

'The ingenious Mr Hutcheson'

An essay on a neglected Scots-Irishman

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Asked to name a great Irish philosopher, many people would have no difficulty choosing Bishop Berkeley, the eighteenth century proponent of 'idealism'. Asked to name a second famous philosopher, most people would be hardpushed. However one man ought perhaps to make an appearance. His name is Francis Hutcheson and his influence as a thinker, a moralist, and a Presbyterian divine, is well worth investigation. Hutcheson was born on 8 August 1694 in his grandfather's manse in Drumalig 'townland, near Saintfield. It is my contention that he is a county Down figure of distinction who has been seriously neglected in his own heartland.

Hutcheson's grandfather had come from Ayrshire to minister to Scots settlers, and by judicious marriage, acquired land at Drumalig. Francis' father, John Hutcheson, would appear to have been a Presbyterian minister in Downpatrick, moving later to Armagh. We know that he took an active part in politics, encouraging the 'bearing of arms' on the Williamite side in 1690.



Francis Hutcheson. Portrait by Allan Ramsay (with acknowledgment to the Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow)

Francis was born at Drumalig and he spent his early years in Armagh. But he returned at the age of eight to his grandfather's place, and there attended a small school, presided over by a Mr John Hamilton, in a disused meeting house in or near Saintfield. Here he would have learnt the classical languages in which he could expect all his future studies to be conducted. Shortly after this the young boy was sent to the academy or 'philosophy school' in Killyleagh, where he was taught by a Mr James McAlpin. There Francis would also meet his cousin William Bruce, son of James Bruce, the local Dissenter clergyman. The studies on offer at Killyleagh were designed to meet the educational needs of aspiring Presbyterians in an Ireland where the established Church of Ireland controlled all aspects of civic life. Hutcheson would have taken courses in logic, in metaphysics, and in moral philosophy which were equivalent to all but the final year of studies at the university in Glasgow. Just before it closed down in 1714, the school had about 160 students and it was very much under the patronage of the Hamilton family of Killyleagh. Francis Hutcheson was to be its most renowned student.

Francis' grandfather had died in 1711, and shortly afterwards, money became available to finance his enrollment at Glasgow University. In 1713 he began to study at this intriguing academic institution, which was known to be the home to several maverick teachers, including a Mr Johnstone, the professor of medicine, described by some as a 'freethinker and freeliver'. The professor of divinity, Mr Stimson, under whom Hutcheson studied, was reputed to be an advocate of a 'more liberal tone in theology' and he faced the ecclesiastical courts on charges of heretical teaching with regard to the key issues of 'punishment for original sin, free-will and the salvation of the heathen.'

In 1717, Hutcheson finished his training in philosophy and theology and then stayed on in Scotland for a short period, working as a private tutor. Among his students was the young Earl of Kilmarnock, who was eventually executed after the second Jacobite Rising in 1745. In 1718 Hutcheson returned to the family home in Armagh as a 'probationary minister'.

Ulster Presbyterianism, at this time, was embroiled in controversy. Believers who were reluctant to subscribe to the 'man-made' doctrinal formulations of the Westminster Confession of Faith were clashing with those for whom the Confession embraced all that was sound and crucial in Reformed theology. These 'Non-subscribing' presbyterians were to become known as 'New Light' believers. They generally put less stress on the 'biblical' dogma of 'sinful human nature' and more emphasis on the broad human imperative to lead a good and charitable life. Into this theological row stepped the young Francis Hutcheson, fresh from Glasgow. We know that he deputed, one wet and cold Sunday, for his father in the Armagh church. (Mr Hutcheson senior, a sufferer from arthritis, did not wish to risk a soaking) The rain cleared and the father decided to risk a short walk in the direction of the meeting house in order to meet with his son on his return journey. However he met up, first of all, with one gloomy-looking member of the congregation, who said to him....

Your silly loon, Frank, has fashed a' the congregation wi' his idle cackle, for he has been babbling this 'oor about the good and benevolent God, and that the souls o' the heathen themsel's will gang to heaven, if they follow the licht o' their ain consciences. Not a word does the daft boy ken nor say about the gude auld comfortable doctrines o' election, reprobation, original sin and faith...

We know that before long. Francis Hutcheson was plucked out of such direct confrontation with local congregations. Although he was 'called' to the Magherally, county Down, congregation in 1720, in the following year he was also offered - and took up - the role of running a private academy for the dissenting population of Dublin. There he could put his undoubted intellect to use. The academy was in Drumcondra Lane, north of the Liffey, and catered for the descendants of the dissenters who had arrived in the capital during the Cromwellian period.

