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1. Introduction

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1. Introduction

Abstract

Criticism of the methods and conclusions of the Enlightenment was initiated almost as soon as the movement itself had begun. It is for this reason that this chapter follows immediately after the one on the Enlightenment, rather than after the later chapters on nationalism, liberalism, industrialism, evolutionary biology, and the social sciences. These movements made their appearance during the latter part of the eighteenth century, but often served only to broaden and strengthen the earlier criticisms of the Enlightenment and the demands for a more adequate way of thinking than it offered. The movements of thought with which we are concerned in this chapter — evangelism, utilitarianism, romanticism, and idealism — started in the eighteenth century and became characteristic elements of Western culture during the first part of the nineteenth century. After about 1848 other currents of thought, mainly social and scientific, tended to supplant them. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Post-Enlightenment, Enlightenment criticisms, movements

Disciplines

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This is a part of [Section XII: The Post-Enlightenment Period](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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XII. THE POST-ENLIGHTENMENT PERIOD

1. Introduction

Criticism of the methods and conclusions of the Enlightenment was initiated almost as soon as the movement itself had begun. It is for this reason that this chapter follows immediately after the one on the Enlightenment, rather than after the later chapters on nationalism, liberalism, industrialism, evolutionary biology, and the social sciences. These movements made their appearance during the latter part of the eighteenth century, but often served only to broaden and strengthen the earlier criticisms of the Enlightenment and the demands for a more adequate way of thinking than it offered. The movements of thought with which we are concerned in this chapter -- evangelism, utilitarianism, romanticism, and idealism -- started in the eighteenth century and became characteristic elements of Western culture during the first part of the nineteenth century. After about 1848 other currents of thought, mainly social and scientific, tended to supplant them.

One way of getting a perspective on the difference in the climate of opinion as we move from the Enlightenment to the post-Enlightenment is to list some of the outstanding names which are usually associated with the later period. As we run through such a list it is also interesting to keep in mind the different disciplines and countries which are represented, as well as those which are not. When we think of this period our minds usually turn to the names of such men as Bentham, Burke, Burns, Byron, Coleridge, Beethoven, Goethe, Kant, Hegel, Keats, Scott, Schubert, Shelley, Schiller, the Wesleys, and Wordsworth. While any such listing is admittedly incomplete, it does suggest that the names which we usually associate with the post-Enlightenment are not those of scientists and social scientists, but rather of artists, poets, dramatists, novelists, musicians, and evangelists. It also points to the fact that the men we ordinarily would choose to represent this period are primarily English and German, rather than French. This suggests strongly that the ideas of this period are coming from other centers than Paris, so long the cultural center of Western Civilization.

The criticisms which are represented by such men as these struck hard at the basic interpretations of nature, man, and God which had been developed by the philosophes. Nature had

*There is not a straight break. Really a reconsidering of the enlightenment
This shows up clearly in Wesley - True of all the Churches at the time. (ethical conduct)
economic & social changes. Ch. failing to meet this challenge. Not enough churches.*

been interpreted as basically an automatic mechanism, for which the favorite analogy had been a watch. Nature did give evidence of mechanism and materialism but, to the post-Enlightenment, some of its parts seemed to be more than either parts of a machine or a whole machine. Some aspects of nature did appear to be determined by a push from behind; but others appeared to be determined by a pull from before. And this meant that perhaps purpose could be as important as mechanical cause. Some parts of nature did appear to be determined from the outside; but other parts appeared to be determined from the inside. Further, some aspects of nature did appear as collections of individual units; but, on the other hand, some of its aspects suggested strongly organic rather than additive wholes. Change sometimes did look like simple change of place and relation; but at other times it looked suspiciously like a real change of kind, or transformation. Things did appear to react; but some of them seemed also to respond. For these reasons it seemed to some people, scientists as well as poets, that nature might well include some further dimensions than those of mechanism. William Blake (1757-1827), poet, artist, and mystic, gave expression to this different attitude toward nature in The Scoffers:

Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau,
Mock on, mock on; 'tis all in vain;
You throw the sand against the wind
And the wind blows it back again.

And every sand becomes a gem
Reflected in the beams divine;
Blown back, they blind the mocking eye,
But still in Israel's paths they shine.

The atoms of Democritus
And Newton's particles of light
Are sands upon the Red Sea shore,
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.

The second and one of the most prevalent criticisms focused on the Enlightenment's inability to catch the full height, depth, and breadth of man in the net of its calculations; somehow man's hopes, fears, loves, and hates seemed to slip through. True, man was a part of nature, and nature might well be mechanical, but man himself seemed to be something more than a calculating machine. He might react mechanically in some situations, but he also appeared to act freely at times. He might be determined, but he could also be determined. His own self-interest might lead automatically to the good of the group, as Adam Smith had suggested; but it also might not, and a clash of interests could appear. Man's progress might appear to be automatic and necessary at times; but then there were times when it seemed to be in need of man's assistance. Man might think and act in terms of survival; but he also was capable of self-

sacrifice. So now argued the poets, evangelists, and dramatists. Evidently there was more to man than had been dreamed of in the calculations of the early "enlighteners."

The Enlightenment concept of God was also found to be unsatisfactory and inadequate by these critics. They had no quarrel with the idea of God as the Creator of nature. But, they argued, following some earlier lines of thought, this meant that nature could never be completely self sufficient or self-sustaining, once it was created. The very doctrine of creation seemed to them to demand logically something like God's continual sustaining of nature after it had been created. The same line of reasoning seemed applicable to man; and it was in this aspect of the argument that the post-Enlightenment was mainly interested. Man, as a part of created nature, was not self-sufficient. Furthermore, and here the evangelists drew on Reformation thought, man was incapable of living the kind of a life God wanted him to live without God's help. Even the poets and dramatists, and later the idealists, gave this argument their own aesthetic form; they argued that man was not complete until he had come into relationship with the Whole, variously interpreted as God or the Absolute. The evangelicals had a hard time envisaging the God of deism as capable of meeting this very human need. They developed an interpretation of Him as much more personal and spiritual. This later interpretation also seemed to be a check on the atheism and materialism into which deism had sometimes developed.

