

# The Theoretical Framework of the Enlightenment and Its Application to the Problem of the 'Other'

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The Enlightenment, which occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was a European intellectual movement that signaled a shift in mainstream thought across the transatlantic world.<sup>1</sup> It was tied to questions of human nature and morality as well as conceptions of progress and reason. The extent to which sides were taken on these concepts led to two internal movements forming within the general Enlightenment. The Moderate Enlightenment was led by thinkers such as Kant, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Locke, Voltaire, and Hume who believed that reason was limited in its scope and wanted to preserve religion and faith. The Radical Enlightenment, on the other hand, which included the *philosophes* Spinoza, Diderot, Condorcet, Paine, and Bayle, thought that everything can be transformed by reason. In this paper, I will be arguing that the Radicals were able to take a stance against anti-colonialism and different forms of discrimination such as race and gender, while the Moderates' philosophical beliefs ultimately upheld slavery and inequality. In order to show how their social and political views became so polarized, I will begin with their differing frameworks on reason, morality, structure, and governmental form.

## Reason

Although both the Moderate and Radical Enlightenment thinkers were part of *the Age of Reason*, it was the latter that regarded rationality as secular, universal, and "the only guide in human life."<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Israel makes a distinction between reason as a self-actualizing capacity and reason as a gift granted to man by God when he states: "For the moderate mainstream, reason is immaterial and inherent in God, a divinely given gift to man, and one that raises him above the rest. In radical thought, by contrast, man is merely an animal among others with no specially privileged status in the universe while 'la raison,' as one radical text expressed it in 1774, far from being something beyond and above matter, is nothing but 'nature modifiée par l'expérience' [nature modified by experience]."<sup>3</sup>

The Radicals saw a kind of oneness among nature, while the Moderates justified the existence of an inherent hierarchy by using reason as a vehicle in upholding the status quo. Thus, instead of reason being given to each person the same and having that power lie in his or her hands, reason is instead restricted in its original form by God in the sense of who fully receives it. The ordering of humans as superior to animals clearly exists within the human species as well, with certain persons being deemed more rational than others. Since human actions were seen as being divinely ordained through reason by the Moderates, they were opposed to the Radicals' desire for change in certain spheres because arguing against those actions would be arguing against God's will. Furthermore, the differences between dualism and material monism further divided the Moderate and the Radical camps, which can be seen by Israel's differentiation of the two: "Beyond a certain level there were and could be only two Enlightenments – moderate (two-substance) Enlightenment, on the one hand, postulating a balance between reason and tradition and broadly supporting the status quo, and, on the other, Radical (one-substance) Enlightenment conflating body and mind into one, reducing God and nature to the same thing, excluding all miracles and spirits separate from bodies, and invoking reason as the sole guide in human life, jettisoning tradition."<sup>4</sup>

Dualism is the belief that the mind and the body exist as two separate entities, whereas material monism claims that nothing exists outside of the material world. Descartes was the philosophical figure who discovered dualism in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* when he was certain that he had a mind—'Cogito ergo sum' (I think, therefore I am)—but doubted that he had a real body in space. As a consequence of dualism, multiple divisions arise between subject and object, matter and spirit, reason and emotion, and culture and nature, which led to the Moderates having to balance concepts that were at odds with one another. Material monism does not maintain these dichotomies, though, and instead proposes that there is a higher unity that manifests itself in matter. Spinoza was the leading figure in this belief and established that God is imminent and thought (mind) and extension (matter) are simply modifications of substance in his *Ethics*. Thus, he divinifies nature by elevating it to the divine, which is God. Since there is only one fundamental reality—unity—differences are apparent but are not real. Thus, while the Radicals were able to see reason as being the ultimate truth that can tie differences together, the Moderates were not able to see the same conception of progress due to their reason-religion dichotomy. Reason was restricted by religion and authority because these were seen as more privileged. D'Holbach, a Radical philosopher, identified organized religion and government as the two *powers* that "have traditionally combined to preclude enjoyment of the benefits that society ought to confer on all men" because the latter had advanced its individual interests rather than the interests of the collective society.<sup>5</sup> Spinoza agreed with d'Holbach that the main churches had turned religion away from its main ideals, the principles of justice based on equality and charity, by "perverting it with humanly concocted 'mysteries,' dogmas, and ecclesiastical authority."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Moderates were following a non-secular conception of reason that limited its power within the confines of religion.

