

Reasoning with the Exclusionary Other: Classical Scenes for a Postradical Horizon

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Thanks to Michel Foucault, one might say it has become possible to conceive that the political relevance of humanity in modern thought does not have to do with its “philosophical essence” but rather with its “non-essence.”¹ Yet this very idea surfaced earlier in Western thought, at the time of the revolutionary turn towards a politicized humanitarianism, and helped to shape some crucial political strategies making up modern liberal democracy. Its potential eluded even Foucault. I contend that tracing the contours of this classical, if long unthinkable idea, can inform our response to the other of social critique.

Against the grain of Enlightenment historiography, my suggestion will be that it was not Jean-Jacques Rousseau but Denis Diderot who managed to convey the self-evidence of humanity as a political question for the first time and in a way that was far from inconsequential.² From his authoritative editorial position, Diderot helped to make the European sense of humanity into an actual reform movement rather than just a moral value, symbol of civility, religious quality, or philosophical debate. But as

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1. Costas Douzinas, “The Many Faces of Humanitarianism,” *Parrhesia* 2 (2007): 5. Foucault explicitly sustained in this sense that “we must not conclude that everything that has ever been linked with humanism is to be rejected, but that the humanistic thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection” (Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Politics of Truth*, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter, ed. Sylvère Lotringer [Los Angeles, 2007], p. 111).

2. See James Swenson, *On Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Considered as One of the First Authors of the Revolution* (Stanford, Calif., 2000), esp. pp. 9–16.

Talal Asad has recently noted, “there is no simple move” from a Christian notion of *humanitas* or from the humanism of the Renaissance inspired by ancient philosophy to the kind of interventionism that from the nineteenth century onwards embraces a species-wide notion of dignity and rights.³ Predisposing factors include the expansive causal perception of an increasingly commercial and contractual everyday life, the growing predominance of moral doctrines insisting on the naturalness of irresistible compassion, or the development of new narratives and forms of aesthetic engagement with suffering and death.⁴ Among the stages that eventually led to liberal modernity, Diderot stands out not just as a voice of intellectual formalization but as a pioneer of properly political problematization.⁵

Diderot’s Open Dialogue with a Violent Interlocutor

“There is no quality essential to your species apart from that which you demand from all your fellow-men to ensure your happiness and

3. Talal Asad, “Reflections on Violence, Law, and Humanitarianism,” *Critical Inquiry* 41 (Winter 2015): 398. For a broad and suggestive account, however, see Jürgen Habermas, “The Concept of Human Dignity and the Realistic Utopia of Human Rights,” *Metaphilosophy* 41 (July 2010): 472–76.

4. See Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1,” *The American Historical Review* 90 (Apr. 1985): 339–61; Norman S. Fiering, “Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37 (Apr.–June 1976): 195–218; and Thomas W. Laqueur, “Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making of ‘Humanity,’” in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (New York, 2009), pp. 31–57.

5. As I elaborate in the essay, the Foucauldian notion of “problematization” is helpful to capture the way influential eighteenth-century authors came to think of humanitarian conduct as a “properly political” question or immediately acceptable problem for any state and any individual. Foucault reads history precisely in terms of what is thinkable at a given time as “problematic” or as difficulties “which hold true as a possible question” (Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” interview by Paul Rabinow, trans. Lydia Davis, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. 1 of *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, trans. Davis et al., ed. Rabinow [New York, 1997], p. 118).

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theirs.”⁶ With these words, Denis Diderot in 1755 described the traditional idea of natural right. He must have known something about rights, having already been imprisoned due to the critical tone of one of his manuscripts as well as having been constrained to write a retraction for an early *Encyclopédie* (1751) article dedicated to political authority. Diderot’s more general point in the considerably more sober although equally influential entry that appeared in volume 5 of the *Encyclopédie* was that humanity could in fact be accepted by any reasonable man as an overriding criterion to determine the question of what is right. Beyond its anthropocentric emphasis or dialogical approach as such, what is historically unique about this argument is that to convince his readers that a humanitarian justice is right, Diderot self-consciously invokes a skeptical Hobbesian figure. He refers us to an impassioned man who, although wishing “to be just and by his justice to ward off the ascription of ‘evil,’” still has no problem with acting on his mundane passions because he suspects that in the end everyone is free to do the same (“DN,” p. 19). “Who, among you, on the verge of death,” the skeptical interlocutor is imagined as carefully objecting, “would not buy back his life at the expense of the majority of the human race, if he could be sure to do so with impunity and in secret?” (“DN,” p. 18). The common sense quality that he finds in this reasoning prompts Diderot to reply that, precisely, “private wills are suspect. . . . But the general will [of mankind] is always good” (“DN,” pp. 17–20).

In a sense, Diderot does little more than paraphrase Samuel Pufendorf’s social defense of natural justice, even if he does seem to anticipate a post-foundational or performative politics when he grasps “the nature of *natural right*,” at the end of an entry that is supposed to define this very concept, through his readiness “to entertain the supposition that species [are] in perpetual flux” (“DN,” p. 21).⁷ His broadly juridical orientation towards mankind follows closely the legal project of Pufendorf, who had already attempted to politicize humanity within a framework of natural law, at least to the extent of secularizing the universal idea of right and providing it with a rational basis that could hold true under all religions.⁸ In principle,

6. Denis Diderot, “Droit naturel,” in *Political Writings*, trans. and ed. John Hope Mason and Robert Wokler (New York, 1992), p. 20; hereafter abbreviated “DN.”

7. For a classical statement on postfoundational politics, see Judith Butler, “For a Careful Reading,” in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (New York, 1995), pp. 128–29. For a recent reflection on the implications of this statement, see Carlos Palacios, “Freedom Can also Be Productive: The Historical Inversions of ‘The Conduct of Conduct,’” *Journal of Political Power* 11, no. 2 (2018): 252–72.

