

CHAPTER I
Progress and the Enlightenment's
Two Conflicting Ways of
Improving the World

That notions concerning “progress,” “improvement of society,” and what one now-forgotten radical-minded novelist of the 1790s termed the “amelioration of the state of mankind” were central to the Enlightenment is scarcely surprising.¹ Four out of six of the Enlightenment’s philosophical founding figures—Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Bayle—held that most people’s ideas about the most fundamental questions are wildly wrong and that were it possible to improve men’s ideas about the world and about the structure of reality, this, in itself, would significantly improve human existence. For it would make society safer and more stable (Hobbes’s main concern), more tolerant (Bayle’s main concern), more rational in its approach to disasters and health problems

(one of Descartes' aims), and also freer and more accepting of the dissenting individual.

All four of these philosophical founders shared in generating this “revolutionary” tendency in Western modernity and hence in forging the dramatically new way of viewing the world that began with them and with the more general cultural changes of the Enlightenment era. Spinoza, however, with his one-substance doctrine—that body and soul, matter and mind are not distinct substances but rather one single substance viewed under different aspects—extends this “revolutionary” tendency appreciably further metaphysically, politically, and as regards man's highest good than do Descartes, Hobbes, or Bayle. On Spinoza's principles, society would become more resistant to being manipulated by religious authority, autocracy, powerful oligarchies and dictatorship, and more democratic, libertarian and egalitarian. Thereby, he creates a sharper opposition than the rest between philosophy and theology, characteristics that make him the first major figure of the Radical Enlightenment.²

The reformation of ideas projected by these great thinkers, however, offered only the theoretical possibility of improvement, not the actuality, and both Hobbes and Bayle remained generally rather pessimistic. By the later eighteenth century, however, there had been a remarkable change. Now it appeared that such a revolution in thinking and circumstances was not just a theoretical possibility but something real. “The world,” declared Richard

Price (1723–1791), a leading representative of the radical tendency in England, “has hitherto been gradually improving. Light and knowledge have been gaining ground, and human life at present compared with what it once was, is much the same that a youth approaching to manhood is compared with an infant. Such are the natures of things that this progress must continue.”³ His close friend Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) and most famous disciple, the feminist theorist Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), were equally convinced God had a plan for the world’s gradual improvement albeit not through direct divine action or miraculous happenings but through the ordinary processes of nature and society.⁴

In enlightened circles during the later eighteenth century, the concept of progress was broadly endorsed in Europe and America and became the general view. Theories of progress, however, contrary to what many have assumed, were usually tempered by a strong streak of pessimism, a sense of the dangers and challenges to which the human condition is subject. The notion, still widespread today, that Enlightenment thinkers nurtured a naïve belief in man’s perfectibility seems to be a complete myth conjured up by early twentieth-century scholars unsympathetic to its claims. In reality, Enlightenment progress breathed a vivid awareness of the great difficulty of spreading toleration, curbing religious fanaticism, and otherwise ameliorating human organization, orderliness, and the general state of health and was always impres-

sively empirically based. Its relative optimism rested on man's obviously growing capacity to create wealth, invent technologies capable of raising production, and devise stable legal and political institutions, as well as, it should be mentioned, the disappearance of the plague. Despite the slowness of our steps, urged the baron d'Holbach (1723–1789), one of the most radical of the *philosophes*, at the close of his *Système social* (1773), the evidence shows, without question, that human reason does progress. We are manifestly less ignorant, barbarous, and ferocious than our fathers and they in turn were less ignorant than their predecessors. Doubtless in times when ignorance and superstition are very strong there is little disposition to accept the light of reason. But who can deny, he demanded, that this resistance has significantly lessened in recent times?

By the 1760s, even the more cynical were convinced: progress was indeed occurring. Across Europe, ruling elites were “beginning to think,” commented the “enlightened despot” Frederick the Great of Prussia (r. 1740–1786), in a letter to Voltaire in January 1766. Even in “superstitious” Austria and Bohemia, he remarked, the bigotry and fanaticism of the past were fading fast, at least in court and administrative circles, and leading men were “opening their eyes.” While official censorship in Central Europe still banned many “good books,” “the truth,” as Frederick put it, was everywhere seeping through and “superstition” and veneration of images receding. Citing

the example of the once notoriously puritanical and rigid Calvinist city of Geneva, Frederick applauded the advance of toleration and press freedom, among other obvious improvements. It all amounted, he thought, to a true modern “miracle” and one undeniably due to the Enlightenment and, especially, he suggested, to Voltaire.

François-Marie-Arouet de Voltaire (1694–1778), after some years residing in Germany and Switzerland, was no less persuaded that “a great revolution in men’s minds was becoming manifest on all sides.” Writing to Jean le Rond d’Alembert (1717–1783) in 1766 Voltaire averred that his fellow *philosophe* would scarcely believe what magnificent progress “reason” was now achieving in Germany. He did not mean, he explained, the advance of those “impious spirits” who embrace the ideas of Spinoza, with whom he carried on a kind of perpetual private battle throughout his career and deemed the quintessence of what he considered the wrong kind of Enlightenment, the radical ideas of Denis Diderot (1713–1784), the baron d’Holbach, and the German materialists; rather, he meant those with no fixed principles concerning the deeper nature of things and who did not pretend to know what ultimate truth is but instead knew what it is not and revered the true principles, as he saw it, of reason and toleration, namely those of Locke, Newton, and himself: “voilà mes vrais philosophes.”⁵

But writing to another correspondent soon afterwards, Voltaire carefully qualified this optimism, pointing out

that while reason had made great strides, this was occurring only amongst a tiny elite, “chez un petit nombre de sages,” those few eager to understand the reality of things. Most men, he noted, prefer to be directed by authority than think for themselves and hence remain no less benighted than before; but then, he added, the remainder of humanity—some nine-tenths of mankind, he calculated—do not deserve to be enlightened (*les autres ne méritent pas que l’on les éclaire*).⁶ Throughout his career, Voltaire consistently opposed radical thought and its egalitarian aims.

