

The Dark Side of the Moon

Does the Enlightenment provide a complete philosophical paradigm? We know that it provides a robust epistemology through Science but, as Hume famously observed, it is one thing to ascertain an *is* and another to ascertain an *ought*. Does the Enlightenment provide an ought, a *lebensphilosophie*, a philosophy of what one should do with their life? To examine this question we will briefly review what might be construed as Enlightenment lebensphilosophies by looking at how key Enlightenment philosophers attempt to determine what man should be doing. After a critique of why these are insufficient we will change our approach. Instead of seeking our answer in the work of key Enlightenment philosophers, we will instead work backwards, looking at an example of a philosophical system that founded its lebensphilosophie upon the Enlightenment - Hitler's Nazism. We will find in *Mein Kampf*, I claim, an honest picture of the lebensphilosophie of the Enlightenment - honest because it will corroborate with the life pursuits of the heroes of the Enlightenment. At last, we will briefly explore the ramifications of our analysis.

The closest thing to a lebensphilosophie that can be found in the works of Enlightenment thinkers is ethics. Enlightenment ethics sought to ground what is ethical on a “secular, broadly naturalistic basis”¹. The following are four simplified examples of Enlightenment ethical theories. In Hobbes's egoistic theory, the Good is “‘whatsoever is the object of any man’s appetite or desire’ ... and evil [is] ... ‘the object of his hate’.”¹ In Hume’s empirical approach to ethics, the virtuous is recognized by a feeling of approval/positive affect and what is vice is recognized by a feeling of disapproval/negative affect. “These are not definitions of ‘virtue’ and ‘vice’ but empirical generalizations” about how virtuous actions make us feel.¹ In utilitarianism, Good actions are those that maximize the Good for the greatest number of people. The Good in utilitarianism is often understood as reduction of suffering and increase in subjective feelings of well being since those are ‘concrete’ humanistic phenomena we can sense. Finally, in Kantian

¹ Bristow, W. (2017). *Enlightenment*. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/enlightenment/>

ethics, a proposed moral principle can only be moral under the condition that if everyone were to always adhere to the principle it would still be good.²

Aside from utilitarianism, these enlightenment philosophies merely provide descriptions of what types of actions can be deemed ethical. They help you verify and check whether an action is ethical by asking questions like ‘do you desire the outcome of the action?’ given Hobbes's theory, ‘does the action evoke positive feelings?’ given Hume’s theory, and ‘can this principle be universalized?’ given Kant’s theory. Crucially, however, those three theories do not provide a life goal (a purpose) relative to which concrete actions can be motivated. Without prescribing what humans should be aiming for, all three theories fail to provide a robust Enlightenment lebensphilosophie. Utilitarianism, on the other hand, does prescribe a purpose: the overall reduction of human suffering summed over all people. This purpose is sufficient to establish a lebensphilosophie as we can see in the fact that utilitarianism is the foundation for the contemporary lebensphilosophie called Effective Altruism³.

Nevertheless, I claim that utilitarianism does not represent an *honest* Enlightenment lebensphilosophie. It is the case that utilitarianism is grounded in humanistic emotion and allows in theory for the application of analytic methods for finding the best ways to reduce suffering (e.g. which charity saves the most lives per dollar?). Therefore utilitarianism adheres to the general approach of enlightenment philosophy of founding ideas on a secular naturalistic basis. However, as we shall presently see, the goal of reducing suffering fails to align with the narrative tradition of Enlightenment, which is why utilitarianism is not an honest Enlightenment lebensphilosophie .

What would it mean for a life goal (a purpose) to align with the narrative tradition of Enlightenment? It would mean that the goal is sought and actualized by the heroic figures of the Enlightenment. Why? Because it is the heroes of a tradition who inspire those within the tradition to imitate their ideal. Why else would aspiring young students of any craft, sport, or subject put pictures of their heroes up on their bedroom walls if not to keep a reminder of who

² Johnson, R. & Cureton A. (2022). *Kant's Moral Philosophy*. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-moral/>

³ Effective Ventures Foundation. (2022, Nov. 15). Effective Altruism. <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/>.

they seek to become in their most intimate of spaces - the space that represents their identity? The legacy of a venerated hero motivates us to follow in their footsteps.

So who are some heroes of the Enlightenment? One simply needs to look at the wall of Paranympth Hall in the University of Barcelona whose motto is “freedom will flood all things with *light*”⁴ (italics added). Up on the front wall are the venerated names of the arts, humanities, and sciences: Guttenberg, Galileo, Newton, Leibniz, Aristotle, Plato, Shakespeare, Rafael, Mozart (to name just some).⁵ Do the stories of any of these men tell a tale of how they maximized the greatest good for the greatest number? No. All of these men produced works which are considered major intellectual feats that pushed human knowledge and culture forward. That is the activity which Enlightenment venerates and holds as its highest Good: *human progress* in the arts, humanities, and sciences. An honest Enlightenment lebensphilosophie should be consistent with what the Enlightenment venerates.