Dublin was a happy and creative environment. Another teacher at the school was Thomas Drennan, whose son William was to become a founding father of the United Irishmen. Hutcheson became involved with a circle of thinkers who met in Lord Molesworth's home on the Blanchardstown estate. Molesworth was a very significant figure. He corresponded with the brilliant 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, and knew Dean Swift, Bishop Berkeley and John Locke. He befriended many intellectual dissenters, with whom he advocated sound historical knowledge as a basis for safeguarding liberty, and the curtailment of clerical influence in government and education.

Between 1723 and 1725 Hutcheson worked on his first philosophical volume, *An Enquiry into Beauty and Virtue*. He also married Miss Mary Wilson from county Longford, and we know that the marriage would be marred by the tragic loss in infancy of six of their seven children. Hutcheson also had to fend off criticism of his work from two sources. His traditionally minded Presbyterian father frowned on his liaison with rich establishment figures like Molesworth, and the episcopal establishment, in turn, was suspicious of the dissenting Hutcheson for 'daring to take upon himself the education of youth'.

In 1725 *An Enquiry into Beauty and Virtue* was published. At the age of thirty-one he had produced a book which tried to give an answer to that age-old philosophical question - What makes something beautiful? The text argued that a beautiful object always possesses a striking degree of both unity and variety and his argument would prove to be a founding text in the study of aesthetics in the modern era. In his ruminations Hutcheson helped lay the ground for the modern study of psychology, inasmuch as this text, and indeed many of his other books, tried to examine philosophical concepts not in terms of transcendent abstraction but rather in terms of the day-today processes of human perception. Hutcheson focused the readers' attentions on the perceptual structure of taste and judgment.

By 1728 he had written and published another book entitled *Essays on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections with illustrations on the Moral Sense*. This text argued that the love and practice of virtue are soundly rooted in the human heart. He wrote, contrary to traditional Calvinist assumptions, that 'we have a moral sense' and that doing moral deeds brings us an enormous amount of 'intense and durable pleasure'. He argued that virtue is a 'natural disposition' and that human beings, rather than being mired in natural depravity, tend to 'desire the happiness of any known sensitive nature', so long as there are 'no oppositions of interest'.

Hutcheson was at pains to point out that we are far more often 'employed about the state of others' than seeking our own 'private good'. He pointed out that 'we work for our family, our friends, our colleagues... we like to think we are contributing to others and measure our own self-esteem by the benefits we bestow on those closest to us.' He then went on to make the radical observation that even those who do harm to us are probably not engaged in self-centred malice, but rather in an unbalanced pursuit of something that they perceive as virtuous. He counselled against forming 'rash opinions' of 'sects or nations' whose opinions or aims seem to differ from our own. If we see such groups as selfish and evil then we will 'be led to act in such a manner [..towards them..] that we must follow them into all extravagance and folly, and inadvertent spectators will imagine some disposition in us, wholly useless and absolutely and directly evil.' In other words, Hutcheson was telling us that many of the worst things in this life are done out of misguided virtue, and that a failure to recognise this widespread condition of 'misguidedness' will only compound the evil.

Another key passage in this most interesting of texts reminded its readers that

No man acts from pure malice; the injurious only intended some interest of his own, without any desire of our misery... .could we but raise our Goodness to a higher pitch, and consider the injurious as our fellowmembers of this great body, we might bring ourselves to that divine conduct of even returning good for evil. Mankind is insensibly linked together and makes one great system by an invisible union . . . we are formed with a view to the general good end and may, in our own nature, discern a Universal Mind, watchful over the whole.

His positive emphasis on the shared traits of all humanity and his disapproval of a theology dominated by 'original sin' would most certainly have brought Hutcheson into conflict with the religious ethos of the churchmen of the day. Yet his emphasis on the benign, harmonious powers of human nature was to chime perfectly with the views and values of the eighteenth century Age of Reason and Enlightenment, which would try so hard to turn its back on the hostile 'sectarian passions' of the previous century, both in Ireland and elsewhere.

It was in 1729 that Francis Hutcheson got a chance to take his teachings to a more influential platform. The University of Glasgow invited him to return as Professor of Moral Philosophy. It was there that he would prove to be a founding figure of the cultural awakening known as The Scots Enlightenment, and his writings on justice and virtue prove to be a key influence on the religious and intellectual tenor of the age, both in Britain and America.

The Ulsterman very quickly established a reputation as a teacher in his alma mater. He was one of the new band of academics who delivered their talks not in Latin but in English and he also paved the way in establishing extracurricular classes for the Glasgow public. He had a reputation for walking up and down the aisles of his lecture-hall, talking fervently. Those who knew him referred to his 'dark blue eyes', his 'dignity', and his 'spirit, sense and kindness'. Like many good teachers, he became involved in the personal as well as the academic life of his students. He was particularly concerned about the Scots-Irish students who 'generally sat in a back place by themselves, and formed little acquaintance with the other students...' These Ulster Presbyterian pupils, known to the locals as the 'wild Irish teagues', were found by Hutcheson to despise 'everything in Scotland... and [to be] incapable of any hearty drudgery at books.' He was a banker and a counsellor and a father-figure to many of them and wrote to Thomas Drennan to bemoan their tendency to indulge in 'the silly manliness of taverns'.

