

## THE ENLIGHTENMENT

As with classical Humanism, the Renaissance project was destroyed by religion. The Reformation and the Counter-Reformation of the Catholic Church were destructive forces which produced a century of conflict in Europe. Both Puritanism and Catholicism are essentially anti-freethought and anti-humanist and essentially intolerant of each other. The result was the 17th century wars of religion.

The 18th century had a different zeitgeist. It was the age of the Enlightenment, a term that came into use in English in the middle of the period. In 1784 the German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote an essay entitled *What is Enlightenment?* in which he defined it as 'man's release from his self-incurred immaturity'. The immaturity is self-inflicted not from a lack of understanding but from the lack of courage to use one's reason, intellect, and wisdom without the guidance of another. He says that the motto of enlightenment is 'Sapere aude' (dare to be know), a term used by the Roman poet Horace. "Have the courage to use your own understanding", he adds, is therefore the essence of the enlightenment. It is an intellectual revolution that enables the human mind to fulfil its natural desire to think for itself and to use its reason to eradicate myth and superstition.

The link between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment is provided, above all, by three writers. The first was **Francis Bacon** (1561-1626). In his rejection of established authority, his insistence that reason and experiment must combine, his zeal for progress, and his championship of liberty and the conquest of nature, Bacon is the Enlightenment's 17th century herald. Indeed he encapsulates the entire Enlightenment project in his preface to the *Novum Organum* (1620), even to the extent of using the appropriate imagery: "But above all, if a man could succeed, not in striking out some particular invention, however useful, but in kindling a

light in nature – a light which should in its very rising touch and illuminate all the border-regions that confine upon the circle of our present knowledge; and so spreading further should presently disclose and bring into sight all that is most hidden and secret in the world – that man (I thought) would be the benefactor indeed of the human race – the propagator of man's empire over the universe, the champion of liberty, the conqueror and subduer of necessities”.

## **SPINOZA**

**Baruch Spinoza** (1632-77) was born in Amsterdam, the son of Portuguese Jewish parents who had fled from Spain to avoid Catholic persecution. Spinoza spent all his short life in the Netherlands. As a young man, he ran an optical lens business with his brother. But the Jewish community cursed and excommunicated him for his heretical views, and he was eventually forced to leave Amsterdam. He lived for some years in Rijnsburg, near Leiden, and then later at The Hague. He finally moved back to Amsterdam, where in 1677 he died of consumption, aggravated by the glass-dust in his lungs.

Spinoza published only two works during his lifetime, *The Principles of Descartes' Philosophy* (1663) and the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670). The latter was published anonymously and was banned in 1674 for its controversial views on the Bible and Christian theology. Once he became known as its author, he was much reviled by Christians for producing an instrument ‘forged in hell by a renegade Jew and the devil’. In the work he advocated complete freedom of thought and religious practice and that there should be a strict historical approach to the interpretation of Biblical sources. What was really important in the Bible, he suggested, was its moral message – its implied science and metaphysics were merely imaginative symbols for teaching ethics to the multitude. He also argues,

more dubiously, that there is nothing in the Bible which should sanction intolerance within Judaism or Christianity, or between them. In this he anticipated modern liberal theology.

He also anticipated the modern sociology of religion in arguing that myths make a society possible in the first instance. Religion is a binding force which promotes civic virtue and social solidarity; but it also constitutes the greatest danger to society itself when priests gain political influence and myths are taken literally.

Politically, too, Spinoza is a very modern philosopher. As Professor Sprigge suggests, his political theory owes a great deal to Hobbes, utilising similarly the idea of a social contract, 'but deriving a more liberal and democratic lesson from it' (*Oxford Companion to Philosophy*). In his day, democratic institutions were an ideal because they require a people disposed towards moderation, with a strong civic culture and reasonable standards of living and education. Nevertheless, democracy is the 'most natural' form of government and he also argues that freedom of opinion is important – two of the basic assumptions of modern liberal democratic theory. He was himself personally committed to the republican policies of the De Witt brothers in Amsterdam, was outraged by their murder, and opposed the royalist ambitions of the House of Orange.

Spinoza's most important work was the *Ethics*, published posthumously in 1677. It begins with metaphysics, then proceeds to an analysis of the emotions and ends with an ethic based on them. In his metaphysics, Spinoza rejects the Cartesian dualism of mind and body (the 'ghost in the machine' in Ryle's memorable phrase) in favour of a monistic view that there is only one substance: God, or Nature (*Deus sive natura*). God did not create but is nature. Thus it is Spinoza who can legitimately be described as the first modern western pantheist. In his view there

can be no such personal immortality as Christians and Jews believe in, but only that impersonal sort which consists in becoming more and more one with nature, or God, which is infinite. Is Spinoza saying that God is simply the universe? Well, he does say that God is at least partly physical – itself a shocking claim in his day. But he also says that God is an infinite thinking thing, as well as an infinite number of other infinite things the nature of which is hidden from us. All this amounts to saying that the universe is an infinite mystery, which again is a very modern claim.

Spinoza is essentially a moral philosopher, and his ethical theory is based upon the assumption that our species is 'a part of nature, not a kingdom within it'. It is our biological nature which explains and justifies human values. In each individual there is a desire for self-preservation against hostile forces – Spinoza called it 'conatus' (striving or endeavour). Our passions derive from it, and when we react merely under the sway of our passions we are passive. To be active, we must understand our passions in the wider context of causes and effects – in the infinite causal system of nature, if you like. Only by understanding ourselves and thus rationally mastering our emotions can we become free. Knowledge and self-control are the key to happiness, and co-operation and friendship between rational men is not only a means to, but an essential part of, the individual's true good.