The later Enlightenment’s greatest philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), teaching at the university of Königsberg (today Kaliningrad) in what was then East Prussia likewise had no doubt that mankind was experiencing “progress” and that this evident amelioration was driven by the advance of “reason.” Hence, while man’s improvement, as he saw it, was manifest in all spheres—legal, political, moral, commercial, and technological—it was in the first place a progression of the human mind and the impact on mankind of nature (or Providence) that was driving the process. In a famous essay of 1795 he asserted that European states were gradually becoming more “republican,” and more “representative” of the general will of their people, through their assemblies, laws, and institutions. Politically, the ultimate end of human progress would be an international federation of powers to resolve disputes, leading ultimately, he envisaged, to

“perpetual peace.” The final goal, or “telos” of human progress, in his view, was the full flowering of human rationality and moral capacity, conceivable only on the basis of republican legislation and perpetual peace; all this, however, would come about almost automatically, through the working of Providence, without any specific human intervention.⁷

Yet while nearly all Enlightenment thinkers were inspired by notions of progress, however diffusely, it was Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1727–1781), one of the founders together with Adam Smith (1723–1790) of the science of economics, who first formulated a coherent, systematic doctrine of progress. A leading reformer of the last decades of the *ancien régime* who served as Louis XVI’s controller-general of the royal finances during the years 1774–1776, Turgot was fiercely critical of Diderot, d’Holbach, and the other radical thinkers.⁸ He, too, championed toleration and especially a sweeping program of economic liberalization and rationalization but strictly within the framework of monarchy, aristocracy, and the existing order. Like Voltaire, he rejected equality as a principle and thoroughly repudiated atheism, determinism, and materialism.

An avowed providential Deist but one who attributed to Christianity a broadly positive role in the world, Turgot delivered two doctoral lectures at the Sorbonne, in Paris, in 1750, which together, as has been said, “framed a new conception of world history from remotest antiquity to

the present and constituted the first important version in modern times of the ideology of progress.”⁹ Turgot, linking epistemology, economics, and administration, argued that man’s capacity to receive new impressions from the outside world—and to sift, combine, and analyze them—had opened a path by which experience absorbs and builds an unending sequence of material improvement, technological advancement, and better organization. The empirically proven fact of progress in the past, furthermore, he construed as proof that retrogression would also be impossible in the future. It was this cumulative unidirectional process embracing all aspects of social development—something he viewed as divinely driven, and hence irreversible—that he designated “progress.”

The Enlightenment’s idea of progress, then, was invariably conceived as being “philosophical,” a revolution of the mind. But it was undoubtedly economic, technological, political, medical, and administrative as well, in addition to being legal, moral, educational, and aesthetic. Enlightenment “progress” was thus very wide-ranging and multifaceted. Moreover, it was also inherently unstable, a feature historians have by no means sufficiently focused on in the past. For it is apparent that Enlightenment progress could take specifically Christian, Deist, or atheistic forms; it could be conceived as endorsing or opposing the existing order of society, as being reversible or irreversible, God-ordained or purely natural.

These differences were certainly not national in character, though the French possibly put more emphasis on the advance of reason than the rest, and Adam Ferguson (1723–1816), the only major Enlightenment figure to hail from the Gaelic-speaking part of Scotland, followed his fellow Scot Lord Kames (1696–1792) in developing what might be deemed a distinctively Scottish perspective. This he did in several works, including his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), which is among the most remarkable and innovative works of the (moderate) Enlightenment in the British Isles. Here Ferguson envisages the entire panorama of civil society as a process of development from primitive beginnings to higher stages, but higher only in the sense that they were later, more intricately differentiated parts of the same coherent sequence. His progress was a collective attainment, a development toward increasingly complex social structures, but also increasingly complex problems that did not necessarily produce a higher—that is, more developed—kind of individual and, still less, a more equal one.

Divine design, for Ferguson, was equally manifest in small and large things and evident, as he put it, “throughout the whole system [. . .] of nature.”¹⁰ For him, as for Kames and Adam Smith, divinely ordained design infuses all features and the successive stages of civil society itself. Everywhere one discerns “a chain of connection and mutual subserviency, which renders the vestige of intelligent

power the more evident, that parts are so various, while they are so happily ranged and connected.”¹¹ Sharing with Montesquieu the idea that manners, attitudes, and morals, reflect and are “adapted to the constitution of the state,”¹² and hence like him, stressing the necessity of aristocracy and rank in a mixed monarchy like Britain, Ferguson did not doubt that different institutions and moral and social systems are appropriate to different societies: “human nature no where exists in the abstract.”¹³ Hence he defended the particular and emerged as an early opponent of the French Revolution, claiming that when opting between rival forms of government, any “fortunate people” will, like the British, adopt some mixed system, combining elements of monarchy and aristocracy, rather than embrace full democracy.