8. See Patrick Riley, “The Legal Theory of Pufendorf,” in *The Philosophers’ Philosophy of Law from the Seventeenth Century to Our Days*, in vol. 10 of *A Treatise of Legal Philosophy and General Jurisprudence*, ed. Enrico Pattaro et. al (New York, 2009), pp. 65–75.

Diderot was trying, as did Pufendorf, to offer a counterargument to Hobbes by openly considering the value of Hobbes's own arguments, even in the context of a much less receptive France.⁹ Yet ultimately, he was seeking to bypass Hobbes entirely—and with Hobbes, the narrow-minded frame of interpretation fixated on the act of distinguishing the social from the natural (whether good or evil) individual.¹⁰

Although both positions in this imaginary dialogue with a violent interlocutor have their own genealogy, the way they come together in Diderot's rationale makes for a significant departure. Diderot displays a strikingly open disposition towards the question of how doing something at a remove from the public eye affects human morality. "Were it not for fear of punishment," he wrote as early as 1749, "many people would have fewer qualms at killing a man who was far enough away to appear no larger than a swallow than in butchering a steer with their own hands."¹¹ This morbidly open-minded way of thinking is in principle Aristotelian, as Carlo Ginzburg has indicated, but "it is Aristotle pushed to an extreme." No other author before Diderot had inferred from this possibly unfortunate relation between distance and indifference in human nature a rationalization for the "presumable lack of remorse of the murderer" ("KCM," p. 50).

Diderot's moral openness is even more acutely reflected in the irreducibly ethical character of his interlocutor. The interlocutor is neither a moral skeptic who is bound by instinct to look for some "good to himself," as Hobbes would put it, nor one who relies on what has been at times called the invisible-men problem.¹² Richard Rorty also calls the latter the "rational egotist's question," which he traces back to Plato. As he describes it, the problem in that case has to do with the skeptical question, "why should I be moral?"¹³ Diderot's skeptic does not reject questioning about the morality of his actions. He affirms, after all, that he is trying to "ward off the ascription of 'evil.'" Notice how this skeptic persistently strives to justify himself in Diderot's text:

Yet I am fair and honest. . . . If my happiness demands that I rid myself of all persons who intrude upon my life, then anyone else may equally rid himself of my presence if it offends him. This only

9. See *ibid.*, pp. 65–68.

10. See Mason and Wokler, "Introduction," in Diderot, *Political Writings*, p. xiv.

11. Quoted in Carlo Ginzburg, "Killing a Chinese Mandarin: The Moral Implications of Distance," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Autumn 1994): 51; hereafter abbreviated "KCM."

12. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (New York, 1998), p. 88.

13. Richard Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," in *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993*, ed. Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (New York, 1993), pp. 124, 133.

stands to reason, I agree. I am not so unjust as to demand from someone else a sacrifice which I am not myself prepared to make for him. ["DN," pp. 18–19]

Diderot, embracing an ethos of mutual accountability, offers in turn a number of more or less persuasive criticisms of the humanitarian skeptic—"that he sets himself as both judge and advocate," "that it is absurd to wish upon others the same wishes one would entertain for oneself"—but, in the end, what is worthy of attention is not the content of these answers as much as the fact that such reasons are being addressed to a reasonable skeptic ("DN," p. 19). Many thinkers before Diderot had attempted to provide decisive reasons for sociable and even benevolent behavior. Joseph Butler advanced a line of justification for "reasonable self-love," for example, contending that, while both selfish and compassionate endeavors can bring satisfaction, "in case of disappointment, the benevolent man has clearly the advantage; since endeavouring to do good considered as a virtuous pursuit, is gratified by its own consciousness, *i.e.* is in a degree its own reward."¹⁴ Notwithstanding, as in the case of more Hobbesian writers such as Bernard Mandeville, the rational locus and point of departure for Joseph Butler's reasons was still a passion-ridden subject, one capable of reflecting upon its own impulses and desires but essentially self-engrossed and impervious to morality or the question of the other's correlated afflictions as such.

Diderot's originality lies in the light that he is able to shed upon what Judith Butler would call the "ethical violence" of this classical humanist debate, that is, the unaccountable judgment that is instigated towards the other by taking for granted "the structure of address."¹⁵ Diderot stops to reflect about the debate, of course, firstly from the perspective of the skeptic, emphasizing that "the good and the evil man alike" would surely admit that "in all things we must exercise our reason" and that moral justice only makes sense as a matter of "calculated" rather than "instinctual good and evil" ("DN," p. 18). But what is even more determinative is that Diderot refuses to let any of the parties in the debate take themselves "out of the mode of address (being addressed as well as addressing the other)."¹⁶ Diderot compels the inquirer no less than the skeptic to keep the other in mind, asking that the "reasonable man" "be mindful to put forward nothing which is not obvious" and that the violent interlocutor pay attention to

14. Joseph Butler, "Sermon 11: Upon the Love of Our Neighbour," in *Fifteen Sermons and Other Writings in Ethics*, ed. David McNaughton (New York, 2017), p. 98.

15. See Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York, 2005), p. 63.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

the “judgment he proclaims in the depths of his soul . . . for otherwise we should have to shut him up without any reply” (“DN,” pp. 18–19).

