ADAM FERGUSON AND
THE PARADOX OF PROGRESS AND DECLINE

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One of the features that distinguishes Ferguson’s history and social philosophy from those of other Scottish contemporaries like Smith and Hume is the pessimistic mood that pervades his work. Though he welcomed the new age of commercialism (a natural product of the laws of ‘spontaneous order’ or unintended consequences) Ferguson was also acutely aware of its potential for corruption and even for the complete annihilation of society. More than anyone before him, and certainly more than either Smith or Hume, Ferguson’s interest lay with diagnosing and remediying the ills of the commercial age. Despite his commitment to the laws of spontaneous order, Ferguson’s writings are infused, paradoxically, with a sense of impending doom. Even as he lauds progress Ferguson seems also to fear it and this renders his philosophy ambiguous.

This paper seeks a textual reconciliation of this conundrum, identified here as ‘the paradox of progress and decline’, in terms of Fergusonian theology. But first, this paradox needs to be elucidated.

The Problem

Ferguson’s exposition of spontaneous order outlines a vision of human affairs as harmonious, orderly, progressive and perfectibilist. He bases his theory of spontaneous order on his studies of all the ‘anthropological’ and historical evidence available to him, evidence which apparently revealed to him universal

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patterns of social order. The ordering process is regulated by ‘laws of nature’ operating between and within individuals and in the external conditions of human life (the ‘law of society or union’, the ‘law of opposition’, ‘laws of progression’, the ‘law of self-preservation’ among others). Order or ‘equilibrium’ is the product of all laws of nature combined and the *raison d’être* of these laws is order.

Ferguson constructs a two-tiered model of social order in which the individual, by following the dictates of such instincts as ‘self-preservation’, ‘the mutual inclination of the sexes’, ‘the desire for unity and advantage’ and even our belligerent tendencies, inadvertently secures social harmony and the progress of the species. The pursuit of private interest, for example, frequently works to the public good; the perpetuation of the species is achieved, not by deliberate planning on the part of legislators, but instinctively, and inventions are rarely the result of a single innovator but arise from the gradual improvements wrought by successive generations.

We are not always conscious of our role in securing social order because ‘[t]hings the most remote, are made to concur to the same salutary purposes’. Since people are conceived as working subrationally to secure order, such rationalist historical fictions as ‘the Great Legislator’ myth and the diffusionist thesis of history are assailed. It is not in the schemes of visionary statesmen that we find explanations for the organization and progress of civilizations; society has an intelligent structure which transcends the abilities of individuals apart and progress is a spontaneous process generated by the accumulated private acts of innumerable actors through time.

History is conceived lineally and is presented in the form of a tri-stadial thesis (savage, barbarous and polished) in which progress is conceived as both natural and, apparently, inevitable. Ferguson explains that the laws of spontaneous

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7 *Institutes*, p. 126.


9 Essay, pp. 121–3, 168–70, 182; *Principles*, I, pp. 207–8; *Principles*, II, p. 509. In the case of language, for example, ‘no single genius, however vast, is equal to the invention of a language’ (*Principles*, I, pp. 42–5).
order secure not only our vital social institutions, but our practical and moral progress as a species through time. There is a natural and sequentially linear order to history and every human society passes through three developmental stages in its progress; the ‘savage’, ‘barbarous’ and ‘polished’ ages. These forms, the divine blueprint of our progress, inhere in ‘human nature’. The ‘Creator’ has destined the species for progress and this is ensured through the deliberate incorporation of certain instincts and propensities (even defects) in the human constitution. Our species is distinct from other species in possessing a conscious striving for excellence; our inherent capacity to evaluate gives rise to ‘ambition or the desire of something higher than is possessed at present’ resulting in the sometimes conscious, sometimes intuitive, desire for perfection. The progressive drive, ambition, is the primary generator of history. Despite its being informed by (short-term) rational choices and moulded by habit and environmental factors, ambition is an innate propensity. History is

10 Essay, pp. 205–7. Unlike Smith and Millar, with their ‘Four Stages’ means of subsistence schema, Ferguson adopts a three-stage paradigm in which categories are based on social structure. These are ‘savage’, ‘barbarous’ and ‘polished’ and refer to the level of laws, government, ‘proficiency in liberal and mechanical arts, in literature and in commerce’ (Essay, p. 205). For his own purposes, Ferguson is correct to base his categories on social, as opposed to economic, forms because his emphasis is with social and political, rather than economic, conditions (D. MacRae, ‘Adam Ferguson; Sociologist’, New Society, 24 (1966), pp. 792–4, p. 794). ‘Civilization’, by its nature, ‘belongs rather to the effects of law and political establishment, on the forms of society, than to any state merely of lucrative possession of wealth’ (Principles, I, p. 252). The terms ‘polished’ and ‘civilized’ are not merely about proficiency or refinement in arts and commerce, scholarship or manners, as with Smith and Millar, but refer more importantly to ‘effective political condition’ and citizenship or ‘civic spirit’, hence John Pocock’s designation of Ferguson’s analysis as ‘perhaps the most Machiavellian of the Scottish disquisitions of this theme’ (see J.G.A. Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment (Princeton, 1975), p. 499; D. Kettler, ‘History and Theory in Ferguson’s Essay on the History of Civil Society: A Reconsideration’, Political Theory, 5 (1977), pp. 437–60, p. 451). Curiously, Ferguson seems to adopt Smith’s and Millar’s Four Stage ‘means of subsistence’ schema (hunting, pastoral, agricultural and commercial) in the Institutes (pp. 28–30). But it is unlikely that this represents a departure from the tri-stadial model. The discussion focuses narrowly on technologies and modes of ‘subsistence’, and there is no suggestion that such modes of subsistence define the ‘ages’ to which he vaguely alludes in these passages. Ferguson continued to insist as late as the Principles that his categories were political and social rather than economic (Principles, I, p. 252). It is entirely possible for a nation to be ‘polished’ or ‘civilized’ without necessarily being ‘commercial’ (Essay, pp. 199–200).


12 Principles, I, p. 236.
propelled unintentionally by the species’ constant drive to improve itself and its material circumstances. ‘Ambition’ is the source of all of our major achievements, whether economic, scientific, artistic or intellectual. Ferguson’s use of the term ambition needs some qualification at this point. By the early eighteenth century the term ‘interest’ no longer referred to the entire sum of human aspirations but acquired a narrower connotation; a preoccupation with personal, economic advantage. Ferguson’s adoption of this latter meaning requires him to provide a more general category of aspirations which he identifies as ‘ambition’. Though ‘ambition’ sometimes directs us to care of the self, it is not synonymous with self-preservation because its objects may also be purely altruistic or moral; and while ambition is instinctive, it is also supported by the moral and rational faculties. Whereas Adam Smith and Marcus Aurelius spoke of ambition in disapproving tones, Ferguson follows Machiavelli in defining ambition positively as a progressive instinct, the incessant and insatiable ‘desire of something better than is possessed at present’ which impels us towards ever more progress; it is the cause of all our advances in science, knowledge, art and ‘philosophy’. Ambition is the key to a proper understanding of Ferguson’s perfectibilism for it is ‘the specific principle of advancement’ and is never ‘satiated’.

Throughout his entire body of work, and particularly in his History of Civil Society, Ferguson wants to show that society has progressed naturally and predictably from a ‘rude’ to a ‘polished’ state in accordance with the species’ naturally progressive tendencies: inventions evolve gradually and are social rather than individual products. Yet, despite this progressivism and perfectibilism, the insistence that progress is immanent in the divine plan, and that the

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13 Ibid., p. 207.
15 Smith thought that ‘(t)he objects of avarice and ambition differ only in their greatness’ (Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. MacFie (Oxford, 1976), III.6.7, p. 174) and defines ambition more narrowly as the desire for eminence, of ‘real superiority, of leading and directing the judgments and conduct of other people’ (ibid., VII.iv.25, p. 336).
16 Principles, I, p. 207. Ferguson adopted the narrower sense of ambition in his earlier works and used only the broader, moral sense in his later work, The Principles (J.A. Bernstein, ‘Adam Ferguson and the Idea of Progress’, Studies in Burke and His Time, 19 (2) (1978), pp. 99–118, pp. 105–6). Progressive instincts are certainly at work in the Essay but they are not yet labelled ambition. By the Principles ‘ambition’ becomes a generalized desire for excellence which may be expressed beneficently, consciously and socially on the one hand, as well as personally, self-interestedly and unconsciously on the other (Principles, I, pp. 236–9).
18 Essay, pp. 8, 123, 205–7; Principles, I, pp. 190, 313.
commercial stage is a ‘natural’ progression in this process, Ferguson seems to harbour grave reservations about progress, particularly with respect to developments in the ‘polished’ or commercial stage which he believed contained the seeds of its own destruction. Ferguson seems to be saying that the commercial age brings with it the likelihood of national ruin. Paradoxically, the polished age, though a natural product of the laws of spontaneous order, produces communities in imminent danger of collapse. Ferguson delivers a warning that if Britain continues with present arrangements it is bound to meet with the same fate as Rome; to degenerate and decline, resulting in complete social, economic and political breakdown.\textsuperscript{19} Ferguson consistently advances a harsh critique of the very progress he seems to be applauding, a critique which seems starkly at odds with the optimism and theodicy of the whole idea of spontaneous order.

