

ELIE KEDOURIE MEMORIAL LECTURE

Two Enlightenments: A Contrast in Social Ethics

GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB

Fellow of the Academy

ELIE KEDOURIE TAUGHT US two profound truths about modern history: the power of ideas and the force of nationality. Nowhere are those principles more germane than in the study of the Enlightenment—or Enlightenments, as I think he would agree.

Not many historians today share Peter Gay's confidence in *the* Enlightenment, an Enlightenment, he admits, that varied among individual thinkers but all of whom belonged to a single family, 'a family of intellectuals united by a single style of thinking'—intellectuals known as *philosophes*.¹ The use of that term, to characterise not only the French but also the British, German, and Italian members of the family, suggests what Gay's volumes amply demonstrate, that the Enlightenment, as he conceives it, was essentially Gallican in spirit. In this respect (although not, perhaps, in others), I share the view of John Pocock, Roy Porter, and others that the Enlightenment was so varied, not only among individuals but among countries, that the singular term is inadequate, and we are better advised to speak of Enlightenments in the plural. I also share their view that there was not only a 'Scottish Enlightenment' (that has always had

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¹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. I, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York, 1975 (1st edn. 1966)), p. x. See also Gay, *The Party of Humanity: Essays in the French Enlightenment* (New York, 1971); Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1971). The criticism of this view of the unity of the Enlightenment was first voiced by Betty Behrens in the *Historical Journal*, 1968.

pride of place among the several national Enlightenments), but also a 'British Enlightenment', comprising the English as well as the Scottish.²

I should like to highlight the differences between the British and French Enlightenments by focusing upon a subject that has not received much attention: the distinctive social ethics in the two traditions. The British did not have *philosophes*; they had 'moral philosophers'. Adam Smith, one remembers, was the 'Professor of Moral Philosophy' at the University of Glasgow, as Francis Hutcheson had been before him and Thomas Reid after him. (There was also a chair of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh, held by Dugald Stewart.) The term 'moral philosopher' applies as well to a variety of other thinkers from Shaftesbury down, who had no such academic title but were engaged in the same philosophical enterprise. John Locke is often regarded as the father of the British Enlightenment. Yet his student, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, has better claim to that title. (Neither, by the way, was Scottish, which makes the emphasis upon the Scottish Enlightenment, and the neglect of the English, all the more dubious.) Shaftesbury's 'Inquiry Concerning Virtue' first appeared in 1699 and was reprinted in 1711 in his two-volume collection of essays, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, which went through ten more editions by the end of the century. It was he who gave currency to the terms that became the key concepts in British philosophical and moral discourse for the whole of the century—'social virtues', 'social affections', 'natural affections', 'moral sense', 'moral sentiments', 'fellow-feeling', 'benevolence', 'sympathy', 'compassion'.

It is significant that the most serious and systematic attack on this philosophy was leveled not at Locke but at Shaftesbury. This was Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, published in 1714, the year after Shaftesbury's death. The subtitle, 'Private Vices, Public Benefits', reads like a manifesto contra-Shaftesbury.³ Society, Mandeville argued, was

² J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. I, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 6–7; Pocock, 'Post-Puritan England and the Problem of the Enlightenment', in *Culture and Politics from Puritanism to the Enlightenment*, ed. P. Zagorin (Berkeley, Calif., 1980), pp. 91 ff; Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York, 2000), pp. xxvii–xxviii (published in Britain under the title *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*); Porter, 'The Enlightenment in England', in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), pp. 1 ff. (The title of this book is in the singular, although the essays give a highly differentiated view of the national Enlightenments.)

³ It has been said that Mandeville had not read Shaftesbury when he published the first edition of the *Fable*. (Introduction to *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. Philip Harth (London, 1970 (repr. of 1723 edn.), p. 32.) But the book has so many echoes of Shaftesbury—in reverse—that this seems improbable. It is unlikely that Mandeville would not have read a book published three years earlier which was so much discussed and praised.

based neither on the ‘friendly qualities and kind affections’ of man’s nature nor on his faculties of ‘reason and self-denial’, but rather on ‘what we call evil in this world, moral as well as natural’. Evil was ‘the grand principle that makes us sociable creatures, the solid basis, the life and support of all trades and employments without exception’.⁴ With a fine display of impartiality, Mandeville applied this jaundiced view of human nature to rich and poor alike. But it was to the poor that it had particular pertinence:

Everybody knows that there is a vast number of journeymen weavers, tailors, clothworkers, and twenty other handicrafts, who, if by four days labour in a week they can maintain themselves, will hardly be persuaded to work the fifth; and that there are thousands of labouring men of all sorts, who will, though they can hardly subsist, put themselves to fifty inconveniences, disoblige their master, pinch their bellies, and run in debt, to make holidays. When men show such an extraordinary proclivity to idleness and pleasure, what reason have we to think that they would ever work, unless they were obliged to it by immediate necessity?⁵

In the second edition of the *Fable* published nine years later, Mandeville added a critique of the charity schools that had become so numerous—schools for pauper children and orphans, who were fed and clothed, taught to read (and sometimes write), and then sent out to serve as apprentices or servants. (There were 1,500 such schools at the time with an enrolment of 28,000.) Mandeville identified the main culprit responsible for those schools as that ‘noble writer’, Lord Shaftesbury, who ‘fancies that as man is made for society, so he ought to be born with a kind of affection to the whole of which he is a part, and a propensity to seek the welfare of it’.⁶ Mandeville professed to have no objection to charity as such, but he was adamantly opposed to charity inspired, as he said the charity schools were, by pity or compassion, which had the effect of encouraging the children in their proclivity to sloth and vice and incapacitating them for a life of poverty and hard work.

The *Fable* profoundly shocked contemporaries, provoking a frenzy of attacks culminating in a ruling handed down by the grand jury of Middlesex condemning it as a ‘public nuisance’. Joining in the near universal condemnation of Mandeville were most of the eighteenth century greats—Bishop Berkeley, Francis Hutcheson, Edward Gibbon,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 370. (Here and in other quotations from this period, I have modernised the capitalisation, punctuation, and spelling.)

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

Adam Smith. It was Smith who condemned Mandeville's philosophy as 'licentious' and 'wholly pernicious'.⁷

Mandeville's was a spirited but futile attempt to abort the moral philosophy that was to be a distinctive feature of the British Enlightenment, a philosophy in which compassion, not self-interest or even reason, played the larger part. In this respect, the Enlightenment was a repudiation of Locke as well as Hobbes, both of whom broke with the natural law tradition by positing a state of nature that was pre-social and pre-political, thus denying the social, political—and moral—character of man. Unlike Locke, who opened his *Essay on Human Understanding* by proclaiming that there are 'no innate practical principles' of morality or justice, the moral philosophers of the eighteenth century insisted upon just such principles. Thus where Locke looked to education to inculcate in children the sentiment of 'humanity', 'benignity', or 'compassion',⁸ Shaftesbury rooted that sentiment in nature and instinct rather than education or reason: 'To compassionate, i.e., to join with in passion. . . . To commiserate, i.e., to join with in misery. . . . This in one order of life is right and good; nothing more harmonious; and to be without this, or not to feel this, is unnatural, horrid, immane [monstrous].'⁹

Compassion had an ancient lineage in both Judaism and Christianity. The great innovation of the British Enlightenment was to convert a religious virtue into a secular one, to transform what had been a duty into a 'passion', and to bring compassion into the sphere of public policy. The other moral philosophers qualified Shaftesbury's teachings in one respect or another, but they agreed that the 'social virtues' derived from a sense or sentiment that was innate in human nature.¹⁰ They did not deny reason; they were by no means irrationalists. But they gave reason a secondary, an instrumental role. Francis Hutcheson, who first enunciated the principle, 'the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers', rooted it in a 'moral sense' that is 'antecedent to instruction' because it is universal

⁷ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in *Adam Smith's Moral and Political Philosophy*, ed. Herbert W. Schneider (New York, 1970 (reprint of the last edn. revised by Smith, 1790)), pp. 41, 43. (This section originally appeared at the end of the book.)

⁸ See Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1690), especially the discussion of why children should be taught not to be cruel to animals.

