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THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT, UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES
AND THE SCIENCE OF MAN

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ABSTRACT

It is a commonplace that the writers of eighteenth century Scotland played a key role in shaping the early practice of social science. This paper examines how this ‘Scottish’ contribution to the Enlightenment generation of social science was shaped by the fascination with unintended consequences. From Adam Smith’s invisible hand to Hume’s analysis of convention, through Ferguson’s sociology, and Millar’s discussion of rank, by way of Robertson’s *View of Progress*, the concept of unintended consequences pervades the writing of the period. The paper argues that the idea of unintended order shapes the understanding of the purpose of theoretical social science that emerges from the Scottish Enlightenment.

Key Terms: Adam Smith; Adam Ferguson; social science; unintended consequences

‘And this remark gives us an opportunity to formulate the main task of the theoretical social sciences. It is to trace the unintended social repercussions of intentional human actions’. —Karl Popper (1989: 342).

INTRODUCTION

It is a commonplace of the history of the Academy that the writers of eighteenth century Scotland played a key role in shaping the early practice of social science. Adam Smith is hailed in the popular imagination as the father of economics, Adam Ferguson as a founder of sociology and David Hume’s call for a ‘science of man’ (*THN*: xvi) ranks as one of the great arguments for the significance of

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the nascent social sciences. In this paper I want to examine how this ‘Scottish’ contribution to the Enlightenment generation of social science was shaped by another preoccupation of the time and place – the fascination with unintended consequences. From Adam Smith’s contested (to put it politely) invisible hand to Hume’s analysis of convention, through Ferguson’s sociology, and Millar’s discussion of rank, by way of Robertson’s *View of Progress* and on and on, the concept of unintended consequences pervades the social, political and historical writing of the period. Regardless of whether you think the metaphor of an invisible hand is appropriate, it is clear that the phenomenon of unintended order lies at the heart of Smith’s thought and is characteristic of the social thought of almost all of his contemporaries. The significance of the idea of unintended order for the Scottish science of man, grounded as it was in a ‘science of human nature’ (*TMS*: 319) and informing the ‘science of a legislator’ (*WN*: 39), is the focus of this paper. I will argue that it shapes the understanding of the purpose of theoretical social science that emerges from the Scottish Enlightenment.¹

It has been widely noted that Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* was a key influence on Scottish thinking about how social theory ought to be approached. Montesquieu stands as an emblem of the desire to provide a deeper, theoretical and systematised approach to understanding social institutions and practices. As a result he represents the Scots’ commitment to theoretical social science. As a way into our discussion I wish briefly to consider three other influential figures whom the Scots credit with influencing the methodology of the science of man and whom we can regard as emblematic of core themes of this paper: Newton as the exemplar of the experimental method, Mandeville as the prophet of social complexity, and Hutcheson as the sentimentalist.²

Much has been written recently about the influence of Newton on the Scottish Enlightenment, and indeed on the tensions between some aspects of Newton’s thinking and the scientific theories of the Scots.³ Whatever the nuances of this connection, it seems unproblematic to observe that the Scots, and Hume in particular, had great hopes that the success of empiricism in the natural sciences could be extended to the social sciences. In the preface to the *Treatise* Hume goes further and notes that the science of man needs to be given a secure empirical grounding in order that the rest of science – which is based upon human understanding – can rest on secure foundations. When we combine this with the observation, universally accepted by the Scots, that man is naturally sociable, there seems to be much at stake in the success of the nascent social sciences.

From Newton the Scots take over the demand for empirical rigour and the practice of forming generalisations in as simple a fashion as possible. The aim of science is to ‘soothe the imagination’ by presenting chains of evidence that explain causal connections (Smith 1980: 46). Humean epistemology takes this as the subject matter of which it must give an account, and Smith deploys a sentimentalist argument to explain the psychology of the human desire for

knowledge in terms of a process of identification and classification. Science is understood as generalisation from evidence to explain causal relationships, and the science of man must proceed along empirical lines if it is to provide a secure basis for the other sciences.

Mandeville enters the fray at this point. He looms large in the background of the Scottish Enlightenment with many of the leading thinkers following Hutcheson in attacking his 'splenetic' system (*TMS*: 127).⁴ However, the refusal to accept Mandeville's account of vice and virtue is combined, in the case of Hume, Smith and Ferguson, with a realisation that his depiction of social interaction was in many respects accurate. In Ferguson's famous phrase: 'nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design' (Ferguson *Essay*: 119).

