Civility, Enlightenment, and Society: Conceptual Confusions and Kantian Remedies

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Civility, Enlightenment, and Society: Conceptual Confusions and Kantian Remedies

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Critics of what is called the "Enlightenment project" have argued that it has been responsible for a number of current social pathologies. At the same time, the term "civil society" has been used to designate those patterns of solidarity that the Enlightenment project allegedly disrupts. This article (1) argues that characterizations of the Enlightenment project tend to be elusive and historically questionable, (2) suggests that the concept of civil society is ambiguous in both its object and its intent, (3) explores how Kant provided a more rigorous account of the relationship between enlightenment and civil society, an account which rests on a contrast between civil and cosmopolitan society, and (4) considers some of the difficulties that plague attempts to define "civility" as a virtue.

Writing in the Berlinische Monatsschrift in 1784, Immanuel Kant speculated that the "hidden plan of nature" was to bring about justice in civil society and peaceful relations between nations by means of the very antagonism that seemed to promise only civil unrest and international conflict. He assured his readers that "though folly and caprice creep in at all times, enlightenment gradually arises," and thus the "chiliastic expectations" of philosophy for the triumph of justice were something more than an illusion (Kant [1784] 1923, 27–8). As we close this millennium, Kant's "chiliastic expectations" regarding enlightenment and civil society do not appear to be generally shared.

Over the last several decades, a remarkably diverse group of philosophers and social critics have traced the origin of a number of social and cultural maladies to something they call the "Enlightenment project." Over the same period, an equally diverse group of political and social commentators have hailed the promise of, lamented the demise of, or sought ways to reinvigorate what they call "civil society." The concerns at stake in these discussions would appear to be related. As Kant's essay shows, the nature and promise of civil society were important concerns in the Enlightenment. Yet, with a few exceptions, current debates over the viability of the Enlightenment project and discussions of the prospects for civil society are conducted in different registers. On those rare occasions when the relationship between the two notions is broached, some commentators tend to see greater difficulties than Kant.

Consider, for example, the explanation that Berger and Neuhaus ([1976] 1996, 161) offer for the tendency of liberalism to underestimate the role played by "mediating structures" in public policy:

Liberalism's blindness to mediating structures can be traced to its Enlightenment roots. Enlightenment thought is abstract, universalistic, addicted to what Burke called "geometry" in social policy. The concrete particularities of mediating structures find an inhospitable soil in the liberal garden. There the great concern is for the individual ("the rights of man") and for a just public order, but anything "in between" is viewed as irrelevant, or even an obstacle, to the rational ordering of society. What lies in between is dismissed, to the extent it can be, as superstition, bigotry, or (more recently) cultural lag.¹

This argument repeats a long-standing charge against the Enlightenment: While it proved effective in tearing down what tradition had wrought, it was unable to foster those mediating structures which sustain civil society. This was the common theme of such otherwise dissimilar works as Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France ([1790] 1987) and Tocqueville's The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution ([1856] 1955). Such an argument also played a central role in Hegel's account of the relationship between the Enlightenment and the Terror in the Phenomenology of Spirit ([1806] 1977). Something similar may be found in Nietzsche's suggestion that the Enlightenment's critique of religion was but the first step toward a critique of the idols of science, morality, and reason that carried with it the prospect of a collapse into nihilism.

This paper proposes that arguments of this sort rest on confusions about what the Enlightenment involved and what civil society implies. They invoke a characterization of the Enlightenment that is historically questionable and an understanding of civil society that is rarely clearly defined. To understand what is amiss, it will be necessary to (1) examine the radically different ways in which the Enlightenment is understood by social critics and by historians, (2) explore some of the ambiguities that plague the concept of civil society, (3) return to Kant, in order to consider an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between Enlightenment and civil society, and (4) consider some of the difficulties that plague accounts of the virtue of civility.

CRITICIZING THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT

In recent decades the notion that there is something short-sighted, narrow, and deficient about the Enlight-
Reflections on the Revolution in France.

