Enlightenment Rightly Understood

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The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments.
Alfred A. Knopf. 284 pages. $25.00

Recent events could cause one to wonder whether we live in an enlightened age. Only yesterday the answer seemed clear: The end of history was upon us, liberal democracy was spreading abroad, the culture wars were dying down at home, America was using its military power for exclusively humanitarian ends, and the new economy was promising fun-filled work and amazing wealth all around. But that was the 90s. Today partisan rage has reached heights not seen since the 1960s, the economy persists in operating under the same old rules, America finds itself locked in a war with an implacable enemy who rejects the notion central to our liberal and democratic traditions that all men and women by virtue of their common humanity are deserving of respect, and, despite our shared commitment to liberal democracy, substantial segments of the population of our European allies regard the United States as a principal source of danger to world stability. Far from progressing, we seem to be backsliding.

We are not the first among moderns to confront conflicting signals about the spirit of our age. And the answer that Immanuel Kant supplied in the late eighteenth century to the question of whether his was an enlightened era provides a source of instruction to ours. As the Enlightenment flowered throughout Europe, Kant argued that he and his contemporaries did not live in an "enlightened age," but that they did live in "the age of enlightenment." The distinction was necessary because the full moral and political demands of enlightenment had by no means been met. That would require universal enlightenment, or "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity." Maturity, from the moral point of view, consists in the use of reason in all matters of conscience. From the political point of view, maturity consists in government that leaves matters of conscience to the free choice of individuals. The reality, as Kant stressed, was that laziness and cowardice continued to keep most people immature for life, dependent not upon themselves but upon clergy, dogma, and tradition for authoritative guidance concerning their rights and duties. Yet his age, Kant believed, did mark a turning point. For the first time the principle of enlightenment — that all men had an obligation to think for themselves and government had an obligation to protect their freedom to do so — had come into full view and could be seen clearly by reasonable people as binding on all humanity.

At its origins, enlightenment had a progressive thrust because it demanded the overthrow of the old authorities — throne and altar. Yet its purpose was not to overthrow all authorities or the very idea of authority — it did not sanction anarchy or permanent revolution — but rather

to install reason as the one true authority. And, of course, not only in morals and politics. Enlightenment is also inseparable from the rise of modern natural science. The nonhuman physical world, as much as the human world, needed to be placed under the dominion of reason through systematic examination of the laws that govern it. Nevertheless, Kant maintained that religion "is the focal point of enlightenment." This was in part because the state had less interest in taking over the sciences (and the arts). More important, it was "because religious immaturity is the most pernicious and dishonorable variety of all": It involved relinquishing the use of reason in the humanly most important spheres of life. Maturity in the exercise of reason, Kant implied, would foster religious maturity. Yet as reason demanded more respect and more responsibility in moral and political life, it found it increasingly difficult to accord respect and share responsibility with religion.

We can say of our own time what Kant said of his: We live in the age of enlightenment though ours is not an enlightened age. To be sure, there are differences. The tenets of enlightenment are even more widely affirmed in our culture and politics than in Kant's, though of course often betrayed in practice. Moreover, in addition to the forms of immaturity Kant catalogued and beyond the appearance of grave new military threats specific to our era, enlightenment in our age confronts a moral and intellectual challenge that Kant did not contemplate: the postmodern challenge, or the ambition to overthrow the authority of reason itself.

Among a prominent segment of the literary and academic worlds, the idea that the moral life is governed by reason has long been subject to arch skepticism if not outright derision. Reason, postmodern thinkers proclaim, is a construct, rights are an invention, nature is a fiction, and truth is an illusion. Despite these familiar anti-enlightenment precepts, postmodernism regularly betrays its roots in the spirit of enlightenment. For postmodernism's implicit claim is that it has at last shined the light on the reality of reason, rights, nature, and truth. What's more, based on its purportedly superior understanding of the human condition, postmodernism aims to emancipate human beings from dependence on false and degrading beliefs by bringing their arbitrary character to light. On inspection, the postmodern critique of enlightenment turned out to represent a radicalization of the enlightenment quest for individual freedom through the criticism of unjust and unreasonable authority. But is emancipation from the authority of reason reasonable? Or a sturdy ground of freedom?

