

THE ROADS TO MODERNITY:

THE BRITISH, FRENCH, AND AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENTS

Gertrude Himmelfarb, the author of this text, is an emeritus professor of history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.¹ She received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1950, writing her dissertation on the 19th century English historian Lord Acton. Her historical interests primarily center on 19th century Victorian-era England, whose social, political, and moral landscape she views as highly relevant for wisely confronting “the problems that haunt the modern world.”² In 1942 she married Irving Kristol (d. 2009), an influential writer on social and political issues, who has sometimes been referred to as the “Godfather of Neoconservatism.” According to Adam Bernstein, Kristol and Himmelfarb, “along with a group of sociologists, historians, and academics . . . emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s as prominent critics of welfare programs, racial preferences, tax policy, moral relativism and countercultural social upheavals that they thought were contributing to America’s cultural and social decay.”³ This is an important point, for many of Himmelfarb’s texts, including *The Roads to Modernity*, are explicitly intended to illumine *more* than the particular historical period they are covering; they are also intended as a contemporary challenge to what Himmelfarb views as some of the most pressing social, moral, and political ills of our own day and age. Indeed, it is probably for this reason that, while critics almost universally acknowledge the power and clarity

¹ I have gleaned the biographical information that follows from Oz Frankel, “Gertrude Himmelfarb,” *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* (March 2009). <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/himmelfarb-gertrude> (accessed October 14, 2010).

² Ibid.

³ Adam Bernstein, “Editor was Godfather of Neoconservatism,” *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/18/AR2009091803728.html> (accessed October 14, 2010).

of Himmelfarb's prose, their responses to her work typically tend to be "colored" by their own "political leanings."⁴

In the "Preface" to the present work, Himmelfarb explains to us why she is here engaged in a work of historical scholarship dealing primarily with the eighteenth (instead of nineteenth) century. It all began, she tells us, with two invitations to deliver papers at scholarly meetings. In the first, a colloquium on the Enlightenment presided over by the Pope, she was asked to address the issue of "poverty and the Enlightenment."⁵ In researching this topic, she became convinced of an even greater "dichotomy between the British and French Enlightenments" than she had previously anticipated (x). In the second, a lecture at the British Academy, she expanded her developing ideas about these "Enlightenments" to include "the larger social and philosophical issues that separated the two countries" (x). Finally, she says, she expanded her research still more to include the American Enlightenment. Since Himmelfarb sees each of these "Enlightenments" as unique in certain respects, she has subtitled her text, "The British, French, and American Enlightenments."

Prologue

In her opening paragraph, Himmelfarb claims that the Enlightenment has been hijacked—by uncritical admirers, postmodernist deniers, and especially the unscrupulous French! Her goal, therefore, is "to reclaim the Enlightenment" from the ne'er do-wells just mentioned and "restore it" to the British "who helped create it" and have yet to be appropriately recognized for this fact (3). Needless to say, since one can hardly speak of the Enlightenment without mentioning France, Himmelfarb's goal is quite ambitious. Indeed, she herself points out

⁴ "Himmelfarb, Gertrude – Introduction," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter, vol. 202. Gale Cengage, 2005, <http://www.enotes.com/contemporary-literary-criticism/himmelfarb-gertrude> (accessed October 14, 2010).

⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Vintage, 2005), x. *Please note: all future citations of this text will occur in parentheses in the body of the essay.*

that to push the British Enlightenment out onto “center stage, is to redefine the very idea of Enlightenment” (5). The key element of Himmelfarb’s redefinition is the notion of “virtue” (5-6). Of course, the British moral philosophers did not reject the value of reason (the key element in the French definition of “Enlightenment”), but they did assign it a role “secondary” to that of virtue (and particularly the “social virtues”) (6). Thus, she says, to maintain the primacy of the British Enlightenment “is to direct attention to a subject not usually associated with the Enlightenment, that is, the social ethic explicit or implicit in each of these Enlightenments” (6).

