

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications

Philosophy, Department of

1-1-2012

Review of *A Revolution of the Mind* by Jonathan Israel

Ericka Tucker

Marquette University, ericka.tucker@marquette.edu

Published version. *Studies in Social & Political Thought*, No. 20 (Winter 2012): 138-140. [Permalink](#). © Tucker 2017. Used with permission.

A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy

by Jonathan Israel

Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011, pbk £13.95 (ISBN: 978-0-691-15260-8), 296pp.

by Ericka Tucker

Jonathan Israel is an academic on a mission. His aim is to reconceive the Enlightenment as a pan-European, transatlantic phenomenon with two distinct, incompatible strains: a Radical Enlightenment and a Moderate Enlightenment.

The Radical Enlightenment, Israel argues, was characterized philosophically by materialism, monism and determinism; religiously by secularism and universalism and politically by its commitment to democracy and revolutionary reform of political institutions. The Moderate Enlightenment, on the other hand, was characterized by its commitment to dualism, deism, constitutional monarchism, and a morality based on sentiment and tradition rather than the Radical insistence on reason. According to Israel, figures in the Moderate Enlightenment eschewed revolution and instead believed progress to be based on Providence. Israel argues that the revolutionary events of the 18th Century were preceded by revolutionary ideas of '*la nouvelle philosophie*', which he identifies with the Radical Enlightenment. In particular, revolutionary events in America, France and the Netherlands were preceded, Israel argues, by the ideas of equality, democracy, and reason as the basis of a universal morality, proposed by the most radical of the Enlightenment thinkers.

Israel does not write short books. His average tome weighs in at 3 lbs paperback, with an average of 800 pages. *A Revolution of the Mind* is a much shorter work; it is an attempt to bring out in a manageable length the core of Israel's project in his three larger works: *Radical Enlightenment*, *Enlightenment Contested* and *Democratic Enlightenment*. As such, it is a good place for the student of political philosophy to begin. Having used it in an undergraduate political philosophy class, I can attest that although it is dense, and its cast of characters rather large, the arguments are clear, original and provocative enough to engage students.

A Revolution of the Mind successfully brings out the original points of Israel's larger trilogy on the history of the Enlightenment, and engages students of philosophy and politics of all ages, backgrounds and expertise. As an original jaunt through the radical history of politics and metaphysics, this is an excellent beginning point for the student of history, contemporary

political philosophy and the history of political thought. *Revolution* also offers much to the philosopher, both professional and student, by offering again, a highly original alternative narrative of the politics and philosophy of the Enlightenment.

Although he focuses his attention on the 18th century, Israel recognizes the foundations of the Radical Enlightenment in the 17th century. He identifies the political and moral kernel of the Radical Enlightenment in Spinoza's metaphysics and political writings. According to Spinoza and his Radical Enlightenment followers, democracy is the freest and most absolute state and therefore the best form of state. However, we cannot count on human nature or Providence alone to achieve this political freedom. Action is required in order to achieve enlightenment.

Israel gives us not only an interesting new take on the historiography of the Enlightenment, but also does important philosophical work. He reveals what radicals in the 17th century knew – dualism and free will do not save genuine freedom; they deny its conditions of possibility. One cannot have genuine freedom, argued Spinoza, without understanding the causal conditions of our existence as material beings. To improve our lives and the lives of our neighbors, we need to understand ourselves as part of Nature, as part of the causal structure of the universe.

Beloved Enlightenment figures, such as Kant, Rousseau and Locke, are lambasted and replaced with new heroes: d'Holbach, Schimmelpenninck, Price and Helvétius. Although Kant, Rousseau and Locke are often forgiven their peccadilloes on race, imperialism and gender, their views on rights, freedom, the scope of reason and Enlightenment are taken as "radical for their time"; however, Israel exposes their views as comparatively conservative, and moderate given the radical ideas on offer.

Israel occasionally errs on the side of grand pronouncement over specific argumentation. For example, his major thesis, that there are two Enlightenments: Radical and Moderate, is well supported. Israel shows us a variety of ways in which the elements of the two Enlightenments can be differentiated. However, his further claim that these two are incompatible philosophically is a claim that merits more detailed argumentation. That is, to say two philosophical views are different is one thing; to say that they are incompatible because of those differences, is quite another. Israel's arguments for difference succeed, but he does not meet the burden of proof for incompatibility. Specialists may take issue with his interpretation of the central figures: Hume, Locke, Diderot, d'Holbach and Spinoza. Israel's interpretations of these figures are controversial; however, his extended arguments for his novel interpretation, while available in Israel's articles and longer works, here merit nary a footnote. Given the overarching mission and

argument of the book, Israel chooses to frustrate specialists in favour of greater readability.

Individual philosophers are always more wily and interesting than the 'schools' or movements to which they belong. Surely, Locke, Smith and Hume fit into Israel's category of Moderate, but their specific arguments and views are quite complex. This tension between the historian's aim to group and synthesize and the philosopher's tendency to find differences and to focus on nuances emerges in each chapter. Philosophers will be annoyed, but perhaps that's all the better. Part of the aim of the book is to reconsider our narratives of 17th and 18th century philosophy and this book succeeds in doing so.

Methodologically, Israel practices what he calls the "controversialist method in the history of ideas." This method is characterized by interpreting the ideas of individual philosophers in the context of the debates of their own time, by which they are influenced and to which their work contributes. Seeing this method in action is perhaps the most promising aspect for contemporary philosophers who want to take historical context seriously. Too often, the ideas of philosophers such as Kant are cherry picked by contemporary philosophers, and the religious, political and philosophical context in which they were conceived is ignored. Israel shows us that by failing to understand the context and controversies in the history of ideas, we fail to understand the contextual nature of philosophy itself. In doing so, we deliberately misinterpret philosophers the past and ignore the contextual nature of our own work.

Ericka Tucker (eltucker@csupomona.edu) is an Assistant Professor at Cal Poly Pomona. She is currently developing a Spinozan framework for global justice.