By bringing to the fore this ethical violence, Diderot politicizes the urgent question about the immanent right of humanity both in a substantive and formal sense. In fact, it is only thanks to the formal sense—to the way he opens up the humanist problematization to plural contestation—that he is able to crystallize Pufendorf’s project and apprehend the substantive sense of the question. Pufendorf had succeeded only in posing the need of a rationally humanitarian conceptualization of natural law, one that valued *socialitas* and ratio above a natural state of war. But Pufendorf was unable to reconcile the reasonable and forcible aspects of a sovereign’s natural right thus conceived.¹⁷ Diderot succeeds in this game of political extrapolation but not because he is finally able to adduce absolute, coherent, and irrefutable reasons to substantiate the juridical basis for a democratization of sovereignty. Rather, the liberal-humanist project becomes thoroughly conceivable thanks to the mutation that he produces in the terms of the debate. What used to be the problem for a secular understanding of natural law suddenly becomes itself the answer in the form of the general will of mankind. An unbounded collective orientation becomes thinkable as an answer once it is posed in relation to a different skeptic, one who no longer calls for a legitimate principle of self-restraint or any effective way of instituting the respect of the other’s individual sovereignty as such, but a skeptic who, being intrinsically susceptible to relational issues and capable of thinking about justice, requires instead reasons to believe in *this or that or any* collaborative society. Distanced from questions of subjection, the matter of materializing the interests of humanity in thought as a meaningful possibility becomes itself the definition of the political.

The question of what is right still guides Diderot, at least in a broad sense. A firm humanist stance makes his multiperspectival inquiry a properly political one, in the sense that Hannah Arendt would defend—that of not falling into purely Socratic relativism.¹⁸ In the end, it is thanks to the way he daringly poses his criterion of judgment, *the general will*, that the concept of humanity is effectively politicized in the dual sense that it is recognized to be a universal problematic (relevant to all individuals, regardless of how reasonable, skeptical, or selfish they are) and a contested field open to inquiry as to its solvability. Nevertheless, through this discourse he at the same time adopts the most radical stance that a strictly political

17. See Riley, “The Legal Theory of Pufendorf,” pp. 65–74.

18. See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago, 1982), pp. 36–37.

spectrum can endure. His claim is a modern one—arguably the first claim of modern radicalism—for his absolute confidence in what is right does not rely on something akin to hermeneutics or a hidden source of truth.¹⁹ The source of his conviction and sense of rightfulness is a different though surely overly ambitious supposition that, given the chance, he could convince any skeptic. What allows Diderot to suggest that whoever continues to disregard the humanitarian ethos is “either insane or morally evil by design” is not a moral bias but a committed attitude towards the universally acceptable (“DN,” p. 19). While the problem founding his radicalism is the matter of what to do in the face of a moral skeptic, his answer is not moralistic. A criterion like *the general will of mankind* is useful to Diderot not simply because it can tell us what is ethical but rather because it can elucidate the more difficult and intrinsically political question of what is more ethical.

Rousseau’s Inner Humanitarian Skeptic

Rousseau in a sense achieved what Diderot had first formulated. One could say that he managed to persuade a highly hierarchical French society of the political self-evidence of radical equality. As Clifford Orwin expresses it, Rousseau “was the first to promote compassion as an affair of social class, as something owed by the rich just because they were rich to the poor just because they were poor.”²⁰ Yet in another sense, one that has been left unrecognized so far, his achievement consisted of pushing Diderot’s ideas to the brink of paradox—to the point that a persistent and inexorably critical will for resolution could only lead to reassessing these ideas in a postradical light.

As has long been suggested, Rousseau’s may well have been the greatest influence upon the Revolution, particularly if one agrees with James Swenson’s point “that influence is always retrospective.”²¹ Regardless, Rousseau’s consideration of the kind of suffering that is caused by society rather than nature was arguably unprecedented. From his first political writing, the *Discourse on Inequality* (1755), Rousseau clearly brought an extreme line of questioning into the center of a hitherto aristocratic worldview. When the manuscript of his *Discourse* was in page proofs and after considering his own distressing argument—that inequality and oppression must exist in any society since social life leads individuals to compete for esteem and privilege and cast aside their genuine regard for others—he decided to ask

19. See Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, trans. Stephen W. Sawyer, ed. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt (Chicago, 2014).

20. Clifford Orwin, “Rousseau and the Discovery of Political Compassion,” in *The Legacy of Rousseau*, ed. Orwin and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago, 1997), p. 309.

21. Swenson, *On Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, p. 52.

without hesitation: “What, then, is to be done? Must societies be totally abolished?”²² The forcefulness of Rousseauian sensibility, its way of dislodging moral sense from tradition, and the urgency it brings to intervening and exercising human judgment from a sort of blank slate can all be readily sensed in this question, published in the same year as Diderot’s incisive encyclopedia article.

Nonetheless, the impact of the *Discourse* and all of Rousseau’s work is perhaps best understood in terms of its exemplary public role—as a matter, in Carol Blum’s convincing formulation, of “a powerful bonding with the persona of the virtuous Rousseau.”²³ In this sense, Rousseau can be seen as the heir of Diderot’s successfully rationalized humanism, for his exaltation of a capacity for virtue inherent in every individual amounted to the most effective eighteenth-century attack on the Hobbesian narrative of corrupted selfhood standing in the way of social radicalism. In thinking about this liberation of the political mindset, one cannot but stare at the radicalized figure of Maximilien Robespierre. But, rather than stress with Arendt the sentimental boundlessness that surrounded Robespierre’s reign of terror as well as future Marxisms, we may prefer to recognize with Blum how Robespierre was just one more revolutionary who had learned from Rousseau to recognize his own intrinsic dignity. As he put it in 1789, “it was only after this internal transformation that he was moved to ‘reflect upon the great principles of the social order.’”²⁴

Diderot did not embrace Rousseauian virtue. He even explicitly aligned, as most readers would, Rousseau and Hobbes in terms of their rhetorical departure.²⁵ But against the Rousseau that speaks to us about a “state of nature,” it is still possible to counterpose the one who warns us in advance that all this has ever been is a “hypothetical” projection of humanity rather than a historical state, the one for whom those “brutes” who can be innocently imagined to have lived “in nature,” outside time and space for all practical purposes, “having no moral relations or determinate obligations one with another, could not be either good or bad” in any case.²⁶ Rousseau himself articulated at length the most decisive counterargument in this respect, although as part of a narrative that would go much further than

22. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, in *The Social Contract: Or the Principles of Political Right and Discourses*, trans. George Douglas Howard Cole (London, 1923), p. 245.

23. Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986), p. 13.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 34. See also Arendt, *On Revolution* (London, 2006), esp. chap. 2.

25. See Diderot, “Hobbisme,” in *Political Writings*, pp. 27–29.

26. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, pp. 175, 176, 195.

Diderot had. On reflection, after having praised and paraphrased Diderot's influential statement in the same volume 5 of the *Encyclopédie* where it had appeared, Rousseau decided to dedicate one of the first chapters of *The Social Contract: Or the Principles of Political Right* (1762) to explaining, under the ironic title "The General Society of the Human Race," why Diderot seemed to confuse the sudden sense of urgency awakened by a humanitarian problematic with the challenge of its resolution.²⁷

The unique postradicalism of Rousseau's reply has probably been overlooked due to the fact that in the end he decided to excise the whole chapter from the final text. Exceptionally among Rousseau scholars, Robert Wokler holds that this chapter draft, perhaps the most original piece in what is known as the *Geneva Manuscript*, strangely exhibits a kind of "ancient postmodernism" because it puts into question the "abstract foundationalism of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century metaphysics in terms later to be embraced by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and their followers."²⁸ In a similar vein, but hoping to sidestep the anachronism, I approach this text as an event in what Foucault called "the history of thought" or the history of the ways "by which one detaches oneself" from a domain of practice "and reflects on it as a problem."²⁹ Regardless of its immediate influence on classical political economists, Rousseau's reflection manages to articulate a certain mode of thinking and problematizing that strongly resembles moves made by other founding figures of liberal modernity, a mode that postmodern thinkers would later fail to recognize as part of modern political thought's own inception.

The *Geneva Manuscript* is the place where Rousseau effects the appropriation, for posterity as we know, of the term *general will*. In spite of the other and even more confrontational title this chapter draft first carried, "That There Is No Natural Society among Men," Rousseau understood that Diderot's proposal had little concern with logistical details and solely offered an abstract foundation. The *general will* for Diderot was simply the standard of justice that all humans, being part of the same thinking species, inevitably shared. His ambitious theory was that the *will of the species* could be followed by everyone, for it "is in each person a pure expression of the understanding," and therefore it is that which "forms the rule binding the conduct of one individual towards another in the same society . . . and of

27. See Rousseau, "The General Society of the Human Race," in "Discourse on Political Economy" and "The Social Contract," trans. Christopher Betts (New York, 1994), pp. 169–75; hereafter abbreviated "GS."

28. Wokler, "Ancient Postmodernism in the Philosophy of Rousseau," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. Riley (New York, 2001), p. 419.

29. Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," p. 117.

that society towards other societies” (“DN,” p. 21). Rousseau would eventually offer the whole of *The Social Contract* as a set of instructions for political management.³⁰ But this sharp practical focus was only made possible by a previous adjustment of the theoretical scale.³¹ Unlike Diderot, he just could not see how the understanding of this will and the drive to follow it could somehow come naturally to the individual. How exactly, he questioned, could it be as general as to include the whole of humanity at once?

Diderot’s rather disproportionate claim is that everyone is actually supposed to be a humanitarian. Evincing his unique radicalism, Diderot suggests that the general will should be “evident to anyone who uses his reason” (“DN,” p. 21). But Rousseau finds the task of enlightening others to be misguided and is instead inclined to grant his skeptical interlocutor the benefit of the doubt. In Rousseau’s own rational mind, it remains “unclear how it is that his personal interest requires his submission to the general will” (“GS,” p. 173; my emphasis). Rather systematically, Rousseau goes through all the imaginable options. If a common sentiment of humanity is natural to all human beings, the egoistic passions are in any case more powerful; if the universal is the sheer capacity to think we all have, it is unlikely that “the majority of men” can master “the art of generalizing ideas” and “deduce principles of conduct from this way of reasoning”; if it is God’s will, it cannot be reliable because “the multitude . . . will always be given gods as insensate as itself”; finally, if it is an “interior voice” that one uses as one’s conscience, it is unlikely that this voice will be oriented to the general will because as history has proven, it is culturally shaped (“GS,” pp. 174, 173, 174):

Only from the social order already existing among us do we derive the idea of the order that we imagine. . . . From even the slightest research into classical antiquity it will easily be perceived that sound ideas on natural law and the universal fraternity of all men were quite late in developing, and progressed through society so slowly that it was only Christianity that disseminated them adequately.
[“GS,” p. 174]

30. See, however, that Rousseau specified that the published text was only a portion of a more ambitious project that he had envisioned before “realizing [his] limitations” (Rousseau, *The Social Contract or the Principles of Political Right*, in “*Discourse on Political Economy*” and “*The Social Contract*,” p. 44).

31. See that in his initial invocation of the general will, Rousseau adopted the same global scope, considering the case in which “the great city of the world becomes a political body” (Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy*, in “*Discourse on Political Economy*” and “*The Social Contract*,” p. 7).

