LOUIS DUPRÉ

# The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture

# Contents

## *A Definition and a Provisional Justification*

In 1783 the writer of the article "Was ist Aufklärung?" (What Is Enlightenment?), published in the *Berlinische Monatschrift,* confessed himself unable to answer the question he had raised.[1] Today it remains as difficult to define the Enlightenment. The uncertainty appears in the conflicting assessments of the movement. The second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes it as inspired by a "shallow and pretentious intellectualism, unreasonable contempt for tradition and authority." Obviously a definition of this nature is not very helpful for understanding a phenomenon distinct by its complexity. But neither is Kant's famous description of it as "man's release from his self-incurred tutelage"—today mainly used as a butt for attacks on the Enlightenment. Rather than beginning with a definition, I prefer to start my discussion by briefly tracing the movement to its sources. The Enlightenment concluded a search for a new cultural synthesis begun at the end of the Middle Ages when the traditional cosmological, anthropological, and theological one had disintegrated.

European culture rests on a relatively small number of ideas. One of them is the assumption that reality as we observe or experience it does not coincide with the principles that justify it. Plato made this distinction a central thesis of his philosophy: appearances are separate from the ideas that ground and legitimate them. He knew well that the theory would be challenged. Why should

*what is* not contain within itself the reason for its being? He himself questioned the theory in the dialogue that ironically bears the name of the great thinker who inspired it—*Parmenides*. Later, his most illustrious disciple so radically criticized Plato's theory of the Ideas that it rarely reappeared in its original form. Yet Aristotle did not question the principle itself. He, no less than Plato, distinguished the reason for a thing's existence from that existence itself. This in fact is why the notion of causality assumed such an importance in his thought. In Enlightenment philosophy that distinction received what may well have been its strongest formulation in the principle of sufficient reason: everything must have a reason why it should be rather than not be. Many consider that the essence of rationalism. But the axiom that the real is rooted in an ideal principle does not imply that the human mind is necessarily capable of justifying it. The latter is a rationalist position that the Greeks never held.

Greek philosophy of the classical age incorporated three areas of reality that modern thought has divided into the separate domains of cosmology, anthropology, and theology. Gods and humans were included in an all-comprehensive nature, the *physis* of the Presocratics, the *cosmos* of Plato and Aristotle. Both gods and cosmos had always existed. Hence, the former did not justify the latter. Neither did Plato's Demiurge explain the existence of the world. The myth of the *Timaeus,* according to which some semidivine being composed the cosmos, does indeed attempt to justify the nature of reality, not, however, through its origin, but through an analysis of its metaphysical components. Aristotle might have called this analysis a search for the formal cause of nature. The Semitic teaching that a God created the world justified the world's existence through a transcendent origin. The Creator of the biblical story belongs to a different realm of reality than creation itself.

Despite this opposition between the Greek and the Hebrew-Christian interpretations, Christians started using Platonic concepts for expressing the intimate union between Creator and creature. In and through the human person all creation participated in the divine realm. The doctrine of the Incarnation, according to which God had become part of the world, seemed to facilitate the union. In fact, a profound opposition separated the two views. In the Greek synthesis, an immanent necessity ruled the cosmos. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, a free act of God stood at the origin of all other reality. Inevitably, the classical-Christian synthesis ran into major difficulties. As nominalist theologians began to attribute the origin of all things to the inscrutable will of God, they abrogated the link of intelligibility that connected the source of reality with its created effect. As a result, by the beginning of the modern age reality had ceased to be intrinsically intelligible and God no longer provided

the rational justification of the world. Henceforth meaning was no longer embedded in the nature of things: it had to be imposed by the human mind.

## The Second Wave of Modernity

It has been written that modernity has reached us in waves. The first wave arrived in the fifteenth century, as the effect of two causes: the collapse of the intellectual synthesis of ancient and Christian thought and the rise of a new humanism. When Descartes, who died in 1650, succeeded in overcoming the skepticism that had resulted from the nominalist crisis by transferring the source of intelligibility to the mind, he brought the first stage of modernity to a close. In establishing self-consciousness as the one point of absolute certainty from which all other certainties could be deduced, he initiated a new stage in philosophical thought. Its validity seemed confirmed by the success of the mathematical method in the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. The new trust in the power of human reason was to inspire the culture of the Enlightenment, the second wave of modernity. Still Descartes's restoration of the authority of reason remained incomplete. A lingering nominalism surrounded his notion of truth. (It is by divine decree, he had argued, that mathematical conclusions are true!)

