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## THE ENLIGHTENMENT PERIOD – A CONTINUOUS SOURCE OF “LIGHT” OR THE WESTERN WORLD’S SPELL OF FALLACIES AND DISTORTIONS?

**ABSTRACT.** Zbigniew Drozdowicz, *The Enlightenment period – a continuous source of “light” or the Western world’s spell of fallacies and distortions?* [Epoka Oświecenia – nieustające źródło „światła” czy okres błędów i wypaczeń zachodniego świata?], edited by M. Baranowski, „Człowiek i Społeczeństwo”, vol. XL, Poznań 2015, pp. 197-214, Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISBN 978-83-232-2964-3, ISSN 0239-3271.

In my reflections I relate to the disputes concerning the philosophical heritage of the Enlightenment period. I refer to the two significantly different positions concerning this issue, that of the liberals and of communitarians. The former tend to have a generally positive attitude towards the achievements of the period, taken to constitute a cultural breakthrough in the thinking of man, his needs and ways of satisfying them. The latter, however, evaluate the period negatively, and even consider it to be an acceleration in the loss of culturally important values and qualities. Both of them assume that an important role in the cultural changes has been played by philosophers – only that the former think it was a positive role, while the latter find it negative.

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### Introduction

From its very outset, the Enlightenment period would inspire different opinions and attitudes – ranging from the radically positive to decidedly negative. Quite clearly, much depended in this respect on those who were formulating these opinions, and on the standpoints they were assuming. Division lines separated those that understood the Enlightenment creed and were willing to accept and implement it, not only from those who did not understand

it, but also from those who had such an understanding and yet for various reasons would prove incapable or unwilling to accept the creed. In all of these groups, significant roles have been played by philosophers more or less consciously identifying with the different churches and denominations of Christianity. This can be demonstrated, on the one hand, by reference to Immanuel Kant as the apologist of the Enlightenment (his Lutheran associations are beyond dispute), and on the other hand, by pointing to the author of the Enlightenment's apparent epitaph – Joseph de Maistre (his Catholic associations are no more disputable).

In my considerations, I shall not refer to these relatively distant thinkers, but rather to contemporary philosophers, who may hold a common belief that many important features of the contemporary culture of the Western world originated in the Enlightenment period, though they differ significantly when it comes to the positive or negative evaluation of those particular features. The lists of the former and the latter are both long and diverse. Therefore, the philosophical schools and the names associated with them should not be seen as fully representative representations of the broad pro- and anti-Enlightenment formations. Two of such representative groups comprise liberals – being the defenders of the Enlightenment heritage – and libertarians – belonging to its critics.

### **Liberals – the successors and continuators of the Enlightenment thinking about man**

Before I venture to present specific representatives of contemporary liberalism, as well as to characterise the attitude towards the achievements of the Enlightenment period, I would like to put forward some general remarks concerning this socio-political formation. Thus, firstly, when it comes to liberalism it seems indisputable that it arose not in the Enlightenment period itself (occurring in the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century) but at a later stage, and even after the period when relatively unsuccessful attempts were made to restore the so-called *ancien régime* (this term referred to not only to the political order of the feudal world but also to all the values and qualities which were intellectually and morally underwriting it). Liberalism's greatest political successors entered the stage even later – towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Secondly, from the very moment of its origin, the formation had a high level of internal diversity, which would only be growing with time – this was

a result of many factors including, e.g., obvious relationships with the social life in the particular countries, and led to the formulation of significantly different desiderata, as well as to the formation and competition between many liberal parties (often within the same countries).

Thirdly, liberalism was not only a certain social philosophy, but also a kind of ideology, i.e., a set of solutions addressed to specific social groups whose implementation was giving those groups the hope of satisfying their vital needs.<sup>1</sup> Fourthly, the precursors of this philosophy and ideology came much earlier than those who attempted to implement the liberal ideas and solutions in political practice, in the economy, education, etc. At the same time, in order to make a distinction between the two groups, one needs to take into consideration not only the cross-country differences, but also the narratives put forward by the liberalism’s adversaries, as this formation would develop its ideas, as well as its political and economic stance, in a clear contradistinction to those professing a different view of man and the world. The same appears to be true when it comes to its historical adversaries such as conservatism and socialism.<sup>2</sup>

