A Case for the Enlightenment. Ten Essays

The Net-Working of the Enlightenment

1. Melchior Grimm's Correspondance Littéraire

In terms of human relations the Enlightenment was a case of networking with a peculiar character. Networking meant that people met each other in clubs, reading academies and societies and of course the famous Parisian salons. They published their writings not only in books or pamphlets (and broadsides), but also in letters. Letters often circulated to more people than the addressee. Many were written with an eye on publication or they were passed around among friends.

Melchior Grimm was the prototype of a net-worker. He came to Paris as a young graduate of the University of Regensburg and soon moved in cliques associated with the Enlightenment. Grimm started his Correspondance Littéraire in 1753 and kept it going until 1774 when he turned his business over to Jakob Heinrich Meister. Every fortnight he sent handwritten letters to German courts, the Swedish court and the Archduke of Tuscany. In his letters he told his correspondents everything which took place in the fashionable world of France.

Grimm's business (for it was a business; he was paid by subscription though the princely readers did not pay him very well or regularly) is remarkable for several reasons.

In the first place he wrote to his correspondents to bring them news on French culture and the scandals of upper class society, emphasizing the fact that Paris was the spider in the web of the Enlightenment in France. Secondly, he wrote to his royals without becoming their stooge. He dealt with them on equal terms. He had the news they wanted. Evidently the royals took a lively interest in the faits divers of the Enlightenment and they did not regard all these writings as being subversive of their exalted positions. Rather their enthusiasm in itself was subversive for it meant that they no longer believed in the orthodox doctrines of state or church, even though they had to uphold them for obvious reasons. From his side Grimm was not alone among the philosophes and literati of the Enlightenment in regarding the ruling princes as instruments of reform. Reform in his estimation had to be applied top down.

Thirdly, the Correspondance Littéraire did not discuss political affairs. The focus of the more serious news was on art, literature and the philosophy of human nature and by and large these topics formed the focus of the Enlightenment. When Grimm stopped writing his CL he became something of a diplomat and a go-between between princes and writers. Since he met Catherine of Russia he did errands for her, buying books, jewels and paintings and during the years 1789 and 1790 when the French Revolution came into full swing, he became her informant on events in Paris. That ended when he was forced to leave the city and his property was being seques tered by the revolutionary government. Grimm from then on lived on Catherine's subsidies.

Fourthly, the Correspondance Littéraire is remarkably indiscrete, at least by our standards. So Grimm reports a love poem that Voltaire sent to his mistress Mme de Châtelet, and though Voltaire repeatedly warned his correspondents to be careful with showing his letters to others, Grimm's CL is proof that many found a much wider circulation. Voltaire used this fact to conceal his own indiscretions washing his hands in innocence. Emile Lizé has registered 886 pieces which relate to Voltaire in the CL. That is a remarkable number, because relations between the 'patriarch' (Voltaire) and the 'prophète' (Grimm) were far from friendly, but Voltaire was always news and Grimm admired the man. Voltaire personified the independent role of the intellectual who dealt with the high and mighty on his own terms. And when at the court of Frederick of Prussia they were not met he left though under painful circumstances. It was a role which the philosophes claimed for themselves. This claim I think explains the reports on love affairs and scandals in Grimm's CL. The high and mighty and the philosophes were entre nous in the business of the Enlightenment.

The 'patriarch' Voltaire was the unoffi cial leader of the philosophes. That is a problematic statement, because Voltaire had a strict neo-classical conception of enlightenment.
the relations of state, church and society which few of the Philosophes shared. He thoroughly disapproved of Rousseau's style of thinking and writing; he frowned upon the blunt atheism of the Baron d'Holbach. There were different groups of Philosophes who met in the salons. You had the circle of atheists who gathered in the salon of d'Holbach (vividly described by Philipp Blom in his study Wicked Company). There was the group around Diderot who wrote for the Encyclopédie, and then there were the économistes who met in an entresol of the palace of Versailles where maitre Quesnay led the discussion on agrarian reform.

Voltaire was at the periphery of all these groups, if only for the reason that he had to live at the periphery of France for most of his adult life. Yet from Cirey (the estate of Mme de Châtelet and her husband), and later at Ferney near Geneva, he sent out his letters and manuscripts. It is estimated he wrote 120,000 letters. Besterman's modern edition contains 21,200 letters of which 15,000 are by Voltaire. From his outpost he influenced everybody and the authorities were powerless to act against his flood of advice, satire and serious criticism. Voltaire had one asset which protected him. He was a firm supporter of the establishment, but he demanded that the leaders of church and state should become more enlightened (I will deal with his ideas on this when discussing his Siècle de Louis XIV in a subsequent essay).

After a beating by the thugs of the Chevalier de Rohan, Voltaire started a lawsuit against Rohan and was sent to the Bastille. There he was given the choice to leave France or stay in prison. Voltaire never forgot the haughtiness of the nobleman and swore that he would never accept it in the future. Voltaire went to London. The intellectual freedom he experienced in England was a tonic to him. In due time, he produced his report on England in his Lettres Philosophiques (1734). Its Parisian edition was immediately banned by the authorities. There were many offensive passages in the Lettres, such as: where there is one church you have despotism, two churches mean civil war, "mais il y en a trente, et elles vivent en paix et heureuses." However Voltaire's general message must have shocked the authorities. England was presented as a successful state with a thriving civil society because of the existence of intellectual freedom. After the Lettres Philosophiques he became the frontrunner of the Enlightenment.

To the French public Voltaire was first of all known as a writer of plays. Some of them are produced occasionally, but I think it is fair to say that they are no longer appreciated very much. Voltaire was a strong believer in the neo-classical model for writing poems and plays. He considered his panegyric on Henri IV, the Henriade, his greatest achievement. For the historian this epic poem is fascinating because of its implicit criticism of the government of Louis XV, but for the general reader it must be dreary stuff, as is the case with all his poems and plays. We remember Voltaire for his Candide and his campaign for religious tolerance and fair justice. It was Voltaire who successfully lobbied for the rehabilitation of Jean Calas. It was the way he presented this case of judicial murder which mesmerized the public and forced the authorities to accept the verdict of the public: never again. The unfortunate draper from Toulouse was slowly tortured to death protesting his innocence of the death of his son who hanged himself in his father's workshop. It was said that the father, who was a Huguenot, had murdered his son in order to prevent his conversion to Catholicism. It was typically a case of persecution and judicial stupidity. In his Traité sur la Tolérance Voltaire broadened the issue by pleading for the religious freedom of the still remaining Huguenots in France.

As a critic Voltaire presents an interesting case. He pursued the authorities with satire, witicism (he had an irresistible impulse to deliver them) and se-

2. The Encyclopédie

What we need, Fontenelle wrote, is new knowledge. We should give up our immoderate admiration for ancient knowledge and promote the expertise we need to develop a new sense of sociability. New knowledge! The Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers fulfilled Fontenelle's dearest wish. D'Alembert wrote the preface for the undertaking and Diderot accepted the main burden of editing the folios of text, 17 in total en 11 volumes of engravings. The first volume appeared in 1751 and after the last volume was published in 1772 he gave up the editorship. A few years later the publisher Panckoucke bought the rights. Robert Darnton has described the intricate history of the reprints in full detail. In the course of years 24,900 sets were sold, the part of the first edition was 4225 sets.

Gradually Panckouke's undertaking became a mixture of old and new knowledge. The old tended to become obsolete after the French Revolution. Take all the entries on feudal laws and privileges. The revolution had abolished all feudal privileges with one stroke, so these entries only had historical interest. The new contributions had a different character. Diderot and his contributors wanted to educate public opinion, the contributions in Panckouke's undertak-
ing wanted to inform. However, the greatest difference between Diderot and Panckouke’s business was that the latter had no trouble with the authorities. Diderot constantly ran the risk that his work would be sequestered and that he would land in jail. In fact both events happened, but Diderot had the protection of the director of censorship (!) and could continue his work. So the contributors and their editor had to be careful in what they wrote. However, Diderot could not resist making little jokes (he shared this habit with Voltaire). So the heathen ritual Vpainty hinted at the Eucharist as a parallel example. Diderot introduced cross-references written in the margin of entries of contributors. So a cross-reference in the entry Cordeliers referred to the entry Capuchon making it clear that the monks of this order were perpetually quarrelling about the size of their monks cap. Apart from these impish jokes there were many instances of serious criticism. Diderot himself wrote: "Le mot intolerance s’entend communément de cette passion féroce qui porte à hâter et à persecuter ceux qui sont dans l’erreur. Intolerance is a bad example of violence towards those who think and believe differently."

