

IMPACT OF ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMS ON THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT

There is a recent debate, arising out of older debates, concerning logic, rationality, truth, science and, more sweepingly, the Enlightenment Project. It is a debate where the concentrated intellectual superpower formed from those substantially committed to the Project is matched against dispersed anti- or counter-Enlightenment forces, and so confronted with protracted guerilla activity. Historically furthermore, the scattered and diverse counter-movement has taken various different forms at different times. In the main respects the recent debate has crystallised into one between definite realism and an egalitarian relativism (as revealed in a useful working example, the debate in *Z Papers* Oct-Dec 1992). Let's call these sides *realism* and *relativism* for short, though the divisions are more complex than that (for one reason, because "realism" comprehends an idealist "anti-realism", and "relativism" includes "constructive" forms).

The contrast is invariably presented (as in the debate in *Z Papers*) as between *the one* correct theory, that ultimately delivered by Science, on the one side, and *many* stories, many points of view perhaps equally good, on the other.¹ But, presented thus, it is almost obvious that what is offered affords a *false* contrast. For omitted are alternatives with more than one correct account (some of these accounts perhaps better than others), but with many other stories faulted. For instance, neglected is my own preferred *middle* way, which recognises many correct accounts, none absolute, and many defective stories.² Such further plurallistic alternatives are not glimpsed for several reasons: one is a false underlying absolute (one) *versus* relative (many) dichotomy³; another is a false (also absolute) character accredited to received

1 See Albert's Editorial, p.2, and the clearly stated position of 'the three defendants', namely Albert, Chomsky and Ehrenreich.

It is both curious and revealing that the debate should have taken *this* polarized course, given the question addressed to 'the six critics' (of the Enlightenment Project). Namely, 'Do we need to reject/transcend/escape an old way of thinking variously called Western Rationality/Science/Logic if we are to attain a better world? (quoted p.17). Put differently, what is role of received "enlightenment" in an Amelioration Project? Because of these *different* issues there is much (loose) arguing at cross-purposes in *Z Papers*.

2 Such a way is elaborated in DP.

logic and scientific methodology. Thus a longer subtitle for the present exercise might well run: the *conflict* concerning logic, rationality, science, truth and all that: the Enlightenment Project and its Enemies, a pluralistic resolution.

Realists take their stand on the basis of received logic and scientific methodology, typically as if that were an indisputable given, in great intellectual shape. A couple of statements will confirm this:

... we do not have to transcend science or rationality as a prerequisite to developing worthy vision and strategy... logic and the roles of evidence are here to stay. Moreover, they're on our side.⁴

Even some small criticism of science is justified; for instance 'science is sometimes narrow, mechanical, colonizing or hypocritical'.⁵ What lie beyond such critical reach are rationality, reason and logic; '... to critique reason or logic as being at the root of sciences many ills is wrong' 'and has no role in making the world better'. Despite extensive left political activity, 'I have not once criticized rationality or logic, and anti-intellectualism has always been anathema to me'.⁶ Others appear fractionally more cautious about reason and logic (not Science!):

...in a discussion...there are certain familiar ground rules: those of rational inquiry, ... what seems to be under discussion here is whether we should abide by these ground rules at all (trying to improve them as we proceed⁷). If the answer is that we are to abide by them, then the discussion is over: we've implicitly accepted the legitimacy of rational inquiry. If they are to be abandoned, then we cannot proceed until we learn what replaces the commitment to consistency, responsibility to fact, and other out-dated notions.⁸

Before a final quoted sentence rounding off this passage notice the equations made:

procedures in a discussion (ground rules) = methods of rational inquiry
= commitment to consistency, responsibility to fact, etc.

3 Conspicuous in Albert's own efforts. Albert attempts to recast the multi-faceted debate in these elementary white and black terms: rationality and science 'real science' which is one and unified) versus anti-rationalism, which is utterly relativist. Anti-rationalism he can then jammer as abandoning truth as well as science, as giving away rational and intelligent (and effective) methods, and as accordingly self-defeating in arguing for ameliorating social change (see p.51).

