

The RSA logo is a grey square containing the letters 'RSA' in a white, serif font. Below the letters, the text '21st century enlightenment' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

RSA

21st century enlightenment

**Twenty-first century
enlightenment**

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The RSA

The RSA has a new strapline: 21st century enlightenment. This pays tribute to the eighteenth century founders of the Society and to the pioneering spirit which inspired them. It makes a statement about the role the RSA can play today, as an organisation established over 250 years ago but which believes its best days may yet be to come.

At the heart of the RSA's contemporary mission and public debates about the future prospects for the human race is the question 'can we go on like this?' Will the ideas and values which transformed our world in the last two centuries be sufficient to find solutions to the challenges we now face or do we need new ways of thinking?

The RSA's focus on twenty-first century enlightenment invites us to return to core principles of autonomy, universalism and humanism, restoring dimensions which have been lost and seeing new ways to fulfil these ideals. The Society is committed to stimulating new thinking, social innovation and – among its 27,500 Fellows – a powerful ethos of collaboration. Its strapline underlines not only the RSA's interest in ideas and experiment but in becoming the kind of organisation the twenty-first century needs.

Twenty-first century enlightenment

This paper explores some of the key ideas of the Enlightenment, suggesting we might both rethink the interpretation we have come to place on them and develop perspectives more relevant to today. Its starting point is to revisit Enlightenment principles that transformed the world in the last 250 years and to ground them in emerging models of human nature. By humanising ideas such as autonomy, universalism and progress, we have a focus for a renewed public sphere. This means we can live up to another Enlightenment exhortation: by recognising the contingent nature of modern consciousness, we can imagine other ways of thinking and being better suited to the century ahead.

The original eighteenth century Enlightenment was not a single cohesive movement, nor did it have a simple start and finish. Many of the ideas with which it is associated can be found in the philosophy of the ancients or being prefigured in the Renaissance or Reformation. Even as Enlightenment thinking was provoking reaction and counter reaction in coffee houses, church pulpits, and royal societies, it was hardly touching the lives of the overwhelming majority of the rural and emerging industrial working class. As Jonathan Israel has shown, the Enlightenment was riven by conflict between its reformist and radical variants.¹ As for the completion of the Enlightenment project, it could be said we are still waiting.

Yet the Enlightenment made us who we are today. In most parts of the world, the lives of human beings have, in the last 250 years, changed more dramatically than in, not only the previous 10,000 years of human civilisation, but the entire

1. J. Israel. *A Revolution of the Mind: radical enlightenment and the intellectual origins of modern democracy*. Princeton University Press 2009.

190,000 years of homo sapiens' existence. Kant talked about the Enlightenment as humanity emerging into adulthood.² So when we think about the core ideas of the Enlightenment, and how those ideas have shaped modern values, norms and lifestyles, it is a process of cultural psychotherapy, delving into what shaped the collective consciousness of modern people. The rise of science and technology, the growth of market capitalism, the expansion of social tolerance and personal freedom; all these phenomena drew on the impetus of Enlightenment thought.

In light of the needs of a new age, we should emphasise certain aspects of Enlightenment values and explore the implications of being true to those values today. In his book *In Defence of the Enlightenment*, the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov suggests three ideas were at the core of the Enlightenment project: autonomy, universalism, and the human end purpose of our acts.³

In relation to the idea of autonomy – that every individual should be able to make their own choices about their own life free from overbearing religious and political authority – I suggest we need to aim for a self-aware form of autonomy, informed by a deeper appreciation of the foundations, possibilities and frailties of human nature. In relation to universalism – the idea that all people are deserving of dignity and share fundamental rights – I suggest we pay more attention to our capacity for empathy, which is not only vital to thriving in an interdependent world but is the motivation for acting on universalism. In relation to the humanist principle – that we should organise the world according to what is best for human beings – I argue that we should more often ask what is progress and acknowledge the fundamentally ethical nature of this question.

2. E Kant. *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Penguin 2009 [1784].

3. T Todorov. *In Defence of the Enlightenment*. Atlantic Books 2009.

The social aspiration gap

Despite the scope for debate between optimists and pessimists, there is a general consensus on the key challenges facing national and global society. How do we achieve the benefits of economic growth – which is both vital to the welfare of those in the poor world and without which no civilisation has been able to survive – while managing environmental constraints in relation not only to greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere but the wider sustainability of the biosphere? How do we deal with the contrast between powerful global forces of commerce, migration, crime and conflict and the as yet weak global public sphere of civil society and governance? How do we manage risk and shape progress to human ends when science, technology and commerce are so complex and fast moving? How do we respond to the evidence that higher levels of affluence among the comfortable majority in the rich world do not seem, at the level of the individual, to be associated with greater well-being, or, at the level of society, with greater inclusion, solidarity or optimism? The pronounced social pessimism revealed in national opinion polls may be misplaced but it is also a worrying sign.

It is characteristic of all modern and many pre-modern eras that citizens believe they are living through times of unprecedented change. An underlying strand in debates about the human race's future prospects concerns how discontinuous is the current moment. For environmentalists we face a global crisis which requires a very different model of progress, while for a new breed of optimists, like the science writer Matt Ridley, the problems we now have are essentially no different to the ones we have been posed and solved in the past.⁴

My first RSA annual lecture in 2007 offered a rather more pragmatic case for new thinking.⁵ I described what I called

4. M Ridley. *The Rational Optimist: how prosperity evolves*. HarperCollins 2010.

5. M Taylor. *Pro-Social Behaviour: the future – it's up to us*. RSA 2007.

a ‘social aspiration gap’ between the kind of future to which most people in a moderate, reasonably cohesive society like the UK aspire, and our trajectory relying on current modes of thought and behaviour. This gap can be said to comprise three dimensions; three ways in which tomorrow’s citizens need, in aggregate, to be different to today’s.