Spinoza practised what he preached. By all accounts, he was an honest, noble and courteous man. When his father died, there was litigation over the estate, as Spinoza's only surviving stepsister claimed it all. Spinoza won the lawsuit, but allowed her to retain nearly everything. Afterwards, he had to fend for himself. He even refused a chair of philosophy at Heidelberg because it was an official position and that implied accepting official ideas and limitations. A precursor of 'death-of-god' theology, democracy, ecology, sociobiology and even modern Humanism,

Baruch Spinoza was well ahead of his time and deserves to rank among the wisest thinkers.

The English philosopher **John Locke** (1632-1704) wrote *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, originally published in 1689. Civil government, in Locke's view, is quite distinct from that of religion because the state is constituted to preserve and promote external, civil interests – life, liberty and property– whereas churches exist to promote internal interests, i.e the salvation of souls. As the two serve separate functions, so they must be treated as separate institutions. Besides, the only way a Church can gain genuine converts is through persuasion and not violence, because while it is possible to coerce obedience it is not possible to coerce beliefs. It is absurd for a state to make laws to enforce a religion, for laws are useless without penalties, and penalties are impertinent because they cannot convince.

Unfortunately, Locke was not free from the prejudices of his time and contradicted his own principles. Jews, Catholics and Atheists were not deserving of such tolerance. His prejudice against Jews reflected other philosophers of his time. During the 17th century, Jews remained the most despised religious minority of Europe. As for 'Papists', one of their main disqualifications was that they owed allegiance to a foreign power, i.e. the Pope. And since Atheists do not believe in a God, Locke assumes that they will be unable to abide by state laws because they have no moral laws guiding them. Although he gave one of the earliest justifications for the secular principle of the separation of church and state, he could not conceive of the possibility that secular moral values might exist.

## **THE PHILOSOPHES**

For a more consistent defence of toleration we have to consider the French Enlightenment. It was the age of anticlericalism and the age of reason. Voltaire, Diderot, D'Holbach and others stood foursquare for human liberation from all tyrannies, not least the tyranny of established religion. "What folly", declared Diderot, "to claim that the authority of tradition is higher than that of reason". 'Philosophe' is the French word for 'philosopher' and was a term that the French Enlightenment thinkers usually applied to themselves. The philosophes, like many ancient philosophers, were public intellectuals dedicated to solving the real problems of the world through reason, science and tolerance and strongly opposed to organised religion which they regarded as the main agent of intellectual tyranny and intolerance. Ultimately, though, they were, as Peter Gay suggests (*The Enlightenment*, p3), "a loose, informal, wholly unorganised coalition of cultural critics, religious sceptics, and political reformers".

The way was paved by **Pierre Bayle** (1647-1706) and **Jean Meslier** (1664-1729), both of whom can be regarded as original sources for the Enlightenment. Bayle was a Huguenot, a French Protestant, born in the village of Carla-le-Comte (now called Carla-Bayle in his name) near the Pyrenees. His father was a Protestant minister who taught him Greek and Latin. When he was twenty he was sent to Toulouse to study at a Jesuit college. Briefly, he was a convert to Catholicism, but he lapsed, one of the worst crimes in France at that time, and he had to flee to Geneva. He returned to France for a time but in the 1680s he was offered the professorship of philosophy and history at a Protestant Academy in Rotterdam, where he spent the rest of his life.

Bayle, a strong advocate of freethought and scepticism, wrote a number of books, including the *Philosophical Commentary*, published in 1687, which is a classic in the literature on toleration and deserves to be as well known as Locke's contribution to the subject. Indeed, Bayle went further than Locke and was more consistent in extending tolerance to all beliefs. He offered at least three major

justifications: we have limited knowledge of the minds of others; forcible coercion breeds hypocrisy and an erosion of social order; and someone whose sincere belief in good faith is perceived to be in error should not be forced to change it. And, for good measure, he suggests that to harass religious dissenters constitutes an affront to God.

The *Philosophical Commentary* was also highly critical of organised religion. Bayle wrote: "The age we live in... is full of freethinkers and deists. People are amazed at their number, but for my part I am amazed that we have not more of this sort among us considering the havoc religion has made of the world, and the extraction of all virtue which inevitably appears when it, the church, authorises all imaginable crimes". This critical approach was also evident in his most famous work, the *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, first published in 1697 and a bestseller of the 18th century: Voltaire called it 'the arsenal of the Enlightenment'. The contents are mostly biographical but some articles discuss religious beliefs and philosophies, in which Bayle does not hesitate to point out contradictions between religious ideas and reason. In his *History of Freedom of Thought*, J.B. Bury writes that Bayle "takes a delight in marshalling all the objections which heretics have made to essential Christian dogmas. He exposed without mercy the crimes and brutalities of David, and showed that this favourite of the Almighty was a person with whom one would refuse to shake hands" (p135).

The *Dictionary* was also generous to the moral excellences of people who deny the existence of a god. In fact, he says that he knows of no atheists who lived bad lives. He writes that it is "a perfectly normal thing, that some men, without religion, should be more strongly disposed to a good and virtuous moral life by their individual constitution, together with the value they place on praise and the fear they have of shame, and some others, simply by the instinct of conscience. Indeed, it's far more bizarre that so many people believe in the truths of religion and yet at the same time are mired in every kind of ill deed".

Jean Meslier was born in Mazerny in the Ardennes and at the age of 25 became a priest in the tiny parish of Étrépigny in Champagne, where he performed his duties for 40 years without complaint. He lived like a pauper and gave what remained of his salary to the poor. He died at the age of 65, leaving all his possessions to his parishioners and asked to be buried in his garden. In his house were found three copies of a 633-page manuscript, which he called a 'Memoir' and signed as 'My Testament'. One of the manuscripts reached Voltaire, who distributed hundreds of copies to his friends and published an edited extract in 1762.

