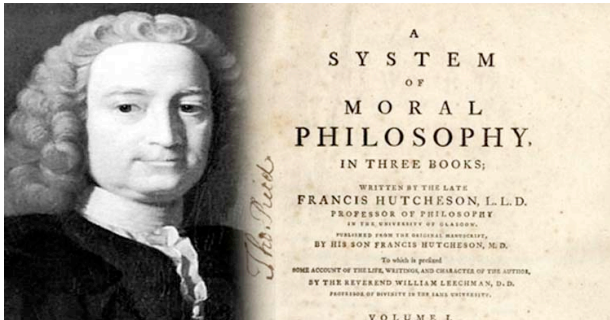


The Humanism of Francis Hutcheson



FRANCIS Hutcheson (1694-1746) was born in the manse at Drumalig, near Saintfield, Co. Down, where his grandfather Alexander, the local Presbyterian minister since 1658, had come over from Ayrshire at the age of 25 to tender to the spiritual needs of Scottish settlers. Francis's Irish father John Hutcheson was also a minister, first in Downpatrick and later in Armagh. His mother, the first of John's three wives, was the daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel James Trail of Killyleagh. Francis lived at Ballyrea, near Armagh, until he was eight, when he went to stay with his grandfather. He attended a school run by John Hamilton in a disused meeting house near Saintfield, and under his tutelage and that of his grandfather he gained the basis of his classical education. At the age of 13 he was sent to Killyleagh Philosophy School, a dissenting academy founded by James McAlpine in the town in about 1696, where he was taught logic, theology and moral philosophy up to university standard.

Dissenters, like Catholics, were prohibited from gaining degrees at Oxford, Cambridge or Trinity College, Dublin, and some of them completed their education at Scottish universities. In 1710 Hutcheson went to the University of Glasgow to study philosophy, classics and theology. After taking his MA degree in 1712, he enrolled in the theology department and began six years of training to become a minister. His teachers at Glasgow included John Simson, Professor of Divinity, and Gershom Carmichael, Professor of Moral Philosophy, both of whom challenged the harsh dogma of orthodox Calvinism, viewing God and humanity in more benevolent terms (Simson was later accused of heresy and prohibited from further teaching in 1729). They clearly influenced Hutcheson in defying the old-time Presbyterianism of his father and grandfather.

He returned to Ulster in 1718 to his father's residence in Ballyrea, and in 1719 entered the ministry of the local Presbyterian church as a probationer. He was, however, considered too liberal for some of the elders. After he had stood in for his father one Sunday, one of them told Hutcheson Senior: "Your silly loon, Frank, has fashed a' the congregation wi' his idle cackle; for he has been babbling this oor about a gude and benevolent God, and that the souls o' the heathens themsels will gang to heaven if they follow the licht o' their ain consciences. Not a word does the daft boy ken, speer, nor say about the gude auld comfortable doctrines o' election, reprobation, original sin, and faith. Hoot, man, awa' wi' sic a fellow" (quoted in W.R. Scott: *Francis Hutcheson*, 1900, pp20-21).

Although he was called as minister to a church in Magherally near Banbridge, probably in 1720, he declined and – perhaps seeking a more congenial and less confrontational atmosphere – instead took up the invitation of a group of Dublin Presbyterians to establish a dissenting academy for nonconformist students in the city similar to the one he had attended in Killyleagh. So, at the age of twenty six, he moved to Dublin where he stayed for the next ten years, teaching and writing. One of his first assistants at the academy, situated in Drumcondra Lane (now Dorset Street), was Thomas Drennan, father of the United Irishman William Drennan, whose writings reflected many of Hutcheson's ideas. The school itself was a great success and Hutcheson's abilities soon came to the attention of prominent figures in Dublin society.

