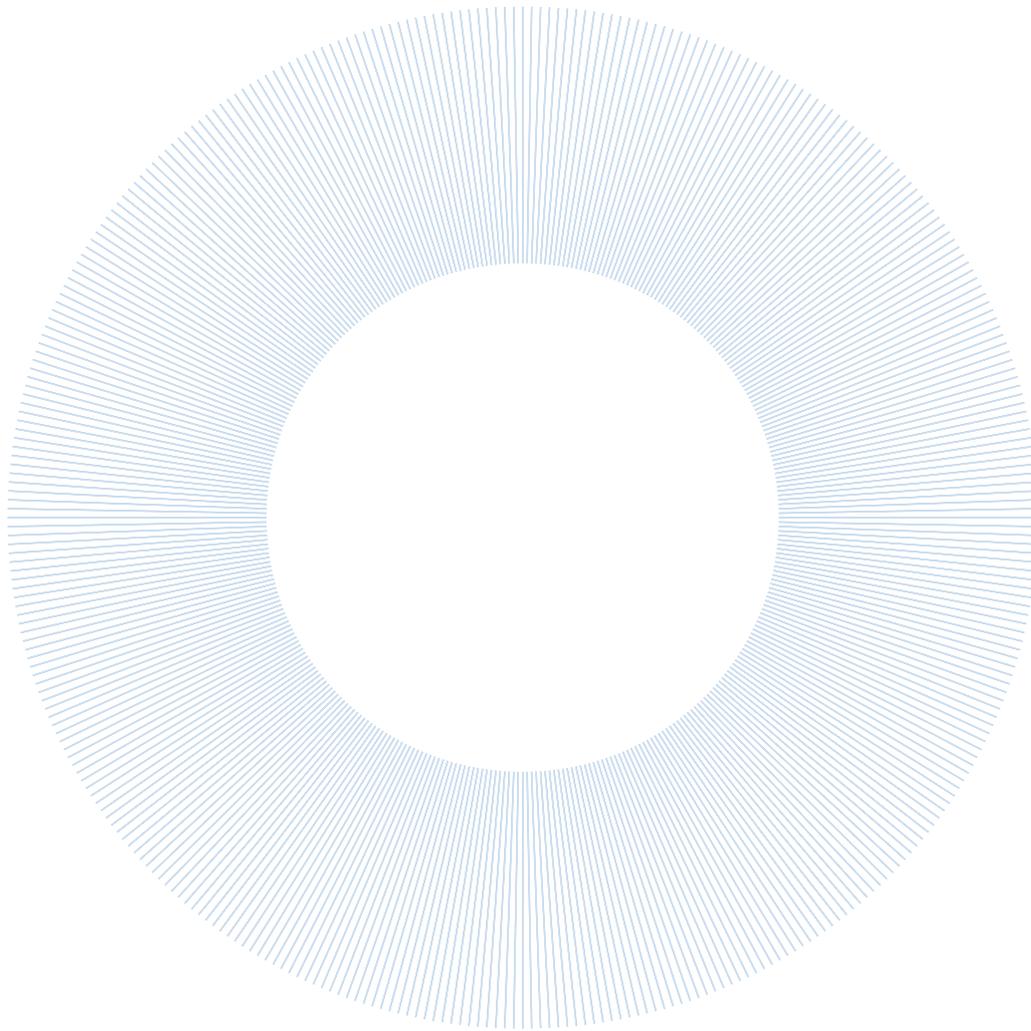


Clarifying the Enlightenment



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CLARIFYING THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The Enlightenment is both a historical period and an instrument of polemic. Tending to become politically engaged, historians have differed over which philosophers best characterize its ideas in what period. The Enlightenment, while it overlapped national borders, seems also to have taken different forms in different European countries. Against this background my work in Durham was to consider criticism of 'the Enlightenment' over the last 75 years, to examine the historical background to that criticism and consider how it reflected continuing political and social tensions in the West. Associations with out-of-control technology and totalitarian politics have been deeply harmful. Further, the metaphor of light, associated with a long and dominant tradition of reason and truth, and deeply embedded in the Enlightenment's self-understanding and reception, has obscured what the Enlightenment was and how to evaluate it.