\textbf{Corruption}

Industrialization brings with it greater luxury and ‘convenience’ but it could also, Ferguson cautions, bring decadence, ‘effeminacy’, a slackening of civic spirit and complete dissolution such as the Roman Empire experienced.\textsuperscript{20} The encroachment of a spirit of ‘servility’ among subjects is Ferguson’s greatest fear for, in the polished age, a vigorous and politically active populace is the only thing standing between a healthy polity and complete tyranny. Corruption derives from a number of interactive sources. The division of labour contracts the mental faculties and inevitably leads to bureaucracy which strictly circumscribes popular participation in civic affairs. The new commercial mentality obliterates corporate sentiments and restricts the citizen’s interest to private gain, which creates, in turn, conditions which subvert and eventually destroy ‘democracy’. The political competence of citizens dissipates and eventually they lose all taste for public life.\textsuperscript{21} Specialization erodes martial and communal ardour which results in a loss of what sociologists now refer to as social cohesion.\textsuperscript{22} Under such conditions despots are likely to ascend, unfettered by the objections of public opinion.\textsuperscript{23} In leadership, the warrior-statesman is replaced by the languid ‘fop’, the wealthy and ‘effeminate’ incompetent who will undoubtedly infect ‘all orders of men with equal venality, servility and

\textsuperscript{19} For Ferguson, Rome is ‘a signal example of the vicissitudes to which prosperous nations are exposed . . . To know it well is to know mankind’ (\textit{History}, p. 2).
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Essay}, pp. 186–7. See also \textit{History}, p. 468.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 240.
cowardice’. There is also the threat of the ascendance of military tyrants who are apt to enlarge their powers through imperialism born of hubris. This results in nations becoming too large and geographically unwieldy to support communal sentiments. Eventually such nations decline, ruined by the despotic rule of incompetent tyrants who govern with ‘caprice and passion’. Any tyranny will inevitably ‘expire by the effect of its own abuse’. Ironically, those who have lived in an age of the ‘greatest improvements’ will perish ‘in the flames which they themselves had kindled’.

This absorption with the disadvantages of modernity reflects a cautious, moralistic streak which seems at odds with Ferguson’s faith in the ineffable perfection of the Divine master plan, and leads the reader to question whether it is possible to reconcile Ferguson’s optimistic belief in the spontaneous harmony of the universe and the inevitability of human progress (his ‘progressive teleology’ to use Kettler’s phrase) with his profound pessimism about the commercial age.

There has been no extensive treatment of this paradox to date; Andrew Bernstein’s brief but insightful examination of the puzzle is a key inspiration for this article and his solution (that is, in terms of Ferguson’s need to respond to the problem of theodicy) has been adopted and expanded upon. Other scholars have been struck by the profound sense of ambivalence in Fergusonian history which William Lehmann describes as ‘a strange intermingling . . . of historical pessimism’ with a ‘progressive optimism’. Lehmann does not pursue this observation beyond a few cursory remarks, and it is treated with varying degrees of nugatory penetration by other scholars.

24 Ibid., p. 255. The separation of the statesman/warrior function worried Ferguson enormously. Apart from degeneration in statesmen, military specialization also led to a general decline in public virtue, hence his insistence on the superiority of a citizen militia. It is a theme which runs through all his works. He published two pamphlets on the subject in 1761, both of which excited considerable attention; they were entitled: Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia and The History of the Proceedings in the Case of Margaret, Commonly Called Peg, Only Lawful Sister of John Bull, Esq. In them he argued for the right of Scotland to have its own militia. See also Ferguson, ‘Of the Separation of the Departments’.
26 Ibid., p. 271. See also Principles, I, pp. 34–5.
27 Essay, pp. 276–7. See also History, p. 468.
28 Essay, p. 278.
29 Essay, p. 110.
33 Jean Willke is an exception here; her unpublished doctoral thesis was discovered by the author towards the end of writing this piece and the approaches share much in
Significantly, Ferguson’s critique of modernity is not incidental to his philosophy, as one might be tempted to assume, but is a major theme, second only perhaps to his faith in progress and spontaneous order. The curious thing is that his doubts about progress are not expressed separately, either textually or chronologically, but inhere in his theory of spontaneous order; the themes of progress and decline shadow each other throughout Ferguson’s entire corpus. The other problematic feature of Ferguson’s approach is that he conceives order and progress as Providentially designed and inspired.34 Yet Ferguson’s is not a wrathful God, nor does ‘He’ permit the existence of ‘evil’. In addition, the human species is ‘His’ favourite creation destined for divine union, consequently ‘God’s’ permission of vice seems curious. Yet this problem does seem to be a soluble one. Because the answer to the conundrum lies in Ferguson’s response to the problem of theodicy, what emerges is a solution in which free will and the positive function of adversity in human progress are posited as key harmonizing constructs. This solution will be outlined presently. But first there should be some brief treatment of Ferguson’s influences in order to contextualize such a solution.

**Influences**

Though Ferguson’s influences were myriad, his dominant classical influence was Stoicism, particularly Roman Stoicism. His favourites were Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, whom he regarded with great reverence, and they were his final authorities on matters moral and theological.35 Stoicism provides the common. See J. Wilke, ‘The Historical Thought of Adam Ferguson’, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (Washington DC, 1962).

34 Ferguson writes that the ‘suggestion of final causes, or of an arrangement in the works of nature’ cannot be accounted for in explanations involving ‘mechanism’ alone (Principles, I, p. 312). See also Principles, I, pp. vii, 53, 180; Principles, II, p. 27; Essay, pp. 55, 90–1.

35 Ferguson quotes Marcus Aurelius in the Principles as the finest expositor ever of religious piety, noting that ‘such sentiments of a sublime religion may be justly considered as the highest attainments of created intelligence’. The writings of both Marcus and Epictetus are deemed the ‘most sublime’ (Principles, I, p. 312). For specific references to Epictetus see for example, Institutes, p. 158; Essay, pp. 38, 55; Principles, II, pp. 359–60, Principles, I, p. 7. For Marcus Aurelius: Principles, II, p. 356; Principles, I, pp. 310, 312. The latter attained a species of ‘god-like eminence’ (Principles, I, pp. 331–2) and was considered the ‘most perfectly virtuous’ (Principles, I, p. 336). An awareness of Stoicism probably came to Ferguson via Shaftesbury and Hutcheson (G. Bryson, Man and Society, The Scottish Enquiry of the Eighteenth Century (Princeton, 1945), p. 55; Principles, I, p. 8). Though Ferguson singled out Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus particularly, he admired all the Stoic philosophers. See, for example, History, p. 170; Principles, I, pp. 7–8; See also J. Small, ‘Biographical Sketch of Adam Ferguson’, in Edinburgh Review, Vol. 75, no. 255 (1867), pp. 48–85. For further discussion of Ferguson’s Stoicism see, for example, N. Waszek, Man’s Social Nature: A Topic of the Scottish Enlightenment in its Historical Setting (Frankfurt, 1986), Ch. 5.
optimistic framework for the spontaneous order elaboration; according to the Stoic view, the universe operates as a harmonious, self-righting unit and Ferguson endorses Marcus’ declaration that ‘(w)e have no reason . . . to believe that it was possible for God to make the universe better than he has done’.36 It is this belief in the ultimate perfection of the universe that makes possible a reading of Ferguson’s philosophy as coherent and it will be shown that his apparent pessimism should be understood in the broader context of his Stoic theology/ontology. Other primary sources were Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Montesquieu, Newton, Bacon, Aristotle, Tacitus, Polybius, Thucydides and Cicero. The latter was employed as a kind of de facto Stoic source; Ferguson makes clear that Cicero will be recognized mainly in his role as an expositor of (early and middle) Stoicism.37

Of course, Ferguson was not the only member of the Scottish literati to be influenced by Stoicism. Smith, for example, has long been regarded as an adherent38 and Shaftesbury and Hutcheson were keen neo-Stoics.39 Stoicism enjoyed a popular rival in eighteenth-century Scotland and the Christian–Stoic synthesis was widely embraced.40 But none of Ferguson’s contemporaries relied so heavily on Stoicism for interpreting social life, particularly where ‘Nature’s’ apparent contradictions were concerned.