The Scots' understanding of the complexity of social life pays central attention to the idea that the interaction of individuals pursuing disparate ends produces social level consequences that formed no part of their intentions. This powerful observation about the nature of social life, what Fania Oz-Salzberger has called Mandeville's 'insight' or 'explicatory device', is developed by the Scots (Oz-Salzberger 2003: 170). But it is developed in a different way from Mandeville's assertion that crafty politicians manipulate the actors, while at the same time avoiding the desire to preserve the moral judgement of individual actions that characterised many of Mandeville's opponents.⁵

Ferguson in particular is fascinated by Mandeville's insight. He is certain that unintended order is an accurate description of the empirical reality of social life, and that this is supported by the historical record, but at the same time he is deeply concerned that this fact will lead to the perversion of traditional discourses about moral responsibility. One need not go so far as Mandeville in identifying vice with virtue to see that attributions of responsibility become extremely difficult if one accepts that most significant social phenomena are not the product of an act attributable to any one individual.⁶ Ferguson's response to this was to help to initiate a tradition of theorising about collective entities such as the nation as though they carried the responsibility that used to be assigned to individuals. In this way Ferguson thought that he would be able to retain the traditional practice of normative moralising while acknowledging the empirical reality of complex of social interaction.⁷

The final member of our group of influences is Francis Hutcheson. Hutcheson's great influence on the tenor of the whole of the Scottish Enlightenment has been well documented, but for our purposes he is emblematic of the tradition of British philosophy that places emphasis on the primacy of sentiment in moral experience. In the first place Hutcheson's account of natural fellow-feeling prompting benevolence feeds into the later Scots' assertion that mankind is naturally sociable. Man is 'formed for society' (*TMS*: 116) and is to be taken in 'troops and companies' as he has always been found (Ferguson *Essay*: 9).

Sociability becomes one of the key planks of the science of man, but it becomes so only after it sheds the language of virtue in which Hutcheson cloaked it. For the later Scots sociability is a fact demonstrated by historical evidence, it does not carry moral weight. The later Scots de-moralize mankind's social nature and instead approach it as part of the subject matter of which their science will provide an account. We might also regard Hutcheson as emblematic of another core aspect of the Scots' science of man: the interest in emotion and other non-rational modes of human experience. The Scottish science of man is particularly attuned to the non-deliberative aspects of human social life – to sympathy, to habit and to custom. This, as we will see, complements the awareness of unintended complexity and the downplaying of purposive action in the generation social institutions.

We are left with a set of methodological concerns that stress an understanding of science as a process of generalisation from evidence that can be applied with profit to the systematic study of the complex patterns that emerge from human social interaction, often through the examination of non-deliberative forces such as habit. One feature that emerges from this brief consideration of those who influenced the Scots is that they are engaged in shaping the relationship between moral philosophy and the science of man.

THE PROVINCE OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

The most significant Scottish writers understood themselves to operate in a tradition of moral philosophy that encompassed almost all of what we now regard as the social sciences. As a result their interests reflect, but do not fall comfortably into, what we today regard as distinct academic disciplines. Among their many contributions to the early formulation of these new disciplines was the desire to separate the science of man from traditional 'moralising'. In the canon of moral philosophy and social theory this move is often portrayed as a consequence of Hume's *Treatise* (THN: 469). In undergraduate moral philosophy classes Hume's purported distinction between is and ought is used to demonstrate the distinction between the subject matter appropriate for normative moral philosophy and the subject matter appropriate for empirical social science. This reading of the Scots' view is supported by the strong statement in Ferguson's *Principles of Moral and Political Science* of the distinction between physical science as concerned with questions of 'theory' and 'fact', and 'moral science' as concerned with questions of 'right' (Ferguson *Principles* 2: 1).

There are problems with this popular reading, not the least of which is the anachronism of reading G.E. Moore and early twentieth century positivists back into Hume. But more significantly it also tends to elide the fact that Hume thought that he was introducing 'the experimental method of reasoning into moral

subjects' (*THN*: xi). What does this mean for social science? One possible reading is that we should seek, with Weber and the positivists, to produce a value free science that provides information upon which to proceed in pursuit of otherwise generated norms. But is this what Hume had in mind? Another possibility might be to follow the approach of what, today, we call the Critical Theorists, who, drawing on Marx, meld normative critique and social science in a discipline of social theory that we tend to regard as a very different animal from normative moral philosophy.⁸

Hume, it seems, did think that politics and a great many other social relationships could be 'reduced to a science', but if we examine the content and purpose of that science it is clear that it was to be pursued for good Baconian reasons of 'utility' (*THN*: xix). The science of man would prove to be a resource in the pursuit of man's goals by offering explanations of how social life operated. There is also what Knud Haakonssen has referred to, in relation to Smith, as a 'very indirect normativity' at play in much of the social theory of the Scottish Enlightenment (Haakonssen 2006: 5). There is no hard and fast distinction drawn by the Scots between the spheres of normative moral philosophy and social science.⁹ Indeed each thinker seems to develop their own attitude to the proper extent of warranted moral assessment appropriate to the nascent social sciences. In one sense this is understandable as the implications of Hume's *Treatise* were only beginning to be worked out, but it is also understandable because science and philosophy were yet to become distinct academic subjects. Indeed the terms were used virtually interchangeably throughout the period. All of the Scots operate with what we, today, would regard as normatively loaded concepts and, moreover, they are comfortable passing judgement on practices of which they disapprove – the most universal example of this being slavery, but others including primogeniture, infanticide and incinerating wives on funeral pyres.¹⁰

