

The Enlightenment (1650–1800)

The Enlightenment was a sprawling intellectual, philosophical, cultural, and social movement that spread through England, France, Germany, and other parts of Europe during the 1700s. Enabled by the Scientific Revolution, which had begun as early as 1500, the Enlightenment represented about as big of a departure as possible from the Middle Ages—the period in European history lasting from roughly the fifth century to the fifteenth.

The millennium of the Middle Ages had been marked by unwavering religious devotion and unfathomable cruelty. Rarely before or after did the Church have as much power as it did during those thousand years. With the Holy Roman Empire as a foundation, missions such as the Crusades and Inquisition were conducted in part to find and persecute heretics, often with torture and death. Although standard at the time, such harsh injustices would eventually offend and scare Europeans into change. Science, though encouraged in the late Middle Ages as a form of piety and appreciation of God's creation, was frequently regarded as heresy, and those who tried to explain miracles and other matters of faith faced harsh punishment. Society was highly hierarchical, with serfdom a widespread practice. There were no mandates regarding personal liberties or rights, and many Europeans feared religion—either at the hands of an unmerciful God or at the hands of the sometimes brutal Church itself.

The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, however, opened a path for independent thought, and the fields of mathematics, astronomy, physics, politics, economics, philosophy, and medicine were drastically updated and expanded. The amount of new knowledge that emerged was staggering. Just as important was the enthusiasm with which people approached the Enlightenment: intellectual salons popped up in France, philosophical discussions were held, and the increasingly literate population read books and passed them around feverishly. The Enlightenment and all of the new knowledge thus permeated nearly every facet of civilized life. Not everyone participated, as many uneducated, rural citizens were unable to share in the Enlightenment during its course. But even their time would come, as the Enlightenment also prompted the beginning of

the Industrial Revolution, which provided rural dwellers with jobs and new cities in which to live.

Whether considered from an intellectual, political, or social standpoint, the advancements of the Enlightenment transformed the Western world into an intelligent and self-aware civilization. Moreover, it directly inspired the creation of the world's first great democracy, the United States of America. The new freedoms and ideas sometimes led to abuses—in particular, the descent of the French Revolution from a positive, productive coup into tyranny and bedlam. In response to the violence of the French Revolution, some Europeans began to blame the Enlightenment's attacks on tradition and breakdown of norms for inducing the anarchy.

Indeed, it took time for people to overcome this opinion and appreciate the Enlightenment's beneficial effect on their daily lives. But concrete, productive changes did, in fact, appear, under guises as varied as the ideas that inspired them. The effects of Enlightenment thought soon permeated both European and American life, from improved women's rights to more efficient steam engines, from fairer judicial systems to increased educational opportunities, from revolutionary economic theories to a rich array of literature and music.

These ideas, works, and principles of the Enlightenment would continue to affect Europe and the rest of the Western world for decades and even centuries to come. Nearly every theory or fact that is held in modern science has a foundation in the Enlightenment; in fact, many remain just as they were established. Yet it is not simply the knowledge attained during the Enlightenment that makes the era so pivotal—it's also the era's groundbreaking and tenacious new approaches to investigation, reasoning, and problem solving that make it so important. Never before had people been so vocal about making a difference in the world; although some may have been persecuted for their new ideas, it nevertheless became indisputable that thought had the power to incite real change. Just like calculus or free trade, the very concept of freedom of expression had to come from somewhere, and it too had firm roots in the Enlightenment.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/history/european/enlightenment/context.html>

Key Figures of the Enlightenment

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

An enormously influential German composer who rose to prominence in the early 1700s. Best known by his contemporaries as an organist, Bach also wrote an enormous body of both sacred and secular music that synthesized a variety of styles and in turn influenced countless later composers.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

An English philosopher and statesman who developed the **inductive method** or **Baconian method** of scientific investigation, which stresses observation and reasoning as a means for coming to general conclusions. Bacon's work influenced his later contemporary **René Descartes**.

Cesare Beccaria (1738–1794)

An Italian politician who ventured into philosophy to protest the horrible injustices that he observed in various European judicial systems. Beccaria's book *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764) exposed these practices and led to the abolition of many.

John Comenius (1592–1670)

A Czech educational and social reformer who, in response to the **Thirty Years' War**, made the bold move of challenging the necessity of war in the first place. Comenius stressed tolerance and education as alternatives for war, which were revolutionary concepts at the time.

René Descartes (1596–1650)

A French philosopher and scientist who revolutionized algebra and geometry and made the famous philosophical statement "I think, therefore I am." Descartes developed a **deductive** approach to philosophy using math and logic that still remains a standard for problem solving.

Denis Diderot (1713–1784)

A French scholar who was the primary editor of the *Encyclopédie*, a massive thirty-five-volume compilation of human knowledge in the arts and sciences, along with commentary from a number of Enlightenment thinkers. The *Encyclopédie* became a prominent symbol of the Enlightenment and helped spread the movement throughout Europe.

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)

American thinker, diplomat, and inventor who traveled frequently between the American colonies and Europe during the Enlightenment and facilitated an exchange of ideas between them. Franklin exerted profound influence on the formation of the new government of the United States, with a hand in both the **Declaration of Independence** and the **U.S. Constitution**.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832)

A German author who wrote near the end of the **Aufklärung**, the German Enlightenment. Goethe's morose *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) helped fuel the *Sturm und Drang* movement, and his two-part *Faust* (1808, 1832) is seen as one of the landmarks of Western literature.

Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793)

A French feminist and reformer in the waning years of the Enlightenment who articulated the rights of women with her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* (1791).

Hugo Grotius (1583–1645)

A Dutch scholar who, like Czech **John Comenius**, lived during the **Thirty Years' War** and felt compelled to write in response to it. The result, a treatise on war and international relations titled *On the Law of War and Peace* (1625), eventually became accepted as the basis for the rules of modern warfare.

George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)

A German-English composer of the late Baroque period whose *Messiah* remains one of the best-known pieces of music in the world. Handel was an active court composer, receiving commissions from such notables as King George I of England, for whom his *Water Music* suite was written and performed.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

A philosopher and political theorist whose 1651 treatise *Leviathan* effectively kicked off the English Enlightenment. The controversial *Leviathan* detailed Hobbes's theory that all humans are inherently self-driven and evil and that the best form of government is thus a single, all-powerful monarch to keep everything in order.

Key Figures of the Enlightenment

David Hume (1711–1776)

A Scottish philosopher and one of the most prominent figures in the field of **skepticism** during the Enlightenment. Hume took religion to task, asking why a perfect God would ever create an imperfect world, and even suggested that our own senses are fallible, bringing all observations and truths into question. Hume's skepticism proved very influential to others, such as **Immanuel Kant**, and was instrumental in the shift away from rationalist thought that ended the Enlightenment.

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

American thinker and politician who penned the **Declaration of Independence** (1776), which was inspired directly by Enlightenment thought.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

A German skeptic philosopher who built on **David Hume's** theories and brought the school of thought to an even higher level. Kant theorized that all humans are born with innate "experiences" that then reflect onto the world, giving them a perspective. Thus, since no one actually knows what other people see, the idea of "reasoning" is not valid. Kant's philosophies applied the brakes to the Enlightenment, effectively denouncing reason as an invalid approach to thought.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716)

Generally considered the founder of the **Aufklärung**, or German Enlightenment, who injected a bit of spirituality into the Enlightenment with writings regarding God and his perfect, harmonious world. Also a scientist who shared credit for the discovery of **calculus**, Leibniz hated the idea of relying on empirical evidence in the world. Instead, he developed a theory that the universe consists of metaphysical building blocks he called **monads**.

John Locke (1632–1704)

An English political theorist who focused on the structure of governments. Locke believed that men are all rational and capable people but must compromise some of their beliefs in the interest of forming a government for the people. In his famous *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), he championed the idea of a representative government that would best serve all constituents.

Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755)

The foremost French political thinker of the Enlightenment, whose most influential book, *The Spirit of Laws*, expanded **John Locke's** political study and incorporated the ideas of a division of state and separation of powers. Montesquieu's work also ventured into sociology: he spent a considerable amount of time researching various cultures and their climates, ultimately deducing that climate is a major factor in determining the type of government a given country should have.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

A genius Austrian composer who began his career as a child prodigy and authored some of the most renowned operas and symphonies in history. Mozart's music has never been surpassed in its blend of technique and emotional breadth, and his musical genius places him in a category with a select few other composers.

Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727)

An English scholar and mathematician regarded as the father of physical science. Newton's discoveries anchored the Scientific Revolution and set the stage for everything that followed in mathematics and physics. He shared credit for the creation of **calculus**, and his *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* introduced the world to **gravity** and fundamental **laws of motion**.

Thomas Paine (1737–1809)

English-American political writer whose pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776) argued that the British colonies in America should rebel against the Crown. Paine's work had profound influence on public sentiment during the **American Revolution**, which had begun just months earlier.

François Quesnay (1694–1774)

A French economist whose *Tableau Économique* (1758) argued against government intervention in the economy and inspired Scottish economist **Adam Smith's** seminal *Wealth of Nations* (1776).

Key Figures of the Enlightenment

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)

An eclectic Swiss-French thinker who brought his own approach to the Enlightenment, believing that man was at his best when unshackled by the conventions of society. Rousseau's epic *The Social Contract* (1762) conceived of a system of direct democracy in which all citizens contribute to an overarching "general will" that serves everyone at once. Later in his life, Rousseau released *Confessions* (1789), which brought a previously unheard-of degree of personal disclosure to the genre of autobiography. The frank personal revelations and emotional discussions were a major cause for the shift toward Romanticism.

Adam Smith (1723–1790)

An influential Scottish economist who objected to the stifling **mercantilist** systems that were in place during the late eighteenth century. In response, Smith wrote the seminal *Wealth of Nations* (1776), a dissertation criticizing mercantilism and describing the many merits of a free trade system.

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677)

A Dutch-Jewish lens grinder who questioned tenets of Judaism and Christianity, which helped undermine religious authority in Europe. Although Spinoza personally believed in God, he rejected the concept of miracles, the religious supernatural, and the idea that the Bible was divinely inspired. Rather, he believed that ethics determined by rational thought were more important as a guide to conduct than was religion.

Voltaire (1694–1778)

A French writer and the primary satirist of the Enlightenment, who criticized religion and leading philosophies of the time. Voltaire's numerous plays and essays frequently advocated freedom from the ploys of religion, while *Candide* (1759), the most notable of his works, conveyed his criticisms of optimism and superstition into a neat package.