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Witherspoon and Beattie on the Philosophy of Common-Sense Abolitionism

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Abstract

This article examines the philosophy of common sense abolitionism in the thought of John Witherspoon and James Beattie. It explores the timely question of how Witherspoon reconciled his moral philosophy with his complex relationship to slavery. Witherspoon baptised a runaway slave, taught anti-slavery sentiments in his course of lectures on moral philosophy, personally tutored three black freemen, enslaved at least two people of colour, and voted against the immediate abolition of human bondage in New Jersey. These activities seemingly appear to be contradictions. However, the transatlantic contexts of an emerging abolitionist movement during the American War of Independence harboured radically different approaches to abolish the institution of chattel slavery. Witherspoon drew from the example of another Scottish Enlightenment moralist, Beattie, on emancipation. Like Beattie, Witherspoon consistently advanced a belief in the divinely inspired self-evident or 'common sense' understanding of universal liberty, which applied to all races, in response to David Hume's mitigated scepticism and racism. They shared a gradual approach to preparing enslavers and enslaved for the inevitable end of human bondage as a condition deemed incompatible with Christianity. This article argues that their philosophy of common sense abolitionism featured exemplified Scottish Enlightenment thought on either side of the Atlantic. By exploring the philosophical origins and pedagogy of their anti-slavery and gradual approach to abolishing the institution of chattel slavery, this comparative case study sheds new light on the legacies of Witherspoon at Princeton and Beattie at Marischal College, Aberdeen.

The transatlantic movement to expose historical connections with human bondage and racism at institutions of higher education recently challenged the legacy of Scottish Enlightenment philosophers. This scrutiny of university histories re-evaluates the ways in which institutions memorialise white men, who directly or indirectly benefited from

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enslaving people of colour and/or advanced pernicious racial theories. Since most Scottish Enlightenment thinkers either graduated or held academic positions at universities on either side of the Atlantic, trustee boards commonly showcase this historical affiliation by enshrining their names on buildings and streets as well as commissioning statues, plaques, and monuments for public spaces on campus. Memorials of this kind are generally intended to inspire students, faculty, and alumni in an elevated pursuit of knowledge. Controversial petitions to end this practise on American and British campuses have become a critical aspect of contemporary public discourse.

The student-led petition to rename David Hume Tower at the University of Edinburgh in June 2020 exemplified sweeping campaigns to confront institutional histories of racism. By correctly identifying that 'Hume wrote racist epithets' in an infamous note attached to his essay *Of National Characters* (1753) and that he later invested in the transatlantic slave trade, petitioners argued that adorning his name on the 'most prevalent building on campus [...] sends a very clear message to BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour] students at Edinburgh that we are willing to overlook this racism for the sake of alumni glory'.[1] However, Hume's racist views were neither exceptional in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world nor were they part of his significant contributions to revolutionising moral sentimentalism in the *Science of Man* after abandoning the study of law at Edinburgh University. Julian Baggini argues that Hume's 'racism is not merely detachable from his philosophy, it actually goes against its spirit and substance'.[2] Scholarly interrogations of Hume on racism, racial difference and racialised slavery are well-established in the secondary literature.[3] And yet, the campaign to rename Hume Tower did not engage with this diverse and wide-ranging historiography.

Hume scholars from different disciplines attempted to inform this public debate. As a Lecturer of Public Law at Edinburgh University, Asanga Welikaka shared with *The Times* that 'David Hume's thought has inspired me throughout a 20-year career working to further constitutional democracy in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa'.[4] 'Strong objections' of this kind from

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1 'Rename David Hume Tower at UoE', petition to the University of Edinburgh (29 June 2020) https://www.change.org/p/university-of-edinburgh-rename-david-hume-tower-at-uoe. See Felix Waldmann, 'David Hume was a brilliant philosopher but also a racist involved in slavery', *The Scotsman*, 17 July 2020; Danielle Charette, 'David Hume and the Politics of Slavery', *Political Studies*, (2023), 1–21.

2 Julian Baggini quoted in Thinkers criticise Edinburgh University's move to rename David Hume Tower, *The Times*, 16 September 2020.

3 See Aaron Garrett and Silvia Sebastiani, 'David Hume on Race' in Naomi Zack (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race* (Oxford, 2017), 31–43; Andre Willis, 'The Impact of David Hume's Thoughts about Race for His Stance on Slavery and His Concept of Religion', *Hume Studies*, 42.1/2 (2016), 213–239; Emmanuel Eze, 'Hume, Race, and Human Nature', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 61.3 (2000), 691–698; John Immerwahr, 'Hume's Revised Racism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53.3 (1992), 481–486; Kendra Asher, 'Was David Hume a racist? Interpreting Hume's infamous footnote (Part II)', *Economic Affairs*, 42.3 (2022), 477–499; Alan Bailey, 'Hume on Race and Slavery', *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 22.2 (2024), 103–128.

4 Asanga Welikaka quoted in 'Edinburgh University ditches David Hume over slavery link', *The Times*, 14 September 2020.

faculty members of Edinburgh did not deter the swift decision to remove Hume from his tower in September 2020. The University opted not to rename it, rather the building became known by the physical address of 40 George Square.[5] This hastily managed controversy raises questions about how contemporary values intersect with eighteenth-century intellectual culture as well as the criteria for commemorating historical figures and the responsibilities of institutions to address problematic aspects of their history that did not age well.[6]

The fall of Hume Tower (at least in name) emboldened the more recent attempt to topple the legacy of another Scottish Enlightenment thinker, John Witherspoon. Memorialised for the ways in which he reformed the curriculum as the sixth president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University) between 1768 and 1794, signed the American Declaration of Independence, and strengthened Presbyterianism in the early republic as an influential minister, the Princeton Board of Trustees commissioned one of two identical ten-foot bronze statues of Witherspoon sculpted by Alexander Stoddart in a 'heroic realist' manner. It portrays Witherspoon surrounded by things that symbolise his achievements in higher education (a lectern), Presbyterianism (a bible), and the founding of the United States (an eagle). The University of West Scotland, Paisley installed the other twin on High Street at their campus during the summer of 2001 in recognition of his contributions to the Church of Scotland as a minister of Paisley between 1757 and 1768.

