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Clifford Siskin and William Warner, This Is Enlightenment (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Pp. xii, 505. $75 (cloth) $27.50 (paper).


So, once again: just what is “enlightenment”? Clifford Siskin and William Warner propose that the twenty essays brought together in their confidently titled volume This Is Enlightenment offer a new answer to this familiar question. They suggest that “Enlightenment” (which they capitalize but typically do not precede with the definite article) was “an event in the history of mediation” (1). It was something that took place in newspapers and magazines (7), creating a world where writers discovered new ways of using printed materials, and where readers found themselves struggling to keep up with the flood of texts that swept over them. Sometime around 1800 it became the victim of its own success and was replaced by something called “Romanticism” (19, 164). In contrast, Dan Edelstein maintains that the Enlightenment is best understood not as “an aggregate of ideas, actions, and events,” but rather as the narrative that “provided a matrix in which ideas, actions, and events acquired new meaning” (13). First articulated at the close of the seventeenth century by members of the Académie des sciences, the Académie française, and the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, this narrative has played a leading role in “the story we tell ourselves about our values, our government, and our religions” (1). Indeed, for Edelstein, it has become “more than just a story: it was and remains a ‘master narrative’ of modernity, even a myth” (116).
What is perhaps most striking about these two rather different answers to the question “What is enlightenment?” is that the differences between them are no longer surprising: we are used to seeing this seemingly simple question spawn a diversity of answers. Such disagreements are, after all, as old as “the Enlightenment” itself: one of the more famous attempts to explain what “enlightenment” was began with a 1783 dispute in the Berlinische Monatsschrift over the advisability of ending clerical participation in wedding ceremonies (i.e., a discussion of whether a particular practice might be characterized as “enlightened”), but it quickly turned into a debate over the criteria that might serve as the markers of “true enlightenment.” Though that discussion ended without agreement, it served as the provocation for the 1784 answer from Immanuel Kant that, as Edelstein (accurately) observes, now serves as a “one-stop shop for defining the Enlightenment” (117).

Although the editors of This Is Enlightenment and the author of The Enlightenment: A Genealogy offer diverging accounts of the Enlightenment, they are united in their suspicion that Kant’s familiar definition of enlightenment as “mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity” is not particularly helpful. Edelstein sees it as both mistaken (since “the Enlightenment” was, in his view, less about ridding oneself of the “guidance of another” than with “exchanging one type of guidance for another” [117]) and unoriginal (since he sees Kant as simply repeating a story that had been told by French academicians a century earlier [109]). Siskin and Warner suggest that Kant’s answer—which functions, in their eyes, as a sort of “self-help manual”—points us in the wrong direction: “readers to the present day have seen Kant’s motto as a signpost to modernity, turning Enlightenment into a precursor to be blamed or celebrated” (2–3). Seeking to undo the mischief that Kant’s answer has wrought, both books look backward. Edelstein argues that the paradigm for subsequent accounts of what “the Enlightenment” involved was a narrative
that emerged in the wake of debates in French royal academies on the relative merits of the ancients and moderns. Siskin and Warner set the advent of “Enlightenment” at an even earlier date: it was the consequence of a transformation in forms of “mediation” first glimpsed by Francis Bacon (12–15).

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Viewing the Enlightenment as “an event in the history of mediation” means that (in intent, if not always in execution) the contributions in This Is Enlightenment are less concerned with the stories seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers constructed to make sense of the changes taking place around them (i.e., the narrative whose history lies at the center of Edelstein’s account) than with the transformation that prompted the need for such stories in the first place. In their programmatic introduction, Siskin and Warner suggest that the term “mediation” should be understood as “shorthand for the work done by tools, by what we would now call ‘media’ of every kind—everything that intervenes, enables, supplements, or is simply in between” (5). As might be expected, print looms large in this history, “not only because there was more of it, but also because it insinuates itself into other forms of mediation” (10), and the most persuasive examples of what might be gained by focusing on the particular media that flourished during the eighteenth century are presented in the essays that examine the ways in which eighteenth-century writers, publishers, readers, and book pirates made use of the various printed materials that flooded the public sphere. Warner’s own essay in the volume looks at the transmission of a diverse range of printed documents (e.g., printed reports of proceedings, votes, and declarations at town meetings) by the Boston Committee of Correspondence in the run-up to the American Declaration of Independence. Drawing on the sociologist Ervin Goffman’s concept of “footing,” Michael Warner considers the relationship between the conceptions of preaching at work in
sermons destined for publication and those delivered by clergy concerned with their spoken impact. Anne Fastrup traces the differing guises in which Diderot presented himself (and, more generally, the image of the philosophe) to the reading public, noting his antipathy toward a print journalism that he saw as populated by “snarling reviewers eagerly waiting for every opportunity to strike at any weaknesses or flaws, ridicule the arguments of the encyclopedists, or mock them as private individuals” (270). In contrast, Adrian Johns’s discussion of the role of book piracy in the dissemination of Enlightenment texts argues that, in German-speaking Europe, “periodicals, not books” served as the “central vehicles” of an enlightenment that “classified the public into discrete segments based in particular topics: chemistry, medicine, philology, and so on” (309). Contributions from Paula McDowell and Maureen McLane document the ways in which ballad collectors considered the sort of scholarly apparatus required to “mediate” the passage into print of what came to be called products of an “oral culture.” Ann Blair and Peter Stallybrass discuss the various techniques of note-taking that late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers crafted to cope with the explosion of printed materials they confronted. And Helge Jordheim considers Michel Foucault’s discussion of Kant’s response to the question “What is enlightenment?” and what it tells us about the different temporalities at work in spoken utterances (e.g., Foucault’s lectures at the College de France) and printed texts (e.g., the subsequent circulation of materials culled from these lectures).

