

The Enlightenment: You Can't Have Just One

Introduction

The Enlightenment was a resurgence of progressive thought that manifested itself in the works of many thinkers as they grappled with some of the fundamental questions of humanity, such as how we should strive to discover nature's truths, what the state of nature is, and how civilizations should be governed. The answers to these questions have guided the development of our society for centuries, and some questions even remain to be resolved. The current social and political climate appears to be a potential turning point in our journey as a civilization, and as such offers an opportunity to pause and evaluate our progress as a society. Upon reflection, the question that needs to be asked is whether or not the work of the Enlightenment is done, or whether society is in need of a new Enlightenment. In order to answer that posed question, first there needs to be a discussion of the most relevant aspects of the Enlightenment that persist to this day, and continue to affect our civilization in both social and political realms. After a brief overview of the most relevant thinkers and the enduring components of their beliefs, one can begin to examine their weaknesses and successes in modern society.

Descartes, Hume, and Shaftsbury. René Descartes was revolutionary in his time and continues to be today for his progressive notion that one can begin their analysis or argument in a place of doubt. This is significant for today's society because skepticism is an important tool to fight against dogma and pathos. Similarly, David Hume wrote about his own skeptical philosophy, which again, the formal idea of intellectual skepticism is important for modern thinkers as well. Beyond helping to establish the legitimacy of skepticism itself, Hume's skepticism regarding religion in particular is also significant. Organized religion continues to be a powerful and influential social and political force, and so understanding how to critically

examine that institution is a vital check on that entity's authority. Next, Lord Shaftsbury is an important figure for his ideas on goodness and virtue. He wrote that an individual's actions of good stem from an affection for fellow human beings, as well as from a quest to feel good about doing good. This framework of understanding goodness and virtue emphasizes an inherent goodness in people, which has important and positive implications for modern society's social dynamics.

Bacon. The influence of Francis Bacon ranges from his writings on knowledge and the scientific method to psychological fallacies such as individual biases and group think. Bacon articulates the necessity of understanding that there are degrees of certainty and that neither extreme is beneficial. Overconfidence in and an excess of conclusions can reduce overall intellect, while an unshakeable skepticism can reduce motivation to cultivate knowledge. Bacon also continued to develop the scientific method, especially in reinforcing the inductive process, with his emphasis on empirical observations, systematic experiments, and analyzing evidence. This methodology continues to be a cornerstone of scientific research even today. Other contributions of Bacon to our current pool of knowledge include the ideas and spirit captured in some of his specific axioms, such as understanding that if something has never been done before, one needs to try something that has never been tried. This is in line with his emphasis on experimentation but it certainly can and should be applied to how civilization deals with social and political issues. Bacon also writes that truths established by arguments are not helpful or as valid because nature is subtler than arguments. Once again, while this is in reference to the scientific method, this is a lesson and warning that is relevant to the political discourse today that is colored by pathos and even fallacy filled logos, as opposed to claims backed up by legitimate evidence.

Bacon also delves into human psychology and the human mind's susceptibility to fall prey to fallacy. Bacon writes about different "idols," or types of intellectual fallacies that were often committed during his time and continue to occur in modern society. Arguably the most relevant idols are those of the tribe, the cave, and the theater. Idols of the tribe refer to fallacies that occur inherently in human nature and are a natural limitation to human reason. This stems from humans distorting truths due to their own perceptions. Idols of the cave, on the other hand, are in reference to fallacies that occur due to more individual biases and beliefs that may be shaped by one's experience and environment. This idea parallels modern psychology's understanding of confirmation bias, or the tendency of an individual to selectively interpret new information in terms of their existing beliefs. Next, idols of the theater are essentially the fallacy of accepting entrenched beliefs and dogma, whether it is religious, scientific, or even political, as true. This idea also has a modern corollary with the psychological concept of "groupthink," or when individuals make irrational or dysfunctional decisions or judgments in order to conform and maintain harmony. Bacon even more explicitly discusses this concept when he writes that genuine agreement occurs when individuals separately and feely consider evidence and come to the same conclusion as others, as opposed to accepting information as fact due to the strength and authority of the source, calling that a case of "moving together as a crowd."

Bacon writes other sharp criticisms of the pace of progress during the Enlightenment that still ring true today. He states that progress was held back by a "reverence for antiquity" and by a "general acceptance of certain propositions," concerns which modern civilization continues to have regarding, just as one example, social justice issues. Religion, which continues to have a conflicted relationship with social progress and growth, was also a target of

Bacon's criticism. He writes that, regarding natural philosophy, it is "stunted in its growth when religion, the thing that has most power over men's minds, has been pulled into the fight *against* it by the stupidity and incautious zeal of certain people."

