

The Science of Man and Society in the Scottish Enlightenment¹

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the ways, and on what assumptions, the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment saw themselves as engaging in social science. This engagement included a critique of individualistic explanations of social institutions, an identification of suitably probabilistic social causation in manners and customs, and practising the comparative method. The enterprise was premised on the assumption of the constancy of human nature but it was not positivistic. The Scots' social science was also normative, inspired by a Baconian commitment to improvement.

I start with a brief word about the presence of 'science' in my title. In the eighteenth century Enlightenment, 'science' expressed an *esprit systématique* that encompassed all intellectual inquiry. Hence those who wrote on society or history or human nature were conscious of operating on the same plane as those working in medicine, chemistry, mathematics and so on. In Scotland this self-consciousness was heightened by a shared concern with 'improvement' and abetted by close personal ties; the Scottish Enlightenment was famously 'clubbable'. A final point about terminology: the Scots with whom I am concerned can be called variously human, social or moral scientists and I will employ these indiscriminately even though the first two were not terms they adopt. Smith does use the phrase the 'science of human nature' and Hume famously refers to the 'science of man'.

Given its now iconic status, the first of my seven sections is devoted to Hume's notion of the 'science of man.'

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1 The Science of Man

Hume refers to the ‘science of man’ in the Introduction to the *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739).² He there declares it ‘evident’ that all sciences relate more or less to human nature and they are thus ‘in some measure dependent on the science of man’. It is important to appreciate what is entailed by this ‘dependency’. Although to give human nature such a central role was a commonplace, Hume, in his own eyes, did not conceive his project as merely reproducing a received system but rather as being ‘almost entirely new’. In boldly programmatic terms, he declares the formulation of ‘the science of man’, as the ‘only solid foundation’ for a ‘compleat system of the sciences’ (*T* Introd 4,6).

We need, however, to be on our guard not to interpret this ‘programme’ as a claim to the effect that all sciences are explicable by individual attributes—the science is not an endorsement of individualism. Rather the reverse. Hume, famously in the case of his rebuttal of the ‘original contract’, criticizes the assumptions of individualism and this critique is a view shared throughout the Scottish Enlightenment. Indeed, we can say it is in virtue of that criticism, and its corollary that the focus should be ‘society’, that the claim that the Scots are pioneer social/human scientists can be sustained. But, as will be explained, this does not leave ‘human nature’ as a ‘dependent variable’ if for no other reason than that their human science is more than a descriptive exercise it is also an evaluative or normative, exercise.³

This critique of individualism hinges on its explanatory inadequacy—in effect on it being ‘bad science’. To appreciate the Scots as human scientists we do, therefore, have to heed what for them constitutes ‘good science’ or appropriate methodology. Still using Hume as a guide we can identify, in a preliminary way, some characterizing features of this methodology. The novelty that Hume had declared for his endeavour is expressed in the subtitle to the *Treatise*, it being ‘an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects’. (It is because ‘moral’ here derives etymologically from the Latin *mores* or social customs that we can reasonably label this an exercise in ‘social science’.) This method, he believes, has borne striking and decisive fruit in ‘natural philosophy’. Though no names are given, Newton is undeniably the inspiration.

In his *Optics* (1717), Newton remarked that if, through pursuit of his method, natural philosophy becomes perfected so, in like fashion, ‘the bounds of Moral Philosophy will be also enlarged’.⁴ To pursue this method ‘morally’

² References will be to the Clarendon edition, edited by D and M. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Citation prefixed *T* inserted in text by Book-Part-Chapter.Paragraph.

³ See for a recent comment R. Hanley, ‘Social Science and Human Flourishing’ *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 7 (2009) pp. 29–46.

⁴ Optics Qn.31 in *Newton’s Philosophy of Nature: Selections from his Writings* H. Thayer, (New York: Hafner, 1953) p. 179. This was employed by Turnbull as the motto for his *The Principles of Moral Philosophy* (London: 1740) Hereafter in text as *PMP* cited by page.

did not mean mathematicizing or even quantifying data.⁵ What we can regard the Scots as doing is adopting the three approaches as adumbrated in Hume's Introduction to the *Treatise*.

First, the moral scientist must carefully and exactly attend to experience. The human sciences are empirical. Second, this should not be a mere cataloguing but should attempt to trace these observational 'experiments' to universal principles, that is, by 'explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes'. This second approach comes to attain almost definitional status. Smith, for example, judges the 'Newtonian method' the 'most philosophical' because it deduces phenomena from a principle and 'all united in one chain'.⁶ While for Adam Ferguson the 'object of science' is 'to collect a multiplicity of particulars under general heads and to refer a variety of operations to their common principle'.⁷ Thirdly, although Hume recognizes that moral subjects are at a 'peculiar disadvantage' by being less amenable to experiment than natural ones, he nonetheless declares 'experiments' are possible (see Section VI below). These are derived from 'cautious observation of human life', as it appears 'in the common course of the world', which when 'judiciously collected and compar'd' can achieve certitude. Moreover, because of the solidity of its experimental conclusions, the science of man can be the most useful of all the sciences. (*T* Introd.10). The Scots, as is typical, of the Enlightenment see the human sciences in utilitarian Baconian terms, an endeavour motivated by a commitment to improve the human lot.⁸

2 Empiricism, Sociality and the Critique of Individualism

I will have much more to say about this third (comparative) approach as well as the relation between moral and natural subjects, however, I start with the

⁵ The one possible exception is Robert Wallace who articulated a 'law of propagation' based on growth rate (*A Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind* (Edinburgh: 1809 [publ. 1753]) p. 11. Hereafter cited in text as *DNM* by page. The most notable essay into what is now standard social science 'methods' is the *Statistical Account of Scotland*, begun in 1790, organised by Sir John Sinclair. This involved sending a questionnaire to all the Scottish parishes, asking for answers to over 60 queries, including information on rents, the 'wages and prices of labour', 'manures', number of poor and 'instances of longevity'. The *Account* was an archetypical Enlightenment enterprise being inspired as a means of promoting the 'happiness and improvement' of society by means of 'anxious attention to facts' as 'the sure basis of investigation and experiment'. *The Statistical Account of Scotland 1791–1799* vol. 1 eds. D. Withrington & I. Grant (Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1983) pp. 4–7, 14.0.

