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Socrates without Ontology (2004)

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The Three Enlightenment

A well-known dialogue of Plato's begins with an encounter between Socrates and Euthyphro, who, it turns out, is on his way to a trial.¹ Socrates naturally asks, "Your case, Euthyphro? What is it? Are you prosecuting or defending?" "Prosecuting," Euthyphro replies.

Socrates: Whom?

Euthyphro: One whom I am thought a maniac to be attacking.

Socrates: How so. Is it someone who has wings to fly away with?

Euthyphro: He is far from being able to do that; he happens to be a very old man.

Socrates: Who is it, then?

Euthyphro: It is my father.

Socrates: Your father, my good friend?

Euthyphro: Just so.

Socrates: What is the complaint? Of what do you accuse him?

Euthyphro: Of murder, Socrates.

Socrates: Good heavens, Euthyphro! Surely the crowd is ignorant of the way things ought to go. I fancy it is not correct for any ordinary person to do that [to prosecute his father on this charge]; but only for a man far advanced in point of wisdom.

Euthyphro: Yes, Socrates, by heaven! Far advanced!

After this self-congratulatory reply, Euthyphro proceeds to tell Socrates that "the victim in this case was a laborer of mine, and when we were cultivating land in Naxos, we employed him on our farm. One day he had been drinking, and became enraged at one of our domestics and cut his throat, whereupon my father bound him hand and foot and threw him into a ditch. Then he sent a man to Athens to find out from the seer what ought to be done—meanwhile paying no attention to the man who had been bound, neglecting him because he was a murderer and it would be no great matter even if he died. And that is what happened."

And so Euthyphro has taken it upon himself to charge his own father for murder. Moreover, Euthyphro is absolutely certain that this is demanded by "piety."

Socrates soon opens the philosophical action of the dialogue by saying, "But you, by heaven! Euthyphro, you think that you have such an accurate knowledge of things divine, and what is pious and what is impious, that, in circumstances such as you describe, you can accuse your father? You are not afraid that you yourself are doing an impious deed?" The response is: "Why Socrates, if I did not have an accurate knowledge of all that, I should be good for nothing, and Euthyphro would be no different from the general run of men."

In the course of the discussion, Socrates very soon asks Euthyphro, "How do you define the pious and the impious?"—and Euthyphro replies: "Well then, I say that pious is what I am now doing, prosecuting the wrongdoer who commits a murder or a sacrilegious robbery, or sins in any point like that, whether it be your father, your mother, or whoever it may be. And not to prosecute would be impious." And then he proceeds to give Socrates what he calls a "decisive proof" of the truth of his words, namely that Zeus is regarded by man as the best and most just of the gods, and yet Zeus bound his father, Cronos, because he wickedly devalued his (other) sons.

To this Socrates replies, "There, Euthyphro, you have the reason why the charge [of impiety] is brought against me. It is because, whenever people tell such stories about the gods, I am prone to take it ill, and so they will maintain that I am sinful. Well now, if you who are so well versed in matters of the sort entertain the same beliefs, then necessarily, it would seem, I must give in, for what could we urge who admit that, for our own part, we are quite ignorant about these matters? But, in the name of friendship, tell me! Do you actually believe that these things happened so?"

This short dialogue of Plato's (including the famous question which is at its heart, whether actions are pious because the gods approve of them, or whether the gods approve of them because they are pious) is a beautiful representative in miniature of the very beginning of the Western tradition of philosophy as we know it. Those of you who have read it will know that Socrates does not pretend to have an answer to the difficult question of the nature of piety. Rather, what he claims is that it is not a sufficient answer to the question to

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give a list of actions that are conventionally regarded as pious and a list of those that are conventionally regarded as impious—and certainly not a sufficient answer to appeal to the Greek analogue of revelation, the stories about the gods.

