Introduction

The Enlightenment has fallen on hard times in recent years. It is true, of course, that the modern West is to a large extent a product of the Enlightenment. Our liberal democratic politics, our market capitalist economies, our embrace of technological progress and scientific inquiry, our toleration of religious pluralism – all were inspired or encouraged by the Enlightenment. As Paul Hazard declared many decades ago, "Rich and weighty as were the legacies bequeathed to us by old Greece and Rome, by the Middle Ages and by the Renaissance, the fact remains that it is the eighteenth century of which we are the direct and lineal descendants."[1] Yet there is widespread agreement across much of today's academy that Enlightenment thought falls somewhere on the spectrum from hopelessly naive and archaic to fundamentally and dangerously misguided. On both the Left and Right, the Enlightenment is routinely associated with a hegemonic form of moral and political universalism, a blind faith in abstract reason, and a reductive and isolating focus on the individual, among other sins. My aim in this book is to contest these charges through a recovery and defense of a central strand of Enlightenment thought that I call the "pragmatic Enlightenment."

While numerous thinkers throughout eighteenth-century Europe could be included in this category, I focus on four of the leading figures of the period: David Hume, Adam Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire. These thinkers, I argue, exemplify an especially attractive type of liberalism, one that is more realistic, moderate, flexible, and contextually sensitive than

[1] Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century: From Montesquieu to Lessing*, trans. J. Lewis May (Cleveland: Meridian Books, [1946] 1965), xvii.

many other branches of this tradition.[2] Some forms of liberalism that emerged during the Enlightenment, such as Lockean contractarianism, Kantian deontology, and Benthamite utilitarianism, were highly idealistic in character, grounded in first principles such as the immutable dictates of natural law, the rational (and therefore categorical) requirements of human dignity, or the universal imperative to maximize the greatest good for the greatest number. In contrast, the liberalism of Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire was far more pragmatic, in many senses of that term: it was grounded in experience and empirical observation instead of transcendent or a priori first principles; it addressed practical human concerns rather than aiming to satisfy abstract standards of right derived from God, Nature, or Reason; it was flexible in its application and attentive to the importance of historical and cultural context; and it favored gradual, piecemeal reform over the pursuit of perfection or the imposition of strict requirements for legitimacy. Thus, the outlooks of these four thinkers demonstrate that "pragmatic Enlightenment" is far from a contradiction in terms.[3]

This defense of the pragmatic strand of Enlightenment thought is meant in part, but only in small part, as a response to Jonathan Israel's recent vindication of what he calls the "Radical Enlightenment."[4] Throughout his weighty tomes, Israel argues that "from beginning to end" the Enlightenment was "always fundamentally divided … into irreconcilably opposed intellectual blocs," the Radical Enlightenment and the "moderate mainstream," and he consistently champions the former.[5] In fact, much of his intellectual energy is devoted to unmasking and

[2] This use of the term "liberalism" is, of course, anachronistic when applied to the eighteenth century, but the outlooks of these thinkers fit readily into the tradition that we now call by that name.

[3] While there are certain similarities between my reading of these Enlightenment thinkers and the later school of American pragmatism, I use "pragmatic" as a generic term rather than a reference to Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, et al.

[4] See Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750–1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a more concise statement of some of the themes that run through Israel's lengthy trilogy, see Jonathan I. Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). Obviously, the present book contains neither the immense historical and geographic breadth nor the sweeping narrative that Israel's volumes do. On the other hand, my focus on just four thinkers allows for much more sustained analysis of their texts and arguments than is possible in works like Israel's.

[5] Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, x.

criticizing the moderate Enlightenment, including the four thinkers who are the focus of this book, for its intellectual modesty and social conservatism. Taken together, Israel's books constitute the most ambitious and comprehensive attempt to come to terms with the Enlightenment since the work of Peter Gay – perhaps since the Enlightenment itself – and his breadth of knowledge is extraordinary. However, I disagree profoundly with his basic claim that the neat "package" of Radical Enlightenment ideals that he derives from Spinoza, Bayle, Diderot, and others (but that none of these thinkers embraced in its entirety) is the only truly coherent and emancipatory philosophical outlook, and conversely that the moderate Enlightenment, with its doubts about the power and scope of human reason and its compromises with the existing order, was ultimately a blind alley and a source of oppression.[6]