If one had to choose between British mixed monarchy and the republican democracy lately established by the Revolution, he remarked in 1792, it is easy to see which would be better. “Under one species of establishment, we observe the persons and possessions of men to be secure, and their genius to prosper” while under the other (that is, in France), we see “prevalent disorder, insult and wrong, with a continual degradation or suppression of all the talents of men.”¹⁴ Here, he diverged dramatically from English Radical Enlightenment writers, such as Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, John Jebb, William Frend, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and the humbly born, irrepressible autodidact Tom Paine (1737–1809). In

Paine's opinion, given in 1792, England had not yet entered the democratic age of "reason" at all. "Conquest and tyranny," he wrote, "transplanted themselves with William the Conqueror from Normandy into England, and the country is yet disfigured with the marks. May then the example of all France," he fervently hoped, "contribute to regenerate the freedom which a province of it destroyed!"¹⁵

With regard to social and political life, the positions of Ferguson and Paine were diametrically opposed, with only the latter seeing the advent of democratic politics, and getting rid of monarchy and aristocracy, as properly an integral part of progress. Indeed, Paine, like the other philosophical radicals seeking to introduce democracy and equality into an essentially monarchical-aristocratic-imperial society (but with a strong commercial underlay), such as Britain was in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, had an altogether more far-reaching conception of progress than Ferguson, not just politically and socially but also philosophically. To him, progress was inseparable from transforming attitudes as well as overturning the prevailing monarchical-aristocratic-ecclesiastical order, and not only in one country but universally. "The insulted German and the enslaved Spaniard," averred Paine, in 1792, "the Russ and the Pole, are beginning to think. The present age will hereafter merit to be called the Age of Reason, and the present generation will appear to the future as the Adam of a new world."¹⁶

This striking contrast between the progress of the radical democratic thinkers and that of defenders of mixed monarchy like Ferguson and Burke exactly mirrors the contrast between opposing broad tendencies running throughout the Western Enlightenment as a whole and making this clear is the chief aim of this chapter. For these two fundamentally different conceptions of progress—the radical democratic and, in metaphysics, materialist-determinist, or alternatively Christian-Unitarian, on the one hand, and the “moderate” and positively providential (Deist or religious), championing the monarchical-aristocratic order of society, on the other—were diametrically opposed to each other in their social and political consequences. They were also from the outset philosophically and theologically incompatible, and indeed opposed, which, on the whole, Enlightenment historians have failed to engage with.

A diffuse, highly complex and wide-ranging phenomenon such as the Enlightenment, we are apt to think, must reflect a great variety of shades of opinion and so it does. But when it came to the most crucial questions, as we shall see, both logic and circumstances precluded any real spectrum of opinion. On the main points, bridging the gulf between Radical democratic Enlightenment and moderate antidemocratic Enlightenment was literally inconceivable both philosophically and practically. The only thinker who seriously tried to bridge this antithesis

conceptually, though even he does not really manage it, was Kant. Kant, as he often did, sought an ingenious, but perhaps overly subtle, synthesizing middle position between the “providentialists” and the “Spinozists.” Building resolutely on his celebrated division of reality into the “phenomenal sphere” of sense, which we actually experience, and the “noumenal sphere” of reality-in-itself, which we know exists but the content of which is closed to us, he showed that a middle position is just about conceptually possible.

His great innovation, splitting reality into two distinct spheres of knowing sealed off from each other, was crucial in the history of metaphysics and epistemology, but far less so in the history of moral, social, and political ideas. It enabled him to steer adroitly between the physical order of “Nature,” which he not infrequently designates the driving force behind “progress,” and the “regular order which we observe in the course of events of this world” and “call Providence, as we discern in her the profound wisdom of a superior cause, which predetermines the course of fate, and makes it tend to the final purpose of human existence.” By entrenching himself in this way in a highly ambiguous position located between blind fate and knowing Providence, the later post-1789 Kant, abandoning his earlier more conservative stance, stood firm with a foot in both camps, unfurling the banner of a pervasive liberalism, and qualified support for the French

Revolution, while at the same time expressly rejecting democracy and insisting that his philosophy was not anti-aristocratic or antimonarchical or opposed to religion.¹⁷

By postulating divine planning and “the finger of God” as the force behind both progress and the existing order, Ferguson, Kames, and Adam Smith, along with Voltaire and Turgot, effectively resigned all prospect of viewing the existing order of institutions and social relations as basically defective, as diverging unacceptably from equity and the natural path. If morality is God-ordained, held Voltaire in his *Essai sur les mœurs*, written in the early 1740s, then the moral ideas we discover through experience must be the correct ones; if the course of history is guided by divine Providence, then men’s basic institutions must have been established upon the right lines. The great limitation of the Moderate Enlightenment was that it was not open to its theorists (assuming that temperamentally they had so wished) to repudiate the existing hierarchical structure of society, or portray society as it had evolved as inherently defective, oppressive, and systematically unjust, and hence wrongly organized for the purpose of advancing human happiness. They could not, like John Jebb (1736–1786), an academic who endeavored to reform Cambridge University in the 1770s but had been forced out in 1775,¹⁸ acknowledge the need for across-the-board reform in all of a country’s institutions, even in a flourishing society like Britain’s. Though he died before

the Revolution, by the 1780s Jebb had come to see the British House of Commons as an appallingly corrupt body: “the majority of that House are no longer the representatives of the Commons; they are,” he deplored, “the dependents of the nobles, the creatures of the crown.”¹⁹ Neither could the moderate mainstream offer the kind of devastating critique of the European colonial empires embodied in the writings of the Abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal (1713–1796), Diderot, d’Holbach, Paine, and other radical thinkers, including the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803).

