

The French Enlightenment and Its Implications for Liberty

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Dear hosts, members, guests, partners, fellow speakers, real-life friends, and Facebook friends: It is a singular honor and pleasure to be here with you today. The French Enlightenment, for the friends of liberty, has not necessarily fared that well in memory compared with the English and, above all, Scottish Enlightenments. Much of the blame for that goes to Rousseau, with his belief that division of labor was the great catastrophe of human history—need one say much more? Much of it goes to the French Revolution, above all in its Jacobin phase, that embraced Rousseau's sad work, *The Social Contract*—which granted absolute sovereignty to those who understood and embodied, whether a majority or minority, the general interest of all, and which specified that neither Christians nor atheists could be citizens in such a society.

In America, such a connection was made early by John Adams, in his *Defense of the Constitutions*, where he argued that most of the French had it wrong. He excepted Montesquieu from his criticism—a large exception, we shall see—but he portrayed the rest as trying to deduce a priori the truths of political science rather than inferring these empirically and cautiously from the study of human life. He argued that the French never understood that only the empirical study of republics throughout history, alone, could teach us about the appropriate and necessary principles of government. He focused on Rousseau and Robespierre, critically, and on Adam Smith, positively. The French, he believed, had rejected a prudent, enduring balance of power in their search for an idealized, efficacious means of achieving change.¹

For those of you who also make that association between the French Enlightenment, on the one hand, and Rousseau and Revolution, on the other, however, there are several problems that should (but surely won't) keep you up nights. First, from the mid-1750s on, Rousseau and the *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment cordially loathed and rejected each other, as Rousseau will tell you explicitly and repeatedly in his *Confessions*, in his *Emile*, his discourses, in his preface to *Narcissus*, in his attacks upon the great *Encyclopédie*—the defining project of the French Enlightenment—and in his correspondence. He was, essentially, *the* most influential *critic*, not proponent, of the French Enlightenment. Second, the Scots whom you love themselves loved the French Enlightenment, and came frequently to Paris to meet its thinkers, and exchanged ideas with them in a great Enlightenment Republic of Letters. That should tell you something. Third, when the Jacobins seized power, there was a dramatic moment at the *Assemblée Nationale* when Robespierre swept off the mantel all busts of Enlightenment *philosophes*, declaring them the enemies and persecutors of the Jacobins' beloved Rousseau. Fourth, almost all of the surviving philosophes, *encyclopédistes*, and denizens of the salons—the exceptions were actually quite few—had turned against the Revolution during the period from 1789 to 1791, seeing it as having abandoned all attempts at rule by law and as given over to lawyers and politicians—the terms were largely synonymous then, too—whose only interest was in personal or group political power. As Frank Kafker's work on the *encyclopédistes* has shown (and, if I might, as my own work on the supposedly radical survivors of the Enlightenment's most notorious salon, the so-called “coterie holbachique” has shown), the antipathy between actual *philosophes* and the Revolution was profound, rapid, and often fatal. This not only should lead to questions about the Revolution, but about the French Enlightenment as well.²

I have written on what was supposedly one of the most radical of French salons—that of the baron d’Holbach. Its behaviors after 1780 apparently had been of no interest to historians. If one followed Holbach’s remnant into the Revolution, however, theirs was a history of hostility to the Revolution, and indeed, often, of counter-Revolution, exile, emigration, and hiding. One of the most militant atheists of Holbach’s salon, Jacques-André Naigeon, Denis Diderot’s closest friend, risked his position and life in 1791 to write publicly in rebuke of the Revolution’s persecution of the Catholic Church, arguing that when the *philosophes* had written about toleration, they had meant it for all. Separate Church and State, he begged, and leave the voluntary communities of worship wholly in peace. Naigeon was, of all members of Holbach’s circle, the *least* critical of the Revolution.³ So, unencumbered by dark thoughts, let us look closely at the French Enlightenment and liberty, and at the relevance of its commitments and of its dilemmas for liberty today.

