



Enlightenment and Education, Then and Now

ADRIAN O'CONNOR

University of South Florida

Abstract: Ideas about education and its power to transform people's intellectual, social, political, and personal lives were central to Enlightenment thought. They were also central to the Enlightenment belief that new ways of thinking engendered new ways of living (and vice versa). Taken together, these points placed education at the heart of early modern debates over the constitution of society, the organization and administration of the polity, the nature and purpose of civil society, and the relations that govern everyday life. To understand this view of education and the Enlightenment debates to which it gave rise, this essay highlights the role of skepticism and uncertainty in Enlightenment thought, the *philosophes'* interest in education as an instrument of moral and social improvement, and their commitment to the idea that both individual and collective progress stemmed from critical forms of social intercourse. As a result, we see that the Enlightenment's educational legacy is not a particular platform or pedagogy, but an ongoing experiment in how the critical and collective pursuit of useful knowledge might reform or remake human society.

Keywords: Enlightenment, education, skepticism, uncertainty, nationalism, society, sentiments, moral freedom

Introduction

In 1693, John Locke wrote that “of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education. It is that which makes the great difference in mankind” (60). Jean-Jacques Rousseau maintained in his massively influential work, *Émile* (1979 [1763]), that “everything we do not have at our birth and which

we need when we are grown is given us by education” (38). Immanuel Kant, among the last of the great Enlightenment thinkers, introduced his work *On Education* (2003 [1803]) with the claim that “man can only become man by education. He is merely what education makes of him” (6). And the controversial French *philosophe* Claude-Adrien Helvétius argued in *De l’Homme* (1773) that “*l’éducation peut tout*” (education can do anything) (332). What was true of individuals was true of societies as well, and Enlightenment thinkers were remarkably consistent in their attention to—and emphasis upon—education as a critical point of reference in any discussion of the nature, legitimacy, and possible reform of the social, political and economic orders.

This is a familiar point, and it squares nicely with our sense that the Enlightenment was an “Age of Reason” (a view that I hope to complicate somewhat over the course of this essay). It also reinforces our sense that the Enlightenment represents a point of origin for “modern” and secular views of science, politics, religion, and human affairs more broadly. As a result, education is central to our narratives of the Enlightenment and of modernity. After all, education was a central focus of Enlightenment thought, and it seems obvious that an “age of enlightenment” would also be an “age of education”; enlightenment depends upon education, and education should lead to enlightenment. However, as is often the case, the actual history is not quite so clear and, upon further inquiry, it is quite a bit more complicated indeed. Luckily, in this case, the history is more interesting than the myth, the more complicated view of historical change is more compelling, and a revised understanding of the Enlightenment is more likely to spark our interest and imagination than does the familiar caricature.

Let us start with Helvétius’s claim that “education can do anything.” It is a straightforward claim; though even for those inclined to agree, it gives rise to many more questions than answers. To begin: just what should education aim to do? Who ought to receive such an education, and who ought to benefit from its achievements? What should students be taught, and by whom should they be educated? For what sort of lives, or careers, or functions, are students to be prepared by this education? Should boys and girls receive the same sort of education, or do sexual (and social) differences require that their educations differ? And, hovering above all of these particular questions: if education is such a powerful instrument of personal and collective development, what might changes in education mean for the world beyond the walls of the classroom?

Clearly, answers to these and other such questions would be deeply revealing not only of one’s views about education, but also about how one thought about the nature, character, purpose, and prospects of human society. That each of these questions gave rise to heated disputes among Enlightenment thinkers suggests that their substantive views

about education—and thus also about society—were far less univocal than their claims about education's importance might lead us to believe. Indeed, Enlightenment debates about education and educational reform were deeply ambivalent, and Enlightenment thinkers recognized the radical possibilities of (and perhaps even the need for) institutional and pedagogical reform, even as they worried about the outcomes to which any such reform might actually lead.

Everything That Admits of the Least Doubt

Before we turn to the polyvalence and ambivalence of the Enlightenment debates about education, it is important that we clarify why Enlightenment thinkers believed education to be so important, why their views on education resonated so powerfully in broader discussions about social and political organization, and what the apparent stakes were for those involved in these disputes.

Many of the Enlightenment debates in philosophy focused on the question of what we can know and with what degree of certainty we can do so, how we should evaluate knowledge claims, where we run into error, and how we come to know more. Contrary to the image of Enlightenment *philosophes* confidently prescribing “reason” as a solution to every problem, the thinkers of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries often began their investigations with a form of skepticism—sometimes rhetorical in nature, sometimes substantive (Matytsin 2016). Enlightenment thinkers knew that the pursuit of knowledge entailed also the avoidance and rejection of error as well as an active defense against the allure of chimerical progress. Both the questions that Enlightenment thinkers raised and, to some degree, the ways in which they tried to answer those questions, were rooted in the challenge and utility of skepticism as a mode of analysis. To cite just two, famous, examples: Francis Bacon (1994 [1620]) attacked the Scholastic “idols besetting human minds” (53), and René Descartes (1993 [1637]) aimed to “[put] aside everything that admits of the least doubt,” while working to “root out from [the] mind all the errors that had been able to creep in undetected” (17). Indeed, while the scientific ambitions of natural philosophers like Bacon and Descartes are often cited as critical inspirations for the Enlightenment—for bringing new energy and rigor to early modern empiricism, rationalism and mathematics—their respective forms of skepticism were just as important.