The Chevalier de Jaucourt, a Protestant from Geneva, wrote a well-informed critique of the French tax system and famous are the two lemmata that Quesnay contributed on Grain and Perniers in which he expounded the physiocratic plans for agrarian reform. But though the tone of contributions to the Encyclopédie was measured and respectful the enemies of the Encyclopédie were not taken in. Omer Joli de Fleuri, Advocate General of the Parliament of Paris, wrote:

A l’ombre d’un dictionnaire qui rassemble une infinité de notions utiles et curieuses sur les arts et les sciences on y fait entrer une compilation alphabétique de toutes les absurdités, de toutes les impiétés répandues dans tous les auteurs; on les a embellies, augmentées, mises dans un jour plus frappant. Ce dictionnaire est composé dans le goût de celui de Bayle. On y développe, selon les articles, le pour et le contre, mais le contre, quand il s’agit de la religion, y est toujours exposé clairement et avec affectation. And you have only to read d’Alembert’s famous Discours Préliminaire to discover what was at stake. The Encyclopédie presented a programme of secular knowledge or sacred knowledge which was presented from a secular point of view. In his Baconian diagrammatic scheme d’Alembert divided all knowledge into three columns reflecting la mémoire, la raison and l’imagination. In the first column history figured including l’histoire sacrée. The third column was devoted to the arts and the second column contained all useful knowledge derived from natural science and the philosophy of human nature. The second column was evidently the most important and with its emphasis on useful knowledge and its anti-metaphysical bias it made the Encyclopédie the major compendium of the ideas of the French Enlight-

ment.10 The clerical critics were well aware of the danger of the propaganda for factual knowledge the Encyclopédie was making. The reading public in France and elsewhere was small. About 50% of the French population was illiterate and of the literature only a small proportion of them were accomplished readers. This was a bourgeois audience of noblemen, merchants, craftsmen, some enterprising farmers and professionals. Traditionally the Church had wielded its hegemonic power over these classes of people. Now the Church had a formidable rival to cope with and gradually the priests lost their audience to the Encyclopédistes. The latter were no revolutionaries in the strict sense. Yet their impact on the Ancien Régime was revolutionary. And we can illustrate this impact by Hume’s last sentence in his Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding. If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.11

3. The Salons

In their heyday, between 1750 and 1770, the topics of the Encyclopédie were discussed in the Parisian salons. Perhaps the most spectacular fact of the existence is that they made it clear that the court at Versailles was no longer the centre of French culture as under Louis XIV. If you were accepted as a guest you might like David Hume make a tour of different salons during the week. If you were accepted: for admittance you needed wit, talent and connections. The Girondin Brissot de Warville carried a grudge against the salons, because he never was admitted.

In Italy at the Renaissance courts groups of men developed the manners for a polite conversation about arts and sciences. The ideal of politesse reached the court of the French King François I and served as a counterweight to the rough and violent behaviour of the French nobility. Catherine of Rambouillet (the name of the ‘hotel’ she had built in Paris to receive her guests) established a salon with the express purpose of promoting a civilized conversation and her salon became the prototype of the eighteenth-century ones.

In the eighteenth century, clubs and societies sprung up everywhere in Europe. They were the product of an expanding economy in which the bourgeoisie took the lead. In England clubs were organized in coffee houses and the interesting aspect of their emergence is that they quickly spread to overseas parts of the expanding British Empire. All these clubs in Britain had the function to put the relations between the bourgeoisie and the nobility on an easy basis. That function was also the express purpose of freemason lodges. The intermingling of bourgeois intellectuals and noblemen also occurred in the French salons, but otherwise the salons presented a different type of gathering. British clubs, including the lodges, were exclusively for men12 and the clubs did
A recent book on the Parisian girl you had a greater chance in an aristocratic world to develop it. As a woman, she was treated by the experts with reverence. She was semi-literate. Her grandmother, who educated her, judged that a girl only needs to know how to read, not to write. After a life as a dutiful wife, Mme Geoffrin started her salon over the protests of her husband (who now is only remembered as her husband). She had a thirst for knowledge and her salon was her education. Being a true bourgeois she firmly kept order in her salon, no drunkenness, no bawdy jokes, no gambling. The salon was her way to enter high-society that is the world of the nobility. However, the interesting aspect of her salon – in fact of all salons – is that she put her bourgeois stamp on the social relations where nobility and bourgeois intellectuals met. Another hostess, Mme Necker (wife of the banker Necker who played an important role in the prologue to the French Revolution) jotted down in her notebook: be careful to keep the attention of your guests, prepare for it, because the success of the conversation in your salon depends on it.13 The position these women acquired was a form of emancipation. In their aspiration to an independent position they were undoubtedly helped by the fact that aristocratic women in France and elsewhere had a greater margin of independence. We remember Mme Châtelet as the mistress of Voltaire and tend to forget that it was she (and her husband; Voltaire lived with them in an amiable marriage à trois) the Marquis who maintained and protected him at her country house in Cirey. And how often we see her in the company of members of the highest nobility. Why then were the philosophes invited by members of the highest nobility to join them at dinner? Why did the Duchess of Luxembourg protect Rousseau when he had become an outcast everywhere else and was sought by the police? The answer is that the nobility was interested in their ideas. We might speak of an asymmetrical relationship between the nobility and writers: the nobility had the power, the money and the influence and to a large extent they dictated the code of conduct in the salon. Yet the asymmetrical relation also ran in the other direction. Without the esprit of the writers and philosophes the salons would have been a dull affair. Perhaps we could use the metaphor of osmosis to explain the culture of the salons. There was a mutual penetration of ideas and ideas. Noblemen as well as commoners were interested in the ideas of the Enlightenment and the protected sphere of the salons allowed them meeting on terms of equality talking freely about religion, justice and humanity. Of course politics were discussed, but it was the politics of intrigue. Discussions on constitutional reform did not take place. Liti gives an impressive account of how the political debate of the seventies hampered and eventually destroyed the sociability of the salons. His heroine is Mme Roland who lost her head, because she maintained a salon old style in the dangerous times of the Revolution. Sociability is one of the keywords in Liti’s analysis. It seems to me that networking was its primary function and the salons were the ideal instrument for this kind of net-working so promoting the Enlightenment. Mondanité is the other keyword. In order to gain access to a salon you needed a reputation and you had to conform to a certain code of conduct. That included the maxim never to be dull. The propriety which the code dictated gave a considerable scope to libertinages in word and deed. Could it be that Mme Geoffrin added a bourgeois element to the definition of propriety? Liti criticises Deni Goodman’s Republic of Letters, but I still like the central idea of her book. She tells us that the aim of the conversation was to avoid the sharp edges of polemical talk. The abbé Galiani, a Neapolitan diplomat, who had frequented the salons in the past was recalled to Naples (which he considered as a form of exile), wrote a critique of the physiocratic plan of a free grain trade which Turgeon, as minister of finance, wanted to put through. Galiani was upset by the sharp tone of Morellet’s rejoinder, a government stooge (but also Galiani’s friend) who wrote for Turgeon. That reaction was not done in the circles of the salon. Diderot who took part in the debate pointed out that Turgeon’s measures might save or destroy the Ancien Régime. They did neither: Turgeon was fired by the king and the Revolution cleaned up the act.

On the eve of the convocation of the États Généraux in 1789 discussions were becoming political. Political issues were not discussed in the Republic of Letters. Politics meant the end of the salons of the eighteenth-century.

4. Enlightenment and Enlightenments

The culture of the French Enlightenment had a hegemonic influence in Europe that was promoted by the fact that French censorship forced authors to have their books printed in Amsterdam, Geneva or even London. Yet the perception of this French influence was
different in each country. The impact of French culture on the Dutch was direct, but the political situation was different. Though the Dutch republic was in a situation of constitutional impasse during the whole of the eighteenth century, the patriciate which ran the republic opted for a closely monitored intellectual freedom and religious tolerance. The Enlightenment never acquired that semi-illicit character it had in France. The numerous German courts aspired to become cultural centres as Versailles had been. This was an ironic develop-
ment, because eighteenth-century Versailles no longer was the cultural centre of France. The imitation underlined the fact that the German courts controlled affairs within their border which was no longer the case in France. I shall discuss the German Aufklärung elsewhere. Perhaps the most significant fact of the transmission of French influence was the reaction against it. German writers such as Lessing, the dramatist, started to agitate against the dominance of French models. Understandably there was no love lost between Lessing and Frederick II of Prussia. Lessing became the forerunner of the Sturm und Drang, that movement of cultural nationalism which sought to create a genuine German culture.

