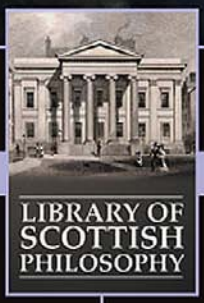
# James Beattie

## Selected Philosophical Writings

Edited by James A. Harris



# Contents

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# Series Editor's Note

The principal purpose of volumes in this series is not to provide scholars with accurate editions, but to make the writings of Scottish philosophers accessible to a new generation of modern readers. In accordance with this purpose, certain changes have been made to the original texts:

- Spelling and punctuation have been modernized.
- In some cases, the selected passages have been given new titles.
- Some original footnotes and references have not been included.
- Some extracts have been shortened from their original length.
- Quotations from Greek have been transliterated, and passages in foreign languages translated, or omitted altogether.

Care has been taken to ensure that in no instance do these amendments truncate the argument or alter the meaning intended by the original author. For readers who want to consult the original texts, full bibliographical details are provided for each extract.

**The Library of Scottish Philosophy** was launched at the Third International Reid Symposium on Scottish Philosophy in July 2004 with an initial six volumes. Attractively produced and competitively priced, these appeared just fifteen months after the original suggestion of such a series. This remarkable achievement owes a great deal to the work and commitment of the editors of the individual volumes, but it was only possible because of the energy and enthusiasm of the publisher, Keith Sutherland and the outstanding work of Jon M.H Cameron, Editorial and Administrative Assistant to the Centre for the Study of Scottish Philosophy.

**Acknowledgements**

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Acknowledgement is also made to the University of Aberdeen Special Libraries and Collections for permission to reproduce the engraving of the Edinburgh Faculty of Advocates from *Modern Athens* (1829) and Raeburn's portrait of Beattie which hangs in the University's Chanonry Lodge.

*Gordon Graham*
*Aberdeen, June 2004*

# Introduction

James Beattie was born in Laurencekirk, Kincardineshire, on 25 October 1735. As was usual in eighteenth-century Scotland, he went to university very young, and began his studies at Marischal College, Aberdeen, when only fourteen years old. This was the start of a life-long association with Marischal, then a separate institution from King's College. After five years as a schoolmaster in Fordoun, close to his native village, Beattie returned to Aberdeen in 1758 to teach in the city's Grammar School. In 1760 Beattie was appointed professor of moral philosophy and logic at Marischal, a position he occupied for the rest of his career. Also in 1760 he published the first of several books of poetry, the most notable of which was *The Minstrel* (1771, 1774), often said to anticipate some of the doctrines of Wordsworthian Romanticism. In the early years of his professorship, Beattie relied heavily on the lecture notes of his predecessor Alexander Gerard, but as time passed he stamped his course with his own character, decreasing the amount of 'pneumatology', or philosophy of mind, and focusing instead upon rhetoric and *belles lettres*. Many of his philosophical writings began life as lectures given to his students. His greatest success as a philosopher was with *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth*, a spirited and sometimes abusive attack on modern scepticism in general, and on David Hume in particular. The *Essay* appeared in 1770, and was a literary sensation, winning for its author honorary degrees from King's and Oxford, an audience with King George III, and a royal pension of £200 a year. 'We all love Beattie', said Dr Johnson in 1772. Beattie's personal life was, by contrast, often very unhappy. His wife Mary was afflicted with insanity, forcing the couple eventually to live apart; and his eldest son, James Hay, having been appointed joint professor with his increasingly ill father in 1787, died three years later. Beattie himself died at Aberdeen on 18 August, 1803.