Meslier's *Testament* is an uncompromising onslaught on religion spanning 97 chapters and 8 sections. Essentially, he seeks to demonstrate the vanity and falsity of all the gods and all the world's religions, which he regards as inventions and purely human institutions fostered by ruling elites to oppress the mass of the people. Faith is 'blind belief' founded on absurdities and contradictions. The prophets of the Old and New Testaments are the delusions of madmen, not least Jesus. Christianity itself propounds false doctrines and its morality contradicts all that nature teaches, especially in its claims that pleasure is wrong, poverty is a virtue and that justice lies in turning the other cheek. The soul is not immortal but just a form of matter which perishes with death.

In the seventh and longest section, which takes up half the work, Meslier argues against the existence of a god. The material order does not require a creator since it is matter and motion which are infinite in time and space. Moreover, the existence of evil is incompatible with a good and wise god. He calls god a 'chimera' and suggests that the supposition of such a being is not a prerequisite for morality. He concludes that "whether there exists a god or not, men's moral duties will always be the same so long as they possess their own nature".

Meslier's *Testament* was too hot even for Voltaire, whose 1762 extracts were clearly chosen to make Meslier appear to be a Deist like himself. The effect was to bury the work for another hundred years until a Dutch humanist published a few

hundred copies in 1860. The first French edition did not appear until 1970, and there is still no complete edition published in England. To complicate matters further, Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, published his own atheist polemic, *Common Sense*, anonymously in 1772 which was republished after he died in 1789 as *Common Sense* (sometimes called *Superstition in all Ages*) 'by Curé Meslier'. This work is still confused with Meslier's to this day and is still republished under his name, though these reprints frequently include Voltaire's abstract from the *Testament* as well as his biography and correspondence regarding Meslier.

**Voltaire** (1694-1778) is generally regarded as the embodiment of Enlightenment values. He was born François-Marie Arouet in Paris into a middle class family. He was educated at a Jesuit college and then studied law. His father, a minor treasury official, wanted him to follow a legal career, but he was more interested in writing, at first poetry, then essays and historical studies and, later, plays. These writings were often so inflammatory that he spent much of his life in flight or exile or imprisonment in the Bastille. Following his first spell there in 1717-18 for a satirical poem in which he accused the regent of sleeping with his own daughter and scheming to usurp the crown, he adopted the name of Voltaire (an anagram of the Latin version of 'Arouet', where 'v' replaces 'u', and the initial letters of 'le jeune', meaning 'the younger', where 'i' replaces 'j').

Voltaire, who used the word 'lumières' to describe philosophers seeking progress through criticism, gained notoriety for his deistic views and his attacks on Christianity. He ended many of his letters and pamphlets with the words 'Ecrasez l'infâme' ('crush the horror'), and by horror he meant Christianity, or at least the Catholic version of it. He regarded it as organised superstition and a major source of cruelty and persecution. In *A Treatise on Tolerance* (1763) he suggests that the most inhuman crimes perpetrated by humanity have been committed in the name of religion and that people should instead be allowed to practise whatever religion they see fit. In his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* ('Philosophical Dictionary'),

which first appeared in 1764, he writes: "Of all religions the Christian is undoubtedly that which should instil the greatest toleration, although so far the Christians have been the most intolerant of all men". Later in the same entry on Toleration, he is quite blunt: "If we look at the matter at all closely we see that the catholic, apostolic and Roman religion is the opposite of the religion of Jesus in all its ceremonies and in all its dogmas".

It is hardly surprising that the *Dictionary* was condemned by the government and church as an 'alphabetical abomination'. The procureur of Geneva described it as a 'deplorable monument of the extent to which intelligence and erudition can be abused'. He objected that Voltaire had quoted from the Bible passages which 'taken literally would be unworthy of Divine Majesty'.

Yet, for all his anticlericalism, Voltaire was not an atheist. Essentially, he followed the argument from design as stated in Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (1713 edition) that the natural harmony of the universe can only be explained as the creation of an intelligent agent. However, he did accept that this argument does not imply an all-good, all-wise God, for in his satirical novel *Candide* he acknowledges that nature is very cruel and criticises Leibnitz for believing that we live in the best of all possible worlds. Nevertheless, he did believe that God was just and wise. Here Voltaire's deism seems inconsistent: if nature can indifferently wipe out thousands in an earthquake, how in any meaningful sense can the god who created it be benign?

There is another problem with Voltaire's view of religion. Despite spending most of his life lambasting it, he believed that it is a major source of moral restraint and social control. Without something to keep them in check, the common people would sink into depravity and iniquity. Hence his famous remark: "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him". (*Épîtres* no. 96). This from the man who relentlessly attacked the Catholic Church for trying to fulfil precisely this role. There is a certain snobbery in Voltaire's attitude in that freedom of thought and

philosophy are for the educated middle class, while he reserves superstition for the masses.

**Denis Diderot** (1713-1784) was more radical than Voltaire in both his religious and political ideas. He was born in Langres and educated at a local Jesuit college and then at the University of Paris, where he obtained a Master of Arts degree in philosophy. At first he failed to settle down to any career, scratching a living from freelance journalism and translation. His interest in religion is displayed in his first work, the *Pensées Philosophiques* (1746), a collection of aphorisms published anonymously, such as: "Superstition is more injurious to God than atheism"; "Scepticism is the first step towards truth"; and "Christianity, instead of clarifying, gives rise to an infinite multitude of obscurities and difficulties". The Paris Parlement condemned the work and ordered it to be burned, declaring that it "places all religions on almost the same level, in order to finish up by not accepting any".

Diderot's early deism was only a halfway house to atheism. In his *Letter on the Blind* (1749), and speaking through the mouth of a dying blind philosopher, he rejects the arguments for the existence of the Christian god, notably the design argument, in favour of a nascent theory of evolution. Although he published the work anonymously, he was quickly identified as the author and imprisoned for three months at Vincennes. He was released after signing a letter of submission and promising never to write anything prejudicial against religion again.