However, we should also note that they are, first and foremost, interested in explaining these practices. And this explanation depends on the science of man and not on the wickedness of the character of the individuals involved. There is a complex inter-relationship between normative moral assessment and explanatory social theory at work here. Judgement, as Smith tells us in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is a natural part of social life. Indeed together with imagination, it is the basis of moral psychology in his account, but this judgement, however natural, is not identical with the project of social theory. It may well be the case that our judgement may be informed by our understanding of the derivation of a practice. The judgement, after all, is 'antecedent to the rule' in Smith's analysis (*TMS*: 159–160). It is only after these rules have been crystallized in practice that we can assess the conditions in which they arose. Explanation does not excuse atrocities, but it does render them intelligible. In Ferguson's case this leads to 'a procedure simultaneously empirical and normative' (Hill 2006: 57). Once we have access to the results of social science we are able to disregard unsatisfactory accounts of

both explanation and justification. For example, superstition will be unmasked, and will cease to be an appropriate discourse when explaining or justifying social level phenomena. When we combine this with the observation, drawn from Mandeville, that there are social level outcomes and practices for which we are unable to apportion 'blame', then we see the development of the science of man as being a 'de-moralising' process. Social theory is no longer primarily a normative exercise and we see this reflected linguistically through the de-prioritisation of the good in favour of the 'useful' understood through retrospective explanations grounded in empirical evidence.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Another useful path into understanding the science of man is to understand what the Scots were reacting against. They have no interest in social contract theories, 'Great Legislator' (*TMS*: 216) myths or divine right arguments. This rejection of the dominant modes of discourse surrounding social institutions is grounded in the observation that they do not accord with historical evidence. They are either normative arguments regarding legitimacy that are advanced by those who wish to defend or oppose particular existing social institutions, or they are the result of past ages soothing their minds with myths. As Ferguson would have it:

An author and a work, like cause and effect, are perpetually coupled together. This is the simplest form under which we can consider the establishment of nations: and we ascribe to previous design, what came to be known only by experience. (Ferguson *Essay*: 120)

The rejection of these established approaches on the grounds that they are not good social science reveals, in turn, what actually underpins the Scots' notion of good science.

Both Hume and Smith argue that the traditions of divine right and contract arguments are a product of party politics that reveal nothing useful about the origin or operation of political institutions (Smith *Jurisprudence*: 402; Hume *Essays*: 64). The science of man is intended to be a replacement for the sort of approach which is hopelessly tainted with wished for normative conclusions. Hume's celebrated demolition of the contract method is clearly meant to imply that there is an alternative account of legitimacy that does accord with the historical facts. So not only is contract theory unrealistic, it is also unconvincing on a normative level precisely because it lacks scientific credentials that pack explanatory punch. Hume's alternative account, given in abstract terms in *Treatise* Book 3 and in the essays on the *Origin of Government* and *First Principles of Government*, demonstrates how the legitimacy of social institutions

is based on our opinion of their legitimacy grounded, in the final analysis, in an appreciation of their utility. Note here that we require two things to make this sort of judgement: first, accurate historical evidence of the development of these institutions and, second, some plausible account of their utility. The identification of both of these is a task for the science of man.

The theme of unintended consequences is also well to the fore in the rejection of simple explanatory models. Ferguson's rejection of legislator myths includes within it an observation that the early Kings feted as designers of constitutions are unlikely to have been able to undertake the task and would instead have issued rulings in line with established practice or the feelings of the group. For Ferguson: 'we ascribe to a previous design, what came to be known only by experience, what no human wisdom could foresee, and what, without the concurring humour and disposition of his age, no authority could enable an individual to execute'. (Ferguson *Essay*: 120).¹¹

Attempts to explain the origins of social institutions which do not ground themselves in established evidence, or reasonable conjecture based on that evidence, fail, in Ferguson's view, to provide a firm basis for knowledge. This historically attuned observation points us away from explanations of social phenomena that rest on purposive individual rationality and action. Like Adam Smith's famous dismissal of the man of system, we see a rejection of the idea that humanity has (or could have?) deliberately designed social institutions in favour of an understanding that sees them as emerging from the interaction of many individuals over time. 'Government', as Hume observes, 'commences more casually and more imperfectly' than contract theory suggests (Hume *Essays*: 39).¹²

This, then, is my first point. Social science is concerned with social phenomena, and these are rarely, if ever, the realisation of the will of one individual. As Ferguson notes: 'every experiment relative to this subject should be made with entire societies not single men' (Ferguson *Essay*: 10). Indeed, if events do represent the will of one actor, or group of actors, then they aren't really that interesting other than as part of a narrative history or as a study of individual psychology. Hume goes further than this and seems to assert that such phenomena are not really open to scientific explanation. His distinction between chance and causes seems to preclude the scientific explanation of the acts of individuals: 'What depends upon a few persons is, in a great measure, to be ascribed to chance, or secret and unknown causes: what arises from a great number, may often be accounted for by determinate and known causes' (Hume *Essays*: 112). To the extent that the Scots do pay attention to designed institutions and deliberate actions that are the result of purposive rationality, they are interested in the unintended consequences that they produce.¹³ The science of man as an explanatory project is intended to trace and to explain patterns that emerge from the unintended consequences of the intended activity of individuals. So we have reached a point where we are able to state that unintended

consequences are the chief element of the ‘social’ and that the ‘science’ involved is grounded in a strict regard for empiricism.