Sir William Forbes notes in his *Life and Writings of James Beattie* that 'Dr. Beattie's philosophical writings may be properly divided into two classes, Morality and Criticism'.[1] Accordingly, this selection from Beattie's writings has two parts. As the reader will quickly perceive from Part One, moral philosophy is in the eighteenth century somewhat broader in scope than it is today. It was believed then that instruction in ethics needed to be preceded by a full analysis of the faculties of the human mind. Where 'natural philosophy' meant the study of nature, 'moral philosophy' meant the study of the mind in all its aspects, and so included study of such mental 'powers' as reason, judgment, memory, imagination, sympathy, and the five senses. In Beattie's day, people were just beginning to use the term 'psychology' as another name for the 'theoretical' (as opposed to 'practical') part of moral philosophy. 'Criticism', too, tends to be more ambitious and wide-ranging than present-day study of literature, and, in fact, also frequently strays into psychological territory. The eighteenth-century critic was often concerned to understand the manner in which a work operates upon the mind, and distinguished between styles of writing, and their respective merits, by examining the effects they had upon the reader. 'Criticism' is thus not primarily the study of intrinsic features of literary forms, nor interpretation of works in terms of authorial intention or cultural and social background, but instead a branch of rhetoric. Moreover, in his concern for how a work engages with the imagination and sentiments of its reader, the eighteenth-century critic is very often interested in the moral (in the narrower, modern sense of the word) qualities of a piece of writing. It was agreed that the function of any art form was to give pleasure, but it mattered that a work give the right kind of pleasure, pleasure in the right kind of thing, to the right degree. The critic's function was to ensure that his readers knew the right kind of pleasure when they felt it: it was, in other words, to cultivate good taste. A dedication to what we might call 'improvement' provides a means of linking

[1] Sir William Forbes, *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie, LL.D.*, 2 vols., Edinburgh, 1806, vol. 2, p. 389.

Beattie's exercises in criticism with his moral philosophy. For moral philosophy, too, is first and foremost a practical science according to Beattie. Theoretical 'psychology' is valuable only to the extent that it yields a better understanding of the grounds and rewards of virtue. Both as a teacher and a writer, inculcating correct sentiments and habits is always Beattie's aim. He concluded his lecture course with a reminder to his students that 'the ultimate End of Man is Action; and that all Science which does not serve to make Men wiser and better, More profitable to themselves, Friends, and Country, is not only useless but also pernicious'.[2] This Introduction will show how the present selection from Beattie's writings on 'morals' and 'criticism' is lent unity by the importance Beattie attached to his role as educator and improver.

## II

A central part of eighteenth-century Scottish intellectual life was the literary or philosophical club. It is difficult, in fact, to overemphasize the importance to the 'Scottish Enlightenment' of these informal, privately-organized, selective, and frequently short-lived societies, which met to discuss every kind of contemporary question, from the most abstract issues in Newtonian science to problems in agriculture and husbandry. In his first years as a professor in Aberdeen, Beattie was a member of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, sometimes known as the 'Wise Club', founder members of which had included Thomas Reid, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Kings, George Campbell, Professor of Divinity at Marischal, and John Gregory, Professor of Medicine in the Old Town.[3] The

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[2] Quoted from notes taken by one of Beattie's students in 1762/3 in Paul Wood, *The Aberdeen Enlightenment: The Arts Curriculum in the Eighteenth Century*, Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1995, p. 121.

[3] For an account of the activities of the Wise Club, see the introduction to H. Lewis Ulman (ed.), *The Minutes of the Aberdeen*

Society concentrated its attention upon 'philosophical' subjects (thereby excluding questions in, for example, grammar, philology and history) and, especially, upon issues raised by the sceptical writings of Hume. In a famous letter of 1763, Reid, writing on behalf of the Society, tells Hume that if he is to 'write no more in morals politicks or metaphysicks, I am affraid we shall be at a loss for Subjects'.[4] But where Reid and Campbell were able to discuss and dissect Hume's arguments carefully and calmly, Beattie had a much more extreme and emotional reaction to Humean scepticism. He appears to have convinced himself that Hume was a threat to the order and happiness of society at large, and that his doctrines needed to be combated by something more forceful than either Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764) or Campbell's *Dissertation on Miracles* (1762). As we have seen, Beattie's first interest had been in poetry and criticism, and he was prepared to admit to having 'neither head nor heart' for the work involved in undoing the confusions and sophistries of the sceptic: 'But when doctrines are published subversive of morality and religion;—doctrines, of which I perceive and have it in my power to expose the absurdity, my duty to the public forbids me to be silent; especially when I see, that, by the influence of fashion, folly, or more criminal causes, those doctrines spread wider every day, diffusing ignorance, misery, and licentiousness, where-ever they prevail'.[5] Unpublished writings, and the letter from Beattie to his friend Thomas Blacklock included here, show that he regretted the

