

Comment

Elster's "Enthusiasm and Anger in History"

(forthcoming, *Inquiry*)

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Jon Elster has argued for the explanatory importance of two discrete emotions in political history: namely, the emotions of "enthusiasm" and "anger." His argument forms part of a larger social philosophy. Elster's overarching aim is to elucidate the role of *mechanisms* in social and political life.¹ Identifying particular causal connections is distinct from constructing a science of prediction: we can explain individual processes in casual terms, Elster believes, yet we cannot predict when a given explanation will apply.² This is because it has proved impossible to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions under which a recurrent causal nexus will obtain. This conclusion disposes Elster to a degree of skepticism about the ability of rational choice modelling to account reliably for the character of human behavior. The nature of this skepticism stands in need of clarification. Elster is not opposed to methodological individualism, presupposed in standard accounts of economic and rational choice theory. On the contrary, he accepts the claim that social processes are resolvable into the behavior of the individual agents who comprise them. "There are no societies," Elster has claimed, "only individuals who interact with one another."³ This view is evident throughout his writings, conspicuously so since his *Logic and Society* of 1978.⁴ It has bred in turn a rejection of functionalist arguments prominent in various philosophers including Marx and Foucault.⁵ Yet, despite his interest in the micro-foundations of social science, Elster has at the same time been a dissenting voice among rational choice theorists to the extent that his picture of the individual actor includes an awareness of impaired deliberation, or imperfectly rational decision-making.⁶

Human beings, Elster recognises, are capable of preference ordering. The process of choosing is sometimes translated into a calculus of utility functions. Both procedures

¹ Jon Elster, *Explaining Technical Change: A Case Study in the Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Idem, *Nuts and Bolts in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

² Jon Elster, *Political Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 140.

³ Jon Elster, *The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁴ Jon Elster, *Logic and Society: Contradictions and Possible Worlds* (New York: Wiley, 1978).

⁵ Jon Elster, "Cohen on Marx's Theory of History," *Political Studies* (March 1980), pp. 121–8; idem, "Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory," *Theory and Society*, 11 (1982), pp. 453–82; idem, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 104.

⁶ Jon Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

presuppose a capacity for optimal adaptation – that is, for rationally selecting the most appropriate means for arriving at a chosen end under given circumstances. Instrumental reasoning of the kind can be further analysed into various components. The desire for a given outcome must deploy beliefs and marshal evidence. In picking our means we act on the basis of belief – on the presumption that a given method is best suited to the desired result. Further, this idea is dependent on our assessment of the facts, as well as on our ability to collect them efficiently. We standardly expect individuals to act in accordance with this model of rational optimisation. We also commonly observe such behavior in practice. Economic forecasting is premised on our effectiveness in managing desires in predictably rational ways. However, Elster’s interest over the past number of decades has been focussed on how practical reasoning can fail.

Evidence of this failure is all around us: for instance, when people irrationally deny indeterminacy between options, or when they are afflicted by weakness of will (*akrasia*), or wishful thinking, or self-deception, or myopia.⁷ In each of these cases powerful emotions are at work. For example, individuals crave the feeling of pride that comes with success, yet more immediate impulses often steer them to short-term satisfactions – which ultimately lead to disappointment. This kind of predicament can come about under the influence of any number of passions – like joy, pity, love, envy, shame and malice. To understand any pertinent conflict we must analyse the constituent emotions – for instance, how immediate fear deflects us from sought-after contentment. Moral philosophy, from Hobbes to Rawls, and the study of prudence, from Kant to Weber, obliges us to register the importance of the drives that guide our projects. Indeed, precursor theories of practical reasoning stretch back to ancient Athens. The emotions that move us give rise to feelings of pleasure or pain, or sometimes – as Plato recognised – to a complex blend of both.⁸ At the same time, the passions that stir us are often prompted by prior *thinking*: so, the feeling of injustice can be distinguished from envy because both are caused by different cognitive antecedents.⁹ Anger provides a clear example of the phenomenon. The emotion is not an instance of a raw affective response, commonly referred to as a “visceral”

⁷ Some of these compulsions are discussed by the contributors to Jon Elster ed., *The Multiple Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁸ Plato, *Philebus*, 36b; Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 58; Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 126 ff.