CONJECTURAL HISTORY

Much has been written about the ‘conjectural’, or ‘theoretical’, or ‘natural’ history that represents the chief methodology of the Scots’ attempt to apply empiricism to social matters and this is not the place to add further to the analysis that began with Dugald Stewart (*Stewart Life*: 295–6). Instead let us confine ourselves to drawing the shape of the project envisaged. In the *Treatise*, Hume identifies the raw materials of the science of man as lying in a ‘cautious observation of human life’ as it is commonly lived (*THN*: xix). Such ‘experimental’ data will then, after careful collation and corroboration, act as the evidence from which the generalisations of social science will emerge.

These generalisations emerge from the careful application of a comparative analysis. The end is not to impose a pattern from theory, but rather to identify regularities, the underlying universalities of human nature, that will allow us to form generalisations about human group life. Smith, Millar, Ferguson, Robertson and Kames all endorse and apply the method. This is theoretical rather than narrative history. Historical evidence serves as data rather than as a matter of antiquarian interest. In its original form the method was designed to deal with the absence of historical evidence by drawing comparisons between similar situations. Perhaps most celebrated amongst these being the comparison of evidence of the American Indians with the German tribes described in Tacitus by Robertson, Dunbar and Stuart. The similarity of these forms of society corroborates the evidence and confirms that we are warranted in viewing the general similarities that they share as aspects that are universal for that ‘type’ of society. The other desire, for which see Kames *Historical Law Tracts*, is to ‘supply the broken links’ in the historical record through ‘cautious conjectures’ that provide a reasonable account of what may have occurred (Kames 1776: 25–6).

However in a celebrated passage Dugald Stewart goes well beyond this and makes what appears, in historiographical terms, to be an extraordinary assertion:

I shall only observe farther on this head, that when different theoretical histories are proposed by different writers, of the progress of the human mind in any one line of exertion, these theories are not always to be understood as standing in opposition to each other. If the progress delineated in all of them be plausible, it is possible at least, that they may all have been realized; for human affairs never exhibit, in any two instances, a perfect uniformity. But whether they have been realized or no, is often a question of little consequence. In most

cases, it is of more importance to ascertain the progress that is more simple, than the progress that is the most agreeable to fact; for, paradoxical as the proposition may appear, it is certainly true, that the real progress is not always the most natural. It may have been determined by particular accidents, which are not likely again to occur, and which cannot be considered as forming any part of that general provision which nature has made for the improvement of the race. (Stewart *Life*: 296)

On one level this seems to be an assertion that the actual course of historical events is not as interesting as what ‘might’ have happened.¹⁴ However, given a slightly more charitable reading, and in the light of what we have said about the project of the science of man, we are left instead with a reasonable statement of the aim of theoretical social science. The desire to generalise from solid evidence means that the principles extracted will capture the commonalities of a type of situation without resorting to disparate narrative accounts of specifics or normatively loaded imaginative accounts. It is these generalisations that are significant for the Scots.¹⁵ They are not unrelated to actual events, but rather seek to abstract from them, to account for them, in a way that captures the universalities that emerge from the comparison of different cases of similar phenomena. This explains why Stewart, and Hume (*Enquiries*: 85), are keen to stress that the universalities that they are in search of do not demand absolutely identical conditions or outcomes in all cases.

Let’s be clear about what’s going on here. The Scots are advancing the view that we can generalise from historical evidence to build conceptual models of how ‘types’ of social situation emerge and change, and what is involved in the internal operation of these patterns. Such knowledge deepens our understanding of social life because it reveals to us the ‘natural’ forces that are at play in what at first appears to be a discord of contingent occurrences. We abstract from the local details in order to find what is of more general interest. We can do this because we have the evidence of the historical record from which to compare and generalise.