First, citizens need to be more engaged, by which I mean more willing to appreciate the choices society faces, to get involved in those choices, to give permission to their leaders to make the right decisions for all of us for the long term, and to recognise how their own behaviour shapes those choices. For example the trade off point between economic growth and environmental sustainability depends in part on our own willingness to accept some changes in our lifestyles. Second, with the cost of labour intensive public services bound to rise, citizens need to be more self-sufficient and resourceful. Whether it is looking after our health, investing in our education, saving for our retirement or setting up our own business, we need to be comfortable with managing our own lives and confident about taking initiative. Third, we need to be more pro-social, behaving in ways which strengthen society, contributing to what the writer on social capital, David Halpern, calls the hidden wealth of nations; our capacity for trust, caring and co-operation.⁶

Some of these issues featured in the 2010 election campaign. This suggested that the gap is less one of recognition and more one of intent. We seem to see that things need to be different, and that this has implications for us all, while responding to the empty promise that change can be achieved without challenging any of our assumptions and behaviours. A poll commissioned by the 2020 Public Services Trust at the RSA found that voters tended to condemn politicians for failing to tell the truth about the current deficit while at the same time demanding to be protected from any service cuts or tax rises.⁷

6. D Halpern. *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*. Polity Press 2010.

7. Commission on 2020 Public Services. *What do people want, need and expect from public services?* Public Services Trust and Ipsos MORI 2010.

The middle-aged establishment in Britain, of which I am a part, has bequeathed a triple deficit. Not only is there the current fiscal imbalance, but the environmental impact of our past consumption patterns are unsustainable and – as writer and politician David Willetts has shown – we have exploited our demographic power to the detriment of future generations.⁸ While not underestimating the extent to which human beings have shown an ability to invent and adapt in the past, on balance I favour the view that we will need to live differently in the twenty-first century if we are to be resilient and to thrive. As the architects of the Enlightenment understood, this means being able to see the world and ourselves from a new perspective.

For the overwhelming proportion of our species' time on earth, our circumstances changed very little. We hunted and gathered in small homogeneous communities; in our short simple lives there was little need for other than the most basic information and communication. But in the last few thousand years, and accelerating rapidly since the Enlightenment, our prehistorically evolved brains have had to cope with wildly different circumstances.

Given the scale of changes that have taken place in our world in just the last twenty or so generations, it is impossible to predict with confidence how the human race will be operating if it survives for another twenty. Whatever happens in the future, we will still have to find a way of negotiating a modern world with brains that evolved in prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies. This is one reason to re-examine the first of Todorov's Enlightenment principles: autonomy.

Self-aware autonomy

At the heart of the Enlightenment project is a commitment to the autonomy of human beings to use their reason to create

8. D Willetts. *The Pinch: how the baby boomers stole their children's future – and why they should give it back*. Atlantic Press 2010.

self-authored, valuable lives. Throughout the Enlightenment, and ever since, debate has raged about the implications of this ideal. One set of issues concerns how individual autonomy should be reconciled to the collective good. Civic republicans, for example, argue that autonomy can only be realised in a society which also exhibits civic virtue. Given that we rely on social order and positive freedoms to allow us to make choices in our lives, we can only have autonomy if we make our contribution to maintaining a healthy society.

Another debate explores what drives our autonomous choices; how rational are we? David Hume, for example, repudiated Plato's dichotomy between the wild horse of passion and the wise charioteer of reason saying:

*Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.*⁹

By the end of the twentieth century a combination of ideas, most notably free market economics, and changes in society – including the perceived failure of the post-war settlement and the rise of consumer capitalism – had led to the apparent triumph of an individualistic view of the domain of autonomy and a rationalist, utility maximising, view of human nature.

The ideology of possessive individualism came to shape the way we think about democracy. With the decline of deference and class-based politics the principle that the customer is always right has been imported into the political system. But the voter is not always right. The problem is not only that the aggregate preferences of individual voters do not add up to a coherent programme but that the preferences of each voter are often internally incompatible. For example, most people in the UK say more power should be devolved to the local level but a similar majority say public services should be the same standard everywhere.

9. D Hume. *A Treatise on Human Nature*. Penguin 1969 [1738].

The UK's leading public sector pollster Ben Page has summed up voters' preferences in a single phrase "we demand Swedish welfare on American tax rates".¹⁰ This is not the only inconsistency. We believe that we should all do more to reduce our contribution to greenhouse gas emissions but most of us admit we have not changed our own behaviour. Most significantly, in many policy areas the preferences people express in opinion polls are systematically different to those which they reach after a process of deliberation. Yet when politicians and commentators genuflect to public opinion it is generally superficial individual preferences to which they refer, not the outcomes of informed collective discussion.

When politicians offer to meet individual voter preferences and then fail – as they must – it only increases public disenchantment with collective institutions. This process may have gone furthest in the US. Here, University of Columbia Professor, Mark Lilla, describes the Tea Party movement of grassroots opposition to President Obama:

*Historically, populist movements use the rhetoric of class solidarity to seize political power so that 'the people' can exercise it for their common benefit. American populist rhetoric does something altogether different today. It fires up emotions by appealing to individual opinion, individual autonomy, and individual choice, all in the service of neutralizing, not using, political power. It gives voice to those who feel they are being bullied, but this voice has only one, Garbo-like thing to say; I want to be left alone.*¹¹

Despite the rise of individualism as an idea, it has, over the centuries, been subject to a variety of philosophical, sociological and political critiques. Meanwhile, public opinion and public policy have moved to and fro on the individualist/collectivist

10. *Understanding Society: Swedish services for US taxes – public expectations vs the new age of austerity.* Ipsos MORI 2009.

11. M Lilla. "The Tea Party Jacobins," in the *New York Review of Books*, 27 May 2010.

spectrum. But, in recent years, research in areas as disparate as economics, evolutionary psychology and neuroscience have provided new grounds for questioning our interpretation of autonomy. It turns out, for example, that Hume was right. As Antonio Damasio describes in *Descartes' Error*, patients with damage to the parts of the brain that govern emotions were unable to make even the simplest of choices.¹² Our capacity to reason does rely on emotion.