The problem, as he tries to demonstrate with all of these examples, is that there is no such thing as a natural element in society that is able to spontaneously and effortlessly drive it towards a more inclusive sense of justice. “The gentle voice of nature,” Rousseau counters, is not “an infallible guide for us” (“GS,” p. 170). Contemporary Rousseau scholars have often noted the actual antinaturalist orientation of Rousseau—the fact that he advocated for a “‘denaturing’ education”³² or even that he may have been the first to consider that “not enough of our [human] nature is visible or recoverable to provide us with a clear guide to what viable self we can create.”³³ But one can further appreciate in these words the basis of a whole political sensibility, one that does not necessarily end in postmodern anti-foundationalism as Wokler suggests.³⁴ Instead of falling into despair, Rousseau in fact closes the chapter with a new kind of “enthusiasm” that leads him to believe that the skeptic or “enemy of the human race” can nevertheless be brought “back to humanity” and “become good, virtuous, and compassionate” (“GS,” p. 175). This enthusiasm reappears when he infers that, if the right way of being a humanitarian is not given in advance, neither by nature, nor God, nor reason, nor culture, then the looming question of what is to be done is always awaiting a response. The task of the skeptical humanitarian cannot be other than to craft an answer:

Let us endeavour to find the cure for the disease within the disease itself. By new forms of association let us, if we can, correct the faults in the general form of association. . . . Let us show him [the skeptic], by perfecting the social art, how to mend the damage done . . . by this art in its beginnings. [“GS,” p. 175]

In this way, Rousseau comes to identify humanitarian politics with a postradical condition. Against Diderot, who had framed his argument around the idea of a natural right, Rousseau decides to speak of humanist intervention as an extension of social art, implying that it is a practice that requires crafting, dedication and, most importantly, demonstration. Let us show others, he resolves, that even if we cannot confirm whether a deep humanity is part of our makeup, we can work with whatever cultural materials we have at our disposal to fabricate another coexistence. What has to

32. See Riley, “Rousseau’s Philosophy of Transformative, ‘Denaturing’ Education,” *Oxford Review of Education* 37 (Oct. 2011): 573–86.

33. Alan Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, N.J., 2012), p. 232.

34. See, however, Wokler, “Rousseau’s Pufendorf: Natural Law and the Foundations of Commercial Society,” in *Rousseau, the Age of Enlightenment, and Their Legacies*, ed. Bryan Garsten (Princeton, N.J., 2012), p. 88. His reading of Rousseau and the *Geneva Manuscript* comes much closer in this essay to a postfoundational understanding of rights.

be shown is that it is plausible to invent new forms of association with a global sense of justice and that the social art that has failed us so far can actually be refined. The political humanitarian is the one who aspires to a fairer society, knowing that the one that does exist amounts to a “disease.” Yet, while the existent social art is insufficient, there is no predetermination as to how that art should be altered either. Let us endeavor to find the cure for the disease within the disease itself is all a postradical radical can really say.

Hume’s Insensibility towards Insensible Men

The contemporary sentimentalist approach that considers humanitarianism to be a matter of civilized education or sensibilization has been often traced back to David Hume.³⁵ Such an approach, however, would not necessarily be antithetical to Rousseau’s postradical program, at least as long as one does not assume that every human being was meant to be humanitarian. Sensibility simply becomes one other strategy, one that, as Rorty famously said in defense of rights talk, can be fervently mobilized regardless of one’s (in principle) ironic attitude towards the naturalistic tone of human rights.³⁶ Still, while any genealogy of liberal humanism must acknowledge this sentimental legacy, Hume himself can be deemed only to have been a pioneer from within his own preradicalism.

Hume was just one more author within that broad intellectual movement that sought to balance Hobbes’s notion of selfish individuality with an account of spontaneous sympathy, fellow-feeling, and humanity.³⁷ But, significantly, within that early modern movement he was the first to point to moral bias as a defining feature of our sympathetic affect for others (see “KCM,” pp. 57–58). As he reflected, there was a reason why human beings had a natural limitation in their ability to care for distant others, even if they rationally praised such a disposition:

There is an easy reason, why every thing contiguous to us, either in space or time, shou’d be conceiv’d with a peculiar force and vivacity, and excel every other object, in its influence on the imagination. . . . The imagination is extremely quick and agile; but the passions are slow and restive.³⁸

35. See Laqueur, “Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making of ‘Humanity,’” pp. 31–32.

36. See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

37. See Michael L. Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today* (New York, 2010).

38. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York, 2000), pp. 274–82.

Rousseau did not invent an absolutely new problem, nor did he pass it on to future generations as a legacy of the Enlightenment. He simply captured with unparalleled clarity and at the earliest stage possible a latent concern among classical liberal writers with the counterintuitive direction of a humanitarian sensibility. Rousseau's unpublished chapter constitutes a rare case in which it is possible to recognize the kind of "problematization" that Foucault thought could lie "at the root" of the "diverse solutions" provided by a style of thought, being that which "makes them simultaneously possible."³⁹ Suddenly, it became clear to many eighteenth-century thinkers that if human beings are not naturally inclined towards a humanitarian existence, they should be approached as such, as individuals with what Hume precisely called "peculiar interests."⁴⁰ Human interests were not exactly egotistic, as Hobbes had originally suggested, but they needed to be reassessed as being definitely and unarguably biased in favor of those others who were not "strangers."⁴¹

Politically, Hume does take this departure seriously, to the point that he depicts a state of nature that, as Michael Frazer describes it, is "marked by the biased operation of immediate sympathy, which draws people close to those connected to them by blood, affection, or resemblance, while keeping all others at an emotional distance."⁴² By emphasizing the localism of our narrow-minded tendencies in matters of sympathy, Hume was able to advance a theory of justice that sought to correct the human moral bias, mostly by appealing to the individual's own interest in cooperating with an ever-expanding circuit of collaboration.⁴³ His solution, however, was far from radical. It relied on the ultimately conservative premise that the capacity of individuals to obey conventional rules—even if such conventions were conceived to be part of a social "artifice" and hence somehow malleable in character—would lead them to positively redirect their "misplaced" or "misguided" passions.⁴⁴

More explicitly relevant to the working conception of radicalism that has been introduced here, the conflict that Hume seeks to solve is not essentially social but, as Annette Baier has stressed, "intrapersonal," a matter of reconciling the contradictions that emerge at an emotional level for the

39. Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," p. 118.

