

*The Living Enlightenment*

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I'm religious, and when I'm home I'm going to the church every Sunday; it's not something I'm crazy about, but it's nice to believe in something.

—Goran Ivanisevic

The Enlightenment made us what we are today, but there are, as there have been for two centuries, powerful forces trying to undo this secular revolution. We have long been told that the spread of unbelief and the decay of divinely instituted authority culminating in that catastrophe, the French Revolution, were the work of doctrinaire coffee-house politicians armed with plausible slogans and easy solutions. And, it seems, their successors have been doing fatal damage ever since, undermining the social order with their subversive disrespect for time-honored institutions. "It's Rousseau's fault! It's Voltaire's fault!" This familiar cry of counterrevolutionary rage continues to evoke echoes. It squarely makes the Enlightenment responsible for all that had gone wrong in France, and the world, since the *philosophes* became influential opinion makers after mid-eighteenth century.

Before I comment on this critique, a few definitions. The term "Enlightenment" is shorthand for a variegated cultural agenda — a capacious umbrella that provided shelter for a multicolored array of ideas. Stretching over at least three generations from John Locke to the Marquis de Condorcet, embracing vastly different territories from the American colonies to Russia, from Scotland to northern Italy and Portugal, the men — and women — of the Enlightenment were deists, skeptics, atheists, or inventors of a religion within the bounds of reason; they were absolutists, relativists, or liberals in politics; they were libertines, hedonists, or conscience-ridden bourgeois in ethics.

Christian fellow travelers like Alexander Pope or Jonathan Swift, though no *philosophes*, lent external support like so many buttresses; they furthered the good cause by inveighing against religious enthusiasm, which they blamed for inelegant and frightening outbursts of hysteria in the name of piety. In view of this diversity, it is best to visualize the Enlightenment (to repeat a suggestion I made years ago) as a family of men and women of words, science, and action: of editors, civilized journalists, philosophers, poets and novelists, of mathematicians, chemists, and biologists, of public servants and hostesses with advanced views. For all their disagreements, they shared an intellectual perspective. When they bickered, as they were bound to do, they did so conscious that their family quarrels would not last and that in any event it was more important to defeat the common enemy, that belief crucial to the Christian world view, original sin, than to argue about details. Only Jean-Jacques Rousseau would be excluded from this overarching consensus—largely on personal grounds, since he shared most of the *philosophes'* convictions.

What made the *philosophes* into a family was, in a phrase, the critical spirit. Immanuel Kant took pride to be living “in the very age of criticism.” His description bespeaks an unwarranted confidence; the *Zeitgeist* he thought he saw was confined to a minority of highly educated progressive individuals. But in stating as a fact what was largely a wish, Kant tersely summarized the Enlightenment’s goal. And Denis Diderot, in his *Encyclopédie*, that capacious net designed to capture as much cultivated opinion as possible, laid down its rationale: “Facts may be distributed into three classes: the acts of divinity, the phenomena of nature, and the actions of men. The first belong to theology, the second to philosophy, and the last to history properly speaking. All are equally subject to criticism.” *All are equally subject to criticism*—this point is, well, critical.

I need not multiply quotations to confirm that this style of thinking lay at the heart of the *philosophes'* mission. What I

described thirty years ago as the *philosophes'* crusade in behalf of a climate of criticism has been amply documented by others. Hence I may be brief: far from being an age of reason, the Enlightenment was a revolt against rationalism — a rejection of what the *philosophes* ridiculed as those bootless verbal pyrotechnics known as metaphysics. Theory must be wedded to practice, thoughts must be tested in experience and experiments. In short: what was wanted in all fields of human activity was a principled empiricism. As David Hume put it in a famous passage in his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*: “When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”