These criticisms of the three basic Enlightenment ideas were applied to the other areas into which this thought had spread. This was especially true after the turn of the century when the results of Enlightenment ideas appeared in politics and economics. The course of the French Revolution and Napoleon could not help but raise questions concerning the validity of Alexander Pope's dictum: "Whatever is, is right." Furthermore, the rise of industrialism in England could not help but raise questions as to whether it was worth its price in human life and suffering. And the lack of manners and morals of some of the upper classes, illustrated by James Boswell (1749-1795) in his account of his experiences, served only to intensify the doubts which had already been raised on this score by such diverse people as Rousseau and Bishop Berkeley. A romantic expression of the general dissatisfaction with the eighteenth century is found in "The World is Too Much With Us," by William Wordsworth (1770-1850):

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;

It moves us not. -- Great God! I'd rather be
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

Along with questions such as these went others concerning the nature of human institutions and history. The very way in which these questions were framed, using the Enlightenment's word "nature," is indicative of the relationship between the earlier and later periods. But the focus of these questions on institutions and history gives an indication of the change of direction which thought was taking. It was a reinterpretation of these ideas which became basic for post-Enlightenment thought.

There was, of course, no complete break between the earlier and later periods. We have already learned not to expect too much discontinuity in human history. The two periods overlapped, as we have already pointed out, and the problems with which they concerned themselves were similar. It is only when we look at these two periods in retrospect that the differences emerge. And the differences can be best expressed by saying that the post-Enlightenment poured new contents into the framework which had already been established by the Enlightenment.

Nature was, for the intellectual leaders of much of the seventeenth, all of the eighteenth, and the first half of the nineteenth century, the all-sufficient whole which represented the boundary of immediate thought and concern. It represented the framework within which both the Enlightenment and the post-Enlightenment tried to find room for human experience as they interpreted it. There was nothing beyond it that seriously bothered or worried them; God was either merely the Creator of nature or the last peak to be climbed within it. For the Enlightenment it was sufficient to call a thing, a person, or an act natural, which by implication meant that it was good; and there was no need for anything further to justify it. With the exception of evangelism this same point of view was largely true of post-Enlightenment utilitarianism, romanticism, and idealism.

What all of these later movements did, however, was to radically change the interpretation of the nature of human experience. Human experience was no longer limited to the passive reception of sensations and reflection on them. Man was no longer seen as only a spectator. For all the later movements of thought man was seen as an active and creative participant in his experience. A new word was used to express this difference: instead of using "philosophy" thinkers now began using "Weltanschauung," which can be translated "way of looking at the world." If man's mind was a mirror of nature there could be no explanation for his mistakes and errors other than that they were equally natural. But such miscalculations seemed to

be his responsibility, not nature's, and hence it was suggested that man's truths as well as his errors were at least partly the result of his activity. This emphasis on man's participation in his thought as well as his action was pressed to the point where, in some of the idealists, he almost assumed the role of God Himself. Within a more restrained interpretation this emphasis meant making room for human imagination, aesthetic creation, religious faith, and reforming activity within history.

Such an interpretation, further, meant that the goal of human activity was no longer viewed as the Enlightenment had seen it. Not as truth but life, not as knowledge but creativity, not as precision but exuberance, not as discipline but expression -- these were the ways in which the later thinkers, especially the romantics, viewed man's purpose. This meant that they were taking the chance of being wrong; but the chance they willingly took in the interest of what they believed to be a more exciting way of life. They were more than willing to give up the interpretation of man as a calculating machine for their interpretation of him as a creative person. And it was this newer interpretation of man which accounts for the outburst of artistic creation, religious enthusiasm, and social reform throughout this period, an outburst which the idealists tried to comprehend within the framework of their new interpretation of human reason.

This reinterpretation of the nature of man and of his experience could not but have its effects on the concepts of nature and God. The standpoint from which these were viewed had changed. Nature was no longer seen as mechanical but rather as organic; and the changes within nature were interpreted according to the analogy of human history, rather than history being interpreted according to the analogy of a mechanical nature. It is for this reason that nature came to be viewed as a struggle, and later, as we shall see, as an evolution. Both nature and history were viewed by the artists as imitating art, rather than as art imitating nature. The only question was whether or not the concept of nature could be expanded to include all of this burgeoning creativity without bursting.

The concept of God also underwent a tremendous transformation. No longer the lawmaker for nature and human action, He was now thought of as primarily spiritual. He was no longer rational and legal, but personal, having both feelings and will. He was a Being to whom one could pray, and from whom one could expect spiritual gifts. He was a deity with whom one could be on intimate terms, not a distant deity far removed from man and his problems. In place of the Enlightenment's mutual respect between man and God, there was substituted a warm personal feeling. And this concept, also largely the contribution of evangelism, idealism later tried to catch within the limits of its expanded interpretation of the nature of man's experience.

This it did by emphasizing God's immanence, and interpreting His transcendence only in terms of an organic whole's transcending of its parts.

In such ways as these the post-Enlightenment not only criticized the major ideas of the Enlightenment, but reinterpreted those same ideas, emphasizing man's greater participation in his experiences and the wider range of that experience.