

Beyond the Essential and Formal Definitions of Enlightenment

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The European Enlightenment of the 18th century (with a capital “E”) was a social, thus historical, product. Few believe that it came out *ex nihilo*, and no matter how many 20th-century thinkers put an emphasis on its generality and universality, most who were not there at the very moment of its birth still count it as something *foreign*.

We have to focus on this foreignness more scrupulously. On the one hand, when one learns Einstein’s theory of relativity, one may not feel a sentiment of foreignness even though the theory has arisen out of a different culture and context. On the other hand, when non-Europeans try to understand the Enlightenment-originated normative values¹ such as humanism, autonomy and the superiority of science over religion, things may be different.

What I want to point out is not only that people’s reactions to scientific laws and normative values are different, but also that the advocates of the Enlightenment throughout history have not succeeded in persuading those who refuse to accept such values. If one who does not share the Enlightenment-originated values says that one does not believe in the superiority of autonomy over obedience, there seems no way to persuade

1. Normative value is found in statements that describe how things *ought to be*. Thus, one can refute it if one wants to (murder is banned but people can kill people). In contrast, a natural law is a law that one cannot refute: e.g. a person cannot be in two places at the same time.

her completely. Even if some scientists may find out that consuming a moderate amount of alcohol is good for one's health, people who forgo it because of religious reasons will not let other members of the religion consume it.

The example about alcohol mentioned above is a rather simple one. However, what about the case of extreme fundamentalists, like those who praise martyrdom and encourage believers to devote their entire lives to their community? Many will insist that nobody has the right to urge people to sacrifice themselves even if they say they do it voluntarily. However, do the critics have a concrete reason to persuade them? If they do not, what is the reason they believe they are *right*? It is not so hard to lead people to admit that one cannot be in two places at the same time. Meanwhile, philosophers and politicians have never succeeded in finding a valid reason for building a foundation for normative values. And what is important to our current discussion is the fact that the Enlightenment was actually an attempt to build a foundation for normative values by drawing on "empirical" facts. Just as religions tried to validate their normative doctrines on religious grounds, the Enlightenment thinkers tried to validate their normative values by instituting an epistemological framework founded on scientific reason. Thus, the pre- and mid-Enlightenment methods for validating normative systems are one and the same.

A radical strategy: The formal definition of enlightenment

The definition of the Enlightenment as an *essentialist* enlightenment is clearly open to criticism. Unlike laws of nature, normative values can never be guaranteed to be valid. One may easily argue against a person who insists that one can be in two places at the same time, but when one who believes that life is good has to face a person who has decided to commit suicide, one becomes far more diffident about her belief. What if the person had been suffering from a fatal disease and her pain is fierce? What if the person had lost everything she had, such as family, friends and all of her property? Not everyone may pity her and accept her suicide as partly justifiable, but it is not unreasonable to assume that some may. The Enlightenment-originated values present a similar case. Humanism,

autonomy, the superiority of science over religion and the indubitable status of reason... all might not only be disregarded by some religious or political communities, but also, they may actually be impossible to be guaranteed as absolute truths.²

Since the universal character of the normative values of the Enlightenment has been proven to be doubtful, advocates of enlightenment started to seek a different strategy to save its validity by changing its definition. For example, Tzvetan Todorov mentions a phrase which underscores the role of *self-criticising* to be faithful to the very nature of enlightenment³ in his work devoted to the defence of enlightenment. Michel Foucault emphasises the distance between true enlightenment and humanism, and he tries to redefine enlightenment as *a critical attitude*,⁴ which steadily criticises the enlightenment's very values and can never be defined as a fixed tenet (Foucault 1984).

If the contents of the Enlightenment have been objects of criticism as we have diagnosed, it seems quite reasonable to redefine enlightenment and exculpate it from the blame of essentialism. If one perceives enlightenment as a *formalist* enlightenment instead of the essentialist enlightenment now, it can be used to refer to every critical and revealing movement of thought, and avoid any criticism on its doubtful contents by transforming itself.

