Chapter Title: European Philosophy and Enlightenment

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WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN ENLIGHTENMENT?

Briefly put, the European Enlightenment is a spiritual-intellectual fever that spread among the European peoples from about the middle of the eighteenth century. The fever has not yet subsided. In that sense the Enlightenment remains unfinished. It has only begun to manifest some of its secondary symptoms. It has affected the mental, moral, and aesthetic tastes of the people brought under its influence all over the world.

At least five aspects of the European Enlightenment need to be held together in order to provide an elementary understanding of this unique phenomenon that broke out in Europe in the eighteenth century and has managed to shape or misshape the entire world in two centuries. There is no way of understanding the various trends and struggles that we outlined in chapter 1 of this book without some grasp of the nature of the European Enlightenment. We insist on calling it the European Enlightenment (sometimes EE for short) in order to distinguish it from the various other historical instances of enlightenment in other parts of the world (e.g., the great Buddhist Enlightenment in the sixth century BCE in India).

Briefly stated, the five elements are:

1. Some special features of European identity that seem to endure through the centuries and shape the actions of European nations and peoples

2. The particular political and socio-economic conditions of Europe in the eighteenth century and after
3. Religious-philosophical ideas that suddenly sprang up in Europe in the eighteenth century, following the collapse of the metaphysical systems that sought to replace religious philosophy.

4. The new movements in the areas of arts and literature in Europe.

5. The development of modern science and the technology based on it.

We shall discuss some of these aspects that powered the European Enlightenment after some preliminary remarks. (LTB 29–30)

THE PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

Perhaps it was easier for the eighteenth-century thinkers to define the Enlightenment when the process was wily beginning to be clearly noticed. Around 1784, five years before the French Revolution, the discussion gets started in the Berlinische Monatsschrift on the question “Was ist Aufklärung?” The great Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn wrote in the September 1784 issue:

The words Enlightenment, Culture and Education (Aufklärung, Kultur, Bildung—Enlightenment, Culture, Image) are still newcomers in our language (i.e., in German). They belong at present to the language of the elite (Bauchersprache). The common people understand nothing of all this. Should this be taken to mean that the substance of it is still quite new to us? I do not think so. . . . Education, Culture and Enlightenment are modifications of social life, effects of the drives and desires of human beings to better their social existence.¹

Mendelssohn makes the interesting distinction between human enlightenment (Menschenaufklärung) and the citizen’s or bourgeois enlightenment (Bürgeraufklärung). He thinks the two can be in conflict and was not quite ready to start out with the Enlightenment of the whole of humanity. In fact, he and many others thought that it would be disastrous to extend the Enlightenment to the common people; it would make people difficult to control and unavailable to do the dirty work they have to do in order to enable the bourgeoisie to enjoy life. The people would have to wait another sixty years.

before a Marx or an Engels would come along to demand an Arbeiteraufklärung, or “Workers’ Enlightenment.”

Immanuel Kant was a participant in that German debate of 1784. He was already an old man (born 1724) when he published in the same Berlinische Monatsschrift (December 1784) his brief piece “Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” (Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?). His opening words reflect the youth of Kant’s spirit even in his advanced age:

Enlightenment is the coming out of Man from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the lack of will to serve one’s own understanding without direction (Leitung) from another. This is a self-imposed immaturity; if Reason languishes, it is not for lack of understanding, but only of resolve and courage to serve oneself without direction from another. Sapere aude! Dare to think! Think boldly! Wake up! Take courage, to serve your own understanding. This is the motto (Wahlspruch) of the Enlightenment.2

In other words, the Germans saw Enlightenment as the assertion of humanity’s adulthood and its revolt against all external authority outside one’s own understanding. This meant repudiation of the authority structure that had prevailed in medieval Europe, namely the authority of the Church, the tradition of the Christian fathers of the Church, Christian theology and the clergy, as well as a lot of superstitious folklore. For a Protestant like Kant, it meant much more. The authority of the Christian Scriptures had to be repudiated, as well as of all traditional wisdom, including the traditional Protestant understanding of what Christianity is all about. It was indeed a radical move for Kant, rejecting all external authority and seeking to found a system of perceiving the world, as he thought, without presuppositions or external authority, with no reliance whatsoever on any kind of tradition.