⁹ Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind*, p. 55.

reaction.¹⁰ Instead, it is triggered, according to Aristotle, by the notion of undeserved contempt: “Hence Achilles in his anger [*orgē*] exclaims: ‘He has dishonoured me...’”¹¹

The analysis of emotions benefits from an awareness that their taxonomy can be subject to historical change. This fact is *prima facie* unsurprising, since the utility of specific emotions varies with circumstances, and the value placed on them is altered accordingly. “War,” Thucydides famously remarked, “is a violent teacher... and it usually generates passions to match our circumstances.”¹² Since the evaluation of sentiments changes, the range of reference for emotional labels, much like the appraisal of the virtues themselves, is prone to vary. “Anger” in Aristotle is closer to our “wrath,” while in Descartes it is more like “indignation.”¹³ In the pages that follow, I want to trace an example of one particular shift in meaning bearing on “enthusiasm” as singled out by Elster. “In textbooks, handbooks, and scholarly articles dealing with emotions,” Elster remarks, “enthusiasm is virtually *never* mentioned, let alone discussed at any length.”¹⁴ I agree with Elster that it merits serious treatment.

Elster is concerned with the impact of emotions – with their capacity to induce a sense of urgency or impatience – as well as with the duration of their effects on human judgment.¹⁵ Fear makes us risk-averse, while anger makes us fool-hardy, and the influence of both declines at unpredictable rates. As we have seen, Elster is also sensitive to the way ideas can spark feelings. He charts these influences and effects systematically in the case of anger. Yet the sentiment of enthusiasm poses peculiar difficulties, and so it is on this feeling that I shall concentrate in what follows. For Elster, a primary piece of evidence for the significance of enthusiasm derives from David Hume. In his famous essay of 1741, “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” Hume associates enthusiasm with various states and emotions, as well as with assorted antecedents and consequences. He singles out the feelings of hope and pride, as well as the state of intellectual presumption.¹⁶ He ascribes to these a peculiar trajectory in addition to a set of preconditions. Enthusiasm, therefore, is not just any sentiment: it is an emotion with such a

¹⁰ George Loewenstein, “Out of Control: Visceral Influences on Behavior,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 65: 3 (March 1996), pp. 272–92.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1378b6–7.

¹² Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, III, 82, ii.

¹³ Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind*, p. 66 and n.

¹⁴ Jon Elster, “Enthusiasm and Anger in History,” *Inquiry*, p. 10. There is, however, a historical literature on enthusiasm. See, importantly, J. G. A. Pocock, “Enthusiasm: The Antiself of Enlightenment,” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 60: 1/2 (1997), pp. 7–28.

¹⁵ Jon Elster, “Collective Action in America Before 1787” in *Morality, Governance, and Social Institutions: Reflections on Russel Hardin*, eds. Thomas Christiano et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); idem, *France Before 1789: The Unravelling of an Absolutist Regime* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁶ David Hume, “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm” in idem, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), p. 74.

specific array of causes and results that it is best described as a condition rather than simply as a passion. It is a condition enabled and accompanied by sentiments, but these only make sense holistically with reference to the general disorder. Elster notes that there is a “step” from rapture to fanaticism in Hume’s account, and comments that the reasons for this transition are less than “obvious.”¹⁷ While Elster declines to pursue the question of why enthusiastic rapture takes the course it does in Hume, I believe the issue can be profitably addressed. Humean enthusiasm is essentially religious in nature, and its features can be understood in this context alone. The concern with moral enthusiasm is a later development variously anatomised by thinkers after the French Revolution.