Scholarly and more general knowledge that Witherspoon enslaved at least two people of colour while serving as president and voted against the immediate abolition of slavery in New Jersey did not deter Princeton from installing their statue in November 2001. Archival evidence of Witherspoon's complex relationship to slavery has since been published by Lesa Redmond as part of *The Princeton & Slavery Project* that commenced in 2013.[7] This wide-ranging and deeply researched student-led project effectively publicised how the first seven presidents of Princeton, as well as numerous alumni enslaved people of colour. It had followed the *Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice* in 2006, which received a second edition in 2021, and coincided with the publication of Craig Wilder's *Ebony and Ivy* in 2013, which exposed historical connections between enslaved people of colour and early American universities.[8]

In the vein of student-led efforts to rename Hume Tower, graduate philosophy students created a petition to remove Witherspoon's statue from Firestone Plaza during the summer of 2022. Petitioners clearly explain:

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5 See Martyn Mclaughlin, 'David Hume Tower: Edinburgh academics warns of "damage" to institution in wake of "denaming" controversy', *The Scotsman*, 16 September 2020.

6 See David Ashton and Peter Hutton, 'Edinburgh University rush to condemn David Hume shames it', *The Herald*, 28 December 2023.

7 See Lesa Redmond, 'Witherspoon and Slavery', *Princeton & Slavery Project*, 27 September 2017, Available at https://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/john-witherspoon [last accessed 20 November 2023]. Scottish universities also have histories of profiting from human bondage. Glasgow, Aberdeen and more recently Edinburgh funded large-scale studies to expose historic connections of this kind.

8 See Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

> The argument that leads us to believe in the importance of this significant change is straightforward. We believe, first, that the statue pays great honor to Witherspoon, and encourages members of the University community to honor Witherspoon. Second, we believe that paying such honor to someone who participated actively in the enslavement of human beings, and used his scholarly gifts to defend the practice, is today a distraction from the University's mission. Unless the statue is removed, this distraction will remain, and indeed may only continue to grow, going forward.[9]

The Council of the Princeton University Community's Committee on Naming responded to this petition, which attracted the support of 285 Princetonian signatories, with a series of 'listening sessions' through which faculty, students, and alumni could express their view of the proposed removal of Witherspoon's statue. One of the 'listening sessions' involved a public facing symposium on 21 April 2023 that explored 'John Witherspoon in Historical Context' with an emphasis on his relationship to slavery and abolitionism.

This symposium of prominent Princetonian scholars featured a talk by renowned historian of American democracy Sean Wilentz, who contextualised Witherspoon's seemingly contradictory positions as an enslaver and abolitionist.[10] Wilentz clarified that distinctive approaches to abolitionism complicated the objectives of the movement as it emerged during the late eighteenth century. Support for abolishing the transatlantic slave trade did not necessarily extend to the universal emancipation of black slaves. And opposition to immediately abolishing chattel slavery did not necessarily exclude support for gradual abolitionism or advancing anti-slavery sentiments. It was not extraordinary for early American abolitionists, such as Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, and Witherspoon's son-in-law Samuel Stanhope Smith, to enslave people of colour or advance racist theories of transformation before the turn of the nineteenth century.[11] Different approaches to abolitionism and conditional antislavery sentiments reflected the various complications of overturning an entrenched institution of human bondage throughout the late eighteenth-century Atlantic world.[12] Considering the on-going petition to remove Witherspoon's statue from Princeton's Firestone Plaza, it is timely to reassess the moral philosophical underpinnings of his seemingly contradictory relationship to slavery and abolitionism shortly after the 300th anniversary of his birth.

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9 CPUUC Committee on Naming and President Eisgruber, 'Petition regarding the statue of John Witherspoon on Firestone Plaza', 2022 June. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScOFsk6bIFvhAuWptVMZDWtd8-3pvjlBhA5pU-gk8ToFrbE9A/viewform [last accessed 20 November 2024].

10 Sean Wilentz, 'John Witherspoon and the Abolitionist Travail', CPUC Committee on Naming Symposium 'John Witherspoon in Historical Context', 21 April 2023. https://vimeo.com/832403171/0dfdcca83d?share=copy.

11 See C.B. Bow, 'Becoming White in the American Enlightenment', *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 22.2 (2024), 149–172.

