

Contribution for a Symposium on *The Pragmatic Enlightenment* by Dennis C. Rasmussen
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Moderation in All Things

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The subtleties that communities of scholars find in their chosen fields of inquiry are typically lost, not only on the general public, but also on scholars with other specialties. This is as true for our interdisciplinary coterie of scholars of eighteenth-century ideas as it is for any other. While we enjoy tracing the many nuances of debate among the various parties in the Enlightenment’s diverse republic of letters, those outside our circle still tend to see the Enlightenment as uniformly devoted to the monolithic “project” of recreating the world as a whole according to the demands of pure reason. Dennis C. Rasmussen’s work is a necessary and important corrective to this “gross caricature of the actual ideas of the period” (p. 4).¹ In contrast to a universalistic, imperialistic, radical, and rationalist Enlightenment, Rasmussen interprets the work of David Hume, Adam Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire to highlight a morally and politically pluralistic, moderate and pragmatic Enlightenment.

Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire are undoubtedly four of the most important, insightful and influential authors of their period. Rasmussen’s goal is to establish beyond any reasonable doubt that the standard characterizations of the Enlightenment put forward by non-specialists do not apply to these four authors. He then argues that “that any critique of Enlightenment that does not apply to any of them stands in need of immense revision, if not being discarded altogether” (p. 11). This makes his book an ideal gift for all one’s colleagues throughout the faculty—be they right or left, Thomist theologians or Adornian cultural critics—who construct a straw man of Enlightenment rationalism for use as a dialectical whipping boy.

Although the news may not yet have reached every corner of the faculty, the anti-radicalism of the four authors that Rasmussen analyzes has always been well known, from their time to our own. Montesquieu himself said that the thesis of his magnum opus is that “the spirit of moderation should be that of the legislator” (*Spirit of the Laws* 29.1, cited p. 206). Voltaire’s maxim that “the perfect is the enemy of the good” has become, as Rasmussen observes, a mantra of management-speak in both politics and business (pp. 209-210). As for Hume and Smith, they have been celebrated by everyone from Edmund Burke to Getrude Himmelfarb as paragons of a characteristically British conservatism, which is often opposed to the supposed radicalism of continental intellectuals.

As such, Rasmussen admits that there is nothing particularly shocking about his insistence on the moderation of these authors. The four are, he admits, “the least likely candidates, among Enlightenment thinkers,” for inclusion in the radical rationalist caricature (p.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical citations are to Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Pragmatic Enlightenment: Recovering the Liberalism of Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

230). No respectable scholar of eighteenth-century intellectual life could really argue otherwise. The fact that these moderates are found on both sides of the Channel may make things a bit awkward for Himmelfarb, who is reduced to claiming that Montesquieu is “more representative of the British Enlightenment than of the French.”² Yet it causes no inconvenience for Jonathan Israel, who is happy to place all four of Rasmussen’s heroes in the “moderate mainstream” of the Enlightenment, which he contrasts with the “Radical Enlightenment” of Spinoza, Bayle and Diderot in his magisterial trilogy on the intellectual revolution of the period.³

While Israel is on the side of the radicals, Rasmussen is on the side of the moderates. Yet this is not where Rasmussen stakes his claim to scholarly originality. His is an overwhelmingly interpretive work rather than a philosophical defense of the ideas being interpreted. While Rasmussen never adopts the pose of a detached, value-neutral scholar, the furthest he is willing to go in defense of his quadrumvirate is to say that “the moderate, flexible form of liberalism embodied in these pragmatic Enlightenment thinkers is an especially attractive one in many respects” (p. 298). A full-throated defense of the virtue of moderation is left to others.⁴

Rasmussen’s main disagreement with Israel is a historical one. Rather than seeing intellectual life in the eighteenth century as a battle between radicals and moderates, Rasmussen sees moderation as the spirit of the age. Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire are thus not only representative men in Emerson’s sense—great individuals who play all-important roles in their societies—but are also representative in the more mundane sense of being typical of their time and place. The moderation of his four protagonists is, Rasmussen insists, also the moderation of “many other leading thinkers of eighteenth-century Europe” (p. 294). To be sure, “charges of rationalism and radicalism might fairly be applied to some of the lesser philosophes such as d’Holbach, Helvetius, and La Mettrie,” but Rasmussen insists that “these figures were by and large outliers.” The pragmatic Enlightenment of the four thinkers he analyzes is also the Enlightenment of many thinkers of that time that he does not discuss, including, among others, “d’Alembert, Condillac, Condorcet, and Diderot” (pp. 295-296).

