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Charly Colman, *The Virtues of Abandon: An Anti-Individualist History of the French Enlightenment*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2014. xi + 402 pages. Notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN: 978-0-8047-8443-6.

Review by Darrin M. McMahon, Dartmouth College.

Charly Coleman has written an elegant and wide-ranging book of originality and learning. It is carefully researched and freshly thought, and is unafraid to draw connections across seemingly disparate bodies of material, tacking against the winds of prevailing scholarly assumptions. Though not all readers will find every aspect of the book convincing, it is undoubtedly a book to make one think. It announces Coleman as a creative and insightful young scholar of considerable promise.

Coleman's subject is the battle of competing notions of the self in Enlightenment-era France, and particularly the oscillation between what he calls "the culture of self-ownership" and the "culture of dispossession," two contrasting modes of understanding selfhood (p. 23). In this respect, the book is somewhat misleadingly named, for it does more than simply chronicle "an anti-individualist history of the French Enlightenment," celebrating the virtues of one of these two modes, but follows the tense interaction and dialectic of the two notions (self-abandon and self-ownership) from the late seventeenth century into the early nineteenth century, chronicling the displacement and defeat of the anti-individualist culture of dispossession and the triumph of individualist notions of self-ownership.

Coleman's interests, then, dovetail with an important body of research that in recent years has sought to emphasize the contingency and multivalence of the emergence of modern selfhood. In this respect, the book merits a place on the scholar's shelf alongside related and well-respected works by Jan Goldstein, Jerrold Seigel, Dror Wahrman, and Kathleen Kete, which similarly seek to avoid reducing modern personhood to simple individualism.[1] Coleman shares that goal, as well as a certain mourning for the loss that in his conception accompanies the victory in the early nineteenth century of a notion of the acquisitive and individualistic self. Yet what sets his work apart is its bold attempt to think across domains and bodies of thought which are too often kept separate and distinct. In a work that spans over a century, Coleman explores questions of selfhood in an impressive array of idioms, ranging from high philosophy to religious mysticism, from medical treatises to disquisitions on sleeping and dreams, from Jansenist philippics to republican politics during the Revolution.

The pay-off of these wide-ranging explorations is to show similarities and point out influences where one might least expect them. Most provocatively, Coleman aims to draw attention to the surprising affinities between radical theology and radical Enlightenment philosophy in the eighteenth century, contesting any easy or complacent account of secularization while arguing the "The Enlightenment did not so much jettison the divine...as marshal it to serve new functions" (p. 12).

Coleman builds this case in an early chapter on the affairs engendered by Quietism, that offshoot of Catholic mysticism that flowered in the late reign of Louis XIV and provoked a good deal of public controversy, including a widely publicized conflict between Bossuet and Fénelon, French Quietism's most able proponent and defender. A variety of post-Tridentine Catholicism that (like Jansenism in this

respect) involved theologically sensitive questions of grace and the role of individual will in the attainment of salvation, Quietism advocated a comparative indifference toward worldly *and* spiritual goods. Quietists, that is, not only adopted a familiar posture of Christian resignation towards the goods of this earth (money, power, property, and so forth), but also toward spiritual goods such as the happiness conferred by salvation. Christian penitents, they argued, should aim to cultivate a pure disinterestedness in the journey to Christ, renouncing self-love and the personal desires of the soul in an effort annihilate the self before God and so to be possessed completely by his all-consuming power. Such an orientation had precedents in the long tradition of Christian mysticism. But in the context of post-Reformation Europe, it appeared to challenge the validity of a central theological tenet established at the Council of Trent: namely, the individual's capacity for virtue and his or her desire to pursue it on the basis of goods to be conferred in reward.

From the perspective of their critics, the Quietists' advocacy of self-annihilation and dispossession threatened to deprive the soul of its salutary interest in heavenly rewards and the impetus to act accordingly, thereby introducing a heretical element into the mystical tradition. As Bossuet put it, the "new mystics" advocated a "kind of disinterestedness" that denigrated seeking from God "anything for oneself, not even the remission of one's sins, the coming of his kingdom, and the grace to persevere in goodness" (p. 68). Bossuet and company argued in return for the individual soul's healthy interest in its own welfare and its capacity to pursue it effectively. Rather than seek to be possessed by God in self-abandonment, they advocated cultivating the possessions of the self on the path to eternal reward.

Coleman sees in these debates "a template" for later polemics involving the human person in the eighteenth century. And although later polemicists did not simply echo the positions of these earlier antagonists, they did gradually "come to view novel situations and untried fields of inquiry through the prisms of self-ownership and dispossession" that developed in the theological debates around Quietism (p. 91). Over time these views "cohered into a culture of dispossession" that was challenged in turn by a "culture of self-ownership," with one side defending an individualism based on the authority and capacity of the self-directing agent, and the other emphasizing the social and natural forces in which human persons are imbricated.

That insight allows Coleman to point out some unexpected similarities in the way eighteenth-century actors talked about the self. He finds, for example, surprising correspondences between the Orthodox Catholic defense of the possessive self and that of later moderate Enlightenment figures, such as Voltaire, who drew on Descartes, Locke, and Newton to make similar claims about the individual's moral agency as a thinking subject and the benevolent consequences of possessive ownership, whether of worldly goods (property) or of rights. Similarly, he points to the close parallels between the discussion of the dispossessive self in Fénelon and the Quietists and that of Baruch Spinoza and his philosophical heirs, such as the Baron d'Holbach, who dissolved the human person in a resacralized and totalizing Nature that dispensed with what they regarded as the fiction of self-agency and free will. Thus, whereas the one camp "demanded that the soul relinquish control of its mind and body to the divine," the other advocated the self's dispossession in Nature, which made equals of us all (p. 127). Such similarities made for strange bedfellows. As Coleman observes, "Radical philosophy converged with radical spirituality in its calls for self-dispossession, while both Enlightenment and Catholic orthodoxies defended self-ownership" (p. 127).

