

The Color of Equality
Race and Common Humanity in Enlightenment Thought

Devin J. Vartija

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021)

[ISBN 9780812253191]

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In this timely, thoroughly documented, and well-argued book, Devin J. Vartija takes on one of the enduring paradoxes of intellectual history: why is the Enlightenment seen as the origin of modern egalitarianism even as it is understood as a source of scientific racism? Vartija begins the book by presenting the paradox of Enlightenment thinking: intellectuals at once ‘politicized the concept of equality while simultaneously making the naturalization of inequalities between Europeans and non-Europeans thinkable’ (1). Vartija delves into the primary contradictions in Enlightenment thought by retracing the development of equality and racial classification within the tradition, elucidating how scholars have perceived this development as dichotomous: ‘[...] either the Enlightenment was an emancipatory intellectual movement foundational to the modern, liberal democratic defense of human rights, or it is the primary culprit in the dark side of modernity, from scientific racism and sexism to colonialism and even genocide.’ Vartija’s book, chronological in its framing, addresses this dichotomy through analysis of the encyclopaedias as primary sources: Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia* (London, 1728), Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1751–1765), and Fortunato Bartolomeo De Felice’s *Encyclopédie d’Yverdon* (Yverdon, 1770–1775). The choice of these three encyclopaedias is important, as Vartija demonstrates that they formed a genealogy, each drawing from the other. Vartija’s appraisal of these also brings into relief the heterogeneity of debates around the questions of equality and race among the Enlightenment thinkers. His choice of corpus allows the reader to engage with how eighteenth-century thinkers made sense of these tensions, notably through the naturalistic account of humanity. Salient and evocative in highlighting the contradictions of the Enlightenment, this book traces continuities of conceptions of human sameness and differences from the eighteenth century to our present day. Vartija’s book not only shows the origins of how claims of common humanity were present in the works of Enlightenment thinkers, but also demonstrates the innovative role that these writings played in shaping slavery and colonisation.

Cromohs (Cyber Review of Modern Historiography), ISSN 1123-7023, 25/2022

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DOI: 10.36253/cromohs-13883

Vartija resists what he reveals to be anachronisms in certain readings of eighteenth-century texts, underscoring the necessity of situating a text within the conventions of a given genre in the history of ideas to decode its context. By committing to using the methodology of the Cambridge School of Intellectual History to understand how these encyclopaedists used and transformed the concepts of equality and race, he underscores the importance of studying an idea in context. Yet, at the same time, Vartija's deft analysis reminds the reader to not grant overdue importance to contextualism as 'a global and exhaustive theory of meaning.' Vartija thus avoids methodological dogmatism and justifies interweaving approaches from the disciplines of cultural history and intellectual history.

In the first chapter ('Early Modern Debates on Human Sameness and Difference'), Vartija outlines how the modern racial classificatory system developed within the ambit of natural history. This chapter situates Enlightenment encyclopaedists' interventions in the context of early modern European debates on human origins, history, and physical diversity. Through a tour of early modern debates on human nature, Vartija provides an intellectual history of the classificatory system of human and non-human species in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He argues:

In addition to the growth of comparative anatomy, the treatment of human beings as subjects of natural history gradually became acceptable practice in the early eighteenth century. This occurred most significantly in the work of Carl Linnaeus, one of the most influential eighteenth-century naturalists. Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*, published in Leiden in 1735, was immediately successful, going through ten editions in Linnaeus's lifetime. His inclusion of the human species in his natural history was controversial and, indeed, forms part of the increasingly secular and scientific treatment of human beings in early modern science. But his division of humanity into four groups must not be read anachronistically as a modern racial classificatory system. (33)

Through his discussion of the sixteenth-century Europeans' articulation of the law of nature, Vartija shows how Spanish colonialism made the argument for conversion of Native Americans (26), distinguishing different modes of classification of peoples prevalent among European thinkers based on language and religion. His appraisal of European colonial thought also reminds the reader that despite Christianity's important role in 'bequeathing to early modern Europeans a powerful monogenetic legacy and an emphasis on humanity's linguistic and religious diversity,' this strain of thought co-existed with deeply racist interpretations of the Scripture during European expansion (25-26).