Philosophy, in this dialogue, already represents what I shall call reflective transcendence, that is, standing back from conventional opinion, on the one hand, and the authority of revelation (i.e., of literally and uncritically accepted religious texts or myths) on the other, and asking “Why?” Philosophy, as we already see it here, thus combines two aspirations: the aspiration to justice, and the aspiration to critical thinking. Of course, Euthyphro, in his own way, seeks justice; indeed, he is convinced that no one knows better than himself what the demands of justice are. What Euthyphro fails to appreciate is the need to connect the aspiration to justice with the practice of critical and independent thinking, without which the search for justice can so easily become—as indeed it does in Euthyphro’s case—a cover for fanaticism.

If you will now permit me to jump about two millennia, to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the common era, and particularly to the phenomenon that historians have called the “Enlightenment,” we can see one development of the idea of linking the search for justice and the practice of reflective transcendence, of “standing back.” Broadly speaking, the Enlightenment was characterized by two great forces.

One force, the influence of the new philosophies of Hobbes and Locke in England, and of Rousseau, as well as of Continental Rationalism, manifested itself in the new con-

ception of society as a “social contract,” and in the new talk of “natural rights.” Both continue to be important in today’s discussions in political theory.² But apart from the details, and apart even from the question as to how social contract theory is to be understood, we can say that the lasting effect of the social contract conception—one that we tend to take for granted—is the widespread acceptance of the idea that governments derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed; while the lasting effect of the Enlightenment’s talk of natural rights is the prevalence of the idea that every human being should have the opportunity to develop certain capabilities (particularly those capabilities needed to play the role of an autonomous citizen in a democratic polity).³

The second great force that characterized the Enlightenment was the new science. The enormous successes of Newtonian physics impressed a wide public, even if that public was incapable then (as most of us are now) of following the mathematical and other technicalities of the new science. As Crane Brinton put it: “No doubt the ladies and gentlemen who admired Newton were for the most part incapable of understanding the *Principia*; and, if some of them fashionably dabbled at home with scientific experiments, they had no very sophisticated concepts of scientific method. Science was for them, however, living, growing evidence that human beings, using their ‘natural’ reasoning powers in a fairly obvious and teachable way, could not only understand the way things really are in the universe; they could understand what human beings are really like, and by combining this knowledge of nature and human nature, learn to live happier and better lives.”⁴

However vague all of these ideas may be (and certainly

they admit of a large number of very different interpretations), as Brinton also remarks, "Certainly very specific, and often very successful, reform movements sprang directly from the thinkers of the Enlightenment. Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* helped set Bentham's mind to work on problems of law reform, and the two together, along with many others, inspired humane reforms in criminal law and in prisons, as well as efficient reforms in civil law all over the western world."⁵

If we compare the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century enlightenment, the Enlightenment with a capital "E," with the earlier Platonic enlightenment, it is not hard to perceive both similarities and differences. On the side of the similarities, there is the same aspiration to reflective transcendence, the same willingness to criticize conventional beliefs and institutions, and to propose radical reforms.

When I speak of a willingness to propose radical reforms in connection with Plato, I don't mean only the grand scheme of the *Republic* as a whole, but more specifically Plato's criticism of the idea of the innate inferiority of women.⁶ You may recall that Socrates considers the objection that "the natures of men and women are different, and yet we are now saying that these different natures are to have the same occupations." The part of the discussion I want to quote begins with Socrates' remark about the effect on people of the practice of debating:

It is extraordinary, Glaucon, what an effect the practice of debating has upon people.

Why do you say that?

Because they often seem to fall unconsciously into mere disputes about words which they mistake for reasonable argument, through being unable to draw the distinctions

proper to the subject; and so instead of a philosophical exchange of ideas, they go off in chase of contradictions which are purely verbal.

Socrates explains the point thus:⁷

We have been strenuously insisting on the letter of our principle that different natures should not have the same occupations, as if we were scoring a point in a debate; but we have altogether neglected to consider what sort of sameness or difference we meant and in what respect these natures and occupations were to be defined as different or the same. Consequently, we might very well be asking one another whether there is not an opposition between bald and long-haired men, and, when that was admitted, forbid one set to be shoemakers, if the other were following that trade.