## Morality

While the Radicals based morality in the faculty of reason to ensure its universalness, the Moderates opted for a morality that was nearly equivalent to religion. Right and wrong would be decided by tradition and practices, which varies based on the particular religion one follows and the specific location one finds himself or herself in. Moral values would not be universal, but would instead be relative, which establishes that there is no sound basis for comparing differences. The ethical consequences that follow are that there would be no valid argument against corruption because the justification for moral virtues or wrongdoings would lie within the system itself instead of within objective values that exist outside of particular systems. The Radicals identified this issue that would manifest as oppression and unfairness, and thus followed a Spinozist philosophical groundwork that instead separated philosophy and morality "entirely from theology, grounding morality...on secular criteria alone and especially the principle of equality."<sup>7</sup> They classified both reason and morality as universal to prevent any theoretical hierarchies from forming since everyone has access to rationality and moral values, making them subject to the same rules as one another. Although Kant is generally a moderate thinker, his *categorical imperative* is an ideal representation of the Radicals' vision of a collective morality. In his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant's deontological moral philosophy rests on the metaprinciple of the Golden rule—*treat others as you wish to be treated*—that calls for obedience to the following principles:

- 1) *Act only according to that maxim by which you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.*
- 2) *Act as though the maxim of your action were, by your will, to become a universal law.*
- 3) *Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.*
- 4) *Act as if you were a law-making member in a kingdom of ends.*

In alignment with Kant's formulation of a proper morality, Radicals such as Diderot, Helvetius, d'Holbach, and Condorcet argued that, "To place morality on a sound basis...one must cease assigning responsibility to tradition, popular sensibility, and climate."<sup>8</sup> Their mentioning of climate refers directly to Montesquieu's endorsement of moral relativism in his book, *Spirit of the Laws*.<sup>9</sup> His insistence that one form of government would not apply to all nations the same implies that different moral codes are justifiable depending on the natural, environmental conditions, material conditions, and cultural conditions as well as the climate, mores, and psychological variations of each place. So far, the Moderates would agree with his conception that political institutions and laws are diverse and must be taken into consideration when discussing morality. However, Montesquieu pushed further and devised a principle of justice that is more in line with Radical thought as it is an *a priori* requirement that different forms of government must follow. Even if there are varying rules and expectations of a group of people depending on their location and authority, human nature is equal, which leads to a formal recognition of individual rights regardless of the culture one is a part of. Nevertheless, Montesquieu confused the descriptive and the normative because he misses the scope of reason in deciding that a law is unjust as reason must be able to transcend material conditions. He missed the fact that there must be other factors apart from external conditions—namely, internal, intellectual conditions—that

recognize a basis for reform. Similarly, The Moderates made the same mistake of not basing morality in reason, which caused them to miss the vital detail that morality must stem from a common sense of justice—an idea that the Radicals recognized and supported full heartedly.

## Structure

The major difference between the Radicals and the Moderates were their diverse focuses on toleration, which pertains to the former, and moderation, which concerns the latter. Both of these concepts can be compared in their ability to allow changes within society to form. Toleration, meaning the ability to respect the beliefs and practices of others, was the Radicals' root objective behind the call for changes in structure. The then-current systems of government, laws, and religion were discriminatory in the sense that they imposed a biased will upon the citizens that were not in conformity with a common good. They were in existence for the elite and maintained a hierarchy that did not allow for individuals to structurally oppose those laws or guiding morals that they deemed biased and unequal. The Moderates were not for toleration as they often disapproved of attitudes and behaviors that went against religious values, so they gravitated towards an approval of moderation. Although they upheld the idea that improvements were necessary in order to better society, they were not supportive of any drastic changes in governmental structures. Ferguson, for example, was a moderate who was in agreement with Voltaire and Turgot and pushed for an Enlightenment that "insisted on retaining most of the existing foundations, walls, and roof in place at any one time, making only marginal changes without altering the building's basic shape or removing so many 'of your supports at once so that the roof may fall in.'"<sup>10</sup> Theoretically, his position seems correct; however, if one were to take a look at the history of the past, he or she would see that slow change is not a very successful strategy of reform. By examining the forms of government that the Radicals and Moderates supported, I will explain the historical background behind the fight for immediate versus gradual change.

## Form of Government

The French government before the French Revolution was an absolute monarchy that followed a feudal system in which persons of higher rank would protect and give land to the workers who fought for them. Similarly, the British government was also a monarchy, although mixed, and the Radical Enlightenment thinkers continued to reject it "on principle as a recipe for dividing sovereignty, introducing unnecessary forms of corruption into politics, manipulating an electoral system that did not provide elected representatives in remotely equal ratios to electors, and preserving what was effectively a modified monarchy encased in aristocracy."<sup>11</sup> The Radicals envisioned a structure that would always uphold freedom and equality, which evidently could not be done in a governmental structure that was oppressive. Thus, they called for a representative democracy that would not be based on privilege and rank, as the Moderates supported, but rather on the principle of equal rights and abidance to a general will. Paine claims that republics are not 'plunged into war,' as monarchies are, 'because the nature of their government does not admit of an interest distinct from that of the nation.'<sup>12</sup>