The last name on this list is especially striking, given the role that Diderot plays in Israel’s Radical Enlightenment. Unfortunately, Rasmussen only makes the case for this

² Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French and American Enlightenments* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), p. 295; cited in Rasmussen, p. 295, fn.

³ Israel describes Spinoza, Bayle and Diderot as “the three principle architects of the Radical Enlightenment” in *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 42; cited in Rasmussen, p. 193, fn. The other two books in his trilogy are *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Israel provides a more concise statement of the ideas in this trilogy in *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁴ In a footnote on page 296, Rasmussen cites Harry Clor, *On Moderation: Defending an Ancient Virtue in a Modern World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008) and Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1830* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

interpretation of Diderot elsewhere.⁵ At times, one wishes he had taken his argument to the heart of his opponent's territory. Might even Spinoza not be the radical that Israel takes him to be? Israel's sprawling trilogy still waits for its equal and opposite, a comprehensive account of Enlightenment ideas from a perspective suspicious of extremism and inclined to see the era as what Rasmussen calls "The Age of the Limits of Reason."

Rasmussen has quite consciously decided not to write such an epic story; "the present book," he admits, "contains neither the immense historical and geographic breadth nor the sweeping narrative that Israel's volumes do." A decision to focus on just four authors, he explains, "allows for much more sustained analysis of their texts and arguments than is possible in works like Israel's" (p. 2, fn.).

Rasmussen is as committed to methodological moderation as he is to moderation in all other matters. Historical works like Israel's lie at one methodological extreme; "large-N" studies of huge numbers of authors, both great and obscure. Those reading such comprehensive surveys will be introduced to many new names and titles, but may find the interpretations of authors with whom they are already familiar to be strangely implausible. Large-N studies may seem the best basis for making broad generalizations about the mental life of an entire era, but social scientists are well aware that generalizations are only as good as the data on which they are based. If each interpretation of a given text is inaccurate, and if the errors are systematic rather than random, then piling misinterpretation upon misinterpretation will only serve to lead the intellectual historian further and further astray.

Those concerned with the accuracy of the interpretation will likely limit themselves to a single author, a single work by that author, or even a single section of a single work by that author. Just think, for example, of the volume of philosophical attention that has been devoted to parsing every line of Kant's *Groundwork*. Compared to these exegetes, Rasmussen admits that he can only provide a "broad overview" of the four thinkers that he discusses (p. 190). Yet while "small-N" studies may provide accurate interpretations of the objects of their study, they provide no reason to believe that this will aid in the understanding of anything outside these narrow confines. If anything, scholarly myopia can lead to systematic distortions. Just think of the many complaints about how undue focus on the *Groundwork* has distorted our understanding of Kant's ethics, or how undue focus on Kant has distorted our understanding of the Enlightenment as a whole (as Rasmussen himself points out; see p. 14).

As is so often the case, we political theorists tend to find ourselves caught between intellectual historians on the one side and philosophers on the other. The question is whether a "medium-N" study such as Rasmussen's—or, for that matter, such as my own book *The Enlightenment of Sympathy*⁶—is the golden mean between these two methodological extremes, or whether it is doomed to share the weaknesses of both and the strengths of neither. As with

⁵ See Dennis C. Rasmussen, "Burning Laws and Strangling Kings? Voltaire and Diderot on the Perils of Rationalism in Politics," *Review of Politics* 73:1 (Winter 2011), pp. 77-104.

