

17 – The Enlightenment: The 1700s

With roots in both the Scientific Revolution and the seventeenth-century beliefs of the English philosopher John Locke, the Enlightenment offered new ideas about how to change the world. The application of scientific method and rational, empirical thought processes to politics, the economy, society, and religion led the intellectuals of the movement, called philosophes, to call for change in government, economic policy, human behavior, and religion. Women, political officials, economists, and educators were also eager to encourage responsible government, expanded education, and rational human interaction. Others, however, challenged this emphasis on reason in European culture and particularly the expanded role for women.

KEY TERMS

Deism	natural rights	old order	physiocrat	separation of
general will	neoclassicism	original state of	Pietism	powers
<i>laissez-faire</i>	mercantilism	nature	Rococo	<i>tabula rasa</i>
natural law	Methodism	<i>philosophe</i>	salon	the social contract

KEY CONCEPTS

- Thinking about the ideal society, the *philosophes* studied a variety of government systems. They were especially concerned with the problems created by absolutism.
- A broad education with a focus on literacy became important to the upper and middle classes as people tried to understand and improve their world. New public venues, such as coffeehouses and lending libraries, along with expanded print media, popularized enlightened ideas in spite of censorship by the government and the Church.
- Physiocrats like Adam Smith rejected mercantilism in favor of *laissez-faire* capitalism.
- Women gained recognition during the Enlightenment as they hosted salons and wrote about their concerns.
- The rational study of religious practices and beliefs led to the demand for religious toleration and the development of Deism. Partly in reaction to Deism, Christianity changed as Europeans strove for more religious devotion.
- Changes in art and music during this time reflected both the interests of the aristocracy and the desire to emulate the logic and reason of ancient Rome.
- Enlightenment values were challenged by the Romantic revival of public sentiment and feeling. Rousseau emphasized the role of emotion rather than logic in the improvement of society and advocated traditional roles for women.

For a full discussion of the Enlightenment, see *Western Civilization*, 8th and 9th editions, Chapter 17.

Life Under The Old Order

The world of early eighteenth-century Europe was one of control by governments and the Catholic Church together. As a part of this control, both institutions stressed the importance of the past and tradition. But based on ideas that had emerged in the seventeenth century, political and religious powers would soon be shaken to their foundations.

The Scientific Revolution, encouraged especially by Charles II in England and Louis XIV in France, had offered a new view of the world beginning in the late seventeenth century. In analyzing the physical world, scientists laid the groundwork for analyzing other topics, such as politics and human behavior. For example, Isaac Newton believed that the universe was created according to natural laws, laws that could be understood by careful study. His mathematical calculations in the studies of motion, gravity, and light, and his prominence as a leader of England's scientific community, encouraged others to look for patterns in a wide range of areas, such as government authority. John Locke, the great pre-Enlightenment thinker, had provided a foundation for the *philosophes*. His belief in the *tabula rasa* – the blank slate, the

mind without mental content at birth – emphasized the importance of education and experience. A reasonable, orderly study of the world, he believed, would lead to the creation of better human beings and, thus, a better society.

AP Tip

An essential historical thinking skill is the analysis of continuity and change over time. Look back at Chapter 1 and think about the ideals of the Renaissance. To what extent do the ideals of the Enlightenment represent a break with old beliefs? To what extent do they represent an extension of those old beliefs?

Common Interests And Beliefs

Although the Enlightenment was centered in France, the *philosophes* were spread across Europe. They were interested in numerous topics and held a wide variety of beliefs, but they shared several underlying assumptions.

First, they believed that the Old Order, referred to by the French term *ancien regime*, was repressive and that political and religious authorities used brute force and tradition to

sustain an autocracy that perpetuated despotism, social and legal inequality, religious intolerance, and ignorance. For there to be progress, the *philosophes* believed, the traditional power of church and state had to be challenged.