⁶ *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres* ed. J. Bryce (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1985) p. 146.

⁷ *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) ed. D. Forbes (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1966) p. 27. Cited as *ECS* in the text by page.

⁸ Ferguson even cites the Baconian dictum 'knowledge is power'—see and *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (Edinburgh 1792) 2 vols. I, 3, 280; II, 40. Hereafter in text as *PMPS* cited by volume, page.

first of these approaches. The Scots are in a straightforward sense empiricists. Hume, of course, developed a philosophically sophisticated exposition and it stimulated Thomas Reid to develop an equally sophisticated response, but most of the Scots' discussion was conducted at a less rarefied level. For them the acceptance of empiricism meant little more than taking facts or evidence as the base-line; there is 'no reasoning' against 'matter of fact.'⁹

In an untheorized way this became a key criterion of 'science', as exemplified by Ferguson in the opening chapter of his *History of Civil Society* (1767). The context is a criticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes, although they are not named. These thinkers by erecting a theoretical 'system', based upon selecting 'one or few particulars', have resorted to 'hypothesis' or 'conjecture' or 'imagination' or 'poetry'. To these Ferguson juxtaposes respectively, 'reality', 'facts', 'reason' and 'science' and it is the latter list that 'must be admitted as the foundation of all our reasoning relative to man' (*ECS* 2). We must, in other words, turn to evidence. The evidence is unequivocal—we have 'no record' of a time when humans were not social (Ferguson *ECS* 6 of 3, 16; *PMPS* I, 266 et passim— see also his *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* [3rd edition 1769] p. 21).

Even if paraded with 'empirical credentials' this might seem pretty unremarkable but what is important is what the Scots 'do with it'. For Ferguson, the inadequacy of Hobbes and Rousseau lies in their shared subscription to the notion that there was a meaningful construct 'the state of nature' to which can be juxtaposed civil or political society. Their imaginary narrative has the individuals leave the former and enter the latter by means of a contract. This contract was the product of individual rational deliberation, that is, individuals calculate that surrendering some of their natural liberty is, on balance, preferable to staying in their natural condition. For the Scots this whole story is 'absurd in science' (Ferguson *PMPS* II, 274), is indeed 'poetry' or 'idle fiction' (Hume *T* 3–2–2.16). In its place the Scots put forward a human scientifically warranted account of 'reality'. As a corollary of the false emphasis given to the 'individual' in the Contractarian account, the role allotted therein to reason (calculation, deliberation) is unrealistic.

⁹ Hume 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations'(1752) in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (1779) ed. E. Miller, Liberty Press, Indianapolis, 1987 p. 421. Hereafter in text as *E: PAN*. Similarly other Essays are followed by abbreviated essay title cited by page: 'Of Interest' *E: Int* (1752); 'Of Commerce' *E: Com* (1752); 'Of Money' *E: Mon* (1752); 'Of the Balance of Trade' *E: BT*—(1752); 'Of the Jealousy of Trade' *E: JT* (1758); 'Of the Original Contract' *E: OC* (1752); 'Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences' *E: AS* (1742); 'Of National Characters' *E: NC* (1748); *Of the First Principles of Government* *E: FPG* (1741); 'Of the Standard of Taste' *E: ST* (1757); 'That Politics may be reduced to a Science' *E: PSc* (1741); 'Of the Origin of Government' *E: OG* (1777); 'Of Polygamy and Divorces' *E: PD* (1742); 'Whether the British Government inclines more to Absolute Monarchy or to a Republic' *E: BG* (1741).

The Contractarians employ a form of means/end rationality. The Scots do not deny that humans are rational in this sense but they circumscribe its role; in particular it is inadequate as a form of social explanation. Since, as Dunbar declares, humans are sociable long before they are rational (*EHM* 16) then it is literally preposterous that the latter could explain the former. It is a cardinal characteristic of the Scots as human or social scientists that they think there needs to be a ‘fit’ (here missing) between the explanandum (social life and its institutions) and the explanans (the deliberations of discrete individuals). Hume states the principle concisely: ‘an effect always holds proportion with its cause’ (*E:Int* 296).

The basic assumption of sociality led the Scots to contest what Engels’ will call the Great Man Theory. The Scots’ target was the long-established view that specific societies possessed the particular political forms, or constitutions, that they did because some especially gifted individual either gave them, or shaped, their constitution. This individual was the Legislator or Law-giver such as Lycurgus for Sparta or Romulus for Rome. The Scots’ criticism of this tradition is worth pursuing because it usefully captures some key elements in their assault on individualism, with Ferguson and John Millar being particularly prominent.

Ferguson argues that the supposed Legislator in fact ‘only acted a superior part among numbers who were disposed to the same institutions’ (*ECS* 124; Gilbert Stuart cites this argument and closely follows Ferguson’s terminology).¹⁰ For Ferguson the ‘rise’ of Roman and Spartan government came not from ‘the projects of single men’ but from ‘the situation and genius of the people’ (*Ibid*). Millar adopted the same line, ‘the greater part of the political system’ derived from the ‘combined influence of the whole people’.¹¹ From Millar and Ferguson’s perspective, individualist theory is simplistic and lacks the credentials of a scientific account.

