



Louis Dupr  . *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. xiv + 397 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10032-7; \$27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-11346-4.

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The Enlightenment Revisited

In recent years, the reputation of the Enlightenment has come under heavy fire, as Carl Becker's "heavenly city" has come to be seen less as ushering in a new world of progress than harboring the seeds of a dystopian modernity. Rather than applauding the self-congratulatory advances of the eighteenth century in science, philosophy, and politics, modern commentators have drawn attention to the ways by which new forms of knowledge could be harnessed to limit and constrain individuals and societies, whether through the use of new power-relations predicated upon the "rational" use of force or the technological subjugation of entire peoples. According to this interpretation, the achievements of the West were bittersweet at best since they allowed entrenched hierarchies to replicate themselves throughout the globe, sowing predatory imperialism and capitalism in their wake. By this reading, Enlightenment thinkers who claimed to have discovered "the truth" were merely falling prey to a form of uncritical subjectivity which blinded them to the social and political dangers embedded within their analyses of the human condition. Thus, rather than focusing upon the lofty thinkers populating the eighteenth-century firmament, historians and philosophers have aimed lower and critically examined intellectual movements closer to the ground (or, in some cases, "underground" as in Robert Darnton's insightful examination of the pre-revolutionary French public sphere).

These criticisms sparked by the Frankfurt School and its followers have themselves been challenged, most notably by Juergen Habermas who argues that the Enlightenment should not be seen as a complete entity in and of itself, but rather as an "unfinished project." By this account, the critical efforts of the Enlightenment were not faulty, but rather abandoned before they could come to fruition. Other historians such as Jonathan Israel have more recently called into question the established canon of Enlightenment thinkers, showing in exquisite detail

the influence of Benedict Spinoza's "radical Enlightenment," a movement both earlier than traditional interpretations and also removed from the Anglo-French sphere. Still, in both these and other cases, the goal has not necessarily been to rehabilitate the Enlightenment, but rather help nuance our understanding of its nature and results. In Louis Dupr  's sweeping assessment of the period, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, these tactics are jettisoned in favor of a close reading of the major (and minor) texts of the high Enlightenment that reminds its readers of the wide-ranging scope of topics that fell under the purview of eighteenth-century writers and highlights their contributions to the very possibility of critiquing their actions.

Dupr   begins by stressing that the Enlightenment marked a fundamental shift in how European thinkers understood themselves and their place in the universe. Focusing on the period between 1648 and 1789, he argues that the true achievement of this period was "first and foremost a breakthrough in *critical consciousness*" that placed traditional moral and religious concerns under a new form of "critical examination" (p. xiii). While this would seem to put his position in accord with longstanding interpretations of the Enlightenment as a movement valorizing reason at the expense of faith, Dupr   is not willing to wholeheartedly endorse this position. Although he does acknowledge that rationality played an essential role for these individuals, he is more interested in the variety of ways in which "truth" came to be understood and explained. Rather than falling back upon the familiar distinction between rationalists and empiricists to explain this process, Dupr   utilizes a pair of conceptual oppositions to frame his analysis. First, he suggests that across a host of disciplines, an appreciation for the subjectivity of knowledge came to be a guiding principle, especially when confronted with those seeking objective facts. A second and related theme running through his analysis is the conflict between universal and particu-

lar forms of knowledge, as exemplified by the social and historical writings of the eighteenth century. Taken together, Dupré implicitly claims that the true import of the Enlightenment for questions of faith and human nature may be reduced to considerations of the nature of human knowledge and the role of the individual in its construction.

Philosophical questioning of reality has a long intellectual pedigree that was inherited by Enlightenment thinkers, yet according to Dupré, their conceptualization of this problem marked a dramatic shift with profound repercussions. Prior to the scientific advances of the seventeenth century, rational inquiry concerning truth was guided by the presumption that it could be identified in an objective or ideal form whose meaning was in some sense timeless. Whether expressed in a classical or Christian key, these investigations were grounded in a “rational” belief that the object of their studies existed outside the human sphere, reflecting either the orderly structure of the cosmos or divinity. The revolutionary achievement of the Enlightenment, as described by Dupré, was to redefine reason in such a way that meaning was seen as emanating from human reason itself; rather than seeking to uncover a pre-existing order in nature, the rational mind imposed order upon nature. As a result of this movement, “the subject, now the sole source of meaning, lost all objective content of its own and became a mere instrument for endowing an equally empty nature with a rational structure” (p. 17). This shift toward subjectivity was not limited to scientific thought, but rather informed Enlightenment notions of aesthetics, philosophy, political and social theory, history, and religion.