Second, they believed that it was possible to change the political and social orders. Drawing on classical philosophy, especially that of Aristotle, Renaissance humanism, and Locke's writings, the *philosophes* held that every human being possessed natural rights, rights that cannot be usurped by any government. The Lockean rights of life, liberty, and property could be safeguarded only when human institutions conformed to logic and reason. To ensure these rights, the *philosophes* called for an end to the Old Order and the creation of a new world of progress and hope.

AP Tip

It is essential that you understand the importance of historical causation. The impact of the Scientific Revolution and the work of John Locke on the Enlightenment form an important area of European history, one that frequently appears on the AP exam. You should be able to analyze – break into parts and discuss the interaction of the parts – the causes of the Enlightenment, especially its roots in seventeenth-century England and its response to autocratic methods of control by both state and Church.

Major Philosophes

To build a new world, the *philosophes* proposed a number of reforms. Some—for example, the Baron de Montesquieu and Voltaire—suggested political reforms, while social reforms were laid out by Rousseau and Wollstonecraft.

The Baron De Montesquieu

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, was a French noble who studied forms of government, looking at how they responded to natural rights. Author of *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Montesquieu believed that men were born equal but that they lost that equality under oppressive government and social systems. Therefore, protection by law was key to a reasonable form of government. He especially appreciated the English parliamentary system, deriving from it the political theory for which he is most known, the separation of powers. The separating of powers into executive, legislative, and judicial branches led to another theory for which Montesquieu is well known, the system of checks and balances.

Voltaire

Another French *philosophe* who admired the British system of government was François-Marie Arouet, known as Voltaire. The well-educated son of a middle-class family, he showed his intelligence early when, after studying law, he gained widespread fame as a writer of philosophy. His fiery temper and ardent fight against the religious intolerance of the Catholic Church and the absolutist French government frequently got him in trouble. After a quarrel with a French

nobleman, he fled to England, where his passion and wit made him popular among the British nobility. During his more than two years there, he came to appreciate much about the English political system, writing *Philosophic Letters on the English* (1734, 1778), in which he praised England's religious toleration and constitutional monarchy.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The Swiss-born Rousseau continued the search for the best governmental system. His conclusion, laid out in *The Social Contract* (1762), was quite different from Montesquieu's and Voltaire's. Coming from a difficult family background, Rousseau had a vision of the ideal society and government that rested on the premise that people had natural rights and were happy in their original, natural states. However, as inequalities arose, people entered into a social contract with one another, surrendering their rights to the community and submitting to the “general will,” or will of the group. If their government failed in its purpose, the people had the right to overthrow and replace it.

Rousseau patterned his basic ideas of natural rights on John Locke's, but there were differences. Locke was more concerned with individual rights and limiting government. Rousseau, on the other hand, held that the individual's rights should be subordinated to the interests of the community, emphasizing the general will as supreme in creating true freedom.

Rousseau also delved into social issues, such as education and women's role in society. In his book *Émile* (1762), Rousseau expounded his belief that people were born good but that society corrupted them, and that people were happiest when they balanced reason and emotion. The purpose of education, then, was to bring a person back to his true moral state. On the other hand, Locke believed that because people had no inherent morality (*tabula rasa*), education actually defined a person. Rousseau also included in *Émile* his thoughts on women: they could be educated in certain areas but were at their best when they were submissive to men, which, he believed, was their natural role.

David Hume

A Scottish *philosophe*, Hume believed, as other Enlightenment intellectuals did, that society could be improved. His theories, like Rousseau's, included some ideas that would become popular with nineteenth-century Romantics. As Rousseau emphasized the balance of reason and emotion, Hume also looked at how to blend the two. In his *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-1740), Hume discussed his “science of man,” a framework that could be used to study human beings. He wrote that reason alone could not be the basis of the analysis of any facet of life; people needed faith to balance how they understood their world. Like Locke, Hume believed that people have natural rights and should have some influence on their government. But unlike Locke, Hume held that authority and liberty should work together to make the best political system, that authority per se was not bad unless

it was extremely tyrannical.