That would be absurd.
Yes, but only because we never meant any and every sort of sameness or difference in nature, but the sort that was relevant to the occupations in question. We meant, for instance, that a man and a woman have the same nature if both have a talent for medicine; whereas two men have different natures if one is a born physician, the other a born carpenter.

Yes, of course.

If, then, we find that either the male sex or the female is specially qualified for any particular form of occupation, then that occupation, we shall say, ought to be assigned to one sex or the other. But if the only difference appears to be that the male begets and the woman brings forth, we shall conclude that no difference between man and woman has yet been produced that is relevant to our purpose. We shall continue to think it proper for our Guardians and their wives to share in the same pursuits.⁸

The similarities between the Platonic enlightenment and the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment extend farther: there is the same enthusiasm for the new sci-

ence (in Plato's case, enthusiasm for Euclidean geometry), and there is the same refusal to allow questions of ethics and political philosophy to be decided by an appeal to religious texts and/or myths. Yet there is also a very large difference.

In Plato's view, what makes a state (ideally) legitimate is that it is ruled by a class of people (who must be philosophers) who alone have the capacity to discern reliably the nature of the Good—which, in Greek thought, means above all the nature of the best life for human beings—together with the requirement that the other components of the state function properly under the guidance of the philosopher-rulers. Legitimacy (or, in Plato's terms, "justice") depends upon the presence of a properly functioning meritocracy, not on the consent of the governed.⁹

I want now to talk about a *third* "enlightenment"—one that hasn't happened yet, or hasn't at any rate fully happened, but one that I hope *will* happen, and one worth struggling for. More than any other thinker of the last century, I think that John Dewey is the best philosopher of this enlightenment (I shall call it the *pragmatist* enlightenment).

Like the two previous enlightenments, the pragmatist enlightenment valorizes reflective transcendence, or, to use an expression Dewey himself once used, *criticism of criticisms*.¹⁰ (By "criticism of criticisms," which, in his *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey equated with philosophy, he meant not just the criticism of received ideas, but higher-level criticism, the "standing back" and criticizing even the ways in which we are accustomed to criticize ideas, the criticism of our ways of criticism.) Like the two previous enlightenments, the pragmatist enlightenment is willing to be nonconform-

ist, and willing to advocate radical reform. Like the eighteenth-century enlightenment, it rejects Plato's meritocratic model for an ideal society; indeed, the case against that model has rarely been better stated than by Dewey in the following words:

History shows that there have been benevolent despots who wish to bestow blessings upon others. They have not succeeded, except when their efforts have taken the indirect form of changing the conditions under which those live who are disadvantageously placed. The same principle holds of reformers and philanthropists when they try to do good to others in ways which leave passive those to be benefited. There is a moral tragedy inherent in efforts to further the common good which prevent the result from being either good or common—not good, because it is at the expense of the active growth of those to be helped, and not common because these have no share in bringing the result about.¹¹

However, the pragmatist enlightenment is not a mere continuation of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment, although it certainly builds on the democratic strain in the Enlightenment. What Dewey calls for has been described by Robert Westbrook as "deliberative democracy"¹² and the term is apt. But Dewey's vision of how deliberative democracy could work is not an eighteenth-century one. The difference will be easier to explain if I first say something about the other feature of enlightenment, the valorization of reason, which was present in different forms in Plato and in the Enlightenment (with a capital "E").

Dewey does not, in fact, like the term "reason" very much (certainly not the term "Reason" with a capital "R"), preferring to speak of the application of *intelligence* to problems,

and the change in terminology is symptomatic of a deep criticism of traditional philosophy. "Reason," in the traditional sense, was, above all, a faculty by means of which human beings were supposed to be able to arrive at one or another set of immutable truths. It is true that this conception had already been criticized by the empiricists, but the empiricist criticism of reason seemed seriously flawed to Dewey. Dewey, surprisingly—at first, at least to people with a conventional philosophical education—finds traditional empiricism in its own way as aprioristic as traditional rationalism.