It is against this backdrop that we come to John Locke's famous request that the readers of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1964 [1689]) “suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the

materials of reason and of knowledge?” (89). By denying the existence of those innate ideas and principles that other thinkers had supposed must exist—and aiming to avoid the errors to which such suppositions might have led—Locke hoped to give his investigation into human knowledge its own ‘blank slate’ of sorts. How is it, he asked, that the *tabula rasa* of the mind at birth comes to be the active mind of mankind, the site of ideas, judgments, reflection, and comprehension?

The question represents an important moment not only in the philosophy of mind, but also in the evolving relationship between ideas about education and human society. So too does Locke’s answer, which was, “in one word . . . *experience*” (Locke 1964 [1689], 90). Rejecting the concepts of original sin and innate ideas, Lockean “sensationalism” held that our sensory experience of the world and the operations of our minds which are then stimulated by those sensory experiences are the two “fountains of [our] knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring” (90). The proposition that people were blank slates—shaped by experience rather than providence or innate character—raised difficult questions. These questions interrogated the nature of the “self,” social hierarchies and the political order, the social and institutional norms that shape what and how people learn (both inside and outside the classroom), and the malleability of people’s individual characters and collective characteristics (Gill 2010, 26–28). In short, it put education (broadly conceived) at the center of the Enlightenment agenda.

With this, Lockean epistemology came into contact with four of the most fundamental intellectual developments of the early modern period: 1) what Pasquale Pasquino (2018) has called the “Hobbesian conceptual revolution”; 2) social Augustinianism; 3) renewed debates over the gendered social order and the assignation of gender roles in the family and in society; and 4) the emergence of “society” and the “nation” as objects of concern, attention and action. Once debates over education became entangled with these questions about the ontology, teleology, and taxonomy of human societies, education emerged as the keystone of social organization and order. These four intellectual developments were of a kind with one another, and it is worth identifying them before we return to the debates over education.

The “Hobbesian conceptual revolution” was the long-term process whereby people stopped thinking of society as a composite of essentially different and unequal groups, and came to think of it instead as an aggregate of fundamentally equal individuals (Pasquino 2018, 117). That is, social hierarchies and differences of station stopped being thought of as indices of essential differences and inequalities among populations, but instead were understood as the contingent outcome of social and historical forces. The hierarchical vision of society against which this revolution operated often presented itself in a form of legal, political, and social

corporatism, a socio-judicial taxonomy in which different orders of people were sorted, classified, and governed in their appropriate categories (in pre-revolutionary France, for instance, as members of the First, Second, or Third Estates, the clerical, noble, or common orders, respectively). On this logic, members of the nobility did not just occupy different social functions than did commoners. Rather, they were different *kinds* of people. Hobbes's political thought rejected this model, paving the way for modern forms of individualism and legal egalitarianism. As Hobbes wrote in *On the Citizen* (1997 [1642]), "all men are equal to each other by nature. Our actual inequality has been introduced by civil law" (26). To civil law, one could easily add education and experience, as Hobbes himself did when he claimed (also in *On the Citizen*) that "man is made fit for Society not by nature, but by training" (25).

If it was not categorical or essential difference which made humans unequal, the existing social order was presumably a product of will and circumstance. But whose will? This is the point at which the second of our early modern developments—social Augustinianism—becomes central. The seventeenth century saw a renewed interest in and concern with Augustinian theology, the "intimation that the Fall had severed humanity and nature so radically from God that humankind could neither strive for grace nor approach by human means the spiritual reality informing the universe" (Baker 1994, 119). The consequences of such a view were not just theological and spiritual, but also political and social. As Keith Michael Baker (1994) notes, "a world from which God was hidden was a world in which authority was delegitimized and political order dissolved" (119). This fed a growing sense that the social and political orders were not reflections of divine will or a providential *telos*, but of human actions and arrangements; this, in turn, promoted the idea that the social and political orders were mutable and malleable.

This was true of the family as well as the polity. Eighteenth-century writers—both male and female—devoted a great deal of attention to relations between the sexes and to the political implications of familial arrangements. Both Cartesian dualists and authors inspired by Lockean sensationalism questioned the idea that sexual difference entailed or required differences in character or capacity. For instance, Louise d'Épinay wrote that men and women "have the same nature and the same constitution" (1992 [1772], 33), though she counseled elsewhere that girls ought to content themselves with domestic lives spent caring for their husbands and children and "console" themselves for the loss of grander ambitions with the pleasures of reading and private learning (Bissière 1998, 362). Similarly, Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis claimed that men and women were equal by nature (Genlis 1795, 257), but nonetheless held that a "young girl's destiny should be marriage, dependency on a husband, and motherhood" (Schroder 1999, 376). This was not, however, a withdrawal from

the political, as Genlis endowed motherhood with “extraordinary power . . . to successfully reproduce an idealized moral community” (Walker 2008, 153). Similar arguments appeared in Mary Wollstonecraft’s famous *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which Wollstonecraft argued that the sexes had an equal need and ability to reason, but also justified the education of woman at least in part on their role as mothers (Wollstonecraft 1793, vi).