This diversity of liberalism does not mean, however, that no common denominator can be found, or that efforts were not undertaken to define it. Such an attempt was indeed made by John Gray, in whose view the common features include: 1. individualism (“it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity”); 2. egalitarianism (liberalism “confers on all men the same moral status”); 3. universalism (liberalism “affirms the moral unity of the human species”); 4. meliorism (liberals proclaim “its affirmation of the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements”).<sup>3</sup> What seems to constitute an important drawback of this proposal is the fact that it predominantly considers liberalism as political thought, while both in the past as well as nowadays it has been treated as an economic or even religious idea (this was the approach of Max Weber, who associated its origins with puritanism, and nowadays this is

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<sup>1</sup> I consider ideology to be – largely following Karl Mannheim – a multifaceted set of complementary, general ideas, postulates and social slogans, which express various needs of different social groups and justify the necessity of such actions that could lead to the satisfaction of such needs. Cf. K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, London 1954.

<sup>2</sup> This has been well captured by K. Mannheim, in his sketch of the English, French and German conservatism opposing the different forms of liberalism present in those countries. Cf. K. Mannheim, *Conservative Thought*, New York 1953.

<sup>3</sup> J. Gray, *Liberalism*, Minneapolis 1995, p. xi.

a way of presenting it assumed for instance by Michael Novak).<sup>4</sup> Assuming such a wide conception of liberalism, many of the mainstream works of the Enlightenment period might be considered a kind of prelude to what kind of liberalism came towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and to what remains of liberalism nowadays. Presently, it constitutes not only a specific body of political, economic and religious thought, but also or even mostly a lifestyle and a way of social conduct dominant in western societies, including the sets of moral norms and legal regulations sanctioning this way of life. It is perceived in this way by many of its acolytes as well as its opponents.

The building blocks of such a conception of liberalism include, for example, clearly articulated and catalogued civic prerogatives: 1. freedom (general and particular, personal and political); 2. duties (individual and collective); 3. equalities and inequalities; 4. divisions and cleavages (including the separation of church and state); 5. superiorities and subordinations (including the recognition of the pre-eminence of general government over the lower-level offices of power); 6. rule of law (including the rule that crimes are classified and punishments issued in accordance with the socially detrimental nature of the criminal act). When it comes to the articulation and cataloguing of these features, a major role was played not only by the philosophers of the Enlightenment (e.g., J. Locke and A. Smith on the British Isles and Montesquieu and Beccaria in continental Europe), but also by those politicians who initially led authentic social revolutions in many Western European countries as well as in the United States, and later would wield actual power in them.<sup>5</sup> This contention is supported among other things by such documents as the Articles of Confederation (proclaimed by the American Congress in the fall of 1777), which is commonly considered to be the first Constitution of the United States, as well as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (proclaimed by the French National Assembly on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1789), which is considered a blueprint of many subsequent declarations of this kind. The documents are clearly referenced by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* proclaimed by the United Nations in 1949.

These documents are also the underlying sources of the Constitution of Liberty by Friedrich August von Hayek (1889-1992). This work boasts an impressive diversity and variety of covered themes. Whilst it does only have

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<sup>4</sup> M. Weber, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, New York 1958; as well as M. Novak, *Freedom with justice: Catholic social thought and liberal institutions*, San Francisco 1984.

<sup>5</sup> The latter are pointed to by G. Himmelfarb in her dissertation *The Roads to Modernity. The British, French, and American Enlightenments*, New York 2004.

one “hero,” i.e., freedom, it appears in so many different situations that one is under the impression that it remains indifferent to nothing that is social. What is challenging in this context is that freedom has been conceived of and used in so many different ways that “in the struggle for the moral support of the people of the world, the lack of firm beliefs puts the West at a great disadvantage.”<sup>6</sup> Yet another problem stems from the fact that no single nation of the Western world is the sole creator and depositary of the freedom which underlies the greatness of the Western culture. In Hayek’s view, true reasonableness depends on “the recognition of the inevitable ignorance of all of us concerning a great many of the factors on which the achievement of our ends and welfare depends.” For most people this denotes that “Our necessary ignorance of so much means that we have to deal largely with probabilities and chances.” For the liberals, however, it means that they have to accept both the fact of their own ignorance as well as of the ignorance of even the wisest, and that “all institutions of freedom are adaptations to this fundamental fact of ignorance, adapted to deal with chances and probabilities, not certainty.”