The locus classicus for this interpretation is Burke's way for complete anarchy or the rule of brute force. Wilson's quip highlights one of the more distinctive features of recent criticisms of the Enlightenment project: Today, punches are thrown from the Left as well as the Right, and the Enlightenment stands accused not only of undermining tradition but also of reinforcing patriarchy, fostering anti-Semitism, sustaining an ideology of white supremacy, embracing a vision that sees progress only in terms of the ever-increasing subjugation of nature, and—more generally—harboring a hostility toward “otherness” in any of its forms. As a way of sorting out the different charges that have been raised, it might be useful to outline, briefly, three different versions of the critique of the Enlightenment project.

The first and perhaps most familiar line of criticism argues that the indifference of Enlightenment rationality to traditional norms and practices destroys the ties that bind individuals together into societies, paving the way for complete anarchy or the rule of brute force. The locus classicus for this interpretation is Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France. Criticizing French “literary men and politicians” as having “no respect for the wisdom of others,” Burke argues that the fatal flaw of the Enlightenment lay in its habit of “exploding general prejudices” rather than seeking “to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them.” Because “prejudice, with its reason,” is capable of moving men to action in a way that “naked reason” cannot, it is wiser “to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice and leave nothing but the naked reason” (Burke [1790] 1987, 76–7). More recent versions of this line of criticism may be found in Oakeshott's ([1962] 1991) critique of political “rationalism” or Gadamer's ([1960] 1989) critique of the Enlightenment's “prejudice against prejudice.” We also find it in passing swipes at the Enlightenment by conservative and neoconservative commentators.

A second line of criticism originates in Hegel's discussion, in the Phenomenology of Spirit, of the transformation of Enlightenment into Terror. While much of Hegel's imagery bears a striking resemblance to Burke, his argument differs in crucial ways. Where Burke sought to defend the reason of tradition against the abstractions of philosophers, Hegel argues that the central failing of the Enlightenment was that it was insufficiently enlightened about the limitations of its own conception of reason. The struggle between faith and Enlightenment turns out to be little more than shadow boxing, since all that Enlightenment can offer in place of religious faith is a faith of a different sort: a belief in the primacy of the category of utility. Enlightenment proves to be “irresistible” in its struggle with faith, but its victory is a bitter one, as is amply demonstrated, in Hegel's view, by the collapse of the French Revolution into Terror. A politics guided by utility alone can produce nothing except “the coldest, shallowest of deaths, with no more significance than cleaving a cabbage head or swallowing a gulp of water” (Hegel [1806] 1977, 360, translation modified). A more recent version of this line of criticism can be found in the account of the self-destruction of Enlightenment sketched by Horkheimer and Adorno ([1947] 1972).

A third line of criticism originates in the work of Nietzsche, whose stance toward the Enlightenment reflects a profound ambivalence. In some of his discussions of the Enlightenment he calls for the rescue of what he characterizes as its original aristocratic ideals from the contaminating influences of democracy and egalitarianism that he associates with Rousseau and the French Revolution (Nietzsche [1878] 1986, 169, 367; [1882] 1974, 293; [1888] 1968b, 101–2). On other occasions, however, he suggests that the Enlightenment's critique of religion was but the first faltering step in the direction of a thoroughgoing critique of the idols of science, morality, and reason, and this carried within it both the danger of a collapse into nihilism and the promise of a new Enlightenment in which the idea of aesthetic self-fashioning would replace the search for universal values (Nietzsche [1882] 1974, 181; [1883–88] 1968a, 56). Nietzsche's present-day heirs are a motley lot, encompassing both those who, like Gray (1995), share his conviction that the Enlightenment paved the way to nihilism but who reject his aestheticization of ethics and those who, like Foucault, are more concerned with exploring the workings of power and knowledge than with meditating on the danger of nihilism (Schmidt and Wartenberg 1994).

