

# The Enlightenment Crisis of Values

by Roger Maioli



In 1792, as the French Revolution was about to start its descent into the Terror, the British print-maker Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) exhorted his compatriots to contrast the ideals of France with those of Britain. In an oft-

reprinted etching entitled “The Contrast,” Rowlandson juxtaposed images of “British Liberty” and “French Liberty” while posing the question: “Which is best[?]”<sup>1</sup> For anyone confronted with the print, the answer would be a no-brainer. On the left side we see an image of Britannia, patroness of Britain, holding Magna Carta on one hand and the scales of justice on the other; on the right side we see Medusa running amok, carrying a decapitated head on her trident as she marches through a crowd of dead bodies. Under these images, Rowlandson compiled two sets of values respectively associated with Britain and revolutionary France. Among other things, the former stands for “religion,” “morality,” “justice,” “industry,” and “happiness,” whereas the latter stands for “atheism,” “perjury,” “injustice,” “idleness,” and “misery.” This sharp contrast between an idealized Britain and a demonized France will seem familiar to anyone used to modern political propaganda, in which caricature also serves to accentuate contrasts. And yet there is something very strange about this print. Take a

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Rowlandson, “The Contrast.” Catalogue of prints and drawings in the British Museum. Division I, political and personal satires, v. 6, no. 8149. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library.

second look. In the list of French “values,” quietly nesting in the company of “murder,” “cruelty,” and “treachery,” we find the word “equality.” Rowlandson expected his public to be as appalled by this term as McCarthyists in the mid-twentieth century were by the words “red” or “communism.” Equality, of course, was supposed to mean the end of class distinctions, a scary prospect for Rowlandson’s target audience. But in the broader context of “The Contrast,” equality also stands as the opposite of religion, morality, even happiness.

This is not unique to Rowlandson. Two years later, in Isaac Cruikshank’s *A*



*Peace offering to the Genius of Liberty and Equality*

(1794), we find liberty and equality again embodied by Medusa, with the snakes on her head proclaiming “rapine,” “murder,” “famine,” and “atheism.”<sup>2</sup> Similar associations pervade other satirical prints as well as British political propaganda more generally in the 1790s. What this antirevolutionary discourse reveals is that equality was worrisome not only from a socioeconomic perspective. It was viewed as a threat to moral values. It is as if equality — the end of

distinctions between human beings — necessarily entailed immorality — the end of the distinction between right and wrong.

Could there be any substance to this charge? After all, the stakes of this debate were high enough in Britain that aspersion and vilification were par for the course in political controversy. But the association between equality and immorality was more than a low move. For British observers, the French Revolution was genuinely

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Cruikshank, detail from *A peace offering to the genius of liberty and equality: dedicated to those lovers of French freedom who would thus debase their country*. Catalogue of prints and drawings in the British Museum. Division I, political and personal satires / Mary Dorothy George, v. 7, no. 8426. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library.

connected with dangerous ways of thinking, especially about morals. Horace Walpole (1717-1797), for example, claimed in his correspondence that “the French philosophers ... expunge all morality, and attempt to establish universal liberty, by destruction of all religion, and all the terrors of futurity.” Divesting its disciples of the fear of eternal punishment, “these monsters talk of settling a constitution ... couched in one law, ‘Thou shalt reverse every precept of morality and justice, and do all the wrong thou canst to all mankind.’”<sup>3</sup> Echoing Walpole’s view, the philanthropist Hannah More (1745-1833) found that the Revolution could have been avoided “if many of the writings of Voltaire, Rousseau, and d’Alembert ... had found more difficulty in getting into the world.” Unfortunately for More, those impious books enjoyed wide circulation, “annihilating the very existence of virtue.”<sup>4</sup> Once virtue and morals are demystified as old prejudices, the ground is clear for doing away with social hierarchies as well. The French Medusa, More implies, was achieving in practice a dismantlement of boundaries that had already happened in theory, through the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

This is not to say that Enlightenment thinkers championed immorality or found it immoral to denounce the abuses of the *ancien régime*. All the authors named by More wrote passionately about ethics. But while the major figures of the French Enlightenment viewed their cause as a highly moral one, they too granted that the philosophy of the times could go too far. The philosophe best known for his intense anticlericalism, Voltaire (1694-1778), feared that radical critiques of religion could pose a threat to moral values. In one of his last philosophical tales, Voltaire suggests that modern atheism “proves like two and two make four that there is no God, no vice, no virtue,” and then goes on to imagine what would happen if all of England

