BEYOND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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WHEN SOMEONE ASKED Chou En-lai what he thought of the Enlightenment, he is said to have replied, "It's too soon to tell." The wily old Communist was right. The intellectual Big Bang of the eighteenth century, which toppled the old Christian order and laid the foundations of modernity, was still reverberating in the mid-twentieth, and the outcome of many of the major trends emerging from it was still unclear.

It was far from certain, for one thing, which of the two rival politico-economic systems spawned by the Enlightenment--the one that was based on the individual, or the one that rested its hopes on the state--would prevail in their mortal struggle. Even the triumph of science was incomplete, and hence perhaps insecure, since major questions in that great field remained unanswered and (at least for the time being) unanswerable.

But now another half century has passed, and it is becoming possible to draw some of those conclusions about the Enlightenment that Chou En-lai cautiously postponed. The struggle between social systems based on totalitarianism and on individual freedom has ended in spectacular victory for the latter. More surprisingly, perhaps, the ongoing investigations of science seem, as the twentieth century draws to its close, to be encountering obstacles of a different and more intractable order than any previously seen. It begins to appear that some major questions may be beyond scientific resolution forever.

Most astonishing of all, even the design of the relatively "benign" Enlightenment tradition, based on free political and economic institutions, is under attack as inadequate for humanity's deepest needs. The attacks come from every point of the compass: from Islam and the Asian world in general, questioning the universal applicability of individualist solutions; from such sophisticated students of Burke's and Calhoun's traditionalism as Eugene Genovese, warning against using the free market as a source of values; from deconstructionists who challenge the whole rational framework of Western thought; from communitarians, seeking to ground society in an entirely new concept of virtue. Last, but far from least, the churches, which the Enlightenment never quite managed to extinguish, let alone replace, have begun reformulating what they believe to be timeless truths in terms that are both intelligible and appealing to modern man. It is time, then, to take another look at the Enlightenment--and even to ask whether what is now widely referred to as "the failure of the Enlightenment project" was merely the result of remediable errors, or was foreordained by the limitations of the Enlightenment's own assumptions.

Those were the topics of two conferences held by the Claremont Institute in 1991 and 1992 respectively. In the long and honorable tradition of academic publications, the papers

given at these conferences are only now appearing in book form, as a single volume: The Ambiguous Legacy of the Enlightenment (1995). They constitute a milestone in the study of that fascinating era and its consequences.

Eighteen political scientists addressed the first conference (which focused on the legacy of the Enlightenment), and certain conventional distinctions were quickly drawn. In particular, stress was laid on the differences between these "Continental Enlightenment," which spawned the totalitarian systems that developed during the nineteenth century and have bedeviled the twentieth, and the "shallower" Enlightenment, which took root in England and Scotland and scored some of its most brilliant successes in Britain's American colonies.

Professor Gerhart Niemeyer of Notre Dame identified the central characteristic of the Enlightenment as a "revolutionary concept of reason," which "replaced faith with certainty, dogma with process"--the process being "the acquisitive pursuit of truth." Niemeyer noted that, in taking this turn, the eighteenth century seemed "bent not so much on knowing reality but on knowing and admiring the human mind." Where this led "did not become fully articulate until the next century, when its postulate, the superman, was openly and formally proclaimed." This postulate, in turn, became linked to a new concept of history, in which history "assumed a self-generating process of inexorable progress, an inevitable upward movement of mankind, and the absolute elimination of every kind of evil in the course of things." With that, the way toward ideology lay open.

"Ideology, the fallacious immanentization of divine salvation, eventually generated armed mass movements that threw the entire globe into convulsions." The bold speculations of the eighteenth-centuryphilosophes bore malignant fruit indeed: "We have lived," Niemeyer concluded, "through the movement of the 'Third Reich,' through that of the 'class-less society,' through the 'end of the illusion,' an entire century of organized, celebrated, soul-lifting enterprises of self-salvation. We have reaped nothing that looked like salvation, only destruction, convulsions, annihilations, alienations, oblivions, separations, and loss of common bonds of all kinds."

