



Western Civilization from 1650 to the Present

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TOPIC 5.1. THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Supplement to Chambers, *The Western Experience*, Chapter 19: The Age of the Enlightenment, pp. 667-697.

THE AGE OF REASON	The ENLIGHTENMENT was an 18 th century European philosophical movement characterized by a QUESTIONING of traditional doctrines and values, a tendency toward INDIVIDUALISM, and an emphasis on the idea of universal HUMAN PROGRESS, the empirical method of SCIENCE, and free use of REASON.
The Scientific Revolution	The 17 th century SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION, culminating in Isaac Newton's discovery of the law gravity, had resulted in a MECHANICAL VIEW OF THE UNIVERSE. Men conceived of the universe as a perpetual motion machine operating according to FIXED LAWS. By using the SCIENTIFIC METHOD (hypothesis, observation, experimentation, generalization) men could discover these fixed laws and acquire a true knowledge of physical reality. Enlightenment thinkers accepted this mechanical view of the universe and were confident that they could open up the mysteries of the universe by using their REASON.
DEISM	Acceptance of the mechanical view of the universe led many Enlightenment thinkers to accept the Deist concept of God. DEISM was a system of thought advocating NATURAL RELIGION BASED ON HUMAN REASON rather than revelation, emphasizing morality, and denying the interference of the Creator with the laws of the universe. Deists conceived of GOD AS A WATCHMAKER. He created the universe, set it in motion, and then stood back and let it operate according to fixed laws without interference. He created men with reason so that they would be able to discover the mysteries of the universe, gave them complete freedom of action, and then stood back and let them function without interference.
PHILOSOPHES VOLTAIRE: Memorable Passages	Enlightenment thinkers called <i>PHILOSOPHES</i> believed that human reason could be used to combat ignorance, superstition, and tyranny and to build a better world. Their principal targets were orthodox Christianity and a hereditary aristocracy (including absolute monarchy). VOLTAIRE [Francois-Marie Arouet], one of the most famous <i>philosophes</i> , is remembered for his wit and humor. His works contain such memorable passages as: <i>I have never made but one prayer to God, a very short one: "O Lord, make my enemies ridiculous." And God granted it. – Letter (1767)</i> <i>I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for you to continue to write. – Letter (1770). This seems to be the closest thing Voltaire ever actually said to the statement often attributed to him: I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.</i> <i>If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him. – Epitre a l'auteur du livre des trois imposteurs</i>
TOTAL SYSTEM OF THOUGHT	Like every TOTAL SYSTEM, the 18 th century Enlightenment structure had to meet certain basic intellectual needs: (1) a plausible ACCOUNT OF THE PAST of mankind to replace Genesis, (2) a theory and a tactic of SOCIAL REFORM to replace the functions of a Church, and a VISION OF THE FUTURE of mankind on earth, instead of in Heaven.
DIDEROT: Account of the Past	Diderot's The Innocent and the Corrupt illustrates how the 18 th century <i>philosophes</i> provided a plausible ACCOUNT OF THE PAST of mankind to replace the Genesis account in which man is corrupt by nature because of original sin. In this account of the encounter of "civilized" men with primitive Tahitians, Diderot allows a Tahitian chieftain