Hume presents his essay as a challenge to “false religion,” although it might better be seen as a critical engagement with religion as such. Melancholic gloom, leading to credulity, disposes human beings to superstition.¹⁸ Underlying this syndrome is the passion of fear. It makes sense to experience dread when confronting unknown forces. Yet, Hume observes, besides our common fears, the human mind, when subject to self-generated “prejudice,” is further capable of submitting itself to foundationless alarms. Here consciousness itself creates its “predominant inclination.”¹⁹ Enthusiasm is similarly identified with a core emotion – with the feeling of hope, caused by the passion of pride. Such sentiments can be further stimulated by an active imagination. As with superstition, a precondition for this tendency is the state of “ignorance.” It is ignorance in both cases that transforms emotions into what I have called a “condition.” Hume is alerting his readers to the impact of religious belief, or the unphilosophical culture of credulity. In a Christian context, this culture takes two predominant forms: a disposition to reverence priestcraft on the one hand, and an inclination to credit inspiration on the other.²⁰ Of the latter case Hume writes: “the fanatic madman delivers himself over, blindly, and without reserve, to the supposed illapses [influxes] of the spirit, and to inspiration from above.”²¹

The concern with inspiration has deep roots in Western culture. It was first systematically analysed in Plato’s *Ion*, an early dialogue on the figure of the rhapsode. There Socrates argued that the poetic performer did not teach by means of knowledge, but rather directed audiences

¹⁷ Elster, “Enthusiasm and Anger,” p, 11.

¹⁸ For the connections between religious sentiment and melancholy, see Angus Gowland, *The Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy: Robert Burton in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Hume, “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” pp. 73–4.

²⁰ For the wider intellectual context, see Michael Heyd, “*Be Sober and Reasonable*”: *The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

²¹ Hume, “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” p., 74. Hume is referring to infusion by the Holy Spirit.

under the influence of “divine dispensation and possession.”²² Plato took the cure for such mania to reside in his own philosophy, yet the diagnosis of the ailment inevitably changed with the advent of Christianity, above all in the aftermath of the Reformation, when relations between faith, reason and knowledge once again became matters for serious investigation. Under conditions where it was necessary to interpret both God’s law and his word, the grounds for discriminating between revelation and inspiration became urgent. Chapter XIX of Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, under the title “Of Enthusiasm,” illustrates the point. Here enthusiasm is described in terms of a spurious resort to personal rather than scriptural revelation. This involved, Locke claimed, a renunciation of rationality, justifying recourse to “the ungrounded Fancies of a Man’s own Brain.”²³ Such baseless imagination bypasses the labor of reason, and seduces the enthusiast into crediting their own idle preferences and assumptions. The process is driven by conceit and vanity, with both ethical and epistemological consequences for the “Perswasions and Actions of men.”²⁴

Much like Hume, Locke looked back to the antinomian sects of the English Civil War as supplying examples of enthusiasts whose dependence on inspiration corrupted both belief and conduct. Whereas Hume was slow to credit revelation as such, Locke took aim at those who trusted fanciful revelation – the sectaries who allegedly felt “the Hand of GOD moving within them.”²⁵ Their strength of feeling discounted the possibility of refutation: “*It is a revelation, because they firmly believe it, and they firmly believe it, because it is a Revelation.*”²⁶ The problem is not just the passion, although its intensity is clearly important. It is also the false belief on which the sentiment is grounded together with its field of application. As Elster correctly reads Hume, excessive optimism might usefully inspire a commitment to liberty. Yet, more disturbingly, blind hope based on (presumed) personal revelation from the deity might be employed to discredit all manner of evident truths, or even the canon of accepted social virtues. This moral subversion accounted for the excesses of the 1640s and 1650s. As Hume argued in his *History of England*, the extremes of piety encouraged hypocrisy as conscience

²² Plato, *Ion*, 536c. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* in idem, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, eds. Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 299: “the ancient songs, from Homer to Ossian or from Orpheus to the prophets, owe their bright eloquence merely to the lack of means for expressing their concepts.”