However, is this really an effective solution for the survival of enlightenment? In my opinion, this new definition is on the snares of formalism, rather than essentialism. Here is the biggest problem: if one says that A's property is continual alteration, A's content can only be alteration. If so, we cannot maintain every Enlightenment-originated virtue like humanism and the superiority of autonomy over obedience because these virtues would also change into relative truths once criticised. Simply, if one wants to maintain this new definition, one has no way of eschewing an inhumanistic version of enlightenment or the superiority of the sacrament-based knowledge over modern science.

Smaller problems also arise: if we define the Enlightenment and its

2. There are contemporary naturalists who believe that normative values can be reduced to natural laws. Since they have not succeeded and do not seem to any time soon, I will not discuss this reductionism here.

3. "c'est en les [les Lumières] critiquant que nous leur restons fidèles" (Todorov 2006, 24).

4. In Foucault's term, "the attitude of modernity" (1984, 38).

descendants to be the only sources of critical ability, it misleads us into supposing that critical ability originated in 18th-century Europe. However, with no doubt, every culture is bestowed with critical ability and few believe that Europeans are the only people who exercise it. Besides, if we admit the formal validity of this new definition, it easily ushers us to accept not only its formal validity but also its essential validity. We can cite Todorov again for instance. He is vacillating between the formal definition and the essential definition of enlightenment.⁵ Even though one cannot accept the fixed essence and the changing nature at once, he does not seem to pay due attention to this fact.

Let us summarise. I have tried to show that the essential definition of enlightenment is not as valid as 18th-century advocates have believed. It seems that we do not have a good reason to assume that forbidding a Muslim from wearing a hijab is right in every situation. Moreover, the advocates' radical strategy to redefine enlightenment formally is problematic. The strategy may escape the snares of essentialism, but its formal definition loses the enlightenment's very essence. If this enlightenment has nothing in common with what has been known anymore, there is no reason to call it by the same name.

Defence of reason: Reason as a tool and reason as a basis

I have briefly sketched the failures of both the essential and formal definitions of enlightenment. If the defeat of the essentialist enlightenment means that the Enlightenment-originated normative values are as invalid as religious ones—at least, the enlightened's strategy to validate normative values is no more persuasive than that of the non-enlightened—and the defeat of the formal which, lacking a platform to stand on, leads to a situation where there is no right or wrong that can be guaranteed, does it mean that we cannot criticise a theocratic or monarchical community and

5. In Todorov (2006, 121), he says “ce que toutes les nations européennes possèdent en commun – rationalité scientifique, défense de l'État de droit et des droits de l'homme – possède une vocation universelle, et non spécifiquement européenne.” However, if the nature of enlightenment is to criticise itself, why does he not criticise those common values that Europeans share?

have no other way than to fall into rampant relativism? To answer this question, first I need to make explicit what has been damaged by criticisms of enlightenment and what could overcome it, which I will do in this section. Then, in the next section, I will examine whether what survives can serve as another steppingstone to constitute a new discourse on normative values.

Usually, an attack on enlightenment is an attack on reason at the same time. Because one of the most central doctrines of enlightenment is to be rational, many robust criticisms have aimed to dismantle this doctrine's validity. In fact, the age of reason slipped into the age of fascism, racism and scientism with seemingly reasonable grounds such as eugenics. In the light of historical evidence, 20th-century critics have revealed that rationalism can go insane just like pre-Enlightenment religion and absolute monarchy. And this idea easily ushers us into a rampant kind of relativism: if nothing including reason can assure us of what is right, there is no way to define what is right. Eventually, there is no right or wrong. Thus, the post-Enlightenment era now becomes an age without values and morals. Let us assume that scientific facts do not provide a valid foundation for any normative value. However, does it mean that reason as a tool of mutual communication and inference also becomes invalid, thus relative?

To clarify this point, first we have to distinguish between reason as a tool, which validates the formal aspect of human thought, and reason as a basis, which provides a foundation for certain normative values. Reason as a tool has neither disappeared nor been re-invented. Without doubt, formal inference consisting of rational steps existed before the age of Enlightenment, and reason used then is no different from mid-Enlightenment reason. In contrast, the validity of reason as a ground is doubtful. If we assume a certain normative demand is *rational* because it has a scientific basis, what we are doing exactly is to assign reason the role of a basis. Nevertheless, reason as a ground does not induce us to construct an infallible and absolute system of normative rules. However, its formal role will be effective regardless of whether its result is right or wrong. If we infer "some race should be eliminated" from "some race is inferior to others" and "an inferior race should be eliminated," then the formal aspect of this inference—reason as a tool—is valid, only its ground seems (quite) wrong, and people who believe such inferences to be scientific truths and to have

a rational basis are (probably) wrong, too.

