The Enlightenment Habit, Part 2: Many Enlightenment?
David Roden (2013)

For Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century, the ‘Scientific Revolution’ of the preceding century had shown how rational argument and respect for evidence could reshape our idea of the natural world. If it could do that, might rational argument also be used to radically reshape our conceptions about human nature and politics?

This was certainly the hope of thinkers like Immanuel Kant, David Hume and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In The Social Contract (1762) Rousseau begins his treatise with the ringing declaration, ‘Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.' By ‘chains' Rousseau was referring to law-governed political authority; the question he posed was not a scientific one about how this civil state arose, but the moral question of how we reconcile the state with our basic human freedom.

Rousseau argued that power cannot provide legitimacy (‘might cannot make right'). He also rejected other ways to claim legitimacy, such as invoking 'nature': he rejects, for example, Aristotle's claim that some people are natural slaves and need to be controlled by their betters. He concludes that only an agreement or 'contract' between freely consenting individuals can make political authority legitimate.

It often claimed that we can think of ‘many Enlightenments’ - meaning that we should always bear in mind the cultural context in which Enlightenment ideas are translated and the ways in which they are adapted to local conditions.

Historians distinguish the ‘French Enlightenment' from German, Polish and Scottish Enlightenments. Enlightenment thinking has also spread its influence beyond Europe, sometimes as a consequence of colonial expansion. For example Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the successful slave revolt in Haiti 1791, was influenced by Rousseau's idea that neither force nor custom can make political authority legitimate. The leaders of the French Revolution (1789-1799) and the authors of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen were also influenced by Rousseau.

There is another sense in which there have been ‘many Enlightenments' in that the key thinkers of the 18th century Enlightenment also impacted profoundly on important philosophical questions such as: Is it rational to believe in a loving God? What is the relationship between human beings and the rest of nature? And, what are the nature of
and limits to our powers of Rationality and understanding?

Thinkers like Kant and Hume argued, in different ways, that reason is limited to organising information given by our senses. Kant argues in his monumental Critique of Pure Reason that abstract reasoning can organise knowledge, but it cannot produce it. When we reason ‘speculatively’ about matters outside of experience - such God or the Soul - we are like birds trying to flap our wings in outer space.

Kant writes in the Critique that he had to ‘deny knowledge (of theological and metaphysical matters) in order to make room for faith.’ While he was not an atheist, his position does give support to secularism. Secularists claim that religion should have no privileged status in public life since disagreements between believers and non-believers cannot be rationally resolved; both must be subject to the same laws.

Kant, like the earlier Rousseau, might be called an exemplar of the ‘moderate Enlightenment’. He rejects any direct role for religion or the supernatural in moral thinking. Kant is also famous for arguing that moral principles can be deduced from the idea of a rational agent doing the right thing just because it is right. He argues that we should assume humans can act in ways that are contrary to the causal principles that determine the rest of nature. Unlike the dualist Descartes though, Kant denies that we can know this or understand how this occurs. We must, he claims, regard people as citizens of two worlds: the natural world - which we can understand through science - and a metaphysical world about which we can only speculate.

For radical thinkers of the French Enlightenment such as Denis Diderot, Paul-Henri Thiry (Baron) d’Holbach and Julien Offray de La Mettrie (author of the L’homme machine [Man the Machine]), and for later anti-Enlightenment thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, belief in free-agency ran contrary to reason and to the findings of the best science.

They argued that the problem with free agency is that it could be seen to accord humans the status of a God by granting them the ability to suspend the natural laws that had been shown to govern everything else. In response to that assertion, materialist philosophers such as Holbach, Diderot and La Mettrie argued that humans, like other animals, were just biological machines and that an enlightened morality
should be based on an understanding of the mechanisms underlying our passions rather than some abstract concept of moral law.

The Enlightenment focused on questions of the nature of the material world and the relationship between spirit, mind and matter. Enlightenment philosophers also debated the respective roles of nature and nurture in shaping human behaviour, and questioned the extent to which people exercise free will. These are questions that are still highly relevant today. Eighteenth century materialism was, arguably, founded on an understanding of living beings that were rudimentary compared to Newton's brilliant account of mechanics. However, in the early 21st century many contemporary philosophers and scientists hope that developments in fields like biology and computer science will make it possible to understand how thinking and agency can emerge from interactions between purely physical entities such as RNA molecules and nerve cells.

Some philosophers, the so-called Eliminativists, have argued on materialist grounds that people do not have minds - at least not if having a mind is traditionally understood as a unique self with thoughts fully expressible in public language and a will whose operations owe nothing to the physiology and chemistry of the body.

For eliminativists like Paul and Patricia Churchland it is conceivable that a future science of the brain will alter our understanding of our minds as radically as modern astronomy reshaped our view of the natural world and the cosmos.

Other philosophers argue forcefully that this ambition is dangerous and self-defeating: dangerous because it undermines the dignity of humans as self-governing (autonomous) subjects and treats humanity as a resource to be manipulated and controlled, and self-defeating because the Enlightenment conception of rationality presupposes that we obey principles because they are right.

Science however cannot provide a satisfactory account of what is right. It can therefore never explain its own rationality. Such thinkers refer back, then, to Kant's claim that we must think of ourselves as citizens of two worlds. The battle between the moderate and radical Enlightenments is still to be resolved!

**Is the Enlightenment for Everyone?**

Some thinkers believe that the European Enlightenment was not a wholly good thing and question its key assumptions. One of these assumptions is the idea that the principles of rationality apply universally, to all people and consequently, that progress depends on throwing off the bonds of traditional thinking. After all, Kant's formulation suggests that cultures in which tradition is revered are less 'mature' than 'Enlightened' cultures.
To some critics this implies that tradition-bound cultures should be guided and controlled by ‘Enlightened’ ones until they ‘see the light’. It can be argued that this position is reminiscent of Aristotle’s long-discredited defence of slavery. To many historians and social critics this view has been shown to be fatally flawed by the ideological role this idea played in justifying the European colonisation of parts of Africa, Asia and America. Some would see the ‘liberal interventionism’ carried out in Iraq and Afghanistan as expressions of this controlling attitude towards the non-European ‘other’.

Others fear that attitudes toward nature derived from the Enlightenment can be used to license a manipulative approach to the natural world. Critics of the Enlightenment point out that this kind of thinking has resulted in the destruction of many species and habitats, and threatens the future of humans and non-humans alike.

Defenders of Enlightenment values argue that the motivations for colonial and planetary exploitation are primarily commercial and political rather than an inevitable outcome of Enlightenment thinking. Kant’s metaphor of pre-Enlightenment thinking as a kind of ‘childhood’ has been criticised for this reason, but at no point does Kant make the argument for dominating others or destroying the planet.

The Enlightenment is perhaps best thought of as an attitude or habit: a preparedness to think and to see through the consequences of thinking wherever it leads. Some of these consequences may be uncomfortable - though this is not the same as saying that they are wrong or should be rejected. Some may be exhilarating. But this habit of thinking has never implied a single view of the world or our place in it. Indeed it could be argued that where opponents of the Enlightenment are sincere in their willingness to follow an argument come what may, then (and only then) are they expressing the authentic spirit of its founders.