The Progressive Character of Human Nature

Adam Ferguson

A leading figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) was a professor of natural and moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. This selection is from his two-volume Principles of Moral and Political Science, *published in 1792.*

For our purpose, however, it is sufficient to observe, that the state of nature or the distinctive character of any progressive being is to be taken, not from its description at the outset, or at any subsequent stage of its progress: but from an accumulative view of its movement throughout. The oak is distinguishable from the pine, not merely by its seed leaf; but by every successive aspect of its form; by its foliage in every successive season; by its acorn; by its spreading top; by its lofty growth, and the length of its period. And the state of nature, relative to every tree in the wood, includes all the varieties of form or dimension through which it is known to pass in the course of its nature.

By parity of reason, the natural state of a living creature includes all its known variations, from the embryo and the fetus to the breathing animal, the adolescent and the adult, through which life in all its varieties is known to pass.

The state of nature, relative to man, is also a state of progression equally real, and of greater extent. The individual receives the first stamina of his frame in a growing state. His stature is waxing, his limbs and his organs gain strength, and he himself a growing faculty in the use of them. His faculties improve by exercise, and are in a continual state of exertion....

The state of nature relative to the species is differently constituted, and of different extent. It consists in the continual succession of one generation to another; in progressive attainments made by different ages; communicated with additions from age to age; and in periods, the farthest advanced, not appearing to have arrived at any necessary limit. This progress indeed is subject to interruption, and may come to a close, or give way to vicissitudes at any of its stages; but not more necessarily at the period of highest attainment than at any other.

So long as the son continues to be taught what the father knew, or the pupil begins where the tutor has ended, and is equally bent on advancement; to every generation the state of art and accommodations already in use serves but as ground work for new inventions and successive improvement. As Newton did not

acquiesce in what was observed by Kepler and Galileo; no more have successive astronomers restricted their view to what Newton has demonstrated. And with respect to the mechanic and commercial arts, even in the midst of the most labored accommodations, so long as there is any room for improvement, invention is busy as if nothing had yet been done to supply the necessities, or complete the conveniences of human life: But even here, and in all its steps of progression, this active nature, in respect to the advantages, whether of knowledge or art, derived from others, if there be not a certain effort to advance, is exposed to reverse and decline. The generation, in which there is no desire to know more or practice better than its predecessors, will probably neither know so much nor practice so well. And the decline of successive generations, under this wane of intellectual ability, is not less certain than the progress made under the operation of a more active and forward disposition.