'The Enlightenment' usually refers to a historical period in the West when the grounds for the assertion of truth shifted from the guarantee of faith to experimental evidence and calculation. The seventeenth-century scientific revolution had suggested the human mind could forge ahead unaided by any divinity and that confidence also permeated the human sciences. As the Enlightenment's leading exponents polemicised with the Church, they began to amass encyclopedic knowledge of the world and to write a self-sufficient story of mankind. An idea of rational progress was born. From Descartes to Diderot, from Hume to Kant, the scope of the new critical enterprise, within variable dates, was vast and varied. It included rationalist and materialist accounts of humanity, empiricist and idealist theories of knowledge. It was never a unified movement, but the face of European societies was transformed. 'The philosophical spirit of the early seventeenth century had been so successfully assimilated that the face of society had changed. [...] The first theories of the Enlightenment started out as celebratory histories of (what would become known as) the Scientific Revolution. Not only was the Enlightenment a development of the anti-Scholastic principles of Bacon, Descartes and others, but it was first and foremost a historical interpretation of the meaning and influence of these principles' (Edelstein, 2010, p. 22).

Nevertheless the Enlightenment has been a remarkably contested achievement, and historians have often needed to take an ideological position in order to tell a coherent and optimistic story. My work in Durham consisted in trying to understand why.

Peter Gay's two-volume history published in 1970 upheld a view of the pursuit of knowledge through reason as the outcome of a tradition stretching back to the Greeks. It argued that the 'pagan' Enlightenment of the eighteenth century rediscovered the traditions of Plato and Aristotle. The continuity was important, which in turn raised sublime expectations of a grandly viewed mankind. Writing in a time of post-war optimism, however, Gay made claims that postmodern thinkers immediately contested. The early work of Jacques Derrida, for instance, was focused on the discontinuity of the Logos and the impossibility of delivering such a coherent account of the story of reason.¹

Jonathan Israel in 2001 championed the Enlightenment as the West's greatest cultural asset. But he discerned two levels of Enlightenment, one moderate and one radical. For him radical Enlightenment was an atheism that embodies tolerance, liberty, equality and democracy: values to which the developed world and its admirers continue to aspire. But there has been widespread criticism of Israel's premising his account of the Enlightenment on the influence of Spinoza, in order to support the argument for atheism. With Spinoza, Israel created a radical counterpart to the moderate Locke, who accepted, as did Voltaire, that there might in the first instance have been a power that created the world we strive to understand. Tensions in present-day discourse between religion and science seem to underlie Israel's bipartite interpretation of the eighteenth-century legacy.

In a comparatively minor but compelling study most recently premised on Kant, Samuel Fleischacker has tried to avoid the need for an a priori commitment on the historian's part to any particular doctrinal content to the Enlightenment by arguing it is a way of holding one's views, set out in the late eighteenth century by Kant, rather than a specific set of views. But here while the premise is attractive, it only accentuates the problem of using a term that is intrinsically vague and politically flexible. In eighteenth-century France when the new sense of intellectual independence from the Church was known as *l'esprit philosophique*, that 'philosophical spirit' was itself 'a floating signifier [...] capable of being affixed to a wide variety of works, initiatives and practices [...] a grab bag of genres [and] ideas [...]; in short 'an extremely elastic concept' (Edelstein, 2010, p. 71). The subsequent term, *le siècle des lumières*, translated into English as '(The) Enlightenment,' and first used around the time of the French Revolution (Edelstein, 2010, p. 15), in one sense only opened up new polemical opportunities.

