

## **New Political and Social Sciences**

With the blossoming of the Enlightenment and the increasing freedom of conscience in Great Britain and other countries, skeptical philosophers and historians began to come out into the open during the 18th century. The grand success of Isaac Newton in explaining the orbits of the planets gave rise to dreams that mathematics and science could be applied to all branches of knowledge. Freethinkers led the way in developing political science and sociology.

### **Bible Criticism and Church History**

The first scholars to critically examine the traditional Christian history and miracles were pious Christians, known as 'erudits', who sincerely wished to sift away what was false so that they could better support what was true. Their compilations of history and sources proved of great use to subsequent secular historians such as Voltaire and Gibbons.

Historical criticism of the Bible emerged in the private writings of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), published after his death by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781). Reimarus established that Paul and other Apostles invented a new Christian world religion which had little to do with the teachings of the Jewish patriot Jesus. These conclusions are basically the same as those held by most secular biblical scholars today. To Reimarus, the Old Testament depicted a tribal religion which was morally inferior to some of the ancient pagan religions. Reimarus was a leader of the German deists. Lessing, who withstood intense orthodox attack for daring to publish the Reimarus 'Fragments', was actually a devote Lutheran who nevertheless defended religious freedom and held every part of his faith up to scrutiny. As such he followed Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) and other "Neologists" who turned the old fideist doctrine on its head; we can only accept revelation if it is consistent with reason.

David Hume, in his *Natural History of Religion*, proposed an evolutionary history of religion starting from primitive animism. Hume refuted the contention of Tindal and other deists that the sophisticated ideas of natural religion were present in primitive religions.

Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), in his monumental *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, exposed the political machinations and petty doctrinal fights of the early "saints" who built orthodox Christianity. In one section, he complained ironically that all the great astronomers of the ancient world, who faithfully recorded every eclipse and comet, entirely missed the great darkness that fell at the moment

Christ died. Gibbon's careful methods helped establish modern historiography.

## Utilitarians

The principle of utility holds that government should try to maximize the sum of all pleasure minus the sum of all pain. Utilitarian science attempts to find formulas for comparing the pleasure and pain resulting from various government policies. There are no assumptions of God ordained morality or of natural rights. Every alternative is judged by an empirical standard of what works best. Most of the utilitarians were freethinkers, either deists or atheists.

Some of the premises of utilitarian thought can be found in Hobbes, who believed that all people are hedonists with only selfish motives. Only the brute power of a monarchy could force people to work together in a society which is ultimately the best for everyone.

The first true utilitarian, David Hume (1711-1776), was more optimistic, because he observed sympathetic motives in himself and others. In *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume defined morality as the recognition that an action which produces pleasure or reduces pain for someone else is equal to one giving the same result in one's self. This is the basic premise of the Utilitarians.

Hume's most important contributions were to the theory of knowledge. In his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, following Locke, Hume held that primary knowledge comes from 'impressions', either through our senses or by experience of our own emotions. Memories and ideas are inexact copies or recombinations of impressions. Hume observed that we form most of our ideas not by clear reasoning but by habit. For example, we have an idea of a self, but it cannot be traced back to a unique impression. Each moment of a life is a different impression. We also form ideas of cause and effect because events are associated, even though we cannot prove a causal relationship.

Hume realized that even the most enlightened philosopher is bound to live life based on ideas acquired from habit. He assumed that a real universe existed 'outside' of his mind, even if he could not prove it. In *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume demolished the arguments of Descartes and others 'proving' God, and showed that we cannot prove nor disprove the existence of God nor anything about God. His arguments applied against both deism and Christianity. A true agnostic, Hume warned against claiming knowledge outside of our direct impressions. To Hume, knowledge is the only legitimate form of worship.

Hume formulated the most skeptical criterion for judging reports of miracles: "No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish." A miracle is by definition impossible, but deception and error are not. "A miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion."

Hume's close friend Adam Smith (1723-1790) founded modern economics with his book, *The Wealth of Nations*. To Smith, the goal of government economic policy should be to improve the standard of living of the common citizen. Arguing against government-protected monopolies and protectionist tariffs, Smith proposed that freedom in the marketplace would lead to national prosperity. He advocated a similar freedom in the marketplace of ideas, religion, and education.