I shall also deal with Britain in an essay on economic reform. British writers had a great admiration for French polite society as exemplified by the salons. However, they were otherwise preoccupied by the problems of an expanding economy and the expansion of the British Empire.

Essay no. III: Deism, Prospect or Threat

1. The Inevitability of a Secular View
The title of this essay needs explaining. Deism is the belief that God has created a benevolent natural order and left it to mankind to exploit it. For the deist, miracles, revelation, atonement and the trinity are part of a Christian folklore which cannot be taken seriously. What I mean by threat is that deism was at the end of a slippery slope for Protestants (particularly protestant ministers) who wanted to stick to an orthodox interpretation of the faith, but who on the other hand were susceptible to the ideas of the Enlightenment, which involved a secular world view. Clergymen accused their brethren that they strayed away from the right and narrow path, because they saw the risk of their own interpretation. Tindal, who, at the beginning of the century was accused by Samuel Clarke of deism, wrote:

If Christianity, as well as Deism, consists in being governed by the original Obligation of the moral fitness of Things ... has not the Doctor himself given the Advantage to Deism?17

As Clarke was considered not to be safe on the interpretation of the holy trinity, that seems a fair comment. So deism was the common denominator of Protestants who wanted to accommodate their Christian faith to a secular world view. In Britain reaching that common denominator had to be avoided at all costs. Threat means that the secular world view was so attractive that it corroded the traditional story of Christianity. When I use the word inevitable I do not want to suggest that a loss of faith was inevitable. What I mean is that it became very hard for a sophisticated person to take the biblical story at face value. Did miracles really happen or should we interpret them in a symbolic sense? That was the way to go in the nineteenth-century and some eighteenth-century Protestants were prepared to go that way, but many others were stuck in the middle between the biblical story and secularism. In catholic countries the clergy left no room for any form of accommodation. They insisted (and insist) that saints are the interme-
diaries between God and man. Gibbon took a strong view of this kind of ‘super-
stition’. He wrote:

The sublime and simple theology of the primitive Christians was gradually corrupted; and the MONARCHY of heaven, already clouded by metaphysical subtleties, was degraded by the introduction of a popular mythology, which tended to restore polytheism.18

Obviously Gibbon referred to the worship of saints, but he also wrote about metaphysical subtleties and accordingly he was accused of being a deist. The prospect of deism can be dealt with by a reference to Lessing. His theodicy predicted that deism would become the faith of civilised Europe. Even in the easy going climate of eighteenth-century opinion it came as a bit of a shock that the cosmologists had constructed a cosmos which could run as a machine and which could do without the intervention of God (Newton, who was not so sure that it could, was an exception). So the Enlightenment in a sense is the attempt to introduce this scientific outlook in human affairs. The philosophers of the Enlightenment are still reputed to have been unbelievers. Those historians who write about the eighteenth century know better, but the label still sticks. However, only a small group of them were atheists. In France it was the small group that convened in the salon of Baron d'Holbach that openly though discreetly confessed that they did not believe in any God. The majority of the philosophers in France and elsewhere remained Christians, but they refused to accept that God could interfere with their personal lives and they no longer believed in the system of eternal punishment or reward.

But atheism did become a buzz-word in the eighteenth century. It was used to accuse your opponent no longer of heresy but of something much worse: atheism. Spinoza was the principal vic-
tim of this use of atheism. There are ba-
sically two ways to interpret his philos-
ophy. According to what we might call a structuralist interpretation, Spinoza made a penetrating assessment of the new type of knowledge which the scientific revolution had procured and lifted it to a metaphysical level. According to the other interpretation, Spinoza was a mystic who showed how to get closer to God. The paradox of his reputation is that he could have become the founding father of the Enlightenment, but owing to Pierre Bayle he did not. Accord-
ing to Bayle, Spinoza was a pantheist who believed that every object on this earth is God. A pantheist in those days was a synonym for an atheist. So Spi-

noza earned the reputation of being an arch atheist. And, as Paul Vernière has shown, that was how eighteenth-

century Frenchmen regarded Spinoza and even those who bothered to read him, such as Voltaire and Diderot, did not see him as their ally.19 The cliché which Hume produced of Spinoza in his Trea-
tise is the best proof that he never read Spinoza.
Only in the German countries did Spinoza's message get across. Writing a review of Jacobib's works, Hegel saw the importance of Spinoza as a philosopher. Now, Hegel remarked, it is time to go beyond Spinoza. Lessing's prospect of deism was the outcome of his reading of Spinoza.

2. Natural Religion in England and Scotland

Atheism was not an issue in eighteenth-century Britain, deism was. John Leland defined the deist as a person who did not believe in revelation. He wrote:

The name of Deists, as applied to those who are no friends to revealed religion, is said to have been first assumed about the middle of the sixteenth century, by some gentlemen in France and Italy, who were willing to cover their opposition to the Christian revelation by a more honourable name than that of Atheists. The suggestion of Leland is of course that deism is a shield for the atheist, but if we look at the list of writers, which Leland discusses, amongst others, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Tindal, Hobbes, Shaftesbury, Hume and Lord Bolingbroke, all of them believed in revelation except Hume. However, Hume denied that he was a deist and that makes sense, because he did not believe in a benevolent natural order. Cherbury and Tindal might qualify as deists. They believed in revelation, but their belief must have been too heterodox, according to Leland. The point of Leland's surprisingly courteous criticism was that their ideas might inspire others to become deists.

Deism was a threat to any orthodox Christian, certainly if he had any liberal leanings to the interpretation of the Scripture. In 1675 Bishop John Wilkins' Of the Principles of Natural Religion was published. In it he pleaded for an accommodation of religion and science, but accommodation was the problem. The major point of contention was God's providence, and did He give signs of His intentions to the infidel? God's providence was registered in the biblical story of the Old and the New Testament and certain episodes of this story were impossible in the light of natural science. Some, like Leland, stuck to the story in its entirety; others were willing to make concessions by viewing these episodes as the allegories of a deeper divine wisdom. The chief bone of contention was the miracles. In 1749 Conyers Middleton published his A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers Which are Supposed to have Subsisted in the Christian Church, from the Earliest Age, through Several Successive Centuries: By Which it is Shewn that We have no Sufficient Reason to Believe, upon the Authority of the Primitive Fathers, that any Such Powers were Continued to the Church, after the Days of the Apostles. I have quoted Middleton's title in full, because it contains his message in all its splendour. Only the miracles which Jesus performed are real. Those that are mentioned in the Old Testament are fables and the Catholic Church has been inventing them since the early days of the Church. His Inquiry created quite a stir. The year before, in 1748, Hume had published his Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding (since called Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding). In the essay on Miracles Hume wrote that all miracles are improbable and impossible. He wrote in My Own Life:

On my return from Italy, I had the mortification to find all England in a ferment, on account of Dr. Middleton's Free Enquiry, while my performance was entirely overlooked and neglected. Given the temper of the time, the arguments of an infidel were less important than the words of a divine (who aspired to be a bishop and never became one). Middleton struck a sensitive nerve: which miracles should a true believing Christian accept as genuine and which should he discard? The discussion on this issue started with Tillotson and by no means finished with Middleton. It is hard to understand in retrospect the fuss, which Edward Gibbon created with chapters 15 and 16 of his History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. In them he told the story of the early Christians and their sufferings. In his Vindication (his answer to his critics) Gibbon had a field day in demonstrating that his handling of the sources was greatly superior to that of his critics, but there was one critic, Dr Watson, who went to the root of the problem, which antagonized Gibbon's critics. He noted the distinction, which Gibbon made between God as the primary cause of the emergence of Christianity and the secondary causes, which explain the rise of early Christianity. And he explained that Gibbon's treatment negated God as the primary cause of life. Gibbon answered Watson courteously and wrote that he was glad that Watson owned "that I have expressly allowed the full and irresistible weight of the first great cause of the success of Christianity" and so "the only question which remains between us, relates to the degree of the weight and effect of those secondary causes". The point is of course that as soon as you make the distinction between the signs of God's providence and the documentary evidence the weight falls to the latter. While Watson regarded the activities of the early Christians as the sure signs of God's providence, Gibbon reduced sacred to ecclesiastical history. He painfully demonstrated the difficulties of the divines who wanted to use documentary evidence to restore the terms of sacred history.