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*Philosophical Society 1758–1773*, Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1990.

[4] Paul Wood (ed.), *The Correspondence of Thomas Reid*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002, p. 31.

[5] James Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism*, second edition, Edinburgh, 1771, p. 535.

respect shown for Hume by other members of the Philosophical Society.[6]

Beattie's acute sense of the perniciousness of Hume's influence explains the extraordinary violence of some passages in the extracts from the *Essay on Truth* with which this selection opens (Selections 1–3). '[S]cepticism is now the profession of every fashionable inquirer into human nature', Beattie complains (p. 19). By 'scepticism' Beattie means, not a Lockean modesty about the extent of human knowledge, but an extreme form of doubt which recommends that, in view of the uncertainty of all things, we not believe anything at all. He interprets Hume as a proponent of this radical kind of scepticism. Beattie's principal aim in the *Essay* is to show that such scepticism is absurd, and that, being absurd, it is plainly unjustified. We have the right to trust our natural belief in, for example, the existence of an external world of material substances, and the freedom of the will, and should not have our confidence in such beliefs undermined by the sophistry and word-juggling of writers like Hume. But this is not to say that Beattie thinks these basic beliefs can be *proven* to be true. We are as certain of their truth as it is possible to be of the truth of any principle, but not on the basis of rational argument. Rather, we *feel* them to be true, using what Beattie calls 'an instantaneous, instinctive, and irresistible impulse; derived neither from education nor from habit, but from nature; acting independently on our will, whenever its object is presented, according to an established law, and therefore properly called *Sense*; and acting in a similar manner upon all, or at least upon a great majority, and therefore properly called *Common Sense*' (p. 32). Beattie, then, is just as much a 'common sense philosopher' as Thomas Reid. Modern philosophy, for Beattie as for Reid, went wrong when Descartes argued that a belief should be

[6] A satire entitled 'The Castle of Scepticism', dated 1767, gives vivid insight into Beattie's attitude towards the way Reid, Campbell and others treated Hume: see E.C. Mossner, 'Beattie's "The Castle of Scepticism": An Unpublished Allegory against Hume, Voltaire, and Hobbes', *University of Texas Studies in English* 27 (1948): 108–45.

rejected unless it can be given decisive justification. The subsequent slide into dangerous absurdity is charted in the excerpt entitled 'Rise and Progress of Modern Scepticism'. Beattie reads Hume in a way that is deeply uncharitable, and sometimes simply obtuse. It is nonsense to suggest that Hume's goal as a philosopher was to divest us of our natural beliefs, and Hume, not surprisingly, was made very angry by the *Essay on Truth*. He is said to have complained that he had 'not been used like a gentleman'. The letter from Beattie to Blacklock included here (Selection 4) gives some insight into the motivation behind the book.

