

Ancients and Moderns: Paganism and Moral Philosophy

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Often the term ‘Christian Stoicism’ is used to describe the intellectual outlook of some of the main enlightened *literati* in mid-eighteenth century Scotland, such as the historian William Robertson, or the first Regius professor of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres at the University of Edinburgh, Hugh Blair. The attitude of these authors to the sources of classical moral philosophy, however, was often complex and ambivalent. As is clear from Robertson’s writings on the history of classical antiquity, his admiration for the achievements of the ancient Greeks and Romans was tempered by the belief that their systems of morality suffered from serious defects, which were related to their pagan character. It was only with the revelation of the gospel that morality was placed on secure foundations. In this paper I show that Robertson’s beliefs concerning the limitations of pagan moral thought are similar to the views of heterodox Presbyterians like Archibald Campbell in the first half of the eighteenth century. Robertson’s scepticism towards classical paganism was rooted, in particular, in earlier arguments about the limits of natural religion, which, Campbell and others believed, could not prove a truth which was especially important for a proper understanding of morality: the immortality of the human soul and the existence of an afterlife.