

Enlightenment Philosophy

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The Age of Enlightenment / The Age of Reason

- A period of history for Europe and European colonies, e.g. United States and Haiti in the late 17th to the 18th century
- Rise of empirical evidence and reason of methods of knowledge
- Political beliefs developed ideas of religious tolerance, natural rights, political progress, and individual liberty → advocated for separation of church and state and constitutional government
- In morality, a move away from religious justification for right and wrong towards scientification of new moral rationality, e.g. Utilitarianism and Deontology



Moving from Religion to Science

- Diverse thinkers were incredibly unified in their belief that philosophy (broadly imagined - includes natural philosophy and social sciences) would improve human life
- D'Alembert, French Enlightenment thinker: the Enlightenment is conceived here as having its primary origin in the scientific revolution of the previous two centuries
- New sciences undermine the earlier religious conceptions of the cosmos → move from geocentric to heliocentric model → also challenged the assumptions that had guided by also constrained earlier philosophical inquiry
- New philosophy thought to be independent from the church and even the goals of the university, freed from institutional influence → created the ability to challenge the old and construct the new

Decentering the Church and the University

- Early middle ages: Knowledge produced in religious institutions → Church
- Late middle ages/Early Renaissance: Knowledge produced at Universities
- Enlightenment: ideas produced and circulated through more decentralized venues: literary salons, Masonic lodges, coffeehouses, books, journals, pamphlets (long term impact of printing press)
- Ideas produced undermined both the authority of the church and of the monarchy → would help influence political revolutions of 18th and 19th centuries
- Later: Nineteenth century movements like socialism, liberalism, neoclassicism will have connections to the earlier Enlightenment movements



The Enlightenment and Political Revolution

- Enlightenment often associated with political revolutions, Esp. French Revolution of 1789
- Growing social unrest in France comes to a head in the political upheaval → sweeps away older modes of politics based on hierarchy and traditional structure (ancien regime)
- These older forms privilege the monarchy, the aristocracy and nobility, and the power of the Catholic Church
- Revolution meant to replace ancien regime with a new order based on reason, and the ideals of liberty and equality



The Haitian Revolution (1789-1804)

- Self-liberated slaves revolted against French Colonial rule in Saint-Domingue → now the sovereign state of Haiti
- Multi-racial revolution: black, biracial, Spanish, Polish, and British
- The ex-slave Toussaint L'Ouverture emerging as Haiti's most prominent general during this time
- Influenced by Enlightenment of ideals for men and representative government → these ideas travelled to the Caribbean and influenced revolutionary consciousness
- Inspires a rebellion where people sought these ideals for themselves



Why did enslaved people join the revolution?

- Inspired by the French Revolution → topic of discussion in Saint-Domingue
- The ideology of the French Revolution made its way to Saint-Domingue via pamphlets, etc.
- The Amis des Noirs group would pass out these pamphlets
- Overheard their enslavers/masters discussing France
- Abbé Grégoire, author of pamphlet that had been circulating among mixed-raced people and eventually filtered down to enslaved people → called for emancipation of all slaves in the French West Indies
- Maltreatment, exploitation, and disunity → but perhaps most important was French Revolution



Some themes in Enlightenment Philosophy & Science

Seventeenth century precursors to the Enlightenment:

- **Bacon's empiricism** → sometimes called the Father of Modern Empiricism
 - Scientific theory must come from the senses, careful observation, filtered through inductive reasoning (drawing conclusions going from the specific to the general... I see the sun rise each morning, therefore the sun rises every day)



- **Descartes' rationalist philosophy** → Wants to construct the sciences on secure metaphysical grounds (many philosophers see this as a failure after this convincing overview of the challenge of skepticism)
 - Led to the dualistic understanding of mind and matter as separate
 - This skepticism is going to be refined in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and Hume's 1740 writings, esp. *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Enlightenment Epistemology

- Separation from Church means a new set of methods for knowledge
- Religious methods left behind: intuition, revelation, dreams, scripture
- Focus of Enlightenment knowledge: rationalism and empiricism
- With the fall of the church, desire to create a new foundation for certainty → God is gone, and we now seek secular justification
- Philosophy joins in with rise of Science → no longer handmaiden to religion, now handmaiden to science
- Must counter wave of skepticism about what can even be known, e.g. Descartes presents skepticism in order to refute it; Hume says it cannot be refuted but that we should just “move on” to avoid problems



Enlightenment Values

- Central values of Enlightenment philosopher were claimed as liberty and religious tolerance → sought to distinguish itself from absolute monarchy and Church dogma
 - However, some, like Voltaire, would turn to the idea of the absolute monarch to implement Enlightenment ideas (reminiscent of Plato's philosopher-king)
- Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Francis Hutcheson (d. 1746): interest in utilitarian and consequentialist principles: virtue provides “the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers”
- Concepts of utility and sociability demonstrate a move towards thinking about politics as relations between individuals under unified social system
- Kant, Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment? (1784):
 - “Dare to know”
 - “Enlightenment is the freedom from the imposition of the other”

Enlightenment and Intellectual Independence

“Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! 'Have courage to use your own reason!'- that is the motto of enlightenment.”

— Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*