40. Palacios, "Society, Like the Market, Needs to Be Constructed: Foucault's Critical Project at the Dawn of Neoliberalism," *History of the Human Sciences* 31 (Feb. 2018): 86.

41. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 315.

42. Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy*, pp. 69–70.

43. See Annette C. Baier, "Hume, the Women's Moral Theorist?" in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers (Totowa, N.J., 1987), p. 42.

44. Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy*, pp. 69, 42.

sake of moral progress. For Hume, the problem of humanity has not yet been decisively politicized and the radical imperative to integrate the humanitarian skeptic, whether strategically or condescendingly, has not fully materialized. As Baier elucidates it, using some of Hume's own words, for him a "lover of conflict will have no reason, since he will have no motive, to cultivate the moral sentiment, and nor will that man of 'cold insensibility' who is 'unaffected with the images of human happiness or misery.'"⁴⁵

Adam Smith's Humanist Self-Restraint

By the time Adam Smith writes his two major works, one on morality and the other on economics, a pioneering political problematization of humanism has already taken on board the insight that we all share a certain susceptibility to humanitarian skepticism. In Smith's accounts one finds a much more textured and mature understanding of the affective bias that Hume had highlighted in human nature. He is able to reflect in a myriad of ways upon what Fonna Forman-Barzilai articulates as our condition of "sentimental nearsightedness."⁴⁶ Smith's sociological realism as regards the provincialism of humanitarian thought is probably matched in his own time only by the counter-revolutionary thought and protoromanticism of his friend Edmund Burke. Smith in effect rejected what he considered to be the unrealistic rigor of Stoic and neo-Augustinian ethics, the idea that it was plausible to "collapse the natural concentric structure of our affections" either "by augmenting beneficence" or "extirpating self-preference."⁴⁷ Yet, as was also the case with Rousseau, Smith's weariness towards cosmopolitan visions should be seen as stemming from a deeply pragmatic and ultimately radical commitment to address the skeptical other so as to effectively shape society in the image of the humanitarian.⁴⁸

In a sense, Smith actually extends the postradical problematization beyond what Rousseau ever achieved, by signaling it to his readership in a much more public and confrontational way. One sees from Rousseau's published writings that Hume's moral realism had already acquired a certain common-sense quality. In 1755, Rousseau refers in passing to how "it seems as though our feelings of humanity evaporate and weaken as they extend across the earth, as though we cannot be as sensitive to calamities

45. Baier, "Hume, the Women's Moral Theorist?" p. 41.

46. Fonna Forman-Barzilai, *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy: Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory* (New York, 2009), p. 139.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 120, 120–21, 121.

48. See Helena Rosenblatt, "Rousseau, the Anticosmopolitan?" *Daedalus* 137 (Summer 2008): 59–67.

in Tartary or Japan as to those that are suffered by a European people.”⁴⁹ But by 1760, when Smith publishes the second edition of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, this realistic acknowledgment is fully transfigured into an ethicopolitical challenge. He invokes, as a thought experiment, the example of “a man of humanity in Europe” who hears about a catastrophic earthquake in China and still has less difficulty sleeping at night than if he had lost “his little finger.” Even without having to refer to a violent interlocutor, as Diderot, more cautiously, had done, Smith is willing to ask: “to prevent, therefore, this paltry misfortune to himself, would a man of humanity be willing to sacrifice the lives of a hundred millions of his brethren, provided he had never seen them?”⁵⁰

By foregrounding the problematic of a humanitarian skeptic, we can today understand why Rousseau may have had an implicit desire to frame the collectivist solution of the social contract as a matter of both self-preservation, of defending oneself from those who could feel free to harm others in the absence of a collective force, and as a matter of individual freedom, without which those who might be tempted to be skeptical could not be persuaded to commit genuinely to a protective form of association.⁵¹ In the case of Smith, however, the challenge lies in appreciating the seriousness with which he so explicitly approached this problematic even at his most utilitarian, that is, when he states that “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker” that a fair state of global coexistence can be realized.⁵² The programmatic statement that followed his 1760 thought experiment is perhaps the most telling in this sense:

When our passive feelings are almost always so sordid and so selfish, how comes it that our active principles should often be so generous and so noble? When we are always so much more deeply affected by whatever concerns ourselves, than by whatever concerns other men; what is it which prompts the generous, upon all occasions, and the mean upon many, to sacrifice their own interests to the greater interests of others? It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature has lighted up in the human heart. . . . It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the

49. Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy*, p. 17.

50. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (New York, 2004), p. 178; hereafter abbreviated *TMS*.

51. See Rousseau, *The Social Contract or the Principles of Political Right*, pp. 54–55.

52. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, 2 vols. (New York, 1976), 2:26–27.

breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct.
[TMS, p. 178]

In spite of his late economicism, Smith is then far from a humanitarian skeptic. He is rather the exemplary case for a classical postradicalism that methodically explores humanitarian practices with a truly expansive applicability, looking for those rationales that lead even *the mean* and those with just a *feeble spark of benevolence* to act sometimes or even often in a *generous* and *noble* way. Like Rousseau, Smith simply looks for a strategic logic that, while not coming naturally to human beings in the way Diderot had imagined, still can be universally implemented. Early in his career, he envisions the inner “impartial spectator” as a mental position with which he believes most individuals would be familiar.⁵³ Later on, of course, he makes all hinge on the invisible hand of the market. Even when the latter depends on a certain human “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange,” what is relevant to him, as he clarifies from the beginning of *The Wealth of Nations*, is not “whether this propensity be one of those original principles in human nature” but how it seems from observation to be “common to all men.”⁵⁴