Each of these lines of criticism has a different sense of what ought to be done in the face of the damage allegedly wrought by the Enlightenment. The solution of latter-day Burkeans is perhaps the most familiar: They counsel a defense of traditional norms where they still survive, a distrust for any social policy that smacks of rational “social engineering,” and support for measures that strengthen the damaged “mediating institutions” of civil society. Those who take Hegel's account as their point of departure, in contrast, are concerned to elaborate a conception of rationality that seeks to transcend the limits of instrumental reason (Habermas 1987). And Nietzsche's present-day disciples may, like Gray, embrace Heidegger's notion of Gelassenheit as a means of avoiding the nihilism they see inherent in the Will to Power (Gray 1996, 182–3) or seek, as Foucault did in his last writings, to redefine Enlightenment as an open-ended project of self-creation (Foucault 1984, 2 For a discussion of the peculiar images Hegel employs, see Schmidt 1988. 3 Horkheimer himself saw the work as an elaboration of Hegel's basic thesis. See his letter to Friedrich Pollock of May 7, 1943 (Horkheimer 1996, 446).
32–50). But if the proposed antidotes for the damage done by the Enlightenment are remarkably diverse, the picture of the Enlightenment that emerges from these critics is strikingly consistent. Let us review its main features.

First, the Enlightenment is routinely characterized as embracing a conception of reason that is held to be insufficiently sensitive to its own limits. Sometimes it is criticized for underestimating the degree to which norms and values can be detached from traditions and conventions of everyday life, resulting—as MacIntyre (1981) has argued—in a situation in which moral discourse has lost all meaning. Other critics argue that it embraces a restricted understanding of reason, modeled on the natural sciences, which equates reason with the successful manipulation of nature, resulting in the rule of “instrumental reason” (Horkheimer 1947). Still others suggest that it naively underestimated the role played by passions and sentiments in human conduct and, as a result, leads to a wildly impractical politics, which Oakeshott ([1962] 1991, 27–31) characterized as a “politics of the book” or an “abridgement of a tradition.” Whatever the particular form of the criticism, the central charge remains the same: The Enlightenment represents an uncritical rationalism that is dangerously unaware of the complexity of reality.

Closely related is the charge that, because the Enlightenment loses itself in abstract universality, it has an ignorance of, or worse still, a contempt for the particular, the local, the specific. According to Oakeshott ([1962] 1991, 9), the “political rationalism” that is the bitter legacy of the Enlightenment combines a “politics of perfection” with a “politics of uniformity.” Horkheimer and Adorno ([1947] 1972, 6) provide an even more chilling image: Enlightenment, in their view, is inherently “totalitarian.” Critics from the Left have charged that its talk of universal rights remained oblivious to inequalities in gender, race, and class, and, as a result, leads to a wildly impractical politics, which Oakeshott ([1962] 1991, 27–31) characterized as a “politics of the book” or an “abridgement of a tradition.” Whatever the particular form of the criticism, the central charge remains the same: The Enlightenment represents an uncritical rationalism that is dangerously unaware of the complexity of reality.

It is further argued that the abstract, uncritical conception of reason embraced by the Enlightenment culminates in an obsession with domination and control. Thus, in Foucault’s Discipline and Punish (1979), the prisoners who have been freed from the darkness of the dungeon are captured all the more securely in the light that floods through the Panopticon. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment ([1947] 1972), the ultimate project of the Enlightenment is the domination of nature and of other human beings. And for Gray (1996, 166, 180), the Enlightenment project is yet another manifestation of that “Will to Power” which lies at the heart of the “Western humanist hubris.”

Finally, the Enlightenment’s critics are united in the conviction that there is such a thing as an Enlightenment project—that it is possible to attribute a common set of intentions to a rather diverse group of thinkers, scattered across a number of different nations. Critics may differ on how exactly this project is to be defined, just as there is considerable difference, from critic to critic, as to who counts as a representative of it. But central to all these criticisms is the conviction that it makes sense to speak of a single, coherent Enlightenment project. While such a possibility is taken as unproblematic by the critics, their confidence is hardly reflected in historical accounts of the period.

In a recent overview, Outram (1995) observed that as historians of the Enlightenment have moved from an examination of a limited canon of works by a few famous (and typically French) authors to a consideration of the Enlightenment as a social, political, and cultural transformation exhibiting a remarkable range of national and confessional variations, it has become more difficult to speak of the Enlightenment as “a unitary phenomenon.” “It might . . . seem that as our picture of the Enlightenment became more complex, as we have begun to study ideas not as autonomous, discrete objects, but as deeply embedded in society, so the term Enlightenment itself might have become increasingly obscure or even meaningless” (Outram 1995, 12).