Ernst Cassirer drew the lessons from such testimony more than half a century ago: the Enlightenment aimed to replace the over-ambitious spirit of systems that had driven the philosophers of the seventeenth century with the systematic spirit of free and fertile inquiry. This antimetaphysical ideal goes far to explain the virtual deification of Isaac Newton during the age of the Enlightenment. Voltaire was not the only one who called him the greatest man who ever lived. And Newton's achievements as a natural scientist, though admirable, indeed unique, were in the *philosophes'* eyes above all splendid proofs of his method — the method that everyone engaged in investigations of any sort ought to follow faithfully: to tame speculation by dependable procedures and to follow the facts wherever they led. T. H. Huxley's moving declaration a century later that we must sit before a fact as a little child could have been the motto of the Enlightenment. The search for a Newton of the mind remained a pressing preoccupation. The *philosophes* never found this genius. But they were willing to wager that

a “science of man” appeared to be not only a most desirable, but a realistic aspiration.

We can easily recite the *philosophes*’ intellectual ancestors from antiquity to the Renaissance and the seventeenth century. We recall that Spinoza had held that we must read the Bible like any other book. We recall Pierre Bayle’s subversive dictionary. But in the sheer vigor they deployed as they trumpeted the benefits of the critical mentality, and in the massiveness of their efforts to make it a reality, the *philosophes* stand alone. Whatever amendments we must make with benefit of hindsight to correct their parochialism, their ideological astigmatism, they achieved a salutary intellectual revolution. It is this brief sketch that provides the basis for the remarks that follow.

We have ample evidence (I shall cite some of it later) that we need enlightenment in our time. Enlightenment by all means, then, but *the* Enlightenment? The indefatigable resistance on the part of churches and the pious to the *philosophes*’ program is a sensible defense: they have only been responding to the unrelenting propaganda of anticlerical and antireligious polemicists of the eighteenth century and their heirs. But secular critics from the right and the left have also offered elaborate reasons for rejecting the *philosophes*’ critical thinking, and it may be useful to offer a rapid survey of the philosophical anti-Enlightenment persuasion.

In doing so, I do not mean to take the self-pitying stance that the history of liberalism has been a long parade of being misunderstood and persecuted. Through the nineteenth century and the twentieth, the Enlightenment has had its grateful, often highly partisan celebrants. Philosophers like Kant, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill; romantic novelists and poets like Stendhal, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron; scientists like Hermann Helmholtz, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud; systematic critics of religion like Karl Marx; and countless others carried its methods and its message into their work and forced it on general aware-

ness. It remains true, though, that the most vociferous detractors of the Enlightenment lost none of their volume with the passage of years.

Certainly not today. It has become common to write obituaries to the Enlightenment project —when someone links the term “project” to “Enlightenment,” the pronouncement that the *philosophes*’ enterprise was a failure is sure to follow. To suggest, then, as I do with my title, that this enterprise is still very much with us, and hint that it should be with us still more, is to highlight the need to separate what is living from what is dead in the Enlightenment. This is a particularly pertinent inquiry because, far from being simply an exercise in intellectual history, it is relevant to current political thinking and social policies that touch us most deeply.

The indictment of the *philosophes* is lengthy and unwieldy, but I may reduce it to two comprehensive, closely related charges: impiety and dogmatism. To the romantics —excepting only some French and a handful of English romantics—the first of these fatal flaws seemed the more unforgivable of the two. The *philosophes*, the argument ran, had labored to disenchant the world and, to its lasting damage, had been largely successful. In 1808, in *The Convention of Cintra*, William Wordsworth denounced “the pestilential philosophisms of France,” exemplified by what he called the “paradoxical reveries of Rousseau, and the flippancies of Voltaire.” The task that the *philosophes*’ irresponsible subversions set these romantics was all too plain: to undo as much as possible what had been done, to restore at least a measure of tradition and faith to the exalted position from which they had been so brutally ejected. In the words of August Wilhelm Schlegel, “the process of depoeticization has lasted long enough; it is high time that air, fire, water, earth be poeticized once again” —and by “poeticized” he meant, of course, a return to Christian humility and Christian doctrine. Nothing would be easier than to multiply these two passages: they are representative of uncounted attacks on the