What philosophical system is consistent with the Enlightenment ideal of human progress? Hitler’s program as presented in *Mein Kampf*. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler explicitly recognizes “everything we admire on this earth today - science and art, technology and invention.”⁶ Enlightenment science and the pursuit of the Enlightenment ideal were the intellectual justification for Hitler’s program. According to Hitler, “he [the Aryan] is the Prometheus of mankind ... forever kindling anew that fire of knowledge which illumined the night of silent mysteries and thus caused man to climb the path to mastery over the other beings of this earth.”⁷ What is more consistent with the Enlightenment ideal than the image of Prometheus who brought the knowledge of fire (equivalently the fire of knowledge) to humanity so that they could stave off the cold darkness of ignorance? Note further the last part of Hitler’s quote, about achieving mastery over other beings. For Hitler, the Enlightenment ideal of progress was not only an end but *also* a means that served the purpose of dominating other people. But why should one seek to dominate other people? Because, as Hitler explains, “men... owe their higher existence ... to the

⁴ Universitat de Barcelona. (2021). *Libertas perfundet omnia luce*.

[http://www.ub.edu/visitavirtual/visitavirtualEH/index.php/en/get-to-know-the-university-of-barcelona/a-history-of-the-university-of-barcelona/libertas-perfundet-omnia-luce-eng#:~:text=Since%20then%2C%20the%20motto%20of,replaced%20by%20libertas%20\(liberty\).](http://www.ub.edu/visitavirtual/visitavirtualEH/index.php/en/get-to-know-the-university-of-barcelona/a-history-of-the-university-of-barcelona/libertas-perfundet-omnia-luce-eng#:~:text=Since%20then%2C%20the%20motto%20of,replaced%20by%20libertas%20(liberty).)

⁵ Universitat de Barcelona. (2021). Paranympth Hall.

http://www.ub.edu/visitavirtual/visitavirtualEH/index.php/en/get-to-know-the-building-room-x-room/first-floor/paranympth?view=gallery_wd#bwg54/1008

⁶ Hitler A. (1988, Sept. 15). *Mein Kampf* (pp. 288) (A. Foxman, Trans.). Harper. (Original work published 1925)

⁷ Hitler A. (1988, Sept. 15). *Mein Kampf* (pp. 290) (A. Foxman, Trans.). Harper. (Original work published 1925)

knowledge and ruthless application of Nature's stern and rigid laws,"⁶ in other words to natural selection.

To its very core, the intellectual justification for Hitler's program is founded not only upon the Enlightenment ideal of human progress but also on one of the most important scientific paradigms - Darwinian selection. In Hitler's analysis the natural state of man is competition of the technologically fittest. Man is not to rise above nature but to harness and quicken the process by which nature has created beings who can produce the height of arts, sciences, and humanities (man's "higher existence"). Those nations who possess the technological capacity to dominate other nations are winning in the competition of the fittest race since they have the "knowledge" and can execute "ruthless application" of killing off inferior peoples. Because it is genetic selection that results in fitness, "the man who misjudges and disregards the racial [natural selection] laws actually forfeits ... the triumphal march of the best race and hence also the precondition for all human progress [the Enlightenment ideal]."⁸

We can see that Nazism is thoroughly founded upon the Enlightenment tradition and is perhaps one of the most honest expressions of its aim. It is not an aberration from the Enlightenment tradition, but rather it is a member of the Enlightenment's lineage. What exactly spawns this lineage? It is the realization that the humanities need not humanize, but can instead aggrandize. The humanities can aggrandize a people into believing their cultural products are the height of humanity and the purpose for humanity's existence. It is also the realization that technological prowess gives one dominion not simply over nature, but over other people. Scientific achievement can be a venerable end in itself but it is *also* a means for political hegemony.

Given that the Holocaust was founded upon an honest account of the Enlightenment's lebensphilosophie, what are we to make of the Enlightenment? If the lebensphilosophie of the Enlightenment is for man to be like Prometheus, a bringer fire to the rest of humanity so that we can stave off the cold darkness of ignorance, then we must ask ourselves: is fire only a source of light or also an imminent source of destruction?

⁸ Hitler A. (1988, Sept. 15). Mein Kampf (pp. 289) (A. Foxman, Trans.). Harper. (Original work published 1925)