	<p>to speak of the natural innocence of his people.</p> <p>In their natural state, uncorrupted by the greed and vice of civilization, the Tahitians make no distinction between “yours” and “mine.” They hold their daughters and wives in common, follow their natural instincts, desire only those things that will satisfy their basic needs of food, shelter, and enjoyment.</p> <p>He reprimands the leader of the “civilized” men for creating dissention among his people by making them desire superfluous goods and knowledge, the comforts and vanities of life which are meaningless to man in his natural state. Thus Diderot creates an image of MANKIND IN A NATURAL STATE as good and corrupted only by society.</p>
<p>ROUSSEAU: Social Reform</p>	<p>Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s The Religion of Feeling illustrates how the <i>philosophes</i> outlined a theory for SOCIAL REFORM. In the course of educating Emile, the vicar of Savoy explains how a knowledge of God and the soul comes from the heart rather than from philosophical principles and arguments.</p>
<p>CONDORCET: Vision of the Future</p>	<p>He explains that we have no real knowledge about Heaven and Hell and that it is vain to contemplate such things. Instead, he proposes that one’s own remembrances of how he had acted will constitute the happiness of the just and the torments of the wicked. Rather than listening to the authority of theology or philosophy as a guide to action, he suggests that a MAN SHOULD FOLLOW HIS CONSCIENCE because this represents the dictates of his heart and is the surest way to achieve peace of mind.</p>
<p>ENLIGHTENMENT: Ideas Set Stage for French Revolution Social</p>	<p>Finally Condorcet’s Future Progress of Mankind illustrates a VISION OF THE FUTURE OF MANKIND ON EARTH, instead of in Heaven. In this selection, he proposed a future in which the INEQUALITY BETWEEN NATIONS WILL BE ELIMINATED, there will be progress in equality within each nation, and man will himself be improved. This will be achieved, he believes, because of the progress of the sciences which will improve education. As men become better educated, inequality will disappear, they will understand the truth, and error will eventually become impossible. They will also develop a universal language which will enable them to communicate their knowledge more precisely and will contribute to the IMPROVEMENT OF HUMANITY.</p>
<p>Political</p>	<p>The ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in The Social Contract paved the way for more democratic SOCIAL PRACTICES. Rousseau proposed that men in their natural state were free and equal and that “no man has a right to be lord and master over others.”</p>
<p>Economic</p>	<p>John Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding suggested more democratic POLITICAL PRACTICES. Locke explained that government was the result of a contract between the ruler and the ruled. No man should by virtue of divine right or inheritance have the right to become a ruler. Only if he contracted with his subjects did he have this right. Government exists, he said, to protect the inalienable rights of the individual: life, liberty, and property. If the ruler infringes on the rights of his subjects, they have the right to overthrow him.</p>
<p>Religious</p>	<p>Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations favored less restricted ECONOMIC PRACTICES. Smith advocated a policy of laissez-faire economics in which the government made no attempt to regulate the economy but, instead, allowed an invisible hand to guide it to the advantage of everyone.</p> <p>Lessing’s story of Nathan the Wise set an example for more tolerant RELIGIOUS PRACTICES. In his story, Lessing tells of a wise and virtuous king who owned a magic ring which gave him the power to be a wise and just ruler.</p>
	<p>Since the king had three sons and knew he was about to die, he ordered two additional rings made so that each of his sons would have one when he died. When the king finally died and the sons received their rings they began to argue about who had the “one, true” ring. Finally, they consulted Nathan the Wise in order to bring an end to the controversy. Nathan</p>

<p>ONLINE RESOURCES</p>	<p>said” “no one of you has the one, true ring. Your father was a wise man and wanted each of you to be happy. Therefore, he saw to it that each of you received a ring. Although the rings are somewhat different they have the power to make each of you a wise and just ruler. So stop arguing and live your lives so that your father would be proud of you.</p> <p>For additional details on the Enlightenment, see the PowerPoint presentation in Course Documents.</p>
<p>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS</p>	<p>For more information on this topic, explore one or more of the following online resources:</p> <p>The European Enlightenment: Excellent series of articles on the Enlightenment.</p> <p>The Age of the Enlightenment: Summary of the development’s major ideas.</p> <p>Age of the Enlightenment: Extensive bibliography of links by NM’s Creative Impulse.</p> <p>Deism: The God That Got Away: On the history, beliefs, and practices of deism.</p> <p>Drawing on the resources you have had an opportunity to explore (textbook, course documents, online resources, library resources), answer one or more of the following questions:</p> <p>How did the Enlightenment philosophes try to apply the principles and methods of the Scientific Revolution to human society? What did they hope to accomplish in doing so?</p> <p>What was the philosophes’ view of traditional Christianity, and what did they propose to take its place? How did deism try to reestablish Christianity on rational scientific principles?</p> <p>What contributions did the Enlightenment thinkers make to economics, political theory, psychology, education, and social reform? What was the Enlightenment view of progress?</p> <p>Do you think we remain a society dominated by the ideas of the Enlightenment?</p>