

The Enlightenment Vision Today

By Stuart Jordan



Many historians would agree that the historical Western Enlightenment played a major role in inspiring the most successful revolution of modern times, the one that created the United States of America.¹ Without the development of a body of thought that was overwhelmingly hopeful and oriented toward universal improvement of the human condition, it is unlikely that political leaders in the former British colonies of North America could have persuaded enough people to fight for independence from a foreign regime that insisted on overlordship, but was not altogether repressive in the manner of many other imperial masters.²

Ideas may be relegated to secondary status in solving many immediate problems, but history takes a longer view, and recognizes the power of ideas over time. The Enlightenment vision of the eighteenth century is one of the most powerful such bodies of thought in history, and it has set in motion changes that are continuing today. In this brief article based on a book I wrote recently,³ we consider what some of those changes are, and how well the original vision has survived the test of time.

To assess the Enlightenment vision today, we need a simple description of what it was at its inception. Quoting from my book, a simple description that satisfies many features of the movement is:

“The Enlightenment was primarily an ethically motivated humanistic movement to improve the secular lives of people everywhere. To do so, it advocated science and reason to achieve that goal.” (ref 3, page 11)

One characteristic of the historical Enlightenment was the optimistic assumption many of its proponents held that *rapid progress* toward achieving these goals was virtually guaranteed. In America, Thomas Jefferson was the revolutionary statesman who shared this radical optimism, and its associated anticlericalism. Consider:

“ Thomas Jefferson famously predicted that young men born during his adult years would probably become Unitarians, a tolerant sect that is viewed with disdain by many religious fundamentalists today.” (ref 3, page 127)

Of course we know that this state of affairs has never been reached in the subsequent two centuries since it was made. This raises the question of whether the original Enlightenment was naïve in its conviction that a more rational human civilization was possible,

as is sometimes claimed by the traditionally religious. The question can be answered in the negative, but it must be asked, for recent history has convincingly demonstrated both spectacular successes as well as equally appalling failures of the human race to realize Enlightenment goals after two centuries trying. The following schematic summary is provided and defended in the book already noted. I have added the item in parentheses to the referenced quote, to give strong weighting to the impressive advances in medicine since the eighteenth century. Refer to ^(ref 3, page 43).

MIXED

Impressive advances in democracy and human rights, with a long way still to go.

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We can now ask where this leaves us, and the total picture is clearly mixed. Avoiding both depressing pessimism and mindless optimism, the obvious approach is to adopt the view from nowhere, which is well described in a clever but quite serious novel by Rebecca Goldstein.⁴ The view from nowhere is simply the view from everywhere that is relevant to the central question, in an attempt to eliminate as much personal bias as inevitably lurks behind all human thought. We can try to proceed in that spirit.

Reflecting on the central question of assessing the historical Enlightenment in the contemporary context, I suggest that the remarks quoted from the book in this article bear directly on the answer. We can start with science, a discussion of what science is and is not, followed by a demonstration of its immense value and power.

“Science is not a collection of facts about the workings of the natural order. Science is the process whereby the facts and the natural laws governing them are established.”^(ref 3, page 65)

“Science is *the* superior way of knowing our natural order. To date, there are no credible competitors.”^(ref 3, page 69)

However, even for the secular humanist, science is not everything that is important. At least today, science cannot give us our most basic ethical principles. It is useful to recall that even the very proscience Enlightenment still viewed science as a critically important *means* for achieving a better secular world for people. Achieving that world remained the central, ethically motivated goal. This led to asking “Is science itself ethical, and if so why?”^(ref 3, page 81) To which I replied:

“... science is ethical because the evidence demonstrates that the reliable knowledge science gives us matters greatly today in solving many of our most pressing world problems ...”^{(ref 3, page 83).}

If science is so important, as argued, is there any particular kind of science that may increase in importance in this century? In my view there is. As a long-time satisfied physical scientist, I nonetheless think the relative importance of the life sciences and particularly the neurosciences will increase, and may hold the key to greater societal progress in the foreseeable future. The underlying argument is based upon the following observation:

“Our mind/brain is the seat of what makes us human. There reside our memories, our cognitive faculties, the seat of our decisions, and the sense of self that is our personal identity. The mind/brain interacts with the rest of our bodies in complex ways (etc. ...).”^(ref 3, page 99)

More could be said, but the point is grasped immediately when considering that decisions ranging from initiating a romantic adventure to – far more disturbing – launching a nuclear attack all initiate in individual human brains ... and their interactions. Understanding all this better on superior scientific, not mythological, grounds is obviously recommended.

These thoughts quickly lead to considerations of human rights, which are based on how we feel about one another and why (again, a mind/brain thing). In the book, I focus primarily on countering ideologies of racism and especially sexism, as examples of where both great progress has been made and much more is clearly needed. In the case of sexism, which affects half of the world’s population and in some cultures remains appalling, the following argument is developed:

“I think the world will be a more civilized home for all our descendants when women are accorded equal rights, opportunities, and respect. Yet, ... I would not be surprised if sexism proves to be the last major ism to fall before the advance of human rights and human knowledge. Passion only yields to evidence when the evidence is overwhelming and the old ways prove destructive.”^(ref 3, page 123) It is noted that the reason probably involves both historical inertia and certain subtleties in the male-female sexual relationship.

Other current major developments that contribute to both progress and reaction are reviewed in the book. Two prominent ones are the still unsolved problem of how to properly regulate mature capitalism and the not unrelated problem of addressing climate change. Idealistic solutions abound. Pragmatic ones that will work and can be “sold” remain elusive. Relatively poor public education is identified as a common problem here and elsewhere, for it matters little if a small elite understands major societal problems when “the people” remain ignorant and susceptible to simplistic political propaganda.

Any effort to assess progress toward Enlightenment goals demands that the roles of religion and politics be included. The book reviews how religion has evolved with other advances in human life, from an era of *brutal gods*, through one of *compassionate gods*, to the current era of *disappearing gods*. Thus, "... the modern God seems, like the unfortunate climber of Everest who vanished into the mists, to be rapidly disappearing into thin air."^(ref 3, page 135) This view is currently held by a significant fraction of the well educated everywhere.

The book argues that politics has become the predominant way to resolve major societal issues today. The demonstration of that can be summarized as follows. "If we add to the religious, military, and corporate attempts to influence politics the emergence of the almost uncontrollable global Internet, along with a media that reaches huge audiences, we are confronted with a rich stew of influences. ... The ultimate goal of all power groups quickly becomes gaining a major degree of control of the political apparatus, even if this is done indirectly."^(ref 3, page 151) The reason each wishes to dominate the politic process is because that is where the course will be set. This can be viewed as "Enlightenment" progress, if the political process is functionally democratic.

My final assessment of the Enlightenment today appears in the next to last chapter of the book. "The grand ethical Enlightenment vision was valid and should be retained. ... Even the means proposed to achieve the goal are workable. ... (However) we must remember to be patient and accept that no road worth traveling is likely to be easy, even for dedicated problem solvers."^(ref 3, pages 211-212) That summary closes with the famous final sentence from Voltaire's delightful farce, *Candide*, concerning the cultivation of gardens.

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The book is dedicated to Paul Kurtz, who after a long distinguished life succumbed to the ravages of age in October of 2012. No American emphasized more the values of the Enlightenment, a term found frequently in Paul's voluminous writings. It is a pleasure to end this article with that dedication. With the permission of Prometheus Books:

To Professor Paul Kurtz, who has done more for the freethought movement in the United States and internationally than any American since John Dewey, and who has for his entire adult life fought for, argued for, and organized for the principles of the Enlightenment that are the subject of this book.

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References:

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