Traditional rationalism, famously, thinks the general form of scientific explanations can be known a priori: we know a priori the laws of geometry and even the fundamental principles of mechanics, according to Descartes. But empiricism equally thinks that the general form of scientific data, indeed of all empirical data, can be known a priori—even if it doesn't say so in so many words! From Locke, Berkeley, and Hume down to Ernst Mach, empiricists held that all empirical data consists of "sensations," conceived of as an unconceptualized given against which putative knowledge claims can be checked. Against this view William James had already insisted that while all perceptual experience has both conceptual and non-conceptual aspects, the attempt to divide any experience which is a recognition of something into parts is futile: "Sensations and apperceptive idea fuse here so intimately [in a 'presented and recognized material object'] that you can no more tell where one begins and the other ends, than you can tell, in those cunning circular panoramas that have lately been exhibited, where the real foreground and the painted canvas join together."¹³ Dewey, con-

tinuing the line of thought that James had begun, insists that by creating new observation-concepts we "institute" new data. Modern physics (and of course not only physics) has richly born him out. A scientist may speak of observing a proton colliding with a nucleus, or of observing a virus with the aid of an electron microscope, or of observing genes or black holes, and so forth. *Neither the form of possible explanations nor the form of possible data can be fixed in advance, once and for all.*

Pragmatism in general (and not only Deweyan pragmatism) is characterized by being simultaneously *fallibilist* and *anti-skeptical*, whereas traditional empiricism is seen by pragmatists as oscillating between being too skeptical, in one moment, and insufficiently fallibilist in another of its moments.

Dewey often calls for more investigation—empirical, policy-oriented investigation—of social problems, but it is important to realize that the social-scientific research Dewey longed for was social science in the service of ordinary people, who, after all, know best when and where their shoe pinches.

Among the classic empiricist thinkers, the most famous ones to call before John Dewey did for the application of scientific research to the problems of society were Mill and Comte. But Comte reverted to meritocracy. He visualized handing social problems over to *savants*, social-scientific intellectuals, a move which falls under Dewey's criticism of the idea of the "benevolent despot."

It might seem that this same criticism cannot be voiced against Mill, who, as much as Dewey was to do, valued active participation in all aspects of the democratic process. But as

far as the application of social-scientific knowledge to social problems is concerned, what Mill called for was the development of a perfected science of *individual psychology*, from which, he thought—continuing the tradition of methodological individualism so characteristic of classical empiricism—we would be able to derive social laws (via the hoped-for reduction of sociology to psychology) which could then be applied to particular social problems. This entire program, as most would concede today, is a misguided fantasy.

On Dewey's view, then, the philosophers of the Enlightenment fell into one of two errors: either they attempted to reason aprioristically, which is to say dogmatically, at one or another crucial point; or (especially if they were empiricists) they fabricated an imaginary science of sensationalist psychology instead of trying to develop real scientific knowledge of real social processes.¹⁴ Dewey has often been accused of being "scientific"; not only is the criticism unjust (as anyone who has read his *Art as Experience* or *Human Nature and Conduct* knows), but it fails to see that Dewey is reacting against a long tradition of social thought which is utterly lacking in respect for serious empirical study of social problems. Even Karl Marx, who claimed to have discovered the "laws" of capitalist development, did not resist the temptation to give an a priori proof in volume 3 of his *Capital* that capitalism *must* collapse of its alleged internal contradictions!¹⁵

I now turn to a second—and equally important—point of difference between the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the pragmatist enlightenment. In the article I quoted from earlier, Brinton very early on tells us

that "two major themes in the history of philosophy took on special importance as they were absorbed into the thinking of the educated public of the Enlightenment."¹⁶ The second "theme," which I chose to discuss first, was "the increasing prestige of natural science," and the remarkable way in which that prestige was reflected in an increasing faith in the power of reason to solve human problems. The first theme was, in Brinton's description, that "the development [in political philosophy] of the social contract theory from Hobbes through Locke to Rousseau was widely publicized, and became part of the vocabulary of ordinary political discussion both in Europe and America, as did the concept of 'natural rights.'"