Lastly, Bacon's significance and influence from the Enlightenment continues to be apparent in his writing about the purpose of knowledge. He essentially states that the purpose of knowledge and science is to make new discoveries "in the service of human life," and that knowledge is human power. He also believed that science itself is dynamic, cooperative, and cumulative. This inherently positive and helpful perspective of knowledge and science is important in order to give those fields the weight and credence they deserve in modern civilization.

Locke. Where Bacon was influential for science and reason, the impact of John Locke's ideals on the concept of the social contract, natural human rights, and individual and collective liberty are seen in many aspects of our modern civilization, and in particular our politics and government. Locke's ideas on social contract theory are predicated first on the notion of natural rights, specifically the rights to self-preservation and punishment. Entering into a social contract means retaining the right to life and liberty, but giving up the right to exact justice in return for the right to a just and impartial arbitrator to protect an individual's property. That property includes one's life, liberty, and estate. These rights, according to Locke, are moral principles that apply to all people at all times, everywhere and irrespective of government arrangements. This belief in one's natural rights is clearly a foundation of our own constitutional democracy, and Locke's belief that a violation of this social contract by one's government results in the right of a society to rebel was also clearly embraced by American revolutionaries. This tension between the power of the government and the rights of the people

continues to play out in our modern political arenas as well, as was clearly seen during the 2016 presidential campaign. Locke also writes that civil society precedes the state, both morally and historically. Consequently, it is society that creates order and grants the state or government legitimacy. This is a clear emphasis on individual consent and responsibility in government, and while this concept is certainly part of our political philosophy today, the necessary reemphasis on this idea will be discussed later.

Enlightenment Importance and Reemphasis

Each of the previously mentioned Enlightenment thinkers and their contributions to society's understanding and beliefs about science, politics, and human nature are vitally important to modern civilization's survival and health. Understanding how to validly and accurately accumulate new information about the world is critical to actually understanding the universe in which we all exist. Also, understanding how to think critically about all of the information and beliefs we as a society may be inundated with is also extremely important, not only to protect society from falling victim to dogma, but also for the quality of learning and understanding of on an individual level as well. Furthermore, all of these different facets of society play out within the framework of our government, and so it is imperative to understand both the government's role and responsibilities, but also its limits and our own role and responsibilities as individuals participating in democracy. With that being said, there are clearly some concepts from the Enlightenment that need to be revisited and brought to the foreground in order to help steer our civilization's discourse and understanding of each other moving forward. In other words, society seems to be falling short of the values that came from the Enlightenment, and we are indeed due for another Enlightenment, or a resurgence in the proliferation of those values. Some of the first steps in helping that to happen include looking

back on some of the ideas of those thinkers, specifically Francis Bacon, Adam Smith, and John Locke.

Bacon. As previously mentioned, part of Bacon's legacy and influence from the Enlightenment is how early he was in identifying the array of intellectual fallacies humans are so prone to committing. These need to be brought to the forefront of society's understanding of how to debate, discuss, and learn. While there is no way to completely rid the world of these human fallacies, hopefully making individuals more conscious of our own potential weaknesses in critical thinking can help individuals to be wary of those pitfalls. Donald Trump and his 2016 presidential campaign is an appropriate and fitting example (as it will continue to be throughout this paper) of how important understanding and recognizing intellectual fallacies are for society. Trump's campaign was quite literally built on dogma and pathos. While there is obviously no guarantee a broader societal understanding of Bacon's thoughts on critical thinking and fallacies would change the minds of many of Trump's supporters, it would certainly do well for an individual who was considering Trump's claims to bear in mind the dangers of confirmation bias and group think.

Smith. Adam Smith's importance and relevance to the development of our civilization's modern economy and conceptualization of capitalism is undeniable. However, as a society, and in particular ardent capitalists and conservatives, would do well to revisit Smith's economic and moral philosophy. For instance, the minimum wage is a major point of political contention at both the state and federal level. Smith, however, writes on the importance of competitive wage rates for the lower class, because a competitive market is the best way to spread the wealth, especially to the poor. Consequently, Smith warns of efforts by the rich and politically powerful to reduce competition and market freedom. Furthermore, Smith is in

support of public policy providing infrastructure for markets and competition, as well as education, as these are sectors that are not profitable to private companies. While Smith was certainly not a social activist and should still be considered an dedicated supporter of the free market, he also clearly raises concerns for lower class workers, particularly with attention to the stagnation of their learning and personal growth, the state of their health, and their quality of life.