Unlike the Scots or English, the French *philosophes* faced a nation, political culture, and culture in general in which the cruel and abusive power of one individual or caste over another—despotism was the name they gave it most often—was part of the very presumptive authority of the past against which they struggled. They lived not in the Edinburgh of moderates in religion and politics, but in the France of royal edicts signed “For such is my good pleasure”; of religious persecution, unto death if need be, with Protestantism officially and brutally outlawed in the generation of most of their parents; of a widespread belief that uniformity of belief and practice was essential to public order; of the widespread use of torture in the search for, the prosecution of, and the penalty for crime; of the denigration of business and commerce—nobles *lost* their

nobility by engaging in it (derogation), and every son of a nobleman was a nobleman—and the celebration of birth and blood; of exemptions from most taxation for Church and nobility (which meant, among other things, the most productive lands in France), and, indeed, for wealthy burghers, which placed an unbearable burden of taxation on the peasantry; of a religious intolerance of which France boasted and which touched every aspect of French life; of a ban on inoculation, a ban supported by both the Parisian Faculty of Medicine (as a violation of the Hippocratic Oath) and the Parisian Faculty of Theology (as man playing God with nature). The British may have looked to French thinkers for inspiration and approval, but, in fact, French thinkers longingly looked to Britain for models of a freer, more innovative, and more decent society.

This was true not only of Montesquieu—known for his celebration of the balances and separations of power that he saw in the British constitutional system—but of the most influential and widely read of all French Enlightenment thinkers, Voltaire, who, in his *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), also known as his *Letters from England*, extended the lessons of England for France to almost all areas of human life. In England, he wrote, men were free in their conscience, and a person could choose his own road to heaven. Religious tolerance, in turn, produced religious pluralism, which further dampened intolerance and violence, creating a freer and more productive society. Voltaire presented voluntary exchange and voluntary religious association as mutually reinforcing goods that were bringing prosperity and peace to Britain. He described the Royal Exchange in London as “more venerable than many a court” and offered a portrait both extremely subversive of contemporaneous French values and glowing, even if tinged with his typical irony, in its celebration of freedom and voluntary commerce:

You will see representatives of all the peoples gathered there for the benefit of humanity. There, the Jew, the Muslim, and the Christian deal with each other as if they shared the same religion and give the name “infidel” only to those who go bankrupt. There, the Presbyterian trusts the Anabaptist, and the Anglican accepts the promise of the Quaker.⁴

The Exchange was a scene of “peaceful and free assemblies,” after which individuals made voluntary choices about their private religious lives: “Some go to the synagogue; others in search of a drink; some to baptisms; others to circumcisions; and yet others to await divine inspiration in their Church.” In the end, Voltaire wrote, “all are content.” Voltaire drew the following conclusion, relevant still:

If there were only one religion in England, there would be great danger of despotism. If there were two religions, they would cut each other’s throats. But there are thirty religions, and they live together in peace and happiness.⁵

What was “English,” then, for Voltaire, was the adaptation of religion, by means of toleration, to the needs of a commercial Britain emerging from generations of civil war and instability. The separation of a public political sphere from a private religious one and the recognition that peace and order were superior to the creedal fratricide of prior centuries were the hallmarks of this adaptation. He praised the clear legal preeminence of the State and linked that to a more irenic religious life. In England, civil society had become more tolerant and peaceful than even its clerics, and Voltaire’s astonishing conclusion on the Exchange and on religious

pluralism, above, marked nothing less than a rethinking of the foundation of civil society itself. The toleration engendered and shown by a commercial, increasingly secular, and religiously diversified state offered a new way of living together and a new set of moral criteria. Religious differences did not have to be resolved publicly because free citizens entered their rightful areas of voluntary association, privacy, and conscience in matters of creed. In Voltaire's pages, one could hear the values of a civilization beginning to change. Religious toleration had evolved in England, but it was Voltaire who captured its conceptual essence and made it available to the world. Indeed, his most singular praise for religious toleration was for that of William Penn in his American colony, where all religions were welcomed. He also extolled Penn's Charter, in the political domain, for its insistence upon the removal of powers from the governors, lest they eventually choose to do harm.⁶

For Denis Diderot, as for the French Enlightenment in its most common denominator, religious intolerance was the enemy of humanity and peace. As he wrote in his celebrated article "Intolerance," in his great *Encyclopédie*, a generation after Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques*, "Instruction, persuasion, and prayer—these are the only legitimate means of spreading religion....Every practice tending to stir up the people, to arm nations and soak the soil with blood, is impious."⁷ Indeed, that speaks to us now, for if the friends of liberty ever think of religious violence and coercion as part of a multiculturalism that we should accept, the fruits of the French Enlightenment will be lost. Voltaire once wrote a play called *Mohammed, or Fanaticism*, intended more as a critique of Christianity than of Islam. In 1993, it was banned in Geneva—a few miles from where Voltaire made his home at Ferney—lest it offend the Muslim population.⁸ That will not do.

