and its application in society rather than with cloistered academic debate between philosophers.
- <sup>13</sup> Lehmann also notes Ferguson’s attack on “the danger of closet philosophy, intellectual retirement, and a bookish, cloistered education” (1930: 166). Kettler adds that Ferguson was “frequently prepared to deprecate the value of knowledge not directly applicable to action and to deny the desirability of contemplation” (2005: 144).
- <sup>14</sup> For a discussion of Ferguson’s active pedagogy see Kettler (2005: 7) and Fagg (1995: xli).
- <sup>15</sup> Ferguson begins his pamphlet *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* with the assertion that men of speculation are rarely able to bring about reform. He argues: “Remarkable changes in Policy commonly arise from some urgent Occasion; and the projects of speculative Men meet with little attention, when not supported by a prevailing Sense of Necessity or Expedience” (*Militia*: 1).
- <sup>16</sup> Indeed Ferguson praises the active engagement of men of philosophical principle in the everyday life of the Roman Republic (*Rome*: 179, 343, 358-9). Men such as Cicero are praised, however, precisely because their action was imbued and not obsessed with the guidance of philosophical schools. They were men of action before they were men of speculation.
- <sup>17</sup> Richard Sher (1985, 1990) has discussed this aspect of eighteenth-century Scottish University education in some detail, attributing it in part to the wide admiration for the teaching style of Francis Hutcheson.