12 See Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (Basic, 2016).

This comparative case study of Witherspoon and James Beattie on abolitionism sheds new light on the intellectual contexts of seemingly contradictory positions. It builds on Kevin DeYoung's two-part article on 'John Witherspoon and Slavery' published in 2023 by examining the understudied features of 'common sense' abolitionism.[13] While following the social history of ideas framework associated with Peter Gay's seminal work on *The Enlightenment* (1995/1966) and Richard Sher's chapter on 'Professors of Virtue' in *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* (1991), this study links early transatlantic abolitionism and antislavery movements to the history of philosophy.[14] Radically different contexts of abolishing the institution of chattel slavery complicated the ways in which new branches of Scottish common sense philosophy were conceived and received throughout the Atlantic world.[15]

Witherspoon was not an original Scottish Enlightenment thinker. His originality emerged from the pulpit and as an influential actor in secular and ecclesiastical politics, rather than diffusing novel ideas behind a lectern or in print. He drew heavily from Beattie's *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1770) as a preferred model for common sense philosophy in the reformed curriculum at Princeton from 1770 to 1778. In the recapitulation lecture of his course on moral philosophy, which was divided into three parts on ethics, politics, and jurisprudence, Witherspoon taught that

> perhaps a time may come when men, treating *moral* philosophy as Newton and his successors have done *natural*, may arrive at greater precision. It is always safer in our reasonings to trace facts *upwards*, than to reason *downwards*, upon metaphysical principles. An attempt has been lately made by Beatty [sic], in his Essay on Truth, to establish certain impressions of *common sense* as *axioms* and *first principles* of all our reasonings on moral subjects.[16]

Beattie boldly advanced an inductive 'common sense' view of antislavery and abolitionism in his course of lectures on moral philosophy at Marischal College, which had informed his *Essay on Truth*, before Witherspoon taught the subject at Princeton.[17] In doing so, he was celebrated by his contemporaries and posterity as a leading Scottish Enlightenment abolitionist.

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13 See Kevin DeYoung, 'A Fuller Measure of Witherspoon on Slavery', *Princetonians for Free Speech*, (2023).

14 Richard Sher, 'Professors of Virtue: The social history of the Edinburgh Moral Philosophy Chair in the Eighteenth Century' in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1991), 87–126.

15 On the complications of slavery and transatlantic diffusion of ideas, see Sean Moore, *Slavery & the Making of Early American Libraries* (Oxford, 2019).

16 John Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* (Philadelphia, 1822), 171.

17 See Glen Doris, 'An Abolitionist too late? James Beattie and the Scottish Enlightenment's lost chance to influence the Slave Trade debate', *Journal of Scottish Thought*, 2.1 (2009), 83–97; Richard Anderson, 'Abolitionism and Aberdeen's Universities' in C.B. Bow and Michael Brown (eds), *A New History of the University of Aberdeen* (AUP, 2024).

This article addresses the question of how Witherspoon's moral philosophy compared to the thought of Beattie on chattel slavery. It examines how their principles of common sense took shape in response to the mitigated scepticism of 'Scotland's Great Infidel', David Hume, before turning to a comparative analysis of their shared antislavery beliefs and moral justification for the immediate abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and gradual abolition of human bondage. Common sense abolitionism in the moral philosophy of Witherspoon and Beattie supported universal, divinely inspired liberties to cultivate the human constitution towards perfection. This article argues that the contexts in which they taught and diffused a strikingly similar approach to common sense abolitionism changed how it was received by their contemporaries and posterity on either side of the Atlantic.

Origins of common sense in the thought of Witherspoon and Beattie

Writing as the minister of Beith, who sided with the ecclesiastical Popular party, Witherspoon gained national notoriety for combatting the Moderate *literati* from the publication of his *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (1753). He satirically challenged twelve religiously unorthodox 'maxims' of moderatism, which extended to a thirteenth that '*All moderate men are joined together in the strictest bond of union, and do never fail to support and defend one another to the utmost*' after they successfully acquitted Hume and Henry Home, Lord Kames from charges of atheism and heresy in the General Assembly of 1755.[18] While preparing this work for the press in 1753, Witherspoon had 'been intending for some time past…to communicate to the world a few remarks upon [Hume's] essay on human liberty, contained in a late treatise, intitled, *Essays upon morality and natural religion*'.[19] He could not have remarked on Hume's racist note since the fifth edition in which it appeared had not yet been published at the time of writing to the editor of *The Scots Magazine*.

Witherspoon's brief remarks published in *The Scots Magazine* reflected his general understanding of divinely inspired external sense perceptions, which he believed were 'common to all men', and a belief in the universal liberty of humankind to exercise free will as agents of change. His 'realist' treatment of these subjects did not significantly contribute to forming the Scottish School of common sense philosophy. The general ways in which he challenged Hume's controversial notion of causation in the moral world and questionable views of natural and revealed religion closely resembled the thought of men associated with founding the philosophy of common sense. Following another 'just' objection to Hume's philosophy published by *The Scots Magazine* in 1752, Witherspoon read Hume's controversial notion of causality as an attempt to challenge the alleged illusion of liberty and shed new light on the doctrine of necessity in human affairs. According to Witherspoon, '[a]ll that he [Hume] offers

[18] John Witherspoon, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (Edinburgh, 1763), 63. See Thomas Ahnert, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Yale University Press, 2015).

[19] John Witherspoon, 'Remarks on an Essay on Human Liberty', *Scots Magazine*, 15 April 1753, 165.

in support of this strange compound opinion, is an argument from analogy, That there are delusive or deceitful perceptions conveyed to us by our senses in the natural world, that the representations of objects and their qualities differ from what philosophy discovers them to be'.[20] In opposition to scepticism of this kind, Witherspoon argued that external sense perceptions accurately testify 'real truth, which certainly ought to be the same with philosophic truth'.[21] Hume's doctrine of necessity concerning causality in the moral world related to his infamous note on racial hierarchies, which favoured racialised elements of Aristotelian natural slavery in 'Of National Characters' (1753). Witherspoon viewed this central feature of Hume's philosophy as a threat to the exercise of virtue.