Denis Diderot

Diderot, a French *philosophe* and writer, brought together the writings of many *philosophes* in his twenty-eight-volume *Encyclopedia* (1751-1765), which included works that decried autocracy and religious superstition and supported natural law and toleration. Because the *Encyclopedia* included many entries critical of the old order, Diderot faced governmental censorship. Yet, because of the work, the belief in toleration and natural rights, especially the right to education, grew widespread during the Enlightenment.

Adam Smith

Smith, another Scotsman, also contributed to the new approach to thinking during the Enlightenment, but in a very different way. Smith believed—as did the French physiocrats—that the best economic system was not the old order mercantilism but a new way of trading, free trade. Led by François Quesnay, the physiocrats held that just as there were natural political and social laws, there were also natural economic laws. One economic law was *laissez-faire*, an economic system in which the “invisible hand” of the market, the law of demand and supply, would rule. With *laissez-faire*, there would be no external control by the government of the economy as there had been with mercantilism, and social and economic order would result. Smith codified and amplified the physiocrats’ theories in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), not only emphasizing the importance of a free market but also declaring that the true wealth of a nation was in the work of its people, not in the gold and silver bullion so important to the countries dependent on mercantilism. Like so many other enlightened thinkers, Smith believed in the freedom of the individual to make choices.

Until this point there has been no mention of the impact of women thinkers. Interestingly, although women had a role in the salon culture and the promulgation of Enlightenment ideals (discussed in the section titled “Eighteenth Century Society”), there were few women actually involved in writing during the Enlightenment.

Mary Wollstonecraft

An Englishwoman, Wollstonecraft was an outstanding proponent of enlightened ideals, especially focusing on the roles and rights of women. During this period, some men held that women only had certain rights or were capable of only some learning. But Wollstonecraft took on the issue headlong. Because of financial problems in her family, Wollstonecraft’s education had been haphazard. Yet she read widely, so once she was ready to espouse her beliefs, she had a vast literary foundation from which to draw. Her concerns about the rights of women were developed over that same lifetime of blessings and difficulties. In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), she wrote, as had Hume and Rousseau, that reason should be balanced with instinct. Therefore, the purpose of educating girls was to encourage in them a

personal strength and the ability to be independent of men. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft continued her argument about the importance of education, along with another main theme—that God had made women equal to men in abilities and rights. Interestingly, although both she and Rousseau believed in natural rights, including various freedoms, Wollstonecraft’s belief that women were equal to men and had the right to independence was in direct contrast to Rousseau’s view of women in *Émile*.

AP Tip

As you study any time period, continually compare and contrast the variations within it. To best understand the Enlightenment, make a chart in which you list information on the *philosophes*, their writings, and their beliefs. Also, make note of ways in which they were both similar and different. This will give you a better grasp of each person, which will help you in answering multiple-choice questions, as well as provide the specifics necessary for a well-crafted essay.

Eighteenth-Century Society

Society during the Enlightenment changed in many ways. One development directly linked to the Enlightenment was the growth of salons. Gatherings of *philosophes* and those interested in discussing how to create a better world, salons were an integral factor in the spread of enlightened ideas. Held in upper-class homes, they were generally hosted by women, such as Madame Geoffrin, who gained recognition and more social influence through them.

Another change during this time was an interest—encouraged by many *philosophes*—in improving laws and making punishments more fairly fit crimes. Cesare Beccaria led a movement to press for the use of prisons for rehabilitation, not just punishment.

The lives of common people changed little. They still worked hard in much the same type of agrarian work as they had for several hundred years, looking forward to the holy days and feasts that had always been their outlet. Yet some differences were gradually developing. Medical care was improving as doctors and surgeons received better training, although hospitals remained dangerous places where diseases spread rapidly from patient to patient. There were also greater opportunities to receive an education. Although university education was generally out of their reach, the lower classes could get a basic education, especially from their parish churches. With some education and access to the many new periodicals and broadsheets spurred by the greater literacy, the common people expanded their understanding of the world.

Probably the greatest social change came in the area of religion. Many *philosophes* espoused Deism, which describes God as a great watchmaker who created the universe, then left it on its own, allowing it total self-determination. *Philosophes* also often encouraged religious toleration, especially by the monarchs who came to them for advice—the enlightened

despots. But this religious toleration was not widespread and generally did not extend to Jews.