In the *Constitution of Liberty*, the discourse is not only concerned with rationality and rationalism, but also with the dilemma of the rationalist, who in his desire to subject everything to human reason, faces a real dilemma: “The use of reason aims at control and predictability. But the process of the advance of reason rests on freedom and the unpredictability of human action,” or to put it in other words, he faces the problem of spontaneity. In a sense, this constitutes a *votum separatum* with respect to rationalism and rationality, which stems from the desire for rational cognition, control and a prediction of all that appears in social life, accompanied by the instinct to suppress all the elemental forces that stand in the way of realising this desire. In Hayek’s view, this would be deeply irrational, as it would entail opposition to the forces which make progress possible – the very same forces discussed and written about by the Enlightenment-period philosophers, especially in England and France. Hayek seems closer to the English (or perhaps more correctly the British) tradition, with key representatives such as David Hume, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson (“Those British philosophers have given us an interpretation of the growth of civilisation that is still the indispensable foundation of the argument for liberty”).

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<sup>6</sup> “This was a time when the intellectuals of the West had to a great extent abandoned the very belief in freedom which, by enabling the West to make full use of those forces that are responsible for the growth of all civilisation, had made its unprecedented quick growth possible.” Por. F. A. von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, Chicago 2011, p. 48.

One would be mistaken, however, to put all the different precursors of contemporary liberalism under a single label – there is hardly a greater contrast imaginable than that between their respective conceptions of the evolution and functioning of a social order and the role played in it by liberty. The difference is directly traceable to the predominance of an essentially empiricist view of the world in England and a rationalist approach in France. The main contrast in the practical conclusions to which these approaches led has recently been well put, as follows: “One finds the essence of freedom in spontaneity and the absence of coercion, the other believes it to be realised only in the pursuit and attainment of an absolute collective purpose.”<sup>7</sup> In the light of the nationality standards assumed by the English and Scottish philosophers, as well as by Hayek, such an endeavour would be essentially irrational.

At least some of the explanations of this irrationality provided by Hayek might seem surprising, not only to those whose understanding of liberalism, and its underpinning rationalism, follow the French and British traditions. While it would not be astonishing to learn that “the antirationalist tradition is here closer to the Christian tradition of the fallibility and sinfulness of man,” which has been widely accepted ever since the publication of Max Weber’s studies on the ascetic varieties of Protestantism, it certainly would be surprising to read that, in the view of the British philosophers “man was by nature lazy and indolent, improvident and wasteful, and that it was only by the force of circumstances that he could be made to behave economically or would learn carefully to adjust his means to his ends.” The claim that the notion of *homo oeconomicus* “was explicitly introduced, with much else that belongs to the rationalist rather than to the evolutionary tradition, only by the younger Mill” could also be read with some incredulity, as of all people John Stuart Mill has always been associated with the British rather than the Continental liberal tradition. In short, it seems that Hayek articulates his standards of rationality not only in opposition to the French tradition, but also in many aspects to the British tradition, or at least to what is commonly associated with it.

One can also find clear references to enlightenment ideas in the two key works by John Rawls, i.e., in his *Theory of Justice* (1971) and *Political*

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<sup>7</sup> “One stands for organic, slow, half-conscious growth, the other for doctrinaire deliberateness; one for trial-and-error procedure, the other for an enforced solely valid pattern.” It is the second view, as J.L. Talmon has shown in the book from which this description is taken, that has become the origin of totalitarian democracy” (ibidem, p. 111). Cf. J.L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, London 1952.

*liberalism* (1992). In the former book, he presented his theory of justice as fairness. It starts with the assumption that justice constitutes “the first virtue of social institutions,” which is that “the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social interests.” These two fundamental assumptions are complemented by the further stipulations that 1. “a society is a more or less self-sufficient association of persons who in their relations to one another recognise certain rules of conduct as binding and who for the most part act in accordance with them;” and 2. “these rules specify a system of co-operation designed to advance the good of those taking part in it.” However, Rawls also writes that “a society is well-ordered when it is not only designed to advance the good of its members but when it is also effectively regulated by a public conception of justice. That is, it is a society in which 1. everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice, and 2. the basic social institutions generally satisfy and are generally known to satisfy these principles.” From this, it follows that “[o]ne may think of a public conception of justice as constituting the fundamental charter of a well-ordered human association.” It seems clear, therefore, that badly ordered human associations do not have an overreaching and commonly shared concept of justice. However, even in well-ordered associations a certain divergence of opinion may persist as to the question of what is actually just or not. The crux of the matter is that it is not necessary for all members to assume one understanding of rationality, but rather to accept some general principles of justice.

