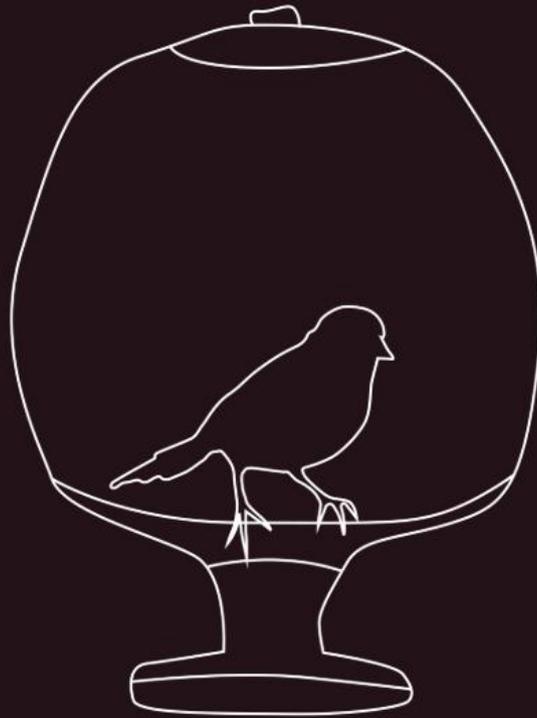




NELSON  
MODERNHISTORY

# THE ENLIGHTENMENT



MICHAEL ADCOCK

SERIES EDITOR: TONY TAYLOR



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### The Enlightenment

*An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* was painted in England by Joseph Wright of Derby in 1768. It was one of a number of scenes Wright painted in the 1760s that featured scientific experiments. In this case, the painting shows a scientist undertaking an experiment in which oxygen is drawn from a glass vessel. The experiment worked and the bird that was trapped in the glass vessel lost consciousness through lack of oxygen. This painting, like the others in the series, encapsulates the spirit of the Enlightenment, a movement that encouraged people to understand the world in rational terms rather rely on the irrational.

*Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–1797)*

*Joseph Wright was an English painter of portraits and landscapes who rose to prominence during the Enlightenment.*

*Read more about Joseph Wright and the English Enlightenment in Chapter 3.*



# Timeline

## 1690–1800



1721

In France, Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* appeared, providing a new model of criticism of French society, apparently by a naive foreigner.

1733

In England, Voltaire's *Letters Concerning the English Nation* was first published.

1690

In Holland, the French thinker Pierre Bayle produced his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, which would provide the inspiration for the 'philosophical dictionaries' of the 18th century.

In Russia, Emperor Peter the Great decided to study European ideas and technology by visiting cities such as Vienna and London.

1730

In Scotland, David Hume published *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

1739

Frederick II became King of Prussia. He signalled his interest in learning by establishing the Academy of Sciences in Berlin.

In France, Montesquieu published *The Spirit of the Laws*, explaining the need for the separation of the powers of the legislature, executive and judiciary.

In France, Madame Geoffrin opened her 'salon' (social gathering), creating one of the great venues for Enlightenment thought and discussion.

In Scotland, David Hume published his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

1697



1740



1748



1751

In France, Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert published the first volume of *The Encyclopaedia*. Some contributors went into hiding or exile.



1771

In Bologna (in present-day Italy), Luigi Galvani discovered the link between electricity and nerve impulses.

In France, Antoine Lavoisier discovered the composition of air.

1776

In Scotland, Adam Smith published *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, one of the greatest and most influential books of economic theory ever written.

1754

In France, Jean-Jacques Rousseau published his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*.

1791

In France, Olympe de Gouges published her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, transforming the original *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (1789) into a manifesto for women's rights.

1750

1770

In France, Jean-Jacques Rousseau published *The Social Contract*, which established the idea that rulers, such as kings, have an obligation to rule for the benefit of their people.

1762

In France, Voltaire published his *Philosophical Dictionary*.

1763

In Austria, Joseph II assumed government of his country in partnership with his mother, Maria Theresa. He would become the first of three great European 'enlightened rulers' to attempt to reform his lands.

1765

In Prussia, Immanuel Kant answered the question 'What is Enlightenment?'

1784

In England, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, providing a powerful statement of basic feminist principles.

1792



“ The public use of one’s  
reason must always be  
free, and it alone can bring  
about enlightenment  
among men. ”

Eric Hobsbawm

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**1st Edition**  
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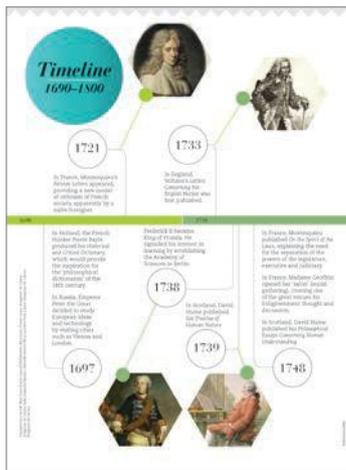
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# ABOUT THE SERIES

## Using *The Enlightenment*

*The Enlightenment* has been developed especially for senior secondary students of History and is part of the Nelson Modern History series. Each book in the series is based on the understanding that History is an interpretive study of the past by which you also come to better appreciate the making of the modern world.

Developing understandings of the past and present in senior History extends on the skills you learnt in earlier years. As senior students you will use historical skills, including research, evaluation, synthesis, analysis and communication, and the historical concepts, such as evidence, continuity and change, cause and effect, significance, empathy, perspectives and contestability, to understand and interpret societies from the past. The activities and tasks in *The Enlightenment* have been written to ensure that you develop the skills and attributes you need in senior History subjects.



### ILLUSTRATED TIMELINE

is a bird's-eye view of the topic and summarises the major developments of the period.

**New social ideas reflected in art**

**Source 10B** *School of Athens* (c.1509–11), Raphael (detail), Vatican Museums, Rome.

**Source 10C** *The Kitchen Maid* (1765), Jean-Benoit Chardin (detail), Louvre, Paris.

If we look carefully, we can see signs of changing social attitudes in art. Many paintings record ideas that were radical at the time. Look at Sources 10B and 10C.

**Source 10B: 'School of Athens'**

Francesco Petrarca devoted his career to painting wealthy aristocrats enjoying their cultivated, idle way of life. He sold hundreds of paintings, mainly to aristocrats and wealthy bourgeois who lived to see their pleasure by way of life reflected in pictures.

**Questions**

- In the painting, Diogenes, what are the aristocrats actually doing with their time?
- How do we know that these aristocrats spent a great deal of money on fashion and expensive luxuries?
- Look carefully at the colours that Diogenes has used. How do the colours of the painting create a sense of 'relaxation and pleasure'?

**Source 10C: 'The Kitchen Maid'**

Jean-Benoit Simeon Chardin painted in France from the 1720s to the 1770s, devoting his career to *genre* scenes, or scenes of everyday life. Some showed empty, dignified scenes of middle-class life, while others showed working people, such as servants at work. These scenes of humble working life appealed especially to gentlemen such as Diderot, an art reviewer of the social art exhibitors in Paris.

### SOURCE STUDIES

of visual and text primary sources and secondary literature appear frequently through the text and are combined with questions and activities to aid your evaluation and interpretation of evidence from the past.

**KEY FIGURES AND ORGANISATIONS**

**RUSSOISEN FRANCIS (1712–1788) (SCOTLAND)**

Rousseau spread the word about the scientific method of France in France and Jean-Jacques, with their emphasis on experimentation, direct observation and evidence. Rousseau also expressed perfectly the Enlightenment belief that the main task of science and education is to increase human happiness.

**KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS**

**Atheism**  
The conviction that there is not a God in the universe.

**Censor**  
An official responsible for checking new publications for any material that threatens the existing government or religion. The censor could prevent the publication of dangerous books and the offending material was removed.

**Deism**  
The conviction that God does exist, but that the traditional forms of organised religious experience – revelation, visions, miracles and

**KEY DOCUMENTS**

**Francis Bacon, *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697)**  
The French thinker Pierre Bayle published his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* in Holland, covering the free model for the philosophical discourse of the 18th century. It was one of the first to be published in a dictionary's first short article collections on philosophical issues. The result is a mixture of religious ideas.

**Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Freethinking* (1712)**  
Collins stated the Freethinking Movement belief that humans must

### KEY FIGURES AND ORGANISATIONS, KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS, KEY DOCUMENTS

feature brief biographies, profiles, definitions and summaries of key documents as a ready reference for learning and revision.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**The Enlightenment beyond France**

Other European countries had quite different conditions to those of France, which may be seen in the 'typical' features of the Enlightenment. In England, for example, the political system already included a parliament, and hence political dissent was not so feared. Further, the Industrial Revolution there involved a Revolution with manufacturing and a strong desire to apply enlightened ideas to that field.

In Scotland, the different conditions created a special 'Scottish' form of enlightenment thinking, with an emphasis on the practical use of the sciences, and a particular focus on the study of the ways in which human beings make societies. In the state of Prussia there was a form of enlightenment, focused on a strongly supported enlightenment thought to strengthen his rule, and established policies of wide religious tolerance. And in the Dutch Republic there was a tradition of a mixture of both religious and philosophical beliefs. The presence here of large numbers of Protestants who had fled religious persecution in other lands tended to give discussion a more radical quality, particularly in criticisms of religious intolerance and fanaticism.

In the American colonies rebellion was brewing, and enlightenment thought began to influence their way through the crisis. The constitutional debate with England about how much power should be given to the American Congress who later led the American Revolution, and became the first republic of the new century of the United States of America, was an outcome of enlightenment ideas.

**INQUIRY QUESTION**

How did the political and social conditions in European countries affect the way the Enlightenment developed there?

### CHAPTER INTRODUCTIONS

provide a context to the issues that are addressed.

**Madeleine Geoffrin and her salon**

The Enlightenment was a process of lively discussion and free exchange of thoughts. Women provided a setting where this exchange occurred, and guided the discussions. Instead of setting up a university or an academy, they created hundreds of gatherings in Paris, in French towns and finally in other European cities. In the days before the Internet and Facebook they created the first social networking, which was carried out through conversations and by the exchange of thousands of letters. The three leaders in this field were Madeleine Geoffrin, Madame de La Fayette and Madame Suzanne Mably.

Madeleine Marie Thérèse Rodée Geoffrin (1699–1777) was the greatest hostess of all, with a mastery of salon conversation. From 1750 until 1777, her salon was the focus of key Enlightenment thinkers. Women across France copied her. Her achievement is impressive because, being female, she was denied the formal education that boys in rich families received. She therefore had to learn from her visitors – who included great thinkers such as Bernard Le Bouvier de Fontenelle and Montesquieu – and rapidly proved her intelligence.

Dena Goodman argues that Geoffrin created the Enlightenment salon. Geoffrin changed the usual way of running the salon to allow longer discussion time. She set fixed days for her salon; artists were invited on Mondays, and writers on Wednesdays. She changed the main meal from dinner to lunch, so that people could spend the afternoon discussing.

The same women created a new institution, a lounge room 'república' in which people could exchange and test ideas freely (but according to certain rules). Thus, these women were more than hostesses; they were 'governors'. Men could attend if they obeyed the rule of the 'governors'. Geoffrin enforced the rules of polite conversation because she practised them, setting such a courteous tone that her guests had to behave accordingly. She was expert in conducting intellectual discussion. Geoffrin was also in contact with the international community including Catherine the Great of Russia and King Stanislaw August of Poland.



### SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUALS

are biographical profiles and assessments of key historical figures and frequently include questions and activities.



**SOURCE 12** The Rules of the Sabe Insurance Society, Anonymous, 1782  
 An engraving's content of the rule. There is a great feeling of calmness here; the message is that the arts and sciences can improve human life.  
**'The Rules of the Sabe Insurance Society', Anonymous, 1782**  
 This engraving is merely the first cover for an insurance company's rules, but it reflects the English Enlightenment's new values. The caption notes, first, that the Sabe Insurance and Society, great knowledge flow, meaning that the existing political and social systems will produce the greatest human well-being possible. The focus is on the industrialist Matthew Boulton (1728–1806) (seated, left of center), and behind him is his famous factory at Soho, near Birmingham. In the front of the scene, we see at the right a carpenter, or joiner of planks (forming wealth and property), and at the left a painter (making artistic activity), together with industrial engineers (creating technology and science). The message is clear: there is no end, in England, to combining the government and the social system. Science, industry and the arts will progressively improve people's wellbeing.

**MARGARET C. JACOB AND THE IDEA OF A 'RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT'**

In this section, we have examined some key Enlightenment ideas. While we should not think that they all are naturally and easily together in one, called individual movements, the most important are the 'radical' range of Enlightenment thought. These ideas were already very radical in 18th-century Europe, but in recent years historians have proposed that the Enlightenment contained even more shockingly radical ideas.

Historians have opinions about what to do with it – to think back to – and looking to the future. Margaret C. Jacob (1982), who since the early 1980s has proposed that one part of the Enlightenment was far more radical than we supposed.

First, Jacob defined the term *radical* as those who the philosophers attacked the authority of the monarchy and the Catholic Church – and identified much more radical thinkers elsewhere, particularly in the Dutch Republic. She believed that 'those quite diverse national settings (England, France and the Dutch Republic) need to create 'the perfect citizen'.

After the revolution of the États of France (which in 1789 had granted universal rights to Protestants) in 1805, thousands of radical French Protestants fled to the Dutch Republic and England – and they carried with them a new sense of the obligation to the future and the future's obligation to us. The Dutch Republic allowed an unprecedented set of advantages to immigrants and refugees. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of these immigrants fled to the United States, where they became known as the Dutch-American community. The Dutch provided social, cultural, linguistic and religious education to all of their new refugees in English.

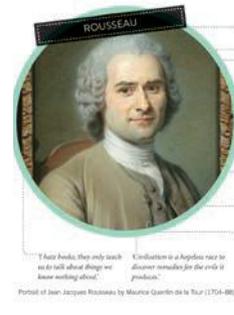
Margaret C. Jacob: 'The Future of Early Enlightenment comes (perhaps) from the Netherlands or the Dutch Republic.' (1982, p. 20)

Jacob discovered a much more political and radical philosophy than we are familiar with.

The radical view – radicalism, means and possibly a very few – often only a radical Enlightenment, also known as the obligation to the future and the future's obligation to us. The Dutch Republic allowed an unprecedented set of advantages to immigrants and refugees. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of these immigrants fled to the United States, where they became known as the Dutch-American community. The Dutch provided social, cultural, linguistic and religious education to all of their new refugees in English.

Margaret C. Jacob: 'The Future of Early Enlightenment comes (perhaps) from the Netherlands or the Dutch Republic.' (1982, p. 20)

Second, Jacob pointed out that the 'Radical Enlightenment' began in a series of royal riots and of religious movements that were radical in nature for their time. These movements were radical in nature for their time. These movements were radical in nature for their time. These movements were radical in nature for their time.



'Man is free, and everywhere he is in chains.'  
 'People who know little are usually great talkers, while men who know much are silent.'  
 'I prefer liberty with danger than peace with slavery.'  
 'The world of reality has no limits; the world of imagination is boundless.'  
 'I am not made like any of those I have seen. I cannot be false; that I am not made like any of those who are so excessive. If I am not false, at least I am different.'  
 'To write a good letter, you ought to begin without knowing what you mean to say, and to finish without knowing what you have written.'  
 'I would rather be a man of passion than a man of prejudice.'  
 'Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Maker of the world; but depravity once it gets into the hands of man.'

**DIAGRAMS AND TALKING SOURCES**

are used to visually summarise complex ideas and events.

**INFORMATION BOXES**

contain extended discussions of key events, concepts and historical developments. Many also include questions and activities.

**HISTORIAN BOXES**

introduce key historians and schools of interpretation as a way of making historiography clearer.

**Chapter summary**

Write notes together covering you have seen in this chapter, make your own small notes while the information is fresh in your mind. Using the points and sub-points writing notes on concept cards or in a computer-based document, using the following main points and add your own examples.

- We refer to the Enlightenment in France or the Enlightenment in England to remind ourselves of the most basic fact: the Enlightenment was not the same thing everywhere. It varied greatly according to the political, social and economic systems of the country in which it was operating. Despite some common themes, every Enlightenment was quite different.
- The Enlightenment in France was an expansion movement that attacked the Catholic Church and the Catholic Church in turn. America also a reform movement, and did not aim to create the revolution that occurred in 1789.
- Enlightenment moved the religious activities by the 'deists' (many of them Unitarian) and inspired the political ideas of the separation of powers (the spirit of the Law).
- Voltaire attacked the religious of religion through 'Letters Concerning the English Nation' and published radical ideas against an absolute monarchy (The Philosophical Dictionary).
- Rousseau published major theories on politics (the Social Contract) and the 'natural education of children' (Emile).

**Further resources**

Philip Barbour, *Enlightening the World: The Origins of the Enlightenment* (New York, 2001).  
 Philip Barbour, *A World of Enlightenment: The Progress of Enlightenment* (New York, 2001).  
 Jeffrey Needell, *Revolution and Enlightenment: The Origins of the Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, 2012).  
 Bruce Van Dyke, *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Science* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014).

**Chapter review activities**

1. What was the political and social conditions in France that led to the revolution of 1789?
2. How did Enlightenment thinkers contribute to France without getting into trouble with the authorities?
3. What is the main argument of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Law*?
4. How did Voltaire aim to reform France without getting into trouble?
5. How was Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* similar to Plutarch's *Biographies*?
6. What were some radical, controversial ideas in Voltaire's *Letters Concerning the English Nation*?
7. What was Rousseau's view of education?
8. What radical suggestions did Rousseau make for the 'natural education of children'?
9. Why, according to Rousseau, did primitive people give up some freedom to stay settled?
10. What does Rousseau mean by the 'social contract'?
11. After reviewing the main ideas of Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, use the terms of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (August 1789) and the American Declaration of Independence (1776). How many of Rousseau's ideas were included in each of these two documents? How do you think Rousseau's ideas were used? Conclude by evaluating (arguing) up or down how much influence Rousseau had on these documents.
12. Carefully examine Section 2.11, which explains Rousseau's educational ideas in *Emile*.
  - What is the significance of the young mother who breastfeeds her baby?
  - Why are natural habits, long on the path, left to be learned and not imposed?
  - In what sense, when an adult with their own 'What is this right'?
  - One small boy trying to cross a busy street with a stick. Why would Rousseau have agreed with this Rousseau activity?



**CHAPTER SUMMARY AND CHAPTER REVIEW ACTIVITIES**

conclude each chapter. They include a brief précis of the topic, suggestions for further reading, and a range of learning activities that consolidate knowledge and understanding of the chapter's content. These tasks incorporate a range of historical understandings and skills.

**CONCLUSION**

**The Enlightenment today**

The Enlightenment [and] its position in the past in the terms of the future.

While there has always been historical debate about the Enlightenment, ever since the Enlightenment itself, it has never been so intense or so right, in the first decades of the 21st century. Recent global developments such as fundamentalism and terrorism have changed Enlightenment values into general questions (not just, for today they apply to all human beings, we understand, how will you connect?). During the period from 2001, when there were several terrorist bombings in London, there is a sense of a 'new' Enlightenment. There is a sense of a 'new' Enlightenment. There is a sense of a 'new' Enlightenment. There is a sense of a 'new' Enlightenment.

**DOUBTS ABOUT THE ENLIGHTENMENT**

Historians have a habit of not only questioning the Enlightenment but also questioning the Enlightenment. They are not only questioning the Enlightenment but also questioning the Enlightenment. They are not only questioning the Enlightenment but also questioning the Enlightenment.

**ACTIVITIES**

1. What is historiography?
2. What is the focus of the Enlightenment?
3. What are some of the Enlightenment's main ideas?
4. Why are some Enlightenment principles only those to our own times?
5. What is Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* for a global context?
6. Using the Internet and book resources, investigate what led to the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948. Write a report explaining why the United Nations felt the need to write a modern declaration of human rights, taking reference to the impact of World War II. In your answer:
  - Use the main rights described in the declaration (30 articles).
  - Explain which countries are responsible for its declaration.
  - Identify the criticisms that have been made of this document by other countries and groups.
  - In particular, acknowledge that the idea of universal human rights might cause some difficulties for other cultures, notably some Islamic countries, that have their own values systems.
7. Using the Internet and book resources, create an annotated graphic showing the origins of Amnesty International, its aims in defending human rights, and the methods it uses to try to protect human life and dignity. In your answer, how successful has Amnesty International been in achieving its goals. Describe some of its successes as well as the limitations on its actions in dangerous parts of the world.
8. Using the Internet and book resources, investigate what efforts have been made in Australia to write a Bill of Rights for our nation. Analyse why Australia has not so far been able to complete this project.
  - When you have drawn your conclusions, write your report in the form of a letter to the Australian Prime Minister explaining why you believe that it is important for Australia to have a Bill of Rights. In your argument, you will need to address the objection that Australia does not need such a bill because we respect human rights, and the more we argue that in the 'Age of Fear' we may need general measures that such bills have. You have decided whether by having which rights you feel should be guaranteed by an eventual Australian Bill of Rights.

**THE CONCLUSION**

summarises the topic and includes a series of activities to consolidate your knowledge of it. More importantly, these final tasks will help you build an understanding and interpretation of this period in history.

**Beyond this book**

The Nelson Modern History series includes numerous titles on a range of topics covered in senior History courses around Australia. For further information about the series visit: [www.nelsonsecondary.com.au](http://www.nelsonsecondary.com.au).

## SERIES EDITOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Studying modern world history is a fascinating and exciting activity for several reasons. The first of these is our closeness to the modern past. All of us who live today are in direct contact with recent and contemporary history. For example, teachers who use this book might have had grandparents who experienced, in different ways, the events of the Second World War. Students who read this book will probably have grandparents who lived through the Swinging Sixties in Australia. Other students, who come from more recently arrived migrant families, will have stories to tell about significant historical events from their former homelands.

And when it comes to topicality, the study of modern history is also the study of events that directly affect the way we live today. For instance, the work of 18th-century Scottish philosopher Adam Smith is still being used by 21st-century politicians to underpin their economic policies. Further, the activities of feminist and civil rights activists in the 1960s have altered the way the international community and contemporary societies deal with their citizens. And the shadow of two world wars still impinges upon the collective memories of dozens of nations, often leading to confusion between commemoration of the past, celebration of long-ago endeavours and what this book is about: the pursuit of investigative history.

The study of the modern past is exciting, too, because when it comes to investigating the late 19th, the 20th and the 21st centuries we can use graphic visual and auditory evidence that brings us close to a fuller realisation of how life was lived then and how the people we are researching looked and sounded. While these new sources of evidence can and do bring a freshness to our understanding of the past, they also demand new techniques of historical investigation.

Finally, the study of modern history, which is, to use historian Pieter Geyl's term, 'an argument without end', is often more intense than other forms of history because of our closeness to the events. This means that, even though conclusions may be passionately expressed, a carefully tempered and dispassionate approach to studying controversial events needs to be employed in the formulation of an historical explanation.

Having said all of that, enjoy your study of modern history.

Tony Taylor  
Series editor

## AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Michael Adcock



# THE ENLIGHTENMENT

This scene was painted in England by Joseph Wright of Derby in 1768. A scientist is demonstrating the technique of drawing oxygen from a glass vessel to create a vacuum. The experiment has worked, and the bird has lost consciousness through lack of oxygen.

For Wright's generation, scientists were the heroes of their age. People saw science as an instrument to improve the world, and scientific experiments promised a new era of progress and happiness for all people. Wright himself was fascinated by science and technology from his earliest boyhood. In the painting, the scientist's face is dramatically lit from below, and he looks directly at us as if explaining his experiment. Wright clearly respected this man and was fascinated by the experiment.

It is unusual that so many people are watching the scientific demonstration. Most of them are interested in the experiment, although two clearly feel sorry for the bird. The people are all grouped around a table, upon which is a lamp that lights up their faces strongly. Closest to us, two gentlemen sit: one watching the scientist closely; the other deep in thought. A third gentleman, standing, points to the glass vessel as he explains the experiment to two girls. From the girls' faces, we can tell they are worried that the bird will die, and one cries. Two boys watch from the side. In the background, a young man and woman gaze into each other's eyes, less interested in the experiment than in each other.

When we enter this scene, we go to the heart of a movement of ideas called the Enlightenment.

In essence, the thinkers of the Enlightenment believed that humans should use their God-given reason to look afresh at the world, and use science to improve people's lives by solving social problems. The Enlightenment's more 'moderate' thinkers did not think it necessary to cause a political revolution to achieve change; they firmly believed that peaceful reform of the existing order could lead to a better world.

The Enlightenment caused controversy, however, because it also revolutionised the way we think about knowledge itself. It boldly questioned all existing information, and particularly criticised the teachings of official religions, such as Catholicism. Because Christianity was so powerful at the time, this new generation of thinkers needed to reject all existing teachings, and to observe the world directly to understand it properly. Some denied that churches, priests and prayers were necessary; a few denied that God existed at all. The Enlightenment contained many different strands of thought, and never became a single organisation, a unified political party or a single ideology; indeed, its thinkers argued fiercely over certain key issues. The Enlightenment also occurred in several very different countries, and so it tended to vary according to the conditions in those countries.

Perhaps the greatest problem with the Enlightenment is its name, which suggests that it was one single movement. In the chapters that follow, we will start to see that it could better be named in the plural, as *the Enlightenments*, to help people understand that it took many different forms.

*An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, 1768, by Joseph Wright of Derby  
Oil on canvas, 183 x 244 cm  
The National Gallery, London, England  
Presented by Edward Tyrrell, 1863

## KEY FIGURES

ANTHONY COLLINS  
(1676–1729)

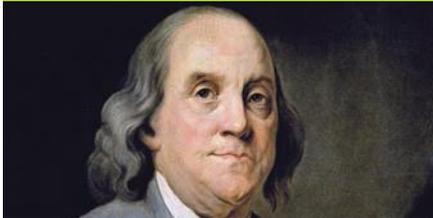


A leading thinker of the Freethinking Movement in England, Collins wrote *A Discourse of Freethinking* (1713).

DENIS DIDEROT (1713–1784)

Diderot was the editor (with Jean le Rond d'Alembert) of the great *Encyclopaedia* (1750–65), but was also one of the most diverse writers in French literature. Apart from writing treatises, such as his *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1772), he proved to be a brilliant writer in art criticism (for example, his reviews for the *Salons*: see below) and in avant-garde novels (such as *Jacques the Fatalist and his Master* (1796)).

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN  
(1706–1790)



Franklin was both a leading Enlightenment thinker in America and a leader of the 'Patriot', or Revolutionary, Movement, which resulted in the 13 American colonies breaking away from Britain. As a scientist, he made significant advances in the understanding of electricity; and as an inventor, he created many practical devices, such as bifocal lenses.

DAVID HUME (1711–1776)

Hume is often regarded as one of the greatest thinkers in Western philosophy, and he inspired Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham and Charles Darwin. In *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1738) he argued that we can apply scientific reasoning to moral and ethical issues. He suggested that we must create a 'science of man' that would use scientific reasoning to understand human nature itself.

FRANCIS HUTCHESON  
(1694–1746)



Hutcheson spread the word about the scientific method of Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton, with their emphasis on experimentation, direct observation and evidence. Hutcheson also expressed perfectly the Enlightenment belief that the main task of reason and science is to increase human wellbeing, famously commenting that their role was to 'produce the greatest good for the greatest numbers'.

IMMANUEL KANT  
(1724–1804)

Kant was a leading German *philosophe* (see below), best known for his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

GOTTFRIED LEIBNIZ  
(1646–1716)



‘The philosopher’s philosopher’, Leibniz was one of the most complex thinkers of the Enlightenment. In the field of physics, he guessed the nature of what we now call kinetic energy. He was equally a pioneer in mathematics, and is regarded as one of the great inventors of mathematical logic. He also suggested the foundation of the Berlin Academy of Sciences, which was opened in 1700.

MOSES MENDELSSOHN  
(1729–1786)



Mendelssohn was one of the most brilliant scholars of the Jewish faith in Germany. Historian Dorinda Outram regards him as ‘the first major Jewish figure to intervene in the Enlightenment’.

THOMAS PAINE  
(1737–1809)



Paine was an English-born philosopher who found fame and success as a political thinker for

the American colonists during their rebellion against British authority. In 1776, he published *Common Sense*, which drew upon the political theories of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to prove that it was ‘common sense’ that the colonies should free themselves from British rule, both for reasons of principle and for practical reasons.

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU  
(1712–1778)

Rousseau made his first contribution to the French Enlightenment by writing *Encyclopaedia* articles for his friend Diderot. His most important political work was *Of the Social Contract* (1762), which further developed John Locke’s idea that rulers – even kings – only rule because they have a ‘contract’ or agreement to look after the wellbeing of their people.

JEAN ROUSSET DE MISSY  
(1686–1762)



Rousset represented one of the most extreme forces of what historian Margaret C. Jacob calls the ‘radical Enlightenment’. He was the leader of a extreme, secret group of freethinkers in the Dutch Republic, who wrote a shocking document titled *The Treatise of the Three Impostors* (1719), which declared the revered leaders of three great world religions to be impostors.

VOLTAIRE (FRANÇOIS-MARIE AROUET) (1694–1778)

Voltaire enjoyed a long life, wrote numerous works, and effectively informed public opinion on important political and social issues. After visiting England (1726–29), he turned to serious political and social commentary, criticising France by praising England in his *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733). He had powerful friends, ranging from Madame de Pompadour in France to King Frederick II in Prussia, which he visited in 1750–53. He settled in Geneva in 1755, and then lived at Ferney, France, from 1760, becoming the guiding spirit of the ‘philosophic’ movement. He wrote many articles on liberal ideas such as tolerance, and supported the idea of deism, or ‘natural religion’.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT  
(1759–1797)

Wollstonecraft was one of the first to understand that society created different conditions for the education and training for girls, resulting in the domination of women by men. In 1787, she challenged the Enlightenment itself by saying – in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* – that women should be given a proper education and a genuine chance of realising their potential.

## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

### Atheism

The conviction that there is not a God in the universe.

### Censor

An official responsible for checking new publications for any material that threatens the existing government or religion. The censor could prevent the publication of 'dangerous' books until the offending material was removed.

### Deism

The conviction that God does exist, but that the traditional forms of organised religious experience – revelations, visions, miracles and even prayer – are useless as a means of communicating with God. Deists value morality, but believe that religions simply divide people and cause conflict.

### Empiricism

Empiricism is the creation of knowledge by the direct observation of the physical world, aiming to draw conclusions from observable fact rather than from theory or from previous, inherited knowledge.

### The Enlightenment

The English term used to describe the intellectual movement for rational thought and empirical investigation in the 17th and 18th centuries. In France, it is called the *siècle des Lumières*, in Germany the *Aufklärung*, in Spain the *ilustración* and in Italy the *illuminismo*.

### Equality

A moral and legal equality enjoyed by all people by virtue of being human; essentially an equality of rights.

### Nature

Today, we tend to see 'nature' as the natural world, as distinct from the civilisations that human beings have created, and which now seem to be threatening the environment. In the 18th century, 'nature' was a powerful concept because people discovered that by using science and reason, they could unlock the secrets of the universe. The world was no longer a mystery understood only by the God who had created it. Isaac Newton, for example, used the science of mathematics to reveal the hidden laws of nature. Further, the adjective 'natural' was used to describe something that was good and right, for example 'natural' rights.

### Noble

A member of an aristocratic family, with a title, special honours and privileges, and traditional ownership of land.

### Philosophe

The name given to the intellectuals of the Enlightenment. Writers on the Enlightenment respect the special 18th-century meaning of the word '*philosophe*', keeping it in French to acknowledge that the *philosophes* considered themselves radically different to traditional philosophers. In essence, *philosophes* felt that some previous philosophers had failed to observe the realities of human life, and had got lost in very abstract systems of thought that had little to do with real human life. The *philosophes* aimed to understand the world around them, and then to improve it so that human beings could lead better lives. They were critical thinkers, even activists.

### Philosophie

The Enlightenment meaning of '*philosophie*' was much more complex than the modern term 'philosophy'. Philosophy today is a specific discipline based on a tradition of thinking that began in ancient Greece. For the actors in the Enlightenment, however, *philosophie* – which they often called '*la nouvelle philosophie*', or 'the new philosophy' – was a powerful toolkit made up of several subjects, including philosophy itself and the subjects we now know as science, politics, sociology, psychology and economics. The *philosophes* felt that they needed new tools to analyse the real world of governments, societies, families and human beings.

### Progress

'Progress' had complex meanings during the Enlightenment. Today, it tends mainly to mean the steady advance of technology. In the 18th century, it meant the hopeful idea that humans and societies did not have to be the way they were; they could be improved. Many *philosophes* believed that the best outcome of progress would be to improve life for the majority of human beings. Some, such as Nicolas de Condorcet, thought that progress might take human life to a state of perfection.

## Reason

'Reason' is another apparently simple word that had many complicated meanings during the Enlightenment. It was the most powerful guiding concept of the time. The *philosophes* insisted that, since God gave us our intelligence, we were intended to use it. This included the capacity to think logically, to observe, to experiment and to draw conclusions. The word also meant a refusal to accept traditional or inherited knowledge, especially knowledge imparted by authorities such as governments, churches or scholars.

## Salon

While a salon was an actual room in an 18th-century house, rather like our living room, it was also the name for a social gathering that took place in the homes of wealthy noble or bourgeois women. Women such as Madame Geoffrin would declare a certain day to be her 'salon', and invite scientists, authors and artists to enjoy intellectual discussion.

## Salon, The

The Salon was the great annual art exhibition held in the Palace of the Louvre in Paris. It was run by government authorities, and was the main way a painter could display his or her works for sale. In particular, both the King and the Catholic Church bought paintings there, meaning that artists had a chance to gain both fame and money. Each year's paintings were the subject of lively discussion and debate. Writers such as Diderot wrote reviews for each year's exhibition. These reviews were also called *Salons*.

## Scepticism

In modern times we have learnt to think of being sceptical as a way of being alert and intelligent. In the 17th and 18th centuries, however, this word was extremely radical and confronting, because there were so many forms of knowledge that people had to accept without question from 'authorities' such as rulers, priests and academic scholars. Scepticism meant an intellectual rebellion, a bold refusal to believe anything just because someone important told you to, and a determination to test out all information using your own reasoning and observation.

## Superstition

The word 'superstition' has often been used to describe beliefs that do not belong to people's own official religion, for example when missionaries referred to the beliefs of indigenous peoples as superstitions. During the Enlightenment, however, thinkers used this word to describe their own religion, such as Catholicism in France. In this sense, 'superstitions' were any religious beliefs that could not be proved, including belief in miracles, the afterlife and original sin, as well as the fearful intolerance that led to the brutal repression of Protestants and Jews in France.

### **Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697)**

The French thinker Pierre Bayle published his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* in Holland, creating the first model for the 'philosophical dictionaries' of the 18th century. It was not really just a dictionary; it was a set of terms that were defined (as in a dictionary), but also carried reflections on philosophical issues. The result is a curious rag-bag of explosive ideas.

### **Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Freethinking* (1713)**

Collins stated the Freethinking Movement's belief that humans must be able to think for themselves, without being tied down by traditional knowledge, religious beliefs or authorities of any sort. People assumed that Collins was therefore an atheist or an agnostic; in fact he was not rejecting God, but traditional religious beliefs. He argued that organised religion never arrived at one central religious truth, and was therefore imperfect.

### **Denis Diderot, *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1772)**

Despite its title, this was not an addition to the journal of the French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville. Bougainville's description of social life and sexuality in the Pacific region touched off Diderot's own thoughts about sexual enjoyment and freedom, as well as his sharp criticism of the way Western societies treat less developed societies.

### **David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739)**

This key work was written in Paris between 1734 and 1739. On publication it did not attract much attention – except from the authorities, who declared that Hume was an immoral atheist – but it was later then broken down into two significant parts – *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) – both of which were extremely influential.

### **Thomas Jefferson and others, *the American Declaration of Independence* (1776)**

Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers took Enlightenment ideals – such as natural human rights – and used them as the theoretical basis for a new political system and society.

### **Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784)**

Kant was responding to the question posed by a German newspaper. He argued that the Enlightenment was the process of freeing the mind from 'tutelage' – a passive and obedient reliance on knowledge passed down by authorities, such as church and state.

### **John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (1689)**

These were two of the most influential political works in the 18th century. The second treatise, in particular – which is fully titled *An Essay Concerning the True Origin, Extent and End of Civil Government* – makes the case for a political system based on the idea of a contract between ruler and ruled, and on the guarantee of the 'natural' rights of every citizen.

### **Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748)**

This is Montesquieu's classic work of political theory. He argued against absolute royal power and in favour of a king ruling with a parliament. He also argued that a political system will be healthy if there is a separation of powers between the legislature (the people who make laws), the executive (the people who conduct government) and the judiciary (the judges and lawyers who apply the laws).

### **Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687)**

In this work, Newton used strict reasoning and mathematical principles to prove that the whole universe operates according to a set of laws, which he called 'natural' laws.

**Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)**

Paine drew upon the political theories of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and argued that it was 'common sense' for the American colonies to free themselves from British rule, both as a matter of principle and for practical reasons. He argued that absolute and hereditary monarchy was wrong: no one family should become permanent rulers.

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762)**

This was Rousseau's key work of political theory, in which he argued that rulers, such as kings, owe their authority to their 'contract' to look after their people; once they fail to bring benefits to their subjects, the 'contract' is broken.

**Jean Rousset de Missy and others, *The Treatise of the Three Impostors* (1719)**

This treatise is probably the most radical Enlightenment critique of organised religion. Written by an extreme freethinking group in the Dutch Republic, led by Rousset, it lashed out at the three great world religions, arguing that Jesus, Mohammed and Moses were all 'impostors', or fakes. Ignoring the moral value of these great religions, the book suggested simply that religion was a process of tricking people into believing myths.

**Voltaire, *Candide* (1759)**

This was the masterpiece among several 'philosophical short stories' written by Voltaire to explore some key Enlightenment themes. It tells the story of its young hero, Candide, who travels the world and sees the miseries caused by wars, slavery and human intolerance.

**Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764)**

Voltaire took up the model of Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* and of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopaedia*, and again used the idea of entries on key words as an excuse for a glorious collection of short essays about the many issues that occupied his mind. Simple words such as 'torture' or 'tyranny' touch off a tirade of sharp, critical thought.

**Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)**

Wollstonecraft proved that male power structures prevent women from achieving their full potential, mainly by depriving them of education and experience. While this work did not have immediate impact in the late 18th century, it is now seen by feminists as a foundation document in the struggle for women's rights.



Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library

# CHAPTER ONE

## *What was the Enlightenment?*

In this chapter, we examine the intellectual movement called the Enlightenment. More than any other movement, the Enlightenment helped to define our modern world. Although it is recognised as one of the most important periods of intense thought and debate in Western civilisation, the Enlightenment remains difficult to define. Its name is based on the word ‘enlighten’, which means to throw light on something and to dispel ‘darkness’, which symbolises ignorance. The idea of ‘light’ signifies knowledge and, more importantly, the ability to think about issues in a reasonable way.

Revolutions in ideas do not just suddenly happen, and it was a combination of many factors that led to the flowering of Enlightenment thought. In particular, the process of rational thinking stemmed from the ‘scientific revolution’ of the 17th century. The scientific spirit of people such as Isaac Newton (1642–1727) inspired reasoned discussion of other subjects, including politics, religion, society, ethics and art. These discussions in turn inspired 18th-century French writers such as Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot to develop their thoughtful new ideas about the way human beings organise their lives. This spirit of rational thought also proved to be very flexible, evidenced by its rapid spread to various countries such as England, Spain and Scotland and even to Britain’s distant American colonies.

◀ *Reading of the Tragedy 'L'Orphelin de la Chine' in the Salon of Madame Geoffrin*, 1812, by Anicet-Charles Gabriel Lemonnier (1743–1824)

### INQUIRY QUESTION

+ What was the Enlightenment, and how did it spread so widely?

## *The Enlightenment today*

Often it is difficult to imagine how or why something that occurred 300 years ago is relevant or significant to today's world. In 2013 several events – including an address to the United Nations by a 15-year-old girl, the publication of a book and a television documentary – in different ways each highlight just why the Enlightenment remains relevant to our world.

### MALALA YOUSAFZAI AT THE UNITED NATIONS

In 2013 the world's attention focused on the extraordinary human dignity and courage of the 15-year-old Pakistani schoolgirl, Malala Yousafzai. Malala had been brutally and senselessly shot in the head by the radical Islamic group the Taliban in 2012, simply – as her attacker told her later – because she was campaigning for girls' rights to have an education. Malala survived the attempted murder, after cranial surgery, and continued to campaign even more strongly for the universal right to education. In July 2013, this resilient and brave young person stood up before the entire United Nations General Assembly and, in a small, clear voice, outlined why she would continue her campaign despite Taliban threats to shoot her again and kill her. In that moment, the great central idea of the Enlightenment – that all humans naturally have rights, which apply equally to everyone – was crystallised in this one vulnerable young figure.

For Malala herself, there is not a shred of doubt about universal rights. In early September 2013, when she addressed the United Nations General Assembly, her speech was filled with determination:

“ Dear sisters and brothers, we realise the importance of light when we see darkness. We realise the importance of our voice when we are silenced. In the same way when we were in Swat [a district of Pakistan near Afghanistan], we realised the importance of pens and books when we saw the guns. The extremists ... are afraid of books and pens. The power of education frightens them. They are afraid of women. The power of the voice of women frightens them. ”

For the United Nations deputies assembled that day, there was no possible doubt either: Malala was voicing principles that were formed during the Enlightenment, that are universal, and that still resonate today. In October 2013, the European Parliament gave Malala the highest award for human rights, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. She was even considered for the Nobel Peace Prize, but was happy when it was awarded to an organisation trying to rid the world of chemical weapons. She has also published her story as *I am Malala* (2013).

By contrast, for the leaders of the terrorist group the Taliban, these 'universal' principles and rights are



**SOURCE 1.1** Malala Yousafzai prepares to address the United Nations General Assembly in 2013.

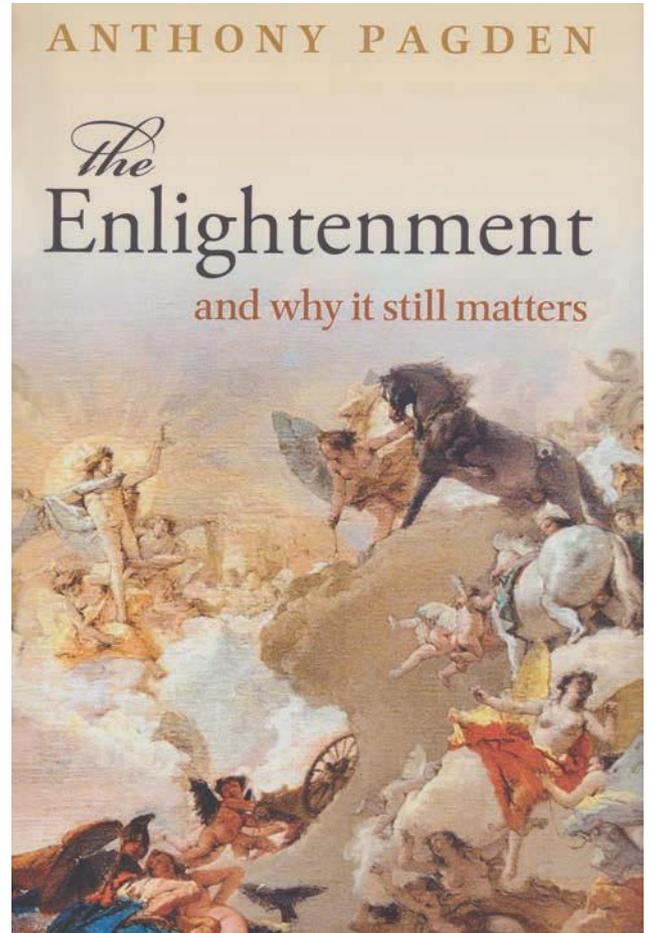
not universal at all; they have simply been made up by Western powers such as America and Britain. The Taliban claim that Malala is being used as a stooge for Western propaganda. They state that they intend to shoot her a second time and ensure that she dies.

