

Sceptical Optimism? Dealing with the Problems of Our Time  
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## The Need for a New Enlightenment

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The essay competition's topic "Sceptical Optimism vs Desperation Routine – Are there strategies for a confident perspective on the future?" evokes an antithesis that seems to be inherent in the intellectual project of the Enlightenment, a project that has, more than any other, shaped modernity. How do these opposing interpretations of Enlightenment thinking interact with each other in framing the discordant narratives of our time, when humanity is confronted with the all too real possibility of a sweeping climate catastrophe? And, more importantly, how faithful are these diverging interpretations to the spirit of Enlightenment thought? In this essay some effort will be devoted to answering this question, the question, in essence, of how we are supposed to collectively and individually react to an uncertain future accompanied by the promise of a looming catastrophe. Are we allowed to espouse a sceptical optimism or are we doomed to keep going through the desperation routine?

The question is anything but straightforward and the answer given here will of course be highly contestable, but we can make a start in trying to diagnose the main aims of the Enlightenment project by looking at the commonalities among the works of some important representatives of this intellectual movement. Then we shall look at two contemporary expressions of the Enlightenment project specifically in the realm of climate ethics and climate crisis policy, one that could encapsulate the term "sceptical optimism" and one that would fit more the term "desperation routine" and try to see which of the two remains more faithful to the original aims of the Enlightenment as here stated.

What would be the converging strands that unite such thinkers as David Hume, Voltaire, and Immanuel Kant? Where do the similarities in their approach to studying the world lie? It seems that they all sought to break with the philosophical tradition as developed until then. While early modern philosophy was still operating within the confines and questions set by medieval (religious) philosophy, the Enlightenment thinkers wished to demolish the systems of their predecessors, to liberate their thinking from philosophical prejudices and look at the world under a completely new light. To do that, they had no qualms, no reverence to show to any of the old minds. No one would escape their ruthless critique; no time-honoured concept was safe from their scathing pen.

Voltaire raved against the superstitions paddled by ecclesiastical leaders, calling his fellow people to educate and save themselves rather than expect some transcendent eternal salvation by an obviously indifferent God. Even more he took issue with the learned men and philosophers of his time who chose to support those very prejudices and obscurities which seemed to Voltaire to have condemned the human species to a fate of ignorance and stupidity. In his philosophical novel, *Candide or On Optimism*, one of the two main characters, Doctor Pangloss is called upon whenever a bad thing happens to his dreamy-eyed optimist student Candide to gloss over it and portray it in a positive light, using more and more stretched and absurd explanations and arguments. In the same spirit Hume, looking down upon the rationalist pretensions of his philosophical predecessors, sought to repudiate any concept that cannot be substantiated by direct experience. In the process, sacred, ancient concepts, such as God, causality, and the notion of the self, fell under the sword of his empiricist criticisms. In his turn Kant proceeded to outdo Hume by undoing in one swift stroke the totality of Western metaphysics up to that date. In his luminary *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant proclaimed that all

the big metaphysical questions that have plagued Western thought ever since the Presocratic philosophers are simply outside the purview of the human mind. Hence, they can all be defenestrated, and we can go on occupying ourselves with questions we can actually answer.

All of these thinkers shared in common the intellectual audacity to clear out the debris of past philosophical systems to erect their own. The Enlightenment spirit is a spirit of anti-dogmatism. These thinkers could not tolerate for a moment what they saw as the obvious mistakes of their predecessors' work. Although they approached the work of past masters with respect and intellectual honesty, they didn't hesitate to break with the past and to venture independently to answer the old, ever recurring questions. They, in a nutshell, dared to think<sup>1</sup>. That of course doesn't mean that their own prejudices didn't seep into their own systems, which in turn solidified to become dogmatic constructions equal in rigidity with the ones that they wished to obliterate. After all, the thinkers we mentioned above, and many others among them, were in one or the other way, practically or intellectually, involved in the exploitation, domination and oppression of the vast majority of humanity, whether that was the poor, women, non-white people, slaves, colonized subjects, queer or disabled people. Nonetheless, they tried and managed to keep alive the original spark that got philosophy going in the first place, the impulse to question the given, the traditional, the dogmatic. The Enlightenment project, with all its numerous imperfections, carries within it the germs of its own supersession. For example, the same political Enlightenment project that excluded the poor, non-white people and women from deciding their own fates by equally participating in political affairs and procedures (exemplified in the American and French Revolutions) provided to the future generations of activists and intellectuals the argumentative material to pinpoint and highlight the very gaps and contradictions that rendered the project incomplete, which allowed them then to use these inconsistencies to challenge the ideological veil with which their oppressors masked the fact of their oppression, to show them essentially as liars and hypocrites.

Coming back, then, to the realm of contemporary climate policy and climate ethics, we can discern in the discussions that are precipitated by the looming climate catastrophe two separate definitions of Enlightenment. One is sampled paradigmatically in the writings of Steven Pinker<sup>2</sup>, who presents himself as a herald of Enlightenment ideals in a political context that is increasingly anti-Enlightenment and hence "irrational". Pinker takes issue especially with those who doubt the ability of science to work as a panacea and those who don't espouse optimistic positions. The Enlightenment, says Pinker, initiated an age, identified with the advent of the Industrial Revolution and capitalism, which has been characterized by unprecedented and uninterrupted progress. The climate crisis is not so much a mistake as an unintended consequence of humanity's unprecedented prosperity<sup>3</sup> and the solution to it is to apply the same methods and techniques that have been successfully applied so far. These methods and techniques can be summarized as a value-free science whose findings are then embodied in an equally value-free technology. Pinker is a stark proponent of technological

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<sup>1</sup> In an essay on Enlightenment, one could not avoid a reference to Kant's own famous 1784 essay *An answer to the question: What is Enlightenment* (Kant & Wood 1996).