Twenty-first century enlightenment involves championing a more self-aware, socially embedded model of autonomy. This does not mean repudiating the rights of the individual. Nor does it underestimate our unique and amazing ability deliberately to shape our own destinies. Indeed, it is by understanding that our conscious thought is only part of what drives our behaviour that we can become better able to exercise self-control.

I have used the simple metaphor for human behaviour of an elephant being ridden through a cultivated jungle, in which the rider is our conscious thought, the elephant our automatic systems and the jungle our social context. The skilful elephant rider is not under the illusion he can take any route at any speed but understands the habits of elephants and the advantages and pitfalls of different paths through the jungle.

Most of our behaviour, including social interaction, is the result of our brain responding automatically to the world around us rather than the outcome of conscious decision-making. In this sense it is more realistic to see ourselves as a node integrally connected to the world rather than a separate, wholly autonomous, entity. For example, recent work on the impact of social networks shows how they subtly but powerfully influence our lifestyles. After studying public health patterns for two decades Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler conclude:

12. A Damasio, *Descartes' Error: emotion, reason and the human brain*. GP Putnam's Sons 1994.

*Social influence does not end with the people we know. If we affect our friends, and they affect their friends, then our actions can potentially affect people we have never met. We discovered that if your friend's friend's friend gained weight, you gained weight. We discovered that if your friend's friend's friend stopped smoking, you stopped smoking. And we discovered that if your friend's friend's friend became happy, you became happy.*¹³

Practically, it turns out that changing our context is a more powerful way of shaping our behaviour than trying to change our minds. If you want to be a better person, don't buy a book of sermons, choose more virtuous friends.

There are other lessons we can learn from the more subtle and holistic models of human nature now emerging. To minimise unnecessary work, the brain uses a whole set of shortcuts to make sense of the world. Generally these are very effective but sometimes they are misleading. For example, we tend not to be very good at making decisions for the long term and we are better at understanding relative than absolute values. One of the lessons of the credit crunch is that systems which rely on the combination of individual choice and self-interest are vulnerable to what Keynes referred to as our 'animal spirits' on both the exuberant upswing and the panic-stricken downswing.¹⁴

We don't only make systematic mistakes about what is happening in the outside world, something we might be able to blame on the information made available to us. More strikingly, we are also poor at estimating our own capacities, predicting what will make us happy or even describing accurately what made us happy in the past. The moral and political critique of an individualist, rational choice, model of autonomy now has an evidence base.

13. N Christakis and J Fowler. *Connected: the surprising power of our social networks and how they shape our lives*. Little Brown and Company 2009.

14. J Keynes. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. Palgrave Macmillan 2007 [1936].

Anthony Giddens is among those who have argued that a key component of modern consciousness is the rise of reflexivity; our ability to reflect upon our own lives and seek to shape them to our chosen ends.¹⁵ Are we now entering a period of neurological reflexivity in which personal and social strategies for a better life take account of the complex and sometimes counter-intuitive foundations of human motivation? The RSA's Social Brain project has begun to explore how sharing some simple rules about cognition can offer people new tools in their lives and at work. Instead of the paternalistic and somewhat overstated policy of 'nudge' – shaping policy around our cognitive shortcuts – we advocate what we call 'Steer'.¹⁶ This involves providing citizens with insights that enable them more effectively to shape their own actions, not through a sheer effort of will but by recognising and changing the contexts which influence automatic behaviour.

Similarly, we need a self-aware form of politics which recognises that unthinking individual preferences are often a poor guide for policy choices and that they can be very different to the decisions people make when given the information and time to deliberate with others. Individual preferences are not a given, nor do they reflect a rational cost benefit calculation, but arise from the social and discursive context in which they are developed and expressed.

Better understanding ourselves and our human frailties also helps fuel doubts about conventional accounts of material progress. Research on happiness shows a weak link between affluence and contentment among the well-off citizens of well-off societies. One reason for this, as Fred Hirsch predicted more than thirty years ago, lies in the growing importance to the economy of 'positional' goods; where the value of things is not in their intrinsic merit but in comparison to what other

15. A Giddens. *Beyond Left and Right – The Future of Radical Politics*. Polity Press 1994.

16. M Grist. *Steer: mastering our behaviour through instinct, environment and reason*. RSA 2010.

people have.¹⁷ By their nature, consuming more positional goods cannot increase aggregate contentment. Add concerns about the global sustainability of conventionally defined economic growth and there is a powerful mix of reasons to question the outcomes of possessive individualism.

Appreciating that as individuals we are continuous with the context we occupy, especially our social relations, understanding our cognitive frailties and recognising the economic and environmental limits to individual preferences can be helpful to us. This enables us to distinguish our needs from our appetites and our amazing human potential from our often self-defeating aspirations. It is the basis for self-aware autonomy.

Empathic universalism

Building on the idea of natural rights which can be traced back to the ancient Stoics, Todorov's second Enlightenment principle, universalism, is generally taken to mean that all human beings are born with inalienable rights and equally deserving of dignity. Of what these rights should consist has since become one of the defining issues of a post-Enlightenment political discourse. The classic debates concern the merits of negative (freedom) rights versus positive (welfare) rights, about the balance between individual rights and the interests of the community, and, on the global stage, between protecting individual rights and respecting national sovereignty.