In fact, all subsequent rationalism continued to bear unmistakable traces of nominalist dualism in the way it separated the universal from the particular. The synthesis of the universal and the particular, established by ancient philosophy and surviving until the end of the Middle Ages, had come under severe strain in nominalist philosophy. That strain only increased in rationalist thought. It may seem far-fetched to link modern rationalism to a medieval position with which it had so unambiguously broken. Did the rationalist concept of reason not imply a rejection of nominalist particularism and a return to classical sources? In fact, the rationalist universal differed substantially from the ancient one. For Aristotle as well as for Plato, things owed their identity to a universal form that *included* all particular determinations. The Enlightenment concept of the universal, to the contrary, was a rational a priori void of any particular content, a category of thought imposed upon the real, rather than expressive of it. Its formalist character shows a surprising similarity with the universal names that, in nominalist philosophy, the mind imposes upon reality in order to gain purchase on a chaotic multiplicity.

To be sure, post-Cartesian thought, in which the mind alone establishes truth, differs from nominalist theology in which the will of God does so. But that distinction does not weaken a fundamental relation between the two. Social factors also presented a powerful incentive for stressing the primacy of

universal concepts and values over particular differences. Regionalism and sectarianism had turned Europe into a thirty-year bloodbath. The restoration of peace in 1648 required that the destructive forces of political and religious particularism be neutralized. To the "enlightened," the differences that had caused the strife were no more than superstitious quibbles or nationalist prejudices. Did the entire cosmos not obey a single law of reason? Did humans, however different from each other, not share a common nature? Destined to live under the rule of reason, they would never attain this goal, according to Voltaire and Gibbon, unless religious particularism was abolished altogether. The Christian religion that had so bitterly divided Europe had to be subordinated to the rule of universal reason.

The Enlightenment's confidence in the powers of reason, its often-naive optimism, as well as its contempt for tradition were too one-sided to remain unchallenged. The excesses of the French Revolution and the rationalist principles that supported it caused a return of the authority of tradition and a revival of much that rationalism had suppressed. The period that followed the revolution introduced a third wave of modernity. It was at first mostly a reactionary movement, yet in time it developed a new, more comprehensive humanism that reincorporated many of the positions established by the Enlightenment while integrating them within a more complex idea of personhood. In Great Britain and in the German lands the transition was gradual: romantic trends had existed all through the Enlightenment.

I assume that the Enlightenment was indeed a distinct epoch in modern culture. Yet this assumption does not entail that there was no continuity in the flow of modern thought nor that it was a homogeneous movement. The Enlightenment remained a project; it never became a full achievement. It continued to question the past and to anticipate the future, but various groups and individuals held different views concerning past and future. It has become increasingly common to exclude traditionalist thinkers such as Vico, Malebranche, Burke, and Herder from the Enlightenment as if they belonged to what Isaiah Berlin has called the Counter-Enlightenment. Yet these writers were not reactionaries. They held modern, though different views concerning their epoch's relation to past and future, and they may have exercised a deeper influence upon future thought than radical critics like Voltaire or Condorcet did. To be sure, in many ways they disagreed with their more radical contemporaries. But those contemporaries in turn found it necessary to respond to their challenges. This dynamic exchange, rather than the static rationalism with which is often identified, characterizes the Enlightenment. It was essentially a dialectical movement.

Finally, conditions and attitudes differed enormously from one area to another. In Western Europe the Enlightenment was mainly a movement of urban intellectuals; in the American colonies, of landed gentry.[2] Nowhere are these differences more visible than in the field of religion. While in France the battle against "superstition" was reaching its pitch, in Bavaria and Austria the Counter-Reformation and Baroque still flourished. French philosophes mostly rejected Christianity; German thinkers consistently sought a compromise with it. In Britain rationalists and anti-rationalists appear to have lived rather peacefully, though often incommunicatively, side by side.

I have restricted my investigation in this book to the *ideas* of the Enlightenment, leaving their economic, social, and political applications to social historians. The battles over the identity, direction, past, and future of a culture are, Husserl claimed, fought by "men of ideas" — philosophers, scientists, theologians, and intellectual historians. Of course, ideas are never born in a vacuum. In an earlier study (*Marx's Social Critique of Culture*) I attempted to show that they originate in, and remain intimately linked to, the immediate practical concerns of society. Yet the influence moves in both directions. For ideas in turn change the social concerns to which they owe their origin. As one distinguished intellectual historian put it: "Ideas powerfully act upon, often decisively shape, the very culture from which they have emerged."[3] My focus here resembles in this respect the eighteenth century's own. Still, a reflection on the ideas of an epoch raises a philosophical problem. Ideas possess by their very nature a timeless quality. We assume that they will last forever. Yet they are conceived in, and form an integral part of, a particular historical conjunction. How can what is essentially transient and historically conditioned have a permanent significance? All thought, including all philosophy, originates in a particular place at a particular time and reflects the concerns of that time. Nonetheless, philosophers, while expressing those concerns, move beyond these limitations and raise them to a universal level.

