

**The Virtues of Abandon: An Anti-Individualist History of the French Enlightenment.** By Charly Coleman.

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Few subjects present trickier problems for historians than “selfhood.” The actual sense and experience of selfhood in most past societies remains largely inaccessible to us. And even when historians retreat to the surer ground of learned representations, theories, and prescriptions, they must still deal with slippery and confusing terminology, shifting and contradictory perceptions, and the challenge of sorting through an imposing tangle of discourses: philosophical, psychological, religious, literary, even economic.

Yet if the climb is arduous, and the summit perhaps unattainable, the adventure can still be marvelously revealing. Recent books by Jan Goldstein (*The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850* [Cambridge, MA, 2005]), Jerrold Seigel (*The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* [Cambridge, 2005]), and Dror Wahrman (*The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* [New Haven, CT, 2007]) all received serious, thoughtful criticism and queries in regard to their methods, source materials, and theoretical references. Yet each was quickly recognized as an important contribution to intellectual and cultural history, opening up fresh perspectives on seemingly familiar material.

Charly Coleman belongs in this company. Unlike Goldstein, Seigel, and Wahrman, he has not put “self” or “selfhood” in his book title, preferring to cast *The Virtues of Abandon* as an “anti-individualist history of the French Enlightenment.” But ideas of selfhood are his principal quarry, and he uses them to make a fascinating series of arguments. The result is first-rate intellectual history: deeply learned, lucidly written, astute, and provocative. It will prompt readers to categorize the main currents of eighteenth-century thought in new ways, to rethink the relationship between these currents of thought and religion, and to reevaluate the history of modern individualism.

Looking across the entire eighteenth century, Coleman argues that ideas about the self fell into two radically opposed categories, which amounted to “opposing cultures of personhood” (3). The first of these rested on the conceptual foundation of “self-ownership,” according to which people enjoyed full possession of and responsibility for their “selves” as “a form of property” (3). For adherents of the concept, “property,” defined in the broadest sense, became the foundation stone of the moral, political, and social order. Enshrined in political philosophy by John Locke, ideas of self-ownership remained powerfully influential throughout the century.

To this familiar story, however, Coleman adds a surprising and provocative twist. Throughout the century, he maintains, ideas of self-ownership were challenged by an “anti-individualist culture of dispossession” (262, 290) whose proponents called for nothing less than the “annihilation of the self” (144), its dissolution into a greater whole. Into this “culture,” Coleman places groups who, at first glance, would seem radically opposed to one another: fervently religious “Quietist” mystics, materialist philosophers, classical republicans, and Jacobin revolutionaries. Among them, Coleman discerns an important “chain of affinities” (262).

At the beginning of the century, the Quietists, principally Jeanne-Marie Guyon and the archbishop François Fénelon, called for the complete surrender of the self to God, leading toward “the merger of the human and the divine” (77). The materialist philosophers, in a strangely similar manner, insisted on the dissolution of humans into the “nature” that they sprang from and of which they constituted only an ephemeral part (as Coleman notes, both Voltaire and Leibniz saw striking parallels between Fénelon and Spinoza). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for Coleman, was an ambivalent figure, experimenting with ideas of self-ownership in *Émile* but then rejecting them in his republican *Social Contract*, which

granted the polity “a totalizing power over the citizens who constitute it” (205). These diverse traditions finally coalesced among the radical Jacobins, who, while anything but mystics, wanted to limit property rights, established a cult of self-sacrifice, and could even advocate their own complete self-abnegation.

Coleman concludes that “the competing ideals of self-ownership and dispossession structured a wide range of polemics” in eighteenth-century France (290). He also suggests that the continuous challenge from the advocates of dispossession repeatedly forced their opponents to sharpen and refine their arguments. Indeed, the challenge helped the advocates of self-ownership to shape their ideals into a coherent system whose implications stretched far beyond the bounds of political philosophy. Thus when the brief, revolutionary moment of dominance for “dispossessive” politics ended on the Ninth of Thermidor, a new order grounded philosophically on self-ownership, and socially on the inviolability of private property, came triumphantly into its own.

All in all, Coleman makes a compelling case, particularly in regard to religion. *The Virtues of Abandon* moves beyond tired debates about “secularization” to offer a persuasive model for how to understand the interplay of religious and secular thought in the Enlightenment. It also provides an interpretation of the “religiosity” of the Jacobins that moves the discussion satisfyingly forward from the foundational work of Mona Ozouf (*Festivals and the French Revolution* [Cambridge, MA, 1988]).

Of course, a work as sweeping and provocative as this also provokes some critical questions. How great an affinity really existed between the wholly passive annihilation of the self in God advocated by the Quietists and the active patriotism demanded by the Jacobins? On the surface, Jacobin (and Rousseauian) calls for self-sacrifice would seem to owe more to classical antiquity than to Quietism, but Coleman does not discuss how classical culture (which also, of course, enthralled Fénelon, the author of *Télémaque*) might play into his story. He is also perhaps somewhat too quick to equate “self-sacrifice” with the total annihilation of the self. While the ideal Jacobin patriot willingly sacrificed his life and possessions for the *patrie*, he received in recompense highly individual recognition in the form of glory and the gratitude of posterity. The extravagant honors paid to individual martyrs at the Pantheon seems very far from Fénelon’s characterization of individuals as mere manifestations of God or from the materialist d’Holbach’s description of them as an effect of the power of nature. Montesquieu, as Coleman notes (135), challenged Spinozist dispossession precisely on the grounds that it left no room for human distinction of any kind. Jacobin republicanism would not have troubled him in this way.

Then there is the large question of how much the opposition between self-ownership and dispossession ultimately mattered, compared to other oppositions and polemics in the century of lights. Coleman’s “culture of self-ownership” is itself hugely capacious, encompassing both Jansenists and Jesuits, Bossuet and Voltaire, not to mention the Thermidorians. What weight should we place on their common acceptance of “self-ownership,” as opposed to the many things that divided them?

Finally, despite his emphasis on concepts of property, Coleman generally resists the temptation to link his “competing ideals” to social formations or processes. In the end, the story he tells about the triumph of “self-ownership” sounds suspiciously like the consolidation of a bourgeois order, but Coleman ventures the word “bourgeois” only in reference to Habermas’s concept of the public sphere. Could not more connections be drawn—perhaps in the manner of William Sewell’s work (*A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution* [Durham, NC, 1994]) on the abbé Sieyès? In short, Coleman’s excellent book should stimulate much discussion and further research.

DAVID A. BELL

Princeton University