Since the late 1980s, the Enlightenment has enjoyed an unusual currency, although more often than not this has been in the worst sense. Even though the popularity of both Romanticism and Modernism has left the Age of Reason in the shadows of academic interest, there has been a recent revival of eighteenth-century studies in terms of its relevance for modern history and philosophy. Whether from a broadly political and scientific point of view (Porter 2000), a sociocultural one (Kramnick 1998; Terry 2001), or from the more restricted field of aesthetic and literary theory (Huhn 2004; Labio 2004), some critics are currently analyzing the construction of Enlightenment values and their meaning for us today. However, the prevailing vision, put forward by such postmodern and poststructuralist writers as Lyotard or Derrida, tells us that the rationalist and normative ideals of the 18th century embody the imposition of rationality as the only method of study in the human sciences—whether in philosophy, history, art or political theory—and are therefore the pillars of “imperialism” in the realm of letters. This view plays down the legacy of rationalist thinking to the verge of parody. In the case of the British Enlightenment, for instance, it is all too frequent to find its immensely rich philosophical and aesthetic contribution confined to the (otherwise very important) works of John Locke, Edmund Burke, David Hume and Francis Hutcheson (see Broadie 2003, for one example). Something similar can be said of other nations. But now that the tide of deconstruction is receding, it is important to reconstruct a more adequate image of eighteenth-century letters in order to properly understand what its contribution to Western culture may have been. This requires considerable effort, since the Age of Reason brings into being modernity in the human sciences. A study based on the original sources—unmediated by the bulk of recent criticism yet at the same time aware of it—was surely needed at this moment.

Louis Dupré’s *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* is such a book. In it, he attempts to rescue the Enlightenment from certain contemporary distortions and misconceptions, that is, without resorting to our current stereotypical images of the period. In this sense, his silence about most postmodern theory, except for a brief consideration of Michel Foucault’s work, is eloquent enough. Dupré pays no heed to preconceived images and chooses to go back to the primary works and see what their relevance might be. Through a systematic and rigorous exposition of the tenets and consequences of 18th-century intellectual culture for the construction of modern Europe, especially in its artistic, philosophical and religious dimensions, the author updates the meaning of the Enlightenment for the 21st century. The aim of the book is not so much a partisan defense of rationalism or empiricism (he actually criticizes both), but rather a genealogical inquiry into the origins of the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement and its application today. In this sense, it offers a history of several humanistic disciplines as they shift from classicism to modernity. Dupré attempts to show that the heritage of 18th-century culture—particularly in philosophy, aesthetic theory and theology—is far from obsolete, since the current meaning of such ideas as artistic expressivity, liberalism or
atheism was shaped in that period. In order to provide an in-depth analysis, one that shows the sweeping influence of the Enlightenment project, the author revises European philosophers and artists alike, from England to Germany.

The book opens with two general chapters ("A Definition and a Provisional Justification" and "A Different Cosmos") in which the theories of both eighteenth-century mechanicism and organicism are fleshed out. These, by far the most influential intellectual doctrines of their time, are shown to be complementary (rather than alien) to each other in that they both work against the idealistic objectivism of previous centuries. This is an important line of reasoning, since it shows the gradual advance of eighteenth-century culture against philosophical abstraction. Each one of these groups produces a different version of man’s place in nature, of the human mind and of the prospects of its study, but they ultimately converge in their struggle against the rationalist imposition of “patterns of meaning” on the human mind (15). The Enlightenment appears here as the counterpart of neoclassical universalism, a scientific response to philosophical and theological simplicity. In this sense, these first two chapters provide the background of eighteenth-century thought by exploring the dilemmas that both tendencies attempted to solve. The most important of these, which will reappear throughout the book, is whether to consider the self as the subject or as the substance of the study of man. The inherent paradox of embracing both perspectives—that is, the human mind cannot be explored objectively as long as any kind of knowledge is mediated by a human conscience—is what signals the rise of the modern human sciences as well as of skepticism. The Enlightenment brings to light the awareness that self-knowledge is necessarily filtered by the thinking subject, and therefore inevitably subjective (and only pseudo-scientific): man is the end and the means of study. (Only through the Kantian synthesis that distinguishes between the transcendental subject and the self can this question be ultimately resolved.) To this quandary Dupré adds a further cultural transformation: instead of studying our perception of reality, in the 18th century thinking became a matter of “forcing reality to answer the subject’s question or, as Kant put it in his famous comparison, of compelling a witness to respond to the judge’s inquiry” (17). This “new cosmos,” in which nature is made to accommodate the subject, the author explains, accounts for the utilitarian vein of the whole Enlightenment and the growing importance of the human being as creator of the meaning of all reality. It is precisely this imposition that postmodern theory has exploited as a token of the Enlightenment’s project of “cultural domination.”