4 Albert, *Z Papers*, p.51.

5 One sample from half a page of 'balancing criticism' in Albert, p.50.

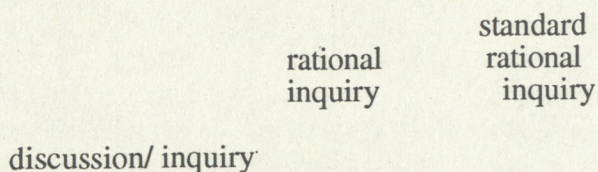
6 Albert, p.56.

7 Like Neurath in his boat, a favourite image of the American intellectual establishment.

8 Chomsky, *Z papers*.

The last are variants upon (Albert's) methods of standard logic (consistency-based) and rules of evidence. Discussion or debate has accordingly been *twice* narrowed (in broad form):

1. by a rationality constraint
2. by explication of rationality through a standard system (by consistency, maximum expected utility, etc.). Pictorially:



Short of some instruction on this matter... new procedures or ideas to replace the old...we are reduced to primal screams.⁹

That is hardly so. Almost everyone is familiar with inquiries, debates, arguments and generally procedures that do not proceed rationally, by any means or standards, but which do not reduce to screams (though some no doubt do). Regrettably few, by contrast, are familiar with *alternative* systems of rationality and logic by which inquiry and so forth can proceed, quite rationally. These alternatives confound and upset realism and the Enlightenment Project.¹⁰

That impact of alternatives on the Enlightenment Project—an impact not recognised or acknowledged by realists—is a main topic to be pursued. But first the uniform, definite realist Project.

The Project itself which persists.

The Enlightenment Project can be drawn out of standard accounts of the Enlightenment and the world discerned under it. The Project involved proceeding in accord with Enlightenment practices and in bringing its vision to fruition. First, then, a revealing picture of

9 Chomsky continuing *Z Papers*, p.52.

10 The useful term *Enlightenment Project* coalesces in the course of the debate. In the course of trying to shame and chastise left intellectuals and left counterparts for their neglect of human concerns, of emancipation, removal of oppression and similar, Chomsky assigns a central place to the "project of the Enlightenment" in serving emancipation, in displacing oppressors, removing monopolies of the powerful, and supplying liberating information and technology. That expression which he has drawn from essays he is commenting upon, quickly contracts to "the" Enlightenment project (same page, p.57).

My own opinion is that Chomsky has grossly overestimated the positive role of the Enlightenment Project in achieving emancipation and social amelioration. Patently too, he similarly underrates environmental negativities and externalities of implementations of the Project.

the world discerned by the Enlightenment and the associated ideology (drawn from Berlin), and secondly the sort of accompanying Project which that yields.

The world discerned was a rational scientific world conforming to 'materialism, utilitarianism, ethical naturalism and atheism':

Whatever the differences that divided the French *philosophes* and their disciples in other countries...there existed nevertheless a wide *consensus*: it rested on an acceptance of what was in effect, a secular version of the old natural law doctrine according to which the nature of things possessed a permanent unalterable structure, differences and changes in the world being subject to universal and immutable laws. These laws were discoverable in principle by the use of *reason* and controlled observation, of which the methods of the natural *sciences* constituted the most successful application. The most powerful instrument in the acquisition of knowledge was held to be mathematics... *the true path to knowledge was that of the natural sciences*; that is to say, all statements with claims to truth must be public, communicable, testable—capable of verification or falsification by methods open to and accepted by any rational investigator. From this it followed that *all other types of authority were to be rejected*, and in particular such foundations of faith as sacred texts, divine revelation and the dogmatic pronouncements of its authorised interpreters, tradition, prescription, immemorial wisdom, private intuition and all other forms of non-rational or transcendent sources of putative knowledge. This principle was held to apply to both the human and the non-human world: to abstract disciplines, such as logic or mathematics, to the applied sciences which established the laws of the behaviour of inanimate bodies, plants, animals and human beings, and to the normative disciplines which revealed the true nature of ultimate human goals, and the correct rules of conduct, public and private, social and political, moral and aesthetic.