⁹ *The Life, Unpublished Letters and Philosophical Regimen of Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury*, ed. Benjamin Rand (1900), p. 158.

¹⁰ For a discussion of some of the 'fault lines within Scottish moral philosophy', see John Robertson, 'The Scottish Contribution to the Enlightenment', in *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation*, ed. Paul Wood (Rochester, NY, 2000), pp. 49 and *passim*; and Christopher J. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1997), pp. 156–66.

in all men.¹¹ Bishop Butler delivered two sermons on ‘Compassion’, in which he argued that ‘reason alone . . . is not in reality a sufficient motive of virtue in such a creature as man’; only when it was ‘joined with those affections which God has impressed upon his heart’ did it inspire virtue: ‘Compassion is a call, a demand of nature, to relieve the unhappy, as hunger is a natural call for food’—the ‘unhappy’ including the ‘indigent and distressed’.¹² Thomas Reid argued that if man had been endowed only with reason, the race would soon have been extinct; fortunately, reason is complemented by the ‘benevolent affections’, which are ‘no less necessary for the preservation of the human species than the appetites of hunger and thirst’.¹³ Similarly, Adam Ferguson made ‘fellow-feeling’, or ‘humanity’, so much an ‘appurtenance of human nature’ as to be a ‘characteristic of the species’.¹⁴

Even Hume, who had a notably unsentimental view of human nature, believed in an instinct that ‘most certainly is not derived from reason, . . . but proceeds entirely from a moral taste’.¹⁵ ‘It appears’, he wrote, ‘that a tendency to public good, and to the promoting of peace, harmony, and order in society does, always, by affecting the benevolent principles of our frame, engage us on the side of the social virtues.’¹⁶ And again: ‘There is some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for human kind; some particle of the dove kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and serpent.’¹⁷

¹¹ Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Concerning the Original of Our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good* (2nd edn., 1726), reprinted in *British Moralists*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1897), pp. 107, 118, 127; Hutcheson, *A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy in Three Books* (5th edn., Philadelphia, 1788 (1st edn., 1747)), pp. 12–13, 21–2. See also his *Observations on the Fable of the Bees* (1726). Adam Smith and commentators following him speak of Hutcheson as having originated the term ‘moral sense’. (Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 59.) In fact, Shaftesbury had used it earlier, along with his other terms for the ‘social affections’. Bentham and others attributed the utilitarian principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number to Helvétius’ *L’Esprit*. But Hutcheson anticipated Helvétius by more than thirty years.

¹² Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons* (London, 1970 (1st edn., 1726)), p. 86 (sermon 5); p. 101 (sermon 6).

¹³ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788) in *The Scottish Moralists: On Human Nature and Society*, ed. Louis Schneider (Chicago, 1967), p. 105.

¹⁴ Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (1792), in *The Scottish Moralists*, p. 88.

¹⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (Baltimore, Md., 1969 (1st edn., 1739–40)), p. 632 (Bk. III, P. III, Sect. 1). ‘Moral sense’ and ‘benevolence’ appear in the chapter titles of this, Hume’s first and major work (p. 522 (Bk. III, Pt. I, ch. 2); p. 652 (Bk. III, Pt. III, ch. 3)).

¹⁶ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (LaSalle, Ill., 1938 (repr. of 1777 edn.)), p. 67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

If reason, for these moral philosophers, was not a sufficient explanation for the social virtues, neither was self-interest or self-love. Unlike Hobbes and Locke, both of whom predicated their moral philosophy upon self-love buttressed by reason, they insisted that ‘fellow-feeling’ was disinterested, derived from a feeling for the other rather than for oneself. Hutcheson said that it could not be a product of self-interest because it involves associating oneself with such painful experiences as the suffering and distress of others.¹⁸ Hume, protesting against the ‘selfish system of morals’ of Hobbes and Locke, declared that ‘disinterested benevolence, distinct from self-love’, is an essential quality of human nature. It is evidently so, he argued, in animals, the inferior species; how can it not be in man, the superior species?¹⁹

Adam Smith gave the idea of compassion its most nuanced meaning in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* published in 1759. The opening sentences set the tone and the theme of that work:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the fortune of others and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others when we either see it or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. . . . By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, . . . we enter, as it were, into his body and become in some measure the same person with him. . . .²⁰

For Smith, it was neither self-interest nor reason but ‘immediate sense and feeling’ that ‘reconcile’ us to virtue and ‘alienate’ us from vice. The perfectly virtuous man ‘desires not only to be loved, but to be lovely . . ., not only praise, but praiseworthiness’. ‘To feel much for others and little for ourselves, . . . to restrain our selfish and to indulge our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature.’²¹ Lest his readers mistake his intention (as some at the time and many since have done), Smith appended to his book several chapters sharply criticising those who derive the social virtues from self-love and reason. Sympathy, he insisted, cannot be regarded as a ‘selfish principle’, for it comes not by imagining oneself in another’s piteous condition, but imagining the other in it. Thus

¹⁸ Hutcheson, *Inquiry Concerning the Original of Our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good*, pp. 86, 93; *Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, p. 9.

¹⁹ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, pp. 138, 143 (Appendix II, ‘Of Self-Love’).

²⁰ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 73–4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 87–8, 141.

'a man may sympathise with a woman in childbed, though it is impossible that he should conceive himself as suffering her pains in his own proper person and character'.²²

When historians write about the British Enlightenment, it is these moral philosophers they have in mind. Thus they either ignore one of the momentous events of the time, the religious revival known as Wesleyanism or Methodism,²³ or they consign it to the status of an anti-Enlightenment. Like the eminent Victorian (and agnostic) Leslie Stephen, they tend to regard it as 'heat without light, . . . a recrudescence of obsolete ideas . . . the narrowest possible intellectual horizon'.²⁴ Yet there is good reason to bring it into the Enlightenment—not the Enlightenment of the French *philosophes*, to be sure, but that of the British moral philosophers.²⁵

Whatever the philosophical, theological, and temperamental differences between the moral philosophers and Methodists, in important practical, ethical matters they tended to converge. If there was, as Roy Porter says, a 'rationalising' of religion by the deists,²⁶ there was also a 'socialising' of religion by the Wesleyans. While the moral philosophers were invoking the moral sense as the basis for benevolence, Methodist preachers were inculcating a religious gospel of good works. 'The poor are the Christians', Wesley proclaimed, and proceeded to make of them his special mission, preaching in the open fields to those who did not feel welcome in church. He assured the Anglican clergy that they need fear no competition from him. 'The rich, the honourable, the great, we are thoroughly willing . . . to leave to you. Only let us alone among the poor.' His poor, moreover, were not only the 'deserving', 'respectable' poor who were the likeliest candidates for conversion. He made a point of seeking out 'the outcasts of men', the 'forlorn ones', the 'most flagrant, hardened, desperate sinner'.²⁷ No one was beyond salvation, no one too poor,

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 53–4.

²³ Today the term 'Methodist' is generally applied to those who left the Church of England after Wesley's death. But the word was first used to describe the religious society in Oxford frequented by John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield several years before the Wesleyan revival.

²⁴ Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought* (New York, 1962 (1st edn., 1876)), II. 350, 361, 364. A notable exception is Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York, 1973).

²⁵ Semmel, *Methodist Revolution*, pp. 87 and *passim*; Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds* (New York, 1968), pp. 292–9. Here I differ from Pocock and Porter who exclude the 'enthusiasts' from the British Enlightenment. See, for example, Pocock, 'Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions: the American and French Cases in British Perspective,' *Government in Opposition*, 1989.

²⁶ Porter, *Creation of the Modern World*, p. 96

²⁷ J. D. Walsh, 'Elie Halévy and the Birth of Methodism', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1975, pp. 14–15.

benighted, or uncivilised to attain the spiritual and moral level deserving of the name Christian.

