# The Open Work of Liberalism

The Signification of the Individual in the Radical Enlightenment and French Revolution

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## Introduction

Jonathan Israel contends in the preface to *A Revolution of the Mind*, his abridged study of the historical origins of the ideals of the Enlightenment, that in order to understand the Enlightenment (and especially the "Radical Enlightenment"), one must examine it in its "historical context" and avoid focusing only on the "core values" it produced as "abstract concepts"[1]. He insists that to fully appreciate the principles of freedom, equality, and democracy put forth by the Radical Enlightenment, one must understand the continuing historical struggle to bring them into existence and avoid "modish multiculturalism" and "postmodernism" that "deems all traditions and sets of values more or less equally valid".[2] Israel believes that these, as well as nationalism, "ignorance and credulity", and "informal aristocracy" have all arisen since the French Revolution to become the "foremost challenges" to the Radical Enlightenment principles espoused by most of the modern world.[3]

Israel claims as his thesis the responsibility of writing "the story of the emergence of modern democratic core values"[4] in a historically-grounded fashion. Yet in the pursuit of a conception of those values as having a singular origin in the radical philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, he produces a history of the Enlightenment that hyper-intellectualizes the various power struggles that occurred within it and ignores many of the more practical concerns of its participants. Setting aside Israel's understanding of the relationship between the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and its latter-day children in the forms of Marxism and post-modernity, his confidence in the abiogenesis of Enlightenment ideals in the rationalism and monist metaphysics of Spinoza means that he recreates in effect the naive conception the Enlightenment had of itself as emerging from an era of absolute barbarism. In fact, as this study will show, many of its principal assumptions originated first in the Christian church before being adopted and repurposed by the Radical Enlightenment *philosophes*. However, Israel's commitment to dividing the Enlightenment into two distinct camps, one representing egalitarian secular monism and the other theo-monarchical dualism, leads him into wholly discounting the influence of Christianity on its earliest philosophical beginnings.

Indeed, one of the foremost examples of this historical process was the development of the "individual" by Christianity as an ontologically and semantically meaningful concept. Larry Siedentop argues, in *Inventing the Individual*, that the growth of Christianity as a historical force was predicated on its conception of the individual; an idea that would have deep philosophical ramifications for not only the religious institution, but the social and cultural forces that interacted with it as well. This conception was tied closely to the individual's self-knowledge as given by the Christian faith's understanding of the relationship between a person (whose individual relationship with God is mediated by the grace given by the singular self-sacrifice of Christ) and the universe (a teleological procession of symbolic meaning that continually reaffirms itself). In his essay "On Symbolism", Umberto Eco explains the symbolism of the medieval world as one that found meaning in the allegorical relationship between a symbol and its religious identity. This version of symbolism, he says, is now lost to the tide of secularism, which abandons the "absolutes of religion" for the "absolute" of poetic symbolism. In this form, an object no longer requires a referent for its symbolism; anything can be placed into a symbolic position, but its symbolism is entirely derived from its position.[5] The individual's ontological and moral significance disappears and is replaced with a meaning derived from its position within secular philosophy.

The semiotic struggle conducted by the philosophers of the Enlightenment over the individual's position within their newly-secularized world and within the subsequent revolutionary projects is the final aspect of the Enlightenment that I find troubling in its absence from Israel's work. This is an error of omission, to be clear: *A Revolution of the Mind* is primarily concerned with the two Enlightenments as they were intellectual exercises, not in their political and social consequences. As Israel deadpans in the "Conclusion" to his history: "The Revolution came and went."[6] Despite the rich intellectual tradition Israel describes, the Radicals apparently had little influence over the course of the Revolution (which may explain his disinterest in its outcome despite his displeasure over the historiographical snubbing of the Radicals' ideological impact upon it). Israel's displeasure with the Revolution's failings is scarcely concealed within these pages, but in an odd step, he criticizes François Furet for his inattentiveness to its intellectual roots. In fact, Furet concurred with Israel's assessment of the Revolution as a "competition among political discourses, rather than social conflict", as Sophia Rosenfeld says in her exhaustively-researched treatise on the subject, *A Revolution in Language*.[7] Her analysis of the symbolism of the French Enlightenment and Revolution offers important insight into the *philosophes*' attempts to actively modify education and language in order to bring about revolutionary change. Israel and Furet's disagreement, it seems, arises from their assessment of whether the Revolution interpreted the Enlightenment *accurately*; the contemporary French historian Rabaut Saint-Etienne, Rosenfeld reports, "attributed the errors of the Revolution to the current language of politics, an idiom whose meanings and uses were increasingly exceeding the control of enlightened revolutionaries like himself."[8]