Whether one is liberal or communitarian, in favour only of protecting civil liberties or arguing for policies that enable everyone to meet their capabilities, there is a less explored dimension to these questions. What is it that drives us to act on the principle of universalism? It is one thing to sign up to the ideal – even in its more minimal versions – another to put it

17. F Hirsch. *Social Limits to Growth*. Routledge & Kegan Paul 1977.

into practice, particularly when this requires us to make sacrifices or when those whose rights are denied or threatened are distant and different. The emotional foundation for universalism is empathy. This is an argument every secondary school child will recognise from their study of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Writing at the dawn of the struggle for civil rights, Harper Lee has Atticus Finch say to Scout: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it”.¹⁸

Empathic capacity is also a core competency for twenty-first century citizens. There have been many attempts to predict the path of human development once we have met our basic material needs and moved beyond the allure of consumerist individualism. The highest stages usually involve a deeper level of self-awareness and self-expression. The classic model is Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs topped by the concept of self-actualisation, which he described in these terms: “The intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately of what is the organism itself . . . self-actualization is growth-motivated rather than deficiency-motivated”.¹⁹ Those deemed to have self-actualised are said to have certain key characteristics foremost among which are that they embrace reality and facts rather than denying truth; they are spontaneous, they are interested in problem solving, and – most significantly for this part of my argument – they are accepting of themselves and others and lack prejudice.

Another perspective is the idea of self-authorship developed by developmental psychologist Robert Kegan.²⁰ Using a similar framework to Jean Piaget’s pioneering work on child cognitive development, Kegan’s masterwork is *The Evolving Self*, in which he describes the stages of psychological development,

18. L. Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. HarperCollins 2002 [1960].

19. A Maslow. “A Theory of Human Motivation,” originally published in the *Psychological Review* in 1943 is available online: <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>

20. R. Kegan. *The Evolving Self: problem and process in human development*. Harvard University Press 1982.

each subsuming the one before, which take place not just in childhood but throughout life.

Kegan argues not just that we should aspire to greater self-awareness but that we need to reach a higher, more empathic, level of functioning to meet the practical requirements of twenty-first century citizenship. In particular, successfully functioning in a society with diverse values, traditions and lifestyles “requires us to have a relationship to our own reactions, rather than be captive of them”. Kegan writes of an ability to “resist our tendencies to make ‘right’ or ‘true’ that which is merely familiar and ‘wrong’ or ‘false’ that which is only strange”. In a 2002 overview of survey evidence for the OECD, Kegan concluded that only one in five people across the world have achieved the competencies necessary for what he termed a ‘modernist’ or self-authoring order of consciousness.²¹

Of all the attributes which we might seek to nurture in modern citizens – living as they do in the more diverse communities that make up our more interdependent world – the one that matters most is our innate capacity for empathy. The good news is that there is every reason to believe we can expand empathy’s reach. Despite major departures from the trend, most terribly in the twentieth century, the history of the human race has been one of diminishing person-to-person violence. Before the Enlightenment era, for example, mutilation and torture were conventional punishments for minor misdemeanours that would today receive a fine. A detailed search of municipal records by the criminologist Manuel Eisner found the rate of killing has subsided from one in a thousand a year in the Middle Ages to one in one hundred thousand in modern Europe.²²

Since the advent of modern civil rights we have seen a revolution in social attitudes towards race, gender and sexuality.

21. R. Kegan. *Competencies as Working Epistemologies: ways we want adults to know*. Paper presented to the OECD Definition and Selection of Key Competencies Symposium.

22. M. Eisner. “Modernization, Self-Control and Lethal Violence: the long-term dynamics of European homicide rates in theoretical perspective,” in *The British Journal of Criminology* 41:618–638 (2001).

Furthermore, modern real time global media have brought the suffering of distant people into our living room and contributed to the emergence of global state and philanthropic agencies now committed to the ambitious Millennium Goals. The opportunities for us to put ourselves in others' shoes have grown exponentially. Immigration, emigration, foreign travel, global culture and communication all provide us with reasons and opportunities to appreciate our similarities and respect our differences.

But there are reasons to ask whether, just at the time when we need it to accelerate, the process of widening human empathy has stalled. After four decades of post-war progress, levels of inequality have risen across the rich world. Tensions between different ethnic groups persist and have taken on new dimensions. In Europe, the US and the UK anti-immigrant sentiment seems to have grown, arguably reflecting a failure by policymakers to balance the imperatives of globalisation with the empathic capacity of those – usually disadvantaged – communities most affected by change. Although crime has fallen in the UK in recent decades, there is a pervasive and violent gang culture amongst teenagers in poor areas. There are concerns about trends suggesting young people live more in the virtual and online world than the face-to-face one. The more competitive nature of modern society may also have an impact. In June 2010 a paper to the American Association of Psychological Science aggregated information from studies of 14,000 college students and found a marked and growing decline in empathy in comparison to the late 1970s.²³

On the bigger stage, despite our greater awareness, and the proud recent record of our own country, the proportion of the rich world's wealth dedicated to tackling global poverty is still disappointing. Most concerning of all is the failure to develop global agreements and systems of governance. Despite the growing interdependence of the world, national interests still

23. Research conducted at the University of Michigan and presented to the American Association of Psychological Science. See "Empathy: college students don't have as much as they used to, study finds," *ScienceDaily* May 2010.

dominate over international concerns. This shows no sign of changing. The eminent development economist Paul Collier recently told an RSA audience that the institutions of global governance are weaker now than twenty years ago.²⁴

Politicians will freely admit that the main impediment to cementing stronger global arrangements is nationalist sentiment at home. The stock of global empathy upon which democratic leaders can draw has to grow if we are to make arrangements and reach agreements which put the long-term needs of the human race ahead of short-term national interests.

Where does empathy come from and how is it manifest? It is a reasonable hypothesis that those most relaxed about outsiders in their midst would also be those most inclined to be sympathetic to the plight of strangers far away. But the chain of connections linking inter-personal, communal and global scale empathy is complex. We need to understand more about the relationship between in-group and out-group empathy, and between personal development and empathic capacity.

In relation to the individual, John Bowlby's attachment theory revolutionised thinking about early childhood development, showing the significance for the development of personality of the relationship between the child and closest carer, usually the mother.²⁵ As Sue Gerhardt puts it:

*Our peculiarly developed social sense involves a constant interplay between self and other. There is always a dual process going on, looking inwards and identifying our own feelings, but also looking outwards and trying to understand others.*²⁶

Empathy can be seen as the emotional force projecting Kegan's self-authoring personality onto the world, both in

24. P Collier. *The Plundered Planet: how to reconcile prosperity with nature*. Allen Lane 2010.

25. See for example R Bowlby and P King. *Fifty Years of Attachment Theory: recollections of Donald Winnicott and John Bowlby*. Karnac Books 2004.