For the author and possibly some readers, this question remains critical. The debate about the Enlightenment has been catapulted from deep past history to the very present, and it is a burning debate about the sort of world we hope to live in. In fact, it is probably even more urgent in our 21st century than it ever was in the 18th century.

## ANTHONY PAGDEN

In 2013 the historian Anthony Pagden published a book with an unusual title: *The Enlightenment: And Why it Still Matters*. Previously, scholars would probably have called such a book *The Enlightenment*, without adding the second part of the title. This is because the Enlightenment of the 18th century was unquestionably seen during the 19th and 20th centuries as a crucially important period in the development of Western thought, either for good or for bad. In our 21st century, however, writers such as Pagden must rethink whether the Enlightenment is still relevant to us today. Like Malala, Pagden himself believes in the universal principles of the Enlightenment, but knows that not everybody accepts them.

Pagden believes that the Enlightenment has not just shaped the modern world; it has also shaped us. In the course of this textbook we will discover the origin of many of our own key ideas and core values. Pagden admits, however, that ‘universal’ Enlightenment ideals are not universally accepted around the world. For example, the Enlightenment taught people to question traditional religious authority. Nonetheless, there are millions of faithful people – such as Muslims, Christians and Jews – who hate the idea of questioning their religion. The Enlightenment taught people to respect different cultures and different religions, and yet the rise of fundamentalist religions, accompanied by terrorism, has shown that not everybody believes in religious tolerance. For Pagden, these new and dangerous conditions make it crucial to reconsider what Enlightenment ideas can mean to us in our own age.



**SOURCE 1.2** *The Enlightenment and why it still matters* by Anthony Pagden, Oxford University Press, 2013.

Cover used by permission of Oxford University Press

## SHEILA HAYMAN AND SHUYUN SUN

In September 2013, two other historians offered us their perspective on the Enlightenment in the documentary film *Heroes of the Enlightenment: The Power of Knowledge*. Sheila Hayman and Shuyun Sun do not hesitate to call the 18th-century thinkers ‘heroes’. They have no doubt that they should still be considered our intellectual heroes. In their introduction, they argue that

the modern rights we enjoy today – such as the right to sit in a café and chat freely about any issue, and the right to sit in a library and access any information we wish – are products of the Enlightenment. They present the Enlightenment as a heroic battle for the possession of knowledge, in which the courageous thinkers challenged the way repressive monarchies and oppressive churches tried to control human knowledge. They believe that the Enlightenment has shaped the world in which we live today, and influenced the way you and I actually think. This two-hour documentary contains eight fascinating case studies of leading Enlightenment thinkers.



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**SOURCE 1.3** Leading Enlightenment thinkers (clockwise from top left) Isaac Newton, Erasmus Darwin, Nicolas de Condorcet, the Marquis de Pombal, Thomas Jefferson, Frederick the Great of Prussia

## *What does ‘Enlightenment’ mean?*

Like many historical names, the term ‘Enlightenment’ is a single noun, suggesting that it was just one movement. Historians know, however, that intellectual movements are more complicated than this. When we start asking questions, we realise that the Enlightenment is very complex.

Our first main task is to ask what we mean by ‘the Enlightenment’. When did it start? What caused the upsurge of new thinking? Did it occur because existing authorities, such as the monarchies and the Church, were weakening? Did it occur because human beings have always tended to discuss and argue about the way we organise our world? Why and how did this spirit of rational discussion spread so quickly and so broadly to so many countries?

The Enlightenment was extremely diverse and varied. Nearly all of the *philosophes* disagreed on virtually all the big questions they debated; they even changed their views and contradicted themselves in their own works. The main activists in the movement were writers, including novelists, journalists, social thinkers and scientists. Some of the greatest thinkers included:

- + Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert in France

- + Edmund Burke and Anthony Collins in England
- + David Hume and Adam Smith in Scotland
- + Gottfried Leibniz, Christian Wolff and Moses Mendelssohn in the German states
- + Jean Rousset de Missy in the Dutch Republic
- + Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson in the American colonies.

## WHEN DID THE ENLIGHTENMENT OCCUR?

Like most ideological movements, the Enlightenment remains difficult to date: there is no absolute starting point or end point for the appearance of new ideas. The Enlightenment is often described as extending over much of the 18th century, from the 1720s to the 1770s. This course, however, asks us to study the Enlightenment from 1750, when Paris emerged as the great centre of Enlightenment thought, until 1789, when the French Revolution began and a new generation of thinkers applied Enlightenment ideas to actually create a new society.



### KEY MOMENTS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

- 1721** Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* appeared, providing a new model of criticism of French society, apparently by naïve foreigners.
- 1725** The Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences was founded in Russia.
- 1726** Voltaire travelled to England to study its institutions.
- 1728** Ephraim Chambers published *Cyclopaedia, or a Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, which inspired Diderot's *Encyclopaedia* in France.
- 1733** Voltaire's *Letters Concerning the English Nation* was published in England; it was published a year later in France.
- 1734** The University of Göttingen was founded.
- 1743** The American Philosophical Society was founded in Philadelphia.
- 1748** Montesquieu published *The Spirit of the Laws*, proposing the separation of the powers of the legislature, executive and judiciary.  
Madame Geoffrin opened her 'salon' (social gathering), creating one of the great venues for Enlightenment thought and discussion.
- 1751** Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert published the first volume of *The Encyclopaedia*.  
Pope Benedict XIV condemned Freemasonry.
- 1752** *The Encyclopaedia* was condemned.
- 1759** Voltaire published his famous 'philosophical story', *Candide*.
- 1761** Jean-Jacques Rousseau published his romantic novel *Julie, or the New Heloise*.
- 1764** Intellectual women in France, such as Madame Necker and Mademoiselle Julie de Lespinasse, created a new type of 'salon' (or social meeting for intellectual discussion).
- 1771** Antoine Lavoisier discovered the composition of air.

**Paris** was the 'capital' of the 'republic of letters'. Its brilliant salons, coffee houses, academies and clubs provided places for discussion during the 18th century. Because of royal censorship, however, certain *philosophes*, such as Voltaire and Rousseau, fled Paris to live in regional France or in Switzerland.

**London**, together with other English cities, such as Birmingham, was the 'cradle' in which early Enlightenment thought was born in the 17th century and continued to flourish in the 18th century. In England, learned bodies such as the Royal Society were crucial to scientific and enlightened thought.

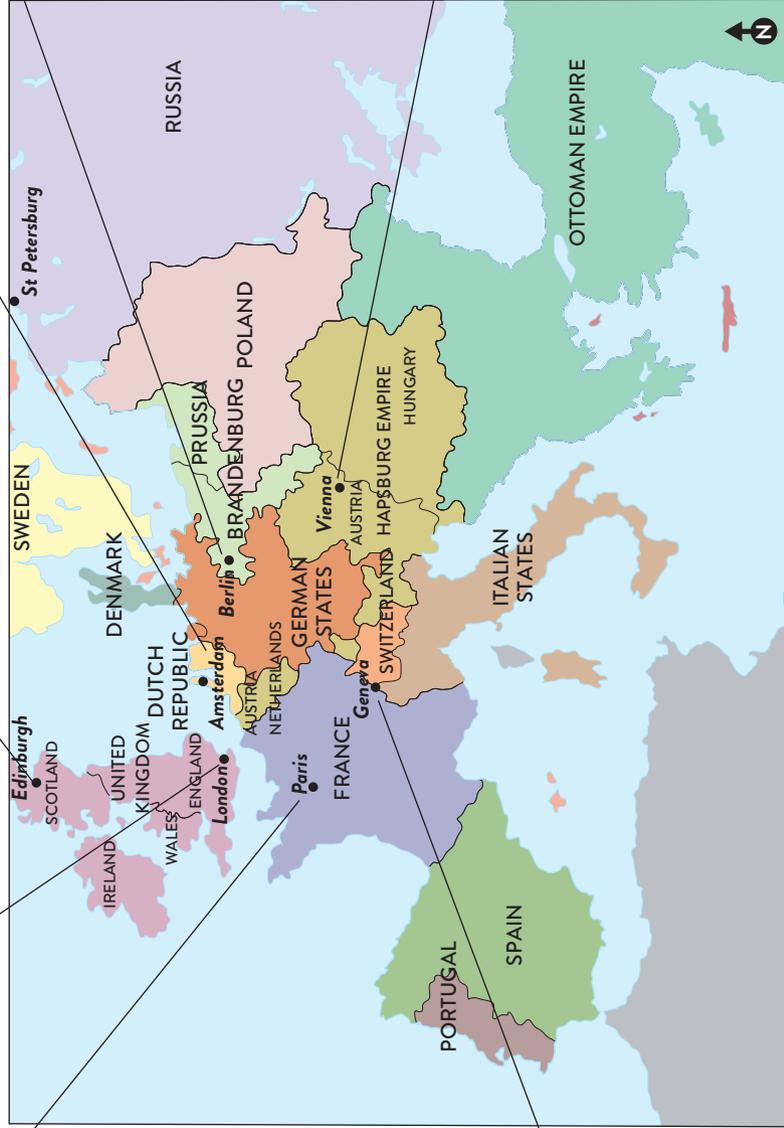
**Edinburgh** was an important centre of Enlightenment thought, and the home of the Enlightenment in Scotland. Its leading philosopher was David Hume.

**Amsterdam**, capital of the Dutch Republic, was a vital centre of Enlightenment thought. Some of the most radical ideas of the Enlightenment originated there. The reasons for this, says historian Margaret C. Jacob, included that the government was tolerant of radical discussion, and that the city hosted many Protestants who had been forced to flee their homes in France by religious intolerance.

**Berlin** was the capital of the large German state of Prussia, ruled by Frederick the Great, who encouraged Enlightenment thought by, for example, improving the Prussian Academy of Sciences and by inviting leading *philosophes*, such as Voltaire, to live and work in his palace.

**Geneva** was the largest and wealthiest city in Switzerland and, like Amsterdam, was profoundly changed by the arrival of large numbers of Protestants fleeing France after the revocation in 1685 of the Edict of Nantes (which in 1598 had granted substantial rights to French Protestants). It was often referred to as 'a Rome for the Protestants'. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born there.

**Vienna** was the capital of a country then known as the Hapsburg Empire: a sprawling combination of many national groups, which was difficult to unify or govern. It was the seat of two determined monarchs: first Empress Maria Theresa and then Emperor Joseph II, the latter of whom adopted Enlightenment thought to create a more modern state and economy, and to apply rational principles to its organisation.



**SOURCE 1.4** European centres of the Enlightenment, 1789

## WHERE DID THE ENLIGHTENMENT OCCUR?

The Enlightenment was centred in Europe, particularly in France, but had a number of other centres of intense activity, including Scotland and the Republic of Holland. Elsewhere, states such as Prussia and Russia hosted Enlightenment thinkers because their rulers hoped to use enlightened thought for their own purposes: to improve their countries. The Enlightenment affected many other countries, such as England and Italy, and even extended to the American colonies.

### Immanuel Kant: What is Enlightenment?

The most important aspect of the term ‘Enlightenment’ is that educated people in the 18th century used the term *themselves* to describe their time; they themselves felt that they were living in a time of intense intellectual activity. For us, as historians, the most valuable primary source reveals how people defined their own experience at the time.

For the German *philosophe* Immanuel Kant, the essence of the Enlightenment was the human ability to think independently, free of traditional understandings, superstitions or old-fashioned authorities:

Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. [Some people] lack the resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. ‘Have the courage to use your own reason!’ That is the motto of enlightenment. For this enlightenment, however, nothing is required but freedom ... It is the freedom to make public use of one’s reason at every point. But I hear on all sides, ‘Do not argue!’ The officer says, ‘Do not argue but drill!’ The [priest] says, ‘Do not argue but believe!’ Everywhere there is restriction on freedom. The public use of one’s reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men.

If we were asked, ‘Do we now live in an *enlightened age*?’ the answer is ‘No’, but we do live in an *age of enlightenment*. As things now stand, much is lacking which prevents men from being, or easily becoming, capable of correctly using their own reason in religious matters with assurance and free from outside direction. But, on the other hand, we have clear indications that the field has now been opened wherein men may freely deal with these things and that the obstacles to general enlightenment ... are gradually being reduced. In this respect, this is the age of enlightenment, or the century of Frederick.

Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, 1784

### Questions

- 1 What does Kant mean by his term ‘tutelage’? What is the dictionary meaning of this word?
- 2 What is the motto (guiding idea) of the Enlightenment?
- 3 What does Kant appear to mean by the term ‘reason’?
- 4 Why does Kant believe that he *did not* live in an ‘enlightened age’, but *did* live in an ‘age of enlightenment’? What is the difference?
- 5 Who was the ‘Frederick’ mentioned by Kant? Why might Kant have admired him?
- 6 How far does Kant seem to feel the process of enlightenment has progressed in his time?
- 7 What sorts of organisations and people might have felt threatened by Kant’s idea that people should be free to use their own reason and to think independently?

*continued*

continued

- 8 We evaluate the **reliability** of a document by asking what makes this passage a good source of information about the Enlightenment. We identify its **contestability** by identifying what limitations it might have, and how other people might disagree with it. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of this document in helping us understand what people at the time thought the Enlightenment actually was?

## The Encyclopaedia

In France, too, people tried consciously to define what the Enlightenment was. In 1751, the French writers Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert published the first volume of their great *Encyclopaedia*. This is judged to be the greatest Enlightenment work. The volumes themselves contained useful factual knowledge about trades and industries, but they did more than provide information. They also defined what the authors thought the Enlightenment was.

As historians, we carefully examine images that explain an idea visually, because they reveal what people were thinking and feeling. In 1772, Diderot commissioned the artist Charles Cochin to design a front-page picture for a later edition of his *Encyclopaedia*. He probably instructed the artist what to show. This image is therefore very much the editor Diderot's statement, and we need to listen to what he is trying to tell us.

The picture is not easy for a modern person to 'read'. What is Diderot trying to tell us? We look into a great building with classical-style columns. Look at the top of the picture. A female figure, representing 'reason', is pulling away a veil to reveal the naked female figure of 'truth'. As she does so, a brilliant burst of light shines out, driving away dark clouds. There are more than 30 other smaller figures below them, many carrying scientific instruments or machines, including a printing press (seen at the left).

Why did Diderot seem to think that his writers had helped 'reason' (the rational use of human intelligence) to uncover the truth? What exactly was the truth that he had uncovered? Why did he think that truth had been covered until then? Who did he think had covered up the truth? And how exactly did scientific instruments and printing presses help in this process of driving out the dark clouds of ignorance, and creating the clear, bright light of knowledge?

We should answer these questions by reading what Diderot himself wrote about this image:

You can see at the top Truth between Reason and Imagination: Reason tries to pull away the veil from Truth, and Imagination gets ready to make Truth beautiful. Below this group is a crowd of speculative *philosophes*,



**SOURCE 1.5** Charles Cochin's frontispiece of Diderot's *The Encyclopaedia*, 1772

continued

continued

and below them a group of artists. The *philosophes* have their eyes fixed on Truth; proud Metaphysics does not look directly at Truth. Theology turns its back on Truth and waits for light from above.

Denis Diderot, *Salon of 1765*, translation by Michael Adcock

## Questions

- 1 What do the three main figures represent?
- 2 What, according to Diderot, do the *philosophes* mainly study?
- 3 What is Diderot's criticism of the old-fashioned philosophers who continued to study abstract theories ('metaphysics')?
- 4 What is Diderot's opinion of religious thinking ('theology')?
- 5 What does bright light represent in this image of the intellectual movement?
- 6 Historians regard all forms of expression from the past as sources that can be 'read' to tell us something about the time we are studying. Write a paragraph, summing up in your own words the origin of this visual source and what purpose Diderot intended it to fulfil. Explain the context (historical setting) of this image, and analyse why Diderot felt that he was fighting a sort of intellectual battle for Truth.

## PETER GAY

The German-American writer Peter Gay (born 1923) is a leading historian of the Enlightenment. His key works are *The Party of Humanity: Essays in the French Enlightenment* (1964) and *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1966). As his titles suggest, he sees the Enlightenment as an early example of the liberal and humanistic tradition of the modern Western world.

Gay writes:

The Enlightenment was a great revolution in man's style of thinking that came to dominate the Western world in the eighteenth century. It was composed of the interplay between ideas and events, inventions and expectations; its raw materials were the triumph of Newtonian science, striking improvements in industrial and agricultural techniques, a widespread loss of religious fervor and a corresponding rise of 'reasonable' religion, an even bolder play of the critical spirit among the older mysteries of Church and state which had for centuries escaped criticism, a new sense of confidence in man's power over his worldly destiny.

Peter Gay, quoted in Charles Vann Woodward, *A Comparative Approach to American History* (Washington: Voice of America Forum Lectures, 1968), p. 37

## Questions

- 1 According to Gay, why must the Enlightenment be seen as a number of important changes happening at the same time?
- 2 What was the most important set of scientific ideas that inspired the Enlightenment?
- 3 What sorts of technological change and invention helped contribute to this revolution in human thinking?
- 4 What were two forms of traditional authority that were challenged and questioned during the Enlightenment?
- 5 How did people's view of their position in the world change as a result of the Enlightenment?

## ORIGINS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

In what is known as the ‘scientific revolution’, a number of brilliant scientific thinkers in the 17th century created the key ideas and words that the *philosophes* would use to explore their own ideas in the 18th century. Like the Enlightenment, the period of this ‘scientific revolution’ is difficult to define precisely. It was a period during which thinkers began to reexamine understandings of the natural world. Using observation, empiricism and the application of

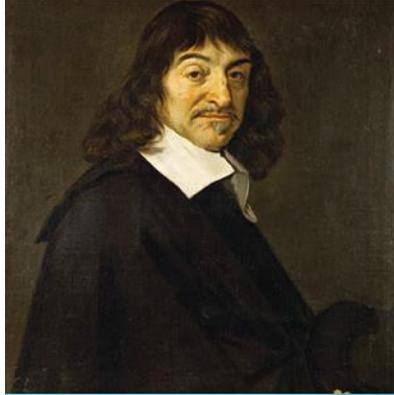
### THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION OF THE 17TH CENTURY

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#### Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

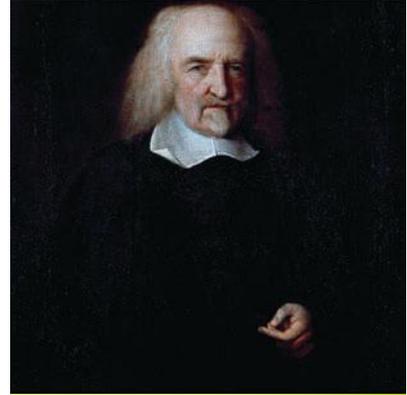
Francis Bacon was a pioneer of a great revolution in human thought that involved thinking about the very act of thinking. His ‘natural philosophy’ was the beginning of modern scientific method. In the course of his only actual experiment, he investigated whether he could preserve a dead chicken by stuffing it with snow. His experiment worked, the chicken was preserved, but Bacon caught a bad cold and died.



#### René Descartes (1596–1650)

René Descartes tried to understand understanding itself. His famous statement ‘I think therefore I am’ suggested that we must base our conclusions upon what we know to be true. When Descartes asked whether we humans really exist, he considered that if he was wondering about existence, then he must exist in order to be here to wonder about it. From this, Descartes concluded that we know that the whole world exists, and even that God exists.

Getty Images/Imagno



#### Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

Thomas Hobbes’ theories were so radical that they terrified authorities – they blamed him for angering God, and believed that God sent the Great Fire of London to punish the English for Hobbes’ work. Hobbes applied reason to the rational analysis of how political power began. In his masterpiece, *Leviathan* (1651), he probed beyond the traditional mystique of kings and princes, and asked why people originally gave up their own freedom in order to obey a ruler. He concluded that they did so in order to be ruled by a king who would keep the peace and guarantee security.

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#### Pierre Bayle (1647–1706)

Pierre Bayle contributed to the 17th-century ‘knowledge revolution’ by insisting that the only true knowledge comes from the actual study of reality, not from theoretical speculation. He insisted that we cannot accept knowledge as true just because people say it is.

mathematical principals to the world they observed, they laid the foundations for modern sciences, such as physics and chemistry. Like the later Enlightenment *philosophes*, they rejected traditional and religious explanations. The methods used by these ‘scientific revolutionaries’ would be adapted by the *philosophes* to a broader range of topics and questions such as ‘how is society organised?’. The individuals detailed below are only a small selection of the key figures of the scientific revolution.

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#### John Locke (1632–1704)

John Locke was, with Newton, the leading thinker to whom the *philosophes* looked for their ideas. He is particularly known for his pioneering work about the nature of human understanding. Locke argued that human intelligence, and the use of reason, allows humans to understand the natural world, as well as human nature, and to improve it. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), he explained that people can observe the natural world, take in what they see, and analyse it. The world is not a mystery understood only by the God who created it; the world runs according to certain rules and truths and, once we understand them, we can discover truth. Therefore, we do not have to accept the world as it is; we can change it for the better.

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#### Isaac Newton (1642–1727)

Isaac Newton’s investigation of the physical world and of mathematical principles provided crucial ideas for all Enlightenment thought. In his *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687), he used strict reasoning and mathematical principles to prove that the whole universe operates according to a set of ‘natural’ laws. Since these laws exist, intelligent humans can discover them. He suggested that the world, and nature, were like a gigantic machine created by God, who set it in motion and allowed to run. Human beings did not need priests, the Bible or old-fashioned philosophical debate to understand this ‘machine’ of nature; they just had to study the machine itself, observe how it works, and analyse what they see.

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#### Baruch Spinoza (1632–77)

Baruch Spinoza’s *Ethics* covered a broad range of philosophical and moral problems. He suggested that we should not focus on our personal problems, but see them in the broader context of everything that exists – we need to learn to ‘look at our own lives through the eyes of eternity’ to get a true perspective on things. Spinoza also wrote: ‘The highest activity a human being can attain is learning for understanding, because to understand is to be free.’ He further commented: ‘The true aim of government is liberty.’

## *What were the big ideas of the Enlightenment?*

During the Enlightenment, thinkers, writers, scientists and artists continued the 17th-century ‘scientific revolution’, re-examining all existing knowledge to create a new system for understanding the world. We now accept scientific investigation as the most reliable way of discovering and understanding the world, but this was not always so. People traditionally accepted what the Church told them; it would take a ‘revolution in the mind’ before they would dare to even think they could discover information for themselves.

The Enlightenment challenged existing authority and questioned the information that those in authority had traditionally given. For example, kings had for centuries claimed to rule by ‘divine right’, meaning that God had placed them in power. For generations, people never dared question this explanation. Enlightenment thinkers, by contrast, challenged the idea of divine right, asking how you could prove that God had put a king on the throne. John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau even suggested that humans only choose to be ruled because they gain some benefit from having a leader, and so a king should only remain on this throne while he ruled for his people’s benefit.

The Enlightenment questioned everything. Its ‘knowledge revolution’ was based on the idea that we can understand human beings, countries, the natural world, the earth and even the universe simply by careful observation and rational thinking. Previously, religious authorities, such as the Catholic Church, had explained the world in terms of miracles, mysteries, visions and other religious beliefs. Now, the Enlightenment thinkers rejected any knowledge that could not be proven. This meant that they increasingly rejected the authority of the Church, and the ‘knowledge’ about the world it provided people. This process of rejecting religious-based knowledge, known as **secularisation**, is a key feature of Enlightenment thought.

### secularisation

The process of removing religious influence and control from a society

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**SOURCE 1.6** *The Philosophers at Supper*, c. 1775, by Jean Huber (1721-86). This artwork gives us a good idea of the nature of the *philosophes*. They thrived on informal, sociable discussion – rather like that which takes place at a good dinner party – and never became a single, organised ideology or a formal political party.

## A GLORIOUS FEAST OF IDEAS

The Enlightenment was an important intellectual movement, but it did not produce one single ideology, or system of ideas. It was driven by many thinkers across the world, who were free to think as they wished. They disagreed with each other, and sometimes quarrelled savagely. They also contradicted themselves within their own work, often writing one idea in one book then its opposite in the next. This was a time when men and women were examining hundreds of new ideas, and they felt no need to force these ideas into one standardised system of thought. If Europe had become a vast living

room for discussion, then the Enlightenment was like a vast dinner table loaded with a feast of ideas. The image *The Philosophers at Supper* in Source 1.6 shows a group of thinkers dining together, with the ideas flowing across the table being far more important to them than the food itself. And, like any good dinner party, this gathering of thinkers does not hold a single set of beliefs.

## The ‘knowledge revolution’ in pictures

The ‘knowledge revolution’ of the 17th and 18th centuries can be traced in these two images.



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**SOURCE 1.7** *St John on Patmos* by Jean Fouquet



Getty Images/Science & Society Picture Library/Science Museum

**SOURCE 1.8** *Watson's Experiment on Electricity*, date and artist unknown

Source 1.7 is a painting by the 15th-century French painter Jean Fouquet (c.1420–80), showing St John on the island of Patmos receiving a revelation from God. Medieval people believed that God created the world and provided us with knowledge through the Bible, through dreams and revelations, through miracles and through the institution of the Church. People assumed they could not understand how the world worked by themselves.

Source 1.8 is an engraving showing the scientist William Watson (1715–87) experimenting with electricity. The men in this image are investigating the natural world directly for themselves, by using observation, experiment and reasoning (rational thought). They are not consulting the Bible or a priest, because they believe that all existing traditional knowledge could be wrong, and needs to be questioned afresh.

## THE BIG IDEAS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT



## RJ WHITE AND THE IDEA OF THE ANTI-PHILOSOPHERS

Historian RJ White has called the *philosophes* ‘anti-philosophers’. He meant that the *philosophes* defined their new, practical spirit by contrast to earlier philosophers. Traditional philosophers specialised in abstract, theoretical discussions of ideas far from the real world and ordinary people. White insisted that the *philosophes* were united by their commitment to using reason, exercising humanity, rejecting superstition and intolerance, and trying to create a better world:

The *philosophes* ... are distinctive only because of their community in opposition to the **old regime**, their wholly **irreverent** temper, their contempt or neglect of the faith and intellect of their forefathers, of all that was old and long-established ... The positive **tenets** of the *philosophes* were less **unanimously** held but ... may be summarised as devotion to liberality and toleration. They believed ... ‘that human nature is good, that the world is capable of being made a desirable abiding palace, and that the evil of the world is the fruit of bad education and bad institutions. [They] were never a party, a school, a single movement. Perhaps it would be best to say that the *philosophes* were united only in the fact that they shared a ... certain common mental aspect.

RJ White, *The Anti-philosophers*, Macmillan, London 1970, pp. 4–5

### *From ideas to action*

To understand the Enlightenment properly, we must first understand the special meaning of the word ‘philosophy’. The Enlightenment thinkers described their movement as *la philosophie*, and themselves as *philosophes*. We do not translate this latter word into English (‘philosopher’), because these thinkers saw themselves as completely different to the traditional philosophers who had gone before them. Most *philosophes* were not professional philosophers or university teachers; they were simply ordinary citizens concerned about society, who believed that the world could be improved by the use of human reason and science.

These *philosophes* criticised previous thinkers for being too theoretical and abstract. The *philosophes* disliked general philosophical, religious or metaphysical speculation, and argued that there were so many practical problems here on earth that the best use of human reason was to find way to improve real life for ordinary people. Today, we would call them ‘engaged intellectuals’ addressing the political and social problems of their times. The *philosophes* were committed to improving the wellbeing of ordinary people, hence Peter Gay’s description of them as the ‘party of humanity’.

We can see the *philosophes* putting their ideas to practical use in three great campaigns to improve the wellbeing of ordinary people:

- + using science to improve human life
- + using art to promote social usefulness
- + using reason to defeat religious intolerance.

**old regime**

The royal government in France before the French Revolution

**irreverent**

Having little respect for authority or religion

**tenets**

Beliefs

**unanimously**

Collectively agreeing on one point or idea

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The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 1.10** *Voltaire at Ferney*, engraved by Prevost, (18th century). Most *philosophes* believed that science could improve life for ordinary people. Voltaire transformed the miserable village of Ferney into a wealthy small town with good agricultural practices and its own industries.

person should do productive work. As modern Australians, we accept this as perfectly natural. It is difficult to imagine an older world in which people who were wealthy, but did not work, were the most respected; and those who did productive work were seen as inferior. Before the Enlightenment, few dared to criticise the aristocracy for doing no work, or the clergy for retiring to monasteries or nunneries. The *philosophes* suggested that even humble artisans in workshops or peasants in fields have greater dignity and social importance than those who do nothing.

## USING REASON TO DEFEAT RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

The third great Enlightenment campaign was the attack on religious intolerance. The Catholic Church was the one official religion in France, and used its power over the government to ensure that people of other religions were disadvantaged. Jews and Protestants were denied legal status,

## USING SCIENCE TO IMPROVE HUMAN LIFE

First, the *philosophes* wanted to prove that science could improve human life. Voltaire, for example, devoted the last 20 years of his life to demonstrating how science could transform a small, miserable village into a wealthy community. He purchased an estate at Ferney, France, in 1759, and the backward village of about 40 poor people became his own scientific experiment:

- + He improved living conditions in the village by building new houses, a church and a theatre.
- + He improved farming practices by introducing new techniques for breeding strong animals.
- + He used the new science of hydrology to drain swamps.
- + He planted trees, and introduced new machines to sow seed efficiently.
- + He used the information from *The Encyclopaedia* to set up new industries, from tanneries to potteries, from watchmaking to silk production.

Within two decades, the miserable village had become a wealthy little town of some 1200 people, with few living in poverty.

## USING ART TO PROMOTE SOCIAL USEFULNESS

The second great campaign was to promote the idea of social usefulness; that is, that every adult

## New social ideas reflected in art



The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 1.11** *Marquis de Sourches and his Family*, 1750, by François-Hubert Drouais (1727–75), Château de Versailles, France



Wikimedia Commons

**SOURCE 1.12** *The Kitchen Maid*, 1738, by Jean Siméon Chardin (1699–1779)

If we look carefully, we can see signs of changing social attitudes in art. Many paintings record ideas that were radical and new at the time. Look at Sources 1.11 and 1.12.

### Source 1.11: *Marquis de Sourches and his Family*

François-Hubert Drouais devoted his career to painting wealthy aristocrats enjoying their cultivated, idle way of life. He sold hundreds of paintings, mainly to aristocrats and wealthy bourgeois who loved to see their pleasantly lazy way of life reflected in pictures.

### Questions

- 1 In this painting by Drouais, what are the aristocrats actually doing with their time?
- 2 How do we know that these aristocrats spent a great deal of money on fashion and expensive luxuries?
- 3 Look carefully at the colours that Drouais has used. How do the colours of the painting create a sense of refinement and luxury?

### Source 1.12: *The Kitchen Maid*

Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin painted in France from the 1720s to the 1770s, devoting his career to genre scenes, or scenes of everyday life. Some showed simple, dignified scenes of middle-class life, while others showed working people, such as servant women. These scenes of humble working life appealed strongly to *philosophes* such as Diderot, who wrote reviews of the annual art exhibitions in Paris.

*continued*

continued

## Questions

- 1 In Chardin's painting, what sorts of work might have been done by the woman shown in the kitchen?
- 2 How do we know from her costume that this woman is a humble worker?
- 3 Look carefully at Chardin's colours. What are the main colours in the painting? What sort of feeling do they create? How do they compare with the colours used by Drouais?
- 4 What do you think was the painter's attitude to this woman? Does his painting express a sense of liking and respect, or does it express a dislike of common working people? If possible, try to identify what elements of the painting make you think this.

and suffered serious discrimination in terms of legal rights and employment. Indeed, they could not even register their names when they were born, so legally they did not even 'exist'. For some time, nobody questioned this injustice. The *philosophes*, however, believed that Catholicism should not be the only valid form of religion.

## A shocking example of religious intolerance: the Calas Affair (1762)

*Philosophes* such as Voltaire drew attention to the seriousness of the victimisation of religious groups in France. The most shocking example was of Jean Calas, an honest Protestant

shopkeeper in the city of Toulouse. His son, Marc-Antoine, suffered depression when, after becoming a lawyer, he could not get a job because of his religion, and committed suicide. Rumours, however, falsely claimed that his father killed him because he intended to convert to Catholicism. Jean Calas was arrested in 1762, tried, and sentenced to death by torture. His execution was barbaric. First, his limbs were dislocated. He was then force-fed water, until his body swelled to bursting point. His torturer then smashed his arms and legs, and left him attached to a pole to die. Through all of this, Calas continued to insist that he was innocent. Later, when his executioners found him still alive, they mercy-killed him by strangling him.



**SOURCE 1.13** *La Malheureuse Famille Calas (The Unfortunate Calas Family)*, 1764, by Louis Carrogis de Carmontelle (1717–1806), Musée de Louvre. As well as defending Calas, Voltaire also tried to assist his family. This watercolour shows the family being told that Calas' conviction has been overturned.

Voltaire rightly saw this as a terrible example of the power of intolerance to commit injustice and devastate an honest family. He wrote:

“ It seems to me that it is in everybody’s interest to look further into this affair which, however you look at it, is the height of fanaticism – ‘intolerance’ is better. Ignoring such a thing is to abandon humanity. ”

He took up the issue in 1762, publishing his *Treatise on Tolerance* the following year.

Voltaire roused public attention, and in 1764 King Louis XV met the Calas family and overturned the court’s findings. He dismissed the chief judge of Toulouse, ordering him to pay compensation of 36 000 francs to the family.

**revocation**  
The withdrawal or cancellation of a law

**lay oligarchies**  
Power structures of a non-religious nature

**clerical oligarchies**  
Power structures of a religious nature

## MARGARET C. JACOB AND THE IDEA OF A ‘RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT’

In this section, we have examined some key Enlightenment ideas. While we should not think that they all sat naturally and easily together as one, unified intellectual movement, the ideas described are the ‘traditional’ range of Enlightenment thought. These ideas were already very radical in 18th-century Europe, but in recent years historians have proposed that the Enlightenment contained even more shockingly radical ideas.

Historians always question what we know – or think we know – and challenge us to rethink. One great ‘rethinker’ is Margaret C. Jacob (born 1943), who since the early 1980s has proposed that one part of the Enlightenment was far more radical than we suspected.

First, Jacob shifted the focus away from France – where the *philosophes* attacked the authority of the monarchy and the Catholic Church – and identified much more radical thinkers elsewhere, particularly in the Dutch Republic. She believed that: ‘three quite diverse national settings (England, France and the Dutch Republic) mixed to create “the perfect storm”’:

After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes [which in 1598 had granted substantial rights to Protestants] in 1685, thousands of exiled French Protestants fled to the Dutch Republic and England ... and they carried with them experiences of persecution vivid and shocking to the modern imagination ... The Dutch Republic offered an unprecedented set of advantages to immigrants and refugees. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries more than 1.5 million people flocked to its western seaboard towns. More than a million emigrated from foreign lands. The influx produced social, cultural, linguistic and especially religious diversity of a sort never before seen in Europe.

Margaret C. Jacob, ‘The Nature of Early Eighteenth-century Religious Radicalism’, in *Republics of Letters*, no. 1, May 2009, p. 1.

Jacob discovered a much more political and radical *philosophe* than we are familiar with:

The radicals were intellectual dissenters, men, and possibly a very few women, often with a refugee background, who could not share the willingness of the major *philosophes* like Voltaire and d’Alembert ... to put their faith in enlightened monarchy. They sought through ... propaganda as well as intrigue, to establish a republican ideal.

Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 20

Second, Jacob pointed out that the ‘Radical Enlightenment’ began as a criticism of royal rule and of religious intolerance, but soon exploded into a movement for real revolutionary change:

What had begun in the 1680s as a movement against religious intolerance and arbitrary rule had become by the 1780s an agenda for reform, threatening courts, princes, and lay and clerical oligarchies. The movement towards the light contributed in complex ways to the late eighteenth-century revolutions. The American patriots Thomas

*continued*

Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams also should be seen as *philosophes*. Their ideas led to independence from Britain and the creation of the American republic. More fundamental changes would be necessary in Europe. In Amsterdam in 1787, Brussels in 1788, and Paris in the summer of 1789, the very structure of government and society was attacked, and violence erupted ... The Enlightenment was one factor in the birth of modern democratic and representative politics.

Margaret C Jacob, *The Enlightenment. A Brief History with Documents*, Bedford/St Martin's, Boston, 2001, p. 3

## *How did the Enlightenment spread so quickly and widely?*

It is tempting, when discussing an ideas-based movement such as the Enlightenment, to focus only on key writers and their works. We certainly need to know who wrote the important works and what ideas they contained, but we also need to go further, and understand how these ideas spread so quickly and so broadly. Writers might publish books full of new ideas, but we cannot assume that they will automatically spread through society: the books must be read by people, discussed, reviewed, questioned and debated. The real history of new ideas only begins when they spread from person to person with amazing speed, or 'go viral', as we say nowadays.

In our own time, we are so used to electronic media providing communication with possibly thousands of people across the world in a few seconds that it is difficult to imagine how people exchanged ideas so intensively when the main forms of communication were simply conversation, letter writing and printed information. And yet to really understand the Enlightenment, we need to see this as a time when the air seemed electrified with a massive flow of new ideas; with conversations that had never occurred before.

Put simply, the ideas of the Enlightenment spread because people at the time learnt the skill of networking; of creating communication links with other people, spanning Europe and finally much of the world. Historian Dorinda Outram stresses that we must understand how many networks there were, and how crucial they were to the spread of new ideas:

“ Many writers point to the establishment, all over Europe, of new institutions and organisations where ideas could be explored and discussed. Some of these institutions, like masonic lodges, learned academies and societies, were formal affairs, whose membership was carefully controlled. Others like public lectures, coffee houses, lending libraries, art exhibitions, operatic and theatrical performances, were nearly all commercial operations, open to all those who could pay, and thus provided ways in which many different social [groups] could be exposed to the same ideas. ”

Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005), p. 12

### **A 'REPUBLIC OF LETTERS'**

One important cause of the Europe-wide explosion of discussion was that thinkers believed that they formed a special brotherhood within their respective societies, with a mission to keep the flow of information, criticism, research and debate going. They imagined they were citizens of

an imaginary country, or ‘republic’, which existed across and within all European countries, and ultimately even further. This ‘republic of letters’ existed in all verbal and printed forms of debate. In 1780, one writer explained that its members ‘form a species by their own merit, and gain a reputation as brilliant as that of the great powers on earth’:

European countries had had talented writers for centuries, but previously they produced works for the pleasure of the wealthy classes. In 18th-century Europe, these writers redefined themselves as professionals who were entrusted to guide independent critical thought. They wrote letters across Europe, visited foreign countries and sent each other books, always fuelling the fires of passionate debate.

## THE BIRTH OF PUBLIC OPINION

The second major change in 18th-century Europe was what historians call the ‘birth of public opinion’. As modern Australians, we just accept that public opinion surrounds us in television news, newspapers, discussions, debates, petitions and demonstrations. Citizens are responsible for keeping themselves informed about matters of national interest. It is difficult to imagine a time when educated European had little chance to discuss national affairs because they were kept unaware of them. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the business of government happened behind closed doors, and any problems or crises were kept secret.

During the 18th century, people in countries such as France turned their attention to national affairs, identifying problems and suggesting solutions. This was the first generation to feel the power of public debate: by simply starting to talk about national problems, people give themselves the knowledge and power to make change. French Finance Minister Jacques Necker (1732–1804) claimed that public opinion ‘was an invisible power without money, without police, without an army’. Through the debates of public opinion, people discovered new ideas and words for critical thought.



**SOURCE 1.14** *The News Readers*, artist unknown. This engraving shows a group of citizens discussing the latest newspapers and journals. Crowding together, they eagerly read the latest news. This interest in current affairs was new in the 18th century, and meant there was a new audience for radical ideas, criticisms and suggestions for reform.

## COFFEE HOUSES AND CHATTER

New ideas and discussion need new venues. Enlightenment discussion was assisted by the birth of an exciting new place: the coffee house, or café. Coffee was the novelty of 18th-century Paris, Vienna, Berlin and other cities, and ‘coffee houses’ sprang up across Europe. Contemporaries noted that, while alcohol stops conversation, coffee improves thinking and expression. Coffee houses became places of discussion and, inevitably, radical political debate. The café owners noticed that people came as much to talk as to drink, and provided the latest books, journals, newspapers and pamphlets for any customer who paid for a drink. The café became an informal library and discussion group combined.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

**SOURCE 1.15** *The Newsmongers*, 1752 by Gabriel de Saint-Aubin In this apparently relaxed café scene, much serious discussion is happening. Today, some people contemptuously refer to intellectuals as ‘the chattering classes’, but this was no mere chatter. Historians know that revolutionary changes begin when people gather and talk seriously about the state of the nation. This ‘birth of public opinion’ – and ‘public chatter’ – was an important factor leading up to the French Revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of 1917 and, in our own time, in the movement for change in contemporary China.



Wellcome Library, London

**SOURCE 1.16** *The Philosophes at the Café Procope*, artist unknown. The *philosophes* gathered in establishments like the Café Procope in Paris. Voltaire, for example, habitually drank 30 cups of coffee laced with chocolate there every day. The caption – ‘Our cradle was the coffee house’ – stresses that the Enlightenment’s birthplace was not academia, but the humble café.

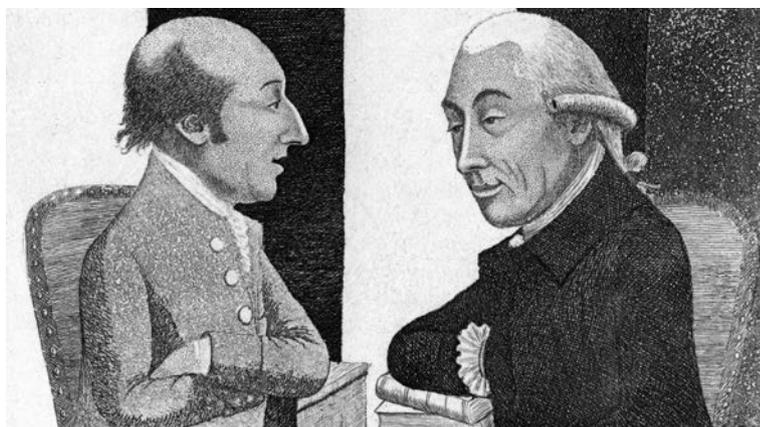
## ACADEMIES AND LEARNED SOCIETIES

Enlightenment thinkers also founded academies to further develop science and knowledge. These were established with royal permission, and had constitutions governing their conduct. They were not open to everybody, requiring an annual fee to ensure that only wealthy people – local nobles, high government officials, wealthy merchants and traders, and rich professionals such as doctors – could join. The academies had meeting rooms, well-stocked libraries and the means to publish papers on scientific issues. They could afford essay competitions with cash prizes. Historian Daniel Roche notes that in 1784 the academy in the provincial French town of Metz advertised an essay competition on the question of the death penalty, and inspired an intense

public debate on the issue. The competition prompted a young lawyer from Arras, Maximilien Robespierre, to contribute an impassioned essay attacking the practice of execution. The winning essay was reprinted many times, keeping the debate alive for some years. For Dorinda Outram, this is evidence that these organisations shaped and sharpened public opinion.