To the extent that it is still possible to impute an identity to the Enlightenment, Outram (1995, 12) suggests that it must be viewed “as a capsule containing sets of debates, stresses and concerns, which however differently formulated or responded to, do appear to be characteristic of the way in which ideas, opinions and social and political structures interacted and changed in the eighteenth century.” This diversity is precisely what the critics tend to overlook when they speak as if there were a single, unitary Enlightenment project.

Gray’s Enlightenment’s Wake (1995) exemplifies how far afield a critic can go when trying to define the Enlightenment project. Turning first to MacIntyre’s After Virtue (1981), he argues that while Enlightenment thinkers may have held differing views on other topics, they were at one in calling for “an independent rational justification of morality” (Gray 1995, 147). Rather quickly, he extends the Enlightenment project to embrace the “refounding” of “society” as well as “morality” on “universal, tradition-independent rational principles,” a project to which “liberalism as a doctrine was, in all of its varieties, unreservedly committed” (pp. 149–50). A few pages later, the “Enlightenment project of human self-emancipation” is characterized as the “naturalistic form” of the “most fundamental Western commitment, the humanist conception of humankind as a privileged site of truth,” a commitment that had been expressed in both “Socratic inquiry and in Christian revelation” (p. 155). Having equated the Enlightenment project with liberalism and humanism, Gray next characterizes it as also embracing the “modernist world-view,” with its “conception of science as the supremely privileged form of knowledge,” a supremacy that is, in turn, defined in terms of a view of the natural world as “an object of human exploitation” (p. 158). Within a few more pages, a “commitment to rationalism” becomes one of the “defining elements of the modernist world-view of which the Enlightenment
project is the most powerful expression" (p. 160). Several paragraphs later, the Enlightenment is characterized as "foundationalist," "representationalist," and "logocentric" (p. 160).

In Gray’s account, the definition has so many differing characteristics that it is uncertain whether it makes sense to speak of a single, all-encompassing project. The attempt to provide “an independent rational justification of morality” (the characterization of the Enlightenment project that Gray takes from MacIntyre) does not require or even imply a view of the natural world as “an object of human exploitation” (a characterization Gray takes from Heidegger and from Horkheimer and Adorno). While the primacy accorded to the natural sciences merges rather easily into the project of the domination of nature, it is not entirely obvious that an “independent rational justification of morality” must ultimately be grounded in the natural sciences: For a thinker such as Kant, it obviously was not. It is also less than clear that “liberalism” is necessarily part of the Enlightenment project: Not all advocates of Enlightenment embraced liberalism, and there were eloquent defenders of liberalism who were also vigorous critics of the Enlightenment.4 It is easy enough to make the “foundationalist,” “representationalist,” and “logocentric” characterization (after all, is not everything since the pre-Socrats “representationalist” and “logocentrist”?), but the price is to obscure a good deal of difference between a foundationalist procedure which, following Descartes, seeks to find a ground for reason and Kant’s attempt to provide what O’Neill (1989, 3–27) has described as a “constructivist” vindication of reason.5

Accounts of the failure of the Enlightenment project such as Gray’s typically tend to rest on criticisms of a number of separate and detachable claims. Thus, when critics take aim at the project’s “rationalism,” they are raising questions about the ability of reason to provide a grounding for law or morality. When they criticize its “scientism,” they are questioning the adequacy of a criterion of rationality that is measured in terms of instrumental efficacy. When they point to its naive commitment to “progress,” they are questioning the possibility of evaluating all societies and cultures in terms of a single measure of “development.” Cobbling distinguishable claims such as these into something called the Enlightenment project misses an essential point: Criticisms of these very same claims were advanced by thinkers typically associated with the Enlightenment. Hume, for example, had doubts about the prospect of constructing a moral philosophy grounded on reason alone, Kant’s entire critical philosophy can be viewed as an attempt to define reason in something other than instrumentalist terms, and both Voltaire and Diderot offered extensive criticisms of the idea of progress. What is bravely called the Enlightenment project thus turns out to be a pastiche of arguments, each of which—when viewed separately—would find critics within the Enlightenment itself.

Thus, current discussions of the Enlightenment are marked by a paradox. Those who speak most confidently of it as a single, coherent project have little confidence in the alleged project’s viability. Those who speak with most competence about the historical reality of the Enlightenment have little confidence in offering a general characterization of what the Enlightenment was attempting to achieve. Thus, the Enlightenment project is coherent only for those who are in the process of rejecting it, while those who examine it more closely find the object of their concern dissolving into a host of particulars.