Presbyterians and Anglicans in the city often mixed together in a fair degree of mutual tolerance, partly as a common front against the large Catholic majority and partly because of a shared intellectual enthusiasm for the new ideas emanating from England and Europe. Two prosecutions against Hutcheson for operating a school without an episcopal licence came to nothing because he had made friendships with several notable members of the established church including William King, Lord Archbishop of Dublin, who was unwilling to take action against him. Hutcheson made such an impression generally that John Carteret, lord lieutenant of Ireland, tried to persuade him to accept a living in the established Church, but he declined the offer, making it clear that the form of church government was not 'determined in the Gospels'.

The most significant influence on him in Dublin was the Irish peer Robert Molesworth, who established what was known as the Molesworth Circle, a group of eminent scientists, philosophers and thinkers including Hutcheson who met at his estate in Brackenstown. Molesworth had been a close friend of the third Earl of Shaftesbury (died 1713), and it was probably through him that Hutcheson first became acquainted with Shaftesbury's works. Like Molesworth, Shaftesbury was a Whig who strongly believed in the principles of the 1688 Revolution and in the idea of political liberty. He also rejected Hobbes's egoistic philosophy and maintained that human nature is basically good. Many aspects of his worldview appealed strongly to Hutcheson, and when in 1725 the latter published his first book – *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* – he dedicated it to him, "the teacher he never met" (Arthur Herman: *The Scottish Enlightenment*, Harper Perennial, 2006, p75). Hutcheson followed it up in 1728 with his second substantial work *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*.

The impact of these works was such that when his old teacher at Glasgow, Gershom Carmichael, died in 1729 he was offered, and accepted, the post of Professor of Moral Philosophy, a position he took up the following year and which he held until his death in 1746. As well as his writings, his work at the university established him as 'the father of the Scottish Enlightenment'. He broke with tradition in delivering his lectures in English rather

than Latin, and indeed his classes were so popular and stimulating that they were regularly oversubscribed. One of his students said that “he displayed a fervent and persuasive eloquence which was irresistible”. His most famous student, Adam Smith, described him as “the never to be forgotten Dr Hutcheson” and wrote that “he was undoubtedly and beyond all comparison the most acute, the most distinct and the most philosophical of all my teachers”. Another student, Alexander Carlyle, who himself became a key figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, said that “he never taught any heresy, yet he opened and enlarged the minds of the students, which gave them a turn for free enquiry, the result of which was candour and liberality of sentiment”.

Francis Hutcheson married his cousin Mary Wilson, of Tully, Co. Longford, in 1725 and by this marriage he acquired extensive property in Ireland. They had seven children, of whom only one survived. In June 1746 Francis returned to Dublin on a visit but became ill of a fever and died on 8th August, the day of his 52nd birthday. He was buried in a tomb in the churchyard of St Mary’s Church, Dublin. When the graveyard became a public park in what is now Wolfe Tone Street, any remains were reinterred elsewhere, but it is not known what happened to Hutcheson’s tomb. In 2012 a plaque was erected in his honour on the stair tower of *The Church* on nearby Mary Street (a religious building now converted into a bar and restaurant). After his death, his *Short Introduction to Moral philosophy*, written in Latin and first published in 1742, was translated into English (1747), and in 1755 his son, also called Francis, published *A System of Moral Philosophy* which, like the *Introduction*, was written by Hutcheson specifically for university students.

ALTHOUGH Hutcheson is not generally regarded as a great writer or a first rank thinker, he nevertheless exerted enormous influence on subsequent moral and political ideas, not only in Britain and Ireland but also in Europe and colonial America. In many respects, he was very ‘modern’ in his outlook and pioneered progressive values. He certainly wanted to give Presbyterianism a human face and this inevitably annoyed the Kirk establishment. In 1738 he appeared before the Glasgow Presbytery on a charge of heresy, on the grounds that he was teaching ‘two false and dangerous doctrines’, first that the standard of moral goodness was the promotion of the happiness of others and, second, that “we have a knowledge of good and evil prior in the order of knowledge to any notion of the will or law of God”. Hutcheson was acquitted partly because his students stated that they found nothing objectionable in his teachings. In a letter to Thomas Drennan on 5th March 1739, he dismissed the accusation as ‘some whimsical buffoonery about my heresy’. A few years later he wrote to Drennan: “I am already called New Light Here. I don’t value it for myself, but I see it hurts some ministers who are most intimate with me” (31st May 1742). Nevertheless, his aim, as he states a little later, is nothing less than to “put a new face upon theology in Scotland”.