This recourse to Legislators, by reducing the complexity of social life and institutions to individual actions, again exemplifies the lack of fit between explanans and explanandum. Of course individuals are ‘actors’ but properly, that is scientifically, understood their explanatory role is limited. Millar allows that some ‘*peculiar* institutions will *sometimes* take their origin from the casual interpositions of *particular* persons who *happen to be* placed at the head of a community’ (*OR* 177: my emphases). However, this contingent fact has been employed as a general explanation. This can even be detected in actual historical cases, such as Alfred ‘the Great’. Millar does not doubt that Alfred made

¹⁰ *Historical Dissertation concerning the Antiquity of the English Constitution* Edinburgh, 1768 p. 248.

¹¹ J. Millar, *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* 3rd edit. (1779) repr in W. Lehmann. *John Millar of Glasgow*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960) p. 177. Hereafter in text as *OR* cited by page.

improvements but comments how his exploits, leading to him being called ‘the English Lycurgus’, have been exaggerated. This is understandable but obscures a proper appraisal. Dispassionate scrutiny reveals that, although the institution of juries, for example, have been attributed to him they rather rose from the ‘*general situation* of the Gothic nations’.¹²

As Durkheim remarked of this style of argument it takes what is first in order of knowledge as first in order of reality.¹³ Ferguson comments that when confronted with a particular institution or social practice the ‘simplest’ explanation is to attribute it to some ‘previous design’, that is, to attribute it to some individual’s will or purpose as the cause of the institution as an effect (*ECS* 123). Stuart remarks that ‘it is easy’ to talk of the deep projects of princes, it is ‘more difficult to mark the slow operation of events’.¹⁴

Individualistic explanations, due to their simplistic superficiality, are misleading. They remove individuals from their social context and since humans are naturally social then this removal is a distortion. In a metaphor of Ferguson’s, society is an ‘atmosphere’ outside of which humans cannot exist and to appreciate the importance of this requires ‘the light of science’ (*PMPS* I, 269). From the perspective of the history of social theory, and to underline the earlier observation, this is an important conclusion: the gamut of social institutions—government, law, family, religion, culture and so on—are to be explained by social causes. Stuart neatly summarizes this point when he remarks that the disorders between the king and the nobles which affected the whole of Europe in the high Middle Ages are ‘not to be referred entirely to the rapacity and the administration of princes. There *must be a cause more comprehensive and general* to which they [the disorders] are chiefly to be ascribed’.¹⁵ This idea of ‘general causes’ is an important element in the Scots’ social science. We find it also invoked in Millar where ‘the general cause’ of the Reformation is ‘the improvement of arts and consequent diffusion of knowledge’ (*HV* 407). Hume refers to ‘general causes’ to account for the activities of the Catholic Church in the reign of Henry III (*HE* I, 338). These ‘historical’ cases exemplify or specify the more generic earlier references to general causes as ‘situation and genius’

¹² *An Historical View of the English Government* (1803—first volume publ. 1787) ed M. Phillips & D. Smith (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 2006) p. 141 (my emphasis). Hereafter cited in text as *HV* by page. Similarly the mode of military organization cannot be properly attributed to his ‘singular policy’, since they were not ‘peculiar’ to England and are rather to be interpreted as arising ‘almost imperceptibly from the rude state of the country’ (*HV* 97–98). Also on Alfred see Hume *History of England* [1762] London: Routledge, 1894 in 3 volumes, I, 50,53. Hereafter cited in text as *HE* by Volume, page.

¹³ *Montesquieu and Rousseau* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965) p. 11.

¹⁴ *Observations concerning the Public Law and the Constitutional History of Scotland* (Edinburgh: 1779) p. 108.

¹⁵ *A View of Society in Europe in its Progress from Rudeness to Refinement* (1792) 2nd. Edition, (Bristol: Thoemmes Reprint, 1995) p. 71 my emphasis. Hereafter cited in text as *VSE*.

(Ferguson, who also refers to the ‘humour and disposition’ of the age [*ECS* 177]) or prevalent ‘manners and customs’ or ‘general situation’ (Millar) or the ‘slow result of situations’ (Dunbar) or ‘slow operation of events’ (Stuart).

3 The Comparative Method

This now raises the question of how the ‘general’ is to be identified. The key tool is the use of comparative evidence; Hume’s third aspect of the method for the science of man, mentioned above. This methodology, we can say, used evidence to check evidence. Millar supplies a clear example. He observes that given we have evidence from ‘illiterate men, ignorant of the writings of each other’, who have described ‘people in similar circumstances’, then the reader, or human scientist, has ‘the opportunity of comparing their several descriptions’, so that ‘from their agreement or disagreement’ the scientist is able ‘to ascertain the credit that is due to them’ (*OR* 181). Similar expressions of the comparative method can be found, for example, in William Robertson¹⁶ and Kames.¹⁷

There was a recurrent pattern to the evidential sources drawn upon for comparison. Ferguson, when affirming the evidential fact of human sociality states, with implicit added emphasis, that this fact is supported by the ‘earliest and latest accounts collected from every quarter of the earth’ (*ECS* 3). For the Scots, as scientists of man, this gleaning of sources, both past and present, is significant for two reasons. First it reflects a commitment to a universalism rooted in the uniformity of human nature. As we will see, the Scots’ human science means they have none of the later intellectual qualms and sensibilities that inform historicist philosophers such as R.G. Collingwood or practitioners of anthropology as thick description like Clifford Geertz.¹⁸ The second significant point is that the use of both history and ethnography is a key factor explaining their scientific ambition. They see themselves as engaged in a ‘natural history of mankind’ (Millar *OR* 180). The science of man (the human sciences) to be worthy of that label, and to approach any sustainable claim to emulate Newton,

¹⁶He remarks that it is through ‘comparing detached facts’ supplied by, among others, missionaries and ‘vulgar travellers’ that it is possible to discover ‘what they wanted the sagacity to observe’ as well as avoid ‘indulging in conjecture’ *History of America* (1777) in *Works* ed. D. Stewart in one vol. (Edinburgh, 1840) pp. 831–2. Hereafter in text cited as *HAm* by page.