Thus this paper will proceed in the following fashion:

> (1) By recounting the development of the concept of the "individual", from its origins in early Christianity and through its evolution from a symbol of Christian religious emancipation into a more abstract term as used within the Enlightenment;

> (2) By investigating the use of individualist language, ideology, and interpretation within the philosophy of the Moderate and Radical Enlightenment; and

> (3) By arguing that, through its divorcing of individualism from its religious and cultural meaning, the Enlightenment transformed it into an "empty sign" that would be reinterpreted as necessary by its subsequent revolutionary projects.

## The Development of the Idea of the Individual

Where did the sign of the "individual" emerge from? In order to discover this, we must travel back into the early history of the Western world. In *Inventing the Individual*, Siedentop outlines his interpretation of the historical processes that granted the idea of individualism its power in the first place. He argues that the history of the West was guided by moral beliefs and that the evolution of specifically Christian thought is tied inextricably to the individual becoming the "organizing social role".[9] However, just as we can only know an individual by their identity, we can only understand the *meaning* of the individual by comparing it to its opposite, the aggregate. Siedentop says that it is common to cite ancient Greece and Rome as the originator of "Western culture" and the idea of individualism, but he believes that this is an artifact of Enlightenment itself, an effort to separate its intellectual efforts from that of the Christian churches.[10] Using the 19th-century French historian Fustel de Coulanges for support, Siedentop describes the classical democracies as possessing "a mind-set that generated a concept of society in which the family was everything."[11] Families, at the outset of human civilization, formed collectives, with the patriarch serving as "keeper of the sacred fire and preserver of the family cult." The fire guaranteed the "immortality" of the male line; the thought of a single son bucking the tradition of marriage was considered treasonous to the family's survival. Women marrying into the family and adopted sons shared a rite: they had to be "admitted to the family's worship. This act of initiation is important to note since, as Siedentop points out, it involved them "renouncing [the] family worship":[12]

Women could participate in the worship of the dead only through their father or husband. For descent was traced exclusively through the male line. But even then, religion governed the definition of relationships so entirely that an adopted son, once he was admitted to the family worship, shared its ancestors, while a son who abandoned the family worship ceased altogether to be a relation, becoming unknown. "In a world where the family was the only social institution, and the family worship the source of personal identity, the move from one family to another was a truly momentous step for a young woman, a step that changed her identity completely."[13] We see here a conception of the individual human being as no more than a component part of a collective identity. Siedentop sees the

development of later Greek and Roman institutions as being "shaped by beliefs about the claims of ancient ancestors" and built to fit the demands of the family cult, not the individual.

In contrast with the ideals of individuality, the religious rituals and rules that a Greek or Roman citizen had to observe "left no space for individual conscience or choice.": "Born into a family and joined to its worship a few days after birth, the youth was years later initiated successively into the cults of *curia* and tribe… before in his late teens being formally accepted as a citizen in a public ceremony."[14] Every aspect of behavior and expression were prescribed for him; anyone who stood out due to his natural talents was likely to be exiled by the king and his priests, just as a son might be cast from a family for refusing to follow his father's orders.[15]

This collective identity was discarded, gradually but steadily. Although the moral foundations of Rome were built upon the assumptions of natural inequality found in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle,[16] this changed as the Jewish religion propagated throughout the empire. Siedentop attributes the attraction of the Roman *polis* to the Jewish Yahweh to two important theological tenets: firstly, the "imagery" of an unknowable God enforcing his will upon humanity had a powerful symbolism for the marginalized peoples of the Roman empire, as well did the "promise" of future salvation that underlied the commandants to obey. Second (and more important to the political and moral development that would be to come) was the idea that no one, from the most pitiful beggar to the most powerful king, was exempt from the universal laws laid down by God.[17] However, something else was needed to break the self-conception of the individual from their socially-enforced familial ties.