²³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 698.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 699.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 700.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 702.

was used to justify inhumane behavior.²⁷ The same point is emphasised in his earlier essay on the same theme: “Human reason, and even morality are rejected as fallacious guides.”²⁸

So we can see how rapture led to fanaticism for Hume. In his *Lettres philosophiques* of 1743, Voltaire described the enthusiasm of the Quakers as “une maladie.”²⁹ Hume regarded the problem in similar terms. The sentiment was a symptom of the Christian faith subject to a particular framework of interpretation. Most crucially it had consequences for the morals of its practitioners. Elster notes how remote this conception seems from later Kantian usage.³⁰ Nothing great, Kant wrote in his 1764 essay on the “Maladies of the Head,” has ever been accomplished without “enthusiasm” (*Enthusiasmus*).³¹ At first glance, this conclusion might seem strange coming from the most ardent critic of metaphysics to have been produced by the eighteenth-century Prussia. Much like Locke, Kant had been eager to expose the lure of delusive mental conceit. That was to be achieved, as he put it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, by disciplining the “extravagances” entertained by the faculty of reason speculating beyond the bounds of valid cognition.³² While metaphysics in the tradition of Leibniz and Wolff was liable to pervert the cause of rational inquiry, the religious enthusiast was still more prone to uncontrolled fantasy. Kant counted both Spinoza and Swedenborg among the ranks of the enthusiasts.³³ In any case, criticism (*Kritik*) was philosophy’s best defence against the phenomenon.³⁴ Without this limiting discipline, Kant argued in 1786, the field lay open “for all kinds of enthusiasm [*Schwärmerei*].”³⁵ Why, then, did Kant also apparently endorse the achievements of enthusiasm?

The answer is that, although the term “enthusiasm” acquired a disparaging connotation through the process by which Plato’s idea of divine possession was directed against antinomian sects in the seventeenth century, the word also retained a range of positive meaning. This

²⁷ David Hume, *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), 6 vols., V, pp. 341, 442; VI, p. 142.

²⁸ Hume, “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” p., 74.

²⁹ Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques* (1734) in *Mélanges*, ed. Jacques Van Den Heuvel (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 8: “L’enthousiasme est une maladie.”

³⁰ Elster, “Enthusiasm and Anger,” p. 12.

³¹ Immanuel Kant, “Essay on the Maladies of the Head” in idem, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, p. 73.

³² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 672. Cf. idem, *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* (1793) in *Religion and Rational Theology*, eds. Allen Wood and George De Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 96.

³³ Immanuel Kant, “Some Remarks on Ludwig Heinrich Jakob’s *Examination of Mendelssohn’s Morning Hours*” in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, p. 178; idem, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, p. 299.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³⁵ Kant, “Remarks on Jakob’s *Examination*,” p. 178. One might render “*Schwärmerei*” as “swooning,” as Samuel Zeitlin has suggested to me – though the specific religious-epistemic-psychological nexus of meaning is key in Kant.

undertone was largely the work of literary and rhetorical treatises, with Longinus' *On the Sublime* among the most powerful influences. Sublimity lifts us near "the mighty mind of God," we read in Longinus.³⁶ The spectacle of greatness – as we contemplate the Nile, the Danube or the ocean – awakens in us the emotions of admiration and pride. In this benign sense, as it passed into Christian thought, enthusiasm was the feeling of sublimity responding to the evidence of divinity in nature. For John Dennis and Robert Lowth alike, writing between the beginning and the middle of the eighteenth century, poetry was the natural medium for this kind of exaltation.³⁷ The feeling was generally contrasted with the faculty of reason, although the two were not always held to be incompatible in practice. As Edmund Burke argued in a fragment from the 1750s, "God has been pleased to give Mankind an Enthusiasm to supply the want of Reason."³⁸ Enthusiasm in this sense was an aid to faith, an incentive to conviction when evidence was lacking.

If sublimity in nature could evoke enthusiasm in this way, so too could the spectacle of moral greatness. Hume analysed this phenomenon under the heading of "heroic virtue" in Part III of *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Excessive pride in their own abilities impels exceptional people to outstanding accomplishments: "all those great actions and sentiments, which have become the admiration of mankind, are founded on nothing but pride and self-esteem."³⁹ Alexander the Great is invoked to illustrate the point: abandoned by his soldiers, on the verge of defeat, he was still driven by an overweening sense of "dignity and right of empire."⁴⁰ We admire the combination of elevation, intrepidity and self-conceit. Hume comments: "an excessive courage and magnanimity, especially when it displays itself under the frowns of fortune, contributes, in a great measure, to the character of a hero, and will render a person the admiration of posterity."⁴¹ What astonishes observers is the force of blind faith in virtue. Hume never used the term enthusiasm for such commitment even though it joined together extreme pride and disproportionate hope.

