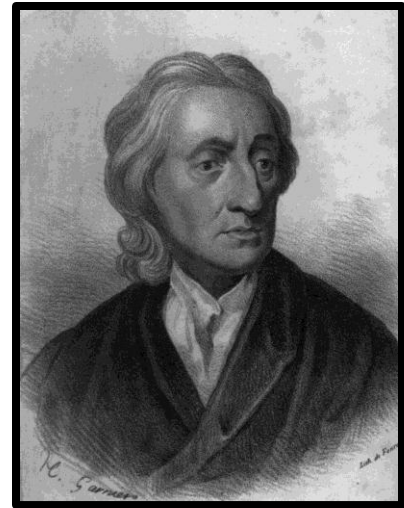


The Age of Enlightenment

Speaker: Bruce Dickerson

Locke, Voltaire, and Montesquieu—these are just a few of the names that students learning about the Age of Enlightenment should be familiar with. Any American citizen should also be aware that the ideas and ideals espoused by many of the Enlightenment thinkers were enshrined in one of the most important documents in the history of Western Civilization, the Constitution of the United States. Western Civilization today is a complex mix of many influences, but the modern concepts of individual rights and constitutional government are relatively recent developments; and, for many in the eighteenth century, these ideas were seen as radical changes in the relationship between the individual and government, and a threat to the traditional order of society.

The Enlightenment was an era when Western Europe experienced the growth of religious skepticism and a naturalistic worldview. This was a time when intellectuals, generally referred to as philosophes, confronted many traditional ideas and institutions as they attempted to apply the scientific method, with its reason and rationality, to the social, political, and economic institutions of European society. They believed that this would result in progress and improvement in the human condition. This was also a time when the findings of the scientific revolution reached more people through the writings of numerous authors and when travel books enhanced many Europeans' awareness of different cultures of the world. There was even a tendency to glorify the so-called "natural man" as superior to the civilized European.



John Locke

During the Enlightenment, the scientific laws established by Sir Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century provided a paradigm for those attempting to discover natural laws. One of the first to attempt to apply a more scientific approach to human societies was John Locke. He was one of the earliest intellectuals of the Enlightenment era and is also considered by many to be the "father of Liberalism." Locke was one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers. He believed that each person was a tabula rasa or blank sheet and that through the application of reason based on knowledge that was acquired through our senses and personal experiences, mankind could create a better world. Locke was also an advocate of religious toleration; and, he famously believed that every individual was entitled to "life, liberty, and property."

An Elderly Sir Isaac Newton

The philosophes of the eighteenth century, following upon the footsteps of Locke, were a cosmopolitan group; and, like John Locke, they believed that through the application of reason, societies could be improved. The French philosophes, with their emphasis on scientific method and secularism, embraced the idea that they were the leaders of an intellectual movement that would transform European society. They believed in human progress and religious toleration, and advocated a "republic of letters" that

would allow for the sharing of their ideas across national boundaries. Many of the leading philosophes were Frenchmen, who were often confronted with state censorship of their writings in France. They were sometimes able to overcome state censorship by having their works published in Holland, or by writing in code and using pseudonyms.

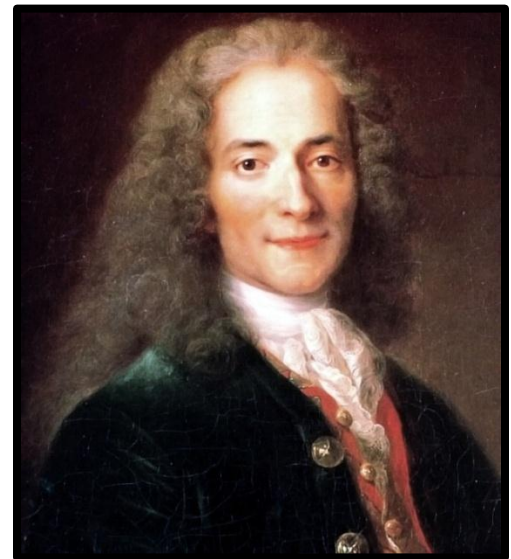
One of the more important political philosophers was the baron de Montesquieu (d.1755). He wrote *The Spirit of the Laws* which praised the system of checks and balances and separation of powers that had developed within the British political system. These ideas were important concepts which James Madison embraced when he helped write the United States Constitution. Montesquieu was also an early opponent of slavery which he also wrote about in *The Spirit of the Laws*.