The birth of Christianity provided that 'break'. Siedentop identifies the Resurrection as the key moment in history where the possibility of individual moral agency, divorced from hierarchical and tribal understandings of the world, could finally bloom. The Christian individual, understanding their soul to be immortal regardless of its standing with the patriarchal ancestral hearth, could now begin to conceptualize their identities as being self-founded and with valid moral claims independent of the family.[18] The growth of the Christian faith within the empire led to another important occurrence: the spread of the idea and moral importance of martyrdom. Siedentop's incredulous attitude regarding the actual prevalence of Roman authorities persecuting the early Christians to the point of death is important to note here, as he again re-emphasizes the importance of symbolism in the early Church (italics have been added for emphasis): "Later Christian apologists probably exaggerated the number of martyrs, but that scarcely matters. The important thing is that the cult of the martyrs began to *redefine heroism* as previously understood. The ancient hero had been – Odysseus-like – an aristocrat. Springing from a leading family and often associated with the founding of cities, the ancient hero was typically male, strong, wily and successful. His conversion into a demigod represented the nature of ancient polytheism. Fame was the *medium* of heroism. Family and civic piety preserved the hero's reputation. He was an eminently *social being*."[19] The sight of individuals "defying society" by standing alone against the Emperor, facing their deaths, was "[a] powerful theater". The sharing of this 'drama' may have inspired many Christians to begin thinking of their own individual moral characters as standing outside of and apart from societal pressures for the first time.[20] Simultaneously, the universality of the religion was established by its spread throughout Rome and into every class and position in the empire while still proclaiming the singular moral status of each of its adherents. Early Christian bishops in Roman cities consciously spread the "love of the poor" of the church to the "social void", acting as mediaries for the non-citizens who lived completely outside of the political continuum of Roman society.[21]

Siedentop finds, in the development of a Christian philosophical tradition originating with St. Augustine the foundations of not only a nearly-modern conception of the church but also the sort of proving-ground for continued intellectual development that was often supposed by early modern thinkers to have faded away with Rome.[22] This led to new ideas about the equality of people within the Christian faith – new ideas that included women and slaves, two groups traditionally excluded.[23] Siedentop goes on to describe the role Christianity played in the development of political power within Western Europe and the near-East, both in the reconceptualization of what political power meant in the vacuum left by the death of the old polytheism and its evolution into an idea of democratic self-rule.[24] This persisted through the 'barbarian' invasions and assimilation of Rome, the early centuries of burgeoning feudalism and monarchy, and inspired the assertion of the Pope's supremacy in the eleventh century after centuries of aristocratic and decentralized rule of the Church by urban bishops.[25] Here, by pursuing a legal grounding for papal rule through innovations in civil and canon law, foundations for later ideas about the individual's moral relationship to their state would be laid by the idea of "natural law": a moral mandate that superseded the laws of mankind and that justified moral action in the face of legal forbearance.[26] Although this innovation would be primarily used to justify papal sovereignty, in the course of asserting that sovereignty another milestone would be reached: moral equivalence under the law. For in the evolution of the idea of papal rule an important distinction had been made between the authority of secular governments and the Pope's authority over individuals' souls within the "universal jurisdiction" of Christ. Siedentop draws attention to the initial early development of the *legal* idea of the

individual as a person in its distinction from ancient ideas of inequality based in slavery, citizenship, and the family cult. An individual, under the new law of the Church, would be considered on their own moral merits regardless of their secular rank.[27] Siedentop draws attention to the subtle detail of the nature of this argument: while the establishment of the "equal subjection" of the individual under the law of a sovereign laid the grounds for the "emergence" of the modern state, it also raised the question of whether the sovereign was subject to that same law.[28]