Solutions to Paradox

Ferguson’s interest in the potential for polished nations to fall into a state of languor was not a peripheral concern incidental to a generally progressive history, but consumed a considerable portion of his attention. This suggests that an interpretation of Fergusonian spontaneous order as perfectibilist and pro-
gressivist might need some serious re-thinking.

There are a number of explanations which could account for the so-called ‘paradox of progress and decline’. It could be argued that Ferguson was inconsistent, ambivalent or that his views changed over time. Alternatively, one could pursue an interpretational line by reading his history as eschatological, cyclical or palingenetic. But do any of these scenarios explain adequately the paradox?

The first suggestion that Ferguson was simply inconsistent has been the conclusion of more than one scholar.41 Though Ferguson could quite justifiably be described as ambivalent, especially when compared to Smith and Hume, it seems unlikely that any professional philosopher would be so consistently inconsistent to the extent that this explanation would imply. Ferguson’s reservations about progress were not incidental to his history; his absorption with progress and corruption were not peripheral concerns; therefore it seems unlikely that he neglected to think their relationship through properly. No thinker would submit to a publisher work this poorly developed, nor continue to produce such apparently contradictory views throughout an entire lifetime of scholarship. The answer must lie elsewhere.

Lois Whitney has suggested that Ferguson’s views changed over time, that the intense interest in retrogression displayed in the Essay faded as he matured.42 There is no real textual evidence for this claim, and although it could be said that he pursued the subject with less vigour in his later works Ferguson’s absorption with the theme of corruption stayed with him right up to and including his last and most optimistically perfectibilist work, the Principles. This title contains a variety of references to the theme of retrogression, including many cautionary remarks about prodigality and some forceful injunctions against imperialism.43 The closing paragraphs of the Principles underline Ferguson’s enduring commitment to the theme of retrogression; in them he focuses on what he has decided is the key lesson of history and philosophy: that proper care of the ‘human mind’ will determine whether a nation progresses or recedes.44 Ferguson’s reduced emphasis on corruption in the Principles is more

41 Kettler, for example, identifies Ferguson’s inconsistency as a function of ‘conflicting commitments’ (Kettler, Social and Political Thought of Adam Ferguson, p. 293). See also C. Camic, Experience and Enlightenment: Socialization for Cultural Change in Eighteenth Century Scotland (Chicago, 1983), p. 54.
43 See, for example, Principles, I, pp. 34, 313–14; Principles, II, pp. 487, 501, 295.
likely to be attributable to the fact that his subject matter had shifted from history to the more general subject of moral philosophy. This explanation is borne out by the fact that the much earlier Institutes, upon which the Principles is based, also contains fewer references to the theme of decline than either the Essay or the History, even though it was published just two years after the Essay and a full fourteen years prior to the publication of the History. In other words, the varying intensity of Ferguson’s concern with corruption cannot be explained chronologically.

Another possibility is that Ferguson held to the view that the world was in its senility, or that he was anticipating a final judgment day heralding the destruction of the earth. Some of his most influential predecessors did, after all, push this line. Notwithstanding the traditional Christian teaching of a final judgment day, there was also a pessimistic strain in Isaac Newton’s thought; the latter believed that the world ‘unwound’ or tended towards dissolution, and could only be reconstituted with the Providential introduction of comets. Rousseau conceived history in typically primitivist terms as continually declining. It would not have been unusual, therefore, for Ferguson to take such a line; the decline of benevolence decried with such great urgency by Ferguson was, after all, precisely the argument employed by eighteenth-century primitivists to confirm the theory of degeneration. Richard Sher has argued that Ferguson’s preoccupation with corruption is really a variation on the traditional Calvinist and Scottish Presbyterian sermonizing device of a jeremiad whereby national calamities are conceived as punishments by God for immorality and sinfulness. This interpretation is, initially, quite a persuasive one. Like Ferguson, the preacher of impending doom posits luxury, apathy, selfishness and atheism as its precursors. The catastrophe which results subsequently redeems the people in the eyes of God. Yet, while Ferguson’s discourse on corruption is infused with the sermonizing spirit of the jeremiad, his rejection of the concept of sin and his Deistic conception of God as a distant, non-interventionist First Cause, strictly precludes this suggestion. Ferguson could not have identified with Rousseau’s approach because he explicitly denounces primitiv-

47 Whitney, Primitivism and the Idea of Progress, p. 22. A number of scholars have concluded that progress, for Ferguson, was not necessarily inevitable. Duncan Forbes, for example, denies that Ferguson’s history is progressivist, claiming that ‘it certainly does not belong to the history of the idea of progress’ (Forbes, intro. to Essay, p. xiv). See also W.C. Lehmann, Adam Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Sociology (New York, 1930), pp. 148–9; and H.M. Hopfl, ‘From Savage to Scotsman: Conjectural History in the Scottish Enlightenment’, Journal of British Studies, 17, no. 2 (1978), pp. 19–40, p. 37.
48 Sher, Church and University, p. 43.
ism. Despite some residual nostalgia Ferguson ultimately mourns no lost paradise; the ‘polished’ or commercial stage is after all natural and, moreover, divinely ordained. Ferguson also rejects eschatology outright; he subscribes unequivocally to an open-ended view of history. Even though he outlines only three stages of history he never suggests that the polished age is the final point of history. His intense aversion to conjecture would prevent him from making any predictions about a possible fourth stage. Istvan Hont’s conclusion that Ferguson ‘prophesied an inevitable decline’ after societies had reached the commercial stage is thus worth questioning. Ferguson makes clear that human progress is an asymptotic process and, though subject to interruption, there is no reason to suppose that retrogression is an inevitable effect of modernity. Rome was, after all, a pre-commercial state. The ‘duration’ of our social and political institutions, Ferguson insists, ‘is not fixed to any limited period’; in other words, the lifespans of civilisations are not finite or predetermined but are contingent on internal political condition. Ferguson’s fear is not of modernity itself, but of any of its aspects which might threaten public virtue, and these, in Britain’s case, happened to have been brought on by industrialization, commercialism and imperialism. Retrogression threatens all prosperous, successful nations, not polished nations exclusively. Ferguson did not, therefore, believe that civilization was winding down. But can we say that he held to a cyclical or anacyclical view of history? The latter might perhaps seem the more viable option since it accommodates some progress.

49 See, for example, Essay, pp. 80, 18–19, 106.
51 See Essay, pp. 34, 2; Principles, I, pp. 501, 320.
53 Principles, I, p. 194.
54 Essay, p. 279.
It has, indeed, been argued that Ferguson subscribes to a cyclical view of history, and superficially this seems plausible in view of his invocation of the ‘youth, manhood, old age’ analogy to describe the natural developmental course of civilizations. Moreover, since Ferguson adopts the tri-partite taxonomy of constitutions used by Montesquieu (republican, monarchical, despotic) which roughly correlates with the latter’s own tri-stadial thesis of history, one could be forgiven for assuming that Ferguson also adopted Montesquieu’s belief in the cycle of constitutions. In addition Ferguson had ample precedent for a cyclical conception of history: some of his most important influences (Plato, Aristotle and Machiavelli) held to cyclical or palingenetic views of history. Seneca attributed one of the causes of the decline of the Roman Empire to the malevolence of the natural order which lets nothing stay at the peak of its development: ‘Nothing’, he wrote, ‘is durable, whether for an individual or for a society.’ The doctrine of palingenesis (the periodic destruction and recreation of the world) is fundamental to Stoic theory and Cicero maintained that the world would be destroyed by fire. But this interpretation also fails to withstand close scrutiny. Ferguson states his aversion to the cyclical view unequivocally in both the Principles and the Essay. The device of dividing history up into categories and periods is, he admits, problematic, for this type of thinking can mislead us to a static conception of human history: ‘in no period’ he insists ‘is the subject stationary.’ Indeed, as if to correct any false impression that Ferguson might himself have conveyed by the use of his ubiquitous ‘childhood, manhood, old age’ analogy to describe the three stages of our development, Ferguson explains that although the ‘image indeed is apposite’, it is ‘obvious, that the case of nations, and that of individuals, are very different’. While the ‘human frame’ on the one hand ‘has a general course . . . and a limited

55 For example, William Lehmann asserts: ‘In fact Ferguson holds quite definitely to a cyclical view of history’ (Lehmann, Adam Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Sociology, p. 149).
58 For example, Marcus Aurelius referred to ‘the great cyclic renewals of creation’ (Meditations, 11. 1, p. 165). See also, Epictetus, Discourses, II. 1., 17–24, p. 219; III. xiii, 2–7, p. 89.
60 Principles, I, p. 192.
duration’, society ‘whose constituent members are renewed in every genera-
tion’, enjoys ‘perpetuated youth, and accumulating advantages’.