The poor were not only the objects of spiritual redemption; they were the beneficiaries of Wesley's social ministrations. 'Christianity', he declared, 'is essentially a social religion.'²⁸ One of his best known and often repeated sermons was on the theme, 'Gain all you can, . . . save all you can, . . . give all you can.'²⁹ The Methodists distributed food, clothing, and money to the needy, paid 'visitations' to the sick and to prisoners in jail, set up loan funds and work projects for the unemployed, founded hospitals, orphanages, friendly societies, schools, libraries, and philanthropic enterprises of every kind. They also took a prominent part in the movements for prison reform and the abolition of the slave trade. Wesley himself was especially passionate on the subject of 'that execrable villainy', slavery. 'An African', he wrote, was 'in no respect inferior to the European'; if he seemed so, it was because the European had kept him in a condition of inferiority, depriving him of 'all opportunities of improving either in knowledge or virtue'.³⁰

Perhaps most notable were the efforts of the Methodists to educate the poor—an education largely devoted to a reading of the Bible and religious tracts but that often went well beyond that, as is evident from their publications: a cheap dictionary, a nine-page English grammar, a host of tracts (many written by Wesley himself) on medicine, electricity, natural history, and the like, and abridgements (somewhat bowdlerised, to be sure) of Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Locke, and other classics. Wesley's three-volume *Compendium of Natural Philosophy* had as its subtitle, 'A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation', but the introduction paid effusive tribute to Bacon, and the work itself was naturalistic rather than theological in spirit.

In the Methodist communion, the poor had the satisfaction of being members in good standing. There were few social distinctions, the lay preachers having no special educational, social, or even sexual qualifications; women preachers had the same status as men. The congregants met once a week in small groups known as 'classes', and in larger groups called 'families'. Bernard Semmel has described this communal aspect of Methodism as the equivalent of the French ideal of fraternity. 'In the

²⁸ Robert Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Common People of the Eighteenth Century* (1945), p. 229.

²⁹ John Wesley, *Works* (Grand Rapids, 1872), VI. 126, 136.

³⁰ Semmel, *Methodist Revolution*, pp. 95–6 (quoting Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (1774) and *Letters* (24 Feb. 1791)).

century of Voltaire's *saue qui peut* and Smith's *laissez-faire*, when the paternalism of the traditional hierarchical society was breaking down, Methodism sought to endow the lower classes with a sense of their own worth, and to revive traditional religion as a source of warmth and solace, of comfort and joy.³¹

This ethic was all the more effective because it was an individualistic as well as a social ethic. Derived from a powerful sense of the individual's relation to God, it promoted a sense of personal moral responsibility akin to the Puritan ethic, encouraging the virtues of thrift, diligence, temperance, honesty, and hard work. 'Self-help' was a natural correlative to the helping of others. The ethic had the additional distinction of crossing both class and religious lines. By the end of the century, Wesleyanism had spawned an Evangelicalism within the Church of England that appealed largely to the middle and upper classes, while the Methodist sects that left the church attracted the working and lower-middle classes.

Moral philosophy and religious gospel acquired a powerful ally in the new political economy. Adam Smith, who combined the roles of moral philosopher and political economist, was as distinguished in his time for *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as for *The Wealth of Nations*.³² It used to be thought that the two Smiths were incongruent—'Das Adam Smith Problem', the Germans called it. Recent scholarship has resolved that problem; the two Smiths are now firmly united. *The Wealth of Nations* is itself an exercise in moral philosophy. Joseph Schumpeter complained that Smith was so steeped in the tradition of moral philosophy derived from scholasticism and natural law that he could not conceive of economics per se, an economics divorced from ethics and politics.³³ The point is well taken, although not necessarily in criticism. The rhetoric of *The Wealth of Nations* is frankly moralistic, condemning 'the vile maxim, "all for themselves, and nothing for other people"'; denouncing the

³¹ Ibid., p. 193.

³² *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was not an early work superseded by *The Wealth of Nations*. Published in 1759, *Moral Sentiments* went through four editions before *Wealth of Nations* appeared in 1776, and another a few years later. Smith devoted the last year of his life to revising and expanding the earlier book. The most important change was the addition of the chapter, 'Of the Corruption of Our Moral Sentiments, Which is Occasioned by this Disposition to Admire the Rich and the Great, and to Despise or Neglect Persons of Poor and Mean Condition'. Most of Smith's disciples were as admiring of the first book as of the second. Edmund Burke reviewed it glowingly when it appeared. A memoir of Smith written three years after his death devoted twenty-six pages to *Moral Sentiments* and only seventeen to *Wealth of Nations*.

³³ Joseph Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*, ed. Elizabeth Boody Schumpeter (New York, 1974 (1st edn., 1954)), pp. 141, 182, 185.

‘clamour and sophistry’ of those who identified their special interests with the general interest; exposing the ‘impertinent jealousy’, ‘mean rapacity’, ‘mean and malignant expedients’, ‘sneaking arts’, ‘interesting sophistry’, and ‘interested falsehood’ of many merchants and manufacturers; and protesting against those who duplicitously furthered their own interests at the expense of ‘the poor and the indigent’.³⁴

These sentiments may seem difficult to reconcile with the famous dictum: ‘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.’³⁵ But this principle was itself predicated on the assumption that the butcher, brewer, and baker abided by the rules of the free market and did not ‘conspire’, ‘deceive’, or ‘oppress’. Under these conditions, self-interest was a moral principle—not as lofty as altruism, to be sure, but in the market place especially more reliable and effective.

Hovering over self-interest was the ubiquitous ‘invisible hand’, which ensured that individual interests worked together for the general good. The metaphor has been criticised for its teleological implications, as if some benevolent agent was required to bring about that desirable end. Smith meant it to be a truly invisible hand, indeed, not a hand at all. This was the genius of the ‘system of natural liberty’. Without outside intervention, even without his own conscious knowledge, each individual unwittingly furthered ‘an end which was no part of his intention’. ‘By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.’³⁶

Smith’s ‘general interest’ was not Rousseau’s or Hegel’s. Theirs transcended the sum of individual interests; Smith’s was simply the totality of interests of all the members of society, including the working classes. This was perhaps the most novel aspect of *The Wealth of Nations*. The title referred not to the nation as the mercantilist understood it—the nation-state whose wealth was the measure of its strength vis-à-vis other states—but to the people comprising the nation. And ‘people’ not in the political sense of those who were part of the political nation, but in the social sense of those living and working in society, the vast majority of whom, Smith pointed out, were in the ‘lower ranks’. It was their interests, their wealth that would be promoted by a ‘progressive’ political economy that would bring about a ‘universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks

³⁴ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York, 1937 (1st edn., 1776)), pp. 98, 128, 250, 388–9, 424, 460, 463, 577, 609.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 423.

of the people, . . . a general plenty [which] diffuses itself through all the different ranks of the society'.³⁷

To those who complained that if the poor shared in the 'general plenty', they would no longer be content with their lot in life, Smith put the question: 'Is this improvement in the circumstances of the lower ranks of the people to be regarded as an advantage or an inconveniency to the society?' His answer was unequivocal:

Servants, labourers and workmen of different kinds, make up the far greater part of every great political society. But what improves the circumstances of the greater part can never be regarded as an inconveniency to the whole. No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe and lodge the whole body of the people should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed and lodged.³⁸

Smith opposed the mercantilist regulation of wages not only because they violated the principle of 'natural liberty,' but also because they were biased against workers by setting maximum rather than minimum rates of wages. He also defied the received wisdom of the time by arguing in favour of high wages. 'Every one but an idiot', Arthur Young had said, 'knows that the lower classes must be kept poor, or they will never be industrious.'³⁹ Smith took a positive view of high wages because he had a benign view of the labouring poor. 'A plentiful subsistence increases the bodily strength of the labourer, and the comfortable hope of bettering his condition, and of ending his days perhaps in ease and plenty, animates him to exert that strength to the utmost. Where wages are high, we shall always find the workmen more active, diligent, and expeditious, than where they are low.'⁴⁰ In the same spirit, he supported the idea of proportional taxation, and taxes on luxuries rather than necessities, so that 'the indolence and vanity of the rich is made to contribute in a very easy manner to the relief of the poor'.⁴¹ He had no objection to the poor laws; what he did oppose, and vigorously, was the act of settlement that established residency requirements for the poor, limiting their mobility and opportunities for improvement and depriving them of the liberty enjoyed by other Englishmen.⁴² Even more significant, because it went against the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 78–9.

³⁹ Arthur Young, *The Farmer's Tour Through the East of England* (1771), IV. 361.