Compared to the seventeenth century, religious disputes did not unsettle the social order. The religious polemics only ruffled the surface of a complacent attitude towards religion. Isabel Rivers discusses theological and moral opinions in the seventeenth and eighteenth century under three headings: grace, reason and sentiment. All three could be divisive, but the latitudinarians of the Anglican Church managed to create a climate of opinion, which was hospitable to toleration. Natural religion was a powerful concept. It could be used to deny Revelation, but it could also be used to support traditional religion. Joseph Butler gave an authoritative statement of this interpretation in his Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature (1736). He maintained that our knowledge of the natural order supports God's revelation. That was typically the message of a latitudinarian clergyman.

All three sources of religion together - grace, reason and sentiment - were kept together in the Anglican Church. The Tudor monarchs Henry VIII and Elisabeth meant it to be a broad church that would absorb doctrinal differences. That latitudinarian aspect of the Church determined the attitudes and beliefs of its members in the eighteenth century. Grace meant that Christians had a special contract with God and it certainly helped that the thirty nine articles, which were established in 1562, were an odd bundle of doctrines and within limits people could read in them what they wanted. Obviously Grace
could inspire an egotistic and rebellious attitude. Reason meant common sense and the spirit of moderation, it could also be claimed as an exclusive right to use Reason by the deist or the atheist to judge divine matters. Anglicans were convinced that sentiment could inspire people to do well. Isaac Watts, a popular preacher, told church goers to cultivate sentiment. Rivers writes about his Doctrine of the Passions:

The relation between reason and the passions or affections (the terms are used synonymously by Watts) must be understood. In the Doctrine of the Passions they are described as ‘those sensible emotions of our whole nature, both soul and body, which are occasioned by the perception of an object according to some special properties that belong to it; they are of a mixed nature, belonging partly to the soul, or mind, and partly to the animal body, that is, the flesh and blood’.25

One can almost replace Watts name by that of Hume, indicating how widespread the notion was that experience is primarily a matter of perception and sentiment, which after the primary experience we then start to process in our mind or soul.

Toleration was an age old concept, but it seems to me that Locke imported the Dutch idea of toleration into England. It meant that Protestants of different beliefs should respect each other. Catholics were excluded from toleration, but they were suffered (‘gedogen’ is the untranslatable Dutch word) to worship in private. After William and Mary became King and Queen, in England and Scotland two state churches were established, the Presbyterian Kirk in Scotland, the Anglican Church in England. In England an attempt was made to include dissenters within the state church by way of comprehension, but the attempt failed. So the dissenters (to call all the Independents, nonconformists, Quakers etc by this generic name) stayed outside the Anglican Church and so could not hold public office and could not have access to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Otherwise they fully participated in public life and founded their own academies where you could get a much better education than in either of the two universities.

Among the dissenters John Wesley was a paradoxical figure. He remained a loyal member of the Anglican Church, but he blazed the trial for what came to be called the Methodist church in the nineteenth century. The Methodists came to emphasize grace and sentiment within their religious communities and for them the doctrinal implications of secularization became a secondary concern. Rivers’ volume one is on theological opinions and volume two deals with moral philosophy. The test of the impact of a secular world view on religion manifests itself in moral theory. The third Earl of Shaftesbury set the tone for eighteenth-century moral philosophy. In his set of essays called Characterisitics he made an argument for the combination of sentiment and civility. Francis Hutcheson, an influential professor in Glasgow, did much to fashion a new moral philosophy, which originated in Scotland. Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart and of course, the two luminaries David Hume and Adam Smith designed a moral philosophy which, in its broadest outline, meant that it was useful and pleasant for people to work together and promote by their behaviour the new market economy. Adam Smith frowned upon the use of the concept of utility by his friend Hutcheson, but he used it himself in his Wealth of Nations as a matter of course. Hume gave a full explanation to Horace’s utile et dulce in his Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (1751). The Scottish school of common sense was as enlightened and engagés as Voltaire and Diderot, and they were considerably more successful than most European philosophes at institutionalizing their values during their own lifetimes.

Whether the majority of continental philosophers were more radical than their Scottish counterparts remains open for debate. I, at least, have argued that politically they were conservatives. As to innovation it seems to me that David Hume and Adam Smith have an equal claim to being innovative. However, the importance of this quotation is in its last sentence. The secret of what we now call the Scottish Enlightenment is that the moderates were active modernizers and this may explain why Scotland took the lead in moral philosophy. Scotland was relatively poor and backward in its economic development. Given the fact that Scotland had a better system of education than England, Scottish intellectuals, clergymen in the first place, were keen on exploiting new possibilities within a larger Britain. The threat of deism was largely ignored in Scotland. And theological discussions in eighteenth-century Britain as a whole were intense and often hostile but did not lead to religious persecution. Deism was a threat in the eye of the beholder but that did not prevent the critic of deism to accept a morality which was secular in its consequences, if not in its form.

3. French Anticlericalism and Voltaire’s Theism

If many protestant clergymen in Europe tended to keep an open mind about the Enlightenment, the Catholic Church was a determined opponent of anything which had to do with the Enlighten-
ment. You could use the Index, that register of books, which the Curia forbade Catholics to read, as a panorama of the Enlightenment. Often, given their point of view, you can understand the decisions of the Curia, but often their decisions were inspired by petty motives as in the case of Montesquieu’s De l’Esprit des Lois. The position of the eighteenth-century French church was a disastrous one. At the insistence of Louis XIV pope Clemens XI issued the Bulla Unigenitus (1713) in which the doctrines of the Jansenists were condemned. The bull led to a quarrel between the parliaments, which took the side of the Jansenists, and the French king, who in vain tried to put the bull into effect. It led furthermore to a running battle between the Jesuits and the Jansenists and both parties had their laic and clerical supporters. The Jansenists believed in predestination. God in his infinite wisdom had decided to divide mankind in the doomed and the blessed. The Jesuits believed in free will. Voltaire, Diderot and many other philosophes, had been educated by the Jesuits and someone, like Diderot, felt a deep seated antipathy for the philosophy of Pascal, one of the luminaries of the Jansenists, but they were the persecuted underdogs and they lived at least according to their strict interpretation of virtue. So in practice the Jansenists had to be tolerated and in the end pope Clemens XIV abolished the Jesuit order in 1771. The conflict soured the climate of opinion in France and gave rise to anticlericalism among the philosophes. Furthermore many clergymen were cruel in their decisions and hypocritical in their behaviour and – even worse– they often appeared plainly ridiculous. So the discerning public laughed heartily at the monks who fined a couple for sleeping together during their bridal night, because they had violated the ipsi primae noctis of the monks. However, if the philosophes were anticlerical in their attitude to the Church (though discreetly; you might expect a rich living from the Church) they were for the greater part not atheists. Holbach and his friends were atheists and pure materialists. Holbach drew his inspiration from a curious document: Jean Meslier’s Will. This village pastor wrote a withering indictment against the Church and its doctrines. Holbach had it translated under the title Le Bon Sens du Curé Jean Meslier Suivi de Son Testament. Holbach and his circle transformed this bitter criticism into a genteel system of order. Lilti maintains that Holbach’s notion of sociability was derived from the symbiosis between the nobility and the philosophes. Writing about the Holbach’s notion Lilti observes: This is, I think, an important observation. When we compare the works on moral philosophy by Holbach, Condillac and Helvétius (among others) with their British counterparts the French works remain very abstract and as soon as we try to visualize the actual society to which they were to be applied, they refer to the small world of the salons, while Hume wrote for the much larger world of commercial society. The group of atheists was only small. Most upper class Frenchmen and most philosophes felt themselves to be Chris-

We all remember Voltaire’s slogan Ecrasez l’infini, meaning the Catholic clergy, and he pursued them relentlessly. But he also said that if the Christian churches had not existed they should have been invented. He was acutely aware that the Church and churches in general were important instruments of social control among a population that was not touched by the Enlightenment. In his Siècle de Louis XIV he accepted the Catholic Church as a national institution provided that its clergy would be broadminded enough to tolerate all kinds of religious belief. In his Essai sur les Moeurs he maintained that civilisations outside the Christian world had developed such a kind of broad minded theism in which believers had their beliefs in one God in common. Voltaire’s theism is a special kind of deism. The God of deism was remote, but Voltaire needed a personal relationship to his God and perhaps in this need he was not alone. It strikes me that Hume denied that he was a deist, but he did not call himself an atheist either. It is as if he felt himself too civilised for that. Could it be that he had the same kind of relationship to God as Voltaire? He did not need a God to help him or to explain the universe. Perhaps he felt that the belief in one God gave an extra, almost aesthetic, quality to the meaning of life. He was, as I have described him, an agnostic theist.