This ambivalent discourse served to simultaneously remove women from the public sphere and place them at the center of the political community; as Meghan Roberts (2016) puts it, “although girls were ultimately destined for domestic roles, they were essential for developing the nation’s civic virtues” (109). While most of the literature on female education continued to stress women’s roles as wives and mothers, these roles were defined increasingly in terms of social utility and the nurturing of familial and associational communities, rather than innate difference or a “natural” division of labor, though the naturalist discourse of sexual and social difference remained prominent and influential despite this emerging critique (Taylor 2004; Sotiropoulos 2007; Popiel 2008; Walker 2008). This distinction between the decrees of nature and those of society implied that the socio-sexual order could—and perhaps someday should—change dramatically. The powers of education would clearly be implicated in any such change.

If the social, sexual, and political orders were increasingly subject to reconsideration and possible reform, the ends towards which one ought to undertake such reforms remained unclear. Two principal foci emerged in debates on this topic: social utility and nationalism. Both “society” and the “nation” came to be seen in this period as “entities that humans freely create through the exercise of political will,” and as objects upon which people could collectively and purposefully act (Bell 2001a, 199). This contributed to an important shift in debates over education, as pedagogical and political thinkers increasingly emphasized the need for students to be prepared for their lives as members of civil society. Where Scholasticism had sought to detach students “from the sinful world by immersion in a formal and not commonly used language and . . . [help them] gain humility through constant, difficult study” (Bailey 1978, 4), eighteenth-century thinkers increasingly argued that “children should be educated in the world rather than cloistered from it and taught about society rather than tossed into it unprepared” (Gill 2010, 137). They aimed, in Charles Duclos’s phrase, to inculcate a “*morale de l’utilité*” among students and among the broader public (Duclos 1784, 20). With this, the goals of preparing students for society and improving society through education became intertwined, and together they reinforced the perceived role of education in defining the social order and in “actively constructing [the] nation” (Bell 2001a, 5). While these ambitions left a

great deal of room for disagreement about the nature of social utility and the character and boundaries of the national community, they nonetheless provided a conceptual framework and a set of analytic categories within which the various proposals for political or cultural action could be assessed and compared.

Together with the human plasticity implied by Lockean and related forms of sensationalism, these four developments endowed the prospect of educational reform with tremendous potential. An individual's character was understood to be the product of his or her experience, a people's collective character (as a society or as a nation) was recognized as a product of institutional and social forces, and social positions and relations were recast as historically contingent products of human choices. These converging ideas suggested that reforms in educational practice would change people's characters and characteristics, which would in turn change the relations among those individuals and the character of the society writ large. It seemed, as Helvétius had said, that education *really could* do anything.

The intersection of nationalism and this new understanding of education was important in another way as well: it made educational reform a matter of state concern. Religious authorities had traditionally been responsible for overseeing and administering many of the educational institutions in early modern Europe, but political authorities and thinkers increasingly recognized the influence that schools could exert on their subjects or their citizens. Education promised to form individuals' character and their expectations, and so also to shape the character and prospects of the polity. As Montesquieu wrote in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1989 [1773]), "the laws of education . . . prepare us to be citizens. . . . Therefore, the laws of education will be different in each kind of government" (31). Not only could governments exert influence on their citizens or subjects through education, but—Montesquieu's claim seemed to imply—the system of education would exert its own reciprocal influence on civil society and on the government. So for political thinkers and authorities, the debate over education was equally a debate over the nature, purpose, and practices of society and of the state. To reform education was to form people in a new image, to prepare them for a new social order, to change their collective character, and to refashion their relationship to the institutions and authorities of political administration. In short, to present a plan for education was to articulate and to pursue a particular vision of the future.

Education in an Age of Uncertainty

Recognizing the apparent stakes for society and for the polity allows us to appreciate the ambivalence that characterized Enlightenment debates

over education and its reform. Enlightenment thinkers were by turns ambitious and uncertain about the prospects of educational reform and, especially, about the possible consequences of extending educational opportunities to the population at large. After all, the transformation of society could be for good or for ill—which is part of the reason Rousseau was so skeptical about the idea of human progress in the first place. For every cry of “*Sapere aude!*” from figures like Kant (1991 [1784], 54), there can be found a claim like Voltaire’s that the “*canaille* [lower classes] . . . are not worthy of being enlightened,” and that for the uneducated classes, “all yokes are proper” (1890 [1767], 171–173).

Statements such as Voltaire’s are often seen as symptoms of the Enlightenment’s underlying conservatism, or its hypocrisy, or its elitism—and there are good arguments for each of these interpretations (Chisick 1981). At the same time, I think that the range of views within the debates over education suggests a deeper uncertainty at the heart of the Enlightenment: an uncertainty that is inseparable from the Enlightenment’s fundamentally radical nature (a nature that both permits and provokes decidedly non-radical voices and proposals).

