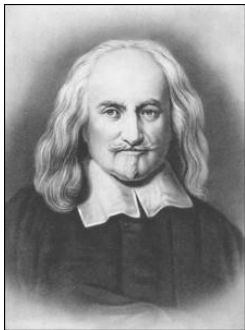


The Enlightenment

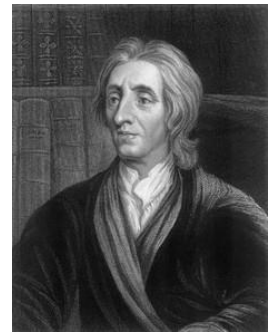
Focus Question: *In what ways did the Enlightenment challenge older patterns of European thinking?*

Historical Context: Growing out of the Scientific Revolution and the humanism of the Renaissance, the thinking of the Enlightenment was optimistic. Many writers believed that the application of reason to natural laws and rights would result in infinite progress. This idea, while not atheistic, nevertheless emphasized man's accomplishments in discovering the laws of the natural world. It led to the conclusion that natural laws governed the social and political spheres. While traditional religion did not disappear, it became less pervasive.

In the seventeenth century, the Scientific Revolution laid the foundations for empirical method of scientific inquiry. Rather than relying on reasoning about principles provided by tradition or religion, intellectuals based their conclusions on their observation of natural data. In that same century, philosophers Thomas Hobbes (author of *Leviathan*, 1651) and John Locke (author of *Two Treatises of Government*, 1690) viewed political life as the result of a social contract. Hobbes argued that people's natural state was to live in a bleak world in which life was "nasty, brutish, and short." However, by agreeing to a social contract, they gave up some rights to an absolutist monarch in return for law and order. Locke, on the other hand, argued that the social contract implied the right, even the responsibility, of citizens to revolt



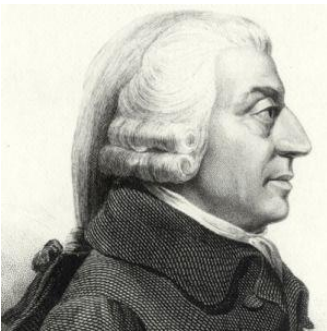
Thomas Hobbes
(1588 – 1679)



John Locke
(1632 - 1704)

against unjust government. Locke argued also that each man had a natural right – a right in the "state of nature" – to life, liberty, and the pursuit of property.

In the eighteenth century, a new group of thinkers and writers who came to be called the philosophes explored social, political, and economic theories in new ways, popularizing concepts they felt followed rationally upon those of the scientific thinkers of the seventeenth century. These writers included Adam Smith from Scotland, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin from the Americas, and Mary Wollstonecraft from England. Also prominent were French thinkers Diderot and three major Enlightenment philosophers Baron de Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Smith argued (in *Wealth of Nations*, 1776) for abandoning mercantilism in favor of free trade and laissez-faire policies wherein governments should minimize their

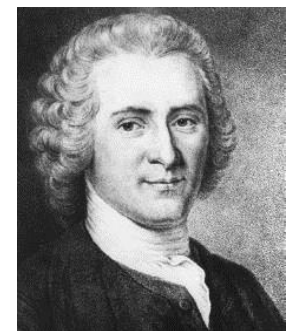


Adam Smith
(1723 - 1790)



Baron de Montesquieu
(1689 - 1755)

intervention in or regulation of the economy. Montesquieu (in *The Spirit of Laws*, 1748) praised the British government's use of checks on power by means of its Parliament and influenced the American system of separation of power. Rousseau (in *The Social Contract*, 1762) expanded on the ideas of Hobbes and Locke by presenting the concept of general will of a population and the obligation of the sovereign to carry out that general will.



Jean Jacques Rousseau
(1712 - 1778)

Directions: Using the information from the quote-categorization activity, write three historical arguments to identify the primary areas of focus of Enlightenment thinkers.

CATEGORY 1 =

Historical Argument

In response to the gross inequalities and social divisions that existed in civilizations, Enlightenment philosophers...