On release, he resumed work on a major project which was to preoccupy much of the next 26 years. In 1746 he had been approached by a publisher to help translate Chambers English *Cyclopaedia*, but before long the idea had changed into a plan to produce an original French equivalent, with Diderot as chief editor and the mathematician Jean D'Alembert as his assistant. Between 1751 and 1772 the *Encyclopédie* appeared in seventeen volumes of text and eleven volumes of illustrations. Over this period the publication was suspended and even banned in

1759 by the French authorities who saw it as a conspiracy against 'society' when the number of its subscribers had risen from 2,000 to 4,000. It continued clandestinely, and the authorities turned a blind eye to its existence. D'Alembert dropped out and Diderot was left to continue on his own.

The *Encyclopédie* encapsulated the spirit of the Enlightenment. Its contributors, who included renowned thinkers like Voltaire, Rousseau, Buffon, Turgot and Montesquieu as well as Diderot himself, believed that not only the natural world but also human affairs were governed by natural laws discoverable by human endeavour instead of the reliance on supernatural revelations. As A.C. Grayling suggests, "What Diderot wished to convey was an attitude and an outlook: an attitude of enquiry untrammelled by dogmas, orthodoxies, or the restrictions of political control; and a correlative outlook based on reason, observation and experiment" (*Towards the Light*, Bloomsbury, 2008, p135). In short, the *Encyclopédie* sought not only to provide information but to guide opinion and, in Diderot's own words in the article 'Encyclopédie', the aim was nothing less than "to change the way people think".

While many of its contributors had no interest in radically reforming French society, and some were even priests, the *Encyclopédie* pointed that way. It reflected its editor's hostility to religious authority and advocated a new Humanism, a new stress on the importance of man, on free inquiry and on the secularisation of society. Given that Paris was the intellectual capital of Europe at the time and that many European leaders used French as their administrative language, these ideas had the capacity to spread, and so it also served as a means by which much of Europe discussed and formulated Enlightenment ideals.

One the major contributors to the *Encyclopédie* was **Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron D'Holbach** (1723-89), a close friend of Diderot. It was his Parisian salon that became an important meeting place for the contributors to the *Encyclopédie* and therefore a shelter for radical thought for nearly 30 years. But the guest list to his dinners

reached beyond the fringe of French society to include some of the most prominent intellectuals in Europe, including Benjamin Franklin, Adam Smith, David Hume, Lawrence Stern, Edward Gibbon, Horace Walpole, Joseph Priestley, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Claude-Adrien Helvétius.

Holbach, like Meslier, was an unequivocally atheist writer, though all his works were published anonymously or under pseudonyms and printed outside France. In *Christianity Unveiled* (1761) he attacked Christianity and religion in general as impediments to the moral advancement of humanity. He wrote: "Many men without morals have attacked religion because it was contrary to their inclinations. Many wise men have despised it because it seemed to them ridiculous. Many persons have regarded it with indifference, because they have never felt its true disadvantages. But it is as a citizen that I attack it, because it seems to me harmful to the happiness of the state, hostile to the march of the mind of man, and contrary to sound morality" (quoted in Jim Herrick: *Against the Faith*, Glover and Blair, 1985, p85). Voltaire, who was accused by some of being the real author, said that "this book leads to an atheistic philosophy that I detest".

In another work, *System of Nature* (1770), Holbach stressed the materialist basis of all life. He presented a monist vision of the oneness of the universe, with man as a part of the entirety of nature. He thought that the idea of a metaphysical component of the universe was mere prejudice and error fostered by the clergy. In an abbreviated version, called *Good Sense* (1772), he wrote: "Religion has ever filled the mind of man with darkness, and kept him in ignorance of his real duties and true interest. It is only by dispelling the clouds and phantoms of religion, that we shall discover truth, reason and morality. Religion diverts us from the causes of evils, and from the remedies which nature prescribes; far from curing, it only aggravates, multiplies and perpetuates them".

## **HUME**

David Hume is generally regarded as the greatest British philosopher. He also deserves to rank among the greatest Humanist thinkers, for he was the first writer to demonstrate rigorously that knowledge, morality and politics do not need any sort of religious basis. Indeed, it was Hume, above all, who laid the intellectual foundations of modern Humanism.

David Hume was born on 26th April 1711 (old style; 7th May, new style) in Edinburgh. His fairly affluent Presbyterian family of landed gentry was a minor branch of the line of the earls of Home which produced a Conservative British Prime Minister in the 1960s, but he changed his name in the 1730s because the English had difficulty pronouncing 'Home' in the Scottish manner. Most of his childhood was spent on the family estate of Ninewells, near Berwick. His father died in 1713 when he was still an infant, the estate passed to his elder brother, and he was left with a small patrimony of about £50 a year.

At the age of barely 12 he went to Edinburgh University but did not graduate, leaving after three years to pursue a legal career. However, he soon discovered that his interests lay elsewhere in the classics, particularly Cicero and Virgil, and in philosophy and history. As he himself said: "I was continually fortifying myself with reflections against death, and poverty, and shame, and pain, and all the other calamities of life". He also decided – in a typically Presbyterian way – that the existing philosophy contained 'little more than endless disputes', and set out instead to find 'some medium by which truth might be established'.

On the verge of a nervous breakdown, he left Scotland in 1734 and went first to Bristol and then to live cheaply in rural France, and to write. He spent a year at Rheims and then settled at La Flèche, the town where Descartes had studied a century before. He made friends with the fathers in the Jesuit college and took advantage of their extensive library. Here, over the course of two years, he wrote his first work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. He returned to Britain in 1737 to find a

publisher. Eventually, in 1739 the work appeared, anonymously, but Hume was disappointed by its reception, one critic describing it as 'abstract and unintelligible'. Three of the most eminent thinkers of the day, Bishop Berkeley, Bishop Butler and Frances Hutcheson, made no comment on it. As Hume joked much later in his brief autobiography *My Own Life*, "it fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots".