Enlightenment in the age of Novalis and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Then, by mid-nineteenth century, the second charge, dogmatism, came to the fore, and it has retained its dominance since. True, laments of dangerous irreverence have been kept alive by papal encyclicals against secularism and a never-diminishing supply of arcane faiths and eccentric sects. In 1895, Emile Durkheim spoke with some dismay about “these times of renascent mysticism.” But in the main, adversaries of the *philosophes*’ project have concentrated on what they denounce as a fanatical urge to make things perfect, a need to control others whether they like it or not, a demonic faith in the superior wisdom of reason—their reason—all of this hubris underwritten by a materialistic conception of human nature and its prospects.

In his vigorous and caustic history of the old regime, Hippolyte Taine put this verdict tersely. As Cartesian visionaries too impassioned, too egotistical, too impractical, he charged, the *philosophes* were infatuated with grandiose plans for human regeneration. It made them intolerant in their very campaigns for tolerance, abstract in their very advocacy of concrete reforms. With their perverted classicism, Taine concluded, they had poisoned the French mind and prepared the way for the murderous age that followed: “Brutal force placed itself at the disposal of radical dogma, and . . . radical dogma placed itself at the disposal of brutal force.”

It is all too easy to see why such a rebuke has found lively resonance in this terrible twentieth century. We have had more than our fill of uncompromising idealists. And nothing I am saying today should be taken as an alibi for the utopian who tells his public, as the harsh German saying has it, that if they will not be his brothers, he will smash in their skulls. The allegation raises a serious question: was the Enlightenment the source of political monomania or its adversary?

Eminent among those who have come down on the side of monomania are Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their brilliant, aphoristic, and to my mind perverse *Dialektik der Auf-*



*kl̄Srung* of 1947. It is an odd, in its way fascinating, polemic: as the proponents of what they called critical theory, Horkheimer and Adorno were turning on the very mainspring of their intellectual energy. Many of you are no doubt familiar with their argument, but it is too important to ignore. The Enlightenment, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, was haunted by deadly paradoxes. Committed to the Baconian ideal of mastery over nature to bring in the reign of universal happiness, it necessarily eventuated in the exploitation of the many by the few, resulting in universal misery. Modern industrial-commercial-military civilization, which put the bourgeoisie in the driver's seat, subjected the working classes to its self-centered dominance. "In the service of the present," they write, "Enlightenment transforms itself into a total fraud of the masses."

It is striking how easily the word "lie" comes to the authors' pen. Rationalism as defined by the triumphant bourgeoisie is a gigantic sham. The Enlightenment, that presumed nemesis of myth, was bound to give way to myths of its own; "the Enlightenment," the authors tell us, "is radicalized, mythic anxiety." The reason it championed was instrumental and manipulative, in short, the gateway to unreason. And its much touted preachments in behalf of tolerance, which make total, self-satisfied claims for the "right" way, could only beget intolerance. "Abstraction, the instrument of Enlightenment," to quote them once again, "behaves toward its objects like the destiny whose concept it exterminates: as liquidation." In short, they summarily wind up, "Enlightenment is totalitarian."

At the root of Horkheimer's and Adorno's aversion to the Enlightenment was its so-called totalizing quality, an ugly modern word stigmatizing any claim to absolute knowledge — a claim that haughtily overlooks the knower's particular religious, cultural, political, or neurotic standpoint, which must always compromise objectivity. The *philosophes*, then, were so thoroughly seduced by trust in omnipotent reason — I repeat, in *their* kind of reason —

that they were incapable of condoning error, let alone dissent. And this rigidity encouraged their dogmatic devotees to push whatever program they fancied in ruthless disregard of human costs. The step from totalizing to totalitarianism is only too short.