Certainly not according to the distinguished intellectual historian Gertrude Himmelfarb. The aim of her elegant new study is to "reclaim the Enlightenment." The Enlightenment needs reclaiming not only from its postmodern critics and the temper of our turbulent times, but also from a pronounced tendency among scholars to identify it with the French Enlightenment, the Enlightenment of Voltaire, the philosophes, and the French Revolution. In fact, argues Himmelfarb, the eighteenth century was home to a multiplicity of enlightenments. The most estimable, in her view, was the British Enlightenment along with

its spirited offspring, the American Enlightenment. In comparing the British, the French, and the American Enlightenments, she stresses that all three were constituted by "ideas about reason and religion, liberty and virtue, nature and society." In all three Enlightenments, these "ideas spilled over from philosophers and men of letters to politicians and men of affairs." And all "three Enlightenments represented alternative approaches to modernity, alternative habits of mind and heart, of consciousness and sensibility." But the better balance — the most reasonable understanding of reason and its limitations in relation to religion, of liberty and its link to virtue, and of society and its grounding in human nature — was achieved by the British and American Enlightenments.

Himmelfarb takes issue with the authorities, implicitly including Kant, that reason is the defining feature of Enlightenment. Virtue's role, she contends, has been neglected, and this has impaired appreciation of the British Enlightenment's distinctive contribution, where "it was virtue, rather than reason, that took precedence." Or rather, it was a distinctive interpretation of virtue that took precedence. In contrast to the Aristotelian tradition's austere moral virtues, the British Enlightenment elaborated "the 'social virtues' — compassion, benevolence, sympathy — which, the British philosophers believed, naturally, instinctively, habitually bound people to each other." Here perhaps Himmelfarb overstates her case, because it is only in a restricted sense that the elaboration of the social virtues impelled the British to derogate from the authority of reason. It would be more accurate to say that British thinking, based not on inherited authorities but on their own observation and analysis about human nature and the moral life, led to the conclusion that human beings, both in acting well and in acting badly, tended to be guided more by passions than by reason, a conclusion of reason that a rational society needed to take into account in framing just and effective institutions and laws.

According to Himmelfarb, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) set the tone for the British Enlightenment with his three-volume Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times (1711), which (along with Locke's Second Treatise [1689]) was one of the best-selling works of the eighteenth century. Shaftesbury rejected the traditional view that virtue was grounded in religious faith, and he rejected as well typically modern attempts to reinterpret virtue as an expression of self-interest, sensation, or reason. Instead, he contended that human beings, by nature, possessed a "moral sense." This was not something learned but built in. It predisposed human beings to a "natural affection" for others and for society as a whole. When properly cultivated it received expression in the exercise of the social virtues, which were their own reward for individuals and promoted happiness for society. Although these social virtues did not depend on religious faith, their exercise did lead, in the day-to-day treatment of other human beings, to conduct consistent with religion's teachings.

Not all the major figures in the British Enlightenment were moral philosophers, yet most followed Shaftesbury in giving pride of place to the social virtues. Preeminent among them was Adam Smith (1723-1790), best known today for An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776) but also famous in his time for The Theory of Moral Sentiments

(1759). The political economy of the former was closely connected to the moral philosophy of the latter. For example, a great advantage of the "system of natural liberty" or the free market, Smith stressed, was that it advanced the good of society, particularly that of the least well-off. Nor is this contradicted, as Himmelfarb points out, by Smith's famous pronouncement in the Wealth of Nations that "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest." The greater reliability of self-interest as a motivation in economic relations was perfectly consistent with the reality of the social virtues and their primacy in noneconomic relations. Moreover, it was Smith's attention to the social virtues that led him to deplore the deadening effects of the division of labor and to propose a state-run system of education so that commercial life would lead instead to improvement in workers' skill, dexterity, and judgment.

