The idea of compassion:  
The British vs. the French Enlightenment

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The "politics of compassion" has become a term of derision. Applied by conservatives to liberals, it suggests a soft-hearted and, worse, soft-minded approach to social problems, in which sentiment prevails over reason, intentions over results, and "feeling good" over "doing good." There is some justice in that criticism, but also some evasion of the real issue. For if the politics of compassion in its familiar sense is faulty, compassion itself, as a principle of social relationships and behavior, is not. Indeed, it is the basis of a serious social ethic with an honorable lineage. Going back at least to ancient Judaism and Christianity, it has come down to us in that hybrid form known as the Judeo-Christian tradition. In modernity, the religious virtue of compassion has been transmuted into a secular one, and a private duty has become a public responsibility. This was the unique achievement of

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the British Enlightenment—the British, not the French.

The British did not have *philosophes*; they had "moral philosophers." Adam Smith was the "Professor of Moral Philosophy" at the University of Glasgow, as Francis Hutcheson had been before him and Thomas Reid after him. The term applies as well to others who had no such academic title but were engaged in the same philosophical enterprise—the third Earl of Shaftesbury, most notably, who had the distinction of being the father of the British Enlightenment. Shaftesbury's collection of essays, including a much quoted and praised essay on virtue, appeared in 1711 and went through 10 more editions by the end of the century. It was he who gave currency to the terms that became the key concepts in British philosophical and moral discourse for the whole of the century—"social virtues," "social affections," "natural affections," "moral sense," "moral sentiments," "fellow-feeling," "benevolence," "sympathy," "compassion."

The year after Shaftesbury's death, Bernard Mandeville paid unwitting tribute to him by launching the most serious and systematic attack on his philosophy. *The Fable of the Bees* was published in 1714; its subtitle, "Private Vices, Public Benefits," reads like a manifesto contra-Shaftesbury. Society, Mandeville argued, was based neither on the "friendly qualities and kind affections" of man's nature nor on his faculties of "reason and self-denial," but rather on "what we call evil in this world, moral as well as natural." Evil is "the grand principle that makes us sociable creatures, the solid basis, the life and support of all trades and employments without exception." With a fine display of impartiality, Mandeville applied this jaundiced view of human nature to rich and poor alike. But it was to the poor that it had particular pertinence, for it was they who show "such an extraordinary proclivity to idleness and pleasure" and would never work "unless they were obliged to it by immediate necessity."

In the second edition of the *Fable*, published nine years later, Mandeville added a critique of the charity schools that were then so numerous—schools for pauper children and orphans, who were fed and clothed, taught to read (and sometimes write), and then sent out to serve as apprentices or servants. (There were 1,500 such schools at the time with an
enrollment of 28,000.) Mandeville identified the main culprit responsible for those schools as that “noble writer,” Lord Shaftesbury, who “fancies that as man is made for society, so he ought to be born with a kind of affection to the whole of which he is a part, and a propensity to seek the welfare of it.” The schools, Mandeville protested, encouraged children in their penchant for sloth and vice and incapacitated them for a life of poverty and hard work.

The *Fable of the Bees* profoundly shocked contemporaries, provoking a frenzy of attacks culminating in a ruling handed down by the grand jury of Middlesex condemning it as a “public nuisance.” Joining in the near universal condemnation of Mandeville were most of the eighteenth-century greats—Bishop Berkeley, Francis Hutcheson, Edward Gibbon, Adam Smith. It was Smith who condemned Mandeville’s philosophy as “licentious” and “wholly pernicious.”

**A natural virtue**

Mandeville’s was a spirited but futile attempt to abort the moral philosophy that was to be a distinctive feature of the British Enlightenment, a philosophy in which compassion, not self-interest or even reason, played the larger part. Unlike Locke, who proclaimed that there are “no innate practical principles” of morality, justice, or faith, the moral philosophers of the eighteenth century insisted upon just such principles. Thus where Locke looked to education to inculcate in children the sentiment of “humanity” or “compassion,” Shaftesbury rooted that sentiment in nature and instinct rather than education or reason. “To compassionat,” he wrote, “i.e., to join with in passion ... To commiserate, i.e., to join with in misery ... This in one order of life is right and good; nothing more harmonious; and to be without this, or not to feel this, is unnatural, horrid, immane [monstrous].”