But Himmelfarb’s thesis is more radical still. For by redefining the Enlightenment in this way, she also wants to expand it “to include thinkers and actors not normally identified with it,” such as Edmund Burke and John Wesley. Because of this, she freely admits that she is “engaged in a doubly revisionist exercise, making the Enlightenment more British and making the British Enlightenment more inclusive” (6). As we will see, the vast majority of Himmelfarb’s text is devoted to an examination (and appreciation) of the British Enlightenment. Although she does not have the same hostility toward the American Enlightenment that she does for the French (indeed, she actually appreciates the American Enlightenment), she nonetheless admits near the end of her Prologue that, in the present work, the French and American Enlightenments serve “as foils for the British” (20).

The British Enlightenment: The Sociology of Virtue

“Social Affections” and Religious Dispositions

Himmelfarb begins her discussion of the British Enlightenment by examining British moral philosophy and the prevailing idea of an innate (or at least common) “moral sense” shared by all mankind. She notes the irony in the French admiration for English thinkers like Isaac Newton and John Locke, while the English themselves, while appreciating the great accomplishments of both men, tended to keep a more respectful distance from some of their views (25). For example, John Locke was adamant in his rejection of the notion of innate ideas, believing the mind to be “a tabula rasa, to be filled by sensations and experiences” (26). Such a

view, Himmelfarb suggests, was going radically “against the grain” of eighteenth-century English moral philosophy. In support of this view, she cites numerous contemporaries of Locke who firmly believed in an innate (or at least “common”) moral sense of one sort or another.

For example, the Earl of Shaftesbury, in his much-acclaimed essay, “An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit,” argued (contrary to Locke) that man’s “moral sense,” or “sense of right and wrong,” was “implanted in our nature” (27). Furthermore, he argued that this “moral sense” revealed itself particularly in our “social affections,” those affections which desired and sought the common good of all mankind (28). Although there were certainly voices of protest raised against such notions, such as Bernard Mandeville’s work, *The Fable of the Bees*, these works were almost universally condemned (31). Although the idea of an innate (or common) moral sense went under a variety of labels, Himmelfarb observes that it “was the basis of the social ethic that informed British philosophical and moral discourse for the whole of the eighteenth century” (33).

Himmelfarb also notes that, among the majority of British moral philosophers, reason and religion were viewed as valuable mainly insofar as they served to help and support man’s innate moral sense (38). Thus, while one does not observe in Britain the sort of warfare between reason and religion that one finds among the eighteenth century French *philosophes*, one does find the view that religion is important primarily in a utilitarian sense (e.g. insofar as it promotes the public good) (38-44).

Political Economy and Moral Sentiments

This chapter focuses on the two great works of Adam Smith: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). Although some interpreters have held that the two books are essentially at odds with one another, Himmelfarb believes that, properly understood, they are perfectly consistent. She writes, “Smith’s economics reflected the eminently modern philosophy that he and his contemporaries were propounding under the name of ‘moral philosophy’” (55). This observation, of course, is

entirely consistent with Himmelfarb's main purpose in writing this book: to restore the British Enlightenment, along with its social ethic centered on the notion of "virtue," to the place of primacy among the various Enlightenments.

In support of her view that Smith's two great works are consistent, Himmelfarb cites a number of lines of evidence. She points to the many "moral imperatives" in Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (56). She observes how both books contain the famous metaphor of "the invisible hand" (57). Although recognizing that this notion was criticized from a moral perspective because of its seeming approval of self-interest, Himmelfarb points out that, for Smith, while self-interest "was not as lofty as benevolence . . . in the marketplace at least it was more reliable and practical—and moral as well" (57). In addition, she says, Smith was convinced that by relying on the power of the free market, the lot of all men (including the poor, who were the largest part of the nation) would be greatly improved (59). And finally, she notes, he defied "received wisdom" by advocating higher wages for the working poor (60-1), proposed a system of state-sponsored education for their children (63), and held that all men share a common human nature and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect (68-9).

Edmund Burke's Enlightenment

In this chapter Himmelfarb takes a minority view among historians and gives Edmund Burke Enlightenment status (71-2). She observes that Burke was a disciple of Adam Smith (an unquestioned member of the Enlightenment) and argued publicly, in speech and in print, for many of the same economic principles expressed in Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (71-3). In addition, Burke shared many of Smith's moral sentiments, arguing for similar notions in his *Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, published before Smith's work (75-6).

