

The Enlightenment

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European politics, philosophy, science and communications were radically reoriented during the course of the “long 18th century” (1685-1815) as part of a movement referred to by its participants as the Age of Reason, or simply the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers in Britain, in France and throughout Europe questioned traditional authority and embraced the notion that humanity could be improved through rational change. The Enlightenment produced numerous books, essays, inventions, scientific discoveries, laws, wars and revolutions. The American and French Revolutions were directly inspired by Enlightenment ideals and respectively marked the peak of its influence and the beginning of its decline. The Enlightenment ultimately gave way to 19th-century Romanticism.

The Early Enlightenment: 1685-1730

The Enlightenment’s important 17th-century precursors included the Englishmen Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, the Frenchman René Descartes and the key natural philosophers of the Scientific Revolution, including Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Its roots are usually traced to 1680s England, where in the span of three years [Isaac Newton](#) published his “Principia Mathematica” (1686) and [John Locke](#) his “Essay Concerning Human Understanding” (1689)—two works that provided the scientific, mathematical and philosophical toolkit for the Enlightenment’s major advances.

Did you know? In his essay ‘What Is Enlightenment?’ (1784), the German philosopher Immanuel Kant summed up the era’s motto in the following terms: ‘Dare to know! Have courage to use your own reason!’

Locke argued that human nature was mutable and that knowledge was gained through accumulated experience rather than by accessing some sort of outside truth. Newton’s calculus and optical theories provided the powerful Enlightenment metaphors for precisely measured change and illumination.

There was no single, unified Enlightenment. Instead, it is possible to speak of the French Enlightenment, the Scottish Enlightenment and the English, German, Swiss or American Enlightenment. Individual Enlightenment thinkers often had very different approaches. Locke differed from David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau from [Voltaire](#), [Thomas Jefferson](#) from [Frederick the Great](#). Their differences and disagreements, though, emerged out of the common Enlightenment themes of rational questioning and belief in progress through dialogue.

The High Enlightenment: 1730-1780

Centered on the dialogues and publications of the French “philosophes” (Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Buffon and Denis Diderot), the High Enlightenment might best be summed up by one historian’s summary of Voltaire’s “Philosophical Dictionary”: “a chaos of clear ideas.” Foremost among these was the notion that everything in the universe could be rationally demystified and cataloged. The signature publication of the period was Diderot’s “Encyclopédie” (1751-77), which brought together leading authors to produce an ambitious compilation of human knowledge.

It was an age of enlightened despots like Frederick the Great, who unified, rationalized and modernized Prussia in between brutal multi-year wars with Austria, and of enlightened would-be revolutionaries like [Thomas Paine](#) and Thomas Jefferson, whose “Declaration of Independence” (1776) framed the [American Revolution](#) in terms taken from of Locke’s essays.

It was also a time of religious (and anti-religious) innovation, as Christians sought to reposition their faith along rational lines and deists and materialists argued that the universe seemed to determine its own course without God’s intervention. Locke, along with French philosopher Pierre Bayle, began to champion the idea of the separation of Church and State. Secret societies—like the Freemasons, the Bavarian Illuminati and the Rosicrucians—flourished, offering European men (and a few women) new modes of fellowship, esoteric ritual and mutual assistance. Coffeehouses, newspapers and literary salons emerged as new venues for ideas to circulate.

The Late Enlightenment and Beyond: 1780-1815

The [French Revolution](#) of 1789 was the culmination of the High Enlightenment vision of throwing out the old authorities to remake society along rational lines, but it devolved into bloody terror that showed the limits of its own ideas and led, a decade later, to the rise of [Napoleon](#). Still, its goal of egalitarianism attracted the admiration of the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (mother of “Frankenstein” author Mary Shelley) and inspired both the Haitian war of independence and the radical racial inclusivism of Paraguay’s first post-independence government.

Enlightened rationality gave way to the wildness of Romanticism, but 19th-century Liberalism and Classicism—not to mention 20th-century [Modernism](#)—all owe a heavy debt to the thinkers of the Enlightenment.

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