Although Brinton mentions only the sequence Hobbes—Locke—Rousseau, it has often been noticed that the image of a social contract, albeit in a hidden form, also figures in Kant's thought. But—and this is why the charge of "atomistic individualism" has so frequently been brought against social contract theorists—the very picture of a "social contract" assumes that there could be fully moral beings, in the Kantian sense of beings who seek to be guided by principles which all similar beings could accept (note that this sense builds in what I have called "reflective transcendence") who still need *reasons* why they should form themselves into a *community*. The human being is conceived of as if she might be a fully constituted intelligent person—and indeed, in the Kantian inflection of the model, a fully constituted *moral* person—*prior* to entering into society. This whole way of thinking was already contested in the nineteenth century, notably by Hegel.

It is perhaps significant that Dewey himself began his

philosophical career as a Hegelian. For Dewey, as for Hegel, we are communal beings from the start. Even as a "thought experiment," the idea that beings who belong to no community could so much as have the idea of a "principle," or a special motive to be guided by principles, is utterly fantastic. On the other hand, unlike empiricist thinkers such as Hume and Bentham, Dewey does not think that a moral community can be constituted merely by the emotion of sympathy. As he writes,

Sympathy is a genuine natural instinct, varying in intensity in different individuals. It is a precious instrumentality for the development of social insight and socialized affection; *but in and of itself it is on the same plane as any natural endowment* [emphasis added] It may lead to sentimentality or to selfishness; the individual may shrink from scenes of misery because of the pain they cause him, or may seek jovial companions because of the sympathetic pleasures he gets. Or he may be moved by sympathy to labor for the good of others, but, because of lack of deliberation and thoughtfulness, be quite ignorant of what their good really is, and do a great deal of harm . . . Again instinctive sympathy is partial: it may attach itself to those of blood kin or to immediate associates in such a way as to favor them at the expense of others, and lead to positive injustice to those beyond the charmed circle.¹⁷

Needless to say, Dewey is not attacking sympathy as such. What he calls for is a *transformation* of sympathy. Like Aristotle, he believes that the reasons for being ethical are not apparent from a non-ethical or pre-ethical standpoint—one must be *educated* into the ethical life, and this education presupposes that one is already *in* a community; it is not something that brings community into existence.

→ John Smith?

Dewey would agree with Kant that the person whose impulses are transformed in this way, the Deweyan moral person, treats the ends of others as something other than mere means. Her sympathy is not something that *competes with* her other impulses, but something that fuses with them. Such a person thinks in terms of "we" rather than simply "me." Thus she obeys the Kingdom of Ends formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative (always to regard the humanity in the other as an end, and not merely as a means). But Dewey's account of *moral motivation* is quite different from Kant's. For Kant, it is the "dignity" of obeying "the moral law" that is the motive (which means, ultimately, the "dignity" of giving myself a law that all other rational beings can also give themselves, the dignity of "autonomy"). For Dewey, there is no separate, and certainly no uniquely transcendent, moral motivation that we have to postulate, only our pluralistic and disparate but *morally transformed* interests and aspirations. The Kantian dualism of "reason" and "inclination" is rejected from the beginning.