The other moral philosophers qualified Shaftesbury’s teachings in one respect or another, but they agreed that the “social virtues” derived from a sense or sentiment that was innate in human nature. They did not deny reason; they were by no means irrationalists. But they gave reason a secondary, instrumental role. Francis Hutcheson, who first enunciated the principle, “The greatest happiness for the greatest numbers,” rooted
it in a "moral sense" that is "antecedent to instruction" because it is universal in all men. Bishop Butler delivered two sermons entitled "Compassion" in which he claimed that reason alone is not "a sufficient motive of virtue in such a creature as man"; it had to be joined with compassion, which is "a call, a demand of nature, to relieve the unhappy, as hunger is a natural call for food"—the "unhappy," he added, including the "indigent and distressed." Thomas Reid argued that if man had been endowed only with reason, the race would soon have been extinct; fortunately, reason is complemented by the "benevolent affections," which are "no less necessary for the preservation of the human species than the appetites of hunger and thirst." So too Adam Ferguson made "fellow-feeling" or "humanity" so much an "appurtenance of human nature" as to be a "characteristic of the species."

Even Hume, who had a notably unsentimental view of human nature, believed in an instinct that derived not from reason but from "a moral taste," or "benevolence." "It appears that a tendency to public good, and to the promoting of peace, harmony, and order in society does, always, by affecting the benevolent principles of our frame, engage us on the side of the social virtues." And again, more eloquently: "There is some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for human kind; some particle of the dove kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and serpent."

If reason, for these moral philosophers, was not a sufficient explanation for the social virtues, neither was self-interest or self-love. Unlike Hobbes and Locke, who predicated their moral philosophy upon self-love buttressed by reason, they insisted that "fellow-feeling" was disinterested, derived from a feeling for the other rather than for oneself. Hutcheson said that it could not be a product of self-interest because it involves associating oneself with such painful experiences as the suffering and distress of others. Hume, protesting against what he called the "selfish system of morals" of Hobbes and Locke, declared that "disinterested benevolence, distinct from self-love," is an essential quality of human nature.

Adam Smith made the idea of compassion the central principle of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The opening sen-
tences set the tone and theme of that work.

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the fortune of others and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others when we either see it or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner.... By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, ... we enter, as it were, into his body and become in some measure the same person with him.

"The perfectly virtuous man," Smith went on, "desires not only to be loved, but to be lovely ..., not only praise, but praiseworthiness.... To feel much for others and little for ourselves, ... to restrain our selfish and to indulge our benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature." Sympathy cannot be regarded as a selfish principle, for it comes not by imagining oneself in another's piteous condition, but imagining the other in it. Thus "a man may sympathize with a woman in childbed, though it is impossible that he should conceive himself as suffering her pains in his own proper person and character."

A social religion

When historians write about the British Enlightenment, it is these moral philosophers they have in mind. Thus they either ignore one of the most momentous events of the time, the religious revival started in 1738 by John and Charles Wesley, or they consign it to the status of an anti-Enlightenment. Like the eminent Victorian (and agnostic) Leslie Stephen, they tend to regard it as "heat without light, ... a recrudescence of obsolete ideas." Yet there is good reason to bring the revival into the Enlightenment—not the Enlightenment of the French philosophes, to be sure, but that of the British moral philosophers.¹

Whatever the philosophical, theological, and temperamental differences between the moral philosophers and Methodists (the term was current at the time), in important practical and

¹ By the same token and at about the same time, Methodism entered the American Enlightenment. The Great Awakening in America coincided almost
ethical matters they tended to converge. If there was a "ratio-
nalizing" of religion by the deists, there was also a "socializ-
ing" of religion by the Methodists. While the moral philoso-
phers were invoking an innate moral sense as the basis for
benevolence, Methodist preachers were inculcating a religious
gospel of good works. "The poor are the Christians," John
Wesley proclaimed, and proceeded to make of them his spe-
cial mission. His poor, moreover, were not only the "deserv-
ing," "respectable" poor who were the likeliest candidates for
conversion. He made a point of seeking out "the outcasts of
men," the "forlorn ones," the "most flagrant, hardened, des-
perate sinner." No one was beyond salvation, no one too poor,
benighted, or uncivilized to attain the spiritual and moral level
deserving of the name Christian.

The poor were not only the objects of spiritual redemption;
they were the beneficiaries of Wesley's social ministrations.
Christianity, he declared, is "essentially a social religion." One
of his best known and often repeated sermons was on the
theme, "Gain all you can, ... save all you can, ... give all you
can." The Methodists distributed food, clothing, and money to
the needy, paid "visitations" to the sick and to prisoners in
jail, set up loan funds and work projects for the unemployed,
founded hospitals, orphanages, friendly societies, schools, li-
braries, and other philanthropic enterprises, and took a promi-
nent part in the movements for prison reform and the aboli-
tion of the slave trade. Wesley himself was especially passion-
ate on the subject of "that execrable villainy," slavery. "An
African," he wrote, was "in no respect inferior to the Euro-
pean"; if he seemed so, it was because the European had kept
him in a condition of inferiority, depriving him of "all oppor-
tunities of improving either in knowledge or virtue."