The main target of this book, however, is neither Israel nor his Radical Enlightenment but rather the Enlightenment's (many) critics. The Enlightenment was condemned in some circles almost from the moment of its inception, and since World War II the opposition has emerged with renewed vigor and from nearly every direction, uniting liberals and conservatives, pluralists and communitarians, postmodernists and religious fundamentalists.[7] Indeed, Darrin McMahon summarizes the current climate well when he remarks that "Enlightenment bashing has developed into something of an intellectual blood-sport, uniting elements of both the Left and the Right in a common cause."[8] While the Enlightenment is criticized from a wide variety of perspectives and for a wide variety of reasons, the main lines of criticism can be grouped into three broad categories:

- *Hegemonic Universalism*. One of the most pervasive criticisms of the Enlightenment in recent years relates to its supposed belief in the

[6] Israel's clearest summary of the Radical Enlightenment "package" – which includes atheism, materialism, political radicalism, democracy, egalitarianism, and comprehensive religious toleration – can be found at ibid., 866.

[7] Given that one of the chief aims of this book is to combat the misperceptions about the Enlightenment that still pervade contemporary political theory, I will be concerned especially with the more recent critics of the Enlightenment, but it should be kept in mind that almost all of their critiques can be traced back to the nineteenth and even eighteenth centuries. For a helpful survey of the opponents of the Enlightenment since the eighteenth century, see Graeme Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2006). For a more polemical account that links Counter-Enlightenment discourse to moral relativism and fascist ideology, see Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, trans. David Maisel (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

[8] Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 12.

existence of universal, ahistorical, transcultural truths in morality and politics. It is widely assumed that Enlightenment thinkers were either unaware of or dismissive of the historical and cultural differences among peoples and beliefs, and that this renders their outlook utterly implausible and dangerously exclusive.

- *Blind Faith in Reason*. Another prevalent charge leveled against the thinkers of this period is that they believed reason could do anything and everything. Critics have long contended that the key to the Enlightenment outlook was an overconfidence – many have said "faith" – in reason's power and compass. This charge is often accompanied by the claim that the Enlightenment outlook entails a naive belief in progress, a conviction that the spread of reason will inevitably produce a corresponding advance in human well-being.
- *Atomistic Individualism*. A final major criticism is that the Enlightenment focused on individuals and rights rather than communal ties and duties, thereby undermining the moral fabric of the community. By ignoring the shared values and attachments that give meaning to people's lives, the critics claim, the Enlightenment outlook reduces people to self-interested, rights-bearing atoms and thereby makes a healthy community impossible.

A closer look at these critiques will have to wait until the following chapters, where we will see that for each of these vices that are attributed to the Enlightenment, Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire – all of whom are central to the Enlightenment on any plausible understanding of its meaning – actually exhibited the contrary virtue. Far from adopting a hegemonic form of moral and political universalism, they emphasized the importance of context in the formulation of moral standards and adopted a flexible, nonfoundationalist form of liberalism. Far from having a blind faith in reason, they continually stressed the limits and fallibility of human understanding and advocated a cautious reformism in politics. And far from promoting atomistic individualism, they saw people as inherently social and sought a healthier and more reliable way to unite them than the traditional bonds of blood, religion, and nationalism, which they found above all in commerce.

Before turning to a more detailed examination and defense of these four thinkers, however, it may be helpful to situate my broader argument within the present state of Enlightenment studies. Most contemporary scholars of eighteenth-century thought concur that the "Enlightenment" that is so reviled by its critics is often a gross caricature of the actual ideas of the period. The recent boom in scholarship on this period has

produced a number of valuable works that aim to defend certain aspects of Enlightenment thought or to reclaim individual Enlightenment thinkers, which I will have the advantage of drawing upon in making my own case. Nevertheless, my approach runs against the grain of contemporary Enlightenment studies in several respects.