Charles Kesler, professor and Director of the Henry Salvatori Center at Claremont McKenna College, cautioned, however, that the Continental Enlightenment "is not the Enlightenment. . . . The land of Bacon, Newton, and Locke, of the [English] Bill of Rights, the Toleration Act, and parliamentary government, was for most of the eighteenth century the very model of enlightened intellectual and political life. . . . The difference is that the English illuminati won, bloodlessly, almost everything they contended for. . . . What is more, the non-radical elements of the English Enlightenment were more plentiful and influential than in France."

Turning to the Enlightenment as it manifested itself in America, Kesler noted that "[t]he English Enlightenment had found its public support for moderation in British constitutional tradition. . . . But in America the ground of moderation is the same as the

ground of justice, 'the laws of nature and of nature's God.'. . . [T]he American Enlightenment, particularly in its public manifestations, remained faithful both to the Biblical God's moral commandments and to His essence, i.e., to the distinction between man and God."

In his paper on "America's Place in the Enlightenment," Ralph Lerner of the Committee on Social Thought of the University of Chicago noted the essential moderation of the American version of the Enlightenment: "Here was no revolution devouring its own children (once the Loyalists were removed from the scene). Here failed constitutions were replaced without severing a single head." in part, perhaps, as a result, "It is arguable that the constitutions of government erected by the generation of American revolutionaries are the preeminent, perhaps the only, great lasting political achievement of Enlightenment philosophy."

But if "the Enlightenment project" must be assessed as, on balance, a failure, it doesn't necessarily follow that any future attempt to base a world view on a strictly rational and wholly secular (or in other words purely scientific) concept of reality must also fail. Perhaps mankind can learn from the Enlightenment's mistakes, and succeed at last where it failed. That speculation gave rise to the inquiry that inspired the second Claremont conference: Does science have inherent limitations that must forever debar it from providing a totally satisfactory description of reality and its significance (if any)?

Six authorities addressed this question from their various perspectives. Edward Teller, now at the Hoover Institution, spoke vividly of the immense "acceleration in science, even during my own very limited--but still long--life-time. But," he added, "in another sense, I see, I believe, I strongly assert, not the limits but the limitations of science."

The most ambitious attempt to defend a rigorously reductive scientific view of the universe, and indeed to derive values from it, was made by Henry Pierce Stapp, a senior staff physicist at Berkeley's Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. Stapp noted that quantum mechanics rejected the Cartesian concept of a mind/matter dualism, seeing each individual "as a coherent whole, with his consciousness an integral part of the world described by physics." On this new basis, Werner Heisenberg constructed "a model of objective reality" in which nature consisted of two logically inseparable parts: "the two parts of the wave-particle duality."

Stapp acknowledged that "The aspects of nature that are represented as 'choice' and 'actualization' could, if one wishes to do so, be named 'God.'" But such a God would simply be another name "for certain aspects of the process of nature itself: namely, those aspects that are not completely described in the scientific description but are represented in that description by the element of chance." Stapp concluded by pointing out that "all of the possible future courses of world events are objectively present right now, although only in a shadowy 'unactualized' potential form. . . . [Therefore] it would be possible in principle to assign, perhaps in accordance with some aesthetic criterion, 'weights' to these

various future possibilities, and to have these weighted possibilities act back, and determine the weights associated with the earlier actual events. . . . Of course, Occam's razor rules out of science any such elaboration of the dynamics if the present unornamented blind-chance ontology explains all of the data just as well. Yet the existence of such statistical enhancements of aesthetically elevated futures would, at least on the simple face of it, make more immediately intelligible the emergence of the form of the world we see about us . . . ."