It seems in fact that this repudiation of all external authority and of any debt to tradition, and the use of reason without presuppositions, seems to constitute the essence not only of the European Enlightenment but also of what we mean today by the adjective modern when applied to thought or philosophy. To be modern is to be able to think without presuppositions and to reject all authority of tradition. In fact, modernity implies hostility to tradition and authority. Moder-

2. Ibid., 9. English translation is by Paulos Mar Gregorios.
nity is another Enlightenment word, though it seems to have come into existence slightly earlier with the breakup of medieval European society.

From Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant we get a general idea of what they understood by the European Enlightenment. It is an affirmation of human adulthood and autonomy and a rejection of all heteronomy, including the authority of those who claim to represent God. The only reliable authority is one’s own understanding, or reason, if you want to call it that. Mendelssohn helps us to see the elitist character of the European Enlightenment that it was not originally meant for the whole of humanity but was intended mainly for the rising middle class of Europe. Mendelssohn tells us plainly that there can actually be a collision between the human enlightenment and the bourgeois enlightenment, in the essential or nonessential, formal or non-formal decision-making structures of society.

Immanuel Kant, though in many respects an ardent advocate of the principle of equality, did not think that all human beings were entitled to participation in the state. In principle he would say that no citizen can be placed under an obligation that is not also binding on others: all are equal before the law, as he would say in his Reflexionen zur Moralphilosophie. While adhering to this principle with some vehemence, Kant would go on to say that equality is only in terms of equal opportunity for all. This has now become a favorite motto of capitalism. Only those who are truly free and independent and have property or some skill by which he or she can easily make an independent living are entitled to citizenship; even a tutor who lives in someone else’s house and shares his table would not be regarded as independent or worthy of the right to vote.

Only a burgher or citizen can be a co-legislator. Every citizen must be his own master, sui iuris, a legislator laying down his own law. Only the free can legislate, for to submit to a law that he or she does not make would be forfeiting his or her own freedom. Servants, journeymen, apprentices, peasants, handymen, and so on have no citizen’s rights at all until they become independent and have property or profession.

3. The Latin word modernus seems to have been coined in the seventeenth century from modo (“now”) as a parallel to the synonym hodiernus from hodie (“today”).
Lest people misunderstand my attribution of elitism to the European Enlightenment, it may be necessary to refer to another eighteenth-century debate in Germany on the philosophical question: Is it useful to deceive the people? The debate was precisely about the advisability of taking the common people into confidence and letting them share in the benefits of the European Enlightenment. The 1780 debate in the Académie des Sciences et de Belles-lettres de Berlin has been edited for us by W. Krauss. It is clear that the issue was more than merely academic. It roused great passions because the economic interests of the “educated classes” or Gebildete Staende would be imperiled if the common people shared in the benefits of the Enlightenment. Only the educated could be enlightened. Education and enlightenment always go together. (LTB 32–35)

REASON’S UNREASON: TEN QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTIONS OF ENLIGHTENMENT RATIONALITY

Critical rationality obviously accepts the principle that reason should always criticise itself, constantly review its conclusions, and make sure that no unexamined assumptions have crept into the process of reasoning. When it comes, however, to the fundamental method or procedure of critical reason, this principle seems often to get ignored. In this chapter we shall examine a few of these assumptions, and abiding by the very canons of critical rationality, exercise our right to criticise the critical method itself.

These assumptions seem to be the ground on which both Western liberalism and Marxism stand or fall. We will take ten of these fundamental assumptions and examine them. Some may assert that these assumptions are inescapable and therefore should not be questioned at all. We counter this by pointing out that other cultures have based themselves on other assumptions, not that the assumptions of other cultures are intrinsically superior. But acknowledging the fact that there are other assumptions possible that invalidates any claim of inescapability.

The present author, being reasonably at home in the Indian tradition, can only draw instances from that tradition to show some of the

many possible alternatives to the usual Western position. Any Westerner with a modicum of interest in non-Western traditions can easily acquire the competence to compare these different possibilities.