⁶ Michael L. Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

most methodological questions, no answer can be given a priori, and the only a posteriori answers available will depend on large-N and small-N studies alike. Historians will have to assess whether those held to be representative of their eras—either in the Emersonian or in the mundane sense—actually were so. Philosophers, literary critics and other close readers will have judge whether the exegesis given of these authors accurately captures the meaning of what they wrote.

Since I lack the erudition required to make judgments of the large-N sort, I will devote the rest of my space here to a single, small-N question. Specifically, I will address Rasmussen’s interpretation of Hume as a moral pluralist, an interpretation for which my opposing view serves as something of a hermeneutic foil.

Moral pluralism is one of the key commitments of Rasmussen’s Pragmatic Enlightenment. Like all moderate positions, it can be understood as the virtuous mean between two vicious extremes. The first of these vices, moral universalism, is part of the standard caricature of the Enlightenment. This is the position that a single set of completely unchanging moral principles holds authority over all human beings in all times and places, perhaps even over all rational beings as such—angels and extraterrestrials included.⁷ This moral universalism is connected in the caricature with political universalism, the position that a single set of laws and institutions is best regardless of time, place or culture. Critics of the Enlightenment have seen these universalisms as the intellectual foundation for Europe’s global imperialism.

The second of the relevant vices, moral relativism, is the now-widespread view that there are no universally-binding ethical principles whatsoever, and hence no grounds for criticizing one set of principles from the perspective of another. It, too, has a closely-allied political analogue, the sort of political relativism that argues no set of laws and institutions can be criticized from the outside as unjust. Note that all of these positions themselves take the form of moral principles of universal applicability; moral relativists have often been accused of contradicting themselves for this very reason.

The pluralist mean between these two extremes is a precarious one, and can easily slide into one of the two vices. Rasmussen insists that while his four authors “by no means outright cultural relativists, their outlooks help to temper the more strident forms of liberal universalism by incorporating a welcome dose of philosophical humility, sensitivity to context, and institutional flexibility into the liberal worldview” (pp. 298-299). For each, some principles of ethics and politics are rightly acknowledged as universal, while others are seen as rightly

⁷ The possibility of rational creatures on other planets was of particular interest to Kant. See Steven J. Dick, *The Plurality of Worlds: The Extraterrestrial Life Debate from Democritus to Kant*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984) and Peter Szendy, *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials: Cosmopolitical Philosophical Fictions*. Translated by Will Bishop (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). For a comprehensive collection of primary sources on the topic—including Kant’s own—see Michael J. Crowe, ed. *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate, Antiquity to 1915: A Source Book* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

determined by local contexts. Yet this description holds true of all but the most radical extremists on the matter. The most common way for relativists to avoid self-contradiction is to grant the universality of relativism itself, while all but the most totalitarian universalists are willing to grant some latitude to local folkways, at least in morally unimportant matters. The question when interpreting any given author on the subject is not whether he or she maintains that some principles are universal while others are local, but which are which, and for what reason.

Rasmussen contrasts his interpretation of Hume and Smith on the matter with mine. Since, in his view, I read both Hume and Smith as moral universalists, I have to turn to J. G. Herder “to introduce a dose of pluralism and contextual sensitivity into Enlightenment sentimentalism.” Rasmussen, however, maintains that “Hume and Smith were moral pluralists and contextualists as well” (p. 29, footnote.). I’ll limit my discussion here to Hume. Rasmussen insists that Smith’s “stance is in fact quite similar to Hume’s” (p. 53), and while it’s not self-evident that this is true, we can safely bracket the matter, confident that at least an analogous (if not quite similar) discussion of moral pluralism could also be had concerning Smith.

As with any reasonable author, Hume needs to draw a line between what is rightly universal and what is rightly local in ethics and politics. Rasmussen interprets Hume’s line as one between universal structure and local substance (p. 37), or universal form and local content. That is, “the way in which moral standards are *formulated* may be the same everywhere and always, for these thinkers, but the *content* of these standards—what actually counts as moral—is in large part socially determined, and so varies with varied circumstances” (p. 29, emphasis in original).