The Enlightenment had posed the question directly: how should we live—individually and collectively—now that we claim for ourselves the potential to refashion our lives and re-form our societies? It gave rise to what the historian Robert Darnton, in an essay about the French Revolution, described as a sense of “possibilism against the givenness of things. . . . A conviction that the human condition is malleable, not fixed, and that ordinary people can make history instead of suffering it” (1996, 29). Education was a particularly important part of this, as it gave an institutional focus to debates over what sort of society and polity could or should be fashioned.

Some of the period’s most important and influential texts sought to evade the problem, and occasionally their impact seemed to stem from just that evasion. Rousseau’s *Émile* (1762), for instance, manages to present a radical new pedagogy precisely by escaping the workings of civil and political society. By relocating Émile and his tutor to a rural retreat, the tutor can design an education rooted in experiential learning, exploration, and dynamic forms of instructive play. This was a radical reconsideration of early modern pedagogy, which often relied on catechisms and rote memorization; but it was not a model well suited to the reform of educational institutions in eighteenth-century states (Palmer 1985, 52).

Others, like Helvétius, evaded the dilemma of institutional specifics in the other direction, emphasizing not only that education could do *anything*, but that it was in fact *everywhere*. A clear consequence of Lockean sensationalism was that education happens not only in purposefully instructional activities, but in all of the sensations, reflections, encounters, and experiences of a person’s life. Indeed, Helvétius steered the question

of educational reform away from the schools and focused more directly on the social practices and interpersonal norms that shaped people's lives; he described a young man's departure from the schools as the point at which he "receives his most lasting instruction, when his values and his character will take shape, when he is finally free and is most himself, and the passions excited in his heart will determine his habits and, often, the way he will conduct himself through his life" (Helvétius 1773, vol. 1, 69). As a result of this focus on socialization-as-education, Helvétius's model of reform seemed to defy linear or programmatic statements: education shaped society but, at the same time, society shaped education, and each was implicated in the virtues and vices of the other. The scale of the problem left him deeply pessimistic about the prospects for reform in eighteenth-century France.

Instances such as these, in which questions about education were displaced onto far more expansive canvases, had a complement in texts or proposals that focused on particular points of curricular or institutional practice—almost to the exclusion of broader reflections on questions of social organization or political reform. For example, in the wake of the Jesuits' expulsion from France in the early 1760s, a wide-ranging debate emerged about how to reform education in the kingdom. The points of debate were largely practical: the Jesuits had administered and overseen approximately one-third of the *collèges* in France (*collèges* were institutions of secondary education, offering instruction in Latin to boys between the ages of roughly ten and eighteen). The sudden removal of more than 1,200 Jesuits from the schools left more than 100 *collèges* in need of instructional and administrative staff. Understandably, those who debated possible post-Jesuit reforms focused a great deal of attention on recruiting, training, and certifying teachers, on establishing new systems of oversight by local political authorities, and on designing a curriculum that helped students to develop "useful" skills. At first glance, their debates seem distant from the *philosophes'* attempts to reimagine society *in toto*. For this reason, historians have often described these debates as having been shaped by a general consensus regarding education and the priorities for reform, and as having been (unfortunately) cut short by unrelated political crises (Bailey 1978, 5; Figeac-Monthus 2015, 22–23; Morange and Chassaing 1974, 88–89).

The consensus was chimerical though. Prominent participants in the debates disagreed about which political bodies ought to oversee the schools, about who ought to be considered as possible instructors (and so role models), and who ought to have access to the reimagined schools. They disagreed about whether schools ought to broaden pupils' horizons or content them with their lot, whether to reinforce existing hierarchies or promote social mobility, and how to serve the interests of the state or of its citizens. For example, the royal attorney at the French Parlement of

Brittany, Louis-René de Caradeuc de La Chalotais, claimed in his *Éssai d'éducation nationale* (1763) that:

The good of society demands that the knowledge of the people not extend further than their occupations. If it should, every man who now works as a laborer will be unable to sustain his work with courage and patience. Among the people there are those who live by their hands and for whom it is not necessary to learn how to read and write. . . . The most advantageous scenario for the state is to have but a few colleges . . . and it is better to have fewer students. (28)

La Chalotais thought that the goal of a national system of education should be “for each citizen [to be] content enough with his lot to never feel forced to leave it” (33). Louis-Bernard Guyton de Morveau, a member of the Parlement of Burgundy, countered that scholars should “work together with citizens of all social orders” and thereby contribute to a “happy revolution” in the morals and lives of the French people (Guyton 1764, 273–275). He stressed the broadly social and utilitarian benefits of education and the obligations that the state had to improve the lives of all of its subjects through the reform of education. A particularly well-placed and influential voice in these debates was Rolland d’Erceville, who was President of the Parlement of Paris and a member of the *Bureau d’administration* at the prestigious Collège Louis-le-Grand. He encouraged the government to expand education so that the state could take advantage of its subjects’ talents while also reinforcing their loyalty to the monarchy (Rolland 1783). These three authors did not just disagree about what should be done in the schools, but about what the schools should do. In the end, Louis XV’s government undertook reforms that were institutionally important, but ultimately modest, reflecting an unwillingness or inability to commit to a particular pedagogical (and so political) future (O’Connor 2016).

