The European Enlightenment: Was it Enlightened?

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Deep in the heart of the French countryside of the Jura lies one of the most curious cultural artefacts in the whole of France: la Saline Royale d’Arc-et-Senans. In 1771 the French government appointed the architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux to oversee the conservation and maintenance of the springs, salt-water wells, and buildings in that place.1 Seizing his opportunity, Ledoux converted his commission into founding a whole complex that was to serve as a self-supporting community for two hundred workers. After an initial scheme that proved abortive, he conceived a project of ten major buildings, arranged along the perimeter of a semicircle having a diameter of 768 metres. Midway between the heels of this horseshoe, he placed the House of the Director, flanked by buildings containing the salt-wells underground.

When it is seen for the first time, the development is overwhelming in its monumentality, and one feels a sense of exhilaration in simply walking across this vast enclosed space. I felt fancifully that this might have been how the French would have constructed one of the larger Oxbridge colleges, had they been given the room and the chance to tackle the job from scratch. The whole area is dominated by and looks towards the Director’s building, which is a fine classical edifice framed by a portico of six massive columns and surmounted by a pyramidal pediment. Happily, the Royal Saltworks have survived the ravages of over two hundred years, perhaps because of their remote situation, and as such they constitute one of the outstanding examples of industrial architecture still remaining from the eighteenth century to be found anywhere in Europe.

The creator of this enterprise occupies an important niche in French art history; major buildings by Ledoux are to be found in both Paris and various places in the provinces. More pertinent, however, to my present purposes is that, in the best Enlightenment tradition, the Royal Saltworks were underpinned by a central tenet: the belief that human happiness is to be found in the rational exploitation of nature and the healthy organization of labour. Ledoux’s own views were set down at length in a work published in 1704, entitled L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des mœurs et de la législation. The title is a manifesto in itself: artistic expression is seen as bound up with customs and the laws: in other words, with the whole socio-political fabric. Whereas the mighty chateau at Versailles had proclaimed the glory of the Sun King, buildings have now come to reflect and enhance the quality of collective public life.

I pass from this circular concept to another such, though it was never built: Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon. Bentham’s great vision was described in letters he wrote from Russia in 1786, with a couple of postscripts added five years later.2 The

1 Anthony Vidler, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 75–133.
Panopticon represented his plan to reform the whole prison system. Bentham sought to replace the wretched cells and way of life by what he termed ‘a simple idea in architecture [. . .] a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind’. This would be achieved by the prison warden’s invisible but all-seeing eye. In order to realize this, the author imagined a central building from which the warden, though himself hidden from view, could look directly into any of the cells at any time. Bentham based his project on the principle of social utility, along the lines of his famous maxim: ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’. The scheme was mechanistically efficient, requiring little actual supervision, since the very fact that the prison officer might be watching would be enough of a deterrent. The intention of the plan ran directly contrary to the ancient principle of inflicting vindictive punishment. The cells themselves, though always open to inspection, would enjoy the benefits of light and airiness, and within the system, the prisoner was offered positive incentives to work cooperatively for his own as well as the common good.

Bentham’s Panopticon attracted considerable attention in England during his lifetime. But it acquired its full renown, or more precisely its notoriety, when the French philosopher Michel Foucault highlighted it as key evidence for his case against the Enlightenment. Foucault’s account of the history of judicial punishment since the eighteenth century, _Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison_ (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) provides a description of Bentham’s scheme before going on to denounce what he considers to be its sinister aspects. The prisoner, Foucault argues, is cut off from his fellow-prisoners and has nowhere to hide. The Pantopticon is viewed by Foucault as a machine to separate out the function of seeing from that of being seen. It also introduces an element of normalization, related to reform and not retribution, and thereby eliminates all anomalies.

Here, then, in Foucault’s opinion, is a model of power relations, which can also be made available for use in other institutions, such as schools, hospitals, lunatic asylums, or even clinical laboratories to try out psychological experiments. The Pantopticon therefore becomes a sort of controlled democracy, a transparent edifice open to the whole world. Those in positions of authority are empowered to make up their own rules as to what constitutes deviancy from the norm, whether it be crime, sickness, or insanity. Having done so, they can then observe, supervise, and isolate exactly how they please. Nothing is kept hidden any longer from the gaze of those who rule. In such a way Bentham’s Enlightenment plan ends up as a totally regimented tyranny (Surveiller et punir, pp. 197–229).