Utilitarians ridiculed the idea of 'natural rights', a doctrine of John Locke and many Deists who claimed that certain rights, such as life, liberty, and security of property, were inherent to each human by nature. Although convenient to writers of revolutionary documents such as the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, natural rights have little support in the historical experience of humanity. We have only the freedom guaranteed by our own power or granted to us by others. But people should remove a government that harms them, if they can. Some authors, such as Thomas Paine, wrote of both natural rights and utilitarian principles without recognizing the contradiction.

The question for Utilitarians was how to tie the interests of individuals together with the interests of others in a society. Adam Smith concluded that given freedom, each person would selfishly try to produce for sale what others wanted, producing a prosperous society. Thus there is a 'natural identity of interest' between individuals and society.

But many Utilitarians, such as the French Philosopher Helvetius, held that the purpose of government is to force people to act together in their own and society's best interest. A system of rewards and punishments produces an 'artificial identity of interest'. Helvetius saw people as the product of their environment, and believed that good laws make good men.

Some Utilitarians saw government as a necessary evil at best. Paine wrote in *Common Sense*, "Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness positively, by uniting our affections: the latter negatively, by restraining our vices."

Paine's friend William Godwin (1756-1836) even predicted that as society

improved by education, government would eventually wither away. He also opposed marriage because it made a woman into the property of her husband. But he secretly married Mary Wollstonecraft, the first modern feminist. Godwin's anarchism enjoyed a brief popularity among English radical republicans, but he fell from favor during the conservative reaction against the excesses of the French revolution.

Utilitarians advocated reforms in the penal system. As the Italian Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794) pointed out, punishment is pain, and is justified only if more than balanced by preventing pain for victims of crime. Therefore punishment should be designed to inflict the least suffering necessary to provide the greatest deterrent. Likelihood of punishment is more important than severity. Beccaria opposed capital punishment and suggested improvements in prisons.

The man who assembled the pieces of Utilitarianism into a movement was Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), with the help of his energetic disciple, James Mill (1773-1836). Bentham found, in a book by Joseph Priestly, the Utilitarian credo "the greatest happiness of the greatest number", which was coined by Francis Hutcheson. This, together with the books of Hume, Beccaria, and Helvetius, inspired Bentham to create a mathematical system for analysing government activity in terms of the pain and pleasure produced. Bentham proposed the development of entirely new law codes based on Utilitarian principles, although it is interesting that many of the results, such as protection of private property, were similar to the old laws, and tended to favor the existing economic structure.

Bentham did not embrace democracy until late in his life, when he was convinced by the ineptitude of the British government that only a government elected by the people could be trusted to look after their best interests. After that, he and his followers worked to extend voting rights to all male citizens.

Bentham's fame spread around the world, and his ideas were applied or studied by Catherine the Great in Russia, several European governments, and many Latin American governments. Bentham shared in the general good opinion of himself. He fantasized of awakening once each century to observe the progress of his ideas, and arranged that his head be preserved after his death.

One Bentham disciple, David Ricardo (1772-1823), was the leading British economist of the era, and a member of parliament. Ricardo was reacting in part to Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), a clergyman who warned of the risks of population growth but rejected birth control as a solution. Ricardo hoped that rapid industrialization would increase production before the population crush would force wages so low and rents so high that people would starve. He

endorsed high profits so that needed capital would accumulate.

James Mill wrote the first English economics textbook for his son, John. He also wrote *A History of British India*, which resulted in reforms and a job for James with the East India Company. He eventually became the director of the company.

### **Owenites**

Robert Owen (1771-1858), a friend of Bentham and Mill, applied his Utilitarian ideals in a great experiment in humanitarian social reform. Owen had worked his way up from apprentice textile worker to become the wealthy owner of many cotton mills. Then he transformed the factories into cooperative villages, with profit-sharing, schools for employees and their children, apartments, good company stores, communal nurseries and kitchens, and associated farms.

Owen tried to persuade the government to adopt reforms including a daily work limit of 10 1/2 hours for children. His factories employed only adults.

Owen saw no need for religion in his villages. He aimed to overcome immorality by improving education, instead of using the threat of religious authority. His teachers experimented with new teaching methods.