Print, however, is not the only form of mediation scrutinized in this wide-ranging collection. John Guillory traces the history of the terms “medium” and “mediation” with a particular emphasis on attempts by Enlightenment thinkers to refine the symbolic systems employed in the transmission of ideas. In a similar vein, Knut Ove Eliassen and Yngve Sandhei Jacobsen examine the materials employed by eighteenth-century savants--for example, the
equipment that the naturalist Carl Linnaeus assembled before setting out on his expeditions—and the discourses they inspired. Mary Poovey sketches the particular contexts that enabled money to mediate value in the nascent global economy of the eighteenth century, and Ian Baucom draws out some of the implications of Poovey’s account by showing how money “as a carrier of law” has served as a means of expanding “the boundaries of law-sanctioned violence” (337) over the last several centuries.

Other contributions operate with a broader notion of what counts as “mediation.” Robert Miles argues that the literary trope of the “inner stranger” (173) may be viewed as a “linguistic instance of mediation” that is every bit “as material a form of mediation as the financial instruments” examined by Poovey and Baucom since it “mediates between two reifications in the realm of subjectivity” (175). Siskin takes a similar tack in his own essay, which offers an account of “the genre of ‘system’” in Newton, Smith, Wordsworth, and Scott that sees “the history of system as something embodied—as something that mediates through its generic embodiments” (166). Kindred approaches to mediation are at work in John Bender’s exploration of the analogies between the novel and eighteenth-century scientific writing and in Bernhard Siegert’s account of the image of the “police” in Schiller and Mercier.

Some of the contributors have more to say about mediation than they do about the Enlightenment. Like Poovey and Baucom, Arvind Rajagopal is concerned with the role of money: his essay offers an extended discussion of a 2004 television advertisement for the Times of India that traced the journey of a counterfeit 100-rupee note. But the relationship of this particular discussion of mediation to the volume’s analysis of “Enlightenment” hinges on little more than a brief invocation of Kant’s discussion of “guardianship” and a nod to Michel Foucault. The same can be said of Lisa Gitelman’s analysis of the evolution of Samuel F. B.
Morse’s telegraphic code: the only link to the broader concerns of the volume is a passing suggestion that Morse “relied upon Enlightenment aesthetic theory” (127). On the other hand, Peter de Bolla’s discussion of the emergence of the concept of “division of labor” in the work of Adam Smith is obviously concerned with an important Enlightenment figure, but de Bolla’s understanding of “mediation” is somewhat more elusive than those of his fellow contributors (the point seems to be that in order for a concept to change other concepts have to change along with it). Finally, the closing essay by Michael McKeon introduces yet another twist in the discussion of mediation by observing that while the “common usage” of the notion invokes the idea of “connection, conciliation, or communication,” mediate also means “to ‘intervene’ or to ‘divide in the middle’,” which leads McKeon to speculate that perhaps “mediation” is “one of those ‘primal words’ whose ‘antithetical sense’ Sigmund Freud . . . finds not only in ancient languages but also in the archaic language of the dream-work” (385). By this time, a reader of This Is Enlightenment (especially if the reader happens to be a reviewer charged with figuring out how all of this is supposed to fit together—a task that probably counts as another instance of “mediation”) may begin to wonder whether answers to the question “What is mediation?” are any less diverse than responses to the question “What is enlightenment?”