26. S Gerhardt. *The Selfish Society: how we all forgot to love one another and made money instead*. Simon and Schuster 2010.

the form of social competencies suited to the demands of modern society and as values compatible with furthering global universalism.

Recognising the importance of empathy to the individual and the group does not necessarily mean supporting a specific policy programme. Just as the original Enlightenment spanned a range of political projects from free market economics to radical egalitarianism, so advocates of the cosmopolitanism of global markets may make as strong a claim to be promoting empathic capacity as those who argue for economic redistribution. However, the emphasis on empathy does push some items up the agenda.

For example, we should applaud the growing focus of public policy on the very early years of children's lives when empathic personalities are formed, and favour approaches to child rearing which place the development of emotional attachment centre stage. A stronger recognition of empathic capacity as a core capability for modern citizens would also influence the design of institutions – public, commercial and civic – and public places, including the online world. It would provide a case for public investment in art and culture which might transcend the sterile debate between art's intrinsic and instrumental benefits.

Treating empathy as a precious resource might place the slippery debate about the impact of media representation and commercial culture on a firmer footing. One of our most important social achievements in the post-war era has been to make prejudice on grounds of race, gender, sexuality and physical disability less acceptable. Yet while it is generally frowned upon to judge people on these grounds, we appear to have transferred our weakness for disparaging others to new targets. Feckless parents, teenage yobs, asylum seekers, welfare scroungers are among the preferred victims of newspaper owners, editors and journalists who know that indignation sells and who see this not as a temptation to be resisted but an opportunity to be exploited. The modern news media

often feel like a disorganised conspiracy to maintain the populace in a perpetual state of self-righteous rage. Headline-seeking politicians have been only too willing to join in.

We need to distinguish the healthy activity of disagreement from the unhealthy habit of disparagement. It is perfectly possible, for example, to believe in tough controls on illegal immigration while at the same time acknowledging that those who cross the world in the hope of security and the chance of a better life are doing exactly what we would do in their parlous circumstances. The systematic disparagement of people we deem unlike us may be a way of making a weak argument seem stronger but it undermines reasoned debate and saps our empathic capacity.

Also, it is surely reasonable to ask what effect the form and content of modern electronic communication is having on young people and their capacity for real world connection. There are eloquent advocates of the creative content and innovative potential of video and online gaming, but this needs to be set against the unknown consequences of children spending long hours alone shooting virtual adversaries. As Susan Greenfield has hypothesised:

*If the screen culture creates a world dominated by sensation and process rather than by content, significance and narrative, it may well be that those playing computer games have brains that adjust appropriately.*²⁷

Evgeny Morozov has argued that the impact of new technology on social relations is neither neutral nor is it useful to generalise.²⁸ Applications have particular impacts flowing from the complex and unpredictable interaction of their specific functionality with the context in which they are adopted. If we are concerned about the factors shaping the empathic capacity

27. S Greenfield. Speech to the House of Lords, 20 April 2006.

28. E Morozov. "The Internet in Society," speech at the RSA, September 2009. See <http://www.thersa.org/events/vision>

of future generations we should be willing, at least, to ask searching questions about the social experiment now taking place in the bedrooms of millions of young people.

To cope with social diversity, global interdependence and environmental risk we need to go further with the principle of universalism. For example, as Adair Turner has said, any long-term settlement on greenhouse gas emissions will have to find a way to honour the principle that every citizen has equivalent rights and obligations in relation to the limits of the environment.²⁹ We are used to the idea that education is the most valuable resource for a global knowledge economy; the stock of human empathy is just as important to achieving a peaceful, just and sustainable world society.

Progress and ethics

I have suggested that twenty-first century enlightenment might involve developing the ideal of autonomy by arguing for a deeper self-awareness and a recognition of what is involved in living lives to the full. It might also require a new emphasis on expanding and deepening empathy as the foundation for universalism. But even a more self-aware and empathic citizenry will still face dilemmas and differences of opinion.

Todorov describes the third Enlightenment principle as “the human end purpose of our acts”.³⁰ In other words, the basis for social arrangements should be what increases human happiness and welfare not what might be dictated by tradition, the words of gods or the whim of kings.

But if gods and kings are not to decide what is right for us, how are we to make those decisions? The utilitarian answer lies in maximising human happiness (bearing in mind the need to protect individual autonomy). If progress is measured by the

29. A Turner. *The Economics of Climate Change*. Sustainable Development Commission 2007.

30. Todorov. *Op cit.*

increase in human welfare there is little doubt that we have succeeded since the Enlightenment. The poorest citizens of the developed world now have better health, longer life spans and many more resources and opportunities than those who would have been considered well-off two centuries ago.

But sometimes it feels as though the humanist equation that progress should be designed to increase happiness has undergone a subtle but important shift into the assumption that pursuing progress is the same as improving human welfare. The success of the Western post-Enlightenment project has resulted in a society like ours being dominated by three logics: of scientific and technological progress, of markets, and of bureaucracy. The limitation of the logic of science and of markets lies in an indifference to a substantive concern for the general good. If something can be discovered and developed it should be discovered and developed. If something sells then it should be sold. The problem with the logic of bureaucracy, as Max Weber spotted over a hundred years ago, is its tendency to privilege procedural rationality (the rationality of rules) over substantive rationality (the rationality of ends).³¹

Sometimes these logics clash, often they reinforce each other. While there is little doubt that markets have become more competitive, competition has also come to dominate so many other spheres of society. In politics and in the media (including the public service media) you will hear time and again the abandonment of principle being excused in the face of the pressure to compete for power, votes or audience share. I work in the voluntary sector, which might be thought of as a haven from competitive values. Not a bit of it. Charities compete for philanthropy, they compete for government contracts and they compete for media profile. From the hedge fund to the NHS internal market, from the *XFactor* to the Turner Prize, the imperative of competition has become all pervasive.

