

Vincenzo Ferrone, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*, tr. Elisabetta Tarantino
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More than two centuries have passed since Immanuel Kant posed his celebrated question ‘What is Enlightenment?’ Yet this inquiry still lingers among philosophers and historians alike, and is unlikely to end soon. Vincenzo Ferrone’s *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea* is not only a further take on Kant’s question, but also offers new insights and proposes a novel way of understanding this watershed phenomenon that recast European thought and shaped so-called Western identity.

The philosopher’s and historian’s ways of analysing the Enlightenment are distinct: whereas the former is interested in scrutinizing the general principles underlying the emerging ideas of the eighteenth century, the latter seeks answers in particular realities and contexts. This methodological differentiation is the theme of the first part of Ferrone’s book. In other words, the author argues that philosophical and historical views of the Enlightenment era have long been confused and intermingled. Therefore, Ferrone contends, it is only by separating these two analyses and taking an approach grounded in social and cultural history that we can truly comprehend what the Enlightenment was and grasp why it is still relevant today. He shows how different interpretations of the Enlightenment have diverged over time from ones based on careful contextual and historical understanding of the ideas and have been replaced by trans-historical philosophical explanations that neglect the particular realities of eighteenth-century Europe. According to Ferrone, this misinterpretation is the fault of Hegel, who has given rise to what is called the ‘paradigm of the centaur’. Ferrone argues that Hegel left it to his many followers to unravel and rebuild the concept of the Enlightenment as a major and fundamentally philosophical problem in modernity’s search for the ultimate foundation of the very nature of man. Consequently, explains Ferrone, many studies that emerged during and after the Enlightenment were grounded in the association of history with philosophy and thus failed to explicate particular realities in their own right. This has led to a dominant yet misleading paradigm that Ferrone calls ‘the Revolution Paradigm’, which he argues is an erroneous explanation of the Late Enlightenment (last quarter of the eighteenth century) in terms of the French Revolution of 1789. Such an interpretation is confusing, according to Ferrone, since it is one based on a teleological understanding of the Late Enlightenment as the intellectual impetus and political momentum behind the

Revolution. Examining Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Horkheimer, Adorno, Foucault and Pope Benedict XVI, Ferrone offers a new reading of the Enlightenment. He argues that we must not merely follow ideas back to their origins, but rather examine their function in the history of the eighteenth century. Such an approach does not only appreciate the particularities of eighteenth-century Europe, but also tends to repose Kant's famous question with a renewed critical spirit.

Acknowledging that the eighteenth century brought about a culture that consisted in the production and consumption of new representations, institutions, values and practices opposed to the very foundations of the *Ancien Régime*, Ferrone argues that the Enlightenment was in itself a 'laboratory of modernity' that bequeathed to later centuries new institutions, values and cultural practices. This notion explains Ferrone's take on the Enlightenment as first and foremost a cultural revolution and marks the general theme of the second part of his book. In other words, this was a period where original ideas were debated, and tested, as well as passionate efforts made at bringing about a fairer and more equitable society, made by man for man. Through an approach grounded in analysis of the historical realities of the eighteenth century, Ferrone demonstrates how the Enlightenment also revolutionized contemporary notions of universal history and of historical time, effectively giving rise to the modern Western consciousness of time that still engages us today. Part II of the book postulates this epochal rift with the *Ancien Régime* and highlights the way in which discontinuity and profound change affected all reference values and ideas pertaining to centuries-old European society, its intellectual horizons and the political order hitherto fixed by ossified ecclesiastical and feudal hierarchies. It is a cultural revolution, claims Ferrone, because it led to a new critical spirit capable of bringing about a new relationship between the natural rights of individuals and their duties to the community.

Besides his masterful survey and analysis of the pioneering works on the various aspects of the Enlightenment that remain prominent to this day, Ferrone's book is significant in two respects. First, the strength of his study is its insistence that the Enlightenment cannot be abstracted as an independent intellectual phenomenon with no socio-historical context, but ought to be understood in the convergence of events, particularities and institutions of eighteenth-century Europe. Therefore, more than being a critique of philosophers' interpretations of the Enlightenment, Ferrone's book ought to be seen as a work that complements our understanding of this movement by providing an empirical foundation grounded in the historical peculiarities of the time. The work is a critical assertion that acknowledges philosophy as a developing process within a particular place and time. Therefore, it is not surprising to find Ferrone focusing on the chronology and geography of the

Enlightenment as a way of assessing the particularities of the emerging ideas of the eighteenth century. The periodization of the Enlightenment is a vivid example of how Ferrone attempts to relocate philosophical interpretations within determined historical timeframes. Second, since Ferrone addresses the Enlightenment as a cultural revolution that impacted European society at large, his discussion of the major cultural media through which the ideas were disseminated is not only remarkable but also well supports his argument. In other words, acknowledging that Masonic lodges, salons and printing houses among other institutions constituted the primary channels that were instrumental in diffusing ideas, Ferrone ends up demonstrating the tangible link and the interplay between philosophy, culture and history. Such an approach not only facilitates our understanding of the impact that the Enlightenment had on the social micro-level, but also demonstrates philosophy's need for a social infrastructure that accounts for its propagation. Vincenzo Ferrone's *The Enlightenment* is an original and provocative study that provides a compelling re-evaluation of the true nature of one of the most contested periods in Western and even world history.

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Robert Stern, *Kantian Ethics: Value, Agency, and Obligation*

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Robert Stern's new collection of essays, *Kantian Ethics: Value, Agency, and Obligation*, serves as an excellent companion for his most recent monograph, *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard* (2012). *Kantian Ethics* has two main parts. Part I concentrates on Kant. Part II examines Kantian themes in the work of a wide range of figures, including Hegel, Bradley, Green, James, Darwall and the Danish philosopher K. E. Løgstrup. This range forces a reviewer to be ruthlessly selective. Given the forum for the present review, I shall focus on Stern's treatment of Kant, taking the main topics in the following order: obligation, agency and value.

Moral obligation is the central topic and guiding thread of *Kantian Ethics*. Stern takes obligation to be the main focus of Kant's moral