This is a formidable indictment. It also carries immediate resonances for our age of the watch-towers over the concentration camps, to name but one horror. The image of the all-seeing eye has the capacity to be deeply disturbing. When one looks back at the Royal Saltworks from this perspective, it is easy to understand how the Director’s central position, observing the whole community, could bear the same frightening potential, however benevolent the claims of the architect. That said, it is an imprudent anachronism to impose late twentieth-century experiences unmodified on eighteenth-century ideas. Both scholarship and a sense of justice...
demand that one should at least start out from the way Ledoux or Bentham actually saw the situation.

Recent studies have in fact gone some way to undermine the plausibility of Foucault’s thesis. Roy Porter finds little evidence that in England, at any rate, any such confinement as Foucault imagines existed at that time (Semple, p. 11). Margaret DeLacy, in her study of prison reform during the period, credits Bentham with a humane desire to moderate hardship, at a time when imprisonment meant filth, starvation, maltreatment, prison hulks and transportation (Semple, pp. 12–13). Bentham himself saw clearly the inherent paradox of being put in gaol: ‘Some forget that a convict in prison is a sensitive being; others, that he is put there for punishment.’4 Hence the need for a balance between ensuring that the inmate’s well-being is protected and that he also be punished. For Bentham punishment was an evil, but a necessary one in terms of social utility, since it seeks to preclude a greater one and also is targeting reform. Ultimately, it is directed less at the guilty than as a public example for society at large (Bozovic, p. 4). So, where Foucault sees transparency as alarming, Bentham regards it as central to the social welfare. The general well-being, indeed, of a democratic state depends, in Bentham’s opinion, on light and clarity, amidst which everyone has the capacity to keep a vigilant eye on those who hold the reins of power (Semple, p. 322).

You may be pardoned at this stage for thinking that my lecture is going to centre on penal reform. Rather, I have chosen these particular examples because they seem to me paradigmatic of the Enlightenment’s predicament in the face of postmodern criticism. Values deemed to be humane in the eighteenth century have become the locus of searching attacks two hundred years later. So I return to the basic question I have posed myself: was the European Enlightenment truly enlightened?

It may be helpful to refer briefly to some of the most trenchant charges laid against the Enlightenment in recent times. It has been blamed, in one form or another, for holding too limited a world-view and for doing so with arrogance. The claim that all men are brothers comes to mean, when deconstructed, all white European men and no women of any kind. Here is a characteristic observation:

The Enlightenment commitment to truth and reason, we can now recognise, has meant historically a single truth and a single rationality, which have conspired in practice to legitimate the subordination of black people, the non-Western world, women [. . .]. None of these groups has any political interest in clinging to the values which have consistently undervalued them. The plurality of the postmodern, by contrast, discredits supremacism on the part of any single group. It celebrates difference of all kinds, but divorces difference from power.5

The Enlightenment’s insistence on rational argument is also assailed for being naive about the nature of reason or for its refusal to assign any place to the affective self. Its claim that human beings can understand nature and make increasing sense of it has led only to brutal exploitation of the world, whether it results in the nuclear bomb, genetic engineering, or global warming. The special status afforded science has, in the view of one contemporary critic, ‘eroded and destroyed local and traditional

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forms of moral and social knowledge; it has [ . . . ] issued in nihilism. Gray separates himself from the postmodernists as such, but is no less hostile to the Enlightenment for that, claiming that it ‘was self-undermining and is now exhausted’ (p. viii).

In the light of such strictures, it is possible now to see with hindsight that the Golden Age of Enlightenment historiography was the inter-war period and stretching perhaps up to about 1970. Societies for Eighteenth-Century Studies continue nowadays to proliferate around the world, which is good to see, but much of their work does not bear upon the Enlightenment, or if it does, is far from enthusiastic about it. In the 1930s, by contrast, many intellectuals from central Europe fled the Nazi menace for Britain or, more often, the United States. Amongst them were such luminaries as the distinguished Diderot scholar Herbert Dieckmann and the philosopher Ernst Cassirer. Cassirer’s comprehensive study Die Philosophie der Aufklärung, published in 1932, remains to this day one of the classic accounts of the movement. The émigré line of scholars continued down as far as Peter Gay, whose mammoth books on the Enlightenment appeared in the late 1960s. These transplanted Europeans joined native Americans such as Ira Wade and Norman Torrey, both of whom were outstanding Enlightenment scholars of their generation. In Italy Franco Venturi, in France Paul Hazard, in England John Spink were but some of the eminent band of commentators who wrote with sympathetic discernment about the period. I can date my own first interest in the Enlightenment to the time when, over fifty years ago in Aberystwyth, I read Kingsley Martin’s comprehensive French Liberal Thought in the Eighteenth Century. These writers broadly shared a reformist view of society. For them, the Enlightenment showed what had been done and might be done again. Cassirer’s work, for instance, though rigorously erudite and meticulous in its precision, was also for him an act of faith.