The next two chapters ("A New Sense of Selfhood" and "Toward a New Conception of Art") trace the projection of anti-idealism on the philosophy of the self, art and literature. In Dupré’s (correct) analysis, eighteenth-century European culture is characterized by an evolution from seventeenth-century objectivism and moralism to pre-Romantic individualism. This cultural change, which is less traumatic than we are sometimes led to believe, occupies most of the book. Enlightenment culture progresses from the narrow empiricism of the Cartesian cogito to the world of feeling, a process advanced by such thinkers as the Earl of Shaftesbury and materialized in different artistic forms. Among these, literary examples are particularly numerous. Dupré chooses to focus on two of the most popular genres of the time, the novel and biography (although he might as well have chosen poetry or drama). The transition from the Italian novella to Richardson’s Pamela and Clarissa serves as a paramount example of the former, whereas the differences between Johnson’s Lives of the Poets and Boswell’s Life of Johnson exemplify
the latter. In both genres, he argues, there is a growing displacement from plain representation to introspection, from moral indifference to sensibility, from common sense to sentiment. In a process that will culminate in romantic expressivity, the subject is now situated at the core of aesthetic creation, therefore displacing extra-personal matters and dissolving the instrumentality of art typical of former ages. This explains the centrality of the hero in the novel of the following centuries, especially in romantic culture. But this is not only a change of places. When feelings become the core of selfhood, the self becomes a fluid, rather than static, entity. As an instance of this transformation, the novel receives extensive attention in chapter 4, where the analysis of Richardson (in *Pamela* and *Clarissa*), Defoe (in *Moll Flanders*) and Sterne (in *Tristram Shandy*) reveals how ideas such as “truth” or “moral content” are relativized, and that it is the hero and his/her particular actions that become the centre of interest. This subjectivism paves the way to romantic aesthetics and to the growing egotism of modern culture.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 (“The Moral Crisis,” “The Origin of Modern Social Theories” and “The New Science of History”) explore the relevance of eighteenth-century notions of feeling to moral theory, sociology and history. Here the prominence of the subjective and the individual becomes even more apparent as Dupré delves into the Enlightenment culture of letters. Locke, Shaftesbury and Rousseau mark the development of moral theory, in particular the notion of “sympathy” (which again culminates in Kant), whereas Adam Smith establishes the principles of modern liberalism in social theory, and Vico, Gibbon and the French *philosophes* profoundly revise the field of historical writing. In general, these are also “practical” chapters, since they attempt to demonstrate—successfully, I believe—the projection of the theoretical principles of eighteenth-century culture upon different disciplines within the Humanities. Although a certain moral content became, via Kant’s third critique, an essential part of aesthetic sensitivity, in the field of moral theory the gap between universal rules and specific contexts of action was never resolved; in social theory, on the other hand, individualism was granted a privileged status in political thought in order to recover the bond between rational ethical choice and public life, even though this ideal was not always fulfilled; but it was in the area of historical knowledge where the dialectic between the universal and the particular was more fruitful. Here, Dupré turns to the works of Vico and Gibbon (and later, to Herder and Kant) in order to describe the transition from the idea of history as a true representation of things past to the idea of history as endless progress—that is, from a static to a fluid notion of events, their causes and effects. Enlightenment history develops towards an organic vision of time and reality in which determinism plays an important role: the individual is powerless to change the course of most events, and it is humanity as a whole that shapes its own path from the past to the future. Among other elements, this inevitability is linked to a certain moral order: virtue leads to peace and expansion as much as moral corruption leads to decay and disappearance (such is the vision, for instance, of Edward Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*). This means that there is a finality to historical progress, an idea that Herder and the romantics will later criticize and Hegel will assume as central to his idea of human development.