CATEGORY 2 =

Historical Argument

The development of monarchies and absolute political authority throughout Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries prompted Enlightenment philosophers...

CATEGORY 3 =

Historical Argument

In order to reduce the harmful effects and conflicts resulting from individual competition and greed, the Enlightenment philosophers...

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WAS THE ENLIGHTENMENT POSITIVE?

Supporters of the Enlightenment were proud of its emphasis on reason. However, for others, relying on reason could be dangerous.

Tradition vs. Reason: Edmund Burk, a British politician and political writer, was among those who challenged the wisdom of the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason. In light of the destructiveness of the French Revolution, Burke cast himself as the defender of tradition and opponent of change. He doubted what he called the "conquering empire of light and reason" and defended instead the "latent wisdom" of ideas and practices that had developed slowly over generations. Burke feared that emphasis on reason undermined long-practiced customs that held a community together. Throughout the nineteenth century, many romantics and nationalists picked up on Burke's perspective and argued for the wisdom of tradition over reason.

Reason as Repression: One twentieth century critic of the Enlightenment was the French scholar Michel Foucault. Writing in an age when everyone from Nazis to Communists claimed to be acting according to reason, he argued that the legacy of reason was a legacy of repression. For example, governments used reason to justify colonizing other lands and putting dissidents in prison.

Defending Reason: However, the Enlightenment has always had strong defenders, particularly for its influence on government. Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, in his work *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers (2007)*, credited the Enlightenment for producing ground-breaking ideas and documents, such as the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Immanuel Kant's proposal for a "league of nations." Historian Jonathan Israel, in *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750 - 1790 (2011)*, as well as in other works, argued that the Enlightenment had profound positive effects on the modern world. Among these were the establishment of successful republican and democratic governments.

Historian and political scientists Anthony Pagden, in *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters (2013)*, praised the Enlightenment for preparing the world for a modern, global age. He credited the Enlightenment for clearing the intellectual arena of dogmatism and superstition and establishing among other concepts, the basic understanding "that all human beings share the same basic rights and that women think and feel no differently than men or Africans from Asians.

SAMPLE ANALYTICAL PARAGRAPH

Focus Question: In what ways did the Enlightenment challenge older patterns of European thinking?

Building on the intellectual pursuits and scientific advances of the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th century focused on the determination of natural rights and debated the proper role and responsibility of government in order to promote social progress and encourage the greater good of humankind. In response to the gross inequalities and social divisions that existed in civilizations across Afro-Eurasia, Enlightenment philosophers emphasized the concept of God-given natural rights, such as equality, freedom, and independence, in order to promote a shared belief in the importance of a fundamental level of humanity. In his 1690 work, *Two Treatises of Government*, Englishman John Locke called for a mutual acceptance of “life, health, liberty, or possessions.” Locke’s word echoed into the revolutionary spirit of the American Revolution, when Thomas Jefferson appealed to the British crown in 1776 that the colonist’s “inalienable rights” were being stripped away by the tyrannical rule of King George III. The continued existence of monarchies and absolute political authority throughout Europe prompted Enlightenment thinkers to conclude that the proper role and responsibility of governments was to protect and promote the natural rights of its citizens. French “philosophe” Baron de Montesquieu proposed the separation of powers to protect citizens against oppressive leaders in his 1748 work, *The Spirit of Laws*. These philosophers did not discount the social progress and intellectual advances made by previous generations, but rather hoped to reduce the harmful effects and conflicts that resulted from personal and national competition through shared principles and action. Jean Jacques Rousseau laid out these ideals in his 1762 *the Social Contract* which called for greater social unity and a reciprocal relationship between members of a society wherein each would give slightly of their basic independence in return for greater social gains and prosperity. Beyond the immediate challenges to existing political and religious authority in Europe, the Enlightenment would influence many of the revolutionary movements of the late 1700 and early 1800s and would help to usher in a shift toward democratic government in the century to come.