The themes of Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* would dominate both Voltaire's long intellectual life and the French Enlightenment in general. They reflected an anglophilia marked by a not unrealistic eye and a great concern for the limitations of power. In his letters on English government and society, Voltaire used England as a foil to criticize the despotism and unenlightened government of France and the Continent. This marked a great change from earlier criticisms of the old regime, abandoning an appeal to an idealized, in this case, medieval and feudal past (such as dominated criticisms of the monarchy at the end of the 17th century, and an idealization that classical liberals must avoid when referring back to the 19th century). He offered a vision of a society in which laws rather than men's wills rule; in which civil liberties are every citizen's right, regardless of birth or rank; in which religious tolerance puts an end to the civil strife and fanaticism of persecuting churches and sects; in which commercial prosperity allows the individual to serve his own interest in a way that enriches the society at large; and in which the arts and sciences, theoretical and applied, are allowed to flourish. These were all interrelated for Voltaire. He stressed the constitutional nature of the English monarchy; the liberty that flows from a government of law not whim; the equality of taxation; the honorable status of commerce; the comfortable lot of the English yeoman compared with the French peasant—in short, the greatness, prosperity, and peacefulness of a tolerant, secular England, under liberty and law, engaged in productive commerce. He offered a glorification of an open and religiously pluralistic bourgeois England as opposed to an intolerant, anti-commercial, aristocratic France.⁹

These all were themes that, well before his *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu had engaged, in the 1720s, in his *Persian Letters*. If the Ottoman Empire had listened to clerical demands to

drive the Christians out of their lands, one of his characters observed, so much commerce and prosperity would have departed with them. Montesquieu often compared the Persians favorably to the French, but this was not the case in his presentation of their treatment of women.¹⁰ He made this theme central to his work not only for its own interest, but as a metaphor for despotism, the subjection of individuals to the coercive will of the powerful. One of the dramatic ironies of the *Persian Letters* was that Montesquieu's fictional Persian traveler, Uzbek, could see despotism everywhere it occurred in Europe, but he was wholly blind to his own despotism with regard to his harem. Montesquieu saw painfully that it was a part of human nature itself to be aware of all abuses of power but their own. (That, of course, is why we choose to limit power itself.) In a letter to the eunuch left in charge of his harem during his travels, Montesquieu's Uzbek offered a chilling ideal type of pure despotism:

And what are you but mere tools, which I can break at will; who exist only insofar as you can obey; who are in the world only to live under my laws, or to die as soon as I command it; who breathe only as long as my happiness, my love, or even my jealousy, require your degraded selves; and who, finally, can have no other destiny but submission, whose soul can only be my will, whose only hope is that I should be happy?¹¹

The last letter (and voice) of the *Persian Letters* is given to the wife whom Uzbek believed had most enthusiastically given herself over to his will. Roxana writes to him, as she takes her life rather than submit to his authority: "No: I may have lived in servitude, but I have

always been free. I have amended your laws according to the laws of nature, and my mind has always remained independent.”¹²

Late in the 18th century, Denis Diderot wrote *The Nun*, whose heroine is a sincere young Catholic placed by her family in a convent against her will; the work is anti-monastic but not anti-Christian. Her confessor explains to her that she does not understand the poverty, work, and hardship that await her outside the convent. She replies, “At least I know the value of freedom.”¹³

Independence from despotism is one of the central themes of the French Enlightenment, always linked to independence of mind, without which alternatives to despotism are not possible (which is true, of course, and which is why believers in liberty should worry much more about coercive political correctness than they do). In the 1760s, in his best-selling *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire created a dialogue between “Boldmind” and “Medroso,” the latter a defender of the Lisbon Inquisition. Boldmind advised, “Dare to think for yourself. . . . It is these tyrants of the mind who have caused part of the misfortunes of the world.” Medroso argues, “If every man thought for himself there would be utter confusion,” insisting, “We are also very peaceful in Lisbon, where no one does [think for himself].” Boldmind urges, “You’re peaceful but not happy. It is the peace of galley slaves.” Medroso asks, “But if I’m satisfied in the galleys?” Boldmind, understanding that you cannot force people to be free, concludes, “In that case, you deserve to be there.”¹⁴