More controversially, Himmelfarb goes on to argue that Edmund Burke (1729-1797), Smith's "avowed disciple," also deserves a place of honor in the British Enlightenment. Best known for his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), which defends the wisdom embodied in tradition and condemns the French revolutionaries for seeking to remake political society on the basis of abstract theories of political right, Burke is often thought of as a leading figure of the counter-Enlightenment. But, as Himmelfarb observes, though a conservative, he is a conservative defender of liberty. He argued that free-market economics was essential to prosperity while insisting that the institutions and sentiments conserved across the centuries work to keep a commercial society from deteriorating into barbarity. Moreover, in The Sublime and the Beautiful (1774) Burke places the passion of sympathy — by which we enter into the concerns of others, see and feel as they do, and take pain at their suffering — at the center of the moral life. His credentials as an Enlightenment figure are further enhanced by the progressive stands he took on foreign policy. He supported the cause of the American colonists, insisting that England had a duty to respect their rights. And he criticized British policy in India, not because he opposed imperialism but rather because he favored, as Himmelfarb puts it, "a benevolent imperialism — a liberal imperialism, it would later be called — an empire worthy of an enlightened England that would respect the rights of the Indian people and the traditions of an ancient civilization."

To be sure, not all eighteenth-century British thinkers belonged to the social virtues wing of the party of enlightenment. Richard Price, Joseph Priestly, Thomas Paine, and William Goodwin were radical or rational dissenters; they displayed a faith in the power of reason to correct the confusions of moral and political life and to serve as the motive for action more typical of the French. Radical dissent reached its climax in Godwin's An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness (1793) in which skepticism toward religion hardened into the belief that religion had to give way, according to Himmelfarb, to the "sovereignty of reason."

At the same time, the British example shows that enlightenment needn't be seen as diametrically opposed to religion. Most of the outstanding thinkers were deists for whom reason and faith could coexist peacefully and who believed that both mandated the principle of toleration. Moreover, argues Himmelfarb, some explicitly religious thinkers should be considered members in good standing of the distinctly British Enlightenment. She makes the case for John Wesley and Methodism. Focusing on the feeling and experience of faith, Methodists left individuals free to form their own opinion. Insisting only on the desire for salvation of the soul, they prescribed no particular form of worship. Articulating a religious ground for the moral sense, Methodists preached the obligation to relieve the suffering of the poor and the sick.

Nor was it only for the devout that the British Enlightenment flowed readily beyond the realm of ideas. The eighteenth century was also the "age of benevolence" for the British in practice. They formed civil or voluntary associations in abundance. They established clinics and hospitals, reformed prisons and workhouses, cared for orphans, and sought to abolish slavery. Their ambition, Himmelfarb approvingly notes, was not to remake society from the ground up but to improve it.

Himmelfarb devotes considerably less time to the French Enlightenment, both because it is better known and because criticizing what is familiar is more straightforward than reclaiming what has been lost and forgotten. She cites Tocqueville's explanation for why French thinkers more readily succumbed to the romance of reason and its attendant immoderation: Whereas intellectuals in England were closer to and exchanged views with those who governed, intellectuals in France sought to elaborate abstract principles for good governance and did so in complete independence of those who had responsibility to administer the state. The literary expression of their surpassing confidence in reason was the Encyclopedia, which aimed to provide a comprehensive account of human knowledge. Such was the advanced state of understanding, French thinkers believed, that they could conclude without hesitation that religion in all its forms was false. Yet far from creating confusion or consternation, the overthrow of religion, in their view, would provide the opportunity to establish reason as the supreme authority for society.

In what way would reason rule? Generally speaking — Montesquieu (1689–1755), a hero of the American Enlightenment, is the outstanding exception — reason as understood by French Enlightenment thinkers issued in universal laws good for all human beings everywhere. From their point of view, there was no reason in principle that an enlightened despot could not elaborate and administer these universal rules and good reason, given the typically low opinion French Enlightenment thinkers had of the people, for believing that only an enlightened despot could grasp, and govern in accordance with, the dictates of universal reason.