At that point, the reader/reviewer/mediator may be inclined to turn to Siskin and Warner’s programmatic introduction (another instance of mediation) for guidance. It notes that “every kind of history foregrounds certain things and obscures others” (6), which suggests that the essays gathered in This Is Enlightenment might be read as an attempt to shift the focus away from the concern with “representation” that the editor/mediators view as the unhappy legacy of Kant’s response to the question “What is enlightenment?”(7) and to foreground the introduction and dissemination of the myriad instances of mediation examined in their collection. In contrast
to histories that attempt to trace emergence and disappearance of “ideas,” a “history of mediation” of the sort offered here is said to deal with a subject matter that is “more easily pinned down to specific times and places” (11). For Siskin and Warner, the crucial transformation that inaugurates the historical period known as “the Enlightenment” (at this point, the definite article becomes obligatory) takes place in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a period marked by “new, or newly important” (12) changes in “infrastructure” (e.g., postal systems and coffeehouses), by the appearance of new “genres and formats” (12) (e.g., public newspapers such as the London Gazette, the Spectator, and Cato’s Letters), “associational practices” (18) (e.g., political parties, secret societies, and scientific academies), and by the establishment of new “protocols” (e.g., the “postal principle,” which stipulates that “any one can address any one,” the system of public credit, and the “regime of copyright” [14]). These transformations are said to establish “the conditions for the possibility of Enlightenment” (12), and over the course of the eighteenth century these “cardinal mediations” went on to enable still other forms of mediation: for instance, magazines composed of previously published articles or reference works such as Chambers’s *Cyclopedia*. This proliferation of mediations provides evidence that the “very medium of mediation—its architecture of forms and tools, people and practices”—has become “load-bearing”: an individual action is now seen “as working not only on its own terms but also as a part of a cumulative, collaborative, and ongoing enterprise” (16). By the end of the eighteenth century these “proliferating mediations” reach a point of “saturation” as more and more people have access to them and even those without access find themselves shaped by their ubiquitous presence (19). In this account, the “Enlightenment project” resembles the Starbucks business model: no human being can ever be more than three blocks away from a mediation. The ubiquity of these mediations indicates that the Enlightenment
was “successful in its own terms” and should be viewed as “an event that ended itself” (20), rather than as a process that was “cut short or somehow interrupted by revolution or Romanticism” (19).

That accounts of the Enlightenment have tended to offer a rather different narrative—in which the Enlightenment appears as either an “unfinished project” in need of rescue or as a continuing catastrophe that must somehow be escaped—is attributed by Siskin and Warner to the continuing influence of Kant’s response to the question “What is enlightenment?” At the very moment when the Enlightenment was drawing to a close (since the mediations it had spawned had reached a point of saturation—like new Starbucks beginning to appear in the entryways of long-established Starbucks—and were beginning to “work in a different way” [172]), Kant came up with a definition of enlightenment in which human beings appeared as “a new kind of tool—a tool whose power now lay in its insistence on using its ‘own’ understanding to change itself” (20). But, as Siskin and Warner see it, Kant’s account was “philosophical, not historical”: it blurs the distinction between (in Julie C. Hayes’s formulation) “a historically locatable phenomenon and a particular intellectual stance” (171).

Hayes held that the ambiguity between these two senses of “enlightenment” (a distinction that those inclined to take advantage of the fact that not all English nouns need to be capitalized might frame as the difference between the historical period known as “the Enlightenment” and the set of practices, projects, or attitudes, not necessarily confined to this particular period, that go by the name “enlightenment”) was “in many respects a productive one” (Julie C. Hayes, “Fictions of Enlightenment: Sontag, Süskind, Norfolk, Kurzweil,” in Questioning History: The Postmodern Turn to the Eighteenth Century, ed. Greg Clingham [Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1998], 22). In contrast, Siskin and Warner would appear
to be suggesting that one of the benefits of situating the Enlightenment within a “history of mediation” is that it puts an end to such confusions and, as a result, breaks the seemingly irresistible hold that Kant’s account has exercised over discussions of the Enlightenment. The lessons of the history sketched in the introduction to This Is Enlightenment (which, of course, may not be shared by all the contributors to the volume) are: first, the Enlightenment was a success; and second, because it was a success, it’s over: in this history, the Enlightenment (as the euphemism goes) is history.

But can an approach that foregrounds mediations and obscures ideas come to terms with the Enlightenment as “a historically locatable phenomenon”? As Dan Edelstein observes near the start of his “genealogy” of the Enlightenment, the media examined in This Is Enlightenment were by no means the exclusive possession of the figures we tend to view as representatives of the Enlightenment. As a result, an account that privileges processes of mediation over the content they mediate may have difficulties in specifying what belongs to the “historically locatable phenomenon” known as “the Enlightenment” and what doesn’t. “To locate the singularity of the Enlightenment,” Edelstein argues, “we must also consider what was mediated, not just how it was” (11).