Ferguson expresses this understanding of the place of social science in the *Essay*. He argues that we must set aside the specifics of every instance of diversity if we are to develop a ‘general and comprehensive knowledge of the whole’, this leads to a methodology that involves us in establishing ‘a few general heads’ around which to focus our investigations. And,

When we have marked the characteristics which form the general points of coincidence . . . we have made an acquisition of knowledge, which, though it does not supersede the necessity of experience, may serve to direct our inquiries, and, in the midst of affairs, to give an order and a method for the arrangement of particulars that occur to our observation. (Ferguson *Essay*: 65)

All of this is posited on the idea that such universalities do indeed exist, for otherwise social matters would not be an appropriate subject for scientific enquiry. Moreover the method itself is based on certain underlying universalities. The most significant of these is the idea of a universal human nature that is itself identifiable through a process of generalisation from historical evidence. This process is one of generalisation from empirical observation, but it is also considered axiomatic in the sense that the very idea of a human nature, and the possibility of communication, necessarily implies a degree of commonality sufficient to warrant generalisation. In other words even to consider this as a worthwhile enterprise you have to be sold already on the possibility of its success. We need to remember that this project was being undertaken before the historicist turn of the nineteenth century. And, indeed, that Ferguson's sociological concerns stand as one of the precursors of the historicism that would later deny the possibility of the Scot's project.

UNDERLYING UNIVERSALITIES AND CONCEPTUAL MODELS

Perhaps the strongest statement of this line of thought comes from Hume:

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 Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, 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. (Hume *Enquiries*: 83)

Social diversity serves us as the material for comparative analysis, and it is through comparative analysis that we are able to refine our generalisations about the universal aspects of human experience. Human institutions 'which cause such a diversity' also 'at the same time maintain such a uniformity in human life' (*THN*: 402). Diversity is constituted by the means (both institutional and conventional) of dealing with universal features of human nature within specific contexts. As a result we can use our generalisations to sift through the diverse appearances of history, and this allows us to identify the underlying nature of 'human' experience.

The Scottish science of man is characterised by the development of conceptual models drawn from generalisations garnered from the evidence of history. Such, for example, are Smith's account of feudalism and slavery, and his analysis of

the development of standing armies in the *Wealth of Nations*. We see the same in Ferguson's three stage accounts of the rise and possible decline of civilised nations and in Hume's discussion of *The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences*: most obviously though we see it in the four stage explanatory models deployed by Smith, and developed by John Millar. The stadial theories represent an attempt to develop retrospective explanations in the form of social theory. The claim is not that this or that nation developed precisely along these lines, but rather that the 'natural' development can be accounted for from a gradual development traced to a principle in human nature, in this case the 'care of subsistence' (Ferguson *Essay*: 35). Smith and Millar's four stage models are intended to demonstrate how social institutions are shaped by the interaction of human nature with the circumstances in which it exists at particular points in history. They are not prescriptive assertions, but rather are theoretical models. In this sense they accord with Smith's definition of a 'system' of knowledge in the *History of Astronomy*: 'A system is an imaginary machine invented to connect together in the fancy those different movements and effects which are already in reality performed'. (Smith 1980: 66). It is the error of the 'man of system' in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* to suppose that he can shape society in line with a rationally constructed ideal system (*TMS*:233–34). This is to misunderstand the nature and the purpose of such intellectual systems. They exist as retrospective explanatory models, and not as rationally designed blueprints.

These explanatory models are designed to account for 'patterns' observed in the evidence of history (Haakonssen 2006: 4). They then provide an account of 'why' these patterns exist that is conducted with reference to universal attributes of human nature and recurring problem situations of human life. In this case the universality of the desire for subsistence is linked to the emergence of notions of property and justice, while the evolution of subsequent institutions and their refinement is accounted for with reference to the stabilisation of problems that arise from changing circumstances. All of this clearly prefigures the spirit of functionalist analysis. The accounts of property, justice and government that the Scots give are embedded in this outlook and serve to illustrate their understanding of the scope of social science.

If we examine Hume's two accounts of the emergence of government in the *Treatise* and the *Essays*, we see that, in both cases, utility carries the explanatory force. But we should also note that there are differences in the 'stories' told – chiefly the stress on mutual recognition of property in the *Treatise* giving way to the habituated acceptance of the authority of judge kings in *Of the Origin of Government*. In both cases utility does the explanatory work, but the details of the conceptual model are tweaked. The descriptions are theoretical reconstructions of what might have happened given Hume's account of a universal human nature and the universal circumstances of justice. The point of these 'models of conceptualised reality' is to provide an account of the development

of social institutions that accords with what we know of human nature and social life (Skinner 2003: 194). This task is necessary, as we saw, because of the absence of reliable historical records of early human life.

Hume's analysis of the origins of government and property in the *Treatise* and *Essays* describes the underlying rationale for such institutions; it explains how interest and a sense of utility are the original spurs to humans establishing government and property. But the actual development of these institutions is laid out in terms of the formation of conventions. And these conventions arise by a series of particular reactions to historical circumstances that become habitual. There is no purposive creation of government, no pre-recognition of the utility, the sense of its usefulness arises as it is practised and developed. Government is an unintended consequence of many short term utility decisions. It becomes habitually accepted because it is repeatedly invoked and because these repetitions come to stabilise expectations.