The *Treatise* was actually published in three volumes, the first two in 1739 and the third, 'Of Morals', in 1740. Hume blamed himself for its 'failure' and produced an anonymous pamphlet in 1740 advertised as an 'abstract' of the *Treatise*, which fell into oblivion until it was rediscovered and published by Keynes in the 1930s. He also continued writing, and in 1741-42 published his two-volume *Essays, Moral and Political*, which were written in an accessible style and were more successful than the *Treatise*. He now became convinced that the poor reception of the *Treatise* was caused by its presentation rather than its content, so in 1748 he published his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which reworked portions of Book I of the *Treatise*. The *Enquiry* also includes two sections that he had cut from the earlier work containing direct attacks on religious belief: 'Of Miracles' and a dialogue entitled 'Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State'. In 1751 he followed with his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, which recasts parts of Book III of the *Treatise*. It advocates a system of morality based on utility and human sentiments alone, and without appeal to divine commands.

In the 1750s Hume also wrote two substantial works on religion: *The Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *The Natural History of Religion*. The latter appeared in 1757 but, on the advice of friends who wished to steer him away from religious controversy, the *Dialogues* remained unread until 1779, three years after his death, when they were published by his nephew.

In 1756 a volume of Hume's essays titled *Five Dissertations* was printed and ready for distribution. They included 'The Natural History of Religion', 'Of the Passions', 'Of Tragedy', 'Of Suicide' and 'Of the Immortality of the Soul'. The latter two essays made direct attacks on common religious doctrines by defending a person's moral right to commit suicide and by criticising the idea of life after death. Early copies were passed around, and Hume's publisher was threatened with prosecution if the book was distributed as it was. The printed copies of *Five Dissertations* were then physically altered by removing the essays on suicide and immortality, and inserting a new essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' in their place.

Hume's writings also inhibited his own career. When the Chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at Edinburgh became vacant in 1744, he was advised by his friend Lord Cougts, the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, to apply for the post, but his reputation provoked vocal opposition. Edinburgh ministers petitioned the town council not to appoint him because he was seen as an atheist. Six years later, he stood for the Chair of Logic at Glasgow, only to be turned down again. In fact, Hume never held an academic post; instead, at various times he was a librarian, historian, diplomat and political essayist. In the 1760s he was for a time private secretary to Lord Hertford, the Ambassador to France, and spent three years in Paris, where he became friendly with many of the Philosophes, including Diderot, D'Alembert, and d'Holbach. He also befriended Rousseau, who was then fleeing persecution in Switzerland. In 1766 he brought Rousseau back to England, but their friendship ended abruptly when the paranoid Rousseau became convinced that Hume was masterminding an international conspiracy against him.

Hume's entire philosophy does not concern us here but only those aspects that directly relate to Humanism. There is much debate about whether he was atheist or agnostic. He never called himself an atheist. The story has come down to us of his attendance at one of d'Holbach's famous dinner parties, when he asserted that

he didn't believe in the existence of atheists, and had never met one; whereupon d'Holbach retorted that he must have been unfortunate – and now he was surrounded by seventeen.

One thing is certain: he had nothing but contempt for Christianity and all the major creeds. In a conversation with Lord Charlemont, he described Rousseau as someone who 'has a hankering after the Bible, and is indeed little better than a Christian in a way of his own'. Writing to his friend Hugh Blair, he referred to the English as 'relapsing fast into the deepest stupidity, Christianity and ignorance'.

His philosophical works suggest that he was an atheist as far as orthodox religions are concerned. Much of it is actually designed to discredit religious belief. Take the following statement from *A Natural History of Religion*: "Survey most nations and most ages. Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are other than sick men's dreams; or perhaps will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkeys in human shape, than the serious, positive, dogmatical asseverations of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational". Then there is the final paragraph of his essay 'Of Miracles' in the *Enquiry*: "the Christian religion not only was at first attended by miracles, but even to this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one".

His hostility to Christianity is non-discriminating. In the *Natural History*, he swipes at Catholicism by quoting with approval the verdict of the 12th century Islamic philosopher Averroes that "of all religions, the most absurd and nonsensical is that, whose votaries eat, after having created, their deity". He adds that "there is no tenet in all paganism which would give so fair a scope to ridicule as that of the *real presence*; for it is so absurd, that it eludes the force of all argument". As for the Calvinists, their God "is a most cruel, unjust, partial and fantastical being".

In the posthumous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, he addresses some of the main arguments for the existence of a God, including the cosmological and ontological 'proofs', but especially the teleological argument from design of which he gives a devastating critique. The three participants in the dialogue are Demea, who believes that the existence of God can be demonstrated *a priori*, Cleanthes, who argues that the proof of God's existence is found in the world's wonders, and the sceptical Philo, who agrees with Cleanthes that the argument from design is the only one worth considering.

Philo clearly speaks for Hume and makes a number of objections to the design argument. First, we cannot infer from the fact that examples of order in the universe have human causes, that order in the universe as a whole has a cause, since we are not acquainted with a multiplicity of worlds but only with this one unique universe. Second, if the universe was designed, who designed the designer? Third, the argument makes God too anthropomorphic, i.e. too much like a human being. Hume mocks both the believer's attribution of human emotions such as anger and jealousy to a deity and the inference of a god's infinite goodness from his often miserable and suffering creation. Fourth, why should there be only one designer? Many people work together to build a house or a ship.