Despotism was always the enemy, and the term “enlightened despotism” would have been an oxymoron for French Enlightenment thinkers, even if they occasionally looked to strong rulers whom they hoped would be “enlightened”—Frederick II of Prussia, for example, or

Catherine II of Russia—to initiate major reforms. Catherine, Diderot’s patroness in many ways, asked him to respond formally to her proposals for reform in Russia. Diderot was frank. He told her that her refusal to address serfdom, the most essential evil in need of reform, was an acceptance of “slavery”: “Does she not know [he wrote to her] that there can be no true civilization, laws, population, agriculture, trade, wealth, science, taste, or art, where liberty does not exist?”¹⁵ Catherine had proposed that “the equality of citizens consists in their all being submitted to the same laws.” Diderot challenged her:

The word “*equally*” should be added. This paragraph [of Catherine’s] involves the abolition of all the privileges attached to the nobility, Church, and magistracy. But I ask, what precautions will be taken so that citizens who are unequal in power, strength, and every kind of means, should all be equal before the law?¹⁶

In a later article on law in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire argued on behalf of diverse peoples evolving diverse laws, with the species learning from the variety and its consequences: “When nature formed our species she gave us a few instincts: self-esteem for our preservation, benevolence for the preservation of others, the love which is common to all species, and the inexplicable gift of being able to combine more ideas than all of the animals together. After thus giving us our portion, she said to us: ‘Do what you can.’”¹⁷ Indeed.

One blessing of that invitation to “do what you can” was the ability of the species to learn from experience, and from trial and error, even if the genesis of what is good was not itself admirable. Voltaire, in his letter pleading with the French to adopt inoculation against smallpox, told how it arose not from any medical or charitable insight, but from the experience of

Circassian families who wished to sell daughters into the sex trade at the highest prices. If they had had very mild cases of smallpox, those daughters were unmarked; exposure to benign cases and then inoculation itself began from that wretched motive. The wife of the English ambassador to Turkey observed it, however, and brought the practice back to England, and statistics, Voltaire explained, now confirmed its value. Its origin was irrelevant to the evaluation of a beneficent innovation.¹⁸

Similarly, for Voltaire, English liberties had arisen not from any desire for liberty or justice, but from a war between “birds of prey”—barons and crown—over the spoils of the labor of the powerless. The Magna Carta was not *designed* to achieve limited government for a nation, nor were any of the further struggles, regicides, or civil wars. Rather, for Voltaire, English liberty arose as an unintended general development of efforts to prevent diverse particular abuses by diverse particular parties. The genius (and good fortune) of England, he wrote, was not in the planning of a constitution, but in the adaptations that led to and arose from that constitution. Again, the message to the abstract theoreticians was the same: Don’t judge by original motive; judge by the effects of ways of being and doing upon human life.¹⁹

Whoever contributed to the power of the human mind to learn from experience, Voltaire wrote, was the benefactor of mankind. Who are the great men?—he and other French Enlightenment thinkers asked. They were not the generals, emperors, kings, and other butchers whom history celebrated, but those men such as Bacon, Locke, and Newton, who had improved the powers of mind, who had stressed the value of empiricism over rationalism, who had studied phenomena rather than vainly theorizing about them, and who had recognized the absurdity of trying to go beyond the limits of human knowledge. It was not accidental that those who

recognized their own ignorance added so vastly to the storehouse of authentic human knowledge. Cause and effect, and the manner in which the world operated, were not matters of conjecture, but of empirical study, of concrete experience, of learning from the world itself. Nor should one value the thinkers of one's own nation—as the French do with Descartes over Newton, he noted—above those, from anywhere in the world, whose work is confirmed by nature herself.²⁰ The human mind, as Hayek famously put it two centuries later, cannot foresee its own progress, but civilizations evolve, learn, and achieve what they never could plan. Voltaire began his own history of the world with China, which he deemed the first great civilization while the West lived in barbarism. What had made European progress possible, as d'Alembert wrote in his *Preliminary Discourse* to Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, was the method of modifying the lessons of the past by the systematically learned lessons available to the present.