Perhaps most notable were the efforts of the Methodists to
educate the lower classes—an education largely devoted to a

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exactly with the Wesleyan revival in England, and was inspired in part by
Wesley's associate, George Whitefield. The historian Martin Marty describes two
intertwined revolutions: a spiritual one that made American religion evangelical,
and a political one that made American society republican. In the idea of
America as a "city upon a hill," he observes, "pious and Enlightenment ideas
could meet, so the two schools of thought could employ one kind of futuristic
imagery while seeking separate goals: a Christian America or a republican America.
Both were part of a common pursuit of happiness."
reading of the Bible and religious tracts but that often went well beyond that, as is evident from their publications: a cheap dictionary, a nine-page English grammar, a host of tracts (many written by Wesley himself) on medicine, electricity, natural history, and the like, and abridgements (somewhat bowdlerized, to be sure) of Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Locke, and other classics.

In the Methodist communion, the poor had the satisfaction of being members in good standing. There were few social distinctions among them, the lay preachers having no special educational, social, or even sexual qualifications; women preachers had the same status as men. The congregants met once a week in small groups known as "classes," and in larger groups called "families." The historian Bernard Semmel has described this communal aspect of Methodism as the equivalent of the French ideal of fraternity. "In the century of Voltaire's sauvé qui peut and Smith's laissez-faire, when the paternalism of the traditional hierarchical society was breaking down, Methodism sought to endow the lower classes with a sense of their own worth, and to revive traditional religion as a source of warmth and solace, of comfort and joy."

This ethic was all the more effective because it was not only a social ethic but also an individualistic one. Derived from a powerful belief in the individual's relation to God, it promoted a sense of personal moral responsibility akin to the Puritan ethic, encouraging the virtues of thrift, diligence, temperance, honesty, and hard work. "Self-help" was a natural correlative to the helping of others. The ethic had the additional distinction of crossing both class and religious lines. By the end of the century, Wesleyanism had spawned an Evangelicalism within the Church of England that appealed largely to the middle and upper classes, while the Methodist sects that left the Church attracted the working and lower-middle classes.

The new political economy

Moral philosophy and religious gospel acquired a powerful ally in the new political economy. Adam Smith, who combined the roles of moral philosopher and political economist, was as distinguished in his time for The Theory of Moral Sentiments
as for The Wealth of Nations. It used to be thought that the two Smiths were incongruent—“Das Adam Smith Problem,” the Germans called it. Recent scholarship has resolved that problem; the two Smiths are now firmly united. The economist Joseph Schumpeter complained that Smith was so steeped in the tradition of moral philosophy derived from scholasticism and natural law that he could not conceive of economics per se, an economics divorced from ethics and politics. The point is well taken, although not necessarily in criticism. The Wealth of Nations is itself an exercise in moral philosophy, as is evident from its rhetoric: the denunciation of the “clamour and sophistry,” “the impertinent jealousy,” “mean rapacity,” “mean and malignant expedients,” “sneaking arts,” “interesting sophistry,” and “interested falsehood” of those merchants and manufacturers who espoused “the vile maxim, ‘all for themselves, and nothing for other people’,” and who furthered their own interests at the expense of “the poor and the indigent.”

These sentiments may seem difficult to reconcile with the famous dictum: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” But this principle was itself predicated on the assumption that the butcher, brewer, and baker abided by the rules of the free market and did not “conspire,” “deceive,” and “oppress.” Under these conditions, self-interest was a moral principle conducive to the general interest—not as lofty as altruism, but in the marketplace especially, more reliable and effective.

Smith’s “general interest” was not Rousseau’s or Hegel’s. Theirs transcended the sum of individual interests; Smith’s was simply the totality of interests of all the members of society, including the working classes. This was perhaps the most novel aspect of The Wealth of Nations. The title referred not to the nation as the mercantilist understood it—the nation-state whose wealth was the measure of its strength vis-à-vis other states—but to the people comprising the nation. It was their interests, their wealth that would be promoted by a political economy that would bring about a “universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people.”

Servants, labourers and workmen of different kinds make up the far greater part of every great political society.... No society can
surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe and lodge the whole body of the people should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed and lodged.

Defying the received wisdom of the time, Smith took a positive view of high wages because he had a benign view of the laboring poor. "Where wages are high, we shall always find the workmen more active, diligent, and expeditious, than where they are low." In the same spirit, he supported proportional taxation, and taxes on luxuries rather than necessities, so that "the indolence and vanity of the rich is made to contribute in a very easy manner to the relief of the poor." He had no objection to the poor laws; what he did oppose, and vigorously, was the act of settlement that established residency requirements for the poor, limiting their opportunities for improvement and depriving them of the "natural liberty" enjoyed by other Englishmen. More significant, because it seemed to go against the grain of the principle of laissez-faire, was his proposal for a state-administered, state-supported, state-enforced system of education for the "common people," including those "bred to the lowest occupation."

