THE AGE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT: UNIVERSALISM OR IMPERIALISM?

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Abstract: In this essay titled, The Age of Enlightenment, Universalism or Imperialism?, I analyze the contextual and real life relationship between the works of four prominent Enlightenment philosophers and today’s ideological rift between “the West and the Rest.” Using the philosophies and literature of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, I explore the unintended consequences and effects of the Enlightenment that attempted to spread modernity and progress to all corners of the world with the creation of the social contract and upholding fundamental “universal values” such as equality, freedom, rationalism, and individualism.
The Age of Enlightenment is a European philosophical movement that characterized 18th century France. The enlightenment drastically changed people’s opinions about the social fabric and their involvement with the government. The Enlightenment philosophers supported rationalism over faith, science over religion, and equality over power. Since this movement undermined the authority of the Church and the monarch, the ruling class tried and failed to stop it from progressing. Men and women alike teamed up for this grass-roots philosophical movement aimed at bringing sovereignty back to the people. The movement, while it originated in France, did not stay localized. In fact, enlightenment literature was being spread across Europe and even into America where it sowed the seeds for democracy to come. The Enlightenment is based on “universal” values and morals, such as freedom, equality, fraternity, separation of church and state, science, individualism, the free market, etc. The purpose of the enlightenment was to awaken the world to the corrupt nature of ‘rule by the few,’ remove the chains of mental servitude and to spread these “universal” values as the key to modernizing. The Enlightenment was undoubtedly one of the most significant events in recent history, however, like any philosophical movement claiming to know the absolute truth about reality, when scrutinized closely some holes in its validity begin to appear. Most importantly is this concept of “universal” values. There is no true universal value, and in this essay, I will argue that the insistence of so is actually a uniquely Western trait. These “universal” values undoubtedly shaped and facilitated the West’s progress and influence, however, they simultaneously marginalized and alienated other cultures having profound relationships with tradition and religion. This division of global paradigms in the 18th century is the source of much of the modern cultural tension seen between “the west and the rest.”

One of the most influential works of the enlightenment was *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. The encyclopedia is a collection of all the world’s knowledge up to that point in time and culminated the idea that knowledge gives people the power to change the status quo, serving as a sort of manifesto to modernity. The underlying rationalistic philosophy called for the refinement of the intellectual arts, including past and recent discoveries on everything from art, science, and even the newly invented mechanical arts. Jean le Rond d'Alembert wrote the *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot* so that readers could gain a better understanding of the structure of the articles, background on significant historical events, and get a closer look at the encyclopedia’s collection of authors. In the *Preliminary discourse*, they argued that all unexplained natural phenomenon can actually be explained by mathematical principles that govern our reality. One can imagine the tension this created with the Church, since before all unexplained phenomenon was attributed to God’s doing. Among the articles, one argument strongly supported is the importance of using the scientific method to deduce clear and absolute truths about reality, that exist whether or not people believe in them. Otherwise known as “natural law,” these are the inherent truths that govern all of life. For example, gravity exists whether or not you believe it does- this is perhaps the only example of true universalism.

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of bodies, in Metaphysics and Ethics the study of our soul and its attachments, etc. Here I am taking Metaphysics in the most rigorous sense, since it is the science of purely spiritual beings. What I am saying here will be even truer when we look at Metaphysics in a more general sense as that universal science which contains the principles of all the others. For if each science is based on observation and on observation alone for its true principles, the Metaphysics of each science can consist only of general consequences resulting from observation and presented from the widest vantage point possible” (D’Alembert).7

Because natural law leaves no room for refutations, the Encyclopedia’s insistence of its governing principles went head to head with the traditional ideologies of religious states. Science is developed out of natural law, therefore the Enlightenment philosophers saw its use as a universal value. However one must recognize the difference between universal truths born out of natural law and universal values. The first are irrefutable facts about nature, the latter are opinions or paradigms on the state of humanity. The first is rooted in rationalism, the latter in faith. This is where we begin to see the chasm between the “west and the rest” widen. In religious states, their God(s) represent their absolute truth. However, because of the Enlightenment pushing the Western idea of rationalism and science as the source of all overarching absolute truth, many religious states saw it as an attack on their culture and religion. Because of this shared sense of marginalization caused by the imposing western ideologies, fundamentalists began organizing their own philosophical movements that supported their own interpretation of reality.

In 1756, Voltaire published Essais sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations, et sur les principaux faits de l’histoire, depuis Charlemagne jusqu’à Louis XIII. His essays, much like the argument we saw in the Encyclopedia, were rooted in the idea that knowledge based upon reason is essential to become a moral human being. It is both a history and a philosophy that details the

shared realities of this world, and also the cultural superstitions or ideologies that prevented these shared realities from being realized. *L’essai sur les moeurs* was written in reaction to Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's *Speech of Universal History* “that presented Judeo-Christian nations as the most advanced”⁸. In his essays, Voltaire attempts to show the advancements of China and India as parallels to Western progress, but also identify the fundamental ideological differences between the two. In addition, rather than describing the Muslim world in terms of despotism in which the people have little power over a cruel or oppressive regime, he juxtaposed the Middle Eastern ideology with the weaknesses and faults of the European feudal system that enforced a rigid class system⁹. In this essay, Voltaire’s argument did not support the evolution of progress from magic to religion to science. In fact he argued that all societies attained a degree of modernity through the recognition of a deity whose existence begets that society’s basis for morality. Undermining the authority of the Church he argued that religion, specifically Christianity, was no longer essential for achieving a civilized society¹⁰. Thanks to Voltaire, society slowly began warming up to the idea that knowledge or wisdom creates moral beings, not the teachings of God. What a slap in the face of the church! To compare to Islamic cultures, what it means to be moral is clearly defined in the Quran.¹¹ Highlighted here is another crucial difference in the Western philosophies born out of the Enlightenment and the Eastern philosophies that are generally more religious-morality, is it universal? Does it mean the same thing from one culture to another?