To begin with, many historians of the Enlightenment now regard the study of the leading figures of the period – a small canon of almost exclusively male thinkers – as unacceptably elitist. Beginning with the work of Daniel Mornet in the early twentieth century, and continuing with such leading scholars of the period as Robert Darnton, Daniel Roche, and Roger Chartier and the Annales school, historians have tended to focus on the social milieus in which Enlightenment thinkers lived and wrote and on the diffusion of their ideas, to the almost total exclusion of the ideas themselves.[9] Much attention has been paid to the rise of sociability and the public sphere – academies and salons, coffeehouses and cafés, debating societies and Masonic lodges, the book industry and Grub Street – while far less has been paid to the arguments of the leading thinkers of the period. Indeed, alongside the move toward what the historians proudly call the "low" Enlightenment has come a kind of scorn for the "high" Enlightenment of the leading thinkers; Roy Porter derisively calls these latter thinkers the "superstars" of the period and suggests that we move beyond conceiving of the Enlightenment in terms of "periwigged poseurs prattling on in Parisian salons."[10]

As a work of political theory, however, this book will necessarily focus on the so-called high Enlightenment – indeed, the very highest of the high Enlightenment. This is not to deny the historical importance or intrinsic interest of the "low" Enlightenment, of course, but in terms of significance for the present, it is the *ideas* of the period – and the leading exponents of those ideas – that matter most. The Parisian salons, Grub Street pamphleteers, and international book industry may have helped to *propagate* the liberal values that we in the modern West have inherited from the eighteenth century, but it is the values themselves that concern us today. As Robert Wokler has argued, when historians of the Enlightenment disdain the study of the ideas and leading thinkers of the period, they thereby

[9] Useful overviews of the scholarship on the social and cultural history of the Enlightenment can be found in Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chapter 2; and John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16–21.

[10] Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 11, 4.

abandon the legacy of these ideas and thinkers to the Enlightenment's critics.[11] It is for its ideas that the Enlightenment is attacked, and so it is by its ideas that it must be defended.

Those scholars who *do* focus on the ideas and leading thinkers of the eighteenth century, for their part, commonly deny the very existence of the Enlightenment as a coherent movement. As James Schmidt and others have emphasized, the term "the Enlightenment," used to designate a specific period and movement of thought, did not arise until the late nineteenth century, and the growing consensus among scholars of eighteenth-century thought seems to be that this term – particularly in the singular, with the definite article and a capital "E" – has become analytically useless and even harmful, insofar as it serves to paper over the great diversity of thought in this period.[12] As Schmidt writes, "the explosion of eighteenth-century studies over the last several decades has had one notable consequence: an incredulity towards generalizations about 'the Enlightenment.'"[13] Thus, many scholars now insist that it is only in the plural that the many different "Enlightenments" of the eighteenth century can be understood properly. The leading advocate of this perspective is probably J. G. A. Pocock, who contends that the process of Enlightenment "occurred in too many forms to be comprised within a single definition and history," and so "we do better to think of a family of Enlightenments, displaying both family resemblances and family quarrels (some of them bitter and even bloody)."[14] Pocock is far from alone in holding this view, however: most political theorists and philosophers who specialize in eighteenth-century thought now concur with Sankar

[11] See Robert Wokler, "Ernst Cassirer's Enlightenment: An Exchange with Bruce Mazlish" *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 29 (2000), 336–7. See also Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, 21.

[12] On the rise of the term "the Enlightenment" and its foreign cognates, see John Lough, "Reflections on Enlightenment and Lumières" *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 8.1 (March 1985): 1–15; James Schmidt, "Inventing the Enlightenment: Anti-Jacobins, British Hegelians, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64.3 (July 2003): 421–43; and James Schmidt, "What the Enlightenment Was, What It Still Might Be, and Why Kant May Have Been Right After All" *American Behavioral Scientist* 49.5 (January 2006): 647–63.

[13] James Schmidt, "The Legacy of the Enlightenment" *Philosophy and Literature* 26.2 (October 2002), 440. See also James Schmidt, "What Enlightenment Project?" *Political Theory* 28.6 (December 2000): 734–57.

[14] J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1: *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 9; see also 7, 13; J. G. A. Pocock, "The Re-description of Enlightenment" *Proceedings of the British Academy* 125 (2004), 105–8, 114, 117; and J. G. A. Pocock, "Historiography and Enlightenment: A View of Their History" *Modern Intellectual History* 5.1 (April 2008), 83–4, 91, 94–5.