Tackling each of these fields in turn, Dupré’s survey highlights how the increasing recognition of the individual subject’s ability to define meaning sparked a dramatic re-evaluation of traditional beliefs. Scientifically, this shift accompanied an effort to isolate the ultimate source of “power” within the world. The key thinker in this quest was Isaac Newton, whose thought sparked both mechanical and organic views of nature that shared a belief that the motive force could be located within “substance” itself, rather than depending upon an external source. Culminating in Immanuel Kant’s “Copernican revolution” of the relationship between the knowing subject and nature, Dupré claims that this cosmological shift provided a worldview that broadly influenced Enlightenment thought. In the field of psychology, this perspective initiated a new view of the “self” that placed less emphasis upon rationality and in turn highlighted the importance of the “inner” life, leading him to claim that the Enlightenment should be “described as an age

of *self-consciousness*” (p. 53). As the passions were explored through introspection, the notion of a continuous self was dislodged and replaced by a more contingent sense of identity that was believed to redefine itself constantly. Dupré explains that the downside of this process was the fact that it became “hard to preserve genuine *otherness*,” as the relationship between the self and the subject threatened to collapse (p. 76). These notions of the integrity of the self also influenced aesthetics, as ideals of artistic beauty came to be increasingly governed by subjective notions of “taste.” Dupré traces this shift through the works of Lord Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper), Francis Hutcheson, and Gotthold Lessing, arguing that rather than seeking to “imitate” reality, art came to be seen as primarily performing an “expressive” function that disclosed “pleasure and taste as expressions of an inner truth” (p. 111).

This turn toward subjectivity was not limited to Enlightenment visions of the self, since it also provided the foundation for a reconsideration of the moral and social codes governing interpersonal relationships. Dupré claims that a key turning point was the growing acceptance of the “principle that no moral absolutes exist” (p. 112). In the absence of any objective ethical standards, Enlightenment figures devised at least three responses that sought to guide human behavior, the most powerful of which was the moral sense theory associated with Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. Rejecting the claim that Shaftesbury’s system jettisoned reason in favor of the “natural affections,” Dupré clearly explains how he saw rationality allowing individuals to understand the natural harmony of the universe. Through the recognition of their innate connection with this cosmic order, virtuous actions could be attained. Still, Shaftesbury’s work continued the slide toward subjectivity when he placed “the entire moral weight on the *intention*” since that implied that “goodness is not inherent in the objective deed, but in the deed as intended by the agent” (p. 123). According to Dupré, Enlightenment moral thought culminated with Kant’s synthesis of earlier rationalist theories stressing universal norms and empiricist sensitivities towards personal experiences. In his analysis of Kant’s strategy for reconciling these traditions, Dupré also highlights the second major point of contention during the eighteenth century: the conflict between universal and particular forms of knowledge and meaning.

In his explanation of Enlightenment social theories, Dupré begins with an extended consideration of the notion of “natural law.” Focusing primarily upon John Locke’s use of this concept, with a brief but insightful digression concerning his medieval precursors, Dupré’s

analysis identifies a fundamental shift in how this term was used to describe the relationship between individuals and society. While Enlightenment thinkers continued to stress the role of reason in discovering the content of natural law, he contends that the function of this idea changed as the notion of natural “rights” became more prominent. Rather than reflecting and describing the rational order of the universe, natural law came to incorporate a prescriptive element that granted “each individual equal rights” premised upon their personal understanding of their own rights and duties (p. 159). For Locke and those following in his intellectual footsteps, this emphasis on the individual within civil society was justified through an appeal to abstract, universal reason. In a similar manner, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s grand vision of the social contract appealed to a primitive condition of equality that was to be protected by the full force of civil society.