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<sup>3</sup> *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-1983), Vol. 34, 177-8, 192.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah More, *Remarks on the Speech of M. Dupont, Made in the National Convention of France, on the Subjects of Religion and Public Education* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1793), 22, 26.

suddenly embraced these principles.<sup>5</sup> What follows is a harrowing thought experiment. The gentry and aristocracy “could live in peace, in the innocent cheerfulness of virtuous people”; by contrast,

the poor and violent atheist, sure of impunity, would be a fool if he did not assassinate you in order to steal your money. From that time all the bonds of society would be broken, all the secret crimes would swarm over the earth ... the lower orders of the people would be only a herd of brigands ... they would pass their miserable lives in taverns in the company of lost women; they would fight, they would fight among themselves; they would tumble down drunken in the midst of their pewter pint pots with which they broke each other's heads; they would rouse up for a new course of thieving and assassination; they would begin again every day this abominable round of brutalities. (177)

Voltaire did not live to see the French Revolution, but this passage reads like a premonition of the horrors to come. It offers the same picture of equality we find in the propaganda of the 1790s: the leveling down of social classes follows from the loss of objective moral values, and the result is not a more harmonious society but utter chaos. “He who has no religion at all,” wrote Montesquieu (1689-1755), “is that terrible animal that feels its liberty only when it claws and devours.”<sup>6</sup> Even as he defended equality as the principle behind well-functioning democracies, Montesquieu condemned “extreme equality” – the state in which “each one wants to be the equal of those chosen to command” – for in such a state “women, children, and slaves will

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<sup>5</sup> Voltaire, *The History of Jenni*, in *The Whole Prose Romances of François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire*, trans. William Walton (London: The Walpole Press, 1900), 126, 177.

<sup>6</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 5.24.8, 465; 5.24.2, 460.

submit to no one. There will no longer be mores or love or order, and finally, there will no longer be virtue” (112).

For Montesquieu and Voltaire, as for Rowlandson and Cruikshank or Walpole and More, there is a connection between radical thinking and radical action: critiques of religion lead to skepticism about morals, which in turn entails social disruption. Equality, as they imagine it, is less a civic ideal than a return to the state of nature — not the regulated state of nature that Montesquieu describes in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), but the earlier, brutish state of nature of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651), in which “every man is Enemy to every man” and there is “continuall feare, and danger of violent death.”<sup>7</sup> Reflecting this view, More tells revolutionists that they “may exult in being once more restored to that glorious state of *liberty and equality*, when all subsisted by rapine and the chace; when all, O enviable privilege! were equally savage, equally indigent, and equally naked” (35). An egalitarian society, for all these thinkers, is one in which the downtrodden are finally free to prey on their social betters. Writers sympathetic towards what Montesquieu calls “extreme equality” were quick to challenge such critiques. The historian and moralist Catherine Macaulay (1731-1791), well-known for her republican principles, accused Hobbes of sheer ignorance. For Macaulay, Hobbes’s “dogmatic assertion, that the state of equality is the state of war” distorted the truth that “political equality, and the laws of good government, are so far from incompatible, that one never can exist to perfection without the other.”<sup>8</sup> Macaulay expresses something close to a modern progressive perspective, which views equality as one of the most basic ethical imperatives. For most of her contemporaries, however, equality was a bugbear. To push for it was to celebrate barbarism and the dissolution of moral values.

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 89.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Macaulay, “Loose remarks on certain positions to be found in Mr. Hobbes’s Philosophical Rudiments of Government and Society” (London: printed for T. Davies et al., 1767), 16.

What these examples suggest is that for large sections of the educated opinion in Britain and France, a genuine commitment to ethics required the acceptance, or even a vindication, of various forms of inequality. Rather than a low move, Rowlandson's "The Contrast" captures, with the conciseness of satire, a longstanding debate in Western Europe about the status of *values*. For complicated reasons, value distinctions — not only between right and wrong, but also between true and false, and beautiful and otherwise — came to be seen as intrinsically connected with other qualitative distinctions: between social classes, men and women, and Europeans and a range of other human groups variously described at the time as "barbarians" or "savages." From such a standpoint, to upset distinctions of the second type would be to compromise distinctions of the first. To affirm the equality of all humans would be to annul ethical, epistemological, and even aesthetic values: virtue, truth, and beauty. Conversely, the revolutionists were taken to promote equality because they had already renounced all such values. In fact, calls for equality were seen more often as a symptom than as the cause of moral corruption. The French Revolution loomed on the horizon beyond the Channel as the terrible fulfillment of a long process of moral decay, signaling the end not only of social hierarchies but, more fundamentally, of objective values.