The idea of the general will, developed most memorably by Rousseau (1712–1778) in The Social Contract (1762), explained how the people's higher or best interests could be determined without their input or involvement. Although people err, the general will does not. So better for the more rational to discern it directly, by reflecting on man's nature and the laws and institutions that could perfect it. This would be preferable to getting bogged down with the people whose views about right and wrong, liberty and virtue, and reason and religion were bound to be distorted by passion, interest, and ignorance. The general will represented the principles that the people would embrace if they had the capacity to rise above their limitations and reason clearly. Accordingly, the general will, or the authoritative statement of it by those who presumed to understand its imperatives, typically diverged, often dramatically from what the people believed to be in their interest. Although, as Himmelfarb insists, one cannot blame the French Enlightenment for the brutality of the French Revolution, one ought to observe how the apotheosis of reason, the embrace of enlightened despotism, and the conceit of the general will encourage illiberal and undemocratic tendencies of the sort that received expression in the Revolution's notorious excesses.

The American Enlightenment was more akin to the British than the French. While American thinkers did not provide systematic investigations of them, the social virtues supplied a background assumption about human nature and the moral life against which their thinking about freedom and self-government took place. The problem of liberty lay at the heart of their politics as well as their thinking. Indeed, even more so than in England, theory and practice were united in America. Many of the American Enlightenment's leading lights — Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison — were also among its preeminent statesmen. Their intellectual and political energies converged in the task of establishing for a large commercial republic a constitutional government that was rooted in the sovereignty of the people and capable of protecting individual liberties.

There was no shortage of disputes in eighteenth-century America about how to achieve the goal. It is easy to forget in an era in which the legitimacy and viability of democracy are taken for granted — at least in the West — how widespread were the fears that the American experiment would fall prey to the tendency, vouched for by history, of democracies to degenerate into tyranny or anarchy and the tendency, supported by the preponderance of authorities, of commerce to corrupt morals. The solution, embodied in the Constitution and explained in The Federalist, was to take men as they are, driven in large measure by self-interest but capable of virtue, and design institutions that would contain individual waywardness by pitting self-interest against self-interest and draw forth from the population to represent the people the most gifted and public-spirited citizens. Although the American founders distanced government from responsibility for cultivating religion and virtue, they taught religious toleration. They did so in part as an imperative of reason, in part as a religious obligation, and in part from the conviction that religion was indispensable to the cultivation of that part of virtue on which good government depended.

Himmelfarb refrains from drawing lessons for the present from her exploration of the past. About the closest she comes is to remark that in America it was “a belief in human imperfectability, and the civic and political arrangements deriving from that belief, which sustained the country — a united country — through all the turmoil of its history.” However, had she wished to relax her scholar’s self-discipline and indulge in informed speculation concerning our current predicament, her rich and suggestive historical explorations would have furnished ample opportunity.

For example, she might have observed that the conceit driving the French doctrine of the general will is alive and well in the thinking of those international lawyers who today seek to bind all nations (but especially the United States) on the basis of principles that, despite vigorous disagreement among nations and the absence of consent, possess, the lawyers insist, universal validity and therefore reflect the will of all peoples everywhere. She might also have suggested that the respect for the limits of reason which leads to regard for the wisdom embodied in tradition and the mystery and teachings of religious faith is no less an imperative of reason than it was in the eighteenth century. And, in light of Edmund Burke’s complex career, she might have pursued the thought that because, now as then, circumstances vary and threats to liberty are multifarious, it may well be the better part of wisdom to struggle at home, on the leading edge of the Enlightenment, to conserve freedom’s moral preconditions while seeking progress abroad in the protection of liberty and equality. Although Himmelfarb leaves such speculations to others, her historical labors clarify their pertinence and lay intellectual foundations for their pursuit.