4. Deism in Germany
In the German speaking countries Spinoza was read. He appealed first of all to Protestants who saw nature as a mystery they wanted to understand. Many theologians of course condemned Spinoza’s writings but on the whole these were well read. One of the critics was Christian Wolff, a very influential theologian, who incorporated a Spinozist element in his rationalist interpretation of the Christian religion. Aufklärung meant the duty to find God through Reason. That form of rationalism does not seem totally dissimilar to Spinoza’s notion of God. In the last quarter of the century many intellectuals, Jacobi, Mendelssohn, Goethe and Schiller among them, were inspired by Spinoza’s view of the universe and man’s position in it. From the point of view of this essay Gottlob Ephraim Lessing is the most interesting writer and Nathan der Weise and Die Erziehung des Menschengeschehens show how deeply he was influenced by Spinoza’s philosophy. In his pithy style he described the blessings of ecumenical tolerance and in Die Erziehung he formulated a kind of theodicy in which deism would prevail. When in England deism was a position, which had to be avoided at all costs, in
Lessing’s view deism would become the creed of all civilised human beings. Lessing was a loyal citizen, but Frederick II did not like him. The reason was simple. Frederick was an enthusiastic supporter of the French enlightenment. Lessing pleaded for a national literature. He felt that the German writers should not slavishly imitate the French. There is one aspect in Lessing’s writings, which shows that we are leaving the era of the Enlightenment behind. His Erziehung has a dynamic element, which reminds one of Condorcet’s Esquisse. Man can move forward and will move forward in the course of human progress. In this Lessing moved away from the Enlightenment and helped to establish the Sturm und Drang period in the German speaking countries. So you could say that the prospect of deism was that it would triumph in the nineteenth century and would turn Christianity into a kind of superior humanism. But what kind of triumph was it really? If we can only rely on God’s providence in general, but cannot expect any help from Him in our personal lives, how much solace can we derive from his Presence? That was the basic worry of eighteenth-century Christians. Since the nineteenth century it turned an increasing number of Christians into agnostics and atheists.

5. Happiness

Ever since I was a student I kept a happy memory of Carl Becker’s The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers. His thesis is that the philosophers of the Enlightenment needed to replace their Christian beliefs by the notion of an earthly paradise that guaranteed happiness in this world. As a historical explanation of the Enlightenment, Becker’s thesis cannot be accepted. Few philosophers of the Enlightenment (including the philosophers) were prepared to give up their Christian beliefs and become atheists and Becker underestimates the scepticism, which is also an integral part of the Enlightenment. On the other hand these philosophers accepted the idea that the moral rules should be man made. So the question remains with what would you replace the beliefs and traditions of Christian- ity in this wholly secular world of human transactions: with the promotion of happiness here on earth?

In this respect the philosophers as visitors to the salons contributed little that could be useful to later generations. Robert Mauzi has described the notions of hap- piness in eighteenth-century France and sums these up in three aspects:

1. “La recherches des équilibres” between nature, human society, and reason.35

2. Happiness means a “sentiment vif de l’existence”26

3. “Les réflexions sur le bonheur au XVIIIe siècle, sont toujours fondées sur l’équivoque.”37

Balance, sentiment and ambivalence: these three notions contain the French ideal of civilised behaviour in the salons. It meant finding the right balance between the traditions of church and state and intellectual freedom. The quest for this balance generated a lot of ambivalence. Perhaps the most original element of the French Enlightenment was the cultivation of vivid emotions. That inspired the sociability of the salons, so much admired in and outside France. Talleyrand is supposed to have said that “celui qui n’a pas vécu avant 1789 ne connaît pas la douceur de vivre.”38 That ‘douceur de vivre’ applied to a very small group. And Frenchmen after the revolution of 1789 had to invent that ‘douceur de vivre’ again under very different circumstances.

Becker’s notion cannot apply to the English or the Scots. Theologians felt the threat of a godless world and named it deism. But the Anglican Church was hospitable enough to absorb the effects of modernization. It seems to me that the Scottish moderates managed to cushion these effects even better. And yet in both cases theologians and writers in general relied on ‘custom’ (as Hume called the complex of traditional experience in his Treatise) to be able to believe that change could not disrupt that traditional order. Hume accepted the possi- bility of a godless world with equanimity. Perhaps he would have been shocked to learn that social change would wipe out the world he was accustomed to. Lessing presented deism as the prospect of the values the modern world would ac- cept: freedom, tolerance and justice. He was the true prophet of things to come, at least in the sense that human beings must accept these values (adding that of democracy to it) in order to live together in peace and happiness and prosper.

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Notes

* Essay I, “What is the Enlightenment” has been published in no. 1, June 2013.


3 An English version appeared in 1733.

4 Voltaire, Lettres Philosophiques (Paris 1986: Gallimard), 61. This dictum reminds one of Madison’s saying in Federalist LK: “In a free government, the security for civil rights must be the same as for religious rights. It consists in the one case in the multiplicity of interests, and in the other, in the multiplicity of sects.” (ed. Cooke, Meridian books), 351-352.


6 He wrote a number of articles on mathematics and a lemma on Geneva which caused a scandal, because he observed that most of the Genevan pastors had Socinian leanings.


9 Quoted by J. Lough, The Encyclopédie (Genève 1989: Slatkine reprints), 123.


12 Later lodges for women came into existence.


14 Ph. Ariès, Centuries of Childhood (Harmondsworth 1973: Penguin), tells us that bourgeois started to give special attention to the education of their children.

Edward Gibbon
but that applied rather to the sons than to the daughters.

12. Julie de Lespinasse could not afford to offer her guests dinner, yet her salon was very popular.
17. J. Leland, A View of the Principal Deistical Writings (London 1766: Longman & Dodson). There was a lot of confusion about the right definition of the deist. Clarke in his Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God (1704) distinguished four types of deists: (in the phrasing of L. Dupré), 1. Those who believe in the existence of an eternal, intelligent being that created a certain quantity of matter and motion without concerning itself with its development or government; 2. Those who believe in the providence of God but not in divinely sanctioned moral obligations; 3. Those who believe in God's moral commands but not in immortality; 4. Those who believe in the Providence of God, moral obligations and immortality, but not in revelation. [L. Dupré, The Enlightenment, 243]. According to Clarke only the fourth kind are real deists. Like Leland Clarke emphasizes revelation (and not providence). Belief in revelation decided whether someone was a deist or not. A generation after Clarke, Conyers Middleton perfectly fitted Clarke's portrait of the real deist.
18. D. Hume, "My Own Life", Essays Moral, Political and Literary, (Indianapolis 1987: Libet/Classics), E. F. Miller ed., xxiv. When he wrote this in 1776, Hume had the satisfaction that Middleton's Free Inquiry was more or less forgotten, while his had risen on the scale of estimation.
La querelle du panthéisme,1 qui secoua le paysage intellectuel allemand de la fin du XVIIIe siècle, fut initiée par Friedrich H. Jacobi. En effet, sans la publication des Lettres à Moses Mendelssohn sur la doctrine de Spinoza, personne n’aurait su que Lessing avait été spinoziste. Le scandale eut été évité. Un tel avenu, de la part de Lessing, ne pouvait passer inaperçu. Comment un Aufklärer, affirmant l’unité de la raison et de la religion, pouvait-il se trouver associé à Spinoza, philosophe perçu généralement comme athée ou hérétique? En vérité, dans cette querelle, Lessing n’est pas seul en cause. Comme le dit si bien Philonenko: «avec Lessing, c’est l’Aufklärung tout entière qui est atteinte.» S’il ne pouvait prévoir l’ampleur de la réaction qui a suivi la publication des Lettres à Moses Mendelssohn sur la doctrine de Spinoza, Jacobi savait très bien ce qu’impliquait son «indiscrétion» au sujet des convictions spinozistes de Lessing. En effet, dire que Lessing et l’Aufklärung sont spinozistes, c’est affirmer que le rationalisme et la philosophie le sont également. Pire encore: il en découle que toute philosophie, dans la mesure où elle est rationnelle, est fataliste et nihiliste. Or, c’est précisément ce que Jacobi, animé d’une relative animosité envers l’Aufklärung, entend démontrer. Pour Jacobi, seule la foi, terme équivalent de l’Aufklärung, entend démontrer. Pour Jacobi, seule la foi, terme équivalent de l’Aufklärung, entend démontrer.