Ferguson conceived progress as linear and asymptotic, a process of ‘continual increments of knowledge and thought’ and ‘continual accessions’ of skills, habits, arts, powers and moral ‘discernment’. Granted, human history is subject to ‘vicissitude’ and ‘interruption’ but it is always able to get itself back onto a progressive track. Societies are not like individual people; they do not have finite life-spans but are continually renewed and borne along by fresh generations: ‘we cannot’, Ferguson suggests, ‘expect to find imbecilities connected with mere age and length of days’. He did not agree with Machiavelli, and those he imitated, that the ‘inevitability of corruption’ was ‘the one great observable fact in human affairs’.

There are also other arguments against a cyclical or palingenetic interpretation of Fergusonian corruption. To begin with, his aetiology of corruption expounds causes which are entirely unprecedented, some of which have positive progressive dimensions or are by-products of an ultimately progressive process. These are the division of labour, the insatiability of needs, the growth of cities, the increased wealth and luxury of nations, the introduction of commercial values and the advent of relative tranquillity. Ferguson never recommends any devolvement or social revisionism in these directions. Ferguson’s ubiquitous Roman analogy can be misleading. It stands as a generalized model of a prosperous empire, but its usefulness as an analogy has limitations and there is no reason to assume that Ferguson definitely expects the British empire to take the same path. Rome stands as a lesson, not a forecast.

Furthermore, Ferguson’s history is Providentially teleological. History has a purpose and, despite his presentation of it in the form of a stadial thesis, Ferguson rejects Aristotle’s static sequence of development which is based on a doctrine of immutable forms. In this latter view development is merely the realization of limited, determined potential with no room for genuine progress. Ferguson’s God would never condemn ‘His’ favourite creation to a meaningless cycle of growth and degeneration. Rather, ‘God’ has destined us for moral perfection, something which can only be striven for in the context of a linear history.

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62 Principles, I, pp. 190–2; Essay, pp. 5, 8.

63 Essay, p. 209.


65 ‘Except in the case of soldiering’ (Ferguson, ‘Of the Separation of the Departments’, pp. 75–6).
Another argument against this kind of interpretation is that the cyclical (and *anacyclical*) view of history is based on the law of nature Machiavelli adopted from Polybius, that single types of polities are unstable and therefore doomed to ‘degenerate’.66 Unlike the Roman Republic the British empire of Ferguson’s inspiration was a mixed monarchy, therefore his pessimism would have been checked by this fact. Ferguson frequently advertised his opinion that a mixed monarchy was the constitutional form best suited to British conditions.67 The fate of Britain and Rome need not be identical since Britain had the advantage of the relative stability bestowed by a mixed constitution.

In any case neither the cyclical nor *anacyclical* interpretation throws any light on the decline/progress paradox. The more promising *anacyclical* view (promising because it seems to accommodate a type of progress) is not applicable to Ferguson’s history because it is contingent on an invariable cycle of constitutions which the existence of a mixed monarchy (in Britain’s case) obviated. Anyway, the whole idea of cycles is anathema to Ferguson. They make no sense in a universe created by a benign Deity intent on our development. ‘God’ created us in order to preserve us, and this preservation encompasses all our accomplishments. Recognizing the perils of presuming to apprehend the Creator’s mind, Ferguson ventures to suggest that we may infer this purpose from the evidence of observable tendencies. Only life forms which possess souls are destined to progress indefinitely, and although humans possess identical natures this should not lead us to a view of these natures as static or invariable: the ‘uniformity’ of human nature belies our adaptable, dynamic and progressive tendencies.68

The pronounced ambivalences in Ferguson have led one scholar to conclude (possibly in exasperation) that Ferguson held no thesis of history at all, that it was neither cyclical, nor inevitably progressive, nor inevitably retrogressive.69 But, on the present reading, Ferguson’s work emerges as thoroughly progres-


Certainly, he admitted that some societies did not progress due to their unwillingness to exert their active energies\(^{70}\) but, on the whole, he thought that progress was inevitable because it was biologically inherent. The ‘law of estimation or progression’ is an ‘ultimate fact in the nature of man’.\(^{71}\) In other words it is incontrovertibly true. The Creator has ensured that ‘(t)he system of nature is secured from decay’.\(^{72}\) The telic dimension of Ferguson’s elaboration confirms the inevitability of progress: ‘Man is \textit{made} for . . . the attainments of reason. If, by any conjuncture, he is deprived of these advantages, he will sooner or later find his way to them’.\(^{73}\)

Ferguson’s peculiarly modern progressivist history could not have come from his favourite Stoics who were mainly systematic determinists. The misleading thing about Ferguson’s history is that even as he keeps the argument from design, a teleological framework and the chain of being doctrine, it still embodies a highly developed theory of progress.\(^{74}\) The other misleading aspect is that Ferguson’s aetiology of corruption is influenced profoundly by ancient authors of cyclical, \textit{anacyclical} or palingenetic histories. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover divergent readings in the commentaries.

In any case, Ferguson’s history is neither eschatological, cyclical, nor \textit{anacyclical}. Neither is it arbitrary. It is, rather, open-ended, purposeful and inevitable. How, then, can the retrogression theme be accommodated within an otherwise optimistic scheme? The remainder of the discussion reveals a textual resolution to the paradox via an examination of Ferguson’s approach to the problem of theodicy. The key construct in this solution is the Christian/Ciceronian principle of free will which causes people to err unwittingly. \textit{Error}, not evil, is the cause of retrogression and since error is always amenable to correction Ferguson is able to demonstrate the contingent nature of retrogression and even its constructive role in the divine master plan. By this reasoning he manages to balance his recognition of the pathologies of modernity while simultaneously maintaining an optimistic commitment to the laws of spontaneous order.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Solution: The Problem of Theodicy:}
\textbf{Perfectibilism, Free Will and Self-Creation}
\end{center}

As a self-confessed ‘theist’ who believed in a world created perfect, ‘sublime’ and ‘beautiful’, Ferguson is confronted with the dilemma of explaining the


\(^{71}\) \textit{Institutes}, p. 90.

\(^{72}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 126. For Willke, Ferguson’s references to corruption are ‘related to the life of national or political units’ whereas his discussion of progress is generalized to ‘mankind at large’ (Willke, \textit{The Historical Thought of Adam Ferguson}, p. 112).

\(^{73}\) \textit{Principles}, I, p. 199 (my emphasis).

\(^{74}\) See, for example, Adam Ferguson, ‘What May be Affirmed or Apprehended of the Supreme Creative Being’, \textit{Unpublished Essays}, ed. Philip, Vol. 2, no. 2. p. 21; and Ferguson, ‘Of Things That Are or May Be’, pp. 106, 137.
relationship between progress and the problem of theodicy, that is, the nature and existence of evil (in this case, the social evils attendant on modernity). If humankind is progressive does that mean we are imperfect, tainted with the burden of original sin? Moreover, if we are imperfect what happens to the perfect divine goodness of which Ferguson is so fond of reminding us? Ferguson addresses the same conundrum which first absorbed the Stoics: ‘If man is a particle of God, why is he not automatically perfect?’

Ferguson responds by showing how apparent evil (in this case corruption) is an inevitable result of our capacity for free-will. Though unpleasant, evil has many positive effects particularly as it hones the moral faculties. Corruption is, therefore, conceived as an unavoidable effect of our perfectibility, a natural by-product of our desire to develop, grow and effect our ultimate union with the mind of the Creator. In other words, any misfortune resulting from human independence is always compensated by its long-term benefits. A certain degree of evil is unavoidable in the laudable pursuit of moral goodness. Ferguson reformulates the entire problem of theodicy by replacing the idea of original sin with that of original ignorance, and by taking on board the Socratic (later Stoic) doctrine that vice is synonymous with ignorance and that our progress through the stages of history represents a perpetual quest to shed this ignorance. Ferguson was not alone among the moderates in resorting to this resolution strategy. Under the influence of Frances Hutcheson, moral cognitivism was commonplace among the moderate literati of the Scottish enlightenment. But what makes Ferguson’s approach so interesting is that, of all the Scots, he seems to be the least optimistic about modern life; he did not seem to share in the widespread optimism about progress which prevailed in the Enlightenment period. The problem of theodicy looms larger in Ferguson’s mind than in that of any other thinker of his milieu. The result is a body of work which embodies a particularly energetic and elaborately worked-out response to the problem of theodicy. His moral cognitivism is extremely well developed because the problem to which it is applied is such a prominent feature of his corpus; accordingly it plays a crucial role in unifying his system of thought.