¹⁷He comments that the most informative method of studying law is by a ‘careful and judicious comparison of the laws of different countries’ *Historical Law Tracts* (1758) 2nd. Edition, (Edinburgh, 1761) p. xiii. Hereafter in text cited as *HLT* by page.

¹⁸I have argued this point in the context of Hume but it holds more widely for the Scots, see C. Berry ‘Hume’s Universalism: The Science of Man and the Anthropological point of View’ in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15 (2007) 529–44. Compare R. Smith ‘The Language of Human Nature’ in *Inventing the Human Sciences* C. Fox et al (eds.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 88–111.

cannot be confined to localism, whether historical or geographical. Even a work as seemingly parochial as *The History of England* becomes in Hume's hands a telling of the path to modernity that, as he says of the Reformation, reveals 'the necessary progress of human affairs, and the operation of those principles which are inherent in human nature' (*HE* II, 336).

The Scots' practice of the comparative method made critical use of this recourse to both past and present evidence. Robertson provides perhaps the most worked out version. When discussing the sources from which information about the 'ancient state of the barbarous nations' of Europe has to be derived, he acknowledges that the historian has to rely not on the barbarians themselves, who, even if not illiterate, left no materials, but instead upon the descriptions provided by the Greek and Roman writers.¹⁹ However, and this is the point of note, he also observes that there is 'still one race of men nearly in the same political situation' as the barbarians, namely, the 'various tribes and nations of savages in North America' (*VPS* 371). He accordingly hypothesizes that if there is similarity between the barbarous Europeans and the Americans then 'it is stronger proof' that a 'just account' of the former has been given than 'the testimony even of Caesar or Tacitus'. He then itemizes five points of similarity—subsistence by hunting and fishing, the limited power of 'magistrates', minimal 'criminal jurisdiction', that leaders must respect those who follow them and that they emerge in time of war. These are all aspects of society to which the Scottish social scientists pay heed. Robertson ends his analysis with the judgment that 'a philosopher' (a scientist of man), will, in line with the evidence, conclude that although not perfectly similar, the 'resemblance is greater perhaps than any that history affords an opportunity of observing' (*VPS* 372). The explanation for this is the basic uniformity of human nature (see Section VI below) and similarity of circumstances, so that there is not need to indulge in 'conjecture' (in a Fergusonian pejorative sense) to explain links between the Old and New world (*HAm* 806).²⁰

4 Cause and Chance

This use of comparison fits with the critique of the Legislators. It is because comparative analysis can identify a similarity of institutions in various places

¹⁹ *A View of the Progress of Society in Europe* (1769) in Works p. 370. Hereafter in text as *VPS*.

²⁰ One manifestation of this was the 'origin' of the Amerinds. There was plenty of supposed detective work drawing on similarities (it was a leitmotif in Robertson's principal source of information, Lafitau's *Moeurs des Sauvages Amériquains, Comparées aux Moeurs des Premiers Temps* 2 vols., (Paris: 1724). Kames 'broke ranks' by arguing for polygenesis, the claim that the Amerinds were a separate 'creation' (*SHM* I, 41. For comment see R. Wokler, 'Apes and Races in the Scottish Enlightenment Monboddio and Kames on the Nature of Man' in *Philosophy and Science in the Scottish Enlightenment* ed. P. Jones (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1988) 145–68.

and at different times then the role of even genuine historical figures can be minimized. This relies on a simple argument—it is improbable that the actions (cause) of discrete individuals produce (effect) a recurrent general pattern of social institutions. We have already noted that Millar, for one, allows for ‘casual’ intervention and ‘peculiarities’ within a general pattern discerned through comparison. There is, however, crucially more to be said about this ‘pattern’. Kames makes a useful distinction. He distinguishes between ‘rational’ history, which traces causal chains, and writing which merely catalogues ‘facts’. The latter cannot explain why a particular event happened when it did or, what is the same thing, it is put down to chance (*HLT* vi–vii).

Hume is instructive on this contrast. He opens his early [1742] *Essay Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences* with some methodological considerations. He says there is a need to distinguish ‘exactly’ between what ‘is owing to chance and what proceeds from causes’ (*E:AS* 111). He does not deny there is a distinction here but the decisive defect of the recourse to chance is that, contrary to the scientific imperative to seek explanation, it precludes all further enquiry. He illustrates it with the performance of a biased die. In a few throws the bias will not reveal itself but it ‘will certainly prevail in a great number’ (*E:AS* 112). Millar uses a very similar example. He supposes that in one or two throws of a die very different numbers will be produced but ‘in a multitude of dice thrown together at random the result will be nearly equal’ (*OR* 177). Millar uses this example in his critique of Legislators to underline the difference between on the one hand ‘the character and genius of a nation’, where ‘fixed causes’ can be identified, and on the other that of an individual, where such fixity is absent.