Witherspoon did not explicitly denounce slavery as vicious neither in print nor from the pulpit during the 1750s. However, his public baptism of a black slave, James Sheddan, on 9 July 1756 suggested a belief in the universal free will to exercise virtue as a Christian.[22] Since Scots Law permitted chattel slavery on Scottish soil during this time, enslaved people of colour rarely received baptisms, because religious liberties extended to civil rights under the 1707 Anglo-Scottish Treaty of Union. The practice of baptising enslaved people created obvious legal complications. Witherspoon was probably aware of George Berkeley's Newport pamphlet published in 1731 on the question of freedom for baptised African slaves, given the generally acknowledged link between George Berkeley and Hume on idealism and necessarian causality. Berkeley believed that religious conversion and, in turn, the salvation of the soul did not necessarily result in civil rights of freedom for an African slave.[23]

The legal interpretation of manumission rights for enslaved people of colour, who were baptised, was ambiguous under Scots Law when Witherspoon met Sheddan. For this reason, Witherspoon drafted a letter that certified the baptism and the surname change from the name of his enslaver (Robert Sheddan) to Montgomery, which had been the maiden name of Witherspoon's wife, Elizabeth. The timing of this name change was probably not a coincidence since it was generally known that Montgomery-Sheddan objected to his imminent sale in Virginia. Having escaped from a ship docked in Port Glasgow that was bound for Virginia, Montgomery-Sheddan sought refuge in Edinburgh before being apprehended and imprisoned in Edinburgh Tolbooth. He died in prison while waiting for a decision from the Court of Session on the first case that questioned the legality of chattel slavery in Scotland.[24] The Montgomery case closed without a ruling and Witherspoon moved from Beith to Paisley shortly thereafter. On the question of liberty, which concerned human bondage, Witherspoon expressed hope that Hume was a 'man of virtuous dispositions, and means no harm to the cause of virtue; but I have met with very few who think that this essay has contributed any thing [sic] to its support'.[25]

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20 *Ibid.*, 165.

21 *Ibid.*

22 See Iain White, *Scotland the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756–1838* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 21.

23 See Tom Jones, *George Berkeley: A Philosophical Life* (Princeton, 2025), 234–237.

24 National Records of Scotland, CS234/S/3/12.

25 Witherspoon, 'Remarks on an Essay on Human Liberty', 170.

The professoriate of Marischal and King's colleges in New and Old Aberdeen shared Witherspoon's concerns about the vicious consequences of Hume's philosophy.[26] Founded by Thomas Reid (regent at King's), George Campbell (principal of Marischal), John Gregory (mediciner at King's), and John Stewart (Duncan Liddel professor of mathematics at Marischal) in 1758, the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, known as the Wise Club, set forth new trains of thought in experimental philosophy as an alternative to modern philosophical scepticism with a particular focus on Hume. They sought

> to comprehend, Every Principle of Science which may be deduced by Just and Lawful Induction from the Phenomena wither of the human mind or of the material World; All Observations & Experiments that may furnish Materials for such Induction; The Examination of False Schemes of Philosophy & false Methods of Philosophising; The Subserviency of Philosophy to Arts, the Principles they borrow from it and the means of carrying them to their Perfection.[27]

Their 137 philosophical discourses and 126 inquiries for discussion followed the 'noble map of science delineated by Lord Bacon' in *Novum Organum* (1620) and sustained the established use of Newtonian empiricism in the Scottish Enlightenment.[28] The emphasis on exposing the errors of 'False Schemes of Philosophy' targeted the mitigated scepticism of Hume.

The use of 'common sense' to describe 'mother wit' or self-evident beliefs provided a novel foundation for the study of metaphysics, natural history, language, rhetoric, and medicine.[29] Campbell applied 'common sense' to a Nominalist notion of rhetoric, Gregory explored 'common sense' medical practises, and Reid shed new light on the operation of internal and external sense perceptions in the science of the human mind. Hume characterised Campbell as 'certainly a very ingenious man, though a little too zealous for a philosopher'.[30] Yet he had a more favourable opinion of Reid's ability in 'a Piece so deeply philosophical'.[31] Reid reworked his philosophical discourses into a draft manuscript on principles of common sense by early 1763. Having knowledge of Hume's feedback on Campbell's *Dissertation on Miracles* (1762), Reid sent their mutual friend Hugh Blair, who Witherspoon had targeted in *Ecclesiastical*

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26 See Jennifer Carter and Joan Pittock, 'Introduction' in Carter and Pittock (eds), *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment* (Aberdeen, 1987), 1–6; Lewis Ulman (ed), *The Minutes of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, 1758–1773* (Aberdeen, 1990), 11–63; Paul Wood, *The Aberdeen Enlightenment: The Arts Curriculum in the Eighteenth Century* (Aberdeen, 1993), 160.

27 Ulman, *Minutes of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society* (Rule 17).

28 Thomas Gordon, 'Of the Philosophy of Language & Grammar', 31 March 1761, Aberdeen University Library Special Collections, MS 3107/1/4, f. 38.

29 See C.B. Bow, 'Introduction: Common Sense in the Scottish Enlightenment' in C.B. Bow (ed.), *Common Sense in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2018), 1–18.

30 David Hume to Hugh Blair, 1761 in J.Y.T. Greig (ed), *The Letters of David Hume* (2 vols, Oxford, 2011), I, 348; Campbell, *Dissertation on Miracles*, 6.

31 David Hume to Thomas Reid, 25 Feb 1763 in Paul Wood (ed), *The Correspondence of Thomas Reid*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 29.