## The importance of learned societies

A related form of networking was created when professionals and merchants formed social groups devoted to learning. In Manchester, such people formed the Literary and Philosophical Society (1785), where educated people met and discussed the latest scientific discoveries. In Birmingham, a similar group formed the Lunar Society in the late 1750s. Some of its members were inventors, such as Richard Arkwright, industrialists, such as Josiah Wedgwood, or intellectuals, such as Erasmus Darwin. We have already seen them at work, gathered intently around the experiment with oxygen shown in the painting by Joseph Wright of Derby (also a passionate member of the group) on the opening page of this chapter.



**SOURCE 1.17** The great economist Adam Smith joined with his friends, the geologist James Hutton and the chemist Joseph Black (both pictured in this 1787 etching by John Kay), to found the Oyster Club in Edinburgh. This ‘dining society’ provided another form of socialising and intellectual discussion.

Mary Evans Picture Library

## THE SALONS

The greatest powerhouse for Enlightenment discussion – the traditional ‘salon’ – already existed, but adapted to this new wave of serious discussion. Since the 17th century, wealthy bourgeois and noble women had held social gatherings featuring elegant conversation and good manners. At first, discussion focused on literature and art and, if it mentioned society, it usually made fun of those who did not fit into this social world. In the 18th century this changed, and some salons hosted people who criticised their own society, notably the political system of absolute monarchy and the institution of the Catholic Church. In this venue, women became crucial directors of enlightened debate.

### DENA GOODMAN AND THE FEMINIST VIEWPOINT

One great feminist historian who has improved our understanding of the Enlightenment is Dena Goodman (1952–), who wrote *The Republic of Letters. A Cultural History of the Enlightenment* in 1994. She argues (at pp. 2–3): ‘A cultural history of the French Enlightenment must also be a feminist history, because it challenges the [idea] of intellectual activity as the product of masculine reason and male genius’.

Goodman recognises men’s great ideas and works, but seeks to balance the picture by proving how important women were.

Goodman believes that we usually study ‘the public sphere’ – public life and affairs – where men usually dominate. Feminists look instead at the ‘private sphere’ – private life, the home, social gatherings and conversations. Goodman correctly argues that we should not study the great ideas alone, but also the setting in which they spread. The Enlightenment succeeded partly because women provided the venues in which ideas developed. Women transformed

*continued*

continued

the 'salons' to create the custom of intelligent people gathering to discuss art, literature, music, philosophy, science and politics. Goodman calls this 'intellectual sociability'.

Goodman's valuable work clarifies how important women were to the discussions that fuelled the Enlightenment. Others, however, disagree with her conclusions, and warn that the total number of women involved in the Enlightenment was relatively small, and that the women of the salons were, after all, merely conducting conversations. Historian Jonathan Israel (1946–), for example, argued in 2012 that the contribution of the Paris salons was 'practically zero'.



### Madame Geoffrin and her salon

The Enlightenment was a process of lively discussion and free exchange of thoughts. Women provided a setting where this exchange occurred, and guided the discussions. Instead of setting up a university or an academy, they created hundreds of gatherings in Paris, in French towns and finally in other European cities. In the days before the Internet and Facebook, they created the first social networking, which was carried out through conversations and by the exchange of thousands of letters. The three leaders in this field were Madame Geoffrin, Mademoiselle Julie de Lespinasse and Madame Suzanne Necker.

Madame Marie Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin (1699–1777) was the greatest hostess of all, with a mastery of salon conversation. From 1750 until 1777, her salon was the focus of key Enlightenment thinkers. Women across France copied her. Her achievement is impressive because, being female, she was denied the formal education that boys in rich families received. She therefore had to learn from her visitors – who included great thinkers such as Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle and Montesquieu – and rapidly proved her intelligence.

Dena Goodman argues that Geoffrin created the Enlightenment salon. Geoffrin changed the usual way of running the salon to allow longer discussion time. She set fixed days for her salon: artists were invited on Mondays, and writers on Wednesdays. She changed the main meal from dinner to lunch, so that people could spend the afternoon discussing.

The salon women created a new institution: a lounge-room 'republic' in which people could exchange and test ideas freely, but according to certain rules. Thus, these women were more than hostesses; they were 'governors'. Men could attend if they obeyed the rules of the 'governors'. Geoffrin enforced the rules of polite conversation because she practised them, setting such a courteous tone that her guests had to behave accordingly. She was expert in conducting intellectual discussion. Geoffrin was also in contact with the international community, including Catherine the Great of Russia and King Stanislaw August of Poland.

### The salon as a machine for rational discussion

Examine Source 1.18, which is an annotated version of *Reading of the Tragedy 'L'Orphelin de la Chine' in the Salon of Madame Geoffrin* by Anicet-Charles Gabriel Lemonnier, also shown on the opening page of this chapter. Then answer the questions that follow.

continued

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The paintings on this wall show scenes from ancient history, and are painted in the neo-classical style.

These two paintings show landscapes. Many of the people present would have been influenced by Rousseau to see the countryside as a place of peace and beauty.

This sculpture tells us more about these people's ideals. It is a bust of Voltaire, and its presence suggests great respect for his enlightened ideas.

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau** began as a friend and associate of the *philosophes*, but soon broke with them.

**Mademoiselle Julie de Lespinasse** was another leading salon hostess. She was first introduced into intellectual circles in the salon of her friend Madame du Deffand. Later, she established her own salon, and attracted great thinkers such as d'Alembert. She became famous for her gracious manner and for her ability to conduct intellectual discussions in her salon.

**The Comte de Buffon** was a famous naturalist.

The actor **Le Kain** is shown in the process of reading Voltaire's play *The Orphan of China* (1755) out loud to the salon. The play was performed in Paris in 1755, with exotic sets and costumes to recreate the 'Chinese' style. Le Kain played Ghengis Khan.



This painting tells us a great deal about these people's values. This painting is Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin's *The Return from the Market*, 1739. Diderot praised Chardin's sympathetic and respectful representation of good, simple people.

**Madame Geoffrin** was a wealthy woman of the bourgeoisie. She was the hostess of this salon. Although the person shown reading to the group is a man, and most of the other visitors are also male, it was women who conducted, guided and controlled the conversations happening in the salons.

**Montesquieu** was the author of the influential political work, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748).

**Fontenelle** was famous for his *History of Oracles* (1687). He was an elderly gentleman at the time this painting depicts, but in his 90s was still expressing appreciation of beautiful young women, saying wistfully: 'He wished he was 80 again.'

**Denis Diderot** was a complex thinker who drove the great project of *The Encyclopaedia*.

**Jean le Rond d'Alembert** was the co-editor with Diderot of *The Encyclopaedia*.

The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 1.18** *Reading of the Tragedy 'L'Orphelin de la Chine'* in the Salon of Madame Geoffrin, 1812, by Anicet-Charles Lemonnier (1743–1824)

continued

## Questions

- 1 What were the usual topics of discussion in a typical salon?
- 2 Judging from their dress and behaviour, was a salon a formal or an informal gathering?
- 3 From what you have read, on what day of the week would this gathering be taking place?
- 4 How do the works of art in the room provide clues about the values and ideals of Madame Geoffrin's friends?
- 5 How did Madame Geoffrin change the traditional salon to create the 'Enlightenment salon'?

## THE FREEMASONS

One crucially important Enlightenment network – Freemasonry – may not seem to be a significant one to the modern observer. Freemasonry still exists in our own time, but 18th-century Freemason societies were vastly more popular and influential than they are today.

Freemasonry combines a commitment to good deeds with its own secret, mystical religious ceremonies. It resembles Enlightenment thought because it believes in the **humanitarian** and in **reason**. In the 18th century, Freemasons also hoped to improve society morally without using traditional religions such as Catholicism. In France, England and in Europe generally, Freemasonry attracted large numbers of educated people – and some 'lodges' (groups) were open to women as well as men – who committed themselves to improving the world around them. Even emperors joined, including Frederick the Great of Prussia.

The Masonic lodges provided another network for spreading ideas, inventions, theories and debate across Europe. Naturally, they faced strong opposition. In France, the Catholic Church feared the Freemasons' rejection of established religions; while in the German states, rulers felt threatened, fearing that the Freemasons might be plotting to overthrow the government.

## *How did the philosophes spread their ideas?*

We have seen that the ideas of the Enlightenment spread quickly and widely because the *philosophes* developed social and intellectual networks so successfully that they communicated their ideas around most of the known world.

We have also noted that the process of communication was very different in the 18th century compared with our own time. In modern Australia, the communication of ideas is almost limitless because of the vast size of the Internet and the impact of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. People today can conduct their social life almost completely through electronic media, to the extent that coming generations may never need to handle a book or use a telephone. Those wanting to challenge their own society today – like the young people seeking revolutionary change in Egypt, Libya and Syria – can do so simply by using mobile telephones. The 'Arab Spring' of the early 21st century proved that revolutions of the mind and in political systems can now happen by instantaneous electronic communication.

### humanitarian

Person who helps other human beings in difficulty

### reason

The rational application of human intelligence to solving problems

Had the *philosophes* been alive today, they would have loved electronic communication for its power to spread ideas and create change. They had no such technology, but they invented their own powerful ways of spreading their ideas.

## HOW DID THE *PHILOSOPHES* CONVINC PEOPLE?

As historians, we must investigate not only how these thinkers who created new ideas *communicated* them to people, but also how they *convinced* them.

### The literary genius of the *philosophes*

These thinkers' secret weapon was their extraordinary talent for writing. To communicate their message, they wrote brilliantly in almost every form of literature known, and also invented completely new types of literary writing. Naturally, they wrote treatises and pamphlets, but they also wrote novels, short stories, a new form called the 'philosophical tale' (discussed below), dialogues (printed discussions) and speeches. Every type of writing was used to make a point.

### Writing in a conversational style

Historian RJ White argues that most Enlightenment works were 'conversational'; that is, they were written in a style similar to the conversations then happening across Europe. The favourite form was called an '*entretien*' (dialogue or conversation), in which two speakers teased out an issue by discussing it. Another was the '*lettre*' (letter): a serious article speaking informally to the reader, as if in a personal letter. Yet another was the '*conte*' (story), which took a form similar to someone telling an amusing anecdote at a dinner party. Thus, people accustomed to discussing ideas in witty and educated conversations also read their favourite ideas in written works that used the same chatty tone.

### Significant stories: the 'philosophical tale'

The *philosophes* were not just theorists; many were also excellent novelists. Voltaire was a brilliant fiction writer, and developed a special form of story – an apparently simple tale hiding deep philosophical meanings. He used these 'philosophical tales' to think through deep issues and to encourage people to reflect on them. For example, he was horrified by the human misery caused by nature in the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755. He was also struck by the pointlessness of conflicts such as the Seven Years' War (1756–63). He wrote a story, *Candide*, in which a young man travels the world observing such problems. Through his young hero, Voltaire reflects on the things that rob human beings of their happiness and wellbeing, and questions the belief that we are living in the best of all possible worlds.



**SOURCE 1.19** *Asker Khan Ambassador of Persia in 1808, 1809*, by Cesarine Henriette Flore Davin (1773–1844). The *philosophes* often put their radical criticisms in the mouths of imaginary foreigners. Montesquieu, for example, wrote in the voice of invented Persians visiting Paris.

## Criticism through ‘foreign eyes’

One of the *philosophes*’ most powerful new ways of writing was the technique of writing a set of letters from a supposedly foreign point of view. This could work in a number of ways. In his *Persian Letters* (1721), Montesquieu claimed that he had ‘found’ some letters left by ‘two Persians’ who had travelled through France and recorded what they saw. He claimed that because he did not write them, he was not responsible for what the authors said. Montesquieu had actually written the letters himself, using his imaginary Persians to express his serious criticisms of French government and society.

## Criticism through praise: the French admiration of England

Voltaire used another clever trick: writing a work that praised another nation for all the good things it had, but which were lacking in his own country. In his *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733), he presented himself as a foreigner visiting England and admiring its political freedom and religious tolerance. This literary trick allowed him to criticise France without seeming to do so: every time he praised the English political system, or the respect given to great thinkers such as John Locke and Isaac Newton, people automatically concluded that, by contrast, France did not have these same qualities.

## Criticism through condemnation: talking about despotism in China

Another clever way to criticise your own government was to write – apparently innocently – about other countries that lacked a democratic system of representation. Many *philosophes* therefore wrote informative articles about China, marvelling at the fact that so many millions of people could be ruled by one emperor who demanded absolute obedience, but who never consulted them. How, they asked with mock innocence, could an emperor rule like a despot and take no notice of his people? Surely this is tyranny? Their comments really applied to France. Their readers understood this, but the police and the censors could not possibly object to these writings because they were supposedly about another country.

## A new weapon of criticism: *The Encyclopaedia*

Of the many literary forms the *philosophes* used, one in particular was a bombshell. This form was usually known under the innocent name of a ‘dictionary’ or an ‘encyclopaedia’, but in reality it was far more than a simple reference book.

This powerful new form of Enlightenment expression occurred almost by accident. In 1745, the publisher and bookseller André Le Breton decided that France needed its own *Encyclopaedia*, like Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* in England. The *Cyclopaedia* mainly covered techniques such as mining, weaving or carpentry, in articles describing the processes involved, and with illustration pages showing the tools and skills used. In 1746, Le Breton asked Denis Diderot to simply translate the *Cyclopaedia* into French.

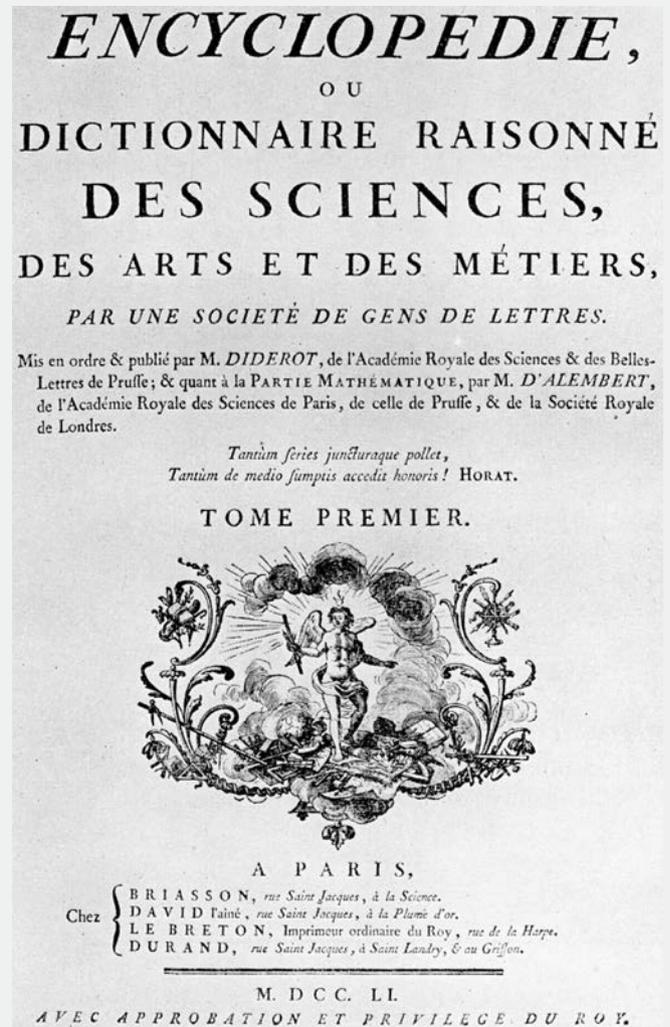
Diderot saw that he could make this publication more powerful than a straightforward description of current technology, and gathered together a team of thinkers to write original articles. He wanted a guide to every known technique to encourage progress and knowledge. Fired with enthusiasm, he asked Jean Le Rond d’Alembert to be his scientific advisor, and then recruited a team of experts on every subject imaginable. He himself worked with great intensity, writing articles, visiting workshops to check technical details and editing the articles by other

authors. He continued this task after he was imprisoned at Vincennes in 1749. In 1750 he advertised the first volume, and soon 2000 subscribers had paid in advance for the book. The volume appeared in 1751, causing great excitement in the intellectual circles of Paris.

## The title page of *The Encyclopaedia*

The title page of the first edition of *The Encyclopaedia* is unusual because it contains so much information: this completely new form of publication had to be explained to its audience.

- + While it was commonly called *The Encyclopaedia*, the second title of the publication was *Reasoned Dictionary* [reason being a key aspect of the Enlightenment] of *Sciences, Arts and Trades*. Note that the second title lists only very practical subjects, and makes no mention of theoretical subjects such as theology, religion or metaphysics.
- + Underneath the two titles are the words ‘By a Society of Men of Letters’, reminding the readers that the Enlightenment was a massive process of discussion between thousands of people across Europe and the world.
- + Diderot’s name is given as the editor. In some versions the title page adds proudly that Diderot was a ‘Member of the Academy of Fine Arts and Sciences of Prussia’, reminding the readers that he was taken seriously by the ‘enlightened’ Prussian ruler Frederick II, who by supporting a leading *philosophe* showed more intelligence than the King of France.
- + The four booksellers who supported the project are then listed.
- + Importantly, the page ends with the reassurance: ‘[published] with the approval and permission of the King’.



**SOURCE 1.20** The title page of the first edition of *The Encyclopaedia*, 1751, artist unknown

## HOW DIDEROT TURNED A SINGLE PUBLICATION INTO A TEAM EFFORT BY THE BEST MINDS OF HIS TIME



**CLERGYMEN**, such as the Abbé Mallet, contributed articles on subjects such as theology, possibly with the aim of hiding the radical nature of other articles.

**RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES**, such as the Archbishop of Paris and the Faculty of Theology (University of Sorbonne), condemned certain articles as heretical.

**ROYAL AUTHORITIES**, such as the King's Council and the High Court (Parlement) of Paris, banned the publication in 1752.

**WORKERS**, such as Bonnet, a silk worker, gave detailed descriptions of every aspect of their trades.

**ARTISTS**, such as Cochin le Fils, did detailed drawings of objects, and then engraved them as informative, clear illustrations for the articles.

**EXPERTS**, such as the astronomer Le Roy, provided detailed advice in their fields.

**THE FRENCH KING, LOUIS XV**, granted a royal 'privilege' or permission to publish an encyclopaedia.

**DENIS DIDEROT** had the idea of transforming a simple encyclopaedia into a vehicle for radical ideas. He made a massive effort to coordinate the project, bringing together dozens of experts and writers.

**JEAN LE ROND D'ALEMBERT** assisted Diderot with his scientific expertise, and was co-editor until 1757. He wrote the general introduction to The Encyclopaedia.

**LE BARON D'HOLBACH** was an example of a major contributor. He wrote some 376 articles, and also donated money to help finance the operation.

**LAMOIGNON DE MALESHERBES**, Director of Bookshops, lent his political support.

**MADAME DE POMPADOUR**, mistress to the King, used her influence to support the project.

**DE SARTINE**, the Lieutenant of Police, supported the publication.

**MADAME GEOFFRIN**, an influential woman of the salons, gave financial support to the publication.

**SUBSCRIBERS**, mainly wealthy people from the nobility and the bourgeoisie, supported the project by ordering and paying for the 35-volume set of books in advance.

**BOOKSELLERS**, such as Briasson, David the Elder, Le Breton and Durand supported the project by selling the sets of books.

## The introduction to *The Encyclopaedia*

In his introduction to *The Encyclopaedia*, co-editor Jean Le Rond d'Alembert wrote:

Among men of letters there is one group against which the **arbiters** of taste, the important people, the rich people, are united: this is the **pernicious** damnable group of *philosophes*, who hold that it is possible to be a good Frenchman without courting those in power, a good citizen without flattering national prejudices, a good Christian without persecuting anybody ... This way of thinking is for many people an unpardonable crime.

The *philosophes* they say are enemies of authority. This is a more serious **reproach** and deserves a serious reply. The *philosophes* respect the authority of the monarch, to whom it belongs, and whose love of truth and justice they recognise ... If those men we call *philosophes* haunted more often the antechambers of ministers, courted ladies of well-known piety, put themselves forward as **advocates** of persecution and intolerance, they would not be the targets for all the insults that are hurled at them. But they honour the great and flee from them; they revere true piety and detest persecuting zeal; they believe the first of Christian duties is charity ... This is their real crime.

Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, quoted in Isaac Kramnick (ed.), *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, Penguin, New York, 1995, pp. 16–17

**arbiters**  
Judges  
**pernicious**  
Harmful  
**reproach**  
Criticism  
**advocates**  
Supporters

### Questions

- 1 What, according to d'Alembert, are some of the key features of the *philosophes*' thinking?
- 2 How does d'Alembert deal with the criticism that the *philosophes* are the enemies of authority?
- 3 Does d'Alembert appear to think that the *philosophes* are the enemies of religion? Explain your answer.
- 4 Why does d'Alembert think that good Catholics should not be involved in persecuting the followers of other religions, such as Protestants and Jews?

## Article on 'equality' from *The Encyclopaedia*

If we look only at the illustrations from *The Encyclopaedia*, we might think that the work was simply a collection of facts about the science, industries, trades and crafts as they stood in France in the 1750s. When we read the text, however, we can see that Diderot and his team included – apparently innocently – other key words that they defined. Let us examine how an 'apparently innocent' definition of 'equality' was actually the pretext for a radical statement of the Enlightenment ideal of 'natural' human rights:

NATURAL EQUALITY: [Natural rights are] what is [shared] between all men by the constitution of nature alone. This equality is the principle and the foundation of liberty.

Natural or moral equality is therefore founded on the constitution of human nature common to all men, who are born, who grow, who live, and who die in the same manner.

Because human nature exists in all men, it is clear that according to natural rights, each person should respect and treat others as beings who are naturally his equal, that is to say, are as much men as he is.

From this principle of the natural equality of men, several consequences arise.

*continued*

continued

- 1 There results from this principle, that all men are naturally free, and that reason has only made them dependent on others in order to secure their happiness.
- 2 That despite all the inequalities produced in political government by differences of condition, by nobility, by power, by riches etc., those who are the most elevated above others must treat their inferiors as being naturally equal to them, avoiding any outrage at all, never demanding anything from them above what is owed to them, and in demanding with humanity anything which really is due to them.

Finally, I agree with the wise Hooker, who bases on the undoubted principle of natural equality all the duties of charity, of humanity and of justice, to which men are obliged towards each other.

It is a violation of this principle [of natural equality] that established political or social slavery. From this, it has happened that in countries subjected to arbitrary power, the princes, the courtiers, the prime ministers, those who handle finances possess all the riches of the nation, while the rest of the people do not have what is necessary to live, and the majority of the people suffer in poverty.

Translation by Michael Adcock

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### Questions

- 1 What, in essence, is this writer's understanding of 'natural equality'? Explain this idea in your own words.
- 2 Explain whether you think people of your own generation still believe that, in modern Australia, all people own 'natural equality'. Why, or why not?
- 3 From what you know of 18th-century Europe, why might a king and his government feel threatened by this set of ideas?
- 4 Why might a rich and powerful member of a noble family disagree with this idea of 'natural equality'?
- 5 Can you trace these Enlightenment ideas in any documents in connection with the American Revolution or the French Revolution?

## Conclusion

From what we have read so far, it is clear that the term 'Enlightenment' is much more complicated than this single word suggests.

First, we know that educated people *felt* that they were living in a time when the 'light' of scientific knowledge was removing the 'darkness' of traditional knowledge, superstition and ignorance. This gives credibility to the term, but as historians we need to remember that all history is contestable, and that we must think critically about what the Enlightenment really was.

Second, it is also clear that that this surge in thinking and questioning was sociable: it occurred in a number of casual social networks, rather than in the formal lecture theatres of universities. To really understand the Enlightenment, we must understand 'the birth of public opinion' in the 18th century, and the feeling that educated and intelligent people across the world were joined in a strong but invisible brotherhood called the 'republic of letters'. These people made maximum use of the networks available to them, including cafés, salons, Freemasons' societies and learned academies.

Third, the *philosophes* were successful because they used nearly every existing form of literature and visual art to get their message across, and also invented totally new forms. The most powerful of these was *The Encyclopaedia* which, disguised as factual information, savagely criticised the French monarchy.

The Enlightenment was not a single movement, but it was a powerful one, and was responsible for inspiring many educated people to rethink politics, economics, religion and society.

## Chapter summary

To draw together everything you have learnt in this chapter, make your own study notes while the information is fresh in your mind. Using dot points and colour coding either on concept cards or in a computer-based document, note the following main points and add your own examples:

- + People at the time of the Enlightenment felt that they were living in a new age of ‘enlightened thinking’.
- + The 17th-century philosophical and ‘scientific revolution’ by Bacon, Bayle, Descartes, Newton and Locke founded modern philosophy, and switched attention to the way human beings understand and learn.
- + These early thinkers provided the basic ‘vocabulary’ of ideas that would allow the *philosophes* of the 18th century to make such rapid progress in their thinking.
- + To understand the Enlightenment, we must accept that it was not one organised system of ideas, or ideology, but rather an assorted bundle of independent thoughts, many of them contradicting each other. The *philosophes* disagreed on nearly all major issues, including the existence of God, the best political system and the way to create a humane new society. The Enlightenment was a gloriously untidy jumble of new and different ideas.
- + There were some broad guiding ideas. *Empiricism* argued that knowledge is best based on direct observation of the real world and on experimentation. This idea led to a rejection of all ‘traditional’ knowledge and all previous authority, such as the monarchy or the Church.
- + *Reason* involved the use of God-given intelligence to analyse the world around us, to identify social problems and to propose more humane solutions.
- + In terms of *political systems*, the greatest emphasis was upon the ‘contractual basis of government’, as outlined in Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*. While people accepted and respected a monarchy that was centuries old, Rousseau taught them to see a ruler as a person who had a historical contract to rule for the good of his people. The radical implication of this was that if the ruler ceased to look after his subjects, their obligation to obey him ceased.
- + In terms of *social values*, 18th-century people respected social utility, or usefulness. Previously, people automatically respected nobles for their power, wealth and aristocratic way of life; in the time of the Enlightenment, thinkers respected the productive classes who produced the real wealth of the nation.
- + In terms of *religious values*, the most important idea was toleration, which in a country like France meant recognising the rights of non-Catholic groups such as Jews and Protestants. While the Catholic Church used its authority to repress other religions, the *philosophes* condemned this as superstition, fanaticism and intolerance.
- + The ideas of the Enlightenment spread so quickly partly because people learnt the skill of social networking, in arenas such as coffee houses, learned societies, salons and freemason societies.



- + The Enlightenment also spread quickly because the *philosophes* used nearly every literary form known, and then invented new ones. The most dramatic of these was the massive project of *The Encyclopaedia*.

### Weblinks

Weblinks relevant to this chapter can be found at <http://nmh.nelsonnet.com.au/enlightenment>.

### Further resources

#### General reading on the Enlightenment

Harvey Chisick, *A Historical Dictionary of the Enlightenment*, Scarecrow Press, New York, 2005

Margaret C. Jacob, *The Enlightenment: A Brief History with Documents*, Bedford/St Martin's, Boston, 2001

Kieron O'Hara, *The Enlightenment*, One World, Oxford, 2010

Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005

Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment, and Why it Still Matters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013

#### Special studies of the Enlightenment

Isaac Kramnick (ed.), *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, Penguin, New York, 1995

Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men*, Faber and Faber, London, 2002



## Chapter review activities

- 1 What was the 'scientific revolution' of the 17th century?
- 2 What were four important capital cities of the Enlightenment?
- 3 What was the 'knowledge revolution' of the 18th century?
- 4 Why does RJ White call the *philosophes* 'anti-philosophers'?
- 5 What is scepticism?
- 6 Why was the idea of reason so important to the *philosophes*?
- 7 What did 18th-century people mean by 'nature' and 'human nature'?
- 8 How would a *philosophe* define the term 'philosophe' to you?
- 9 What was the main political belief of the Enlightenment?
- 10 What did the *philosophes* mean by 'natural rights'?
- 11 Why did the *philosophes* believe that a new style of education could improve all human beings?
- 12 Why did Enlightenment thinkers attack the idea of miracles so savagely?

- 13 Why did the idea of deism threaten established and organised Churches so seriously?
- 14 What was meant by the ‘republic of letters’?
- 15 How did the discovery of coffee help the spread of the Enlightenment?
- 16 What was a ‘salon’?
- 17 How did Madame Geoffrin create the Enlightenment style of salon?
- 18 Imagine that you are Voltaire, and that you have just read about the unjust and inhuman execution of the Protestant Jean Calas for the alleged murder of his son. You are now preparing your speech to the court of enquiry, defending his innocence, and condemning the injustice of his execution. Using a number of ideas from this chapter – such as the contractual basis of government, natural rights and tolerance – write a speech using the sorts of ideas and terms that an Enlightenment *philosophe* would use to attack the injustice. Remember that, unlike a modern lawyer, you would not focus solely on evidence, but would appeal to more general principles.
- 19 Using the book references and weblinks provided for this chapter, research the work of the famous historian of the Enlightenment, Margaret C Jacob. What does she actually mean by the term ‘Radical Enlightenment’? In your response, be sure to mention some of the key radical thinkers, and radical ideas, that Jacob studies. Include a list of her main works on the Enlightenment, using proper bibliographic referencing.
- 20 Imagine you are a young, idealistic person living in Paris and attending the salon gatherings of Madame Geoffrin. Write a letter to your elderly parents, who live on their estate in the countryside of France, describing your experiences in the capital city. Because your parents have not had the experience of visiting such a salon, you need to describe what it is like to attend one of Madame Geoffrin’s gatherings. Remember to explain the special meaning of a ‘salon’ (that it is not just a living room), the importance of the hostess, Madame Geoffrin, her role in conducting conversation, and the sorts of people who gathered there. Try to explain why the salon was really a ‘machine’ for thinking and debate, and describe some of the fresh new ideas that were discussed there.
- 21 In this role-play, you will be required to act out an imaginary clash between the royal authorities and the writers of *The Encyclopaedia* as they attack or defend the publication. (No such debate ever took place, but the *philosophes* would have been delighted if it had.)  
Your key figures are as follows:  
The case against *The Encyclopaedia*
  - + King Louis XV
  - + the Chief Minister
  - + the Archbishop of Paris
  - + the Chief of Police



### The case for *The Encyclopaedia*

- + Madame de Pompadour, the King's mistress
- + Denis Diderot, editor
- + Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, editor
- + Voltaire, contributor

Each student involved should research the position of one of these people as regards *The Encyclopaedia*, and be prepared to speak from that point of view.

The debate should start with Louis XV making a formal royal statement condemning the publication, followed by the Chief Minister, and then by the Archbishop of Paris, condemning *The Encyclopaedia's* attack on religion. There should then follow a warning from the Chief of Police to cease publication.

When they have finished, the supporters of *The Encyclopaedia* should make their case, defending its usefulness, its clear display and explanation of all useful arts and trades and its summary of all human knowledge to the present point.

- 22 Research the life and influence of one of the three great women of the Parisian salons: Madame Geoffrin, Mademoiselle Julie de Lespinasse or Madame Suzanne Necker. In your response, describe their social background and explain how they became such intellectual leaders. In your conclusion, evaluate how important they were to the spread of Enlightenment ideas in France.



Photo by permission of the Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Who were the main thinkers of the Enlightenment in France?*

The Enlightenment thinkers created a remarkable global network through which ideas and arguments flashed across the world, as we have seen in Chapter 1. Their ‘republic of letters’ – an invisible organisation that worked across national boundaries – was a real and great achievement in the age before email, YouTube and Facebook; an age when written letters and printed pamphlets were still the main forms of communication.

We should not think of Enlightenment thinkers as working in a vague place called ‘Europe’, with the same conditions everywhere. We must remember that the *philosophes* were in different countries, with different political systems, different social values and conditions, and different religious systems. Clearly, there was no one Enlightenment, but several Enlightenments.

Even though these thinkers travelled widely and communicated their ideas across Europe, we can only properly understand them if we study their ideas in the context of their own societies. We therefore refer to, for example, ‘the Enlightenment in France’ (rather than the more usual ‘the French Enlightenment’) or ‘the Enlightenment in Scotland’, to remind ourselves that each group worked within the special conditions of its own country.

In this chapter we examine the *philosophes* who lived and worked in France. We explore their intentions, and analyse exactly what they believed. To explain their role in the development of this intellectual movement, we need to identify what each thinker contributed, and evaluate how important their ideas were in the development of Enlightenment thought.

◀ *The Philosophes at Supper*, c. 1750, by Jean Huber

#### INQUIRY QUESTION

+ One Enlightenment, or several?

# The Enlightenment in France

We usually think of France as being the typical site of Enlightenment thought. There, the government was an absolute monarchy, and there was growing and extreme public concern and debate about the political and social system. While the French *philosophes* did not intend to unleash the revolution of 1789, they certainly challenged French royal government with powerful public criticism.

## 18TH-CENTURY FRANCE

In 18th-century France, the political and social systems faced serious public criticism from educated people.

The French nation-state had formed during the Middle Ages. In the 16th century, the powerful King François I defined its political system, creating a powerful central government. In the 17th century, the rule of the king was strengthened when, in 1661, King Louis XIV assumed complete personal authority over his nation. Aided by his powerful minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, he developed the political theory of **absolutism**, whereby the king enjoyed, theoretically, complete authority (although the king still had to rule within the laws of the land, and to respect certain political groups and organisations). According to this theory, a nation did not need a parliament:

### absolutism

The principle or exercise of absolute authority

just as the human body is guided by the head, which knows just what the body needs, so the political system is guided by the king, who knows exactly what his subjects need.

During the 17th century, government was largely conducted by the king and his ministers in private. Educated citizens rarely discussed national affairs because they knew little about them. During the 18th century, however, people became more concerned and vocal about political matters. In particular, France's massive national debt – caused by its expensive involvement in four major wars, including the American War of Independence – caused criticism of Louis XVI's foreign policies, of Queen Marie-Antoinette's spending on clothing and luxuries, and of the unfair taxation system that taxed common people heavily but fell relatively lightly upon the clergy and nobles.



**SOURCE 2.1** France's massive national debt highlighted Queen Marie-Antoinette's lavish spending on clothing and luxuries, illustrated in this portrait by Jean-Baptiste André (1740–86).

In this tense atmosphere, educated people naturally focused on the nation's organisation. They believed the political system of absolute monarchy threatened to become **despotism**, or bad rule. The social system of privilege – the clergy and the nobles having special rights in matters of law and taxation – seemed unfair. The taxation system was inefficient and wasteful. The French *philosophes* were therefore vocal in criticising these structures to prompt reform of the existing system, but never intended a revolution to destroy it altogether. These conditions created a strong current of intellectual thought in France.

### despotism

A negative term applied to cruel and unjust exercise of authority

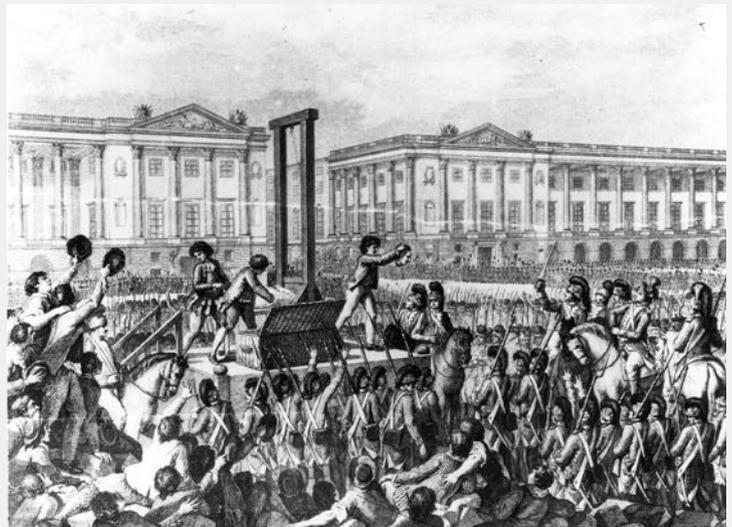
### materialism

The belief that human beings are only physical bodies and do not have souls

## Other major figures of the Enlightenment in France

There were many *philosophes*, of whom Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau have today the most towering reputations, due largely to the influential books they wrote. Before we examine the key works of these great thinkers, however, it is worth remembering some other remarkable Enlightenment thinkers.

- + **Jean le Rond d'Alembert (1717–83)** was a famous mathematician and later co-editor of *The Encyclopaedia* with Diderot from 1751 to 1758. He had a broad and varied intelligence, and wrote some 1400 articles on a wide range of subjects. His writings led him into conflict with Rousseau. He was appointed Secretary of the Royal Academy of the Sciences in 1779.
- + **Georges Louis Leclerq, Comte de Buffon (1707–88)** contributed to the Enlightenment by writing the 15-volume *Natural History*, published between 1749 and 1767. He shocked contemporaries, particularly churchmen, by suggesting that the Earth was much older than the dates suggested by the Bible, and by arguing that human beings were a *part* of the natural world, not above it. He was also Director of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Paris, where the people could study the animals and plants he described.
- + **The Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94)**, in his *Essay on the Admission of Women into the Republic* (1790), was one of the first writers to demand equal rights for women. He was also one of the few *philosophes* to live to see the French Revolution. He later became a victim of the Terror (the period of violence and mass executions at the start of the Revolution), and ended his own life in protest against being sent to the guillotine for crimes he had not committed.
- + **Julien Offroy de La Mettrie (1709–51)** shocked Europe with *Man the Machine* (1748), which proposed the idea of **materialism** – the belief that human beings are only physical bodies and do not have souls. He suggested that humans, like animals, are merely



**SOURCE 2.2** There were mass executions during the Terror. The Marquis de Condorcet avoided the guillotine only by taking his own life.

continued

continued

automotons or machines. The Church condemned him for undermining religion, and even Voltaire and other *philosophes* hated him. La Mettrie also argued that excessive physical pleasure was the greatest good in life, and demonstrated this idea by eating a vast amount of pâté at a feast, from which he then died.

- + **Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723–89)** was one of the Enlightenment's most radical critics of organised religion. He was the centre of a group that included Diderot, d'Alembert, Rousseau and Buffon. He was an atheist. In his *The System of Nature* (1770), he attacked organised religion, and argued that the only reality was the natural world itself.

## Montesquieu

One of the most important French *philosophes* was Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu (1689–1755). His family were nobles, who practised law in the provincial town of Bordeaux. In 1709, Montesquieu moved to Paris, fascinated by its radical thinkers. He returned home in 1713 to manage his father's estate, which produced wine, and then accepted the important position of President of the High Court of Bordeaux. By the age of 24, he belonged to the city's elite, but supported progressive ideas. He joined the Academy of Bordeaux and successfully presented scientific papers.

Mary Evans Picture Library/CAGP/iberfoto



*'I have never known any distress that an hour's reading did not relieve.'*

Undated portrait of the Baron de Montesquieu by an unknown artist

*'Liberty is the right to do what the law permits.'*

*'An empire founded by war has to maintain itself by law.'*

*'There is no more cruel tyranny than that which is perpetuated under the shield of law and in the name of justice.'*

*'To become truly great, one has to stand with people, not above them.'*

*'Useless laws weaken the necessary laws.'*

*'If the triangles made a god, he would look like a triangle.'*

## INNOCENT CRITICISM: PERSIAN LETTERS (1721)

In 1721, Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* set the pattern for the whole Enlightenment: rather than write a political pamphlet, and be arrested for it, Montesquieu hid his meaning in a literary book. This masterpiece pretended to be the letters of two 'innocent outsiders' – Persians called Usbek and Rhedi – who allegedly travelled though France, naively making observations and saying the most outrageous things about a society they misunderstood. They described the Pope as 'an old idol worshipped out of habit', and Louis XIV as 'a great magician'. They marvelled when they visited a noble estate and saw that the lord, who did no work at all, seemed well-fed and contented, while the peasants, who worked very hard, seemed skinny and hungry. Of course this was actually all written by Montesquieu, and it was deliberate social criticism disguised in the fake letters of the imaginary Persians. Combining philosophy and literature, his writing sparkled with wit. People enjoyed reading it, but understood its serious message. For example, Montesquieu criticised the disastrous revocation in 1685 of the Edict of Nantes (1598), which forced most of France's Protestants to leave the country, by making his imaginary Usbek criticise his own government in Persia for a similar mistake:

“ You know, Mirza, that a number of ministers [forced] all the Armenians in Persia to leave the kingdom or become Muslims, with the idea that our empire would be polluted [poisoned] as long as it kept these infidels [unbelievers] in our midst. This would have meant the end of the grandeur of Persia, if blind devotion had been heeded [obeyed] at that time. The ministers were on the verge of destroying in a single day all the merchants and nearly all of the artisans of the kingdom. ”

Quoted in Norman Torrey, *Les Philosophes*, Capricorn Books, New York, 1960, pp. 87–8

Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* touched a nerve of public feeling, and was instantly popular: he was invited to the court of Louis XV and to the great Paris salons. He travelled to England, became a Freemason, observed the English political system and studied English political thought and the Greek and Roman classics. He concluded that republican government encourages 'civic virtue', meaning that citizens will sacrifice their personal good for the common good.



**SOURCE 2.3** Violence against French Protestants erupted following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, illustrated in this 1904 lithograph by French artist Maurice Leloir (1853–1940).

## THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS (1748)

Montesquieu developed this idea further in his classic political work, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), arguing that laws must protect the citizens' liberty and security, and develop the nation's prosperity. He wrote:

“ The political liberty of the subject is the tranquillity of mind arising from the opinion that each person has of his safety. In order to have this liberty, it is requisite the government be so constituted as one man need not be afraid of another. ”

Montesquieu established the Enlightenment commitment to reason, moderation, tolerance and humanity in national affairs. He attacked France's laws and justice, including barbaric punishments such as 'breaking on the wheel'. This in turn caused widespread discussion of 'humane punishment', inspiring the Italian Cesare Beccaria to write his *Essay on Crimes and Punishments* (1764).

Montesquieu argued that a political system is healthy if there is a separation of powers between the **legislature**, the **executive** and the **judiciary**. He condemned absolute monarchy as despotism, and suggested that the most reasonable form of government would be a king who ruled with 'intermediary governments', such as parliaments – a political theory called parliamentary liberalism. He discussed how this could be achieved by referring to the English political system, using the key ideas of John Locke's *Treatise on Civil Government* (1689). Although Montesquieu preferred a constitutional monarchy to a republic, the overall spirit of his work was a passionate defence of liberal principles such as freedom of thought, freedom of worship and personal liberty, protected by law.

Decades later, *On the Spirit of the Laws* guided revolutionary American political thinking, especially in the state constitutions of Pennsylvania and Virginia. Montesquieu's theory also influenced the early French Revolution (until 1791). His ideas also surfaced in the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (August 1789) and France's Constitution of 1791.

Montesquieu worked on *The Spirit of the Laws* for nearly 20 years, and produced the most powerful argument for political liberty so far. The massive project ruined his eyesight and his health, but he wrote philosophically: 'I have only two matters left to attend to: one, to know how to be ill, the other, to know how to die.' He died in 1755.

## *Voltaire: 'the man unique to all ages'*

Voltaire (1694–1778) was born François-Marie Arouet. Initially, he hoped to become a literary author, and specialised in writing poems and plays. He became critical of authority after 1717, when he was imprisoned in the Bastille for 11 months for some satirical poems that he had allegedly written. By the 1720s, he was frequenting cafés and salons where radical thinkers gathered. He disliked organised religion, especially the institution of the Catholic Church. Seeking greater freedom, he visited the Dutch Republic in 1722, and met the freethinkers who had written the most radical attack on religion of all, *The Treatise of the Three Impostors* (1719). Soon after returning to France, Voltaire suffered another injustice: his comments offended an aristocrat who had him thrown into jail without a trial or evidence.