Now we can clearly elicit what the critics of reason attacked. The criticisms of reason are not aimed at its formal aspect but at its ground aspect. If their target is indeed its ground aspect that has been employed to give a foundation to some normative values such as “eliminate inferiors,” then their real target is foundationalism. The pre-Enlightenment religious world and the mid-Enlightenment rational world have no difference in their foundationalistic character. Then, here comes the question: if religion and reason as a ground are abolished likewise, is our post-Enlightenment world a world without foundation, thus a world in which rampant relativism rules?

Inter-comprehensible character of normativity: On the very idea of a scheme of values

Let us begin in a different way with a simple question. Has enlightenment changed the world radically? In other words, has the world been transformed so drastically that dwellers in each world have totally different normative systems and cannot even try to communicate with dwellers in another world? I raise this question because if we follow advocates of enlightenment or its critics, they claim that a huge paradigmatic shift occurred. Something must have changed indeed, but what exactly? Obviously, the grounds needed to validate the righteousness of our morals and normative judgements have changed from religion to relatively objective scientific facts. And criticisms of enlightenment exposed that this relatively objective science is not any better at validating normative values. On this point, Habermas (1981, 452–4) has diagnosed the problems of the project of modernity.⁶ He first accepts that we who live in the modern (post-Enlightenment) world have many problems such as anxiety surrounding the validity of normative values that were not yet identified in the pre-modern world: in other words, we do not know where to base our confidence for normative values on. And what he is denying is that the

6. For example, Habermas thinks that “der Abstand zwischen den Expertenkulturen und dem breiten Publikum” (1981, 453) has been broadened, and thus the knowledge needed to promote the enlightenment project became hard-to-get for many.

cause of those problems would be found in modernity itself so he believes modernity can still do something for us. I agree with him that the culprit is not modernity, but I do not agree with him that if we follow modernity we can reach some place more harmonious.

In the pre-Enlightenment world, basic normative maxims like “you shall not murder” were appreciated by virtue of a religious foundation, and such maxims continued to be important through the mid-Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment eras when the religious foundation had already weakened and new foundations such as human dignity appeared. Foundations may change, but the scheme of values in which individual normative values are effectuated (not founded) has undergone no radical changes. If we are carrying on with our normal lives regardless of what foundation we stand upon, we have to reconsider the relation between foundation and the system of normative values.⁷ There is one more thing we have to pay attention to: people have used the term, *clash of civilisations*. Given the fact that civilisations consist of normative values, it may sound like the *clash of different normative values*. However, are struggles between civilised, thus enlightened, nations and developing, thus not enlightened, nations the same as struggles between completely different schemes which constitute normative values of each culture? I admit that the two opposite sides may have different interests, but their normative values are still inter-comprehensible and do not contradict for the most part. According to holism, if someone can understand another person’s statement (in the context of our discussion, a normative statement), that means what the two people share is far bigger than what they do not. Furthermore, the important thing is that what we share is not only an accumulation of atomic statements but also the very structure of our life-world. In fact, normative rules—such as “do not harm others,” “be good to one’s community,” etc.—are quite similar in many cases across different cultures, and the background scheme in which those rules are formed is common and shared.

7. I do not have enough space to delineate the relation now, but, to give a brief sketch, I think of one’s having normative values as Heidegger’s *In-der-Welt-sein*, and thus of normative values as having existed *always already*. The demand for a foundation can only arise afterwards. Korsgaard (1996, 7–48) gives a lucid explanation of the detached relation between normativity and its foundation.

The Enlightenment has shifted the foundation of normative values from religion to science and its critics have declared that a scientific foundation is as invalid as a religious one. At the same time, that does not mean that the whole system of values has changed completely.⁸ If we at least accept the conservative nature of normative values, the central issue—how to give the absolute foundation to normative values—which has been fiercely argued among pre-, mid- and post-Enlightenment thinkers, may not be so central. Regardless of whether we (at least believe to) have it or not, our scheme of normative values has existed all along.