⁴⁰ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 81.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 683. See also pp. 777, 821.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

grain of the principle of laissez-faire, was his proposal for a state-administered, state-supported, state-enforced system of education for the 'common people', including those 'bred to the lowest occupation'.⁴³

In 1776, when the *Wealth of Nations* was published, these were powerful but heterodox views. It was not long, however, before that book had become a classic in its own time. The first edition (a two-volume work of over a thousand pages) sold out in six months, a second was published two years later, and three others followed in the dozen years before Smith's death. Hume immediately declared himself his disciple, and others across the political spectrum soon followed: Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine, Edward Gibbon and Richard Price, William Pitt and Lord North.

These interlocking strains of thought—the moral philosophy of compassion, the Wesleyan gospel of good works, and the political economy of natural liberty—combined to create, in the latter part of the century, what the evangelical writer Hannah More called (not entirely in praise) 'the Age of Benevolence'.⁴⁴ One London magistrate, distressed by what he saw as the excessive leniency displayed towards criminals, rebuked Henry Fielding (the novelist who was also a justice of the peace and a vigorous advocate of court and prison reforms) for vulgarising Shaftesbury by reducing virtue to 'good affections in contradiction to moral obligations and a sense of duty'. 'We live in an age', he complained, 'when humanity is in fashion.'⁴⁵ Others testified, in admiration rather than criticism, to the 'extraordinary growth of benevolence', the 'exalted virtue' of charity, the 'spirit of humanity' prevalent in the country.⁴⁶

⁴³ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 738. This proposal comes at the end of the famous 'alienation' passage describing the unfortunate effects of the division of labour on a man who spent his life performing a few simple operations, with no opportunity to 'exert his understanding' or 'exercise his invention'. The passage would seem to contradict those other parts of the book which were so laudatory of the poor, who were to be the mainstays and beneficiaries of the new political economy. But it must be understood in context. It appears toward the end of the volume in a paragraph that concludes: 'But in every improved and civilised society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, *unless government takes some pains to prevent it*' [italics added]. It was to forestall that dire condition that Smith went on to propose a system of public education.

⁴⁴ M. G. Jones, *The Charity School Movement: A Study of Eighteenth Century Puritanism in Action* (Cambridge, 1938), p. 3 (quoting Hannah More, *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society* (1788)).

⁴⁵ M. Dorothy George, *England in Transition: Life and Work in the Eighteenth Century* (1931), pp. 73–4.

⁴⁶ A. R. Humphreys, *The Augustan World: Society, Thought, and Letters in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 1963), pp. 200–2.

Earlier in the century, Mandeville had complained of the charity schools inspired by Shaftesbury's 'affection' for society and 'propensity to seek the welfare of it'. Fifteen years later he would have had much more to complain about. A *History of London*, published in 1739, gives a detailed account of the schools, hospitals, almshouses, and charitable societies flourishing in the metropolis. 'As opulency and riches', William Maitland wrote, 'are the result of commerce, so are learning, hospitality, and charity the effects thereof.' Unlike other countries, he was pleased to report, which had no legal provision for relief, Englishmen of all ranks were raising vast sums of money for both relief and charity.⁴⁷ By 1756 when the second edition appeared, this section of the book had to be greatly expanded to accommodate the many new charitable societies established in the interim. Maitland then commended his countrymen for the 'truly Christian spirit of Benevolence, which at this time so generally prevails amongst us, to the great honour of this Age and Nation'.⁴⁸ Shortly afterward, perhaps reflecting upon the generous response of the English to the victims of the Lisbon earthquake (people of another nation and another faith), Samuel Johnson wryly observed, 'Every hand is open to contribute something, every tongue is busied in solicitations, and every art of pleasure is employed for a time in the interest of virtue.'⁴⁹ Toward the end of his life, John Wesley took the measure of the time: 'While luxury and profaneness have been increasing on one hand, on the other, benevolence and compassion toward all forms of human woe have increased in a manner not known before, from the earliest ages of the world.'⁵⁰

If 'benevolence and compassion' were keywords of the time, so were 'philanthropy' and 'philanthropist', the latter applied to those gentlemen, like John Howard, Jonas Hanway, Thomas Gilbert, and others, who made of philanthropy a full-time, voluntary, unpaid profession. There were societies for every kind of worthy purpose: for 'Promoting Christian

⁴⁷ William Maitland, *The History of London from Its Foundations by the Romans to the Present Time* (1739), pp. 635, 800.

⁴⁸ Maitland, *The History and Survey of London* (1756), II. 764. For a list of philanthropic societies and institutions, see Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 329–40.

⁴⁹ Humphreys, *The Augustan World*, p. 202 (quoting Samuel Johnson, *Idler*, 6 May 1758).

⁵⁰ David Owen, *English Philanthropy 1660–1960* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 68. It is curious that this is the only appearance of Wesley in this book, in spite of his substantial contributions to the philanthropic movement and in spite of Owen's characterisation of him as one of the 'humane and informed observers of the eighteenth-century world'. One other passing reference includes the Wesleys among those active in the anti-slavery movement (p. 129).

Knowledge' (started in the late seventeenth century and most notable for its part in founding the charity schools), for 'Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor', for the abolition of the slave trade, and for the care of deserted infants, sick and maimed seamen, orphans of clergymen, prostitutes, the deaf, dumb, and blind. There were also abundant proposals for reform of the legal system, the poor law, hospitals, prisons, and workhouses. Even people sceptical of such efforts found some cause to elicit their sympathy; Defoe wrote a tract in favour of founding hospitals, Mandeville approved of poor relief for the aged and sick, and Hannah More was an enthusiastic supporter of Sunday schools.

The Sunday school movement itself is significant, as a social as well as a religious and educational phenomenon. Started in 1785 by a society consisting of both Anglicans and Dissenters, the schools had, by the turn of the century, an enrollment of over 200,000. Some historians have made much of the insistence of Hannah More and others that instruction be confined to reading, especially of the Bible, on the theory that writing would encourage the children to 'rise above their station'. In fact, many of the schools did teach writing and arithmetic, as is evident from the records of expenditures on spelling books, slates, pencils, and desks. Apart from educating the poor, the schools had the corollary effect of fostering the same kind of communal spirit that the Wesleyan movement did. School outings, teas, and clubs made them, as the leading historian of the movement notes, 'a central feature of working-class community life'—all the more because the teachers often consisted of former students and parents.⁵¹ (This too is reminiscent of the Wesleyan movement, where lay preachers were chosen from the congregation.)

It was in the same communal spirit, and the spirit of self-help, that the poor provided for themselves by subscribing to 'friendly societies', a form of insurance to help them in time of need. By 1801 there were 7,200 such societies with a membership of almost 650,000 adult males—this out of a total population of nine million.⁵² And all of this, it must be remembered, was in addition to poor relief. England was the first country (and for a long time the only one) to have a public, secular, national (although locally administered) system of poor relief. In 1795, that

⁵¹ Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1780–1850* (New Haven, 1976), pp. xi and *passim*. It should be noted that some of the opposition to writing came from Sabbatarians who believed that writing violated the Sabbath. To accommodate them, classes were sometimes held during the week to permit instruction in writing.

⁵² David G. Green, *Reinventing Civil Society: The Rediscovery of Welfare Without Politics* (1993), p. 31.

system had been much expanded with the adoption by some counties of the 'Speenhamland system', a family allowance, in effect, not only for the indigent but for 'every poor and industrious man' whose earnings fell below a level determined by the price of bread and the size of his family. A bill introduced by the Tory Prime Minister Pitt, the following year, intended to establish relief as 'a right and an honour', was finally withdrawn because so many additional benefits and supervisory agencies were added in committee that it became impracticable. As another Tory, Samuel Johnson, once said: 'A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilisation. . . . The condition of the lower order, the poor especially, was the true mark of national discrimination.'⁵³

It was this social ethic, a compound of the secular and the religious, the private and the public, that was largely responsible for what the French historian Elie Halévy called 'the miracle of modern England'—the fact that England was able to survive the economic revolution without succumbing to the political revolutions that wrought havoc on the continent.⁵⁴ Before writing the classic work in which he developed that theory, he wrote two little-known articles entitled 'The Birth of Methodism in England'. He then reflected on the convergence of secular and religious thought that was to prove decisive in this critical period of English history. 'A half-century later [that is, after the birth of Methodism], free-thinkers in association with the philanthropists of the evangelical movement would work for the material and moral betterment of the poor. In the interval, they were "converted" to philanthropy through the influence of Methodist preachers.'⁵⁵

This was the Enlightenment as the British experienced it. But it is not the Enlightenment generally associated with that term. *The 'Enlightenment' tout court* is the French Enlightenment, a movement that includes thinkers who disagreed among themselves but disagreed even more (with the exception of Montesquieu) with their British counterparts.⁵⁶ It is

⁵³ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (Chicago, 1952 (1st edn., 1791)), p. 182.