Since the main battle in France was with the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, to support the 'the Enlightenment' was to be irreligious. Conservative British responses to the French Revolution such as Edmund Burke's were so negative in their influence over establishment thinking that from 1891 until 2010 the Oxford English Dictionary defined the Enlightenment as 'sometimes used [*after Ger. Aufklärung, Aufkläreerei*] to designate the spirit and aims of the French philosophers of the 18th c., or of others whom it is intended to associate with them in the implied charge of shallow and pretentious intellectualism, unreasonable contempt for tradition and authority, etc.'² A serious review in the British press in 2013 asked why another new history of the Enlightenment did not broach 'The Christian Enlightenment' to answer why reason had sapped the moral authority of the Church without suitably replacing it.³ Meanwhile revolutionaries from 1789 to 1917 used atheism to assert a new age of human progress. This ongoing tension explains exactly why Jonathan Israel was moved to draw his distinction between a radical and a moderate Enlightenment. For Israel, reason as the determinant of a radical modern culture could not be a wishy-washy compromise with faith in a divine creator and deference to conservative tradition. It had to be radical human self-determination.

The Enlightenment therefore may be a historical period; and it may also be attributed to specific thinkers, with Gay choosing Locke, Hume and Rousseau, Israel focusing on Spinoza, Fleischacker emphasising Kant, and Isaiah Berlin favouring Locke and Berkeley. But very often it is above all a topic to be moulded, and how you mould it depends on how determinedly you want to assert its atheist credentials, and whether this atheism entails a political vision.

And yet I think criticism of it, fear even, is more profoundly understood in a related, but subtler context. For more than two centuries critics have objected not primarily to the Enlightenment's scientific secularism in contest with organised religious belief, but to the dominance of reason over non-reason in any explanation of the human. The Enlightenment is seen as forcing a larger world into a rationalistic mould, excluding realities that do not fit. This is certainly the

critique of the Enlightenment that has come to the fore in the last 50 years. Renewed interest in the Counter-Enlightenment of such alternative eighteenth-century thinkers as Hamann and Vico has been part of that critique. The Enlightenment as reason, and as European or Western phenomenon, has tyrannized over non-rational human ways for two centuries, critics now would say. Foucault and Derrida, spokesmen for the first two generations of French philosophers after the Second World War, broadly shared this view and their influence has spread widely. I explore Derrida's nuanced position in 'The Sad Rider' (forthcoming). See also Powell (2006, *passim*).

In my view this objection to the Enlightenment needs to be seen in the first instance as French philosophy finally challenging the enormous respect for Descartes, and for Cartesian rationalism, that more or less defined its existence until the Second World War: two long centuries indeed, until the non-rational, anti-scientistic vision of Henri Bergson took hold. But the postmodern response to the Enlightenment had a second aspect that was something different again. It was a response to Hegel. Hegel is not normally seen as an Enlightenment philosopher, but it was his treatment of reason as a suprapersonal and transcendent power inherent in historical change that made his European critics in the second half of the twentieth century lament the triumph of that power over more flexible and variable human values. As reason was applied to material human needs, technology was seen as the negative outcome of the scientific revolution, to be accepted reluctantly, perhaps, but entailing much to lament in terms of the social fabric and the spiritual community. If postmodern rejection of the Enlightenment seems roughly dateable to 1945, it is because European thinkers following Heidegger related out-of-control technology with the German catastrophe. In fact, in the less well-known Russian context, it had already been associated with nineteenth-century attempts to westernize traditional Russian society.⁴ Alexander Solzhenitsyn would see it as the malaise at the heart of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

The more flexible and variable non-rational human values I alluded to just now as the core of the twentieth-century attack on the Enlightenment might be called spiritual, though that term brings its own difficulties. I use the term spiritual here to point to a human complexity unanswered by science and encouraged by mystical and religious speculation.

When the Counter-Enlightenment attacked the Enlightenment for repressing the spiritual, that was not the same as calling it irreligious. But the two attitudes, clearly operative in attacks on the Enlightenment today, are sometimes difficult to distinguish. The human mind, in whose independence and self-sufficiency the eighteenth-century enlighteners once delighted, is diminished in the face of twentieth-century historical catastrophe and ecological disaster; and this negative attitude to the Enlightenment does have a political correlate. The Enlightenment is taken to task for buttressing individualism, and it is associated with capitalism, both negatively understood; and it is reprimanded for encouraging an insensitive use of technology.