According to Rawls, one should seek these rules in “the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social co-operation.” This he calls the “basic structure of society,” capable of generating such norms as “the legal protection of freedom of thought and liberty of conscience, competitive markets, private property in the means of production, and the monogamous family.” It goes without saying that individuals in society occupy different starting positions (for instance, due to birth) as well as have different life-chances (determined by political as well as economic circumstances), and that social institutions tend to favour some over others. While these inequalities might be inevitable within the basic structure of any society, “they cannot possibly be justified by an appeal to the notions of merit or desert.” It is nevertheless possible, and advisable, to treat individuals according to such rules that allow for an equal distribution of life chances, which in Rawls’ view constitutes one key procedural rule of fairness.

While addressing the question of how this theory relates to the Enlightenment traditions, I would like to emphasise that the great social revolutions such as the 17<sup>th</sup> century English Puritan revolt against royal power, and all the late 18<sup>th</sup> century uprisings of the forces of new France against those of the old France (*ancien régime*), were motivated not so much by the conviction that there was a deficit of freedom in those countries (various social groups did have diverse prerogatives), but rather by the view that they lacked in justice, i.e., that those freedoms (prerogatives) were unjustly distributed – and that those who had more of them than their social value would warrant did not want or could not understand the idea of social utility or the entitlements and duties stemming from it. While attacking the question where such disparities have always been coming from, Rawls refers to 1. the concept of *understanding* (“each man is presumed to have the requisite ability to understand and to act upon whatever principles are adopted”); 2. a *veil of ignorance* (accompanying both the choices of the principles of action and their implementation); 3. careful and fair judgement, which “excludes the knowledge of those contingencies, which sets men at odds and allows them to be guided by their prejudices,” as well as 4. such principles which are able to guide us, when needed, by reference to our strongest convictions. All this is only but an addition to the principle of social utility, or – what amounts to much the same thing – to the principle of utility.

In the foreword to the *Theory of Justice*, Rawls states that the utilitarians (such as Hume, Smith, Bentham and Mill) “were social theorists and economists of the first rank; and the moral doctrine they worked out was framed to meet the needs of their wider interests and to fit into a comprehensive scheme.” In the opening paragraphs of the first chapter, he provides further justification for holding the utilitarians in such high esteem, and also outlines the foundations of their ideas. These foundations comprise such a conception of man, whereby “each man in realising his own interests is certainly free to balance his own losses against his own gains.” Given that he seems to be good at what he is doing, “why should not a society act on precisely the same principle applied to the group and therefore regard that which is rational for one man as right for an association of men?” Subsequently, Rawls enumerates all the reasons for the rationality and attractiveness of the utilitarian approach, including the combination of individual utility with that of a group, or combining the understanding of social rationality with the principle of “rational prudence applied to an aggregative conception of the welfare of the group.”

In the subsequent part of the dissertation, he points to some discrepancies between his conception of justice as fairness and the utilitarian concept of justice as utility. The first states that “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others,” while in the latter case, they are subject to such haggling that “a second contrast is that whereas the utilitarian extends to society the principle of choice for one man, justice as fairness, [...] assumes that the principles of social choice [...] are themselves the object of an original agreement. [...] The last contrast that I shall mention now is that utilitarianism is a teleological theory whereas justice as fairness is not. By definition, then, the latter is a deontological theory, one that either does not specify the good independently from the right, or does not interpret the right as maximising the good...”<sup>8</sup> These and other differences between these two conceptions are supposed to lead to the conclusion that utilitarianism might be a rational approach, although its rationality remains weaker than that of Rawls’ conception. In justification of this view, Rawls suggests a discussion of intuitionism (also referred to as “pluralism”), as a perspective enriching his own views, yet, just as utilitarianism, requiring substantial improvements. These improvements concern both the principles of justice and the procedures of their selection.

The treatise *Political Liberalism* contains important expansions of Rawls’ idea of rationality, but also certain modifications of his theory of justice as fairness. To some extent it can be seen as a polemic in response to the communitarian criticisms of his theory. He readily admits to lacking some crucial elements in his theory, including: “1. the idea of justice as fairness as a freestanding view and that of an overlapping consensus as belonging to its account of stability; 2. the distinction between simple pluralism and reasonable pluralism, together with the idea of a reasonable comprehensive doctrine; and 3. a fuller account of the reasonable and the rational worked into the conception of political (as opposed to moral) constructivism, so as to bring out the bases of the principles of right and justice in practical reason.” In general, Rawls is convinced that his explanations would lead to a better understanding of political liberalism, as well as to an improved comprehension of its underlying concepts of reasonableness and rationality.