Hume’s use of the die was in this way a means of pointing up the difference between ‘what depends upon a few persons’ and ‘what arises from a great number’. While the former ‘is in a great measure to be ascribed to chance, or secret and unknown causes’, the latter ‘may often be accounted for by determinate and known causes’ (*E:AS* 112). This is an example of what he calls in this context a ‘general rule’ (he uses it differently in other contexts).²¹ This ‘rule’ provides the social scientist with a ‘working tool’. For example, his essay on population is phrased as an enquiry as to ‘whether it be probable from what we know of the situation of society in both periods [ancient and modern] that antiquity must have been more populous’ (*E:PAN* 381). As this example illustrates social science deals properly with probabilities. Hume, again using the example of a die, elaborated upon this in the *First Enquiry* where he states,

There is certainly a probability which arises from a superiority of chances on any side; and accordingly as this superiority encreases, and surpasses the opposite

²¹ Among other uses, general rules function as correctives of erroneous beliefs (eg *T* 1–3–13.12) or the passions (eg *T* 2–1–6.8) or their meaning as inflexible regulations to sustain social stability (eg *T* 3–2–3.3) and regulate taste (*E-ST* 235).

chances, the probability receives a proportionable encrease and begets still a higher degree of belief or assent to that side in which we discover the superiority.²²

While Hume's is typically the most rigorous application he is not alone. Indeed Wallace in his population essay also explicitly set out to enquire whether 'it is not probable' that the ancient world was more populous (*DNM* 33).

Having to deal with probabilities does not mean social science is not a search for causes. There is 'no such thing as chance in the world' (Hume *EU* 6.1). Hence the above reference to 'secret and unknown causes' (echoing the earlier remark in the *Treatise* [*T* 1–3–12.1, cf. Kames *PMNR* 195]). Hume's wording makes it clear that this difference between chance and cause is one of degree of knowledge. This entails that causal explanations are in principle always available. Of course, care must be taken neither to 'assign causes which never existed' nor to 'reduce what is merely contingent to stable and universal principles' (*E:AS* 113). Nonetheless the question why arts and sciences arise is a general one that can be 'accounted for, in some measure, by general causes and principles' (*E:AS* 114). Hume, in language we have already met, is here reinforcing the importance the Scots attach to finding the correct fit between cause and effect. The contingent will remain, so that to seek to explain why a particular poet, say Homer, existed when and where he did is to pursue a chimera.²³ But even when dealing with the seemingly quintessential individuality of a poet there remain causally relevant general considerations that a scientific or philosophic account can elicit. Hence Hume claims that these individuals nevertheless share the 'same spirit and genius' that is 'antecedently diffused throughout the whole people'. Recall now Ferguson's reference to 'situation and genius of the people' as a general cause. In Hume this social 'spirit' serves 'to produce, form and cultivate' from 'earliest infancy' the 'taste and judgement' of the poet (*E:AS* 114). This is to identify a process of social (moral) causation.

5 Habit and Social Causation

The identification of moral causation lies at the heart of the Scots' account of human science. This mode of causation was commonly distinguished from

²²Hume. *An Inquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748) ed. T Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) Ch. 6 para. 1 Hereafter cited in text as *EU* by book.paragraph. For a discussion of Hume and 'probability' (and the Enlightenment context more generally) see L. Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) Ch.4 and K. Baker, *Condorcet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) esp. p. 160f.

²³Hume gives the case of Homer at *E:AS* 114. Thomas Blackwell had argued that Homer was not a 'miracle', a poet 'inspired from Heaven' but that a 'concourse of natural causes conspired to produce and cultivate that mighty genius' *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London: 1735) pp. 3–4. Hereafter cited in text as *Homer* by page.

another—‘physical’ causation. Hume employs this pre-existing distinction to prominent polemical effect in his *Essay Of National Characters* (1748). Its argumentative thrust is that moral causes are the effective explanation for national character, while physical causes fail in that task. While it needs, as we will see, to be interpreted with due caution, it represents the Scottish ‘take’ on the difference between human and natural science. To obtain some preliminary purchase on this point we can treat ‘physical causation’ as falling in the remit of natural science and can reasonably interpret Hume’s polemics in *Of National Characters* as demonstrating its limitations as an ‘explanation of moral subjects’.

In that *Essay*, he gives nine reasons to support his dismissal of the explanatory reach of physical causation (elsewhere he is somewhat more concessive, recognizing, for example, disease as a physical cause that has impact [*E: PAN* 379]). A common argumentative strategy runs through this list. If physical causes (such as climate and air) do explain national character as an effect then that can be disproved by citing cases where the requisite constant conjunction between cause and effect is absent. This can take two forms. Either the cause is the same but the effect is different or, conversely, the causes are different but the effect is the same. As instances of the former Hume supplies the case of England and Scotland (*E: NC* 207) and of the latter the Chinese (*E: NC* 204).

Hume’s compatriots read this as a critique of Montesquieu.²⁴ All the Scots regard moral causes as effectively explanatory. Whereas in Hume’s terms physical causes work ‘insensibly’ on the ‘temper’ via the ‘body’, moral causes work on the ‘mind’ as a ‘motive’ via making a set of manners ‘habitual’ (*E: NC* 198). The same differential crux is identified in slightly different terminology by Robert Wallace. In his version physical causes ‘depend utterly on the course of nature and are independent of mankind’, while moral causes ‘depend on the affections, passions and institutions of men’ (*DNM* 12).

It is important not to overemphasize the difference between these two types of causation. The Scots, that is to say, do not subscribe to some categorical distinction between *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaft*. Turnbull clearly enunciates the key principle at the beginning of his *Principles*, ‘an enquiry into human nature is as much as an enquiry into fact, as any question about the frame and texture (for instance) of any plant or of the human body’ (*PMP* 1 cf. 58 and Gregory *CV*

²⁴In *De l’Esprit des Loix* Montesquieu argued that was a direct relationship between climate or air, as causes, and social institutions or national character and human behaviour, as effects. Hence the different reception afforded to the same opera in England and Italy or the fact that punishment has to be severe in the cold climate of Muscovy (Bk.14, Ch. 2). The *De l’Esprit*, however, was published in 1748 and only a little before Hume’s *National Characters* in that same year. There is at best only circumstantial evidence that Hume had read Montesquieu (see P. Chamley ‘The conflict between Montesquieu and Hume’ in *Essays on Adam Smith* eds. A. Skinner & T. Wilson [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975] pp. 274–305) but aside from historiographical reasons the point is not here vital, since in principle the argument is not ad hominem (even if in practice it often took that form) and Hume had prefigured his argument against ‘soil or climate’ in the *Treatise* (*T* 2–2–11.12).