But meanwhile there are new generations of 'believers' who take Darwinian science as the rational enemy, who are also 'anti-Enlightenment.' Most recently in the anglophone world the battle over the Enlightenment has appeared to be an extension of the atheism versus faith debate that has pitched evolutionary biologists against their humanist and religious opponents. The Voltaire who famously called upon an enlightened public to crush the power of superstition would find, in fact, that he had new opponents in the same old mould today, desperate to restore a medieval wonder and deference before the powers of the Almighty.

In ongoing opposition to 'the Enlightenment' what is really at stake, in my view, is the definition of the human. It is difficult to be precise about the battle-lines. There are opponents of reason who argue that it is too narrow a calculus to embrace the human. They may judiciously argue

that science has its place, but that a reductionist scientism applied to society is invidious. And they would, in my view, be right. Cultural anti-Darwinists fear Darwinism can be misused. Where some enemies of the Enlightenment and some Darwinists find themselves on the same side, meanwhile, is that they both oppose a rather exalted and mentalist idea of mankind. They oppose in particular how an idealist and essentialist like Kant understood human nature. A statement by Kant's successor Hegel, that 'Man, because he is Spirit, can and must consider himself worthy of everything that is most sublime' (Bloom, 1969, p. vi)⁵ is abhorrent to them in its arrogance. But Enlightenment humanists like the present author welcome a scientific culture that furthers an exceptionalist view of man, and resist pressure from the evolutionists to embrace brother animal.

The collapse of Marxism has also affected the reputation of the Enlightenment. Marxism was the last of the Enlightenment humanisms widely espoused as a revolutionary philosophy in the name of mankind and progress. Marxism was a creed that believed in the nobility of at least some human beings, the proletariat, and the establishment of a rational society which would be maximally in their interest. If the aims of social justice remain, the idea that they belong to a vision of rational universal progress, and that one socio-economic class might be superior in promoting them, seems at the present time to have vanished from the intellectual horizon: such that we might see ourselves as living in a post-Enlightenment age.

I would still make a case for the ongoing achievements of the German Enlightenment. To begin, the German *Aufklärung*, which centred on the impact of Kant's idealism in the last three decades of the eighteenth century, was far less antipathetic to religious sentiment than was the *siècle des lumières*, the Protestant Church being not nearly so strenuous an opponent to free thinking as its Roman relative. The target in the germanophone world was a generalized 'dogma'; never Voltaire's *infâme*. In Kant moreover there was a discernible Christian tinge to his moral thinking which distinguished his idealist view of man from, say, Diderot's materialism and Condillac's sensationalism. He had that high moral expectation of 'man' that Hegel expressed a few years after his death and which, because of the Hegel connection, is both the scourge and the secret delight of postmodern Enlightenment criticism; almost postmodernism's divided reason for being. The culture of *Humanität*, a unique Greek-inspired modern humanism, which dominated the German-speaking lands of Kant's and Hegel's time, was suspended between a critical attitude to knowledge and a feeling that reason could never account for what was most valuable about human life, in terms of dreams, passions and belonging.

Kant's contribution to the German Enlightenment was to present it with a critical guide to how the human mind worked. Kant believed he could explain how the mind acquired and applied concepts, and how these yielded knowledge of the natural world. These concepts were the ideas of the idealist, whose understanding of life was diametrically opposed to the materialist. The human mind as Kant understood it was not just able to apply concepts and build scientific knowledge; it also understood an absolute moral law and had a capacity for imaginative yearning. Kant's definition of reason was much broader than, say, Locke's or Hume's empiricism in England, and, to repeat, his idealism was quite distinct from the materialism of Diderot and the sensationalism of Condillac.

