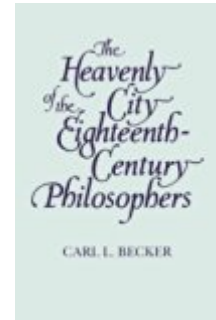




**Carl L. Becker.** *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932. 132 pp. \$14.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-00017-7.



**Reviewed by** Donald K. Pickens

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[Note: This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.]

The depression decade was a time of intellectual crisis. Haunted on the Left and Right by totalitarianism, the democratic center faced a collapsing capitalist order, and the United States and western Europe suffered from an intellectual crisis regarding historical identity and cultural purpose. In 1932, four years into the crisis, Carl Lotus Becker (1873-1945) gave a series of four lectures at Yale University on the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The result was a splendid little book that as a whole has proven more significant than the sum of its parts. It was not a systematic study, it ignored the orthodox standards for historical inquiry, but it is a work of art.

Becker was his usual relaxed self regarding the assignment. "I'm writing four lectures to be given at the Yale Law School on the Storrs Foundation in April. I am trying to do something with

the eighteenth century social & political philosophy: and will entitle the book (lectures will I suppose be published) *The Heavenly City of the Philosophers*. I am enjoying writing it more than I supposed, and I believe it won't be too bad." [1] Indeed. The book was destined to be a classic, both in its historiographical interpretation and as a vital intellectual document generated from the varied despairs of the 1930s. It dismissed progress as the "Grand Illusion." Becker was not attracted to totalitarian systems of thought but would, over the course of his life, return to the democratic hope found in the American natural law tradition, that still-glittering generalization for all American liberals.

Any and every book is part of its author. In Becker's case, his books are expressions of his intellectual pilgrimage, mirroring his life-long concerns over the course of liberalism and democracy's dilemma in dealing with industrialism and the philosophical certainties of nineteenth-century historicism as they melted away with the advent of new scientific theories and a renewed interest in the irrationality of human nature. The

twentieth century was not kind to the idea of progress, but Becker was committed to the study of the history of freedom from a reasoned optimistic position.[2]

Becker was born in the Lincoln Township in Black Hawk County, Iowa, on September 7, 1873 to German-American Lutheran parents. The externals of his life were not dramatic; but his inward voyage was highly emotional and moving. He studied at Cornell College (Iowa), next at the University of Wisconsin with Frederick Jackson Turner and finally with James Harvey Robinson at Columbia. He held teaching positions at Pennsylvania State College, Dartmouth, University of Kansas (where he wrote a highly critical essay about the state), and the University of Minnesota. His final professorship was at Cornell where he remained from 1917 to 1941. He died in 1945. He married and had several children.

The significant part of Becker's intellectual life was his questioning of the traditional historical method that led him to relativism and his famous presidential address, "Every Man His Own Historian" before the American Historical Association. "Facts" were free floating things subject to the writer's textual and political concerns. Ever intellectually restless, after 1936 Becker moved away from relativism and once again explored the natural rights tradition and its contributions to the historical development of civil rights in an emerging democracy. Remaining skeptical, Becker sought some degree of certainty from a better-organized understanding of the American past.

In the context of his life work, *The Heavenly City* is a major transition from his earlier progressivism to skepticism and on to his later renewed support for liberalism. Despite his reputation for defending relativism, Becker was a student of continuity as much as an disciple of change. He was a "lumper" rather than a "splitter," to use J. H. Hexter's classification. This was quite clear in *The Heavenly City*. As Burleigh Wilkins Taylor has noted, ". . .the eighteenth century was to Becker what

the Middle Ages were to the Catholic, a source of solace if not always of inspiration." [3] Becker agreed with Lord Acton that the higher history is the record of the abiding. An examination of the structure of *The Heavenly City* reveals some long-standing consequences of human thought and aspirations. "The chief value of history is that it is an extension of personal memory, and an extension which masses of people can share, so that it becomes, or would ideally become, the memory of a nation, or of humanity." [4] Tested during the course of the twentieth century, this value placed a premium on the human aspect of the past and held up the achievements of mankind against the ideological madness of both the Left and Right.