In Hume's account government is explained as a convention that arises within a society, is authorised by the utility of a central authority to determine property and is strengthened by the force of habit and custom. The institutions of justice need not be just in their origins. Indeed the conceptual model of the origins of government clearly abandons the focus on individual purposive action that marked simpler models of explanation. The evolution of government was a product of a process of unintended consequences: it arose from the temporary reactions to present concerns and literally 'grew' from there in reaction to new circumstances. As time passed these conventions became customs and possessed a force in the minds of those who held them which, though the institutions themselves were ultimately underwritten by notions of utility, carried an emotional strength which made them part of the sympathetic social bond.

For all of the Scots habit and custom are understood as core social phenomena.¹⁶ The initial development of social practices is understood largely as the result of a process of habituation. This sub-rational process accounts for how we become 'used' to the 'useful', and how we become attached to it in a way that invokes an emotional preference for familiar practices. Building on this the Scots also place great emphasis on the process of socialisation. As Hume puts it:

In a little time, custom and habit operating on the tender minds of the children, makes them sensible of the advantages, which they may reap from society, as well as fashions them by degrees for it, by rubbing off those rough corners and untoward affections, which prevent their coalition. (*Treatise*: 486)

This continues the Scots tendency towards 'the demotion of purposive rationality' (Berry 1997: 39). The focus on socialisation as an explanation for the transmission of beliefs and practices as a 'contagion of manners' (Hume *Essays*: 204), is a

further step in the process of removing deliberate rational behaviour from the explanation of the emergence and transmission of social patterns.

The stress on socialisation and custom in the construction of explanatory models is even more pronounced in Ferguson's version of the early ages of government. Here the stress is on the coalition of social groups as tribal bands and their increasing coherence in response to external threats. Ferguson's early conflict sociology is similar in some respects to Hume's account in the *Essays*. But it is developed in far greater detail. It also stresses that utility calculations do not enter into the deliberation of the actors involved. Ferguson notes that human attachment and loyalty to groups is strongest at precisely that point where it is of lowest individual utility – during warfare (Ferguson *Essay*: 23).

Similarly, Smith's criticism of Hume's account of justice is based on the view that it is too dependent on utility calculations and that it pays insufficient attention to socialisation and to the emotional force of sympathy.¹⁷ He thus reverses Hume's formulation which places consideration of utility before sympathy in the emergence of justice. For Smith utility is often invoked after the fact as an explanation or justification of a particular practice rather than as the prime motivating factor in the activity that becomes the basis of the practice. For example, Smith disavows any role for utility in his explanation of the close nature of social bonds such as the family.

Smith's point about the place of emotion brings to our attention once again the downplaying of rational calculation in the explanation of social phenomena. Hume's account pays insufficient regard to the sub-rational forces that impel us to action. Despite his celebrated regard for the passions as motivating forces, his conceptual model turns out to be excessively rationalistic. Hume's account is based on the gradual entrenching of short-term utility decisions into long-term institutions that generate utility in ways unforeseen by the original actors. The moral force of these comes, in Hume's view, from a marriage of emotion and group-feeling (sympathy with the public) and underlying utility. What Smith reminds us is that the underlying universality is underlying, that is to say that the actual bonds of society are experienced emotionally, and it is only our post-hoc reconstructions that reveal the utility that can be traced in the generation of the practice.

The shift of focus to sympathy redirects our attention to the place of unintended consequences in this process. The explanatory models are not to be understood as being accessible to the actors within them. We do not form a government because we undertake a conscious process of institutional design followed by an assessment of utility. The earliest human societies did not possess the capacity for abstract thought that this would require. As a result, we mistake the conceptual reconstruction of the *Treatise* if we view it as anything other than a retrospective explanatory device. Assessments of the utility of institutions are detached from explanations of the origins of those institutions – a particularly necessary step for

Hanoverians who wished to avoid justifications based on historical contortions. The more important point is that explanation does not depend on the intentions of the actors. The outcomes that are generated as the unintended results of human action are the appropriate level for any subsequent assessment of the utility of a practice.

DIVERSITY AND JUDGEMENT

One result of this understanding of human social life is that different circumstances will produce different habituated practices. This process ramifies as these customs become the basis upon which further innovations are undertaken. The 'outward circumstances' (Hume *Treatise*: 487) which lead different groups to develop different customs become the subject for explanation in the light of underlying universalities of human nature. It is because we have been able to identify these universal aspects of humanity that we are able to understand and explain the generation and operation of social phenomena. Moreover, with the Scots' imperfect division of explanation and normative judgement, they also regard this universal human nature as a barrier against relativism in moral judgement.¹⁸ The universality of human nature is the key to understanding how they can recognise cultural diversity and seek to explain it, while passing judgement on different practices.