Here then one enters a new difficulty with the whole question of the Enlightenment as a historical period and as an intellectual storehouse. When with reference to what happened in France 50 to 75 years before the German-speaking world from the mid-eighteenth century began to refer to *die Aufklärung*, the term was retranslated into English as 'the Enlightenment' without constraint. Among prominent intellectual critics of the French Enlightenment, perhaps

only Michel Foucault has insisted on referring separately to the *Aufklärung* in its own right and quietly expressing his enthusiasm for it (1977a, p. 52 and passim).⁶

The *Aufklärung* generated fierce opposition in its own terms, as I have noted in passing. J. G. Hamann, the best-known figurehead of the German Counter-Enlightenment, who was Kant's friend and contemporary, could not relinquish the suspicion that imagination, language, genius, expressivity, creativity and passion were ill-served by a dominant culture of reason. And yet one might think that Kant's dearest hope was to achieve over the range of his three critiques a logical-imaginative balance. One might make the case for Hamann's Counter-Enlightenment by saying that whether or not the return of the *infâme* brought with it unclarity, obscurity and muddle, loss of the sacred mattered most. But it is Kant who is the modern philosopher, while Hamann seems more akin to a poet like William Blake.

The most damaging direct attack on the Enlightenment in the twentieth century was set out by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944). Not widely available in German until its reissue in 1969, and not translated into English until 1972, and then as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, not distinguishing the German term, since the last third of the twentieth century it has virtually dictated how (negatively) the Enlightenment should be judged in the present day. In an unwitting extension of Russian spiritual critiques of the West, culminating in seeing the Russian Revolution (and subsequent Stalinism) as the triumph of reason over the body of the motherland, Adorno and Horkheimer associated the *Aufklärung* with Nazism's treatment of human beings as things. Crucial to the 1944 text was the allegation that: 'Die Aufklärung verhält sich zu den Dingen, wie der Diktator zu den Menschen' (1969, p. 15), 'Enlightenment relates to things the way the dictator does to people.' After the war the two German authors bore witness to what the Nazis had done with technology by way of perpetrating a 'final solution' on the Jews. Moreover, the West, which had the atom bomb, seemed to be on the verge of destroying the world.⁷ In no period since the scientific revolution, when the story of the Enlightenment began, was science more feared and less admired, one might observe, as when these two thinkers attacked what for them was essentially the Hegelian, dialectical legacy.⁸

They were close to Heidegger here but also part of a wider upheaval in philosophy. Fear of the damage which reason did to human feeling was Heidegger's basic position, and in the Nazi context it inspired him to equate the Holocaust with a misuse of technology. Heidegger aligned the Shoah, otherwise incomprehensibly and offensively, with the technology which brought about collective farming (and famine) in Soviet Russia (Safranski, 1998, pp. 414, 421). To understand this devastating onslaught on the legacies of the Enlightenment one has to appreciate a world inspired by German idealist philosophy that, from Freiburg to Moscow, had become terrified of 'reason.'

A last, popular assault on the Enlightenment in the twentieth century has questioned its association of truth with light and its privileging of sight as the way to get at that truth. Particularly in France, seeming once more to stem from reaction against the enduring authority of Descartes, who was both a rationalist and a highly visual philosopher, twentieth-century thought mounted serious opposition to 'light' in one particular respect: the prioritizing of vision. Just as the Enlightenment became a negative quantity associated with the suppression of all that the Western idealisation of rational man excluded, so ocularcentrism became a parallel term of reproach. With the nobility of mankind *tout court* cast in doubt, surely the eye should no longer automatically be regarded as 'the noblest of the senses,' as the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid once called it. In fact ocularphobia has not proved an easy cause to mobilize in the name of suppressed truths, not least because of the advantage of vision

to the evolved human being (Dennett, 1995, p. 128).⁹ In the words of a historian engaged in sorting out cultural polemics over eighteenth-century optics, the very issues raised in attacking the 'light' and 'sight' aspects of the Enlightenment seem 'ensnared in metonymy' (Burwick, 1986, p. 52).