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<sup>8</sup> “The question of attaining the greatest net balance of satisfaction never arises in justice as fairness; this maximum principle is not used at all.” *Ibidem*, p. 27.

## Communitarians – the critics of the Enlightenment view of man

*Political Liberalism* contains a polemic against the challenges to the theory of justice as fairness, as formulated by the communitarians. Their general allegation amounts to the contention that the liberal individualism assumed by this theory generates a series of negative consequences for public life and social bonds. One of these communitarians was Alasdair MacIntyre, the author of *After Virtue*. In his view, Rawls and the other defenders of liberal individualism do not recognise that allowing for a high degree of moral pluralism when it comes to the diversity of human convictions makes public discourse on moral questions degenerate into endless squabbling, without the possibility of the objective superiority of some moral standards over others. In short, this pluralism is supposed to lead to: 1. (in the sphere of morality) to arbitrariness and instrumentalism, or at least to the impossibility of distinguishing between instrumental social relations and those non-instrumental; 2. (in the sphere of consciousness) to the emergence of such a self which is but a set of “open possibilities” (without “any necessity”); 3. (in the normative sphere) not to the formulation of some standards, but to such a de-standardisation which for the contemporary man would spell an end to being embedded in stable social structures and a consequent hopeless drift without any orientation, compass or port of destination, which would sooner or later lead to a catastrophe.<sup>9</sup> MacIntyre justifies this pessimistic evaluation of the state of contemporary culture with reference to the historical circumstances that lead to such a state of affairs. An important role in this account is played by the representatives of the Enlightenment-period – and especially by those philosophers whose “Enlightenment project of justifying morality” lastly contributed to this “hopeless drifting;” apart from them, he also points to the contemporary man of science and the arts. Thus, his *After Virtue*, constitutes an attempt at an intellectual showdown with the modern “self,” whose ideological fathers comprise the most significant representatives of the Enlightenment, such as D. Diderot and A. Condorcet

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<sup>9</sup> “It is the aim of this book to make that thought available to radicals, liberals and conservatives alike. I cannot however expect to make it palatable; for if it is true, we are all already in a state so disastrous that there are no large remedies for it.” Cf. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame 2007, p. 4 ff.

in France, D. Hume and J. Bentham in England, A. Smith in Scotland, or I. Kant in Germany.

In Chapter IV of this book – entitled *The Predecessor Culture and the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality* – he points not only to the main culprits responsible for the catastrophic state of contemporary culture, but also argues that the culpability for this state of affairs is not evenly distributed. The largest chunk of responsibility falls with the Enlightened Frenchmen – but enlightened or enlightening not so much through their intellectual and moral capacities, but as by the fact that “the French themselves often avowedly looked to English models, but England in turn was overshadowed by the achievements of the Scottish Enlightenment.” These references and borrowings did not do them much good, as it led to “the French eighteenth-century intellectuals constitut[ing] an intelligentsia, a group at once educated and alienated; while the eighteenth-century Scottish, English, Dutch, Danish and Prussian intellectuals are on the contrary at home in the social world, even when they are highly critical of it.”<sup>10</sup> The culture of the former (similarly as that of the Spanish and the Italians) is considered to be South-European and thus in a juxtaposition to the European North. In addressing the question what the first of them lacked, MacIntyre points to the absence of “a secularized Protestant background, an educated class which linked the servants of government, the clergy and the lay thinkers in a single reading public, and a newly alive type of university exemplified in Konigsberg in the east and in Edinburgh and Glasgow in the west.”

In any case, the project established and promoted by the Enlightenment philosophers broke with the tradition, whereby the rules of morality do and should have a teleological and categorical character, which in turn ultimately meant that they had to refer to God-established laws. While some of these philosophers (e.g. J. Bentham) sought to justify these rules through “innovative psychology,” and especially the human desire for pleasure and avoidance of pain, others (e.g. I. Kant) pointed to the human desire for reasonability, and especially to the “nature of practical reason,” yet, in MacIntyre’s view, both of them relied on one and the same thing, i.e., on man seen as “sovereign in his moral authority.”