I have already outlined the failures of the essential and formal definitions of enlightenment in the first section. And my next task was to scrutinise what exactly has been expelled by criticisms on enlightenment. As a result, it seems to me that, for us, two footholds still remain: the formal aspect of reason, namely reason not as a basis but as a tool, and the anomical character of normative values to its foundation, the foundation which has been the main topic of debate for pre-, mid- and post-Enlightenment thinkers. As foundation is not a crucial factor for (at least many central) normative values, the essentialist pitfall of fixating on single foundations of the Enlightenment-originated values like humanism and superiority of science loses its significance. What we know is that the normative scheme survives its foundations and individual normative values, and as we are practically carrying on with the surviving scheme of values through the paradigmatic change of foundations, the formalist pitfall to fall into rampant relativism ceases to be the only remaining option.

At the beginning of this paper, I defined enlightenment as a movement that has scientism and humanism as its central contents. Many criticisms have already proven that the foundation of the Enlightenment-originated normative values is as invalid as the religious one. Thus, if we stick to this definition of the “Enlightenment,” we have no hope of completing the mission to disperse the Enlightenment-originated values. Consequently,

8. We can find a supportive argument in Davidson (1973–4) in which he discusses the impossibility of the very idea of a different conceptual scheme. Yet, he reserves judgement on whether the status of morals is the same with that of science and understanding (188). In my opinion, individual moral rules may change, but since we and the world in which we live do not change, the *scheme* of values to evaluate and clarify individual moral rules cannot diversify.

as we have pointed out above, the formalist enlightenment loses its identity. In my suggestion of an alternative for a new enlightenment, what we have to eschew is the obsession with foundationalism, namely, an obsession to build a concrete foundation for specific normative values. We have to admit that both religion and science have failed to build a concrete foundation for normative values. If we appreciate the fact the pre-Enlightenment world and the mid-, post-Enlightenment world shares the same scheme of values, we will also be able to recognise and protect the mutual comprehensibility of normative values among synchronically and diachronically different societies. Even though superficial norms may differ, if the scheme itself—a basic common orienting system to constitute normative values that exists in holistic nature—remains the same, the idea of a radically different scheme of values is impossible, even absurd. And the validity of reason as a tool assures the formal aspect of mutual comprehensibility.

In my opinion, what we have learned from enlightenment and its critics is not to neglect the validity of reason as a tool and the conservative character of day-to-day normative values. Thus, the task of the new enlightenment is neither to build a more concrete foundation nor to deny any possible contentful description of normative values. Rather, the task is to put and preserve faith in the inter-comprehensibility of seemingly various normative value schemes, which actually exist as a singular scheme. This faith should not be based on an invention for presenting a new style of foundationalism or relativism, but on a therapy to recover the confidence in the inter-comprehensibility of seemingly multiple normative schemes.

In sum, my critique on the essential and formal definitions of enlightenment is indeed a critique on the idea which regards the nature of normative values as that of a static picture. Foundationalists presuppose an entrenched profile of normative values and try to judge things from that standpoint. Relativists fall into confusion and paralysis because of a temporary lack of agreement or the denial of the possibility of agreement. In contrast, the *pragmatist*⁹ enlightenment (my suggestion for a new enlight-

9. In this context, pragmatism is not a discourse which regards utility as a fixed foundation for normative values but a discourse which puts an emphasis on what is *regarded* as valuable currently and the process of commitment to it. Putnam (2004, 89–129) offers another

enment) that is based on reason as a tool and the impossibility of an incomprehensible scheme of values, reveals a dynamic character. What is important here is not a static profile of normative values, but a process of analysis. I dare not say that this pragmatist enlightenment will solve all the problems we face today. However, unlike foundationalists who want to see things in black and white under a fixed single criterion and relativists who want to abandon the possibility of setting a criterion, the pragmatist enlightenment is able to provide a sounder belief in the process of dynamic attunement based on inter-comprehensibility and reason for discussions on normative values.

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delineation of the pragmatist enlightenment from a different, but not contradictory to my position, point of view.