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The Pragmatic Enlightenment: Recovering the Liberalism of Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire

By Dennis C. Rasmussen,

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This is a well written, clearly organized book by an author whose knowledge of the secondary literature is extraordinary.

Rasmussen's positive agenda is as follows: 'The Enlightenment is routinely associated with a hegemonic form of moral and political universalism, a blind faith in abstract reason, and a reductive and isolating focus on the individual, among other sins. My aim in this book is to contest these charges through a recovery and defense of a central strand of Enlightenment thought that I call the "pragmatic Enlightenment.'" (1). Rasmussen addresses the following issues: (a) the meaning and usefulness of the intellectual historical category of 'The Enlightenment'; (b) the validity of critics of various interpretations of the meaning of the Enlightenment. (c) He addresses these first two issues by focusing on the works of four thinkers, Hume, Smith, Montesquieu and Voltaire (hereafter 'the pragmatic four'). A large part of the book is spent defending the pragmatic four against the aforementioned charges. In so doing, (d) he sharply distinguishes between these four and a group of other thinkers he refers to as idealistic, namely Locke, Kant, and Bentham. In his analysis of the pragmatic four, (e) he identifies a commonality among these four thinkers he calls 'The Pragmatic Enlightenment', and (f) maintains that they collectively express a kind of liberalism that is still relevant today: 'support for limited government, religious toleration, freedom of expression, commerce, and humane criminal laws [citing John Robertson's *The Case for the Enlightenment*]...I would submit that...thinkers ...who diverge from these broad liberal ideals...also diverged from the Enlightenment' (9; see also 297).

Rasmussen's negative agenda is a response to Jonathan Israel's claims that [1] 'the Enlightenment was "always fundamentally divided...into irreconcilably opposed intellectual blocks", the Radical Enlightenment and the "moderate mainstream".' Israel [2] 'champions the former', specifically their espousal of equality, materialism,

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and revolution, and Israel criticizes the latter [specifically Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, and Voltaire] for 'intellectual modesty and social conservatism.'(2–3)

We turn, first, to the meaning of 'The Enlightenment'. Rasmussen addresses the 'usual semantic suspects' who turn up whenever a large category is invoked: the expression is too broad, too narrow, is useful but needs to be fine-tuned, or does not serve the intellectual or ideological agenda of the nay-sayers. All of these nay-sayers are making legitimate points, but then so is Rasmussen who is doing what good scholars do, namely connecting the dots. What we need to ask is whether, and to what extent, the connecting is illuminating, suggestive, and helpful in understanding individual authors and texts.

Might it be the case that historical categories are not only useful in calling attention to what thinkers in a particular area have in common but also in identifying against what those thinkers were reacting? It seems fair to say that the Enlightenment can be understood negatively as an intellectual reaction against late scholastic modes of thinking and more importantly addressing a world that needed to recover from the demise of feudalism. This latter approach would allow us to see when groups of thinkers who share a common perception also disagree about how to understand that problem and how to respond to it.

More to the point, if one thinks historically then the Enlightenment usually covers the time period of the eighteenth century. Given what occurred before and given what came after, what is the consensus view on what constitutes the most important events in that time period? I suggest that there are two indisputable candidates: the American 'founding' and the French Revolution(s). If those are the crucial events, then we need to ask who are the thinkers that help us to illuminate those events?

The two indisputable seminal thinkers are Locke and Rousseau. Regrettably, Locke is dismissed by Rasmussen, and Rousseau largely ignored. In a forthcoming book, Capaldi and Lloyd (*Liberty and Equality in Political Economy: From Locke versus Rousseau to the Present*, Elgar, 2016) maintain that the great conversation/debate of modernity originated in Rousseau's critique of Locke, and, further, that most subsequent thinking reflects the evolution of that original 'debate'. Ironically, Rasmussen's previous book on Smith and Rousseau was an excellent exposition of one stage in that conversation. I say 'ironically' because Rasmussen fails to see how that would enhance his theses about the Enlightenment.