75 Principles, I, p. 172; Principles, II, p. 27.
76 J. Passmore, The Perfectibility of Man (London, 1979), p. 56; For Ferguson’s most exhaustive treatment of this question see Ferguson, ‘Of Things That Are or May Be’.
78 Principles, I, p. 183.
79 Ibid., p. 175.
The ‘ignorance thesis’ enables Ferguson to deal with the difficult question of the need for improvement in the absence of original sin. Ferguson recognizes that the presence of free will often results in vice, but he holds optimistically to a faith in the spontaneous order of the universe in the sense that the learning process never fails to reveal the triumph of good over vice. The ‘experience of evil’ resulting from free will offers a powerful lesson in our moral education for ‘it tends for the future to inculcate a better choice’. Ferguson’s theodicy is thus much closer to that of Marcus Aurelius, as opposed to that of Shaftesbury, because the former allows for a universe simultaneously ‘perfect’ yet sometimes ‘harsh’ and ‘unpalatable’. Life is fraught with perils and obstacles deliberately set in place by the Creator in order to facilitate human development. Original ignorance must be overcome; and in the process we discover that good may come out of vice and that adversity can be a positive social force.

Ferguson’s entire philosophy embodies an energetic affirmation of our freedom to choose: everyone, he opines, ‘is a voluntary agent’. Ferguson rejects the doctrines of pre-destination and moral necessity and disputes the application of mechanistic causal explanations to organic life forms, particularly human beings. Although we are ‘destined to grow in perfection . . . without end’ Ferguson denounces indignantly any conception of human beings as programmed automatons playing out a meaningless, deterministic charade. He tells us that the ‘good’ of our species consists in ‘advancement and its evil decline’. But if decline is our ‘evil’ what function does it serve in a Universe created perfectly benign and where nothing is useless?

Ferguson’s conception of progress is closely bound up in his moral perfectibilism; as the species develops in skills and accomplishments through time, so it also intuitively strives for union with the mind of the Creator. The only certain route to becoming a moral agent, Ferguson explains, is through self-discovery and self-creation. This occurs, not in religious isolation or introspective contemplation, but in the practice of our daily lives and in our interactions with other members of society. We learn from each other through trial and error and in the everyday process of securing our ‘accommodations’. Essential to this process is the assumption that, as individuals, we exercise a fair degree of independence. On balance, Ferguson believes that any evil resulting from human independence will be offset by the advantages gained by the progress it affords us in our moral education. Ultimately more good comes of free will than

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81 *Principles*, I, p. 234. See also Ferguson, ‘Of Things That Are or May Be’, pp. 120–1.
83 Ferguson, ‘Of Things that Are or May Be’, p. 117.
84 *Institutes*, p. 125; and *ibid*, Ch. II, section 13, *passim*. See also Adam Ferguson, ‘Of the Distinctions of Which it is the Lot of Man to Deliberate’, *Unpublished Essays*, ed. Philip, Vol. 3, no. 20, p. 78; and Ferguson, ‘Of Things That Are or May Be’.
85 *Principles*, I, p. 191.
bad. People learn and evolve morally through experiencing the disagreeable effects of poor choices. Ferguson couches his arguments concerning human choice and volition in teleological terms, that is, the Creator has fashioned people for progress through the free exercise of their faculties.

Progress is defined as a process of self-education based on a desire, not to atone for sin, but to shed our natural defects and ignorance. This notion of our leaving behind our original ignorance through progress is highly reminiscent of the Stoic idea of the emerging sapient. Ferguson follows Epictetus in suggesting that we work our way towards union with the mind of God through a process of acquiring knowledge. In this sense, then, our salvation from the ills of modernity is secured, paradoxically not by a return to some imaginary golden age but through more progress; that is, progress in knowledge which enhances moral awareness. Individuals are assisted in making their choices if they care to become acquainted with the laws of progression which govern human nature. Indeed, Ferguson goes so far as to suggest that ‘God’ is deliberately obscure about these matters in order to stimulate our curiosity about them. Agents must learn the distinction between good and evil and acknowledge that the law of human progress or ‘advancement’ when subject to abuse leads to ‘degradation and ruin’. Choice brings with it the risk of failure and this is what makes it truly educative. We exercise volition within certain constraints (those of our environment and the irresistible imperatives of our primordial nature) which nevertheless afford ample scope for error. ‘A design may be perceptible’, Ferguson remarks, ‘but if directed by folly or malice is an object of disgust or of reprobation.’ The laws of nature are fixed; they simply await discovery. The shape or form of human history is predetermined in the long view but in the short-view, in its rate and content, it is largely the result of human volition. To the ‘absurd’ fatalist Ferguson counters that the very existence of free will implies the contingency and indeterminacy of human progress. Ferguson reasons, somewhat awkwardly, that the very fact of our having been endowed with rational faculties confirms their constancy. The transcendent order is immutable and invariable yet we are, at the same time, fated to act voluntarily within it. The extent of our influence is, however, impossible to discern.

86 Ibid., p. 183.
88 Ibid., p. 312. See also Essay, pp. 38, 55.
89 Willke, The Historical Thought of Adam Ferguson, p. 182.
93 Principles, I, p. 179.
94 Ferguson, ‘Of the Separation of the Departments’, p. 78.
Some of the answers, therefore, to the problem of theodicy (the existence of evil, or in this case, corruption) are to be found in Ferguson’s theory of progress; a theory founded on arguments about free will. Our species’ worldly accomplishments are part of (perhaps even by-products of) our intuitive quest for union with the mind of God. Yet Fergusonian perfectibilism is means rather than ends oriented, and is thus inconceivable without the assumption of free will. This latter dimension (free will) is not, however, typically Stoic. Despite the emphasis on action and process the Stoics were constrained by the notion of pre-destination therefore it is likely that the free-will dimension is the result of either Hutcheson’s influence or of Christian and Ciceronian sources.

What then is the precise relationship between the transcendent order and human agency? Ferguson’s answer is a subtle variation on the longstanding theological debate about free will: human progress is linear, open-ended but not purposeless; uniform in form though not in content. The three developmental stages (savage, barbarous and polished) encountered thus far were never avoidable, though variations and errors naturally occur and this is attributable to the operations of free will in concert with obvious variations in nature (geographical and climatic diversity). Despite the prevalence of vice (error) Ferguson’s optimism remains intact for ‘contingence itself is a perfection in (God’s) works’. Progress is transcendentally teleological in the sense that the super-trajectory of the species is determined by God and fulfilled through human striving. Ferguson’s history is really a type of salvation history, though with two important qualifications. The first is that we are not redeeming ourselves from sin, but from an insufficiency of knowledge about ourselves and the role we play in ‘God’s’ master plan. The second is that we secure our own redemption: ‘God’s’ efficacious grace is supplanted by efficacious self-education.

Providence, meanwhile, provides an immutable framework (the three-stage schema and whatever is to come after it) which constrains and impels us to progress lineally and infinitely, and then endows the species with the raw materials of will, choice, judgment and the progressive instinct of ‘ambition’. There is a striking underlying tension between the Creator’s will and human independence in Ferguson’s writings, and this is largely a function of his simultaneous commitment to a Christian/Ciceronian conception of agency, a Stoic view of resignation and a Roman Stoic/Machiavellian stress on activism.