Fifth, why can we not regard the universe as a living organism, which grows and reproduces in a regular manner, rather than a machine or an artefact? Sixth, the universe could be the result of chance, i.e. there are periods of chaos and order and we are, luckily, living in a period of order. There is also another argument against any monotheistic god which Hume makes in the *Enquiry*, namely, that we can only ascribe to a cause whatever qualities are needed to produce the effect, therefore the design argument could only prove the existence of a design-producing being, not one with any of the other attributes traditionally ascribed to God.

Yet, although Hume strongly doubts the existence of any monotheistic god, he concedes that “the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence”, and he is agnostic about ultimate reality. In his *History of England* he writes: “While Newton seemed to draw off the veil from some of the mysteries of nature, he showed at the same time the imperfections of the mechanical philosophy; and thereby restored her ultimate secrets to that obscurity in which they ever did and ever will remain”.

Philosophically, Hume is the arch empiricist and arch sceptic. He puts it bluntly in the *Enquiry*: “When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion”. But he also described himself as ‘mitigated’ sceptic, suggesting that while humbly accepting the limitations of human knowledge and pursuing the legitimate aims of logic and science he also in his non-philosophical moments relied on the natural beliefs of everyday life.

A further aspect of Hume’s Humanism is his ethical concern. In the *Enquiry* he defines moral philosophy as ‘the science of human nature’. But there is no ultimate justification for our moral ideas because we cannot derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’ (sometimes called Hume’s Law). Moral judgments are neither ‘relations of ideas’ nor ‘matters of fact’. Psychological laws, not reason, provide us with moral guidance, because “tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger” (*Treatise*). Instead, “reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (*Treatise*).

Reason, according to Hume, can at best recommend means for attaining a given end, but it cannot recommend ultimate ends. It can provide no motive to action, for reason alone is insufficient to produce moral blame or approbation; for that we need sentiment and motivation. Morality therefore derives from feeling. He argues that we are innately social and benevolent creatures and that the principle of 'humanity' or fellow-feeling is the basis of ethics. Modern Humanists would certainly concur with that.

We may think that he underestimated the role of reason in ethics and himself derived an 'ought' from an 'is' in basing his morality on the facts of human nature, but it is a matter of degree. As he himself wrote: "generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous". As in his philosophy, so in his life, Hume was indeed a model Humanist, a fact recognised by Adam Smith: "Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime, and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will admit".

## **KANT**

In 1785 one of the most important books ever written was published in Prussia, and yet more than 200 years later very few people have ever heard of it. The work in question laid the foundation of the modern belief in universal rights. Its author suggested that morality is based, not – as western Christendom had maintained for centuries – on divine commands, nor – as political theorists like Machiavelli had argued – on the principle of utility or self-interest, but on human reason. The author was Immanuel Kant, and the work was *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. In his *Treatise of Human Nature* Hume had rejected both divine commands and self-interest but advocated another approach. As we have seen, morality, he said, is based on

natural feelings of sympathy, and reason is “and ought only to be the slave of the passions”. In other words, reason concerns only means, not ends. Kant, who said that Hume interrupted his ‘dogmatic slumber’, seeks instead to demonstrate that reason refers to ends as well as means.

Now, it is a big claim indeed to argue that morality is derived solely from our reason. It implies that our own desires, hopes and interests are irrelevant and that the action itself commands us to do it. There are *imperatives* of action which derive from the dictates of reason. This would seem to suggest that we have no freedom of choice in the matter. On the contrary, argues Kant, it is only when we are truly free that we can make rational decisions: for him, ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. And when we discern what the rational course is, we realise that it is our duty to follow it. Thus we have 3 key concepts linked together: freedom, reason and duty. Our free will tells us that it is our duty to obey rational imperatives. And if we follow these imperatives we will realise our freedom, which is “the property that a will has of being a law to itself”. Freedom is therefore the ability to be governed by reason.

Kant distinguishes two kinds of imperative. The first are hypothetical imperatives, which depend on certain ends to be achieved. For example, if I want to acquire knowledge, then I must study and learn – this is a logical ‘ought’. Or we might believe that murder is wrong because it does not maximise social good – this is a utilitarian ‘ought’. For Kant, these are not concerned with morality at all but only with desires. It is the second kind which are *categorical* imperatives – absolute and unconditional moral commands, based on reason, whatever the consequences. They are, in fact, universal moral laws, governed by the ultimate or basic moral law, namely that you should “act only on the maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”. Thus the principle of universalisability, sometimes called ‘the Formula of Universal Law’ (FUL), may be described as *the* ‘categorical imperative’, upon which all others are based.

In short, we should only act on rules or maxims that we would want to apply to everybody. Examples include making false promises, lying or stealing. To break our promise would result in trust breaking down so that we could not act on our initial maxim of promising falsely. Similarly, if people lied when they thought they could get away with it, we would never know when anyone was telling us the truth and there would be no way to tell a truth from a lie, so its universalisation would generate a contradiction. And the universalisation of 'steal when you can' would create a world in which no one's property would any longer be rightfully theirs, but without private property there can be no stealing either.

Is the Formula of Universal Law the same as the Golden Rule found in Confucius, Jesus and others: "do (or do not do) unto others as you would (or would not) have them do unto you"? Is FUL the Golden Rule with philosophical knobs on? We might say no, because the Golden Rule is based on subjective preference – what we *want* – whereas FUL is based on objective *duty* – what is rationally necessary, irrespective of what we want. The weakness of the Golden Rule, according to Kant, is that what you would want done to you might not be what another person wants done unto them. People have different wants. For example, a sadist or a masochist would be justified in causing or receiving pain. The categorical imperative is thus arguably an improvement on the Golden Rule because it says that you should act as you would want ALL other people to act towards all other people.