In an insightful passage R. G. Collingwood describes the dialectical relation between the historical and the eternal roles of ideas. "In part, the problems of philosophy are unchanging; in part they vary from age to age, according to the special characteristics of human life and thought at the time; and in the best philosophers of every age these two parts are so interwoven that the permanent problems appear *sub specie saeculi,* and the special problems of the age *sub specie aeternitatis.* Whenever human thought has been dominated by some special interest, the most fruitful philosophy of the age has reflected that domination; not passively, by mere submission to its influence, but actively, by making a special attempt to understand it and placing it in the focus of

philosophical inquiry."[4] We inevitably think and judge with the categories, schemes, and metaphors of our own time, however critical of them we may be. At the same time we believe that ideas are bound to be permanent.

This confronts us with the question: How can ideas conceived for coping with the problems of one time remain meaningful at a later epoch? If indeed a rigid line divides the necessary and eternal from the historically contingent, as rationalist philosophers assumed, then the particular events, achievements, and ideas of an earlier generation hold little meaning for a later one. But the meaning of an epoch lies not only and not even primarily in the "universal" ideas it produces. The significance of a culture exceeds that of the "eternal" ideas we may extract from it. A philosophical reflection on the past differs in this respect from the way mathematics, logic, or the positive sciences reach their conclusions. Past thinkers showed little concern about the question of how their ideas originated. But a reflection on the meaning of a particular age requires more than lifting certain ideas out of the cultural complex in which they were conceived. Each culture possesses an ideal identity within which these ideas have their place and, as Ernst Cassirer pointed out, the task of the philosophy of culture consists in seeking to understand how the elements that compose it form a system, an organic whole.[5] Cultures, like living beings, possess a unity of their own. This unity enables successive generations to build up a collective identity.[6] Over a period of time the various symbolic processes of science, art, religion, and language coalesce into a comprehensive unity.

Premodern metaphysics had neither a need nor a place for a philosophy of culture. The epochs of history may yield lasting results, but their coming or going belonged to a realm of historical contingency that fell outside a reflection on true reality. In modern philosophy, however, the human subject plays a central part in the constitution of meaning. The fact that this subject exists and thinks in time thereby assumes a philosophical significance. Nor is this significance restricted to the individual consciousness. A philosophical reflection on the temporal nature of the subject must take what Ricoeur calls "the long detour around the *selves'* objective achievements in history" and focus on the symbols human consciousness has left us in its various cultural achievements. Only through history do we acquire a true knowledge of ourselves. "What would we know of love and hate, of moral feelings and in general of all that we call *self,* if they had not been brought to language and articulated by literature?"[7]

The primary function of culture is to provide a society with the norms, values, and means needed for coping with the conditions of its existence. Through their various engagements with nature, humans subdue nature's otherness. The domestication of nature begins when humans start naming

things. Yet a culture also aims at a spiritual "surplus" that drives its members beyond the satisfaction of immediate, physical needs. In Georg Simmel's words: "Man, unlike the animals, does not allow himself simply to be absorbed by the naturally given order of the world. Instead he tears himself loose from it. Somehow beneath and above [the accomplishment of ordinary tasks and the pursuit of material interests] there stands the demand that through all of these tasks and pursuit of material interests a transcendent promise should be fulfilled."[8] Culture raises the phenomenally transient to ideal permanence and so establishes a symbolic chain in which each historical period acquires an ideal, lasting significance.[9] Levinas captured this potential of cultural symbols to convey an ideal meaning to the temporal in a lapidary sentence: "La culture c'est le sens venant à l'être." If Being becomes disclosed in time, then the passage of time itself is more than a subjective quality of consciousness: it possesses an ontological significance. This position runs counter to Parmenides' thesis, today publicly abandoned but often still tacitly accepted, that Being *is* and becoming *is not*. It responds affirmatively to the question Heidegger raised at the end of *Being and Time:* "Is there a way which leads from primordial time to the meaning of Being?"[10]

### A Provisional Profile

Two qualities are commonly considered characteristic of Enlightenment thought: rationalism and emancipationism. The dual meaning of the term "rationalism" has led to misunderstandings. It refers to a philosophical doctrine that insists on the primacy of a priori concepts in the process of knowledge. As such it is opposed to empiricism according to which the origin of our ideas lies in experience. Historically the former was embodied in the theories of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Wolff. Yet those who refer to the Enlightenment as a "rationalist" period usually understand this to include philosophical empiricists as well as rationalists. This use of the term assumes that the human mind is the sole source of truth and hence must reject faith as a possible source of truth. Descartes who is often regarded as the father of the rationalist method in philosophy never subscribed to this second, ideological rationalism. For him, at the ground of reality as well as of truth lies a transcendent cause. Nonetheless, he created the conditions for an ideological rationalism when he transferred the question of truth from its traditional ontological basis (according to which truth resides primarily in the nature of the real) to an epistemic one whereby it becomes the result of a method of thinking.