Edelstein’s point is well taken. As Darrin McMahon (Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) has shown, the Catholic enemies of the Enlightenment were as skilled in their use of the literary marketplace as the philosophes. Likewise, the network of artists and printers who infused political caricature (a medium unfortunately neglected in This Is Enlightenment) with a wit and savagery that have rarely been equaled launched salvos at both Edmund Burke and Richard Price — see, for example, Frederick George Byron’s depiction of Burke as Don Quixote, seated on an
ass that has the face of Pius VI, riding out of the door of his publisher to lay siege to the National Assembly and James Gillray’s famous image of Price, the “atheistical-revolutionist,” surprised in his midnight calculations (Nicholas K. Robinson, Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996], 142, 144). And Steve Pincus notes that coffeehouses were frequented not only by “republicans, radicals, and Whigs” but also by royalists, supporters of the Anglican establishment, and other critics of political and religious radicalism. One of the pamphlets he quotes observes that “a coffee-house, like logic, the lawyer, and the Switzer will maintain any cause.” (Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create’: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture,” Journal of Modern History 67, no. 4 [1995]: 807–34 [quote: 816–17].) The same might be said of mediations.

If, as Edelstein argues, the mediations examined in This Is Enlightenment are, taken by themselves, incapable of delivering an account of the Enlightenment as a “historically locatable phenomenon,” then an attempt to view “Enlightenment” as “an event in the history of mediation” will wind up either employing “Enlightenment” simply as synonym for “the long eighteenth century” or falling back on an understanding of the period that is derived (explicitly or tacitly) from more conventional approaches. Either way, the alleged advantage of concentrating on mediations—namely, that they “can be more easily pinned down to specific times and places than ‘ideas’” and, hence, tracked “more accurately” (This Is Enlightenment, 11)—begins to fade. For even if we assume that it is easier to determine when a particular “mediation” appeared on the scene (e.g., the first British coffeehouse) than it is to pin down the first occurrence of an “idea” (e.g., the first use of “enlightenment” to designate the project in which the philosophes were involved), we would still have to work “ideas” back into the account in order to specify how the various mediations we are tracking advanced the set of practices, projects, and (for lack
of a better term) “ideas” that defined the Enlightenment as a “historically locatable phenomenon.” Siskin and Warner concede as much in a note assuring the reader “that ‘ideas’ have not been left by the wayside” and that their point is simply to highlight the difficulties of “constructing a history of ideas unmediated by genre, technology, etc.” (415). It is hard to argue with this more modest formulation; however, it is also easy to see how Edelstein could make a similar move and state that, of course, he is not proposing that “mediations” be “left by the wayside” but is only pointing to the difficulties of constructing a history of the Enlightenment that is unmediated by a consideration of “ideas” or, as he would probably prefer, “narratives.”

The tendency to emphasize “mediations” at the expense of “ideas” may have something to do with Siskin and Warner’s desire to put some distance between their approach and an account that, at least on first glance, would seem to share much with theirs: Jürgen Habermas’s discussion of “bourgeois publicity” in his Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit (Neuwied: Lutcherhand, 1962). While acknowledging their debts to Habermas’s work, Siskin and Warner nevertheless stress that “understanding the Enlightenment as an event in the history of mediation differs in fundamental ways from the public sphere approach.” They maintain that Habermas’s account “invariably downplay[s] the mechanics of mediation, the role of technologies, the influence of genres, the dynamic of association, and the aggregate effect of elemental protocols.” Its separation of “the human from the tool and the group from its informing structures” turns the mediation of meaning into “something that rests with strictly human agency.” To make matters worse, this “human agency” appears in the guise of “the public,” a term the “abstractness” of which explains “both the allure and the liability” of Habermas’s account (23). Reprising Keith Michael Baker’s critique of Habermas’s use of the term “public sphere” to designate both the practices of communication that emerged over the course of the eighteenth century and a
normative model for “rational negotiation through communication” (Baker, “Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France,” in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig J. Calhoun [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992], 183). Siskin and Warner wish to draw a clear demarcation between an examination of the work done by mediations and Habermas’s broader claims about the rise and subsequent fall of the “bourgeois public sphere” (23). By treating “mediations as themselves constituting a history” they seek to rescue “the enormous variety of Enlightenment mediations from being relegated to supporting roles in Habermas’s political master plot: the liberal-Marxist story of the bourgeois critique of and resistance to political absolutism” (23).