**INVOKING CIVIL SOCIETY**

In the writings of scholars, social critics, and political activists, the invocation of civil society is even more pervasive than criticisms of the Enlightenment project. During the 1970s and 1980s, critics of authoritarian regimes in both Eastern Europe and Latin America used the notion as a rallying point (Arato and Cohen 1992, 29–36, 48–69). Since then, it has played a major role in discussions of the prospects for democratization (Gellner 1996, 1–12). Over the last decade, social scientists have looked for signs of its emergence in societies where conventional wisdom assumed it did not exist (Hann and Dunn 1996; Schwedler 1995) and have sought to explain its apparent demise in the United States (Putnam 1995). Over the last few years its “renewal” has been the object both of foundation support and of proposed legislation—witness the Project for American Renewal drafted by Senator Dan Coats (R-Indiana), which consists of a series of measures designed to halt “the decline of civil society” by providing support for “families, churches, neighborhoods, voluntary associations” (Coats 1996).

Like the Enlightenment project, the meaning of “civil society” tends to be rather elusive. Shils’s (1992, 3) often-quoted definition reads like a sketchy set of directions: “Civil society lies beyond the boundaries of the family and clan and beyond the locality; it lies short of the state.” There is, however, a good deal to be found beyond the family but short of the state: markets, voluntary associations, churches, interest groups, labor unions, nongovernmental organizations, and Robert Putnam’s (1995) steadily dwindling bowling leagues. It remains an open question whether much is gained by gathering these different forms of association together under a single label (Kumar 1993). Furthermore, rival sets of directions explain where civil society may be found: Arato and Cohen (1992, ix) differ from Shils by placing civil society “between economy and state” and arguing that it is “composed above all by the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of association (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication.” The possibilities for dispute about just what—and where—civil society is would appear to be endless.

Invocations of civil society resemble criticisms of the
Enlightenment project in a second respect: They come from across the ideological spectrum (Walzer 1991). Opponents of authoritarian regimes employ the term to denote something like the rights and liberties long associated with liberal democracies. Radical democrats use it to denote the ideal of an engaged, active citizenry, directly involved in public deliberation. For libertarians, it designates a market society, free from political coercion. For communitarians, it evokes the network of voluntary associations and the civic virtues they engender. If the Enlightenment project serves as a catch-all category that designates whatever particular aspect of the modern world aggravates the critic who marshals it, so "civil society" appears to be an equally elastic category, designating whatever the social critic finds central to the particular vision of society that is being articulated.

The looseness of the term may be attributed partly to the fact that, unlike "the Enlightenment," "civil society" has generally served as a theoretical concept used to designate a certain form of association rather than as a way of denoting a particular period.6 Theorists are thus at liberty to propose new definitions, often with only the slightest familiarity with earlier formulations. The term first entered the world as a way of translating koinonia politike, coined by Aristotle to describe the form of association more commonly termed a polis (Schmidt 1986). Until the close of the eighteenth century, "civil society" was employed, following the paradigm laid down by Aristotle, to designate that form of political association conventionally referred to as a "state" or civitas. This pattern of usage was taken over without alteration by natural law theorists. But by the early nineteenth century, it had been called into question (Schmidt 1995). Hegel's Philosophy of Right made use of a distinction between state and civil society that was unconventional enough to confuse his first reviewers (Schmidt 1982), and Tocqueville's drafts for Democracy in America proposed a tripartite division into "religious," "civil," and "political" societies (Schleifer 1980, 7). To speak, then, of civil society (following Hegel) as something distinct from both the family and the state, or (as in Tocqueville's initial drafts) from both religious and political forms of association is to suggest that there are patterns of association not adequately grasped by eighteenth-century political and legal theory. This altered use of "civil society" set the stage for the emergence of the various social sciences that went on to explore the domain carved out by the term.