Characteristics (1753), an introductory letter along with a partial draft of his unpublished manuscript for Hume's consideration. His letter informed Hume that:

> Your Friendly Adversaries Drs Campbel & Gerard as well as Dr Gregory return their Compliments to you respectively. A little Philosophical Society here of which all the three are members, is much indebted to you for its Entertainment… If you write no more in morals politicks or metaphysicks, I am afraid we shall be at a loss for Subjects.[32]

The ways in which Campbell and Reid challenged Hume's philosophy 'without bitterness' contrasted sharply with the criticism from 'that bigoted silly fellow' James Beattie, according to Hume.[33]

Elected as a member of the Wise Club in 1760 and then professor of moral philosophy at Marischal, Beattie mingled poetical allusion with 'common sense' moral philosophy. Beattie engaged with the science of mind as shown in his first discourse concerning the operations of the human mind in the Wise Club on 7 October 1761. And he addressed his preferred interest in criticism in a discourse on 'The Characters of Poetical Imagination' on 26 February 1765. In a fortunate 'accident', Beattie changed the question he prepared on 'Whether Music, Painting or Poetry gives the greatest scope to Genius' to asking 'What is the difference between Common Sense and Reason' at a meeting on 10 December 1765.[34] Given this sudden change, perhaps Beattie sincerely wanted Wise Club members to explain the nature of common sense. Yet they encouraged him refine his own understanding of 'common sense' applied to poetry. In 1766, Gregory wrote to Beattie:

> I beg you will take some pains about our Philosophical work, and likewise about these Critical Discourses you read to the Club, which I think would do you honour. I want you to be known to the world in another light than that of a poet, because I think you one of the very few who have united a truly philosophical with a poetical genius.[35]

The four philosophical discourses concerning principles of common sense that Beattie read before the Wise Club eventually resulted in *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (1770).

Beattie developed his philosophy of common sense in *An Essay on Truth* through objections to Hume's epistemological theory of impressions that led to ideas. He challenged Hume's belief

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32 Thomas Reid to David Hume, 18 March 1763 in *Correspondence of Thomas Reid*, 31.

33 Thomas Reid to David Hume, 18 March 1763 in *Correspondence of Thomas Reid*, 31. See R.J.W. Mills, 'The Reception of "That Bigoted Silly Fellow" James Beattie's *Essay on Truth* in Britain, 1770–1830', *History of European Ideas*, 41 (2015), 1049–1079.

34 James Beattie to William Forbes, January 1766 in *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie* (3 vols, Edinburgh, 1807), II, 79–80.

35 John Gregory to James Beattie, 1766 in Forbes, *Life and Writings of James Beattie*, II, 29.

> That every idea should be a copy and resemblance of the impression whence it is derived;—that, for example, the idea of red should be a red idea; the idea of a roaring lion a roaring idea; the idea of an ass, a hairy, long-eared, sluggish idea, patient of labour, and much addicted to thistles; that the idea of extension should be extended, and that of solidity solid;—that a thought of the mind should be endued with all, or any, of the qualities of matter,—is, in my judgement, inconceivable and impossible. Yet Mr Hume takes it for granted; and it is another of his fundamental maxims. Such is the credulity of Scepticism![36]

In opposition to Hume's mitigated scepticism, Beattie argued that all forms of truth must conform to common sense as a 'fixed and invariable standard'.[37] 'In a word,' he wrote that

> the dictates of common sense are, in respect to human knowledge in general, what the axioms of geometry are in respect to mathematics: on the supposition that these axioms are false or dubious, all mathematical reasoning falls to the ground; and on the supposition that the dictates of common sense are erroneous or fallacious, all truth, virtue, and science, are vain.[38]

Beattie advanced the truth of abolishing human bondage and racial hierarchies as acts of common sense. While Aberdeen Enlightenment thinkers discussed the questions of 'what is the origine of the blacks' on 13 March 1764 and '[w]hether Slavery be in all cases inconsistent with good Government' on 24 November 1761, Beattie was the only member of the Wise Club to explicitly challenge Hume's racist note as a common sense abolitionist. Afterwards, Witherspoon advanced a strikingly similar version of Beattie's common sense abolitionism at Princeton.

Teaching common sense abolitionism

Shortly after arriving as the sixth president of the College of New Jersey, Witherspoon delivered an inaugural address in Latin on 17 August 1768 that explained his Scottish Enlightenment value of combining piety and scientific inquiry.[39] The union of Presbyterian evangelicalism and the empirical study of natural and moral worlds underpinned how Witherspoon reformed the curriculum at Princeton.[40] It also featured prominently in his critical support of American

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36 James Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth; In Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (Edinburgh, 1770), 251.

37 *Ibid.*, 142.

38 *Ibid.*, 143.

39 John Maclean Jr., *History of the College of New Jersey from its Origin in 1746 to the Commencement of 1854*, two vols (Princeton, 1877), 1, 300.

40 See C.B. Bow, 'Reforming Witherspoon's Legacy at Princeton: John Witherspoon, Samuel Stanhope Smith and James McCosh on Didactic Enlightenment, 1768–1888', *History of European Ideas*, 39.5 (2013), 650–669; Mark Noll, *Princeton and the Republic*, 1768–1822:

revolutionary principles concerning self-evident religious, political, and civil liberties. Two months before signing the American Declaration of Independence, Witherspoon informed Princeton students that

> the ambition of mistaken princes, the cunning and cruelty of oppressive and corrupt ministers, and even the inhumanity of brutal soldiers, however dreadful, shall finally promote the glory of God, and in the mean-time, while the storm continues, his mercy and kindness shall appear in prescribing bounds to their rage and fury…if your principles are pure—and if your conduct is prudent, you need not fear the multitude of opposing hosts.[41]

The widely distributed publication of this sermon became an influential view of the American revolutionary pursuit of political sovereignty.[42] Gideon Mailer argues that the combination of evangelicalism in Scottish ecclesiastical politics as well as Anglo-Scottish unionism informed the treatment of divinely inspired liberties in *John Witherspoon's American Revolution* (2017).