Yet, once again, just what is it about a particular mediation (e.g., the network of coffeehouses that grew up in London at the close of the seventeenth century) that warrants calling it an “Enlightenment mediation”? If the phrase is to mean anything more than a mediation occurring at some point between 1680 and 1800, it is difficult to see how questions of agency, aims, and aspirations can be left in the background. Even if we assume that Habermas’s account of “the public sphere” has all the shortcomings that Siskin and Warner suggest (for some reasons to think that it doesn’t, see Harold Mah, “Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians,” Journal of Modern History 72 [2000]: 153-82), it still might be the case that his mingling of empirical communicative practices with the normative ideals they sought to advance is an inherent feature of any attempt to comprehend the event known as “the Enlightenment.” If the term “mediation” is to be understood as shorthand for “tool,” then a history of “Enlightenment mediations” cannot let the consideration of the various projects that these tools were being used to advance fade into the background. For these normative commitments and the “ideas” in which they were expressed were a central part of what the Enlightenment was.
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While the contributors to This Is Enlightenment approach the Enlightenment as “an event” and examine its rise, spread, and eventual “saturation” by tracking changes in media and mediations, the focus of Dan Edelstein’s study lies less with the social, cultural, or political transformations taking place in Europe across the long eighteenth century than with the story told about them. As he explains, the “prime objective” of this “genealogy” is “to reconstruct how the narrative of ‘the Enlightenment’ emerged as a self-reflexive understanding of the historical importance and specificity of eighteenth-century Europe” (2). Edelstein argues that the Enlightenment is best understood as a change in what Niklas Luhmann characterized as a “second-order observation”—i.e., it represented “not so much a change in the way people thought but a change in the way people thought about the way people thought” (13). As a result, the most salient characteristic of the period was that it “seems to have been the period when people thought they were living in an age of Enlightenment.” Indeed, what people were thinking matters less than their having “perceived themselves to be thinking or acting in ‘reasonable,’ ‘philosophical,’ and ‘enlightened’ ways” (73–74).

The narrative that Edelstein traces boils down to this: “the present age (siècle) was ‘enlightened’ (éclairé) because the ‘philosophical spirit’ of the Scientific Revolution had spread to the educated classes, institutions of learning, and even parts of the government” (2). Edelstein finds this basic account already in place by the time of Jean-Baptiste Dubos’s Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture (1719), one of the first works to characterize the contemporary arts and sciences as distinguished by something called the “esprit philosophique” (24). This particular catch-phrase was not unique to Dubos (as Edelstein notes, “esprit philosophique” also turns up in contemporary works by Fontenelle and Fréret), but its usage in
Dubos’s *Réflexions critiques* is notable in that it appears there as part of “a whole constellation of keywords, which taken together come very close to designating what we would now identify as ‘the Enlightenment’” (24–25). Dubos did not regard the *esprit philosophique* as a recent development: he traced its origins to the 1650s or 1660s and credited its appearance to the works of Bacon and Descartes (27–28). But since Edelstein’s interest lies in establishing the genealogy of the narrative Dubos constructed, he is understandably less concerned with Dubos’s particular reasons for locating the origins of the *esprit philosophique* at this specific historical moment than with the sources that might have persuaded Dubos to speak of an “*esprit philosophique*” in the first place. For this reason it matters that the bulk of the discussion of the *esprit philosophique* occurs in a section of Dubos’s *Réflexions critiques* that addresses the contribution “the good authors of antiquity” made to the ability of moderns to “reason better than the ancients” (37).

Dubos’s respect for the achievements of the ancients is the clue that points Edelstein in the direction of the particular discursive context in which the Enlightenment narrative first began to take shape: the “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns” (36–37). While denying that this “domestic academic dispute” (36) was “to any degree the cause of the Enlightenment,” Edelstein suggests that we would not be misguided were we to think of it as “the catalyst that precipitated the Enlightenment narrative” (45). Its significance resides in the fact that it forced all those who entered it—and, as Edelstein stresses, this debate attracted a wide range of illustrious participants—to reflect on “how the present compared to the distant past” (45). Which side a thinker took in this debate turns out not to have been particularly important; indeed, Dubos defended the claims of the ancients. Simply by entering the debate, contestants were forced both to reflect on the contrasting achievements of ancients and moderns (and, hence, to engage in a
“second-order observation”) and to structure their arguments around a common conceptual opposition (namely, the contrast between “Ancients and Moderns”) (45).

The idea that the “Enlightenment narrative” descended from what, in the end, was “a domestic academic dispute” (36) is central to Edelstein’s argument. Tracing the genealogy of the narrative back to “a literary quarrel” counters the tendency to see the Enlightenment as “an intellectual crisis that ushered in ‘modernity’” (45): pace Paul Hazard, it involved “a prise, not a crise de conscience” (13). Repeatedly stressing that its invention was “unrelated to any epistemological change” (28, see also 2, 23, 88, 115), Edelstein insists that there is no point in “searching for some intellectual revolution” or “epistemological seismic wave” that might have set this narrative in motion (28, 66). The most that can be said is that “it simply happened that it was in France that the ramifications of the Scientific Revolution were interpreted as having introduced a philosophical age, defined by a particular esprit, and as having a particular impact on society” (28). Further, situating the debate that allegedly “precipitated” the “Enlightenment narrative” in a uniquely French dispute means that there is also little to be gained by searching for precursors to this narrative beyond the borders of France. Although English scientific achievements (i.e., Newton) figured in the narrative, Anglo-Dutch politics (e.g., the “Glorious Revolution”) did not (79–80). Edelstein assures the reader that this does not mean that Dutch or English writers had no importance “in the history of ideas” or “even in the history of Enlightenment ideas.” But it does mean that the genealogy of the narrative that would tie these ideas together into a coherent history “is primarily a French one” (21).

