

The Counter-Enlightenment

I

OPPOSITION TO THE CENTRAL IDEAS of the French Enlightenment, and of its allies and disciples in other European countries, is as old as the movement itself. The proclamation of the autonomy of reason and the methods of the natural sciences, based on observation as the sole reliable method of knowledge, and the consequent rejection of the authority of revelation, sacred writings and their accepted interpreters, tradition, prescription, and every form of non-rational and transcendent source of knowledge, was naturally opposed by the Churches and religious thinkers of many persuasions. But such opposition, largely because of the absence of common ground between them and the philosophers of the Enlightenment, made relatively little headway, save by stimulating repressive steps against the spreading of ideas regarded as dangerous to the authority of Church or State. More formidable was the relativist and sceptical tradition that went back to the ancient world. The central doctrines of the progressive French thinkers, whatever their disagreements among themselves, rested on the belief, rooted in the ancient doctrine of natural law, that human nature was fundamentally the same in all times and places; that local and historical variations were unimportant compared with the constant central core in terms of which human beings could be defined as a species, like animals, or plants, or minerals; that there were universal human goals; that a logically connected structure of laws and generalisations susceptible of demonstration and verification

could be constructed and replace the chaotic amalgam of ignorance, mental laziness, guesswork, superstition, prejudice, dogma, fantasy, and, above all, the ‘interested error’¹ maintained by the rulers of mankind and largely responsible for the blunders, vices and misfortunes of humanity.

It was further believed that methods similar to those of Newtonian physics, which had achieved such triumphs in the realm of inanimate nature, could be applied with equal success to the fields of ethics, politics and human relationships in general, in which little progress had been made; with the corollary that once this had been effected, it would sweep away irrational and oppressive legal systems and economic policies the replacement of which by the rule of reason would rescue men from political and moral injustice and misery and set them on the path of wisdom, happiness and virtue. Against this, there persisted the doctrine that went back to the Greek sophists, Protagoras, Antiphon and Critias, that beliefs involving value-judgements, and the institutions founded upon them, rested not on discoveries of objective and unalterable natural facts, but on human opinion, which was variable and differed between different societies and at different times; that moral and political values, and in particular justice and social arrangements in general, rested on fluctuating human convention. This was summed up by the sophist quoted by Aristotle who declared that whereas fire burned both here and in Persia, human institutions change under our very eyes. It seemed to follow that no universal truths, established by scientific methods, that is, truths that anyone could verify by the use of proper methods, anywhere, at any time, could in principle be established in human affairs.

This tradition reasserted itself strongly in the writings of such sixteenth-century sceptics as Cornelius Agrippa, Montaigne and Charron, whose influence is discernible in the sentiments

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of thinkers and poets in the Elizabethan and Jacobean age. Such scepticism came to the aid of those who denied the claims of the natural sciences or of other universal rational schemas and advocated salvation in pure faith, like the great Protestant reformers and their followers, and the Jansenist wing of the Roman Church. The rationalist belief in a single coherent body of logically deduced conclusions, arrived at by universally valid principles of thought and founded upon carefully sifted data of observation or experiment, was further shaken by sociologically minded thinkers from Bodin to Montesquieu. These writers, using the evidence of both history and the new literature of travel and exploration in newly discovered lands, Asia and the Americas, emphasised the variety of human customs and especially the influence of dissimilar natural factors, particularly geographical ones, upon the development of different human societies, leading to differences of institutions and outlook, which in their turn generated wide differences of belief and behaviour. This was powerfully reinforced by the revolutionary doctrines of David Hume, especially by his demonstration that no logical links existed between truths of fact and such a priori truths as those of logic or mathematics, which tended to weaken or dissolve the hopes of those who, under the influence of Descartes and his followers, thought that a single system of knowledge, embracing all provinces and answering all questions, could be established by unbreakable chains of logical argument from universally valid axioms, not subject to refutation or modification by any experience of an empirical kind.

Nevertheless, no matter how deeply relativity about human values or the interpretation of social, including historical, facts entered the thought of social thinkers of this type, they too retained a common core of conviction that the ultimate ends of all men at all times were, in effect, identical: all men sought the satisfaction of basic physical and biological needs, such as food, shelter, security, and also peace, happiness, justice, the harmonious development of their natural faculties, truth, and,

somewhat more vaguely, virtue, moral perfection, and what the Romans had called *humanitas*. Means might differ in cold and hot climates, mountainous countries and flat plains, and no universal formula could fit all cases without Procrustean results, but the ultimate ends were fundamentally similar. Such influential writers as Voltaire, d'Alembert and Condorcet believed that the development of the arts and sciences was the most powerful human weapon in attaining these ends, and the sharpest weapon in the fight against ignorance, superstition, fanaticism, oppression and barbarism, which crippled human effort and frustrated men's search for truth and rational self-direction. Rousseau and Mably believed, on the contrary, that the institutions of civilisation were themselves a major factor in the corruption of men and their alienation from nature, from simplicity, purity of heart and the life of natural justice, social equality, and spontaneous human feeling; artificial man had imprisoned, enslaved and ruined natural man. Nevertheless, despite profound differences of outlook, there was a wide area of agreement about fundamental points: the reality of natural law (no longer formulated in the language of orthodox Catholic or Protestant doctrine), of eternal principles by following which alone men could become wise, happy, virtuous and free. One set of universal and unalterable principles governed the world for theists, deists and atheists, for optimists and pessimists, puritans, primitivists and believers in progress and the richest fruits of science and culture; these laws governed inanimate and animate nature, facts and events, means and ends, private life and public, all societies, epochs and civilisations; it was solely by departing from them that men fell into crime, vice, misery. Thinkers might differ about what these laws were, or how to discover them, or who were qualified to expound them; that these laws were real, and could be known, whether with certainty, or only probability, remained the central dogma of the entire Enlightenment. It was the attack upon this that constitutes the most formidable reaction against this dominant body of belief.