This resulted, among other things, in the emergence and propagation of 1. utilitarianism as the new blueprint for morality (its principles were presented, for instance, by John Stuart Mill (“at once the first Benthamite child and clearly the most distinguished mind and character ever to embrace

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 37 ff.

Benthamism”); 2. emotivism understood as a way of justifying morality (“emotivism informs a great deal of contemporary moral utterance and practice and more specifically [...] the central characters of modern society [...]). These characters, it will be recalled, are the aesthete, the therapist and the manager, the bureaucratic expert”); 3. criticism treated as the “mark of the moral seriousness and strenuousness”; 4. voluntarism conceived as the right of every individual to speak “unconstrained by the externalities of divine law, natural teleology or hierarchical authority;” 5. positivism understood as man bestowing “those rights conferred by positive law or custom on specified classes of person” (“They are the rights which were spoken of in the eighteenth century as natural rights or as the rights of man”).<sup>11</sup>

In MacIntyre’s view, all this translates – more or less directly – into such supposed imperfections of contemporary culture as 1. egoism and permissivism towards sin (“Enlightenment [is] a rational and rationalizing disguise for selfishness and sin”); 2. bureaucracy and bureaucratism (already M. Weber demonstrated that “the sole justification of bureaucracy is its efficiency); as well as 3. focusing on constantly changing and competing short-term goals (“short-term results are of notoriously deceptive value because they can be easily manipulated to show whatever one wishes them to show”). “Twentieth century social life turns out in key part to be the concrete and dramatic re-enactment of eighteenth-century philosophy.”<sup>12</sup>

Even though in *After Virtue* MacIntyre evades any definitive answers to the question of what is to be done in order to get out of the cultural situation made toxic and deformed by the errors of the Enlightenment, the book does nevertheless contain some indications in this respect. These include, for instance, the statement occurring in Chapter IX that one should not trust the words and writings of such modern philosophers as Nietzsche, Marx, or Weber (“The contemporary vision of the world [...] is predominantly, although not perhaps always in detail, Weberian”), nor should the contemporary liberals be trusted (including, for instance, Isaiah Berlin). On the other hand, one should put much faith in the directions of the ancient philosophers, such as Aristotle (“the role of Aristotelianism in my argument is not entirely due to its historical importance”), but one should especially trust the message of the medieval Christian philosophers – and especially the words of Thomas

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<sup>11</sup> “Characteristically in that century they were defined negatively, precisely as rights not to be interfered with. But sometimes in that century and much more often in our own positive rights – rights to due process, to education or to employment are examples – are added to the list.” *Ibidem*, p. 69.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87 ff.

Aquinas, who is supposed to have compiled the most accurate catalogue of “cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, courage) and the triad of theological virtues” (such as patience, endurance, humility, or purity).<sup>13</sup> The statements of the preeminent medieval theologian should nevertheless be taken into consideration in a way that accounts for their specific historical context, and thus they demand corrections and specifications resulting from the state of contemporary culture. *After Virtue* does contain such corrections and specifications.

The Enlightenment vision of man and human morality is also critically evaluated by Charles Taylor. In his book, entitled *Sources of the Self: the Making of Modern Identity*, he closely resembles McIntyre in the way that he sketches the specific way in which the contemporary identity emerged – the identity whose features include first, modern inwardness, the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths, and the connected notion that we are “selves;” second, the affirmation of ordinary life which develops from the early modern period; third, the expressivist notion of nature as an inner moral source.”<sup>14</sup> He traces the historical origins of the first of these points to St Augustine, of the second to the protestant reformation, and of the third to the Enlightenment. Modern philosophers had a major impact on all the three of them and thus they are among the most frequently referenced in the book.

The beginning of fallacies and distortions in the perception and representation of man is situated by Taylor in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and explicitly associated with the puritanism in England (“Puritanism brought about at first a downgrading of natural, given, inherited communities in favour of one which came about through personal commitment”), as well as with the thought of Montaigne in France (“The search for the self in order to come to terms with oneself, which Montaigne inaugurates, has become one of the fundamental themes of our modern culture”). In the following century, such milestones on the way to the development of modern identity include Descartes in France (“Descartes’s insight that our knowledge of things is our own construct was the basis for his deep confidence, which seems to have preceded the arguments that articulate its justification, that we could attain certainty”), as well as Hobbes and Locke in England (“Building also