2,206). In the Scots' eyes a categorical divide would be to jettison the very idea of there being a human *science*.²⁵ The fact that Hume refers to moral *causation* is of moment. His support for moral causes is still deterministic. I have labelled this position 'soft' determinism.²⁶ This is 'soft', as opposed to 'hard', because it operates not directly on the body, as a mere automatic reflex (such as, in Montesquieu's example, the fibres on a sheep's tongue) but through the 'mind'. Yet this is still deterministic because the way the various circumstances that constitute moral causes operate is to establish a set of motives or reasons that 'render a peculiar set of manners habitual' or, as he puts it in the following paragraph, 'the manners of individuals are frequently *determined* by these [moral] causes' (*E:NC* 198: my emphasis). The mode of determination Hume explains a little later. He declares that 'Whatever it be that forms the manners of one generation, the next must imbibe a deeper tincture of the same dye; men being more susceptible of all impressions during infancy, and retaining these impressions as long as they remain in the world' (*E:NC* 203).²⁷

The very fact that humans are social creatures means that they are exposed to the formative force of habit; they are as Ferguson put it 'withal in a very high degree susceptible of habits' (*ECS* 11 cf. *PMP* I, 209). By stressing habit formation in childhood (what Turnbull calls 'early accustomance' [*PMP* 99]) the Scots are emphasizing the importance of socialization (generically) or education (specifically). A realistic account of social life, that is, one that will explain its operation recognizes the force of socialization; to pretend 'society' is some sort of blank canvass on which individuals can write at will is not to 'do' science but to indulge in poetry or utopian speculation. Of course any particular individual can in some aspect of their behaviour act idiosyncratically, Homer can still be a uniquely creative individual. But, as we have seen, these are explicable exceptions to the 'general' rule (note Hume's insertion of the adverb 'frequently' before 'determined' in the quotation from *E-NC* p. 198 above). The human sciences do not deal in rigid laws but, rather, what Turnbull identifies as generalized regularities, inferable 'by induction from the observation of many individuals' (*PMP* 72).

The Scots' focus is on 'social habits' or 'manners'. There is evidentially a frequency and repetitiveness to living in society and the effect of this social interaction is that a people 'must acquire a resemblance in their manners' (Hume *E:NC* 203 my emphasis). These manners, or 'the habits and way of living of the

²⁵Ferguson does make a distinction between 'physical science', which deals with 'facts', and 'moral science' which deals with 'right' (*PMP* I, 2, 160) but the latter's focus is on inferences from fact (II, 2) not on a separation. Nor does he think there is a difference in 'method', in both sciences it consists in the collection of particulars and induction therefrom (II, 35–6), so there can be a 'science of manners or ethics' as well as of 'jurisprudence and politics' (II, 32).

²⁶C. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) p. 84.

²⁷For a fuller account of this argument see C. Berry, 'Hume and the Customary Causes of Industry, Knowledge and Humanity', *History of Political Economy*, 38 (2006) 291–317.

people' (Hume *E: Int* 298 cf *E: Mon* 290, 294, Blackwell *Homer* 12,29), will differ but not so profoundly as to preclude scientific explanation. The fact that 'men are guided more by custom than by reason [to] follow, without inquiry, the manners which are prevalent in their own time' (Hume *HE I*, 395 cf. III, 116) can be exemplified by their sociological account (as we might term it) of obligation.

Here, again, we can discern the Scots' purported scientific 'realism' in contrast to the 'poetry' of the Contractarians. For Hume all the evidence points to the fact that all existing governments were originally founded on usurpation or conquest (*E-OC* 471). It was to side-step these considerations that the Contractarians had sought the touchstone of legitimacy in an original contract.²⁸ But for the Scots 'legitimacy' is something to be accounted for; it is 'unscientific' simply to assert it as a consequence from some postulates about a supposed 'natural condition'. That is to say, the explanation of the facts of obligation has to be sought in social life and not by invoking an extra-societal notion of a state of nature. In sharp contrast to the ahistoricity of a state of nature, human social experience is temporally structured. This temporalization is a necessary condition in the formation of habits. For Hume, since the evidence is that governments originate in 'usurpation and rebellion' (*T* 3–2–10.4) then the further evidential fact that they are not now regarded as illegitimate requires explanation. Hume's answer is to invoke temporally induced belief, subjects come over time to consent willingly 'because they think that from long possession he [the ruler] has acquired a title' (*E: OC* 475 cf *E: PrS* 511, Ferguson *PMPS* II, 232, Millar *HV* 694). It is 'time and custom' that make 'legal and obligatory' what was 'founded only on injury and violence' (*T* 3–2–10.19) and, in line with the 'principles of human nature', men 'once accustomed to obedience never think of departing from that path in which they and their ancestors have constantly trod' (*E: OG* 39).

Hume refines this argument when, picking up some earlier usage,²⁹ he declares generically that all governments (even despotic ones) rest on 'opinion' (*E: FPG* 32)—a view he reiterated (*E: BG* 51, *HE* III, 395 etc). He also claimed more specifically, that 'antiquity always begets the opinion of right' (33). 'Opinion' here refers to 'belief' and it is one of the Scots' contribution to the human sciences that they effectively write a history of belief; an historically informed sociology of knowledge, the history of what Hume himself calls the 'the minds of men' (*HE* III, 12)³⁰ and Robertson the 'history of the human mind' (*HAM* 811).

