The Age of Enlightenment

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A public lecture about a model solar system, with a lamp — in place of the sun — illuminating the faces of the audience. The painter, Joseph Wright of Derby, captured the moment in which Enlightenment intellectuals were attempting to spread scientific principles throughout Europe. Image from the public domain.

European politics, philosophy, science and communications were radically reformed from 1685 to 1815. The changes that came about were part of a movement called the Age of Reason, or simply the Enlightenment.

Enlightenment thinkers in Britain, France and the rest of Europe questioned traditional authority. They also put forward the idea that humanity could be changed and improved through the use of reason. The Enlightenment produced numerous books, essays, inventions, scientific discoveries, laws and even wars.

The American and French Revolutions were directly inspired by Enlightenment ideals. The American Revolution was when colonies in North America rebelled against the British Empire and founded the United States. The French Revolution was when the merchants in France overturned the power of the aristocracy, the king and the Church.

These events marked the peak of the Enlightenment's influence and the beginning of its end. The Enlightenment ultimately gave way to a new age, called Romanticism, in the 1800s.

The early Enlightenment: 1685-1730

Many great thinkers worked in the years right before the Enlightenment and paved the way for it. They included thinkers from the 1500s and 1600s like the English philosophers Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, as well as the French mathematician René Descartes. They also included Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler and Gottfried Leibniz, who made important discoveries in astronomy and mathematics.

The Enlightenment's roots are usually traced to 1680s England. In the span of three years, Isaac Newton published his "Principia Mathematica" (1686) and John Locke his "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (1689). These two works provided the scientific, mathematical and philosophical toolkit for the Enlightenment's major advances.

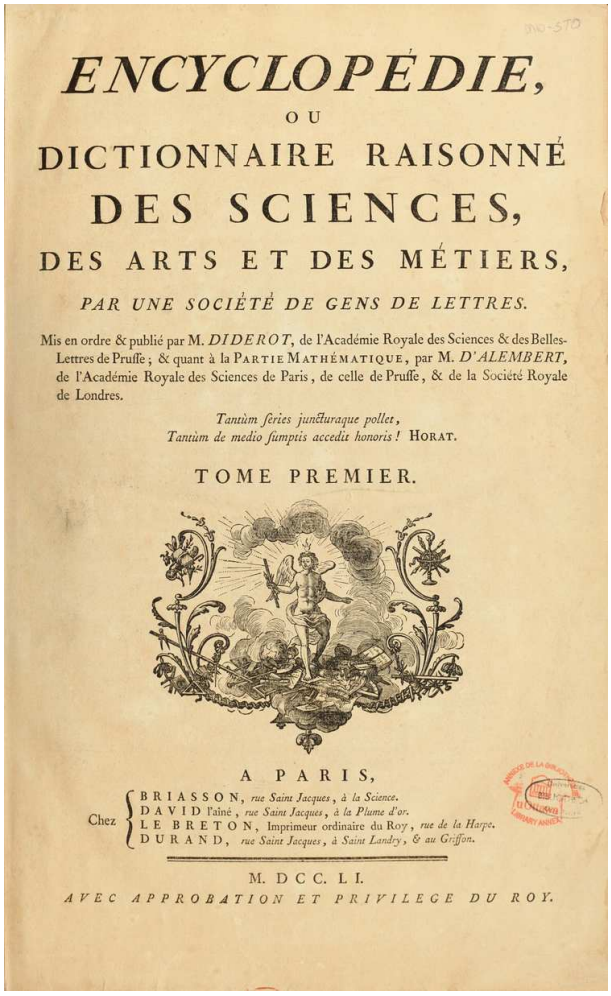
Locke argued that human nature was changeable. He also argued that knowledge was gained through experience and the senses rather than by thinking in an empty room. Newton advanced important theories in math and optics — the science of light and seeing. These were powerful Enlightenment metaphors for measuring change and illuminating what used to be unknown.

This all goes to show that there was no single Enlightenment. Instead, there was the French Enlightenment, the Scottish Enlightenment and the English, German, Swiss or American Enlightenment. Individual Enlightenment thinkers often had different approaches. Locke differed from David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau from Voltaire, Thomas Jefferson from Frederick the Great. Yet their differences and disagreements emerged out of common Enlightenment themes. Those themes involved questioning based on reason and a belief that discussing new ideas would lead to progress.

The High Enlightenment: 1730-1780

A later phase of the Enlightenment, referred to as High Enlightenment, centered on the dialogues and publications of the French "philosophes," such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Buffon and Denis Diderot. One historian called Voltaire's "Philosophical Dictionary" "a chaos of clear ideas." That is a good way to describe this period of the Enlightenment. First among these ideas was the notion that everything could be rationally explained and cataloged. The signature publication of the period was Diderot's "Encyclopédie" (1751-77). It was one of the first encyclopedias and brought together leading authors to produce an ambitious collection of human knowledge.

The Enlightenment was also an age of enlightened despots, or rulers who hold absolute power. One of the most famous was the king Frederick the Great, who unified and modernized Prussia in between brutal wars with Austria. Prussia later became part of Germany. But this period of the Enlightenment was also a period of revolutionaries like Jefferson. His Declaration of Independence (1776) framed the American Revolution based on ideas from Locke's essays.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Secret societies, such as the Freemasons, the Bavarian Illuminati and the Rosicrucians, flourished. These societies offered European men and a few women new modes of fellowship and mutual assistance. Coffeehouses, newspapers and literary salons (gatherings) emerged as new venues for ideas to be shared.

This was also a time of change with respect to religious ideas. Christians sought to explain their faith according to reason. Deists and atheists argued that the universe worked without God's help. Deists are people who believe in God, but also that God doesn't interfere in the world. Atheists do not believe in God at all.

The late Enlightenment and beyond: 1780-1815

The French Revolution of 1789 was the peak of the High Enlightenment. The leaders of the Revolution followed Enlightenment ideals, and they wanted to throw out old authorities in order to set up a society based on reason. However, the Revolution sank into bloody terror. This showed the limits of Enlightenment ideas. The Revolution also led, a decade later, to the rise of Napoleon.

Still, many admired the Enlightenment goal of equality among all people. For example, it influenced the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, who argued for equality of men and women. The Enlightenment inspired the Haitian war of independence against France. It also inspired Paraguay's first government after it gained independence from the Spanish to include people of different races.

Enlightened rationality gave way to Romanticism, which was popular from the early 1800s to about 1850 and was a reaction to the Enlightenment. It stressed individuality and emotion over

reason. But after 1850, other movements owed a heavy debt to the thinkers of the Enlightenment. These movements were Liberalism, Classicism and Modernism.