Muthu's conclusion "that 'the Enlightenment' *as such* and the notion of an overarching 'Enlightenment project' simply do not exist" and thus that "it is high time … that we pluralize our understanding of 'the Enlightenment' both for reasons of historical accuracy and because, in doing so, otherwise hidden or understudied moments of Enlightenment-era thinking will come to light."[15]

Here I agree in part, but also disagree in part. There is no question that the Enlightenment was a multifaceted, diverse movement; I myself am focusing primarily on one strand of Enlightenment thought – the pragmatic Enlightenment of Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire – which I distinguish throughout from other strands, above all those exemplified by Locke, Kant, Bentham, and some of the more radical philosophes. On the other hand, the larger claim that the Enlightenment simply *did not exist* seems to me to go much too far. It is important not to miss the forest for the trees here: the presence of diversity within a movement does not render it any less of a movement, and the existence of national, ideological, or other subgroups does not mean that the broader category "the Enlightenment" does not exist. (Do the differences between Luther and Calvin render the very notion of a Protestant Reformation unintelligible?) Nor must such a category encompass every thinker and idea in the eighteenth century. Critics of the idea of *the* Enlightenment often argue that, since there are no principled grounds on which to choose one set of thinkers or ideas over another, the term "Enlightenment" should be used strictly as a temporal adjective to designate the entirety of the period.[16] Yet this would render the term superfluous, since the period designation alone would suffice for this purpose. It seems to me more sensible to narrow the scope and to ask instead whether a certain kind of thinker or a certain set of widely shared principles and values can plausibly be said to make up the Enlightenment.[17]

One powerful reason to suppose that it *is* possible to identify the Enlightenment in this manner is that many of the leading thinkers of

[15] Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 264.

[16] See, for example, ibid., 1–2.

[17] As Robert Darnton suggests, the recent tendency to expand the Enlightenment to encompass the entirety of the eighteenth century, and often a large part of the seventeenth, has meant that "the Enlightenment is beginning to be everything and therefore nothing." To counteract this tendency Darnton sensibly proposes a "deflation," although the physical and chronological boundaries that he sets – which confine the Enlightenment exclusively to Paris in the early eighteenth century – seem to me a bit *too* restrictive. See Robert Darnton, *George Washington's False Teeth: An Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 4.

eighteenth-century Europe saw *themselves* as part of a collective enterprise. As Wokler observes, there was a widespread sense in the eighteenth century of "shared principles, a campaign, an international society of the republic of letters, a party of humanity."[18] Indeed, one of the most striking features of the Enlightenment was the deliberate, self-conscious nature of the movement – the awareness, on the part of its proponents, of a broad set of shared goals and of their distinctive place in history. Even Pocock concedes that many eighteenth-century thinkers "were aware … of what they and their colleagues and competitors were doing – aware even of their historical significance, to a degree itself new in European culture – and the metaphor of light (*lumière*, *lume*, *Aufklärung*) is strongly present in their writings."[19] As the prevalence of this metaphor suggests, even if the term "the Enlightenment" did not yet exist in English in the eighteenth century, it *did* exist in some form in French, Italian, and German, and the idea was certainly present in Britain and America as well.[20] Nor were the proponents of the Enlightenment alone in ascribing to themselves a common identity: their enemies too saw them as a single group.[21]

What, then, did the Enlightenment outlook consist of? A conclusive or comprehensive answer to this question is probably impossible, but the definition offered by John Robertson – one of the relatively few contemporary scholars to embrace the idea of a unitary Enlightenment – constitutes a reasonable starting point: "the commitment to understanding,

[18] For this reason, Wokler allows, "I am not so unhappy as are some other historians of eighteenth-century thought with the idea of an Enlightenment Project." Robert Wokler, "The Enlightenment Project and Its Critics," in *The Postmodernist Critique of the Project of Enlightenment*, ed. Sven-Eric Liedman (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 18–19. See also Robert Wokler, "The Enlightenment Project as Betrayed by Modernity" *History of European Ideas* 24.4–5 (1998), 302–3.

[19] Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1, 5. Dan Edelstein has recently claimed that even if "the narrative of Enlightenment was open to different and evolving interpretations … it still makes sense for historians to speak of 'the Enlightenment,' as the plural-only rule contradicts the lived experience that *Aufklärer* and *philosophes* were made of the same wood – a slightly less crooked timber." Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 14.

[20] Moreover, as Schmidt acknowledges, it is clearly possible for there to have been a movement – even a self-conscious one – without a word for it. See Schmidt, "What the Enlightenment Was, What It Still Might Be, and Why Kant May Have Been Right After All," 649.