It is even more important that the West makes an effort to acquire that competence. There is no other way for European civilisation to overcome its horizon-confining and reality-distorting parochialism except to open itself—even if it appears difficult at first—to some Asian-African cultures, including the Arab, Indian, and Chinese ways of perceiving and dealing with reality, as well as to its own ancient traditions like the Native American, the Shamanist, the Greek, and the Christian. If we point to some of the inconsistencies in the modern tradition of critical rationality, it is not to demand that the West abandon the critical tradition altogether but only to plead that at least some Western people make a genuine effort to understand the human heritage in a less narrow-minded way. In that process the critical tradition will itself be altered; the fecundity of thought in the West is proverbial; if it exposes itself, it will also absorb, and in that process find some healing; it may also lose some of its cherished false certainties.

The ten assumptions we review here are mutually interconnected: they depend on each other, and it becomes difficult therefore to treat them separately. Any discussion of one of them inescapably touches another or even all of them. But let us first briefly list them, so that we can have a comprehensive look:

1. Naive realism about the nature of reality
2. Truth, concept, idea and proposition
3. Language as a vehicle of truth
4. Epistemology as a guarantor of veracity
5. Conscious reason as the instrument of knowing
6. Causality as explanation
7. Measurement-based science as a way to precise knowledge
8. The universe as self-existent
9. Time and space as given
10. Change, evolution, development, and progress. (LTB 147–48)
The awareness of this other world impinging upon our little time-space cosmos was once very strong in the European tradition; it has been only partially eclipsed, even by such a powerful anti-reality force as the secular Enlightenment with its critical rationality. But the light of the European Enlightenment today shines so bright that it covers up much more than it reveals. It is like vision during the day and during the clear night: we can see many details of our earth very clearly by sunlight, which we would not see by the light of the stars or of the moon at night. But during that process of seeing by sunlight we give up the possibility of seeing the night sky with its galaxies of stars, the other planets, and the moon.

It is only as the daylight fades and the dusk begins to obscure much of the detail we see by day, that the night sky with all its grandeur and splendor comes into view. Our European Enlightenment is something like the daylight, which makes us see many things that we would not have seen without its help; but in that very process of opening up a detailed and clear vision of some things, the daylight, by its very brightness, eclipses the stunningly vast expanse of the billions of galaxies that lie all around. It is too bright a light, this European Enlightenment and its critical rationality. If we lived all twenty-four hours by sunlight we would miss out on most of reality, which “comes to light” only when the sunlight is dimmed, and when even the moon’s reflection of the sunlight is not too forceful.

Our waking consciousness is like the light of the day. During the day, it is possible for us to do many things that we could not do at night, except perhaps with some substitute for daylight: hunting, fishing, sowing, harvesting, and most other of our normal activities except perhaps sleeping, dreaming, and procreation. It is also obvious that we cannot stand that waking kind of consciousness continuously without great strain; we need the night to sleep for at least a few hours in order to be capable of that daylight kind of awareness for one more day.

But suppose there were no night when the sun would go down from our sky and leave us in the dark. Suppose we lived in a flat, plane earth where we had full sunlight all the time, we would not in that situation know for sure that the stars, planets, and our own moon existed; our understanding of the universe would be extremely lim-
ited, and if some scientist were to come along and tell us that there were other planets besides our own orbiting around the sun, or that there were myriads of other suns or stars or galaxies in the grand universe “out there,” we would be a bit skeptical. The night helps us to see much we would have missed otherwise and also to know our own finitude in such a vast universe.

I repeat, the visibility that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Enlightenment has given us has been like the light of the sun. But if we live in that light all the time, we are likely to miss out on much that is going on in the universe, and be ignorant of other dimensions of our own existence. The European Enlightenment has, indeed, brought on the siècle des lumières, the age of the Erklärung, the two or more centuries of bright sunlight. We have discovered so much; we have invented many contraptions; we have made numerous sorties into space and into the nature of things. We claim to know much more than our ancestors did; we can answer many questions they could not; we can do much they never could. But does that mean definitely that they knew less than we do? Not necessarily, because this daylight that blinds us now to other dimensions of reality was not so strong for them. They could see the night sky in a way we can no more. And even if we do not immediately understand what they say they saw, it may be useful for us to listen to them again, especially the wiser among them, the sages and the seers. (LTB 187–89)