95 See, for example, Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, IV, 26, p. 69.
96 For references to the doctrine of freewill in Cicero, see De Re Publica; De Legibus, with an English translation by Clinton Walker Keyes (London, 1988), VI, xxvi, pp. 281–3.
98 Willke, The Historical Thought of Adam Ferguson, passim.
99 Cicero argues that since we are fragments of divine intelligence, of a first cause capable of moving itself, so we are also capable of self-movement (Cicero, De Re Publica, VI, xxiv–xxvi, pp. 279–83).
David Kettler has described the tension in Ferguson between free will and the transcendent order as ‘discordant’, suggesting that the latter’s views on their relationship are incompatible. This charge seems justified superficially, but it fails to take account of the subtlety of Ferguson’s vision which can be summed up as follows: human beings are the principal bearers of history; they exercise considerable independence in the process, yet they are also engaged in fulfilling the Creator’s telic blueprint. Ferguson urged each agent to act as God’s ‘willing instrument in what depends on his own will; and . . . a conscious instrument at the disposal of Providence in matters which are out of his power’ yet insisted ultimately that ‘man is his own master’ and a ‘voluntary agent’. Ferguson enjoins us to take a conceptual step backwards so as to appreciate that it is the species through time, not the individual, who generates history. He then enjoins us to take a further step back in order to see that human actions merely represent efficient causes; final causes are the exclusive province of the Creator. The species is involved in a marvellous process of self-creation which it experiences through trial and error, activity, conflict, adaptation and choice. Notwithstanding those ‘few determinate instincts’ which relate to animal self-preservation, ‘man’ is ‘left to follow the dictates of his own observation, discernment and experience. We discern appropriate action by studying the logos of the universe, knowledge of which is reflected in God’s works. We are capable of inferring our destiny, albeit imperfectly, and we can infer from the tendency of our own progress the will of the Creator; consequently we can exercise a high degree of independence in pursuing it. The ends are prescribed and fixed, however the means employed in attaining them are left entirely to individuals. We also exercise considerable latitude in determining our own time frame. The three-stage sequence seems to be fixed, since it is immanent in a human nature which is invariable, but each society will proceed at a different rate of advancement given the diversity of physical environments and the operations of volition. Moreover, human development may not be strictly linear but may regress or even veer tangentially for a period as a result of bad choices. Ferguson seems to be well aware of the paradoxical nature of his perfectibilism. Since progression is instinctive, he concedes in passing, we should naturally expect to find a ‘continual advancement’ of the species. However, we cannot

101 Principles, I, pp. 130–1, 313; Essay, p. 389; Institutes, p. 11.
102 Principles, I, p. 53.
105 Principles, I, p. 54.
fail to perceive that ‘human affairs are subject to vicissitudes and the human species is observed to decline in some periods, no less than to advance in others’.\textsuperscript{106}

We cannot manipulate the laws of nature (since they are fixed) but we can certainly familiarize ourselves with them in order to maximize our advantage, minimize our liabilities and properly submit ourselves to the will of the Creator.\textsuperscript{107} This aspect of Ferguson’s thought is difficult to reconcile with his belief in spontaneous order as dependent upon human blindness of higher ends.\textsuperscript{108}

Physical environments vary widely, which partially accounts for the striking heterogeneity of cultures evidenced in human life. In terms of design and purpose no explanation is offered for this geographical diversity apart from the highly anthropocentric observation that the Creator obtains some amusement from variety.\textsuperscript{109} Different obstacles are encountered and different choices made in the vast range of human experience. Poor choices can lead to disastrous detours in the human developmental journey, however the results are ultimately the same on the level of form. The species passes from its ‘infancy’ (barbarity) through to ‘manhood’ (rudeness) and into the wisdom of its old age (polished civilization). There are natural stages in the development of the species however they are obtained by diverse means. Certain psychogenetic variables, representing the seeds of our \textit{telos} or destiny, remain constant whereas circumstantial variations and human agency result in eccentricities, variety and sometimes temporary disasters. This explains why Ferguson can be simultaneously pessimistic about progress and still wax teleological. Our approach to perfection is achieved dialectically via our capacity to err and to learn from our mistakes. This capacity to err, as teleologically conceived, is one of the most compelling aspects of Fergusonian perfectibilism. It will now receive some closer attention.

\textbf{Error and Defect}

Error borne of ignorance is the cause of corruption. Yet the whole notion of our capacity to err is built into Fergusonian perfectibilism. Error is teleologically conceived. We are \textit{destined} to err, to benefit by the disagreeable effects of our mistakes and thereby advance intellectually, practically and morally.\textsuperscript{110} This is

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{106}{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 313–14; \textit{Institutes}, p. 240.}
\footnotetext{108}{See, for example, \textit{Essay}, pp. 122, 140.}
\footnotetext{109}{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 324.}
\end{footnotes}
how Ferguson’s teleology differs from the Aristotelian; it is genuinely progressive because our misdemeanours actually alter the course of events.111

According to the Stoic view, imperfection flows from the failure of people to see things as they really are, while Socrates conceived vice as a function of ignorance.112 This is exactly how Ferguson approached the problem of evil: good and evil are not binary opposites, evil is simply the title we give to pernicious events which result from poor judgment. The causes of national and constitutional corruptions are directly traceable to errors in judgment. Hedonism, for example, comes from mistaking the proper objects of attention, imperialism is an error of hubris and so on. Ferguson thus resists a dualistic solution to the problem of evil by appealing to the monistic solution which denies the existence of evil out of hand. Apparent evil is really just an absence of good, a state of imperfection. People are deliberately endowed with defects by ‘God’ in order to stimulate their progress: ‘A being that is destined to acquire perfection must originate in defect’ and the errors to which our defective natures inevitably give rise are perfectly natural.113 Ferguson reformulates the entire problem of theodicy by replacing the idea of original sin with that of original ignorance. In this way he deftly disposes of those troubling questions about the necessity for improvement in the absence of original sin. Error is a natural result of our perpetual quest to leave behind a dearth of self-knowledge.114

Ferguson is able to retain his Stoically-inspired belief that we are godlike particles by asserting that there is godlike potential in each person; he accords with the Stoic view of defining happiness as a (civically) virtuous state of mind115 and of identifying our ultimate goal as union with the mind of God.116 Agents pursuing their moral perfection are in a permanent state of emergent godliness. The knowledge each moral agent seeks is knowledge of ‘his nature’ which will allow ‘him’ to live according God’s laws and avoid future error. ‘Man’ is distinguished by ‘his destination to know himself’.117 Self-knowledge is vital since all the ills of the world are caused, not by malice as might be expected, but by innocent ignorance.118

112 Ibid., pp. 55, 204.
113 Principles, I, p. 181.
114 Principles, I, p. 185; See also Principles, I, p. 175; and Ferguson, ‘Of Cause and Effect, Ends and Means, Order, Combination and Design’, pp. 58–74.
115 Principles, II, p. 412; Principles, I, pp. 313, 179. Ferguson shared this conception in common with other Moderates (Sher, Church and University, p. 211).
117 Ibid., pp. 3–4.
118 Ibid., p. 181; Ferguson, ‘Of Cause and Effect, Ends and Means, Order, Combination and Design’, pp. 72–150; Jean Willke adopts a similar line in The Historical Thought of Adam Ferguson, pp. 60–1.
History is, therefore, the gradual liberation of people from ignorance, a
dialectical process which exacts a heavy penalty such as the Roman Republic
eventually paid. Although our insatiable ambition to shed our original igno-
rance is the unconscious cause of all the evil and corruption in the world, it
must not be forgotten that this same desire has produced order, progress and
civilization. Our capacity for spontaneous order contains, necessarily and si-
multaneously, the capacity for entropy. This explains why the progress/decline
themes consistently shadow each other in Ferguson’s writings.

**Perfection as Process**

Like Aristotle, Ferguson conceives of our moral progress as a process rather
than an absolute goal; the former suggests that it is the *effort* of things to achieve
their goals that is the source of world order. Since only God is perfect, humanity
strives to draw ever-closer to God who, outside and transcending the world, is
the cause of motion: the *Final* Cause. Ferguson addresses the complaint of his
imaginary adversary, ‘the atheist’, who demands to know why a beneficent God
would present His favourite creation with a world where every desire is denied
‘him’ and where not a single one of ‘his’ needs ‘is gratified without delay’. In
reply Ferguson invokes the rather circular argument that in such a world our
essential nature would ‘remain unemployed’ and would therefore be superflu-
ous.119 After all, our ‘versatile disposition’ equips us for every condition; even
the most inhospitable circumstance is an enlivening opportunity for the exercise
of our inclination to ‘supply its defects’.120 He then introduces a second, perhaps
more convincing, argument that the process of advancement is no less important
to the development of the moral personality than its actual attainment.121 Acts
become important ends in themselves, and the process of perfection is just as
significant, if not more so, than the goal of perfection itself.122 Rather than
attesting to God’s indifference to us, a world of unrequited needs thus speaks
of God’s love for us.123

This conception of perfection as an ongoing, means-focused process is
necessitated by Ferguson’s recognition of the practical unattainability of per-
fec tion: since only the Creator is perfect Ferguson responds by taking the
practical step of identifying our improvement as mere ‘progress’.124 We do not
achieve perfection in some remote afterlife but may attain some measure of it
here in our daily lives where each individual contributes to the ongoing perfec-

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119 *Principles*, I, p. 178.
120 *Essay*, p. 108.
121 *Principles*, I, p. 184.
122 *Ibid.*, p. 250. See also Ferguson, ‘Of Things That Are or May Be’, *passim*.
123 Ferguson, ‘Of Things That Are or May Be’, p. 117; ‘Of Cause and Effect, Ends
124 *Principles*, II, p. 403.
tion of the species through time. Moral perfection, while being a worthy goal, is unrealizable. We can, however, express virtue practically and socially in the exercise of beneficence, which Ferguson describes romantically as one of the 'godlike principles'.