We all know Kant's description of the Enlightenment as an emancipation of mankind through an unconditional acceptance of the authority of reason.

"Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. . . . *Sapere aude!* 'Have courage to use your own reason!' That is the motto of enlightenment."[11] Kant here expresses his unambiguous opposition to any unexamined authority. Further in the text he more specifically addresses the conditions needed for educating people toward thinking for themselves. This, he claims, requires "the freedom to make *public use* of one's freedom in every respect" (*Freiheit von seiner Vernunft . . . öffentlichen Gebrauch zu machen*). Concretely this means for the "learned" the right to educate the masses through an uncensored press. The ideal of a full human emancipation through uncensored knowledge had already supported the program of the editors of the *Encyclopédie*. They regarded themselves in the first place as educators. Diderot's description, however self-serving, expressed a keen awareness of the social role of the intellectual: "The magistrate deals out justice; the *philosophe* teaches the magistrate what is just and unjust. The soldier defends his country; the *philosophe* teaches the soldier what his fatherland is. The priest recommends to his people the love and respect of the gods; the *philosophe* teaches the priest what the gods are."[12]

Kant's educational project appears legitimate and, by today's standards, uncontroversial. Yet his definition of enlightenment as the "release from a self-imposed tutelage" contains more than the need to think for oneself, which all educated people do and have always done. It has a polemical edge: many deprive themselves of that right by their willingness to accept uncritically the opinions of political and religious authorities. Kant condemns such a submissive attitude as immature (*Unmündigkeit*) and morally irresponsible. Still one wonders: Could anyone survive without accepting a number of unexamined ideas on the authority of others? Or, for that matter, what gives a decisive authority to the one whom the public considers a *Gelehrter,* a learned person?[13]

In many respects Moses Mendelssohn's earlier, more modest contribution to the German debate on the nature of the Enlightenment proves more helpful than Kant's clarion call. In a few pages Mendelssohn attempted to clarify the meaning of the terms that, by the middle of the eighteenth century, had begun to circulate. He distinguishes *Aufklärung* from *Kultur* and *Bildung*. *Bildung* (in this context: "education") refers to people's response to their vocation as human beings, *Kultur* to the practical agenda for reaching this goal, and *Aufklärung* to the more theoretical program — science and philosophy. Ideally, Bildung includes the other two terms and largely defines their meaning. Language constitutes the link among them. "A language attains enlightenment through the sciences and attains culture through social intercourse, poetry, and eloquence."[14] The German Enlightenment with Lessing, Mendelssohn,

and Kant, was more self-consciously reflective than either the French or the British. The French Enlightenment may well have been more influential, both because of the impact of its writings (especially the *Encyclopédie*) in a language common to educated Europeans and because of its radical conclusions. But its simplified concepts and radical break with tradition made it also the more controversial one. In this respect it differed not only from the German but also from the English Enlightenment that proceeded at a gradual pace, without causing an abrupt break with the past.

It should be observed that, beside the diversity of expressions of the Enlightenment in different regions, there was also a considerable difference in the degree to which its principles were accepted. Even those who regarded the mind as constitutive of meaning did not necessarily consider its contribution sufficient. Philosophers like Malebranche, Berkeley, and Leibniz grounded the mind's constituting activity upon a transcendent basis — as Descartes himself had done. For all of them, God remained the ultimate source of truth. Nor were rationalists always consistent. A blind belief in progress often conflicted with their thesis of the unchangeable laws of nature. The inconsistency was particularly striking among such materialists as d'Holbach and La Mettrie. Also, men and women of the Enlightenment did not live more in accordance with the rules of morality and reason than their ancestors. One needs only to remember Saint-Simon's reports on life at the French Court, Rousseau's abandonment of his children, Casanova's memoirs of his philandering, and de Sade's account of his sexual gymnastics. People's everyday lives are rarely ruled by reason, despite their frequent appeals to it. Far less than their predecessors in the seventeenth century did men and women of the Enlightenment period submit their passions, feelings, and emotions to the control of reason. The Enlightenment was not so much an age of reason as an age of self-consciousness. People became more reflective about their feelings, their social positions, their rights and duties, the state of religion, and all that touched them near or far. They also became more critical than any previous generation, and this self-consciously critical mentality induced them to question tradition.