Historically speaking, the concern with objective values predated the concern with radical action, and a debate about the loss of moral distinctions preceded the one about the threat to human distinctions. At the heart of the Enlightenment there was an unprecedented crisis regarding the sources and the status of values. It may seem unfair that More and other critics charged Voltaire and Montesquieu with destroying the very values these thinkers had endeavored to defend. But we should distinguish between what Enlightenment philosophers championed and what their philosophies were seen to entail. Just as eighteenth-century thinkers accused Spinoza of encouraging atheism despite the latter's insistence that there is a God, different sections within the Enlightenment accused each other of endangering the very principles they claimed to

promote. Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), the polymath best known as the discoverer of oxygen, reproached his contemporaries in the Scottish Enlightenment for basing ethics no longer on “*absolute, unchangeable, and everlasting*” truths, as was usual in the seventeenth century, but on “some unaccountable *instinctive persuasions*, depending upon the arbitrary constitution of our nature, which makes all truth to be a thing that is relative to ourselves only.”<sup>9</sup> For Priestley, while moral philosophers such as James Beattie (1735-1803) and John Oswald (c.1760-1793) regarded themselves as defending virtue, they were unwittingly undermining it by promoting moral relativism. Moral truths, in their systems, are “relative to ourselves only,” reflecting “instinctive persuasions” that vary from person to person. Such relativism, Priestley worries, “has really very serious and alarming consequences” (122); it would authorize those with no religion or morality to trust their personal prejudices as a measure of right and wrong. As will be seen over the course of this book, Priestley’s concern that Enlightenment philosophy relativizes values was a widespread one. Even as philosophers endeavored to develop new foundations for objective values, their systems were routinely viewed as tending towards relativism.

I began with equality and ended with relativism. The argument of this book is that the concern with theories of equality around the time of the French Revolution can be traced back to an earlier history of concerns about relativism. What I propose to do is retrace their connection, now in the reverse direction, beginning with the crisis of values; and then show that objections to equality share an intellectual genealogy with the campaign to rescue values from the Enlightenment’s relativistic tendencies. For now, I should note that not everyone agrees that there was such a thing as Enlightenment relativism. Isaiah Berlin has famously argued that anything that looks like relativism in the eighteenth century is instead pluralism. Relativism, for Berlin, is

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry into the human mind ... Dr. Beattie's Essay on the nature and immutability of truth, and Dr. Oswald's Appeal to common sense ...* (London : printed for J. Johnson, 1774), 121.

not simply the view that values vary by culture; it is, more substantively, the view that values are not objective. Relativism is “a doctrine according to which the judgement of a man or a group, since it is the expression or statement of a taste, or emotional attitude or attitude, is simply what it is, with no objective correlate which determines its truth or falsehood.”<sup>10</sup> And Berlin contends that the eighteenth century lacked the conceptual tools to advance this view, which requires a more developed anthropology as well as concepts that would only become available through Marx’s treatment of ideology and Freud’s theory of the unconscious. What we find in the eighteenth century, for Berlin, is simply pluralism: the view that the different values held by different societies are all objective. Even philosophers often regarded as relativists, such as Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), “are not telling us that the values of these societies, dissimilar to ours, cast doubts on the objectivity of our own, or are undermined by them” (82). There are, instead, “a plurality of values, equally genuine, equally ultimate, above all equally objective” (82), and recognition of this fact poses no threat to our own system of values.

Berlin’s distinction between relativism and pluralism received renewed articulation in recent work by Michael Krausz and David Hoy, and it lies at the heart of the only extant history of Enlightenment relativism, written by Maria Baghramian.<sup>11</sup> As applied to the Enlightenment, Berlin’s account calls for two responses. The first is that it downplays how unsettling cultural differences could be for societies that were still fundamentally Christian. The notion that different moral truths could govern different societies *was* threatening for those bred in the universality of Christian values. God’s laws, after all, were supposed to be valid for all of mankind, and to suggest that

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (Princeton: PUP, 2013), 83.