### legislature

The arm of government responsible for making laws

### executive

The arm of government responsible for devising and administering policy

### judiciary

The system of courts of justice in a country

VOLTAIRE



Mary Evans Picture Library

*'To stop criticism they say one must die.'*

*'It is dangerous to be right when those who are in power are wrong.'*

*'In general, the art of government consists in taking as much money as possible from one class of citizens to give it to the other.'*

*'I have never made but one prayer to God, a very short one: "O Lord, make my enemies ridiculous." And God granted it.'*

*'If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.'*

*'Men use thought only to justify their wrongdoing, and employ speech only to conceal their thoughts.'*

*'It is said that God is always on the side of the big battalions.'*

*'All the reasoning of men is not worth the sentiment of one woman.'*

Engraving of François-Marie Arouet, known as Voltaire, by CH Barbant (1694–1778)

In 1726, Voltaire argued with a member of the powerful and noble Rohan family, and was again imprisoned in the Bastille. Released, he fled to England, still looking for a country unlike France. There, he learnt English and mixed in the best literary and intellectual circles, concluding that England was significantly superior to France. The political system was a constitutional monarchy; the social system allowed nobles to do profitable work; the religion was tolerant, and the commitment to science was impressive. Returning to France, he published his ideas in his *Philosophical Letters* or *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733). This work established his reputation as a radical thinker, but also showed him the dangers of radicalism. The King's censor ordered that the book be publicly burned by the executioner in the courtyard of the law courts in Paris – a chilling warning to any author.

Voltaire fled France again, then returned secretly to live with his lover and supporter, Madame du Châtelet, in her mansion in the region of Lorraine. In 1750, he tried a new role, that of 'philosophic advisor' to Frederick the Great of Prussia. He lived in Berlin for three years, but soon found his protector too oppressive.

Since it was not safe to return to Paris, he lived in Switzerland, first renting a property, then buying an estate at Ferney, just over the French border. The 1750s and 1760s were the great age of his writing.

Rather than simply writing theoretically about humaneness and tolerance, Voltaire practised these qualities. He took up the case of people who had suffered religious persecution, such as the Protestants Jean Calas (discussed in Chapter 1) and Pierre-Paul Sirven (who was exonerated, largely through Voltaire's efforts). He also used works such as his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764) to spread his criticisms of French government and religion.

### LETTERS CONCERNING THE ENGLISH NATION (1733)

Like Montesquieu, Voltaire used the technique of pretending to write letters as a means of social comment.

In his *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733), he used the guise of a visitor to England in the year 1728 to 'criticise through praise'. In reality, this critical work was written in 1732, well after his return to France, and drew upon his research into thinkers such as Isaac Newton and John Locke. The French authorities were not fooled, and banned the book, because it was clear that Voltaire, in praising England, was subtly criticising France. For example, when he praised the way in which England honoured its great thinkers and scientists, people understood that he meant that France did not do the same. When he praised England's *Toleration Act* (1689), people immediately saw this as a criticism of France's lack of religious toleration. Voltaire's most important 'letter' was the entry on Locke's political ideas. By praising England's constitutional monarchy and its tradition of political liberty, Voltaire was clearly criticising France's absolute monarchy and lack of political freedom.

*Letters Concerning the English Nation* was first printed in England (in English) in 1733. When illegal copies appeared in France in 1734, Voltaire was imprisoned and the book was burned by the police.



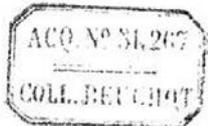
**SOURCE 2.4** *The Levée of Voltaire at Ferney*, by Jean Huber (1721–86). This unusual portrait of the great Voltaire dressing himself gives some idea of his intense activity during the years at Ferney. He now had a secretary, and began dictating ideas even as he dressed himself in the morning.

Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library

FROM VOLTAIRE'S LETTERS  
CONCERNING THE ENGLISH NATION

# LETRES PHILOSOPHIQUES.

PAR M. DE V....



The Bridgeman Art Library

**A FAIR TAXATION SYSTEM:** *No one is exempted in this country from paying certain taxes because he is a nobleman or a priest. All duties and taxes are settled by the House of Commons. When the Bill has passed ... and is signed by the King, then the whole nation pays, every man in proportion to his revenue or estate, not according to his title, which would be absurd.*

**GOVERNMENT:** *The English are the only people on earth who have been able to prescribe limits to the power of kings by resisting them; and who, by a series of struggles, have at last established that wise form of government where the prince is all powerful to do good, and at the same time is constrained from doing evil.*

**RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND TOLERANCE:** *An Englishman, as one to whom liberty is natural, may go to heaven his own way.*

**A SENSIBLE SOCIAL SYSTEM:** *Voltaire praised the fact that English gentlemen were not ashamed of doing productive work, such as trade or industry, whereas aristocrats in Germany and France would feel it an insult to their nobility. 'In France, the title of marquis is given gratis to anyone who will accept of it; and whosoever arrives in Paris from the midst of the most remote provinces with money in his purse and a name terminating in "ille" or "ac", may strut about and cry, "Such a man as I! A man of my rank and figure!" And may look down upon a trader with sovereign contempt; whilst the trader, on the other side, by hearing his profession treated so disdainfully, is fool enough to blush at it.'*

**A NATION DEVOTED TO REASON:** *When his English friends discussed who was the greatest man of all time, Voltaire agreed with them that it must be Sir Isaac Newton, 'who commands over the rest of the world by the force of truth, not those who enslave their fellow creatures'.*

## PHILOSOPHICAL DICTIONARY (1764)

Another powerful book, or weapon, was Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764). Just as *The Encyclopaedia* (which probably inspired it) was far more than simply an encyclopaedia, this was much more than a dictionary: under the innocent arrangement of articles by title, Voltaire unleashed a glittering but merciless attack on monarchy and religion.

When it first appeared, the dictionary contained 73 articles, of which half dealt with his main target: religion. The format proved powerful and effective, and by 1769 the work contained 114 entries. It became a bestseller, even though Voltaire never dared admit he wrote it. Throughout the republic of letters, people begged, smuggled and exchanged copies, carrying it like a precious jewel in their pockets. The political and religious authorities realised that the dictionary was a massive and damaging attack on religion, and in 1764 the Public Prosecutor of Geneva condemned it as 'audacious criticism', 'scandalous, destructive of revelation' and 'contagious poison'.

Voltaire's point of view is clear. As a deist, he unquestionably believed that God made the world. As a follower of Locke and Newton, however, he was committed to rational thought, scientific observation and experimentation, and the study of the real world. Like many of his contemporaries, he could not accept that one religion was correct and therefore could oppress other religions. Neither could he accept the array of superstitions, visions, revelations and miracles that the faithful were asked to believe. Not surprisingly, there are many articles in the dictionary with titles such as 'Miracles', 'Prejudice', 'Superstition', 'Tolerance', 'Enthusiasm' and 'Persecution'.

Voltaire also returned to his favourite political theme. In his article 'Government', he suggested that:

“ the English system was the one that all of humanity would choose if they were given a choice to make laws ...

... This is what English lawmaking has finally come to: giving back to each man all his natural rights, which people have been stripped of in nearly all monarchies. These rights are: the complete liberty of the person and of his possessions; to speak to the nation through the instrument of the pen; to be tried in any criminal matters only by a jury made up of independent men; to not be judged in any matter except by the precise terms laid down by the laws; to follow in peace any religion one desires ... I dare to say that if you assembled all of human kind to draw up laws, this is how they would frame them for their own safety. Why then are they not followed in other countries? ”

Translation by Michael Adcock

By the end of his life, Voltaire was a legendary figure. He had created the model for enlightened thinking and argument, and made famous the campaigning phrase 'écrasez l'infâme!' or 'crush the evil thing out of existence!'. He once wrote, 'Every man is a creature of the age in which he lives and few are able to raise themselves above the ideas of the time', but he himself was a 'man unique to all ages'.

As Voltaire lay dying in February 1778, he asked for pen and paper and wrote: 'I die adoring God, not hating my enemies, and detesting superstition.'

## HN BRAILSFORD ON VOLTAIRE

What shall we say of this extraordinary man? In this fragile dynamo, Nature concentrated an intellectual energy that would have [been enough] to render a dozen men famous and useful. No obstacle, no weight of authority intimidated him. He challenged, with an audacity that has few parallels, a power that had held civilisation in bondage since the first measurement of time. What was his goal? 'God and Liberty' was the last motto in which he summed it up for himself. He sought to break the fetters that Church and King had laid upon the human intellect. He labored to make a humane and impersonal law supreme above a despot's will. He smashed the barriers of nationality and creed that separate mankind. 'If virtue', wrote Condorcet, 'consists in doing good and in loving mankind with a passion, what man has more virtue than Voltaire?'

HN Brailsford, *Voltaire*, Oxford Paperbacks, No. 74, 1935, pp. 133–5

# *Denis Diderot: the encyclopaedic mind of the Enlightenment*

Of all the *philosophes*, Denis Diderot (1713–84) is remarkable in showing the broadest intelligence and the most enquiring spirit. He is also one of the most radical Enlightenment thinkers. His thoughts on society, biology and sexuality were so challenging that some were never published during his lifetime, and only appeared in print decades later. Thus, some of the most extraordinary ideas of the Enlightenment were only communicated by handwritten copies to trusted friends. Some of these ideas are still challenging, even offensive, to readers today.

Diderot first trained in the law in Paris, from 1729 to 1731; however, he left the law in 1734, living in poverty for 10 years. His life changed considerably when the publisher André Le Breton entrusted the editing of *The Encyclopaedia* to him (*The Encyclopaedia* is discussed in Chapter 1). The first volume appeared in 1751 but, due to the massive task and interruptions, the full 28 volumes were not completed until 1770.

Diderot met his mistress, Sophie Volland, in 1759. His philosophical work attracted the attention of Empress Catherine the Great of Russia, who bought his entire library in 1765 – providing him with a private fortune to live on – and then let him keep it as the librarian caretaker. She hospitably invited him to visit Russia in 1773.

DIDEROT



Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library

... .. 'If one sees something the way it is in nature, one is a philosophe.'

... .. 'The first step towards la philosophie is disbelief.'

... .. 'If you want me to believe in God you must make me touch him.'

... .. 'I am not happy anywhere unless I can enjoy my soul, can be myself, myself pure and simple.'

... .. 'We must have neither priests nor gods.'

... .. 'Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.'

Portrait of Denis Diderot, 1753, by Louis-Michel Van Loo (1707–71)

## PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS (1746)

Diderot's early works were almost immediately too radical for the authorities in France. His *Philosophical Thoughts* (1746) stated the theory of deism (which argues that reason alone tells us that God must exist) and rejected traditional religious beliefs and superstitions. Diderot emphasised the importance of reason and the direct observation of reality. His third theme was his defence of human passions, notably sexuality, as an essential part of human life. Throughout his life, he attacked the conventions of civilised societies on the grounds that they restricted and repressed the natural passions.

## A WORLD WITHOUT GOD

Diderot, like most of the *philosophes*, reflected intelligently on all issues, and related them to the philosophy of the Enlightenment thinkers. In his first major work, *A Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those who can See* (1749), he studied the phenomenon of blindness, investigating whether the lack of one of the five senses made any difference to a person's intellect and personality. Typically, Diderot went beyond the immediate question to broader issues. Until then, he had at least believed in deism; now, he concluded that God was not actually necessary for humans to achieve their goals. He stated that humans must know and understand the natural world, using science as their guide. This angered the authorities, and Diderot was imprisoned in the dungeons of the Vincennes fortress.

## THE SCIENCES

Diderot's most extraordinary work was done in scientific investigation. By pursuing experiments, observation and inductive reasoning, he came very close to making some of the great scientific breakthroughs of the 19th and 20th centuries, notably in the fields of molecular science, heredity and genetic theory. His *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature* (1754), for example, emphasised the importance of empiricism, observation and experimentation – following Francis Bacon's example – and anticipated modern theories of biological evolution.



**SOURCE 2.5** Diderot attacked the conventions of civilised societies on the grounds that they restricted and repressed the natural passions.

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In his *Dream of d'Alembert* (written in 1769, but not published until 1830), Diderot pushed his investigation of matter almost as far as the modern concept of molecular science, although he did not yet have the terms to describe it. He also ventured into embryology, speculating about the existence of what we now call genes and chromosomes, and sensing that birth abnormalities might be caused by the wrong linking of what he called 'threads' at the moment of conception of a child. He also conjectured about cells (which he called living molecules) and atoms (which he called dead molecules). He even anticipated Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's and Charles Darwin's theories regarding heredity and natural selection.

In his follow-up to this work, Diderot returned to the idea of 'monsters' (those with deformities), and pointed out that a monster cannot be against nature, because it is a part of nature: everything is. He concluded that a monster is an unusual departure from nature's norm, caused either by heredity or by a response to a particular environment. Finally, he studied the relationship between the brain and the body, and tried to explain why we have dreams. His conclusions about the nature of dreams influenced Sigmund Freud in the 20th century.

## A DEFENCE OF PHYSICAL PLEASURE AND AN ATTACK ON SOCIAL CONVENTIONS

One of Diderot's most powerful works was so radical that it was originally given only to close friends in handwritten copies, and was not published until 1796, well after his death. In 1771, Diderot read *Voyage Around the World*, the explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's account of his journey in the South Seas, and his observations of the people of Tahiti. Diderot was immediately interested by Bougainville's description of the sexual freedom of the Tahitians, which was really sexual liberty for men.



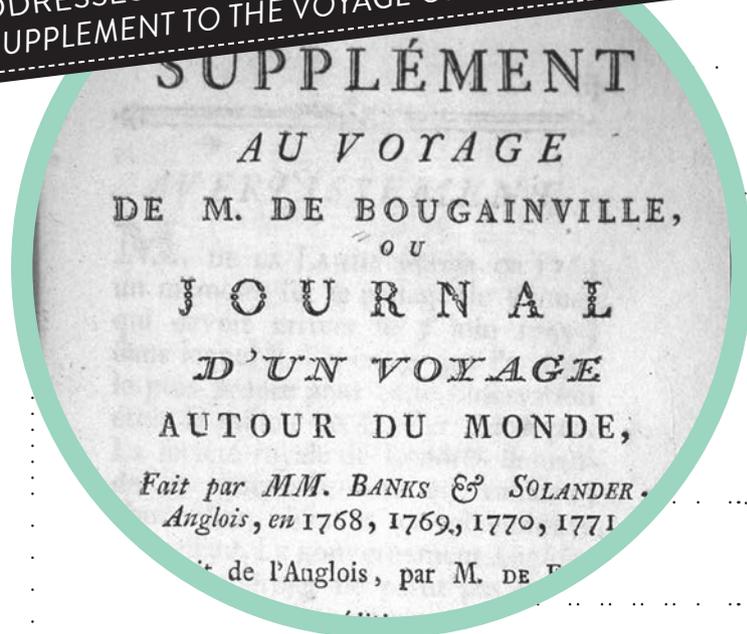
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**SOURCE 2.6** *Poedua (Poetua), Daughter of Oreo, Chief of Ulaietea, One of the Society Isles*, 1785, by John Webber (1750–93).

This painting is one of many images of women in the Pacific Islands, created by the official artists who accompanied explorers into the South Pacific. Webber saw this woman in 1777, when he accompanied Captain Cook's third voyage into the Pacific. For Europeans like Diderot, this person was not just a beautiful woman: she represented an entirely different system of social and sexual customs, which challenged traditional European values.

Diderot was inspired to write his own *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* in 1772. Bougainville had mentioned that, while the French interacted with the Tahitians, a very old man stood apart from the crowd, looking at the foreigners with real dislike. Diderot adopted this isolated figure and used him as a mouthpiece for his own feelings against conquest and slavery.

DIDEROT CREATED AN ELDERLY TAHITIAN MAN WHO ADDRESSES A HYPOTHETICAL BOUGAINVILLE IN SUPPLEMENT TO THE VOYAGE OF BOUGAINVILLE



**A LESSON ON MORALS:** *The elderly man tells the story of how the ship's chaplain was sent to stay in the house of a man called Orou, who immediately fed the priest then offered him his naked wife and daughters to sleep with. This led the elderly man to express Diderot's own ideas about religion and morality: 'I don't know about this thing that you call "religion", but I can only have a low opinion of it because it forbids you to partake of an innocent pleasure to which Nature, mistress of us all, invites you ... I am not asking you to take your moral standards back with you to your own country, but Orou, your host and your friend, begs you merely lend yourself to the morality of Tahiti. Is our moral code a better one or a worse one than your own?'*

Cited in Margaret C Jacob, *The Enlightenment. A Brief History with Documents*, Bedford/ St Martin's, Boston, 2001, pp. 161–6

**AN ATTACK ON THE EUROPEAN PROCESS OF CONQUERING AND CLAIMING LANDS:**

*'What they have written on this strip of metal [is] "This land belongs to us". And why? Because you set foot in it. If some day a Tahitian lands on your shores, and if he should engrave on one of your stones ... "This land belongs to the people of Tahiti", what would you think? You are stronger than we are!'*

**AN ATTACK ON SLAVERY:** *'You are neither god nor the devil – by what right then do you enslave people? ... You are not slave; you would suffer death rather than be enslaved, yet you want to make slaves of us!'*

**A DEFENCE OF UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS:**

*'This Tahitian, whom you want to treat as a chattel [object], as a dumb animal – this Tahitian is your brother. You are both children of Nature – what right do you have over him that he does not have over you?'*

**A DEFENCE OF THE TAHITIANS' HAPPY STATE OF NATURE:**

*'We are innocent and happy, and you can only spoil our happiness. We follow the pure instinct of nature, and you have tried to efface her imprint from our hearts. Here all things are for all. Our women and girls we possess in common ...'*

**A DEFENCE OF UNASHAMED**

**SEXUALITY:** *'A little while ago, the young Tahitian girl blissfully abandoned herself to the embraces of a Tahitian youth ... In our presence, without shame, in the centre of a throng of innocent Tahitians who danced and played the flute, she accepted the caresses of the young man whom her heart had marked out for her ... Now our enjoyments, formerly so sweet, are attended with guilt and terror. That man in black [a priest] has spoken to our young men, and I know not what he has said to our girls, but our youths are hesitant and our girls blush.'*

# Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) was an important and very individual *philosophe*. He was a deeply troubled man, driven by his suspicious mind to alienate most of his friends and supporters. After initially working with *The Encyclopaedia* team, he later quarrelled and broke with them. Nonetheless, he wrote three of the most important and powerful Enlightenment works, transforming modern European thought.

Rousseau was born in Geneva, into the Protestant family of a watchmaker, and suffered an unhappy childhood. His mother died soon after he was born, and he was brought up by his father for the first 10 years of his life. His father introduced him to novels of romance, which developed his interest in the human passions. He also discovered the political works of ancient Greece and Rome, which inspired his commitment to the republic as a form of government, and to freedom as its basic aim.

In 1722, Rousseau's family life was again disrupted when his father left Geneva to avoid imprisonment for trespass. Rousseau saw little of his father after then. He was brought up by various members of his family, and then apprenticed to an engraver. His employer was brutal, and he ran away. He spent the next 10 years searching for his path in life, and finally decided that he wanted to be a man of letters.

Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library



*'I hate books; they only teach us to talk about things we know nothing about.'*

*'Civilisation is a hopeless race to discover remedies for the evils it produces.'*

Portrait of Jean Jacques Rousseau by Maurice Quentin de la Tour (1704–88)

*'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.'*

*'People who know little are usually great talkers, while men who know much say little.'*

*'I prefer liberty with danger than peace with slavery.'*

*'The world of reality has its limits; the world of imagination is boundless.'*

*'I am not made like any of those I have seen. I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different.'*

*'To write a good love letter, you ought to begin without knowing what you mean to say, and to finish without knowing what you have written.'*

*'I would rather be a man of paradoxes than a man of prejudices.'*

*'Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Maker of the world, but degenerates once it gets into the hands of man.'*

In 1733, he followed a recommendation to introduce himself to Madame de Warens, who became his mentor and lover, and converted him to Catholicism. In 1742, he left her and made his way to Paris, where he met Denis Diderot and established his reputation in intellectual circles. He left Paris briefly to serve as secretary to the French ambassador in Venice, but – typically – quarrelled with him and returned to Paris in 1744. Here, he formed a relationship with a servant woman named Thérèse Levasseur, with whom he lived happily for a number of years. His decision to send their five children to an orphanage shortly after their births – supposedly for their own welfare – remains a controversial aspect of his life, particularly given his later defence of a natural and loving education for children.

In 1756, Rousseau moved into Diderot's circle of writers and lived in L'Hermitage, a house owned by Madame d'Épinay at Montmorency, north of Paris. He contributed an article on 'Political Economy' to *The Encyclopaedia*. Within a year, however, he quarrelled with these friends too – partly because of sexual politics, and partly because of intellectual disagreements – and moved to another house.

Rousseau wrote three great books about his vision for a more natural society. The first, his sentimental novel *The New Heloise* (1761), provided a new image of the 'natural' family. The second was *Émile* (1762), a revolutionary work about the education of children. The third was *The Social Contract* (1762), his masterpiece of political writing, which provided a new image of how society should be governed.

## ÉMILE

Rousseau wrote *Émile* between 1757 and 1760, and published it in 1762. Despite it being a deeply serious book, *Émile* became a popular bestseller, simply because its theories could be applied by any intelligent person to an aspect of their own personal life: the rearing of children. For example, Rousseau suggested that children are happier and healthier if they are not tied up in swaddling clothes, and if they are breastfed by their own mother rather than by a wet nurse (this is discussed further in Chapter 5). Thousands of men and women in the wealthy classes read these suggestions and changed the way they cared for their children. The book was also attractive because it was a hopeful work, promising that, with the right techniques, we might create a happier society and a new type of individual human being. Its tone was rational, humane and positive.

Rousseau's ideas were inspired by John Locke. Rousseau agreed with Locke that human beings are formed by their senses; that is, by what they can see, hear and feel. This being so, the process of education should focus on deliberately training the senses in order to form a certain sort of person. Rousseau went further than Locke in arguing that young children, infants, and even unborn babies, can all be 'formed' by deliberate education.

Rousseau believed that a child is born good, and is only made bad by having bad experiences. The opening sentence makes it clear that he is continuing his attack on civilisation as something that weakens people; it reads: 'Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man'. For this reason, he radically suggested that we actually need to protect 'good' children from social behaviour, even shielding them from books, avoiding literacy and giving them their first education through things in the real world.

THEORIES ON THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN FROM ROUSSEAU'S ÉMILE

Archives Charmet/The Bridgeman Art Library



**CREATE A 'NATURAL SOUL':** Children must not be influenced by society, and must be sheltered from social impulses such as vanity, the desire to dominate, greed and dishonesty.

**APPEAL TO THE SENSES:** Children should be allowed to learn by direct observation rather than from theories and books, because young people learn best from sensory input.

**NEGATIVE EDUCATION:** Children should be brought up in the countryside, far from city life, society and books.

**FREEDOM:** Children must be left free to form themselves by experience, and nature is the best teacher.

**PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT:** Children need moral upbringing more than science and technology: they must develop qualities of honesty and goodness.

**PRACTICALITY:** Children should learn practical information about the real world, because this is most useful in life.

**CHILDHOOD:** Children should not be treated like 'little adults', but treated according to the stage of life they are in. They should not be dressed in restrictive swaddling clothes, which harm their development.

**FOLLOW NATURAL DEVELOPMENT:** Children follow a natural course of development, which must be respected. You should not reason with a child before it has the ability to reason. Do not appeal to sensibility until the child has developed this quality.

**NATURAL BONDS:** Mothers should breast-feed their babies themselves, rather than giving them out to paid feeding nurses.

This illustration from the frontispiece of *Émile* uses a classical idea to explain the importance of education in forming a child. Homer's character Thetis dips her son Achilles into sacred water to make him indestructible, but she held him by the ankle, which remained his weak point.

*Émile* remains one of the most influential books on education ever written and is still read by modern educators and psychologists, although some of Rousseau's theories about children have been disproved by more recent research. In particular, many of his comments on gender have been criticised, especially by feminist historians.

**THE SOCIAL CONTRACT**

Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762) is the most famous example of Enlightenment political theory. Its main theme is that a sovereign government should represent the general will of all the people who make up what Rousseau called 'the social body'; that is, the nation. In political terms, this is called 'popular sovereignty'.

Rousseau's most important idea concerns the source of **sovereignty**. Previously, 'sovereignty' meant the king's authority. The king used his absolute power to create unity and stability in a society in which there were many groups and interests. As a result, people

**sovereignty**  
Power and authority in government

9780170243988

accepted that sovereignty – the power to rule – came from above. Rousseau reversed this, and argued that sovereignty came from below: from the people. He saw the state as an association of all its free citizens, agreeing to live together in freedom under the rule of laws obeyed by all.

### legitimacy

Lawfulness, genuineness or 'rightness'

Rousseau questioned the **legitimacy** of a form of government.

How do we know that a particular government has a *right* to rule us?

Rousseau first imagined people living in a natural state, like cavemen and cavewomen in prehistoric times. He believed that, at first, primitive people had no sense of law or government, and simply acted individually to meet their needs. (He was actually wrong on this point: he had evidently not read the works of the great naturalist Buffon, who had already discovered that even apes live and act in social groups and follow group rules.)

Second, Rousseau imagined the moment when these individuals surrendered some freedom to follow rules, cooperate and obey leaders. Although they gave up the freedom to do whatever they pleased, they made some gains. Did this mean that they had lost their freedom entirely? Not necessarily. People can still be 'free' if they remain a part of the sovereign group; that is, if they have representation in government.

### general will

Similar to the 'common good': whatever is best for the majority of the people

Next, Rousseau defined what he called the '**general will**', his most complicated – and often contradictory – idea. The general will is like the 'common good': whatever is best for the majority of the people. This can only occur when each citizen has been educated to give up his or her own personal interests in favour of doing what is best for everybody.

The general will also requires that a government – whatever its actual form – continues to do what the general will of the population demands. For Rousseau, the general will *came from* everybody in a society, and *applied to* everybody in a society. If this happened, the general will could express the common good of all people.

This part of his theory has attracted the most criticism. Historians today ask first whether a general will actually exists and, if it does, how do we know what it is? They wonder whether a society really is made up of individuals who just want to be free to do what they want. Is it possible that it is quite right and natural for people to have competing interests, and to do their best to achieve them?



**SOURCE 2.7** *Louis XV in Coronation Robes*, (studio of) Louis Michel van Loo (1707–71). Prior to Rousseau, 'sovereignty' meant the king's authority and absolute power. People accepted that sovereignty – the power to rule – came from above.

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## Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *The Social Contract* (1762)

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau first explained his theme:

Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer.

If I took into account only force, and the effects derived from it, I should say: 'As long as a people is compelled to obey, and obeys, it does well; as soon as it can shake off the yoke, and shakes it off, it does still better; for, regaining its liberty by the same right as took it away, either it is justified in resuming it, or there was no justification for those who took it away.' But the social order is a sacred right which is the basis of all other rights. Nevertheless, this right does not come from nature, and must therefore be founded on conventions. Before coming to that, I have to prove what I have just asserted.

Rousseau then speculated that the natural unit of the family was the first model for the idea of a society led by a ruler:

The most ancient of all societies, and the only one that is natural, is the family: and even so the children remain attached to the father only so long as they need him for their preservation. As soon as this need ceases, the natural bond is dissolved. The children, released from the obedience they owed to the father, and the father, released from the care he owed his children, return equally to independence. If they remain united, they continue so no longer naturally, but voluntarily; and the family itself is then maintained only by convention.

The family then may be called the first model of political societies: the ruler corresponds to the father, and the people to the children; and all, being born free and equal, alienate their liberty only for their own advantage. The whole difference is that, in the family, the love of the father for his children repays him for the care he takes of them, while, in the State, the pleasure of commanding takes the place of the love which the chief cannot have for the peoples under him.



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**SOURCE 2.8** Rousseau saw the family as the first model of political societies as illustrated in this 1791 painting of the family of Pierre-Jean de Bourcet by Charles-Paul de Landon (1760-1826).

*continued*

Rousseau concluded that people therefore put themselves under the authority of the ruler not because they respected kings or wanted to obey, but because they could see that they would obtain a greater benefit by obeying a single monarch:

I suppose men to have reached the point at which the obstacles in the way of their preservation in the state of nature show their power of resistance to be greater than the resources at the disposal of each individual for his maintenance in that state. That primitive condition can then subsist no longer; and the human race would perish unless it changed its manner of existence.

This sum of forces can arise only where several persons come together: but, as the force and liberty of each man are the chief instruments of his self-preservation, how can he pledge them without harming his own interests, and neglecting the care he owes to himself? This difficulty, in its bearing on my present subject, may be stated in the following terms: 'The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.' This is the fundamental problem of which the Social Contract provides the solution.

Finally, each man, in giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody; and as there is no associate over whom he does not acquire the same right as he yields others over himself, he gains an equivalent for everything he loses, and an increase of force for the preservation of what he has. If then we discard from the social compact what is not of its essence, we shall find that it reduces itself to the following terms: 'Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.'

## Some common misconceptions of Rousseau's theory

### 1 Did Rousseau invent the idea of social contract?

He did not. He was influenced by a large number of previous writings by John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Hugo Grotius (a Dutch legal expert, 1583–1645) and Samuel von Pufendorf (a German political thinker, 1632–94).

### 2 Did Rousseau think that people would be happier if they went back to being primitive savages?

Definitely not. He clearly stated that humanity cannot go backwards. Although he believed that people were happier before civilisation, he never suggested they could go back to an earlier state.

### 3 Did Rousseau's idea of the general will mean that he supported the idea of totalitarian government, of the sort created later by Hitler and Mussolini?

No, this is all urban mythology. The whole tone of Rousseau's writing is in favour of freedom, legal rights and democracy. The idea that Rousseau supported totalitarian government emerged because right-wing politicians singled out the concept of the general will and separated it from the context of Rousseau's commitment to republican freedom.

#### 4 Was Rousseau's *The Social Contract* so radical that it angered the government?

Apparently not. This work was certainly noticed when it was published, but it was not a bombshell that shook the government. In fact, Rousseau got into more trouble for his book *Émile*, with its radical theories on education, and he had to flee Paris to avoid arrest. Threatened by the University of the Sorbonne and by the Paris Parlement (High Court), he fled to Switzerland in 1762.

#### 5 Did Rousseau's *The Social Contract* cause the French Revolution?

Not directly. There were just 12 editions of the book shortly after its publication in 1762, and still relatively few until the outbreak of revolution in 1789. However, once the French Revolution occurred – for other reasons – it adopted *The Social Contract* as a sort of ‘Bible’ of political belief. It became the main basis for the French revolutionary ideal of popular sovereignty.



**SOURCE 2.9** A statue of Rousseau in the town of Ermenonville, which contains a park named after him

Wikimedia Commons/P. Poschadel.

## THE FINAL YEARS

By 1766, Rousseau was facing strong criticism from the Catholic Church and the Paris Parlement, and he fled to England. The English thinker David Hume generously offered him accommodation at his property at Wootton, Derbyshire, and even gained a government pension of £100 for him. Sadly, Rousseau had developed paranoia that was by this stage out of control, and he was haunted by the idea that Hume was part of a conspiracy with Diderot and the French thinkers to persecute him. He even proudly refused to use the money in his pension, arguing that he could not remain independent if he owed anything to Hume or to the British Government. After just 18 months, he turned his back on all his English friends and returned to France.

Rousseau stayed in Paris from 1770 to 1778, still refusing to draw on his English pension, and making a miserable living by copying sheets of music. In 1778, he found a new supporter in the Marquis de Girardin, who kindly gave him a house at Ermenonville in northern France.

Rousseau died in 1778. The posthumous publication of his *Confessions* in 1782 provided a frank and sometimes shocking insight into his intellectual, emotional and sexual life.

## *Conflicts between key thinkers*

As we have seen, the *philosophes* never had a single, unified set of beliefs or ideas, and they often disagreed fiercely on the big questions, such as Civilisation versus Nature, Reason versus Passions, and God versus Non-God. In this respect, intellectual conflict was not a *fault* in Enlightenment culture, but its defining feature and greatest *strength*.

The Enlightenment movement was carried by an unprecedented surge in discussion, debate and exchange. Out of this firestorm of ideas came important discoveries in modern philosophy, modern science and numerous disciplines, ranging from sociology to geology. Enlightenment debate was therefore fluid, dynamic and changeable; and if we simply examine its ideas in still-frame – each idea in isolation – we will miss the bigger picture.

The way that ideas and theories were further sharpened and developed was by interactions between the thinkers. These interactions could erupt into massive arguments, as they often did. All of Europe listened and joined in. Such flashpoints in intellectual history provide a ‘window’ that allows us to see deeply into the Enlightenment.

## SOCIETY VERSUS NATURE: ROUSSEAU VERSUS DIDEROT

One of the most famous philosophical disagreements of the Enlightenment was between Rousseau and Diderot. Rousseau became a friend and associate of Diderot in Paris in 1741. In 1749, while Diderot was imprisoned at Vincennes, he encouraged Rousseau to enter the essay competition run by the Academy of Dijon. Rousseau recorded that Diderot urged him to give flight to his ideas, and the result was his first *Discourse*. When *The Encyclopaedia* was launched in 1750, Rousseau in turn supported Diderot.

It was during his stay at L’Hermitage in Montmorency that Rousseau became entangled in an argument with Diderot and the other writers of *The Encyclopaedia*. In 1757, Rousseau quit the project and left L’Hermitage, complaining bitterly of a ‘plot’ against him by Diderot, Melchior Grimm, and Grimm’s lover, Madame d’Épinay, the owner of L’Hermitage.

One reason for the conflict was a purely intellectual matter: the issue of society. Rousseau’s strongest theory was that society was too refined, too civilised, too artificial. He looked to nature to try to find a better way of life.

Diderot disagreed entirely. For him, society was the basic structure in which we live. Unlike Rousseau, who worshipped nature, Diderot believed that nature could not offer us a structure within which to live. He thought that humans were naturally social animals, born to live and work together; and that the society around us is nothing less than the natural instincts of human beings, which have been worked upon by history, evolution and social laws. True, society may be corrupt, but it is necessary to us: far from trying to escape society, Diderot thought we needed to live within it and work to improve it.

Tensions grew in 1757, when Jean le Rond d’Alembert published his article on ‘Geneva’ in *The Encyclopaedia*. He criticised the Government of Geneva, which had banned theatres in the city because it considered actors to be immoral people. Encouraged by Voltaire, d’Alembert argued that if theatres were allowed, the citizens of Geneva would develop finer emotions, and foreigners would visit the city more. Rousseau, who saw himself as a critic of all the refinements of civilisation, lashed out with his *Letter to M. d’Alembert on Plays* (1758), arguing that the theatre damages public morals, because acting is based on false appearances and false characters. This was hypocritical, because Rousseau himself wrote plays and operas which were produced on stage.

A second reason for the conflict was personal: Rousseau was an unhappy, suspicious man, and quarrelled with all his friends over petty issues. When he wrote his *Confessions*, he tried to justify himself to the future, but his comments – ostensibly about Diderot – reveal far more about himself than his former friend.

“ I tenderly loved Diderot; I respected him sincerely, and I had absolute confidence in the same feelings from him. But, exasperated by his endless stubbornness to always contradict my tastes, my preferences, my way of life, everything that was solely my business; revolted to see a younger man than I try at all costs to control me like a child; repelled by the ease with which he made promises but never kept them; annoyed by so many meetings made but never attended ... my heart was heavy with all of these wrongs.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, Gallimard, Paris, 1963, vol. 2, Book IX, pp. 196–7

For his part, Diderot was annoyed that Rousseau had left Paris and gone to live a simple life in the countryside; and because he had deserted the band of *philosophes* and abandoned the hope of progress through reason.

## OPTIMISM VERSUS REALISM: ROUSSEAU VERSUS VOLTAIRE

Rousseau also clashed with the powerful Voltaire, over a philosophical question: the issue of Optimism versus Realism. One of the greatest debates during the Enlightenment was whether ‘all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds’ (Voltaire), or whether we have to admit that there is human suffering caused by wars, civil war, disease, natural disasters and poverty. If God is good, some asked, why would he have designed a world in which he allows so much suffering?

Voltaire had disliked Rousseau’s ideas from his *Second Discourse* (1754) onwards, and had written to him rudely.



Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 2.10** *Rousseau Quarrelling with Voltaire* c. 1760–70, artist unknown. The Enlightenment gained much of its energy from the processes of discussion, debate and disagreement. In some cases, debates flared up into quarrels, often carried out in print or in letters. Rousseau and Voltaire, for example, clashed on many points. This image misleadingly represents the intellectual disagreement between Rousseau and Voltaire as a physical fight. This never took place, since the two thinkers never met in person.

“ Sir, I have received your new book, written against the human race ... Never was so much intelligence used to make us stupid. While reading it, one longs to go on all fours. ”

Then, in 1755, a natural disaster occurred that challenged the way people saw the world. A devastating earthquake struck the city of Lisbon (Portugal) and killed possibly 100 000 people. This triggered debate across Europe as to whether everything was really good in the world. In philosophic terms, the problem was this: God is defined as being perfect, so why would God create a world that is not perfect? God is meant to be the loving father of humanity, so why would God allow thousands to suffer? The traditional Christian explanation – that God sends problems to test our souls – just did not answer these burning questions.

First, Voltaire wrote a poem arguing that there is evil in the world, and therefore not everything is perfect. Then Rousseau responded with the argument that Voltaire was questioning the essential goodness of God, which was then known as ‘providence’. Voltaire then countered with the philosophical tale of *Candide, or Optimism* (1759), where the young hero travels the world and sees so much human misery – in the form of wars, slavery – that he has to conclude that everything is not always for the best, and that needless human suffering does occur.

Rousseau finally wrote to Voltaire:

“ I do not love you, Sir; you have hurt me where I am most sensitive, me, your disciple and enthusiastic supporter ... You have alienated my fellow citizens from me ... you have made it impossible to live in my own city ... I hate you. ”

Voltaire probably did not reply to Rousseau’s letter, but he commented to a friend:

“ I have received a long letter from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He has gone quite mad. It is a pity. ”



## Chapter summary

To draw together everything you have learnt in this chapter, make your own study notes while the information is fresh in your mind. Using dot points and colour coding either on concept cards or in a computer-based document, note the following main points and add your own examples:

- + We refer to ‘the Enlightenment in France’ or ‘the Enlightenment in England’ to remind ourselves of the most basic fact: the Enlightenment was not the same thing everywhere. It varied greatly according to the political, social and economic systems of the country in which it was operating. Despite some common features, every ‘Enlightenment’ was quite different.
- + The Enlightenment in France was an opposition movement that criticised the absolute monarchy and the Catholic Church. It was, however, also a reform movement, and did not aim to create the revolution that occurred in 1789.
- + Montesquieu invented the technique of criticism by the ‘innocent outsider’ (*Persian Letters*) and suggested the political idea of the separation of powers (*The Spirit of the Laws*).
- + Voltaire invented the technique of ‘criticism through praise’ (*Letters Concerning the English Nation*) and published radical ideas disguised as dictionary definitions (*The Philosophical Dictionary*).
- + Rousseau published major theories on politics (*The Social Contract*) and the ‘natural’ education of children (*Émile*).

### Weblinks

Weblinks relevant to this chapter can be found at <http://nmh.nelsonnet.com.au/enlightenment>.

### Further resources

Philipp Blom, *Enlightening the World: Encyclopaedia, the Book that Changed the Course of History*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005

Philipp Blom, *A Wicked Company: The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment*, Basic Books, New York, 2010

Jeffrey Freedman, *Books without Borders in Enlightenment Europe*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2012

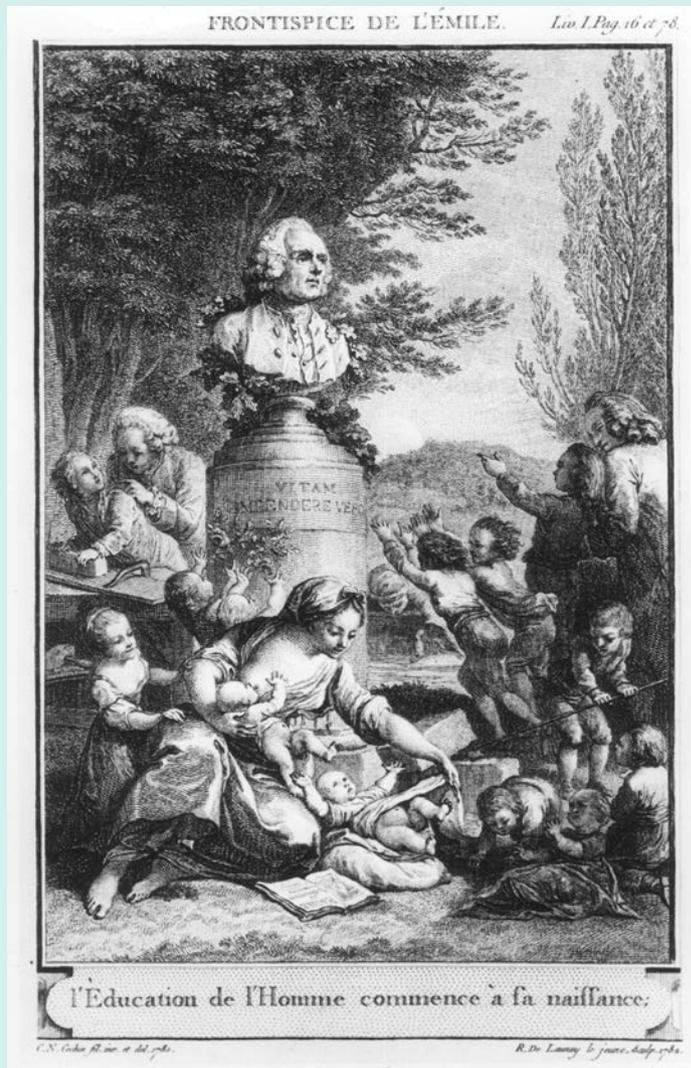
Sharon Stanley, *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014



## *Chapter review activities*

- 1 What were the political and social conditions in France that led to criticism of the monarchy?
- 2 How did Montesquieu teach people to criticise France without getting into trouble with the authorities?
- 3 What is the main argument of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*?
- 4 How did Voltaire learn to criticise France without getting into trouble?
- 5 How was Voltaire's *The Philosophical Dictionary* similar to Diderot's *Encyclopaedia*?
- 6 What were two radical, confronting ideas in Diderot's *Addendum to the Voyage of Bougainville*?
- 7 What was Rousseau's view of civilisation?
- 8 What radical suggestions did Rousseau make for the 'natural' education of children?
- 9 Why, according to Rousseau, did primitive people give up some freedom to obey a ruler?
- 10 What does Rousseau mean by the 'social contract'?
- 11 After reviewing the main ideas of Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, use the Internet to read the texts of the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (August 1789) and the *American Declaration of Independence* (1776). How many of Rousseau's key ideas were translated into reality in these key foundation documents of two great modern democracies? In your answer, be sure to quote phrases from the three key texts to prove your point. Conclude by evaluating (weighing up) just how much influence Rousseau had on these documents.
- 12 Carefully examine Source 2.11, which translates Rousseau's educational ideas into an image.
  - a What is the significance of the young mother who breastfeeds her baby?
  - b Why is the second baby, lying on the pillow, left in loose clothing and almost undressed?
  - c In two cases, fathers are shown with their sons. What is their role?
  - d One small boy is trying to move a heavy stone with a stick. Why would Rousseau have agreed with this dangerous activity?

- e Why is this education not happening in a schoolroom? Where have the children been sent to gain an education?
- f This young mother has been reading her copy of *Émile* (foreground). How would she explain the purpose of what she is doing here?
- 13 Using both book sources and the Internet, investigate the reasons for Rousseau's conflicts with other *philosophes*. In your answer, analyse the clash of actual ideas, but also explore Rousseau's difficult personality and the personal rivalries within the different groups.