The Enlightenment narrative may have been uniquely French in its origins, but it had cosmopolitan implications. For Edelstein, the account articulated by these French academicians between 1675 and 1730 was something more than one of a number of diverging answers to the
question “What is enlightenment?” that percolated throughout Europe over the course of the eighteenth century. It was, instead, nothing less than “the narrative of the Enlightenment” (2, 5, 16)—indeed, this uniquely French account would eventually become “a ‘master narrative’ of modernity, even a myth” [116]).

Though the subtitle of Edelstein’s book promises “a genealogy,” the book itself winds up offering two different genealogies. The first works its way backward from Dubos’s Réflexions and traces the lineage of the cluster of terms that Dubos brought together to the “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns.” The second moves forward from the Réflexions critiques and is intended to demonstrate that all subsequent accounts of the Enlightenment—whether by French philosophes or by their European colleagues—descend from the paradigm that had been constructed in the course of the Quarrel: they reiterate the narrative found in Dubos, but introduce no essential modifications in it. The implications of this second genealogy are a good deal more significant than the first: on it hangs the difference between regarding the Quarrel and its progeny as one among a number of contesting “narratives of enlightenment” and seeing it as “the narrative of the Enlightenment.”

The evidence marshaled in support of this second genealogy is concerned, for the most part, with making the case that the philosophes added little to the general conception of enlightenment that was already in place by the time of Dubos’s Réflexions critiques. Edelstein maintains that, despite the invocation of “a new siècle de lumière” and occasional swipes at vain displays of “erudition,” the philosophes made few significant advances beyond seventeenth-century conventions of scholarship: works by the ancients far outrank those by the moderns in the citation indexes of the Encyclopédie (50); the organization of the work itself was “not that dissimilar to the early-modern commonplace book” (50–51); the philosophes’ understanding of
politics was profoundly shaped by early-modern humanists (55); their conception of natural law
theory was deeply influenced by “classical representations” (58); their assumptions about God
and nature were indebted to Jesuit teachings (65–66); and their overall aim was not to invent a
new philosophical system but rather to assure that the intellectual achievements of the previous
century were diffused throughout society (88). In their actions they remained, in most respects,
denizens of the seventeenth century: the same royal academies that had been the location of the
Quarrel served as their “de facto headquarters” (81); far from being critical of the institutions of
the absolutist state, they viewed it as an ally in their struggles with their enemies (89–91); they
were dependent on aristocratic patronage and skilled in the art of cultivating it (93–94); and
those who were still alive in 1789 were not particularly enthusiastic about the Revolution (100–
103). There are times when The Enlightenment: A Genealogy reads like a more sensible version
of The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers. While the philosophes may not
have had more in common with Middle Ages than with the presents, they emerge from
Edelstein’s account looking more like sixteenth-century humanists than nineteenth-century
philosophical radicals.

The narrative presented in Dubos also proved, in Edelstein’s view, to be a remarkably
successful export. In a “rapid tour d’horizon” (104–115), he argues that “almost all of the
European centers and figures of the Enlightenment were exposed to the writings of the
philosophes” and that the narrative embedded in these works proved “sufficiently open-ended” to
be “appropriated by almost anyone for almost any political or intellectual purpose” (105). While
Hume and other Scots may have introduced variations in the French model by giving
government a larger role to play in the spread of enlightenment than it enjoyed in Dubos or
Voltaire, this only serves to confirm the plasticity of the paradigm: “it offered a basic model that could be modified at will” (107).

Ian Hunter’s account of the contest between “rival Enlightenments” at the University of Halle may, at first glance, seem to present more significant problems for Edelstein’s general thesis, since it confirms the existence, prior to the arrival of the French narrative, of alternative conceptions of enlightenment (Ian Hunter, Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006]). But these enlightenments amount to little more than a momentary speed-bump in a survey intended to show that there is but one Enlightenment narrative and that it comes from France. Since Hunter’s Germans were concerned only with “the world of learning,” rather than with the more general diffusion of enlightenment through society, their account was closer to the sort of narrative Thomas Sprat had employed in his 1667 history of the Royal Society (108, 29–30) than it was to the authentic “narrative of the Enlightenment” found in Dubos. Eventually, the Germans got with the program and embraced the récit français: during the 1780s a “more fully self-aware concept of Aufklärung” arrived on the scene and—thanks to the diffusion of French writings throughout German-speaking Europe—this narrative “was pitched in specifically social terms.” Edelstein maintains that this “remarkable time lag” makes Hunter’s case for a specifically German tradition of “civic” enlightenment “particularly unconvincing” (108–109).