³⁶ Longinus, *Peri Hypsos*, XXXVI, 2.

³⁷ John Dennis, *The Advancement and Reformation of Poetry* (London: 1701), p. 29; Robert Lowth, *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* (Oxford: 1753), p. 16.

³⁸ Edmund Burke, "Religion of no Efficacy Considered as a State Engine" in *A Notebook of Edmund Burke*, ed. H.V.F. Somerset (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 68. For discussion see Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, pp. 152–3; see also Ross Carroll, "Revisiting Burke's Critique of Enthusiasm," *History of Political Thought*, 35:2 (Spring 2014), pp. 317–44.

³⁹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 382. For the social implications of Hume's moral thought, see Paul Sagar, *The Opinion of Mankind: Sociability and the Theory of the State from Hobbes to Smith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁴⁰ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 382, paraphrasing Charles Marguetel de Saint-Evremond, *Works*, trans. Pierre des Maizeaux (London: 1714), 3 vols., I, pp. 67–8.

⁴¹ Hume, *A Treatise*, p. 383.

Hume associated heroism with paganism above all else. Christianity had celebrated humility instead. Outstanding virtue did not pose any conspicuous problem precisely because it was exceptional by definition. Religious enthusiasm, on the other hand, was readily disseminated, Hume thought. He might have cited Ranters, Muggletonians, Moravians, Anabaptists or Quakers as evidence. The awful virtue of a Cato was hard to emulate whereas self-admiring piety spread like a contagion among Christian sects. It was left to commentators following the French Revolution to identify moral enthusiasm as a serious threat to social stability. Kant was in effect an intermediary figure. He classified moral devotion as a species of *Enthusiasmus* yet distinguished this from religious “illumination” or *Schwärmerei*.⁴² Volney observed that the revolutionaries in France were consumed by an admiration for the virtues of the ancients. This amounted, he commented, to “blind” enthusiasm.⁴³ It had spread like an epidemic over a hundred and fifty years and come to a climax in the mindless imitation of ancient politics attempted after 1789. For Kant, by comparison, such moral enthusiasm could be noble. The raptures of the moralist might be benign, lacking the depravity of the *Schwärmer*. Yet nowhere did Kant credit religious enthusiasm.

Still in the tradition of Hume, Kant counted exceptional magnanimity as an instance of the “sublime”: “Boldly undertaking danger for our own rights, for those of the fatherland, or for those of our friends is sublime.”⁴⁴ In the same year, he described the willingness to broach such peril when incentivized by moral sentiment as “enthusiasm” (*Enthusiasmus*). He further explicated the disposition as characterizable in terms of a “fantasy in moral sensations that are in themselves good.”⁴⁵ In his mature work Kant denominated the state of mind in which the idea of the good is affectively motivated with the term “enthusiasm,” still qualifying the impression it left on observers as “sublime.”⁴⁶ This moral attitude was admirable, he claimed, though it could not be wholly approved. It was worthy insofar as it advanced the cause of morality, yet problematic since it did so tumultuously. Kant described this as an “*enthusiasm* [*Enthusiasm*] of good resolution,” a well-disposed emotion acclaiming the concept of freedom

⁴² Immanuel Kant, “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” (1786) in idem, *Religion and Rational Theology*, p. 17. For the wider intellectual context see Anthony La Vopa, “The Philosopher and the ‘Schwärmer’: On the Career of a German Epithet from Luther to Kant,” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 60: 1/2 (1997), pp. 85–115.

⁴³ Constantin-François Volney, *Leçons d’histoire in Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1843), p. 592. I am grateful to Miriam Leonard for this reference.

⁴⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) in idem, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Kant, “Essay on the Maladies of the Head,” p. 73.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 154.

under moral laws. It was caused, but not directed, by the faculty of reason.⁴⁷ His favourite example of an event that stimulated this response was the spectacle of the French Revolution.⁴⁸ Whatever might be said about its adverse consequences – and these were many – it had certainly been morally infectious. Even though it brought misery and atrocity in its wake, it still pointed to “a moral predisposition in the human race.”⁴⁹ According to Kant’s world-historical calculus, the dividend in the long run would cancel out the recorded deficits.