However, other religions moved decisively away from logic and reason. The Roman Catholic Church still held to its doctrines and belief in an all-powerful God. Within the Protestant faiths, two popular movements arose. Pietism, which began in the Germanic states, encouraged a personal relationship with God. Along that same line, John and Charles Wesley led a revival in England, beginning what would become known as Methodism. The heart of this new faith was the importance of having a deep relationship with God. Thus, religion during the Enlightenment saw movements both toward and away from logic.

Eighteenth-Century Culture

From literature and music to art, eighteenth-century culture developed alongside and in response to the ideas of the Enlightenment. Logic, faith, and new views of the world were shown through the work of great writers, composers, and artists.

Literature

Writers did much to expand literature. Encouraged by, and encouraging the growth of, literacy, more periodicals were founded. Historians looked to the past for lessons that could lead to a better world. A new form of story-telling—novels—appeared, initially in England. Interestingly, novels provided women not only the stories they wanted to read, but also the opportunity to write them.

Music

The focus of music during the eighteenth century was both religious and secular. New forms of music, such as the opera and the symphony, were created in Italy, England, Austria, and the German states. Johann Sebastian Bach, the epitome—and virtually the end—of Baroque music, focused on religious compositions. German-born George Frederick Handel, famous for *Messiah*, found enormous success in England, where he was patronized by the courts of George I and George II. Probably the greatest composer of this time was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. A child prodigy who played for the court of Maria Theresa, Mozart mastered many musical forms.

Art

Art most dramatically represented the changing views of the eighteenth century. The death of Louis XIV in 1715 marks the beginning of the Rococo style, a reaction by the nobility to the classical baroque of the palace at Versailles. As the Enlightenment highlighted reason, Neoclassicism emphasized the values of ancient Greece and Rome. It was the dominant artistic style of the last quarter of the century.

Developed during the reign of Louis XV, Rococo focused on the idealized life of the French nobility, with its power and fashion centered at Palais-Royal, the court of Louis's regent, Philippe d'Orleans. Love, fantasy, and domestic life were the subjects of its major artists. Jean-Antoine Watteau's *Departure*

from *Cythera* is a great example of a fantastical image of the carefree lives of aristocracy. One of the most widely recognized Rococo paintings is *The Swing*, by Jean-Honoré Fragonard, showing a young woman and her lover caught up in the frivolity of the time. Fragonard also documented the increase in literacy in *Young Girl Reading*. The growing influence of women was shown in the work of Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Le Brun, who painted portraits of eminent women of the time. The favorite artist of Marie Antoinette, Louis XVI's wife, she painted some thirty portraits of the queen.

Neoclassicism directly reflected Enlightenment ideals by linking the logic and reason of the classical world to late-eighteenth century events. Spurred by excavations in Italy, the publication of such works as *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and the revolutionary movements in America and France, young artists from across Europe traveled to Italy to study. Preeminent among these young painters was Jacques-Louis David. After returning to France, he painted his seminal work, *Oath of the Horatii*, emphasizing the importance of loyalty and morality. David later painted in support of the French Revolution, most famously a work meant to garner support for the revolution, *The Death of Marat*.

AP Tip

Art appears on the AP European History exam in both multiple-choice and essay questions. When studying it, focus less on the artistic components such as color and shape, and more on how each artist and artistic work reflected the period of time and the culture in which he or she worked. The works of David, for example, are influenced by the Enlightenment in the artist's choice of classical Roman subject matter in the case of *Oath of the Horatii*, and his espousal of revolutionary ideals as seen in *The Death of Marat*. The historical thinking skills of periodization, contextualization, and appropriate use of relevant historical evidence are all used when analyzing works of art.

The Impact of the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment had a significant impact on governments around the world. Several monarchs, the so-called enlightened despots, gained many of their ideas for reform directly from the *philosophes*. The American and French revolutions drew from the work of the *philosophes* both their inspiration and some facets of their eventual governmental structures.