The book concludes with three chapters devoted to religious and theological matters (“The Religious Crisis,” “The Faith of the Philosophers” and “Spiritual Continuity and Revival”). These analyze the role of modern atheism in the decline of religious faith throughout the eighteenth century. For Dupré, eighteenth-century atheism does not
attempt to fill the “cultural vacuum” (267) left by the disappearance of religious belief, as is the case today, but to contest the theological order imposed by religious institutions in philosophical terms. So conceived, atheism appears as a philosophical movement with its own theory of knowledge, morality and social order, all of them usually naturalistic. The struggle between non-belief and belief therefore becomes one between reason and the heart: the divinity addresses himself to the heart, but his nature and work can be understood by reason. Here feeling again prevails over the mind, since the former has the perception of revealed truth attached to it. But this attempt to place the culture of reason below that of theological truth fails, and consequently theology has to shift towards rationalism and symbolism throughout the whole century, as the works of Hamann, Swedenborg and Jonathan Edwards make evident. This transformation leads to a consideration of the universe as connected to a certain spiritual, godly realm, thereby calling into question the naturalism and empiricism of atheist doctrines.

The “Conclusion” takes up many of the topics of the whole book and briefly reveals their critique in contemporary culture. For Dupré, Enlightenment culture has provided our age with important and long-lasting concepts (expressivity in art, liberal democracy in politics, symbolism in theology), which we should not accept or reject in an outright manner if we are to understand their proper significance. The standards of eighteenth-century culture are not applicable today as they were envisaged in their time, but only if they are reelaborated for our time. The aim of the whole book is here made even more explicit: the Enlightenment project will survive as long as it is adapted to our day, for only in such a way will we be able to understand the significance of its conception. Its validity as a set of intellectual principles is what ultimately matters. Here lies the genealogical value of the book.

The only shortcoming in Dupré’s otherwise valuable book stems from his claim that the Enlightenment, notably an “age of self-consciousness” (53; his emphasis), was too rational to produce any important—or at least lasting—art, even though he acknowledges that “the aesthetic criticism of the eighteenth century surpassed that of the two earlier periods and provided most of the categories used in the two centuries that followed” (78). These statements do not contradict each other, but imply the following assumptions: (1) that Enlightenment art cannot be understood beyond its “intellectual content,” whatever that might mean; and (2) that the whole eighteenth century succeeded only in producing critical commentary about the literature of the past. The first assumption leaves no room for works such as Dryden’s poetry, Goethe’s Faust or Schiller’s and Voltaire’s plays, and seems to contradict Dupré’s own genealogy of the eighteenth-century as an age of sensibility; the second may be true, for instance, of Shakespearean and Miltonian criticism, some of which remains unrivalled today in its depth, but it also means ignoring the relevance of Johnson, Pope and Voltaire, among others, as theorists. Moreover, if Dupré chooses to focus on eighteenth-century aesthetic theories, particularly those based on expressivity, the absence of John Dennis or Mark Akenside is difficult to justify. I mean that, despite his generally sympathetic view and comprehensiveness, Dupré still neglects a relevant part of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, which renders only a partial image of the European Enlightenment despite the book’s title. To give just one example, Scottish thinkers such as Lord Kames, Archibald Alison, Dugald Stewart or Thomas Reid are absent. Except for David Hume, Francis Hutcheson and a few remarks on Alexander Gerard, the Scottish Enlightenment is altogether omitted, even though its contribution to
the formation of modern psychology, art theory and criticism is generally acknowledged as extremely significant (think, for instance, about Kant’s acknowledged debt to Gerard and Hume). Unfortunately, in this regard *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* does not help to solve a traditional injustice.

In spite of these limitations, which nevertheless do not weaken the main argument of the book, Dupré’s book is highly recommendable to both professors and graduate students specializing in modern European intellectual history, as well as for those approaching the eighteenth century for the first time. Its breadth and depth are simply enviable, as is the author’s ability to discern important ideas from accessory ones. In this sense, the book works as both a manual and a critical study. Written in an accessible style despite its erudition, this contribution should leave a long-lasting mark in the field of eighteenth-century studies.

**Works Cited**


Labio, Catherine 2004 *Origins and the Enlightenment: Aesthetic Epistemology from Descartes to Kant*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