Such a commitment was, perhaps inevitably, to be challenged as the intellectual climate changed. The first important breach in the walls is generally reckoned to have been the seminal work by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialektik der Aufklärung (1944). Appearing, significantly, towards the end of the Second World War, it argued that the catastrophe was a product of the Enlightenment. Far from being the harbinger of universal freedom and justice, the movement had led to a sterile technological rationality, culminating in an amoral absolutism. Since the Enlightenment method of reasoning was based on the criterion of social utility, it could be manipulated by anyone who had the power to deploy it. This book opened the way to the gravest subsequent accusations against the Enlightenment. Seen in this light, even the Holocaust could be considered to be an exemplary model of efficient organization.

Other critics were soon to follow. Jacques Derrida maintains that the West is duped by its concept of reason, which deludes us into believing that we can achieve a pure communion with the world. This rational certitude is tyrannical; it excludes everything that is unsure or at variance with itself. For Derrida, no meaning can be definitive. All truths are provisional and deferred ad infinitum. Hence Derrida’s clever neologism: différence. Thus deconstructionist readings assume that no one interpretation can be claimed to be superior to any other. Foucault, for his part, was

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more concerned with the problems of power and legitimacy. Every age, in his opinion, is governed by its episteme, the system of thought that is generally acceptable at that particular time. Just so did the horrendous practice of judicial torture give way to the illuminated Panopticon of Bentham’s imagination. Rational discourse, in Foucault’s view, establishes its own arbitrary frontiers of orthodoxy. Like Derrida, he sees it as excluding any notion of alterity, while for Jean-François Lyotard, the postmodern condition requires a sceptical attitude towards all metanarratives (would-be universal truths), and he sees the Enlightenment as falling into that category.

At least some of these criticisms may be thought to have a measure of validity. The belief, especially amongst the more optimistic Enlightenment thinkers such as Condorcet, that the increase in knowledge of nature and humanity would logically lead to greater justice and happiness has been proved a sad casualty of our times. Nor has the world of cyberspace, despite all the vast potential it has opened up for the explosive increase of information, yet had any apparent impact upon the intractable problems in places like the Balkans. Similarly, what the Enlightenment would have called ‘fanaticism’, whether it takes the form of personal horoscopes or of religious fundamentalism, appears little affected by the growth in mass literacy. It must also be admitted that the philosophes were often tempted into assuming that the universal moral norm was that of a well-educated Parisian. By and large, too, they remained fairly complacent about the plight of the poorer classes. No one, for instance, questioned the principle of having domestic servants, who formed a substantial proportion of the total population of Paris.⁸

One might therefore find it easy to succumb to a sceptical despair about the Enlightenment. But, in all the onslaughts by the postmodernists, one aspect strikes me as perversely cheering. What is their target? The Enlightenment. Whether it is claimed to have given rise to Stalinist terror or the Nazi death camps or some other atrocity of our time, whether or not it is now moribund or even as dead as a doornail, the Enlightenment is still held to be responsible for our age. The attackers agree with the defenders about at least one thing: this movement of ideas coincides with the beginning of the modern era. So it remains a primary point of reference, since our world, for better or worse, stems from Enlightenment values.

This seems a useful point of departure. It might also be worthwhile to undertake what the postmodern critics generally neglect to do, which is to look more precisely at the individual thinkers of the time. For it is characteristic of the hostile approach to view the Enlightenment as some kind of undifferentiated totality. Horkheimer and Adorno do not discuss in detail the work of any single eighteenth-century author. John Gray’s Enlightenment’s Wake mentions Voltaire once, Rousseau once, and Diderot twice (in one case erroneously). The vast writings of these three geniuses are ignored. The idea that authors as prolific and diverse as these might contain their own internal tensions and subtle nuances of thought never seems to impinge. When, furthermore, one learns that Spinoza and Leibniz are also accounted to be Enlightenment thinkers (Gray, p. 122), one can but conclude that the term has lost all its generally agreed definition.