31. M Weber. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Free Press 1997 [1920].

The acceleration of change and the evident power of markets make competition more intense and pervasive. More and more organisations are gripped by a spirit of bureaucratic competitiveness and there is one overriding rule; whatever helps the organisation to compete successfully is right. The decision somewhere in the multinational organisation BP to drill for oil a mile below sea, despite apparently having no guaranteed way of dealing with a possible leak, could be seen to combine the logics of technological progress, bureaucracy and competition.

It is in this context that the twenty-first century enlightenment demands a reassertion of the substantive and ethical dimension of humanism. If we deny that the question 'what should be the human ends of our acts' is essentially ethical, we are in danger of two errors: failing to recognise that the rationalising logics of progress themselves rely on this kind of reasoning, and denying the place of ethical motivation in human nature.

More consequentially, a utilitarian or incurious approach to human progress leaves us without a framework through which we can inquire more deeply into what kind of future we want. Is it one where we continue to accept the exclusion of so many people at home and abroad from the opportunity to reach the potential the modern world has to offer them? Is it to be a world where so many feel that the shape of their lives is dictated not by the ideal of a life fully lived but by social convention or economic convenience? Why should we cram education into the first quarter of life, juggle work and caring (first for children, then for parents) in the middle half and then suffer second-class status and fear of neglect in the final quarter? So powerful are the logics of progress that it can come as a shock to be reminded that as well as lacking all our modern comforts, citizens of pre-industrial periods also enjoyed many things we might envy: shorter working hours, more festivals and parties, stronger community and family bonds, for example.

The train of progress hurtles down the tracks with us as its passengers. Whether we have good seats or bad, whether

we enjoy or complain about the view, it rarely feels as though it is us setting the destination. Rationality can tell us how best to get from A to Z but without deeper reasoning we cannot decide where Z should be. David Halpern reports that the Danes are the happiest people in the world not only because of their material circumstances but because they say what matters most in life is good relationships. In contrast, the most miserable nationality, the Bulgarians, say money is the key to happiness. Living the good life may be as much about what you aim for as what you achieve.

Each person's ethical framework reflects their socialisation and the cultural norms around them, but ethical thinking is also part of our human nature. Recent research from the Yale University Infant Cognition Center has found that even before they have developed speech, infants make rudimentary moral judgements.³² In one experiment babies between six and twelve months old watched a simple coloured geometric shape – for example, a red circle with eyes – try to climb a slope. When other shapes intervened, apparently either helping or blocking the circle, the children's responses showed a clear preference for the helping shapes. Professor Paul Bloom who leads the research team at Yale says: "There is a growing body of evidence that supports the idea that perhaps some sense of good and evil is bred in the bone".³³

Our ethical instincts are deep rooted but do not necessarily conform to rationality. The evolutionary biologist Marc Hauser has conducted a massive global online survey of moral judgements.³⁴ He argues that certain quite subtle moral distinctions appear to be 'hard-wired' in human beings. For example, when faced with a passenger train carriage heading

32. K Wynn. "Some innate foundations of social and moral cognition," in P Carruthers, S Laurence and S Stich (eds), *The Innate Mind: foundations and the future*. Oxford University Press 2008.

33. P Bloom quoted in "Six months old and he can tell good from evil," in *The Times*, 9 May 2010.

34. M Hauser. *Moral Minds: how nature designed our universal sense of right and wrong*. Ecco 2006.

for disaster, people from all countries and all cultures are willing to redirect the train down another track at the expense of a single person on the line but much less inclined to stop the train by pushing someone onto the track.

Religious believers have no difficulty with the idea that we are born with a predisposition to ethical judgements. Despite the predictions of many Enlightenment thinkers, religious faith has not declined in the face of scientific rationalism. Indeed it is predicted that by 2050 four out of five of the world's citizens will be religious believers. But before the rest of us scorn the irrationality of faith, it is worth considering what drives our own attitudes. As anthropologist Scott Atran has shown, all human beings have sacred beliefs, those which are beyond rationalisation and to which, if we are offered incentives to abandon them, we tend to adhere even more strongly.³⁵ The difference between believers and non-believers lies not in adherence to the sacred but that the latter tend to claim their beliefs have a stronger objective basis. But do these rational faiths really have a greater intrinsic claim to validity? We may scorn a religious belief in the sanctity of human tissue reflected, for example, in concerns about stem cell research, but argue the categorical status of individual human rights. However, versions of the former belief predate the latter by millennia.

Having acknowledged that ethical beliefs are part of our human nature – as human as the urge to compete or acquire – we need also to recognise that the powerful logics of progress are themselves dependent on ethical values. Put at its simplest, markets rely on trust, bureaucracies on duty and scientific progress on collaboration. Indeed, as life becomes more complex and fast moving, and using external regulation to shape behaviour consequently more onerous and less effective, our reliance on benign motivation becomes greater. Regulation is one of those highly contradictory areas of public opinion; we think there is too much of it in general but are inclined

35. S Atran. *In Gods We Trust: the evolutionary landscape of religion*. Oxford University Press 2002.

to demand more in the face of specific risks, however small. Of course, we need the right regulatory frameworks for global commerce and controversial areas of scientific experimentation, but to rely on regulation as the way of ensuring we do the right thing is like trying to turn a clay pot by following a rule book. Just as a potter relies on skill and a sense of the aesthetic to shape the spinning clay, so we need business people, public servants and scientists who have internalised the tenets of ethical practice.