The extract from the 'dissertation' 'Of Memory and Imagination' (Selection 5) shows that Beattie was capable of approaching subjects in moral philosophy coolly and accurately, even if he does not do so in the *Essay on Truth*. The extract tells us something about Beattie's positive conception of the proper method of analyzing the faculties of the mind: like many of his Scottish contemporaries (including Hume, in fact), Beattie believes that study of the mind should be based on 'Reflection, Consciousness, or Internal Sensation', and that psychology can proceed without investigation into the physical basis of thought. This extract is noteworthy also because it introduces a recurrent theme in Beattie's writings: the difference between human beings and animals. Beattie says that, unlike human beings, animals 'are affected, only or chiefly, with outward things; and seem incapable of what we call reflection of consciousness' (p. 62); he seeks to prove that, while animals have a faculty of memory, it is much inferior to human memory (pp. 80–81); and later on, he argues that animals have none of the 'secondary senses' necessary for aesthetic appreciation (p. 66). Furthermore, in the extract 'Of the Nature of Virtue', Beattie declares that conscience, the faculty by which we distinguish between virtue and vice, is 'peculiar to rational nature; brutes have nothing like it' (p. 99); and he begins the extract 'Of the Origin of Civil Government' with the claim that 'Man is the only political animal; that is, the only animal capable of government' (p. 120). Where Hume, for one, dwells on the similarities between man and animal, Beattie's concern is always with 'those powers,

which form the glory, and indeed the distinguishing character of man; I mean, our capacities of speech, invention, and science, and those particulars in our frame, that entitle us to the denomination of moral, political, and religious beings' (p. 83). Moral philosophy, then, shows us that we have it in ourselves to be much more than merely sophisticated animals; and Beattie frequently moves quickly from the role of mental anatomist to the role of an instructor keen to suggest how to make the most of our distinctive powers. It will be seen that Beattie takes it as his task, not only to describe the faculty of memory, but also to tell the reader how memory can be cultivated and improved.

Largely for the benefit of his students, Beattie produced 'an Abridgment, and for the most part a very brief one' of his lecture course in moral philosophy, entitled *Elements of Moral Science* (1790–3). The Introduction to the *Elements* is included here (Selection 6) in order to help clarify Beattie's understanding of the subject he taught. It will be unsurprising to find Beattie (like every Scottish philosopher of his day) endorsing the Baconian definition of philosophy as 'The knowledge of nature applied to practical and useful purposes' (p. 86). It may be more unexpected that Beattie says that 'pneumatology', or '[t]he Speculative part of the philosophy of mind', comprises arguments for the existence and attributes of God as well as analysis of the human mind (p. 87). Beattie's version of the popular 'argument from design' is included here as representative of his style of natural theology (Selection 7), along with a passage from his biography of his son James Hay (Selection 8). It was in fact standard practice for a professor of moral philosophy to lecture on natural theology: this is not evidence of an unusual religiosity on Beattie's part. But it is, nevertheless, undoubtedly true that a vindication of religious belief was absolutely central to all of Beattie's teaching and writing. It mattered at least partly because, as Beattie put it in a passage from the *Elements* not included here, 'Atheism is utterly subversive of morality, and consequently of happiness… They therefore, who teach atheistical doctrines, or who endeavour to make men doubtful in regard to this great and glorious truth,

THE BEING OF GOD, do every thing in their power to overturn government, to unhinge society, to eradicate virtue, to destroy happiness, and to promote confusion, madness, and misery'.[7] (It will be seen in the extract from the essay 'On Poetry and Music' included here (Selection 12) that Beattie objected to the way in which Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* represents his Houyhnhyms 'as patterns of moral virtue, as the greatest masters of reason, and withal as completely happy, without any religious ideas, or any views beyond the present life' (p. 150 fn.).) In underlining the importance of religious belief to virtue and happiness, Beattie is, once again, at one with most of his peers.[8] But religion for Beattie is always more than mere 'natural' religion: in a book not represented in this selection, *The Evidences of the Christian Religion: Briefly and Plainly Stated* (1786), Beattie insists on the 'importance and usefulness of Divine Revelation'.

Beattie's emphasis on the significance of revealed religion goes together with a belief in Original Sin. Human nature remains corrupted, and we therefore need the promise extended in the Bible to be sure of the possibility of regaining felicity. Yet Beattie is no Calvinist pessimist about our ability to undo, to some extent at least, the results of the Fall. For one thing, he argues in favour of the natural freedom of the human will: we do not have to wait for a mysterious act of divine Grace before sin can be renounced.[9] For another thing, and as is shown in the passages included here

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[7] James Beattie, *Elements of Moral Science*, 2 vols., Edinburgh, 1790–93, vol. I, pp. 375–6.

