

1 Enlightenment Thinkers: A Review

In the late 1600s and the 1700s, philosophers reexamined society using the *scientific method*, a new approach developed during the Scientific Revolution to study the natural world. During the Enlightenment, philosophers felt confident that they could use reason to discover natural laws that governed human behavior. As a result, this period is also called the Age of Reason.

Hobbes and Locke

The ideas of two English philosophers, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, had a significant impact on how people viewed the individual's role in society. During the 1640s, Hobbes witnessed the violent upheavals of a civil war in England.* Hobbes became convinced that if people were left alone they would constantly fight among themselves. In 1651, he published his ideas in *Leviathan*. In this work, he described a state of nature in which people had no laws or government. Hobbes claimed that such a life would be "nasty, brutish, and short."

According to Hobbes, to escape the chaos of their natural state, people entered into a contract, or agreement. They gave up their freedom and agreed to obey a ruler. In exchange, the ruler ensured peace and order. The best government, Hobbes said, was one in which the ruler had absolute power to keep order. Furthermore, Hobbes insisted, once people entered into such a contract, they could not rebel, even if they thought the ruler was a tyrant. Hobbes' ideas, therefore, supported the rule of absolute monarchs.

In 1690, John Locke published *Two Treatises on Government*. Locke agreed with Hobbes that the purpose of government was to establish order in society. He also saw government as a contract between the ruler and the ruled. However, Locke's other ideas about government differed greatly from those of Hobbes.

Locke had a more optimistic view of human nature than Hobbes. He thought people

were basically reasonable and would cooperate with each other. Moreover, Locke argued that rulers could stay in power only as long as they had the consent of those they governed. If a ruler were a tyrant, then he or she had broken the contract. In such a case, the people had the right to rebel and set up a new government.

Locke presented some very important ideas. He believed people had natural rights, including the right to life, liberty, and property. Government was responsible for protecting these rights, but its power should be limited. After Locke's death, his ideas became popular in France and in North America.

Social and Economic Ideas

Many writers and thinkers, especially in France, expanded on Locke's idea of natural rights. They became known as *philosophes*, a French word meaning philosophers. The philosophes had great confidence that the use of science and reason would lead to continued human progress.

Many philosophes gathered in Paris, where they helped to make Enlightenment ideas popular. Often, they came from middle class families. They were well-educated and valued clear thinking as well as wit and humor.

The philosophes were concerned about many social issues. They urged religious toleration and condemned wars of religion. They claimed people had the right to believe as they wished. The philosophes called for freedom of speech and the press, and they criticized the strict censorship that most governments imposed. They believed censorship was harmful because it prevented people from learning about new ideas. They encouraged education as the way to end ignorance, prejudice, and superstition.

The philosophes denounced slavery because it deprived people of their most basic rights. They spoke out against torture and

cruel punishments for crimes. Some philosophes campaigned for more humane treatment of the mentally ill.

One group of philosophes, known as *physiocrats*, searched for natural laws to explain economics. Mercantilism influenced the economic policies of most governments at the time. *Mercantilism* was an economic philosophy maintaining that a nation's economic strength depends on exporting more goods than it imports. Physiocrats opposed mercantilism. They

argued that land was the true source of national wealth, not hoards of gold and silver. They urged rulers to encourage farming.

Furthermore, physiocrats believed that restrictions on trade should be removed so farmers could sell their products wherever there was a market. They favored a *free market*, that is, a market in which all goods can be bought and sold without restraint. They argued that the resulting increase in trade would mean greater wealth for everyone.

Josiah Wedgwood: A Practical Man of the Enlightenment

During the Enlightenment, middle class businesspeople, lawyers, and scientists tried to apply the scientific method and the principles of reason to everyday life. One such person was Josiah Wedgwood, who lived in England from 1730 to 1795. Wedgwood is best known for producing Wedgwood pottery, which is still sold all over the world.

Wedgwood was no ordinary potter. He combined science and art as few in his field had done before. He taught himself chemistry so he could understand the chemical changes that took place when clay was heated. He invented special thermometers to measure the high temperatures required for glazing clay. An experimenter, he frequently tried new materials and designed new ovens to improve the quality of his products.

Like many artists of this period, Wedgwood admired the simple, elegant designs of classical Greece and Rome. As a result, his pottery often carried Greek or Roman figures.

As his pottery business prospered, Wedgwood pursued other interests. He joined the Lunar Society, a group of businesspeople and scientists who met to discuss scientific developments. Among Wedgwood's friends in the Lunar Society was Joseph Priestley, the scientist who discovered oxygen. Wedgwood helped support Priestley's work financially. He also invented special laboratory equipment for Priestley.

Wedgwood used his pottery to spread ideas about social justice. Like many Enlightenment thinkers, he campaigned vigorously against the slave trade. Wedgwood designed

and produced thousands of anti-slavery medallions like the one shown here. The slave in chains utters the words: "Am I not a man and a brother?" Wedgwood distributed the medallions in Britain and shipped many across the Atlantic to the American colonies. Fashionable people wore the medallions or put them on display at home, thereby expressing their support for the antislavery cause. In his own way, Wedgwood helped to channel Enlightenment ideas into the homes of many people.