None of this is to claim that people have become more or less ethical; such a judgement would depend on which aspects of behaviour were being examined. The concern is that the powerful logics of modernity may be making it harder to acknowledge our intrinsically ethical nature and to find ways of talking about substantive differences in aims and values. Despite all the good things about a society like ours, perhaps because of them, such considerations often seem marginal, or even inappropriate, to vast swathes of activity. There may be a parallel with the late Victorian attitude to sexual appetite. Just as sexual repression spawned hypocrisy and vice in the nineteenth century, so the suppression of ethical discourse leads to the strange coincidence, remarked on by Edward Skidelsky, of an era which combines social tolerance and cultural relativism alongside an almost continuous drum beat of public indignation against everyone from bankers and celebrities to welfare cheats and immigrants.³⁶

Restating the intrinsic importance of substantive and ethical considerations in shaping our commercial, political and scientific goals and methods will not provide us with simple answers, but such considerations should more often be part of the question. How can we make it easier to ask ‘is this the right thing to do’? In my life in politics, in voluntary organisations and on the boards of private companies, too often I have to admit, the question would have seemed at best gauche or shallow, and at worst subversive. This isn’t because I have been around

36. E Skidelsky, “Words that think for us,” in *Prospect*, 18 November 2009.

bad people but because the prevailing culture either treated such considerations as irrelevant or, more often, assumed they were sufficiently addressed by the pursuit of the organisation's competitive aims.

As Todorov says: "Our time has become, in many respects, one of forgetting ends and sacralizing means". Superficially, ethical differences may look like a threat to social harmony or organisational coherence. In fact, recognition and respect for difference is the foundation for an enduringly cohesive society and a strong basis for innovative thinking. Indeed, theories of plural rationality, such as those based on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, argue convincingly that fundamental differences in attitude to power and change are not only endemic in all organisations – from families to governments – but feed off each other.³⁷ Resolution is impossible, but the recognition of difference can enable 'clumsy' but creative solutions.

Mature, substantive and ethical discourse is the foundation for multiculturalism, for mutual respect and for the possibility of conflict resolution; all vital in the twenty-first century. And as we face tough policy dilemmas, a recognition that legitimate differences are about ends and ethics is necessary for an authentic and engaging politics; an enlightenment politics of human ends rather than a technocratic politics of regulatory means.

A new humanism

The leading contemporary historian of the Enlightenment, Jonathan Israel, described it as "a revolution of the mind".³⁸ The changes in our ways of thinking since the eighteenth century go beyond ideas. It is not only our explicit beliefs that changed but our whole way of thinking about ourselves and the world we occupy; what we might term our consciousness.

37. M Douglas. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. Routledge 2003.

38. J Israel. *Op cit*.

Of course, conscious thought and consciousness are neither watertight nor mutually exclusive categories. Our opinions, attitudes, norms, predispositions and social instincts are on a continuum ranging from things which we believe only because of the last information we heard, to assumptions so deeply held that we would find it hard even to imagine believing something else.

For many in the Enlightenment project the aim was not simply to replace one set of beliefs with another. Its champions argued that the nature of the true and the good should not be received wisdom but emerge through reason and open discussion. The sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas argues that the Enlightenment saw the emergence of a public sphere outside the control of church or state.³⁹ This sphere comprised newspapers, reading clubs, coffee houses and institutions dedicated to discussing and developing new ideas; institutions like the RSA.

The Enlightenment had to struggle against the dogma of religious and monarchical authority, but are there today new dogmas, deeply embedded in our culture and consciousness which we need to find a way to question? That our lives are the story of self-consciously directed individuals, owing our allegiance to the large but exclusive tribe of strangers we call a nation, ever seeking to progress our material interests in a universe governed by knowable rules; this feels natural to us. Not to all of us, not all the time, certainly not in every culture but this is the dominant world view, the one that developing nations tend to adopt and adapt as they modernise. But it is none the less contingent upon a very recent, very particular response to the massive changes that have taken place in human affairs in the most recent fraction of our existence.

While the Enlightenment's advocates contrasted its cool reasoning with mystical fanaticism, Kant was among those who recognised the danger of Enlightenment values becoming their

39. J Habermas. Translated by T Burger, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT 1991 [1962].

own dogma, forgetting the limited and contingent nature of human rationality.⁴⁰ As Michel Foucault says of Kant's own description of enlightenment: "It has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them".⁴¹

This essay has explored aspects of the way we now think: the idea that autonomy is sufficiently expressed in a culture of possessive individualism; a failure to acknowledge the importance of the emotional capabilities which incline us and equip us to relate to strangers; and the tendency to see progress as a virtue in itself rather than explore how the forces of progress might best be shaped to enhance human fulfilment. The aim is enlightenment in the general sense, shedding light on deeply held assumptions so that we can question whether they are up to the challenges posed by the coming century.

Epochal change involves a combination of altered circumstances, new ideas and values and transformative technologies. Today we are confronted by the human impact of globalisation and one way or another we have to reconcile human aspiration and the limits of our natural environment. The internet has joined the short list of agriculture, the steam engine and electricity as a profoundly liberating and disruptive technology. The scene is set for a shift of consciousness on a par with the shift of circumstances and technologies.

Copernicus, Galileo and Newton helped lay the ground for the Enlightenment by revealing that the laws of nature didn't conform to the accounts in religious doctrine. Despite the powerful logics of progress and the narrowing of Enlightenment values, might it be insights into human nature which help prompt a twenty-first century enlightenment? Running through this essay is a new take on humanism. It advocates excavating

40. E Kant. *Op cit.*

41. M Foucault. "What is Enlightenment?" in P Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader*. Pantheon Books 1984.

and holding up to more critical inspection the logic behind major forces of modernity (science, markets, bureaucracy) while qualifying the powerful experience of consciousness with a deeper sensitivity to our nature as a species. We can know ourselves better. Perhaps we need to.

If so, we will need to see a more reflective public discourse; a revival of a public sphere in which we might debate who we are as social beings, how we should connect to other people and the natural world, how we should adapt and innovate to new demands, and what really matters in life. Just as institutions, like the RSA, created this space in the eighteenth century, so we need new and reformed institutions to create a twenty-first century public sphere and a pluralist, more democratic political system that is open and porous to the currents of debate taking place within wider society.