⁵⁴ Elie Halévy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. I, *England in 1815*, trans. E. I. Watkin and D. A. Barker (1924 (Fr. edn., 1913)), p. 387.

⁵⁵ Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, trans. Bernard Semmel (Chicago, 1971 (Fr. edn., 1906)), p. 66. See also p. 37: 'They [the Methodists] regenerated the Church of England. . . . They even had an effect on free thinkers, who subsequently refrained from criticising Christian doctrine in order to devote themselves to political economy and philanthropy. Utilitarians and evangelicals agreed to work together for commercial freedom, the abolition of slavery, and the reform of criminal law and prison organisation.'

⁵⁶ Yet even Montesquieu, who so admired English institutions, rejected their idea of a 'moral

remarkable that the two Enlightenments were so different, in substance as well as temper, considering the great degree of interaction between them. The leading figures in both countries knew and visited each other, read, reviewed, even translated each other—and respectfully but firmly differed from each other, in philosophy, sensibility, and social policy.⁵⁷

Tocqueville attributed their differences to the distinctive roles assumed by the intellectuals in each country.

In England writers on the theory of government and those who actually governed cooperated with each other, the former setting forth their new theories, the latter amending or circumscribing these in the light of practical experience. In France, however, precept and practice were kept quite distinct and remained in the hands of two quite independent groups. One of these carried on the actual administration while the other set forth the abstract principles on which good government should, they said, be based; one took the routine measures appropriate to the needs of the moment, the other propounded general laws without a thought for their practical application; one group shaped the course of public affairs, the other that of public opinion.⁵⁸

There were other political and institutional reasons for the disparities between the two Enlightenments: the differing relationship of the monarchy to the aristocracy in the two countries, of the aristocracy to the middle classes, of the central government to local government, and of the state to the church. No less important, however, were the philosophical differences that underlie Tocqueville's observation. Where the British idea of

sense'. For him, virtue varied with the country and polity and was the result of acculturation rather than an innate human quality.

⁵⁷ Voltaire lived in England from 1726 to 1728 and afterwards professed to be guilty of 'Anglomania'; his *Dictionnaire philosophique* refers to his meeting with Berkeley and quotes Newton (whom he revered), Locke, and Shaftesbury. Diderot's first work was a translation of Shaftesbury. Helvétius asked Hume to translate his *L'Esprit*. Smith reviewed Rousseau's *Discourses* in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1755. And Smith's *Moral Sentiments* was translated not once but twice into French (1764 and 1774), as was the *Wealth of Nations* shortly after its publication in 1776.

⁵⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1955 (1st edn., 1856)), pp. 145–6. This statement has been disputed by Keith Baker who points out that some of the *philosophes*—Montesquieu, Mably, Voltaire, Turgot, Helvétius—did engage in public affairs, but since the public order was in such disarray, they could only think about reforming it in an abstract way. (*Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the 18th Century* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 20–1 and *passim*.) Dena Goodman, taking issue with Baker, maintains that although the Enlightenment did not 'single-handedly' produce the culture of the Old Regime, it did 'endow it with a set of values and practices that were republican at least as much as they were literary'. (*The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY, 1994) p. 303.) See also Norman Hampson: 'Burke was an active political agent within a system whose legitimacy he accepted, and Montesquieu was not.' ('The Enlightenment in France', in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, p. 46.)

compassion lent itself to a variety of practical, meliorative policies to relieve and improve social conditions, the French appeal to reason could be satisfied with nothing less than the 'regeneration' of man.

It is curious that just as the term 'Enlightenment' has been claimed for the French, so has the word 'compassion'. Yet it was the English who introduced that word and idea long before the *philosophes* and who made it the central theme of their moral philosophy. 'Compassion' earned only a very brief entry in the *Encyclopédie*, concluding with the observation that the more miserable one is, the more susceptible to compassion; this is why the people love to watch executions.⁵⁹ Rousseau, who is often credited with the idea of compassion,⁶⁰ generally used that word interchangeably with 'pity'. In the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, pity is said to be a 'natural sentiment' of man in the state of nature, where it contributes to the preservation of the species by moderating the force of self-love (*amour de soi-meme*). In civil society, however, that sentiment is weakened by inequality, which gives rise to the 'factitious' sentiment of vanity (*amour propre*), destroying freedom and subjugating mankind to 'labour, servitude and misery'.⁶¹ Reviewing the *Discourses*, Adam Smith criticised Rousseau for sharing Mandeville's view that 'there is in man no powerful instinct which necessarily determines him to seek society for its own sake,' that only by a 'slow and strenuous process' do men learn to live together, and that the laws that prevail in society are 'the inventions of the cunning and the powerful, in order to maintain or to acquire an unnatural and unjust superiority over the rest of their fellow creatures'.⁶²

⁵⁹ 'Compassion', in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris, 1751–72), III. 760–1.

⁶⁰ Allan Bloom makes this a prominent theme of his introduction to his translation of *Emile* (New York, 1979), pp. 17–18. See also Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1963), pp. 54 and *passim*; Judith N. Shklar, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Equality', *Daedalus*, Summer 1978, p. 13; Clifford Orwin, 'Compassion', *American Scholar*, 1980, p. 319. Orwin says that Smith was indebted for the idea of compassion to Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (1755), which he reviewed in July 1755, three and a half years before the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was published. (Orwin, paper delivered at the 1977 meeting of the American Political Science Association.) By the same token, one could argue that Rousseau was indebted to Shaftesbury, whom he read long before he wrote the *Discourse*; or that *Emile* (1762) was indebted to Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published three years earlier. More significant than the issue of priority is the fact that compassion (or sympathy, as Smith more often called it) plays a larger role in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* than in either the *Discourse* or *Emile*.

⁶¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York, 1986), pp. 162, 184–5. See also Rousseau's note, p. 226.

⁶² Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 67. Winch observes that Smith was one of the first to notice the fundamental affinities between Rousseau and Mandeville, so that Smith's refutation of Mandeville in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was also a refutation of Rousseau (p. 60). Joseph

In *Emile* Rousseau did posit an ‘inner sentiment’, but he took it to be the basis of justice rather than compassion and a reflection of self-love rather than the love of another. ‘When the strength of an expansive soul makes me identify myself with my fellow, and I feel that I am so to speak, in him, it is in order not to suffer that I do not want him to suffer. I am interested in him for love of myself [*l’amour de moi*] . . . Love of men derived from love of self [*l’amour de soi*] is the principle of human justice’.⁶³ The social virtues do not come naturally to Emile; he has to learn them by becoming involved with those less fortunate than he. At one point Emile seems to be charged with the most exacting duty to the poor: ‘Let the interest of the indigents always be his. Let him assist them not only with his purse but with his care. Let him serve them, protect them, consecrate his person and his time to them.’ But that message is immediately qualified. Emile should not be ‘a knight errant, a redresser of wrongs’. On the contrary, ‘his first duty is toward himself’.⁶⁴ Moreover, he is instructed to exercise the social virtues not in relation to particular individuals but to the ‘species’, the ‘whole of mankind’.

The less the object of our care is immediately involved with us, the less the illusion of particular interest is to be feared. The more one generalises this interest, the more it becomes equitable, and the love of mankind is nothing other than the love of justice. . . . It is of little importance to him [Emile] who gets a greater share of happiness provided that it contributes to the greatest happiness of all. This is the wise man’s first interest after his private interest, for each is part of his species and not of another individual.