Whatever stories may have been told at Halle, they doesn’t count—at least as Edelstein scores these things—as stories about “the Enlightenment.”

Russian, Tuscan, and Neapolitan enlighteners turn out to have been exposed to the French narrative as well and, in most cases, found ways of adopting it to their needs: no rival English, Dutch, or German narrative had an equivalent impact (110–12). Edelstein’s tour
d’horizon concludes with a few reflections on the failure of either the Dutch or the English—the “two candidates rivaling France for the honor (if it is one) of having formulated the first theory of the Enlightenment”—to “produce particularly visible or viable enlightenment movements” (112). This argument would seem to up the ante: not only were the Dutch and English incapable of producing an “Enlightenment narrative” that could serve as a viable competitor to the French product, they were unable even to get an enlightenment organized. Dutch intellectuals, Edelstein argues, had little or no interest in the political, religious, and philosophical ideas that were being propounded by Huguenot émigrés in the wake of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (112–13) — though it is unclear whether he might allow that the Huguenots themselves might have been engaged in an enlightenment — and although the English may have had various ideas about “reform and social instruction,” they “never really coalesced . . . into a movement that could be said to constitute an Enlightenment” (113). Until the arrival of the Rational Dissenters at the close of the eighteenth century, “one would be hard-pressed to find any group of English citizens that conceived of itself or of its aims in enlightened terms,” which suggests that, were there such a thing as an “English Enlightenment,” it (like the German one) was “certainly a latecomer” (113–14).

This rather hectic survey of the reception of the French narrative is not the most convincing part of Edelstein’s study. The concession that, perhaps, the Rational Dissenters might count as a group that “self-consciously identified themselves” (113) with something that resembled an Enlightenment appears to have been a concession slipped into the text to plug a rather obvious hole (182, n. 54 indicates that it was a late addition) and consigning them to the “late eighteenth century” (113) ignores the problem that the struggles against the Test and Corporation Acts in which they were engaged reach back to the end of the seventeenth century.
Tracing that genealogy might suggest the existence of a narrative of enlightenment that—uninfluenced by the narrative put together by Dubos—linked progress in the sciences, improvements in politics, and advances in religious criticism. Such a narrative (or narratives, since there is no reason to assume it took only one form) may have been a part of the lingua franca of the community of English and Huguenot exiles who gathered in the Dutch Republic during the 1680s.

While it makes sense to distinguish, as Edelstein suggests, between “Enlightenment ideas and practices in particular” and “political or religious debates more generally” (114), it is important to recognize that narratives that regarded improvements in religion and politics as evidence of the spread of enlightenment were being constructed in England, Holland, and Prussia. Indeed, Kant’s answer to the question “What is enlightenment?”—which, for Edelstein, marks the moment when German latecomers finally take up the French narrative—argues that “religious matters” are “the main point of enlightenment” [Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” in What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions, ed., James Schmidt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) 62-3]. There is no reason to assume that the limited role such concerns may have played in the narrative of enlightenment whose genealogy can be traced back to the Quarrel makes these narratives any less “narratives of enlightenment” than the French version. Likewise, although a case might be made that the “conceptual framework” of the French narrative of enlightenment was, as Edelstein argues, “historical, not epistemological” (115), it is far from obvious why those narratives in which epistemological shifts do play a role (e.g., John Toland’s use of Lockean epistemology in Christianity Not Mysterious or, for that matter, the attempt in the Discours préliminaire to bring a systematic coherence to the Encyclopédie) are
ruled out as viable alternatives to the narrative whose genealogy Edelstein has traced in his opening chapters. In other words, why assume that there is only one Enlightenment narrative (and, for that matter, only one Enlightenment)?

