

Diametros 40 (2014): 1–4
doi: 10.13153/diam.40.2014.626

THE RADICALISM OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL EDITION¹

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Abstract. This brief “Introduction” to the volume discusses the general idea of the special edition of the journal, which is dedicated to the radicalism of the Enlightenment in the context of Jonathan Israel’s recent work on the Enlightenment, and highlights the topics of the articles contained in the edition.

Keywords: Enlightenment, radical Enlightenment, moderate Enlightenment, Spinoza, revolution, European consciousness, liberal democracy.

The Age of Enlightenment is considered to have ushered in the process of cultural change which came to shape modern consciousness. The question arises as to the constitutive ideas of this epoch and their respective life spans. When did this revolution in European consciousness and the road leading from it to the present actually start?

This collection of articles relates to Jonathan Israel’s thesis that the beginning of the epoch should be moved back to the early 1650s, and it also draws upon his interpretation of Spinoza’s system, reducing it to the naturalism and secularism adhered to by the philosophers of the French Enlightenment, which underpin modern consciousness. This standpoint has led proponents of this interpretation to view contemporary reality as a secular age.

As it turns out, the Enlightenment has not yet become a closed research area. On the contrary, philosophers and historians of ideas still look to it for new sources of inspiration. One of the most significant and influential books recently published on this topic is Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* (2001), followed

¹ This special edition of *Diametros*, dedicated to the radicalism of the Enlightenment, is part of the research project “Radicals and Conservatives in the Philosophy of the Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity,” led by Professor Justyna Miklaszewska in collaboration with Dr Anna Tomaszewska and Mr Damian Barnat at the Institute of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University in Kraków. The project is funded from a grant received from the National Science Centre in Poland (for the years 2013 to 2016). Anna Tomaszewska’s work on this edition has been financed from the research project “Science – Environment – Technology,” carried out at the Jagiellonian University in the years 2013 to 2015.

by other complementary works written by him. According to Israel, the philosophy of Spinoza is crucial for the development and formation of modernity. In particular, naturalistic, materialist and even atheist tendencies in the philosophy of the Dutch thinker found numerous followers (Spinozists) and influenced the French materialists in the second half of the eighteenth century. In this approach, however, which emphasizes the stage of the early Enlightenment and at the same time diminishes the role of its later phase, represented by Kant, the idea of progress is no longer recognized as a hallmark of this era.

The thesis on the radical Enlightenment was also formulated before by Margaret Jacob, who in her book *Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (1981) contrasted moderate thinkers, Locke and Newton, with the radicalism of Spinoza. Israel also describes the moderate tendencies of the Enlightenment in opposition to its radical trend. Unlike Jacob, however, he attempts to demonstrate that this trend, represented by Spinoza and Spinozists, was not a marginal movement, but of major importance for the Enlightenment philosophy in France and elsewhere. Indirectly it became a main cause of the French Revolution, a political revolution that was preceded by a revolution in the sphere of consciousness. According to Israel, these radical and revolutionary ideas were always intrinsic and central to the Enlightenment at every stage of its evolution from 1650 down to 1850. The new philosophy, rooted in naturalism and materialism, was a liberating force not only for science but also for moral and political systems. It resulted in revolutions both in Europe and the United States and caused the transformation of people from slaves to enlightened citizens.

The works of Jonathan Israel initiated a global debate on the nature of the Enlightenment to which the authors of the polemical articles published in this issue of *Diametros* have made an important contribution.

The issue addresses the radicalism of the Enlightenment from a number of different perspectives, offering both a critical appraisal and appreciation of the legacy of the period. Importantly, the issue combines perspectives represented by philosophers, historians of philosophy, historians of ideas, and historians, revealing not only different facets of the Enlightenment but also diverse methods of studying it. Thus, in his article, Jonathan Israel recalls the distinction between the radical and the moderate Enlightenment, introduced as early as in 1920s in Germany and in 1970s in the United States. Considering the case of the American Enlightenment and drawing upon the work of L. Strauss, H. May, G. Mühlpfordt, M. Jacob, G. Paganini, M. Mulsow, and his own, Israel highlights the key tenets of the radical Enlightenment: the rejection of religious authority, and consequently secularism, as well as the promotion of democracy and human rights.

Israel's claim that the liberal democratic modernity has its roots in the radical Enlightenment, and ultimately in the philosophical ideas of Baruch Spinoza, is challenged by Sebastian Gardner who argues in his article that radicalism can be traced back to post-Kantian German idealism, also influenced by Spinoza, but employing entirely different aspects of Spinoza's philosophy, ones that would give rise to the Hegelian idea of history as progress of the absolute spirit (or human consciousness of freedom), rather than to the naturalism and materialism of the Baron d'Holbach. Similarly, Przemysław Gut criticizes Israel's construal of Spinoza's philosophy for focusing selectively on those aspects of it that indeed warrant materialist and naturalist accounts. Margaret Jacob, reassessing her earlier work on the radical Enlightenment, published in 1981, addresses the issue of secularism, one of the building blocks of the radical Enlightenment, in a more extensive manner. Presenting radical approaches to religion, extracted from the works of Bernard Picart, Rousseau, or Thomas Jefferson's edition of the Bible, Jacob reveals the origins of what we could nowadays consider comparative studies of religions and describes the first attempts at articulating a universal natural religion.

The possible impact of the radical Enlightenment ideas on the 18th century philosophers is studied in other articles. Eric Schliesser considers the history of the publication of Adam Smith's essays in relation to John Toland and Spinozism. James Schmidt, providing an analysis (accompanied by illustrations) of Edmund Burke's use of the images of "light" and "enlightenment" in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, focuses on Burke's critique of R. Price's rhetoric manifesting radical views. Zbigniew Drozdowicz brings to the fore the views of Voltaire, a leading Enlightenment figure, stressing his uncompromising anticlericalism. Finally, going beyond the radical Enlightenment, Bert van Roermund discusses J.E.M. Portalis's drafting of the French *Code civil*, as a joint result of Enlightenment and Restoration, and Kenneth R. Westphal examines the realization of the Enlightenment ideals (individual rights, responsibilities, republicanism), spelled out *inter alia* by Kant, against the background of the failures of the contemporary educational system.

The picture of the Enlightenment which emerges from the above discussion has been inspired by Israel's thesis of the major role of Spinoza in the breakthrough that was made in the culture and consciousness of the early modern era. The dualistic perspective of radicals and moderate thinkers which he imposes on this epoch, however, does not allow attributing inconsistency or split tendencies to this interpretation. In this perspective, the radical Enlightenment presents itself as a unitary structure based on crucial ideas such as equality,

democracy, cosmopolitanism, which created the ideological foundations for the modern world.

The Guest Editors:
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