Here again lay the real crux of the Enlightenment debates over education: even for the *philosophes*, enlightenment was not primarily about imparting information or imposing a social order that reflected the prescriptions of a disinterested rationalism. Instead, the debates over education were a critical element in the broader reconsideration and re-imagination of human society, and so they hinged on what authors took to be the nature of the social good and how they thought the routines of everyday life could be redirected to serve that collective end. For this reason, Enlightenment pedagogy focused on the cultivation of certain habits, dispositions, sentiments, and customs among the members of civil and political society. This was work to be done not by instilling a precise logic or calculating reason, but by the habituating force of emulation.

Habits, Sentiments, and Moral Freedom

Attention to the motivating power of emulation was by no means new with the Enlightenment; emulation had been central to both Scholastic and early modern instruction, and even the Scholastics and their Jesuit inheritors had been rejuvenating an old form (Dupont-Ferrier 1921). Indeed, the tradition extended from Plutarch's *Lives* in Antiquity to the Renaissance celebration of "illustrious men," giving rise to an extensive corpus of texts, statues, portraits, and other didactic representations in which "exceptional" people were eulogized and venerated, offering models to be revered and lives to be emulated not only by students, but by the public as well (Bell 2001b). François Fénelon—whose *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1699) was among the most widely read books of the period—helped to bring this focus on emulation into the eighteenth century, emphasizing throughout his works the role of examples, models, and habits in forming the individual for society (Schmitt-Maaßl, Stockhorst and Ahn, 2014). Fénelon (1847) shared Locke's conviction that the infant's mind was initially "unformed," and suggested that parents, tutors, and teachers take care in how they shape the child, particularly in how they "awaken [the child's] attention to the examples which we would wish to give them" (21). These early impressions and examples would shape the child's habits, which become increasingly difficult to break or alter over time, which makes the selection of examples and nurturing of good habits in early childhood particularly crucial.

Enlightenment figures were quick to embrace an emulation-centered pedagogy. As John Iverson (2003) has noted, "emulation attracted keen attention from eighteenth-century thinkers," often in "proposals for responding to the complex social and political questions" facing eighteenth-century society (218). At the same time, emulation came to include not only the establishment of "great examples" or models for students to imitate, but also a sense of competitive achievement among students—each of whom would try to become a model for the others (Shovlin 2006, 61). For example, Adam Smith writes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2009 [1759]) that "emulation, the anxious desire that we ourselves should excel, is originally founded in our admiration of the excellence of others" (137). This potentially vainglorious desire was ultimately an instrument of moral improvement, as it gave rise to a more powerful desire not just to be praised, but to be praise-worthy. That is: to be good. Helvétius similarly considered emulation the surest "[o]f all the means for exciting love of talent and virtue" (1773, vol. 2, 889). And Montesquieu (1989 [1748]) thought that the presentation (and frequent re-presentation) of appropriate "examples" could change the mores and manners of a people—an ambitious goal, given his claim that "mores and manners [are] the institutions of the nation in general" (315).

Here the debates over education (taken in its broadest sense) intersected with Enlightenment discussions of virtue, morality, justice and autonomy: precisely those arenas in which the force of reason was supposed to “enlighten” individuals and society alike. How, though, was this supposed to happen, and what role were habit and “sentiment” to play? It is useful on this point to follow David Hume in asking about the relative roles of reason and sentiment in establishing moral codes and conduct. Concerns like Hume’s went to the heart of Enlightenment debates over virtue, ethics, and civil society, and they intersected with discussions about education and its influence on individuals and communities alike.

In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1983), Hume revisits the controversy over whether morals “be derived from reason, or from sentiment; whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction or by an immediate feeling and finer inner sense.” He notes that the two proposed answers are actually pursuing different objects, claiming that “what exists in the nature of things is the standard of our judgment; what each man feels within himself is the standard of sentiment” (13–14). While the two “concur in almost all moral determinations and conclusions,” there is a critical difference between them: sentiments and the feelings to which they give rise animate our desire to turn moral calculations into new ways of living. “Inferences and conclusions,” he writes, “have no hold of the affections. . . . They discover truths: But where the truths which they discover are indifferent, and beget no desire or aversion, they can have no influence on conduct and behaviour.” With that, “morality is no longer a practical study, nor has any tendency to regulate our lives and actions” (15). This, Hume thinks, would undermine the point of moral inquiry in the first place, which he describes as “teach[ing] us our duty; and, by proper representations of the deformity of vice and beauty of virtue, beget correspondent habits, and engage us to avoid the one, and embrace the other” (14–15). Hume was by no means alone in thinking about the relationship between reason and motivation in these terms. A similar view was evident in Honoré de Mirabeau’s claim that “man more often obeys his sentiments than his reason” (1791, 82–83), and in Friedrich Schiller’s argument that in completing man’s moral education, “the path to the head must be opened through the heart” (2016, 28).