The Moderate Enlightenment was not opposed to reform as such, but did reject sweeping programs of reform like those envisaged by Paine, Priestley, and Price. Ferguson, like the foremost Scottish philosopher of the Enlightenment, David Hume (1711–1776), urged extreme caution—though admittedly not outright conservatism—when evaluating plans for the future depending on any “derangement in the only scenes with which we are acquainted.”²⁰ Among the first theorists to analyze the phenomena of rank, social classes, and class exploitation, he was indeed a highly original thinker. His work continued to attract the attention of social theorists, including Hegel and Marx, during the nineteenth century. Yet he has remarkably little to say about the conflicts—economic, moral, and political—generated by the social divisions he was among the first to investigate. His prime criticism of

the French *philosophes* as social critics, significantly enough, was that they were too prone to exaggeration of the evils of present and past society.

Hume, no less unreceptive to radical ideas, was viewed in conservative circles as a particularly useful philosophical resource against egalitarian and democratic ideas and was also invoked against colonial rebellion. Among his conservative admirers was one of the leading American “Tory” publicists who in 1776, under the pseudonym “Candidus” [William Smith?], published a tract insisting on the benefits of rule by Britain and glorying in the fact that “this beautiful system (according to Montesquieu), our constitution is a compound of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy,” an empire dominating the Atlantic and the trade of the entire world. Implacably opposed to independence, “Candidus” went so far as to claim that “independence and slavery are synonymous terms,” repeatedly citing “the profound and elegant Hume” against the subversive elements attempting to “seduce the [American] people into their criminal designs.”²¹

At the close of his *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (1792), Ferguson memorably summed up the difference between the radical kind of Enlightenment he roundly rejected, and the sort of Enlightenment he endorsed, the empirically grounded path of moderation advocated by Turgot and Voltaire and most British and American participants in the Enlightenment.²² The radical conception he repudiated (in France then vari-

ously termed *la philosophie nouvelle*, *philosophisme*, or simply *la philosophie moderne*)—the thought of Diderot, d’Holbach, Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715–1771), the marquis de Condorcet (1743–1795), and such British and American radicals as Paine, Jebb, Joel Barlow, and Robert Coram—he compared to that of an ambitious architect who aspires to tear down the entire existing edifice of institutions and then rebuild it from scratch on purely rational principles. The intentions of these confident architects, as he saw it, were not in themselves bad though they betrayed a considerable lack of respect for the divinely fashioned order of things; the consequences, however, were to his mind catastrophic. He did not deny the need for improvements or to make society better. Indeed, he was convinced God wants us to strive for amelioration: even “the walls,” he says, “may be renewed or rebuilt in parts successively.” But his Enlightenment insisted on retaining most of the existing foundations, walls, and roof in place at any one time, making only marginal changes without altering the building’s basic shape or removing so many “of your supports at once as that the roof may fall in.”²³ The basic structure of government, law, and administration, as he and his Scottish colleagues and allies—Hume, Kames, Smith, William Robertson (1721–1773), and Thomas Reid (1710–1796) saw it—should remain always in place.

Between these two opposed conceptions obviously no compromise or half-way position was ever possible, either

theoretically or practically. Throughout the Enlightenment's history it is this irresolvable duality—rooted in the metaphysical dichotomy of one-substance doctrine (Spinozistic monism) and two-substance dualism, the latter as upheld by John Locke (1632–1704) and Voltaire, as well as other providential Deists and (most) Christians and Jews—that was always the principal and overriding factor shaping its course.

Thus, while in the last two or three decades scholars have mostly fastened their attention on national or confessional differences between shades of Enlightenment in different parts of Europe, embracing the “family-of-enlightenments” idea developed by John Pocock (a notion still widely in vogue today), such an approach is largely inapplicable to the Enlightenment's most basic and far-reaching questions and controversies. For the “family-of-enlightenments” concept deflects attention from the most fundamental disputed points of thought, morality, and social action, among them the scope of reason, the possibility or impossibility of miracles, and the status of divine Providence, as well as the place of ecclesiastical authority and the split for and against democracy, equality, a free press, and separation of church and state. For all these were essentially either/or questions. Either history is infused by divine providence or it is not, either one endorses a society of ranks or embraces equality, one approves representative democracy or opposes it. On these questions it

was the polarization, the division of opinion, that shaped developments.

