

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that began in Britain and reached its height in 18th century-France. It built on the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, when many thinkers came to believe that the whole world could be described and explained by the use of human reason. The Enlightenment extended the field of rational inquiry to government, society, and religion. The works of Enlightenment thinkers were often repressed by autocratic states, but their ideas became increasingly popular and were widely discussed among the emerging middle classes, particularly at the intellectual social gatherings of 18th-century Europe (known as salons).

PRINCIPAL IDEAS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

- **Rationalism** Belief that truth can only be arrived at by reason (rational, logical thinking)
- **Cause and Effect** Belief that everything has a cause and an effect, and that these can be discovered through observation and experiment
- **Natural Law** Belief that the universe is guided by simple laws pre-ordained by God, such as the law of gravitation. Denial of the possibility of miracles, which contradicts these natural laws
- **Progress** Belief that society and individuals can be improved and progress towards perfection. Denial of the medieval view that humanity is in a state of decline from a golden age of the distant past (identified by medieval thinkers with the classical era of Greece and Rome)
- **Freedom** Belief that individuals should be free to make up their own minds and form their own beliefs without being restricted by superstition, religious dogma, or autocratic government
- **Happiness** Belief that a morally good life is a happy life. Denial of the view of the medieval Christian Church that people should endure hardship on Earth in the hope of reward after death

MAJOR FIGURES

1596–1650 René Descartes; French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist. Pioneer of attempts to describe universal laws of motion and matter. In *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (Meditations on First Philosophy, 1641) he uses reasoned argument to show that we cannot be certain of the truth of our experiences because they might be illusions. He concludes that we can only be certain of things that are perceived “clearly and distinctly” by the mind, as mathematical truths are. His arguments persuade many Enlightenment thinkers that rationality is the only possible source of truth

1694–1778 François-Marie Arouet (known as Voltaire), French writer considered to be the leading figure of the Enlightenment. His critical essays and satires attacking absolutist rulers and religious beliefs earn him as many enemies as admirers. His most influential works include *Lettres philosophiques* (Philosophical Letters, 1734), *Candide* (1759), and *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Philosophical Dictionary, 1764). He is also a major contributor to Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* (Encyclopedia)

1712–1778 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, French writer and political philosopher. Believes that society is responsible for all the evils suffered by people and advocates a return to small apolitical communities. He argues that, since government was created by the people and not ordained by God, the people can change or replace it. His extreme radicalism and non-aristocratic background lead to prolonged persecution. His best known works, *Du Contrat social* (The Social Contract, 1762), *Emile* (1762), and *Confessions* (posthumously, 1782), are influential in the growing French revolutionary movement

1623–1704 John Locke, English philosopher. His political philosophy, expressed in *Treatises of Government* (1690), states that a ruler’s power is not absolute, and that all people have certain natural rights and duties, including life, liberty, and the ownership of property. It strongly influences the authors of the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789). His major abstract work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), stresses that humans are not born with knowledge but acquire it through their contact with the world and through rational thought

1689–1755 Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, French writer and political philosopher. His theories become influential in European politics. He believes that all aspects of the world are governed by natural laws, and that society would be improved if philosophers could discover those laws by the exercise of reason. Best known for *De l’esprit des lois* (The Spirit of the Laws, 1748) in which he praises the English democratic system and advocates division of governments into three parts: law-making (the monarch and parliament), law-interpreting (the judiciary), and law-enforcing (the executive)

1713–1784 Denis Diderot, French writer and philosopher. Best known as chief editor of *Encyclopédie* (Encyclopedia), a multivolume reference with provocative articles by leading French thinkers on politics, religion, science, and the arts. Takes 20 years to complete (1751–1772); French authorities attempt to suppress it twice; the Catholic Church opposes its publication. Political freedoms discussed in the *Encyclopédie* appeal to growing middle classes (who have no say in government) and add to demands for political reform in France