Witherspoon's emphasis on the providential design of self-evident or common sense American revolutionary notions of liberty also reflected his consistent critique of moral sentimentalism associated with Hutchesonian and Humean thought. His appeal to Francis Hutcheson's moral philosophy at Princeton did not directly inform his view of abolitionism, although it became a significant source for other abolitionists.[43] Having removed Berkeley's idealism from the curriculum, he introduced students to the writings of Reid and Beattie in his course of lectures on moral philosophy. Witherspoon taught:

> Some late writers have advanced with great apparent reason, that there are certain *first principles* of dictates of *common sense*, which are either simple perceptions, or seen with intuitive evidence. These are the *foundation* of all reasoning, and without them, to reason is a word without a meaning.[44]

Like Beattie, he stressed the divine origin of inductive reasoning from the belief 'that the whole of Scripture is perfectly agreeable to sound philosophy; yet certainly it was never

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The Search for a Christian Enlightenment in the Era of Samuel Stanhope Smith (Vancouver, 1989), 294.

41 John Witherspoon, 'The dominion of Providence over the passions of men,' sermon at Princeton on 17 May 1776, second edition, (Philadelphia and Glasgow, 1777), 9, 28.

42 Gideon Mailer, *John Witherspoon's American Revolution* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 13. See also Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh*, (Edinburgh, 1985), 328; Thomas Ahnert, 'Clergymen as polite philosophers: *Douglas* and the conflict between Moderates and Orthodox in the Scottish Enlightenment', *Intellectual History Review*, 18.3 (2008): 375–383; Kevin DeYoung, *The Religious Formation of John Witherspoon: Calvinism, Evangelicalism, and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Routledge, 2020).

43 See Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton, 2011).

44 John Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* (Philadelphia, 1822), 50.

intended to teach us everything'.[45] For this reason, Witherspoon informed the graduating Princeton class of 1775 that

> It hath been generally a favourite point with me, to recommend the union of piety and literature, and to guard young persons against the opposite extremes. We see sometimes the pride of unsanctified knowledge do great injury to religion; and on the other hand, we find some persons of real piety, despising human learning, and disgracing the most glorious truths, by a meanness and indecency hardly sufferable in their manner of handling them.[46]

While Witherspoon introduced a 'common sense' union of piety and reason to Princeton, questions emerged concerning the imperial management of racialised chattel slavery.

The Somerset case of 1772 informed colonial political thought and the American Revolution. Colonialists viewed Mansfield's decision in this landmark case that one cannot be a slave on English soil as a legal precedent that might extend to imperial management.[47] Pro-slavery concerns that the institution of chattel slavery was in jeopardy underpinned American revolutionary arguments for political and economic sovereignty. Contrary to pro-slavery revolutionaries, such as Thomas Jefferson, Witherspoon did not sign the Declaration of Independence with the preservation of slavery in mind.

This seminary of learning and cultivating principles of common sense extended to two free black students, Bristol Yamma and John Quamine, who Witherspoon personally taught at Princeton in 1775. Witherspoon reported that they 'behave very well' and have 'become pretty good in reading & writings & likewise have a pretty good notion of the Prompts of the Christian Faith'.[48] Like his primary ambition for all students at Princeton, he sought to prepare Yamma and Quamine for the ministry by teaching them the 'union of piety and literature'.[49]

Beattie provided Witherspoon with an example of how to unify scripture and inductive philosophy in advancing common sense abolitionism. Having lectured on principles of common sense while developing his version of this philosophical system as a member of the Wise Club during the 1760s, Beattie diffused anti-slavery sentiments and outlined common sense abolitionism in his lecture 'Of Economics' concerning chattel slavery. He taught that

> The duties resulting from this state [of chattel slavery] it is not the business of Philosophy to deduce, no more than it is the business of Philosophy to settle the

45 *Ibid.*, 7.

46 John Witherspoon, 'An Address to the Students of the Senior Class at the 23 September 1775 Princeton Commencement' in Samuel Stanhope Smith (ed), *The Works of Rev. John Witherspoon*, second edition, (4 vols., Philadelphia, 1802), III, 105.

47 See Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America* (New York, 2014); Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (Verso, 2013).

48 John Witherspoon to Samuel Hopkins, 27 February 1775, Thomas Addis Emmet Collection, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, EM.808.

49 See Redmond, 'John Witherspoon'.

> Laws of dwelling, of Thieving or of poisoning; for notwithstanding the universality of the Practice, we have no scruple to declare it almost in every case unlawful.[50]

It was self-evident or an exercise of common sense to denounce racialised slavery and, in turn, it did not require a philosophical argument to justify why it was a vicious institution. 'That slavery is inconsistent with both Christianity and with virtue is but too evident when we consider the manners of those countries in which it prevails', he asserted.[51] It certainly prevailed at Princeton during Witherspoon's lifetime.

Beattie's 'common sense' attack on Hume's defence of slavery in *An Essay on the Immutability and Nature of Truth* (1770) provided Witherspoon with an example of how to do so at Princeton. Recognising that Hume 'inferred man's natural and universal right to liberty, from that natural and universal passion with which men desire it' in an appeal to Aristotelian notions of natural slavery, Beattie identified the paradox that 'Hume argues nearly in the same manner in regard to the superiority of white men over black'.[52] He proceeded to challenge the misinformed errors of Hume's eurocentrism that echoed Carl Linnaeus's taxonomy of racial difference. 'Let it never be said', Beattie wrote, 'that slavery is countenanced by a people the bravest and most generous on earth, and who are animated with that heroic passion, the love of liberty, beyond all nations ancient or modern'.[53] These concluding lines of chapter two in an *Essay on Truth* resonated with Witherspoon's revolutionary principles of liberty.