This transformation of moral standing from that of individuals' self-concern to a legal concern of the Church *était la clé* for the emergence of the doctrine that would eventually be known as "liberalism".[29] As early as the twelfth century, Catholic canon lawyers were making subtle distinctions in the nature and extent of natural law, separating it from ideas about 'natural order' and scriptural law. Instead, they found grounding for it in the ideas of human freedom and choice, "where action is neither commanded nor forbidden by nature."[30] Certain rights, including ones recognizable to the modern liberal and concerned with property and the consent of the governed, were even explicated by the fourteenth century.[31]

Siedentop puts special emphasis throughout *Inventing the Individual* on the changing role of specific terms through the historical usage, as well as the subtle influence those changes wrought on the way people viewed their world. Thus, the moral understanding of the 'individual' led to the individual becoming the primary legal unit of the new struggle over sovereignty in Europe. The legal grounding of the individual in the canon law of the Catholic Church led to the aspiring absolutist monarchs asserting the individual rights of their subjects in the face of feudal lords' ancestral claims to power.[32] In the interest of finding further grounds for individuals' rights, a quietly subversive tradition of theological-philosophical thought regarding equality emerged, originating with Peter Abelard's doctrine of nominalism. Abelard pushed back against the notion of universal maxims inherited from Aristotle and against the interpretation of universals as having actual existential meaning as a consequence of the general Christian "preoccupation" with the pure processes of the mind as opposed to the sensuous qualities of the world. Abelard instead proposed that language described specific objects and that the notion of 'classes' was the mind's way of finding "general terms or concepts [abridging] the world of things." This distinction between the internal activities of the mind and its empirical experiences, Siedentop believes, is one of the roots of early modern rationalism.[33]

Semantic distinctions of meaning continued to be highly influential for the development of the idea of the individual. Siedentop traces this relationship to William of Ockham's philosophy of rights within the sphere of "dominum" – lordship. Ockham objected to the use of the term "rights" as a legal description for dominum as condensing, without justification, the ancient notion of *jus dominii* as a natural superiority in a social hierarchy of fundamentally unequal ranks. Ockham found that by describing dominum as a "right", one granted the idea of that social superiority a "new universality" and granted those claiming it dual and conflated rights: "the right to rule and the right to own." Ockham separated those rights into two conceptions of power: one "mere" power, the power of mastery, and the other as *jus*, a "rightful" power guaranteed by its grounding in "'right reason' or justice."[34] This "right reason", in Ockham's eyes, was agreeable with Duns Scotus' conception of an act being good only if it was "free… and objectively good and done with the right reason."[35] But for humans to be truly free, the pursuit of justice cannot disallow the "sphere of conscience", the freedom for humans to be guided by their internal sense of justice and not restricted by an 'objective', external justice. Yet, following this notion to its logical end, Ockham was led to claim the existence of certain natural rights, one of which was the right to renounce the ownership of property when directed to do so by one's conscience. Siedentop identifies this as the first historical incidence of the moral self-critique produced by Christianity undermining its own doctrine in favor of individual autonomy.[36]

Ockham's moral semantics were accompanied by his revolutionary beliefs in the causal relations between material things and our understanding of the world. Siedentop gives him credit for overturning the 'old' teleological rationalism of the ancient world, which had clung on over the centuries, for a modern rationalism built upon the understanding of empirical evidence of causal relations. Ockham believed in the unlimited nature of God's freedom and the relative poverty of human experience; Siedentop thinks it "amounted to a protest against the 'domestication' of reality".[37]  The final two chapters of *Inventing the Individual* ("Dispensing with the Renaissance" and "Epilogue: Christianity and Secularism") summarize the events thus far and look 'forward' into the consequences of the development of the individual on the events of the Enlightenment. Siedentop, for a closing statement regarding the creation of the modern idea of the individual, finds it in linguistic history:  "There is one final, formidable piece of evidence about 'inventing the individual available. It comes from what remains the most reliable source about social change, language itself. If we look at the word 'individual' in historical dictionaries of the English or French languages, we will find that it first became current in the fifteenth century. The word 'state', with its stipulation of sovereign authority, became current at about the same time. And that is no accident, for the meanings of these two words depend upon each other. It was through the creation of states that the individual was invented as the primary or organizing social role."[38]