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<sup>13</sup> “Purity is crucially important because the medieval world is one which recognizes how easily any grasp of the notion of a supreme good may be lost by worldly distraction; patience too is crucial because it is the virtue of endurance in the face of evil.” *Ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>14</sup> Ch. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, p. x.

on Hobbes, they emphasized further the constructive dimension of our knowledge of the world. Hobbes, and later Locke, followed by his disciples in the eighteenth century, thought of our world picture as almost literally put together out of building blocks-which were ultimately the sensations or ideas produced by experience”).<sup>15</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were visions of the man who would be continually developed and propagated by those philosophers of the Enlightenment who subscribed to the intellectual formation of deism – “here was a fully rational religion, which made no appeals to historically grounded authority” and became the first step towards the Enlightenment denial of faith represented by such philosophers as Helvétius, Bentham, Holbach or Condorcet.<sup>16</sup> Taylor refers to those philosophers as “radical Aufklärer” or – what amounts to much the same thing – “radical utilitarians.” Such utilitarians have no use for “the notion of providence, or a providential order.” What they need is the concept of utility, as well as the observation that people crave happiness and pleasure while avoiding pain. Thus, the only question remaining was that of maximising happiness.<sup>17</sup>

In the chapter devoted to do with this intellectual formation he not only points to the subsequent philosophers subscribing to the tradition (such as Voltaire and Diderot in France, and A. Smith or D. Hume in Scotland), he does also enumerate the contradictions standing between them and formulates a generalising thesis that “utilitarian Enlightenment is in this way shot through with contradiction” stemming from the ontology reducing the human world, including that of culture, to the world of nature. Such a reductionism might arise from some form of respect of, bewilderment with, or even a cult of nature – “The awe is awakened partly by the tremendous power of this world which overshadows us – we sense our utter fragility as thinking reeds, in Pascal’s phrase [...]. We who think and see have a glimpse of how deep the roots are of our fragile consciousness, and how mysterious and strange its emergence is. This spiritual attitude is in flat contradiction to the Cartesian,” as well as to the world-view of all of those who have developed

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<sup>15</sup> “Locke was a crucial figure in this phase-and indeed, in this whole development, granted his immense influence on virtually all strands of the Enlightenment. His was one of the earliest embodiments of the synthesis. One of the most important articulators of disengaged freedom-indeed, one who carried it to new lengths of self-objectification, as we saw above-he remained in some sense a believing Christian, and one deeply influenced by the Puritan affirmation of ordinary life.” *Ibidem* p. 234.

<sup>16</sup> “This outlook is one of the major constituents of contemporary culture.” *Ibidem*, p. 404.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 330 ff.

and justified it in the modern and contemporary culture.<sup>18</sup> At least to some extent this seems close to those theologians and philosophers like St Augustine in the middle Ages or the Jansenists in the 17<sup>th</sup> century arguing for the necessity of referring to God – a necessity, it should be added, which included the use of reason.

One should add as well that it is also in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that Taylor finds such thinkers who are capable of recognizing the errors and deformations inherent in their contemporary modes of receiving and representing man and the human situation in the world. Those among them which later had a major impact on culture include in his view for instance Jean Jacques Rousseau (in Taylor’s opinion “he is the starting point of a transformation in modern culture towards a deeper inwardness and a radical autonomy”) as well as Immanuel Kant “Kant gives a firm but quite new base to the subjectivization or internalization of moral sources which Rousseau inaugurates”). Those more positive heroes of the period comprise also some men of letters, such as for instance Lessing, Goethe and Schiller. This does not, however, change the general opinion that the philosophical currents played a crucial role in forming and establishing the modern identity – and especially the negative role in this respect was played by the radical Enlightenment, which “accredited a philosophy which denied strong evaluation; and in its own fashion, the developing power of creative imagination has tended to lend colour to philosophies of subjective self-expression.”<sup>19</sup> Although the dissertation does not include unequivocal indication as to where one should seek foundations for the formation of the proper identity, especially in the later parts it does include a clear suggestion that according to the author such foundations can be found in the Holy Scriptures; Christian spirituality is there as well as such literature (not necessarily philosophical) has its sources in both the former and the latter.