I should like to make a brief digression at this point, since it may be relevant to the general ambit of my topic, and it is to express a regret. The leading postmodern critics are not, by and large, littérateurs; they are usually historians or philosophers. Indeed, their sceptical approach has been causing seismic disturbances not only in the field of Enlightenment literature but also amongst historians at large. If postmodernism holds that the only valid discourse is linguistic and that language can only be self-reflexive, what price, then, history itself? For if history is merely a series of narratives, often competing with each other, anything goes. If all texts are of the same intrinsic value, with their true significance endlessly withheld, those, for example, that deny the existence of the Holocaust are as valid as those that affirm it.

There are, fortunately, signs that sanity is winning out in the world of historiography. Richard Evans’s thoughtful book, In Defence of History (London: Granta, 1997) seems a hopeful augury. Evans does not aim to oppose every single point of postmodernist attack. There have even been some gains. In certain respects, for instance, all historians will have to exercise more self-criticism about their possibly unconscious prejudices in areas such as ethnicity or gender. But, given that caveat, it is the historian’s task to strive for as much objectivity as he can. Otherwise, all is lost.

One is encouraged to see a leading British historian taking this line. But what about literary critics? It may be that the present crisis of confidence in the values of the Enlightenment takes its rise in part from the decline in large-scale critical works about the great masters. Wade and Torrey wrote extensively on Voltaire, Spink on Rousseau, and so on. Their scholarship proceeded from a belief in the intrinsic worth of the authors they were discussing. Have such comprehensive accounts of the major writers become outdated? The picture is not entirely bleak, if one thinks, for instance, of the recent five-volume biography of Voltaire under the aegis of René Pomeau, or the large surveys of Rousseau by Raymond Trousson or the late Maurice Cranston. Nevertheless, in the present fashion, valuable enough in itself, for studying wide-ranging themes rather than wide-ranging authors, one is in danger of forgetting the wealth to be found in the texts of those who did most to create the basic outlook of the Enlightenment.

What then may be gained from closer enquiry? I begin almost at the end of the age, with Kant’s Was ist Aufklärung?. It is a curious paradox that whereas the leading writers of the movement were to be found in Paris, the debate about the nature of the Enlightenment was waged most fiercely in Germany, and from as early as 1760. Kant’s essay, a quarter of a century later, came as an answer to the same question, posed by the theologian Zöllner in the Berlinische Monatsschrift in 1783. Zöllner was attacking the secular attitudes he had observed in those who, he claimed, were undermining the basis of morality under the pretext of enlightenment. But when he tried to discover what enlightenment consisted of, he had, he said, failed to find the answer anywhere.9

Kant’s reply followed by some months that of Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn accepted that the concept of enlightenment was still very new in Germany; but he was quite clear in his mind as to what it involved:

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Ich setze allezeit die Bestimmung des Menschen als Maß und Ziel aller unserer Bestrebungen und Bemühungen [. . .] Diesem nach würde die Aufklärung einer Nation sich verhalten, (1) wie die Masse der Erkenntnis (2) deren Wichtigkeit, d.i. Verhältnis zur Bestimmung (a) des Menschen und (b) des Bürgers, (3) deren Verbreitung durch alle Stände, (4) nach Maßgabe ihres Berufs.\textsuperscript{10}

Kant himself responded directly to the question in his opening sentence: ‘Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit. Unmündigkeit ist das Unvermögen, sich seines Verstandes ohne Leitung eines anderen zu bedienen.’ So he takes as his watchword the celebrated remark by Horace: ‘Sapere aude! (Dare to know!)’.\textsuperscript{11} In so doing, Kant establishes epistemology as the vital philosophical factor. Not that he is particularly sanguine about success in the endeavour: he makes a clear-cut distinction between an enlightened age and an age of enlightenment. As he sees it, he was living in the latter but not in the former (p. 6). However, his call to humanity to show the necessary courage if one is to enjoy personal autonomy evinces a lively awareness of the struggle which will still have to be undertaken. As he had put it in his Critique of Pure Reason, no institution should be deemed to occupy a position so extraordinary that it was effectively removed from the sphere of rational debate:

