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A Glance at the Philosophy of Two Absolutist *Philosophes* and their Application to European Monarchies

1. Introduction

The transition between the pre-Enlightenment world and the Revolutionary Age produced a curious blend of elements from both. Monarchs, enticed by the ideals of Classical Liberalism but convinced only they could competently bring them into their own realm, developed a specific way of applying them: Enlightened Despotism. Their use of authority as absolute monarchs to reform society drew mixed reactions from some Enlightenment thinkers. This essay will first look at a couple philosophers who stood in agreement with the monarchs, then those who found the actions of the Enlightened Despots objectionable.

1. Thomas Hobbes, Voltaire and Absolute Monarchy

According to Sorell (writing for the Encyclopedia Brittanica), Thomas Hobbes, a prominent figure of the early Enlightenment, espoused absolutism, seeing it as the best way to maintain peace. Man in his free state, he thought, was prone to be a creature of war. Thus, to increase his own safety, man congregates together and confers governing authority to a single figurehead, so that any who would continue in barbarity are subject to the same consequences from the figurehead as anyone else. Thus, liberty (and competition with other humans) is exchanged for safety and harmony (Sorell, 2024).

For Hobbes, this figurehead needs to retain his freedom so he can rule and provide for his people as best as he sees fit, even if it runs contrary to what his subjects would prefer. Hobbes insisted that the people under the king’s authority have the right to rebel only if the safety they have is no greater than if they simply remained in their natural state. If a monarch reigns so incompetently that he does not give what his people need of him, they will naturally abandon his authority.

In the disputes between King Charles I and Parliament, Hobbes wrote an essay titled The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic, in which he came to the defense of the king’s right to liberally interpret the functions he served as monarch. He would flee to Paris as tensions began to rise, and would later serve as a tutor to Charles II. Thus, he is now remembered as an Enlightenment thinker who maintained favor with absolutism in the midst of his understanding of human liberty and borderline materialism.

Voltaire, another man of the Enlightenment, was also a supporter of Absolute Monarchy (Besterman, 1976, pp. 305-319, cited in Vennis, 2020, p. 9). It is known that he had an extensive correspondence with Catherine II of Russia, though the fact that she was manipulating him to gain favor is evident (Lentin, 1974, pp 11-32). However, he was not an unwavering loyalist to Absolutists. Voltaire writes the following concerning the policy of Louis XVI towards Protestants in his own nation:

His glory and success received a further addition from the weakness of most of the other crowned heads in Europe, and the miserable state of their people. The emperor Leopold was at that time in fear of the rebellious Hungarians, and especially of the Turks, whom they had called in to their assistance, and were preparing to invade Germany. Louis thought it politic to persecute the Protestants of his own kingdom, in order to prevent them from being able to create any disturbance; but he underhandedly protected the Protestants and rebels in Hungary, because they might be of service to him. (Ch. XIII)

Later on in the same work, Voltaire again labels Louis XVI’s persecution of Protestants an error, though in the same paragraph he lauds the overall progressiveness of the French king:

Notwithstanding that he has been reproached with littleness of mind in his zeal against the Jansenists, with too much haughtiness to foreigners in his prosperity, with too great indulgence to several women, and too great severity in personal concerns, with wars undertaken without sufficient reason, with the burning of the Palatinate, and the persecution of the Protestants, yet his great qualities and glorious actions being placed in the scale have at last more than counterpoised all his imperfections. (Ch. XXVI).

Voltaire, while no John Locke, certainly frowned on any sort of religious intolerance, whether for religious or for political reasons. He certainly was not willing to abandon it as a point of criticism even against persons that he otherwise largely appreciated.

1. Conclusion

While there is much more that could be said about the relationship between the enlightened despots and the *philosophes*, both time and space constrain this author. It will have to suffice to say that while there was much overlap between the beliefs of some thinkers of the Enlightenment and the goals and actions of some European monarchs, there was also some disunity. Religious intolerance was still an issue at play in some corners of Europe, even among the Enlightened Despots (though there was a level of duplicity in the case of Louis XVI), which plainly runs against the grain of Enlightenment thought. But in any case, the absolutism of some Enlightenment monarchs was ultimately abandoned, and the *philosophes* won the day.