The battle against unexamined tradition has continued ever since Kant's declaration of war against it. A social-economic variant of it appeared in Marx's critique of ideologies. The term "ideology" originated in the eighteenth century, and its meaning initially pointed in an opposite direction. When the French aristocrat Destutt de Tracy first used the word in a paper read at the Institut National des Sciences et des Arts, *idéologie* referred to scientific rather than metaphysical knowledge of human nature. Later he expanded the concept, using it against any kind of social prejudice.[15] Soon the critique turned against ideology itself. Napoleon felt that those social theorists whom he

contemptuously called "les idéologues" had been responsible for the French Revolution. With Marx the term came to stand for ideas uncritically accepted by most members of a society, even though they merely reflect the interests of the ruling classes. Ideologies serve to confirm the prejudices and interests of those classes. Later commentators qualified Marx's attack on ideologies. Thus Louis Althusser argued that they consist mainly of the unproven assumptions that form an indispensable part of every social structure, not necessarily one that supports the interests of one class. All groups need to hold on to a number of unproven ideas, myths, or representations to preserve their identity. The task of the social critique consists not in destroying those assumptions but in rendering them conscious.[16]

In our own time the controversy about the Enlightenment's attack on prejudices has resurfaced. In his great work on hermeneutics, *Truth and Method,* H. G. Gadamer argued against the Enlightenment's critique of prejudice. He may appear to repeat Edmund Burke's defense of political prejudice: "Instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a considerable degree, and, to take more shame upon ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices."[17] Burke assumed that a healthy community, like any normal organism, needs no external interference to overcome its problems. It is capable of correcting itself. Criticism, Gadamer argues, must be guided by a return to the roots of one's tradition rather than by an alleged rule of absolute "rationality." The rationalist critique of the Enlightenment failed to recognize the unproven assumptions on which it rested.

The limitation of the human mind excludes the possibility that it should ever be free of prejudices. Indeed, prejudices constitute an essential part of human reasoning. The Enlightenment's fight against them stemmed itself from a prejudice and followed the Cartesian methodical rule that no position ought to be considered intellectually "justified" before it was proven. Of course, the mind must remain critically conscious of its unproven assumptions and free itself from demonstrably false prejudices. But the rule that traditional authority must in all instances be submitted to the critique of reason is impossible to maintain and hence unjustified. According to Gadamer, the ongoing dialogue among the members of a society should suffice for eradicating those assumptions that would harm a society's rational development.[18] Others have questioned whether a critique based upon the very principles of the tradition it criticizes can ever be effective. On that ground Jürgen Habermas has defended the critical principles of the Enlightenment. If the movement failed, he maintains, it was not because of them, but because they were abandoned before having had the time to prove their effectiveness. I shall consider his argument in the next section.

Ever since Kant described the Enlightenment as an intellectual and political emancipation, we have come to consider freedom the dominant idea of the age. Of course, the idea of freedom, no less than that of reason, had long been a primary concept in Western thought. But with Kant it acquired a more intellectual content. He regarded no act as truly free unless it was based on reason and promoted the rule of reason. Good and evil depend on the law of reason: they are constituted in and through that law. Moreover, freedom came to be viewed primarily as an emancipation of the *individual*. The emphasis upon individual freedom had been implied in the modern theory of the subject, which assumed that the source of value is the human subject itself.

The anthropocentric orientation of Enlightenment culture also affected aesthetic theories. Since the early Renaissance, Western artists had continued to pay homage to the classical ideal of form. Painters had traditionally interpreted it as consisting in simplicity of composition, harmony of color, and clarity of design. What distinguished the eighteenth century "classicist" style was the rigorously rational, at times geometrical way in which these qualities came to be understood. Even Jacques Louis David, the great classicist painter, has been called "puritanically rational."[19] Compared with the dynamic style of the Baroque, much art of the Enlightenment era impresses us today as static and cold. Artists were torn between two conflicting tendencies. On the one hand, they favored a form *idealized* in accordance with rational norms of simplicity, clarity, and harmony. On the other hand, a rational concern for literal truth required that reality be painted *as it is,* however far removed from that formal ideal. Thus the representation of ordinary life and the expression of passions and emotions, foreign to classical art, entered the art of the Enlightenment.