The French Enlightenment worried, however, about ethnocentrism and any belief that human life should be uniform. The deepest question for Montesquieu, for example, in all of his works, was what, in fact, was rightly relative to time and place, and what was given by nature? What is malleable and what is common to all human experience? His Persian travelers sought to disguise themselves, to avoid the constant curiosity, but when Uzbek would reveal himself to someone, he was invariably asked, “But how could one be a Persian?”²¹ It was a line the 18th-century French loved in the work, and it came to stand for anyone who could not believe that someone was different or thought different from himself? “Monsieur is a classical liberal? But how could one be a classical liberal?”

For Montesquieu, it was empirically the case that human forms of association, including despotism, including slavery, including the oppression of women, and forms of value and belief,

from the diversity of religions to the celebration of cruelty, could exist almost beyond our individual imagination. It was equally true empirically, however, that there was a reality principle of natural desires and consequences that required coercion to secure certain forms and that conferred survival benefits on others. There was a great variety of moral codes in the world, and exponentially so in history, but these had consequences beyond human will. In the *Persian Letters*, his mythical Troglodytes existed for some time without honoring contracts or enforcing laws, but they perished because of those traits, and those Troglodytes who lived by reciprocity and honor survived. Note well, however, in the clearest warning to our present and future, that the latter Troglodytes prospered mightily because of those positive traits, but precisely in and because of their prosperity, they then wished to be governed rather than to be self-governed, and they chose a king. The king accepted sadly, but he warned them:

You bring me the crown, and if you insist upon it absolutely, I shall certainly have to take it. But be sure that I shall die of grief, having seen when I was born the Troglodytes in freedom and seeing them subjects today....Your virtue has begun to be a burden to you....You would prefer to be subject to a king, and obey his laws, which would be less rigid than your own customs. You know that you then would be able to satisfy your ambitions, accumulate wealth, and live idly in degrading luxury; that provided you avoided falling into the worst crimes, you would have no need of virtue.²²

As seen in Roxana's final letter to Uzbek, Montesquieu believed in a natural law of liberty, but fear and force could suppress it, and tyranny could last a long, long time, covering the world with all the varieties of despotism. Montesquieu in the *Persian Letters* (1721), the *Considerations of the Romans* (1734), and *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), sought to understand the order of nature and the variety of human forms of association. Was there a unifying truth amid the relativity of human perspectives? Could we know the regularity of human nature, recognizing common form beneath surface differences? Could we know the essential varieties of political association, such as aristocratic republics, monarchies, despotisms, and democracies? Each form, he believed, had its own tendency toward degeneration: oligarchy, tyranny, demagoguery, and an anarchy in which no man's life or fruits of labor were safe. We might think we have the science of society, he warns us yet today, but history teaches, above all, the instability and cyclical nature of human political history. If one cares about liberty, security, justice, and equity, one faces, above all, human nature, and the struggle for such things is never ended.

For Montesquieu, it was clear that there is an independent natural reality in which behaviors have real consequences. These point to universal values: human societies can achieve any number of forms, but they cannot survive unless they solve the problem of linking the individual to the broader society, of security, of equity, of justice. Such success, however, given human nature, will not be permanent. Nonetheless, for Montesquieu, these are the problems that matter more than all others, and each generation and civilization faces, he warns us, the three great problems of political life: Can one overcome or avoid the catastrophe of despotism? Can one achieve rights while avoiding anarchy? Can one achieve a separation, balance, and mutual check

upon the powers that seem endemic to human life—the despotic, the aristocratic, the monarchical, the popular—leaving room for liberty and self-governance?

Montesquieu and Voltaire were among the first commanding voices of a movement that arose in their wake that has come to be termed—self-named, of course—“the French Enlightenment.” What characterizes that movement as a whole?

In a highly stratified France, there emerged toward the middle of the 18th century a community of thinkers and writers who shared certain attitudes towards the new philosophy, toward arbitrary authority, and toward the privileges and monopolies of the Church. They saw themselves as part of a Republic of Letters (a phrase widely used to describe the world of writers and educated readers) that stood between a sad past of superstition, despotism, ignorance, and suffering, on the one hand, and a possible future of human Enlightenment, on the other. In that future, they hoped, freed from the presumptive authority of the past, educated by experience methodically gathered and tested, and applying knowledge toward the end of reducing human suffering and increasing human well-being, the human species might rewrite its relationship to the natural and social world. They constituted a remarkable moment in the history of human consciousness: a generation that thought of itself as leading Europe from a phantasmagoric past into a world that would seek to change the conditions of human life closer to the heart's desire for happiness and ease from pain.