If I am correct in focusing on the American Founding and the French Revolution as the key events in the eighteenth century, and

if those events and their aftermath can be explained intellectually as reflecting a 'debate' (Locke was already dead when Rousseau wrote) which originated between Locke and Rousseau, then it follows that: (A) there must be serious differences between the American Founding and the French Revolution (as many scholars have pointed out), and (B) those differences must reflect important but conflicting world views. I submit that the world views can be categorized either as prioritizing liberty (as Capaldi and Lloyd argue, the liberty narrative encompasses the endorsement of a technological world view, a free market economy, limited government, rule of law understood in the Anglo-American sense, and a culture of personal autonomy) or as prioritizing equality (as Capaldi and Lloyd argue the equality narrative encompasses the rejection or severe limitation of a technological world view, e.g., environmentalism, rejection of free market economies, endorsing both the potential for unlimited government and the continental legal state as opposed to the rule of law, and the rejection of personal autonomy in favor of fraternal communitarianism). Putting the matter in this way, allows us to accept and even applaud Rasmussen's exposition of the liberalism he finds in the pragmatic four. It also allows us to see the legitimacy of Israel's identification of two camps. It further follows that Locke cannot be ignored and that Kant is an important member of this ongoing conversation/debate.

Rasmussen's exclusion of Locke and Kant is tied to his opposition to Israel. Part of that opposition is that Israel is both a defender of the 'Rousseau equality narrative' and a critic of the 'Locke liberty narrative'. I note in passing that Rasmussen's endorsement of a version of what Capaldi and Lloyd are calling the 'Locke liberty narrative' reinforces my contention that the Locke vs. Rousseau conversation/debate is still a vibrant part of the intellectual world. What Rasmussen really wants to do, and the whole organization of his book reflects this, is to defend the liberalism of the 'pragmatic four' from Israel's criticisms. Rasmussen has, unfortunately, allowed Israel to define the discussion.

Presumably, the Israel criticisms of the liberalism of the pragmatic four are that it reflects a 'hegemonic universalism', 'a blind faith in reason', and 'atomistic individualism'. I think it is a mistake to adopt this kind of terminology not only because it is the language of those who oppose the liberalism that Rasmussen endorses but also because to use the language of the opposition not only allows the opposition to control the debate by subtlety and surreptitiously privileging their theoretical framework. In any case, having done

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so, you can understand, in part, why Rasmussen is reluctant to include Locke and Kant.

Rasmussen responds to the charge of hegemonic universalism in his chapters one and two. He elaborates the extent to which the pragmatic four understand the constraints of place (Montesquieu) and time (Hume). This response does not fully work because (a) adjusting to context does not rule out universalism at some more fundamental level (e.g., in Hume the Rhine and the Rhone flow in different directions but they have the same source); (b) Smith believes, e.g., that to truck, barter, etc. are fundamental features of the human condition; Smith also believes that there is a parallel between the evolution of economic conditions and legal institutions; and (c) the latter reflects the presence of a kind of (Newtonian inspired) natural history conception of the world in Hume and Smith.

Rasmussen responds to the charge of 'blind faith in reason' in his chapters three and four. Here he is more successful, noting the extent to which Hume emphasizes the limits of discursive reason. He also rightly maintains that the pragmatic four do not exemplify Oakeshott's famous critique of rationalism in politics. But Rasmussen misses a golden opportunity to turn the tables. It is precisely the radical egalitarian Enlightenment so beloved by Israel that does reflect rationalism in politics. It is among the *philosophes* Condorcet, Helvetius, LaMettrie, Diderot, etc. that there arose the idea of a social science that leads to social technology; and it is a belief in social technology that animates latter socialist proponents of the equality narrative (why Rousseau leads to Proudhon, to Marx and to Rawls and Piketty). This also leads Rasmussen to ignore the extent to which Kant made room for faith and sought out 'transcendental' arguments. This also leads Rasmussen to ignore the extent to which Locke relied upon religion and not just abstract principles of natural right.