## Individualism and Enlightenment

But is Siedentop correct in his perception of the notion of the individual requiring certain religious assumptions to provide it with its moral meaning? And does the individual necessitate the existence of a state for its legal claim to possessing rights? Let us return to Israel and the two Enlightenments to investigate these claims.

In the essay entitled "Radical Thought and the Construction of a Secular Morality" from his book *Enlightenment Contested*, Israel finds the surest grounding for the Radical Enlightenment's explicitly secular morality in the philosophy of Diderot. Diderot holds that true morality is founded on the pursuit of human happiness. Social and religious shame, "meekness", "piety" – all could be discarded, as these were the relics of a religious morality predicated on a reward being given for 'good behavior. Instead, "self-love", self-interest, "ambition", and "desire for fame" should all be embraced as moral goods by fact of the happiness they generate in people. This is not just base emotional and sensual satisfaction, however; Diderot defines happiness as something produced through work, education, and "virtue". Virtue, for Diderot, is identified with the combination of genuine self-interest and the educated understanding of the *bien général*.[39] Diderot's supposition was that of a proto-utilitarian; as society is enriched (in his view) by the generation of wealth, by the pursuit of personal aims, and the harmonious collaboration between rational and enlightened individuals, no system of morals that hampers that balance of private interests should be allowed to continue to exist.

This is a more advanced view than simple utilitarianism, to be certain, and Israel notes this about Diderot.[40] However, in *A Revolution of the Mind*, Israel does attribute the general moral viewpoint of the Radical Enlightenment as "all alike seeking 'well-being to avoid pain' and that it is this that grounds the single universal true morality."[41] Furthermore, Diderot, along with the rest of the Radical *philosophes*, supported wide-ranging plans to "transform ideas about right and wrong" through the "reform [of] education, institutions, and the law with the support of government." Helvétius thought this would be accomplished through secular control of the schools and the ending of the clergy's monopoly on moral teaching, as well as the ultimate 'leveling' of society through a more equal distribution of wealth.[42] Diderot, however, disagreed with Helvétius' "excessively streamlined" moral system, as he saw it as *too* permissive, allowing any behavior to be justified by its ends if in the service of the *l'intérêt public*, even unthinkable atrocities.[43] Diderot and d'Holbach instead sought to identify human moral action with their biological needs and their self-interest. They utilized a Spinozistic, mechanistic model of human behavior as ultimately determined by causal forces outside of our control, rendering complex moral systems pointless; true moral virtue was found in the pursuit of a "smooth, uninterrupted feeling of pleasure… filling one's days."[44] This allowed many of the Radical *philosophes* to reduce moral behavior down to a pair of simple binary relationships between justice and injustice and charity and lack of charity.[45] The universal morality, according to d'Holbach: "love, if you wish to be loved,"; this maxim, if taught to all men as the truth, would lead them to correct moral action without the strictures of religion and superstition.[46]

Israel's contention is, then, that unlike the later French revolutionaries, Diderot and the *philosophes* built their political and moral systems on a principle of compatibility with the present society by constructing within it an ideal of "civil society" free of prejudice and hate. As written by Dumarsais under the *Enclycopédie* entry for "Definition of a *Philosophe*":