According to this doctrine, *all genuine questions were in principle answerable: truth was one*, error multiple; the true answers must of necessity be universal and immutable, that is, true everywhere, at all times, for all men, and discoverable by the appropriate use of reason, by relevant experience, observation and the methods of experiment, logic, calculation. A logically connected structure of rules, laws, generalisations, susceptible of demonstration or, at least in practice, of a high degree of confirmation (and, where required, of application appropriate to differing circumstances) could, at least in principle, be constructed, and could replace the chaotic amalgam of ignorance, laziness, guesswork, superstition, prejudice, dogma, fantasy, and, above all, what Helvétius called 'interested error', which enabled the cunning and the strong to dominate and exploit the stupid, ignorant and weak, and had throughout human history been largely responsible for the vices, follies and miseries of mankind. Only knowledge, that is, the growth of the sciences, could rescue mankind from these largely self-induced evils. Some believed that certainty in empirical matters was attainable, others that no more than high probability could be achieved; some were pessimistic about progress towards virtue or happiness, others were more sanguine. But the majority of the *philosophes* were agreed that if irrational passions could be controlled, and ignorance, prejudice, fear and greed diminished, an end could be made to the worst confusions in

human thought and feelings, which led to blind fanaticism in thought and savage barbarism in practice.¹¹

Though we should contest very many of those claims, it would be foolish to deny that there was *much* that was enlightened, by comparison with what had gone before, in Enlightenment proposals.¹² In many respects, the proposals were socially and otherwise enlightened, though definitely not environmentally so.

The Enlightenment Project affords a brief convenient way of alluding to the prime aims and objectives of the Enlightenment, which largely coincide with those of modern secular science broadly construed. Central among emphasized objectives were: pursuit of the truth; exact deployment of rational methods, including logical argumentation; reliance on science and especially rigorous empirical procedures. A suitable mnemonic would be TRASH, (short for truth and reason, and science and (atheistic) humanism).

The Project also included these components:

- as regards *practice*: *acceptance* of rational and scientific practice and methods, and *rejection* of other methods, such as those depending upon closed authority, private or organisational revelation, magic and so on.

- bringing to *fruition*:

rendering the intelligent inhabitants of the Earth (humans) *enlightened*, in particular in their practice; corollaries are extensive, and include

educational and *social* programs (e.g. humans have to be in a position to use their intelligence, and not ill, disabled, enslaved, etc.);

obtaining that accessible correct information.

For all its apparent merits, the project had, and has, a large downside. For example, the Project underwrites monopolies and elites, namely those who held control of the correct methods, the right procedures. It brings in its train all those strait-jacketing features now so familiar in scientific and intellectual life: experts, technocracy, the peer group process, procedural correctness, scientific accountability, and so on. (Plurallistic criticism will pull the blocks from under all this familiar rigmarole.)

What looks even worse (from outside), main oppositional groups assume a similar set of assumptions. Present monopolies and elites are simply mistaken about the truth, which they have no monopoly upon and do not even hold. Nonetheless truth will out (e.g. with enough publicity or disguised propaganda, when the public wake up or become informed, or whatever). Then that opposition, in possession of truth and rationality (or its relevant variants,

11 Berlin pp.162-4.

12 See DP, final chapter. A *detailed* critique of both the Enlightenment project and its Anti-Enlightenment alternatives is offered in this work.

facts and consistency, etc.) will triumph. These oppositional groups have premised their opposition upon similar monistic illusions (but nor is *the* pluralistic truth hidden away in the background).¹³

Criticism of the Project: trashing TRASH.