[21] See McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, especially 11–12, 28–32, 192–5, 200–1. The same could be said of the Enlightenment's greatest eighteenth-century opponent: Wokler writes that "Rousseau himself, I have no doubt, believed that there was an Enlightenment Project, by which I do not just mean the international conspiracy to defame him." Wokler, "The Enlightenment Project as Betrayed by Modernity," 302.

and hence to advancing, the causes and conditions of human betterment in this world."[22] A number of broadly liberal principles and values generally followed from this desire to improve the human condition in the here and now, including support for limited government, religious toleration, freedom of expression, commerce, and humane criminal laws.[23] Indeed, I would submit that those eighteenth-century thinkers and groups who diverged from these broad liberal ideals, to the extent of the divergence, also diverged from the Enlightenment.[24] Of course, there were important differences even among those who supported these ideals. To borrow the concept made famous by John Rawls, the Enlightenment can be conceived as an overlapping consensus in which the members of the movement all supported a number of basic liberal ideals but did so in different ways, and for different reasons. For example, some Enlightenment thinkers, such as Locke, promoted these liberal ideals on natural law or natural rights grounds; others, such as Kant, grounded them in the requirements of human dignity; still others, like Bentham, based them on the imperative to maximize utility; while yet others, including Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire, advocated these ideals on nonfoundationalist grounds. Moreover, the various ways of grounding these ideals frequently led to differences in the *character* of the liberalism espoused by different Enlightenment thinkers. For some, liberalism was a radical or even revolutionary outlook, while for others – including, again, the four thinkers who are the focus of this book – it was a more moderate and reformist one. Similarly, the liberalism of some Enlightenment thinkers was highly individualistic in conception, rooted in individual

[22] Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, 28.

[23] These liberal ideals may seem unexceptionable to many today, but we should recall that throughout much of Europe the eighteenth century was still an age of royal absolutism, hereditary hierarchy, religious persecution as a formal policy, political and ecclesiastical censorship, slavery, colonialism, and routine judicial torture, and that France did not burn its last witch until 1745. When viewed in historical context, both the intellectual coherence and the importance of the Enlightenment become more apparent.

[24] I have made this case at some length regarding the eighteenth-century thinker who most resists all categorization, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The case is even more obvious for, say, the conservative Catholic "anti-*philosophes*" who have been called to our attention by Darrin McMahon. Simply having lived in the eighteenth century does not make one an Enlightenment thinker. See Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), chapter 1; Dennis C. Rasmussen, "Adam Smith and Rousseau: Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment," in *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, ed. Christopher J. Berry, Maria Pia Paganelli, and Craig Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment*.

rights, choices, and interests, while that of the pragmatic strand of the Enlightenment was much more insistent on the social nature of human beings and concerned with the character of the community.

Thus, while the Enlightenment's critics commonly assume that Enlightenment thought necessarily appeals to universal moral and political foundations, that it necessarily places a great deal of confidence in the power and scope of abstract reason, and that it necessarily rests on individualistic premises, I show that the pragmatic Enlightenment does not fall prey to *any* of these charges. This is an absolutely crucial strand of the Enlightenment, at that: Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire are each every bit as central to the movement as are thinkers such as Locke and Kant. Hume and Smith are almost universally seen as the two towering thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, and the importance of the Scottish Enlightenment for the Enlightenment as a whole is now well established. Hume was, in the judgment of many, the greatest philosopher of the eighteenth century – or at least the greatest rival to the "sage of Königsberg" – and even the greatest philosopher ever to write in the English language. Partly for this reason, Alfred Cobban dubs him "the philosopher, par excellence, of the Enlightenment," and Peter Gay casts him as the signature "modern pagan" in his study of the period.[25] Smith, for his part, has long been recognized as the leading theorist of commercial society in the eighteenth century; indeed, Wokler claims that *The Wealth of Nations* is "perhaps the most influential of all Enlightenment contributions to human science."[26] Moreover, Smith's philosophy as a whole is now starting to be appreciated for the achievement that it was, and we will see that his writings exemplify many of the key ideals of this pragmatic strand of the Enlightenment.

Similarly, Montesquieu and Voltaire were plainly two of the leading figures among the French philosophes. Given Montesquieu's enormous influence not only in France but also in Scotland, North America, and beyond, Gay concludes "after due deliberation and with due consideration for the claims of potential rivals" that "Montesquieu was the most

[25] Alfred Cobban, *In Search of Humanity: The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History* (New York: George Braziller, 1960), 133; Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 1: *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 401–19.

[26] Robert Wokler, "The Enlightenment Science of Politics," in *Inventing Human Science*, ed. Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 336. See also Charles L. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially 9–26.