What are we to make of this critique? The *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, with its dazzling acrobatics, is wholly innocent of empirical material to support its conclusions. Even so, it has had a considerable impact on the debate over the Enlightenment. Perhaps the best-known text to lend backing to the Horkheimer-Adorno thesis, though it emerged from a very different position on the political spectrum, is J. L. Talmon's well-known and equally perverse volume, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*. It portrays — or, rather, caricatures — the *philosophes* as the direct ancestors of the terrorist regimes of the twentieth century. As an intellectual historian, Talmon cannot escape quoting at least some eighteenth-century material, but it lends his case feeble assistance at best. No one can quarrel with Talmon's distaste for twentieth-century totalitarianism, but, hypnotized by it, he seeks its roots in soil far more congenial to its antithesis. As Alfred Cobban noted years ago, Talmon's book has "only incidental references to Montesquieu and Voltaire, none to the articles in the *Encyclopédie*, none to Turgot, only one to Diderot." Instead, Talmon relies on tendentious readings of Baron d'Holbach and Claude-Adrien Helvétius, on outsiders like Morelly and Abbé de Mably, and on the most damaging interpretation he can impose on that rich and elusive thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As we know, Rousseau did advocate forcing people to be free, a chilling proposal that reminds us of the dystopias of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. But he did so in a highly complicated context, and to this Talmon is tone deaf. Nor, for that matter, does Talmon adduce the slightest evidence that Stalin or Hitler or Benito Mussolini took the Enlightenment for a teacher.

In the last few years, philosophers have elaborated the critique of the "Enlightenment project," though in more restrained tones.

In several highly regarded essays, Michael Oakeshott assailed what he called the “disease” of “modern Rationalism” in politics, to his mind a human scourge committed to solving intractable problems with an air of certainty. His catalogue of symptoms documents that he had the Enlightenment in his gun sights: in addition to some crackpot causes like the single tax or a world state, he lists the Declaration of the Rights of Man, open diplomacy, votes for women, the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He finds what he calls the Rationalists’ “ominous interest in education” easy to understand but necessary to defeat. “The modern history of Europe,” he concludes —with an air of certainty —“is littered with the projects of the politics of rationalism.”

In the early 1980s, Alasdair MacIntyre rejoined the troop of those lamenting —or, rather, welcoming —the failure of the Enlightenment project with some pointed chapters in *After Virtue*. “All these writers” — he mentions Diderot, Hume, and Kant — “share in the project of constructing valid arguments which will move from premises concerning human nature as they understand it to be to conclusions about the authority of moral rules and precepts.” Their “Enlightenment project” was doomed to break down because it could never place morality on a secure footing. Interestingly enough, around the same time Richard Rorty’s assessment reached precisely the opposite conclusion: “the rationalist justification of the Enlightenment compromise,” he argues, “has been discredited.” He has the *philosophes*’ theory of human nature in mind, which to him, like all such theories, is a major philosophical error, typical of thinkers thirsting for a foundation on which to build their schemes. In short, if for MacIntyre the Enlightenment project had to collapse because it had no foundation in which to ground its ideals, for Rorty the Enlightenment project had to collapse because it *had* a foundation. Both do agree that, whether it succeeded or failed, the Enlightenment *tried* to be totalizing.

French postmodernist writers have rushed to the aid of the anti-Enlightenment party. Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard,

and their allies have held that if there is one thing the Enlightenment cannot accommodate it is “error.” The heretics holding to it must be expelled or extirpated. Among all these critics, Rorty is particularly interesting. He is an agreeable stylist who has mastered demotic rhetoric and is for that reason good company. But, more intriguing still, cutting as he is about the *philosophes*, he shares their ideals, professing himself a bourgeois liberal. “There is . . . nothing wrong with the hopes of the Enlightenment,” he writes, “the hopes which created the Western democracies.” He even explicitly enlists himself among “the heirs of the Enlightenment.” Yet, as a pragmatist, he feels constrained to reject the *philosophes’* reasoning, even though he finds their aims to be commendable. A critique of his critique may thus prove illuminating.