In this brief book, 132 pages, Becker packed four lectures. The titles are "Climates of Opinion", "The Laws of Nature and of Nature's God", "The New History: Philosophy Teaching by Example", and "The Uses of Posterity." The first lecture laid down the basic assumption of the Enlightenment, that is, that through human reason, humanity could take the measure and master the world. The second lecture noted that a shift in the usage of certain words illustrated the process in which man uncovered the laws of nature for his own benefit. In the third and fourth lectures Becker followed intellectuals of the day as they began to focus on nature, natural law and human perfectibility rather than theology, thereby learning toward hubris. [5] With scholastics of the Middle Ages, the philosophers of the eighteenth century shared a common hope but expressed it in different rhetoric. Both groups "were unwilling or unable to learn anything from history which could not, by some ingenious trick played on the dead, be reconciled with their faith." [6] They both held fast to a revealed body of knowledge which provided for Christians salvation in the world to come and for philosophers salvation in the here and now.

Becker observed that Christianity was a tough institutional and metaphysical nut to crack. It had

staying power and hope in a transcendent value that irradiated the pessimism of the human condition. A steady movement toward the City of God replaced the endless cycles of constant human nature.[7] Ironically, the continuity of Christian aspirations and eighteenth-century utopianism was questioned by Peter Gay in a scholarly session on Becker's book in 1958 at Colgate College. Amidst the criticism and praises of the *Heavenly City*, a general consensus emerged that the book's thesis was sound and that Becker's writing skills smoothed away any rough places in his scholarship. Of the group, Peter Gay gave the most systematically critical comments. It was Gay who later used Becker's thesis in his two masterful volumes on the Enlightenment to insist that the eighteenth century was the birthplace of modern paganism.[8]

As Becker observed in his last lecture, the struggle was not only over the distant past and semi-forgotten events but also over the future and how attitudes toward the future must be shaped for the maximum benefit to humanity. Facing the double challenge of rejecting both the Christian paradise and the golden age of antiquity, eighteenth-century philosophers constructed their own heavenly city. "For the love of God, they substituted love of humanity; for the vicarious atonement, the perfectibility of man through his own efforts; and for the hope of immortality in another world, the hope of living in the memory of future generations." [9] The last point was desire for fame, something that drove the founding fathers of the American revolution to seek higher honors in this world.[10]

As for Becker, he approached the writing of history in the spirit of David Hume -- skeptical, questioning, but finally writing as if the past did exist and that some degree of truth was obtainable. It was a courageous act on Becker's part. For the truth is that for all the cool and ironic structure of Becker's narrative describing the shift of the Christian interpretation of history to the En-

lightenment's, he was describing the intellectual crisis of the 1930s as well as of the eighteenth century. The automatic process of improvement directed by human intelligence, as expressed in John Dewey's creed of instrumentalism, was in 1932 on the defensive. Becker rescued the situation by his annexation of the heavenly city of the philosophers to the City of God which was laid out by the Puritan divines.

It should be noted that this little book with its great insight will be read and ought to be read and cherished as long as historians hunt for insight and truth about the human condition.

[1]. Michael Kammen, ed. *"What's the good of history?" Selected Letters of Carl L. Becker, 1900-1945*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 144.

[2]. Raymond O. Rockwood, ed. *Carl Becker's Heavenly City Revisited* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), xvii.

[3]. Burleigh Wilkins Taylor. *Carl Becker: A Biographical Study in American Intellectual History* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1961), 175.

[4]. Kammen, *"What is the good of history?"*, xxiii.

[5]. Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 47.

[6]. *Ibid.*, 102.

[7]. *Ibid.*, 108.

[8]. See Peter Gay's two masterful volumes for a fuller development of his criticism and thesis: *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Knopf, 1967) and *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. The Science of Freedom* Volume II (New York: Knopf, 1969). Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) provides a first rate overview.

[9]. *Ibid.*, 130.

[10]. Trevor Colbourn, ed. *Fame and the Founding Fathers* (New York: Norton, 1974).

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