In 1776, when the Wealth of Nations was published, these were powerful, if heterodox, views. It was not long, however, before that book had become a classic in its own time. The first edition (a formidable two-volume work of over a thousand pages) sold out in six months, a second was published two years later, and three others followed in the dozen years before Smith's death. Hume immediately declared himself his disciple, and others, across the political spectrum, soon followed: Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine, Edward Gibbon and Richard Price, William Pitt and Lord North.

The new humanitarianism

These interlocking strains of thought—the moral philosophy of compassion, the Wesleyan gospel of good works, and the political economy of natural liberty—combined to create what the evangelical writer Hannah More called (not entirely in praise) "the Age of Benevolence," and what a later historian described as the "new humanitarianism." Earlier in the
In the 18th century, Mandeville had complained of the charity schools inspired by Shaftesbury’s “affection” for society and “propensity to seek the welfare of it.” Fifteen years later, he would have had much more to complain about. A History of London published in 1739 gives a detailed account of the schools, hospitals, almshouses, and charitable societies flourishing in the metropolis. “As opulence and riches,” the author wrote, “are the result of commerce, so are learning, hospitality, and charity the effects thereof.” By 1756, when the second edition appeared, this section of the book had to be greatly expanded to accommodate the many new societies established in the interim. Samuel Johnson wryly commented, “Every hand is open to contribute something, every tongue is busied in solicitations, and every art of pleasure is employed for a time in the interest of virtue.” Toward the end of the century (and the end of his life), John Wesley observed that while “luxury and profaneness” had unhappily increased, so had “benevolence and compassion toward all forms of human woe ... in a manner not known before, from the earliest ages of the world.”

If “benevolence” and “compassion” were keywords of the time, so were “philanthropy” and “philanthropist,” the latter applied to those gentlemen—John Howard, Jonas Hanway, Thomas Gilbert, and others—who made of philanthropy a full-time, voluntary, unpaid profession. There were societies for every kind of worthy purpose: for “Promoting Christian Knowledge” (by means of the charity schools, among other things), for “Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor,” for the abolition of the slave trade, and for the care of deserted infants, sick and maimed seamen, orphans of clergymen, prostitutes, the deaf, dumb, and blind. And there were abundant proposals for reform: of the legal system, the poor law, hospitals, prisons, and workhouses. Even people skeptical of such efforts found some cause to elicit their sympathy. Defoe wrote a tract in favor of foundling hospitals; Mandeville approved of poor relief for the aged and sick; and Hannah More was an enthusiastic supporter of Sunday schools.

The Sunday school movement itself was significant, as much as a social phenomenon as a religious or educational one. Started in 1785 as a joint venture of Anglicans and Dissenters, the schools had, by the turn of the century, an enrollment of
over 200,000. Some historians have made much of the insistence of Hannah More and others that instruction be confined to reading, especially of the Bible, on the theory that writing would encourage the children to "rise above their station." In fact, many of the schools did teach writing and arithmetic as well, as is evident from the records of expenditures on spelling books, slates, pencils, and desks. The schools also had the effect of fostering the same kind of communal spirit that Methodism did. School outings, teas, and clubs made them, as the leading historian of the movement noted, "a central feature of working-class community life"—all the more because the teachers often consisted of former students and parents.

It was in the same communal spirit, and the spirit of self-help, that the poor were providing for themselves by subscribing to "friendly societies," a form of insurance to help them in time of need. By 1801 there were more than 7,000 such societies with a membership of two-thirds of a million adult males—this out of a total population of nine million. And all of this, it must be remembered, was in addition to poor relief. England was the first country (and for a long time the only one) to have a public, secular, national (although locally administered) system of poor relief. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, that system had been much expanded with the adoption of something like a family allowance for the working poor as well as the indigent. It was not a radical or revolutionary but the Tory Samuel Johnson who said: "A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization.... The condition of the lower order, the poor especially, was the true mark of national discrimination."

It was this social ethic, a compound of the secular and the religious, the private and the public, that was largely responsible for what the French historian Elie Halévy called "the miracle of modern England"—the fact that England was able to survive the economic revolution without succumbing to the political revolutions that wrought havoc on the continent. Before writing the classic history in which he developed that theory, he wrote two little-known articles entitled "The Birth of Methodism in England." It was there that he reflected on the convergence of secular and religious thought that was to prove decisive in this critical period of English history. A half
century after the birth of Methodism, he wrote, "freethinkers in association with the philanthropists of the evangelical movement would work for the material and moral betterment of the poor. In the interval, they were 'converted' to philanthropy through the influence of Methodist preachers."