To prevent pity from degenerating into weakness, it must, therefore, be generalised and extended to the whole of mankind. Then one yields to it only insofar as it accords with justice, because of all the virtues justice is the one that contributes most to the common good of men. For the sake of reason, for the sake of love of ourselves, we must have pity for our species still more than for our neighbour.⁶⁵

Whatever Rousseau’s differences with the other *philosophes* (and they were many), they had this in common: the tendency to ‘generalise’ the virtues, to elevate ‘mankind’ over the ‘individual’, the ‘species’ over one’s ‘neighbour’. When Francis Hutcheson spoke of the ‘greatest happiness for the greatest numbers’ he meant this in the most prosaic, quantitative sense.

Cropsey, on the other hand, emphasises the similarity of themes and views between the *Discourses* and the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. (‘Adam Smith and Political Philosophy’, in *Essays on Adam Smith*, ed. Andrew S. Skinner and Thomas Wilson (Oxford, 1975), p. 136, n. 4.)

⁶³ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 235 n.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

When Rousseau spoke of the 'greatest happiness of all', he meant it in some transcendent, metaphysical sense, a 'common good of men' that was something other than the totality of their individual goods (just as his 'general will' was something other than the totality of the wills of individual men).

Moreover, the 'common good of men' did not necessarily mean the good of common men. In *Emile*, Rousseau's great work on education, the common man figures not at all. Emile himself is of 'noble birth', and his education, a moral education, is undertaken by a private tutor. There is a passing mention of public education, but this refers not to an education provided by the state for everyone, but rather a private education to promote the public end of 'citizenship'. The idea of public education in the ordinary sense is briefly dismissed: 'The poor man does not need to be educated. His station gives him a compulsory education. He could have no other.'⁶⁶ The same message appears in *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*: 'Those who are destined to live in country simplicity have no need to develop their faculties in order to be happy. . . . Do not at all instruct the villager's child, for it is not fitting that he be instructed; do not instruct the city dweller's child, for you do not know yet what instruction is fitting for him.'⁶⁷

In this respect, Rousseau was at one with the *philosophes* (with the notable exception of Turgot and Condorcet, who did favour education for the poor). If literacy rates (defined as the ability to sign one's name) rose in the course of the century (from 29 per cent in 1700 to 63 per cent in 1790), it was not because of the *philosophes* but in spite of them. One historian observes: 'Most Enlightenment thinkers opposed teaching peasants how to read and write, while the Church and especially the lower clergy favoured it,' adding that for the latter this was 'not without contradiction, for although there was good reason to be wary of impious books, the needs of the community had to be taken into account.'⁶⁸ The old

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 40, 52.

⁶⁷ Rousseau, *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* in *Oeuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Pléiade edn., (Paris, 1959), II. 567 (letter 3)). In a tract published posthumously, *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*, Rousseau did speak of 'public education'. But even then the object of education was to instill patriotism rather than promote literacy. Thus he proposed emphasising sports over booklearning. (Ibid. II. 966–70 (chap. IV).)

⁶⁸ Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), p. 432. (The figures were higher in the north of France than in the south, and considerably higher in Paris (pp. 428, 659).) Another estimate has literacy rising from 25 per cent in 1686–90 to 40–5 per cent in 1786–90. (Carlo M. Cipolla, *Literacy and Development in the West* (London, 1969), p. 62). Neither of these figures supports Simon Schama's extraordinary statement that 'literacy rates in late eighteenth-century France were much higher than in the late twentieth-century United States'. (*Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989), p. 180.) (It goes without saying that by the late twentieth century literacy was no longer defined as merely signing one's name.)

regime, early in the century, actually passed ordinances making schooling compulsory—not, to be sure, out of a solicitude for education but as part of its campaign against Protestantism—but these were not always carried out.

Even the most sympathetic commentator on the French Enlightenment cannot fail to observe the disdain for the masses on the part of the most influential *philosophes*.⁶⁹ Voltaire used the terms ‘*le peuple*’ and ‘*la canaille*’ almost interchangeably. ‘As for the *canaille*’, he told d’Alembert, ‘I have no concern with it; it will always remain *canaille*.’ And it would remain *canaille* because it was uneducable. The people would never have ‘the time and the capacity to instruct themselves; they will die of hunger before they become philosophers’. ‘We have never pretended to enlighten shoemakers and servants; that is the job of the apostles.’⁷⁰

Le peuple could not be educated because they could not be enlightened; and they could not be enlightened because they were incapable of the kind of reason that the *philosophes* took to be the essence of enlightenment. They were mired instead in the prejudices, superstitions, and irrationalities of religion. This was the great enemy—*l’infâme*. Religion, Voltaire wrote to Diderot, ‘must be destroyed among respectable people and left to the *canaille* large and small, for whom it was made’. Diderot agreed. The poor were ‘imbeciles’ in matters of religion, ‘too idiotic—bestial—too miserable, and too busy’ to enlighten themselves. They would never change; ‘the quantity of the *canaille* is just about always the same’.⁷¹

The *Encyclopédie* reflected this disdain for the unenlightened. In Diderot’s article defining the purpose of the *Encyclopédie*, he made it clear that the common people had no part in the ‘philosophical age’ ushered in by his enterprise. ‘The general mass of mankind can neither follow nor comprehend this march of the human spirit.’⁷² Everyone

⁶⁹ Again, Condorcet was an exception, but he was regarded primarily as a philosopher of science. Although his *Réflexions sur le commerce des blés* (1776) echoed Turgot’s and Smith’s views on economics and, to some extent, on social matters, it was as the secretary of the Academy of Sciences that his influence was primarily felt. Moreover, even in this work his utopian belief in the perfectibility of man gave his practical proposals an air of impracticality.

⁷⁰ Peter Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics: The Poet as Realist* (Princeton, 1959), pp. 221–2. Gay says that Voltaire’s views on the *canaille* moderated in the course of time, but he never lost his ‘distrust of the masses’ and continued to identify ‘the masses with passion, the educated classes with reason’ (p. 226).

⁷¹ Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. II, *The Science of Freedom* (New York, 1977), p. 521.

⁷² ‘*Encyclopédie*’, *Encyclopédie*, V. 637. In the preface to the *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu wrote: ‘It is not a matter of indifference that the minds of the people be enlightened.’ (*The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (New York, 1949 (1st edn., 1748)), I. lxxviii.) But the ‘people’ he had in mind were those capable of reading his book.

agrees, he wrote in the article on Natural Law, 'that we must reason about all things, because man is not just an animal but an animal who reasons; that for every subject there are ways of discovering the truth; that whoever refuses to search for that truth renounces the very nature of man and should be treated by the rest of his species as a wild beast; and that once the truth has been discovered, whoever refuses to accept it is either insane or wicked and morally evil'.⁷³ In another article he wrote: 'Distrust the judgement of the *multitude* in matters of reasoning and philosophy; its voice is that of wickedness, stupidity, inhumanity, unreason and prejudice. . . . The *multitude* is ignorant and stupified. Distrust it in matters of morality; it is not capable of strong and generous actions . . . ; heroism is practically folly in its eyes.'⁷⁴

The *Encyclopédie* was, to be sure, very appreciative of the 'mechanical arts'. Its pages contained copious drawings, diagrams, and plates illustrating them, and it professed great respect for the artisans who practised those arts. It also protested against the great inequalities of wealth that kept some people in a condition of excessive luxury while others were deprived of the barest necessities of life.⁷⁵ But it had little patience and less regard for the great mass of the people who were not artisans, who were not educated or educable, and its pages contained few practical proposals to alleviate their condition. Turgot (first as intendant of Limoges and then briefly as comptroller-general of finance) did succeed in abolishing compulsory labour on the roads, eliminating some of the guilds' privileges, and removing the immunities from taxation enjoyed by the rich. But he was unsympathetic, even hostile, to charity, not only because it was administered by the church but because he objected to it on principle. 'The poor', he granted in his article on Foundations, 'have incontestable rights on the abundance of the rich; humanity and religion equally prescribe a duty to alleviate our unfortunate fellow beings; it is to perform this indispensable duty that so many charitable establishments were erected.' But the result of this practice was most unfortunate.