**SOURCE 2.11** *The Education of a Man Starts at his Birth*, an engraving c. 1780, by Robert Delaunay (1749–1814), used as the frontispiece to *Émile*.



© Wolverhampton Art Gallery, West Midlands, UK/The Bridgeman Art Library

## CHAPTER THREE

# The Enlightenment beyond France

Other European countries had quite different conditions to those of France, which may be seen as the ‘typical’ home of the Enlightenment. In England, for example, the political system already included a parliament, and hence political discontent was not so fierce. Further, the Industrial Revolution there inspired a fascination with manufacturing and a strong desire to apply enlightened ideas to this field.

In Scotland, the different conditions created a special ‘Scottish’ form of enlightened thinking, with an emphasis on the practical over the theoretical, and a particular focus on the study of the ways in which human beings make societies. In the state of Prussia (now a part of modern Germany and Poland), Frederick II actually supported Enlightenment thought to strengthen his rule, and established policies of wide religious toleration. And in the Dutch Republic there was a tradition of tolerance of both religious and philosophical beliefs. The presence there of large numbers of Protestants who had fled religious persecution in other lands tended to give discussion a more radical quality, particularly in the criticism of religious intolerance and fanaticism.

In the American colonies rebellion was brewing, and Enlightenment thought helped the colonists think their way through the crisis. The constitutional debate with England about taxes created special concerns for the American ‘patriots’ who later led the American Revolution and become the first statesmen of the new country of the United States of America, as we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5.

◀ *An Allegory of Wisdom and Science*, 1798, by James Millar (c. 1735–1805)

### INQUIRY QUESTION

- + How did the political and social conditions in European countries affect the way the Enlightenment developed there?

## *The Enlightenment in England*

In England, the political situation was different to that in France in a number of important ways. First, the democratic political system, created by the Revolution of 1688, was relatively more tolerant of discussion, and so English thinkers did not feel the need to attack an oppressive government. Nor was the king's court as powerful, and so opinions could flow more freely.

Second, the economic system was sympathetic to toleration: England was a great trading nation, and its merchants understood the need to cooperate with people of other cultures and beliefs in order to do business with them.

Third, England was going through the process of technological invention known as the Industrial Revolution, in which there were major developments in areas such as coalmining, the use of steam to give massive power, the making of iron and steel, and the manufacture of textiles such as wool and cotton. English people were as fascinated with new ideas and the expanding world of science as anyone else in Europe; but in their case they were also fascinated to apply these ideas to the field of manufacturing.

### Reflecting the values of the Enlightenment in England through art

#### *An Allegory of Wisdom and Science* by James Millar, 1798

This painting (also on page 74) is an allegory, meaning that the painter is trying to explain a general idea by using human figures and objects to symbolise certain things. The young woman represents Wisdom, and the eager children represent Learning. The sculpture in the foreground symbolises the Arts, and the bell jar in the background represents the power of Science. Through the window, a hot-air balloon takes off, reminding us of the latest wonder: humanity's conquest of the air. There is a great feeling of excitement here: the message is that the arts and sciences can improve human life.



**SOURCE 3.1** *An Allegory of Wisdom and Science*, 1798, by James Millar (c. 1735–1805)

*continued*

continued



**SOURCE 3.2** *The Rules of the Soho Insurance Society, 1792, artist unknown*

### ***The Rules of the Soho Insurance Society***

This engraving is merely the front cover for an insurance company's rules, but it reflects the English Enlightenment's core values. The caption (centre, front) states 'From Art, Industry and Society, great blessings flow', meaning that the existing political and social system will produce the greatest human wellbeing possible. The hero is the industrialist Matthew Boulton (1728–1809) (seated, left of centre), and behind him is his famous factory at Soho, near Birmingham. In the front of the scene, we see at the right a cornucopia, or horn of plenty (meaning wealth and prosperity), and at the left a palette (meaning artistic activity), together with industrial cogs (meaning technology and science). The message is clear: there is no need, in England, to overthrow the government and the social system. Science, industry and the arts will progressively improve people's wellbeing.

Finally, England had already seen the birth of its most radical ideas in the previous century – the 17th – when writers such as Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, Isaac Newton and Johan Locke had published some of the most revolutionary ideas about the nature of knowledge in Western culture. Indeed, historian Kieron O'Hara argues that the English *philosophes* generally did not want to overthrow England's political and social system, citing Edmund Burke, who supported the American Revolution but criticised the French Revolution. O'Hara also mentions the great revolutionary thinker, Thomas Paine, whose radical ideas simply did not attract attention in England, and so went to the American colonies, where his political ideas and style of writing had a massive impact.

As a result, the English Enlightenment thinkers emphasised using science and reason to increase the wellbeing and happiness of people.

## THE LUNAR SOCIETY

In England, some of the most intense discussion of the use of science to improve industry, agriculture and human life took place in the many learned societies. Historian Jenny Uglow has written a detailed study of one of these societies – the Lunar Society – in her book, *The Lunar Men*. She writes:

“ They are a small, informal bunch who simply try to meet at each other’s houses on the Monday nearest to the full moon, to have light to ride home (hence the name) and like other clubs they drink and laugh and argue into the night. But the Lunar Men are different – together they nudge their whole society and culture over the threshold of the modern, tilting it irrevocably away from the old patterns of life towards the world we know today. ”

Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men*, Faber and Faber, London, 2002), p. xiii

Uglow explains that the meeting date of the Monday nearest the full moon was for practical reasons. As there were very few lights – and many robbers – on English roads, members could walk home safely by the light of the moon.

These men were charming eccentrics, who cheerfully described themselves as ‘lunarticks’. One of them was so fat that he had to cut an oval shape into his dining table to fit his belly, just so that he could reach his food! They were also enthusiasts: they were enormously excited by every new scientific discovery, seeing each as one more step towards the discovery of the rules of the natural world.

The informal membership of this society included many great, energetic geniuses of 18th-century England, such as the following.

- + Matthew Boulton (1728–1809), the great industrialist and inventor, was a leading figure.
- + The famous Richard Arkwright (1732–92) introduced new machines, such as the spinning frame, and created the way forward for mass-produced fabric.
- + Dr Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802) studied medicine, botany and education, and first sketched out theories of evolution that would be taken up by his grandson, Charles Darwin.
- + Thomas Day (1748–89) was more radical. He campaigned against the slave trade and supported both the American Revolution and the French Revolution.
- + Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744–1817) took up the cause of education for girls.



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**SOURCE 3.3** *Portrait of Richard Arkwright, 1789–90*, by Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–97). The great energy of the Lunar Society came from its combination of men of science and men of industry. For these people, there was no separation between the two fields: scientific theory translated into technological invention, which led to greater production, which generated greater wealth. This portrait celebrates the very practical genius of the industrial inventor Richard Arkwright.

- + Samuel Galton (1753–1832) discovered the basis of the seven colours of the spectrum. He supported the Lunar Society, but was later thrown out because his family made weapons.
- + James Keir (1735–1820) was the owner of a glassworks at Stourbridge. He, like Josiah Wedgwood (1730–95), the great pottery maker, was interested in science for new manufacturing production techniques.

## JOSEPH WRIGHT OF DERBY: THE PAINTER OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT IN ENGLAND

We are fortunate that the Lunar Society also included one of England's best painters, Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–97), who recorded many of the key actors and ideas of this exciting time. He is now considered the accredited painter of the Enlightenment in England and of the Industrial Revolution that accompanied it. Art historian Stephen Daniels argues, in his recent study *Joseph Wright*, that the painter was deeply engaged with most of the key thinkers of the Enlightenment in England, and his paintings accordingly reflect many of their ideas.



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**SOURCE 3.4** *A Philosopher giving that Lecture on the Orrery, in which a Lamp is put in Place of the Sun*, c. 1766, by Joseph Wright of Derby, (1734–97). This painting shows another aspect of the popular passion for science. Here, a learned society, probably the Lunar Society, gathers to listen to a lecture about the universe, in which the philosopher uses a device with a lamp to demonstrate the position of the planets in relation to the Sun.



National Gallery of Victoria

**SOURCE 3.5** *Self-portrait*, 1765–68, by Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–97). This self-portrait was painted when Wright was studying art in Rome. He has a mischievous face and a knowing smile, and is trying to see whether he has shocked us by dressing himself in the turban and costume of an Italian bandit.

This painting is held by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Interestingly, this gallery has an unusually rich collection of Wright's paintings, which were donated by his descendants, who immigrated to Australia.



The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 3.6** *Matlock Tor by Daylight*, c. 1778–80, by Joseph Wright of Derby. This painting shows the great rock formation at Matlock Tor Derbyshire. It is both picturesque, because it emphasises the great rock formation, and scientific, because it studies the structures of the rock.

Historian Jenny Uglow argues that Wright's landscapes reveal much about the new, scientific interest in the countryside. Progressive thinkers in England paid much more attention to understanding the physical structure of the world around them. One example of this trend was the surge of interest in the science we now know as geology. Uglow points out that interest in the origins and formation of our planet resulted in scientific studies such as John Whitehurst's *An Inquiry into the Original State and Formation of the Earth* (1778), which gave detailed diagrams of dramatic rock formations like Matlock Tor. At the same time, painters such as Joseph Wright of Derby painted scenes that showed a better understanding of the forces that has shaped the landscapes they saw.

## EDMUND BURKE

One major English thinker, Edmund Burke (1729–97), was moderate, even conservative, in his political thinking. Born into a poor Protestant family in Ireland, he studied in Dublin, trained in the law, then became a member of parliament in 1766. An independent and original thinker, he often took unusual positions. For example, he argued that a member of parliament might be the *representative* of the people who had elected him, but did not have to obediently *follow* what they advised; he was still responsible for using his own judgment when voting on laws and policies.

One of Burke's most powerful – and unusual – ideas was that the existing society was not necessarily wrong, and that individuals who questioned society

were not necessarily right. While the French *philosophes* felt that they were principled individuals standing up against a bad political system, Burke felt differently. Far from seeing society as ‘old’ or ‘wrong’, he saw it as the sum of many wise decisions made in the past; of thousands of acts by thousands of people over time. He argued that the society we live in and our political system have developed over hundreds of years, responding to challenges and difficulties by creating solutions. Thus the world we see around us now is the result of centuries of such responses.

Burke’s conclusion is inevitable: while we might be thrilled by the new theories of some brave, revolutionary thinker, no single person – no matter how radical and visionary – is adequate by themselves to think up a whole new social system to replace the one we now have, which has been formed by centuries of wisdom. This is why – in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) he criticised the great, visionary project of the French Revolution to create a new, fair society. He believed instead that each generation has been passed the care of society as it is, with a duty to hand it on safely to the next generation. Human beings are all imperfect, so they should not try to create a perfect society. Far better, he thought, to admit that humans have faults, and entrust government to men of good judgement who are used to exercising authority over people. In other words, he looked to England’s upper classes as the ‘natural’ rulers of the land.

Not everybody in modern democratic Australia would agree with Burke’s theories, even though they have become the foundations of conservative political theory. He nonetheless remains one of England’s greatest political thinkers, and his works are still studied as landmarks in the history of political thinking.



**SOURCE 3.7** *Sir Sampson Gideon and a Companion*, 1767, by Pompeo Batoni (1708–87), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia/Everard Studley Miller Bequest. Burke had approved of the ideals of the American revolutionaries, and yet deep down he believed that society is best ruled by wealthy and powerful people such as Sir Sampson Gideon, shown here in a formal portrait by Pompeo Batoni. His reason is that he believed that people who were used to exercising authority – like the aristocratic Sir Sampson – were the best equipped to rule the land.

## ANTHONY COLLINS: A LEADER OF THE FREETHINKERS

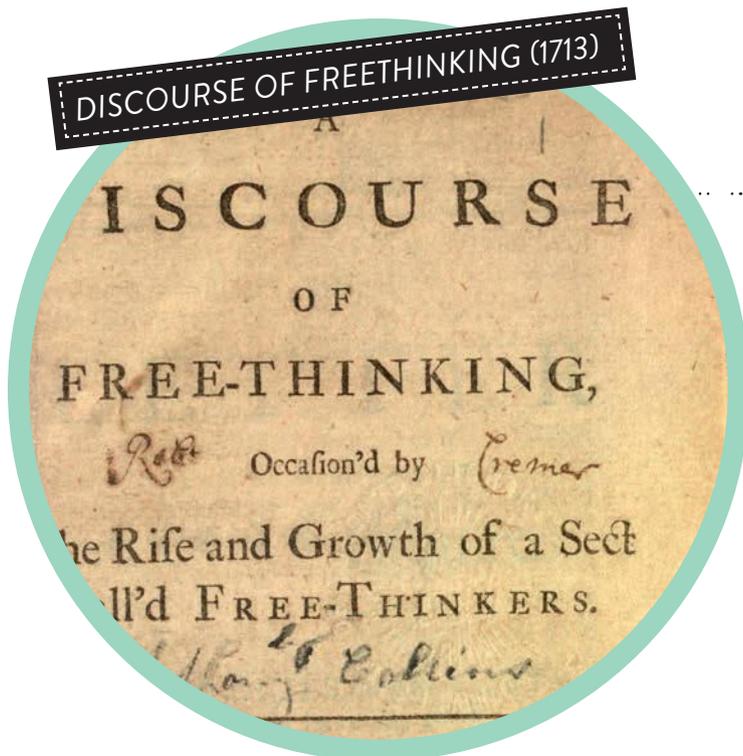
The Enlightenment in England did produce radical thinkers, some as extreme in their views as their French counterparts. One example is Anthony Collins (1676–1729), who is best known for his strong criticism of organised religion in his *Discourse of Freethinking* (1713).

The English tradition of freethinking, or freethought, began late in the 17th century, and argued that people can only understand the world around them by the direct observation of reality. As the name suggests, freethinking held that humans must be able to think for themselves, without being tied down by traditional knowledge, religious beliefs or authorities of any sort. Freethinkers rejected the authority of religious dogma published by the Church, and argued that we should not take the Christian Bible literally. Because they insisted upon observed reality, they rejected religious miracles, revelations, visions and other supernatural events, claiming that they could not be proven.

Collins' contemporaries assumed that he was an atheist or an agnostic, but he was neither: he was not rejecting God, simply traditional religious beliefs. He particularly attacked religion on the grounds that both priests and believers never arrived at one central religious truth.

Although Collins wrote in a polite, reasonable style, his arguments naturally angered and alarmed Church authorities, and his works provoked strong answers in print from High Churchmen of the Anglican Church.

Between 1750 and 1850, the Scottish capital of Edinburgh became what historian James Buchan has called 'a capital of the mind', with a gathering of brilliant thinkers such as the geologist James Hutton, the philosopher David Hume and the economist Adam Smith (who wrote the first real theory of economics: *The Wealth of Nations* (1776)). Like England, Scotland also had an active network of learned societies, including the Poker Club and the Select Society.



..... · 'Humans must not be denied the right to critically examine religious beliefs'

..... · 'Freethinking is acceptable to God and will work to abolish superstition'

..... · 'Men must critically examine all leaders and religions who speak of revelations, miracles, new beliefs, otherwise they cannot be sure which is true'



© City of Edinburgh Museums and Art Galleries, Scotland/The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 3.8** Edinburgh in the 18th century was a major centre of Enlightenment thought, as shown in this late 18th-century painting, *The Parliament Close and Public Figures of Edinburgh*, by an unknown artist.

## *The Enlightenment in Scotland*

While historians often focus on England and key cities such as London and Birmingham as centres of Enlightenment activity, other parts of Britain were also very important. Scotland in particular was a major centre of Enlightenment thought.

While these Scottish thinkers were inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment in Europe, they developed their own distinctive approach, preferring the practical over the theoretical, and placing enormous faith in reason and empirical investigation as the way to improve government, society and human beings themselves. The Enlightenment in Scotland was no offshoot of the European movement. It was a leading force, enjoying enormous international prestige. Voltaire famously said: ‘We look to Scotland for all our ideas in civilisation.’

The Scottish thinkers were especially interested in the study of the ways in which human beings make societies. The five greatest thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment – David Hume (1711–76), Adam Smith (1723–90), William Robertson (1721–93), Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) and John Millar (1735–1801) – focused on the study of social systems, creating the origins of the modern subject of sociology. They believed that humans are generally good and keen to cooperate, and that they form societies not out of fear, but because these are the best way to live. They also believed that, for the same reasons, human societies develop and improve over time. More so than the French, they firmly believe that people want to live peacefully and harmoniously together.



© The Hunterian, University of Glasgow 2014

**SOURCE 3.9** *Portrait of Francis Hutcheson, c. 1740–45, by Allan Ramsay (1713–84).* This portrait shows the profound thinker and inspiring, ‘never to be forgotten’ teacher wearing his academic gown. He is holding a book by the ancient Roman author Cicero.



© Christie's Images/The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 3.10** *Portrait of Dr James Hutton, Seated Three-Quarter Length in a Brown Jacket and Breeches and White Stock, a Pile of Geological Specimens on the Table Beside Him by Sir Henry Raeburn (1756–1823).* James Hutton was crucial to the development of modern geology because he correctly saw that rock formations carry evidence of massive changes over vast periods of time. He rejected the existing belief that the Earth was only a few thousand years old, and began the process of discovering its evolution over many millions of years.

## FRANCIS HUTCHESON: EMPIRICISM AND SCIENTIFIC METHOD

Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) was born in Ireland but studied and taught in Scotland. He taught philosophy at the University of Glasgow (1729–46), and helped spread Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton’s scientific method, with its emphasis on experimentation, direct observation and evidence.

Hutcheson was a wonderful teacher: his student Adam Smith described him glowingly as ‘never to be forgotten’. Hutcheson expressed perfectly the Enlightenment belief that the main task of reason and science is to increase human wellbeing, famously commenting that their role was to ‘produce the greatest good for the greatest numbers’. Whatever produced the greatest happiness was for him, by definition, ‘good’.

In religious terms, he startled his contemporaries by arguing that, in addition to the five senses, humans have additional in-built senses, such as the sense of beauty, the sense of the absurd and the sense of morality. In his *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations upon the Moral Sense* (1728), he argued that we all have our own moral sense through which we can decide how to act in an ethical way. People were shocked when he said that this moral sense can exist without an understanding of God.

## JAMES HUTTON: THE BIRTH OF MODERN GEOLOGY

James Hutton (1726–97) pioneered the science of the Earth, which we now call geology. He became fascinated by rock formations in Berwickshire, and eagerly studied new theories with other experts at the University of Edinburgh. He examined cliffs on the coast, and noticed that the successive exposed layers of rock were not all horizontal, and that some had been turned vertically. He guessed, correctly, that the Earth had not been made in one single event, as the Bible tells us, but that there were several stages in its formation. These were marked by violent episodes, which disrupted the lie of the rocks, followed by periods when more sediment was laid down by the sea to create new horizontal layers. He also noticed fossils of sea creatures encased in rock that were now on the tops of mountains. Instead of concluding that a gigantic flood must have covered the mountains, he wondered whether these rocks had originally been a seabed and were lifted high by gigantic forces that could literally shape mountains.

In 1786, he convinced scientists that rock formations documented a long, slow development over millions of years; and by 1788 he had published his conclusions with the Royal Society of Edinburgh. In so doing, he shocked existing experts, who still believed that one major event – a catastrophic flood – had created all the rocks of the Earth at once. He upset their sense of time because his findings challenged their idea that the Earth was just several thousand years old. Although he never said how old the Earth was, his principle that it must be very old indeed to allow



Alamy© Andrew Ward

**SOURCE 3.11** 'Hutton's Unconformity' is the name given to geological phenomena identified by Hutton, where two different types of rock formations – created at different times and by different forces – adjoin. The one pictured is on the Isle of Arran.

such massive changes touched off the process by which later scientists dated the planet first to tens of thousands, then to hundreds of thousands, then to millions of years. The Church criticised Hutton for these conclusions, because it was still teaching that the Earth was 6000 old.

Hutton also 'discovered' rain by explaining how warm air holds vapour and, when cooled, releases rain.

## DAVID HUME: THE BIRTH OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

David Hume (1711–76) is often regarded as one of the greatest thinkers in Western philosophy; indeed, historian Charlotte Randall judges him to be 'the most important philosopher ever to write in English'. His ideas inspired Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Charles Darwin and the German thinker Immanuel Kant.

Hume was certainly one of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment in Scotland, and addressed all the key issues raised by the other European *philosophes*. Like them, he was a sceptic who questioned all existing forms of knowledge and insisted that we can only be sure of a fact by direct observation of the world.

Hume is famous for his ability to make enlightened thinking even more practical than it was in France, by focusing on the nature of human knowledge and understanding, and on the importance of evidence, experimentation, observation, real experience and the understanding of **causality**. This made him one of the most important theorists of the modern scientific method we know today.

Hume was born in Edinburgh in 1711, and quickly proved to be a precocious boy; his mother sent him to the University of Edinburgh at the age of 11. There, he studied ancient and modern philosophy, mathematics and natural science. His reading of the ancient Roman author Cicero inspired him to become a scholar and philosopher. Lacking the wealth necessary for further formal study, however, he moved to France where the cost of living was lower. He lived there for three years, eagerly reading the works of the French *philosophes*.

### causality

How one event causes another to happen



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**SOURCE 3.12** *David Hume in Paris, 1764*, by Louis Carrogis (1717–1806). This painting shows Hume during his stay in Paris (1763–65), when he worked as Secretary to the British Ambassador. Parisian society adored him as much for his great intellect as for his gentle and generous personality.

## A ‘science of human nature’

Hume was only 26 years old when he completed one of the most revolutionary books in Western philosophy, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (published 1739–40), which he wrote during his years in France (1734–37). This was Hume’s response to John Locke’s earlier *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). Locke’s most important argument was that humans do not have one fixed idea of themselves, but a changing and developing network of impressions of their identity. Hume went beyond Locke, however, by suggesting that we can apply scientific reasoning to moral and ethical issues. He argued that we should create a ‘science of man’, using scientific reasoning to understand human nature itself. To do this, we would have to understand the human mind itself.

## A belief in an in-built moral sense

Like many of the Scottish thinkers, Hume believed that people are essentially good, contradicting the Christian belief that people are essentially bad. In his *Essays Moral and Political* (1741–42), he stated that a sense of right and wrong does not come from God, via the Church and its priests; instead, he said, *all* people have their *own* deep sense of morality. Good moral behaviour comes partly from our reason, because we have to be able to say *why* something is right or wrong. Our moral sense also comes

from our emotions or feelings, because we often *feel* that something is wrong and we feel bad about doing it. Our rational mind is influenced by our emotions, and we tend instinctively to do the right thing. For Hume, this was very important: he saw this essential goodness or ‘benevolence’ as crucial to the peacefulness and progress of human society.

## An attack on miracles

In 1748, Hume launched his attack on established religion and, like many thinkers, he focused on an obvious target: the reliance on miracles to increase people’s Christian faith. His *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) included the famous section ‘Of Miracles’, in which he argued that the evidence available to us about the nature of the physical world is much stronger than the evidence available about miracles, which defy all the known rules of reality.

## The existence of God

Hume addressed the question of the existence of God in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1777). He concluded that there is enough evidence to think that the universe is so well-ordered that it must have been designed by God. Like others, however, he thought of God as the ‘engineer’ of the universe, but could not believe that he was a loving father of humanity. Hume believed that the rational order visible in the universe was similar to the rational mind that God had given human beings.

## Political ideas

The work that had most impact in Europe was Hume's *Political Discourses* (1752), which was translated into French. In this work, Hume accepted Locke's idea of the contractual nature of government and, with it, the idea that all human beings have natural rights. Later, he changed his position and, in *Of the Origin of Government* (1777), he argued that government developed from the family unit in order to deliver order and justice. He still believed that a government's powers must be limited by the principle of personal liberty.

Hume had also explored this theme in his *History of Great Britain* (published 1754–57). His analysis of the reigns of the Stuart Kings was more than just a story: it explained how England's present system of government had developed from the moment when the English people first challenged the authority of kings.

## The problem of knowledge: the black swan

Hume took the idea of scepticism to an extreme point, suggesting that it might never be possible to be completely sure of anything at all. He explained his view by referring to the then recent example of the black swan.

Until the exploration of Australia, Europeans had only seen white swans, and had concluded that all swans must be white. Hume argued that we might observe a hundred swans, all of them white, but this does not mean we can be sure that the 101st swan



Dreamstime © Grahammoore999

**SOURCE 3.13** Hume argued that we might observe a hundred swans, all of them white, but this does not mean we can be sure that the 101st swan will also be white.

will also be white; just because all *known* swans are white, this does not mean that all swans *are* white. In this case, all existing 'certain' knowledge had been swept away when the Dutch explorer Antonie Caen first reported having seen black swans in Shark Bay, Australia, in 1636. Later explorers, such as Nicholas Baudin in 1804, were to actually bring back examples of these birds as proof.

## Lack of academic recognition

Curiously, this influential thinker never enjoyed the academic prestige he deserved. He was repeatedly denied professorships in Scotland's universities, and had to support himself by diplomatic work and librarianship. The Scottish Church declared him an atheist, while the Catholic Church banned all his works from 1761 until 1966.

Hume's works did contain radical ideas that continue to confront people even today. His *Of Suicide* argued, against Christian belief, that suicide might sometimes be morally acceptable (he wrote this work in 1755, but did not dare to publish in his own lifetime; it finally appeared in 1783). Likewise, his radical *Of the Immortality of the Soul* (also written in 1755 and published in 1783) rejected the Christian belief that a soul lives on after death.

# *The Enlightenment in the German states*

Before the modern country of Germany was created in 1871, there were a number of Germanic states of varying size, each ruled by its own king or prince. Some hosted significant Enlightenment activity. One of the most famous – but controversial – enlightened rulers was King Frederick II of Prussia, who became known as Frederick the Great.

## FREDERICK THE GREAT

Frederick (1712–86) ruled the powerful German state of Prussia from 1740 until his death. He was called Frederick the Great for his genius in military organisation and warfare. Curiously, his childhood interests were classical literature, poetry, philosophy and music. His father, Frederick William I, ruled Prussia – and his own family – strictly. He insisted that his son not be educated with royal pomp and splendour, but that he be given an ordinary person's practical and religious education by a trusted French tutor, Madame de Montbail.

Frederick secretly pursued his passion for literature, and his tutor helped him collect a library of 3000 books of modern literature, classical literature and philosophy. Speaking French fluently, Frederick could read the French *philosophes'* key works. Later, in 1730, the 18-year-old boy tried to flee to England with his friend Hans von Katte. They were captured and brought back by Frederick's enraged father, who made his son watch his friend's execution by beheading as punishment. Frederick was imprisoned in the Kustrin military fortress, and given lessons in political and military administration. He moved to Berlin in 1732 and then to Rheinsberg, where he spent his happiest years surrounded by a group of musicians and artists, devoting himself to literature, drama and music. This period ended when he became King of Prussia in 1740.

Now living in the royal palace of Sans-Souci near Berlin, Frederick, as King, could offer important **patronage** to musicians and artists. A Freemason since 1738, he corresponded with the

### patronage

When a person provides support, in the form of encouragement, money or even lodgings, to a writer, artist or musician



**SOURCE 3.14** *Frederick II as King*, by Antoine Pesne (1683–1747)

The Bridgeman Art Library

French *philosophes*; the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe praised his government; and Johann Sebastian Bach wrote music for him. Frederick improved the existing Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin, instructing that its main focus should be philosophy and that its official language for publishing should be French. He invited French thinkers such as Jean le Rond d'Alembert, Pierre-Louis de Maupertuis and Étienne de Condillac to Berlin.

### Frederick and Voltaire

Frederick attracted the great Voltaire to his court (1750–53), and showered him with favours. King Louis XV of France never liked Voltaire, and was relieved when the radical thinker left France for Prussia. Frederick gave Voltaire the prestigious rank of Chamberlain, the honour of the Order of Merit, a payment of 29 000 francs per year, and even a pension for his niece. Voltaire's only obligation was to give Frederick an hour's lesson in French each day, and to edit the poems the King wrote in French. He could avoid formal dinners and the company of powerful nobles and generals, but enjoy 'philosophic dinners', when thinkers and writers gathered in the King's private rooms.

Voltaire's stay at Sans-Souci was not all positive, however: there was bitter personal rivalry between him and Malpertuis, Director of Frederick's Academy. When Maupertuis unfairly dismissed a member of the Academy, Voltaire stepped in and wrote a ferocious satire on Maupertuis, *The Diatribe of Dr Akakia* (1752). It was so savagely funny that it became an instant hit, selling 6000 copies in Paris in one day. Frederick took this as a personal insult and was enraged. Voltaire, for his part, disliked Frederick's teasing manner towards him, and there were also some unpleasant questions about Voltaire's financial dealings in Prussia. Tension turned to conflict. Frederick said that he would host Voltaire for one more year: long enough to squeeze him like an orange, then 'throw away the skin'; Voltaire replied that he hated correcting Frederick's poems, which he likened to washing dirty clothing. Voltaire finally left Berlin angry and disappointed with Frederick; he wrote sadly: 'I see clearly that the orange has been squeezed: it is time to think of saving the skin.' He was not fast enough: after he left Berlin, Frederick had him arrested and imprisoned for six weeks. Later in life, they resumed their friendship in letters, in which Frederick expressed great respect for Voltaire, and Voltaire great fondness for the King.

Nonetheless, Frederick read the works of the *philosophes*, and adopted their ideas for his campaign to modernise the government and the armed forces of his kingdom. Using Voltaire's *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763), he passed effective laws to create real religious tolerance, agreeing with Voltaire that religion was a cause of fanaticism and crimes against humanity. Historian Dorinda



**SOURCE 3.15** The music room in Frederick's royal palace at Sans-Souci, near Berlin



Mary Evans Picture Library/BeBa/berfoto

**SOURCE 3.16** This image, *Voltaire with Frederick II in the Study at Sans-Souci*, was first painted by Charles Monsiau, then engraved by PC Baquoy. It is the classic image of the *philosophe* guiding a monarch who is willing to be enlightened. The image is useful in so far as it allows us to visualise the study of the monarch and the conditions in which Voltaire worked. Its limitations are that it does not show the tensions between the two men – which ruined their intellectual relationship – and the fact that Frederick studied French culture but ignored his own German culture.

Outram reminds us that enacting such laws was much more difficult than it appears. European monarchies claimed authority from the support of an ‘official’ church, which in Prussia was the Lutheran Church. Frederick supported this church as the main religion of his state, but was himself an atheist. People questioned how a Protestant subject could be loyal to an atheist king.

In nearby Austria, Queen Maria Theresa expelled thousands of Protestants from the region of Bohemia to demonstrate that she was a Catholic ruler of a Catholic state. Outram argues that Frederick II of Prussia was remarkable in doing the opposite: once in power in 1740, he ‘established policies of wide religious toleration within his kingdom’.<sup>1</sup> He stated: ‘All must be tolerated ... here everyone must be allowed to choose his own road to salvation.’<sup>2</sup>

## FREDERICK II AS AN ENLIGHTENED MONARCH?

We should not exaggerate Frederick’s achievements: his toleration had limits. In fact his contemporaries, like later historians, remain divided about his real achievements. The German *philosophe*, Gotthold Lessing (1729–81), for example, believed strongly in religious toleration and freedom of thought, criticising the use of miracles – which cannot be examined – to prove the existence of God. Having lived in Prussia for nearly 30 years, he observed that while Frederick had created some religious tolerance, he had not created more general political freedoms.

Recent historians are more positive about Frederick’s ‘enlightened’ policies. Dorinda Outram says that while Frederick denied full toleration to Jews and some of his writings expressed anti-Semitism, he did decree a liberal *General Privilege and Regulation for the Jews* in 1750. This granted them significant rights, including the right to be tried according to Jewish law, and to establish their own schools, synagogues and cemeteries.

*continued*

continued

Outram notes that historians also debate whether Frederick pursued toleration out of conviction or practicality. He understood the *philosophes*' arguments for religious toleration, but he also aimed to strengthen Prussia's economy, industry and trade, and so hoped to import skilled workers and professionals of other religions. For example, when Queen Maria Theresa of Austria expelled Protestant workers from Bohemia, this provided a good opportunity for Frederick to quickly acquire a skilled workforce.

Another historian, CBA Behrens, compared the political situation in France and Prussia and discovered that the conditions were very different, meaning that the development of Enlightenment thought was also different. In Prussia, the Enlightenment was 'the ideology of the King himself', taught by university intellectuals such as Christian Wolff (1679–1754), who supported absolute monarchy. Thus:

the Enlightenment as understood by Frederick, in so far as it was concerned with political and social affairs, was not, as in France, an ideology of protest, but the official ideology taught in the universities and ... accepted by the bulk of educated people.<sup>3</sup>

Behrens observed that, while the Prussian Government was judged to be ruling for the general good of its people, it was all-powerful. The government demanded obedience, and the people obeyed.

Although Frederick made some policy mistakes, in general 'his achievements seemed by far to outweigh his faults'. Frederick disliked political ideas such as democratic representation and universal human rights, but he succeeded in turning Enlightenment ideals into reality, and using them to unify his country.

## GOTTFRIED WILHELM LEIBNIZ

Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) was an important founder of Enlightenment thought in the German states. He still commands respect for the sheer range and importance of his discoveries. He studied at the great German universities of Leipzig, Jena and Altdorf, and specialised in philosophy, mathematics and law. He was so brilliant that he was offered a professorship at the age of 21. Instead, he chose to work as the personal assistant to Baron von Boyneburg in Frankfurt, which gave him time to pursue his wide interests in mathematics, diplomacy, science, law and even poetry. Leibniz made some astounding discoveries, suggesting, for example, that fossils were the remains of once-living creatures.



De Agostini Picture Library/The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 3.17** Portrait of Gottfried Leibniz, German philosopher and scientist



Shutterstock/andreiu88

**SOURCE 3.18** Leibniz cited the rainbow as an example of something in the natural world that is not physically real, but which does exist.

In philosophy, Leibniz's main idea was the 'principle of sufficient reason', which holds that every fact has a reason for being what it is. The whole world is constructed on reason, and so reason can be used to understand the world. Leibniz admitted, however, the 'theory of well-founded phenomena', which means that there are things in the natural world that are not physically real, but which do exist. He gave the example of the rainbow: there is not in fact a solid, coloured arc in the sky; the phenomenon is created by forces in nature, and we experience it as a rainbow, even though we cannot touch it. It is not one person's hallucination, because everybody sees it.

Leibniz is also famous – but misunderstood – for his theory that we live in the 'best of all possible worlds'. His so-called 'optimism' was based on his argument that God is perfect, and therefore cannot have created an imperfect world.

Leibniz made remarkable discoveries in mathematics, and is still regarded as one of the great pioneers of mathematical logic. For example, he discovered the technique of infinitesimal analysis by himself – possibly even before the famous Isaac Newton did. Unfortunately, he was a disorganised author, and often lost work or forgot to publish it.

Finally, Leibniz made important discoveries in physics. He guessed the nature of what we now call kinetic energy – everything that moves has energy, and as its speed increases so does its mass, giving it greater energy – which he named '*vis viva*', or 'the living force'.

Leibniz won new prestige from the father of Frederick the Great, King Frederick I of Prussia, and enjoyed the patronage of the Queen, Sophia Charlotte. She supported his idea of founding the German Academy of Sciences in Berlin, which was opened in 1700.

Leibniz is often called 'the philosopher's philosopher'. This has a double sense. It means that some of his works are so complicated that only professional philosophers can understand them. It also means that his works had enormous influence over generations of philosophers; in fact, his ideas were only understood fully in the 20th century.

## CHRISTIAN WOLFF

The pioneering work of Leibniz was carried forward by Christian Wolff (1679–1754), who wrote books on almost every major question raised by the Enlightenment. He is regarded as a founder of the Enlightenment in the German states.

Wolff focused on economic and public administration: two areas of importance to the modernisation of the state of Prussia. He saw philosophers as rational advisors to government officials, and universities as places where officials could be trained for the tasks of government.

Wolff studied mathematics, physics and philosophy at the University of Jena. He then progressed through the University of Leipzig and became a professor at the University of Halle. By this stage, his emphasis on reason and rationality was challenging the Lutheran Church. Like his British and French colleagues, Wolff claimed that religious beliefs must be based on reason and mathematical accuracy. Like Voltaire, he criticised his religious enemies

by writing praise of a different religion in *The Practical Philosophy of the Chinese* (1721). For Wolff, China's strong social code, Confucianism (based on the teachings of the scholar Confucius), provided an example of a complete moral code and system of values strong enough to allow millions of people to structure their entire lives and to conduct their behaviour. To Wolff, it proved that human beings can create their own moral systems, and live by them, without having to be taught morals by an official church or established religion. This, concluded Wolff to a packed lecture theatre of more than a thousand admiring students in 1721, demonstrates how human beings can use reason alone, free of any religious superstitions, to create a totally adequate moral system. This text was translated into English in 1750, and caused a sensation when it was published outside Germany.

Admittedly, Wolff's enemies in the Lutheran Church had the last word, because they convinced King Frederick I of Prussia that Wolff was undercutting religion and law. The King ordered him to leave the state of Prussia within 48 hours or be executed. Wolff found refuge at the University of Marburg, in Hesse. He became an intellectual celebrity: his flight from Prussia was so dramatic that most of educated Europe began debating his ideas, causing a flood of letters, reviews and books – some defending his ideas, some condemning them.

Wolff's fortunes changed when Prussia's Crown Prince, Frederick (later Frederick II, 'the Great'), showed interest in his work. First, Frederick ordered Wolff's book *Logic, or Reflections on the Strength of Human Reasoning* (1736) to be translated from German into French and sent to Voltaire for comment. When he became King in 1740, Frederick tried to attract Wolff to his Prussian Academy. Wolff finally accepted a position as Chancellor of the University of Halle, and became a respected and wealthy man.



**SOURCE 3.19** Portrait of Christian Wolff by Johann Georg Wille



**SOURCE 3.20** For Wolff, China's strong social code, Confucianism, proved that human beings can create their own moral systems, and live by them, without having to be taught morals by an official church or established religion.

Like his master, Wolff was authoritarian, and believed in the authority of the ruler and the state. He taught Frederick's key belief – that the state was all-powerful, and that its main purposes were to create stability and wealth, and to enhance the wellbeing of all citizens. The government, therefore, had the right to interfere in every aspect of the nation's life, and in every aspect of an individual's life.

Wolff's book *Politik* was an instruction manual on the science of government. Wolff readily accepted the contemporary belief in the contractual basis of government, but gave it a very Prussian slant. He argued that we can tell by simple reason that people only formed a government in order to gain security, safety and progress towards general wellbeing. The purpose of a government is therefore to become what Wolff called a 'welfare state', meaning a government that creates wellbeing for everybody.

Wolff's teaching gave rise to a group of followers known as the 'Wolffians', who were the first named, distinct group in German philosophy. He is also credited with the decision to publish some of his works in his native German, instead of the Latin that most thinkers had used until then. By doing so, he made German a language capable of discussing philosophical matters, with the correct philosophical vocabulary and terminology.

## MOSES MENDELSSOHN: A LEADER OF THE JEWISH ENLIGHTENMENT IN PRUSSIA

Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86) was one of Germany's most brilliant scholars of the Jewish faith, with a profound expertise on the writings of the Talmud. While he remained a devoted practising Jew, he found the Enlightenment a vehicle for thinking about the problems faced by people of his own religion, notably the anti-semitism that often led to prejudice and victimisation. He was helped by Frederick the Great's religious tolerance, which allowed him to form his own intellectual circle and to publish radical ideas of freedom of conscience. Frederick gave Mendelssohn the title of 'Jew under extraordinary protection'.

Mendelssohn was inspired by the *philosophes'* demands for tolerance and freedom of worship, and their attack on religious superstition and fanaticism. Rather than attack the Christian Church for its intolerance of other religions, he focused on a defence of the rights of the Jewish people. He argued that Jews were not just good citizens, but excellent citizens, because they lived by a strict code of religious laws defining their behaviour. He believed that Jews should enjoy the same 'universal' rights as all other human beings, including freedom of conscience and worship. He insisted that, in any country, government was responsible for ensuring that all religious groups, including Jews, had the same civil rights as other citizens. His most radical idea was that if a state could not or would not guarantee the natural rights of all religious groups, then clearly the state was in the wrong and should be reformed.



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**SOURCE 3.21** Portrait of Moses Mendelssohn by Anton Graff (1736–1813). Mendelssohn was one of the first Jews to engage in the debates of the Enlightenment.

### *Jerusalem: Or On Religious Power and Judaism (1783)*

In 1783, Mendelssohn wrote *Jerusalem: Or On Religious Power and Judaism*, which demanded that governments must ensure that all citizens enjoy the same rights. He argued that no government has the right to control what people believed or how they worshipped. He agreed with John Locke (in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689)) that a government should not concern itself with people's private religious beliefs, since these never interfered with the wellbeing of all citizens. Mendelssohn did, however, admit that governments may have to force their citizens to do the right thing, saying that where the size of the state 'makes it impossible to govern by convictions alone, [then] the state will have to resort to public measures, coercive laws, punishments of crime, and rewards of merit'.

Mendelssohn concluded that governments have the right to force their people to obey, because of the social contract (see Chapter 2), but that religions should not have this power. For example, he argued that in original Judaism, the Church did not have the power to excommunicate people, and that this power had only been introduced later, following the example of Christianity. He concluded: 'The state has *physical power* and uses it when necessary; the power of religion is *love and beneficence*'.

## *The Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic*

The Dutch Republic was another important site of Enlightenment thought and, once again, local conditions created a distinct form of enlightened culture. The heart of modern Holland was created in 1581, when a number of Dutch provinces declared their independence from Spanish rule. Later, the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands was established (1588), and formally recognised by the Spanish (1648).

During the 17th century, the Dutch Republic became a trading superpower, and enjoyed its 'Golden Age' in terms of society, economics and culture. Possessing the largest merchant fleet at that time, the republic easily dominated global trade routes.

In the Dutch Republic, political and social conditions made truly radical thought and discussion possible. In matters of religion there was a tradition of toleration. When the provinces first formed a defensive union in 1579, their agreement, the Treaty of Utrecht, included the *Decree of Toleration*, which stated that all individuals were free to follow their own religious beliefs, and must not be persecuted for doing so. This decree applied to Jews, and in 1598 the first permission to build a synagogue was granted. In 1615, a new law regularised the system for admitting Jews to the republic, and for their governance.



**SOURCE 3.22** During the 17th century, the Dutch Republic became a trading superpower.

It is true, however, that the Reformed Church became the dominant church of the country, and that only its members could hold government positions. During the 17th century, Roman Catholics were seen as enemies of the official religion, and there was some repression of their worship and services. By the 18th century, however, the republic had progressed to a general toleration of all religions, with the condition that religious services other than those of the Reformed Church take place behind closed doors in buildings that were not obviously churches.

According to historian Margaret C. Jacob, the most important factor creating what she calls a 'radical Enlightenment' in Holland was the fact that thousands of exiled French Protestants – who had been forced to leave France after the revocation in 1685 of the Edict of Nantes (1598) – fled to the tolerant Dutch Republic. They not only imported their ideas, but also their anger, and quickly became powerful champions for religious toleration, and critics of the unjust persecution of Protestants in Catholic France.



**SOURCE 3.23** *Tyranny against French Protestants*, 1685, artist unknown This engraving, made in the Dutch Republic, dramatically shows the 'tyranny' of the French King Louis XIV in cancelling the Edict of Nantes in 1685, effectively forcing thousands of Protestants to quit France. The artist shows him looking on as Protestant children are slaughtered; the smaller images show scenes of murder, rape, torture, and the burning and pillaging of houses. For historian Margaret C Jacob, this passionate image helps explain why French Protestants felt safer in the Dutch Republic.