A man of great moral courage and passion, Burke stood up for "the rights of man" even when it was unpopular to do so. This is particularly evident in the positions he took on India and America, defending both against what he perceived as an oppressive British imperialism that was violating basic human liberties (78-82). This has led some to see an

inconsistency in Burke, in light of his very different response to the French Revolution (84). But Burke regarded the French Revolution not as a political revolution, but a moral one—and this he warned strenuously (and even prophetically) against (91-2). According to Himmelfarb, “The moral philosophers posited a moral sentiment in man as the basis of the social virtues. Burke took this philosophy a step further, by making the ‘sentiments . . . and moral opinions’ of men the basis of society itself, and, ultimately, of the polity as well” (92). It is for reasons such as these that Himmelfarb awards Burke a prominent place in the British Enlightenment.

Radical Dissenters

In this chapter Himmelfarb deals with the radical dissenters: Richard Price, Joseph Priestly, Thomas Paine, and William Godwin (93). Each of these men, while differing among themselves, held quite radical political and religious views (95-6). Although Price, Priestly, and Paine “all professed to be disciples” of Adam Smith, their distrust (and disregard) of government go far beyond Smith’s own views (97-9). Even stranger than their political views, however, were their religious views. In the *Age of Reason*, Paine lashed out against the Bible and Christianity (103). Priestly, while agreeing with Paine’s rejection of the Trinity and the deity of Christ, strongly affirmed “the Bible as the product of divine revelation” (103). In addition, both he and Price believed in a literal and imminent return of Christ to establish his kingdom on earth (103-05). The strange combination of orthodox and heretical beliefs is as baffling as it is fascinating.

Like Price and Priestly, observes Himmelfarb, “William Godwin also looked forward to a millennium,” but for him it was to be a “thoroughly secular” affair (105). An “avowed atheist,” he proposed abolishing private property, doing away with governmental and social institutions (including marriage and the family), and even ridding the world of concerts and plays (106)! In Godwin’s view, this was the only way for mankind to become “thoroughly rational” and, hence, “virtuous, free, and equal” (106-07). Eventually marriage, family, and financial obligations helped disabuse Godwin (at least in part) of his rather odd utopian fantasies (109-12). And with him, “the radical Enlightenment in Britain” came to an end (115).

Methodism: "A Social Religion"

It is initially a bit strange, even for me, to think of Methodism as an "Enlightenment" movement. However, if we keep in mind that it is Himmelfarb's intention to redefine the very notion of the British Enlightenment in terms of "virtue" and "social ethics," then one can hardly think of a better, or more illustrious, candidate for Enlightenment status than that of Methodism!

In the first place, as the American historian Bernard Semmel pointed out, "the Methodists were very much in the Enlightenment tradition" when one considers their views on religious toleration (119). Even more important, however, was the incredible social impact of Methodism. Under John Wesley's watchful eye, the Methodists worked tirelessly preaching the gospel, caring for the poor, establishing hospitals, orphanages, schools and libraries, and diligently opposing the slave trade (120-23). Finally, they helped give birth to the Evangelical movement, which later helped "inspire the 'Moral Reformation' and philanthropic movements that were so distinctive a part of the British Enlightenment" (130).

"The Age of Benevolence"

The eighteenth century British Enlightenment gave birth to such a host of "reform movements and philanthropic enterprises" that the Evangelical writer Hannah More was led to describe it as "the Age of Benevolence" (131). "Societies" and "movements" were founded for virtually "every kind of worthy purpose" imaginable (133). Of particular interest was the founding of the Sunday School movement. "Started by a society consisting of both Anglicans and Dissenters, the Sunday Schools had the support of Methodists and Evangelicals as well" (141). Not only did these schools help educate the poor, they also contributed powerfully to social cohesion and a "communal spirit" among the working-classes (142). Indeed, this may have helped contribute to the formation of various "societies" by the poor themselves, specifically designed to support and help one another in times of injury or distress (143). Although this age, like any other, certainly had its faults, it seems nonetheless appropriate that Himmelfarb concludes this section by contrasting the British "Age of Benevolence" with the

French “Age of Reason,” observing that if “Benevolence was a more modest virtue than Reason,” it was also “perhaps a more humane one” (146).