Signposts to twenty-first century enlightenment

In making the case for new thinking it is important to avoid the temptation of exaggerating today's problems. Enlightenment values have helped make the people of the world wealthier, healthier and more able to choose the life they want. It is possible that we will find solutions to the new challenges the world now faces using the same methods that have got us this far. But the solutions might be smarter and the outcomes might be better if we thought differently.

There are already trends and practices in modern society which appear to align with the principles of twenty-first century enlightenment as outlined in this essay. In no particular order, here are a few.

First, there has been a marked shift in public policy towards a greater recognition of the vital importance of the earliest years of a child's life, the time when their personality – including their capacity for empathy – is most firmly moulded.

Second, there are signs that developed societies are beginning to take mental health more seriously. There may be claims about the emergence of a 'therapeutic state' or concerns that we are letting drug companies pathologise normal human emotions such as sadness, but it is surely a good thing that people develop the same sense of confidence about addressing mental as well as physical well-being. The growth in mindfulness training – a non-spiritual form of meditative practice – is particularly interesting.

Third, after a century of ever greater specialism in academia, a focus on human motivation and behaviour is seeing a new multi-disciplinarity emerge with research spanning disciplines as diverse as neuroscience, economics, anthropology and sociology. This strengthens the chances of developing a more holistic understanding of human nature and strategies for enhancing capability.

Fourth, as well as the continuing pressure on big business to demonstrate a sufficient sense of corporate responsibility, there seems to be a steady increase in the number of people who want to establish what might be called 'social businesses', organisations that combine the spirit of entrepreneurialism with a deep commitment to social purpose. This means more organisations in which the question 'is this the right thing to do' is always relevant.

Fifth, despite the impact of religious extremism and the associated emergence of a strident atheism, greater attention is being paid to the fostering of inter-faith dialogue, a process which involves identifying unifying themes within the great faiths as well as creating the space to talk respectfully about difference and develop collaborative humanitarian projects.

Sixth, with the post-war rise in TV ownership and other domestic comforts, the widely accepted thesis of just a few years ago was that we would continue to retreat into a privatised domestic sphere. Yet, despite the amount of time we spend sitting in front of screens, we have more recently seen an upsurge in collective forms of recreation, everything from rock festivals and art exhibitions to lectures and debates. It seems

that if we get the offer right, people enjoy engaging with others, even discussing how best to run the world.

Finally, within governments and global institutions including the OECD, there has been a greater willingness to question conventional measures of economic growth in favour of more sustainable models with a greater emphasis on well-being.

As we struggle through economic turbulence these may not feel like the most important things happening in the world right now. But it is worth bearing in mind that better insights into human nature and a greater willingness to talk about values and goals might have helped us avoid the hubris and irresponsibility which generated the economic crisis and the debt, and the national parochialism which makes the road to recovery so steep and perilous.

A twenty-first century enlightenment organisation

The RSA has changed many times in its long history. When it began giving prizes for inventions and drawings back in the mid-eighteenth century there had not yet been a public exhibition of art in Britain. The idea of well-funded science laboratories, technology parks and company research and development investment, all lay well into the future. As the world has changed so has the mission and working methods of the Society. For example, seventy five years ago the RSA created Designers for Industry to give much needed recognition to an emerging discipline. Now industrial and commercial design is a high status and often well rewarded profession and the design team at the RSA has turned its focus to how the skills and insights of design can improve services and provide people with a greater sense of efficacy. A current project is exploring teaching design skills to patients with spinal injuries so they can redesign their lives to maximise independence and dignity.

Each strand of the RSA's work can make its contribution to new ways of thinking. Our lectures and other commissioned content open up exciting ideas to wider audiences. There will be a continuing focus on dimensions of human capability. We will seek explicitly to encourage multi-disciplinary dialogue, looking at life from different angles to develop a fuller picture of who we are and who we could be.

Our research projects seek to explore concretely what are the conditions for starting to close the social aspiration gap. Our Citizen Power project in Peterborough is developing new forms of public discourse, including using the power of art and culture to encourage more constructive engagement between citizens, and between citizens and decision makers. Our curriculum, Opening Minds, and the work of our innovative Academy, are developing the fuller capabilities young people need to thrive in changing times. Our Social Brain and Connected Communities projects are opening up deeper understanding of human behaviour and of the social networks which are so important to life chances. The 2020 Public Services Commission at the RSA is exploring how remodelling public services can combine the ethic of care with the spirit of entrepreneurship.

The re-imagining of the RSA Fellowship itself is in pursuit of a new ethic of collaboration. Whilst campaign groups can mobilise people's anger in concerted bursts and social networks can provide entertainment and recreation, the RSA is looking to develop a model of innovative social activism. The hierarchical, bureaucratic model of membership organisations is bust. Attempts to revive these institutions have tended to be half hearted or lose momentum in the face of the dynamics of voluntary organisation; of which the most challenging is that destructive behaviour drives out the constructive and collaborative more effectively than vice versa. Creative people who want to make a difference have a million and one opportunities and distractions. To engage them requires a mission with the clarity to inspire and the openness to adapt. It means having the right mechanisms of support

ranging from ideas to infrastructure to finance. Most of all it means an ethic which is intolerant of negativity, rigid thinking and self-promotion and instead keeps people constantly in touch with the words of the anthropologist Margaret Mead, true to the spirit which created the RSA 255 years ago and to the aspirations of our Fellows today:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

RSA pamphlets

This is the first in a series of short essays that the RSA will be publishing over the coming months and which will explore the concept of twenty-first century enlightenment.

The RSA is interested in ideas and action and the complex links between the two. With this in mind, we have commissioned a series of essays from leading thinkers and practitioners, looking not only at the history and theory that lies behind the notion of twenty-first century enlightenment, but also at the practical implications of what this may mean today.

Future pamphlets will address a range of questions including what new twenty-first century enlightenment approaches may be needed when approaching the market, economics and sustainability, and what role the arts, a sense of place and social networks may play.

All pamphlets will be available online at www.theRSA.org and we would welcome ideas from Fellows and others to:

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