It is precisely in the countries where these free goods are most abundant, as in Spain or parts of Italy, that misery is more widespread than elsewhere. The reason is simple and many travellers have remarked on it. To permit a large number of men to live free of charge is to encourage laziness and all the

⁷³ 'Droit Naturel', *Encyclopédie*, V. 116.

⁷⁴ 'Multitude', *ibid.* X. 860. On one occasion, Diderot recommended to Catherine the Great that the peasantry be taught to read, write, and count; but that was for Russia, not France.

⁷⁵ See, 'Fortune' by d'Alembert (*Encyclopédie*, VII. 206); 'Indigent' by Diderot (VIII. 676). The single paragraph in the article on the indigent concludes: 'there are no indigent among savages'.

disorders that follow; it is to render the condition of the idler preferable to that of the man who works. . . . The race of industrious citizens is replaced by a vile population composed of vagabond beggars free to commit all sorts of crimes.⁷⁶

Diderot echoed these sentiments in his article on the poorhouse (*l'hopital*). It was more important, he said, to try to prevent *la misère* (extreme poverty) than to create shelters for *les misérables*, who were too often professional beggars. Outside the poorhouses there were countless 'young and vigorous idlers who, finding in our ill-conceived charity easier and more generous sustenance than they could get by work, fill up our streets, our churches, our grand boulevards, our market-towns, our cities, and our countryside'. They were the 'vermin' produced by a state that did not value real men.⁷⁷

Half a century later something like this argument, expressed far more temperately, was advanced in England by Malthus and his followers who proposed (unsuccessfully) the abolition of the poor law. But they were criticising an ever-expanding system of public relief, which did not exist at all in France. And they were tolerant of private charities, which were much more numerous in England than in France.⁷⁸

One cannot saddle the French Enlightenment with responsibility for all the deeds, or misdeeds, of the French Revolution. Yet there is no doubt that some of the principles and attitudes of the Enlightenment were carried over into the Revolution, the anti-clericalism, for example, resulting in the emancipation of Protestants and Jews and the legalisation of civil marriage and divorce. By the same token, the *philosophes'* indifference (or worse) to the poor may be reflected in the fact that, apart from the abolition of feudal privileges, little was done to alleviate the condition of the poor, and such measures as were attempted were notably unsuccessful. The workshops established by the *Comité de Mendicité* proved so unwieldy that they had to be suspended, and the laws regulating prices, wages, and the production of food were not only ineffectual but counter-productive. A few historians have made much of these initiatives, describing them as the forerunner of the modern welfare state, but even they

⁷⁶ 'Fondations', *ibid.* VII. 75.

⁷⁷ 'Hopital', *ibid.* VIII. 294. See also 'Mendiant' by Louis de Jaucourt, which opens with the definition: 'beggars or vagabonds by profession, who demand alms for idleness and sloth, rather than earn their livelihood by work' (X. 331). In Jaucourt's article 'Le Peuple', he distinguished this class from the working poor, disputing the idea that the latter would work and be docile only if they were kept in poverty (XII. 476).

⁷⁸ In his 'Memoir on Pauperism' written in 1835, just after the reform of the English poor law, Tocqueville criticised public relief while commending private charity by individuals and voluntary associations. (*Memoir on Pauperism*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb (Chicago, 1997).)

admit the failure of these attempts.⁷⁹ Most historians agree that the poor, bereft of the old religious charities and suffering from the dislocations and disruptions caused by the Revolution itself, were worse off at the end of the Revolution than at the beginning.⁸⁰

As with poverty, so with education: so far from improving the condition of the poor, the Revolution actually exacerbated it. The anti-clerical bias of the new regime meant that the old church-run country schools were abolished with nothing replacing them. In 1791 Condorcet wrote a report on public education for the Assembly, including a proposal to establish a school in every village for children between the ages of nine and thirteen.⁸¹ But perhaps because of the outbreak of war the following year, it was put off for discussion, so that for the first three years of the Revolution, the subject of education was never officially raised. In 1793 Robespierre presented a plan for compulsory education—in boarding schools, he specified, where the children would be protected from the influence of reactionary parents. Although this was passed by the Convention, its essential provisions were eliminated. Only after Thermidor did the Directory promulgate an educational code providing for a minimal elementary education to be paid for by parents.

It was not a historian but a modern philosopher who attributed to the Revolution a conscious, articulate, truly revolutionary social ethic and social agenda. For Hannah Arendt this was the distinctive feature of the French Revolution and its bequest to all later revolutions. More than reason, more than liberty, she maintained, it was the ‘social question’ that defined the Revolution; this was the ‘necessity’ that drove it forward and eventually sent it to its doom: ‘When they [the poor] appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them . . .; freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life process itself.’ ‘*Le peuple*’, the key words in the Revolution, referred to the ‘low people’, *les malheureux*, *les misérables*. It was for the sake of these people that

⁷⁹ George Rudé, *Robespierre: Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat* (New York, 1975), p. 140; Colin Jones, *Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region, 1740–1815* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 8, 159 ff, 184 ff.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Alan Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor* (New York, 1981), pp. 169 ff.

⁸¹ Condorcet returned to the subject in his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (published in 1795 shortly before he died in prison). In a single paragraph toward the end of the book, he outlined the purposes of such an education, starting with the management of the household and concluding with the ability to exercise one’s rights and reason. But it did not include any concrete proposal for schooling. (*Sketch*, trans. June Barraclough (New York, 1955), p. 182.)

Robespierre, the disciple of Rousseau and the agent of this social revolution, abandoned the Rights of Man for the Rights of the Sans-Culottes and sacrificed the 'despotism of liberty' to the 'welfare of the people'. This 'passion of compassion', first articulated by Rousseau and carried out by Robespierre, had no room for law or government, for liberty or even reason. Nor did it have any patience with the negotiation, persuasion, and compromise required in the political process. Heeding only the voice of 'necessity, the urgent needs of the people', compassion called for immediate and direct action. Thus it created the Terror that was the doom of the Revolution.⁸²

This is a moving and dramatic account of the Revolution, but a fanciful one. The Revolution did not turn into a social revolution and did not fail because of the attempt to do that. It remained a political revolution and it failed as such.⁸³ The motif of Robespierre's government was not the welfare of the people but 'public safety', the safety of the regime. The Republic of Virtue celebrated not the virtue of compassion but that of reason—an abstract, elevated reason that denigrated the practical reason of ordinary men. Its profession of equality was similarly abstract, conferring no real, existential equality upon the poor. '*Le peuple*', in whose name Robespierre established the Republic, was not the people in any ordinary sense, not even the poor, still less *les misérables*, but a singular, abstract 'people' represented by an appropriately singular and abstract 'general will'. Robespierre might have been quoting Rousseau when he described the people: 'The people is good, patient, and generous. . . . The interest, the desire of the people is that of nature, humanity, and the general welfare. . . . The people is always worth more than individuals. . . . The people is sublime, but individuals are weak.'⁸⁴

This 'people' required not education in the usual sense (literacy), not even reformation in the usual sense (an alleviation of abuses and grievances), but nothing less than 'regeneration'. It was in the name of regeneration that Robespierre defended his proposal for boarding schools: 'I am convinced of the necessity of bringing about a complete

⁸² Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1963), pp. 54–5, 66, 69–70, 87.

⁸³ It was after the failure of the Revolution (that is, after Thermidor) that Babeuf's 'Conspiracy of the Equals' attempted to bring about a social revolution. But this, as the name suggests, was a conspiracy, not a revolution—and a failed conspiracy at that.