Three Influential Views on Government

Among the most influential Enlightenment thinkers were Montesquieu (MAHN tuhs kyoo), Voltaire, and Rousseau (roo SOH). Each formed his own ideas about the best way to organize governments. Yet all three shared the basic beliefs of the philosophes.

Montesquieu. Born to a noble family, the Baron de Montesquieu was a keen student of government. He read the works of Newton and Locke. In *The Spirit of Laws*, he discussed various forms of government.

Montesquieu was especially impressed with the system of government that had developed in England by the mid-1700s. He believed that English government preserved the liberty of the people by the separation of power among three branches of government: the legislature, executive, and judiciary. Montesquieu thought that in England Parliament, as the legislature, made the laws; the king, as the executive, enforced the

laws; and the courts, as the judiciary, interpreted the laws if disputes arose. The English system did not work that way in reality, but Montesquieu's ideas were widely discussed.

Montesquieu also thought that the power of each branch of government should be carefully defined to provide a system of checks and balances. That way no branch of government could dominate another. Montesquieu's ideas on checks and balances and the separation of powers would later influence the men who wrote the Constitution of the United States.

Voltaire. Probably the best known philosophe was François Marie Arouet, who used the pen name Voltaire. Voltaire came from a French middle class family. He traveled widely and became popular for his witty plays and novels as well as for his pamphlets attacking evils in society.

Voltaire spent much of his life arguing for religious toleration and freedom of thought. He is credited with saying, "I do not agree with a word you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

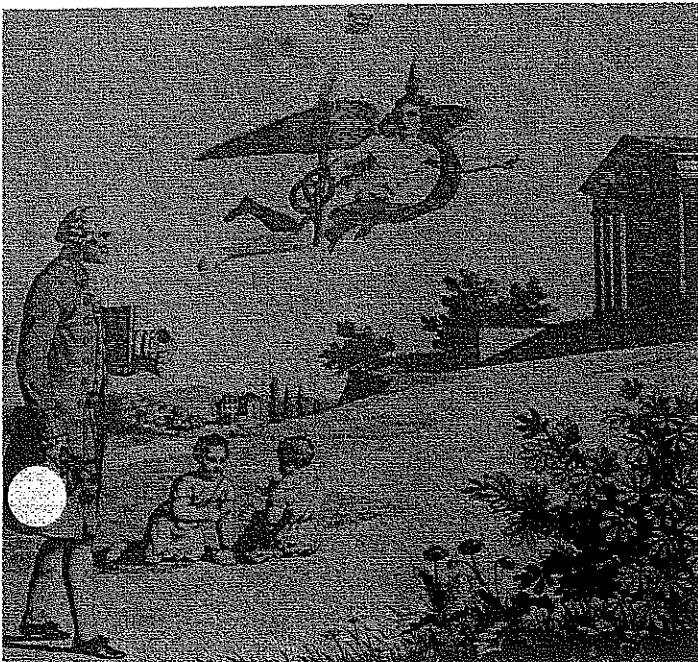
Voltaire praised English liberties and the works of Newton and Locke. He favored the idea of a strong monarch. To Voltaire, the best ruler was an "enlightened monarch." By that he meant a monarch who studied the science of government and protected the basic rights of the people.

Rousseau. The Swiss philosophe Jean Jacques Rousseau came from a poor and unhappy family. When he went to Paris, he always felt out of place among the sophisticated intellectuals who gathered there. A complainer and constant critic of others, Rousseau quarreled with many philosophes. Yet his political and social ideas were an important part of Enlightenment thought.

Rousseau believed that human nature was basically good. In his opinion, society corrupted people. He also argued that all people were equal and that all titles of rank and nobility should be abolished. "Man is born free," he wrote, "and everywhere is in chains."

Rousseau admired what he called the "noble savage," who lived in a natural state, free from the influences of civilization. How-

The French honored their greatest writers, including Voltaire and Rousseau, by electing them to the French Academy. Members of the French Academy were called "the immortals." This picture shows a winged spirit conducting Rousseau, on the left, and Voltaire, on the right, to the temple of glory and immortality. The writings of Rousseau and Voltaire shaped Enlightenment thinking in France and elsewhere.



ever, Rousseau realized that people could not return to the natural state.

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau described an ideal society. In this society, people would form a community and make a contract with each other, not with a ruler. People would give up some of their freedom in favor of the "general will," or the decisions of the majority. The community would vote on all decisions, and everyone would accept the community decision.

Rousseau's beliefs in equality and in the will of the majority made him a spokesman for the common people. Revolutionaries in many countries would later adopt his ideas.

SECTION REVIEW

1. Identify: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jean Jacques Rousseau.
2. Define: scientific method, philosophe, physiocrat, mercantilism, free market.
3. (a) What kind of government did Hobbes support? (b) According to Locke, when did people have a right to rebel?
4. Describe three concerns of the philosophes.
5. Why did Montesquieu support a government system with checks and balances?
6. (a) Who did Voltaire think should govern? (b) What did Rousseau mean by the "general will"?



The first English coffee house opened around 1650. London coffee houses, like the one shown here, became gathering places for writers, scientists, businessmen, and politicians. At these coffee houses, men discussed politics and the new ideas of the Enlightenment.