

## The Enlightenment in Europe

**Setting the Stage:** The influence of the Scientific Revolution soon spread beyond the world of science. Philosophers admired Newton because he had used reason to explain the laws governing nature. People began to look for laws governing human behavior as well. They hoped to apply reason and the scientific method to all aspects of society – government, religion, economics, and education. In this way, the ideas of the Scientific Revolution paved the way for a new movement called the **Enlightenment**, or the Age of Reason. This movement reached its height in the mid-1700s.

**Two Views on Government:** The Enlightenment started from some key ideas put forth by two English political thinkers of the 1600s, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Both men experienced the political turmoil of England early in that century. However, they came to very different conclusions about government and human nature.

**Hobbes' Social Contract** Thomas Hobbes expressed his views in a work called *Leviathan* (1651). The horrors of English Civil War convinced him that all humans were naturally selfish and wicked. Without governments to keep order, Hobbes said, there would be “war of every man against every man.” In this state of nature, as Hobbes called it, life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Hobbes argued that to escape such a bleak life, people gave up their rights to a strong ruler. In exchange, they gained law and order. Hobbes called this agreement, by which people created government, the **social contract**. Because people acted in their own self-interest, Hobbes said, the ruler needed total power to keep citizens under control. The best government was one that had the awesome power of a leviathan (sea monster). In Hobbes' view, such a government was an absolute monarchy, which could impose order and demand obedience.

**Locke's Natural Rights** The philosopher John Locke held a different, more positive view of human nature. He believed that people could learn from experience and improve themselves. As reasonable beings, they had the natural ability to govern their own affairs and to look after the welfare of society. Locke criticized absolute monarchy and favored the idea of self-government. According to Locke, all people are born free and equal with three **natural rights** – life, liberty, and property. The purpose of government, said Locke, is to protect these rights. If a government fails to do so, citizens have a right to overthrow it.

Locke published his ideas in 1690, two years after the Glorious Revolution. His book, *Two Treatises on Government*, served to justify the overthrow of James II. Locke's theory had a deep influence on modern political thinking. His statement that a government's power comes from the consent of the people is the foundation of modern democracy. The ideas of government by popular consent and the right to rebel against unjust rulers helped inspire struggles for liberty in Europe and the Americas.

**The Philosophes Advocate Reason:** The Enlightenment reached its height in France in the mid-1700s. Paris became the meeting place for people who wanted to discuss politics and ideas. The social critics of this period in France were known as **philosophes**, the French word for philosopher. The philosophes believed that people could apply reason to all aspects of life – just as Isaac Newton had applied reason to science. Five important concepts formed the core of their philosophy:

1. Reason – Enlightened thinkers believed that truth can be discovered through reason or logical thinking. Reason, they said, was the absence of intolerance, bigotry, or prejudice in one's thinking.
2. Nature – the philosophes referred to nature frequently. To them, what was natural was also good and reasonable. They believed that there were natural laws of economics and politics just as there were natural laws of motion.
3. Happiness – a person who lived by nature's laws would find happiness, the philosophes said. They were impatient with the medieval notion that people should accept misery in this world to find joy in the hereafter. The philosophes wanted well-being on earth, and they believed it was possible.
4. Progress – the philosophes were the first Europeans to believe in progress for society. Now that people used a scientific approach, they believed, society and humankind could be perfected.
5. Liberty – the philosophes envied the liberties that the English people had won in their Glorious Revolution and Bill of Rights. In France, there were many restrictions on speech, religion, trade, and personal travel. Through reason, the philosophes believed, society could be set free.

**Voltaire Combats Intolerance** Probably the most brilliant and influential of the philosophes was Francois Marie Arouet. Using the pen name Voltaire, he published more than 70 books of political essays, philosophy, history, fiction, and drama. Voltaire often used **satire** against his opponents. He made frequent targets of the clergy, the **aristocracy**, and the government. His sharp tongue made him enemies at the French court, and twice he was sent to prison. After his second jail term, Voltaire was exiled to England for two years. There, Voltaire came to admire the English government much more than his own.



Dr. John Locke may have been created his equal, but in a state of nature, Thomas Hobbes was bruttish, thus the fight was short.

After he returned to Paris, much of his work mocked the laws and customs of France. He even dared to raise doubts about the Christian religion. The French king and France's Catholic bishops were outraged. In 1734, fearing another unpleasant jail term, Voltaire fled Paris. Although he made powerful enemies, Voltaire never stopped fighting for tolerance, reason, freedom of religious belief, and freedom of speech. He used his quill pen as if it were a deadly weapon in a thinker's war against humanity's worst enemies – intolerance, prejudice, and superstition.