Diverse in social and educational origin, but bright, sociable, recognizing each other by common values, interests and opponents, the *philosophes*—the philosophers of the French Enlightenment—coalesced around certain institutions (cafés, salons, patrons, academies) and around certain ideas. By mid-century, they developed a sense of community with purpose,

coming to consciousness of the drama of their rejection of inherited authority per se, and, in theory at least, of their commitments to empirical evidence, rational analysis, nature as the sole source of our knowledge and values. From those beliefs arose their commitment to the principle of utility—that the happiness of the species is the highest value, and that all things may be judged by their contribution to happiness or suffering. For them, as opposed to the case with most of us, there was no conflict between natural law theories and utility: the pursuit of happiness was the natural law under which we found ourselves.

Their commitment to these values, and their competition with the clergy for the role of educator of their society, led them into a fundamental conflict with the Roman Catholic Church in France that is one of the defining characteristics of the French Enlightenment: struggling with the church over issues of tolerance and censorship, and offering quite different histories and analyses of their societies, the philosophes came to identify the church (and the church the philosophes) as their antithesis, their deepest foe. The philosophes' rejection of traditional authority and supranatural claims; their espousal of secular need as the highest value in political and public life—all these led the community of philosophes to see the Church as the epitome of arbitrary traditional authority, anti-secularism, anti-utilitarianism, and through its powers (often greatly exaggerated by the Enlightenment) of censorship, persecution, intolerance, and monopoly of most education, as the greatest barrier to the future they would bring into being. Anti-clericalism was probably the most common denominator of the Enlightenment.

Their struggle with the worldly Church of the 18th century—a Church that would be revived and purified by its persecution by the Revolution—centered on two issues, above all: first, the Enlightenment's call for freedom of inquiry and expression; and second, its call for

religious toleration and an end to coercive intolerance.

One of the major agencies of the organization and dissemination of the Enlightenment: the project of the *Encyclopédie*, the great encyclopedia of human knowledge produced largely under the editorship of Denis Diderot. The *Encyclopédie* moved from a simple decision in 1746, by a consortium of publishers, to do an augmented translation of Chamber's *Cyclopaedia*, a publishing success in England, to a vast work conceived of as a sanctuary of all acquired knowledge and experience. It would be a work that should serve as a bridge to the future and a barrier against any new dark ages because it would communicate not simply what we know, but how we came to know it; not simply philosophy, but history, the arts, the letters, and, most remarkably, technology, the mechanical and technical inventions that were changing the human relationship to power and production. It grew to be seventeen volumes of text and eleven volumes of technical plates published between 1751 and 1772. It was a runaway best-seller, remarkably so, and frequently sold in pirated editions throughout Europe.

It engaged over 160 writers and possibly another hundred informal consultants, drawing into its orbit and its frame of reference the expertise and scholarship of lay (and occasionally even clerical) France. Its premise was that there had been a rebirth of knowledge and a qualitative change of method in the seventeenth century, creating a human power to understand and to alter what could be altered. The human world was dynamic, not static, and knowledge was central to that. One could question the origins and foundations of all authorities, beliefs, and institutions; one could apply science, technology, and secular inquiry progressively, rewriting the human relationship to the world.

Frequently attacked and occasionally suppressed, it drew its authors, experts, and readers into the drama of censorship; it found agents of collusion and support in the highest structures of the old regime, in the courts, the aristocracy, and the ministries of the monarchies. Its very existence as well as its contents were corrosive upon the sacred idols and established intellectual authorities of its culture, and it played a major role in establishing the consciousness of this movement that more and more came to call itself "the party of humanity," or "the party of reason," whose criteria of truth were not claims of special authority or revelation, but the reason and experience of natural lights, explained for all to see and judge, and whose goal was not despotic power, but, rather, utility, the happiness and self-preservation of the human race. That was their self-image, and, increasingly, their image in a culture in which they were winning the war for public opinion.

The Enlightenment was a diverse set of phenomena arbitrarily and favorably named by itself and its historians, but the culture recognized the heart of the Enlightenment in its claim that so much of existing authority—intellectual, religious, political, and social—is arbitrary, arising from power and tradition alone. The Enlightenment did not assail authority per se, but arbitrary authority, and in countless works it called upon authority in countless domains to justify itself.