> Reason is to the philosopher what grace is to the Christian. Grace causes the Christian to act, reason the philosopher. Other men are carried away by their passions, their actions not being preceded by reflection: these are the men who walk in darkness. On the other hand, the philosopher, even in his passions, acts only after reflection; he walks in the dark, but by a torch … The philosophical spirit is, then, a spirit of observation and exactness, which relates everything to true principles; but the philosopher does not cultivate the mind alone, he carries his attention and needs further … The temperament of the philosopher is to act according to order and reason; as he loves society extremely, it is more important to him than to other men to bend every effort to produce only effects conformable to the idea of the honest man.[47]

So, indeed, Diderot and his peers felt that 'enlightenment' through education and the active use of reason would deliver men from ignorance. This was, in the end, the aim of the project of the Radicals: to revolutionize humanity's conception of "true morality" by abolishing the rule of "ignorance and servitude" as put upon men by their kings and priests. This aim would only be accomplished in full, in Diderot and d'Holbach assessment, upon the installation of "just government and laws."[48] Then their "revolution of the mind" could be conducted. No mere reconciliation would do; a "universal re-evaluation of values" would have to be completed.[49]

This idea was embodied in the French Revolution; as Israel writes: "... it is certainly true that the Revolution reinterpreted, codified, and recast in new terminology the thought of the Enlightenment."[50] Despite the great influence of the Radical thinkers on Revolutionary philosophy, their project quickly became hinged on the political ramifications of the disconnection of moral philosophy from religious and natural grounds. Blandine Kriegel identifies the traditional conceptualization of "natural right" as having broken from its Aristotelian form and become modern with the advent of the mathematization of nature conducted by the early moderns. This led to the "replacement" of the teleological, hierarchically-ordered cosmos with a naturally-ordered 'flat' universe of causal relations. Where civil society was once thought to have been 'elevated' above nature, now modernity had to find a new way of separating civil society from "the state of nature". They now differentiated human nature with "juridical subjectivism", or humanity's ability to self-regulate via the development and application of law through the use of reason.[51] Or as Pierre Manent puts it: "The moderns wanted to construct a law that would be so detached from human nature, so artificial, that it would leave nature completely free to be itself. The result did not meet their expectations. From the moment that law's place is occupied, the effect is the same: it modifies nature. Authorization itself becomes authoritarian."[52]

## The Individual in Revolution

Rosenfeld puts forth in *A Revolution in Language* that, in accordance with Furet's assessment of the French Revolution as a "linguistic event", that in the Revolution "there developed an acute and singular sense of the power of language to shape human destiny." This was grounded in the *philosophes*' attitude towards the process of semiosis as a "natural" one and "linked intellectual and social progress to linguistic advance." To communicate their intent was to create greater concordance of will; to fail in communication was to set the Revolution aback.[53] Rosenfeld goes on to concur with Keith Michael Baker's thesis that the Revolution's use of language was "cobbled together" out of a mixture of radical revolutionary thought and *ancien régime* absolutism. This was not the only thing that hobbled its goals; Rosenfeld's argument is that the mixture of absolutist thought with specifically the Radicals' doctrine of individual wills being harmonized through education and rational discourse "contained the seeds" of the "intolerance" for differing political beliefs and the "faith" that all incompatibilities between private interests would, eventually, be eliminated.[54]

Rosenfeld identifies a common trend in Enlightenment thought to try to define and disambiguate language; from Helvétius' claim in *De l'Homme* that by precise definition of every term all "mysterious obscurity" regarding philosophical life will be ended to Diderot and Voltaire's competing "semantic enterprises", the *Enclycopédie* and the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, philosophers from both the Moderate and Radical Enlightenments "saw themselves fighting against one of their chief enemies – usage or custom – and all of its negative associations with errors, prejudices, and superstitions."[55] This was accompanied by what Rosenfeld calls an "ironic" skepticism in the belief that words truly represented anything objective. She thinks the Radicals especially, as represented by the multitude of works in the *Enclycopédie* discussing the mutability of language, were in agreement that language systems, either natural or artificial, would ever achieve the level of precision and accuracy necessary to fully "reproduce either the external world or individual experiences."[56]