The French Enlightenment: The Ideology of Reason

Of the three Enlightenments studied in this book, Himmelfarb is least impressed with the French version—and for good reason, it seems to me. The *philosophes*, who were primarily responsible for bringing about the French Enlightenment, are contrasted from the very beginning with their English and American counterparts. In England—and even more so in America—there was a close working relationship between the political philosophers and theorizers and those responsible for the practical affairs of actually governing the nation. In France, however, this was not the case. The unfortunate result, as one can easily imagine, was that the *philosophes* were left to theorize without any regard for “how their ideas might be translated into reality” (149-50).

Himmelfarb subtitles this chapter, “The Ideology of Reason,” for “reason,” she observes “served almost as a mantra” for the high-minded *philosophes* (with the exception of both Montesquieu and Rousseau) (151). Reason was viewed as virtually the antithesis of religion. Indeed, reason (for the *philosophes*) assumed something like the status of a religion. An article in the *Encyclopédie* declared, “Reason is to the philosopher what grace is to the Christian. Grace moves the Christian to act, reason moves the philosopher” (152). With very few exceptions, the *philosophes* were extremely hostile to all institutionalized religion, especially Judaism and Christianity (152-8).

One of the ways in which this reverence for reason worked itself out in the political thought of the *philosophes* can be seen in their thinking about “enlightened despotism” and the “general will” (163-9). According to Himmelfarb, “Enlightened despotism was an attempt to realize—to enthrone, as it were—reason as embodied in the person of an enlightened monarch” (163). The theory of the general will was virtually identical to this. However, whereas enlightened despotism was concerned with the rule of reason through something like a philosopher-king, the notion of the general will saw this rule expressed through the collective

will of the human race (167-8). Unfortunately, having rejected the Christian doctrine of sin, the *philosophes* had to find out the hard way that neither monarchs nor humanity in general could always be counted on to act in accordance with the dictates of reason, wisdom, justice, or love (164-9).

Indeed, the *philosophes* themselves could not be counted upon to do so. One of the key differences between the French “Age of Reason” and the British “Age of Benevolence” can be seen in the way in which the common people were depicted by the educated elite in both countries. As a general rule, the French *philosophes* tended to look down their noses at the common people, believing them to be wicked, stupid, lazy and irrational (177). By contrast, “the moral sense and common sense that the British attributed to all individuals gave to all people, including the common people, a common humanity and a common fund of moral and social obligations” (170). The results of these two attitudes were quite astonishing. We’ve already noted the many philanthropic and humanitarian movements which Britain produced. In France, however, with just a few notable exceptions, this sort of work was carried on solely by the Catholic church—and with far less energy and vigor than was to be found in Britain. Himmelfarb observes that “just as there was no “Age of Reason” in Britain, so there was no “Age of Benevolence” in France” (181).

The misanthropic and anti-clerical seeds which were sown in the French Enlightenment by the *philosophes* may have contributed in various ways to both the French Revolution and the Terror (181-7). Although the most prominent *philosophes* had died before the Revolution commenced, Himmelfarb doubts that they would have been entirely satisfied with the results (182). While they would doubtless have rejoiced at the disestablishment of the church, they would likely have been appalled at some of its effects (e.g. the elimination of church-run charities and schools with “nothing to replace them”) (182). Of course, Himmelfarb is quick to point out that “one cannot fairly saddle the Enlightenment with responsibility for all the deeds, or misdeeds, of the Revolution” (183). All the same, however, “there were unmistakable echoes of the *philosophes*”— of Rousseau in particular—“at every stage” of the journey (183).

The American Enlightenment: The Politics of Liberty

Liberty, it seems, was at the forefront of the American consciousness from the time “that many of the first settlers came to America” (191). Initially motivated (at least in many cases) by a desire for religious liberty, the colonists soon found themselves thirsting for political liberty as well (191). Having declared their independence from Great Britain, and having subsequently purchased it on the battlefield, they then set about the task of framing what became the U. S. Constitution. Writing in support of this document, and against the Anti-Federalists, “the Federalists defended the essential principle of the Constitution: a strong central government with a due regard for the rights and liberties of both individuals and the states” (194). The American Enlightenment, as Himmelfarb presents it, was all about “the politics of liberty.”