Morality is everywhere the same for all men, therefore it comes from God; sects differ, therefore they are the work of men (Voltaire).

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**Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique** by Jean Jacques Rousseau was published in 1762 as an analysis of the contractual relationship between citizens and their government. The social contract is specifically the relationship between the members of a society and the state in which they live. In this novel, he seeks to understand if there can be a legitimate political authority, and what that would look like. Rousseau’s main argument is that only the people constitute a legitimate state’s power and that only the people can determine a nation’s sovereignty. What’s more, he argues that people have the right to determine the laws under which they live. An essential element to this popular sovereignty is what Rousseau calls «general will.» General will, or the willpower of the people, seeks the mutual agreement of individual interests that ultimately strive to benefit the common good of all.  

Like its members, the social pact gives the body politic absolute power over all citizens, and it is this same power, which, directed by the general will bears, as I have already said, the name of sovereignty. .. It is a question of distinguishing the rights of the citizens and the sovereign, and the duties which the first ones have to fulfill as subjects, of the natural right which they must enjoy as men (Rousseau, Du contrat social).

General will is what constitutes legitimate power to a political authority, essentially rendering the people as legislators. Rousseau argues the necessity of separating the sovereign body from the government. “This division is necessary because the sovereign cannot deal with particular matters like applications of the law. Doing so would undermine its generality, and therefore damage its legitimacy.” If the government oversteps the boundaries determined by the citizens, it is up to them, and only them to abolish it and create a new government that upholds the general will. To tie in Rousseau’s Social contract to modern day events and philosophies, let’s take a

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closer look at the “general will” of the Arab Spring protests. “The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across the Middle East in early 2011.”\textsuperscript{16} While originating in Tunisia, roughly 20 Arab-majority nations ended up participating in some kind of protest. The goal of the Arab Spring was to bring attention to the widespread political corruption, lack of accountability, and the deep resentment for many Arab dictators, and in some cases either expel the existing government or create a new one. While the results of these protests varied widely from country to country, few actually attained the goals they set out on. However what did change was how Arabs view and respect their social contract. The three main problems the Arab Spring identified with the existing social contract was that the government was failing to provide its people with sufficient public sector jobs, the private sector unfairly benefitted autocrats, and finally, subsidies favored the rich, not the poor.\textsuperscript{17} The manifestations that occurred across the Arab world were aimed at getting the people to hold their government accountable for their actions, and to create laws that support the general will, not the will of the few. In this instance, we can see how influential Rousseau’s idea of the social contract is. It is the right of the people to determine the social contract and it cannot be imposed by a government or authority. Its legitimacy derives from solely from the general will of the people.

The influence of the Enlightenment philosophers like Diderot, D'Alembert, Voltaire and Rousseau among others continue to define much of Western philosophy, specifically about the duties and responsibilities of individual to interact directly with their government. While some ideas they’ve put forward, like science born out of natural law, seem to drive a wrench between western and oriental philosophies, others like the social contract show the “universal” or shared

\textsuperscript{17} Devarajan, Shanta. “What is the social contract and why does the Arab world need a new one?” Voices and Views: Middle East and North Africa, The World Bank, 12 Nov. 2015.
willpower’s that unite all of us. Whether you are Arab, English, African, or whatever else it
doesn’t matter, we all want a say in the legislation of our lives, if we are denied this what is to
distinguish us from slaves? While the Enlightenment weakened the power of the Church
throughout Europe, it did quite the opposite elsewhere in the world. In rejecting other paradigms
and claiming that reason and universal truth are born out of science and not God, the
enlightenment philosophers unintendedly strengthened the fundamental religious faith. Call
someone’s God a myth and they will only believe in him more.

From the mere fact that God was set over every political society, it followed that
there were as many gods as peoples. Two peoples that were strangers the one to
the other, and almost always enemies, could not long recognise the same
master: two armies giving battle could not obey the same leader. National
divisions thus led to polytheism, and this in turn gave rise to theological and
civil intolerance, which, as we shall see hereafter, are by nature the same”(De la
Religion Civil- Rousseau).

In conclusion, are the enlightenment values born out of universalism or imperialism? The
fact is that both are correct, based on who you ask. The laws of nature cannot be refuted,
therefore they must apply to all nations- religious or not. In some ways, this is universalism.
However, in spreading the Enlightenment philosophy as the key to society’s modernization, an
argument for imperialism can also be made. The ethnocentric belief that the Enlightenment
values are just and necessary for every civilization to become modern drove an opposition
movement even more organized and motivated- the fundamentalists. Because cultures and their
beliefs vary so greatly from country to country, no philosophical movement will ever be
accepted as “universally true.” However, the influence of such movements will forever shape our
relationship with reality. The age of the Enlightenment saw the natural transition from a
civilization that practices first magic, then religion, and then science, as the “endgame” for
achieving a civilized society. However, the idea of progress as an entirely linear process is false.
Western civilization did develop in this manner, however, one cannot assume that all humanity is ready or willing to evolve in the same manner. Therefore, since the Enlightenment tried to spread its values through power, both physical and intellectual, “what is universalism to the West, is imperialism to the Rest.”\textsuperscript{18}

Bibliography


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