How, though, do habits born of subjective feelings rooted in sentiment differ from prejudices or forms of superstition, those arch-enemies of the Enlightenment? Here, Enlightenment ambitions sound dangerously close to what Kant (1987) indicted as “a propensity to a passive reason, and hence to a heteronomy of reason . . . called prejudice.” For Kant, “the greatest prejudice of all [was] superstition . . . [and] liberation from superstition is called enlightenment” (160–161). D’Holbach, d’Alembert, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and others shared this contempt for prejudice,

and dethroning prejudice would become a rallying cry for educational efforts to regenerate and “enlighten” French society during the French Revolution (Malcolm 2018).

Hume, of course, was aware of this charge, and his response hinged on arguments about social utility, exchange and improvement. He remarked in his discussion of private property that “mutual trust and confidence” were the means “by which the general interest of mankind is so much promoted” (Hume 1983, 28). Trust and confidence make possible continued exchange (interpersonal and economic alike), and it is through exchange that people come to cultivate the social virtues that allow for moral improvement. On Hume’s account, self-interest leads us to engage others, and to recognize the benefits (and attendant requirements) of social utility. These benefits and requirements lead us to refine our habits and our judgments, though sometimes our engagements will lead us into conflicts as well. These, too, can be morally and intellectually beneficial, as they force us to reexamine our behaviors and our beliefs. With experience, then, we gain the prospect of education and thus of enlightenment. He writes: “If any false opinion, embraced from appearances, has been found to prevail [in questions of morality]; as soon as farther experience and sounder reasoning have given us juster notions of human affairs; we retract our first sentiment, and adjust anew the boundaries of moral good and evil” (19).

In this variation of the “*doux commerce*” thesis—or the idea that commercial exchanges would soften manners and serve as a moralizing force in society—Hume incorporated the animating powers of self-interest and sentiment, the dynamism of social life, and the corrective force of reason. Montesquieu (1989) made a similar claim, arguing that “commerce cures destructive prejudices, and it is an almost general rule that everywhere there are gentle mores, there is commerce and that everywhere there is commerce, there are gentle mores. . . . Commerce has spread knowledge of the mores of all nations everywhere; they have been compared to each other, and good things have resulted from this” (338). They, like many of their contemporaries, followed Bacon in offering a secularized version of the biblical passage from Daniel 12:4: “*Plurimi pertansibunt, et multiplex erit scientia*” (“many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased”) (Matytsin and Edelstein 2018, 9–10). Crucially, Hume and Montesquieu presented commercial and social exchange as initiating a process of moral enlightenment. At the heart of that process was the relationship among cultural differences, social discomfort, and moral choice.

For both Hume and Montesquieu, self-interested exchange promoted contact among people with different customs, beliefs and norms. Exchange between dissimilar groups was expected to prompt disagreement among the parties and, often, discomfort with the customs of foreigners. This discomfort would itself prompt a reconsideration of one’s own inherited

norms and an assessment of each culture's benefits and deficiencies. That is, such exchanges made moral *choice* possible in a way it had not been under what Montesquieu called systems of "pure" or unadulterated mores.

This element of choice distinguished potentially enlightening habits from superstitious prejudices, and it led many *philosophes* to think that education could contribute to a significant and on-going improvement in how people lived their lives. Reason in this instance was not curricular, but discursive; its function was not to impose decrees upon a superstitious society, but to emerge from social practices that would replace superstition with incrementally more enlightened views. It would also improve and enrich the bonds of society, allowing citizens to more fully cooperate with and trust one another. This virtuous cycle of social encounters and reasoned discussion was particularly important to the idea of progress embraced by the mathematician and *philosophe* Jean-Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, the Marquis de Condorcet.

Known primarily for his work in social mathematics and for his posthumously published *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), Condorcet is often remembered as a cold rationalist whose primary concern lay in freeing reason from the prejudicial influence of presumptive authorities or the distorting effects of emotion. For instance, the eminent historian R. R. Palmer (1985) wrote that "Condorcet emphasized the cognitive rather than the moral side of education, which must above all else impart the 'truth'; hence he gave great weight to the scientific, technical, and vocational subjects on which future progress must depend." Palmer tells us that Condorcet "expected that with right knowledge the desired virtues would naturally emerge. Sheer enlightenment would be enough" (125). As with any caricature, there is evidence for this view; Condorcet did indeed argue passionately against calls for a "national catechism," against efforts to regulate or impose normative "political, moral, or religious opinions," and against attempts to promote patriotism and national loyalty as a form of "faith" during the Revolution (Condorcet 1976, 124–133). But more recent scholarship has modified our view of Condorcet considerably, recognizing the social and sentimental dynamics of his work and of his model for progress (Rothschild 1998, 2001). In revisiting Condorcet's view of progress we can, I think, profitably recast the role of education in the Enlightenment.

As Emma Rothschild (2001) has noted, "enlightenment" for Condorcet was a "way of thinking and seeing. . . . It was a *mentalité*, a *Denkart*, a '*disposition des esprits*'" (15), this last phrase coming from Condorcet himself in his *Vie de Voltaire* (1789). Condorcet's arguments against catechistic teaching and political indoctrination were rooted in an awareness that even his own strongly-held views might be wrong—what Rothschild (2001) described as his "somber" skepticism—and, over the course of his career, in an "increasing willingness to live with uncertainty" (190).

They were also rooted in his sense of what it was for a person to be enlightened and to be free.