This is as much as we can hope for in one lifetime. Our moral and practical progress depends on the degree of ardour and enthusiasm with which we exercise our faculties. Since the highest virtues are civic, Ferguson emphasizes that participation in community life is particularly efficacious. He agrees with Cicero that the key problem with Rome was that Caesar’s and Antony’s autocratic regimes had suppressed public life, thus undermining the virtue which would normally have prevented its decline. Civic virtue flows from knowledge of duties and station. Marcus Aurelius equated knowledge with happiness: ‘happiness, by derivation, means ‘a good god within, that is good master-reason’.

Ferguson follows the example of Epictetus in conceiving moral perfection on two levels: the first is a practical, civic virtue which we can exercise on a day-to-day basis; the second is moral perfection expressed in our perpetual quest for union with the Creator. The two kinds of virtue connect when we exercise the other-regarding passions and fulfil our civic obligations, thereby exhibiting the signs of our potentially God-like nature and our willingness to accord with the desires of Providence. Ferguson is unique among his contemporaries in linking the ‘moral perfection of individuals with the common good’; Cicero likewise made the connection between private virtue and the internal regulation of the individual soul, on the one hand, and civic action and service, on the other. We see the same conception repeated in Hutcheson’s thinking much later; as Haakonssen puts it, civil society, for Hutcheson, “is essentially an institution for the moral development of mankind . . . [it] exists not just to maximise happiness, but to inculcate the benevolent or beatific motivation of the citizenry”.

When we exercise the other-regarding passions and fulfil our civic obligations we represent a fragment or mirror of our potentially God-like nature. We love each other as God loves us and thereby accord with His will: we are in harmony with our essential nature. Since God is so distant from us, it makes more sense for us to concentrate our efforts on the practice of virtue here on earth via a discernment and observance of the logos of the universe. Yet, even when we exercise civic virtue individually we are contributing to our long-term collective moral perfection. It is the Creator’s wish that we direct our virtuous efforts to the here and now, an interpretation Ferguson finds evidence for in the Creator’s apparently deliberate ambiguity about a future state. This uncertainty about our ‘immortality’

125 Ibid., pp. 32–4.
127 Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 7. 17, p. 108.
129 Willke, The Historical Thought of Adam Ferguson, p. 138.
130 Haakonssen, ‘Natural Law and Moral Realism’, p. 77.
or otherwise serves the ‘final cause’ of drawing our attention to the more pressing concerns and immediate duties of the present.\footnote{Principles, I, p. 318.} Socrates’ injunction to redirect our attention from the heavens to more prosaic earthly concerns is likewise lauded.\footnote{Ibid., p. 4.} After all, ‘[t]he immediate uses of moral law are choice, practice and conduct’.\footnote{Institutes, p. 6.} Ferguson accords with Aristotle’s view that people seek their highest perfection in discovering their niche in society and pursuing communal or civic values; a person is excellent ‘in the degree to which he loves his fellow creatures; he is defective, in the degree to which he hates or is indifferent to their welfare’.\footnote{Principles, II, p. 41.}

To be precise, then, Ferguson explicates a teleology without an attainable telos. The telos, human moral perfection, is unrealizable but is conceived as an ongoing process of ‘diminishing’ imperfection; the progress of the race traces a curve which never finds a point of repose. Our ‘capacity for advancement is nowhere exhausted’. Ferguson employs a geometrical analogy to demonstrate his point that the perfective process is asymptotic:

What is created can never equal its creator . . . the least defect is the greatest perfection. A defect which is always diminishing, or in a regular course of supply, we may suppose to be the perfection of created nature . . . In its continual approach to the infinite perfection of what is eternal, it may be compared to that curve, described by geometers, as in continual approach to a straight line, which it can never reach.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 184–5. See also Ferguson, ‘Of Things That Are or May Be’, p. 141; and Ferguson, ‘Of Nature and Art’, p. 153.}

In order to ensure our unending quest for improvement in all our pursuits the Creator has deliberately ‘baffled our project; and placed nowhere within our reach this visionary blessing of absolute ease’.\footnote{Essay, p. 216.} ‘Intelligence’ knows ‘no specific place’ and our destination ‘is yet hid from our sight’. Ferguson conceives of our moral perfection as a continuous event, a ‘baffled project’, an infinite ‘curve’ and a perplexing ‘labyrinth’, rather than a precise goal. Once again, this is a typically Stoic idea, which Epictetus, for example, sets out in his Discourses.\footnote{Epictetus, Discourses, I.iv.1–27, pp. 27–35.} Seneca also noted that ‘nature does not give a man virtue: the process of becoming a good man is an art’.\footnote{Seneca, Letters From a Stoic, XC, 43, p. 176.} Ferguson quotes Cato in

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\footnote{Principles, I, pp. 315–16; See also ibid., pp. 330–1.}

\footnote{Epictetus, Discourses, Iiv.1–27, pp. 27–35.}

\footnote{Seneca, Letters From a Stoic, XC, 43, p. 176.}
Cicero’s *De Finibus* for the statement that ‘action’ and process are far more important than ‘the end or purpose to which the action was directed’. Ferguson’s avowed aim in his chapter on the origin of evil in the *Principles* is an attempt to ‘justify the ways of God to men’. Obliquely identifying himself as a theist, he opposes his adversary, ‘the atheist’ by arguing that apparent evil, rather than negating the existence of God manifestly attests to it. Everything exists for a reason; nothing in the universe is truly evil for all of creation performs some positive role in the ineffably benign master plan. Marcus argued along similar lines in the *Meditations*. Even ‘roguery’ and ‘impudence’ are ‘necessary to the world’ just as ‘sickness, death, slander, intrigue, and all the other things that delight or trouble foolish men . . . are normal’. Ferguson notes, meanwhile, that even the belief in ‘polytheism’ one of ‘the great and prevailing errors of the human mind’ is a ‘blessing’ because it contributes to our knowledge and eventually leads us to a belief in one God. ‘Complaints of moral evil’ in people, are likewise really ‘the symptoms of a progressive or improving nature’. Accordingly, there is no real concept of evil (in the Christian sense) in Ferguson’s philosophy. There is only either unfulfilled need and desire (physical evil) or consciousness of imperfection (moral evil). Evil merely consists in physical inconvenience and in a disjunction between what we are and what we would like to be.

Despite his emphasis on the Stoic virtues, Ferguson’s model is not static and we should, presumably, be getting better and better at civic virtue. For, if virtue is knowledge, why has not virtue grown with its by-product: the three stages of history? Ferguson stresses the growth of knowledge but also a concomitant and paradoxical growth of vice. The obvious question which arises is: why has the former not prevented the latter, for surely they are mutually exclusive tendencies, by Ferguson’s own reasoning? If virtue is happiness what is the point of all the tertiary, material benefits of progress without the primary moral benefits? There are two ways in which Ferguson might have resolved this difficulty. The first is that he might have made a clearer distinction between two different types of knowledge: one pertaining to social progress and one to individual moral progress. Ferguson does not adopt this strategy but describes the first as the *matrix* to the second. The second solution would have been to

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141 *Principles*, II, p. 327.

142 *Principles*, I, p. 172.


144 *Principles*, I, p. 168.


146 ‘The Creator in laying a scheme of Progression for Man towards the Perfection of his Intelligent Being has at the same time projected his Happiness as the end of Creation’ (Adam Ferguson, ‘Of Perfection and Happiness’, *Unpublished Essays*, ed. Philip, Vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 6–7).

147 Thanks to David Millar and Geoffrey Smith for drawing my attention to the difficulty with Ferguson’s approach here.
follow Smith in giving moral priority to the growth of knowledge over the cardinal virtues in the commercial age. It would have been far easier for him to demonstrate a growth of knowledge than to insist on the inevitability of moral progress in the face of all his own evidence for increasing vice. But Ferguson does not adopt this line. The knowledge Smith refers to is of a technical and wealth-generating nature and would, therefore, be regarded by Ferguson as not only inferior to true wisdom, but as a primary cause of degeneration.