At the same time and due to the same subjective source that had affected the notion of freedom, aesthetics was developing a far more radical theory, which did not have its full impact upon the creation of works of art until the next century. According to this theory, art, rather than imitating or idealizing a given form, had to be in the first place expressive. The new idea entered gradually and not without a major struggle, as we shall see. Artists and even the more progressive theorists continued to repeat the adage that art had to imitate nature. Yet, eventually "imitation" came to be understood in a manner that had little to do with a realistic or idealized representation of nature, but everything to do with nature as a symbol of the artist's inner self. This interpretation differs substantially from that of ancient and even early modern aesthetics. Whereas both had placed the ideal beyond the mind, advanced Enlightenment aesthetics located it *within* the mind. The expressive theory did not reach full maturity until the era of Romanticism. In this instance also,

Romanticism rather than being a mere reversal of the principles of the Enlightenment fully developed their implications.

## The Crisis of the Enlightenment

None of the changes described in the preceding profile warrant speaking of the Enlightenment as a cultural crisis. Taken singularly the shifts were rarely abrupt or disruptive, but together they fundamentally altered the direction of Western culture and some major thinkers have regarded this change as a crisis. In a lecture delivered in Prague, entitled "The Crisis of the European People" (1935), Edmund Husserl argued that modern rationalism had moved away from the Greek idea of reason and deviated from Europe's spiritual destiny. According to the founder of phenomenological philosophy, the rationalism of the Enlightenment transformed the Greek concept of reason that had ruled European thought since its beginning. A narrowly objectist idea of reason had deflected Western culture from its original development "in the direction of an ideal image of life and of being, moving toward an eternal pole."[20] Husserl's diagnosis is all the more remarkable in that his own philosophical goal had been to reform philosophy into a "rigorous science."[21] Now he dismissed the modern objectivism implied in that project as a betrayal of the principle of rationality to which it continued to appeal.

While Husserl referred to an intellectual crisis caused by the slide into objectivism, Hegel in a well-known passage of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* had described the Enlightenment as a general cultural crisis. Significantly, in doing so he attributed to a particular historical period the full responsibility for a change in the ideal development of mind. All through the *Phenomenology* he inserts cryptic allusions to historical figures and events, such as ancient skepticism, the coming of Christ, monastic life, the French Revolution, and Napoleon. The Enlightenment Hegel mentions by name, as if it were a historical interruption in an ideal process. That particular event raised consciousness to the universality of reason, enabling it to view reality as expressive of itself.[22]

Not before reality appears as the objective expression of mind, does civilization become *culture* — a Western concept with a uniquely spiritual connotation. Those intent on attaining culture must abandon their natural, self-centered attitude and assume a universal, spiritual one. This change requires effort and denial. Hegel therefore referred to culture as an *alienation* from one's natural self. Beyond this subjective alienation required by the process of education, there is also an objective one inherent in the nature of culture itself. It directly corresponds to what others have called the "crisis" of the Enlightenment. Having intended to build a culture expressive of, and appropriate to,

reason, the builders of the Enlightenment had to confront the melancholy fact that culture leads a life of its own, escapes control, and fails to correspond to their intentions. This estrangement has caused a rupture within the modern consciousness. Two tendencies emerge. One uninhibitedly criticizes any content in which the mind does not fully recognize itself; the other, solicitous to avoid reducing mental life to a mere critique without content, projects its essential content into an otherworldly realm where it will be safe from the assaults of critical insight. Hegel refers to this latter attitude as *faith*. Enlightenment for him consists neither in the critical rationalism of pure insight nor in the conservative one of faith, but in a constant struggle between the two.

This esoteric account of the Enlightenment contains two important ideas. One, the very notion of culture belongs to a particular stage of Western consciousness—one that, as Freud was later to confirm in *Civilization* [a more accurate translation would be *Culture*] *and Its Discontents,* imposes severe demands upon the natural consciousness and may degenerate into antinatural perversions. The second idea directly bears upon the concept of the Enlightenment as a cultural crisis. The view of culture as the mind's "own" expression inevitably leads to a split (*entfremdet* [alienated]) consciousness. On the one hand, the mind knows culture to be an expression of itself. On the other hand, once it is objectively established, it begins to lead a life of its own with many restrictions and limitations that make it increasingly difficult for people to recognize it as a self-expression. That sense of alienation from the traditional culture reached a critical point during the Enlightenment.

In addition, Hegel first grasped a crucial feature of the Enlightenment that had been ignored by his predecessors and was often neglected by his followers, namely, that it was essentially a *dialectical* movement. At no point did that movement ever develop into a simple rationalism or an unambiguous antirationalism. Without the simultaneous presence of, and the productive struggle between the two currents, it remains unintelligible how the Enlightenment could ever have resulted in Romanticism. In all chapters of this book, therefore, I have given attention to anti-rationalist thinkers (often misnamed "Counter-Enlightenment" thinkers), such as Herder, Shaftesbury, Rousseau, and Fénelon.