In one of his essays Rorty criticizes “the Enlightenment’s misguided search for the hidden essences of knowledge and morality,” futile since these essences do not exist. Rorty is disposed to argue that if a policy works, we need not waste valuable time searching for foundations to support it. This is not the place to discuss the merits of pragmatism ; something less portentous yet no less telling is at stake. Has Rorty done justice to the thought he so glibly impeaches? To put it bluntly, he is not really completely at home with the Enlightenment. Hence he has found it easy to set up straw men, and just as easy to knock them down.

Nor do I find it reassuring that he should contradict himself on succeeding pages. On the opening page of his lecture “Solidarity or Objectivity” he writes: “The tradition in Western culture which centers around the notion of the search for Truth, a tradition which runs from the Greek philosophers through the Enlightenment, is the clearest example of the attempt to find a sense in one’s existence by turning away from solidarity to objectivity. The idea of Truth as something to be pursued *for its own sake, not because it will be good for oneself, or for one’s real or imagined community*, is the central theme of this tradition.” Then on the next page Rorty writes that ever since the Enlightenment, “liberal social

thought *has centered around social reform* as made possible by objective knowledge of what human beings are like —not knowledge of what Greeks or Frenchmen or Chinese are like, but of humanity as such.” He then proceeds to dismiss the Enlightenment’s theory of human nature as “ahistorical.”

Obviously, the second statement invalidates the first: the truth for its own sake becomes the truth in the service of humanity. But, worse, the latter, though closer to the Enlightenment’s truth, contains a serious misstatement. In dismantling it, I am reaching for the crux of my argument. The philosophes were both absolutists *and* relativists. They believed on the one hand that there is a universal set of needs, endowments, and defenses that we may properly call “human nature.” On the other hand, they believed that the expression of these needs, endowments, and defenses, the varied forms they take, is spread across a wide spectrum of time and space.

That a fluctuating combination of nature and nurture shapes human conduct is a time-honored commonplace on which everyone can agree. It is when we attempt to fill these sweeping categories with content that controversies arise. I want to contend that precisely what Rorty deplors and MacIntyre rethinks is unavailable, the Enlightenment’s theory of human nature, was a practicable basis for the politics of the *philosophes*—and for politics two centuries after them. Rorty has little to offer on that salient issue, no basis more solid on which to ground his liberalism than to insist that it is nice to be nice, especially when a lot of people think so.

In this context, the Enlightenment historians deserve particular attention. Voltaire, David Hume, and Gibbon secularized historical causation. It is impossible to overstate the epoch-making importance of that plunge into unbelief. To these students of the past, the rise and fall of empires resulted from natural events and human actions rather than the favor or the wrath of God. This meant that they recognized no privileged sanctuaries out of bounds to the critical investigator. The accusation by nineteenth-century

historicists that the philosophical historians of the eighteenth century assimilated the past too closely to their present has some merit. But precisely in insisting on the essential resemblance of ancient Greeks to the modern French, English, or Americans, they laid the foundation for a modern historiography without which no true historical writing would be possible.

The *philosophes'* style of thinking necessarily had practical — which is to say, political — consequences. “Two matters deserve my attention,” Diderot noted in an early work, *La promenade du sceptique*, “and they are precisely the ones you forbid me to discuss. Impose on me silence concerning religion and government, and I’ll have nothing more to say.” He preached on this crucial text all his life. “Everything must be examined,” he asserted in his *Encyclopédie*, “everything must be shaken up, without exception and without circumspection.” No wonder the authorities, in Old Regime France and elsewhere, responded to such subversive disrespect with extreme nervousness.

I have no intention of idealizing the *philosophes*. In speaking of the living Enlightenment, I mean to argue, rather, that its style of thinking, even if realized imperfectly, remains valid. It would be obtuse of me, as well as unhistorical to defend every plank in the *philosophes'* platform. The Enlightenment’s intense practicality was not without its shadow side, tempting some *philosophes* into a certain anti-intellectualism, even Philistinism. But I recall their affection for poetry, their civilized conversation, their literary brilliance. Diderot’s imaginative inventions, Voltaire’s greatly admired tragedies, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s drama criticism, Hume’s elegant essays, and Gibbon’s equally elegant history are persuasive exemplars of a perspective offering something better than the pursuit of mere material satisfactions.