In his essay on the “nature and object of public instruction” (1976), Condorcet wrote that “the man who does not know how to read, write, and do arithmetic really depends upon the more literate man to whom he must constantly have recourse. He is not the equal of those to whom education has given this knowledge; he cannot exercise the same rights to the same extent and with the same independence” (106). Elsewhere, Condorcet made clear that this was a social as well as a political danger, noting the “painful disquiet which is associated with being aware of one’s own ignorance, and which produces the vague fear of not really being in a position to defend oneself against the ills by which one is threatened” (1847, 259). The socially and politically corrosive effect of such “vague fears” was a recurring theme in Condorcet’s work, for he worried that:

A truly free constitution, in which all classes of society enjoy the same rights, cannot subsist if the ignorance of some of its citizens prevents them from understanding the nature and limits of these rights, and obliges them to pronounce on what they do not know, choosing when they cannot judge. Such a constitution would destroy itself after a few convulsions, degenerating into one of those forms of government that can preserve peace in the midst of an ignorant and corrupt people. (Condorcet 1976, 120–121)

For Condorcet, a truly free person had to be able to not only understand the world around her, but also to recognize competing interests and options, to discuss issues of social, political, or personal importance with family members and fellow citizens on an equal footing, and to decide for herself how best to proceed. As for Hume and Montesquieu, the element of choice was central. Condorcet wrote in his essay, “On Freedom” (2012): “Every being is free who is able to have two contradictory sentiments relating to the same action, and who can decide either to wish, or not wish, to take that action in complete awareness that his will is conforming to one of the two sentiments” (181).

But, we might ask, in what sense is this freedom “enlightened?” Couldn’t this “free” person still base her decisions upon superstitious, prejudicial, or unreasonable grounds? After all, Condorcet does not here emphasize reason’s role in settling upon a course of action, only the prospect of choice that is characteristic of freedom. Nor does simply adding “reason” to the equation get us to enlightened and free action, as even a person who thought clearly and rationally about her options might be uncertain as to what she should ultimately do. Condorcet recognized this possibility, as well as the prospect that the free person might choose unwisely. Far from being a bad thing, though, the uncertainty and fallibility that come with freedom can themselves contribute to the personal and collective cultivation of a “disposition of enlightenment” insofar as they prompt the sorts of “endless and judicious public

discussion” that were at the heart of Condorcet’s “political economy of education” (Rothschild 2001, 190; 1998, 218). Discussion, rather than revelatory or imperious reason, was at the heart of Condorcet’s vision of enlightenment, a point he made clear in his famous discussion of the printing press in the *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*. In that text—his last defense of enlightened inquiry and human progress—Condorcet wrote that:

all those means which render the progress of the human mind more easy, more rapid, more certain, are also the benefits of the press. Without the instrumentality of this art, such books could not have been multiplied as are adapted to every class of readers, and every degree of instruction. To the press we owe those continued discussions which alone can enlighten doubtful questions. (Condorcet 1795, 181–182)

Here, Condorcet’s visions of progress and of enlightenment come very close to those presented by Immanuel Kant in “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” (1991 [1784]).

The dramatic overture to Kant’s essay, in which man “emerge[s] from his self-incurred immaturity” by “daring to know” (“*Sapere aude!*”), gives way quickly to the recognition that “a public can only achieve enlightenment slowly” (54–55). The process of enlightenment was, for Kant, made possible by the pairing of “freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all manners” (55) with the presence of a political authority that allowed for public disagreement while maintaining order (59). Together, Kant thought that the forces of critical inquiry and civic order would “gradually react upon the mentality of the people, who thus gradually become increasingly able to act freely” (59). That he thought in similar ways about education more narrowly defined is clear in his *On Education* (2003 [1803]), where Kant wrote that:

The prospect of a *theory of education* is a glorious ideal, and it matters little if we are not able to realise it at once. . . . [For] education is an art which can only become perfect through the practice of many generations. Each generation, provided with the knowledge of the foregoing one, is able more and more to bring about an education which shall develop man’s natural gifts in their due proportion and in relation to their end, and thus advance the whole human race towards its destiny. (8–11)

If Kant found himself living in an “age of enlightenment,” it seems there were to be many more such ages. So long as people were educated well, were free to express themselves and their views, were capable of critical and independent thought, and were willing to change their minds when new information or arguments emerged, then the process of enlightenment would continue. In short, Kant recognized that the discussions and disagreements necessary to promote collective enlightenment were both social and intergenerational.

Conclusion

What, then, should we make of the Enlightenment? What might its legacy be for our own thinking about education and critical thinking today?

First, we should recognize not only that doubt and skepticism were as important to the Enlightenment as “reason” was, but also that skepticism helped to shape what Enlightenment thinkers meant by reason and by critical inquiry. As a result, reason’s role in promoting enlightenment lay at least as much in its power to unsettle and to dissolve, as it did in its power to produce or assure knowledge; it was for this reason that Diderot thought philosophical work required “boldness of mind,” for it must “examine and stir up everything, without exception and without caution” (Diderot 2002 [1755], 644a).