[8] I explore this issue in more detail in 'Answering Bayle's question: religious belief in the moral philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment', in Steven Nadler and Daniel Garber (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy: Volume I*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

[9] See Beattie, *Elements of Moral Science*, vol. I, pp. 195–214. An account of Beattie on free will can be found in my *Of Liberty and Necessity: The free-will debate in eighteenth-century British philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, ch. 6.

from 'Of the Nature of Virtue' (Selection 9), he believes that the faculty of conscience remains healthy, and is 'the supreme regulating principle of human nature' (p. 100). Virtue, Beattie says, 'is the ultimate end for which man was made' (p. 100), and it is natural to us despite our corruption. Virtue, that is to say, is not for Beattie, as it is for the Calvinist, impossible for the 'natural man'. We deserve divine punishment, when we do, because we freely abuse what we are all given, not because we somehow inherit a curse on account of the sins of Adam. Also in this extract, Beattie engages with the eighteenth-century British debate concerning the means by which we distinguish between right and wrong, and seeks to reconcile the opposing parties by claiming that 'moral approbation is both an agreeable feeling, and also a determination of judgment or reason; the former following the other, as an effect follows the cause' (pp. 108–9). Beattie is particularly concerned to rebut the idea that 'moral sentiments are merely the effects of education' (see p. 110). He regards conscience as one of those faculties 'implanted in man by his Creator' (p. 113).

In Selection 10 Beattie discusses the origin of political society. He treats the question in two ways. He seeks to determine both 'what reasons, and by what steps is it probable, that men, not subject to government, would think of it, and submit themselves to it'; and also 'what may reasonably be presumed to have been the actual origin of government, according to the best lights that may be had from history, tradition, or conjecture' (p. 120). Like virtue, Beattie believes, political society is natural for human beings, and so Hobbes was wrong to argue that it is not. Government is artificial, but not unnatural (see p. 122). It is entered into freely, and freedom remains intact when government is established, though here freedom means neither the right to do as you please, nor being governed by laws of your own making. True liberty lies in being 'so governed by equitable laws, and so tried by equitable judges, that no person can be hindered from doing what the law allows, or have reason to be afraid of any person so long as he does his duty' (p. 130). And the British constitution has over the centuries

been refined so as to guarantee such liberty. It will not be a surprise that Beattie was an enthusiast for the 1707 Act of Union that had united Scotland with England, nor that he was deeply hostile to the aims of the French Revolution. Yet Beattie was no mere unthinking conservative. His religious beliefs sometimes caused him to set himself against the views of the majority of his peers, as is shown by the short passage on slavery included here from the *Essay on Truth* (Selection 11).[10] Beattie refuses to accept that black people are naturally and inevitably inferior to white. Whatever differences there seem to be between the capacities of slaves and their masters, Beattie points out, are probably due to the conditions in which slaves are kept. It would be in the spirit of Britishness, he concludes, to abolish slavery altogether.

## III

Beattie writes in a letter that his wish is 'rather to form the taste, improve the manners, and establish the principles, of young men, than to make them profound metaphysicians; I wish in a word, not to make Humes of them, or Leibnitzes, but rather, if that were possible, Addisons'.[11] As we have seen, Beattie took his role as a moralist seriously, but he does not regard virtue as in any sense requiring the repression of the passions and sentiments by reason or conscience. His task, as he sees it, is to promote the flourishing of all aspects of human nature, and the cultivation of the pleasure we naturally take in the beautiful and the sublime is, he thinks, a central part of that task. The persona Joseph Addison had adopted in *The Spectator* provided for Beattie, as for every enlightened person in eighteenth-century Britain, the model combination of virtue without abstinence, piety without bigotry, and taste without

[10] There is a much longer treatment of slavery in the *Elements of Moral Science*: see vol. II, pp. 153–223.