Smith describes strategies that are particularly conscious of the fact that human beings have their own “peculiar interests.” He evinces, in this sense, the broadly liberal concern with giving due consideration and, when possible, priority to the private interests and liberties of the individual in the construction of modes of coexistence that will be fair. But the reason for this stance does not have to be explained as a sacred respect for freedom. If we return to Rousseau, for example, when he challenged the strategy of Diderot by alluding to his own individuality, asking “how it is that his personal interest requires his submission to the general will,” he was not imposing the value of freedom over social justice. Rousseau would immediately agree with Diderot if he thought that, were he somehow a skeptic, he could be converted by simply reading or hearing about Diderot’s exhortations on the rightfulness of humanity as a natural law. Yet since he cannot find any self-evident reason in this text or elsewhere for his inner skeptic to follow such a general will, he must assume that the humanitarian perception is, in spite of his own common sense, a rather rare sensibility.

Smith and Rousseau do not need to go as far as becoming humanitarian skeptics. For the time being they must remain skeptical humanitarians.

53. See Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, 2004), p. 44.

54. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, p. 25.

Their liberal posture is contingent, for it only appears as the by-product of a prior decision to embrace a certain humanist self-restraint. Refusing to negate the skeptical position, they thus have to restrict the validity of the humanitarian claim to cover only those who find it feasible. At any rate, Smith's moral realism has been much more difficult to digest than Rousseau's. Yet Smith is actually the one who started to target directly the source and implication of this humanist problematic: the sentimental shortsightedness behind the exclusionary other. Returning to a more explicit humanitarian register, at least at first, he declared as a priority the matter of impartial spectatorship, the fundamental need to make an effort through the imagination to correct our natural bias towards the human suffering of those who are in our physical and social proximity. "Of all the corrupters of moral sentiments," he vociferously inferred, "faction and fanaticism have always been by far the greatest." He warned us about the peril posed by the citizen who "pays little regard to the sentiments which foreign nations may entertain" and whose "whole ambition is to obtain the approbation of his own fellow-citizens," for "he can never please them so much as by enraging and offending their enemies" (*TMS*, pp. 201, 199).

Kant's Rational Faith in the Scoundrel

Kant's concern with postradical impartiality was even more acute. Arendt even suggests that "the real political faculty in Kant's philosophy" is what she calls an "enlarged mentality" or the ability to imagine alternative standpoints in order to form one's judgment.⁵⁵ Yet, even for her, Kant never fully developed this political dimension and left us, for the most part, with a "moralizing" categorical imperative or, at best, a renewed "version of the theory of enlightened self-interest."⁵⁶

Her argument is that Kant's humanitarian inclination towards self-legislation is actually derived from a Socratic vision that points not to a political as much as personal project of living in agreement with oneself.⁵⁷ Against this interpretation, I would rather stress the presence of a not immediately immoral humanitarian skeptic as a defining referent in Kant's both political and moral thought.

As Riley recently points out, Kant goes considerably further than Diderot in his desire to find a readily agreeable cosmopolitan rationality, that desire to which Rousseau had objected so explicitly in the *Geneva Manuscript*

55. Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York, 2005), p. 169.

56. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, pp. 17, 18.

57. See *ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

for its still naturalistic orientation.⁵⁸ Yet, it must be granted that Kant never believed the categorical imperative to be a principle that could be derived “from some *particular property of human nature*,” that is, neither from a “special natural predisposition of humanity” nor “from a special tendency peculiar to human reason.”⁵⁹ His unique juridical device was still, in the end, a matter of strategy, for, as he conceded, “a rational being that itself were to follow this maxim punctiliously cannot, because of that, count on every other to be true to it as well” (*GMM*, p. 50). In general, one can sense in his departure an optimism similar to that which had led Rousseau to embrace a social art.⁶⁰ For, even at his most moral and rationalistic, the ultimate justification underlying Kant’s humanist work was simply that “the idea of a pure world of understanding as a whole of all intelligences . . . remains always a useful and permissible idea for the sake of a rational faith” (*GMM*, p. 71).

Arendt notes at one point in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* how his understanding of the *bad man* is peculiar in that he “is *not* the man who wills evil” but simply refers, in Kant’s own words, to “those who are ‘secretly inclined to exempt’ themselves.”⁶¹ This reading comes from *Perpetual Peace*, where Kant famously states that even if “the republican constitution is the only one which is perfectly adapted to the rights of man,” though it would require its members “to be angels,” the formation of a peaceful state is in any case “not insoluble, even for a race of devils, granted that they have intelligence.”⁶² Kant never elaborates in this text on why certain individuals would exactly want to exempt themselves or why it is determining for us to be so inclusive, deferring the underlying justification for the self-evidence of these political questions to the providential, if inaccessible, wisdom of nature.⁶³ But it is still difficult to reduce his conception of the humanitarian skeptic to the matter of a private human propensity towards self-interest—as Arendt eventually does via a certain interpretation

58. See Riley, “Rousseau’s Philosophy of Transformative, ‘Denaturing’ Education,” pp. 577, 578.

59. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (New York, 2012), pp. 37, 38; hereafter abbreviated *GMM*.

60. See Thierry de Duve, “Aesthetics as the Transcendental Ground of Democracy,” *Critical Inquiry* 42 (Autumn 2015): 149–65, who reads Kant’s problematization of humanity as a strictly *aesthetic* ideal that must still be considered foundational for political action precisely because it is a *postulate* and, as such, cannot be proven or disproven. *Humanity* becomes a legitimate transcendental and irrefutable claim the moment it is recognized that it can only be pursued as a matter of art.

61. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, p. 17.

62. Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay*, trans. M. Campbell Smith (London, 1917), pp. 152, 153, 153–154.

63. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 144–46.

of the categorical imperative—if it is indeed accepted that his imagined interlocutors do not will evil in principle and that he is simply committed to find a solution that works even if they were to be imagined as a “race of devils.” There is one crucial instance where Kant does stop to reflect upon the exclusionary other, in the very text where he develops the idea of the categorical imperative:

There is no one, not even the most hardened scoundrel, if only he is otherwise in the habit of using reason, who—when one presents him with examples of probity of purpose . . . of compassion and of general benevolence (involving in addition great sacrifices of advantages and comfort)—does not wish that he too might be so disposed.
[GMM, p. 63]

For Kant, evil may not have been a “banality”—to use Arendt’s own expression—that is, something that is never chosen as such.⁶⁴ But he does definitely approach it with pragmatism. Not even in the case of the categorical imperative can one say that he was seeking to tell the “bad man” what was actually right. For the contemporary revisionist historian of human rights, Samuel Moyn, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* only shows how Kant’s extreme rationalism towards the liberal-humanist morality was itself a practical response to the increasingly thinkable possibility of an “empathically numbed agent”—a way of taking sentimentalism “beyond intersubjective identification altogether.”⁶⁵ His humanitarian strategy would have been, in this sense, to reason with “the scoundrel,” who may well wish evil now but perhaps only because of lacking “the clear conviction” to enact a radically collaborative behavior “of which the world so far has perhaps not yet given an example” (GMM, p. 22). As Kant at one point revealingly declares, categorical imperatives are strategically meant to work “for beings, who, like us, are also affected by sensibility, as incentives of a different kind” (GMM, p. 59).

Recovering a Classical Postradical Sensibility

It is thanks to Ginzburg’s inquiry into the infamous scenario of a European who is untroubled by killing a Chinese mandarin, published

64. See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 1965). See also Paul Formosa, “Kant on the Limits of Human Evil,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 34 (2009): 190–93.

65. Samuel Moyn, “Empathy in History, Empathizing with Humanity,” review of *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* by Carolyn J. Dean and *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, and Critical Theory* by Dominick LaCapra, *History and Theory* 45 (Oct. 2006): 401, 409.

twenty-five years ago in this journal, that so much of the genealogy of the ethical humanitarian skeptic has been clarified. But Ginzburg missed a crucial implication of that Eurocentric philosopheme by focusing on Aristotle, Hume, and Diderot, while leaving out authors like Rousseau, Smith, and Kant. For Ginzburg, the interesting question that follows from the sociological proposition of a sentimental nearsightedness is “how can we [historically] trace the boundary between distance and extreme distance?” (“KCM,” p. 57). But, beyond the issue of whether such a boundary can even be traced in any comprehensive way—although Eric Hayot has made some headway in this sense—what I find immediately relevant about this proposition is that a number of classical, foundational thinkers of liberal democracy seem to have built their political theories from a position of humanist self-restraint in order to render their inner radicalism sociologically viable.⁶⁶ As Hayot’s work has demonstrated, Ginzburg’s concern leads us to recognize in the example of China the kind of other that has helped Western modernity to culturally draw “the very distinction between otherness and similarity . . . the very idea of horizons.”⁶⁷ Attending, instead, to the open-mindedness that Western liberal founding figures displayed when referring to our expected reactions towards suffering when it is Chinese (or similarly distant) points us in the direction of an otherness that has helped define modernity internally rather than externally. The humanitarian skeptic is not a cultural mirror in the horizon but an inner political quandary.

It may be perplexing to find that this line of inquiry can be pursued in such a circular way, ending with the same kind of reversal with which it had started: humanity not as an impossible problem but a reasonable answer. What changes between the moment Diderot declares natural right to be identical with the will of mankind and the moment Kant legislates a categorical imperative of “humanity, as an end in itself,” is the skepticism that is left in the political projection of humanism’s own radical universalism as an irreducible remainder (*GMM*, p. 41). This remainder may take the shape of an easily forgettable scoundrel or a more memorable Chinese mandarin, but its mere presence in the forms of foundational critical thought that proposed such explanations as “the people” or “the invisible hand” endows it with an enduring relevance to the postradical politics of any later age. Particularly when confronting authoritarian (and professedly postdemocratic) populisms, we may need to reconsider the tools of liberal humanism

66. See Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (New York, 2009), p. 270.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

in performative terms, as solutions that were always expected, to use Judith Butler's words, to "become open to a further elaboration."⁶⁸ A classical post-radical problematic invites commitment through something other than opposition or irony, whether towards the free market, the democratic process, or human rights, to the extent that what makes it ultimately compelling is simply knowing how perilous the project of humanity always was from the start.⁶⁹

We seem to be increasingly vexed by the appearance of such exclusionary sentiments, as though their sociological manifestation were unprecedented, foreign to us, an explanandum calling for a new concept that can address such a jarring development.⁷⁰ Yet, from a historicist vantage point, liberal-democratic politics was never a development that followed from the possession of a more sensible claim. It emanated from a strange sensibility that is radical in nature and, for the same reason, in need of strategies rather than ethics as such—or in need of moral reason not because it is more reasonable to be humanitarian but because reasoning how we can actually become humanitarian beings is what will be strategically decisive.

68. Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015), p. 5.

69. For significant efforts in this direction, see, respectively, James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Redistribution* (Durham, N.C., 2015); Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*; and Ben Golder, *Foucault and the Politics of Rights* (Stanford, Calif., 2015).

70. See for example Grahame Thompson's commendable attempt to both differentiate the phenomenon of populism from liberal democracy and to respond to it through a "liberal pluralism" in Grahame F. Thompson, "Populisms and Liberal Democracy—Business as Usual?" *Economy and Society* 46 (Feb. 2017): 55.