

Scottish Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century: Volume I: Morals, Politics, Art, Religion (Review)

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This is a volume in the Oxford series *A History of Scottish Philosophy*. Its scope is quite broad, as its subtitle's reference to "morals, politics, art, [and] religion" hints. The volume's editors, Aaron Garrett (Boston University) and James Harris (University of St. Andrews), are recognized authorities in the field, and they have assembled an expert team of contributors who together have delivered a very useful volume, if one that is sometimes uneven in coverage. The contributors are notably interdisciplinary. In fact, while the book's co-editors are philosophers, only a minority of the thirteen contributors (among whom the editors are counted) are from philosophy departments. Six of the thirteen are from departments of history, but English literature and political science are also represented. This lineup is not accidental; it reflects the intention of the editors, who point out in their introductory chapter that "it is a peculiar feature of the history of philosophy that it is written primarily by philosophers" (2). The result is that "usually the history of philosophy is the work of those who are philosophers first and historians second" (2). The editors' choice of authors suggests a different, more historical, approach, something also evident in the volume's content.

The book's introduction does a good job of summarizing the state of modern scholarship on the philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment.¹ It also offers a synopsis of each of the book's chapters. Some are devoted to the star players of the Scottish Enlightenment—Hume, of course, but also Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and Thomas Reid—but most of the chapters engage in thematic approaches that include discussions of groups of philosophers. Following is a listing of the volume's contents along with a few words of summary on each:

Chapter 1, "The World in Which the Scottish Enlightenment Took Shape," by Roger L. Emerson, provides a splendid survey of the setting for Scottish intellectual life at the close of the seventeenth century. An underlying theme of the chapter is that the Scots' orientation was toward the continent rather than toward England, as is sometimes thought: "Dutch models and universities were of great importance and Dutch influences long persisted" (22). Emerson concludes that "the Scottish Enlightenment was not principally about politeness or civic humanism but something more basic, the remaking

1. A correction might be offered to the editors' claim that a new edition of "the complete works of Hume" has "been initiated" (1). The *Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume* has no plan to include Hume's *History of England*, a work that shows how Hume used his philosophy in historical explanations and in so doing conveyed it to the "conversible world." Given the editors' historiographical aims in this volume, that is worth mentioning.

of a society so that it could produce men able to compete in every way in a rapidly changing world” (31). That theme is taken up in several of the following chapters. The Scottish Enlightenment defined in this volume is very much one that is concerned with improvement in people’s daily lives, a guiding theme of much that Emerson has researched and argued over the years.

Chapter 2, “Francis Hutcheson’s Philosophy and the Scottish Enlightenment: Reception, Reputation, and Legacy,” by Daniel Carey, provides an overview of Hutcheson’s life and writings. Considerable attention is given to Hutcheson’s critics, of which there were many. As Carey puts it, “The attention he [Hutcheson] received did not always imply agreement with his position but rather a recognition that his views merited consideration and the awareness of readers” (65). Interestingly, “even among the Scottish figures who disputed his analysis he managed to shift the locus of discussion away from either a rational or self-interested orientation to one attendant to ‘sensitive’ internal reactions and the moral psychology of passions and affections” (71). While Carey makes brief mention of Hutcheson’s American influence, it would have been interesting to hear more about that aspect of his reception, reputation, and legacy.

Chapter 3, “Moral Philosophy: Practical and Speculative,” by Aaron Garrett and Colin Heydt, offers an overview of eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosophy as it related to conceptions of human nature and as it compared to earlier traditions of moral motivation (Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Butler, Clarke) and natural law theory (Pufendorf, Grotius, Barbeyrac, Cumberland, Carmichael). Garrett and Heydt shed light on some works that are typically overlooked, such as David Fordyce’s *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, a book that had a remarkably long shelf life, not only in Britain (where sections were reprinted in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, as the authors point out), but also in revolutionary America (where sections were reprinted in the newspapers, such as the *Massachusetts Spy*). The chapter provides an extended discussion of the relation and interplay between duties, rights, and virtues for eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosophers.