The Enlightenment, as already pointed out, taught us to see the *legitimacy* of states as based upon the consent of the governed. Certainly, Dewey (or James, or Mead, or any other of the classical pragmatists) would not wish to challenge the idea that a legitimate state must have the consent of those whom it governs. But the Enlightenment *derived* the idea of the consent of the governed from the model of society as arising from a social contract. In effect, it derived sociability as well as morality from an idealized image of the law of contracts, from *property law*. And Dewey, like Hegel, thinks that this is ridiculous.¹⁸

In contrast to the entire social contract tradition, Dewey

does not try to justify standing within society (or within the ethical life) at all, and *a fortiori* does not try to justify it either by appeal to a transcendent motive, like Kant, or by appeal to an admittedly fictitious "social contract." For Dewey, the problem is not to justify the existence of communities, or to show that people ought to make the interests of others their own; the problem is to justify the claim that morally decent communities should be *democratically* organized. This Dewey does by appealing to the need to deal intelligently rather than unintelligently with the ethical and practical problems that we confront. Dewey's arguments against the idea that we can simply hand our problems over to experts (there was a famous exchange between Dewey and Lippman on this issue in the 1920s)¹⁹ and his insistence that the most ordinary of individuals has at least one field of unique expertise—if only the knowledge of where his or her "shoe pinches"—are part of what Ruth Anna Putnam and I have called Dewey's "epistemological defense of democracy."²⁰ Dewey argued that without the participation of the public in the formation of such policy, it could not reflect the common needs and interests of the society because those needs and interests were known only to the public. And those needs and interests cannot be known without democratic "consultation and discussion which uncover social needs and troubles." Hence, Dewey said, "a class of experts is inevitably so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge, which in social matters is not knowledge at all."

It would be a grave error to read this statement of Dewey's as claiming that experts *inevitably* "become a class with private interests and private knowledge." As Dewey makes clear

in many of his essays and books, we need experts, including social scientists and professional educators like himself. What he argued against is the view that the role of the ordinary citizens in a democracy should be confined to voting every so many years on the question of which group of experts to appoint. As his own primary contribution to bringing about a different sort of democracy, a "participatory" or better a "deliberative" democracy, he focused his efforts on promoting what was then a new conception of education. If democracy is to be both participatory and deliberative, education must not be a matter of simply teaching people to learn things by rote and believe what they are taught. In a deliberative democracy, learning how to think for oneself, to question, to criticize, is fundamental. But thinking for oneself does not exclude—indeed it requires—learning when and where to seek expert knowledge. *good + best + knowledge*

That our communities should be democracies follows, for Dewey, from the fact that only in a democracy does everyone have a chance to make his or her contribution to the discussion; and that they should be *social* democracies follows from the fact that the huge inequalities in wealth and power that we permit to exist effectively block the interests and complaints of the most oppressed from serious consideration, and thus prevent any serious attempt at the solution of such problems as the alleviation of stubborn poverty, or deeply entrenched unemployment, or the inferior educational opportunities afforded to the children most in need of education, from ever getting off the ground.

But there is yet another difference between Dewey and—not just the Enlightenment, but the whole conception of ethics or moral philosophy that dominated and still domi-

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importance of expert knowledge
Benjamin J. Anderson

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nates the thinking of the great majority of philosophers down to the present day. I don't know of any better way to indicate what the received conception is than by quoting a couple of sentences from John Rawls's magnificent lectures on the history of moral philosophy. Very early in that work, in the section titled "The Problem of Modern Moral Philosophy,"²¹ we read:

Here I think of the tradition of moral philosophy as itself a family of traditions, such as the traditions of the natural law and of the moral sense schools and of the traditions of ethical intuitionism and of utilitarianism. What makes all these traditions part of one inclusive tradition is that they use a commonly understood vocabulary and terminology. Moreover, they reply and object to one another's conclusions and arguments, so that exchanges between them are, in part, a reasoned discussion that leads to further development.