Montesquieu

Another important Enlightenment intellectual was François-Marie Arouet, or better known as Voltaire (d.1778). The name, Voltaire, has become almost synonymous with the Enlightenment. He was a strong advocate of civil liberties, free trade, and freedom of religion; and, his ideas would later have a huge influence on the French Revolution. Voltaire was an important figure in the spread of scientific method to philosophy. He attacked the intolerance of organized religion, bigotry, and censorship; and, like many other philosophes, he embraced Deism. This is the belief in a mechanistic god who established the universe and set it to operate according to natural laws. Deists rejected the traditional Christian perspective of an activist god that actively participated in human affairs.

Not all Enlightenment writers were necessarily opposed to organized religion like Voltaire, but they did reject religious intolerance. These philosophes rejected the belief that society could be improved through strict adherence to a particular religious system. They believed that through the systematic application of reason people could improve society—something they believed religious belief alone could not accomplish. For the philosophes, reason meant the application of a critical, informed, and scientific approach to solving social issues and problems.



Voltaire

Jean Jacques Rousseau is another eighteenth century philosopher who influenced the French Revolution. Rousseau was very critical of many of his predecessors. He believed that people

needed to follow their instincts—that reason alone was not enough. Unlike some philosophers, he embraced the belief in the spiritual origins of man’s soul. However, he did reject the idea that one

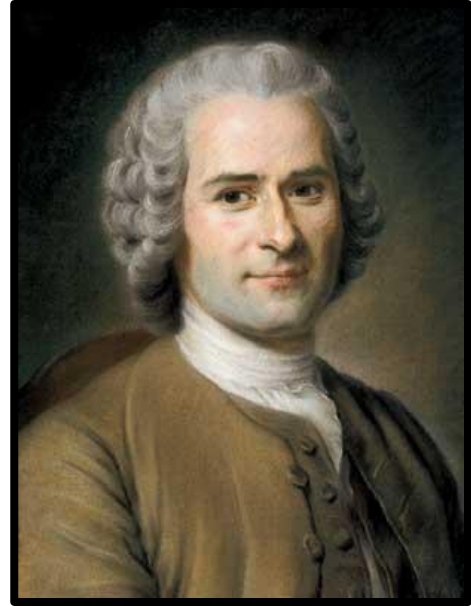
religion was superior to another, believing that all religions were equally worthy. In his work, *The Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right*, Rousseau rejects the idea of a king divinely empowered to enact and enforce laws. He believed that all laws must come from the legislative power of the people. Rousseau believed:

The heart of the idea of the social contract may be stated simply: Each of us places his person and authority under the supreme direction of the general will, and the group receives each individual as an indivisible part of the whole...

Thus, the social contract guarantees an individual's rights as a member of a society, but also requires that the individual fulfill the responsibilities that come with membership in the group. Rousseau believed that a society must be ruled by the "general will" because what was best for all members of the group must also be what is best for any one individual.

Another important French philosophe was Denis Diderot (d.1784). Diderot was a harsh critic of religion and, in particular, Christianity which he thought was a fanatical and unreasonable faith. He spent many years compiling many Enlightenment ideas in a multi-volume *Encyclopedie*. The 28 volumes included many radical and controversial articles many of which dealt with theoretical and critical concepts. Although many articles attacked religious superstition, they also embraced religious toleration. Many articles also advocated changes in social, political, and legal institutions that would lead to a more humane, cosmopolitan and tolerant society. The criticism of religious intolerance during the Enlightenment contributed to the spread of negative attitudes toward organized religion among the leaders of the French Revolution. This had a big impact on the power and status of the Catholic Church in France during and following the French Revolution. Unlike the French monarchs, Joseph II, the emperor of the Hapsburg Monarchy, embraced the notion of religious tolerance when he issued an *Edict of Toleration* in 1781.

David Hume was a Scottish philosopher who is considered one of the most important individuals in the history of philosophy (d.1776). Hume advocated a "science of man" that explored the psychological aspects of human nature. He rejected many of the rationalist approaches of many Enlightenment philosophers, believing that faith rather than reason controlled human behavior. Hume's ideas contributed to the development of what we would call "the social sciences." Hume influenced the



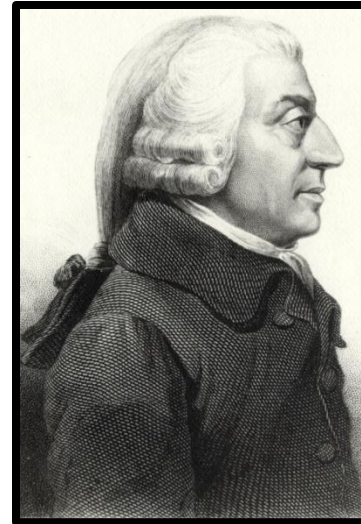
Rousseau



Joseph II

writings of the economic theorists such as Adam Smith. In economics, Smith and the Physiocrats rejected mercantilism and advocated a free market economic system that followed the laws of supply and demand. Smith wrote about his belief in “laissez-faire” economics in *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith’s ideas provided the basis for the development of economic liberalism in the nineteenth century.