Witherspoon applied self-evident liberties to his anti-slavery sentiments and a common sense approach to gradual abolitionism at Princeton. Like Beattie, he taught that 'it is certainly unlawful to make *inroads* upon others, *unprovoked*, and take away their liberty by no better right than *superior power*'.[54] The question of enslaving a person as punishment for a crime, which he supported as a timeless practice, did not extend to racialised chattel slavery. His belief that there was not 'any *necessity* on those who *found* men in a state of slavery, to make them free *to their own ruin*' explicitly referred to emancipating 'enslaved' criminals.[55] He acknowledged that

> Some have pleaded for making *slaves* of the *barbarous nations*—that they are actually brought into a more *eligible state*, and have more of the *comforts of life*, than they would have had in their own country.[56]

Since he possessed a copy of Lord Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man* published in 1774, Witherspoon probably had Kames's pro-slavery argument in mind with this example.[57] While

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50 James Beattie, 'Lectures on Moral Philosophy', AUP, MS 555, f. 365.

51 *Ibid.*

52 James Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth; in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (Edinburgh, 1770), 479.

53 *Ibid.*, 484.

54 Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* (1822), 91.

55 *Ibid.*, 92.

56 *Ibid.*, 91.

57 C.B. Bow, 'The "Final Causes" of Scottish Nationalism: Lord Kames on the political economy of enlightened husbandry, 1745–82', *Historical Research*, 252 (2018), 10–13.

sharing with Hume a belief that the 'colour of the Negroes…affords a strong presumption of their being a different species from the Whites', Kames questioned 'who can say how far they [black chattel slaves] might improve in a state of freedom, were they obliged like Europeans, to procure bread with the sweat of their brows?'[58] He conjectured that enslaved people in Jamaica lived on par 'if not better' than free blacks living in West Africa.[59] Having objected to the acquittal of Hume and Kames in the General Assembly of 1755, Witherspoon certainly identified heresy in Kames's controversial polygenic defence of human bondage. Witherspoon taught that this kind of 'argument may *alleviate*, but does not *justify* the practice' since it was not a 'more *eligible* state, if less *agreeable*' to enslaved people.[60]

The socio-economic politics surrounding abolitionism complicated the antislavery convictions that Beattie and Witherspoon taught at Aberdeen and Princeton. Beattie received encouragement to publish what he taught to strengthen an emerging abolitionist campaign based in London.[61] An *Essay on Truth* did not focus on the question of slavery; instead it resembled yet another one of his objections to Hume's philosophy. However, his seventeen-page pamphlet *On the Lawfulness and Expediency of Slavery, Particularly that of the Negroes*, which he drafted in 1778, attempted to set forth an explicit case for common sense abolitionism.[62] The self-evident belief that universal manumission required a moral and just plan for what would become of enslavers and those they enslaved underpinned his common sense approach to gradually abolishing the institution throughout the British imperial world. Beattie did not 'blame them [enslavers] for not giving liberty to all their slaves, when I consider, that so many savage men, set free at once, might annul the property and destroy the lives of thousands of innocent persons, and perhaps involve the whole empire in confusion'.[63] In other words, the Anglo-Atlantic world was unprepared to address the consequences of an immediate abolition of chattel slavery in 1778. He privately shared with fellow abolitionist and social reformer, Elizabeth Montagu, that 'it would be better to suppress than to publish' his pamphlet since 'it would rather create enemies to the author, than promote justice and benevolence'.[64] Those seeking to immediately abolish human bondage as well as pro-slavery advocates would have objected to Beattie's common sense view of gradual emancipation.

Witherspoon also applied a common sense abolitionist approach to his influence on secular and ecclesiastical politics in the early republic. Although he claimed in his 'Description of the State of New Jersey' that enslaved people in his state 'are exceedingly well used, being fed and clothed as well as any free persons who live by daily labour', the political purpose of this description was not to defend or abolish slavery.[65] He was responding to a request from the French ministry secretary, François Barbé-Marbois, for reports on 'all what can increase

58 Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man* (Edinburgh, 1774), 11, 12.

59 *Ibid.*, 12.

60 Witherspoon, Lectures, 92.

61 See Glen Doris, *Aberdeen and the Abolition of Slavery in the British Empire*, 1770–1833 (University of Aberdeen Dissertation, 2007), 14.

62 James Beattie, 'On the lawfulness and expediency of Slavery, particularly that of the Negroes, written in the year 1788', AUL, MS 30/49/1.

63 *Ibid.*

64 James Beattie, 'Letter to Mrs Montagu, 21 December 1779', AUL, MS 30/1/177.

65 Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* (1802), 406.

the progress of human Knowledge' from state representatives.[66] It concerned twenty-two questions, which included descriptions of historic boundaries, population, natural resources, industries, and defences. Descriptions from state representatives, such as Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* written in 1781, sought to strengthen the Franco-American alliance towards the end of war. Condemning the institution of chattel slavery as immoral would not serve the foreign political interests of the early republic at that critical time.