Yet we could reasonably argue that the Golden Rule merely personalises a universal principle. Is there really any significant difference between saying: "Do what you think everyone should do" (FUL); and: "Do what you think the other person should do" (Golden Rule)? Moreover, what you want another person to do is not a matter of taste if you want them to act 'rationally'. In other words, if we rewrite the Golden Rule as: "do unto others as you would want them rationally to

do unto you”, then there is no significant difference and the categorical imperative is essentially the Golden Rule in philosophical dress.

A second categorical imperative, derived from FUL, is: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means”. In other words, we should show respect to others and never treat them as a means to our own ends. This is sometimes called the Formula of the End in Itself. It implies that our freedom is constrained by respecting the freedom of all, for how else can our freedom issue in universal laws?

This second formulation of the categorical imperative is immediately compelling and it also has had the greatest cultural impact on western thought and politics, but is it really implied by the Formula of Universal Law?

Arguably no, because the first principle is actually only a formal rule which does not really tell us whether an action is good or bad. A universal rule that we should kill anyone who gets in our way is not self-contradictory and would therefore fulfil the Formula of Universal Law, though clearly it would run completely against the Formula of Ends in Themselves, which is a substantive principle of respect for the dignity of persons. Nevertheless, a universal law, though morally neutral, if combined with the Formula of Ends in Themselves, does enable us to reach a position not far removed from a modern liberal humanist ethic.

Modern humanism does indeed propose that there are certain universal principles relating to freedom and human rights which transcend local cultures and customs. The United Nations embodies this approach in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, we have to acknowledge that such rights cannot be applied rigorously in all circumstances. Children, for example, cannot have the same rights as adults and animals do not have the same rights as humans (Kant accorded animals no rights, on the grounds that they weren't rational beings).

And what happens when our duties clash or when universalisation conflicts with respect for persons? We might think it is wrong to lie but also that it is wrong to cooperate in cruelty to others. A common illustration is the man who is harbouring a Jew from the Gestapo. He might well consider that he should lie in order to prevent an innocent person from being murdered. And what about the father who thinks it is right to steal a loaf of bread in order to feed his starving children?

Kant's ethics are often called deontological because they focus on the rules and duties (Greek 'deon' meaning 'duty') that serve as imperatives for our actions. This approach is often contrasted with teleological or consequentialist ethics which focus on the outcomes of actions. A strict adherence to the latter implies that the end justifies the means, a position Kant completely rejects because he regards morality as entirely a matter of intentions. Yet an obvious deficiency of basing an ethical theory on intentions alone is that someone cannot be held morally accountable for what they do, but only for why they did it. Hence, if a person *were* to steal a loaf of bread, we would really have to delve into their motives and put their heart on trial, something which, at the moment, we are unable to do.

Kant's ethics have a certain rigidity and are open to misinterpretation. Adolf Eichmann declared at his trial that he had lived his life according to Kant's moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty. As Hannah Arendt says, "this was outrageous, on the face of it, and also incomprehensible, since Kant's moral philosophy is so closely bound up with man's faculty of judgment, which rules out blind obedience" (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p136). Eichmann had interpreted the categorical imperative to mean that he should act as if his principles were the same as that of the state legislator, i.e the Führer.

We cannot ignore the consequences of our actions in formulating moral rules. Yet, despite this and other weaknesses, Kant's ethics were the first and remain the most influential attempt to vindicate universal moral principles without reference to

preferences or to a God. It is we ourselves as practical rational beings who give moral laws to ourselves. As he himself declares in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793): "Morality in no way needs religion (whether objectively, as regards willing, or subjectively, as regards capability, but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason".

## **PAINÉ**

Tom Paine was born in Thetford, Norfolk, in 1737, the son of a Quaker corset-maker. He attended Thetford grammar school but left at thirteen and was apprenticed to his father. In late adolescence he enlisted and briefly served as a privateer. On return, he eventually became a master corset-maker and set up a shop in Sandwich, Kent. In 1759, at the age of 22, he married Mary Lambert, but a year later the business collapsed and his wife died in childbirth, with the baby.

Paine then drifted from job to job before becoming a schoolteacher in London, then an excise officer in Lewes, Sussex, where he met and married Elizabeth Olive, his landlord's daughter. He became involved in local politics, serving on the town council and establishing a debating club in a local tavern. Three years later, in 1774, he separated from Elizabeth and moved back to London. Here he was introduced to Benjamin Franklin, who suggested he emigrate to the more congenial surroundings of America. He arrived in Philadelphia in November 1774, where he settled as a journalist, editing the *Pennsylvania Magazine* in which, inter alia, he advocated the abolition of slavery.

America was then in the throes of revolutionary turmoil, and Paine was on fire with a missionary zeal. In early 1776 he published, anonymously as 'written by an Englishman', a seditious pamphlet called *Common Sense*, which called for independence six months before the Declaration. It sold 120,000 copies within three months and became the 'war-cry' of the revolutionary movement. "The cause

of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind", he wrote; it is the providentially chosen asylum for liberty while Europe is crumbling into despotism.

"Society", he announces, "in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one". The best state protects freedom and security by taking a representative and republican form. The worst states are monarchical and aristocratic tyrannies which are wholly incompatible with the preservation of freedom. Government by kings runs counter to the natural equality of man, and when America gains its independence, in contrast to Europe, it will be a land where 'the law is king'. Paine himself joined up, but was described as "not a soldier, he always kept out of danger". He was also a brilliant, morale-boosting war correspondent and even travelled to France in 1781 to raise money for the American cause.

Paine played no major role in American government after independence. As a mere clerk in the Pennsylvania Assembly with a love of alcohol, he was invariably hard-pressed for money and had to rely on his American friends. In 1785 he was given \$3,000 by the U.S. Congress in recognition of his service to the nation, but he eventually became restless again and in 1787 he returned to Europe where, for the next four years, he divided his time between Britain and France.