National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Felton Bequest, 1920

**SOURCE 3.24** *The Town Hall, Amsterdam*, 1690, by Gerrit Berckheyde (1638–98). This painting gives us a glimpse into the orderly world of the Dutch Republic in the 17th and 18th centuries. Everyday life goes on in front of the stately Town Hall of Amsterdam, but the people who you see gathering to discuss issues in the public square enjoy an unusual amount of freedom to discuss radical ideas. Here, many Protestants who had been forced to flee France could openly discuss topics such as religious toleration and even freethinking. Note that a Dutch citizen in the foreground on the right is talking to a foreign merchant, who stands out by his oriental dress. The presence of foreign cultures and ideas in port cities like Amsterdam added to the ferment of ideas there.

## JEAN ROUSSET DE MISSY

Dutch *philosophes* – inspired by the great pre-Enlightenment Dutch thinker and rationalist Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) – espoused radical theories, particularly in regard to established religion.

One of the most extreme documents of the ‘radical’ Dutch Enlightenment was also, for some time, one of the most mysterious. Historians had long known about a shocking document titled *The Treatise of the Three Impostors* (1719) – which declared the revered leaders of three great world religions to be impostors – but they did not know who had written it. Recently, historian Margaret C Jacob solved the mystery by tracing its authorship to a radical, secret group of freethinkers in the Dutch Republic, led by Jean Rousset de Missy (1686–1762).

Rousset was born into a Protestant family in France, but lived in the Netherlands, first serving as a soldier in the Dutch States Army and then, in 1724, turning to journalism. He later became a leading Freemason in Amsterdam, and led a revolution there in 1747–48.



The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 3.25** *Two Old Men Disputing* by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–69). This painting by the Dutch master Rembrandt imagines two philosophers in ancient times, passionately disputing some idea. This reminds us that the essence of all philosophy is debate: you find out what you believe by actually arguing with somebody. In the Enlightenment, the vast majority of scientific discussion took place in social form, such as salon conversations and discussion in learned societies. This process of ‘sociable thinking’ was much easier in countries where there was a tolerance for new ideas.

## A radical attack on religions

Recent discoveries among Rousset’s papers suggest that he might have been even more radical in his thinking than was previously known. There is evidence that in 1719 he joined an extreme freethinking group, with Charles Levier and Jan Vroese, and that he wrote the *Treatise of the Three Impostors*. His main argument still shocks people of faith today. Instead of merely criticising the Catholic Church, or traditional organised religion, he lashed out at three major religions, arguing that Jesus, Mohammed and Moses were all ‘impostors’, or fakes.

The main points of *The Treatise of the Three Imposters* can be summarised as follows. The treatise:

- + opposes religious beliefs as a form of human knowledge;
- + states that religions mislead people, while philosophers enlighten them;
- + considers that religions are organisations for the powerful and the greedy;
- + attacks the great religious leaders without any respect for their great moral teachings, cynically explaining that religion is just a way of tricking and exploiting people.

Rousseau's explanation as to how religions began will seem too simple to modern readers; historians of religion now know far more about the origins of the world's great faiths. Further, people of religion are not easily impressed today by the rational criticism of their beliefs, and would now tend to argue that faith – in any religion – is the act of simply believing something sacred that cannot be proven by logic. In essence, faith is accepting beliefs 'on faith'.

Rousseau's text is of interest not as a profound criticism of religion, but as evidence of how very radical some thinkers became once they questioned all authority. This work was the extreme point of Enlightenment thinking on religion.

## *Conclusion*

From this survey of the key thinkers outside France, in the context of the conditions in the countries in which they worked, it is clear that the Enlightenment was a very complex thing. We acknowledge that sense of shared ideals and values that created a belief in a 'republic of letters', but we also have to agree that there was no one, single Enlightenment; no 'one-size-fits-all'. We can only understand the movement properly if we have a clear sense of the political, social and economic conditions in each country, and an understanding of how these affected the way Enlightenment thought processes worked in that country.

## Chapter summary

To draw together everything you have learnt in this chapter, make your own study notes while the information is fresh in your mind. Using dot points and colour coding either on concept cards or in a computer-based document, note the following main points and add your own examples:

- + In England, political and economic conditions created an environment sympathetic to enlightened thought. The political system was more tolerant of discussions of reform, while England's role as a leader in industrial production, as well as in international trade, made its people focus on the useful scientific and technological aspects of the Enlightenment.
- + The Enlightenment in Scotland was much more than a minor echo of the Enlightenment in England; Scotland was one of the most important centres of Enlightened thought in Europe. The list of Scottish talent is extraordinary, and included the geologist James Hutton, the philosopher David Hume and the economist Adam Smith.
- + The Enlightenment in the German states was cultivated by Frederick the Great, who believed that rational principles could make for better government. Thinkers such as Christian Wolff responded by turning Enlightenment ideas into a force that would strengthen, not challenge, the government.
- + The Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic was more radical than elsewhere, partly because the government was more tolerant of free debate, and partly because of the presence of large numbers of Protestants who had fled persecution in France. The writings of Rousset demonstrate the extent to which radical ideas could go.

### Weblinks

Weblinks relevant to this chapter can be found at <http://nmh.nelsonnet.com.au/enlightenment>.

### Endnotes

- 1 Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 116.
- 2 Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 117.
- 3 CBA Behrens, Society, *Government and the Enlightenment. The Experience of Eighteenth-century France and Prussia*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1985, p. 178.



## *Chapter review activities*

- 1 Why and how did the special political conditions in England produce a different sort of Enlightenment to that of France?
- 2 How did the Industrial Revolution in England influence the development of enlightened thought there?
- 3 Why were popular societies like the Lunar Society so important to the spread of enlightened discussion in England?
- 4 What was the role of Joseph Wright of Derby in the Enlightenment in England?
- 5 What were the main ideas of freethinkers such as Anthony Collins?
- 6 What were some of the special characteristics of Scottish enlightened thought?
- 7 How did Scottish enlightened thought contribute to the birth of studies of human society (sociology)?
- 8 How did James Hutton contribute to the birth of the science of geology?
- 9 What did David Hume mean by the 'science of man'?
- 10 How did Frederick the Great use Enlightenment thought to improve his country and strengthen his rule?
- 11 Why were thinkers in the Dutch Republic so very radical in terms of politics and religion, compared with other European writers?
- 12 Form a Q&A-style role-play group, create your own salon gathering, and debate the extent of Frederick the Great's success as an enlightened monarch. The debating panel should include students taking on the roles of Frederick himself, Voltaire, Maupertuis (Director of the Berlin Academy of Sciences) and Mendelssohn.
- 13 To what extent was the Enlightenment the source of modern subjects such as sociology, political science, geology, psychology and educational psychology?
- 14 From what you have read in this chapter, explain why we cannot speak of one Enlightenment, but must understand that there were many different Enlightenments in different times and places. In particular, give *two* examples of how the political system, the economy and the social system of a nation affected the way the Enlightenment developed in that country.



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## CHAPTER FOUR

# Responding to the Enlightenment

We have seen that, in France and in Europe generally, the intensive upsurge in the discussion of scientific ideas in the Enlightenment created enormous developments in existing fields of knowledge, including politics and technology, as well as creating whole new areas of study, such as sociology, psychology, geology, economics and education. From our perspective in the 21st century, there is no doubt that Enlightenment thought created the subjects we still use to understand the world we live in today.

From this modern viewpoint, however, it is easy to forget that these new ideas were not so obviously important in the 18th century. They were exciting to some, but threatening to others. We must remember that the *philosophes* actually set out to challenge all existing knowledge, and so, by definition, they challenged those groups and organisations that had controlled knowledge previously. Inevitably, established authorities – such as kings, princes, churches and universities – felt threatened, simply because they *were* being challenged.

At the same time, the new ideas provided opportunities for some groups, who realised that they could use them for their own purposes. In the case of women seeking equal rights, or of ‘patriot’ revolutionaries seeking American independence from Britain, Enlightenment ideas provided a wonderful weaponry of words to help achieve their goals.

In this chapter, we will examine the reception of Enlightenment ideas; that is, the ways in which different groups in society responded to them. We will discover that how societies responded to Enlightenment ideas varied massively depending on the interests of the group concerned. While some monarchs were suspicious of the new ideas, others harnessed them to their needs as they modernised their countries.

◀ *Peter I of Russia and Louis XV of France* by Louis Hersent (1777–1860)

### INQUIRY QUESTION

+ How did society as a whole respond to the radical ideas of the Enlightenment?

# Monarchs

Historian John Gagliardo argues that the monarchs who ruled European countries in the mid-18th century were not necessarily opposed to the Enlightenment. They were ‘the first generation of princes to have been brought up and educated in the full flowering ... of the Enlightenment’. Their courts ‘already reflected much of the secularism, wit and cultural cosmopolitanism ... of the eighteenth century’. Compared with previous rulers, these kings and queens accepted that it was necessary to have knowledge in the current intellectual world. Gagliardo believes that ‘the courts of the late eighteenth century ... and their royal leadership ... show[ed] a desire to **emulate** and surround themselves with the cultural sophistication of the new class of semi-professional intellectuals whom we know as the *philosophes*’.<sup>1</sup> The idea of ‘enlightened despotism’ was created by a generation of rulers who embraced Enlightenment thought, each in his or her own way.

## emulate

Copy something or someone you admire

## ROYAL CENSORSHIP IN FRANCE

Our understanding of the Enlightenment is heavily influenced by what we know of the movement in France; however, we cannot assume that all monarchs were automatically hostile to the *philosophes*. Even in France, the situation was more complicated than this.

## censorship

The practice of having trained officials examine new publications to decide whether they contain any ideas that threaten the political and social order

The French monarchy used **censorship**. Officials could either refuse the right to publish a work, or demand that offending sections be removed before permission to publish was given. This technique allowed the newly formed nation-states of early modern Europe, such as France, to prevent any questioning of their power, while their ally, the Catholic Church, repressed radical ideas that challenged its teachings.

In France, there was a number of powerful bodies responsible for these acts of controlling criticism and challenge. The Chancellor of France could condemn ‘dangerous books’, and the High Court of Paris (the ‘Parlement’) could condemn books that



**SOURCE 4.1** *Portrait of Louis XV (1715–74) in his Coronation Robes*, 1730, by Hyacinthe Rigaud (1649–1743). This state portrait shows King Louis XV, who ascended the French throne in 1715. Although it makes him look all-powerful, Louis struggled with several challenges to his authority, notably the political challenge of the rebellious High Courts of France, and the intellectual challenge of the *philosophes*, who criticised absolute monarchy.

The Bridgeman Art Library

threatened the established order. In religious terms, the Faculty of Theology at the University of the Sorbonne could declare books to be heresy.

All authors had to submit their book to the Chancellor of France, who would pass it on to the censors. They looked for anything that they thought might harm the government, religion or morality. They could refuse permission to publish, although they could also grant ‘tacit permission’ (unspoken permission) to publish if they were not completely sure that a book was dangerous.

Not all censors, however, were strict: Lamoignon de Malesherbes (1721–94), who was in charge of censorship from the 1730s to the 1760s, tolerantly gave tacit permission to publish many works that would previously have been banned. Nonetheless, the *philosophes* objected strongly to the idea that a government official could decide what people could read. Having faith in human reason, they believed that individuals were intelligent enough to decide what they should read and, more importantly, what they would *believe*.

## ROBERT DARNTON ON POLICE CENSORSHIP

While most historians understand the repressive action of censorship in France, few have studied what the police actually did in 18th-century Paris. An exception is cultural historian Robert Darnton, who dug deeply into the historical records to uncover the everyday work of Joseph d’Hémery (1722–1806), a Parisian policeman. Darnton’s article, ‘A Police Inspector Sorts his Files’ is included in his work *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984).

The French royal government, Darnton observed, feared the new class of ‘intellectuals’, especially their books. D’Hémery devoted his life to investigating every author in Paris, ‘from the most famous *philosophes* to the most obscure hacks’. He was no brute, but ‘took stock of the literary world with sympathy, humour and an appreciation of literature itself’. Nonetheless, he represented the established order, and ‘did not waver in his loyalty to church and state’.

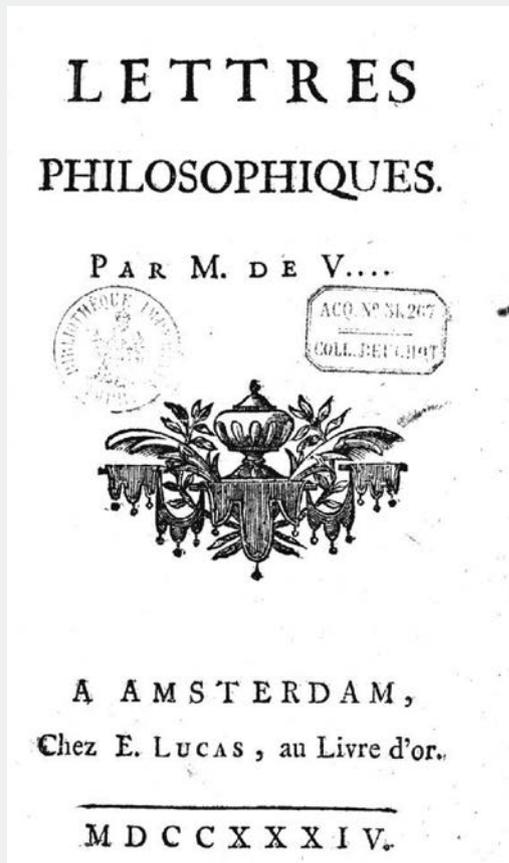
D’Hémery recognised talent, and admired Voltaire as ‘an eagle in his spirit but a very bad subject [of the King] in his opinions’. He described writers using such terms as ‘dangerous’, ‘suspicious’ and ‘a bad subject’. He reacted strongly when a writer published a libellous attack, especially when it criticised a powerful noble family or an important official. When authors published political pornography about Louis XV or his mistress Madame de Pomadour, for example, he did not hesitate: this was outright **sedition**, or undermining of the authority of the government. He called one of these authors ‘a dangerous man, who would overthrow a kingdom’.

Strangely, d’Hémery did not see the *philosophes* as being dangerous as a group – he kept notes on them, but concluded they were ‘safe’ – and he did not criticise Enlightenment thought. Although he disliked Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopaedia*, he saw only that the monarchy was becoming vulnerable to increasingly noisy expressions of disrespect. His job was ‘information gathering in the age of absolutism’, but he showed no awareness that revolution would destroy his world in 1789.

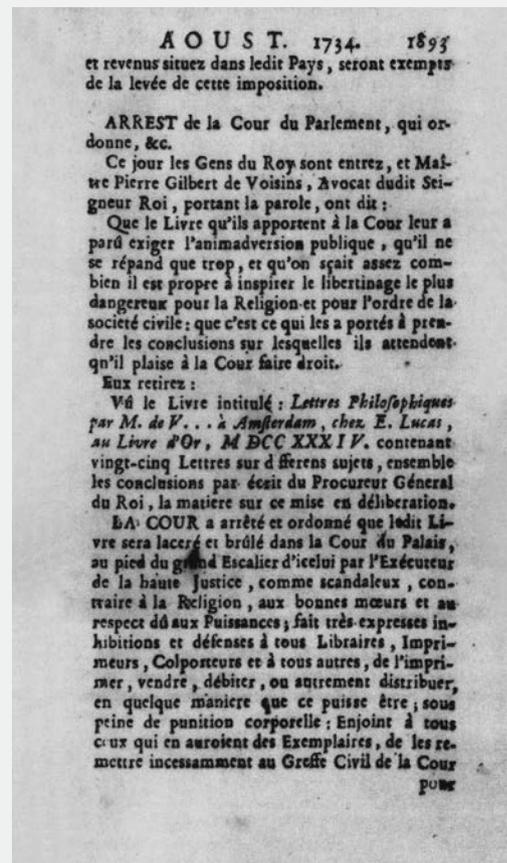
As in all his writings, Darnton shows a profound ability to get inside the minds and the attitudes of people in the past. To read his writings is to be transported into the world of the past.

Excerpts from Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984, pp. 153, 170, 173

## The censorship and burning of Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters*



**SOURCE 4.2** The title page of Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* (1734)



**SOURCE 4.3** The condemnation of Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* (August 1734)

These two documents illustrate the process by which the *philosophes* challenged established authorities, and the ways in which these authorities responded. Source 4.2 is the title page of Voltaire's daring book, *Philosophical Letters*, also called *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, which was published in Amsterdam in 1734. Source 4.3 is the order from the High Court of Paris (or 'Parlement') to burn the book in public.

The emotional language in the High Court order reveals the fear created by the *philosophes'* works. It states:

That the work brought before the court seems to demand public warning, that it is spreading too quickly, and that we know how suitable it is to inspire free thought that is dangerous to Religion and to the order of civil society. The court has ordered that the said book should be slashed and burned in the Courtyard of the Palace of Justice, at the foot of the Great Stairway, by the executor of High Justice, as scandalous, contrary to religion, to good social manners and to the respect due to established authority.

## EMPEROR PETER THE GREAT OF RUSSIA

Elsewhere in Europe, the Enlightenment was actually encouraged by some monarchs, who felt that it could serve their aims. In Russia, the Enlightenment was tied up with the desire of Peter the Great (1672–1725; who ruled from 1682 as Tsar and from 1721 as Emperor) to modernise his empire, specifically by adopting Western technology and ideas.

In 1703, Peter founded a European-style capital city called Saint Petersburg, his ‘window on the West’. He was initially more interested in the West for its technology, especially military science, than for its learning. Later, when he had turned Russia into a major military power, he began the administrative reform of Russia, and again looked to the West for expertise – this time in creating effective administrative systems, especially in taxation.



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**SOURCE 4.4** *Portrait of Peter I or Peter the Great, 1717*, by Jean-Marc Nattier (1685–1766). This portrait celebrates the Russian ruler who had the vision to see that Russia needed to modernise itself, and the courage to insist that modernisation meant Westernisation; that is, adopting the social and cultural standards of Western Europe, especially of France. Peter the Great’s elegant city of Saint Petersburg was his statement to his unwilling nobles that Russia would adapt Western standards and give up Russian traditions that he saw as being ‘backward’.

### The campaign to Westernise Russia

Peter’s desire to *modernise* Russia also meant that he had to *westernise* it. Although Russia is a part of Europe, it is so big that it is also a part of Asia. Over the centuries, it had developed its own political and social system, and was quite different to the countries of Western Europe. Educated Russians thought their country was backward, and were embarrassed by the primitive conditions, particularly in the countryside. Peter first studied, and then adopted the culture of Western Europe.

On his first great study trip (1697–98), Peter stayed away for 18 months, visiting Prussia, the United Provinces of Holland, England and Austria-Hungary. He claimed that he was travelling in order to make an alliance of European powers against the Turks, but was in



Shutterstock/Tatiana Volgutova

**SOURCE 4.5** The Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences was founded in 1724 by Peter the Great, who was advised by the German *philosophe* Gottfried Leibniz. When the Academy opened, however, Peter found that there were no people in Russia sufficiently educated to qualify to study there, so he had to import eight students from Germany.



Shutterstock/Maria Egorova

**SOURCE 4.6** The great library of the Kunstkamera was founded by Peter the Great in 1719 and opened in 1727. It was the first public museum and library in Russia. It featured a collection of 1200 minerals, exotic animals such as stuffed giraffes and elephants, and examples of deformed human and animal fetuses. It was later renamed the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, and now houses two million items.

fact studying Western culture with a view to applying it to Russia. He focused particularly on English and Dutch expertise in shipbuilding, hoping to create a great navy for Russia. He also visited the French royal court of Versailles, and made a heroic effort to visit everything worth seeing in Paris. He made a second tour in 1717, and visited France to meet the new French King, the seven-year-old Louis XV.

Some of Peter's reforms appear strange to modern eyes. For example, he noticed that most educated Europeans did not wear beards. When he returned to Russia, he decided that some traditions – like the wearing of long beards – symbolised Russia's backwardness. He passed a law ordering city people to shave their beards and, to make his point, seized two of his leading generals and slashed their beards off on the spot. From then on, nobles walking through Peter's palace could be attacked by the razor-wielding Tsar. (Later, he faced so much opposition that he gave in and passed another law to allow people to wear a beard, providing they paid a very large fine and wore a sign saying 'Beards are ridiculous!')

Peter built three fine palaces to rival Versailles, and then encouraged his nobles to attend his royal court. There, they learnt refined manners and behaviour, spoke in French and read Voltaire. Later, some of the more daring read the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which criticised the refinements of civilised society and offered an alternative set of values.



Wikimedia Commons

**SOURCE 4.7** *Peter I of Russia and Louis XV of France* by Louis Hersent. Peter shocked his nobles and officials by visiting European countries to study their industries and trades. This painting, also shown in the opening to this chapter, shows him visiting Versailles, paying his respects to the young Louis XV. To our modern eyes, this visit is no different to routine diplomatic visits made by kings and diplomats to a royal court. To Russian eyes, however, this scene was shocking, because many of the powerful nobles in Russia were **xenophobic** and wanted to keep Russia free from Western influence. To see their tsar dressed in the European style and learning Western ways was disturbing to them.

**xenophobic**  
Having hatred  
and fear of foreign  
cultures

This program of change and reform was interrupted by Peter's death in 1725, but resumed during the reign of Empress Elizabeth (1741–62), who encouraged Russian interest in Western literature. The third stage of the great change occurred in the reign of Catherine II (1762–96).

## EMPRESS CATHERINE II OF RUSSIA

The work of Peter the Great was continued by Catherine II of Russia, also known as Catherine the Great (born 1729; reigned 1762–96). Like Frederick II of Prussia (see Chapter 3), she hoped to be an 'enlightened' despot, which to her meant initiating further reform to improve and modernise her still very backward empire. She aimed to centralise government in the capital of Saint Petersburg, to rationalise the structures of the administration, and to modernise Russia by reference to European systems of administration.

One of Catherine's most impressive achievements was her great work called the *Nakaz*, or *Instruction* (1767). This summed up her 20 years of reading the world's great political theorists – particularly the French *philosophes*, and especially Montesquieu – in 22 chapters and 500 articles. It offered a new vision of how Russia might be governed. It became a 'bible' of administration, and was read aloud weekly to public servants, chapter by chapter. It contained many liberal political ideas – ideas so radical that the monarchy in France banned its publication or sale there.

Catherine passed many new laws. Decrees regulated the police and created a new system of national education, at least in city areas. She also actively sought out the advice of the best minds in Europe, writing regularly to Denis Diderot, Jean le Rond d'Alembert and Voltaire. But, like many reformers, she discovered that while one can make new laws, it is difficult to change a place as big and as backward as Russia. She concluded that Russia was so large that it must be ruled autocratically.

De Agostini Picture Library/A. Dagli Orti/The Bridgeman Art Library



*'[As laws] are made for the punishment of crimes, they ought to include in themselves the greatest virtue and benevolence.'*

*'A Punishment ought to be immediate, [suitable] to the nature of the crime and known to the Public.'*

*'The sovereign is absolute; for there is no other authority but that which centres in his single person that can act with a vigour proportionate to the Extent of such a vast Dominion.'*

*'What is the true End [aim] of the Monarchy? Not to deprive People of their Natural Liberty; but to correct their actions, in order to attain the supreme Good.'*

*'Each law ought to be written in so clear a style as to be perfectly intelligible to everyone, and, at the same time, with great conciseness.'*

*'The most certain Curb upon Crimes is not the severity of the punishment, but the absolute Conviction in the People that delinquents will inevitably be punished.'*

*Portrait of Catherine the Great* (c. 1770) by Fyodor Rokotov (1736–1808). Catherine the Great of Russia, became Empress after her husband, Emperor Peter III, had been overthrown and killed, probably with her approval and help. For her, the Enlightenment meant improving, modernising and Westernising Russia. She was less able to cope with the most radical aspect of the Enlightenment: its capacity to teach people to think for themselves.

## An allegory of Catherine the Great

This propaganda print was made in Paris by the French artist François Foliot (1748–c. 1839), and was probably commissioned by the Russian Government. It shows the theory of reform: an enlightened monarch, Catherine the Great, rides in the chariot of progress, holding up the torch of Enlightenment and the sceptre of strong rule. Her grateful subjects crowd forward, offering her gifts and thanks for the prosperity and wellbeing she has brought them by modernising Russia. Notice in the top right-hand corner that Peter the Great is looking down from a cloud, admiring the way she is continuing his work.



**SOURCE 4.8** Allegory of Catherine the Great by François Foliot

The reality was very different. Even Catherine found it difficult to bring much change to the vast mass of miserable peasants.

Examine Source 4.8, and then answer the following questions.

### Questions

- 1 Why is the flaming torch a symbol of the Enlightenment?
- 2 How does the symbol of the sceptre (representing strong rule) link with Catherine's ideas about how the vast country of Russia must be ruled?
- 3 Why is the presence of Peter the Great important to Catherine's prestige and credibility as a reformer?
- 4 We evaluate the *reliability* of a document by asking what makes this passage a good source of information about the Enlightenment. We identify its *contestability* by identifying what limitations it might have, and how other people might disagree with it. Evaluate the reliability and contestability of this visual document as a representation of conditions in Russia during the reign of Catherine. In your answer, analyse whether you think Catherine really was committed to Enlightenment ideals. If so, can you identify any improvements she made that would have improved life for ordinary people?
- 5 Who do you think might have ordered this image to be made for Catherine? Why might this image be contestable? What might the happy peasants in the image say if we were to ask *them* how their lives were improved?

Catherine admired the French Enlightenment, particularly Voltaire's works. Her nobles obediently read his works with similar enjoyment, and even accepted his ideals. The weakness of this 'Enlightenment in Russia', however, was that these nobles lived in the privileged world of the wealthy, either at the royal court or in their own luxurious mansions. While theoretically

agreeing with Voltaire, they ignored the brutal realities of life in Russia, where people known as serfs were mistreated, beaten, tortured, and even sold like animals by their owners.

During the 1760s and 1770s, however, a younger generation of Russians began to think for themselves and to look independently into Western thought for useful ideas. They found three faults with the Enlightenment ideas supported by the Empress:

- 1 Some of the French thinkers, such as Voltaire, were atheists, and this did not appeal to these faithful members of the Russian Orthodox Church.
- 2 Enlightenment thought challenged the existing political and social order, whereas these young Russians were a part of that order and did not want to destroy it.
- 3 They felt that Enlightenment thinkers could not solve the serious economic and social problems of a backward Russia.

Thus, humane young men such as Ivan V Lopukhin (1756–1816) looked for another system of thought, and found it in Freemasonry (see Chapter 1). For Lopukhin, Freemasonry had a strong moral code, was not committed to destroying the existing order, and valued humanitarian social action. Lopukhin believed that if he could improve the education and way of life of the primitive Russian peasant, then his nation would improve.

In Russia's response to the Enlightenment, the assumption was that the ruler chose certain ideas and officially approved them for the nation. Nobody predicted that a younger generation of Russians might choose other thinkers and ideas for themselves, and write their own works critical of Russia. Neither Peter the Great nor Catherine the Great understood that the Enlightenment contained a vast number of ideas, and that it encouraged people to think for themselves.

By the end of her reign, Catherine had come to realise that Enlightenment ideas – particularly those that had been adopted by the American and French revolutionaries – threatened the absolutist system of which she was the head. By then, however, the Enlightenment had done its work: the likes of Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau had inspired a generation of young Russians to write seriously about social problems in their literature, creating a tradition of radical social criticism that blossomed throughout the 19th century and erupted into revolutionary political action in 1905 and in 1917.

## *Church leaders*

While the *philosophes* did not intend to create a political revolution, they certainly unleashed a revolution in the way people thought about religion. Their greatest attack was on official or organised religion; that is, on powerful institutions such as the Catholic Church in France. While some *philosophes* still believed in God and remained true Christians, many felt that they did not need to pray in churches or to seek the guidance of priests

The Catholic Church could not afford to ignore this challenge to its authority. It had already suffered severe criticism of its practices from the **Reformation Movement** in the 16th century. It had also been alarmed by the emergence of modern scientific thought in the 17th century, because its discoveries contradicted the Church's teachings. Now, in the 18th century, the Enlightenment belief in deism or natural religion went further, and denied that churches, priests and prayers were of any use whatsoever in communicating with God. Taken to its logical conclusion, this belief would deprive the Catholic Church of its reason to exist and its power over people.

### **Reformation Movement**

A reform movement, led in the 1500s by Martin Luther, that publicly criticised the many corrupt practices of the Catholic Church, such as giving forgiveness for sins in return for cash payments

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## WILL DURANT AND THE ANTI-ENLIGHTENMENT

The most comprehensive and detailed study of the Catholic Church's counter-attack to the onslaught of the Enlightenment was written by Will Durant in his *The Age of Voltaire* (1965). Durant's research uncovered a virtual firestorm of confident, powerful counter-criticism. He found a staggering total of 900 works defending Christianity and its Church published in France alone between 1715 and 1789, with a peak of 90 in the single year of 1770.

The *philosophes* were outnumbered and outgunned: Rousseau only wrote one *Émile*, but Christian writers wrote 10 counter-attacks to this particular work. The same happened to Diderot when he published his *Philosophical Thoughts*. Durant notes that the Abbé Guyon used the *philosophes*' own technique of mockery to make savage fun of the Enlightenment in his *Oracle of the New Philosophes* (1759–60); while the Abbé Gauchat attempted to demolish Buffon's emerging theories of evolution in the massive, 15-volume *Critical Letters* (1755–63).

Durant's pioneering early research also has the advantage of revealing why and how the Catholic Church encouraged and rewarded those clergy willing to take up their pen in defence of Christianity. He offers a number of revealing case studies, such as that of Nicolas Bergier:

The materialists encountered an able opponent in Nicolas Sylvestre Bergier, a parish priest in the diocese of Besançon. His 'Deism disproved by itself' (1765) was 'the answer of a real cure to the Savoyard vicar of Rousseau's imagination.' For his 'Certainty of the Proofs of Christianity' (1767) he received a letter of praise from the Pope. At the age of fifty-one (1767) he was elevated to the canonry of Notre-Dame-de-Paris, and became confessor to the daughters of Louis XV. In that year, he published an 'Apology of the Christian Religion against the author of 'Christianity Revealed' – a blast against d'Holbach. Pleased, the Assembly of the Clergy voted him (1770) an annual pension of two thousand livres [French pounds] to give him more leisure to defend the faith. Within a year he issued a two-volume 'Examination of materialism', a reply to d'Holbach's 'System of Nature' ... In his 'Examination of the Christian Religion' (1771), Bergier stressed the argument that atheism ... would ruin morality.

Will Durant, *The Age of Voltaire*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1965, pp. 756–7

### Questions

- 1 In earlier years, few people would have dared to criticise the Catholic Church, and its authority rarely had to be defended. How do we know that it felt under real threat in the 18th century?
- 2 Draw up a list of all the types of encouragements given by the Catholic Church to its defender, Bergier. Of these, which ones do you think might have been the most useful in giving him time to write more books defending the faith? Explain your answer.
- 3 What would these clergy have understood by the term 'materialism', and why did they see it as such a threat to religion?

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S ATTACK ON THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA

The great project of *The Encyclopaedia* struck problems in 1752, when some strict religious groups accused the publication of containing 10 statements that were **heretical**. By February 1752, there was a campaign to destroy the publication, and the government declared it illegal to sell or to have copies of *The Encyclopaedia*. The King's Council declared that the books:

**heretical**

Contradicting the Catholic Church's core religious beliefs

“ tend to destroy royal authority, to foster a spirit of independence and rebellion, and with the aid of obscure and equivocal terms, raise the foundations of misunderstanding, corrupt morality, and spread irreligion and incredulity. ”

Stephen J Gendzier, *Denis Diderot's The Encyclopaedia: Selections*, Harper Torchbooks, 1967, p. xxv.

Denis Diderot sought assistance from powerful people, and won the support of several royal ministers, the King's mistress Madame du Pompadour and Lamoignon de Malesherbes, the government official in charge of publishing and books.

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S ATTACK ON ÉMILE

The publication of Rousseau's *Émile* angered not only the French Government, but also the Catholic Church. The Archbishop of Paris, Christophe de Beaumont, sent out a *Pastoral Letter*, warning faithful Catholics of the dangers of radical thought:

“ Saint Paul predicted, dearly beloved brethren, that dangerous days would come when there would be men infatuated with themselves, proud, overbearing, blasphemers, impious, calumniators, inflated with conceit, seeking voluptuousness instead of God; men of corrupt minds and perverted faith. ”

Quoted in Gavin de Beer, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his World*, Putnam's Sons  
New York, 1972, p. 66



**SOURCE 4.9** Frontispiece of the *Reflections of a Franciscan with a Preliminary Letter addressed to M. XXX [Diderot] Author of the Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, 1752, artist unknown. This engraving illustrates how many religious people must have felt about the *philosophes*. A gigantic hand, waving a rope belt like a whip, causes the hated Diderot to run away screaming in fear, as he jumps over a book labelled 'Aristotleism'.

This strong letter did not silence Rousseau. It prompted him to state that he did believe in God and that he was a Christian, but that he was a believer who could not accept the Catholic idea of original sin or a religion based on the fear of Hell. He replied in his fiery *Letter to Christophe de Beaumont* (1762) that the Archbishop had defamed him, and that if he were a private citizen, he would be brought before a court of law. Rousseau added that if there were a single enlightened ruler in Europe, he or she would put up a statue in honour of the man who had written *Émile*.

Later Rousseau set himself up against the entire Catholic Church. In 1776, he wrote his *Dialogues: Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques*. Convinced now that he was misunderstood and persecuted, as Jesus Christ had been, he decided not to entrust this book to anybody but to take it into Notre-Dame Cathedral and to lay it on the high altar, before the eyes of God. On 24 February 1776, he noted that the manuscript was 'An offering entrusted to providence'. However, when he arrived at Notre-Dame to place it on the altar, the door was locked, so he walked away and gave up the project.

## Women

### feminist history

History that aims to rediscover the experiences of women in the past, and to understand how gender roles and power relationships affected their lives

Historians are continually rethinking the way they understand past times. They ask new questions, and arrive at new conclusions. Every historical event and person is *contestable*, meaning that people will continually make new judgements.

One of the most important forms of contestability to appear in recent times has been the emergence of **feminist history**. Feminist historians aim to draw attention to the presence and importance of women in history. They reveal that every society has invisible structures

of power and authority, and that these structures powerfully affect people's life experiences. The power structures usually support male authority, limiting and disadvantaging women. By revealing these invisible power structures, feminists try to stop them from continuing. They aim to create a world in which women enjoy the same freedoms and opportunities as men.

### MADAME MARIE-ANNE PIERRETTE LAVOISIER: THE 'MOTHER' OF MODERN CHEMISTRY

Women in the Enlightenment did more than simply host gatherings in their salons for men of letters and science. Some overcame their lack of education – and the prejudice against women's intellectual activity – to become leading thinkers.

There is convincing evidence of women's contribution to the

Enlightenment. For example, many books reproduce the portrait by Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) (Source 4.10) of the famous scientist Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier (1743–94), who is rightly regarded as the 'father' of modern chemistry. He converted his home into a modern laboratory and, from 1772, investigated the nature of air and oxygen. The portrait shows him at his desk writing a scientific experiment, but it does not show his wife engaged in the same work; she simply leans on his shoulder and looks at the viewer. In fact, however, this is a portrait not of one scientist (and his wife) but of two. Marie-Anne Pierrette Paulze (1758–1836) married Lavoisier when she was 13, and devoted herself to science. She expertly set up his laboratory, and invented new pieces of equipment for him. She drew the engravings to illustrate Lavoisier's books, and enjoyed a European reputation as a serious chemist in her own right. After her husband was executed in the French Revolution, she published all his work.

### MADAME ÉMILIE DU CHÂTELET: THE SCIENTIST THAT HISTORY FORGOT

Memorably described by Voltaire as 'a great man whose only fault was being a woman', Madame Émilie du Châtelet (1706–49) was another distinguished Enlightenment thinker. Born into a noble family in Paris, she quickly convinced her parents that she possessed unusually high intelligence. One story tells that, when she was a young girl, her maid entertained her by using a pair of dividers



De Agostini Picture Library/E. Lessing/The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 4.10** *Portrait of Lavoisier*, 1788, by Jacques-Louis David. This portrait shows two scientists in their laboratory: Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier, the 'father' of modern chemistry, and his wife, Marie-Anne Pierrette, who was a leading chemist in her own right. Although the painter shows both scientists in their home laboratory, the way he portrays them suggests that it was Lavoisier who was the only scientist at work. Why do you think attitudes to women at the time might have led him to show the couple in this manner?

(callipers) to make a doll. The clever child impatiently tore off the doll's clothing, and worked out for herself how to use the instrument to draw a perfect circle.

Madame du Châtelet's father, Louis Nicolas le Tonnelier de Breteuil, was an important official at the royal court at Versailles who introduced visiting diplomats to the King. He was also famous for his weekly salon, which attracted thinkers, writers and especially scientists. Madame du Châtelet grew up in an intellectual milieu, and by the age of 10 was conversing with the great Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, President of the French Academy of Sciences. Her father gave her an unusually thorough education, hiring private tutors to teach her four languages, including Latin. She studied literature, mathematics and physics, which became her great passions and inspired her to publish works.

At the age of 19, she had an arranged marriage with the Marquis du Chastellet-Laumont, a royal governor in Burgundy. By the time she was 26, having had three children, she was determined to return to her studies. She arranged tuition from Moreau de Maupertuis of the Academy of Sciences, and later from the mathematical genius Alexis Clairaut. When Madame du Châtelet returned to social life in 1733, she met Voltaire, became his friend and invited him to live in her home at Cirey-sur-Blaise. They became lovers, with the understanding and approval of her husband, the Marquis.

Madame du Châtelet's scholarship was broad and deep. She took on the works of the great John Locke, arguing – against him – that the universe must work according to certain laws, otherwise nothing would make sense. In 1740, she published her *Lessons in Physics*, which



alg-images/Archives CDA/St-Genès

**SOURCE 4.11** *Portrait of Émilie du Châtelet*, c. 1748. This portrait was by Marianne Loir (1715–69), who showed her sitters in luxurious, fashionable clothing. While Madame du Châtelet looks very feminine here, her interest to us in the modern age was that she was a feminist before the word was invented.

reviewed the scientific knowledge in that field for her children. In 1749, she translated Isaac Newton's *Principles of Mathematics* (1687) into French, with her own commentary; it remains the best translation available in this language.

She became what we now call a feminist; that is, an activist who argues that women deserve equal rights and opportunities to men. In her translation into French of John Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*, she used her introduction to make the point that society must give all women access to genuine education, like that received by boys, otherwise they would not be able to develop their talents in the arts or the sciences. She wrote: 'If I were king, I would redress an abuse which cuts back, as it were, one half of human kind. I would have women participate in all human rights, especially those of the mind.'

Most astonishing of all was Madame du Châtelet's discovery of an early

principle of kinetic energy (movement), which she wrote as  $E \cong mv^2$ . Some 150 years before Einstein, she glimpsed a law of physics that would later be refined as his famous equation for the energy equivalent of matter,  $E = mc^2$ . She died in 1749, after the birth of a fourth child.

## LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU: THE ENLIGHTENED TRAVELLER

In England, another intelligent and capable woman benefited from her personal circumstances to overcome the intellectual limitations normally placed upon women. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762) was born into a noble, but not wealthy, English family. She might have lived a genteel life in a great mansion, except for the fact that she married the wealthy Edward Montagu, who in 1716 was appointed English ambassador to the imperial court of Turkey.

The family only stayed in Turkey for 15 months, but in that time Lady Mary discovered her talent for travel and her ability to observe other cultures on their own terms. Rather than assume that her own culture was superior, she saw that the Turks possessed sophisticated learning and an advanced civilisation. She became an enlightened woman – intelligently and respectfully observing another culture, and using it to think critically about her own society. While Montesquieu had written about the ‘foreign’ point of view of his imaginary Persians, Lady Mary engaged with real Turkish people. She took to wearing Turkish dress. While many modern travellers willingly do this, in the 18th century this act had a deeper meaning. It showed that Lady Mary was able to observe foreign societies not as primitive or inferior, but as valuable cultures that had their own customs and beliefs. In her famous *Turkish Letters*, which were circulated and widely read at the time (although not formally published until after her death, in 1763), Lady Mary wrote fresh and sparkling thoughts, winning instant literary celebrity.

Everything she observed stimulated new thoughts. When we are exposed to new and foreign social customs, we often think with new clarity about our own way of life. Lady Mary learned the idea of relativity; that is, that our own social values are not the only ones possible, nor are they always the best ones.

She did, however, criticise some Turkish customs. In a letter to the Abbé Conti (29 April 1717), she evaluated Turkish beliefs in terms of the Enlightenment ideal of reason:



**SOURCE 4.12** *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, c. 1725, by Jonathan Richardson (1665–1745)

Placeholder photo acknowledgement

“ [Another] point of doctrine is very extraordinary: any woman who dies unmarried is [believed] to die in a state of reprobation [disgrace]. They reason that the end [aim] of the creation of woman is to increase and multiply ... Many of 'em are superstitious and will not remain widows for ten days for fear of dying in the reprobate state of a useless creature ... This is a piece of theology very different from that which teaches nothing to be more acceptable to God than a vow of perpetual virginity. Which divinity is more rational I leave you to determine [decide]. ”

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Embassy to Constantinople: The Travels of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, introduced by Dervla Murphy, Century, London, 1988, p. 144

## Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and inoculation

Lady Mary also recognised that, far from being 'primitive', the Turks were in many ways more advanced than Europeans. In a letter to Miss Sarah Chiswell, she described the Turkish practice of what is now known as inoculation (which she called 'ingrafting'), by which people were injected with a small amount of smallpox, which gave them a mild case of the illness but ultimately gave them resistance to it. She acknowledged that the Turkish people had advanced medical and scientific knowledge; in this case, a simple and safe technique that was unknown in England:

I am going to tell you a thing that will make you wish yourself here. The small-pox, so general and so fatal amongst us [in England], is here [in Turkey] entirely harmless by the invention of ingrafting. There is a set of old women who make it their business to perform the operation every autumn, in the month of September ... People ... make parties and when they are met (commonly fifteen or sixteen together), the old woman comes with a nut-shell full of the matter of the best sort of small-pox, and asks which vein you please to have open. She immediately rips open [the vein] that you offer with a large needle (which gives you no more pain than a common scratch), and puts into the vein as much matter as can lie upon the head of her needle and, after that, binds it up with a hollow bit of shell; and in this manner opens up four or five veins ... Then the fever starts to seize them, and they keep to their beds two days, very seldom three. They have very rarely about twenty or thirty [smallpox] in their faces, which never mark; and in eight days' time they are as well as before their illness ... There is no example of anybody who has died of it; and you may well believe I am well satisfied with the safety of the experiment, since I intend to try it on my own dear little son. I am patriot enough to take pains to bring this useful invention into fashion in England; and I should not fail to write to some of our doctors particularly about it ...