This dialectical principle also explains the considerable part religion, the main target of the critique, occupies in this work. Both the critique and the resistance to it have been responsible for the way the Enlightenment has reached us. Even such spiritual movements as Quietism and Pietism that never came to grips with the rationalist critique but instead took refuge in a secluded interiority at a safe distance from the intellectual currents of the time, played a significant role within the culture of the Enlightenment. They initiated a search

for interiority that corresponded to the Enlightenment's drive toward self-understanding. For that reason, I have included a chapter on those spiritual movements at the end of this book. The effect of the Enlightenment in the succeeding periods can be understood only if both currents, the rationalist and the anti-rationalist, combine their influence.

Still this dialectical quality of the Enlightenment should not be interpreted as if it were already a synthesis *in nucleo*. The Enlightenment remains a period of tension, opposition, and strife. The two currents never came to peace with one another. They were united only in combat. This appears most clearly in the area of religion, perhaps the only one to which the term "crisis" properly applies. In fact, Paul Hazard in his classic *La crise de la conscience européenne* (published the same year [1935] as Husserl's lecture) held the abandonment of the transcendent source of meaning responsible for a crisis in the European consciousness.[23] Two contemporary scholars of the Enlightenment, Peter Gay (in *The Enlightenment*) and Michael Buckley (in *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*) have in different ways confirmed the dramatic effect of this shift.[24] I also believe that the most drastic transformation of the Enlightenment took place in the religious consciousness. Still, this change occurred over an extensive period of time. People in Scotland, the Low Countries, Rhineland, Austria, Italy, or Spain (to mention only Western Europe) did not think of themselves or their religion as being "in crisis." Even in France whose intellectuals spearheaded the secular revolution, the great majority of the population continued to live unaware of the disturbing questions that had been raised about their traditional beliefs and practices. Not until a long-smoldering resentment against ecclesiastical privileges and against a higher clergy closely linked to an oppressive political regime burst into revolutionary flames can one speak of a religious "crisis" among the general population. In Britain religious decline may have been even more gradual. The constant denominational changes, the unpopular Puritan revolution, and after the Restoration, the constant tensions between the established Church and the nonconformists slowly eroded faith and spread skepticism.

Christianity, for centuries the core of European culture, had left a tradition of values on which even secular intellectuals remained dependent long after having abandoned their faith. Most professed a belief in God even while adhering to a philosophy that emptied the idea of God of its traditional content. They continued to regard the idea as indispensable for morality, though morality had largely ceased to rely on it. Voltaire and Rousseau displayed an uncommon proselytic zeal for their deist faith and an aggressive hostility toward any kind of atheism. But this pragmatic use of the idea of God as foundational principle of the cosmos and as the basis of ethics had too little coherence

to resist further deconstruction. Beginning with Hume and Diderot the suspicion grew that neither the origin and preservation of the cosmos nor the sanctioning of morality might require a personal God.

No part of Enlightenment thought has deservedly met with more criticism than the absence of genuine *otherness,* related to a lack of internal differentiation within the rationalist universals. For ancient and for most medieval thinkers, reason had involved a dialectical relation between the universal and the particular. In his later dialogues Plato became intensely aware of the complexity of this relation. In deducing the primary categories of thought he considered it of primary importance that the universal should contain the particular *within* itself. Hence to prevent the concept of *Being,* the most universal of all, from excluding particularization — as had occurred in Parmenides' philosophy — he distinguished in it the categories of *motion* and *rest.* Next, he protected them from collapsing into one another and into *Being* by adding *otherness* and *sameness* (the principle of identity) (*Sophist,* 254D–255E). Identity comes from the universal form, yet it cannot exist without being related to an *other.* Hence otherness, though opposed to identity, is nonetheless intrinsically linked to it.[25] It is by its own intrinsic momentum, then, that the universal moves toward particularization, not by being "applied" to particular instances. Universals convert particular perceptions into ideal structures. Yet if these structures be conceived as independent of the concrete particularity in which they originated, they become permanently removed from the real. Often rationalists treated universals as categories of the mind that remain on the ideal level of mathematics, paralleling the real without ever meeting it.

Spinoza understood the inappropriateness of such a procedure. He considered philosophical definition adequate only if it included not merely the universal idea of an object but also the conditions of its particular existence. So did Leibniz. Most thinkers of the Enlightenment appear to have conceived of universals as patterns of meaning either abstracted from (in empiricist philosophy) or imposed upon reality (in rationalist thought). This accounts for the neat, homogeneous picture they drew of a reality undisturbed by the confusing, disorderly array of the concrete. Plato had shown how a recognition of otherness will move knowledge beyond the static identity of pure universals to the particularity of concrete existence.