Though the Scots are keen to dissociate themselves from any sense of relativism, and are happy to condemn as they see fit, they are nonetheless among the first to notice the problems of cultural bias that would later be of such concern to anthropologists. Ferguson, as the most sociologically sophisticated of the group, expends much energy defending the science of man from accusations of merely elevating the standards of one culture into universal standards for humanity (Ferguson *Essay*: 75, 103, 184).¹⁹ It is 'difficult' to 'convey a just apprehension of what mankind were in situations so different, and in times so remote', he writes anticipating the historicist turn that would discredit the project of a science of man from the later nineteenth century (Ferguson *Essay*: 79). If historical distance is a barrier to understanding, then so is cultural distance.

To the ignorant or to the proud, who consider their own customs as a standard for mankind, every deviation from that standard is considered, not as the use of a different language and form of expression, but as a defect of reason, and a deviation from propriety and correctness of manners. (Ferguson *Principles* 2: 142)

This leads to the observation that manners are 'severally to be judged of by the standard of their own custom or practice, none has a right to apply that standard, in

estimating the manners of others' (Ferguson *Principles 2*: 151). Thus far Ferguson seems merely to be observing the dictum of 'when in Rome' for everyday life. But the observation goes further than this. For while 'to judge of other men by the standard' of our 'own manners and customs' (Ferguson *Principles 2*: 152) is an 'error'. It is an error that does not lead to relativism. This is because Ferguson's toleration is not extended to that which rejects 'what is evidently salutary' or to that which is 'pernicious' (Ferguson *Principles 2*: 152–3).

We are then left with the puzzle of how it is that we identify the 'pernicious' that we are to reject. Again the answer lies in the development of customs from the interaction of human nature with outward circumstances. The Scots' science of man anticipates the comparative method that is characteristic of much contemporary social science, and we see here the further anticipation of later approaches, specifically functionalist sociology. Smith's criticism of Hume's account of the origins of justice was, as we saw, directed at its excessive dependence on calculations of utility by the actors involved. But we should also note that utility remains Smith's 'meta-principle' (Otteson 2002: 251). While he does not invoke it as the primary explanation of custom generation, he accepts that it has a role to play in the creation of explanatory models (Haakonssen 2006: 16). Utility provides the explanatory criterion for shifts in moral practices. It does not represent all that there is to say about how, or indeed why, we experience morality, but it does allow us to build conceptual models to account for why moral beliefs change.

Moreover this account of shifts in moral belief, grounded as it is in the universal aspects of human nature, can then be understood as providing a yardstick for the assessment of the functionality of customs and institutions. A view expressed from a slightly different position by Eric Schliesser in relation to Smith: 'We may turn to history to learn how our social institutions fit our (past) needs; this provides a normative baseline with which to evaluate changes in our social institutions' (Schliesser 2006: 90).²⁰ It is in this way that we see how normativity re-enters the picture and melds itself to the explanatory models of historical development (Otteson 2002: 222).²¹

We see this in Smith's discussion of infanticide (*TMS*: 209–11).²² Here he is able to give an explanation of the practice, to judge that it is more 'pardonable' (*TMS*: 210) in undeveloped societies, and then to criticise its continuation through force of custom after the circumstances had altered. The explanation that Smith provides for infanticide is based on utility, but this explanation does not provide a moral justification for the practice when assessed through the sentiments. Infanticide can be explained as a response to population growth in a situation of severely limited resources (explanatory social theory), but it cannot be justified in the light of the underlying universalities of human nature (normative moral philosophy).

CONCLUSION

Earlier I noted that Dugald Stewart's claim that alternative conceptual models have the potential to be useful in terms of conjectural history appears at first glance to express a preference for variety of rational reconstructions above a unified account of actual events. What we see in the three accounts of the origins of government provided by Hume, Ferguson and Smith is precisely that. We have slightly different conceptual reconstructions that stress different aspects of the status of utility as an explanatory principle. Each, in its own way, demonstrates some aspect of the significant part that unintended consequences play in the development of social institutions.

If we want to understand the sort of legacy that the Scottish Enlightenment has left for the contemporary social sciences we can point to their anticipation of the comparative and functionalist methods and to their influence on the methodological thought of the likes of Popper and Hayek. But more significantly we should look to attempts to create models of 'types' of human behaviour and social situation. It is in social theory and more particularly in game theory and some forms of sociological and economic modelling that we see the generation of explanatory models understood as abstractions from particular cases that provide us with insight into the operation of social life. Ultimately the Scots were engaged in a similar sort of theoretical social science. They were keen to keep their theorising grounded in evidence, but they were also aware of the value of abstract conceptual models in advancing our understanding of the operation of society. Social science must be more than history: It must involve theory and it must involve abstraction. But this abstraction must not become detached from the empirical evidence upon which it is based, nor must it become the dogmatic or insular preserve of those adept only in the manipulation of the models. In such cases it becomes little better than the old scholastic models of understanding that the Scots reacted against.

