



Are We Naturally Good?

Review of Henry Vyverberg

Historical Pessimism in the French Enlightenment

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Review of Henry Vyverberg, *Historical Pessimism in the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958: Harvard University Press), *French Studies* 14 no. 1 (January 1960), 167–70



Jean-Baptiste Dubos

THE PURPOSE of this learned monograph is to provide evidence against the very widespread belief, shared by most writers about the period, that the main current of enlightened French thought in the eighteenth century represents human nature as being fundamentally virtuous, rational and, when correctly instructed, capable of, or even inevitably destined to, unlimited progress. According to this view the *philosophes* and *Encyclopédistes* were one and all buoyed up by this optimistic faith in reason and science, and either wholly ignored the influence of evolutionary, traditional and irrational factors, or else believed that its strength derived from

‘interested’ error,¹ idleness and vice, which the progress of reason would duly expose and destroy. It is undeniable that this is the account provided by most historians of ideas, both in the nineteenth century and in our own; one copies from another until it becomes an unassailable dogma.

Professor Vyverberg is concerned to refute this highly misleading oversimplification and does what he can to emphasise the scepticism, the relativism and the distrust of historical progress to be found in the thought of some of the most representative among the *lumières*, and he attempts to trace the roots of such sentiments to sociological, ethical and aesthetic views held by their forerunners in the seventeenth century. Professor Vyverberg has read widely, and his little book is a scholarly, sensible, accurate and useful summary of the evidence for the clear strain of pessimism that runs through the writings of some of the best-known French radical reformers of the [168] eighteenth century. But he has little feel for ideas as such, and his vignettes of his chosen thinkers are, as a rule, too sketchy, and too timidly executed, to convey the full flavour, let alone provide analyses of the intellectual structure, of any one attitude or doctrine or school of thought or action.

The author begins with Descartes, as the father of rationalist optimism, and of what Professor Hayek has called ‘scientism’ – that is, the belief that the methods of the natural scientists are in principle capable of solving all problems, social and moral as well as intellectual. He then turns to his antithesis, Pascal, but makes no

¹ [This Berlinian phrase appears to originate in an anonymous, somewhat free, translation of Holbach’s ‘recourons à nos sens, que l’on nous a fausement fait regarder comme suspects’, *Système de la nature* (1770), part 1, chapter 1, as ‘let us fall back on our senses, which error, interested error, has taught us to suspect’: M. de Mirabaud [sc. Holbach], *Nature; and Her Laws: As Applicable to the Happiness of Man, Living in Society: Contrasted with Superstition and Imaginary Systems* (London, 1816), i 26. The phrase is copied in translations by Samuel Wilkinson (1820) and H. D. Robinson (1835). However creative this Englishing may be, the sentiment seems entirely characteristic of Holbach, who writes, for example, of ‘erreurs utiles’ (‘useful errors’), op. cit., part 2, chapter 12, and ‘hommes fortement intéressés à l’erreur’ (‘people with a strong interest in error’), *Le Bon Sens* (1772), § 82.]

effort to uncover the roots of his unanswered scepticism, the disintegrating doubt that has haunted all but the shallowest thinkers since his day; nor does he advance any reason (including Pascal's own) for Pascal's claim to set limits to the pretensions of reason. Professor Vyverberg goes on to discuss Bossuet (of whose basic ideas there is scarcely even a brief sketch), Boileau, Perrault and Fénelon, and considers to what degree they should be regarded as Cartesians. Here he lays great emphasis on the incompatibility of Boileau's concept of authority – which derives from the general consent of mankind – and critical reason as conceived by Descartes and Perrault. Doubtless according to strict Cartesian theory nothing can stand before the scrutiny of untrammelled individual reason, whose word is final. But there is a good deal about natural 'light' and 'good sense' in Descartes and his successors, which modifies this absolute position in practice, and which, pace Professor Vyverberg, permits the 'classical' theorists, from Boileau to Batteux, to hold both positions without too much logical discomfort.