While Enlightenment figures certainly made sustained appeals to universal principles, Dupré is careful to point out that thinkers approaching the question from a more empiricist position tended to stress the force of local or particular factors. Passing quickly over Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu’s musings concerning contingent historical and geographic factors in the constitution of governments, Dupré rightly emphasizes the crucial role of economic theory in disassociating civil society from the political sphere. Focusing upon Adam Smith’s seminal work, he claims that the growing importance of particular individual needs within society minimize the authority of political order to the point where it “becomes in fact reduced to a social umbrella over interindividual relations” (p. 177). As explained by Dupré, this conceptualization of the value of particular needs was later appropriated by Edmund Burke to justify his organic appeals to local traditions as a source of political meaning. Furthermore, both the universal and particular strands of thought were woven into the historical writing of the eighteenth century, especially the groundbreaking work of Giambattista Vico. In his quest for historical meaning, Vico sought to discern universal truths amid the welter of contingent and variable events of the past. By coupling a providential vision of progress to his appreciation for the uniqueness of national histories, Dupré claims that Vico’s work provided a crucial synthesis of the Enlightenment poles of the universal and the particular that sparked the later theories of Edward Gibbon and Johann Gottfried von Herder.

These concerns for history also found a religious expression during the eighteenth century and Dupré contends that questions of faith were in many ways central

to the Enlightenment. Citing the challenges to Christianity posed by the rise of biblical criticism, scientific rationalism, and the divisions between religious communities, Dupré suggests that these factors began to wear away at the Church’s edifice, but had not yet completely destroyed its foundation. As Enlightenment theologians began to apply new standards of interpretation to religious belief, Dupré detects a strong current of rising subjectivity and a growing concern for questions concerning the scope of the Christian message. Beginning with Spinoza, Dupré stresses the substitution of “a new, subjective principle of exegesis, namely, the intention of the author,” while also questioning whether revelation should be seen as having a universal or particular message (pp. 232-234). Against proponents of deism such as Samuel Clarke, who sought to reconcile reason and faith, Dupré charts the rise of a naturalistic “atheism” that aimed to supplant religious meaning with a philosophically grounded theory of truth and morality. At the same time, Dupré does not limit his analysis to those seeking to undermine faith and takes care to describe the philosophical responses of devout Christians such as Nicolas Malebranche, George Berkeley, and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. In each of these cases, Dupré claims that their primary objection to their contemporaries’ critiques of religion stemmed from their reliance on the “principle of subjectivity,” going so far as to claim that the “absence of genuine *otherness*” was the “most problematic side of Enlightenment philosophy” (pp. 310-311). At the same time, he draws welcome attention to other Christian thinkers, such as Johann Georg Hamann, Francois Fénelon, Jonathan Edwards, and Emanuel Swedenborg, whose work eschewed the intellectual innovations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in favor of preserving continuity with the pre-modern past. Through their insistence upon the symbolic nature of religious thought, specifically the belief that knowledge of the divine could only be expressed through analogy, Dupré argues that in the end religion was strengthened. Rather than trying to reconcile science and religion, the religious community was forced “to seek the proper domain of religion in symbols of transcendence rather than in science” which “compelled it to begin a search for the kind of spiritual depth needed to live in accordance with this insight” (p. 339).

Taken as a whole, Dupré’s study provides a fantastic overview of the philosophical, political, social, and religious thought of a number of major and minor Enlightenment figures. On the whole, this is very useful and gives readers a good sense of the primary texts of these thinkers, although his approach does hold some limita-

tions. For instance, while he nods toward the importance of historical circumstances in shaping concepts and their applications, Dupré harkens back to Arthur Lovejoy in his belief that “ideas possess by their very nature a timeless quality” (p. 5). As a result, his analysis makes little effort to locate the contexts within which these thinkers operated, or the relationship between their innovations and environment. Furthermore, the vast bulk of the individuals examined by Dupré are male, with almost no mention of female Enlightenment figures. While it could be argued that the majority of the more influential eighteenth-century thinkers were male, given the effort he has expended in cataloguing the thought of over one hundred figures, the gender imbalance is a bit surprising. This point aside, the exhaustive nature of Dupré’s

analysis raises another issue: the fact that while his descriptions of the ideas expounded by these thinkers are extremely detailed, the comprehensive nature of his text obscures his larger argument. While he claims that the trends he has identified “have become an essential part of what we are” today, his argument that the Enlightenment provided the “foundation” for modern culture is relatively weak (p. 339). In his introduction and conclusion he does touch on this issue, but throughout body of his text he mostly limits himself to hinting at how these ideas point toward the Romantic era, rather than contemporary society. Still, for those seeking an insightful and comprehensive overview of Enlightenment thought across all levels of society, Dupré’s analysis is an excellent and highly recommended place to begin.

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