Like other early American abolitionists, Witherspoon had personal experience of enslaving two people, who worked at his 'Tusculum' country home. His last will and testament suggested an intension to grant manumission after they turned twenty-eight years of age.[67] The circumstances surrounding if or when they were freed remains unclear. He also privately tutored a former slave, John Chavis, at Tusculum in 1792 with an explicit intention to prepare Chavis 'for the better enjoyment of freedom'.[68] This sheds light on why he voted against immediate emancipation in 1790 as chairman of a committee on the abolition of slavery in New Jersey. This particular vote reflected a common sense belief that human bondage would inevitably fade out of practise since it was already illegal to import slaves into the state. Witherspoon had adopted the same gradual approach to abolishing slavery in ecclesiastical politics. A committee tasked with 'overturning' slavery in the Synod of New York and Philadelphia applied what Witherspoon taught as a religious 'duty of those who maintain the rights of humanity…to promote the abolition of slavery'.[69] In a public-facing statement on 28 May 1787, the Synod echoed Witherspoon's philosophy of common sense by

> highly approv[ing] of the general principles, in favor of universal liberty, that prevail in America; and the interest which many of the states have taken in promoting the abolition of slavery. Yet, inasmuch as men introduced into a servile state, to a participation of all the privileges of civil society, without a proper education, and without previous habits of industry, may be, in many respects dangerous to the community. *Therefore*, they earnestly recommend it to all the members belonging to their communion, to give those persons, who are at present held in servitude, such good education as may prepare them for the better enjoyment of freedom…And, finally, they recommend it to all the people under their care, to use the most prudent measures, consistent with the interest and the state of civil society, in parts where they live, to procure, eventually, the *final abolition of slavery in America*.[70]

This statement was an example par excellence of Witherspoon's view of common sense abolitionism.

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66 Robert Forbes, 'Notes on the State of Virginia (1785)' *Encyclopedia Virginia*, *Virginia Humanities*, 7 December 2020, https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/notes-on-the-state-of-virginia-1785/ [Last accessed 10 June 2024]

67 See DeYoung, 'A Fuller Measure of Witherspoon on Slavery', *Princetonians for Free Speech*, 26 January 2023.

68 David Walker Woods, *John Witherspoon* (New York, 1906), 179.

69 *Synod of New York and Philadelphia Minutes*, 28 May 1787. VF BX 8951, 434.

70 *Ibid.*

Legacies of common sense abolitionism

In his opening sermon at the General Assembly of 1789, Witherspoon preached from 1 Cor. iii. 7: 'So then, neither is he the planteth any thing, neither he that watereth: but God that giveth the increase'. The subject of this sermon reflected his consistent commitment to a self-evident belief that God created the human constitution to perceive natural knowledge for a moral purpose. His philosophy of common sense significantly informed American principles of liberty and gradual abolitionism among American Presbyterians.[71] These achievements certainly rivalled the significance of Beattie's contributions to the transatlantic abolitionist movement.

In an early issue of the *Journal of Scottish Thought*, published in 2009, Glen Doris argues that Beattie was too late to significantly impact the slave trade debate.[72] His contributions to the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which was founded in 1787, featured prominently in Richard Anderson's recent large-scale study of historical links to slavery at the University of Aberdeen. This project resulted in an exhibition on 'Legacies of Slavery: Transatlantic Slavery and Aberdeen at the Duncan Rice Library between 27 March to 2 December 2023. Beattie's petitions on behalf of Marischal College in 1788 and 1792 pressured Parliament to 'alleviate the rigours of Negro slavery and prepare the way for its final extirpation in every part of the British Empire'.[73] While animating the British abolitionist movement in Aberdeenshire, Beattie informed the thought of future abolitionists as a professor of moral philosophy. Beattie wrote to Montagu in 1789 that 'I can say with truth, that many of my pupils have gone to the West Indies; and, I trust, have carried my principles along with them, and exemplified those principles in their conduct to their unfortunate brethren'.[74] Like Beattie, the legacy of Witherspoon's philosophy of common sense abolitionism primarily concerned how it was applied by former students in the early republic.

Witherspoon and Beattie advanced an original common sense philosophical approach to abolitionism. However, gradual abolitionism did not age well. Beattie receives praise as one of the earliest Scottish Enlightenment abolitionists while students petition to remove Witherspoon's statue from Princeton. Of course, Beattie did not enslave people of colour while promoting the anti-slavery sentiments and notions of universal liberty, which Witherspoon did in a complicated way. Objections to memorialising a person who enslaved another did not originate at Princeton. Vandals spraypainted Witherspoon's statue with 'slave owner' and 'Black Lives Matter' at the University of West Scotland, Paisley in July 2020. It coincided with the petition to remove Hume's name from a prominent building at the University of Edinburgh. And yet, officials at the University of West Scotland refused to remove their statue. The fate of the other twin at Princeton has not yet been decided. This public debate

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71 On early American abolitionist movements in print, see Moore, *Slavery and the Making of Early American Libraries*, 103–107.

72 See Doris, 'An Abolitionist too late?, 83–97.

73 Quoted in John Hargreaves, *Aberdeenshire to Africa: North East Scots and British Overseas Expansion* (Elsevier, 1982), 14.

74 James Beattie to Mrs Montagu, 25 May 1789. National Library of Scotland, Fettercairn Papers, Box 92, Acc. 4796.

would benefit from a closer scholarly examination of his complex relationship to slavery. While his philosophy of common sense abolitionism might not be worthy of memorialising at Princeton, it explained how he reconciled seemingly contradictory positions of teaching and baptising people of colour, signing the Declaration of Independence, condemning the institution of chattel slavery in the classroom, and voting against immediate abolition in New Jersey while enslaving people of colour. The extent to which common sense abolitionism extended beyond the thought of Beattie and Witherspoon among their students at Marischal College and the College of New Jersey remains fertile grounds for future research. Nevertheless, Witherspoon and Beattie should be associated together in the same intellectual vein of the abolitionist movement on either side of the Atlantic.