Beyond a certain level there were and could be only two Enlightenments—moderate (two-substance) Enlightenment, on the one hand, postulating a balance between reason and tradition and broadly supporting the status quo, and, on the other, Radical (one-substance) Enlightenment conflating body and mind into one, reducing God and nature to the same thing, excluding all miracles and spirits separate from bodies, and invoking reason as the sole guide in human life, jettisoning tradition. There was a closely allied variant to the latter, also part of the Radical Enlightenment, in the shape of philosophical Unitarianism, a variant almost as relentless in proclaiming reason as the sole guide, rejecting tradition as a source of authority and denouncing the existing order more or less in toto. The essence of the Radical Enlightenment both in its atheist and Christian Unitarian modes was that “reason, and law founded on reason,” as the point was expressed by Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger (1722–1759) in a classic text of radical philosophical literature, “should be the only sovereigns over mortals.”²⁴

To correctly grasp this basic dichotomy, without which the key points about the Enlightenment cannot be understood, it is essential to avoid simply equating the split (as many tried to do at the time) with the difference between theists and atheists. Many “atheists” and thoroughgoing

skeptics—including Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), Julien Offroy de La Mettrie (1709–1751), Hume, and the marquis de Sade (1740–1814)—were not at all “radical,” in the sense the term is employed here, since they did not base morality on reason alone, or on the principle of equality, or link their conception of progress to equity and democracy. Neither did they possess that sense of being the heads of a “faction” in society, of an underground movement, opposing a dominant bloc and evincing that clandestine, proselytizing spirit and impulse to convert others to their way of thinking that, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) stresses in his last work, *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1777–1778), was atypical—indeed, he thought the prime characteristic of the radical thinkers whom he, too, mostly labels simply the *philosophes modernes*.²⁵ These were the men (principally Diderot, d’Holbach, and their disciples) whom Rousseau, following his bitter and enduring quarrel with Diderot that began in 1757, came to perceive as “mes persécuteurs” and principal enemies.

“Radical Enlightenment” cannot in any way simply be equated with “atheism,” or, still more vaguely, with free-thinking or with libertinism or irreligion. As many contemporary critics stressed, the sort of ideas diffused by Diderot, d’Holbach, and their disciples in the 1770s and 1780s had an essentially “Spinozist” philosophical underpinning in that they envisaged philosophical reason as the only guide in human life, sought to base theories about society on the principle of equality, and separated philos-

ophy, science, and morality entirely from theology, grounding morality (as Bayle notably also did, but Hume, equally notably, refused to do) on secular criteria alone and especially the principle of equality. Radical Enlightenment was further quintessentially defined by its insistence on full freedom of thought, expression, and the press, and by identifying democracy as the best form of government, features again specifically Spinozistic and in no way Hobbesian or, in the latter case, Humean. Neither did radical thought ever have anything concretely to do with Locke and still less (despite the continuing efforts of some to argue this)²⁶ with the English Commonwealth tradition or Freemasonry. Without classifying radical thought as a Spinozistic tendency, combining one-substance doctrine or philosophical monism with democracy and a purely secular moral philosophy based on equality, the basic mechanics of eighteenth-century controversy, thought, and polemics cannot be grasped.

However, classifying Radical Enlightenment as “Spinozistic” does not mean all believing Christians, Jews, and Muslims were excluded from participating in the radical tradition. In his clandestinely published *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* of 1670, Spinoza holds that all the main churches had betrayed true Christianity by perverting it with humanly concocted “mysteries,” dogmas, and ecclesiastical authority, though Christ’s moral teaching remains the highest ethics and the purest tradition of moral teaching. He claimed that “disputes and schisms

have ceaselessly disturbed the church ever since Apostolic times, and will surely never cease to trouble it, until religion is firmly separated from philosophical theories and reduced to the extremely few, very simple dogmas that Christ taught his own.”²⁷ These boiled down, according to Spinoza, to the principles of justice based on equality, and charity.

Teaching “true” Christianity was something the Apostles and the church fathers failed to do, held Spinoza, “because the Gospel was unknown to people” then, so that “to avoid offending” the populace “with the novelty of its teaching, they adapted [Christianity], so far as they could, to the minds of their contemporaries and built upon the basic principles most familiar and acceptable at the time.”²⁸ The result was a great heap of “superstition” piled on by theologians and the churches since Apostolic times, all of which, contends Spinoza, must be stripped away if one wishes to grasp the precious core. This Spinozistic doctrine opened the way for Spinoza’s Christian Socinian Collegiant friends to join him and these “philosophical” Unitarians—men such as Pieter Balling (d. 1669), who translated much of his early work into Dutch; Jarig Jelles (c. 1620–1683), who wrote the preface to his *Opera Posthuma* (1677); and the Amsterdam publisher Jan Rieuwertz (c. 1616–1687), who published his writings clandestinely (despite all the mature works of Spinoza being banned by decree of the Dutch States General in 1678)—figured

among his most important allies in late seventeenth-century Holland.

These men were sincere in their Christianity, yet also deeply influenced by the moral teaching expounded in Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677). By forging an alliance with them, Spinoza gained important adherents for his campaign of philosophical renewal and social reform. But the Socinians, too, gained much from their alignment, especially a new methodology of Bible criticism of unparalleled sophistication at the time, and one that seemingly undermined the authority of all established churches as well as rabbinic Judaism (while leaving open the possibility of a reformed Judaism), and that powerfully reinforced their own arguments against the doctrine of the Trinity and Christ's divinity. Spinozism also equipped them with a much more incisive and broader argument for toleration than any other thinker had yet come up with (and much broader than that of Locke), something of practical consequence to them since Socinianism was then banned practically everywhere, in theory even in Holland and post-1688 England. It also afforded them a system of ethics that not only eliminated all ecclesiastical authority but removed all dependence on theological notions that they eschewed, such as Original Sin, Spinozism rendering primitive man neither good nor bad morally but merely neutral and morality itself purely a function of society.

