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G. Matthew Adkins, *The Idea of the Sciences in the French Enlightenment: A Reinterpretation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. 174 pp. \$70.00 (cl), ISBN 978-1-61149-474-7.

Review by Margaret Carlyle, University of Cambridge.

G. Matthew Adkins' *The Idea of the Sciences in the French Enlightenment* is an ambitiously conceived book which promises a reinterpretation of the sciences in eighteenth-century France. The author is guided by a set of questions that are wide-ranging for a monograph of only 150 pages: What was the idea of the sciences? How did it emerge? What happened to this idea during the Revolution? The book's central claim is that savants with membership in the Paris Royal Academy of Sciences developed and attempted to implement politically an idea of the sciences as morally enlightening. Familiar Enlightenment figures like Voltaire enter the narrative as actors testing the validity of this philosophy. In so doing, many of them attempted to persuade the House of Bourbon of the political and social stability that might be achieved through its support of their natural scientific pursuits. In the process of championing—and often failing in—this cause, the savants described in this book are depicted as establishing their individual and collective moral authority.

The book opens on the eve of the creation of the Paris Royal Academy of Sciences and concludes on the eve of the death of the Marquis de Condorcet during the revolutionary Terror. Its five chapters survey this 130-year period in chronological fashion, drawing on a selection of figures who function as narrative pivot points. The book's first chapter gets off to a promising start by drawing attention to Samuel Sorbière, whose role in reinvigorating moral philosophy in a post-crisis age appears as nothing short of pioneering. Specifically, Sorbière appealed to the Neostoic conception of the sciences as morally enlightening in order to provide much-needed socio-political stability in the aftermath of the sixteenth-century Wars of Religion.

Sorbière happily congregated with fellow travellers around the house of Montmor until the summer of 1663, when he appealed to Cardinal Mazarin's ministry to transform this informal scientific academy into a state-sponsored organ. The untimely death of this ministerial ally dashed Sorbière's visionary hopes and excluded him from involvement in the subsequent foundation of the Royal Academy of Sciences in 1666 by Jean-Baptiste Colbert. Sorbière nonetheless emerges thanks to the author's retrieval as an important actor within a broader movement of Neostoic sceptics. These sceptics provided the framework in which a generation of early Enlightenment freethinkers explored natural philosophy as a pragmatic, non-systematic, and non-dogmatic pursuit that might prove useful to government interests.

The second chapter shifts focus to the more familiar figure of Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, who served as the perpetual secretary of the Academy of Sciences during a critical transitional period in its history. We are reminded of his institutional memberships and commitment to the new science, his initiation of the academic tradition of the eulogy, his projection of the image of the dispassionate scientist, and his formative role in building links between the Academy of Sciences and the ministerial channels of Louis XIV's France. More originally, we learn that Fontenelle articulated a moral philosophy that positioned the study of the natural sciences as a source of virtue and savants as a new moral elite. The chapter trails off into interpretations of Fontenelle's philosophical oeuvre—arguing, for instance, that his conception of man as a passionate creature presaged Nietzschean philosophy (p. 40)—and in so doing loses grip of a narrative that subsequent chapters fail to reclaim. From here on, the link between statist scientific programs and Neostoic philosophy is

rarely invoked, and the reader is left to wonder if their link is more tenuous than the introduction suggests.

The third chapter charts how the figure of the savant achieved new social and political currency in the reigns of Louis XV and XVI, and how particular savants harnessed this growing recognition towards a more overtly defined political role. New authority did not always translate into successful ventures, however, and the failure of Voltaire and his disciples including Turgot to unify reason with state power provides the proof. The author's eagerness to describe the Physiocratic moment unfortunately obscures the more salient point that his ministry marked the culmination of Sorbière's project to bring together reason and state. The link between Neostoic and later philosophies is all but lost in the final two chapters, which cover developments during the high Enlightenment. Chapters four and five paint the picture of Condorcet as the reformer-cum-revolutionary, who failed in his attempt to transform the role of the virtuous savant into that of political agitator. French Revolution scholars may be disappointed to find that there is little value added in Condorcet's portrayal, save perhaps the revisionist argument that this ardent Republican was no patriot when it came to education. Not only did his liberal scheme fail to hold the factional support of the Girondins, it was met with overwhelming opposition from them. (p. 118-119)

The brief epilogue describes the relevance of Condorcet's legacy to our present in the absence of a much-needed conclusion. Here the author might have drawn a link between Sorbière and Condorcet. Were they failed visionaries who in their respective times arrived at views of science as morally and politically compatible? On the other hand, comparison of these bookend figures are telling of the difficulty of the author's task. Where Sorbière articulated the Hobbesian need for royal authority backed by scientific reason, Condorcet appealed to reason to overcome that authority in favor of republicanism. These considerations beg the question of whether or not the underlying aims of these two very different men can be reconciled into a cohesive narrative. Just how unified or potent was this "moral idea" of the sciences? The diachronic methodology put to use by the author would seem to suggest that these men contributed to the same historical process. Yet the demands of this approach are never fully realized, and the book's central claim is lost early on. This is in no small part because the narrative remains more focused on retelling the careers of the individual savants evoked than in analyzing their contributions to a broader philosophical-political process.