“The Rhine flows north, the Rhone south,” Hume writes, “yet both spring from the *same* mountain, and are also actuated, in their opposite directions, by the *same* principles of gravity.”⁸ He observes that “irregular and extraordinary appearances are frequently discovered in the moral, as well as in the physical world.” Yet just as the same formal physical laws produce different results in different settings, the same basic principles of human psychology underlie the full range of our moral and political diversity. However odd some human phenomenon may appear, we can always trace them to “springs and principles which everyone has within himself.”⁹

Following his usual procedure, Hume performs an “anatomy”¹⁰ of the various forces “which cause such a diversity, and at the same time maintain such an uniformity in human

⁸ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford Philosophical Texts (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), “A Dialogue” 26, p. 192.

⁹ Hume, “Of Some Remarkable Customs,” in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (1740/1777) Edited by Eugene F. Miller. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1985), p. 366.

¹⁰ See Michael L. Frazer, “Anatomist and Painter: Hume’s Struggles as a Sentimental Stylist,” in Heather Kerr, David Lemmings and Robert Phiddian, eds. *Passions, Sympathy and Print Culture: Public Opinion and Emotional Authenticity in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, Forthcoming).

life.”¹¹ The main force responsible for producing a wide variety of moral and political content out of the uniform material of human nature is what Hume calls “custom,” and analyzing the amazing power of custom is one of the chief tasks of humanistic scholarship such as Hume’s own. “Those who consider the periods and revolutions of human kind, as represented in history,” he writes, “are entertained with a spectacle full of pleasure and variety, and see, with surprise, the manners, customs and opinions of the same species susceptible of such prodigious changes in different periods of time.”¹²

Yet since the effects of custom are always imposed upon the same basic human nature, it is always possible for acute observers to trace back a belief or practice to psychological sources which they themselves possess. The ability to see psychological similarities underlying differences of custom is, for Hume, characteristic of refined taste; it is an indispensable skill for the adequate moral and aesthetic judgment of the works or deeds of those whose customs differ from our own. Hume castigates the “person influenced by prejudice” who, when considering the creations of distant times and places, “makes no allowance for their peculiar views and prejudices but, full of the manners of his own age and country, rashly condemns what seemed admirable in the eyes of those for whom alone the discourse was calculated.”¹³ In his condemnation of such ethnocentrism, Hume foreshadows ideas which would be developed much more fully by Herder.

So far, then, Rasmussen and I are basically in interpretive agreement. Yet Hume is no mere descriptive anatomist; he is also a normative moralist.¹⁴ Indeed, the whole point of conducting a comprehensive study of human nature and human custom is so as to improve our evaluative judgments of the phenomena being anatomized. In the end, Hume is convinced that truly refined judgments will decree that, in most times and places, the primary effect of custom on our moral sentiments is negative, serving to block the reflective development of sentiments which would unite all of humanity behind a single set of general principles. While Rasmussen is correct that Hume is a descriptive moral pluralist, he is still a normative moral universalist.

Rasmussen quotes me pointing out that “all human beings share a psychology from which, with sufficient reflection, the same moral sentiments will develop” (p. 53, footnote, citing Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 141). This is not to say that Hume believed all individuals in fact have the same moral sentiments, any more than rationalists believe that all individuals have correctly interpreted the moral principles legislated by right reason. Yet just as Enlightenment rationalists believed that reason could at least potentially overcome local differences to unite all of humanity in a common moral project, so too did Hume believe that “nothing but nature and reason, or, at least, what bears them a strong resemblance, can force its way through all obstacles, and unite

¹¹ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740). Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford Philosophical Texts. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.3.1.9, p. 259.

¹² Hume, “Of Eloquence,” in *Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

¹³ “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Ibid.*, p. 239.

¹⁴ For a contrasting interpretation of Hume’s work as entirely descriptive in nature, see Russell Hardin, *David Hume: Moral and Political Theorist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

the most rival nations.”¹⁵ For Hume, this force that bears a strong resemblance to nature and reason—but is identical to neither—is the reflective refinement of our shared human psychology and the development, from a general point of view, of a common standard of moral taste. While, for Hume, there may be considerable room for disagreement among even the most refined aesthetic tastes, the same is not also true in the moral sphere.