[11] Cited by Wood, *The Aberdeen Enlightenment*, p. 126.

pedantry.[12] Selection 12, taken from the essay 'On Poetry and Music, as they affect the Mind', sees Beattie expounding the mainstream view of his day that the proper goal of poetry is to give pleasure, and that it gives pleasure just in so far as it is 'natural', which is to say, just in so far as it represents or imitates accurately. This extract makes it clear that while Beattie is concerned with the morality embodied in a poem, and with poetry's capacity to 'instruct', he does not expect a poem to play the role of an improving tract. A short poem, for instance a lyric or an exercise in pastoral, need not concern itself with moral matters at all. But epic or drama, Beattie says, must 'touch the heart and exercise the conscience' (p. 140) if it is to succeed in giving us pleasure, since 'moral sentiments are so prevalent in the human mind, that no affection can long subsist there, without mingling with them, and being assimilated to their nature' (p. 140). What gives us most pleasure in a poem is therefore description of human affairs. Yet Beattie is careful to admit that a poem does not have to be 'an exact transcript of real existence' (p. 147) in order to succeed as imitation: it is enough if it be consistent with general experience, with popular opinion, and with itself. This emphasis upon the role of imitation in aesthetic pleasure raises the question of why we enjoy music, an art that is, according to Beattie, not usually imitative at all. Beattie's answer to this question is found in Selection 13, another extract from 'On Poetry and Music', where he argues that music pleases because 'certain melodies and harmonies have *an aptitude* to raise certain passions, affections, and sentiments in the soul' (p. 153). This in turn raises the further question of why different types of music develop in different places, even in different parts of the same country. Beattie's answer to this question, with reference to Scottish music, is also included here.

Beattie regarded a taste for the pleasures of the imagination as natural to human beings (and, as has been already noted, as absent in animals), but just as the moral sense has to be carefully tended

[12] Beattie published (anonymously) his own edition of Addison's works: [James Beattie, ed.], *The Papers of Joseph Addison, Esq.*, 4 vols., Edinburgh, 1790.

so as to prevent corruption by prejudice and poor education, so also does taste. Taste and its improvement are Beattie's concerns in Selection 14. As usual, there is nothing particularly original in Beattie's treatment of his topic here. He signals the influence upon his ideas of, not only Addison's *Spectator*, but also Francis Hutcheson, Alexander Gerard (his predecessor at Marischal) and Lord Kames.[13] While Beattie's general approach to the philosophy of mind is similar to that of Thomas Reid, one thing that differentiates Beattie's writings from Reid's is a concern for the role of 'habit' in the development of our beliefs and sentiments. Taste changes over time, Beattie observes: what was esteemed under the reign of Charles II is not what was valued under Queen Anne and George I; and 'Of late the publick taste seems to have been most effectively gratified by correct expression, and historical and philosophical inquiry' (p. 169). Changing habits and customs play an important role in determining what is found tasteful, as do 'constitutional differences'. The Enlightenment taken as a whole is often accused of being overly concerned with an unchanging and ubiquitous 'human nature', and with ignoring the role of history and geography in the determination of cultural practices and political institutions. There is some truth to this, but Beattie's concern with habit, with 'constitutional differences', and with geographical peculiarities (as in his discussion of Scottish music) illustrate the fact that a concern for faculties 'implanted in man by his Creator' could be combined with sensitivity to the difficulties in assuming that human beings are the same at all times and in all places.