Hutcheson’s attempt to ground ethics in humanity is made clear at the very beginning of the *System of Moral Philosophy*. Its aim, he writes, is “to direct men to that

course of action which tends most effectually to promote their greatest happiness and perfection; as far as it can be done by observations and conclusions discoverable from the constitution of nature, without any aids of supernatural revelation”. To suggest that the study of morality is the study of human nature is to place it on secular grounds independent of theology. Indeed Hutcheson, following Shaftesbury before him, argues that non-Christians and even atheists have equal access with Christians to moral knowledge and virtuous actions. Hence the charge of heresy in 1738. As he says in the *Inquiry*, “many people have high notions of honour, faith, generosity, justice, while having almost no opinions about the Deity, and no thoughts of future rewards; and abhor any thing that is treacherous, cruel, or unjust, without any regard to future punishments”.

The view of mainstream Presbyterianism, following John Calvin and John Knox, was that humans were depraved and corrupt from birth, warped by the effects of original sin. This conclusion was supported by the ethical theories of later writers such as Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville, who argued that humans were naturally selfish and aggressive and that, in the words of Hobbes, the general condition of mankind is “a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death”. All four men thought that these depraved and egotistical impulses had to be severely restricted by a controlling authority – in the view of Calvin and Knox by

church leaders trained and dedicated to following God’s word, and in the view of Hobbes and Mandeville by a powerful state made up of skilful politicians. In neither scenario was there any role for the concept of personal freedom.

Hutcheson rejected the notion of natural human depravity in favour of a more complex nature which is capable of altruistic as well as egoistic behaviour. He maintained that, as well as the five external senses, we have internal senses, different in quality but not in kind from seeing and smelling, that enable us to discern non-physical properties and relationships. They include a sense of beauty, a sense of honour, a public sense, and even a sense of the ridiculous. Most important of all and governing some of the others is the moral sense, a term he adopted from Shaftesbury, which is implanted in us by God, though we do not have to be religious to be motivated by it.

This sense is a faculty which approves of virtue for its own sake and begins with a feeling of pleasure, resulting from our natural instinct of benevolence, defined as the disinterested “desire of the happiness of another”. The feeling is spontaneous and passive and in no way based on calculation of advantage or interest to ourselves (note that Hutcheson here relates pleasure to the natural love of others, rather than to a duty imposed by God or the state). Moreover, the object of the moral sense is not so much actions as the character reflected in them: “the love, humanity, gratitude, compassion, a study of the good of others and a deep delight in their happiness” (*Inquiry*, Section 1, pp110-111). Indeed, the ultimate criterion of virtue is that “that action is best, which accomplishes the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers; and that worst, which, in like manner, occasions misery” (op. cit., Section 3, p164). ↗

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Here, then, was Hutcheson coining the phrase that summed up the greatest happiness principle which Jeremy Bentham proposed as central to utilitarianism. According to Hutcheson, when we are faced with having to choose between alternative courses of action, we have to ‘compute’ which action will lead to the highest virtue which “is in proportion to the number of persons to whom the happiness shall extend”. He thus shares with later utilitarians the belief that whether actions are right or wrong depends on their consequences. But, in positing the existence of a moral sense, he also suggests the reason we seek the happiness of others is that it accords with our benevolent instinct. This renders his philosophy a mixture of hedonism, utilitarianism and emotional intuitionism. He was also what was called a ‘sentimentalist’, that is, one who believes that morality is a matter of feeling rather than philosophical knowledge.