²⁸ Though see Hutcheson *A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (1747) (Hildesheim: Olms repr., 1969) p. 285 and Reid (*Practical Ethics* ed. K. Haakonssen, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) p. 15). Both writers were more sympathetic to the Lockean contractarianism than their compatriots.

²⁹ See, especially, Sir William Temple, *An Essay upon the Original and Nature of Government* (1672) included in his *Miscellanea* (London: 1680) p. 54. Hume knew Temple's writings (he was for example another advocate of 'climate') and judged him a 'considerable writer' *HE* III, 782. My thanks to Ryu Susato for alerting me to this particular judgement.

³⁰ See M. Phillips, *Society and Sentiment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) p. 50.

Smith in his jurisprudence lectures echoes Hume's argument with his remark that 'everything by custom appears to be right'.³¹ Contrary to the Contractarians' recourse to a rationally deliberated contract between individuals, the Scots explain the source of government in social scientific terms. The 'evidence' is that it arises 'casually and imperfectly' (Hume *E:OG* 39).

Hume comments on this process that, despite any appearance of inevitability, in fact, government commenced casually because it 'cannot be expected that men should beforehand be able to discover them [principles of government and allegiance] or foresee their operation' (*E:OG* 39). This is an expression of recognition by the Scots that social life is pervaded by unintended consequences. Although Smith's invocation of the 'invisible hand' exemplifies it, its meaning is broad, both in his thought and in his compatriots. Ferguson captures this in his remark that 'nations stumble upon establishments which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design' (*ECS* 122).

This 'fact' about human life is a key ingredient in their sociological histories. Millar, for example, rejects the view that Anglo-Saxon government was the result of 'deep-laid schemes of policy', rather it was the product of what occurred successively to the people 'for the supply of their immediate wants and removal of accidental inconveniences' (*HV* 192). What he has in mind here is how Parliamentary procedure arose merely from the nature of the business under consideration and was not 'the fruit of any pre-conceived system of policy' (*HV* 324). Hence, the 'freedom of the common people' was 'not intended' in the various medieval charters but with the general 'progress of arts' they were able to benefit from the limitations on arbitrary power that the feudal barons had obtained for their own particular benefit (*HV* 237–8).

The Scots' general alertness to the dissonance between intention and outcome echoes their critique of Legislators and thus exhibits, again, their 'scientific' endeavour to reject simplistic individualist explanations of complex events and institutions. It also counsels against attributing 'wisdom' to 'sovereigns or single men' in their attempt, for example, to increase population, because their projects are likely to have the unintended consequence of frustrating, misleading and even hurting those they are intending to help (Ferguson *ECS* 140). Social scientific investigation reveals that in practice (in 'reality') much of human life is not pliable. Of course, change occurs but this is significant at the institutional level in the form, to re-quote Dunbar, of 'the slow operation of situations' rather than 'regular design'. It is because individuals are 'social', entangled in a web of roles and structures, that even their most deliberate actions ramify and 'escape' control. Institutions arise not as the traceable effect of intended actions but, as Ferguson declares, 'from successive improvements that were made, without any sense of

³¹ *Lectures on Jurisprudence* ed. R. Meek, D. Raphael and P. Stein, (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1982) p. 322.

their general effect; and they bring human affairs into a state of complication, which the greatest reach of capacity with which human nature was ever adorned, could not have projected'. Indeed so extensive is this complication that it cannot be 'comprehended in its full extent' (*ECS* 182). This explains why Hayek was such a fan of the Scots and of this aspect of Ferguson in particular.³² This genealogy is reinforced by the realization that the 'market' or 'economic' behaviour fits this 'model' as a series of discrete purposive decisions by separate individuals produces an overall outcome that none of them individually intended.

6 HUMAN NATURE, UNIVERSALITY AND JUDGEMENT

This penultimate section takes us back to beginning—to the project of a science of man—and examines its assumptions. 'Man' or human nature has to be a fit 'subject' for science if the human sciences, in their Baconian guise of seeking to improve human life, are to have an effect. To engage in fruitful moral science requires that its foundation in human nature be able to bear that weight. For the Scots this was the case because human nature 'consists of the same principles everywhere' (Gregory *CV* 123).

Perhaps the most unequivocal expression is found aptly enough in Hume, the most forthright advocate of a science of man. In a well-known passage, Hume confidently asserts that 'it is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same in its principles and operations' so that it now follows that

history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour

(*EU* 8.7).

Echoing the Introduction to the *Treatise* quoted in Section I, Hume is quite explicit that these 'materials' provided by the historical record are 'collections of experiments' that enable the 'moral philosopher' to fix 'the principles of his science' just like 'the natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants[etc] ... by the experiments which he forms concerning them'.

³² Hayek even titled one of his essays after Ferguson's phrase—in his *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967 pp. 96–105.

These ‘principles’ (effectively human passions) operate independently of their particular social context.³³ Of course there are differences and variations but the comprehension of these is still founded on knowledge of constant uniformity. All human behaviour, even if it has a ‘local’ character, is explicable because it is governed causally by regular motives that have uniform effects. Thanks to Hume’s non-contextualism, ‘man’ is a fit subject for a ‘science’ because his behaviour necessarily exhibits certain uniformities. ‘Man’ is not differentially defined by local context. It would be contrary to the first Newtonian rule of philosophizing if these contextual variations could not be subsumed under and explained by a few simple causes but had, rather, to be accounted for in their own strictly non-comparable terms, where (as he puts it) ‘every experiment’ was ‘irregular and anonymous’ (*EU* 8.9).