Additionally, Smith's writings on morality discuss human sympathy and the existence of a concept of an "impartial spectator" as a fictional figure that shapes an individual's actions and feelings. Smith also has an arguably deistic view of human's self-interest. He writes that by fulfilling our own nature and acting in our self-interest, it will ultimately create a better society, because society's equilibrium is reached by living alongside each other and not doing harm to others, but still achieving our own self-interest. Our sympathies and the influence of the impartial spectator help to establish what the limits of our self-interest are within our society. This idea—that an individual can and should achieve their own interests but not at the expense of others—is clearly not novel, yet it seems to have been lost in passage of time. To once again invoke Trump, his supporters were in favor of his campaign promises as they believed those actions would be in their best interest. Those actions, however, such as the proposed deportation of Mexican immigrants or the creation of a registry of Muslim Americans, so clearly infringe on the rights of others to achieve those interests. This is just one modern example of when revisiting and reemphasizing Smith's beliefs on morality and human nature would be beneficial to try to put the current direction of political discourse and action into a—hopefully—more reasonable perspective.

Locke. In a similar vein, Locke's ideas regarding an individual's right to their own liberty also deserves a reemergence and examination. Locke called this a natural right, however, this liberty still only extends to the right to act on behalf of one's self interest so long as it does not infringe on the rights of others. This is an exceedingly important point in terms of society's public policy, social dynamics, and political discourse, yet it seems to be increasingly forgotten. There can be no legitimacy in actions that seem to achieve a certain group's goals if they come at the substantial cost of another's natural rights and freedoms. This is an ideal that, as can be seen with Locke and Smith, has been espoused since the Enlightenment, and was embraced by our Founding Fathers. The more our society forgets this fundamental belief, the further we get from the visions and ideals of the Enlightenment.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Locke writes that government derives its legitimacy from the consent and support of the people. This clearly implies an inherent cooperative, and continuous relationship between citizens and their government. While Locke focuses on taxes as a reasonable demand of the government from its citizens, the problems facing today's society and the vastness of our civilization requires an expansion of that view. As will become familiar throughout this paper, Trump exemplifies this concern and issue. Trump's campaign for many was consistently the epitome of the institutionalized racism, sexism, and overall bigotry prevalent in American culture. Despite the concerns expressed by many constituents, voter turnout remained low, with most optimistic numbers putting it near the levels of the election of 2012 (Montanaro, 2016). With such a significant election in 2016, and with such drastically different potential outcomes, it's absolutely shocking the level of civic engagement that seems to have occurred in this election cycle. This apparent apathy and resignation of some segments of society needs to be combated with a reemphasis on Locke's

ideas of the foundation of civil society. In other words, society needs to relearn the importance of and the duty we have to be civically engaged.

Education. With such a terrifyingly bizarre election cycle exposing the weaknesses and fallacies in the American psyche, it is easy to identify where Enlightenment ideals have been lost along the way. The question then becomes, how do we as a civilization recapture those ideals? While there are numerous threads to follow in order to try to untangle this problem—from encouraging civil discourse to improving community relations—most solutions will ultimately come back to education. Every individual has the right, and we as a society have the duty, to present these visions and ideals of the Enlightenment as part of every curriculum. Research has consistently shown that education reduces racism and xenophobia (UN News Centre, 2013) as well as reduces inequality (Greenstein & Merisotis, 2015). By ensuring that every citizen is taught the values of the Enlightenment that would hopefully guarantee that most are at least exposed to the importance of critical thinking, the intellectual fallacies we all are prone to, as well as to what are our duties as citizens of a large, diverse democracy.

Enlightenment Weaknesses and Contradictions

For all of the strengths, importance, and influence of the Enlightenment, it of course also comes with its own weaknesses and contradictions in both its schools of thought and philosophy. These issues may affect the efficacy of the Enlightenment's impact, if only because these are fundamental questions that are still debated to this day. These include questions on the extent of an individual's political obligation, society's state of nature, the correct role of government, and the role of religion.

