Three Theses for the debate on “The Radical Enlightenment: the basis of our democracy?” on Friday 23 September 2011, Public Library, The Hague

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1. One should distinguish clearly between different types of concepts of “the Enlightenment” (Aufklärung, Les lumières, I lumi, Verlichting &c).

(a) Enlightenment as an intellectual movement; (b) E. as a historical/cultural period in European civilization; (c) E. as the collection of ideas put forward by (a); (d) E. as a specific mental attitude, specified in Immanuel Kant’s “Was ist Aufklärung?” (1784), for example; (e) E. as a specific set of values, such as freedom, tolerance, equality, mental autonomy, &c.

The definition that Jonathan Israel is presenting in his talk this afternoon, aiming at providing “a fully adequate historical and philosophical definition” is ambiguous between (a), (b), and (c).

2. Jonathan Israel’s thesis of a “fundamental dichotomy” between “Radical” and “Moderate” Enlightenment is misleading, because a philosopher such as David Hume is very radical in some respects and moderate in other respects. Even worse: his moderate attitude in morals is logically connected to his radical view on reason (cf. Jonathan Israel: *A Revolution of the Mind. Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2010).

According to Israel, the “essence of the Radical Enlightenment” is that “reason, and law founded on reason... should be the only sovereigns over mortals” (op. cit., p. 19 and passim). But in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), David Hume *radically* rejected the idea that reason can have this role by saying that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (II, iii). Concerning morality, this seems to be the correct view (cf., for example, Jesse J. Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, Oxford UP, 2007). Apart from the distinction between (more) radical Enlightenment and (more) moderate Enlightenment, one should also use the traditional philosophical distinction between rationalism and empiricism (absent in Israel’s book). As a consequence, four types of Enlightenment in sense (c) should be distinguished.

3. Although Radical Enlightenment is one of the intellectual origins of modern democracy, as Israel argues, there is no guarantee whatsoever that modern democracy produces radically enlightened politicians.