Granted that the *philosophes'* thought was highly aggressive, they justified their partisanship as the only stance possible to writers at war with powers that had dominated European society

for a millennium and more, powers that could still keep them from disseminating their views or could punish them for their publications. Voltaire said flatly that there are times when one must destroy before one can build. As I have noted, the *philosophes* were challenging the idea of original sin that lies at the core of Christianity. They were inventive Davids attacking a resourceful Goliath. Their slingshots included reasoning, critical reading, but — no one should be surprised — ridicule and slander as well.

Did Voltaire really expect that he would defeat *l'infamie* by continually harping on it? It is improbable that he was quite so sanguine. That he should so strongly believe in the value of repetition —as he said repeatedly —suggests that he recognized just how tenaciously people hold to their basic beliefs, just how securely trapped they are in the moral and religious culture in which they have grown up. Indeed, we have depressing documentation all around us to prompt the gloomy thought that even with such reservations, the hopes of the *philosophes* for the eventual effectiveness of enlightened reason were excessive.

The *philosophes* have often been accused of naïve optimism — wrongly so. The much-ridiculed theory of progress with which they have been saddled is far more a nineteenth- than an eighteenth-century fantasy: the Enlightenment produced only one essay by Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot committed to a scheme for the course of progress. And though Condorcet's frequently quoted but rarely read essay on human progress enshrines the theory in its title, it paints the bleakest possible picture of present-day humanity, only hoping against hope for the future. And the still most widely read text of the Enlightenment is Voltaire's *Candide*, which continues to amuse us. It is, as you know, a witty and disillusioned assault on utopianism and a recipe for stoical forbearance under the blows of fate or, at best, a plea for the modest cultivation of limited goals. No doubt the Enlightenment underestimated the foolishness and the beastliness of the human animal. Friedrich Schiller, far from hostile to the *Aufklärung*, once said memorably that

against stupidity the gods themselves contend in vain, and he could have added viciousness to his dictum. But, not being gods, we may as well try to contend with these depressing realities.

If Voltaire were with us, he would deplore the widespread dismissal of the *philosophes* as worse than an irritant. He would find, after all, a good deal of *l'infâme* still to be crushed—find even more, in fact, if he cast his net wider than religion. We have learned to our horror that secular superstitions can be just as deadly as the most fervent sectarian faith. And each report of unearthly beings surrounding and mastering us is just one more proof for the contention that Voltaire's call to battle remains as urgent as it ever was. Untold numbers trust reports of extraterrestrials; some thirty million residents of the United States are reported to be sure that they have seen a ghost. And the scandal of astrology dictating the conduct of powerful politicians remains a vivid memory.

There is more: borrowing from Garry Wills's summary of the situation, I cite some striking testimony. Religious belief in itself is no threat to a living Enlightenment; millions who pray for a sick loved one also call the doctor. Many of those who go to church or synagogue do so for social or cultural reasons, to keep alive a cherished tradition, to fit themselves into a community they trust. And many among them profess a faith sailing so close to the higher criticism that even a Voltaire would feel constrained to do nothing more drastic than smile at them indulgently.

It is rather the prevalence of extravagant beliefs that sustains the point I am making. In the United States, eight out of ten "believe," Wills tells us, that "they will be called before God on Judgment Day to answer for their sins," and the same proportions are convinced that "God still works miracles." A little inconsistently only "seven Americans in ten believe in life after death." Fundamentalists and chiliastic zealots are never in short supply, and apocryphal books, with their colorful apocalyptic predictions,



mean far more to them than the whole of the Old or New Testament. Their favorite texts supply and dramatize their most highly prized fantasies of bliss and catastrophe.