Political obligation. As mentioned, Locke in his writings implies a level of political obligation of citizens participating in a social contract. While it was previously discussed that

these ideas should be expanded in their application to modern civilization, Locke's initial concept of an individual's political obligation does pose a weakness that could potentially undermine efforts to create and maintain a large, functioning democracy. Locke only goes so far as to say that the state can demand taxes as a moral obligation of a participant in a social contract. With the far-reaching power of our modern government, this framework should be adjusted, and individuals should have much greater investment in democracy and in who is in power, since it can have a much greater impact on their individual lives than perhaps in previous eras.

State of nature. There seems to have consistently been debate amongst Enlightenment thinkers regarding what that state of nature is, as exemplified by the dramatically different visions painted by John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. Where Locke saw society in a state of nature as being relatively peaceful, Hobbes saw the state of nature as nasty and brutish, with people acting selfishly and even maliciously. In a way, these conflicting views of humanity have persisted all the way to the views of humanity painted by the major political parties in this election cycle. Where Hillary Clinton spoke of an inclusive and supportive society, Donald Trump pandered to the image of a roguish and threatening society that requires a return to "law and order." These are competing visions that have existed in opposition since the Enlightenment, and as long as there is any support for the legitimacy of Hobbes's view, there will continue to be debate and discourse on how to approach the social and political issues that plague modern civilization based on either perspective.

Role of government. These differing perspectives on the state of nature inexorably influence the different perspectives on what kind of government a society should construct, and what should be the role of that government. Where Locke argued for a social contract and for

the fundamental need for the consent of the governed, Hobbes argued for an all-powerful ruler and a sovereign that retains virtually all-governmental rights. While this was not a view that was necessarily purported by many other Enlightenment thinkers, it is a contrary framework of government that has certainly left room for those other ideals in support of democracy and natural rights to be challenged.

Similarly, Edmund Burke writes a differing vision of the relationship between society and government. While he supports checks on government power and the protection of liberty through avenues such as the power of the press, he also does not believe in the people's right to dissolve their government. In other words, Burke does not believe that a government can be completely torn down and a completely new and differing one rebuilt in its place. He believes that morality and culture develop as a culmination of a society's history over time, and that destroying government in such a way also wipes away that foundation of a civilization. While this is not as contradictory to the other visions of government developed during the Enlightenment as Hobbes's is, it still provides a basis to curb the progressive tide of Enlightenment views.

Outside of those specific areas of weakness and contradiction, Enlightenment ideals themselves are undermined if there is no societal support and infrastructure that allows them to be shared. Additionally, if they are not wielded successfully and actually benefit the majority of people, they will continue to lack legitimacy. That is the current crisis our society seems to be seeing with the election of Trump. The 2016 election was, among many things, a vote based on identity (Potts, 2016). The prevailing identity was one that feels that Enlightenment ideals, at best, do not benefit them, and at worst, actively threatens their positions of power and privilege. As long as that is the perspective of some individuals, there will always be barriers and

resistance to Enlightenment ideals that aim to improve society and aid in civilization's progress.

“Enemies of the Enlightenment”

There are certainly “enemies of the Enlightenment” and their strength and numbers have never been as clear as they have been than after the 2016 election. Donald Trump and his followers of every level, whether they are from the nation's constituency or his cabinet nominations, seem to reject many of the values of the Enlightenment. These include the values and ideals regarding the importance of experts, or what the Enlightenment would dub “the Thinking Class.” They also seem to reject the notion of protected, inalienable natural rights. Another entity as a whole that seems to challenge some of the values of the Enlightenment is organized religion.

The Trump effect. The election of Trump demonstrates the extent to which Enlightenment values are still needed and the extent to which people will continue to fight them. For instance, there are segments of the population that denounce experts and scientific knowledge, two values the Enlightenment expressly worked to improve and revere. This can be seen when voters ignore the science confirming climate change, or ignore expert opinions that state that Trump's plan to build a border wall is not economically viable, nor is his tax plan (BBC, 2016). Yet, the reaction of individuals to these facts from qualified experts exemplifies a level of alienation that is occurring. This mentality relates back to the previous discussion about how important it is that Enlightenment values bring positive benefits for society at large, or else they will lack legitimacy among the public. At the same time, just because a group of individuals is unable or unwilling to recognize the benefits of the Enlightenment does not mean those benefits do not necessarily exist. For better or worse, the responsibility falls on

proponents of Enlightenment values to engage others in civil discussion and to help promote those values. The Enlightenment has, overall, culminated in values that do aim to improve society as a whole. Equality and justice, however, can be perceived as a threat to those that enjoy the privileges of a society, whether through race, gender, or socioeconomic status, to name a few factors. Once again, that is why the burden falls to those who recognize the importance of embracing Enlightenment values to continue that fight.