It is easy to accuse Hutcheson of naivety. If human beings are naturally benevolent, why is goodness in such short supply and instead why is there so much hatred and cruelty in the world? Do some people not actually take pleasure in the pain or misery of others? Hutcheson rejects the idea that human beings are capable of what he calls ‘malicious disinterested hatred’, or what Coleridge, writing about Iago, described as ‘motiveless malignity’, and suggests that if people take pleasure in the pain or misery of others, it is because we believe that they have done evil and deserve to have evil done to them in just retribution. Much evil he regards as a form of misguided self-love; for example, many bad actions result from merely satisfying sensual appetites or from a distorted sense of justice or honour.

We may feel that Hutcheson pushes his case too far in the opposite direction to the Calvinist-Hobbesian view, yet an antidote was clearly needed to their bleak diagnosis of the human condition. And it was indeed his positive and optimistic vision that gained the ascendancy at least for a time, not only in philosophy but also with regard to social and political rights. Even before Kant, it was he who made the connection: as he writes, “from this (moral) sense too we derive our ideas of rights” (*Inquiry*, Sect. 7, p256). Like Kant, he saw that ought implies can. If people are morally obliged to perform a certain action, then they must logically be able to perform it, and there is no point in calling on them to do something if it is not within their power. Freedom is a prerequisite of moral duty, because rights are legal or moral entitlements which each individual needs to do what he thinks is right. In short, we should all be free to choose for ourselves rather than having morality imposed on us, and the benevolent principle will, according to Hutcheson, ensure that what is good for the individual cannot but be good for all. Liberty would lead not to anarchy, as Hobbes suggested, but to general happiness.

Hutcheson’s political philosophy was taken very seriously in the American colonies and inspired some of the Founding Fathers. His books were studied as required or recommended course readings in all the main colonial educational establishments from the 1730s onwards. The three men most closely associated with the American Declaration of Independence – Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams – all displayed a knowledge of the Ulsterman’s writings. In his 1749 pamphlet on *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania*, Benjamin Franklin quotes approvingly from ‘the ingenious Mr Hutcheson’. Copies of several of Hutcheson’s

books were found in the library of John Adams, and his Diary entry for 16th January 1756 tells us that he is: “Reading Hutcheson’s *Introduction to Moral Philosophy*”. In his *Thoughts on Government*, written in 1776 on the eve of the *Declaration of Independence* he states, echoing Hutcheson, that the purpose of government was ‘the greatest quantity of human happiness’.

In *Inventing America* (1978) Garry Wills challenges the conventional view that Thomas Jefferson, who drew up the draft of the *Declaration*, relied heavily on John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, and instead argues that he took his ideas from the Scottish Enlightenment and, above all, from Hutcheson. The *Declaration* refers to all men being endowed with certain ‘unalienable rights’, but Wills points out that Locke had no theory of inalienability. This concept originates in Hutcheson who, in both the *Inquiry* and the *System*, distinguishes between alienable and unalienable rights. An unalienable or inalienable right is one that cannot be bought, sold or transferred from one person to another. Hutcheson also refers to the right to life and to natural liberty, “of which liberty of conscience is not only an essential but an unalienable branch”, while Locke refers to ‘natural rights’ and states that three of the most fundamental are ‘life, liberty and estate’. However, whether Jefferson took the term ‘unalienable rights’ directly from Hutcheson is another matter, for he never cites him in any of his writings, though he does refer to Locke on several occasions. Moreover, the distinction between the two kinds of rights is also made in *The Principles of Natural and Politic Law*, first published in 1747. Its author was Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, the Swiss theorist who was however a disciple of Hutcheson and presumably took it from his *Inquiry*.

In writing that “all men are created equal”, Jefferson was undoing the ancient formula of Aristotle (who had written that “from the hour of their birth, some men are marked out for subjection, others for rule”). Locke also writes that “it is evident that all human beings... are equal amongst themselves” and also refers to “this equality of men by nature”; while Hutcheson writes that “in this respect all men are originally equal, that these natural rights equally belong to all... nature makes none masters, none slaves” (*Short Introduction*).