Kant’s ethical enthusiasm here is clearly distinct from his *Schwärmerei*. The former, he thought, undoubtedly deserved censure. It was governed by moral feeling rather than rational principles. But the sentiment in itself was fundamentally benign. It was disinterested in its motivation, widespread in its appeal and constructive in relation to its objective. Ultimately, whatever the more immediate scale of the costs associated with the attempt to realise a republican constitution in France, the example of moral righteousness would forever be retained as a spur to improvement.⁵⁰ Yet, for other observers coming after Kant, this species of moral excitation constituted a supreme problem. Just as debate about religious enthusiasm receded from the European scene, moral enthusiasm was subjected to renewed scrutiny. Originally the key analyst was Edmund Burke who in November 1790 turned to satirise select compatriots for precisely their ethical zeal: “they have nothing of politics but the passions they excite.”⁵¹ Much like their French counterparts, as Burke saw it, overriding enthusiasm for an abstract enterprise propelled them into hypocrisy: “Hypocrisy, of course, delights in the most sublime speculations.”⁵² The prospect of a virtuous consummation freed the partisans of the Revolution from the need for intermediary judgments of responsibility. Indeed, they had in effect relinquished any such practical assessment since they lacked all concern with appropriate methods, experience, or levers.

Such scepticism was famously taken up by Tocqueville. Of publicists in France after 1789 he wrote: “The very situation of these writers prepared them to like general and abstract theories of government... no experience tempered the ardors of their nature... they didn’t have any idea of the dangers which always accompany even the most necessary revolutions.”⁵³ In

⁴⁷ Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, pp. 356, 370.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

⁴⁹ Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) in *idem, Religion and Rational Theology*, p. 302.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 302–4.

⁵¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 157.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁵³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 197.

1798 Kant had applauded the appetite for danger exhibited by ethical enthusiasts in his own homeland. Prussian devotees of the Revolution in France cherished the ideal of republican government ahead of any sense of how to achieve it. In fact, there was no ascertainable path that could plausibly lead from their own absolute monarchy to a fully legitimate regime, yet still their acclamation seemed valuable to Kant.⁵⁴ By comparison, practical implementation, based on an assessment of probabilities, counted for everything in Tocqueville and Burke; normative judgement could not be separated from political calculation. This insight became the linchpin of Hegel's political thought. In the same year that Kant had published his *Conflict of the Faculties*, Hegel was investigating how the spirit of Christian love had passed over into a species of "life-despising enthusiasm" (*lebenverachtende Schwärmerei*) in the period directly following the founding of the faith. A fanatical assault on natural impulse culminated in a "flight into the void."⁵⁵ Much later, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel further equated the Islamic form of piety with fanatical enthusiasm understood as a species of excitation (*Begeisterung*).⁵⁶ But from his Jena period onwards it was the connection between subjectivity, society and politics that absorbed most of his attention. At this point moral enthusiasm became an abiding topic of concern. Moreover, it became a central object of criticism. Judgments of value, Hegel pleaded, ought properly to be carried out with exhaustive reference to practical contexts. It was not enough to confront society armed with the dictates of conscience alone.

Hegel's commitment to holistic judgment is apparent from the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, notoriously written after the Carlsbad decrees.⁵⁷ The thought of Jakob Friedrich Fries was singled out for abuse, partly, of course, for well-known personal reasons, but also because he provided the occasion for condemning the resort to abstract "conscience" (*Gewissen*) in practical judgement – or to a sentimental politics of subjective conviction (*subjektive Überzeugung*).⁵⁸ But while Fries is the immediate target here, Kant remained the more serious overarching preoccupation. Hegel's mature engagement with Kantian ethics had taken shape by the time of his 1802–3 essay on natural law, yet even Kant appeared to Hegel to be symptomatic of deeper currents at work in modern culture. These currents had their intellectual

⁵⁴ Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*, p. 302n.

⁵⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal in Frühe Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), p. 404.