The preceding reflections may seem exceedingly speculative until one realizes the consequences the imposition of abstract universals had upon practical life. We know the excesses to which the rift between the universal and the particular led during and after the French Revolution. Even the idea of a universal humanity, unless it allows for a diversity of traditions, inevitably

results in political repression. I hope to show the presence and influence of those abstractions in philosophical texts, practical attitudes, literary works, and artistic criticism.

I must postpone a critical assessment of Enlightenment culture to the conclusion of this book, but not without at least raising the fundamental question which so much preoccupies us today: Is the Enlightenment project still valid? Habermas, in his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity,* claims that its movement toward human emancipation was diverted from its critical course. New oppressive modes of thought, pseudo-religions he calls them, gradually reoccupied the place from which the Enlightenment had evicted the old religion. Thus he turns Hegel's critique of the Enlightenment against Hegel's own theory of the Absolute Spirit. This all-including pseudo-religious category allowed no outside criticism because there was no "outside." In its frozen system of reality the call to emancipation was lost altogether. Habermas therefrom concludes that the valid program of the Enlightenment had been prematurely abandoned.

In contrast to this conclusion, I believe that the problems of the Enlightenment are due not to a subsequent deviation from the original plan, but rather to an inadequate conception of that plan, which later thinkers attempted to remedy. The principle of rationality that lies at the core of the Enlightenment project was undoubtedly legitimate. Its origin goes back to the Greek beginnings of Western thought. The Enlightenment, much to its credit, attempted to restore that principle to its full force. Yet by making reason an exclusive construction of the mind, it fundamentally transformed its nature. The Greeks had conceived of reason as an ordering principle inherent in reality. The mind possesses the unique ability to understand its inner structure and consciously to pursue its immanent designs. Modern thinkers, however, reversed the relation and submitted all reality to the structures of the mind. They imposed the rules of the one science that the mind could indeed claim full authorship of and which depended on no external content, namely, mathematics. The mind thereby acquired an unprecedented control over nature, yet it ceased to be an integral part of it.

The transformation did not occur all at once. The culture of the Renaissance had fully asserted the mind's creative role in the constitution of meaning, yet the mind itself had remained part of a single, hierarchical order of reality that depended upon a transcendent source of power. We find a remnant of this dual creativity in Descartes's epistemology, where the mind alone constitutes meaning yet truth ultimately depends upon the will of God. The Enlightenment drew far more extensive conclusions from the modern premises. Its thinkers detached the subjective principle from the given order. At first this was a

purely methodical issue: for all we know, meaning originates in the subject. Of other sources we remain scientifically ignorant and hence they ought not be introduced into the process of knowledge. Later some denied the very existence of an order that apparently contributes nothing to our knowledge of the world. The Frankfurt philosopher Max Horkheimer considered the disconnection of the link with a transcendent source a crucial moment in the new conception of reason: "The divorce of reason from religion marked a further step in the weakening of its objective aspect and a higher degree of formalization, as became manifest during the period of the Enlightenment. The neutralization of religion . . . contradicted its total claim that it incorporates objective truth, and emasculated it."[26] What first was neutralized ended up being discarded from the concept of reason.

Two consequences followed from the transformation of reason. One, the subject, now sole source of meaning, lost all objective content of its own and became a mere instrument for endowing an equally empty nature with a rational structure. Two, since reality thereby lost the inherent intelligibility it had possessed for the ancients and the Schoolmen, the nature of *theoria* fundamentally changed. Thinking ceased to consist of perceiving the nature of the real. It came to consist of forcing reality to answer the subject's question or, as Kant put it in his famous comparison, of compelling a witness to respond to the judge's inquiry. Contemplation, for the Greeks the highest end of life, became an instrument in the hands of, and for the benefit of, an all-powerful subject. This explains the utilitarian streak of the Enlightenment. Reason ceases to be an ultimate good. Henceforth it functions in a system where everything has become both end and means. It has ceased to be an ultimate goal. Yet, as we saw, that was only one current in the dialectic of the Enlightenment. A countermovement, intent on saving the traditional content of reason paralleled this functionalism. It rarely spoke with the eloquence and confidence of the rationalist voice. Moreover, it fell back upon a tradition that was under fire and whose advocates seldom possessed the critical weapons needed to defend it. Nonetheless, those who so lacked the critical power of the Enlightenment may in the end have achieved much toward broadening the Enlightenment's concept of reason. They helped to restore the spiritual content of that subject which had come to occupy a central place in the modern concept of reason. During the time of the Enlightenment the two remained mostly opposed. Yet they were to become, at least in part, reconciled during the subsequent Romantic era.