Remarkably, the alliance between Spinozism and Socinianism (or at least some Socinians) persisted not just

through Spinoza's lifetime but virtually throughout the eighteenth century. In the enormously influential *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (17 vols.; Paris, 1751–1765) of Diderot and d'Alembert, the powerful seventeen-page entry “Unitaires,” pronounced by Voltaire the most *terrible*—meaning the most formidable—of all the articles in the later volumes, a piece penned by Diderot's disciple Jacques-André Naigeon (1738–1810) clearly states that what he, too, calls *la philosophie moderne*, itself materialist, had one major ally within the religious fold—the Christianity of the Unitarians. This needs emphasizing not just because Spinoza would not have achieved the impact and diffusion he did without the help of the Dutch Collegiants but because in the later eighteenth century—particularly in Britain, America, and Holland—Unitarianism and the Dissenting fringe infused with Socinianism produced some of the most effective spokesmen of the Radical Enlightenment and helped inject the radical tradition into many provincial and local groups, charities, and societies.

In the early eighteenth century, the very term “Socinian” still elicited general and intense disapproval. The beautifully illustrated *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (7 vols.; Amsterdam, 1723–1735), edited by the radical Jean-Frédéric Bernard (c. 1683–1744) and illustrated by Bernard Picart (1673–1733), the world's first real encyclopedia of religion, styles Socinianism a doctrine “so odious and dangerous,” as the English

version puts it, “with its subtle arguments and objections proposed,” as to be little better than atheism. While “both Arians and Socinians deny the Trinity,” the *Cérémonies* explains, only the Socinians refused to worship Christ and declared him a man, hence treating “Christ with much more indignity than the Arians ever did.”²⁹ The *Cérémonies* summarized the key points of the Socinian (Unitarian) creed as rejection of Christ’s divinity and the Trinity and the claims that “there is no such thing as Original Sin” and that “God might have forgiven the sins of mankind, and reconciled Man with divine justice, and pardoned them, without the satisfaction of Christ.”³⁰

While stressing the sect’s allegedly dangerous character, the *Cérémonies* informs readers of the “astonishing progress that [Socinianism] has made through Europe.”³¹ Astonishing progress it certainly made: by the middle of the eighteenth century, Socinianism had spread dramatically both as an open church movement where this was permitted de facto—in some places in Holland, England, and Germany—and also privately within other churches, including the state churches. Consequently, France was by no means the only country where incredulity and religious subversion were perceived to have made huge inroads by 1750. As the Devon-based liberal Presbyterian minister Micaiah Towgood observed in 1755, there was “now a present prevailing scepticism” and such “a mighty prejudice, with some men of sense and consideration, against Christianity [as traditionally understood]” that

many took seriously the unbelievers' claims that the established Church, the Church of England, showed "plain marks of imposture"; indeed, there were "violent and strong suspicions that it could not possibly come from God." Moreover, it was now only a "little less notorious in Britain, so strong was this scepticism," observes Towgood, that in their own thoughts the Anglican "clergy are, generally, gone far from the religious sentiments which the Articles [of the Church] expound and are many or most of them either Unitarian or Arian."³²

The signs of the time, Towgood admonished the English bishops, showed that "Christianity is now passing a strict examination" and while, as far as he was concerned, his religion stood ready to undergo "the most critical search," the "consequence of this search, there is little question, will be that superstition must totter; and that all claims and pretensions of a spiritual kind not founded on truth, nor supported by right, must fall before the axe laid at the root." He implored the bishops to act—that is, thoroughly purge their theology of irrational, unfounded and unnecessary accretions—whilst there was still time to prevent those "having broken from the chains of gloomy superstition" from going from one extreme to the other, and from rushing "headlong into the wilds of disconsolate infidelity," Socinianism, and atheism.³³ The choice the bishops faced, he insisted, was to align with or be conquered by the force of reason.

If the evidence of book acquisitions in the college libraries at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Philadelphia (College of Pennsylvania) is anything to go by, there were scarcely any “philosophical Unitarian” works extant in America before the 1776 Revolution. After 1780, though, interest in such texts grew, a process accelerated from 1791 when the outspoken former New England Calvinist minister Eliahu Palmer (1764–1806) caused a great scandal in Philadelphia by publicly admitting his Unitarianism (he later became a militant Deist, opponent of Christianity, and fervent admirer of the French Revolution),³⁴ and from June 1794 with the arrival in America of Priestley himself.³⁵ The more intellectually minded wing of the Socinians, moreover, combined their Unitarianism with an emphatic linking of Unitarian doctrine with philosophy, on the one hand, and democracy and egalitarianism, on the other. The officially Arian but privately Unitarian Richard Price, described by one leader of eighteenth-century English Unitarianism, Theophilus Lindsey, as someone who “though an Arian [. . .] is one of the firmest Unitarians I know,”³⁶ when celebrating the fall of the Bastille in London in 1789, linked Enlightenment, civil emancipation on the basis of equality, and so-called Rational Dissent in the clearest terms. “Why are the nations of the world so patient under despotism?—Why do they crouch to tyrants, and submit to be treated as if they were a herd of cattle?” His unequivocal answer is because they

lack Enlightenment. “Ignorance,” he wrote, “is the parent of bigotry, intolerance, persecution and slavery.” Enlighten mankind and it will not only get rid of tyrants and institute equality, a principle for which he was passionate, but also abandon the prevailing forms of Protestant and Catholic religion, grasping that true religion resides not in theology, or indeed, “in any rites and ceremonies, but in worshipping God with a pure heart and practicing righteousness.”