Scholars have been amused by poll results hinting at a remnant of congenital optimism among these American faithful: more people, it seems, believe in heaven than in hell. But there is, of course, nothing funny about these beliefs. They lend picturesque shapes to deeply felt convictions that affect attitudes toward social issues and political behavior. The recent report in the *New York Times* about scores of French people sitting in the lotus position and humming “omm” is a reminder that departures from scientific styles of thinking, or conventional religiosity, are not confined to the United States. And the vendors of the most egregious forms of alternative medicine, though unable to adduce valid verification in its behalf, and contemptuous of demands for such verification, are boosting a modern, highly profitable superstition.

One consequence has been that in the United States at least the center of public opinion has shifted so much away from the Enlightenment’s critical stance that it seems inconceivable for any politician —at least, any politician wanting to be reelected —to propose eliminating the slogan “In God we trust” from our currency or the words “under God” from the pledge of allegiance, even though both, being recent additions, lack the authority of tradition. The effort to dismiss Darwinian biology as a “mere theory,” or to pair it with creationism in the schools, is another symptom of the widespread retreat from the Enlightenment’s critical thinking.

Such facts of our life are disheartening enough. Far more destructive are barbaric regressions across the world, which at their worst amount to primitive, bloodthirsty tribalism. Witnessing them, even from afar, we are likely to agree that Western civilization needs enlightenment more than ever, and that, if it is comatose, it desperately needs to be revived. Nor is my adverb “desperately” overdrawn: recent pleas by Carl Sagan and Stephen Jay

Gould that we see through, and if possible check, contemporary pseudo-science attest that the battle for enlightenment has not been won and stands in some danger of being lost.

This brings me to a final, no less central point, the pertinence of the Enlightenment's view of human nature to our time. I return to the much maligned *philosophe*-historians. Granted, they stressed resemblances among cultures and ages more strongly than we would today, but this is a matter of shading rather than of substance. In their historiographical pronouncements, not as well known as they should be, they made it plain that they saw the human tragicomedy as a spectacle of astonishing diversity. Although human nature remains basically unchanged, wrote Voltaire, different cultures produce "different fruits." All men, he added, "are formed by their age" and "very few rise above the *moeurs* of their day," so that across the centuries such worldly realities as climates and forms of government make for a heady (often distasteful) brew of human nature in action.

The philosophic historians were, if this oxymoron be permitted, professional amateurs. They understood the need to enter the past they were writing about; at times they sound as though they could have taught Ranke. "When I have summoned up antiquity," wrote the Baron de Montesquieu, "I have sought to adopt its spirit, that I might not regard as similar situations that are really different." Speaking of Muslim civilization, Voltaire observed: "Here are manners, customs, facts, so different from everything we are used to that they should show us how varied is the picture of the world, and how much we must be on guard against the habit of judging everything by our customs."

Hume put the tension between the unity of human nature and the diversity of human experience most graphically. "It is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions." He listed ambition,

avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit, mixed “in various degrees, and distributed through society,” as the springs of action that “have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprizes, which have ever been observed among mankind.” Hence, he concluded, “history informs us of nothing new or strange” about motives. At the same time, he affirmed that “mighty revolutions” in human affairs provide the historian with entertainment and surprise him as he sees “the manners, customs, and opinions of the same species susceptible of such prodigious changes in different periods of time.” We may take issue with details in these texts, complain that the practice of Gibbon and his colleagues did not live up to their professions, or that they lacked distance from their European culture. But the Enlightenment, far from promoting what Rorty has called an “ahistorical” view of human nature, did its best, to the limits of its ideological horizons, to historicize it.