The French Enlightenment

This was the Enlightenment as the British experienced it. But it is not the Enlightenment generally associated with that term. The "Enlightenment" is identified with the French Enlightenment, a movement that includes thinkers who disagreed among themselves but disagreed even more (with the exception of Montesquieu) with their British counterparts. It is remarkable that the two Enlightenments were so different, in substance as well as temper, considering the great degree of interaction between them. The leading figures in both countries knew and visited each other, read, reviewed, even translated each other—and respectfully but firmly differed from each other, in philosophy, sensibility, and social policy.

Tocqueville attributed their differences to the distinctive roles assumed by the intellectuals in each country.

In England writers on the theory of government and those who actually governed cooperated with each other, the former setting forth their new theories, the latter amending or circumscribing these in the light of practical experience. In France, however, precept and practice were kept quite distinct and remained in the hands of two quite independent groups. One of these carried on the actual administration while the other set forth the abstract principles on which good government should, they said, be based; one took the routine measures appropriate to the needs of the moment, the other propounded general laws without a thought for their practical application; one group shaped the course of public affairs, the other that of public opinion.

There were other compelling reasons for the disparities between the French and British Enlightenments: the very different political and social systems in the two countries, the different relationship of the monarchy to the aristocracy and of the aristocracy to the middle classes, the different role of the church in the state and the different nature of the church itself. But no less important were the philosophical differ-
ences that underlay Tocqueville's observation. Where the British idea of compassion lent itself to a variety of practical, meliorative policies to relieve social problems, the French appeal to reason could be satisfied with nothing less than the "regeneration" of man.

It is curious that just as the term "Enlightenment" has been claimed for the French, so has the word "compassion." Yet it was the English who introduced that word and idea long before the French and made it the central theme of their moral philosophy. In the *Encyclopédie*, "compassion" earned only a very brief entry, concluding with the observation that the more miserable one is, the more susceptible to compassion, which is why the people love to watch executions. Rousseau, who is generally credited with the idea of compassion, spoke more often of "pity" and gave it an ambiguous role in society. In the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, pity appears as a "natural sentiment" only in the state of nature, where it contributes to the preservation of the species by moderating the force of self-love (*amour de soi-même*). In civil society, however, pity is replaced by the "factitious" sentiment of vanity (*amour propre*), which destroys both equality and freedom, subjugating mankind to "labor, servitude and misery." Reviewing the *Discourses*, Adam Smith criticized Rousseau for sharing Mandeville's view that "there is in man no powerful instinct which necessarily determines him to seek society for its own sake," and that society itself is an instrument of "the cunning and the powerful" desiring to maintain their superiority over the weak.

Rousseau's *Emile* does posit an "inner sentiment," as the basis not of compassion but of self-love and justice. "When the strength of an expansive soul makes me identify myself with my fellow, and I feel that I am so to speak, in him, it is in order not to suffer that I do not want him to suffer. I am interested in him for love of myself.... Love of men derived from love of self is the principle of human justice." The social virtues do not come naturally to Emile; he has to learn them by becoming involved with those less fortunate than he. But he must also learn that "his first duty is toward himself." And he is instructed to exercise the social virtues not in relation to particular individuals but to the "species," the "whole of man-
kind.” It does not matter, he is told, who gets “a greater share of happiness”; all that matters is that it contributes to “the greatest happiness of all.” “This is the wise man’s first interest after his private interest, for each is part of his species and not of another individual.”

To prevent pity from degenerating into weakness, it must, therefore, be generalized and extended to the whole of mankind. Then one yields to it only insofar as it accords with justice, because of all the virtues justice is the one that contributes most to the common good of men. For the sake of reason, for the sake of love of ourselves, we must have pity for our species still more than for our neighbor.

Whatever Rousseau’s differences with the other philosophes (and they were many), they had this in common: the tendency to “generalize” the virtues, to elevate “the whole of mankind” over the “individual,” the “species” over one’s “neighbor.” When Francis Hutcheson spoke of the “greatest happiness for the greatest numbers,” he meant this in the most prosaic, quantitative sense; when Rousseau spoke of the “greatest happiness of all,” he meant it in some transcendent, metaphysical sense, a “common good of men” that was something other than the good of individual men.