Justification requires criteria, so what were the criteria of the Enlightenment? First, it demanded that claims of knowledge and authority be based upon natural experience, social, communicable, and verifiable. Our teachers must earn, not impose, their influence on our minds. In one sense, this empiricism favored a certain emphasis on nurture: we are, in many essential ways, what we experience. Nonetheless, the issue of nature versus nurture was, for almost all

of them, an open and empirical question, and few believed that physical causes do not distinguish us as individuals. They were meritocratic without being, on the whole, egalitarian.

The empirical side of moral theory, for the French Enlightenment, was utility: the increase of well-being and the reduction of suffering of our species. This did not sound dry at all in an age of famine, smallpox, incurable disease, drought, dynastic and colonial wars, torture, aristocratic privilege, and the burdens of peasant taxation, tithes, and feudal dues.

Nonetheless, happiness as the ultimate criterion, for them as for us, was not, to say the very least, unproblematic. Should it be measured individual by individual or cumulatively in society? Was happiness psychological and a state of mental well-being, or was it physical, more linked to voluptuousness and sensual pleasure? Was happiness otherwise amoral, or was there a happiness to virtue itself? You will be intrigued, I think, by the effort of François-Jean, chevalier then marquis de Chastellux, to resolve this in his work *De la félicité publique (On Public Happiness)*, published in 1772. Voltaire, in what most historians view as a moment of great weakness, termed Chastellux's work on happiness superior to Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. In fact, he may have been on to something.

Chastellux's work is, among other things, a review of prior world and European history, and, most immediately, a call to solving the French fiscal crisis by despoliation of the great wealth of the landed Church and forced loans at low interest to the public treasury by those classes—his own foremost among them—that have not paid taxes as a matter of aristocratic and other birth and privilege. It is also an effort to sort out the problem of thinking politically about utility and happiness. For Chastellux, there is no way around the fact that happiness rightly and

ineluctably differs for every individual, and that any effort to impose a single standard of private happiness would be tyrannical. His solution is quite wonderfully elegant. We cannot measure the private happiness of others, but we can measure public happiness. For each individual, there are 168 hours in a week. Let us call that A. A significant part of those hours are required to provide the means of subsistence. Let us call that B. (The greater the division of labor, the level of technological innovation, the productivity, and the availability of goods and services of a society, the lower that B will be, so to speak.) A very significant portion of those 168 hours is labor demanded and coercively obtained by public power: building the pyramids in ancient Egypt or the cathedrals in medieval Europe; fighting and paying to support offensive wars in ancient Rome and modern France; forced labor; mandatory tithes; paying public fees, dues, and, above all, taxes. Let us call that C. $A - B - C$ equals the amount of time that individuals in a society have to pursue their own private visions of happiness, however different those might be, a remainder that provides us with a measure of “public happiness,” a metric of the goodness or wickedness of a state and society.²³ Not bad.

From the 1750s to the 1780s, when France became much more politicized and focused on its immediate crises, there was a voluminous literary output from the philosophes: every year, scores and then hundreds of works, large and small, which became the rage. The foes of the Enlightenment increasingly were on the defensive, and every act of censorship and scandal excited the interest of the reading public.

The great issue and battle cry of the Enlightenment that united its diverse tendencies and that won over first public opinion and then the state itself was toleration, religious and intellectual. They were telling their readers: You have the right to judge, to know, to reason, to choose your

path to ultimate things. Voltaire, in Ferney from the 1750s on, until his death in 1778, took every case of judicial murder of Protestants or unbelievers, every torture, every breaking on the wheel, every drawing and quartering, every ripping out of the tongues of blasphemers before they are burned alive, and he brought these atrocities to the consciousness of European culture.

He sang the praises of every defender of such victims and publicly named and shamed every persecutor or complicit magistrate. Did the Enlightenment win? I am in a room of educated men and women. You could name me many apologists of the 17th century in France—Pascal, Bossuet, Fenélon, Malebranche, and so on. How many of you can name even one French apologist of the 18th century? *Before* the Revolution, serfdom ended in France, torture was abolished, religious toleration was restored, and the sentences of victims of judicial murder were acknowledged as such and overturned. Voltaire would write, in his *Treatise on Toleration* (1763), that where the state may kill for belief, no one is safe. It was Voltaire, not his critics, who was welcomed back to Paris in the days before his death in 1778, flowers strewn wherever he passed.