'What happens, therefore, when a speaker uses light and dark metaphors? Because of their strong positive and negative associations with survival and developmental motives, such metaphors express intense value judgements and may thus be expected to elicit significant value responses from an audience. When light and dark images are used together in a speech, they indicate and perpetuate the simplistic, two-valued, black-white attitudes which rhetoricians and their audiences seem so often to prefer' (Osborn, 1967, p. 116). With the most recent shifts in the critique of the Enlightenment, 'simplistic, black-and-white attitudes which rhetoricians and their audiences seem so often to prefer' are indeed evident. On the other hand, because the bright light of reason has come to be associated with surveillance (Foucault, 1977b), the critic of the Enlightenment who is now a spokesperson for a subtler, shaded light, and not a dazzling beam, seems likely to persuade us to listen to his contentions, not least because reasoning involving light as truth and truth as power has lost its status quite drastically since the eighteenth century. A tendency with the Enlightenment was for the metaphor of light as truth to be treated as a fact in the real world. A case in point was David Hume, interpreted as saying that 'what has power over us we legitimize theoretically as what is true' (Blumenberg, 1998, p. 22). The observation of the persuasiveness of an old metaphor made real by the forcefulness of a new technology actually instantiating it might be applied equally to Bentham, who with his panoptikon inspired Foucault's meditation on the punitive beam. This elision of a metaphor with the reality of a new material circumstance, and the inclination to call it 'Truth,' surely culminated in Lenin's formulation, 'Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country' (Lenin, 1920).¹⁰ The ocularphobic twentieth century might be seen as directly responding to this annexation of the metaphor of light by totalizing political power; and reacting angrily (Jay, 1993, *passim*) to the divorce of light from freedom (Blumenberg, 1957, p. 171). Hence its counter-attempts to find soft power in the relatively neglected human senses and in the cultural shadows.¹¹

In sum the term Enlightenment in whatever language, and including the term *Aufklärung*, has been at the centre of an unfinished debate over the nature of man and the possibility of creating an ideal society, whether that encourages or represses actual humanity. The Enlightenment, the *Aufklärung* and Counter-Enlightenment combined seem to represent the need for philosophy to debate and account for these human-centred tensions.

The actual content of the Enlightenment as a historical period meanwhile floats free, somewhere containing that critical attitude to knowledge, and that wariness of superstition, without which the West of the eighteenth century would not have seen fit to see itself as a source of light for a better future. Theologically-governed autocracies were the darkness it decided should be left behind.

The term now hovers between an exhausted polemical usefulness and an ability to recall an optimism, based on faith in reason, which remains a benchmark of civilization.



Notes

- ¹ The impossibility of continuity is a pervasive theme in Derrida's attack on the Logos.
- ² I would like to thank James Schmidt of the University of Boston for drawing this to my attention.
- ³ Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment*, reviewed by Jeremy Jennings, *Standpoint*, September 2013.
- ⁴ I discuss this at length in 'Rejecting the View from Descartes' and 'On the Edge of Reason' in *Motherland: A Philosophical History of Russia* (2004).
- ⁵ Bloom, 1969, cited as the epigraph to *Alexandre Kojève* etc.
- ⁶ 'In France the conditions for the exercise of philosophy and political reflection were very different.'
- ⁷ The Preface to the 1944 essay is a tissue of fear in which Cold War tensions, the power of technology and the grip of consumerism are interwoven.
- ⁸ In the 1969 preface to the reissued work the authors grant that many of their previously held views no longer apply, but at the time that the experience of Nazism had so strongly influenced them. But, one might say, the damage to The Enlightenment's reputation was done.
- ⁹ '[...] vision is certainly not a necessity on Earth [...] however [...] it is a very good bet.'
- ¹⁰ 'Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country, since industry cannot be developed without electrification.' 'Our Foreign and Domestic Position and Party Tasks,' Moscow 1920. See also Great Soviet Encyclopedia, third edition, entry on 'ГОЗЛО' [GOELRO], available online.
- ¹¹ Jay (1993) does not to my mind explain this sufficiently.

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Insights

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