The same effort at sensible relativism marks the most nuanced political thinking in the Enlightenment. I adduce my *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist*, published in 1959, a book that, despite Rorty's avid appetite for reading, seems to have escaped his attention. Traditionally, Voltaire's political thought had been seen as an undifferentiated humanitarianism, monotonously reiterated in legal case after case, and filled with a contempt for the *canaille* that led him to advocate what used to be called enlightened despotism. But this simplistic reading of Voltaire's politics misses his sophistication, his sheer appetite for experience. He was the model of what I have just called a sensible relativist: for England, he favored parliamentary government as against royal domination; for France, he opted for centralized state power, opposing the reactionary obstructionism of both the old and the new nobility; for Prussia, Russia, and the Hapsburg empire, all of them encumbered with widespread illiteracy, he took absolute enlightened monarchs to be inescapable. As for the little commonwealth of Geneva, in whose contentious politics he cheerfully meddled in the last decades of

his life, he shifted across the years from a conservative to an extremely liberal attitude on the question of the suffrage, even to the left of that Genevan patriot Rousseau. The criterion governing his differentiated judgments was the political maturity of the population in question. Once he discovered that Geneva's disfranchised poor watchmakers read good books, including presumably his own, he advocated a marked widening of the right to vote. Politics were for him a question less of nature than of nurture, but reforms must work to bring out the best in human nature.

Even after this defense against the massive criticisms the Enlightenment has undergone and continues to undergo, the question remains: has it anything to say to us? The best vantage point for exploring this is to return to the Enlightenment's foundation, to its theory of a fundamentally unchanging human nature. I shall put the matter concisely. The Enlightenment took the giant step of secularizing causation. And by including mind in nature, subjecting its operations to the governance of cause, they laid the groundwork for modern psychology that culminated in the psychoanalytic system of Freud, the Newton of the mind that the Enlightenment had sought in vain. Its campaign to liberate human nature from the guilt-inducing burden of the Fall of Man was a direct corollary to this naturalism. True, the secular super-ego, and Freud's tough-minded theory of the drives striving for gratification and resistant to change, can be quite as troubling as the belief in original sin. But the idea of original innocence enlarged the range of private and public human actions designed to relieve suffering and promoted health and welfare. It is worthwhile in this connection to recall my earlier point that the *philosophes'* optimism was strictly circumscribed, contingent particularly on the ability and willingness to employ all available resources to reduce the evils that humans have done, and are still doing, to themselves.

This requires the intelligent employment of reason, that splendid and vulnerable endowment that sets humans apart from other

animals. And that reason can flourish only if it is free from interference from censors clerical and lay, since it needs elbow room for thought experiments, imaginative play with possibilities, investigations of subjects that have been kept sacred —and an opportunity for telling inconvenient truths. This is not to say —and I have argued this before —that the *philosophes* slighted the passions. In fact, the *philosophes* indicted Christianity not only for its hostility to reason but also for its hostility to passion. Particularly two urges attached to human nature, both under fire through the Christian centuries, found their most enthusiastic support: sensuality and pride. It is bracing to read Diderot on the first and Voltaire debating Blaise Pascal on the second. Indeed, the Enlightenment had supplied the rationale for the pursuit of happiness that the Founding Fathers of the United States singled out as a principal human right.

None of this is an invitation to return to the eighteenth century, to become epigones. Since, in Kant's words, Enlightenment is defined by autonomy, it would be a gross misreading of its message to copy any models, no matter how admirable. In a time like ours, when science is being charged with the sins of technology and the prestige of willful irrationality is rising, the *philosophes'* championship of the critical spirit remains an essential reminder. "Our science is no illusion," wrote Freud in the famous closing sentences of *The Future of an Illusion*. "But it would be an illusion if we sought anywhere else what it cannot give us."

This is a *philosophe's* credo, all too easy to misunderstand. Freud was speaking not of love or aesthetic delight, but, firmly in the tradition of the Enlightenment, of the road to the kind of knowledge that is open to quantification, experiment, and observation. That road is stony and hilly, with unexpected and arduous twists and turns. Compared with it the appeal of obscurantism and the substitution of melodrama for complexity are perfectly understandable; they promise a revival of largely imagined child-like pleasures, the uncertain blessings of na•vetŽ and obedience.

Whether we accept this invitation or fight it depends on what kind of persons we want to be. And to the extent that such decisions are open to choice at all, the Enlightenment remains the intellectual stance of choice.