Meanwhile the cares mounted. There were regular bereavements, as his children died in infancy. There were the wayward Ulster students to assist. There were, in the 1730s, allegations from Scottish Presbyterians concerning his 'contravention' of the doctrines of the Westminster Confession of Faith. He was accused of

teaching... the following two false and dangerous doctrines, first that the standard of moral goodness was the promotion of the happiness of others and, second, that we could have a knowledge of good and evil without and prior to, a knowledge of God.

No wonder a premature sense of ageing was evident when he wrote to Drennan, in June 1741, at a mere 47 years of age. 'In short, Thom, I find old age not in grey hairs and other trifles, but in an incapacity of mind for such close thinking and composition as once I had...' Two years later he told Drennan, in bitter tones: 'I am so delighted by vain jaunts of business that I must do everything by starts.'

But Hutcheson was playing a more important role than these quotations suggest. The abridged version of his lecture notes was published in 1742, the same year as his translations of the classical writer, Marcus Aurelius. And he was working on a more large-scale systematic treatise on moral philosophy that would not be published until after his death.

In 1737 a brilliant young man called David Hume, on whom Hutcheson had great influence, sought him out and presented him with a work entitled *Treatise on Human Nature*, which was published in 1739. Hutcheson and Hume corresponded right up to the time of the older man's death. The relationship was conflict-ridden, in some measure due to Hutcheson's wariness about Hume's increasingly obvious religious scepticism. However there is no doubt that Hume (1711-1776), on his way to being recognised as one of the world's greatest philosophers, cut his teeth on the views and arguments of Hutcheson.

Adam Smith, the great economist, was also Hutcheson's pupil at Glasgow University. Smith would later commend him as being 'undoubtedly, beyond all comparison, the most acute, the most distinct, the most philosophical of all my teachers'.

By June 1746, for a reason we do not know, but probably connected to ill-health, Hutcheson left Glasgow for Dublin. He became very ill during the summer. On 8 August he died on his 52nd birthday. The location of his grave is uncertain. It has been claimed that he was buried in St. Mary's churchyard in Dublin, a burial ground much disturbed in the intervening centuries. Thomas Witherow, the Presbyterian historian, claimed, in the nineteenth century, that Hutcheson was in fact interred in his mother's burying ground, in county Meath.

So what kind of legacy did Francis Hutcheson leave? Not only had he laid down some influential ground-work in the discipline of aesthetics but he had helped pave the way, by his study of perception, for the as yet to be named discipline of psychology. In the realm of moral philosophy he had endeavoured to assess right and wrong in terms of the happiness afforded to human beings. In a sense his accusers were right. For Hutcheson, goodness was not to be measured by abstract, divine, or eternal criteria but by the happiness or unhappiness of the human lot. It was he who first came up with the dictum - 'That action is best which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers.' Later adopted by Jeremy Bentham and his Utilitarian disciples, this dictum was to become a cornerstone of British government social policy.

Hutcheson was also one of the first modern thinkers to take a more positive and benign attitude to children. In contrast to the puritan view of the 'sinful child' in need only of salvation and discipline, he noted many of the distinctive and attractive aspects of the childhood condition. He noted with delight how children had 'a constant propensity to action and motion... grasping handling, viewing, tasting everything... with an implanted instinct towards knowledge.' He was fascinated by the eager directness of children and noted how

they are ever in motion while they are awake... they observe whatever occurs. . . remember and inquire about it... kind affections soon break out toward those who are kind to them.... [They show] strong gratitude and an ardour to excel in anything that is praised... they are prone to sincerity and truth and openness of mind...

We can discern in this attitude to a child's nature the roots of the romantic idealisation of childhood and a modern pedagogy which tries to respond to the benign and creative instincts presumed to be present in each individual child.

Another legacy of Hutcheson's unfolded on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. From the 1730s onwards, the Ulsterman was a key philosophical influence in an America that would soon be at war with the 'mother country'. Among those who were avid readers of Hutcheson was John Adams, who would become second president of the United States. Another was Jonathon Edwards, the New England cleric and revivalist who, although he would have profoundly disagreed with Hutchesonian theology, was arguably much influenced by the Ulsterman's emphasis on the role of feelings in the religious and the moral life.