Hutcheson, on the other hand, interprets equality more fully than Locke by condemning slavery. Indeed, he was the first modern writer to formulate ethical principles inimical to slavery as an institution, specifically repudiating Aristotle: “We must therefore conclude, that no endowments, natural or acquired, can give a perfect right to assume power over others, without their consent . . . This is intended against the doctrine of Aristotle, and some others of the ancients, ‘that some men are naturally slaves, of low genius but great bodily strength for labour’” (*System*). No men, he argues, were born ‘natural slaves’, because despite their difference from each other in terms of wisdom, virtue, beauty or strength, “the lowest of them, who have the use of reason, differ in this from the brutes, that by forethought and reflection they are capable of incomparably greater happiness or misery”. Of course, Jefferson included a denunciation of slavery and the slave trade in his draft of the *Declaration*, but the passage was excised by the Continental Congress (paradoxically Jefferson during his lifetime owned about 600 slaves).

The evidence suggests that Jefferson was probably aware of the ideas of both Hutcheson and Locke and incorporated elements from each into the *Declaration*. ⇨

And indisputably Hutcheson's ideas influenced other Founding Fathers, notably Franklin and Adams. What would have particularly attracted many of them was the fact that Hutcheson championed the right of the oppressed to overthrow an unjust sovereignty. As all civil power is constituted for the benefit of the public good and not for the good of the ruler, it follows that if the ruler acts against the interests of the public good, then the contract between the two is broken and the people have a right to change the government: "but as the end of civil power is acknowledged by all to be the safety and happiness of the whole body, any power not naturally conducive to this end is unjust; which the people, who rashly granted it under an error, may justly abolish again when they find it necessary to their safety to do so" (*Short Introduction*). And again: "But when the common rights of the community are trampled upon, and what at first is attempted against one is made to be precedent against all the rest, then as the governor is plainly perfidious to his trust, he has forfeited all the power committed to him" (ibid).

Hutcheson explicitly applied these principles to colonies. Colonial subjects have a right to beneficial government. If they fail to receive such government, and are oppressed, they may justly overthrow their oppressor: "if the mother country attempts anything oppressive towards a colony, and the colony be able to subsist as a sovereign state by itself... the colony is not bound to remain subject any longer". Indeed, he stresses the point: "the people's right of resistance is unquestionable" (ibid).

It is clear from this survey that Hutcheson had a major impact on moral and political philosophy. And his ideas, which had been imported into pre-revolutionary America, were re-imported to his native Ireland in the insurrectionist ideology of the United Irishmen. In his book on *The Scottish Enlightenment*, Arthur Herman puts it strongly: "Francis Hutcheson had created a new political and social vision, one that went far beyond Locke or any comparable English thinker: the vision of a 'free society'. He is Europe's first liberal in the classic sense: a believer in maximising personal liberty in the social, economic and intellectual spheres, as well as the political. But the ultimate goal of this liberty was, we should remember, happiness – which Hutcheson always defined as resulting from helping others to be happy" (p80).

It is indeed a grand vision and, although Francis Hutcheson was a religious man, it is an essentially Humanist one. Life, liberty, equality, benevolence and the pursuit of happiness were his concerns, as they are of Humanists everywhere. Hutcheson was clearly a man well ahead of his time in his thinking and his humanitarianism: he opposed slavery and the oppression of women and children; he championed freedom and equality; and he promoted a secular morality which emphasised the positive values of benevolence, love and happiness.

Yet sadly, after a brief influence in the 1790s, he became a forgotten man in his own country just like John Toland. Both have been shunted into oblivion by the dominant conservative religious ideologies, whether Catholic or Protestant. For these two far-sighted Irishmen were too liberal, too freethinking, too radical, too individualistic for Ireland's reactionary and retarded tribes. A new Irish Enlightenment, based on the lost legacies of John Toland and Francis Hutcheson, is well overdue. We Humanists must strongly advance this project. □