Moreover, the Scots, as a feature of their place in the development of the modern distinction between normative philosophy and social theory, remained open to normative addenda to explanations of social phenomena. In this sense their legacy is carried forward in the contemporary school of critical theory. However, the centrality of the preoccupation with unintended consequences is such that they do not fall into the trap of 'moralising' their conceptual reconstructions, or of mistaking them for justifications. Instead they regard their conceptual explanations as contributions to knowledge rather than supports for a particular political agenda. It is with the science of man that the Scots are at their most 'enlightened', but this enlightenment does not allow itself to be misled into regarding reason as all powerful. Instead the fascination with unintended consequences leads to a more historically nuanced approach that places explanation above justification in their concerns. At the end of the

day the key to understanding the social science of the Scottish Enlightenment lies in understanding how they direct empirically based theory towards explaining the unintended consequences that characterise all genuinely social phenomena.

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NOTES

- ¹ For the purposes of this essay I will focus on the writings of Hume, Smith and Ferguson.
- ² In the Introduction Hume also credits Bacon, Locke, Butler and Shaftesbury as influencing his view (*THN*: xvii).
- ³ See the discussion in Montes (2006) and Emerson (1988).
- ⁴ See also (*TMS*: 308–13); Ferguson (*Essay*: 37); (*THN*: 500).
- ⁵ As Mandeville famously notes: 'the moral virtues are the Political Offspring which Flattery begot upon Pride'. (Mandeville *Bees I*: 51).
- ⁶ This is the same problem that plagued Machiavelli under the guise of Fortuna and which produced judgemental contortions in the writings of Cardinal De Retz as they tried to retain some aspect of a moralised great man understanding of history (Smith 2007: 158–59).

- ⁷ This step, through Ferguson's influence on Hegel and Marx, leads directly to the contemporary tradition of critical theory.
- ⁸ Indeed, if we were to continue our emblematic exercise we might view Hume as the precursor of positivism and Ferguson as the precursor of critical theory. We should also note in passing that the Scots' commitment to explanation leads to a relative paucity of religious allusions in those passages where the science of man is deployed. This indicates a further step in what we will call the 'de-moralising' of social science.
- ⁹ This has proved to be a particular theme in Smith studies. See, for example Campbell (1971) and Haakonssen (1981).
- ¹⁰ See Lieberman (2006: 228–9).
- ¹¹ See also Millar (1990: 7).
- ¹² See also Hume (*Essays*: 124).
- ¹³ The significance of unintended consequences is a well established account of the focus of the science of man and has previously been rehearsed, inter alia, by Berry (1997), Haakonssen (1981) and Campbell (1971).
- ¹⁴ See Berry (1997: 66–7) for a discussion of this passage and its critics.
- ¹⁵ They represent what Karl Popper would later call 'situational analysis' (1972: 179). Such analyses would facilitate the production of a 'generalized historical hypothesis' (1972: 272). Friedrich Hayek also makes use of the method, what he calls compositive social theory to provide an account for the periods of social evolution of which we have no record. He argues:

To repeat: mind and culture developed concurrently and not successively. Once we recognize this, we find that we know so little about precisely how this development took place, of which we have so few recognizable fossils, that we are reduced to reconstruct it as a sort of conjectural history in the sense of the Scottish moral philosophers of the eighteenth century. The facts about which we know almost nothing are the evolution of those rules of conduct which governed the structure and functioning of the various small groups of men in which the race developed. On this the study of still surviving primitive people can tell us little. Though the conception of conjectural history is somewhat suspect today, when we cannot say precisely how things did happen, to understand how they could have come about may be an important insight. (Hayek 1993 3: 156)

It is clear that the Scots' interest in unintended consequences invites comparison with the consideration of the same phenomenon in Hayek and Popper's discussion of the methodology of social science. The centrality of unintended consequences to Hayek and Popper's work on the methodology of social science is well known and they both readily acknowledge the influence of the Scots on their thinking. We should note however that advances in knowledge – in Hayek's case Darwinian evolutionary theory, in Popper's case his own theory of scientific method with its rejection of Humean induction, and in the case of both the historicist turn of the nineteenth century – make the direct intellectual lineage of their views problematic to trace. However the main thrust of the argument here is that such is the sophistication of the Scots' appreciation of unintended consequences that it is canonical for any consideration of these themes in the later social thinking of figures as diverse as Marx and Hayek.

- ¹⁶ What Lisa Hill refers to as the focus on 'sub-rational human experience' (Hill 2006: 14).
- ¹⁷ Hume on priority of utility at (*THN*: 499–500), Smith's critique (*TMS*: 20, 88–89, 142, 188–9).

¹⁸ See Berry (1997: 75–6); and Haakonssen (2006: 4)

¹⁹ See also Smith ‘we are all apt to think well and commend of the times we live in and to prefer them to all others.’ (Smith *Jurisprudence*: 112).

²⁰ Schliesser also argues here that Smith held an evolutionary view of human nature that distinguished him from the absolute universalism that we find in Hume.

²¹ Lisa Hill (2006: 73) describes Ferguson as requiring ‘the descriptive to define the normative’.

²² Hume (*Essays*: 398) and Ferguson (*Essay*: 135) make similar points.