Price, like Priestley, dismissed all conventional forms of Protestantism, including Presbyterianism and Baptism, as well as Anglicanism and Catholicism, as so badly corrupted as to be not truly “Christian” at all. In addition to the many among the higher ranks of men who “not distinguishing between the religion they see established and the Christian religion, are generally driven to irreligion and infidelity,” there was also, he thought, great peril in England from undesirable forms of evangelical fervor spreading in society via new and disturbingly popular “irreligious” church movements welling up among “the lower orders.” Very many “are sinking,” as Price styled it, “into a barbarism in religion lately revived by Methodism.”³⁷

Unitarianism, then, is a vital part of the fundamental dichotomy characterizing the play of intellectual forces, and hence the history of philosophy in the period, and, also crucial, reflected in the interaction between social forces and ideas. For it was above all social forces that

drove the polarization between Radical Enlightenment and the moderate mainstream until by 1770 it had reached boiling point, culminating in what Voltaire called a “*guerre civile entre les incroyables*.” If one wished to attract the support of governments, churchmen, and magistrates in the eighteenth century one had to couch proposals for reform in terms of support for monarchy, for the existing social hierarchy based on privilege, and for the existing moral norms—in other words, propose only slight repairs to the existing edifice. Every Enlightenment writer had to choose either broadly to endorse the existing structure of law, authority, and privilege, whatever incidental repairs he proposed, or else denounce them more sweepingly. If he or she, as in the case of Mary Wollstonecraft or the feminist republican historian Catherine Macaulay (1731–1791), chose the latter course, circumstances inevitably pushed such would-be reformers into the arms of the out-and-out rejectionists and into the direction of democracy, equality, and revolt. For once spurned by those in authority, the only way to gain any support at all was to become a mouthpiece for social grievance and resentment.

Given the prevailing vast disparities of wealth in England as in the rest of Europe, the conspicuous lack of protection for the poor or unprivileged individual, extremely inadequate and archaic structure of the law and the penal code, the oligarchic, corrupt character of politics, and disabilities still applying to Dissenters,

Catholics, and Jews, social grievance was bound, in Britain, too, to be a broad impulse in the late eighteenth century. No doubt, as has been frequently observed, ordinary British folk were predominantly hostile to radical ideas. In Britain, the “sheer volume and the social and geographical distribution of [...] conservative propaganda was much greater than that disseminated by the radicals in the 1790s.” But the very relentless and overwhelming character of the loyalist campaign—eulogizing the governing elite and constantly invoking “the rampant xenophobia and virulent anti-gallicanism that had long been a feature of British society”—and continual efforts “to arouse a profound loathing of British radicals and deep hatred of French revolutionaries” also reveal the scale of the perceived challenge.³⁸ The distinction between mainstream and Radical Enlightenment, driven by legal and social conditions, including gender discrimination, as much as by ideas, was thus both intellectually and socially an unbridgeable, polarizing dichotomy that no one could evade.

Finally, to define Radical Enlightenment fully and accurately one further distinction is necessary: that between the British Radical Enlightenment as part of the wider philosophical-ideological movement in the Western world and late eighteenth-century English radicalism in its narrower, more exclusively political and parochial sense. For there remained a hard core of often highly mo-

tivated radicals in late eighteenth-century Britain who cultivated the old seventeenth-century Commonwealth tradition. Typically these men were ardent for what they considered the “true” English constitution, a legacy revived but, as they saw it, not fully restored by the Glorious Revolution of 1688.³⁹ The leading reforming activist, John Thelwall (1764–1834), for instance, agreed with Price, Priestley, Paine, and Jebb that eighteenth-century British parliamentary monarchy, thoroughly corrupted by crown interference and “rotten-borough mongers,” was really just a “usurped oligarchy,” but, unlike them, took no interest in the philosophical grounding of human rights, in turning radical ideas into a universal ideology, or even in establishing a full democracy in Britain, being quite willing to accept that even when the “corruption” was corrected, Britain would still be what Thelwall termed a “limited democracy,” with a House of Lords embodying its aristocratic element and an hereditary chief magistrate—namely, the king—acting as the country’s chief magistrate. True Commonwealthmen, like Thelwall, were inclined to disapprove of those, like Paine and Priestley, whom they suspected were ready to plunge society “into commotion for speculative opinions.”⁴⁰ In this respect they shared some of the distaste shown by Edward Gibbon (1737–1794), the foremost eighteenth-century English historian, and Edmund Burke (1729–1797), England’s preeminent conservative philosopher, for what the latter labeled Priestley’s and Price’s “democratic fanaticism.”⁴¹

Not only were radical enlighteners intellectually better placed than their Moderate Enlightenment opponents and nonphilosophical radicals to give expression to broadly based social discontent, grievance, and resentment; they were also driven by circumstances to repudiate the existing system of social hierarchy. This they denounced, along with its accompanying structures of law and institutions, as oppressive, rapacious, and fundamentally unjust. Priestley, who was well known on both sides of the Atlantic for his researches into electricity and chemistry, called for the total abolition of the aristocracy on the grounds that this would prove a moral blessing not only for society but also for the nobility themselves.⁴² With the yawning divide extending in this way to social theory and politics, the split inevitably also generated conflict between competing factions at the local level, as in Ireland, for example,⁴³ and in late eighteenth-century Liverpool. It was an antagonism encompassing all major issues—totally indefinable along national, ethnic, or religious lines—even though by 1789 France had opted, for the time being, for radical solutions and by the mid-1790s Tom Paine, Godwin, Wollstonecraft, Coleridge, Price, Priestley, Frend, and the poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) had all either been ejected from Britain or effectively silenced.