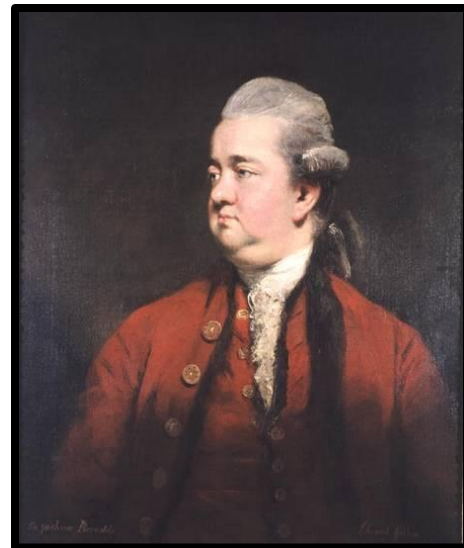
The Enlightenment philosophes also transformed the method and style of writing history, rejecting the role of God on the course of historical events and concentrating on natural causes. This can be seen in Voltaire’s masterpiece, *The Age of Louis XIV*, and in Edward Gibbons six volume history, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Historical writings began to include not only information about politics, but also information on economic, social, and cultural events, while dismissing many religious subjects as mere superstition and barbarism.



Adam Smith

As philosophes debated the nature of man and society, it was only natural that the “woman question” would become part of the debate. Many of the male philosophes maintained their traditional attitudes towards women and were critical of women who attempted to participate in the intellectual debates of the day. However, Mary Anstell (d.1731) and Mary Wollstonecraft (d.1797) were two women who added new perspectives to the debate, arguing forcefully for the equality of the sexes and in favor of the right of women to an education. Wollstonecraft argued that a system which allowed men to dominate women was just as wrong as a system that allowed slave owners to dominate slaves. She believed that not only were women entitled to the same rights as men to a good education, but that women should be guaranteed equal economic and political rights and that if reason was a human quality then it must naturally be a female quality as well. Wollstonecraft is considered by many to be the founder of modern feminism.

The ideas of the Enlightenment spread among the growing cosmopolitan elite of Europe. Many of these elites were nobles, but many were also members of the expanding wealthy and educated urban populations that did not have titles of nobility. Most of the educated and wealthy population of Europe even outside of France spoke the French language and embraced many aspects of French culture. However, the majority of Europe’s population—still mostly poor peasants—were not immediately affected by the ideas of the Enlightenment. These ideas appealed mostly to the urban middle and upper classes and passed the peasants by. Enlightenment ideas spread as they were discussed openly in Parisian salons, where women were most often the hostesses, and in coffeehouses, reading clubs,



Edward Gibbon

lending libraries, and societies like the Freemasons and outside of France in similar venues. The Select Society of Edinburgh and the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia are two examples of private clubs that were established for the discussion and debate of enlightened ideas.

The eighteenth century was also a period that saw changes in the arts as the lightness and curves of the Rococo replaced the majesty, power, and movement of the Baroque style. There were also major changes in music as the Baroque styles of Bach and Handel were replaced by the Classical symphonies of Haydn and Mozart. Also, during the Enlightenment Era the novel became a new literary form. Reading as a popular pastime also spread as there was an increase in the number of books, magazines, and newspapers. The European elite still dominated educational institutions. Elite private schools continued to emphasize the Greek and Latin classics; however, gradually a new middle class education developed that stressed modern languages and other more relevant subjects. Although in some respects education was becoming more democratic in nature, many

philosophes continued to believe that education should still serve as a means of keeping people in their proper social class. This attitude can be seen in the following quote by Baron d'Holbach: "Education should teach princes to reign, the

ruling classes to distinguish themselves by their merit and virtue, the rich to use their riches well, and the poor to live by honest industry."



Mary Wollstonecraft



A Reading in the Salon of Mme Geoffrin, 1755



Mozart was a child prodigy

The liberal ideas and attitudes of the philosophes helped to transform European society in numerous ways, especially by contributing directly to the outbreak of the French Revolution, to the spread of the belief in individual rights and equality, and to the desire for democratically elected forms of constitutional government. However, the conservative traditions and institutions were not easily overcome. Conservative opposition to many of these liberal ideas dominated the political debate in Europe for years to come. In many respects, the contest between conservative, political, and religious worldviews and secular liberal beliefs continues today, influencing the politics and government of not only Western societies, but much of the rest of the world as well.