Another aspect of the Enlightenment that its “enemies” seem to argue against is the protection of every individual’s natural rights and liberties. Once again, Trump, his campaign, and his supporters, provide a fitting example of these beliefs.

Organized religion. Referring back to Bacon’s previously discussed sharp criticisms of religion and theological dogma, it is clear that organized religion has long been an enemy of Enlightenment ideals and values. Granted, there are genuine social benefits to religion, such as the establishment and support of a set of morals generally meant to better an individual, the support and encouragement of participating in charitable work, and the providing of a comfortable existential framework that many need in order to understand one’s place in the universe. However, this can sometimes come at a cost to society as well. Organized religion can lead individuals to being against liberal or progressive ideas due to the belief that it violates their religion’s teachings. Or, vice versa that it may lead to one person restricting another individual’s rights or choices by imposing their own religious beliefs on that other individual. Bacon, during his time, was concerned with organized religion’s ability and effectiveness at suppressing critical thinking, analysis, and healthy skepticism. Those concerns have not lost their relevance or importance today. A modern example of this tension and conflict can be seen with the issue of gay marriage. Many opponents of gay marriage claim that it is immoral and

unnatural based on the teachings of their own religion. There are even instances of business owners refusing service to a same-sex couple and justifying that action by claiming it is within their right to freedom of religion to refuse service to individuals whom they feel do not abide by their own religious doctrine (Gershman & Audi, 2015). These sorts of actions and subsequent rationalizations are in direct opposition to basic Enlightenment values concerning civil society and individual liberty. A value of the Enlightenment is the protection of individual liberty, with the caveat that one's individual liberty may be exerted in so far as it does not infringe upon the liberty of another individual. As with the example of gay marriage, that conceptualization of the exercise of religious freedom comes at the expense of another's protected right to not face discrimination, and as such, those actions should not be allowed to stand. In modern society, this tension between organized religion and Enlightenment values tends to consistently manifest itself concerning social justice and individual liberty, although it is also still prevalent in the relationship between religion and science. In order to fight this notion that one person's liberty should be given more weight or importance over another's, one can turn to Burke's concept of how a society's morality and culture is developed. As discussed, Burke writes that a civilization has a shared history and culture, and while he used this characterization in his writings on government, it can be expanded to say that a civilization is ultimately a community. Through discourse, a greater emphasis needs to continue to be put on the interconnectedness that all individuals share. Hopefully that, coupled with respect for other people, can help to stave off "enemies of the Enlightenment." This past election cycle, however, has shown the difficulty and potential ineffectiveness of aiming to steer the direction of society by merely emphasizing the value of community and inclusivity. For that reason, it

ultimately once again comes down to creating change at the smallest and most fundamental level—on an individual, interpersonal basis.

Conclusion

As a civilization, we have a duty to live by and uphold some of the fundamental ideals developed during the Enlightenment. This is not merely due to a respect of Enlightenment thinkers or history itself, but due to an obligation we as a civilization have to continue to work toward progress and justice for the majority of individuals, and the values of the Enlightenment have consistently proven themselves to be the way forward.

It can be difficult to have faith in the vision of the Enlightenment when the most recent Presidential election feels like a step backward—skipping over the Enlightenment entirely and returning to the Middle or Dark Ages. It is at this precipice, however, when thoughtful citizens learned in the values of the Enlightenment are needed most. In fact, at the risk of overusing the 2016 election cycle as a case study, Hillary Clinton put it most poignantly in her concession speech saying, “Never stop believing that fighting for what’s right is worth it.” The great work of the Enlightenment is not done, and the utter resistance to those values exemplified by this election is not the end, but rather a demonstration of where we as a society are and where we have yet to go. Many of our citizens who identify as minorities already knew that our society is racist, sexist, and bigoted. While an unknown level of privilege may have blinded many of us to the extent of those sentiments, that never changed the fact that they existed with an almost vicious vigor. Now, we must continue to debate and discuss with a passion and dedication to challenge those views that threaten the endurance of Enlightenment values. Even if its enemies are misplaced in their feelings of anger and alienation, and its proponents valid in their feelings of anger, frustration, and fear, another value of the Enlightenment is the emphasis on free

thought and the freedom to debate. In order for our views to be heard, we still must make the other side feel heard as well. If we can support civil discourse and create a sense of community and understanding around Enlightenment values at an individual level, perhaps we can continue to move forward as a civilization together.

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