There was also considerable ambiguity as to just what the proper focus of the newly emerging social sciences might be. Recasting Hegel's distinction be-

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6 There are notable exceptions. The German term bürgerliche Gesellschaft can also be employed as a way of designating a particular historical form of social life, "bourgeois society." Marx made the most of the ambiguity in The German Ideology ([1845] 1975, 89):

"Civil society as such only develops with the bourgeoisie; the social organization evolving directly out of production and commerce, which in all ages forms the basis of the state and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure, has, however, always been designated by the same name."
KANT ON ENLIGHTENMENT AND CIVILITY

Those who have sought to revive the concept of civil society have generally taken their departure from either Hegel or Tocqueville. They have thus tended to overlook the contribution of a thinker who framed the relationship among civility, enlightenment, and society in a particularly suggestive fashion: Immanuel Kant. Late in 1784, Kant published two essays in successive issues of the Berlinische Monatsschrift: “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” and “An Answer to the Question: ‘What Is Enlightenment?’” On first glance, they seem to be pursuing rather different concerns. The “Universal History” essay, Kant explained, was written in response to a note published in the Gothaische Gelehrte Zeitung, which mentioned a conversation in which Kant had outlined his ideas on the philosophy of history to a passing scholar. The second essay was prompted by an earlier article in the Berlinische Monatsschrift, which had noted that the term “enlightenment” was frequently invoked in the journal but rarely explained and had asked for a definition. Yet, notwithstanding their diverging subject matter and almost casual character, when read together the two essays provide a remedy for at least some of the confusions that plague current discussions of the Enlightenment and civil society. They (1) offer a definition of the Enlightenment that rests on a novel conception of the “public use of reason,” (2) employ the distinction between public and private uses of reason to distinguish civil society [bürgerliche Gesellschaft] from cosmopolitan society [weltbürgerliche Gesellschaft], and (3) use the perspective of a hypothetical cosmopolitan society as a critical vantage point from which to scrutinize civil society.

Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?” is by now so familiar that it is easy to overlook how novel it was and how theoretically fecund it remains. He defined enlightenment not in terms of what it achieves but by what it escapes: “Enlightenment,” the famous opening line proclaims, is “mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity” (Kant [1784] 1923, 35). While Moses Mendelssohn’s response, published a few months earlier but not seen by Kant, had defined enlightenment as one of the “modifications of social life” that bring a people “into harmony with the destiny of man,” Kant measured the advance of enlightenment in terms of the elimination of constraints on the “public use of reason.”

In a number of important essays, O’Neill has stressed the significance of Kant’s approach. It takes practical reasoning as fundamental and invokes neither perfectionist presuppositions about the proper ends of human action nor metaphysical presuppositions about the validity of human reasoning (O’Neill 1989, 28–50; 1990; 1996). The grounding for practical reasoning must be constructed rather than discovered: Reason, as Kant ([1781] 1929, 593) insisted in the Critique of Pure Reason, “has no dictatorial authority; its verdict is always simply the agreement of free citizens.” O’Neill argues that the much-criticized tendency toward universalization and abstraction in Kantian ethics follows from Kant’s requirement that practical reasoning must be “followable by those for whom it is to count as reasoning” (O’Neill 1996, 51–59).

Nothing will count as a principle of reason if it demands submission to some unvindicated authority; anything that does count as a principle of reason must be one that all can follow. The principles of reason are those that can secure the possibility of intersubjectivity. Kant does not ground reason in actual consensus, or in the agreement and standards of any historical community; he grounds it in the repudiation of principles that preclude the possibility of open-ended interaction and communication (O’Neill 1990, 194).

Thus, what “communitarian” critics see as the central vice of the Enlightenment—its abstraction from particular, local norms and circumstances—is, for O’Neill, its central virtue. Insufficiently generalized explanations of practical reasoning, which require the acceptance of specific presuppositions or disputable ends, will be less likely to win intersubjective agreement than more abstract accounts of practical reasoning. “There are no general reasons for thinking,” O’Neill argues, “that thick act descriptions are more comprehensible than thin ones” (O’Neill 1996, 68n).

Kant’s distinction between private and public uses of reason plays an important role in his account of civil society. In “What Is Enlightenment?” he argues that when individuals are engaged in a “private” use of reason—a use constrained by the demands of the positions they hold and the associated duties and responsibilities—they function as “passive” parts of the “machine” of civil society. But individuals are never simply members of civil society. At every moment they are also (if only potentially) members of a “cosmopolitan society,” and as members of this community they enjoy a right to the free and unrestricted public use of their reason. As participants in this cosmopolitan society of writers and readers, individuals retain the right to criticize the demands made upon them as members of the civil society in which they reside.