Contemporaries were quite willing to acknowledge these parallels. Voltaire, for example, drew disparaging comparisons between Spinoza and the Quietists, while Diderot seemed to embrace them. Indeed, in his illuminating analysis of Diderot, Coleman shows how the materialist heir to Spinoza was also explicitly indebted to Quietism. Diderot, he remarks, "consciously appropriated the taboo rhetoric of Quietism to question man's power of volition, rationality, and individual consciousness," while advocating the artistic and epistemological benefits of states of alienation and dispossession. Likewise, Coleman shows in a fine chapter on Rousseau that, although he oscillated somewhat between the two

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cultures of the self, Rousseau was heavily indebted to Fénelon, a demonstration that sheds new light on Rousseau's critique of amour-propre, his yearning to alienate the self (in the body politic or the reveries of nature), his suspicion of reason, and his desire to free human beings from their possessive inclination towards property and acquisitive appetites.

Just as a number of scholars, then, have recently called into question any simple view of the battle of the Ancients and the Modern that would associate the one side with progress and the other with atavism, Coleman asks us to consider Enlightenment and religion (and religious Enlightenment) in similar terms.<sup>[2]</sup> By showing the long arm of theological controversy in the eighteenth century and its continued resonance and impact, he asks us to consider that "The Enlightenment was as much a movement within theology as a reaction against it" (p. 290). Echoing a contention of recent scholarship that points to the centrality of forms of religious Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and the shifting alliances this entailed, Coleman emphasizes that at least where questions of the self were concerned, "Orthodox theologians and mainstream philosophes could and did find common cause—in the defense of self-ownership—against the efforts of radical mystics and materialists to dispossess the individual of its prerogatives and status as an autonomous, thinking subject" (p. 290).

Coleman observes in the introduction that eighteenth-century cultures of personhood were comprised of both discourse and practice. He is at his best when relating the one to the other, giving historical specificity and contextual distinctiveness to his analyses. Thus, he opens the book by ruminating not only on the influence of Quietism, but on the escalating practice of venality under Louis XIV, which, by making identity a commodity that could be bought and sold, sapped traditional understandings of personhood, and so opened the door for a new, and contextually specific, speculation about the self.

At times, however, Coleman's analysis is less grounded, and here his invocation of "cultures" of self-ownership and dispossession is not entirely helpful. In a book that is otherwise theoretically astute, he never explains his understanding of the term. "Culture" thus becomes a very loose way of pointing out similarities in discourse about the self in various domains. Yet, it is not at all clear what "culture" Fénelon and the Baron de Holbach really shared beyond a general sense that the self was not autonomous. Family resemblances are not cultures, but if they are, we might conclude that the cultures of dispossession and self-ownership extended well beyond the eighteenth century.

Consider as an example Coleman's discussion of the concept of "genius" in the writings of Diderot (and others) in the eighteenth century. He rightly notes the positive valence given to enthusiasm, alienation, and self-loss in Diderot's writings on the subject, observing that "Diderot's contributions" experiment in an ideal "steeped in the language of alienation, and even of Quietism, that considers the revelations to be gained from self-loss" (p. 185). Such an ideal, he further notes, "gestures toward a resacralization of the human person in a world without God" (p. 185). That is aptly observed. But insofar as Diderot is participating in a "culture" of dispossession, it is one that stretches all the way back to the ancient world, where a powerful discourse associated insight and creative power with the alienation induced by madness or the muse.

A no less equally powerful discourse, by contrast, conceived of poetic and other forms of greatness as an inherent possession of the gifted subject, who owned what he conceived. Revived during the Renaissance and altered and adapted during the eighteenth century in keeping with new aesthetic and epistemological insights, the basic duality between what the musicologist and philosopher Peter Kivy has called the "possessor" and the "possessed" bears a close resemblance to Coleman's cultures of self-ownership and dispossession.<sup>[3]</sup> That is not to say that there are no differences. There were. Nor is it to deny that something distinctive happened to notions of the self in the social imaginary in the eighteenth century. Clearly, it did. But by focusing more explicitly on the ways in which his central binary between self-ownership and dispossession at once transcended, and was determined by, eighteenth-century

conditions and practice, Coleman might have told us something more pointed about the century's distinctive contribution to an opposition that is in some sense universal.

There is one other missed opportunity. Coleman's account, strangely, has almost nothing to say about distinctions of gender and sex. There can be no question that understandings of selfhood in the eighteenth century were gender-inflected (and, in Judith Butler's sense, performed). It would have been interesting to learn how these matters intersected with Coleman's two cultures—all the more so in that one of his leading protagonists, the Pietist mystic Jeanne-Marie Guyon, was a woman. That said, good books raise questions they don't always answer. There is plenty in this one to prompt further inquiry.

## NOTES

[1] Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Jerrold Siegel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Kathleen Kete, *Making Way for Genius: The Aspiring Self in France from the Old Regime to the New* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

[2] See, for example, Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2009) and Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2011)

[3] Peter Kivy, *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001).

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