The attempts to openly modify the form and structure of French society by Robespierre and the Terror are well known. Less well known are the details about the revolutionaries' attempts to "regenerate" the French language in order to bring about a new and perfectible system of signs capable of giving, as Diderot and d'Holbach believed, the "correct starting-point"[57] for universal moral knowledge. These were inspired in a large part by Rousseau and Diderot's challenges to the idea of language as something unchanging and fixed. They proposed that language was temporal; that it was active (as was the process of signification); and that it was reformable.[58] Ernst Cassirer praised Rousseau's conception of the political power language thusly: "The incomparable power which Rousseau the thinker and writer exercised over his time was ultimately founded in the fact that in a century that had raised the cultivation of form to unprecedented heights, bringing it to perfection and organic completion, he brought once more to the fore the inherent uncertainty of the very concept of form."[59] This led to the study of and reform of the *langue d'action* within theater and the teaching of the deaf through sign language; the latter, *la langue des signes*, even saw significant development up to and through the Revolution as a potential "universal language" to replace what certain philosophers and political activists saw as the hopelessly arbitrary natural language.[60] These experiments eventually failed alongside Robespierre and the Terror; the Jacobins' attempts to reform language and its use in order to promote greater political harmony led instead to more strife and discord.[61]

The conviction that language could be actively developed into new forms designed "scientifically" and with specific purposes in mind faded away and was replaced by the suspicion that the image of language as "idyllic, natural, originary and egalitarian" was something restrained entirely to the aesthetic pursuits.[62] The new formation of meaning in post-Revolutionary France, then, was predicated on a new thought: that the ideal citizen of the new world being built was not someone whose moral intuitions were formed by the precise meanings of their language, but instead was a person who could understand the inherent "malleability" of language and use it to their own "advantage".[63] In a public trial of a deaf-mute boy, one of the leading lights of the late-Revolution linguistic movement, the Abbé Sicard, went so far as to defend the boy's innocence by declaring that someone who had neither verbal nor written language was wholly incapable of perceiving any form of "moral responsibility", as that notion was predicated upon being able to comprehend the "conventional language" of society.[64] We see here how distant the post-Terror conception of language was from the rationalistic ideal of Diderot and Rousseau's. This conception, far from being unscientific, was an attempt to distance the study of semiotic meaning from its idealistic and ultimately futile utopianism during the early Revolution. The individual's moral standing was, again, explicitly linked by this point to their relationship with and understanding of the body of laws that made up the state; the idea of regarding a person as an entity with an inherent moral equality, separate from the state's legal guarantee, had already been abandoned.

## Conclusion

In the end, Israel's assessment of the historical consequence of the Radical Enlightenment is correct: their ideals of freedom, moral equality, and the ability of humans to determine the shape of their futures have spread and been widely accepted around the world. Yet one of its most important projects, the signification of the individual, remains an "open work", in the phrasing of Eco. The individual, divorced from its foundations in religious and natural law, has been rendered through the language of the Radicals into a figure possessing no meaning besides its ability to self-justify itself legally. It is especially easy to see the effects of this subtle semiotic emptiness in the modern court system, in which individuals are often batted about and taken advantage of merely due to their own ignorance of the law. This was not a situation ameliorated much in the era of absolute rulers and papal decree, of course, but the promise of the Enlightenment was that, through reason, more universal and equitable forms of the state would emerge, generating greater equality and uplifting all men to a higher state of intellectual enlightenment. In this telling, however, the Enlightenment laid the grounds for its own undermining during and after the French Revolution, during which many of its core conceits were repurposed, reformed, and rejected in favor of a modern conception of language as something endlessly modifiable by individuals for their own ends, without any greater purpose in mind.

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[55] *Ibid*, 25.
[56] *Ibid*, 25-26.
[57] Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind*, 195.
[58] Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language*, 55.
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[60] Rosenfeld, *A Revolution of Language*, 123.
[61] *Ibid*, 181-183.
[62] *Ibid*, 231.
[63] *Ibid*.
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