Private uses of reason are limited by presuppositions that must simply be accepted as a condition for occupying a particular post. Kant ([1784] 1923, 38) argues, for example, that a clergyman assigned the task of instructing students in the central beliefs of the faith does not have the right to instruct students in his own diverging interpretation of the church doctrine. Simply because private uses of reason are embedded in ongoing practices and institutions, they will often be more difficult for outsiders to follow than public uses. The latter, simply because they take less as given, will of necessity be framed in a more abstract and universal voice. As a result, civil society confronts its members with a host of local rules and restrictions that simply must be accepted as given. Only when these same individuals conceive of themselves as citizens of a cosmopolitan society will they be in a position to

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7 For a discussion of the background to Kant’s essay, see Schmidt 1989.
examine the rationality of the practices in which they are engaged in their role as members of civil society. The opposition between civil and cosmopolitan viewpoints is thus central to Kant’s understanding of the nature of enlightenment.

The opposition of civil and cosmopolitan society had already been deployed, for different purposes, in Kant’s “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” which appeared one month before “What Is Enlightenment?” In the earlier essay, Kant argued that “the greatest problem for the human species, the solution of which nature compels it to seek, is that of attaining a civil society which can administer justice universally” (Kant [1784] 1923, 22). The solution, however, turns out to be “subordinate to the problem of a law-governed external relationship with other states” (p. 24). Justice within civil society cannot be achieved as long as states are engaged in constant preparations for conflict with one another, but—in the famous paradox on which the essay turns—it is precisely the considerable costs of war and the preparations for war that provide the external impetus for states to reform their own constitutions in the direction of republican forms of rule. The driving mechanism behind the entire process is the equally paradoxical notion of “unsocial sociability”: the tension, endemic to the human race, of desiring both to live in society with others and to live as an individual (pp. 20–1). Civil society appears in this essay as a domain racked with antagonisms and tensions that provide the impetus for creating a cosmopolitan order, which in turn provides the background conditions needed for attainment of a just civil order. Once again, Kant provides an account of civil society which refuses to downplay the particularity and individuality that rules in civil society, but he also refuses to grant it the last word.

It is difficult to square much in Kant’s account of civil society with recent discussions. The imagery he employs in the description of civil society in “What Is Enlightenment?” is hardly appealing: He likens it to a machine, and individuals are but passive cogs in its gearwork. The “Universal History” account of “unsocial sociability” is far removed from the cozy assurance that when “civil society is strong, it infuses a community with its warmth” (Coats 1996, 25). Both accounts depart from recent discussions by remaining true to the conventions of natural law theory and using state approaches. Kant views civil society as a norm against which states are to be evaluated. By transforming the term “civil society” explicitly into “substantive civility” suggests some of the difficulties encountered by such approaches.

For Kant, civil society denotes that form of association proper to a state or civitas, a society ruled by laws that pass a universalization test, which requires them to respect the attributes of “lawful freedom,” “civil equality,” and “civil independence” that citizens possess as hypothetical contractants who agree to subject themselves to civil order (Kant [1797] 1907, 311–6). As such, Kant views civil society as a norm against which states are to be evaluated. By transforming the term into a set of institutions located somewhere between the individual and the state, those thinkers who have sought to define norms of “civility” have typically rejected the sorts of universalization tests to which Kant appealed. A brief consideration of Shils’s attempt to describe the virtue of “substantive civility” suggests some of the difficulties encountered by such approaches.

Substantive civility is the virtue of civil society. It is the readiness to moderate particular, individual or parochial interests and to give precedence to the common good.

... Whenever two antagonistic advocate arrive at a compromise through recognition of a common interest,
they redefine themselves as members of a collectivity, the
good of which has precedence over their particular objec-
tives. The good which is accorded precedence by that
decision might be no more than the continued existence of
the collectivity in which they both participate. The com-
mon good is acknowledged wherever a more inclusive collec-
tivity is acknowledged.