In November 1790 the Whig MP Edmund Burke, who had spoken out for Americans, Irish Catholics and slaves, published a pamphlet entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in which he defended the ancien regime and argued that the revolution would end disastrously. Burke maintained that the revolutionaries, with their abstract principles, ignored the complexities of human nature and the importance of private property, tradition and 'prejudice', with its adherence to values regardless of their rational basis which 'renders a man's virtue his habit'. He advocated gradual, constitutional reform, stressing that a political doctrine founded on abstractions such as *liberty* and the *rights of man* could be easily

abused to justify tyranny. He predicted, with almost supernatural prescience, that the Revolution's concomitant disorder would make the army 'mutinous and full of faction', and then a 'popular general', commanding the soldiery's allegiance, would become 'master of your assembly, the master of your whole republic'.

In Burke's view, the British constitution, established 'for ever' by the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, was a balanced combination of rule by the king, the nobility and the common people: "We are resolved to keep... an established monarchy, an established aristocracy, and an established democracy, each in the degree it exists, and in no greater". For Burke, society was a sacred contract, "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society".

In one of the most famous passages, Burke lamented the rough treatment meted out to Marie Antoinette in October 1789. He speaks of the 'decent drapery of life' being 'rudely torn off'. After a paean to the French Queen, 'glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendour, and joy', he announces: "The age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever".

Paine decided to write a reply, and *Rights of Man* was the result, published in two parts in 1791 and 1792. He declares: "I am contending for the rights of the living, and against their being willed away, and controlled and contracted for, by the manuscript assumed authority of the dead; and Mr. Burke is contending for the authority of the dead over the rights and freedom of the living". In reply to the image of the 'decent drapery of life', he remarks that Burke "pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird".

He also mocks the hereditary principle: it is 'as absurd as an hereditary mathematician, an hereditary wise man, and as ridiculous as an hereditary poet laureate'. He writes in contempt of the monarchy and governmental system of Britain. "I have always considered monarchy to be a silly, contemptible thing. I compare it to something kept behind a curtain, about which there is a great deal of bustle and fuss, and a wonderful air of seeming solemnity, but when, by any accident, the curtain happens to open, and the company see what it is, they burst into laughter".

In the first part of *Rights of Man* Paine defends the French Revolution's legitimacy against Burke's attacks. In the second part he sets out a defence of democratic republicanism in which all over 21 should be given the vote, and outlines a blueprint for a welfare state, including old age pensions, maternity grants, funeral grants, provision of work for the deserving poor and progressive income tax. So *Rights of Man* is not only one of the strongest and clearest defences of human rights, liberty and equality ever written; it is also one of the first expressions of the duty of government to take care of its less fortunate citizens.

*Rights of Man*, which became the bestselling book of the 18th century, caused uproar in Britain. The book was banned and the government launched a prosecution for seditious libel. Paine was persuaded by friends to leave the country. He fled to France, having been threatened with stoning by a crowd at Dover. Arriving in Calais in September 1792, 'Citizen Paine' was immediately offered French citizenship and elected as the town's representative in the National Convention.

There he sided with the moderate Girondins and courageously defied the dominant Jacobins by arguing that Louis XVI should not be executed but exiled to the United States. As the Revolution began to devour its own children and most of his friends went to the guillotine, Paine was imprisoned without trial for ten

months in 1794 and was saved from death by luck and the fall of Robespierre. He was particularly upset that Washington, whom he had befriended in America, had been prepared to leave him to his fate – indeed, he was convinced that he had connived at his imprisonment.

Just before being jailed in the closing days of 1793 he completed the first part of *The Age of Reason* (the second part was written on his release). It is this work that was responsible for the hostility with which Paine was subsequently treated, being an uncompromising attack on Christianity and all formal religions, though written by someone who was not an atheist but a deist (or pantheist) seeking to combat the growing atheism of the time.

Paine opens with a statement of his own creed: “I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow creatures happy”. But, on the other hand: “All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolise power and profit”.

Paine pulls no punches in denouncing the Bible: “Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon than the word of God”. It is nothing but “a book of lies, wickedness and blasphemy; for what can be greater blasphemy than to ascribe the wickedness of man to the orders of the Almighty”. He reserves most contempt for the central tenet of Christianity, the morally hideous concept of scapegoating or ‘vicarious atonement’: “Moral justice cannot take the innocent for the guilty even if the innocent would offer itself”. In short, to place your sins upon another,

especially if this entails a human sacrifice, is a grotesque evasion of moral and individual responsibility.

Paine returned to America in 1802 at the invitation of Thomas Jefferson, who had become President. Jefferson remained loyal to him, but most Americans could not forgive him for his opposition to slavery, his *Age of Reason* and his public attack on Washington. He spent his last 7 years in drunkenness, loneliness and ill health, regretting that he had ever returned to America.

In an essay on *The Fate of Thomas Paine*, written in 1934, Bertrand Russell said that it was his fate to be always honoured by opposition and hated by government. It was for his virtues that he was hated and successfully calumniated. For example, as Russell indicates, from first to last he was consistently opposed to every form of cruelty, whether practised by his party or by his opponents. In England he advocated reform as the cure for the ruthless exploitation of the poor and had to fly for his life. In France, for opposing unnecessary bloodshed he was thrown into prison and narrowly escaped death. In America, for opposing slavery and upholding the principles of the Declaration of Independence, he was abandoned by the government. And of course *The Age of Reason* offended every major religion of the day. Even the Quakers refused his request for burial in their cemetery.

We might indeed say that Paine was a prophet not without honour, but in his own three countries. Yet in the long run his memory endures as a great crusader for humanity with an honesty, clarity of mind and critical intelligence that is a model for us all. His motto, expressed in *Rights of Man*, is a rallying cry for modern Humanists: "My country is the world, and my religion is to do good"