Second, ideas about education were always also ideas about society and about possible collective futures. The formative influence attributed to education by Enlightenment thinkers applied to collectives as well as individuals, injecting a sense of urgency and of “possibilism” into debates about the social, sexual, political and legal orders of the early modern period. It both fed upon and nurtured an (incomplete and imperfect) revolution in how we think about human beings and social hierarchies, and introduced a conceptual schism between the apparent decrees of nature and nurture. The sense that the character of both individuals and of societies could be influenced—and even transformed—through social or institutional reforms gave political authorities, cultural critics, and would-be revolutionaries an opportunity to reimagine relations and norms that had once seemed immutable.

Third, these possibilities engendered as much uncertainty and ambivalence as they did reformist enthusiasm. In retrospect, we often turn to the Enlightenment as a point of origin for the ideas that underlay a modern system of universal, compulsory, national, and democratic education. But Enlightenment thinkers were by no means univocal in advocating such a system, either in principle or in practice. The Enlightenment should, on this point and many others as well, be seen as more akin to a “laboratory” than a movement (Ferrone 2015, xi). Recognizing this allows us to recognize further that the debates of the Enlightenment included—and benefited from—the work of many figures who would not have considered themselves members of the “family” of *philosophes* described by Peter Gay (1967, 4), and certainly not devotees of the “Radical Enlightenment” described by Jonathan Israel (2010). Reason and religion, knowledge and faith, materialism and mysticism, “mechanical philosophy” and millenarianism: these categories interacted more dynamically and more dialectically than is suggested by historical narratives that pit Enlightenment philosophy against the foil of superstition or obscurantism (Matytsin and Edelstein 2018). The Enlightenment did not stem, as is often supposed, from a pitched battle between two clearly defined and mutually exclusive

campus. Rather, it resulted from the entanglement of different intellectual traditions and concerns, and from the ensuing attempt to determine which ideas and approaches were tenable, and which were not.

Fourth, this laboratory was experimenting with ways of living as well as ways of thinking. Among the Enlightenment's greatest achievements was to spread the idea that new ways of thinking should give rise to new ways of living and, conversely, that new ways of living might incubate new ways of thinking. This is also the point on which ideas about education and about living an "enlightened life" bear most directly on our own attempts to integrate a robust form of critical thinking into twenty-first century pedagogy. As we engage in healthy debates over curricula, assessment, the integration of new technologies into education at various levels, and about institutional and classroom practices, it is an important reminder that the routines we devise and the practices we embrace should serve an emulative as well as instructive function. We are not only disseminating knowledge or helping students to develop skills, but also cultivating ways of "thinking and seeing." Both they and we must remain at once ambitious and skeptical, open-minded and critical, iconoclastic and humble.

This is particularly important as we think (and rethink) how our approach to teaching prepares students for life outside the classroom—and, more important still: outside of a discipline or profession. Like the thinkers of the eighteenth century, we face a social, scientific, and cultural milieu in which information (and misinformation) is produced, disseminated, digested, and discarded in new ways and at apparently ever-increasing speeds. Condorcet was by no means alone in thinking that the evolution of print technologies and the expansion of literacy would usher in a more peaceful, prosperous, and "enlightened" age for mankind, and our own "digital age" has apostles of the very same sort. These technologies present challenges as well as opportunities though, and we must follow Condorcet in recognizing that education should prepare citizens not just "to understand the truths presented to them," but to "reject the errors intended to victimize them" (1804, 8). Critical thinking in the twenty first century will similarly have to teach citizens not just how to use the digital and communications technologies that seem to be reshaping so many parts of our lives, but how to think about those technologies, how to maintain one's independence of mind amidst so many cacophonous voices and competing authorities, and how to distinguish between compelling and specious claims. As Evgeny Morozov (2013) reminds us, enthusiasts may "imagine" that the expanding reach of technology will give us a "more vibrant and responsible civic life, [but] this is hardly a foregone conclusion" (63).

Finally, and as we try to turn from retrospective survey to future-oriented action, we find that both the self-reflective cosmopolitanism of Hume and Montesquieu, and the patient but critical culture of discussion

upon which Condorcet and Kant based their faith in progress, suggest some conceptual and practical concerns that we might bear in mind. Along with Bacon, Descartes, Locke, and others, they offer us models for scrutinizing sources or evidence, encountering and engaging with opposing arguments, and articulating why it matters that we think clearly, critically, and publicly. And they also offer us an opportunity, as we recognize the *philosophes'* blind-spots, hypocrisies, complacencies—and sometimes misplaced optimism—to face squarely the fact that we certainly suffer many of those same shortcomings in our own lives and work, both individually and as a society. Again, it is worth recalling that the Enlightenment stemmed from a desire to eliminate errors born of complacency and “immaturity”—not from a fetishization of reason as such—and committing ourselves to a similarly ambitious form of self-scrutiny.

In so doing, we find that the Enlightenment model of critical thinking rests not just on the scrupulous application of particular methods to complex problems (though that may sometimes be useful), but on the liberal virtues of broad-minded curiosity, methodological rigor, analytic skepticism, critical inquiry and, above all, intellectual honesty. In short, we find that the Enlightenment's legacy in education is not a method or a motto, but an experiment in how the critical and collective pursuit of useful knowledge might reform or remake human society.

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