### Some general remarks

The first among these remarks concerns the cultural role of the Enlightenment philosophers and philosophy. Although the aforementioned liberals and communitarians differ with respect to the evaluation of their influence on the contemporary culture, they seem to be united by the conviction that the influence had in fact been significant. The liberals generally consider it

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 347 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 514 ff.

to have been positive, while the communitarians assume a predominantly negative attitude. To be more precise, one should add that these views are not completely shared by all the liberals and communitarians. This can be attested by reference to the position of Max Weber (usually associated with liberalism), and on the other hand with Michael Walzer (associated with communitarianism).

In his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the former ascribes such an influence to Protestant theologians – both the “global,” i.e., creating their own churches and denominations (e.g. Luther, Calvin) and the “local” devotional circles – such as the proponents of Pietism in the German states or the Quakers in England.<sup>20</sup> From the point of view of the author of this dissertation, it seems to have been of little import what the enlightenment philosophers had to say about these issues – or at least this appears to be the meaning of the fact that none of them has featured on the pages of the book. In his most fundamental work, i.e., *Economy and Society*, an explanation can be found for the marginalisation of the social role, namely, that those philosophers such as the Enlightenment man of letters constituted a socially alienated group and “no matter how much the appearance of a widespread religious interest may be stimulated, no new religion has ever resulted from such needs of intellectuals or from their chatter.”<sup>21</sup> M. Walzer questioned the significance of the social role played by philosophers and philosophy in his book *Philosophy and Democracy*, where these arguments lead to the conclusion that “democracy has no claims in the philosophical realm, and philosophers have no special rights in the political community.” As to the question of what stands behind the authority of the law, he thinks that it is not the reason of philosophers, but rather the social will, and therefore people are likely to accept not what is rational but whatever they find agreeable. From Walzer’s point of view, and that of other communitarians (such as John Hart Ely, the author of *Democracy and Distrust*), democracy cannot, however, entirely dispense with philosophers, as they have an important role to play when it comes to the rational criticism of irrational prohibitions and demands. Setting the standards of such a critique, Walzer writes that it should be an immanent critique, looking not so much for the ideal city, but for an ideal dwelling for a small community.<sup>22</sup>

The second of these general remarks concerns the relationship between the phenomena which emerged in the Enlightenment period and the current

<sup>20</sup> M. Weber, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York 1958.

<sup>21</sup> M. Weber, *Economy and Society*, Berkeley 1978, p. 517 ff.

<sup>22</sup> M. Walzer, *Philosophy and Democracy*, “Political Theory” 9/1981, p. 388 ff.

state of contemporary culture. What I have in mind comprises, for instance, such a mode of public speaking on different issues as if the speaker were a “specialist on everything” – even though both then and now it has been impossible to be an expert on everything, and such a mode of speaking is frequently associated with the lack of responsibility for one’s own words. In that older era, the influence of the “specialist on everything” on society remained relatively limited, as there were clear limits of the available media, which were frequently restricted to the oral form or to writings distributed in a narrow circle of people literate in the relevant language. Nowadays, the influence is much broader thanks to the available media of mass communication (such as television or the Internet), and the place of the old languages of philosophers and theologians (such as Greek and Latin) as well as of the local languages has been taken by the mass languages (such as English all the peculiar mixture of national languages used on the Internet). It remains disputable whether the responsibility for this mode of speaking in the West lies with the preachers involved in various conflicts with different Christian churches or with the philosophers involved in the struggles against various academic authorities. The liberals who follow the Enlightenment tradition are more likely to point to the first group, while the communitarians who follow the Christian tradition are rather prone to point to the latter group. One way or another, the problem persists.

Some are of course led to believe that when it comes to contemporary culture nothing is truly for real or – what amounts to much the same thing – everything is “as if” or “maybe,” and the spectrum of these “maybes” is in fact unrestricted. On the other hand, others become confused by the myriad of those “as-ifs” and “maybes.” While others still are irritated by the state of affairs and demand access to such ways and means of getting out of it which they think have so far proved successful in providing solid grounds to lay foundations on. Quite indisputably, they include communitarians, who postulate a retreat to Christian beliefs and Christian churches. It remains questionable, however, whether they also include such liberals who postulate a retreat to the natural rights of man and citizen. Quite clearly, the communitarians seems certain that the liberals cannot in any way subscribe to this option, but in fact remain co-responsible, for instance, for the lack of such a basic virtue in contemporary western societies as responsibility (not only for what one is saying, but also for the mode of speaking). Apart from everything else, they consider this to be leading the questioning of the capacity for self-creation by man (without any significant divine support) of a world of authentic values and qualities. This is the third and last of my general remarks.

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