To address these challenges, the author might have engaged in a more disciplined way with the question of *how* and *why* the "moral idea of the sciences" was forged by savants in and around the Academy of Sciences. Bringing aspects of the Academy's institutional history to the foreground of the story would no doubt broaden the source base and provide further clues on how this moral idea was constructed and deployed, as well as debated, at the collective level. The author might explore debates among savants, both well-known and obscure, over how to bring reason to bear on the political. The Academy as a space, as well as a community, would no doubt emerge as the dynamic vehicle giving mileage to this moral idea of the sciences. James E. McLellan III's *Specialist Control* (2003) provides one way to reinvigorate the history of the Academy and to decipher its members' priorities.[1] Drawing on little-known committee meeting minutes, McLellan invokes fresh figures to tell the story of how Enlightenment academicians gained control over their scientific research and published output. Such an approach is also compatible with the author's stated aim to treat his historical actors contextually, as movers embedded in grids of association that limit and contour their agency (pp. 3-4). Surely, the institutional setting of the Academy of Sciences is an important grid where such associations were forged.

Engaging with Enlightenment historiography would provide another direction for the book's argument. The author might distinguish more explicitly between the phases of the Enlightenment in order to elaborate on just how the temper of reform accelerated as the eighteenth century wore on. This may have brought to bear more explicitly on the *longue durée* aspect of the book, by illuminating the role played by savants in upholding while transforming the moral idea of the sciences to suit contemporary political and social circumstances. It may well be that the Neostoics' pessimistic and elitist view of human nature (p. 30) is the distant cousin, rather than direct forebear, of the Enlightenment ideals of egalitarianism. Conversely, the author might have substantiated this ideological-genealogical link, and in so doing, clarified his argument's contribution to the existing

literature on the history of Enlightenment thought. Jonathan Israel's writings on "radical Enlightenment" (2001, 2006, 2011), for example, provide inspiration on how to reinvigorate a well-worn approach.^[2]

The moral authority of the savant who studies the natural world is worth articulating, but so too is the moral authority of nature itself. One related problem is that the "moral" is not adequately problematised in this work. Reason seems to be taken as synonym for a moral idea of the natural sciences. How does this relate to the moral or rational authority embodied in nature? The author might have placed his work within or against the other available approaches to the complex question of how natural knowledge, the moral, and politics relate in this period. Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal's volume on *The Moral Authority of Nature*, for example, has been particularly effective in framing these interconnected themes and in orienting methodological approaches to them.^[3] It focuses on the many ways that savants like the ones described by Adkins have used natural knowledge to establish criteria for determining what counts as valuable, beautiful, or good.

There is more for this book to explore, but this is also an exploratory book. Its episodic and uneven treatment of the figures, subjects, and historiographies discussed here mean that it might better serve as a collection of essays tackling conceptions of the eighteenth-century natural philosopher as part of a moral elite. Such an approach might also provide the perfect meeting of form and content, given that the fits and starts of the Academy's moral idea of the sciences match this less linear and more imaginative format. So while the book does not deliver a sustained argument, it does provide a series of vignettes that might generate discussion on the moral and political stakes imagined by eighteenth-century students of nature.

The Idea of the Sciences is a book whose title and introduction promise a discipline-enriching "reinterpretation" that it does not quite deliver, in part because the discourse it is reinterpreting is never made clear. The book will still be of interest to historians and philosophers of science, historians of Enlightenment thought, and those interested in the old regime. Its main achievement is its claim that Neostoic philosophy was at the root of a new and politically important moral idea or way of thinking that was forged and explored by early Enlightenment savants. Among them was the enterprising Samuel Sorbière, whose aspirations to secure resources to fund scientific investigation place him in good company in 2014.

NOTES

[1] James E. McLellan (III), *Specialist Control: The Publications Committee of the Académie Royale des Sciences (Paris), 1700-1793*. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 93:3 (2003).

[2] Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); *Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[3] Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal, eds., *The Moral Authority of Nature* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

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