Professor Vyverberg moves on to the hedonists and sceptics Saint-Évremond and Fontenelle, who, whatever their differences, held man's nature to be incurably and everywhere egoistic, blind, greedy, envious, and incapable of change; from which it must follow that belief in moral progress is an illusion. He comes to life in his discussion of Dubos, of whose relativism this is probably the best account in English. But, unaccountably, he does not discuss the influence of either Hume or Herder in France: to exclude two of the philosophers so influential in France in the later eighteenth century because they were not Frenchmen seems oddly pedantic.

As for the most devastating of all the critics of the Enlightenment, Giambattista Vico, he is mentioned only as the author of a cyclical theory of history – admittedly his best-known, but certainly his least original and least important, doctrine. It is true that Vico's works lay virtually unread in the eighteenth century, and if Professor Vyverberg had chosen to disregard him on that ground, this might have been defensible. But since he does mention him, it is strange that he says nothing about the one doctrine of Vico that

is most deeply relevant to all that our author is discussing – namely that the methods of mathematics and natural science are not in principle applicable to human affairs, and that the doctrine of progress founded upon belief in these methods, largely because of their phenomenal success in their own sphere, leads to cardinal fallacies if used as a method of interpreting the life either of society or of individuals – in short the celebrated doctrine that lies at the basis of [169] European historicism, and in particular of the sharp contrast drawn between the natural and the ‘humane’ studies by the Germans who followed Herder and rejected Condorcet.

Professor Vyverberg’s quotations from Condillac, Raynal, Grimm, Mirabeau, Dubos and the anti-*philosophes* are most instructive, and his account of the arguments for and against belief in free will, happiness, progress and the like which occur in the writings of Voltaire, Diderot and their epigoni is a useful caution for those who believe these thinkers to be either simple or consistent. But here, too, there are queer omissions: there is nothing on Diderot’s sceptical remarks about Helvétius’ mechanistic, wholly behaviourist description of human nature, nor on the criticisms made by Helvétius and others of the pessimistic implications of Montesquieu’s relativism – in particular on the common charge made against him by the *philosophes* of describing vices without castigating them, and of reporting facts without sufficiently suggesting that they can or should be altered and improved. Against this may be set the attention paid by Professor Vyverberg to Linguet and Sade, two bold and unusual swimmers against the tide, who drove some of the principles of the left-wing orthodoxy to their logical conclusions, with devastating results. Professor Vyverberg writes better on Sade than on Linguet, whose theory of class war – central to his social doctrines and his ‘pessimism’ – he fails to notice.

Despite these blemishes, this book has much to recommend it: it is clear, modest and informative; it is a product of wide learning, does not generalise beyond the solid first-hand evidence upon which the exposition is founded, and makes a good case for its central thesis. Moreover it makes valuable points on its way. Thus

it shows that only a small minority of even the ‘optimistic’ thinkers of the eighteenth century thought man naturally good – that the majority thought him merely neutral, capable of being moulded by environment, by education, by accidents, towards vice or virtue. It draws an important and valuable contrast between the allied, but ultimately incompatible, adherents of reason and those of empiricism – between starting from a priori premisses and arguing deductively, and, as against this, leaning on observation and experiment. He points out that the conflict between these approaches became open and acute only after the common enemies of both – the Church, the court, irrationalists, traditionalists – the entire *ancien régime* – had been defeated. The author could have found much additional evidence – and illustrations, of which there are too few – for this thesis in the writings of the physiocrats, particularly Mercier de la Rivière and Letrosne. Professor Vyverberg makes an original and historically interesting point in noting that so admired and widely influential a *philosophe* as Buffon looked upon nature not as the harmonious ideal or the wise teacher – Dame Nature or Mistress Nature, obedience to whose precepts led to wisdom, happiness and virtue – but as hostile to man’s aspirations, a brute obstacle or, at worst, a murderous battlefield, which is a conception not to be found again until Sade or the German anti-naturalists Kant and Fichte and the French reactionary writers Maistre and Bonald.

[170] Compounded of these faults and virtues, Professor Vyverberg’s lucid and well-argued addition to the Harvard Historical Monographs is to be welcomed as an effective, badly needed and greatly overdue antidote to those more comprehensive, but more superficial and fundamentally misleading, surveys of the French enlightenment as an unbroken, harmonious whole (at any rate until Rousseau), of which Cassirer’s celebrated volume is perhaps the leading example.