The Enlightenment and the Nightfall on Civilization

1. Introduction

The Enlightenment was, and remains, a significant factor in the Western philosophical heritage. Classical Liberalism and the lines of thought that came out of it have shaped at a fundamental level how occupants of the first world perceive reality, especially as regards society and government. But there has always been some people who, for various reasons, have opposed these ideas. From Roman Catholic clergy of the 18th century to modern thinkers seeking to recover an older way of viewing the world, different persons have had different reasons for taking issue with the various strands of thought that find their origin in the Enlightenment. This essay will seek to cover a couple of these reasons.

1. Enlightened Esotericism

The ideology of Enlightenment was, speaking colloquially, a mixed bag. As much as it was an age of materialist reason and scientific/philosophical revolution, it was also an age of occultism, alchemy, and secret societies. These two strains even blended in such persons as Sir Isaac Newton, John French of Agrippa, and Sir Francis Bacon. Many groups with esoteric tendencies (such as the Freemasons and the Carbonari) were involved with the promotion of Liberalism. The Roman and English churches would have strong reactions against these secret societies (though the Church of England did have unrelated internal divisions that enabled the rise of Occultism even among the clergy [Monod, 2013, pp. 37-38, 43]), and their association with Enlightenment ideals produced an allergic reaction from conservative persons against these new ways of thinking [Kenneth, 2022, pp. 499-500]. The secretiveness of these societies certainly did not help their case, a phenomenon that continues into the modern day.

1. The Enlightenment, Religion, and Re-Enchantment

Thinkers like Jonathan Pageau have also pointed out that certain lines of thought from the Enlightenment were human-centered rather than God-centered, which strikes the religious conscience as idolatrous. In his interview with Benjamin Boyce, Pageau states that the rationalist materialism that was most strongly found in the English strain of the enlightenment essentially cut off a major part of human experience (including human experience as a phenomenon in and of itself) (15:04-17:48).

Ironically, this way of thinking that was meant to exalt man as his own sovereign being has led to humans being treated as commodities, an issue that some have identified with Capitalism, but the author of this essay would rather put the blame on Materialism. As Pageau points out, together with Dr. Jordan Peterson in their co-written essay*, Identity: Individual and the State versus the Subsidiary Hierarchy of Heaven*, the freedom-centered absolute individualism born of John Locke’s line of thinking necessitates the authoritarianism of Thomas Hobbes (2013, p. 5). As each person persists in their own decadence that marginalizes and isolates them (“atomizes” is the word that Pageau and Peterson use), an authoritarian structure has a greater opportunity to step in and give the hedonist what he thinks he wants in exchange for enslavement to a system that sets itself up as a god in place of the God left behind in the Enlightenment.

The preternatural aspect of how *homo sapiens* interacts with the rest of reality could not, however, be suppressed forever. Even as materialism has firmly rendered Western Civilization a post-Christian society, spirituality continues to beckon to humanity. According to Leeds Trinity university, Neo-Paganism has been on the increase in the United Kingdom over the past few decades. Enlightenment rationalism and occultism also seem to be butting up against one another again, as The Atlantic (cited by Tangermann on Futurism) reports that some of the staff at OpenAI will often incorporate rites of worship centered around the projects they are working on. In a similar vein of spiritual reawakening (though working in a contrary direction), the author of this essay also wrote a presentation on the growth of Eastern Orthodox Christianity (a church that heavily emphasizes the closeness between the material and the immaterial) in the United States. Though the West has become post-Christian, many within it still find a bulwark within the Church, it seems.

And even in circles where religion itself is seen as oppressive and hateful, its vestiges can still be seen. Boyce and Pageau point out some of the reapplication of Christian morality to the schema of the radical political left. It takes on a fractured and broken form, because it is uprooted from the central concept of sacrifice, but there is still an idea of a metaphysic that allows for the transcendence of categories and the worship of the marginal (30:57-34:40).

1. Conclusion

The Enlightenment is a many-faceted philosophical movement, and it can be hard to pin down all the currents of thought that were coursing through it. It becomes a strange paradox where religion dies but also flourishes, reverted to a pre-Christian state of decentralization. Hence, many both contemporary with the movement and in the modern day find fault with it, or at least view it with suspicion. But for better or for worse, it has left a lasting impact on culture, philosophy, and politics, and many of its outworkings are still playing themselves out.

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