<sup>2</sup> See especially Pinker (2019).

<sup>3</sup> Never mind that the biggest part of greenhouse gas emissions has happened in the last 30 years, after climate change was a well-known and documented natural phenomenon (Stainforth & Brzezinski 2020).

solutions to the climate crisis, namely the widespread use of nuclear power possibly supplemented by geoengineering projects and carbon capture and storage technologies. This wonderfully optimistic and frankly psychologically relieving picture of reality states a very simple view: human ingenuity applied to the control of nature will once again save us. We just need to trust in the power of the Enlightenment ideals, in the potency of science and technology and in the seemingly irreversible trajectory towards continuous and unstoppable progress. This set of ideas is usually characterized by its proponents as 'sceptical optimism', although it's a struggle seeing which part exactly of this approach is sceptical.

There is, however, another, less obvious, definition of Enlightenment at play in this discourse. This particular strand of thought doesn't seek so aggressively to adopt the mantle of the old Enlightenment ideals which are now more than ever seen to be ossified constructions and idealizations of our past and current collective plight. What this strand does, exemplified in various theories of ecology, in feminist and indigenous approaches to nature, in post-growth and de-growth theories, is dared to think outside the constraints of our current political and economic situation. This strand of Enlightenment thinking chooses to use the knowledge newly<sup>4</sup> acquired about humanity to sweep away the old prejudices and self-imposed immaturities<sup>5</sup>, the there-is-no-alternative thinking, the moral complicity of the status quo supporters. This sort of thinkers dares to reimagine social reality. The issue they take with the technological solution is that, in essence, it doesn't solve but merely postpone the problem humanity faces, which is not the climate crisis per se but a deeply problematic relationship with nature, a relationship of domination and exploitation. In this vein of thinking, opting for nuclear power now will avert the climate crisis in the short term, only until we face a nuclear-waste-disposal crisis in the long term. The 'sceptical optimists' of our last paragraph will swiftly call out these theorists for engaging in a tedious and tiresome "desperation routine". Where is their hope, where is their belief in the capacities of humanity to overcome its problems?

The "desperation routine" thinkers can propose a simple answer: such belief in automatic, natural, everlasting progress is itself deeply metaphysical. There is no empirical evidence that supports a view that humanity will continue to progress overtime, whatever else happens. In order to progress humanity needs to push itself. This criticism of metaphysical optimism is what makes the "desperation routine" thinkers more faithful to the original spark of the Enlightenment, to its originary, anti-dogmatic impulse. These people criticize what has become an intellectual elite of Enlightenment-style thinkers who keep defending ardently the same ideals that first emerged 250-300 years ago without taking into account the deficiencies in the political application of these ideals, the monstrosities they helped<sup>6</sup> and still help to cover up, the gross power inequalities of the socioeconomic system they helped erect. They use new

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<sup>4</sup> Newly, since it resides in large degree to ideas proposed by thinkers and activists who hail from heretofore excluded parts of the general population. We're talking here about ideas coming from feminist, critical race, Marxist, indigenous, queer theorists, etc. These ideas contribute to our fuller knowledge of how social reality works, since the experiences they were based on were to a large extent excluded from public view and discourse before the 1960s. The view on reality that these ideas offer us are indeed akin to discovering a new continent.

<sup>5</sup> Another reference to Kant's *What is Enlightenment* essay, referenced in footnote 2.

<sup>6</sup> An interesting account of how Enlightenment thought has played a significant role in the widespread exploitation and domination of the natural environment and of our fellow human beings can be found in Horkheimer (2002).

knowledge, new criticism, and ideas to supersede the Enlightenment, to essentially apply Enlightenment's intellectual audacity to Enlightenment itself. They underline what is also programmatically stated and used as the title of this essay: the need for a new Enlightenment. The old Enlightenment has become an ideological fossil like the ones Hume, Kant and Voltaire sought to bring down and demolish. The intellectual elite of our times, people like Steven Pinker, are increasingly taking up the role of Voltaire's Doctor Pangloss. It seems, then, as this text draws to a close, that we need to invert the terms we have been using from the beginning, the terms framing the topic of this essay competition. It seems that the people who bravely and daringly, in the face of fierce resistance and ridicule, push towards a New Enlightenment are the embodiment of a truly sceptical optimism, an optimism which knows its limitations and the obstacles ahead but, in the very act of original, stimulating thought, dares to look ahead with hope. The Doctor Panglosses of our time, on the other hand, seem to express the true desperation routine: a belief that humanity reached the culmination of its potential with the Enlightenment 250 years ago, and nothing can lead us anymore to transcend this fixed state of affairs, so we ought not to think about it. In this sense, it doesn't seem unreasonable to take on the mantle of Voltaire and the other Enlightenment thinkers and, in true Enlightenment spirit, try to clear out the debris of a bankrupt and inadequate intellectual and political project to erect something new in its place. It's not so far-fetched either to imagine that those Enlightenment thinkers, Voltaire, Kant, Hume, would take pride in our attempts to clear away their flawed contributions to human thought, just as they did with their predecessors. To co-opt Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous quote: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)" (Wittgenstein 2021, 249). Maybe the time has finally come to throw away the ladder of the old Enlightenment and keep on climbing without burdens.

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