Quoted in Margaret C Jacob, *The Enlightenment: A Brief History with Documents*, Bedford/St Martin's, Boston, 2001, pp. 152–3

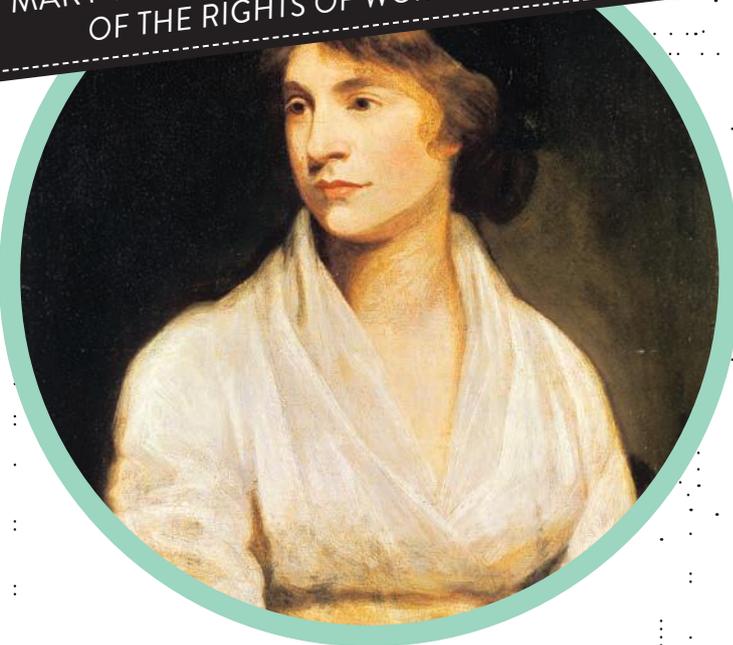
### Questions

- 1 Using the Internet, discover how the process Lady Mary calls 'ingrafting' (inoculation) works to protect people from a disease like smallpox.
- 2 What exactly is 'the matter of the best sort of small-pox' that the women put into people's veins?
- 3 What is actually happening when 'the fever starts to seize them'?
- 4 Why are these people 'as well as before their illness' after eight days? Why have they not died of the illness, as people did in England?
- 5 Why might some of Lady Mary's contemporaries have been surprised or shocked to discover that the Turks had medical knowledge that the English did not have?

## MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: CHAMPION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The life stories of Madame Lavoisier, Madame du Châtelet and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu prove that women had the ability, given the chance, to make a major contribution to the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment; but most women simply never had the opportunity do so. Before women could join in the intellectual life of Europe, they had to first establish the basic idea that women had every right to enjoy education and enter into public affairs.

### MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN (1792)



Getty Images/De Agostini

*'[If only] men [would] generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers – in a word, better citizens.'*

*'I would [like to] convince reasonable men of the importance of my remarks ... I appeal to their understandings and, as a fellow creature, claim in the name of my sex, some interest in their hearts. I entreat them to assist to emancipate their companion, to make her a help-meet for them!'*

Portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft, c. 1797, by John Opie (1761–1807)

*'It is vain [pointless] to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree independent of men.'*

*'A man may ... dare to think and act for himself, but for a woman it is a herculean task, because she has difficulties peculiar to her sex to overcome which require almost superhuman powers.'*

*'Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalise them, when principles would be a surer guard ...?'*

*'How much more respectable is the woman who earns her own bread by fulfilling any duty, than the most accomplished beauty!'*

*'The laws respecting woman ... make an absurd unit of a man and his wife, and then, by the easy transition of only considering him responsible, she is reduced to a mere cypher.'*

*'Though I consider that women in the common walks of life are called to fulfill the duties of wives and mothers, by religion and reason, I cannot help lamenting that women of a superior cast have not a road open by which they may pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence.'*

*'I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government.'*

*'But what have women to do in society? Women might certainly study the art of healing and be physicians as well as nurses ... They might also study politics, and settle their benevolence on the broadest basis. Business of various kinds they might likewise pursue, if they were educate in a more orderly manner, which might save many from common and legal prostitution. Women would not then marry for support.'*

One of the greatest leaders of this campaign for equal rights for women was Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97). She wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), described by feminist historian Olwen Hufton as 'a foundation text in modern feminism [that] took female writing into a new phase ... in that it linked a change in the status of women with radical political change'.<sup>2</sup>

## *Revolutionary leaders in the American colonies*

The American *philosophes* were important because, unlike many of their fellows in Europe, they were not restricted to theory: because of the American Revolution, they had to use philosophic ideas to actually create the reality of a new government and society.

The Enlightenment in America occurred later in the 18th century, after the great European thinkers had completed their intellectual work. Historians define the beginning of America's Enlightenment as about 1765, and its full flowering as being in the later 1760s, the 1770s and the 1780s. The revolutionary leader John Adams (1735–1826), for example, defined his own political ideas – including the theory of lawful revolution – by reading Locke and Montesquieu. The statesman Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) considered Bacon, Newton and Locke ‘the trinity of the three greatest men the world has ever seen’.

In addition to the great leaders of the Patriot Movement (colonists who wanted to secure independence from Britain, and who guided the rebellion that became the American Revolution), a generation of other American writers drew heavily on the European Enlightenment. Historian Bernard Bailyn studied *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967), by which he meant the outpouring of political ideas in hundreds of pamphlets during the 1760s. Pamphlet writers such as James Otis (1725–83) looked to the Enlightenment in Europe, particularly in England and Scotland, to find ideas that supported the American rebellion, and used these ideas in their reasons for rejecting Britain's authority.

If the American ‘patriots’ of the 1760s had largely turned to Europe to use its ideas, by the 1770s the situation had been reversed. Historian Charles Vann Woodward argues that while the American revolutionary project came late in the Enlightenment, it confirmed that the Enlightenment dream of making a new, rational and humane society could actually happen in reality:

“ America became the model for Europeans of good hope – living, heartening proof that men had the capacity for growth, that reason and humanity could become governing rather than merely critical principles. [For educated people,] the historical role of the young United States seemed to be to act as a laboratory of Enlightenment ideas. ”

Charles Vann Woodward, *A Comparative Approach to American History*, Voice of America Forum Lectures, Washington, 1968, pp. 44–5

### **BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**

The most influential, inventive and colourful figure of the Enlightenment in America was Benjamin Franklin (1706–90). Born the son of an artisan who made soap and candles in Boston, Franklin became a leading Enlightenment thinker in both America and Europe. He showed extraordinary skill in a wide range of fields, including science, political debate, business and, late in his career, diplomacy on behalf of the American colonies and the newly-born United States of America. He is still idolised in America as a national hero. He is undeniably a remarkable example of a man of humble origins who rose to extraordinary importance in his nation's intellectual life. His fame was such that, when he died in 1790, 200 000 people attended the funeral to pay their respects.

## BENJAMIN FRANKLIN



· · · · · *'Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.'*

· · · · · *'Fart for freedom, fart for liberty—and fart proudly.'*

· · · · · *'In my opinion there never was a good war or a bad peace.'*

· · · · · *'[I want] leisure to read, study and make experiments, and converse on such points as may produce something for the common benefits of mankind.'*

*He wrote his own epitaph when he was young, with the date of his death to be filled in:*

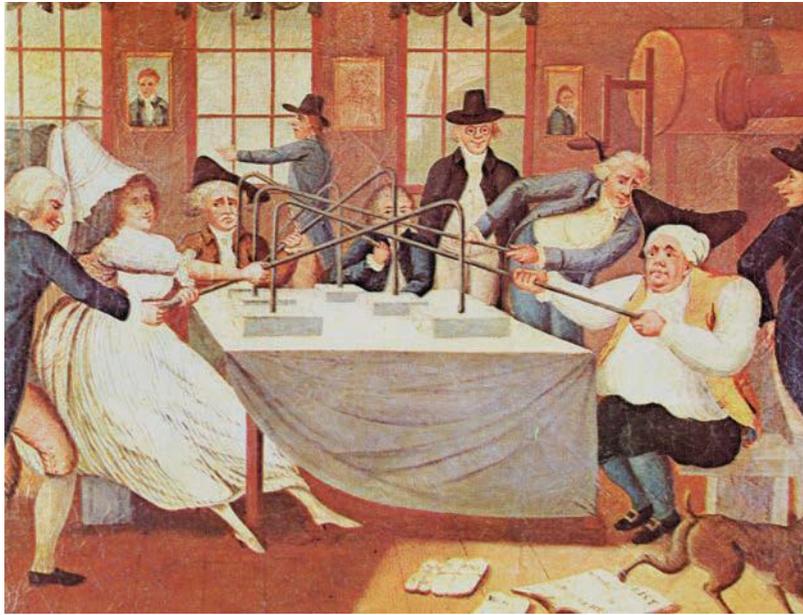
*'The Body of B. Franklin Printer;  
Like the Cover of an old Book, Its Contents torn out,  
And stript of its Lettering and Gilding, Lies here, Food for Worms.  
But the Work shall not be wholly lost:  
For it will, as he believ'd, appear once more,  
In a new & more perfect Edition, Corrected and Amended By the Author.  
He was born on January 6, 1706.  
Died 17 ...'*

*Portrait of Benjamin Franklin, c. 1785, by Joseph-Siffred Duplessis (1725–1802)*

Franklin's early formal education was interrupted, and he was taught by his father and a tutor. He refused to follow his father's business or any other trades available in Boston, and at the age of 12 became apprenticed to his brother James, who was a printer.

Franklin read greedily and soon discovered his own writing skills. Taking the fanciful name 'Mrs Silence Dogood', he slipped articles into his brother's printing shop. They were sharp, effective criticisms of British political authority in colonial America, and he was delighted when James published them without knowing who had written them.

In 1723, he moved to Philadelphia, where he ran his own successful printing business. He owned the business by 1730 and was able to retire in 1748, allowing him to focus on scientific theory and experimentation. By 1751, he had published his *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*, which won him membership of the Royal Society of England.



The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 4.13** Benjamin Franklin's Experiments with Electricity (turned into an 18th-century Parlour Game), artist unknown

## Unlocking the secrets of electricity

Benjamin Franklin is best known for his famous experiments to investigate the mysterious force of electricity. He was not the first to attempt to understand this field, and he and other *philosophes* were playing with a deadly force they barely understood. One Russian scientist was actually killed when his experiment produced a deadly spark a foot wide which went through his head, and Franklin himself received a severe shock from one of his experiments.

Franklin's generation never really mastered electricity, but it did begin the process of analysing what it was.

## Analysing the natural world

Franklin's scientific activities went well beyond his study of electricity. An Enlightenment man, he believed that we can use science to describe, analyse and understand the entire physical world around us, and he also studied cyclones, wind dynamics, weather patterns such as cloud, mist and fog, and ocean currents.

Typically, Franklin opened up a whole new study – oceanography, or the study of the seas – for practical reasons. In the 1760s and 1770s, tensions were mounting between Britain and its American colonies in the lead-up to revolution breaking out in 1776. The colonists and the British both realised that it was vital to get news quickly, yet letters and journals travelling by ship took six weeks. The British asked Franklin to investigate why ships sailing from Britain and Europe to America crossed more slowly than those going in the opposite direction.

Franklin guessed this was because of the Gulf Stream: a powerful current of water originating in the Gulf of Mexico and flowing through the Atlantic near America's east coast. He suspected that sea captains had accidentally – or instinctively – sailed into the stream and thus travelled faster. He believed that if he used science to measure and describe this natural force, people could make deliberate use of it.

Franklin pioneered techniques for measuring water temperature and water speed. When he travelled from England to America in 1775 and 1785, sailors watched in amazement as the elderly scientist lowered thermometers 10 metres into the ocean and recorded the higher temperatures of the warm waters. He noticed that the cold waters glowed at night because of the presence of small luminous bodies known as plankton, while the warm waters of the Gulf Stream had no such glow.

Franklin interviewed experienced captains, absorbing their years of observation. They explained to him that whales were found in some places but not in others, and Franklin guessed that whales avoided the warm water of the Gulf Stream and kept to the cold waters, where there was more plankton for them to eat.

Franklin observed that experienced captains sailed directly along the coast when sailing to England (thus sailing in the Gulf Stream and travelling faster), but when they sailed to America they learned to zigzag (thus cutting across the Gulf Stream, which was then flowing against them.)

The British authorities mocked and then ignored his discoveries.

## Political and diplomatic career

Franklin distinguished himself in politics and diplomacy by using the clear analysis and common sense for which he was famous. Before the American Revolution, he was a diplomatic representative for Pennsylvania and other colonies (1757–62, and then 1764–75). By the time he returned home to Philadelphia, he had come to believe that Britain's rule was unjust, and that the colonies must fight for their independence. He therefore joined the Patriot Movement (colonists who wanted to secure independence from Britain). He forcefully criticised Britain's *Stamp Act* (1765), and by 1776 was involved in the start of the American Revolution. In 1787, he accepted presidency of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery.

## Ambassador to the court of France

Franklin lived in Paris as America's ambassador to France (1778–85). There, he helped conclude the Treaty of Paris (1783), which redefined the relationship between Britain and its former colonies, which were by this stage a nation-state in their own right.

While in Paris, he made direct contact with the French *philosophes*. Historian Harold Nicholson recounts that Franklin was a sensation in Enlightenment Paris. He was the darling of the salons,



De Agostini Picture Library/The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 4.14** *Benjamin Franklin in Paris*, c. 1786, artist unknown. This painting shows Franklin towards the end of his life, visiting the royal court of Louis XVI at Versailles and becoming the centre of adoring admiration and attention. The fact that he dared to come to court in such simple clothing would earlier have exposed him to ridicule; now, it seems to be a sign of his home-grown simplicity. As the Comte de Ségur noted, the contrast with the beautiful clothes of the French courtiers was strong.

for they saw him as a simple man from a simple society; a fighter for freedom and liberty who also understood the science of electricity and natural philosophy. He seemed to be a sage like Aristotle, and a plain man such as Rousseau had dreamed of.

Franklin probably played the part of the simple man: when he attended the royal court at Versailles, he appeared wearing the plainest suit he had and carrying a simple walking stick – hardly necessary in the fine surroundings of Versailles – perhaps trying to look like some wandering philosopher.

### An endless series of practical inventions and ideas

Finally, Franklin was the ultimate inventor, his mind ceaselessly throwing up clever ideas for ingenious devices. He invented bifocal glasses for himself, and a mechanical hand to reach books on high shelves.

He invented daylight saving when he noticed that Parisians were spending a fortune on candles during the winter months. Later, when living in Philadelphia, he directed the renovation of the city, insisting that its muddy roads should be paved, that street lights should be installed, that rubbish collectors cleaned the city by day and did patrols by night, and that the first formal fire brigade be organised. Concerned about fuel supplies, he became a pioneer conservationist when he proved that the forests would ultimately be bare, and invented an air-fed fireplace which burned fuel more efficiently and gave more heat for less wood.

## Conclusion

It is clear from these case studies that there was no single response to the Enlightenment; it was a threat to some, and an opportunity for others.

Because the Enlightenment criticised political abuses, it provoked hostile reactions from suspicious monarchs, such as the kings of France. The Enlightenment also represented the use of reason, science and technology to modernise and improve society, and was adapted by reforming monarchs in Prussia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia.

It is more difficult for the modern reader to understand why established religions, such as the Catholic Church in France, reacted so severely to liberal ideals that seem perfectly reasonable to us today. For example, the idea of burning books in public seems a very extreme response to us, because we now associate it with the Nazi regime in modern Germany. We must understand that the Enlightenment was a pitched battle for the possession of knowledge, and a fierce debate about the nature of knowledge itself. The *philosophes* were strongly empirical, and claimed that people cannot be asked to believe stories of miracles, revelations and visions. In doing so, they were demolishing the very methods by which the Catholic Church held the faith and loyalty of its congregations. When they went on to propose their idea of deism, they were essentially dismissing the entire organisation of the Church – popes, archbishops, cathedrals, churches, priests and Sunday services – as irrelevant. Seen in this light, the Church had no option but to respond to something that threatened its very existence.

The Enlightenment was a liberation movement, and invited certain social groups to adopt its ideals. While enlightened discussion on the rights of women and the education of girls progressed slowly, the Enlightenment itself created new opportunities for women in the wealthy classes to take part in intellectual discussion and scientific speculation. Feminist historians remind us that individuals such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Madame Marie-Anne Pierrette Lavoisier

proved how much women can contribute when they are given the opportunity, but warn that these opportunities did not fall to the majority of women.

Historians also note that a project for reform sometimes achieves its goals over a longer period of time. Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, wrote an important text on women's rights, but it did not have its full impact in her time; in the longer term, however, it drove the debate about women's rights through the 19th and 20th centuries, and into our own.

While the Enlightenment achieved some of its goals in European countries during the 18th century, it also found a new application in the newly formed nation of the United States of America. Thinkers such as Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin had been inspired by Enlightenment thought, but they now gave back to the European thinkers their own inspiring example of how the great principles of reason and humanity and natural rights could serve as the basis for the creation of an entirely new society.

## Chapter summary

To draw together everything you have learnt in this chapter, make your own study notes while the information is fresh in your mind. Using dot points and colour coding either on concept cards or in a computer-based document, note the following main points and add your own examples:

- + There is no single type of reaction to the fresh ideas and the powerful propaganda of the Enlightenment. Reactions varied according to the political, social, economic and religious conditions of each country where enlightened activity took place.
- + In political terms, European monarchs were not automatically opposed to the Enlightenment. The hostile reaction of a Louis XV or a Louis XVI in France is most famous, but the enthusiastic response of Catherine the Great (Russia) or Frederick the Great (Prussia) was in fact more common.
- + The idea of 'enlightened despotism' meant that monarchs such as Catherine and Frederick had come to believe that it was time to use reason and science in order to govern better.
- + The Enlightenment presented a far more serious threat to some organised religions, such as the Catholic Church in France, because it questioned most of the most basic aspects of official religion. Churches therefore used their own authority, and that of the monarch and the law courts, to try to fight the new ideas.
- + The Enlightenment started the debate about the rights of women, and many *philosophes* asserted that, if human rights are truly universal, then women should have them too. Others made bold claims for equal education for girls. While they did not 'win' this debate in their own time, they initiated a debate that began to triumph in modern times.

- + The Enlightenment took on an important new dimension beyond Europe when, late in the 18th century, educated people in the British colonies in America first questioned British rule and then, when they had rejected it, created a new political and social system in the United States of America. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson translated Enlightenment ideas and debates to the American setting, showing a strong preference for the practical use of science to improve life for the majority of people. They then became leaders of a revolutionary war of liberation and then, after their victory, the first statesmen of a new country. The United States of America became the ‘laboratory’ or ‘workshop’ in which Enlightenment ideas were put to the test of reality.

### Weblinks

Weblinks relevant to this chapter can be found at <http://nmh.nelsonnet.com.au/enlightenment>.

### Further resources

#### Women’s history over time

Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, 1500–1800*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1996

#### Mary Wollstonecraft

Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, Weidenfield and Nicholson, London, 1974

#### Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Embassy to Constantinople: The Travels of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Century*, London, 1988

#### Émilie du Châtelet

David Bodanis, *Passionate Minds: The Great Love Affair of the Enlightenment*, Crown Publishers, 2006

Judith Zinsser, *La Dame d’Esprit. A Biography of the Marquise du Châtelet*, Viking Adult, London, 2006

Judith Zinsser and Julie Hayes (eds), ‘Émilie du Châtelet: Rewriting Enlightenment Philosophy and Science’, in *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, September 2010, vol. 33, issue 3, pp. 415–16

### Endnotes

- 1 John Gagliardo, *Enlightened Despotism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971, pp. 21–2.
- 2 Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, 1500–1800*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1996, pp. 453–4.



## *Chapter review activities*

- 1 How and why did the French kings use censorship to control and repress Enlightenment thought?
- 2 How did the Russian Tsar Peter the Great hope to use Enlightenment ideas to improve his backward country?
- 3 How did Catherine the Great use Enlightenment ideas to create the principles of a modern legal system?
- 4 What were the limits of Catherine the Great's support for Enlightenment ideas?
- 5 Why did the Catholic Church in France feel threatened by Enlightenment thought?
- 6 How effectively did the Catholic Church in France counter-attack the Enlightenment?
- 7 What are the aims and intentions of feminist history?
- 8 How do the case studies of Madame Marie-Anne Pierrette Lavoisier and Madame Émilie du Châtelet support feminist arguments for equal education for women?
- 9 How does the case study of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu prove that the Enlightenment created a new generation of travellers who were able to appreciate cultures other than their own?
- 10 What were the main arguments advanced by Mary Wollstonecraft regarding equal rights for women?
- 11 Why was colonial America considered a 'laboratory of Enlightenment ideas'?
- 12 Why was Benjamin Franklin considered America's own Enlightenment man?
- 13 Form a discussion group, and decide what arguments you would have put forward in favour of equal rights and education for women if you had lived at the time of Madame Émilie du Châtelet.
- 14 Imagine you are Benjamin Franklin visiting the royal court at Versailles in France. Write a brief speech, in which you pay tribute to the French and explain how the Enlightenment thinkers of France inspired you and your fellow politicians as you created the principles of a whole new society in America.



SOUPE  
DES  
ALPAGES

AU  
BIENFAITEUR DE FERNEY

VOLTAIRE FAIT CONSTRUIRE  
PLUS DE CENT MAISONS

IL DONNE A LA VILLE  
UNE EGLISE UNE ECOLE UN HOPITAL  
LE RESERVOIR ET LA FONTAINE  
IL PRETE DE L'ARGENT SANS INTERETS  
AUX COMMUNES ENVIRONNANTES  
IL FAIT DESSECHER LES MARAIS  
DU PAYS  
IL ETABLIT DES FOIRES ET DES MARCHES  
IL NOURRIT LES HABITANTS  
PENDANT LA DISETTE DE 1771

## CHAPTER FIVE



*What were  
the effects of the  
Enlightenment?*

The *philosophes* proudly stated that rather than merely discussing theoretical ideas, they devoted themselves to using reason and science *practically* – to improve people’s lives and to make human society more just and humane.

The impacts of the application of enlightened ideas have been far-reaching. In the short term, the Enlightenment led to changes in the way societies were organised. This is most obvious in the sphere of politics; the Age of Enlightenment ushered in the French and American Revolutions. In the long term, the Enlightenment also triggered significant social changes, such as changing perceptions of childhood, and the end of slavery.

Our next task is to evaluate, or weigh up, how much change the *philosophes* really achieved, and whether human beings were actually better off.

We will find that the question of achievement does not depend only on the quality of the ideas, but also upon the conditions in which thinkers are trying to create change. In France, for example, a powerful monarchy was hostile to reforming ideas and had considerable power to crush them. In the newly formed nation of the United States of America, by contrast, a generation of politicians who had been educated in Enlightenment thought turned eagerly to the ideas to create the basic principles of their new society.

◀ A statue of Voltaire overlooks the bustling marketplace in modern-day Ferney, France.

### INQUIRY QUESTION

+ To what extent did the Enlightenment change people’s lives?

## *Introduction*

To evaluate the significance of the Enlightenment, we must remember that the *philosophes* set themselves the definite goal of using science, reason and humanity to improve society and to increase the wellbeing and happiness of most people. Their intention was not just to write theories about improving society, but to actually encourage real political, legal and social change. They also learnt that political systems, social traditions and people themselves do not always change easily, and so we might expect that the *philosophes* would succeed in changing some things, but not others.

Historians still argue fiercely about the actual effects and achievements of the Enlightenment. The basic problem of the Enlightenment was not that it introduced the idea of human rights and freedoms, but that it declared them to be ‘universal’; that is, applying to all human beings. The hopeful declaration that ‘*all* men are born free and equal’ ignored the fact that in the 18th-century world, large groups of people – notably millions of women and millions of slaves – did not enjoy the same freedoms and rights as other people.

Historians generally agree that the *philosophes* stirred up public opinion enough to force the French monarchy to make genuine reforms. Voltaire pressured the old regime in France by exposing the injustices of the Calas Affair (1762: see Chapter 1). Later, Louis XVI made reforms to calm public criticism. In 1784 Louis demonstrated the idea of tolerance by allowing amnesty for political prisoners. The same year, he demonstrated respect for human liberty by abolishing serfdom on all royal estates; and also demonstrated the principle of religious toleration by stopping the heavy personal taxes on Jews. In 1787 he granted equal civil rights to Protestants. He also abolished the use of torture by royal police.

## *Revolutionary ideas in America*

The impact of Enlightenment ideas in America has already been introduced with the discussion of Benjamin Franklin (see Chapter 4). Franklin was, however, only one of many American revolutionaries greatly influenced by Enlightenment ideas.

### **THOMAS PAINE**

Thomas Paine (1737–1809), who was the son of a poor corset-maker in England, became a leading thinker of the American Revolution. His father was a Quaker, who gave Thomas a strong moral sense that all human beings are equal. He also taught his son that a man of faith would commit himself to the practical reform of society. While he remained in England, however, Thomas did not distinguish himself either in business or in writing.

In 1760, Paine became a teacher in London, and witnessed the sufferings of the poor in the capital’s slums. At this time he developed the ‘common touch’ – learning how to speak simply and clearly about politics to the artisans and labourers he befriended.

He was already middle-aged when his life changed. In 1774 he was introduced to Benjamin Franklin, who suggested that he emigrate to America. Paine arrived in the colonies later that year, just when the Patriot Movement’s resistance to British taxation was about to erupt into outright revolution. In 1775, the year of the Battles of Lexington and Concord, he became writer and then editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, quickly establishing himself as a powerful defender of the colonist cause against Britain.

The American patriots were well-read in political ideas and wanted some theory to explain their rebellion against the ‘mother’ country, Britain. At this critical moment, Paine’s greatest weakness – his relatively poor education – became his greatest advantage. Because he both spoke and wrote simply and clearly, he could explain political principles convincingly. His first article, ‘Justice and Humanity’, impressed the colonists with its powerful anti-slavery argument.

### *Common Sense* (1776)

In early 1776, Paine published *Common Sense*, his most famous political pamphlet. Drawing upon the political theories of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he argued that it was ‘common sense’ that the colonies free themselves from British rule, both for reasons of principle and for practical reasons. To prove his point, he argued that absolute and hereditary monarchy was wrong: all people are born free and equal, and so no one dynasty or family should establish itself as permanent rulers over them. He pointed out that automatic inheritance of a title is dangerous when one member of a royal family is less able to govern than others. People thought immediately of the apparent ‘madness’ of the British King George III (who reigned 1760–1820), which was caused by a tragic illness. Paine argued that the only legitimate form of government is the republic, because it recognises the sacred idea that all people are born equal by granting equal rights to all citizens.

*Common Sense* was also important for its crystal-clear style. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, thousands of political pamphlets were produced in Britain and its colonies, but most were written in a difficult, academic style that could only be read by educated members of the elite. Paine’s writing convinced educated Americans, and many influential people were persuaded to support the revolution and even to lead it. But this pamphlet could also be read and understood by ordinary people with little education.

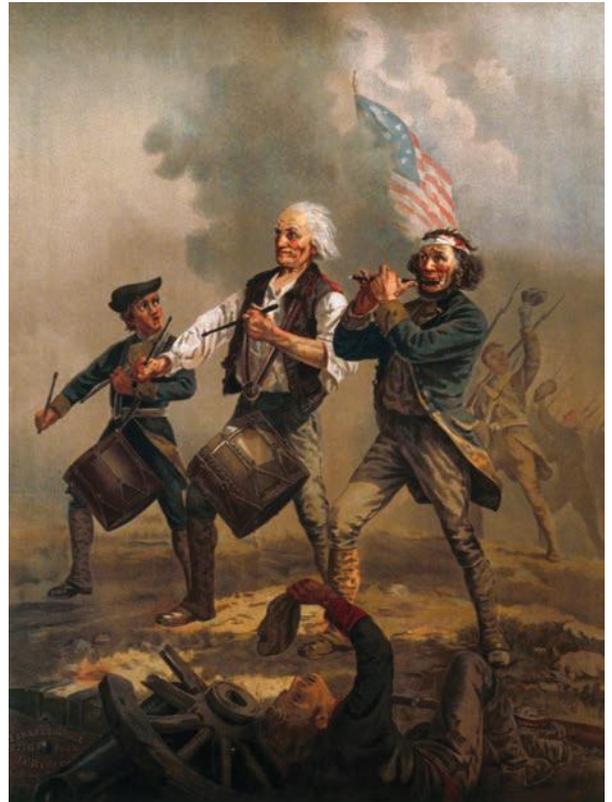
Instead of selling a few hundred copies to the wealthy, Paine sold thousands of copies – 120 000 in the first three months – to workers and artisans. His simple but impassioned words were so inspiring that the revolutionary leader Thomas Jefferson ordered that *Common Sense* be read out to his exhausted troops the night before one of the greatest battles of the War of Independence.

Thus, an Englishman, who had been something of a failure in England, had found the words to give the American colonists an intelligent reason for their rebellion.



© Chicago History Museum, USA/The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 5.1** Portrait of Thomas Paine by George Romney. The painting captures the personality of Thomas Paine, the sharp, practical thinker who transformed political writing in America, and who arguably provided the most powerful encouragement to the colonists to fight for their independence from Britain.



**SOURCE 5.2** *Common Sense* inspired exhausted American troops to continue their fight in the American War of Independence.

## ISAAC KRAMNICK ON THOMAS PAINE

Of the hundreds of political pamphlets that were published in the American colonies in the 1770s, historian Isaac Kramnick argues that Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* was the most powerful, partly because of the timing of its publication, and partly because of its firm argument and clear style:

The publication of Paine's 'Common Sense' could not have come at a better time. The delegates who read it on the January day it appeared in Philadelphia were, like most Americans at the time, confused and ambivalent [uncertain]. Tied by kinship, culture and commerce and decades of loyalty to England, they found themselves suddenly at war with His Majesty's troops. But Paine, the Englishman, had no doubt about the right course. Boldly he announced that America's purpose in these battles was to achieve complete independence, to break all ties with corrupt and tyrannical Britain.

The success of 'Common Sense' was phenomenal. Benjamin Rush, whose idea it had been that Paine write it, recalled that 'it burst from the press with an effect which has barely been produced by types or papers in any country.' Franklin described its effect as 'prodigious'. Americans devoured the pamphlet in the early months of 1776. According to Paine, it sold some 120 000 copies in its first three months. One biographer estimated that 500 000 copies were published that year alone ... It captures the imagination of the colonists as had no previous pamphlet. No learned treatise, no lawyer's brief, no philosophical discourse, 'Common Sense' was a blunt and direct argument that could be understood by any literate colonist, whether simple farmer or plain mechanic. Not only was it widely read but widely applauded. When, for example, a pamphlet attacking 'Common Sense' was published in New York, a 'committee of mechanics' destroyed all the copies before they could be sold. Paine's piece of January 1776 was, in the assessment of the distinguished American historian Bernard Bailyn, 'the most brilliant pamphlet written during the American Revolution, and one of the most brilliant pamphlets ever written in the English language'.

Like all historians, Kramnick must finally evaluate, or weigh up, how important Paine's work actually was. He concludes:

No one will ever know the exact role of 'Common Sense' in changing American opinion in favour of independence in 1776. There were, certainly, other factors at work which help account for the pronounced shift in public opinion which developed as the year wore on. News of the hiring of German troops against his own people by George III helped accelerate the movement for freedom. The very day Paine's 'Common Sense' was published a copy reached Philadelphia of the king's speech to parliament several months earlier which constituted a severe setback for American opponents of independence ... George III had [criticised] 'the rebellious war'.

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, edited and with an introduction by Isaac Kramnick, Penguin Books, 1984, pp. 8–10

### Questions

- 1 What do the comments of contemporaries tell us about the impact of *Common Sense* early in 1776?
- 2 What do the actions of contemporaries tell us about the impact of *Common Sense* early in 1776?
- 3 Why, according to Kramnick, did *Common Sense* appear at exactly the right time? Why were the colonists confused and uncertain about what they were doing?
- 4 Why was the style of Paine's writing crucial to the success of *Common Sense*?
- 5 Why did Paine's nationality add to the credibility of his argument?
- 6 How has a recent historian assessed the quality of Paine's pamphlet?
- 7 No revolution has ever been started by just one cause. Identify one other serious event that helped convince Americans to reject English rule.

## A patriot in Paris: *The Rights of Man* (1791)

In London again from 1787, Paine travelled to France at the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 and observed the great program to create a new government and society (1789–91). Inspired by the energy and hopefulness of the early revolution, he wrote *The Rights of Man* (1791), in which he contradicted Edmund Burke's idea that no single revolutionary individual or group has the wisdom to completely redesign society. Paine had just seen a group of reasonable revolutionaries effectively take the society of the old regime and rearrange it according to rational principles. The French created a new political system (constitutional monarchy), a new society (based on liberty and equality, and the elimination of privilege) and a new administrative structure (based on 83 uniform departments).

Paine's powerful defence of the process of revolution alarmed the British Government, and he was charged with treason in May 1791. He fled Britain for Paris, and was elected member of the National Assembly (parliament). There, he witnessed the period in the French Revolution known as 'the Terror' (1792–94), when Robespierre and the Jacobin group used strong measures to overcome the emergency created by international and civil war. Because Paine supported a group of moderate republicans known as the Girondins, he fell under suspicion from Robespierre's government and, on one occasion, was imprisoned with the very real risk of being guillotined. He survived, however, and after the fall of Robespierre (in July 1794) was released and returned to his seat in the National Assembly.

While Paine wrote further books – *The Age of Reason* (1794) and *Agrarian Justice* (1797) – his later years were obscure. By the time he died in New York in 1809, he was almost forgotten. Only six people turned up to his funeral.

## THOMAS JEFFERSON

Historian Harvey Chisick suggests that Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) was 'probably the most notable figure of the Enlightenment in America'.

Like many leaders of the Patriot Movement against Britain and the armed resistance of the American War of Independence, Jefferson came from a wealthy family, enjoyed a university education and studied the classics. His professional training in law soon led to his entry into the political life of the colonies in 1769, and he shot to prominence when the colonists called the Continental Congress (1775) to publish their principles. A number of people contributed to the famous *American Declaration of Independence* (1776), but Jefferson was the main author, and perfectly captured the values and spirit of his fellow Americans.

Jefferson also effectively translated many of the principles of the European Enlightenment into an American context, thus creating an official document that enshrined liberal ideas in a formal political declaration of ideals. This was no easy thing. In legal terms, Jefferson firmly believed in the Enlightenment principles of natural rights for all human beings, regardless of



© Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, UK/The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 5.3** This portrait (c. 1797) by James Sharples (1751–1811) shows Thomas Jefferson, America's most significant Enlightenment thinker, revolutionary leader and statesman in 1797, after he had been appointed Vice-President. In 1800, he was elected the third president of the United States.

race or colour, and yet he had to write this statement of universal belief in a country that would continue to allow people to keep slaves for decades. He himself continued to keep slaves, although he freed them in his will. In political terms, Jefferson was absolutely opposed to absolute monarchy and to despotism, and believed strongly in the principles and processes of democracy. Nonetheless, he pursued these goals in a country in which people believed that politics was best conducted by men of property, who had some financial independence. He also believed in John Locke's theory of the contractual basis of government, and had to hold firm to this belief when many of his co-patriots were alarmed by such a radical theory.



© Philadelphia History Museum at the Atwater Kent/Courtesy of Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection/  
The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 5.4** *Congress Voting Independence*, c. 1795–1801, by Edward Savage (1761–1817) captures a decisive moment in American history.

## Jefferson and the French Revolution

While most Americans respect Jefferson's contribution to the American Revolution, fewer knew how important he was to the French Revolution.

Jefferson's contact with France began in 1785 when friends, fearing that he was suffering depression after the death of his wife, Martha, had him appointed the United States Minister to France, succeeding the popular Benjamin Franklin. Jefferson was active, socially and intellectually, in the 'patriot' circles that guided the early stages of the French Revolution

## The American Declaration Of Independence

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

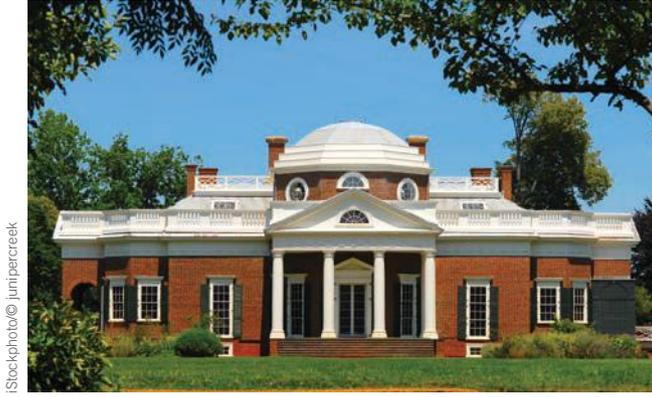
### The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn [has shown], that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. – Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.

### Questions

- 1 Identify and quote the phrase that indicates the two sources of our most basic rights.
- 2 According to Jefferson, what are the inalienable rights of human beings?
- 3 Why do human beings form governments in the first place?
- 4 For what reason might people have the right to withdraw their obedience to a government?
- 5 Jefferson admits that it can be dangerous to make changes in government. Why did he feel that the American colonists were forced to do so?
- 6 What special meaning did Jefferson and other Enlightenment thinkers attach to the word 'happiness'?
- 7 How many points in common can you find between this declaration and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*?



**SOURCE 5.5** Thomas Jefferson's beautiful neo-classical mansion, 'Monticello', practically sums up the entire Enlightenment movement. Its owner and designer believed passionately in Enlightenment ideals, including the natural rights and freedoms of all human beings; but at the same time he owned slaves, who were put to work to build this house.

after 1789. First, he had influence just by his presence: he represented a new country and government that were a 'laboratory' or 'workshop' for the great Enlightenment ideals that also inspired the revolutionaries of 1789 to create a new society in France. America's success gave the French revolutionaries an assurance that reform was not all a matter of theory; it could actually create a new society. Further, Jefferson's friends were liberals – such as the Count of Mirabeau and the Marquis de Lafayette – who believed that France should have a constitutional monarchy.

Jefferson himself confirmed that, while he believed in the republican system for America, France should retain its king in a constitutional monarchy.

### An architect of the Enlightenment

Jefferson also expressed his commitment to Enlightenment ideals in a more physical form: that of architecture. In 1768, he began to build a mansion, 'Monticello', on his 5000-acre plantation in Virginia. He devoted his talents to designing a splendid neo-classical building, which was constructed by local builders and tradesmen, but with labour provided by his own slaves. He moved into 'Monticello' in 1770.

## *The rights of women and the role of the family*

One of the main features of an 'enlightened' society in any age is that it believes all people should have equal rights and opportunities. This is particularly important in relation to the question of women's rights, and of political involvement for all men and women alike.

The Enlightenment raised the issue of women's rights long before the word 'feminism' was first used, and thus started a debate that continues today. In modern Australia, the debate has been brought to a successful conclusion with the introduction of education for boys and girls alike.

This important debate was also inspired by another idea, that of 'natural rights', which in turn raised the issue of slavery.

### ROUSSEAU ARGUES FOR A TRADITIONAL ROLE FOR WOMEN

Jean-Jacques Rousseau represents one end of the Enlightenment debate about the role of women in the family and society. He argued that women are not as physically strong or as active as men, and so they should be under the control of men and should devote most of their energies to looking after their children. He wrote:

“ woman was specifically made to please man. If man ought to please her in turn, the necessity is less direct. His merit lies in his power; he pleases simply because he is strong.

...

In the union of the sexes, [men and women] alike contribute to the common end, though in different ways. From this diversity springs the first difference that may be observed between man and woman in their moral relations. One should be strong and active, the other weak and passive; one must necessarily have the power and the will – it is sufficient for the other to offer little resistance.

Quoted in Susan Groag Bell and Karen Offen (eds), *Women, the Family and Freedom: The Debate in Documents*, Stanford University Press, 1983, vol. 1, 1750–1880, pp. 43–9

## Condorcet demands women's rights

The Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94) was one of the first French writers to demand equal rights for women. His essay *On the Admission of Women to the Republic* (1790) argued that if all human beings are born with equal and natural rights, then logically women must have exactly the same rights as men. Women must also have equal political and civic rights. He demanded that women be given the chance to act in political life and in lawmaking, and be allowed to vote.

Condorcet did not immediately win this case, because the new revolutionary government in France still excluded women from politics, but his ideas influenced opinion, and triggered a debate that continued for another two centuries. He wrote:

It is in the power of habit to familiarise men with a violation of their natural rights ... For instance, has not every one of them violated the principle of the equality of rights in tranquilly depriving the half of the human race of [the right to assist] in the making of law and excluding women from the rights of citizenship? Is there stronger proof of the power of habit, even over enlightened men, than the [sight] of the equality of rights being invoked in favour of three or four hundred man ... and being forgotten in respect of 12 millions of women? For this exclusion not to be an act of tyranny, it would be necessary either to prove that the natural rights of women are not absolutely identical with those of men, or else to show that women are incapable of exercising them.

Now the rights of men result only from this, that men are beings with sensibility, capable of acquiring moral ideas, and of reasoning on these ideas. So women, having these same qualities, have necessarily equal rights.

It would be hard to prove that women are incapable of exercising the rights of citizenship. Why should beings to whom pregnancy and passing indispositions are incident, not be able to exercise rights, of which nobody ever dreamed of depriving people who have gout every winter, or who easily catch cold?

Quoted in Susan Groag Bell and Karen Offen (eds), *Women, the Family and Freedom: The Debate in Documents*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1983, vol. 1, 1750–1880), p. 99. Note that the original text has been abbreviated and simplified by the author.

## Questions

- 1 How did Condorcet use the idea of 'natural rights' to argue in favour of equal rights for women?
- 2 According to Condorcet, what are some of the thinking skills that men and women both possess?
- 3 What three forms of political rights did Condorcet demand for women?
- 4 How does Condorcet destroy the argument that women are 'the weaker sex'?

## 'THE DISCOVERY OF CHILDHOOD'

Historian Philippe Ariès explored the history of the family in his *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1962). Ariès believed that the concept of the child as we know it did not exist in the Middle Ages, and that it only developed slowly in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Enlightenment in particular was responsible for what he called 'the discovery of childhood'. Before this time, people did not properly understand children as children, and that they need love and affection in order to develop properly.

Ariès has since been criticised for making some mistakes. He used painted portraits to prove that people did not understand their children and dressed them as miniature adults in stiff, formal clothing like that of their parents. Historian Geoffrey Elton has objected that Ariès took these portraits too literally, as if they were photographic snapshots of real life. In fact, Elton argues, children probably did wear different, suitable clothing most of the time, and were probably just dressed up as 'miniature adults' for the very special occasion of the painted portrait.

Historian Jacques Gélis continued Ariès' interest in the history of the family, but discovered that thinking about childhood began much earlier – first in the cities of Renaissance Italy in the 15th century, then in the cities of England and France in the centuries that followed. As early as the 16th century, writers thought critically about **swaddling** and **wet nursing**. For the mothers, wet nursing was a mixed blessing: they lost their close link with their baby, and in many cases the baby even died. Yet, wet nursing was an entrenched practice that was expected in fashionable society. Women who were living in wealthy families could hope to lead their own life, including education and socialising, without having to feed an infant.

Thus, the Enlightenment did not invent these ideas, but it certainly revisited them and – with its powerful machinery of propaganda – publicised and popularised them as never before.

### Representing childhood

Historians recognise that the Enlightenment thinkers helped create our modern understanding of childhood. The *philosophes* understood the critical importance of close physical bonds between adult and child – particularly by mothers breastfeeding their own children – and of close emotional bonds, demonstrated through the warm expression of love from parent to child.



© The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

**SOURCE 5.6** *The Sackville Children*, 1796, by John Hoppner (1758–1810). Ariès believed that the Enlightenment was partly responsible for what he called 'the discovery of childhood'.

#### swaddling

Wrapping tight clothes around a baby to immobilise it

#### wet nursing

Sending infants out to be fed by 'mercenary' paid nurses

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Denis Diderot wrote a powerful article on ‘Motherhood’ for *The Encyclopaedia*, in which he pointed out that some wet nurses were so careless of their responsibility that many infants died. Indeed, the infant mortality rate was alarmingly high among children who were wet-nursed. In addition, Diderot argued, babies missed out on that first bond with the mother that is created by breastfeeding, and so their emotional life is affected forever.