The struggle was between sweeping reformism versus a gradualist, conservative approach. It was also a battle between amelioration purely natural, on the one side, and

supernaturally ordered and divinely guided progress, on the other, a fight between progress that drives toward equality and democracy and seeks to enlighten everyone, and marginal reform of the existing order of monarchy and privilege, backed by theological criteria, content (or even preferring), especially in Voltaire's and Frederick the Great's case, to enlighten only the few. The "revolution of the mind" the Radical Enlightenment had engineered among sections of society by the 1770s and 1780s through the clandestine spread of new ideas aspired one day to carry through a successful revolution of fact, leading to an entirely new kind of society. Such a perspective was roundly rejected by those who understood progress as divine Providence at work. Even the two opposed enlightenments' respective conceptions of "reason" were distinct and, before long, fiercely competing ideas. For the moderate mainstream, reason is immaterial and inherent in God, a divinely given gift to man, and one that raises him above the rest. In radical thought, by contrast, man is merely an animal among others with no specially privileged status in the universe while "la raison," as one radical text expressed it in 1774, far from being something beyond and above matter, is nothing but "la nature modifiée par l'expérience."⁴⁴

Opposition and struggle, then, were inherent in the radical conception of history. Tom Paine summed up the story of human progress as a progression in three main stages. First, mankind evolved from the "government of

priestcraft” in remote times to states based on “the uncivilized principle of governments founded in conquest” in more recent eras, a system in which aristocracy is the essential element and the whole edifice rests on schemes “to govern mankind by force and fraud, as if they were all knaves and fools.” And, finally, the culmination of human progress, developing “in contradistinction” to life under rule rooted in “superstition and conquest”—that is, under the government of “reason,” statecraft based on “the common interest of society, and the common rights of man.”⁴⁵

Hence the divide between Radical and Moderate Enlightenment is far more fundamental and also more enduring than distinctions within the Enlightenment that were national or confessional in character. But the dialectics of Enlightenment were also a shifting balance of intellectual forces in the course of which, from the 1760s down to the early 1790s, especially in Holland and France, the moderate mainstream were increasingly thwarted and repulsed and the radical wing increasingly preponderant. This occurred first intellectually and, then, for some years, in France and the Western European countries conquered by the French revolutionaries, especially the Netherlands and Italy, also politically. It was precisely this and the frustration and failures of the moderate mainstream after 1770 that lent formidable new vigor to both the loyalist anti-intellectualism that flourished in Britain and the general Counter-Enlightenment, the system of ideas that rejected

both kinds of Enlightenment, insisting on the primacy of faith and tradition, not reason, as the chief guides in human existence. This reaction reared its head on all sides after 1770, and still more after 1789, as moderate mainstream Enlightenment, both in its Christian and Deist modes, was more and more humiliated and weakened.

The modern reader might be surprised by this outcome, as the existing historiography strongly suggests that the political cards were always stacked heavily against the radical wing. Admittedly, all the nobilities and monarchical courts of Europe opposed radical thought and, after 1789, became much more strident and aggressive in doing so, whether in Russia, Prussia, Austria, or Britain. It is worth noting that in Britain the bulk of the lower and middle orders of society proved entirely willing to unite under crown and Parliament in decrying radical activity and seditious writings.⁴⁶ But this was because, behind the scenes, democratic and egalitarian ideas were gaining ground and a fierce defensiveness, even signs of desperation, were taking hold of the *ancien régime's* defenders. Nor should the sheer cumulative effect of the diffusion of radical ideas—that is, the impact of plain intellectual cogency fortified by genuine resentment against social injustice—be underestimated. The dramatic rise of the Counter-Enlightenment and the vehemence of the British public's loyalism and anti-intellectualism by the 1780s and 1790s are probably symptoms that the moderate mainstream, in the tradition of Montesquieu, Hume, and

Voltaire, was losing the fight to block radical intellectual arguments.

The last three decades of the eighteenth century were an age of much turmoil, instability, and revolutionary violence. But they were also an age of promise. The emancipation of man via forms of government promoting the “general good” and life in a free society that accords protection to all on an equal basis, argued d’Holbach in 1770, is not an impossible dream: “if error and ignorance have forged the chains which bind peoples in oppression, if it is prejudice which perpetuates those chains, science, reason and truth will one day be able to break them” (*si l’erreur et l’ignorance ont forgé les chaînes des peuples, si le préjugé les perpétue, la science, la raison, la vérité pourront un jour les briser*).⁴⁷ A noble and beautiful thought, no doubt, but was he right? That perhaps, is the question of our time.