Jacobi et la querelle du panthéisme
Le rationalisme et la philosophie en question

1. La philosophie rationaliste de Spinoza est nihiliste et fataliste
Le principe auquel adhérerait Lessing et qui le rattache selon Jacobi à Spinoza, est le fameux «Un et tout» d’Héraclite, auquel Jacobi ajoute le principe paradoxal que la contradiction est le principe même de la pensée.2 En effet, si aucune génération n’est possible à partir du néant, le fini ne pourrait procéder d’un infini antérieur qui en serait la cause, le devenir ne pourrait plus avoir commencé à être à partir du permanent, car cela supposerait une génération à partir du néant puisqu’une chose n’est pas encore et qui est dans son essence complètement différente d’une autre ne peut être produite par une autre totalement différente d’elle qu’en supposant une production spontanée, à partir de rien. Pour Spinoza, il convient de supposer au contraire que l’infinité est éternelle et permanente, n’est en rien antérieur au fini, mais qu’il est une de ses modifications, une propriété dérivée de l’être, qu’il lui appartient et est, de ce fait, identique à lui. Tout rapport entre le fini et l’infinité se ferait alors dans l’immanence de l’être infini, qui est substance. Plein, continu, l’être comprend en lui comme autant de propriétés premières et dérivées, toutes ses modifications, qui se conditionnent l’une l’autre de façon nécessaire sans qu’il faille poser le surgissement de quelque chose à partir de

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1. J. Burckhardt, Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen, (Stuttgart 1949: Kröner), 271

2. F. L. van H., Würde es ein wunderbares Schauspiel, freilich aber nicht für zeitgenössische, irdische Wesen sein, dem Geist der Menschheit erkennend nachzugehen, der über all diesen Erscheinungen schwebend und doch mit allen verflochten, sich eine neue Wohnung baut.

3. Friederich Heinrich Jacobi

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Yes, the term Enlightenment is full of mystery exactly because it is a nineteenth-century term. The wisest of 19th-century historians, Jacob Burckhardt, used it in the original sense, but his vista of things is very different from the way Kant had in mind.

He wrote, in a piece on happiness and misfortune in history, as follows:

Würde es ein wunderbares Schauspiel, freilich aber nicht für zeitgenössische, irdische Wesen sein, dem Geist der Menschheit erkennend nachzugehen, der über all diesen Erscheinungen schwebend und doch mit allen verflochten, sich eine neue Wohnung baut.

For Burckhardt this was a long term speculation, for us it has become a duty. We must aspire to a controlled situation on a global scale so that mankind can survive.
Cette unité qui comprend tout est bien conforme à l’Un héracléitien dans lequel les contraires où les opposés étaient réduits à l’identité tout comme il rejoint l’Être plein de l’armonide qui ne peut se décomposer en lui le néant. Cette substance première qui est tout, que rien ne conditionne et qui conditionne toutes choses comme des propriétés ou modifications d’elle-même, est Nature ou Dieu. Or, ce Dieu, non seulement, selon Jacobi, ne peut-il, conformément à l’orthodoxie chrétienne, avoir créé le monde fini à partir du néant, mais il ne peut non plus être conçu comme un dieu personnel, doté d’intelligence et de volonté. En effet, l’Être comme substance possède comme qualités premières, liées immédiatement à lui, l’étendue et la pensée. Toutefois, si la pensée est, en tant qu’attribut, dérivée de l’être, il est impossible qu’elle en soit la cause et puisse le mouvoir. L’Être ou Dieu, précédant la pensée, n’est pas lui-même une cause intelligente. Il n’est pas davantage une volonté puisque celle-ci est le résultat d’un rapport entre des propriétés dérivées, l’idée et le sentiment de soi-même. L’Être originaire, cause de tout, n’est en lui-même ni intelligence ni volonté.

« Cette cause infinie et immanente n’a comme telle, explicite, ni entendement ni volonté; car, d’après son unité transcendantale et son infinithé ou absolu et champ, elle ne peut avoir d’objet de pensée et de volonté; et une faculté de produire un concept avant le concept ou un concept qui existerait avant son objet et serait la cause parfaite de lui-même, sont des choses tout simplement inépues, de même qu’une volonté qui produirait le vouloir et se déterminerait entièrement elle-même… ».

Cela signifie, plus profondément, que dans le monde il n’existe pas de causes finales qui produiraient spontanément leur effet à partir d’une idée, mais uniquement des causes efficaces, car, si ce dont tout dérive est une cause sans pensée ni intention, ce qui en résulte l’est par un engendrement nécessaire de causes et d’effets. Toutefois, comme tout ceci n’est pas successif mais en réalité simultané, tout ce qui existe dans le Tout est le résultat de certains rapports entre des propriétés. Cela signifie qu’il n’existe aucune cause intentionnelle, que la volonté humaine n’est pas libre, que même les pensées arrivent en nous sans que nous en soyons responsables. La volonté a bien des objets qu’elle veut mais ceux-ci ne sont pas créés spontanément par le moi individuel; ils résultent plutôt de l’enchaînement de différentes causes à l’intérieur de l’être. Le fait de constater que nous avons des volontés ne signifie en effet nullement que nous les avons librement produites. Selon Spinoza, la tendance qui nous permet de juger du bien et du mal et de viser le bien est une tendance naturelle irrésistible, celle de la conservation de soi, qui agit en nous sous la forme du désir, et constitue la cause effective et nécessaire de nos volontés. Ce qui reviendrait à dire, selon Jacobi, que: « J’agis selon ma volonté; mais ce n’est pas ma volonté qui me fait agir. »

Quant aux idées, aux découvertes scientifiques qui en dépendent ou aux grandes réalisations artistiques, nous ne pourrions jamais nous en considérer comme les auteurs puisque notre pensée, telle un miroir, n’a fait que voir ou prendre conscience d’un effet, lui-même rattaché à toute une série de causes et d’effets antérieurs, qui arrive en elle, sans qu’elle ait produit quoique ce soit de nouveau ou d’inédit par elle-même. Ainsi, selon Jacobi, le déterminisme spinoziste affirme que: « L’inventeur de la montre ne l’inventa pas, au fond, il regarda sa naissance à partir de forces se développant aveuglément. »

Certes, une telle pensée, complètement étrangère à l’attitude naturelle, exige un effort d’abstraction difficile, car il faut n’être attentif qu’à ce qui est. Cela suppose de ne pas s’attacher aux apparences ou aux phénomènes trompeurs qui nous portent à croire que nous sommes à l’origine de nos pensées, que nous décidons librement de nos actes, et que tout se déroule dans le temps de façon successive et non simultanément et éternellement. En fait, pour Jacobi, toute l’exigence rationaliste tient dans cette attitude, qui, tournée vers le fondement, soit l’être, identique à lui-même, absolu, plein et continu, rejette dans le domaine de l’illusion et de l’apparence trompeuse, tout ce qui est inexplicable au moyen d’un engendrement rigoureux et nécessaire de causes efficaces. Si toutes les philosophies rationalistes n’ont pas nécessairement abouti au monisme déterministe de Spinoza, c’est qu’elles n’ont pas été suffisamment cohérentes et rationnelles, qu’elles n’ont pas poussé jusqu’au bout la logique de leur propre position. Le rationalisme est intrinsèquement fatigant. Bien qu’il affirme la plénitude de l’être infini et immuable, il est aussi nihiliste, car il s’avère impuissant à saisir l’existence dans sa singularité et son immédiateté irréductibles. Il n’a donc dans la généralité du concept, et se perd dans une chaîne de déduction infinie. Ce faisant, il demeure étranger à la manifestation de l’existence dont il s’abstait au profit du concept, pour tenir ensuite d’en rendre compte par déduction. Or, cette entreprise est vouée à l’échec. En effet, vouloir tout expliquer par dérivation causale en identifiant la cause immédiate et en remontant ensuite jusqu’aux causes antécédentes, est un processus infini, car de méditations en méditations nous n’arriverons jamais au principe premier qui seul pourrait nous fournir une explication complète ou intégrale de la chose. Le philosophe naturaliste peut bien feindre de se contenter des seuls rapports de causalité qui se trouvent dans la nature sans chercher à les fonder dans une cause première inconditionnée, il n’en demeure pas moins que sans une relation à ce principe inconditionné, la chaîne de la causalité naturelle elle-même ne fait plus sens. Un premier principe, une certitude première ne peut être démontrée ou atteinte au terme d’une déduction. L’existence, abandonnée au profit du concept, n’est pas davantage atteinte au terme du processus déductif. Le rationalisme est un néant.