Every action in which thinking of and attempting to
reduce the prospective loss inflicted on one section of a
society when another section would benefit from a partic-
ular event of policy is an act of substantive civility. It is
always possible to consider the consequences of any par-
ticular action in the light of its effect on the wider circle
within which a decision is made. Every action which bears
in mind the well-being of a more inclusive collectivity is an
action on behalf of the common good (Shils 1992, 16–7).

There are three immediate problems with Shils’s for-
mulation. First, the blanket assertion of the primacy of
the good of the “more inclusive collectivity” over
“particular, individual, or parochial interests” is
fraught with difficulties. Is Shils seriously proposing
that any assertion of individual rights against the
greater good of the collectivity is an affront to the
virtue of civil society? Does the good of a “more
inclusive collectivity” always trump the rights of indi-
viduals? Second, what sort of metric are agents sup-
posed to apply when they reflect on whether the
consequences of their actions will advance the good of
the collectivity? What degree of uncertainty about the
complex chain of causes that link actions to conse-
quences is tolerable? Finally, Shils’s statement that it is
“always possible to consider the consequences of any
particular action in the light of its effect on the wider
circle” raises an obvious question: What falls within
“the wider circle”? Should the effect on future gener-
ations be considered part of our “common good”? And
what of present and future members of other societies?

When contrasted with Shils’s attempt to articulate a
set of virtues specific to civil society, many of the
conventional criticisms of Kant’s views on enlighten-
ment and civil society lose their force. Complaints
about the Enlightenment’s “excessive” concern with
individual rights pale in comparison to a concept of
civic virtue which, in its embrace of “communitarian”
goods, would open the way to state intervention in
domains that it long ago vacated, so long as we have
assurances that the “public good” is being served. It
may be the case, for example, that the enforcement of
religious conformity would advance the “common
good” of societies with a fair measure of religious
homogeneity. But this hardly is a compelling reason for
rejecting well-established principles of religious liberty.
Likewise, it is by no means clear that an attempt to
assess the consequences of actions on a less than
clearly defined community gives us any greater guid-
ance than Kant’s attempt to construct an account
which, by focusing on the intelligibility of practical
reasoning, frees us from the necessity of calculating
evasive chains of causal connections. Finally, whereas
Shils can provide no reason for limiting the scope of
ethical concern to a particular civil society, Kant ex-
licitly recognizes that any account of the moral im-
provement of individual states must of necessity con-
sider the relationship between actions within state
borders and those involving the international com-

There are thus good reasons for being suspicious of the
well-worn arguments against Enlightenment uni-
versalism and the new-found enthusiasm for the virtue
of civil society. The Enlightenment project remains too
ill-defined a notion to serve as an object either of
allegation or condemnation. What is needed instead is a
careful weighing of the variety of different commit-
mants and intentions—not all of them reconcilable—
carelessly lumped together under that label. But as has
been suggested above, to undertake a critical examina-
tion of these different claims is to take up a task which,
with less violence to history than other accounts, might
well be characterized as the Enlightenment project.

With regard to the current enthusiasm for the virtues of
civility, vigilance of a different sort is required. In so
far as “civil society” is a category of analysis in the
social sciences, the question is whether this new use of
an historical term advances our knowledge of the social
factors that promote the emergence of democratic
institutions. The answer will be decided by the quality
of empirical research that the concept fosters.11 With
regard to the normative use of the concept, even
greater skepticism may be justified. A rich tradition
within political philosophy has sought to define civil
society—understood as the most general term avail-
able for designating that form of association in which
public life transpires—in terms of the norms of liberty,
equality, and justice. Until we see a more compelling
reason for giving preference to the alleged virtues of
civility over the stricter demands of justice, we may be
forced to second the advice that the Evangelist gives to
the Pilgrim in John Bunyan’s great allegory: “Mr.
Legality is a cheat; and as for his son Civility, notwithstanding
his simpering looks, he is but a hypocrite and
cannot help thee.” And just as the Evangelist advises
that “there is nothing in all this noise, that thou hast
heard of sottish men, but a design to beguile thee of thy
salvation,” so, too, we may do well to ask whether all
this noise about civility is anything more than a design
to turn us away from that concern with justice which
lies at the heart of any “Enlightenment project” worth
defending.

11 For dissenting views on the analytic usefulness of the category, see

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