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Eric V. Snow HST 815 September 16, 1992 Review of Hampson's The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment's thought is more complicated, and is a part of a complicated age than is commonly thought. For instance, one can find an increasing emphasis upon the emotions as the source for moral choice within its thinkers (such as Rousseau) long before Romanticism makes its appearance proper (see Hampson, p. 188, 194). Hence, with all the changes and inconsistencies in its thought, the historian's task of trying to describe the Enlightenment is not going to be easy. Two reasonable successful attempts at describing the Enlightenment's thought, though they have differing emphases, are Norman Hampson's The Enlightenment and Ernst Cassirer's The Philosophy of the Enlightenment.

Hampson's book is more general than Cassirer's, in that it includes overviews of the political and economic history of Europe in this time, in order to give some context to the Enlightenment's thought (H., p. 43-72, 165-185). Hampson, however, is generally somewhat skeptical of drawing simple connections between the political/social environment of the Enlightenment, and its thought, though he makes some tentative judgments (for instance, H., p. 165, 175). Particularly interesting is his rough periodization of the Enlightenment into an earlier, optimistic rationalist phase and a later, more skeptical, pessimistic emotionalist phase (p. 113, 186-188). Through being somewhat wary of over-generalizations, and the avoidance of lockstep Marxism concerning the rising of a middle class (H., p. 184), but still being conscious of the effects a society's political and economic conditions can have upon its thought, Hampson has produced a sophisticated yet fairly readable summary of the Enlightenment and its age.

Cassirer's work, at its title implies, focuses mostly upon the thought of the Enlightenment, not upon its political or economic background, as Hampson's work often does. Perhaps its main advantage over Hampson is how it extensively

traces the Enlightenment's thought as a building upon, or reaction to, the system building of the seventeenth century philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz (C., p. 13, 22, 158). For example, the emphasis of the later Enlightenment upon the individual's uniqueness is traced back to Leibnitz's monadology (C., p. 32-33). Lessing builds upon Spinoza's religious thought (C., p. 190), and Rousseau uses yet also criticizes Hobbes (C., p. 258-260).

The principle disadvantage of his work, besides its heavy, dry academic style that has sentences that often seem to go on forever, could be it makes few attempts to tie the Enlightenment's thought to any political, social, or economic developments occurring at the same time. While such tie-ins are always hazardous to make, and I would agree with his bias that thinkers normally build upon, or react to, prior and/or contemporary thinkers, still some more mention of such background factors as might have been involved would be useful.

Both Hampson's and Cassier's works on the Enlightenment have their respective advantages and disadvantages. Hampson's much greater emphasis on describing the political, social, and economic developments helps to provide background to the Enlightenment's thought, but he fails to trace back its thought as much as Cassier to prior thinkers, especially the seventeenth century's philosophical system builders. Cassier, on the other hand, mostly lacks the former, but does much more of the latter. Hence, depending of whether you want a history of the period (Hampson), or a history of the period's thought (Cassier), you choose one or the other accordingly.