2. L’idéalisme de Kant et de Fichte n’est qu’un spinozisme renversé
Dans la critique qu’il fait du rationalisme des Lumières, Jacobi se rapproche de certaines thèses kantiennes, ce qui reconnait lui-même ouvertement. En effet, il soutient avec Kant que l’existence ne peut être un prédicat, susceptible d’une démonstration logique, mais une «position ». Cela induit chez lui la même suspicion qu’avait Kant envers la preuve ontologique de l’existence de Dieu. Chez lui, comme c’est le cas pour Kant, l’existence de Dieu et l’immortalité de l’âme ne peuvent faire l’objet d’une démonstration rationnelle et sont, en l’occurrence, des objets de croyance. Une limitation de la connaissance d’entendement lui semblait requise et l’insistance de Kant sur l’intuition sensible et l’expérience correspondait à son réalisme profond, rebuté par les longues chaînes de déductions abstraites de type géométrique qui caractérisaient la philosophie spinoziste, tout comme celles de Leibniz ou de Wolff. Enfin, tout
comme Kant également, il conçoit les questions métaphysiques portant sur le non-sensible comme les plus impor-
tantes, comme celles auxquelles sont en fait subordonnées toutes les autres qui trouvent leur réponse dans l’ordre
du sensible et de la nature. Toutefois, en dépit du fait que Kant maintenait le caractère réaliste de sa position, dans la
mesure où la connaissance y demeurait dépendante d’un donné intuitif irréduc-
tible, Jacobi y décèle, au contraire, les
germes de ce qui deviendra chez Fichte un idéalisme subjectif radical, soit une
nouvelle version du néant philoso-
phique, ouvrant la voie à un scepticisme
et à un désespoir encore plus profonds.
Ce nouveau nihilisme n’est pourtant
que l’envers du nihilisme précédent, au-
quel il fait irréconciliablement écho. En
effet, lorsque Kant prétend que nous ne
connaissons des choses que ce que nous
y mettons nous-mêmes, il fait de l’objet
de connaissance un phénomène, c’est-
dire une représentation, élaborée et
déterminée par nos formes a priori et nos
concepts, dont le rapport avec la chose elle-même ou la chose en soi demeure problématique. À celle-ci, semble-t-il, nous ne pouvons avoir accès, car elle
demeure fondamentalement extérieure à notre conscience qui ne peut que se
percevoir elle-même, dans la multitude
de ses modifications. Fichte aurait eu le
mérite de pousser cette tendance subjec-
tive et idéalistique jusqu’au bout, déduisant
toute réalité extérieure, autrui, la nature
-en gros, le non-moi- du moi transcen-
dantal, qui n’est, en lui-même, qu’une
pure activité, produisant hors de lui,
grâce à son imagination, un monde.
Or, cette activité productrice incessante,
qu’ils, pour ainsi dire, le moi ou l’entendement à se poser des limites,
qui il tend ensuite à dépasser, pour re-
trouver son unité originale et revenir à
soi, constitue la seule réalité. Toutefois,
le moi qui agit, en tant que pure acti-
vité, ne possède aucune réalité substan-
tielle. À l’instar du monde extérieur, il
n’est pour lui-même qu’une représen-
tation, une image, une illusion, qui
ne peut s’ancrer dans un référent, dans
une chose réellement existante dont il
provientrait. Dans la philosophie
fichtéenne, si rien n’existe à l’extérieur
du Moi, le moi lui-même n’est qu’une
illusion, une représentation. L’idéalisme
serait donc, lui aussi, tout comme le spi-
nozisme, quoique différemment, une
vaste entreprise de nénatation:
Le philosophe de la raison pure doit
donc être un processus chimique qui
transforme en néant tout ce qui est
extérieur à celle-ci et la laisse seule sub-
sister — un esprit si pur que, dans cette
pureté qu’a son tour cela ne peut être,
mais ne peut être intuitionné comme
existent que dans le produire de l’esprit:
un processus qui n’est pas un acte d’acte
(Thats-That).8
Non sans humour, il compare la phi-
losophie de Fichte à un bas tricoté. En
effet, le fil, qui au moyen d’un mouve-
ment de va-et-vient, se limite lui-même
constamment, crée ainsi sans aucune
intervention d’un être extérieur à lui,
sans qu’aucun élément étranger vienne
s’y ajouter, des étoiles, des maisons, des
animaux, des montagnes, des mots va-
riés, s’apparente au fil fichtéen, qui en
posant un non-moi qui lui est extérieur,
ne rencontre jamais rien d’autre que lui-
-même et n’est toujours, du début jusqu’à
la fin, qu’un seul et même fil. Il suffit
de défaire le bas pour s’en convaincre:
le fil, en se dénouant, fait s’évanouir
les motifs, les fleurs et les oiseaux, et révèle
l’identité du sujet et de l’objet. Toute-
fois, précise malicieusement Jacobi, le
bas existe au moins pour une jambe,
qui lui donne un but, une signifi-
cation, une raison d’être, tandis que le
motif, pure création du moi par le
moi pour lui-même, n’est en rela-
tion avec rien, ne se rapporte à rien,
ne signifie rien. Cette vision fantomatique
est de celle dont Jacobi se détournait
épouvante et horreur, car c’est celle d’un
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En quel sens, toutefois, Jacobi prétend-il
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la première étant cependant plus fondamentale que la seconde, puisqu'elle porte sur l'absolu ou l'inconditionné qui est au fondement de tout ce qui existe. L'entendement et la science qu'il produit conduisent bien à ce que Jacobi appelle des vérités, mais ils ne peuvent capter le vrai, lequel est présenté au moyen de la raison seule. Ce «pressentiment du vrai» est pourtant ce qui pousse l'entendement à vouloir tout expliquer, tout comprendre et tout lier, mais les constructions abstraites auxquelles il aboutit l'éloignent fatalement de l'être et du vrai. Véritable médiateur, l'entendement, qui caractérise l'entreprise philosophique, se situe entre la perception immédiate du suprasensible (l'inconditionné) et la perception sensible de mon corps, des objets hors de moi. Ce faisant, il se révèle, certes, utile à des connaissances diverses, mais impropre à révéler l'existence et de même coup à créer en nous une véritable conviction.10 De plus, l'existence des choses dans leur singularité individuelle et irréductible ne peut être approchée par l'entendement qu'à travers la médiation de l'essence ou du concept, qui par son abstraction nie la singularité de l'existence individuelle au profit d'une généralité abstraite et morte. Ainsi, le rationalisme nous condamne à rester à jamais éloignés de la chose dans son existence individuelle, à ne l'approcher qu'à travers nos propres constructions, nos modèles, et à rester ainsi enfermés en nous-mêmes. Ainsi, pour Jacobi, le rationalisme et la philosophie tout entière sont nihilistes, parce que perdus dans des raisonnements infinis, ils sont incapables de produire une véritable conviction, ce qui mène au scepticisme, et parce qu'au moyen du concept, qui est une abstraction, ils nient l'existence. Selon S. Zac, dans la vision jacobienne du rationalisme: «On part du néant, on va au néant, on est dans le néant».11 Le rationalisme est également nihiliste parce que, niant toute transcendance, il enferme tout ce qui existe dans un déterminisme universel englobant, vidant le cœur de l'homme d'espoir et d'aspirations, lui enlevant la liberté et la perspective d'un sens à son existence; il l'est aussi parce qu'ayant dissous le monde dans un rêve rationnel sans consistance, il fait de notre vie une illusion, de nos convictions morales des absurdités. Tout se passe comme si la philosopohie, dans son développement, s'était fourvoyée: bien que l'entendement ne puisse commencer à fonctionner sans le pressentiment du vrai suprasensible par la raison et la certitude qui l'accompagne, sans la révélation des sens qui lui donnent un contenu à abstraire, il se développe et se perfectionne au point de croire qu'en réalité tout provient de lui. Il en vient à croire que c'est lui qui, grâce à ses concepts, donne l'existence aux objets des sens, la réalité aux phénomènes, tandis qu'il croit également pouvoir remettre en doute l'existence de l'inconditionné, que révèle la raison et mettre ainsi des bornes à celle-ci, sous prétexte qu'il ne peut ni l'expliquer ni l'intentionner. Ce faisant, il perd de vue l'existence, se réfugie dans l'abstraction et c'est pourquoi il n'existe plus de limites à son perfectionnement infini. Mais celui-ci n'est qu'un jeu, un divertissement, qui se révèle vain. «Nos sciences, en tant simplement que telles, sont des jeux que l'esprit humain s'invente en guise de passe-temps. En s'inventant ces jeux, il ne fait qu'organiser son ignorance, sans s'approcher d'un poil d'une connaissance du vrai».12 Pourtant, la philosophie, si elle est et demeure selon Jacobi une activité d'entendement, doit avoir un autre but, qui n'est pas vain: soit de révéler l'existence. Si Jacobi se dit partisan d'une non-philosophie, ce n'est pas parce qu'il abandonne celle-ci ou se déclare irrationaliste, mais uniquement parce qu'il est persuadé qu'elle a fait fausse route et qu'elle doit impérativement se transformer. Pour bien comprendre la critique que fait Jacobi de cette philosophie dominée par l'entendement et ce qu'il propose lui-même comme étant une voie préférable à celle du fatalisme nihiliste qu'elle provoque nécessairement, il faut éclaircir les notions parfois confuses de croyance et de révélation.13 Évoquée dans les Lettres à Moses Mendelssohn sur la doctrine de Spinoza, la notion de croyance a fait l'objet de certaines mises et suscité bien des malentendus. Profitant de ce flou terminologique, Mendelssohn pouvait aisément dire à propos de Jacobi qu'il proposait «une retraite honorable» sous le «drapeau de la foi», le terme de croyance (Glauben) étant habituellement réservé aux vérités révélées de la religion. Il devenait alors impératif pour Jacobi de justifier le choix de ce terme et d'en démontrer le caractère philosophique. C'est ce qu'il fera en 1787 dans le livre David Hume et la croyance. Idéalisme et réalisme. Selon Jacobi, certaines vérités positives, de première main, se révèlent immédiatement à la raison et aux sens. Cette révélation de l'être est à la fois immédiate et inexplicable. C'est pourquoi Jacobi la qualifie de «vraiment miraculeuse».14 Le sentiment qui accompagne cette révélation est celui d'une certitude inébranlable, qui n'a que faire de preuves, qui ne peut se démontrer mais qui constitue le fond à partir duquel nous pouvons croire en général à des choses. La certitude scientifique ou philosophique elle-même se trouve fondée sur cette croyance première qui s'exprime au moyen de deux propositions: «Je suis» et «il y des choses hors de moi». Nous croyons en ces deux propositions immédiatement, sans pouvoir les séparer l'une de l'autre, par la révélation que nous en avons; cette certitude précède toute représentation et réflexion. C'est à juste titre, selon Jacobi, que l'on peut qualifier cette croyance de philosophique puisqu'on la retrouve chez David Hume, du moins en ce qui concerne la révélation sensible. En effet, pour Hume, si nous sommes capables de cerner la différence entre les fictions de notre imagination et les véritables choses perçues hors de nous, c'est parce que nous sentons qu'elles ont plus de réalité qu'un certain poids s'attache à leur représentation, que n'ont pas les rêveries de l'imagination; nous croyons en leur existence et cette croyance en la réalité de nos perceptions est fortement ancrée dans la nature humaine. Toutefois, selon Jacobi, la croyance s'applique aussi au suprasensible. Par la raison (Vernunft), dont l'étymologie révèle le parenté avec le verbe vernehmen, saisir, nous avons l'intuition immédiate de notre liberté, qui se manifeste en nous par notre capacité à résister aux penchant, aux désirs, à nous arracher à la nature. Elle nous révèle aussi l'inconditionné, l'existence d'une cause première de tout ce qui existe. Ces certitudes ne peuvent être démontrées, ni prouvées: elles sont immédiatement certaines. Provoquant une conviction immédiate, elles appartiennent à la nature même de l'homme. Arracher l'homme à ces convictions, les relativiser au nom d'un rationalisme éclairé, c'est le livrer à des connaissances incertaines, à un monde qui n'a plus de fondement, à une nécessité dont toute liberté est exclue, à une existence dépourvue de but. À tout prendre, dira Jacobi, vaut mieux une croyance inébranlable que l'on ne peut expliquer rationnellement qu'une
science qui s’avère n’être au fond qu’un néant,8 ce qui est une autre manière de dire que sa non-philosophie, comme philosophie du non-savoir, est préférable à la philosophie, comme savoir du néant.