<sup>11</sup> Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (New York: Routledge, 2004). See especially Part I Chapter 2 and Part II Chapter 10. Baghramian also wrote a shorter version of this account: “A Brief History of Relativism,” in Michael Krausz (ed.), *Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010).



they have only local jurisdiction would be to call them into question. This concern about the universality of values survived into the more secular (but not entirely secular) accounts of values emerging at the time. Even as Enlightenment philosophers studied cultural differences, their discussions of the topic frequently reassured readers of the superiority of European norms (if not, alas, of European practices). We find such reassurances in Montesquieu, Voltaire, Samuel Johnson, Edward Gibbon, and a range of others. An instructive exception is the Piedmontese exile Alberto Radicati (1698-1737), one of the few Enlightenment thinkers to go all the way towards embracing relativism. In his *Philosophical Dissertation upon Death* (1732), Radicati reminds its Christian readers that “many Nations greatly venerate ... those Things which, by the *Christians* and by sundry other People, are utterly condemned,” including “Murder, Theft, Adultery, Fornication, Incest, Sodomy, Rebellion, Treachery.”<sup>12</sup> Given such widespread disagreement about values, Radicati argues, no one is in a position to decide “which are the good and which the bad Morals” (50). Originally published in London in an English translation, the *Dissertation* led to the imprisonment of both author and translator, forcing Radicati to eventually leave England for the Netherlands.

What Berlin calls pluralism – the recognition that other societies act by other rules – was very much seen as threatening in eighteenth-century Europe. The reason, as Priestley feared and Radicati illustrates, is that cultural differences could easily be taken to mean that European values were just local prejudices. The cultural anxiety associated with this possibility is tellingly captured in Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic novel *The Romance of the Forest*, whose villain, the Marquis de Montalt, is himself a relativist philosopher. When trying to convince another character to kill the novel’s heroine, the Marquis offers not a reward but an argument:

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<sup>12</sup> Alberto Radicati, *A philosophical [sic] dissertation upon death. Composed for the consolation of the unhappy. By a friend to truth* (London: printed for and sold by W. Mears, 1732), 40-1, 29.

While the refined Europeans boast a standard of honour, and a sublimity of virtue, which often leads them from pleasure to misery, and from nature to error, the simple, uninformed American follows the impulse of his heart, and obeys the inspiration of wisdom ... The Indian discovers his friend to be perfidious, and he kills him; the wild Asiatic does the same; the Turk, when ambition fires, or revenge provokes, gratifies his passion at the expence of life, and does not call it murder ... It is the first proof of a superior mind to liberate itself from prejudices of country, or of education.<sup>13</sup>

Murder is morally permissible, since other nations presumably do it without blinking. This, Radcliffe implies, is the logical consequence of taking foreign systems of value seriously: it enables opportunists like the Marquis to justify whatever courses of action suits them, and in the process corrupt the unwary. We find the same concern in portrayals of the libertine in the literature of the long eighteenth century, from Molière's *Don Juan* to Samuel Richardson's *Lovelace*. For these authors, to suggest that values are not universal is tantamount to saying that they aren't objective.

My second response to Berlin is that relativism does not need to be defended in order to exist. Berlin may be right that very few Enlightenment thinkers endorsed relativism; but a large number of philosophers, essayists, novelists, poets, dramatists, letter writers, and artists were able to envision relativism as a philosophical possibility – and then argue against it. My working assumption in this book is that Enlightenment relativism was very real, but that it had more articulators than proponents. Relativism was seen as the logical consequence of a wide variety of philosophical positions, all of which shared one common feature: they transferred the discussion of values from the theological framework of the seventeenth century to the more secular and psychological framework of Enlightenment empiricism. The gradual shift to a secular

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<sup>13</sup> Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, ed. Chloe Chard (Oxford: OUP, 1986), 222.

system of values raised growing concerns with relativism, which later fed into concerns about equality.

What follows is the first full-length discussion of Enlightenment relativism, its origins, and its consequences. My hope is not only to recover an understudied phenomenon in the history of ideas but also to help mend the fracture between two opposite pictures of the Enlightenment. Accounts of the Enlightenment have long celebrated its defense of principles we still cherish today, such as human rights and freedom of thought and expression. But canonical histories of the Enlightenment, such as those by Ernst Cassirer and Peter Gay, have disappointingly little to say about the Enlightenment's toleration of social and gender inequality, or about the promotion of scientific racism by Enlightenment naturalists. More recent studies by scholars including Sylvana Tomaselli, Emmanuel Eze, and Lisa Lowe have countered this positive picture by drawing attention to the darker sides of the Enlightenment program, giving us a much better sense of the movement's role in perpetuating gender, racial, and cultural prejudices. And yet, partly due to the long shadow cast by Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there remains a tendency to separate these two sides of the Enlightenment's legacy, as if its negative dimension subsumed the positive one. The Enlightenment, I argue, was about both the secular humanism we still regard as essential to modern democracies and the forms of discrimination we are still struggling to overcome. Even more importantly, for reasons this book seeks to uncover, for the many voices caught in the fray of this debate, progressive values and human hierarchies seemed inextricably linked, as if the defense of the one were difficult to envision without a defense of the other.