The genealogy Edelstein is tracing seems at times to be marked by an odd circularity. The “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns” plays the role it does in The Enlightenment: A Genealogy because it marks the moment when “the terms, but also the narrative, used to identify and define what we now call ‘the Enlightenment’ were first put into circulation” (21). But who is this “we” who defines “the Enlightenment” in this particular way (and what might a genealogy of this “we” look like)? A “we” that conceives of the Enlightenment in terms that are roughly equivalent to those deployed in Dubos’s Réflexions may well be inclined to agree that this particular narrative descended from the “domestic academic dispute” that raged in the French academies and Parisian salons between 1680 and 1720 and would also agree that it was “less epistemological than narratological,” that it was not particularly radical in either its political or religious views, and that it owed more to the century that preceded than to the one that would follow. On the other hand, a “we” that found it difficult to conceive of a narrative about the Enlightenment in which concerns about religious toleration are not a central issue, in which claims about rights and liberties do not loom large in the discourse, in which the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the Glorious Revolution play no role and events in England and the Dutch Republic, while important, aren’t really relevant to “the Enlightenment” will probably come up with a genealogy that looks rather different from the one that moves from Dubos back to the Quarrel (for an example of how a genealogy of this sort might proceed, see Margaret C. Jacob, “The Nature of Early Eighteenth Century Religious Radicalism,” which appears in Republic of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts 1:1 [May 1,
2009], the fine online journal that Edelstein edits: http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/42.) It is also likely that this “we” would look askance at emphatic claims about “the Enlightenment” and would not be particularly troubled by the prospect that there were many different narratives about enlightenment available to eighteenth-century Europeans (this “we” sounds a bit like J. G. A. Pocock, “Historiography as a Form of Political Thought,” History of European Ideas 37 [2011]: 1–6). Such a “we” might be grateful to Dan Edelstein for ferreting out this peculiar French narrative about enlightenment, but would be perplexed as to why Edelstein invests so much energy into securing its status as “the narrative of the Enlightenment.” After all, there are reasons for constructing genealogies other than identifying the pretenders and disinheriting the bastards.

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Siskin and Warner argue that one of the benefits of their effort to trace mediations rather than to determine the lineage of ideas is that it “spares us more intellect-wasting custody battles over Enlightenment: ‘It’s French, of course.’ ‘No, it’s actually British.’” A history of mediation, as they understand it, offers the prospect of shedding light on “both the singularity of each local event and what those events have in common” (11). Applying such an approach to the material explored by Edelstein might yield some interesting results (indeed, Edelstein’s own involvement in “Mapping the Republic of Letters,” an attempt to map the network of correspondence across the period from 1500 to 1800 [https://republicofletters.stanford.edu/], suggests that he is well aware of this point). For, while Edelstein may be right to argue that in order to understand the “singularity of the Enlightenment” we will need to “consider what was mediated, not just how it was” (11), it is also conceivable that sorting out the interchanges between the contesting enlightenment narratives that circulated throughout Europe over the long eighteenth century may
help us to understand what elements they shared as well as what set them apart. What Edelstein views as “a process of diffusion through which a singular concept of the Enlightenment was made available to different cultures, which in turn adapted it” (3) could, presumably, count as yet another example of what Siskin and Warner have in mind when they speak of “mediation.” But there is no reason to assume that this mediation always took the form of the appropriation of a French message into the language of a local culture and even less reason to suppose that this particular account was the only one to be mediated.

Finally, the so-called “historically locatable” Enlightenment might itself benefit from a genealogy that would explore how a number of diverging historical accounts of “the Enlightenment” (each of them with a different “we” who saw the Enlightenment in a particular way) emerged from a series of eighteenth-century disputes about the activity known as “enlightenment.” Despite their differences, both This Is Enlightenment and The Enlightenment: A Genealogy tend to concern themselves with the historical period now known as “the Enlightenment” rather than with the diversity of practices that may have passed for “enlightenment” in eighteenth-century Europe. Siskin and Warner concede that “although the cluster of words, formulations, and practices that we have been noting did not precipitate the term ‘Enlightenment’ until later,” but nevertheless argue that their use of the term should not be viewed as an attempt to impose a retrospective coherence on the past (18). For his part, Edelstein argues that “adopting a historicized standard to define the Enlightenment—as elastically as possible—will assist us in formulating criteria for determining what the limits of the Enlightenment might be” (17). But the “historically locatable” Enlightenment does not appear to have a univocal understanding of what enlightenment involved. Eighteenth-century Europeans used terms like “enlightenment” in ways that suggest that such terms were highly
contested. These contests were joined by individuals who, while viewed today as having little to
do with “the Enlightenment” (or, worse still, who are often grouped under the singularly
unhelpful category of “Counter-Enlightenment”), nevertheless understood themselves as
defending what they took to be “enlightenment” against various impostors.

For an example of how such contests played out, we need look no further than the
controversy that produced Kant’s answer to the question “What is enlightenment?” Johann Erich
Beister, a member of the Prussian bureaucracy, argued that removing clergy from wedding
ceremonies advanced the cause of “enlightenment.” Johann Friedrich Zöllner — a clergyman,
educational reformer, and (like Beister) a member of a secret society of “Friends of
Enlightenment” — had difficulties understanding how Beister’s proposals could possibly be seen
as fostering “enlightenment,” at least as he understood the notion. So he asked for a definition.
While there may be good reasons to share the reservations expressed by both the editors of This
Is Enlightenment and the author of The Enlightenment: A Genealogy about the particular answer
Kant provided to the question that appeared in the pages of the Berlinische Monatsschrift,
Zöllner’s question remains a useful one, if only because it reminds us that our sense of “the
Enlightenment” does not always square with what the eighteenth century understood as
“enlightenment.”