

## Origins of the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement in Europe that can be roughly traced from the mid-seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century. Enlightenment thinkers did not hold a common view or ideology, though they agreed on many things. Rather, what characterizes the Enlightenment is the development of new methodologies rooted in science and reason that enabled scientists and philosophers to discover truths about the natural world and human society. These intellectuals worked largely outside the existing power structures of church and state. While the impact that they had at the time varied, their legacy is enormous; the Enlightenment provided some of the foundational ideas of modern society.

### *Science and Reason*

The development of the Renaissance in Florence in the Late Middle Ages, and its spread throughout Europe by the end of the sixteenth century, reintroduced some ideas from classical Greek and Roman philosophers to European society. Renaissance ideas remained the leading ideas in Europe until the beginning of the Enlightenment, which differed from the Renaissance in its approach to learning. Whereas Renaissance thinkers considered classical works from ancient Greece and Rome to be the pinnacle of knowledge, Enlightenment thinkers challenged even these accepted ideas using science and reason. Because of their emphasis on science and reason, Enlightenment thinkers considered themselves to be the most modern and civilized people in history.

The period from the mid-1600s to the end of the 1700s witnessed a number of foundational scientific discoveries; historians now call this the Scientific Revolution. It occurred at the same time as the Enlightenment, and many of its discoveries influenced how intellectuals studied human society. During this period, Galileo articulated his theory that the Earth is round and Sir Isaac Newton developed his theory of gravity. Newton also studied calculus and developed many of its core ideas. His rival, German mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz likely perfected the basic study of calculus, but Newton maintained that he had done so. Calculus was significant because the idea of infinity, which is basic to calculus, caused much friction with ecclesiastical officials, which you will see later in this section. The discovery of dinosaur fossils in a series of excavations around the world also annoyed Christian leaders, because the existence of the fossils called into question the exact timing of the creation of the world.

These and many other scientific discoveries alerted early Enlightenment thinkers to the fact that the natural world did not always correspond to what they had been taught. Longstanding European ideas about human societies were also challenged, as European explorers brought back increasingly detailed information about the rest of the world. It became evident to Enlightenment thinkers that many things that people believed to be true of humanity in general were merely traits of European society.

These realizations led to new ideas about *epistemology*, or the study of knowledge. They also led to an increasing dependence on reason to determine the truths of the world. The most important theory of epistemology from the Enlightenment was developed by English philosopher John Locke. Locke believed that the mind is a

blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, at birth; this theory opposed almost all European theories of epistemology dating back to Aristotle, which argued that humans had built-in knowledge and a conscience. Locke asserted that humans develop all of their ideas from experience and do so by analyzing the input from their senses. By applying reason, the mind could trace the sensations and draw conclusions from them.

### *A Republic of Letters*

Enlightenment intellectuals engaged in wide-ranging inquiries that often delved into the nature of humanity and of existence. They called themselves *philosophes*, a term that they believed to encapsulate the all-encompassing nature of their work. In general, the philosophes were not mere armchair philosophers. Most knew a great deal about the political and social organizations of the day, often because they worked for them. Voltaire, for instance, was employed for a time as a historian, a propagandist, and a diplomat in France. John Locke spent some time in the employ of the Earl of Shaftesbury, who started the Whig Party.

The philosophes were widely read across Europe. They felt obligated to reform both their own countries and the whole of Western civilization. As such, they were able to make connections with like-minded thinkers abroad, and this web of association made the philosophes feel as though they were part of an international “republic of letters.”

Theoretically, everyone in the republic of letters could criticize another, and often they did find fault with one another’s theories. Sometimes the conflicts were personal – Voltaire and Rousseau, for instance, were bitter enemies. Most philosophes focused their critiques on society and on political organizations. While some of their works appeared in straightforward treatises, their criticisms often took the form of satire in novels or plays. The authors used sarcasm and humor in an attempt to make the reader or viewer see the absurdity of the characters. This helped the audience make easy associations between the fictional accounts and their own lives. Of course, the people they mocked usually didn’t appreciate their message, and many of the philosophes spent years in exile.