Moreover, the “common good of men” did not necessarily mean the good of the common man. In Emile, Rousseau’s great work on education, the common man figures not at all. Emile himself is of “noble birth,” and his education is undertaken by a private tutor. “The poor man,” Rousseau wrote, “does not need to be educated. His station gives him a compulsory education. He could have no other.” The same message appears in Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse: “Do not at all instruct the villager’s child, for it is not fitting that he be instructed; do not instruct the city dweller’s child, for you do not know yet what instruction is fitting for him.”

The common people

Even the most sympathetic commentator on the French Enlightenment cannot fail to observe the philosophes’ disdain for the masses. Voltaire used the terms “le peuple” and “la canaille” [the rabble] almost interchangeably. “As for the
canaille," he told d'Alembert, "I have no concern with it; it will always remain canaille." And it would remain canaille because it was ineducable. The people would never have "the time and the capacity to instruct themselves; they will die of hunger before they become philosophers.... We have never pretended to enlighten shoemakers and servants; that is the job of the apostles."

The people could not be educated because they could not be enlightened; and they could not be enlightened because they were incapable of the kind of reason that the philosophes took to be the essence of enlightenment. They were mired instead in the prejudices, superstitions, and irrationalities of religion. This was the great enemy—l'infâme. Religion, Voltaire wrote to Diderot, "must be destroyed among respectable people and left to the canaille large and small, for whom it was made." Diderot agreed. The poor were "imbeciles" in matters of religion, "too idiotic—bestial—too miserable, and too busy" to enlighten themselves. They would never change: "The quantity of the canaille is just about always the same."

The Encyclopédie reflected this disdain for the unenlightened. In Diderot's article defining the purpose of the Encyclopédie, he made it clear that the common people had no part in the "philosophical age" ushered in by his enterprise. "The general mass of mankind can neither follow nor comprehend this march of the human spirit." "We must reason about all things," he wrote in another article, "because man is not just an animal but an animal who reasons; ... whoever refuses to search for that truth renounces the very nature of man and should be treated by the rest of his species as a wild beast; and once the truth has been discovered, whoever refuses to accept it is either insane or wicked and morally evil." In yet another article he explained that one must distrust the judgment of the "multitude" in matters of reason and philosophy because "its voice is that of wickedness, stupidity, inhumanity, unreason and prejudice." "The multitude," he concluded, is "ignorant and stupefied."

The Encyclopédie was, to be sure, very appreciative of the "mechanical arts," and its pages contain copious drawings, diagrams, and plates illustrating them. And it professed great respect for the artisans who practiced those arts. It also ob-
jected to the inequalities of wealth that kept some people in a condition of excessive luxury while others were deprived of the barest necessities of life. But it had little patience and less regard for the great mass of the people who were not artisans, who were not educated or educable, and its pages contained few practical proposals to alleviate their condition. Turgot was the rare philosophe who was also a reformer; in his brief time as comptroller-general of finance, he abolished compulsory labor on the roads. But even he was hostile to charity, not only because it was administered by the church but also because he deplored its practical effects. "The poor," he wrote in the Encyclopédie, "have incontestable rights on the abundance of the rich"; it is a duty, prescribed by both humanity and religion to alleviate these unfortunates, and it is the function of charitable foundations to do that. The results, however, had been unfortunate, for those countries where charity was most abundant were also those where misery was most widespread. The reason was simple. "To permit a large number of men to live free of charge is to encourage laziness and all the disorders that follow; it is to render the condition of the idler preferable to that of the man who works.... The race of industrious citizens is replaced by a vile population composed of vagabond beggars free to commit all sorts of crimes." In another article, Diderot echoed these sentiments, criticizing the poorhouses as refuges for professional beggars. This ill-conceived charity produced masses of "young and vigorous idlers" who preferred to get their sustenance free rather than work; they were the "vermin" produced by a state that did not value real men.

Something like this argument, expressed far more temperately, was advanced in England toward the end of the century by Malthus and others, who proposed (unsuccessfully) the abolition of the poor law. But they were criticizing an ever-expanding system of public relief, which did not exist at all in France; and they were tolerant of private charities, which were much more numerous in England than in France.²

² The Malthusianism and Ricardianism of the early nineteenth century, and the Darwinism of mid-century, provided the framework for a very different social ethic, one rooted in the implacable facts, as was thought, of economics and biology. This ethic recognized no moral or social imperatives, no principle of
To make a new people

One cannot saddle the Enlightenment with responsibility for the deeds, or misdeeds, of the French Revolution. Yet there is no doubt that some of the principles and attitudes of the French Enlightenment were carried over into the Revolution—anti-clericalism, for example, resulting in the emancipation of Protestants and Jews and the legalization of civil marriage and divorce. Similarly, the philosophes’ indifference (or worse) to the poor is reflected in the fact that, apart from the abolition of feudal privileges, little was done to alleviate the condition of the poor, and such measures as were attempted were notably unsuccessful. The workshops established by the Comité de Mendicité proved so unwieldy that they had to be suspended, and the laws regulating prices, wages, and the production of food were not only ineffectual but counterproductive. Most historians agree that the poor, bereft of the old religious charities, were worse off at the end of the Revolution than at the beginning.