When, in the 1740s, Samuel Johnson of Yale prepared the first philosophical book to be published in America, he drew heavily on the writings of Hutcheson. Benjamin Franklin's writings speak approvingly of the 'ingenious Mr Hutcheson' and Thomas Jefferson is known to have spent time debating Hutcheson's contention that morality should not be founded on mere reason but on a special inner faculty called the 'moral sense'.

It was as a political moralist that his influence was most strong in America. In his writings, Hutcheson was a critic of all kinds of slavery and insisted on the 'natural equality of all men'. He wrote, 'No endowments, natural or acquired, can give a perfect right to assume power over others without their consent.' In response to the commonly heard claim that Africans were better off as slaves than in their native environments, he wrote scathingly that it was

strange that in any nation where a sense of liberty prevails, where the Christian religion is professed, custom and high prospects of gain can so stupefy the consciences of men, and all

sense of natural justice, that they can bear such computations made about the value of their fellow men, and their liberty, without abhorrence and indignation.

Although all too many in the American colonies would be reluctant to recognise the full significance of Hutcheson's argument against any kind of slavery, nonetheless the principle of liberty that Hutcheson espoused was taken very seriously in the particular context of America's subjugation to Britain.

Hutcheson repeatedly argued in his later writings that

Civil power can scarce be constituted justly any other way than by consent of the people... rulers have no other sacred rights or majority than what may arise from this... the people have the right of defending themselves against the abuse of power.. .the people's right of resistance is unquestionable.

We can see the immense potential influence of this kind of thinking in an America disenchanted with its colonial status. Another potentially explosive passage from Hutcheson reads as follows:

If any citizens, with permission of the government, leave their country, and at their own expense find new habitations, they may justly constitute themselves into an independent state, in amity with their mother country... [but] if the mother country attempts anything oppressive towards a colony, and the colony be able to subsist as a sovereign state by itself, or have its plan of polity miserably changed to the worse, the colony is not bound to remain subject any longer.

The influence of Hutcheson is quite clear. The Rev Francis Alison, Irishman and professor of moral philosophy at the College of Philadelphia during the 1750s, 60s and 70s, taught Hutcheson's works in depth to his students and quoted him endlessly in his sermons. The students under his tutelage would eventually include five future signatories of the Declaration of Independence, four high-ranking officers in Washington's army, and sixteen men who held office in the newly created independent states.

At the university of Glasgow, the legacy of Hutcheson's liberal teachings during the same decades was part of the amalgam of influences that moulded the generation of Presbyterian clergymen who played a key role in the United Irishmen. Men like Steele Dickson and James Porter who were educated at Glasgow would play an important role as radical, militant clerics, dedicated to the belief that 'the people's right of resistance is unquestionable.'

When local cleric, Rev James Ledlie Birch, preached to a large army of Presbyterian rebels in the town of Saintfield in 1798, history had turned a full circle. The town where the young Francis Hutcheson had his first schooling now witnessed the presence of an insurgent dissenter army, fired by the Enlightenment values that Hutcheson himself had done so much to kindle.

It is a measure of the obscurity into which this great thinker has fallen, that his last resting place is uncertain and his early homeland unmarked by a proper memorial. In the centuries after his death the Presbyterian church in Ulster would witness further schism and, ultimately, a contraction of the 'New Light' grouping of believers. There can be no doubt that the tradition of thought which Hutcheson helped initiate was to be eclipsed inside Ireland by the rise on either flank of Roman Catholic nationalism and Protestant unionism.

However one does not have to believe in the tenets of his theology, which many Ulster evangelicals would still disparage, rightly or wrongly, as 'unitarian', nor does one have to follow the complex arguments of his philosophy, to see that Francis Hutcheson might have something to contribute to an Ulster that is still desparately seeking for an ethic of civic virtue and religious tolerance. If there is some way for the traditions in the north of Ireland to talk to one another about justice and citizenry within a broadly Christian framework, without causing mutual offence, then 'the ingenious Mr Hutcheson' might help us to discover it.

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Further reading

▶ This study of Hutcheson has been written without footnotes, which might have made it inappropriately ponderous in this context. The following brief list of sources will assist those wishing either to build upon or to verify the material included.

The biographical volume to read is W R Scott's *Francis Hutcheson, his life, teaching and position in the history of philosophy* (Cambridge 1900)

A suitable introduction to a selection of Hutcheson's work is R S Dowie (ed.) *Philosophical writings of Francis Hutcheson* (London, 1994)

The best way to discover more about Hutcheson's significance in a range of fields is to read the excellent compendium of scholarly essays, *Francis Hutcheson - a special symposium on the thought, career and influence in Ireland, Scotland and America of the UlsterScots philosopher and dissenter*, edited by Damian Smyth and published as a supplement to *Fortnight* magazine (Belfast, 1992)