In 1825, Robert Owen traveled to America to found a new cooperative village at New Harmony, Indiana. Unfortunately, this effort broke up after a few years, because of squabbles over who owned the land. Robert returned to England, but his two sons, Robert Dale and William, continued the work in America.

### **John Stuart Mill**

The most advanced of philosophers in the Utilitarian line was John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). John's prodigious mind was subjected to the most rigorous 'home schooling' by his father, James. Like the elder Mill, John worked for the East India Company and became the director, but he retired early because he opposed direct rule of India by the Crown and Parliament. Later he was elected to Parliament, where he served the interests of the working class and championed women's rights.

After his father, the largest influence on Mill's writing was his eventual wife, Harriet Taylor Mill (1807-1858). Mill lived for many years with Harriet and her first husband, John Taylor, and married her after Taylor died. He gave her credit as a coauthor of many of his books.

Among Mill's many essays the most famous is *On Liberty*, which urges the civil protection of unpopular ideas. His *System of Logic* was the best on that subject since Aristotle. In *Principles of Political Economy* he suggested

cooperative agriculture and more equal division of profits with workers. He also wrote *The Subjection of Women* and *Utilitarianism*.

Mill's upbringing, without religion, allowed him to explore the subject rationally. He showed that the logical conclusion of Natural Religion (i.e. Deism) is that God is "A Being of great but limited power ... who desires, and pays some regard to, the happiness of his creatures, but who seems to have other motives of action which he cares more for, and who can hardly be supposed to have created the universe for that purpose alone." As for revelation and miracles, Mill concluded that "The whole domain of the supernatural is thus removed from the region of Belief [it never was a matter of Knowledge] into that of simple Hope."

## **Positivism**

Positivism was a movement to apply scientific principles to all aspects of human society. It spawned two "religions", one for each of its colorful founders, Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) and August Comte (1798-1857).

Saint-Simon, who had served with French forces in the American Revolution, renounced his noble title to join the "citizens" in the French Revolution. He was elected to the National Convention, but coming under suspicion because of his aristocratic background and his growing wealth from shrewd business ventures, he was arrested and thrown into the same prison as Thomas Paine, one of his heroes.

In addition to Paine, Saint-Simon's philosophy drew from the works of the Philosophes, particularly Condorcet, and the "Physiocrats", a related group of economists who were influential during the last decades before the revolution.

After his release in the new France, Saint-Simon proposed to replace Theism with a religion of "Positive" science. He envisioned a society led by industrialists, who would sponsor scientists and educate workers to produce abundance for all.

Saint-Simon hired the young August Comte as his secretary. Comte had already shown remarkable ability as a mathematician and teacher at the School of Polytechnics, but he had been expelled after leading a student protest.

The two Positivists collaborated for seven years. Saint-Simon blew out one eye in a suicide attempt that ironically brought him more followers and support. But Comte became dissatisfied at his lack of credit for the work, and felt that Saint-Simon was drifting away from rational atheism into an emotional spiritualism. So he separated from his mentor.

After the death of Saint-Simon, his followers formed a new religion known as

"Saint-Simonism".

Meanwhile, Comte developed Positivism to its fullest extent. He outlined three stages of human knowledge: "theological" or superstitious, "metaphysical" or abstract philosophy, and "positive" or objective science. Astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology were already in the positive stage. Comte proposed extending positivism to human society, in the branch of science he named "sociology". Comte and Saint-Simon are considered to be the founders of sociology.

Comte married Caroline Massin to "rescue" her from prostitution. Her care enabled him to write his great works, and to survive a severe mental breakdown. But his verbal abuse finally drove her away. Comte lived by minor teaching appointments, but he continually clashed his superiors. At one point, John Stuart Mill organized a subscription from English admirers to help Comte through rough times.

Late in his life Comte fell in love with Madame Clotilde de Vaux. She fed his ego, but would not be his lover, and after one year, she died of tuberculosis. Comte then transformed his philosophy into a Religion of Humanity based on "Love". Organized with a hierarchy much like Catholicism, with himself at top, the new religion had rituals based on the events of his meetings with Clotilde. But not all of his admirers followed him into this new Religion.

Comte's Positivism had an extensive influence in Europe and abroad. In Latin America, Positivism was the dominant form of humanism for much of a century. For instance, Positivists led the education department in Mexico under Porfirio Diaz.