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which was passed by the French National Assembly in 1789, was an ideal outline of a general good. Within its seventeen articles, the document covers the freedoms that men possess—equal rights, liberty, property, and resistance to oppression—as well as the restrictions of law.<sup>13</sup> However, the progress that came with this document would arguably not have existed if it was not for the French Revolution. Again, the division between the Moderates and the Radicals can be seen here as the former did not support revolution, while the latter believed that all individuals have the right to revolt. Israel highlights the argument of progress that the Radical Enlightenment thinkers advanced when he brings up the question of sacrifice: "D'Holbach and Diderot conceded that political revolution is apt to entail fearful upheaval and slaughter. Even so, averred d'Holbach six years before the outbreak of the American Revolution, the English, Dutch, and Swiss through revolutionary upheaval and long years of strife and bloodshed had in earlier centuries incontestably gained in the end and so would others in the future. Were not a few temporary disturbances more beneficial to humanity than languishing eternally under endless tyranny?"<sup>14</sup>

Their argument that progress has its benefits and drawbacks seems more defensible than the view that the Moderates, such as Kant and Rousseau, take on avoiding violence altogether. If the citizens of a government are being subjected to inequality by those in power, surely those individuals should be able to vocalize their concerns considering that their monarchical governments do not give them the power to do so through government.

## Application of the 'Other'

Now that a framework has been established on reason, morality, structure, and governmental form, I see it fit to explain how the Radical Enlightenment thinkers were able to address the issues of sexism and racism, while the Moderates went so far as to endorse these discriminations. By comparing thinkers such as Rousseau and Hume in opposition with Paine and Wollstonecraft on gender as well as a critique of moderate thought on race by Charles Mills and Susan Buck-Morss, I will show how the stances of the Moderate and Radical Enlightenment are significantly different within this context.

## Gender

Ideas of keeping women as the housewife and servant of the husband echoed in the Moderate Enlightenment philosophy as they were believed to be intellectually inferior to men.<sup>15</sup> Rousseau was a key moderate figure who held that education must be different for girls and boys because they have "specific duties as gendered beings."<sup>16</sup> In his book, *Émile*, written in 1762, he discusses how education is about becoming virtuous, which then would lead to happiness; however, virtue for men and women are not the same as the former achieves it through self-cultivation and the latter achieves it only as a result of actualizing what is good for others. Rousseau's attitude of gender inequality is apparent when he claimed that, "the aim for women is 'to be pleasing in sight, to win his [her husband's] respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of women for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young.'"<sup>17</sup> The role of women is apparently to be the caregiver of men; however, this conception of women treats them as a means to an end – namely, men's happiness and order. Thus, the woman is robbed of her own identity and must live a life that is no longer her own. Israel explains Rousseau's claim of gender inferiority in that, "Morals are only maintained...where the sexes dwell separately for the most part and women are strictly confined to the home...[and]...nothing could be more degrading, he averred, than a society abounding in opportunities for extramarital sexual contact."<sup>18</sup>

Hume also sided with Rousseau in accepting the "subordination of women, and the one-sided attitudes to sexuality such a custom-based moral system entails."<sup>19</sup> He disagreed with the radical notion that men and women should enjoy the same sexual freedom because it would disrespect the traditional values of society.<sup>20</sup> The Radicals, however, did not care for tradition that promoted inequality, and started the philosophical thesis that "sexual pleasure, including masturbation, is neither intrinsically sinful nor morally deviant, but rather an inevitable and positive accoutrement of human life."<sup>21</sup> All human feeling was morally acceptable except for that which is harmful to oneself or to others, which was in drastic opposition to the Moderates' belief that certain socially unfavorable sexual behaviors, such as "fornication, lesbianism, and adultery," were condemnable.<sup>22</sup> England's previous law of divorce is a perfect example of legalized gender discrimination in that "adultery on the part of the wife (not the husband) remained the only accepted grounds for dissolving a marriage."<sup>23</sup> Women were supposed to exist merely as a wife in order to ensure the placement of men's property. Condorcet, however, challenged this view of women being expected to conform to societal expectations while not being granted the political rights they deserve; he reasoned that women did not have to pay their taxes as long as they were barred from voting because it was taxation without representation.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, Paine and Wollstonecraft, who are both English radical activists, were opposed to appealing to women's beauty rather than their ability to reason. In *An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex*, Paine criticized men for treating women as material objects and as their caretaker. He claimed that, "Nature herself, in forming beings so susceptible and tender, appears to have been more attentive to their charms than to their happiness," implying that their beauty has placed them in an unfavorable position in society.<sup>25</sup> Wollstonecraft furthers Paine's disapproval of using attractiveness and vulnerability as an excuse for inequality in her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, when she claimed that, "Dismissing, then, those pretty feminine phrases which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence...I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue."<sup>26</sup> Thus, she argued that cultivating virtue in women was greater than making them follow gendered mannerisms, which then makes education necessary for the progress of knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