**Montesquieu and the Separation of Powers** Another influential French writer, the Baron de Montesquieu devoted himself to the study of political liberty. An aristocrat and lawyer, Montesquieu studied the history of ancient Rome. He concluded that Rome's collapse was directly related to its loss of political liberties.

Like Voltaire, Montesquieu believed that Britain was the best-governed country of his own day. Here was a government, he thought, in which power was balanced among three groups of officials. The British king and his ministers held executive power. They carried out the laws of the state. The members of Parliament held legislative, or lawmaking power. The judges of the English courts held judicial power. They interpreted laws to see how each applied to a specific case. Montesquieu called this division of power among different branches **separation of powers**.

Montesquieu oversimplified the British system (it did not actually separate powers this way). His idea, however, became a part of his most famous book, *On the Spirit of Laws* (1748). In his book, Montesquieu proposed that separation of powers would keep any individual or group from gaining total control of the government. "Power," he wrote, "should be a check to power." Each branch of government would serve as a check on the other two. This idea would later be called checks and balances. Montesquieu's book was admired by political leaders in the British colonies of North America. His ideas about separation of powers and checks and balances became the basis for the United States Constitution.

**Rousseau: Champion of Freedom** A third great philosophe, Jean Jacques Rousseau, was passionately committed to individual freedom. The son of a poor Swiss watchmaker, Rousseau worked as an engraver, music teacher, tutor and secretary. Eventually, Rousseau made his way to Paris and won recognition as a writer of essays. There he met and befriended other philosophes, although he felt out of place in the circles of Paris high society in which they traveled.

A strange, brilliant, and controversial figure, Rousseau strongly disagreed with other Enlightenment thinkers on many matters. Most philosophes believed that reason, science, and art would improve life for all people. Rousseau, however, argued that civilization corrupted people's natural goodness. "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains," he wrote. In the earliest times, according to Rousseau, people had lived as free and equal individuals in a primitive "state of nature." As people became civilized, however, the strongest among them forced everyone else to obey unjust laws. Thus freedom and equality were destroyed.

Rousseau believed that the only good government was one that was freely formed by the people and guided by the "general will" of society – a direct democracy. Under such a government, people agree to give up some of their freedom in favor of the common good. In 1762, he explained his political philosophy in a book called *The Social Contract*. Rousseau's view of the social contract differed greatly from that of Hobbes. For Hobbes, the social contract was an agreement between a society and its government. For Rousseau, it was an agreement among free individuals to create a society and a government. Like Locke, Rousseau argued that legitimate government came from the consent of the governed. However, Rousseau believed in a much broader democracy than Locke had stood for. He argued that all people were equal and that titles of nobility should be abolished. Rousseau's ideas inspired many of the leaders of the French Revolution who overthrew the monarchy in 1789.

**Beccaria Promotes Criminal Justice** An Italian philosophe named Cesare Beccaria turned his thoughts to the justice system. He believed that laws existed to preserve social order, not to avenge crimes. In his celebrated book *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764), Beccaria railed against common abuses of justice. They included torturing of witnesses and suspects, irregular proceedings in trials, and punishments that were arbitrary or cruel. He argued that a person accused of a crime should receive a speedy trial, and that torture should never be used. Moreover, he said, the degree of punishment should be based on the seriousness of the crime. He also believed that capital punishment should be abolished. Beccaria based his ideas about justice on the principle that governments should seek the greatest good for the greatest number of people. His ideas influenced criminal law reformers in Europe and North America.

**Women and the Enlightenment:** The philosophes challenged many assumptions about government and society. But they often took a traditional view toward women. Rousseau, for example, developed many progressive ideas about education. However, he believed that a girl's education should mainly teach her how to be a helpful wife and mother. Other male social critics scolded women for reading novels because they thought it encouraged idleness and wickedness. Still, some male writers argued for more education for women and for women's equality in marriage.

Women writers tried to improve the status of women. In 1694, the English writer Mary Astell published *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. Her book addressed the lack of educational opportunities for women. In her later writings, she used Enlightenment arguments about government to criticize the unequal relationship between men and women in marriage. She wrote. "If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?"

During the 1700s, other women picked up these themes. Among the most persuasive was Mary Wollstonecraft, who published an essay called *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. In the essay, she disagreed with Rousseau that women's education should be secondary to men's. Rather, she argued that women, like men, need education to become virtuous and useful. Even if they are to be mothers, education will make them better mothers. Wollstonecraft also believed that women should not only be able to become nurses, but should also be able to become doctors. Women made important contributions to the Enlightenment in other ways. In Paris and other European cities, wealthy women helped spread Enlightenment ideas through social gatherings called salons.