Nonetheless, the tensions of the French Enlightenment remain still with all lovers of liberty. When we think about reforms, do we think about what modality of power is permissible to achieve those reforms we bring into being? By whose agency must reform be accomplished to be worth the price of power given? When we speak of learning from nature, especially of following nature, what equivocation of meanings do we encounter? Having identified religion with the presumptive authority of the past, and with centuries of abuse, what place have we left it in the public sphere, and—it is an empirical question, after all—can a Europe without religious fervor defend its liberties of conscience and mind and satire against the religious fervors of

others? We have turned to history, not abstraction, for our deepest lessons: are those lessons ones of optimism or pessimism? We have replaced birth by merit and legal equality, but have we avoided the awful path of egalitarian expectations of outcome? Have we ever answered the question that Montesquieu pondered: Can there be self-governance without virtue, and, if not, what is the durable source of such virtue?

The French Enlightenment, and one sees it ever more nostalgically perhaps—for the right but sad reasons—changed a civilization. When Salman Rushdie emerged from his first year of hiding from the Ayatollah’s fatwa, his sentence of death for mocking Islam, reporters at his secret press conference asked him what he had been doing for a year. He answered, “Reading a lot of Montesquieu, reading a lot of Voltaire.” Perhaps we need to add the same to our quota of reading Adam Smith.

What did they teach us? Mutual forbearance, commerce, peace, and prosperity go hand in hand. Lose the former, and all the rest is in peril. Ideas change civilizations, and the minds and consciences of our compatriots are worth fighting for. The foundation of liberty, its *sine qua non*, is free inquiry, free debate, the sharing of knowledge, and resistance to all oppression of the human mind. The price of that, which we should welcome, is an endless series of debates, among ourselves, and with those who disagree with us. Ideas change civilizations. When the 18th century began in France, all religions but one were proscribed, heresy and blasphemy were crimes, uniformity meant social coherence and peace to most minds, birth determined station in life, trade and commerce were denigrated and tightly controlled, innovation was suppressed even to the point of prohibition of inoculation, and the goal of the state was to secure God’s one true faith, at whatever secular cost to the individual. The French Enlightenment changed all that.

Their watchwords—toleration, commerce, reduction of human suffering, no censorship, a free science, and liberty from despotisms of all kind—are ours. We are their heirs, and they hoped we one day would take up their cause.

¹ John Adams, *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America Against the Attack of M. Turgot* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), passim.

² See, in addition to the works of Rousseau cited, Alan Charles Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 4-35, 261-329; Frank Kafker, *The Encyclopedists as a Group: A Collective Biography of the Authors of the Encyclopédie* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1996).

³ Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie*, 259-300.

⁴ Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, Ernest Dilworth, transl. (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961), 26.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 3-40.

⁷ Denis Diderot, *Political Writings*. John Hope Mason and Robert Wokler, eds. and transl. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 29-30.

⁸ There is an excellent account of this, in French, at <http://carolinefourest.wordpress.com/2007/02/01/tariq-ramadan-et-la-censure-de-voltaire/>; see also, in German, <http://www.correspondance-voltaire.de/html/mahomet-genf.htm>

⁹ Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, 30-40.

¹⁰ Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*. C. J. Betts, transl. (Penguin Books: New York, 1993), passim.

¹¹ Ibid., 69.

¹² Ibid., 280-81.

¹³ Diderot, *The Nun*. Leonard Tancock, transl. (Penguin Books: New York, 1974), 37.

¹⁴ Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*. Theodore Besterman, transl. (Penguin Books: New York, 1984), 280-81.

¹⁵ Diderot, *Political Writings*, 112.

¹⁶ Ibid., 97.

¹⁷ Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 287-88.

¹⁸ Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, 41-45.

¹⁹ Ibid., 30-38.

²⁰ Ibid., 46-74.

²¹ Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, 83-84.

²² For the letters on the Troglodytes, see Ibid., 53-61. The king's speech is on 60-61.

²³ François-Jean de Chastellux, *De la félicité publique, ou considérations sur le sort des hommes dans les différentes époques de l'histoire*. 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1772). The work was in an augmented third edition by 1776.