In Chapter Two ('Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* and *Supplement*: The Growth of the Natural History of Humanity'), Vartija investigates *Cyclopaedia: Or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* and its conceptualisation of cross-cultural equality and cultural and ethnic differences. Vartija distinguishes an egalitarian ethos in Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*, reflecting what some historians maintain are structural

changes in European society of the era (60). Although restricted to a limited readership because of its cost, Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* participated in the nascent Republic of Letters and, as Vartija argues, provides remarkable insights into human and cultural diversity in the eighteenth century. He emphasises that notions of common humanity in Chambers' work on the equality of rights structure his definition of religious tolerance. Chambers' critical stance against the slave trade coexists within the larger conception of Mankind, in which 'whiteness serves as the norm from which blackness deviates' (64). Another interesting feature of this chapter is Vartija's exploration of Chambers' notion of temporality, in which Europe has reached the zenith of arts and culture, surpassing even that of ancient Rome, and stands in contrast to the '[s]avages [who] are described as nomadic peoples who live without religion, law, or policy, and the article states that a great part of America is populated with savages, many of whom are also cannibals' (62). The quest to understand differences and search for answers in natural history marks a shift as '[...] older notions of European civilizational superiority were complemented by the emergent anatomical and natural historical interest in human physical diversity' (66). Thus, Vartija argues, Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* consolidates the role of natural history in defining racial difference.

In Chapter Three ('Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*: A New Human Science'), Vartija explores the diverse voices of Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, thereby establishing the multitudinous, contradictory, and heterogeneous nature of Enlightenment thought. He establishes how the salience of equality as a political concept in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* distinguishes and differentiates itself from the definition in previous English encyclopaedias (85). Vartija proposes the 'idea of a thin coherence' in Enlightenment thought, thereby eschewing the dichotomy between radical and moderate Enlightenment thought and reminding the reader that the '*Encyclopédie* [...] contains ideas and philosophies running the gamut from radical to counter-Enlightenment' (87). Vartija also demonstrates that the range of views represented in the *Encyclopédie* reflects 'the relationship of the Enlightenment to the politicization of equality and the development of a racial classificatory system' (87). Thus, Vartija argues, whereas slavery is 'tacitly defended in a few *Encyclopédie* articles,' it would be erroneous to see these articles as representative of the views of all Enlightenment thinkers (87). This chapter also outlines how sociality is embedded in notions of natural equality as worldviews shifted among many thinkers. The *Encyclopédie* can be equated with the Enlightenment as a whole only to the extent that it reflected and contributed to 'a series of debates' (87). Furthermore, the lack of consistency in Enlightenment thought accommodates both Eurocentric justification of slavery and more progressive condemnations thereof.

Chapter Four ('De Felice's *Encyclopédie d'Yverdon*: Expanding and Contesting Human Science'), examines De Felice's *Encyclopédie d'Yverdon*, introducing readers to the text's demonstration of the naturalness of inequality. Vartija observes that 'key articles in the *Encyclopédie d'Yverdon* [...] assert that a natural gulf separates Europeans

from non-Europeans, particularly Native Americans and sub-Saharan Africans' (149), which he argues '[r]eflect(s) the "hardening" of racial categories in the second half of the eighteenth century.' Written by Protestants in Switzerland, many articles in this encyclopaedia are drawn from Diderot and D'Alembert's text and subsequently revised, representing both the iterative and evolving aspects of the concepts of inequality and race. Vartija also points towards the growing importance of the topic of equality in the eighteenth-century world, given its large presence in the articles, even in a work that brought together debates grounded in atheistic materialism and Christian doctrines. This chapter demonstrates the dual function of natural rights, where on the one hand natural rights contest oppressive religious and political structures, and on the other hand remain committed to the inevitability and necessity of hierarchy in society (153).

Emphasising the commonalities and differences between different ideas of equality and racial classificatory systems, Vartija situates Enlightenment encyclopaedists' interventions in the context of early modern European debates on human origins, history, and physical diversity. Vartija's attention to the paradox of imagining humankind as a unified species while simultaneously dividing it based on different traits allows him to present the contradictions, innovations, and political tensions of equality and race within the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, Vartija's book does not elide the paradox or attempt to resolve the contradictions of different strands of thought. Situating his work in conversation with scholars such as Anthony Padgen, Anthony Strugnell, Siep Stuurman, Andrew Curran, Lynn Hunt, and Sankar Muthu, among others, Vartija lays bare the intertwinement of the political and the philosophical in the fashioning of ideas of equality and race. Vartija's book presents the Enlightenment in its complexity, multiplicity and heterogeneity. *The Color of Equality: Race and Common Humanity in Enlightenment Thought* provides an exceptional model for locating the inherent intellectual tensions that the Enlightenment embodies and addressing the problematic interpretive legacies that it leaves in its wake.