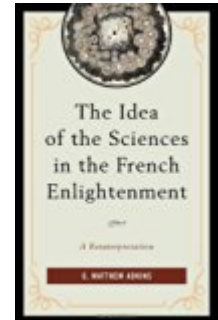


**G. Matthew Adkins.** *The Idea of the Sciences in the French Enlightenment: A Reinterpretation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. 174 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61149-474-7.



**Reviewed by** Jeremy Caradonna

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**Commissioned by** Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

G. Matthew Adkins's *The Idea of the Sciences in the French Enlightenment* is a short, unfocused, and mostly under-stimulating perusal of the sciences in eighteenth-century France. The book takes on the hefty task of figuring out not only the “idea of the sciences” in the Enlightenment, but also “what happened to the idea as the crises of France worsened and precipitated a revolution” (p. 2). The author’s stated goal is to “reinterpret” the Enlightenment’s obsession with natural philosophy and to understand how the latter affected the origins and course of the Revolution—a mammoth task for a book that has less than 150 pages of actual text. It seems to this reviewer, at least, that the author fails to fulfill the essential promises of the introduction.

This book is less of a coherent monograph and more of a loosely related collection of essays. Chapter 1 deals with Samuel Sorbière and the origins of the Academy of Sciences; chapter 2 focuses on Bernard de Fontenelle’s academic eulogies; chapter 3 centers on Turgot, Voltaire, and the “crisis of the monarchy” in the middle decades of the

century; chapter 4 hones in on the career of Condorcet; and chapter 5 purports to focus on the sciences during the French Revolution, but is really just an extension of the author’s discussion of Condorcet’s life. The epilogue is merely a few pages long and does little to tie together the different strands of the blurry argument. The author seems to have cherry-picked particular episodes from the Enlightenment in the hopes of reinterpreting the whole period, but the lasting feeling is having done math on a broken calculator: the correct buttons might be getting pushed, but it is impossible to know what it all adds up to.

Immediately striking here is the fact that Adkins takes an author-centric approach to the Enlightenment, which very much contrasts with the practice- or culture- or institution-based approach of recent historians. Daniel Roche analyzed the academies and their intellectual practices, and provided a prosopography of French academicians; Charles C. Gillispie tried to understand the myriad ways in which the French crown exploited the natural sciences; Margaret Jacob has

looked at Masonic Lodges and the culture of natural knowledge in northern Europe, as has Paula Findlen in the Italian context; and my work has focused on intellectual prize competitions organized by Parisian and provincial academies.[1] In some ways, Adkins's approach is reminiscent of Jonathan I. Israel's recent (and spirited) revival of intellectual history, with its shameless focus on ideas and philosophers (*Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* [2013]). But the difference is that Israel draws on untapped archival resources, offers a truly novel interpretation of the Enlightenment, based on Spinoza and the importance of the Low Countries; and does so in a comprehensive three-volume attack. But even if Israel's books have received heavy scrutiny, one can at least marvel at his learning and his ambitious academic pursuits. The work of Adkins, in contrast, is underwhelming precisely because it treads over such familiar territory without offering much that is new, let alone a complete "reinterpretation" of the sciences in the Enlightenment.

Perhaps the only figure here that might be unfamiliar to historians of the period is Sorbière, the enterprising philosophical organizer who tried to convince the French crown in the mid-seventeenth century that the sciences could provide practical support for the state. He is widely regarded as one of the grandfathers of the Paris Academy of Sciences, but Adkins has difficulty relating this figure to the broader scope of the book. It is in the opening chapter, however, that the author comes the closest to staking out a clearly defined thesis. The argument seems to be that there was a revival in Neostoicism in the years around 1700, which was a philosophical movement that stressed tranquility and constancy in one's own person, but also had implications for social and political life. For Sorbière and other Neostoics, apparently, the pursuit of natural knowledge led to moral advancement. That is, being a man of science made one a better person and improved society and the political sphere. Science was not just

about science but also about cultivation of the self, based on the values once held dear by the ancient Stoics: discipline, clarity, constancy, pragmatism, and harmony.

In theory, this argument makes sense—that natural philosophers saw themselves as morally upstanding creatures and that the sciences possessed sociopolitical utility. In fact, Steven Shapin has made a similar argument in the context of the seventeenth-century Royal Society in *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (1995). The problem is that Adkins never argues his case in any systematic way and the idea of Neostoicism disappears for long stretches of the book. It appears sporadically in the discussion of Fontenelle but is largely absent from the analysis of Turgot, Condorcet, and Voltaire. But if the social and political utility of the sciences is the point of this book, then one must question why the author focuses on members of the Academy of Sciences, who represent but a small portion of intellectual life in this period; on a handful of well-known male savants; and on seemingly random subjects and archival sources.

For instance, it is not clear how Fontenelle's academic eulogies drive home the author's apparent argument. Nor is it clear how Condorcet's or Turgot's student-mentor relationship with Voltaire has anything to do with Neostoicism. It seems like there are much stronger events and practices that the author could have drawn on to make this argument—for instance, the many utility and virtue prizes that existed in the eighteenth century and that allowed savants to sing the praises of a science- and technology-based approach to social improvement. The words "*vertu*" and "*utile*" appear quite frequently in the academic world of the late eighteenth century. Or why not focus on the many pre-1789 educational treatises and experimental schools in this period that sought to create better citizens through scientific knowledge? Or why not take a look at what moralists thought about science? (Many of them,

of course, disagreed that enlightened science improved society and the human mind, but Adkins is not much interested in critiques and conflict.) But as it is, the author gets rather sidetracked by well-worn episodes from the period—for instance, Turgot's travails in Limoges, Condorcet's meetings with the elderly Voltaire, and Condorcet's attempts to enter the French Academy—and loses sight of the bigger stakes in the book. So the dubious sources and lack of focus are two very major issues here.

Likewise, the discussion of the revolutionary period is rather disappointing. The introduction promises some kind of pay off—we are supposed to learn how this moralistic view of science affected the Revolution of 1789. But again, Adkins is fuzzy in his narrative and argumentation, and the discussion of the sciences post-1789 is reduced to a simple retelling of Condorcet's career trajectory. We are reminded that Condorcet was a political pamphleteer and stood for election to the Estates-General. We are told that he was instead elected to the Commune. We are refreshed on his career in the National Assembly, his ill-fated education proposals, his republicanism, his falling out with the Jacobins, his insanely optimistic *Esquisse*, and his tragic death. But we do not learn much about how the Neostoic ideal mentioned much earlier in the text played a role in the Revolution. Moreover, the epilogue is woefully short and inadequate. It attempts to tie things together by linking Condorcet back to Neostoicism, but it fails to offer a satisfactory resolution. Certainly this book was badly in need of a detailed conclusion.

*The Idea of the Sciences* makes a very limited and modest contribution to a well-established historiography. It does not offer the complete reinterpretation that is invoked in the title and the introduction, but it might, however, offer some guidance to students with interest in specific aspects of the history of the Academy of Sciences. Perhaps Adkins can continue to develop his thinking on

Neostoicism to better illuminate his ill-defined aims.

#### Note

[1]. Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des Lumières en province: Académies et académiciens provinciaux, 1680-1789*, 2 vols. (Paris: Mouton, 1978); Charles C. Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France at the End of the Old Regime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Margaret Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1981); Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and Jeremy L. Caradonna, *The Enlightenment in Practice: Academic Prize Contests and Intellectual Culture in France, 1670-1794* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). See also William Clark, Jan Golinski, and Simon Schaffer, eds., *The Sciences in Enlightenment Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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