It was mentioned above that Beattie's poetry is often seen as foreshadowing the Romanticism of William Wordsworth. There are what sound like anticipations of Wordsworth also in the essay 'On Poetry and Music', for instance where Beattie writes that 'some minds there are of a different make; who, even in the early part of life, receive from the contemplation of Nature a species of delight

[13] For selections from Hutcheson and Gerard see Jonathan Friday (ed.), *Art and Enlightenment: Scottish Aesthetics in the 18th Century* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004).

which they would hardly exchange for any other' (p. 143). There might seem to be something of the Romantic too in Selection 15, taken from Beattie's 'Illustrations of Sublimity'. Here Beattie makes it even clearer that the relation between poetry and morality is in his eyes far from straightforward. As he says, 'the test of sublimity is not moral approbation, but that pleasurable astonishment wherewith certain things strike the beholder' (p. 185); and, because evil when depicted in the right way—for instance, as by Milton in his portrayal of Satan in *Paradise Lost*—has the capacity to astonish us pleasurably, 'we sometimes admire what we cannot approve' (p. 186). Shakespeare's tragedies similarly violate our natural sentiments, by causing us to take pleasure in horror; Beattie cites *Macbeth* as an example. The effect of the sublime in poetry is to elevate the mind, to push it up beyond the everyday, and beyond the realm of the merely natural, and thereby to provide proof that, to quote Beattie quoting Longinus, 'the whole world is not an object sufficient for the depth and rapidity of human imagination' (p. 201). It is only in the brief final paragraph of the dissertation that Beattie makes a claim for the moral value of the cultivation of a taste for the sublime. It would not do, however, to imagine that Beattie is consciously opposing the realm of the unencumbered free play of the aesthetic imagination to the more limited and prosaic moral domain. There is in fact nothing revolutionary, either in his conception of the sublime or in his claims about the value of early exposure to the beauties of nature. What is sometimes termed 'Pre-Romanticism' is often unimpeachably traditional in its values and aspirations. It has been claimed, in fact, that the only text of this period to which the label 'Pre-Romantic' could reasonably be applied is Wordsworth's own Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800).[14]

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[14] See P.W.K. Stone, *The Art of Poetry 1750–1820*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, ch. 9.

## IV

It has been emphasized here that Beattie is not properly regarded as an original thinker. One historian of the Scottish Enlightenment has argued that, in valuing Addisonian politeness over Humean 'metaphysics', Beattie departed from the mainstream of moral philosophy in eighteenth-century Scotland;[15] but to the extent that this is true, it does not signal a great deal of independence of mind on Beattie's part. His understanding of the nature of virtue and taste was very far from innovative. Nor did Beattie want to be regarded as an innovator. He says in the *Essay on Truth* that if philosophers such as Descartes and Malebranche had given more attention to 'the ancients', 'they would have made a better figure in philosophy, and done more services to mankind' (p. 43); and he constantly refers to Greek and Roman writers, sometimes where one might expect him to refer to modern ones instead: the dissertation on the sublime is full of citations from Longinus, but never once refers the reader to Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). At every turn, Beattie simply echoes the dominant assumptions of his day, and this surely helps to explain his disappearance from the philosophical canon. There is nothing in his writings which presses questions that later philosophers were forced to answer. Another reason for his present obscurity is his intense concern for the practical, and declared hostility for the merely theoretical and speculative. By the time of Beattie's death, European philosophy, and American philosophy as well, was becoming increasingly technical and academic. Having for a brief period been as much the concern of the 'polite' man of letters as of the university professor, philosophy in the early decades of the nineteenth century retreated back into scholasticism, particularly with the arrival on the scene of the systems of Kant and Hegel.

[15] See Wood, *The Aberdeen Enlightenment*, pp. 119–29; also 'Science and the Pursuit of Virtue in the Aberdeen Enlightenment', in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

Psychology, moreover, eventually transformed itself into a 'proper' science, eschewing introspection and embracing the materialist theory of mind. As early as the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume had contrasted his 'anatomical' approach to the mind with the didactic approach of the moralist. Beattie's response was to claim that there is no distinction there; that when the mind is seen as it really is, it will be obvious that virtue and piety are what the mind is made for. The success of the *Essay on Truth* suggests that many of Beattie's contemporaries believed, or wanted to believe, the same. This was a Pyrrhic victory only, however: Hume may have lost the battle for popularity, but he won the larger war. Subsequently, anatomy triumphed over moralizing. Yet if one wants to understand the background against which Hume's startling innovations are seen in their proper light, Beattie is a good place to start.