As with poverty, so with education: Here too the situation was exacerbated, the old Church-run schools having been abolished with nothing to replace them. In 1791, Condorcet wrote a report on public education for the Assembly recommending, among other things, village schools for children between the ages of nine and thirteen. Perhaps because of the outbreak of war the following year, it was put off for discussion, so that for the first three years of the Revolution the subject of education was never officially raised. In 1793, Robespierre presented a plan for compulsory education—in boarding schools, where the children would be protected from the insidious influence of reactionary parents. Although this was passed by the Convention, its essential provisions were eliminated. Only after Thermidor did the Directory promulgate an educational code providing for a minimal elementary education to be paid for by parents.

It is not a historian but a modern philosopher who has compassion or innate moral sense that might override the individualism of the marketplace or the struggle for survival in society as in nature. Elements of the old ethic, however, survived, so that social policies and attitudes were never as amoral or asocial as the theory would have it.
made of the French Revolution a social revolution, with a conscious, overt, truly revolutionary social ethic and agenda. For Hannah Arendt, the Revolution was "born out of compassion" for the "low people," *les misérables*. This "passion of compassion," first articulated by Rousseau and carried out by his disciple Robespierre, inevitably culminated in the Terror, for that passion responded only to "necessity, the urgent needs of the people," leaving no room for law or government, for liberty or even reason. Thus the Rights of Man had to yield to the Rights of the Sans-Culottes, and the "despotism of liberty" to the "welfare of the people."

This is a moving but, I believe, fanciful reading of history. The Revolution was not a social revolution, and the Terror was instituted not for the welfare of the people but for "public safety," the safety of the regime. The Republic of Virtue celebrated not the virtue of compassion but that of reason—an abstract, elevated reason that denigrated the practical reason of ordinary people. Its profession of equality was similarly abstract, conferring no real, existential equality upon the populace. "*Le peuple,*" in whose name Robespierre established the Republic, was not the people in any ordinary sense, still less *les misérables*, but a singular, abstract "people" represented by an appropriately singular and abstract "general will." Robespierre might have been quoting Rousseau when he said, "The people is always worth more than individuals.... The people is sublime, but individuals are weak."

This "people" required not so much education as commonly understood (literacy), not even reformation in the usual sense (the alleviation of abuses and grievances), but nothing less than "regeneration." It was in the name of regeneration that Robespierre defended his proposal for boarding schools: "I am convinced of the necessity of bringing about a complete regeneration, and, if I may express myself so, of creating a new people." This idea of "regeneration," the historian Mona Ozouf observes, was a key concept of revolutionary discourse, connoting nothing less than the creation of a "new people," a term that had often been invoked, but by no one so fervently as Rousseau, which is "one of the reasons why the Revolution was all his from the beginning."
Reason vs. compassion

In Britain, where the "passion for compassion" (in Hannah Arendt's memorable phrase) first arose, it took the form not of regeneration but of melioration. Secular and religious institutions, civil society and the state, public relief and private charity complemented and cooperated with each other. Above all, there was no Kulturkampf, no religious war, to distract and divide the country, pitting the past against the future, creating an unbridgeable divide between reason and religion, and making social reform hostage to antireligious passion. The British Enlightenment, one might say, was latitudinarian, compatible with a large spectrum of belief and disbelief (just as Wesleyanism itself was compatible with both Anglicanism and Dissent). A book on the British Enlightenment could never bear the subtitle that Peter Gay gave to the first volume of his work on the Enlightenment, The Rise of Modern Paganism. Even Hume, skeptical in matters of faith and fearful of religious zealotry, was a staunch supporter of the established church, if only as a corrective to zealotry. And Gibbon, contrary to the popular view, was not hostile to Christianity as such; it was as a Protestant distressed by what he took to be the perversions of the original faith of the gospels that he criticized the church in antiquity. He disapproved, he wrote in his memoirs, of the "intolerant zeal" of the philosophes: "They laughed at the skepticism of Hume, preached the tenets of atheism with the bigotry of dogmatists, and damned all believers with ridicule and contempt."