Though many mainland philosophes celebrated England as a free society, most of them made their living in France. Paris was a center of culture in this period, which gave philosophes living near Paris an advantage, because they were already seen as writing from the heart of European life. Not only that, the kingdom had developed a largely literate public critical of an increasingly intrusive and bumbling state. As the French government stumbled from failure to failure, it became increasingly vulnerable to the ravages of public displeasure. The most eloquent of these voices of protest were usually the philosophes.

Most radical philosophes spread their ideas through the shadowy, semisecret underworld revolving around the approved book trade. All books in Paris at this time had to be approved by censors. Publishers who were found printing books with forbidden information could be struck with severe penalties. So could writers – Diderot and Voltaire spent time in prison for insulting the king and the Catholic Church.

To evade government censors, authors would use false names or write anonymously. The most controversial books were printed in Switzerland or the Netherlands; the latter always wanted to print something bad about the French king, as the two countries fought several wars during the Enlightenment. Some Dutch printing houses even specialized in printing forbidden books and conducting successful smuggling operations to get them into France.

### *Expansion of the Public Sphere*

The German sociologist Jürgen Habermas argues that European society in the eighteenth century witnessed the growth of a “public sphere.” He defines the *public sphere* as one in which individuals in European society discussed and exchanged views in common areas that developed outside of the control of the state, such as coffee houses and newspapers. Habermas’s theory distinguishes the new public sphere from the representational culture that existed previously, in which the people were represented by members of the power structure. Habermas’s conception of a public sphere is somewhat idealized, but it is useful for introducing how societal changes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries spurred the Enlightenment.

One of the crucial ingredients in the Enlightenment’s success was the creation of a reading culture into which the ideas of the philosophes could quickly spread. The eighteenth century saw wide-ranging increases in literacy, which meant that more people were able to read the books of the philosophes. Moreover, along with the increase in literacy, the reading habits of the general population changed. In the past, people had often read a few books repeatedly, and they were often read aloud to a small audience. This was more practical when few people were literate. As the Enlightenment progressed, however, people began to buy more and more books of their own, and they read them privately instead of in a group.

Cafés and coffee houses also became centers of reading in this period. The first English coffee houses appeared in Oxford in the 1650s, and the first French cafés opened in the 1680s. Coffee houses acted as social hubs where readers could discuss the books they had read or read books that they could not afford to buy. They also sometimes doubled as publishing houses and regularly became involved in book distribution.

While more people could read, and there were more places to do so, we must keep an important caveat in mind: It is very difficult to determine what exactly the people of Europe were reading. While the Enlightenment refers to the flowering of a republic of letters among the philosophes, the reading public could – and often did – choose to read more diverting, less dense literature than the political-theory tomes of Rousseau or Voltaire. As historian Robert Darnton writes, “a lot of trash somehow got mixed up in the eighteenth-century idea of philosophy.”<sup>1</sup>

In Paris during the eighteenth century, for example, a new form of publication called *libelles* became popular. Such works, which were mostly in the form of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), 2.

pamphlets, featured slanderous pieces about celebrities or figures in authority, including the monarchy. As such, they often included distillations of some of the theories and criticisms developed by the philosophes, but they need to be distinguished as a more crude form of criticism than the satirical works of Enlightenment thinkers.

### *The Enlightenment and Religion*

While some of the Enlightenment can be considered a reaction against religion, at the same time much of what happened in the Enlightenment was done by people who believed in God, or considered themselves religious, and believed that what they were doing glorified and renewed their religion rather than challenging it. The reaction of the various European churches to Enlightenment authors also varied – sometimes the churches spoke out against Enlightenment writers, other times they approved of Enlightenment ideals or tracts.

In some cases, religious intolerance spurred the elaboration of Enlightenment ideals. In France, King Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes, according to which the French state had tolerated the Calvinist Huguenot minority, brought swift condemnation. The British government, meanwhile, introduced laws in the eighteenth century that made Catholicism illegal in Ireland and England. Actions such as these followed the brutal Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), in which the Catholics and Protestants rained destruction upon each other and the lands of central Europe. It is perhaps unsurprising that amidst the religious turmoil that continued to simmer in Europe, some Enlightenment thinkers began to envisage a world in which people of different confessions could live together peacefully.

As the period historians now call the "Scientific Revolution" began in the seventeenth century, Catholic and Protestant authorities took an ambivalent approach. In some cases they suppressed scientists harshly, but in others they did not, possibly because scientific discoveries rapidly became popular with the reading public.