⁸⁴ Robespierre, *Lettres à ses commettans* (Paris, 1792), II, 55; Ernest Hamel, *Histoire de Robespierre* (Paris, 1865), I, 427–8; F. A. Aulard (ed.), *La Société des Jacobins* (Paris, 1891), V, 254.

regeneration, and, if I may express myself so, of creating a new people.⁸⁵ The historian Mona Ozouf sees the idea of ‘regeneration’ as a key concept of revolutionary discourse, connoting ‘nothing less than the creation of a “new people”’. That term, she points out, had often been invoked but by no one so fervently as Rousseau, which is ‘one of the reasons why the Revolution was all his from the beginning’.⁸⁶

In Britain, where the ‘passion for compassion’ (in Hannah Arendt’s memorable phrase) first arose, it took the form not of regeneration but of melioration. Secular and religious institutions, civil society and the state, public relief and private charity complemented and cooperated with each other.⁸⁷ Above all, there was no *Kulturkampf* to distract and divide the country, pitting the past against the future, creating an unbridgeable divide between reason and religion, and making social reform hostage to anti-religious passion. The British Enlightenment, one might say, was latitudinarian, compatible with a large spectrum of belief and disbelief (just as Wesleyanism itself was compatible with both Anglicanism and Dissent). A book on the British Enlightenment could never bear the subtitle that Peter Gay gave to the first volume of his work, ‘The Rise of Modern Paganism’. Even Hume, skeptical in matters of faith and fearful of religious zealotry, was a staunch supporter of the established church, if only as a corrective to zealotry.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Réimpression de l’ancien Moniteur* (Paris, 1858), XVII. 135 (session of 13 July 1793); *ibid.* XVI. 748 (session of 25 June 1793).

⁸⁶ Mona Ozouf, ‘Regeneration,’ in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, pp. 781, 785. From the beginning, revolutionaries invoked Rousseau as their inspiration. In Oct. 1790, a bust of Rousseau was installed in the Assembly Hall, together with a copy of the *Social Contract*. In April 1794 the Convention decreed that his body be transferred to the Pantheon. ‘It is not the *Social Contract* that brought about the Revolution,’ a member of the Convention declared. ‘Rather it is the Revolution that explained to us the Social Contract.’ (François Furet, ‘Rousseau and the French Revolution’, in *The Legacy of Rousseau*, ed. Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago, 1997), pp. 168, 181.)

⁸⁷ From a French Enlightenment point of view, the system (if it can be called that) was highly irrational. The Poor Law was a national measure authorised by Parliament, but it was carried out by local authorities. The parish was the administrative unit, but the Poor Law Guardians were not church officials. The charity schools were organised and financed by the churches, but they were intended more as instruments of social remediation than of spiritual salvation.

⁸⁸ In the essay, ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’, Hume described superstition as an ‘enemy to civil liberty’ and enthusiasm as a ‘friend to it’: Enthusiasm starts by producing ‘the most cruel disorders in human society, but its fury is like that of thunder and tempest, which exhaust themselves in a little time and leave the air more calm and pure than before’. His examples of Enthusiasts who evolved in this benign fashion were Quakers and Independents, Anabaptists and Jansenists. He did not mention Methodists, but contemporaries may well have thought that this applied to them as well. (*The Scottish Moralists*, p. 176).

This may be the most striking contrast between the two Enlightenments. As there had been no Reformation in France, so there was no equivalent to Methodism, no religious revival to animate the established church or provide a religious alternative to it, and thus no opportunity to enlist religion in humanitarian causes. It is often said that it was the identification of the absolute monarchy with the Catholic Church that made the *philosophes* so unremittingly hostile to Catholicism in particular and to religion in general. But it was also their reverence for reason that made them antagonistic to everything and everyone redolent of religion. They had no sympathy with *les misérables* because they had no respect for those so unenlightened as to be religious. To be religious was to be wanting in reason, thus deficient as a human being. This was the ultimate expression of rationalism as the *philosophes* understood it: a rejection not only of institutional religion, not only of religion per se, but of the religious conception of man—man who is truly human simply by virtue of being born in the image of God.

In this sense, the British, even the most secular of them and even the least democratic of them, were more egalitarian than the French. They were not about to admit the lower classes into the polity, but they did not deny their essential humanity. In France, Peter Gay explains, the campaign to abolish torture, like that to abolish the Jesuits or to spread technological knowledge, was part of ‘the struggle to impose man’s rational will on the environment’.⁸⁹ The motive for reform was quite different in England. There the campaign to reform prisons, or abolish the slave trade, or promote education, was motivated not by ‘rational will’ but by humanitarian zeal, by compassion rather than reason.

Tocqueville was speaking of the French revolutionaries—but he might have been of the *philosophes*—when he said that their ‘salient characteristic’ was a loss of faith that upset their ‘mental equilibrium’. The vacuum in their soul was promptly filled by the ideal of the perfectibility of man. ‘They had a fanatical faith in their vocation—that of transforming the social system, root and branch, and regenerating the whole human race.’ They adored the human intellect and had supreme confidence in its power to transform laws, institutions, and customs. But the intellect they adored was only their own. ‘I could mention several’, Tocqueville sardonically observed, ‘who despised the public almost as heartily as they despised the Deity.’ This was very different, he added, from the respect shown by Englishmen and Americans for the opinions of the majority of

⁸⁹ Gay, *Party of Humanity*, p. 130.

their countrymen. ‘Their intellect is proud and self-reliant, but never insolent; and it has led to liberty, while ours has done little but invent new forms of servitude.’⁹⁰

Tocqueville did not mention Adam Smith in this connection, but he was a perfect exemplar of the Englishman he was describing and a perfect foil to the *philosophe*. For Smith, the defining attributes of human nature were not so much reason and intellect as interests and passions, feelings and sympathies. These were qualities shared by people of all classes, even the poorest and least educated. They were modest qualities—as modest as the ‘propensity to truck, barter, and exchange’.⁹¹ But they were sufficient to achieve the well-being of individuals as well as society. No enlightened despot, not even an enlightened philosopher or legislator, was required to activate these qualities or to harmonise them for the general good.

Nor was the philosopher, Smith believed, innately superior to the common man. Indeed, the distinction between the philosopher and the labourer, he said, was more the product of nurture (as we would now say) than of nature. ‘The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education. . . . By nature a philosopher is not in genius and disposition half so different from a street porter, as a mastiff is from a greyhound.’⁹² One cannot imagine Voltaire or Diderot (or even Rousseau) likening himself to a street porter. It took one of Britain’s most illustrious philosophers to do so.⁹³

In those few sentences, Smith encapsulated the contrast between the two Enlightenments. Smith did not deny ‘difference of talents’ (as he put it); on the contrary, he insisted upon it. It was that difference that emerged and flourished under the conditions of ‘natural liberty’. Such a society respected the liberty of human beings to be different, and at the same time the equality of human beings in their essential nature. The

⁹⁰ Tocqueville, *Old Regime*, pp. 156, 281 n. 64.

⁹¹ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 13.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

⁹³ Britain’s other illustrious philosopher, Hume, observed ‘how nearly equal all men are in their bodily force, and even in their mental power and faculties, till cultivated by education’. (‘Of the Original Contract’ in *David Hume’s Political Essays* (Indianapolis, 1953 (1st edn. 1741–2)) p. 44.) Diderot, on the other hand, rebuked Helvétius for suggesting that circumstance, education, and interest might account for differences in *l’esprit*: ‘He [Helvétius] has not seen the insurmountable barrier that separates a man destined by nature for a given function, from a man who only brings to that function industry, interest and attention.’ (John Morley, *Diderot and the Encyclopaedists* (New York, 1978), p. 338.)

philosophes by contrast, committed to the principle of reason, a reason not accessible to all men, had no rationale for such a liberal society, let alone for a democratic one.

The two Enlightenments were not a passing phase of history. If we still debate their character, it is not only as an exercise in the intellectual history of the eighteenth century (although that is warrant enough), but as a forecast of the social history of the subsequent two centuries. The heritage of the French Enlightenment can be seen in some of the most momentous events of recent times: in communism, which reflected the aspiration for the 'regeneration' of man, the creation of a 'new people' liberated not only from the old religion but also from all the strictures and conventions of an old society; in socialism, which sought the 'common good of men' in an economy and polity that transcended both the good and the will of individual men; in the welfare state, whose penchant for social-engineering can well be described as an attempt to 'impose man's rational will on the environment'; and in the modern disposition for 'value-free' social policies based upon an ostensibly 'value-free' social ethic, reminiscent of the *philosophes'* idea of reason.

If today we are rethinking some of those principles and policies, we are doing so in the spirit of the British Enlightenment: a 'moral philosophy' that valued compassion above reason; a political economy that made of 'natural liberty' an ethical as well as economic ideal; and a humanitarianism that welcomed religion as the ally, not the enemy, of an enlightened society and polity.