Ferguson’s solution to the ‘paradox of progress and decline’ is thus fraught with its own problems. His perhaps overly-ambitious project of attempting to synthesize a classical perspective with modern political economy and actual conditions yields an awkward result. Yet Ferguson does go a long way to solving the more vexing problem of increasing vice by depicting the universe as a gigantic, self-righting unit with its own inbuilt laws of equilibrium. The relationship of these laws to his response to the problem of theodicy will now be canvassed.

A Self-Righting Universe

The universe we inhabit is inevitably self-righting. It was created for our benefit as ‘God’s’ favourite creatures and the Creator has foreseen ‘that absolute evil cannot befall the universe; for whatever be the contingent effects of freedom, it is ever susceptible of remedy and it is ever good that intelligent beings should be free’. Periods of decline are not always permanent states of affairs, nor are they stages in eternally recurring cycles but are better understood as ‘temporary intermissions’. Our progress as a species tends to be punctuated by interruptions and temporary setbacks, but the ultimate effect is a natural, progressive order. Any inconvenience must be understood as a necessary sacrifice in the dialectical progress of our moral and practical evolution. Paradoxically, the more errors we commit, the further we are drawn along the inexorable path of perfection. Only through exhausting all the possible incorrect choices can we truly earn our virtue. It is manifestly our species’ ‘state of nature’ to progress without ‘any necessary limit’; however, that progress is disrupted wherever citizens fail to cultivate the civic virtues. Each of our natural, normally positive drives hold the potential to harm us because they are always alloyed with freedom of choice, without which real progress would be

149 Principles, I, p. 155.
150 ‘[T]he capacity of his progress is indefinite — these steps which we observe him make are but part of the scheme of a nature which is destined to endure for ever . . . The progress of Man’s nature is various or unequal but nowhere definite’ (Ferguson, ‘Of Things That Are or May Be’, pp. 119, 145). Principles, I, pp. 310–11.
151 Principles, I, p. 298.
impossible. Natural ambition and insatiable need, for example, when operating smoothly, bring progress and moral development, but when directed towards unworthy objects the same drives lead to *hubris*, tyranny and unbridled hedonism. Similarly, our natural tendency to specialize, when applied to the one profession it should always be exempt from (soldiering), results in retrogression rather than progress. Yet without these original tendencies there would be no order and no progress at all. This is why Ferguson fails to censure such seemingly pernicious developments as the division of labour, the love of ‘trifling’ accommodations and conveniences, and even luxury, since they are products of our natural urges and therefore productive of spontaneous order.

Ferguson believed the human universe contained its own self-correcting mechanisms. The ills of the bloated, over-extended state embody their own antidotes. Ferguson accords with Thucydides’ view that empires contain the seeds of their own destruction. Rule by force (always a feature of empires) is tyrannical and tyranny always leads to revolt. Tyrants inevitably meet their end at the hands of their own subjects. Despotism induced by apathy, over-extension and dissipation cannot survive, for tyrannies are dead constitutions with no potential for growth.152 The unnaturalness of tyranny is confirmed by its inability to withstand change and accommodate progress. Since constitutions are simultaneously nurseries of, and objects for, the honing of civic virtue, they must be supple, organic, alive and responsive. Constitutions should be social products; a single, scheming architect of tyranny neglects the fundamental law of history; that institutions are the spontaneous products of countless generations.

Ferguson reflects at length on the injustice and evil of those ‘tyrants’ who govern ‘at discretion’, referring to the perpetual ‘war that subsists, in despotic governments, between the oppressor and the oppressed’.153 Commerce eventually falters under conditions of political and economic slavery for ‘the hopes of gain and the secure possession of property must perish under the precarious tenure of slavery and under the apprehension of danger arising from the reputation of wealth’. National poverty and misery result and the community inevitably collapses under the insupportable weight of adversity. The driving engine of commerce, self-interest (which is contingent on the prospect of the enjoyment of the fruits of our labours), falters and with it prosperity. ‘[N]ational poverty . . . and the suppression of commerce are the means by which despotism comes to accomplish its own destruction’.154 Ferguson thus agrees with his absent mentor, Montesquieu, that the destruction of prosperity would lead to the destruction of its cause, tyranny.155 Despotism drags citizens into a wretched

152 Essay, p. 278.
153 *Principles*, I, p. 503.
154 Ibid., pp. 276–8.
state of poverty, isolation and insecurity, subjecting them to the ‘horrors of fear (and) despair’, and stripping them of any capacity to defend themselves or even to form social ties. Subjects become unruly, crime escalates and ‘devastation and ruin appear on every side’. Eventually the oppression of subjects becomes so great as to be rendered a paradoxical kind of freedom. A populace with no rights and no property to defend has nothing to lose, and subjects with nothing to lose are always dangerous.\textsuperscript{156} At this point citizens ‘quit their habitations’ and turn to a nomadic life of crime. The extreme oppression of subjects warrants, in turn, the extreme reaction of a full-blown revolution. Ferguson inveighed against the whole notion of revolution using the evolutionist dimension of spontaneous order as his rationale. In the case of tyranny however, he makes a rare exception because, apart from the misery it causes, tyranny impugns the progressive dimension of spontaneous order.\textsuperscript{157}

But Ferguson neglects to stipulate how, precisely, this process of reconstitution is supposed to come about. How exactly will nations rise up from their ruins and get themselves back onto a progressive track, especially once people have lost their capacity for community and united defence? This portion of his writings lacks clarity and resolution. From the discussion the re-establishment process seems to involve some kind of devolvement in social scale and specialization, however the detail he provides is too scanty to allow for any clear scenario to emerge. Even if these were his recommendations, they would represent a contradiction of other views such as his rejection of primitivism and his belief that the cure for the ills of modernity lies in more progress, rather than in a return to a more simplified mode of existence such as is hinted at here. In any event, the only clue he provides is a passage in the \textit{Essay} where it is suggested that once citizens have quit the villages and towns they will reform into smaller social units elsewhere and begin to re-establish their sense of community and eventually their civic virtue: ‘\textit{When human nature appears in the utmost state of corruption, it has actually begun to reform.}’\textsuperscript{158} Ferguson thus expects a kind of spontaneous restoration of civil society and implies that history testifies to his claims of self-righting polities. Jean Willke has detected the weakness of his analysis here: ‘the further he departs from historical examples the more incomplete his discussion . . he offers no concrete illustration of his theory of national re-emergence from despotism’.\textsuperscript{159} Most conspicuously, Ferguson neglects to justify the failure of the Roman empire to recover and return to its former greatness, thus undermining his postulate of a self-righting universe.

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Essay}, p. 279.
\textsuperscript{157} \textit{History}, p. 5. See also \textit{Principles}, II, pp. 292, 497.
\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Essay}, pp. 278–9 (my emphasis).
\textsuperscript{159} Willke, \textit{The Historical Thought of Adam Ferguson}, pp. 190–1.
In any case this latter picture is a worst-case scenario which Ferguson seems to have limited to ‘parts of the East’;\textsuperscript{160} it is not clear whether or not he expects this to be Britain’s fate also. The point is that he insists all along that our natural urges (under the auspices of a transcendent scheme) cannot fail to realize our progressive destiny. There is a naturalness in retrogression, just as there is in progression, though the former is not inevitable whereas the latter certainly is. Existence has a purpose and no matter what befalls us in the course of our dramatic and arduous developmental process, that purpose must, and will, be realized. Periods of great tumult inevitably subside, affording citizens a valuable learning experience:

\[\text{[I]n the case of states that are fortunate in their domestic policy, even madness itself may, in the pursuit of violent convulsions, subside into wisdom; and a people return to their ordinary mood, cured of their follies and wiser by experience; or with talents improved, in conducting the very scenes which frenzy had opened, they may then appear best qualified to pursue with success the object of nations. Like the ancient republics, immediately after some alarming sedition, or like the kingdom of Great Britain, at the close of its civil wars, they retain the spirit of activity, which was recently awakened, and are equally vigorous in every pursuit, whether of policy, learning or arts. From having appeared on the brink of ruin, they pass to the greatest prosperity.}\textsuperscript{161}

To conclude, the ‘paradox of progress and decline’ is reconcilable; there is always the danger of retrogression but it is not inevitable in prosperous states and it is never a permanent state of affairs when it does occur. Ferguson confirms this in his final remarks of the \textit{Essay} where he winds up his discourse on despotism on an optimistic note: activism, not fatalism, he declares, is the only proper way of dealing with the threat of corruption.\textsuperscript{162} So long as there are citizens guarding and cultivating their civic virtues, and so long as statesmen provide constitutions friendly to popular participation all, presumably, will be well.

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\textsuperscript{160} \textit{Essay}, p. 279.
\textsuperscript{161} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 212.