Leon Kass, of the Committee on Social Thought of the University of Chicago, was far less sure that science "explains all of the data." Speaking of biology (his own specialty), he asked, "Does biology today, defined as the science of life, do justice to the beings that live, to the plants and animals that come-to-be and pass away, one by one, and that reproduce themselves, after their kind? . . . Does [it] do justice to human life, which is always lived in formed lives, bioi, shaped not only by genetics and physiology but by human aspirations, choices, and beliefs, and by cultural institutions, practices, and norms? Does biology--can biology--teach us anything important about the nature of human life or the manner in which it might best be lived?"

While paying his respects to the achievements of modern medicine, Kass noted that "these benefits are not unmixed: we are beginning to notice that power over nature is power that can be restricted and withheld from some, misused and abused by others; that even the benevolent uses of humanitarian technologies often have serious unintended and undesired consequences. . . .

Worse, the scientific teachings themselves challenge and embarrass the existing pre-scientific or religious notions of better and worse, and of human life more generally, on the basis of which we have made--and still make--moral judgments, on the basis of which we have lived--and still live--our lives."

Noting the "disquieting disjunction between the vibrant living world we live in and enjoy as human beings and the limited, artificial, lifeless, objectified representation of that world we learn from modern biology," Kass argued that "knowledge permitting prediction and (some) control over biological events has been purchased at the cost of deep ignorance, not to say misunderstanding, of living beings, ourselves included."

Kass was also critical of the materialistic character of modern biology ("Not the materials as such, but the materials as organized are efficacious--and the organization or form is, by definition, immaterial"), and of its mechanistic quality ("The mechanical account leaves no room for spontaneity of self-initiated action"). More broadly, he dismissed the whole "non-teleological" character of modern biology as "not true to life. . . . [L]iving things must be regarded as purposive beings, as beings that cannot even be looked at, much less properly described or fully understood, without teleological notions."

Father Stanley Jaki, a Templeton Prizewinner who holds doctorates in both sacred

theology and physics, made the same point in another way, by proposing "to speak of the mind, or soul, as a subject beyond physics." He began by noting that "No physicist has ever observed causality. Physicists merely observe the succession of events, as all nonphysicists do. Only by taking recourse to metaphysics, tacitly or not, can physicists and nonphysicists alike take this or that succession of events for causal interaction."

Similarly, "No biologist has even seen a species. The term 'species' is a generalization. . . . The truth of biological evolution . . . rests ultimately on generalizations and inferences that cannot be accounted for unless one is ready to take metaphysics into account. . . . Life is not seen with physical eyes alone, unless those eyes are supplemented with the vision of the mind. No biologist, contemptuous of metaphysics, can claim, if he is consistent, that he has observed life, let alone its evolution. . . . Metaphysics is present in each and every human work."

Jaki asserted that "much talk is wasted on the ability of science to penetrate billions of years into the past of the universe, as if astronomers could ever spot the moment of creation. Creation out of nothing, the only kind of creation worth speaking of, is by definition unobservable. The view of Aquinas, that one can only know from revelation that the universe had a beginning, remains unobjectionable from the viewpoint of science."

But "when the universe is used as a springboard toward God," Jaki goes on, "science can be enormously supportive. . . . What science cannot do today, it may do tomorrow or the day after. Any quantitatively or empirically stated problem can have its answer in science, even if that science is not yet known. In that sense there is nothing beyond science. One is, however, pushed beyond science as soon as one faces basic questions about existence and knowledge. One indeed has to go beyond science in order to have science itself."

A third conference in the Claremont series, held in 1992, sought to probe the directions in which mankind might turn in the twenty-first century, if the Enlightenment project has in fact failed and science is indeed permanently incapable of answering certain fundamental questions. It is hoped that a separate volume will be published dealing with that conference, which predictably found the quest a difficult one. Meanwhile, the first two conferences (whose riches can only be suggested by the brief summaries of several of the papers offered above) mark a serious effort to break free of the limitations of Enlightenment thought in general and of science in particular, as an essential first step toward a new and more profound understanding of reality.

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