Unser Zeitalter ist das eigentliche Zeitalter der Kritik, der sich alles unterwerfen muß. Religion, durch ihre Heiligkeit, und Gesetzgebung, durch ihre Majestät, wollen sich gemeiniglich derselben entziehen. Aber alsdenn erregen sie gerechten Verdacht wider sich, und können auf unverstellte Achtung nicht Anspruch machen, die die Vernunft nur demjenigen bewilligt, was ihre freie und öffentliche Prüfung hat aushalten können.\textsuperscript{12}

So much for the rationale. What of the diverse attitudes that go to make it up? A key notion, perhaps the most essential of all, was that of tolerance; the idea runs right throughout, from Locke and Bayle to Voltaire’s ardent defence of Calas and beyond. But the most subtle treatment of religious toleration may well be found in Lessing’s masterpiece Nathan der Weise. The dramatist insists upon the polarity between man in nature and cultured man as defined by his loyalties and attachments. But instead of seeking to minimize the religious differences, as would a Voltaire, Lessing sees the Christian, Judaic, and Islamic creeds as all valid in themselves, even though there can be no objective criterion in favour of any religious truth. The three rings symbolizing the religions will remain indistinguishable to human eyes. What counts is secular morality, and a striving towards personal emancipation. In all this the theme of fatherhood plays a central role. But, as Saladin says to Recha near the end of the play:

\begin{quote}
Was brauchst du denn
Der Vater überhaupt? Wenn sie nun sterben?
Bei Zeiten sich nach einem umgesehen,
Der mit um uns die Wette leben will!
\end{quote}

(v.vii.3672)

Lessing here anticipates, in 1779, the concept of maturation that was integral to Kant’s definition of Enlightenment five years later.

\textsuperscript{10} Moses Mendelssohn, Gesammelte Schriften, ed. by Alexander Altmann, 24 vols (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1971–97, VI/1, 115–17.


\textsuperscript{12} Kant, preface to the first edn of Kritik der reinen Vernunft (Werke, II, 13n).
In Lessing's drama the stress is laid once again upon man rather than God. But
not man versus God. Only the most extreme of the materialist philosophers, like
Helvétius and d'Holbach, took up a stance of militant atheism. This insistence on
human values, appreciated so clearly by Moses Mendelssohn, finds trenchant
expression in Diderot's article 'Encyclopédie', where the philosophe sets out the aims
and methods underlying the great Dictionary of which it forms a part: 'L'homme est
le terme unique d'où il faut partir et auquel il faut tout ramener.' Man must be at
the centre of this work, just as he is the only meaningful centre of the universe:
L'univers se tait, le silence et la nuit s'en emparent. Tout se change en une vaste solitude où
les phénomènes inobservés se passent d'une manière obscure et sourde. C'est la présence de
l'homme qui rend l'existence des êtres intéressante.

Here we come to the kernel of the Enlightenment, for there are no hard and fast
dogmas to circumscribe the movement. The devout Anglican Samuel Johnson and
the essentially Lutheran Lessing belong to it quite as much as the anti-Christian
Voltaire and the materialist Diderot. The Enlightenment was less a body of doctrine
than a general outlook, which derived its basic view from the premise that the
natural order is capable of being known and understood by the human mind,
whereas ontological first principles will be for ever unintelligible to us. So, for
example, we need no longer fear the appearance of comets in the heavens, since
they obey fixed laws that can be elucidated by mathematical calculation. On a
larger scale, Newton's discovery of the principle of gravitation underpins the cosmic
assurance of Voltaire. Pope's famous couplet points to Newton's epochal influence:

Nature, and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night,
God said: Let Newton be, and All was Light.13

If physical science has its laws, why not the human mind also? So Locke's Essay
Concerning Human Understanding (1690) became, as one French historian puts it, the
eighteenth century's bedside book.14 Similarly, man in society, too, may become an
object of scientific study. Sociology can be said to begin with Montesquieu,
linguistics and anthropology with Rousseau. Everywhere there is the possibility of
human advancement of knowledge. In this context, the search for happiness and a
higher standard of morality is a major preoccupation. Since mankind is a species
that is susceptible of modification and therefore of improvement, education lies at
the heart of this way of thinking. Enlightenment is seen as a modern phenomenon, at
odds with the forces resistant to change. The enemies of the Encyclopédie specified by
Diderot fit in well with this generalization; they are, he said, the Court, the higher
reaches of the nobility, the Army, the Church, the police, the magistrates, and
fashionable society.15