Rasmussen responds to the charge of atomistic individualism in chapters five and six. The main argument here is that Hume and Smith in particular both focused on how sympathy connected individuals to a social perspective and allowed for consideration of the common good. This is well done, but still misses the point of the radical critics. To begin with, the critics maintain that the community is constitutive of who we are – it is not just an inherited but malleable context. Neither Hume nor Smith would ever endorse such a position. One could also argue that the critics are correct to maintain that neither Hume (by his own admission) nor Smith were completely successful in demonstrating that there could be no ultimate conflict between the true aims of all the members of the polity. Their

arguments are not quite convincing, but that alone does not delegitimize their project.

But all is not necessarily lost. Here again, Rasmussen put himself in an unnecessary bind. One can maintain, first, that the radical egalitarians have never successfully defended their position. Moreover, individual autonomy is in fact already present in Locke (the whole notion of personal identity as it is expressed in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and other works as well as our relation to God is highly Protestant and personalized), as well as Hume and Smith (the imagination upon which sympathy is based is a creative and active force not a passive one). It is Kant who not only offers the most articulate expression of individual autonomy but makes it the basis for avoiding conflict. I quote Oakeshott on this:

Almost all modern writing about moral conduct begins with the hypothesis of an individual human being choosing and pursuing his own directions of activity. What appeared to require explanation was not the existence of such individuals, but how they could come to have duties to others of their kind... This is unmistakable in Hobbes, the first moralist of the modern world to take candid account of the current experience of individuality... even where an individualistic conclusion was rejected, this autonomous individual remained as the starting point of ethical reflection. Every moralist in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is concerned with the psychological structure of this assumed 'Individual'...*nowhere is this seen more clearly to be the case than in the writings of Kant. Every human being, in virtue of not being subject to natural necessity, is recognized by Kant to be a Person, an end in himself, absolute and autonomous.... as a rational human being he will recognize in his conduct the universal conditions of autonomous personality; and the chief of these conditions is to use humanity, as well in himself as in others, as an end and never as a means....* personality is so far sacrosanct that no man has either a right or a duty to promote the moral perfection of another: we may promote the 'happiness' of others, but we cannot promote their 'good' without destroying their 'freedom' which is the condition of moral goodness... [*italics added*] (367–68 in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, ed. T. Fuller, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1991; the title of the specific essay [1961] is 'The Masses in Representative Democracy').

Having invoked Oakeshott, one could go one to note that Oakeshott identifies what I would call the moral retardation of defenders of the egalitarian and radical Enlightenment: the *anti-individual* is a

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pathological character, forever parasitic upon the autonomous individual. Oakeshott describes the anti-individual in Rousseauian terms: 'the counterpart of the...entrepreneur of the sixteenth century was the displaced laborer.' The 'anonymity of communal life was replaced by a personal identity which was burdensome' (*ibid.*, 371). It 'bred envy, jealousy and resentment' (*ibid.*, 372). It rejected the morality of 'liberty' and substituted the morality of 'equality', 'solidarity' and 'community' (*ibid.*, 375). The anti-individual is a derivative character who survives only by defining itself against individuality. The destructive urge of the anti-individual is inhibited only by the desire to enjoy the fruits of what individuals create. The anti-individual reflects the pathology of someone who has failed to realize freedom and responsibility.

I suggest that Rasmussen would agree that defending liberty against equality is what is really paramount and that the pragmatic four are part, but only a part, of the story.

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Cultural Evolution

By Tim Lewens

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The phrase 'Cultural Evolution' conceals multiple ambiguities that have given rise to considerable conceptual confusion, as workers in this emerging field have attempted to harness various aspects of the explanatory power of evolutionary concepts in the strictly biological realm to account for and model different types of cultural change. Tim Lewens' careful study of the value and limitations of the evolutionary metaphor as a tool for understanding cultural change performs sterling service in disentangling its different variants and subjecting each to a searching critical analysis, leading to a measured and balanced assessment that, while strongly underscoring the very great disanalogies that obtain, both between the dynamics of cultural change and organic evolution and the underlying causal mechanisms that respectively produce them, affords an important and intellectually reputable role for some varieties of 'evolutionary thinking' in cultural studies.