But the “politics of liberty,” she also notes, “was, in a sense, a corollary of the ‘sociology of virtue’” (198). Federalists and Anti-Federalists wrestled with one another over these issues, both fearing that the inherent weakness of human nature could soon endanger the new republic (198-201). Indeed, this is one of reasons that the Federalists were “so insistent upon the separation of powers and checks and balances” (201). They fully realized that, human nature being what it is, the separation of governing powers was an absolutely critical element in curtailing “the abuses of government” (202). But a virtuous people was equally important, for the people would be responsible for electing their governing representatives. But if a virtuous people did not elect virtuous representatives, then, noted Madison, “No theoretical checks, no form of government, can render us secure” (203). It was essential that liberty and virtue go hand in hand.

In America, the strongest force for uniting liberty with virtue was that of religion. Unlike France, Tocqueville observed, where religion and liberty seemed generally to have an adversarial relationship, in America they were “united intimately with one another” (205). Although the First Amendment prohibited Congress from establishing a state church, it also guaranteed the freedom of religion for all America’s citizens. As a result, religion flourished in the new republic and was generally viewed as offering a strong incentive to virtue and morality (210-11). Although many of the Founders seem to have had “a utilitarian or functional view of

religion, valuing it as a social and political asset,” Himmelfarb suggests that such a view need not be seen as evidence of a demeaning attitude toward religion (211). After all, she says, “to look upon religion as the ultimate source of morality, and hence of a good society and sound polity pays religion—and God—the great tribute of being essential to the welfare of mankind” (211).

Not only was religion seen as an incentive to public virtue and morality, however, it was also viewed (again, contra France) as being entirely compatible with “reason, science, and the life of the mind in general” (212). As evidence, Himmelfarb discusses a number of important American intellectuals who were not only interested in science and philosophy, but who were also deeply religious (though not necessarily Christian). Along these lines, she mentions Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, John Witherspoon, Ezra Stiles, Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush (212-15). She also mentions the founding of the American Philosophical Society (by Ben Franklin in 1744) and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (by John Adams in 1780). She notes how both of these learned societies were filled with “clergymen of every denomination as well as scientists, doctors, and prominent public figures” (215).

Himmelfarb concludes this chapter by discussing the profound moral issues which Americans were forced to confront regarding their relationships with the Indians and slaves (219-225). In both cases it is clear that many Americans (including those in positions of leadership) had a very uneasy conscience about how these peoples were being treated. Because of the bloodshed committed by both sides, however, the Indian question appears to have generated less anxiety and soul-searching. Nevertheless, even here we read of Washington appealing to the American people “to behave honorably to the Indians” (221). And John Jay warned of “dire consequences” if whites did not cease “murdering Indians in cold blood for nothing else but their land” (221).

The question of slavery, however, was even more difficult “than that of the Indians” (221). Some, such as Quakers and Methodists, advocated the complete “abolition of slavery” (221). Most, however, while seeing slavery as a great moral evil, nonetheless believed “that the

‘inconvenience’ of living without slaves was so great as to make abolition impractical” (222). The Founders, of course, recognized that the Constitution fell woefully short of the Declaration of Independence in this regard. How, for example, if “all men are created equal,” could five slaves be regarded as the equivalent of three white men (222)? Of course, ultimately slavery was abolished in America, but this did not take place until after the Civil War, a war that was, in Himmelfarb’s estimation, perhaps “the most cataclysmic event in American history” (225). All the same, slavery was abolished. And this, Himmelfarb thinks, offers potent testimony to the power and persistence of the “politics of liberty” (225).

Epilogue

Himmelfarb continues her discussion of America in the Epilogue—but it is no longer the America of the past that she is interested in, but that of the present. Unlike the British and French Enlightenments, which are now primarily of interest only to historians, the American Enlightenment, Himmelfarb tells us, is still “alive and well” (227). Not only has America preserved its original emphasis on the “politics of liberty,” it has also perpetuated the “sociology of virtue” that had previously characterized the British Enlightenment (232-33). Indeed, compared with Britain, France, or any other European country, the United States today is far more religious and moralistic (233). Although in Himmelfarb’s estimation the Enlightenment spirit may still be active only in America, she nonetheless concludes by reminding us that we are all “still floundering in the verities and fallacies, the assumptions and convictions, about human nature, society, and the polity that exercised the British moral philosophers, the French *philosophes*, and the American Founders” (235).