In the tradition Rawls describes, and to which he himself has made such a significant contribution, moral philosophy deals with judgments that contain the familiar ethical concepts *right, wrong, just, unjust, good, bad, right, duty, obligation*, and the rest. What is more important, moral philosophy continues to be thought of as a matter of adjudicating between different familiar traditions—today, varieties of Kantianism and Utilitarianism still being at the forefront of the debate—and moral philosophy is still conceived of as involving fairly predictable kinds of arguments containing the familiar handful of abstract ethical terms.

Nothing could be farther from Dewey's conception of ethics. For Dewey, ethics is not a small corner of a professional field called "philosophy," and one cannot assume that its problems can be formulated in any one fixed vocabulary,

or illuminated by any fixed collection of "isms." For Dewey, as for James, philosophy is not and should not be primarily a professional discipline, but rather something that all reflective human beings engage in to the extent that they practice "criticism of criticisms." The question of ethics is at least as broad as the question of the relation of philosophy in *this* sense to life. Any human problem at all, insofar as it impacts our collective or individual welfare, is thus far "ethical"—but it may also be at the same time aesthetic, or logical, or scientific, or just about anything else; and if we solve a problem and cannot say, at the end of the day, whether it was an "ethical problem" in the conventional sense of the term, that is not at all a bad thing. Thinking of logic, as Dewey did, as the theory of inquiry and not as a branch of mathematics that happens to be taught in philosophy departments, and of ethics as the relation of inquiry to life—so that the same book, e.g., Dewey's *Logic*, viewed one way is a text in logic (or in epistemology, even if Dewey disliked the word) and viewed another way is a book about social ethics—is, I believe, the right way, indeed the only way, to open up the whole topic of ethics, to let the fresh air in. And that is an essential part of what I have been calling "the pragmatist enlightenment" calls for.

In this lecture I have claimed that there have been *learning processes* in history, and that there can be further learning in the future. I have depicted the appearance on the historical stage of the kind of reflection illustrated by the discussion between Socrates and Euthyphro, which I quoted at the start of this lecture, as representing a learning process. I have depicted the eventual rejection of the meritocratic view of the

ideal society advocated by Plato as a result not of mere “contingency,” but of human experience and of intelligent reflection on that experience. I have depicted the great experiments in democracy which began in the eighteenth century, and the ideas of the Enlightenment, as a further learning process; and I have depicted Dewey’s fallibilism and his internal linking of fallibilistic inquiry and democracy, as well as his reconceptualization of ethics as a project of inquiry rather than a set of rules or formulas, as an extension of that learning process.

There are many thinkers to whom my talk of three enlightenments will seem naïve. “Poststructuralists,” positivists, and a host of others will react with horror. But I have chosen to speak in this way to make clear that I am an unreconstructed believer in progress, though not, indeed, progress in the stupid sense of a belief that advance either in ethics or in social harmony is inevitable. “Progress” in that sense is just a secular version of eschatology. But what I do believe in is the *possibility* of progress. Such a belief can indeed be abused—what belief can’t be? But to abandon the idea of progress and the enterprise of enlightenment—when that abandonment is more than just fashionable “postmodern” posturing—is to trust oneself to the open sea while throwing away the navigation instruments. I hope we shall not be so unwise.

Skepticism about Enlightenment

In the previous lecture I characterized philosophy as an enterprise that aims at what I called “reflective transcendence”—the act of standing back from conventional beliefs, received opinions, and even received practices, and asking a penetrating “Why should we accept this as right?”¹ At certain crucial moments in history, the result is a profound reevaluation of our ways of thinking, which we may call “enlightenment.” I cited Plato as a philosopher of enlightenment, in this sense, and I used as examples his criticism of religious fanaticism and his brilliant defense of the proposition that all offices in society ought to be open to women as well as men. The second enlightenment, in my list, was the one best known by that name, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century movement associated with the names of Hobbes and Spinoza, Rousseau and Kant, Voltaire and the *philosophes*. I characterized that enlightenment as representing a faith in the powers of the new sciences, powers which it hoped to apply to thinking about social and moral problems, and a conception of society as a social contract. I said