As a sidelight, the Project was *unachievable* in principle. It implied that there was a set of methods by which any sought piece of knowledge could be obtained. But given the logical systematization the Project presumed (with its consistency requirements, etc.), there are no such methods; there are inevitable limitations to knowledge.¹⁴

The problems with the Project are not restricted to knowledge and information. The idea that all genuine questions are in principle answerable is similarly flawed. As there are unknowable truths, so there are unanswerable questions.

As a result, the Project has to withdraw, to retract some of its sweeping claims—else it fragments, admitting different logical theories which skirt the limitations, in different ways. Much as with naive set theory, where consistencizing repairs yield many competing alternatives, none intellectually decisive, so it is elsewhere. Paradoxes and puzzles produce a plurality or “solutions”. Likewise, and in any case, the Project fragments, or rather plurallizes, so it can be argued. But, most important for present purposes the Project fragmented, and was *bound* to fragment.

The Project breaks up into a plurality—of projects, frameworks, ideologies, and so forth—because of *alternative systems*, of one sort or another. Fundamental among these are alternative systems of logic, alternative correct systems, and therewith of alternative frameworks of reason and rationality. As von Wright has contended, ‘there is not one logic which is *the true one*’.¹⁵ But from such a plurality of logics derives a plurality of reasoning and rational procedures, and therewith of all theoretical domains deploying logical methods. From

13 Most of my own experience confirms the contention (defended at the beginning of JB) that truth, even in fairly degenerate forms, will not out. Certainly not on its own; but I grant that we should be working and agitating to force truth (plural) out. Even then truth may not emerge and be recognised in time, before people are hanged, or species or cultures lost. The traditional tag *magna est veritas et prevalebit* is itself infected with falsity.

The erroneous assumption that truth (similarly reason) will win out on its own, without agitation or political activity is also a prime reason, or excuse, for much academic and scientific inactivity and complacency. An associated illusion is that *they* have grasped the truth or, if not, have a better grasp upon it (now singular) than any others. It is an illusion shared with—what enjoys significantly less respectable evidence—monistic religion.

14 Details are given in NL.

15 Havas, agreeing with von Wright’s thesis (presented in his ‘Logic unified’), p.149.

these flow, directly or by analogous arguments, alternatives elsewhere, indeed everywhere in sciences and arts.¹⁶

Alternative *systems* is intended to take in a wide sweep of alternatives: alternative logics, alternative mathematical systems, alternative theories or theoretical systems more generally, alternative cultural arrangements, and shifting definitely down to a semantical level, alternative actual worlds, alternative realities, and so on.

An obvious reaction—had all the alternatives now (beginning to be) appreciated been systematically assembled at once, in an appropriate show of alternative strength—should have been pluralization of the Enlightenment Project. Each viable system of alternatives would have its own project or set of projects. There would be enlightenments.¹⁷

But, for one thing, the alternatives did not appear historically all at once, but in dribs and drabs; for another, some have not yet been widely appreciated at all (e.g. alternative logics, alternative rules of evidence, alternative rational methods). So alternatives and diversity could be fought off or assimilated.¹⁸ For yet another, some unwarranted reactions occurred, which both neglected and further information did little to justify. These included for instance, outright rejection of the Project, and debilitating relativisation.¹⁹

Most philosophers, indeed most intellectuals of scientific disposition, are still caught up in the Enlightenment Project, in what should be a defunct Project.

References

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 R. Sylvan, *Deep Plurallism*, Bungendore, 1994; referred to as DP.

16 Detailed arguments are assembled in DP.

17 It seems a similar plural development should have occurred with oriental religions, such as Buddhism, advocating enlightenment. But religions tend to fossilize.

18 Consider? for instance the search for uniformity and commonality which is often implausible, as at more than a superficial level, in ethics or aesthetics.

19 Rival forms have evolved and developed. Thus what was Anti-Enlightenment became Post-modernism, including both Nihilism and Egalitarian Relativism (see Gare). [Also "middle way" needs further explanations.]