What is critical to note, however, is that Enlightenment scientists and philosophes had to be careful about what they said and wrote, because the wide-ranging nature of their skepticism led them to question fundamental understandings about subjects such as creation and infinity. The Catholic Church's outright rejection of Galileo, a favorite of the pope's, showed that scientists had to be careful about what they published. Rene Descartes, for example, refused to publish his *Le Monde* during his lifetime because it challenged Aristotle's conceptions, and Aristotle's works were central in the theology of the Catholic Church. *Le Monde* was not published until 1664, after Descartes' death.

Scientists were still willing to work despite these conditions, even though sometimes they needed to do logical contortions to show that their research did not challenge core doctrines. Sir Isaac Newton, who was well known to be a devout Anglican, nonetheless aroused the suspicion of church authorities for his work on infinity; it was thought that such work necessarily denied the existence of God. Scientists in Newton's time were usually prudent and reserved a place for God in their writings. By the second half of the eighteenth century, however, most scientists no longer included references to God.

Part of the reason for this change was that some Enlightenment thinkers had begun to consider the Christian God in a different way from most Christians. This new system of belief was called *deism*. Deists believed that God had created the universe and had imbued all humans with morality and a sense of his existence. Unlike the denominations of Christianity, however, deists asserted that God was uninvolved in everyday life. Only a few Enlightenment thinkers, including Thomas Jefferson, proposed the possibility that there was no God, an assertion that was very radical at the time and that was often made only privately. Jefferson kept his religious convictions ambiguous during his lifetime, but his Jefferson Bible contains no supernatural passages.

All of these perspectives, however, represent instances in which Enlightenment thinkers attempted to use reason to examine their religious convictions. From their perspective, their deism removed the corruption and superstition involved in church teaching and replaced it with a purer knowledge of the divine.

The Enlightenment search for a purer understanding of the Christian God took place at the same time as a series of movements, often called “awakenings,” in Christian Europe. The Protestant version of the movement was called Pietism, and the roughly equivalent Catholic movement was called Jansenism. Pietism became popular in Germany, Britain, and the British colonies in North America, and included the preaching of the Moravian brethren and the Methodists. The latter were organized under Charles and John Wesley and Charles Whitfield, a trio of young Anglican ministers who drew enormous crowds of worshippers. The Jansenists became very popular in France, and later among Catholic communities in Germany, the Low Countries, Spain, and Italy.

Though there were key differences between the Pietist and Jansenist theologies, central to both was a more personal connection with God – a position that often explicitly cut out the clergy. Initially, the awakened Christians sympathized with the ideals of science and reason advocated by Enlightenment thinkers, and often shared in their investigations. For example, John Wesley was very interested in science, and Blaise Pascal, the pioneering mathematician, was a Jansenist.

Enlightenment thinkers and awakened Christians were united by their criticism of the established churches, but this unity was not strong and it did not last. Enlightenment thinkers who were influenced by deism often left no room in their religious belief for concepts like sin, damnation, and redemption by Jesus Christ’s death. The awakened Christians could not accept this denial of the supernatural aspects of religion. By the nineteenth century, the awakened Christian movements had become adamant opponents of deism.

### *Summary*

- Enlightenment thinkers developed new methodologies, based on science and reason, for examining the world.
- The philosophes’ communications with one another created a “republic of letters,” in which ideas were shared and debated across Europe.

- Britain and France were key countries for Enlightenment thinkers. Enlightenment thinkers appreciated the relatively free and open society in Britain, but the center of philosophe activity was Paris.
- The Enlightenment was helped along by the development of a reading culture in eighteenth-century Europe. More people were literate, and the creation of cafés and coffee houses provided forums in which people could discuss the ideas they read about.
- The Enlightenment is important because many of the ideas elaborated during this period form the basis of modern capitalist democratic society. However, the reading public at the time of the Enlightenment was often more interested in lighter fare.
- The ideas of the Enlightenment challenged many of those put forth by mainstream Christianity at the time. As a result, many early philosophes and scientists developed their work in a way that would not offend ecclesiastical authorities.
- Enlightenment thinkers' attempts to renew their Christian communities coincided with broad-based awakenings within Christianity called Pietism and Jansenism.