Hume generally explains the failure to live up to his universal moral standards as a failure to undergo a full reflective correction of one’s moral sentiments. In certain cultural contexts, this failure may be both understandable and forgivable. We must be careful not to condemn too rashly those whose moral or aesthetic standards are different from our own, and must sympathetically consider their own point of view in order to judge them adequately. None of this, however, implies a genuine plurality of acceptable human values.

We may be able to comprehend, for example, why “uncultivated nations, who have not, as yet, had full experience of the advantages attending beneficence, justice, and the social virtues”¹⁶ treat courage as the greatest—indeed, sometimes the only—virtue. This understanding, Hume acknowledges, may even lead us to consider such primitives blameless when their excessive valorization of courage leads to acts which would now be considered sheer brutality. Yet Hume sees nothing other than moral progress when their outmoded ethic of bravery is destroyed by a further progress of sentiments. Homer’s “want of humanity and decency” shocks our more refined consciences. “And whatever indulgence we may give to the writer on account of his prejudices,” Hume insists, “we cannot prevail on ourselves to enter into his sentiments, or bear an affection to characters, which we plainly discover to be blamable.”¹⁷

Of course, there are times when we must humbly acknowledge that another culture may be in the right while we are in the wrong, that it might be our own moral conviction which could not bear its own survey with a fuller progress of sentiments. Hume suggests that such may be the case with his era’s abhorrence of suicide, a moral sentiment not shared by most other human cultures.¹⁸ Universalism is not the same thing as ethnocentrism. The single, universally binding moral code could very well be closer to another culture’s worldview than one’s own; many in the French Enlightenment, most famously Montesquieu, viewed the English moral and political system in roughly this way. Alternately, what the world requires might be a synthesis of elements drawn from a variety of historical cultures, or perhaps an entirely new worldview somehow created *ex nihilo*.

Even in a world without a genuine plurality of refined and reflectively corrected moral sentiments, moreover, there can still be some room for diversity. After all, one of our most important moral sentiments, for Hume, is our approval of utility, and the same practice may be useful in one historical context but useless or harmful in another. Thus what appears to be a

¹⁵ Hume, “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” in *Essays*, op. cit., p. 112.

¹⁶ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, op. cit., 7.15, p. 135.

¹⁷ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays*, op. cit., p. 246.

¹⁸ See Hume, “Of Suicide,” in *ibid.*, pp. 577-589, as well as *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* Dialogue 34-35, p. 193.

conflict of values might thus instead be a recognition of these “different utilities.”¹⁹ There are also possible cases when two genuine virtues must be balanced with one another; there may be a range of acceptable compromises between them, which may vary by custom across time and place.

It is therefore possible to disaggregate moral and political universalism. Hume may indeed agree with Montesquieu that geographical, climactic, cultural and historical differences may make certain laws and institutions more useful in some times and places than others. He may even think that politics is a matter of balancing competing desiderata, and that more than one such balance is morally acceptable. All this is compatible, however, with the recognition of but a single set of substantive (and not merely formal) moral principles that justify these political differences.

That said, Rasmussen is clearly right that Hume is less of an extreme moral universalist than (for example) Kant. At the same time, however, he is far more of a moral universalist than Herder, not to mention the full-blown moral relativists of later eras. I tend to think the best course here is the one laid by the pluralist Herder, but the extreme universalist Kant does not lack for defenders today, nor does the moderate universalist Hume.

In this and all other cases, the middle way might be the best one, but then again it might not. In each instance, the path of virtue can only be decided on its substantive merits, and not on the basis of a purely formal commitment to the golden mean as such. Situations of egregious injustice might call for Israelite Radicalism, other contexts for Rasmussenian Pragmatism, and still others for some other path. Whichever course we choose, however, we can be confident that we can find some hero from the eighteenth century’s broad range of philosophical luminaries to help light our way.

¹⁹ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* Dialogue 42, p. 195.