Hume’s position is the common Enlightenment view. The underlying assumption of the human sciences is that human behaviour exhibits significant uniformities that enable predictions to be made. Hume in the *First Enquiry* asks rhetorically, ‘how could politics be a science if laws and forms of government had not a uniform influence upon society?’ (*EU* 8.18). Though this pertains to moral evidence, for Hume, to repeat a point earlier, this is not qualitatively different from ‘natural evidence’. Indeed the two are generally co-implicated as exemplified by the predicament of a prisoner in jail. The individual has ‘neither money nor interest’ and thus escape is impossible due as equally to the ‘obstinacy of the gaoler’ as it is to the ‘walls and bars with which he is surrounded’. Experience has taught that human physical strength cannot destroy stone walls (natural evidence) and that deprived of the means to bribe jailers the latter’s interests are bound to their custodial role (moral evidence) (*T* 2–3–1.17, *EU* 8.19).³⁴

It would be misleading if this Humean stance was interpreted in a strictly positivist manner. For all the Scots, and this includes Hume, science did not inhabit some *Wertfrei* zone.³⁵ The various ways of life that the Scots’ ethnographic, comparative and historical work covers is open to external evaluation. The universalism of human nature allows a scientist of man to judge between true (better) and false (worse) institutional expressions. To Dunbar, ‘it belongs to reason and philosophy to rejudge mankind; and under an endless variety of appearances ... to fix the principles which affect in every age and country

³³I have labelled this a ‘non-contextualist’ theory C. Berry, *Hume, Hegel and Human Nature* (The Hague, Nijhoff, 1982); C. Berry *Human Nature* (London, Macmillan, 1986).

³⁴Cf. Kames who likens the ‘necessity’ of the criminal on his way to the scaffold forseeing his execution to the expectation that a stone will drop to the ground when released (*PMNR* 158). Hume too had used the example of an execution to make the same point (*EU* 8.19).

³⁵The one time hotly debated passage in the *Treatise* where he remarks that it ‘seems altogether inconceivable’ that ‘ought’ can be deduced from ‘is’ when they are ‘entirely different’ (*T* III-1–2.1) does not signal that Hume believed his science of man was non-judgmental, rather the reverse as we will see.

the proportion of human happiness and perfection' (*EHM* 534–5). Although Dunbar counsels against boastful European pretensions, he is clear that there has been progress.

In practice, this evaluativeness grounded in progress has multifarious expression. The institution of polygamy, for example, can be scientifically explained (by the low status of women, by voluptuous manners where subsistence is easily obtained and as a temporary expedient—see variously Kames [*SHM* I, 302], Dunbar [*EHM* 49], Millar [*OR* 225]) but it can still be pronounced, by Hume, as barbaric and 'odious' (*E:PD* 183,185), deprecated as an instance of female degradation by brutish manners by Kames (*SHM* I, 307) or a symptom of female slavery by Millar (*OR* 225) and judged with disfavour as a 'usurpation of the powerful and opulent' by Dunbar (*EHM* 50). The universalism of human nature underwrites a universalism of judgement. Smith provides a particularly clear example of this in his declaration that the 'sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted' (*TMS* V.2.1). This statement is made in the context of a discussion of infanticide but it makes explicit that the uniformity of human nature constitutes the foundation of moral sentiments. This means that there is a uniform or universal structure to morality which then licenses the judgment that particular practices may indeed be judged 'warped'; they are not all on a par, some deviate from an authoritative transcultural norm.

None of this is to say the Scots are unaware of 'difference' or cultural bias and of the dangers of arrogant prejudicial judgement.³⁶ Dunbar thinks the labels 'barbarous' and 'civilized' should be set aside as too general and more pointedly, that Europeans are prone to an opinion of 'superiority over other nations' (*EHM* 151–2 cf.455). Similar sentiments are expressed by, for example, Ferguson (see *ECS* 75).

7 CONCLUSION

In my assessment the key contribution of the Scots to the rise of the human sciences lies in a conception of society as a set of interlocked institutions and behaviours. A society of hunter gatherers will have little in the way of personal possessions, will have nothing to speak of in the form of governmental machinery where any 'rule' would be personal and temporary, will exhibit few status distinctions except the inferiority of women and will live in a world populated with a multiplicity of gods whose actions make their feelings plain. These savages would also respond to these events in a speech abounding in vivid and

³⁶ See C. Smith, 'The Scottish Enlightenment, Unintended Consequences and the Science of Man' *Scottish Journal of Philosophy* 7 (2009) 9–28.

animated images (Ferguson *ECS* 172, Blackwell *Homer* 38). They would also likely bedaub themselves, self-mutilate and represent their gods in idols (Kames *SHM* II, 453). By contrast, those who live in civilized societies will typically own property some of it in the intangible form of bills of exchange, will enjoy the freedom and security attendant on the impersonal rule of law, their manners will be polite and women will be treated with deferential respect, their religion will be monotheistic and their language plain and their art tasteful. In the round this represents progress so this synchronic picture of societal coherence is complemented by a diachronic account of societal change.

The Scots thus provide an analysis of both social statics and social dynamics. This analysis serves to shift the focus away from the 'individual' that characterized early modern jurisprudentialism. Humans as social beings are best understood in society and not as monadic individuals. Their analysis also sidelines the traditional centrality allotted to the 'political'. Humans are social not political animals. Political institutions (including the traditional classificatory device of constitutional type) are simply one among several, with no greater priority than others. Hence whether it be political sociology, the sociology of religion or literature, political economy, social anthropology or an account of the forces and fault-lines of social change eighteenth century Scottish thinkers gave considerable impetus to the emergence of the human sciences.