Diderot famously intended, in the 'Encyclopédie' article, to 'changer la façon
commune de penser'. A similarly reformist outlook prevailed in both Germany and
England, albeit not couched in quite such ambitious terms.16 In Italy, Beccaria
was following the same route. His treatise on crime and punishment, Dei delitti e delle pene

15 Maurice Tourneux, Diderot et Catherine II (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1899), p. 431, quoted in Jacques Proust,
16 The Enlightenment in National Context, ed. by Roy Porter and Mikulâš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge
is virtually an Enlightenment paradigm, and as such found immediate popularity throughout Europe once it had been translated into the universal language of French. Frederick the Great, Catherine the Great, the Empress Maria Theresa, Hume, Bentham, d'Alembert were just some of those who greeted the work with enthusiasm; and Beccaria was lionized when he visited Paris (p. xxvi). Voltaire paid the essay the supreme compliment of writing a full-length Commentaire on it. Beccaria’s approach too typifies the Enlightenment. It combines a passion for justice, especially where the practice of legal torture and the death penalty were concerned, with a coolly rational attitude to penology, corresponding to ‘la massima felicità divisa nel maggior numero’, a phrase destined for renown when Bentham copied it fifty years later.18

In all these enquiries the empiricist method dominates. Where Descartes had worked from aprioristic principles, the philosophes set their face against what they called ‘systems’. Experience, not rules, was to be the starting-point. Anticipating the Kantian view that nothing should be outside the ambit of reasoned debate, Hume demystifies miracles:

Upon the whole […] it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof […] It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature.19

Gibbon was to wreak similar damage, though by more deviously ironic means, as when recounting, in the Decline and Fall, the prodigious events apparently sent by Heaven to support the Emperor Constantine and thereby ensure the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire.20

Such principles being universal, it follows that men of letters should reach beyond their natural borders and link up everywhere with each other. Cosmopolitanism is the ideal. To cite Hume again, man is ‘a creature […] who carries his researches into the most distant regions of the globe’.21 I have already noted how vociferous postmodern critics have been in denouncing this pretension and pointing to the gap between claim and reality. But in doing so, they too are generalizing from a partial view. Voltaire’s concern is far from being solely with European ways, as the most cursory reading of his Essai sur les mœurs will make clear. Confucius is as much of a hero to him as Epicurus and the Stoics.22

Since Voltaire ardently sought to believe in a universal code of justice, he is vulnerable to the postmodern accusation that the Enlightenment wanted to reduce all sense of justice the world over to a Western rationalist concept. That sweeping accusation deserves closer analysis than I have time for here. But, in any event, to deduce that he is a cultural imperialist, in line with Edward Said’s thesis about European writers,23 is to ignore his passionate interest in the cultures of India and

20 The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ed. by David Womersley, 3 vols (London: Allen, 1994), i, 735–42.
21 Essays, Moral, Political and Literary, ed. by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1875), 1,
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China in their own right, or for instance the episode of the black slave in Candide (Chapter 19). Voltaire derives his sense of humanity not from a Eurocentric position but from his view of the general human condition:

La nature dit à tous les hommes: Je vous ai tous fait naître faibles et ignorants, pour végérer quelques minutes sur la terre, et pour l'engraisser de vos cadavres. Puisque vous êtes faibles, secourez-vous; puisque vous êtes ignorants, éclairez-vous et supportez-vous. (xxv, 114)

This does not seem to me all that far removed from the plangent remarks of our contemporary Emmanuel Levinas that ‘in its expression, in its mortality, the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness, separated, in some way, from any whole were my business’. Nor does the Eurocentric thesis entirely hold water for Diderot, as Tony Strugnell has shown in discussing the philosophe’s contributions to Raynal’s Histoire des deux Indes. In identifying himself with the plight of Indians suffering at the hands of their European masters, Diderot respects that heterogeneity of the Other which the postmodernists have too readily assumed to be beyond the possibilities of the Enlightenment mind.