**Acknowledgments**

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# Chronology

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|---|---|
| 1735 | Born in Laurencekirk, Kincardineshire, 25 October |
| 1749 | Entered Marischal College, Aberdeen |
| 1753 | Graduated MA; began as a schoolmaster at Fordoun, Kincardineshire; also attending divinity classes at Aberdeen |
| 1758 | Moved to Aberdeen to teach in the Grammar School |
| 1760 | Published first book of poetry; appointed to chair of moral philosophy and logic at Marischal; invited to join the Aberdeen Philosophical Society (the 'Wise Club') |
| 1763 | First visit to London |
| 1767 | Married Mary Dun |
| 1768 | Birth of James Hay Beattie, 6 November |
| 1770 | Publication of *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth*; awarded LL.D. by King's College, Aberdeen |
| 1771 | Publication of *The Minstrel* (second volume published in 1774); second visit to London, meets Johnson and circle, Garrick, Reynolds |
| 1773 | Third visit to London; introduced to King George III; awarded honorary degree by University of Oxford; granted a royal pension of £200 per annum |
| 1774 | Refuses to apply for moral philosophy chair at Edinburgh, and declines positions in the Church of England |
| 1775 | Fourth visit to London; portrait painted by Reynolds |
| 1776 | Publication of a subscription volume containing the *Essay on Truth* and several other essays |
| 1778 | Birth of second son, Montagu, 8 July |

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| 1779 | Supports moves to increase the freedoms of Scottish Roman Catholics |
| 1780–1 | Living apart from his wife because of her insanity |
| 1783 | Publication of *Dissertations, Moral and Critical* |
| 1786 | Publication of *Evidences of the Christian Religion* |
| 1787 | James Hay appointed joint professor with his father |
| 1788 | Joins agitation against the slave trade |
| 1790 | Death of James Hay, 19 November; publication of first volume of *Elements of Moral Science* (second volume published 1793) |
| 1796 | Death of Montagu, 14 March; retires from teaching in May; succeeded as professor of moral philosophy by George Glennie |
| 1800 | Partially paralysed by a stroke |
| 1803 | Dies at Aberdeen, 18 August |

# One: Introduction to 'An Essay on Truth'

To those who love learning and mankind, and who are more ambitious to distinguish themselves as men, than as disputants, it is a matter of humiliation and regret, that names and things have so oft been mistaken for each other; that so much of the philosopher's time must be employed in ascertaining the signification of words; and that so many doctrines, of high reputation, and of ancient date, when traced to their first principles, have been found to terminate in verbal ambiguity. If I have any knowledge of my own heart, or of the subject I propose to examine, I may venture to assure the reader, that it is no part of the design of this book, to encourage verbal disputation. On the contrary, it is my sincere purpose to avoid, and to do every thing in my power to check it; convinced as I am, that it never can do any good, and that it has been the cause of much mischief, both in philosophy and in common life. And I hope I have a fairer chance to escape it, than some who have gone before me in this part of science. I aim at no paradoxes; my prejudices (if certain instinctive suggestions of the understanding may be so called) are all in favour of truth and virtue; and I have no principles to support, but those which seem to me to have influenced the judgements of a great majority of mankind in all ages of the world.

Many will think, that there is but little merit in this declaration; it being as much for my own credit, as for the interest of mankind, that I guard against a practice, which is acknowledged to be always unprofitable, and generally pernicious. A verbal disputant! what claim can he have to the title of Philosopher! What has he to do with the laws of nature, with the observation of facts, with life and manners! Let him not intrude upon the company of men of science; but repose with his brethren Aquinas and Suarez, in the corner of some gothic cloister, dark as his understanding, and cold