## Racism

The philosophic stance of the Radical Enlightenment was key to breaking down the theoretical basis of slavery and the eighteenth-century transatlantic thinking. It opposed the idea of race constituting different rights for persons with skin color that was not white. Since difference is all but appearance, skin color is not fundamental. Israel explains that this kind of monism was the only solution to oppression: “For in the cultural context of early modern empires, there was only one conceivable way in which a comprehensive anti-colonialism could evolve—and that was by means of a systemically monist philosophy embracing moral, social, and political concepts powerful enough comprehensively to challenge the tightly interlinked strands of justification of empire.”<sup>28</sup>

The Moderate Enlightenment that believed in dualism, rather than monism, failed to recognize that different modifications can represent the same reality. They instead created a hierarchy of races and human types that was based on a tainted conception of reason originating from religion.<sup>29</sup> Locke, for instance, doubted the Spinozist idea of modifications, and took reality as a manifestation of the will of God. The current reality—the oppression of black people—was necessary because God knows more than material beings due to his immortality.<sup>30</sup> He criticized the materialists and Spinozists for claiming to know the “the true order of things,” yet he was guilty of the same accusation when he asserted that God has set up the world the way it should be, without having an objective argument for God’s existence.<sup>31</sup> Hume contributed to Locke’s ignorance in his 1748 writings as he describes black persons as ‘tho’ low people, without education’ who seem to be ‘naturally inferior to the whites.’<sup>32</sup> He asserted that religion and public authority should act as a moral guide when there is no stable form of government in place.<sup>33</sup> His political thought endorsed structures of imperial rule and allowed for a blatant denial of basic equality.<sup>34</sup>

Radical Enlightenment thinkers used the characteristic Spinozist theme of *universalism*, which appeals to an equality of thought and application.<sup>35</sup> Whatever one desires for himself or herself must be able to be translated to anyone else; thus, if a white philosopher, such as Locke or Hume, believes that he is not allowed to be enslaved, then he cannot enslave others. If he wants preferential treatment based on his *whiteness*, then he must give everyone that treatment regardless of their race. On the other hand, if he discriminates against others based on the color of their skin, then he must be treated the same by others. By establishing a common ground that everyone is subject to, there is no longer a possibility of preferential treatment and discriminatory treatment occurring within the same society because it would either be one or the other. Paine believed that the slave always has a right to reclaim his freedom as he is the proper owner of it.<sup>36</sup>

Charles Mills, in his book, *The Racial Contract*, criticizes the Moderate Enlightenment for its *European Enlightenment humanism*.<sup>37</sup> He claims that the movement which emphasized rationalism and empiricism over dogma was restricted to white European men. He describes their social contracts within his contract—which he terms the *Racial Contract*—as “always the differential privileging of the whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of socioeconomic opportunities to them.”<sup>38</sup> He establishes a relationship between European advancement and the downfall of the rest of the world to show that its colonialism oppressed the growth of other regions.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, in *Hegel and Haiti*, Susan Buck-Morss highlights that freedom was the “highest and universal political value” in the eighteenth century and yet some of the Enlightenment thinkers were deliberately ignoring that its antithesis—slavery—was being spread and endorsed. She cites Locke, for example, in his *Two Treatises of Government*, written in 1690, as he states that, ‘Slavery is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man, and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our Nation; that ‘tis hardly to be conceived that an *Englishman*, much less a *Gentleman*, should plead for’t.’<sup>40</sup> By using the term *slavery* as a metaphor for legal tyranny, he is erasing the real definition of slavery, which was the oppression of non-whites through an economic institution of unpaid labor and abuse.

It is evident that Moderate Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and Hume were not interested in stopping the system of slavery and allowed it to continue despite its promotion of grave inequality. The Radical Enlightenment thinkers, in contrast, were able to provide a discourse against inequality as their beliefs were not grounded in theology, authority, or societal constructs. Their support of democracy and the principle of equality made them distinct as they promoted a kind of progress that was being ever pushed forward by reason. d’Holbach, a leading radical figure, claimed that ‘philosophy’ “is not just the aptest but [also the] only agent potent enough to precipitate a rapid, all-encompassing revolution.”<sup>41</sup> He was correct because it was the Enlightenment movement, inspired by philosophers, which truly led to changes in government as well as groundbreaking ideas of individual rights and a collective sense of identity.

## References

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