The essential stumbling-block may well lie in the different constructs of Reason in the Enlightenment age as compared with a postmodern world. As I have said, the belief in Reason was on occasion too narrowly exclusive. But to go on from there to disowning reason as a false guide incapable of attaining any truth whatsoever is quite another matter. The philosopher Martin Hollis, after a rigorous critique of the ambiguities attaching to rationality, concludes that none the less, one can and indeed must continue on this trail, however incomplete it may be and uncertain the prospects, in a spirit of what he calls ‘trust-within-reason’. This may fall far short of the expectations of many Enlightenment thinkers. But as there is no defence against fanatical beliefs save through an appeal to pondered thought, this is the best we have. Relativist philosophies, celebrating only diversity and fissiparous alterity, are defenceless against arbitrary forms of oppression. Indeed, the postmodern critique is caught in a self-referential contradiction. To quote Terry Eagleton: ‘If it [postmodernism] rejects the external standpoint of Enlightenment rationality, it shares with the Enlightenment the fundamental trust in the moderately rational nature of human beings.’

David Hume, that most reasonable of philosophers, sums up the dilemma with customary lucidity. In his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion the sceptic Philo gets most of the best lines, and at one point he delivers a devastating attack on human reason, with all its ‘weakness, blindness, and narrow limits’. But his interlocutor Cleanthes is quite untroubled by the onslaught and actually smiling as he replies to Philo: ‘Whether your scepticism be as absolute and sincere as you pretend, we shall learn bye and bye, when the company breaks up. We shall then see, whether you go out at the door or the window; and whether you really doubt, if your body has

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gravity, or can be injured by its fall.' In that dialogic exchange, there is surely something of Hume in both characters.

It would perhaps be overstating the case to claim, as does one critic, that the Enlightenment 'eliminated the sacred from the world'. A more nuanced view was presented by Béatrice Didier at the Bristol International Congress on the Enlightenment in 1991, when she spoke on 'L'art sacré dans l'Encyclopédie'. She charts the shift in thinking by the Encyclopedists, showing that a concern with the divine still survives. This coheres well with the ubiquitous appeal to Nature, often as an ideal, in the eighteenth century; one senses that for most Enlightenment authors, God is not wholly dead. But, even so, there has been a change in mentalités. Mankind's place is now seen as overwhelmingly of this world, and not in some putative other, whether before or after this life. This attitude prevails, even when linked to strong professions of religious faith, as with Samuel Johnson.

The contrast is rather to be made with contemporaries such as Hamann and Blake, who both set aside reason in favour of a world of infinite imagination linked to eternity. This basic difference of world-view is clearly visible in the following observation by the German Romantic writer Fichte: 'Détourne tes regards de tout ce qui t'entoure, vers ton royaume intérieur: voilà la première exigence que la philosophie adresse à ses adeptes. Rien n’a d’importance, qui est en dehors de toi: tu es toi-même le seul problème.'

The critic Jean Raimond, quoting this passage, adds that virtually every great Romantic author would have assented to this injunction, which elevates the Self into an absolute and encourages introspective exploration as the privileged path to transcendence. The Enlightenment, on the contrary, operated in a public sphere, where authors saw the spread of knowledge as their duty, in order to influence opinion.

Such is the outlook of Jürgen Habermas, who sees the importance of communication between writers as affording, then as now, a link across diverse cultures. Habermas, sharing in the present-day disillusionment about Enlightenment optimism, nevertheless asks himself the crucial question: should we hold to those intentions, somewhat battered though they are, or abandon the whole project of modernity? His answer is unambiguous. The Enlightenment is an incomplete enterprise. But, unlike the negativity of postmodernism, it engages with the world, while maintaining modest hopes that human emancipation from fear and superstition may yet continue. Let me conclude with the quiet wisdom of an old friend. Jean Sgard sees the Enlightenment period as both so different from us and yet so close. On the one side we have become sceptical about the larger slogans such as progress, tolerance, human rights, and yet they still matter dearly in those places where oppression, violence, and human contempt still prevail. And when he has his

dark moments, he says, he has a remedy to hand: he reads *Candide* again.\(^{34}\) I do not know of a better counsel.

\(^{34}\) 'Comment peut-on être dix-huitième?', *Œuvres et critiques*, 19 (1994), 20–21.