⁵⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 431: "Diese Begeisterung war Fanatismus."

⁵⁷ On contemporary circumstances, see T. M. Knox, "Hegel and Prussianism," *Philosophy*, 15: 57 (1940), pp. 51–63; Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Chapters 10–11.

⁵⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 20.

source in the writings of Rousseau, above all in his picture of the thinking, conscious will. But the trend culminated politically in the “prodigious spectacle” of a Revolution instigated by deliberate design.⁵⁹ The French Revolution for Hegel was at once seductive, repellent and irreversible. Fundamental to the event was self-regarding wilfulness announcing itself as an ineliminable feature of the world. Its ambition took the form of a “moral demand” couched in the disarming garb of “ethical feeling.”⁶⁰ The problem was that the call for redress was both confused and factious. This brand of Enlightenment dissent is not straightforwardly to be likened to contemporary forms of identity-based partisanship fed by a sense of relative injury, but it is a precondition for this later development.

As in 1789, so also with us, symbolic reparations will scarcely be enough to quell enthusiasm. Disgruntled *amour-propre*, in the absence of deliverable goals, is doomed to feed voraciously on itself. The feeling of being slighted, like the experience of oppression, can only be remedied by an interconnected programme of action linking individuals and their moral projects to systematic arrangements embracing legal relations, economic interests, occupations and public life. Self-referential polemical discontent will not be satisfied by gestures of righteous repudiation. We have to think more deeply about the sources of our expectations, the nature of our commitments, and their connections with a [wider constituency than their own](#). All societies include groupings who violently disagree with each other, and who are equally prone to self-regard and self-interest. Enthusiastic optimism in this context is misplaced. The proneness to moral corruption is universally distributed, exposing the adherents of conscientious purity to the permanent temptation of hypocrisy.

Religious enthusiasm remains an active presence in global politics, extending from the Middle East to the Midwest. In the United States, for instance, Pentecostalism continues to thrive. Elements of this worldview have percolated into the Christian Right, although its impact is barely noticeable on university campuses, where well-schooled portions of the workforce are produced.⁶¹ Moral enthusiasm, on the other hand, can be found in numerous sectors. A faint echo of its passion is discoverable within pockets of the tertiary education system.⁶² Aspects of this outlook are apparent in the pronouncements of stylized versions of conscientious outrage.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 400.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 435.

⁶¹ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

⁶² Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 209 ff.; Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2015), *passim*.

Much of the vocabulary associated with the attitude has taken shape since the 1960s, and so it would be wrong to think of Hegel as having captured all its features. However, he certainly did analyse some of its longer-term components. For one thing, he saw that moral enthusiasm was not just propelled by ethical optimism, as it had been for Kant. It was also fed by unremitting anger, which Hegel called “fury” (*Furie*).⁶³ An echo of the religious origins of this secular mindset is evident in Hegel’s description of the condition as kind of zealotry.⁶⁴ In the *Philosophy of Right* he was still depicting its movements by the verb “Schwärmen.”⁶⁵ However, his considered view was that the impulse was precipitated less by devotion than by the spirit of modern self-conceit.

In other words, moral enthusiasm for Hegel was rooted in subjectivity. For that reason, its aspirations could not be directly impugned or contradicted; and nor should we wish to eradicate them anyway. They represented an achievement of the thrust of modern freedom. The real question was how such zeal could be optimally articulated. “Optimal” here refers to the rational expression of normative preferences; and the word “rational” is intended in a specific, practical sense. Practicality implies viability considered from two angles: first, implementation must be planned along causally efficacious lines; second, it must also be sensitive to the wider social context. The demands of conscience need to be realised through the means available, and to include a plan for doing business with one’s opponents. Enthusiasm and anger can be constructive incentives to action but they can also be detrimental to the cause they are intended to serve. The moral force of conviction can never suffice for its justification as long as it is imprisoned in a circle of self-affirmation. In this situation we are condemned to assert, in a parody of Locke, that “we are right because we firmly believe in ourselves, and we firmly believe in ourselves because we are right.”

⁶³ Hegel, *Philosophie des Rechts*, p. 50.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.