Historians analyse whether the *philosophes*’ ideas actually influenced people and caused social change. For example, Rousseau argued in *Émile* (1762) that women should breastfeed their own babies, but this alone does not prove that people began to change the way they raised children. Historians know that an idea has taken effect when they see evidence of it in more popular forms of art, such as novels, plays and paintings.

In particular, historians see signs of change to the role of the family, the expectations of women and the understanding of children when completely new subjects appear in paintings. In Paris, paintings were put on display once every year in a vast exhibition called The Salon. Sometimes, one particular painting caused a strong reaction, crowds gathered around to view it and the painting became ‘famous’. Also, art critics wrote reviews of popular paintings and these provided valuable written evidence of what people were thinking and feeling when they looked at a painting.



The Bridgeman Art Library

**SOURCE 5.7** *Farewell to the Nurse*, 1776–77, by Étienne Aubry, (1745–81). Aubry has taken Rousseau’s idea of ‘natural’ motherhood and turned it into a little scene, like a play being acted out to communicate a message. Here, a wealthy mother and father have decided to bring their infant back from the home of the professional wet nurse, and care for the child themselves.

Painters began to show more scenes of motherhood, emphasising Rousseau's message about the joys of natural parenting. *Farewell to the Nurse* by Étienne Aubry was painted in 1777, just 15 years after Rousseau published *Émile*. In this painting (Source 5.7), Aubry creates a visual 'lesson' about good parenting. The wealthy couple on the right have gone to the village where they had left their child with a wet nurse. Inspired by the writings of Diderot on motherhood and of Rousseau on breastfeeding, they will bring their baby home and care for it themselves. There is a note of warning, however: notice that the baby has been separated from them for so long that it does not recognise its true parents, and reaches out to go back to the nurse.

Aubry painted this scene because he expected that it would appeal to his public of well-educated people. And it did; people got his message straight away. One critic wrote:

'[The] practice, so little seen in nature, that of entrusting one's child to a mercenary woman, must not be very natural and by consequence cannot move a reasonable man.' In fact, when this painting was exhibited at the Paris Salon exhibition of 1777, it created a sensation, because 'enlightened' people were convinced of Rousseau's message about mothers' 'responsibility' to Breastfeed their children.

Other painters recognised the appeal of the new idea of the family. Although they had previously done portraits of mothers with their children, they now began to make them look more tender, so that you can feel the strong emotion between mother and child. François-André Vincent (1746–1816) has made the unnamed mother in Source 5.8 resemble the Virgin Mary in religious art. She is shown in the simple dress women wore at home, instead of her finest silk gown. She sits upright, looking directly at the viewer with quiet confidence and obvious contentment. She holds her baby tenderly on a pillow, and the infant reaches up to touch her dress, as if to start breastfeeding, making that physical contact that Rousseau stated was crucial to children. This young woman considered it an honour to be shown caring for her baby.

Another artist who appealed to the new taste for natural parenting found that she could make a whole career out of such paintings. Marguerite Gérard (1761–1837) had a long and



**SOURCE 5.8** *Portrait of a Mother and Child*, 1782, by François-André Vincent This painting illustrates the enormous social change that Rousseau's ideas had caused. Previously, women wanted to be painted in their finest dresses, ready to go out to some glamorous dinner ball. Now, this unknown young mother was proud to be shown in a simple home dress, tenderly caring for her baby, whom she will shortly breastfeed.

The New Orleans Museum of Art

successful artistic life, starting to paint in the 1770s, becoming a specialist in family scenes by the 1780s, and exhibiting at The Salon exhibition from 1799 to 1824. In *The First Steps*, a young mother in a beautiful satin gown kneels down as her baby boy takes his first steps away from his cradle. Her expensive dress makes it clear that she is from a wealthy family – the sort of people the *philosophes* hoped to persuade – and suggests that it is possible to be beautifully dressed for a ball and yet still play affectionately with your child. We barely notice that the baby is half undressed – this is so common in modern families – but in the 18th century this was radical, because people had tended to insist that babies be dressed tight swaddling clothes. Rousseau warned that tight clothing restricted a baby's movement and development. A godmother and an elderly maid look on with delight as the baby walks for the first time. This young mother still has a servant to look after her baby, but the infant does not live with the servant.



**SOURCE 5.9** *The First Steps*, c. 1780–85, by Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Marguerite Gérard  
To modern viewers, this pleasant scene seems nothing more than an image of a happy family gathered around an adorable child who is taking his first independent steps, a moment we now regularly capture in our family photographs. In the 18th century, however, this theme was new, even revolutionary. It translates into a picture the idea that society will improve if families are unified, happy and full of natural emotions.

## *The anti-slavery movement*

The most important aspect of Enlightenment reform was certainly the campaign to eliminate the inhuman business of trading slaves, but historians remain divided about the Enlightenment's achievements on this issue.

The problem of slavery was raised early, when Montesquieu condemned the trade in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), although he concentrated on the economic aspects of slave labour, and cautiously avoided religious and moral objections. The author Louis de Jaucourt (1704–79), however, was unambiguous in his article 'The Slave Trade' in *The Encyclopaedia*: 'This buying of negroes, to reduce them to slavery, is one business that violates religion, morality, natural laws and all the rights of human nature.' The issue was taken up by other *philosophes* such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot and the Abbé Raynal.

Voltaire took up the anti-slavery cause after reading accounts of slave labour by Jean-Baptiste Labat (1663–1738) in his *New Journey to the American Islands* (1722). Voltaire used his 'philosophical story' *Candide* (1758) to provide a confronting image of the brutal treatment of slaves, choosing to set the following scene not in a French colony, but in Dutch-controlled Surinam, in South America.

## ‘It is at this price that you eat sugar in Europe’

This picture illustrates Voltaire’s philosophical story *Candide* (1758). It shows the hero, Candide, meeting a negro who has been cruelly treated by his Dutch colonial master. By making Candide ask what had happened to him, Voltaire gives voice to the negro slave, allowing him to explain to the reader the brutality of cutting off hands and legs. But the slave is also expressing Voltaire’s own ideas, especially when he reminds the reader that every time we eat sugar, we too are distantly involved in the slave system.

Upon approaching the town, they met a negro lying on the ground ...; the poor man lacked the left leg and the right hand. ‘Oh my God,’ said Candide in Dutch, ‘what are you doing there, my friend, in this horrible state I see you in?’ [The negro replied] ‘When we work in the sugar mills, and the mill catches your finger, they cut your hand off; when we want to run away, they cut our leg off. It is at this price that you eat sugar in Europe.’



**SOURCE 5.10** *It is at This Price that you Eat Sugar in Europe*, artist unknown illustration from Voltaire’s *Candide* (1758), artist unknown

akg images/Collection Dupondt

The negro then states the *philosophes*’ favourite idea that all people are human, both in the eyes of God and in terms of natural rights:

Dogs, monkeys and parrots are a thousand times less miserable than us; the Dutch missionaries who converted me say to me every Sunday that we are all the children of Adam, whites and blacks. I am not a genealogist; but if these preachers are telling the truth, we are all cousins born of cousins. Now, you must admit that you could not treat your relatives in a more horrible way than this.

Translation by Michael Adcock

## IN FRANCE

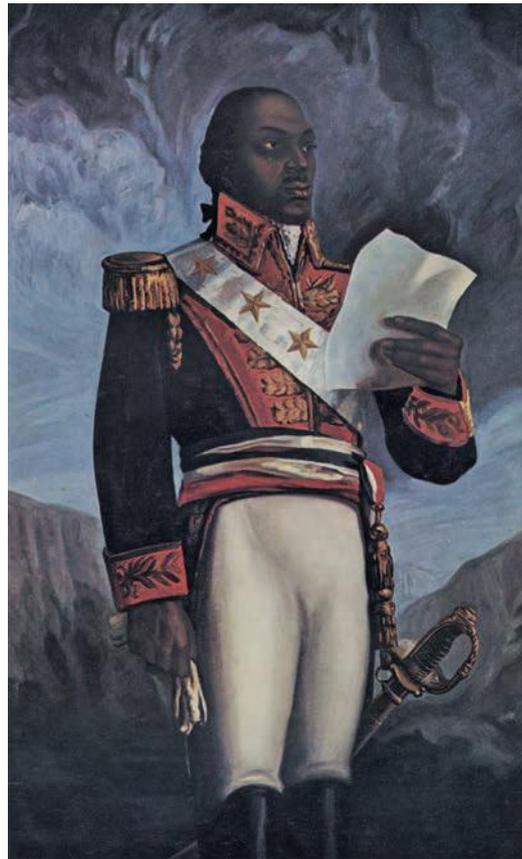
By the 1770s, the anti-slavery movement was quickening in Europe. In France, the *philosophes* vocally attacked slavery, but their campaign was slowed by economic realities. The government knew that the French economy relied on the sugar trade for its healthy trade surplus. Historian Robert Foster states that just one island, the French colony of Saint-Domingue (modern Haiti), produced 40 per cent of the world's sugar and 70 per cent of its coffee, using a workforce of 500 000 slaves. There was a strong business lobby, with massive funding, to defend the need for slaves. Their slogan was simple: 'No slaves, no sugar. No sugar, no colonies.' Nonetheless, humane reformers formed groups such as The Society of the Friends of Black People in 1788.

After the French Revolution began in 1789, the new government first turned its attention to matters inside France, but was forced to consider the problem of slavery by a massive slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue in August 1791. These slaves fought a determined war, led by Toussaint Louverture (1743–1803) – a free black man known as 'The Black Napoleon' – and were so successful that the revolutionary government had to recognise that they had won their freedom, and declared their liberation (in February 1794).

Despite these hopeful signs, however, slavery was not abolished and continues to be practised in some parts of the world today. In France, the revolutionary government was forced to admit that the French economy could not survive without slaves, and in 1804 Napoleon Bonaparte reintroduced slavery in its colonies.

## IN BRITAIN

The anti-slavery movement was stronger and more successful in Britain. Compared with the Catholic Church in France, the British Protestant religions expressed strong moral disapproval of slavery. This religious campaign was backed by a political one: leaders such as William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson were tireless campaigners who used all their skills – in the form of articles in newspapers, sermons in churches, pamphlets and lectures, and speeches in parliament – to shape public opinion. In this, they were helped by the fact that Britain was developing a large empire that did not rely so heavily on the trade in sugar, so the business lobby was less able to argue that abolition of slavery would cause economic ruin.



New York Public Library

**SOURCE 5.11** *General Toussaint Louverture*, 19th century, artist unknown

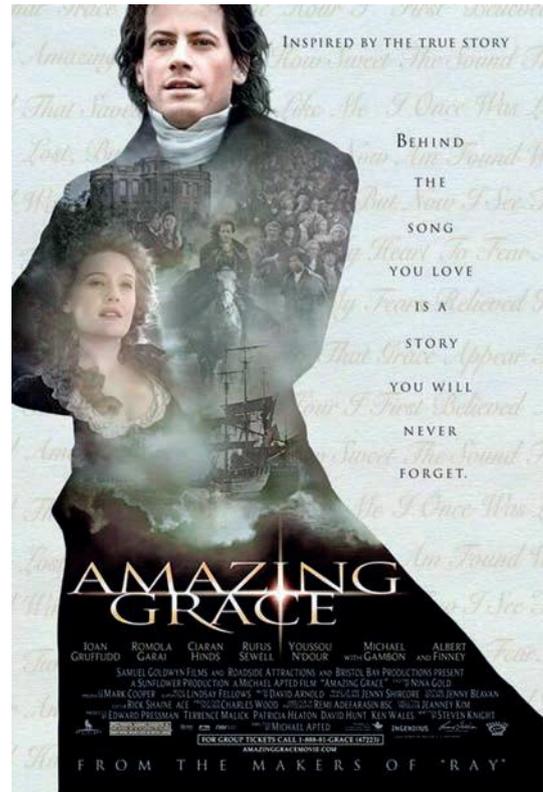
## Michael Apted's *Amazing Grace*

The life and career of William Wilberforce (1759–1833) is the subject of a modern film, *Amazing Grace* (2006), directed by Michael Apted. The film starts in 1797, and Wilberforce tells his own story commencing in 1782, when he was a member of parliament and friends like William Pitt the Younger suggested that he should take up the risky issue of the British slave trade.

Predictably, Wilberforce's campaign quickly angered the powerful political lobby that represented the interests of the slave trade in parliament. Unafraid, he plunged more deeply into the anti-slavery cause, inspired by the story of John Newton, who had once been the owner of a slave ship, but who was now haunted by the harm he had done to the 20 000 negroes he had shipped to slavery. Nonetheless, the campaign seemed impossible, and by 1797 he was ready to give up.

With the support of his wife Barbara and friends such as James Stephen, however, Wilberforce finally succeeded in passing the *Slave Trade Act* through parliament in 1807. He continued to support this cause, aiming for the complete abolition of slavery throughout Britain's lands. By 1826, he was forced to resign from Parliament due to illness, but still achieved the *Slavery Abolition Act* (1833), which outlawed slavery throughout much of the British Empire. He died shortly after this ultimate success.

This modern film was released in Britain in 2006, then shown for the first time in America in 2007 to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the American slave trade in 1807.



**SOURCE 5.12** Director Michael Apted created his film *Amazing Grace* (2006) to celebrate the achievements of the anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce in passing laws to abolish the slave trade in Britain. This film appeared 200 years after Wilberforce's first great success in 1807.

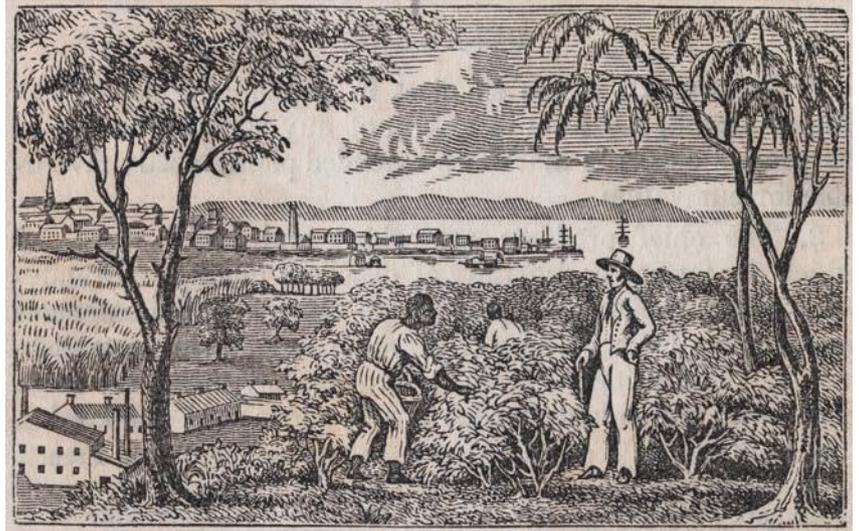
## Questions

After viewing the film *Amazing Grace*, discuss the following questions with your class.

- 1 What role did religious experience play in Wilberforce's decision to become an abolitionist?
- 2 How did his friendship with John Newton work to give him useful insights into the slave trade?
- 3 How did Wilberforce manage to confront some of his contemporaries with the realities of the slave trade?
- 4 **Research:** Wilberforce took up a number of other causes, some of them less humanitarian than the abolitionist campaign. What were some of his other projects? Did they succeed?
- 5 **Research:** Who wrote the words of the song 'Amazing Grace'? What ideas do these words express? What was the original tune used for this song, before the more famous current tune was used?
- 6 **Contestability:** Historical films can give us a vivid sense of the past, but sometimes they include misleading inaccuracies. List any evidence of historical inaccuracies in *Amazing Grace*, and evaluate whether the film is still useful in historical terms.

## IN AMERICA

In some American colonies, such as Pennsylvania, the citizens freed their slaves in 1780 and refused to buy more. The American Revolution raised hopes for reform, but the United States Constitution of 1787–88 failed to grant freedom to African Americans. The greatest anti-slavery campaigner, Thomas Jefferson, commented sadly that they had ‘taken the wolf by the ears’ (meaning that they had tried to handle the terrible problem of slavery) but not succeeded. Slavery was not banned in America until 1865, through the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution.



**SOURCE 5.13** Slavery continued in America until 1865.

## THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND SLAVERY: AN EVALUATION

From a modern point of view, the failure to abolish slavery seems to condemn the Enlightenment. The humane and rational thought of the Enlightenment produced Rousseau’s ‘man is born free’. It also produced the idea of personal liberty mentioned in the *American Declaration of Independence* (1776) and the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (August 1789). However, the very *philosophes* who spoke publicly against slavery sat in coffee houses and salons, drinking coffee, eating sugar and smoking tobacco, knowing full well that these had been produced by the sweated labour of thousands of slaves. Is it possible that the Enlightenment was all talk and no action?

While it is tempting to criticise this contradiction, the real situation was much more complex. Historian Dorinda Outram examined the failure to extend ‘liberty’ to people of colour, concluding that there were good reasons why the Enlightenment could criticise, but not abolish, the practice of slavery. Put simply, the Enlightenment’s great achievement was to raise the debate about slavery and to declare it wrong; but it simply could not immediately remove a vast industry.

First, in financial terms, abolition of slavery would have destroyed the prosperous economy in which these people lived. In France, for example, one-third of the economy’s revenue came from trade of goods from Saint-Domingue. It therefore seemed ‘common sense’ to support slavery because it was the basis of the whole economy. This was confirmed by government ministers, high officials and wealthy nobles, all of whom owned shares in enterprises such as the Company of the Indies. The economist Jean-François Melon (1675–1738) stated firmly in his *Political Essay on Commerce* (1736): ‘The use of slaves authorised in our colonies teaches us that slavery is not contrary to either religion or morality.’

Second, in intellectual terms, the abolitionists were not able to quote the Bible for a definition of what was wrong with slavery. This was particularly important for those who wished to use the Bible as a moral yardstick, like many American reformers. They were unable to directly counter the arguments of the opponents of abolition, such as the plantation owners in Virginia, who justified

their position by quoting the examples of Abraham and kings in the Old Testament who kept slaves. If the reformers wanted to use religion and morality to back their demands, they had to use more vague arguments, such as the idea that Christianity sees all humans as being equal.

Third, in scientific terms, the reformers were weakened by new scientific theories that were ‘racial’ (in the sense that they talked about black Africans as a ‘race’); today, we would describe these theories as ‘racist’. Put simply, ‘experts’ used science to prove that negroes as a race had certain characteristics which made them well suited to slavery. *Philosophes* such as Montesquieu argued that negroes had black skin as a result of the environment in which they lived; but the ‘experts’ built whole systems of ‘scientific knowledge’ to ‘prove’ that the African race was inferior.

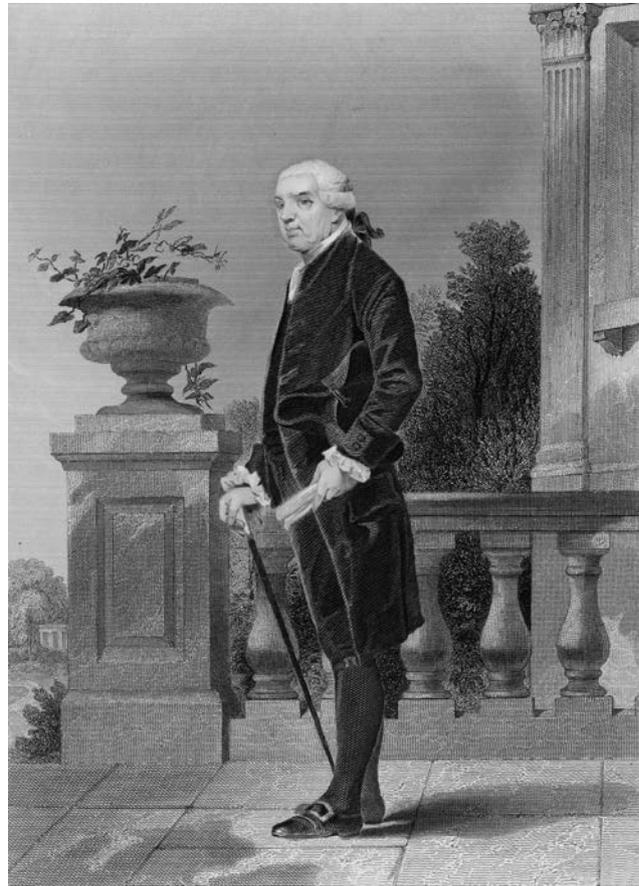
Outram’s research shows that the Enlightenment reformers genuinely opposed slavery, but that there were many overpowering reasons why they could not simply stop the practice. She notes that Thomas Jefferson did write articles in the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) making the slave trade, and slave owning, illegal, but that he was forced to remove them by the opposition of colonies such as South Carolina and Georgia.

The important thing to note is that the issue had been raised, the debate had been started and attitudes were changing.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we must recognise that reform movements such as the Enlightenment, like political revolutions, criticise the old regime, and provide a vision for a new society. It is, however, one thing to state ideals and aims, but another to actually achieve them. Usually, reformers and revolutionaries make ‘sectional gains’, meaning that they succeed in some areas, but not in others.

It takes time to change attitudes. Let us take the example of the Enlightenment debate on the role of family, the nurturing of children and the matter of votes for women. While Rousseau succeeded in transforming how wealthy people brought up their children, Condorcet would not live to see the



**SOURCE 5.14** Engraved portrait of Henry Laurens, artist unknown. Some anti-slavery reformers had been slave traders themselves. Henry Laurens (1724–92) ran a profitable slave-trading business in South Carolina, but became convinced that slavery was wrong. He was an opponent of the trade from 1760. Later, as President of the Continental Congress of 1776, he was a powerful supporter of reform.

vote given to women in France (this did not happen until 1948). Thus, we may have to talk about ‘the long Enlightenment’, and acknowledge that, realistically, some changes take generations to achieve. The achievement of the Enlightenment then was not to achieve change, but to start the debate.

Reformers quickly learn that matters of burning principle – such as the inhuman crime of slavery – cannot be stopped by moral objections alone. The great principle of human dignity and liberty depends upon the political, social and economic conditions in which the anti-slavery campaign is conducted. The same anti-slavery arguments failed in France, where sheer economic necessity made the slave plantations of Saint-Domingue crucial to the French economy, yet succeeded in Britain, where the slave trade was relatively less important to the British economy.

Our conclusions about the success of the Enlightenment must surely depend upon our endpoint: the historical moment at which we sum up what the Enlightenment achieved. For the purposes of the Australian National Curriculum, this point could be 1789, and yet it is clear that the principles raised during the Enlightenment continued to reverberate through the 19th and 20th centuries, and into our own.

The Enlightenment produced strong points of view. It did so because it challenged existing power structures, both in politics and religion, and also in the ownership of human knowledge itself. The Enlightenment was also controversial because it was seen as the beginning of an attack on traditional authority that ended in the French Revolution of 1789 and therefore, presumably, the murderous excesses of the Terror in 1792–94. Ever since Edmund Burke wrote his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), the Enlightenment has been a target for those who condemn the revolutionary upheaval that followed it. Burke clashed with the *philosophes*’ belief that human beings have enough God-given reason to design a new society, and objected that no single thinker or group had enough wisdom to replace all the structures and traditions that society had developed over centuries. This argument became the foundation of conservative thought in the Western world, which explains why so many writers today criticise the Enlightenment when expressing disapproval of reform in their own time. In this, they disagree with professional academic historians of the French Revolution, who now almost universally reject the idea that the Enlightenment ‘caused’ the French Revolution, and least of all the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century.

The historiography of the Enlightenment becomes passionately engaging when we realise that the story is by no means finished. As historians, we might think that we are studying an intellectual movement that occurred in the past, and that the story is over; we just have to read the conclusion. Not so. In one sense, the Enlightenment has ‘won’, in so far as many of its main ideals are now the main principles upon which our Western liberal societies are founded. Without our being aware of it, many of our core ideas are Enlightenment principles; they guide the way we think about the world. To take a simple example, when we see an Oxfam advertisement about a starving child in Africa, we immediately *feel empathy* (we ourselves don’t like to be hungry), we *feel sympathy* (we feel humanely sorry for the poor child) and we *take action* (perhaps by donating money) and some of us might even dream of a better system of food distribution across the globe, and possibly enlist as a United Nations humanitarian volunteer. Every one of these reactions is an Enlightenment reaction, although we are not aware of it.

## Chapter summary

To draw together everything you have learnt in this chapter, make your own study notes while the information is fresh in your mind. Using dot points and colour coding either on concept cards or in a computer-based document, note the following main points and add your own examples:

- + Although the Enlightenment certainly did not solve all of humanity's problems, it did create powerful ideas that have continued to echo through the centuries that followed, progressively helping to create democratic societies in Europe and North America.
- + In political terms, the values of democracy, representation and the separation of powers were defined (see Chapter 2), helping to define new political systems that emerged from the American and French Revolutions.
- + Equally importantly, the Enlightenment effectively created a new vision of human beings. It established that all human beings are naturally born with certain rights, and that these cannot be taken away. This in turn led to more just legal practices, the moderation of barbaric punishments and the abolition of torture.
- + The Enlightenment taught people not to blindly accept information as true simply because their king or their church tells them it is. It identified many forms of religious belief as superstition, and taught people that things such as miracles simply do not stand up to empirical investigation. Since the Enlightenment, some people have come to the idea of 'faith', which consists in believing something sacred that cannot be proved (see Chapter 3).
- + The *philosophes* hoped to use humanity and science to deal in a more humane way with those who were unfortunate or unable to care for themselves. They created hospitals for the insane, and began to understand that madness is not caused by being possessed by the devil, and hence might be treated. They also created a new form of 'natural' education for children, sensing that an infant needs the presence and affection of its parents in order to develop well.
- + The Enlightenment also led to an explosion in the fields of human knowledge. In particular, the social sciences we now take for granted were either born or much advanced in the 18th century. When the *philosophes* turned their empiricism on the world around them, they effectively created modern subjects such as economics, psychology, child psychology, sociology and anthropology, as well as comparative religion.
- + The Enlightenment transformed European political thinking, first by providing a powerful critique of absolute monarchy, and second by inspiring intelligent discussion of concepts such as democracy, representation and the separation of powers. While this form of thinking did not *cause* the American and French Revolutions, when they occurred it certainly informed the way the 'patriots' conceptualised their new political systems.
- + The theoretical definition of women's rights began with strong statements by Condorcet. Actual social attitudes and practices took longer to change, however. This issue belongs to 'the long Enlightenment', particularly when we note that the cause has still not yet been fully won in our own time.



- + Rousseau and his supporters transformed child rearing and family life by encouraging more 'natural' practices, such as the breastfeeding of infants and experiential education for children.
- + The success of the campaign against slavery, though founded on the greatest moral absolute of all – human freedom – depended on the economic conditions in each country. While Wilberforce succeeded in abolishing slavery in Britain and then in the British Empire, equally committed campaigners in France and the United States could not immediately overcome the economic realities of economies founded largely on plantation slave labour.

### Weblinks

Weblinks relevant to this chapter can be found at <http://nmh.nelsonnet.com.au/enlightenment>.

### Further resources

#### Thomas Jefferson

Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings: An American Controversy*, University Press of Virginia, Richmond, 1997

Kevin Hayes, *The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008

Howard Rice, *Thomas Jefferson's Paris*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1976

#### America

Jonathon Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011

#### Women

Philippe Ariès and George Duby, *A History of Private Life: Passions of the Renaissance*, Harvard College, Harvard, 1989

Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2006

Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, 1500–1800*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1996

Richard Rand, *Intimate Encounters; Love and Domesticity in Eighteenth-century France*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997

Joel Schwartz, *The Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984

#### Slavery:

Louis Sala-Molins, *Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 2006

Arthur Stinchcombe, *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995



## *Chapter review activities*

- 1 Enlightenment ideas claimed to be ‘universal’, applying to all human beings, but did not always do so. Who missed out?
- 2 Why and how was the Englishman Thomas Paine able to give the American colonists such powerful arguments to rebel against Britain and demand independence?
- 3 How was Thomas Jefferson able to translate Enlightenment ideas to American conditions and provide the principles for a new society?
- 4 How did Jefferson contribute to the French Revolution?
- 5 The Enlightenment may be said to have raised the debate about equal rights for women. Has the debate been brought to a conclusion? Explain your answer.
- 6 How did Rousseau transform existing ideas about the raising of children?
- 7 Why did it prove so difficult to eliminate the industry of slavery in France?
- 8 Why was the anti-slavery movement more successful in England?
- 9 When revolution broke out in France in 1789, the French quickly drew up their own declaration of rights, which was inspired partly by Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and partly by Jefferson’s *American Declaration of Independence*. An extract of the French document is printed below; search the internet for the text of the American declaration. Make a list of the human rights that the French revolutionaries thought were essential, and analyse their similarities to and differences from to the American declaration.

### **THE DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN AND CITIZEN**

#### **Approved by the National Assembly of France, 26 August 1789**

The representatives of the French people, organised as a National Assembly, believing that the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole cause of public calamities and of the corruption of governments, have determined to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man ... Therefore the National Assembly recognizes and proclaims, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and of the citizen:

**Articles:**

- 1 Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.
  - 2 The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible [inalienable] rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
  - ...
- 10 From what you have read in this chapter, how effective do you think enlightened ideas were in actually bringing about changes in the way people lived during the Age of Enlightenment? Make sure you consider the following in your response:
- + To what extent were the less fortunate groups in society – such as women, working people, the poor and slaves – really helped by the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment?
  - + How do we measure change for the better?
  - + If the Enlightenment only achieved some of its goals in its own time, does this mean that the movement was finally a failure?
- Present your conclusions in the form of an essay, a PowerPoint presentation, a blog or a talk to your class group.

# CONCLUSION

## *The Enlightenment today*



“ The Enlightenment [was] an assault on the past in the name of the future. ”  
 Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment and why it still matters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

While there has always been historical debate about the Enlightenment, ever since the Enlightenment itself, it has never been as intense as it is right now, in the first decades of the 21st century. Recent global developments such as fundamentalism and terrorism have thrown Enlightenment values into question. Indeed, your generation now faces one of the most difficult questions ever posed: Are Enlightenment values and ideals really universal? Are you sure that they apply to all human beings, regardless of nation, race, gender or class? If you believe they are universal, how will you convince the large number of people who now claim that they are not?

During the period from 2001 to the present – commonly referred to as the ‘Age of Terror’ – writers have seriously reconsidered the Enlightenment’s significance in our more troubled and dangerous world. This is a crisis of faith, as we in the West realise that not everybody shares our humanistic, liberal ideals; indeed, powerful super-states such as China and dangerous groups such as Al-Qaeda actively reject Enlightenment ideals as being solely Western. Thus, the very idea of a ‘universal’ declaration of human rights is now under question.

## DOUBTS ABOUT ‘THE LONG ENLIGHTENMENT’

Historian Harvey Chisick has stated that, until 20 years ago, people generally accepted that the Enlightenment was relevant to modern society because it had actually created the conditions in which we live. In recent decades, however, historians are less certain. Chisick writes:

“ There was general agreement in the West, at least, that the validation of individual happiness and liberty, mutual toleration and separation of church and state were the means for achieving a desirable form of society. Today, both the rightness and the effectiveness of these assumptions are called into question. Insofar as the Enlightenment has provided the intellectual framework within which capitalism has developed, it has released forces that are greater and more destructive than first believed. The belief that the pursuit of self-interest would automatically result in the common good is no longer tenable. Nor is the presumed [goodness] of technology. Though modern technology has the potential for furthering human welfare ... if it is not subjected to appropriate human controls, it turns its power against both mankind and the environment. ”

Harvey Chisick, *A Historical Dictionary of the Enlightenment*, Scarecrow Press, 2005, pp. 159–60

Writing in 2005, Chisick concluded that Enlightenment values were ‘under attack’, and that we cannot assume that they are established forever. In our time, there has been a resurgence of fundamentalist religions, which have undone much of the work done by the *philosophes* against racism and slavery, and in defence of toleration and individual rights.

◀ Eleanor Roosevelt holds a copy of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

## THREATS TO ENLIGHTENMENT IDEALS

Another view of the Enlightenment is that of Stuart Jordan in *The Enlightenment Vision: Science, Reason and the Promise of a Better Future*.<sup>1</sup> Jordan is not a historian but a scientist – an astrophysicist – who was previously a senior member of staff at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, and is currently President of the Institute for Science and Human Values. Not surprisingly, he still sees the Enlightenment as essentially humanistic, based on science and committed to breaking down the divisions created by traditional, intolerant religion. He argues that 'the historical Western Enlightenment remains the right vision for a higher stage of human civilisation' and that Enlightenment ideals are established across much, but not all, of the world. For example, the ideal of representation has led to modern democratic institutions in some countries, but not all. The ideal of scientific experimentation has led to medical and technological advances that have massively reduced human suffering from disease and injury, but not everywhere. The ideal of universal human rights has translated into the international standards supported by the United Nations, and recognised by many, but not all, countries. In this respect, Jordan is a scientist who can see that science has improved human life significantly, but not completely.

As an admirer of the Enlightenment, Jordan feels that its ideals have survived and are beginning to triumph; he cannot, however, conclude that they have won. He admits that 'we have so far fallen short of its attainment and will not likely reach the goal soon or without further struggle'. This is because these wonderful 18th-century ideals are now trying to function in the vastly more complicated and dangerous world of the 21st century. For Jordan, his Enlightenment is a secular (non-religious) movement, and yet our century has seen a rebirth of established religions, of fundamentalist religions, and of terrorist groups that wrongly use religion as their rationale. Our globe is a complicated place, and generalisations are not easy. Jordan finds that democratic, representative governments are common, but not universal. They at least seem to have won out over the great dictatorships of the 20th century, and more recently we have witnessed the astounding 'invention of democracy' in countries where we would never have expected to see this, notably Libya and Egypt. The implementation of democracy, however, can prove problematic, as the world witnessed in the violence in Egypt in 2013.

Jordan admits similar problems in terms of social values. He states that physical indicators – such as standard of living and life expectancy – are increasing in many countries, especially the United States, Europe, Japan and parts of Asia, but adds that physical wellbeing is not the whole story. Our world still sees shocking examples of racism, denial of human rights, sexism and sexual exploitation. These can be caused by political/ideological groups, such as the Taliban, or by criminal economic interests, such as the international traffic in women and children for the sex industry. Amnesty International points out that slavery was not abolished in the 18th century, and exists in new forms today; and the United Nations states that the status of women across the globe generally is still poor. Jordan believes that there is still not a single country on the planet that accords full and equal rights to women, although the United States proclaims that it does.

Jordan also admits that, in economic terms, the Enlightenment dream of improving life for all people across the globe has not been achieved. Certainly, science and technology have allowed increased production in the past 50 years, but this is undercut by the enormous inequality of the *distribution* of global wealth, because resources are controlled by a tiny minority of people.

Jordan's conclusion has great significance for you, the reader. He believes that the ideals of the Enlightenment project are basically correct, but that they are now facing the massive global problems of our own world. He urges you not to study Enlightenment ideas as something from the past, but as a work in progress in the present, and well into the future. He suggests that these ideals now need to be handed on to you, and that it is your generation's turn to take up the work done by Locke, Voltaire and their like.

For Jordan, it is your turn now.

## THE IDEAL OF A GLOBAL COMMUNITY

“ But all history, if it is to be anything more than mere archeology, must be a reflection of what the present owes to the past. ”

Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment and why it still matters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

Anthony Pagden is a professional academic historian, teaching political science and history at the University of California, Los Angeles. This dual expertise qualifies him to analyse both the Enlightenment and also the context of the contemporary world in which we live.

Pagden feels that the Enlightenment created the core values of the liberal democratic societies of the Western world. These are now so deeply ingrained that we are not even aware of them as ideals; they are now built invisibly into the structure of the society in which we live. Most people take for granted the ideals of personal liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and human rights. We believe that our own governments, and international organisations such as the United Nations and Amnesty International, are right in supporting these values globally.

### The hopes of internationalism

As a modern analyst in a troubled world, Pagden suggests that the Enlightenment was also based on a sort of 'humanism'. The *philosophes* believed that human beings are essentially good; that they are **empathetic** and **sympathetic**. Out of this, Pagden sees the possibility of '**cosmopolitanism**': a common sense of humanity that can unite people across the entire globe.

The Enlightenment itself created the theory of internationalism. We have in fact seen the birth of many internationalist projects in the 20th century, including the League of Nations, and the United Nations and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). From American President Woodrow Wilson's statement of ideals at Versailles in 1919, to the operations of the United Nations today, there is a vision that all human beings might be joined in a global society living according to certain basic rules and ideals, hopefully enshrined in international laws and enforced by international courts.

The weakness of the Enlightenment is the assumption that Western societies developed ideals of representative democracy, human rights and the secular criticism of religion, that these are 'right', and so we must encourage other societies to live by them. Critics such the philosopher and historian Michel Foucault counter-argue that the Enlightenment movement was an early form of imperialism remarkably similar to the patronising efforts of the British and other Europeans to 'civilise the natives' in the countries they colonised. We need to take this criticism seriously.

#### **empathetic**

Able to imagine how other people feel

#### **sympathetic**

Able to feel sorry for the sufferings of others

#### **cosmopolitanism**

The state of belonging to all parts of the world, not just one part of the social, cultural, political or intellectual world

In many parts of Asia and the Middle East, resentment of ‘Western imperialism’ is as sharp as it was a hundred years ago, and is a factor used to good effect by many extremist groups, such as Al-Qaeda. But Pagden replies that it was not the Enlightenment of the 18th century that caused colonisation, but the nationalism and fake scientific racism of the 19th century that created Western oppression of developing nations.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty of the University of Chicago presents another point of view of the Enlightenment. He argues that the Enlightenment occurred in the same century as the Industrial Revolution, whose main achievement – it was thought – was learning new techniques in the use of coal, then gas, and then oil to fuel the enormous need for power in the growing factory system. Few *philosophes* – apart perhaps from Benjamin Franklin – foresaw the environmental problems of this massive increase in the use of fossil fuels, but in our century we can anticipate a realistic scenario in which fossil fuels must ultimately run out. We can also see the endpoint of science and progress on our horizon, which could be the catastrophic collapse of the Earth’s entire ecosystem and, possibly, the end or reduction of human presence on the planet. If ever there was a need for a cosmopolitan consciousness, and international agreements and governance, the moment is now.

## THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND YOU

The real historiographic debate about the Enlightenment, however, is raging right now, and it is about to fall squarely into our hands. The big question is whether our core beliefs really are universal, or whether they are just something invented by, and applicable to, Western societies. Do you believe in representative democracy, in freedom of thought and expression, in freedom from religious intolerance and superstition, in equal rights and education for women and in the rule of international law? If you do, then you as a citizen of the 21st century face far greater problems even than the 18th-century thinkers, because there are many individuals, groups, religions and nations who *do not* accept Enlightenment ideals. How, for example, would you argue with somebody who claims that China cannot afford to grant human rights to its people? How would you respond to an Islamic fundamentalist or a terrorist who claims that Christianity has been intolerant, and therefore that religious tolerance is not relevant in the world today? How would you argue with a religious person who claims that female genital mutilation is an ancient tradition and that we must respect this cultural practice?

Commentators such as Chakrabarty and Pagden have only begun to address the issue, by usefully combining a good historical knowledge of what the Enlightenment actually was, with a good working knowledge of global problems of the 21st century. Perhaps the clue to the future is that global analysts are increasingly seeing problems such as global warming, natural disasters, terrorism, food inequality and pandemic diseases as ones that can only be resolved by global governance; that is, by cooperation on a global scale. Perhaps modern forms of electronic communication, which were recently so effective in the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, might hold the secret to the creation of a new form of the ‘republic of letters’ that might effectively address the problems affecting humanity in the 21st century.

## CAN WE BE ‘CITIZENS OF THE ENTIRE WORLD’?

In closing, you might like to recall the inspiring comment of one of the first great ‘global thinkers’: the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes, whom the *philosophes* admired greatly. A passer-by asked him one day: ‘Friend, what city [in Greek, “polites”] do you come from?’ Diogenes paused, and replied: ‘I am a citizen of the entire world [in Greek, “kosmo-polites”: the first use of the word “cosmopolitan”].’

Like the *philosophes* in the 18th century, we in the 21st century can only imagine what sort of global civilisation we might create if every human being could feel themselves to be a citizen of the entire world.

### Endnote

- 1 Stuart Jordan, *The Enlightenment Vision: Science, Reason and the Promise of a Better Future*, Prometheus Books, New York, 2012.

## ACTIVITIES

1

- a What is historiography?
- b What is the 'heroic view' of the Enlightenment?
- c What criticisms of the Enlightenment have been made by its opponents?
- d Why are 'universal' Enlightenment principles under threat in our own times?
- e What is Anthony Pagden's vision for a global community?

2

Using the Internet and book resources, investigate what led to the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948. Then, making reference to the impact of World War II, write a report explaining why the United Nations felt the need to write a modern declaration of human rights. In your answer:

- + List the main rights described in the declaration's 30 articles.
- + Explain which countries are signatories to this declaration.
- + Describe the criticisms that have been made of this document by other countries and groups.
- + In particular, acknowledge that the idea of universal human rights might cause some difficulties for other cultures, notably some Islamic countries, that have their own value systems.

3

Using the Internet and book resources, create an annotated graphic poster outlining the origins of Amnesty International, its aims in defending human rights, and the methods it uses to try to protect human life and dignity. Evaluate how successful Amnesty International has been in achieving its goals, describing some of its successes as well as the limitations on its actions in dangerous parts of the world.

4

Using the Internet and book resources, investigate what efforts have been made in Australia to write a Bill of Rights for our nation. Analyse why Australia has not so far been able to complete this process.

When you have drawn your conclusions, write your report in the form of a letter to the Australian Prime Minister explaining why you believe that it is important for Australia to have a Bill of Rights. In your argument, you will need to address the objections that Australia does not need such a bill because we respect human rights, and the more recent argument that in the 'Age of Terror' we may need special measures to deal with this threat. Your letter should conclude by listing which rights you feel should be guaranteed by an eventual Australian Bill of Rights.

5

If human rights really are ‘universal’, then logically all people in all cultures would agree to them. This is not the case. The weakness of the Enlightenment movement is that it was defined in European countries, not in other regions of the world.

Write a reflective essay on the topic: Are human rights just a dream of Western civilisation? Investigate how other countries and cultures have responded to the idea of universal rights. Examine the *Bangkok Declaration* of 1993, which was published after the World Conference on Human Rights of that year, and explain how Asian countries in our region have responded to the challenge of defining rights. To what extent have they accepted the idea of universal rights? What are the problems they see in the concept of human rights? If you were a diplomat for Australia, how would you suggest that Asian nations might proceed to embrace human rights in a manner acceptable to them?

6

Read and review Malala Yousafzai’s book, *I am Malala*. In your response:

- + Explain how and why Malala Yousafzai came to the role of campaigning for education for girls.
- + Investigate why groups such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban are opposed to the idea of women receiving an education.
- + Evaluate the effect of the Taliban’s attempt to kill Malala. Do you think their action has strengthened or weakened the campaign for the education for girls in the current age?

7

Review what you have learnt in this book about the key thinkers and the key ideas of the Enlightenment.

- + Consider what the Enlightenment’s aims were, and what it actually achieved.
- + List the Enlightenment ideas that are still important in our Western societies today, and explain how they continue to affect our lives in the 21st century.
- + Finally, identify the forces in our own world – such as globalisation, the rebirth of slavery, government control of society, fundamentalist religion and terrorism – which threaten the tolerant and liberal ideas of the Enlightenment in our time.

Present your conclusions in the form of an essay, a multimedia presentation, a blog or a talk to your class group.

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