This may be the most striking contrast between the two Enlightenments. As there had been no Reformation in France, so there was no equivalent to Methodism, no religious revival to animate the established church or provide a religious alternative to it, and thus no opportunity to enlist religion in humanitarian causes. But it was not only the identification of the absolute monarchy with the Catholic church that made the philosophes so unremittingly hostile to Catholicism in particular and to religion in general. It was also their reverence for reason, which made them antagonistic to everything and everyone redolent of religion. They had no sympathy for les misérables because they had no respect for those so unenlightened as to be religious. To be wanting in reason was to
be deficient as a human being. This was the ultimate expression of rationalism as the *philosophes* understood it: a rejection not only of institutional religion, not only of religion per se, but of the religious conception of man—man who is truly human simply by virtue of being born in the image of God.

In this sense, the British, even the most secular of them and even the least democratic of them, were more egalitarian than the French. They were not about to admit the lower classes into the polity, but they did not deny their essential humanity. In France, Peter Gay explains, the campaign to eliminate torture, to abolish the Jesuits, or to spread technological knowledge was part of “the struggle to impose man’s rational will on the environment.” The motive for reform was quite different in England. There the campaign for the reform of prisons, the abolition of the slave trade, or the promotion of education was motivated not by “rational will” but by humanitarian zeal, by compassion rather than reason.

Tocqueville was speaking of the French revolutionaries—but he might have been of the *philosophes*—when he said that their “salient characteristic” was a loss of faith that upset their “mental equilibrium.” The vacuum in their soul was promptly filled by the ideal of the perfectibility of man. “They had a fanatical faith in their vocation—that of transforming the social system, root and branch, and regenerating the whole human race.” They adored the human intellect and had supreme confidence in its power to transform laws, institutions, and customs. But the intellect they adored was only their own. “I could mention several,” Tocqueville sardonically observed, “who despised the public almost as heartily as they despised the Deity.” This was very different, he added, from the respect shown by Englishmen and Americans for the opinions of the majority of their countrymen. “Their intellect is proud and self-reliant, but never insolent; and it has led to liberty, while ours has done little but invent new forms of servitude.”

Tocqueville did not mention Adam Smith in this connection, but he was a perfect examplar of the Englishman he was describing and a perfect foil to the *philosophe*. For Smith, the defining attributes of human nature were not so much reason and intellect as interests and passions, feelings and sympa-
These were qualities shared by people of all classes, even the poorest and least educated. They were modest qualities—as modest as “the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange.” But they were sufficient to achieve the well-being of individuals as well as society. No enlightened despot, not even an enlightened philosopher or legislator, was required to activate these qualities or to harmonize them for the general good.

Nor was the philosopher, Smith believed, innately superior to the common man. Indeed, the distinction between the philosopher and the laborer was more the product of nurture (as we would now say) than of nature. “The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education.... By nature a philosopher is not in genius and disposition half so different from a street porter, as a mastiff is from a greyhound.” One cannot imagine Voltaire or Diderot (or even Rousseau) likening himself to a street porter. It took one of Britain’s most illustrious philosophers to do so.

In those few sentences, Smith encapsulated the contrast between the two Enlightenments. Smith did not deny the “difference of talents” (as he put it); on the contrary, he insisted upon it. It was that difference that emerged and flourished in a society committed to “natural liberty.” Such a society respected the liberty of human beings to be different, and at the same time the equality of human beings in their essential nature. The philosophes by contrast, committed to the principle of reason, a reason not accessible to all people, had no rationale for a liberal society, let alone a democratic one.

The two Enlightenments today

The two Enlightenments were not a passing phase of history. If we still debate their character, it is not only as an exercise in the intellectual history of the eighteenth century (although that is warrant enough), but as a forecast of the social history of later times. The spirit of the French Enlightenment may be seen in communism, for example, which aspired to the “regeneration” of man, the creation of a “new people” liberated from the old pieties and constraints; or in
socialism, which sought the "common good of men" in a society and economy that transcended the good and the will of individual men; or in the welfare state, with its penchant for social-engineering, which could well be described as "the struggle to impose man's rational will on the environment"; or in the modern disposition for "value-free" social policies inspired by an ostensibly "value-free" social ethic, which recalls the "reason" that the philosophes valued so highly.

In the last few years, we have been witnessing—in the United States, if not in Britain—something like a turning away from the French Enlightenment and toward the British. It is curious to find social thinkers and policy makers recapitulating, unwittingly, the essential ingredients of the British Enlightenment: the idea of compassion that was at the heart of this moral philosophy; the political economy that made of natural liberty a moral as well as economic principle; and the evangelical movement that played so large a part in the philanthropic and humanitarian spirit of the time. It was an impressive, not predictable, and perhaps not entirely compatible conjunction of forces that made up the British Enlightenment. And it is a no less impressive, unpredictable, and somewhat incompatible conjunction of forces that are defining—or redefining—the social ethic today.