In chapter 4, “Beauty, Taste, Rhetoric, and Language,” Gordon Graham focuses on Scottish aesthetics in the eighteenth century. Graham explores “four principal themes”: “the question of ‘taste’ and its relation to the perception and reality of beauty,” “aesthetic criticism,” “the rhetorical use of language,” and “the study of the origins of language.” He shows that “on each of these topics, the Scottish philosophers had interesting, insightful, and in some cases enduringly important things to say” (134). Still, much more time goes to beauty and taste than to rhetoric and language. Hume’s essays “Of Tragedy” and “Of the Standard of Taste” figure prominently, although some may think that Hume accords more power to “imagination” and “judgment” than Graham’s account of a rather “passive” Hume permits. With considerable attention to George Campbell, Graham’s reference list surely ought to have included Jeffrey M. Suderman’s *Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: George Campbell in the Eighteenth Century* (2001), which has comments on relevant themes.

In chapter 5, “Hume In and Out of Scottish Context,” by James A. Harris and Mikko Tolonen, Hume’s writing career is surveyed with an eye to where Hume was resident when he wrote, what Hume explicitly wrote about Scotland, and how Scottish (or not) Hume’s perspective really was. While Harris and Tolonen find that Scotland was “never far from Hume’s mind,” they also submit that he was consistently cosmopolitan in

his concerns and approach. Some, no doubt, will question Harris and Tolonen's claim that "insofar as it is possible responsibly to form any hypothesis at all about Hume's intellectual influences in the early 1730s, it would seem that it was Bernard Mandeville who played the most important role" (166) in his writing. It may be more useful to see Mandeville as one influence of many. Indeed, the eclecticism of the early Hume may be thought to be something that unites the Hume of the *Treatise* with the later and equally eclectic Hume of the *History of England*. The later work is not often discussed in works on Scottish philosophy, and this chapter illuminates it in interesting ways.

Chapter 6, "Religion and Philosophy," by Jeffrey M. Suderman, approaches enlightened Scots as another group of Europeans who were "dealing with religious problems left over from the Reformation" (198). The philosophy of the Moderates in Scotland "fully embraced the new style of learning" (217). Important here were Hutcheson and Turnbull, but also Fordyce. All three and others of their ilk were more representative of their times than was Hume, who "managed without a benevolent guarantor God" (235). Suderman finds that the "Enlightenment in Scotland was a fundamentally Christian Enlightenment" (235). Like the Moderates, Hume wished "to apply the emerging techniques of the social sciences to the study of human thought and behavior" (224), although without a Christian gloss. We should see that Hume shared common ground with many of his critics, even some of his harshest ones, like George Campbell. As well, "Campbell answered Hume not as an outraged Calvinist minister but as an empirical philosopher, maintaining that belief in miracles is not only possible in the light of the structure of human belief but perfectly defensible in terms of the historical evidences available to reasonable men in an enlightened age" (229).

Chapter 7, "Adam Smith: History and Impartiality," by Aaron Garrett and Ryan Hanley, gives "a general overview of the philosophy of Adam Smith through examining the place of history and of impartiality in his philosophy" (239). Seeing Smith as a "second-generation philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment" (276) brings to the fore his borrowings from Hutcheson, Hume, Kames, and Butler at the same time that it highlights a central place for history in Smith's thought. Garrett and Hanley are surely right to emphasize this historical dimension to Smith's thought. They are also right to follow Istvan Hont, who recommended "taking Smith seriously as a political thinker and . . . abandoning the attempt to try to pigeon-hole his work as merely historical sociology" (253). Like Hont, Garrett and Hanley see Hume as "a creative normative theorist" (253). The Smith presented here, in other words, "was governed less by a mere concern to survey the past than by a deep and abiding concern to assist his contemporaries in their efforts to understand the unique conditions of their present, and thereby to prepare them for effective practical action that might optimally shape their future" (253). Looking to the contemporary reception of Smith's work might have helped to drive that point home. Edmund Burke in his review of the *Wealth of Nations* for the *Annual Review*, for instance, could write: "The growth and decay of nations have frequently afforded topics of admiration and complaint to the moralist and declaimer: they have sometimes exercised the speculations of the politician; but they have seldom been considered in all their causes and combinations by the philosopher."² Burke was correct: Smith did that.