Afin d’éviter les vains débats qui opposent le matérialisme à l’idéalisme, le théisme au naturalisme, l’un et l’autre ne pouvant au fond prouver ce qu’ils avancent (que seule la nature existe et qu’il n’y a point de Dieu, ou qu’il existe un Dieu qui a créé le monde à partir de rien), il conviendrait une fois pour toute de comprendre selon Jacobi que le désir effréné d’expliquer qui caractérise l’entendement et la philosophie présuppose la croyance, la saisie immédiate du vrai, mais qu’elle ne peut, paradoxalement, expliquer et démontrer ce qu’elle présuppose et s’en éloigne dès lors forcément. La non-philosophie de Jacobi s’instaure alors comme une critique de cette prétention délirante de la philosophie à démontrer l’existence, que celle-ci soit sensible ou suprasensible. Elle est un savoir du non-savoir, une docile ignorance, dont la réserve est salutaire puisqu’elle écarte le spectre du nihilisme et du fatalisme, qu’elle réconcilie l’homme avec lui-même s’il est bien, selon Jacobi, un être qui aspire au vrai, au suprasensible, qui tend à dépasser la sphère naturelle de ses besoins immédiats, vers quelque chose qui importe plus que le simple divertissement que procurent les vérités du savoir: le beau, le bien, le vrai. À ce propos, Jacobi propose de radicaliser la prophétie de Lichtenberg selon laquelle: «notre monde deviendra un jour si raffiné qu’il sera alors tout aussi risible de croire en Dieu qu’il l’est, aujourd’hui, de croire aux fantômes», car celui-ci n’a pas vu que l’extrême raffinement s’installerait dans l’insignifiance, dans la médiocrité, à qui a perdu la certitude issue de la croyance, «rien ne peut encore sembler important et respectable: son âme a perdu la noble trempe. La force du sérieux».9 10 Vois: il est rare ça et là et il éclate de rire… de rire!11

La critique qui opère Jacobi envers la philosophie rationaliste, qu’elle soit idéaliste ou matérialiste, envers les Lumières allemandes et sa critique idéaliste, dont il a le mérite de percevoir la continuité essentielle, est en dépit de sa religiosité, bel et bien philosophique, en plus d’être d’une actualité et d’une pertinence remarquables. En effet, Jacobi porte, bien avant Nietzsche, avec, nous semble-t-il, plus de subtilité sinon de profondeur, un diagnostic perspicace sur notre civilisation moderne, rationnelle et naturaliste. Armée de ses modèles et de ses chaînes causales infinies, elle dissout l’être dans le néant d’un système de relations, anéantit la liberté dans un déterminisme naturel implicite, remet en question nos convictions intimes les plus profondes (le Moi, le Monde) et nous livre à une existence sans but, dépourvue d’idéal. L’ambition de tout démontrer, qui caractérise l’entendement, comporte pourtant, selon Jacobi, des limites; elle ignore qu’au fondement de son propre travail de compréhension se trouve une aspiration originale au Vrai, une donation première du Moi et du monde, sans lesquelles il ne pourrait pour-tant pas travailler. La révélation de l’être dans l’intuition sensible ou intellectuelle se trouve niée au profit d’une construction logique. Il en résulte un sentiment d’irréalité, celui d’être coupé du monde, étran-ger à soi-même, sentiment qui croit à la mesure de l’écart qui sépare le monde perçu, le moi ressenti et vécu, de celui qui se trouve reconstruit par le savoir rationnel. Si Jacobi nous rappelle notre ignorance et tente de mettre des bornes à la raison, ce n’est nullement pour évacuer le savoir ou le nier, mais pour qu’il respecte certaines limites, reconnaît qu’il n’est lui-même possible que sur la base de présupposés fondamentaux, qu’il serait vain et dange-reux de nier.

Marceline Morais

Notes


2 Philonenko, A., préface à Qu’est-ce que s’orienter dans la pensée de E. Kant, Vin (Paris, 2001), p. 16.


5 Ibid., p. 90 (W1,1 74).

6 Jacobi, H.J., Lettres à M. Mendelssohn, p. 60. (W1,1 21).

7 Voir : Kant, E., Critique de la Raison Pure, Œuvres philosophiques, vol. 1, La Pléiade, Gallimard, p. 1214-1215 (AK. III, 401).


9 Jacobi, H.J., Lettre sur le nihilisme, p. 54 (W 2, 1 200-201).


12 Jacobi, H.J., Lettre sur le nihilisme, p. 60 (W2,1 206).


16 Jacobi, H.J., Des Choses divines et de leur révélation, p. 76 (W3, 60).

17 Ibid.
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