2. Edmund Burke, "An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. By Adam Smith L.L.D. F.R.S. 2 vols. quarto" in "Account of Books for 1776," *The Annual Register, or A View of the History, Politics, and Literature, for the Year 1776* (London: J. Dodsley, 1777), 241.

Chapter 8, “The Rise of Human Sciences,” by Christopher J. Berry, aims “to explore, across various dimensions, a key focal characteristic of the Scottish Enlightenment, namely, its delineation of how a ‘science of man’ can inform and structure an account of ‘society’” (283). This is a subject that the author knows well, having published books on it and related fields. His books include *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (1997) and, more recently, *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment* (2013). In this chapter, Berry highlights what he refers to as “the Scots’ scientific realism” (295) in order to better understand their approach to social change. He concludes that “whether it be political sociology, the sociology of religion or literature, political economy, social anthropology, or an account of the forces and fault-lines of social change, eighteenth-century Scottish thinkers gave considerable impetus to the emergence of the human sciences” (318).

Chapter 9, “Barbarism and Republicanism,” by Silvia Sebastiani, attempts “to map out some of the views of the Scottish historians and moralists concerning human progress and commercial societies” (326). Sebastiani gives particular attention to Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun and Adam Ferguson, whose civic republicanism is said to have differentiated them from Hume and Smith (and William Robertson). For Hume, “as well as for Smith, with the progress of society manners improved and social passions were tamed” (332; Hume, of course, saw limits to this progress, as his correspondence with Turgot shows clearly). A central concern of Sebastiani’s chapter is to show that for many of the Scots, the “condition of women” was taken “as a benchmark and measure of the degree of development attained by societies” (325). That line of argument might be pursued further in some of the sources Sebastiani lists in her references (including her own work), as well as in the work of others not listed, such as Rosemarie Zagari.

Chapter 10, “Revolution,” by Emma Macleod, discusses “the views expressed by the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers on the subject of political resistance and revolution in the later eighteenth century—in practical terms, the revolutions in America and France” (361). Macleod provides a thorough and smart survey of the historical record with reference to published works and private correspondence of Ferguson, Smith, Hume, Kames, and others. She finds that “contrary to the general perception . . . the Scottish philosophers did not present a straightforward or unanimous response in opposition to the American Revolution” (385). Nevertheless, while “their responses to revolution were by no means uniform . . . they upheld a theoretical right to resist tyrannical government” (397); further, “they were reluctant to bury that right in practice in the face of the upheaval caused to Britain by these two actual examples of resistance to government” (398).

Chapter 11, “Thomas Reid and the Common Sense School,” by Paul Wood, uses Reid as a jumping-off point to discuss “the scope of philosophy in eighteenth-century Scotland, the role of philosophy in the curricula of the Scottish universities, the supposed existence of a ‘school’ of commonsense philosophy, and the nature of the Scottish Enlightenment” (404) more generally. Wood gives particular attention to George Turnbull and to the origins of the concept of “common sense,” demonstrating “the interplay of metaphysics, mathematics, and natural philosophy” in Reid’s writings (443). For Wood, Reid’s Enlightenment world—much like the early Enlightenment world Emerson sketches at the beginning of the volume—“was a cosmopolitan one which embraced the Republic of Letters in the Atlantic World as a whole” (446).

The volume concludes with a short postscript, also by Paul Wood, “On Writing the History of Scottish Philosophy in the Age of Enlightenment.” Here, in a few gracefully written pages, Wood identifies some of the difficulties inherent in that exercise, including the problem of deciding “what is meant by ‘the Scottish Enlightenment’” (457). That problem, he argues, may not be an easy one to solve, but seeking informed answers remains a worthwhile exercise. The essay concludes with an appropriate quotation from Lucien Febvre: “a historian is not one who knows, he is one who sees” (464).

All in all, this volume is a remarkable achievement. It provides a useful statement of the current state of the field, offering summaries of much that has been written about the Scottish Enlightenment and the place of moral philosophy in it. At the same time it offers many new points of interpretation and invitations for future exploration. For these reasons, it ought to be in every university library and will surely be the starting point for much scholarship to come. In the meantime, we should all look forward to the publication of volume 2, which is expected to deal with metaphysics, logic, and natural philosophy, subjects that are largely absent from this volume.