

The Enlightenment Philosophers: What Was Their Main Idea?

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Reading of Voltaire's "L'orphelin de la Chine" at Madame Geoffrin's home, 1755.

Overview: During the late 17th and 18th century in Europe, well-educated people known as *philosophes*, or philosophers, met in French salons and English drawing rooms to discuss political, economic, social and religious questions. The cutting-edge discussions helped shape the capitalistic, democratic world in which we live today. Because this period was a time of high intellect and bright new ideas, historians have called it the Age of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason.

The Documents:

Document A: John Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government*

Document B: Voltaire, *Letters Concerning the English Nation*

Document C: Adam Smith: *The Wealth of Nations*

Document D: Mary Wollstonecraft: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

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The late 17th and 18th century was a period of many changes. Between discoveries in science and disagreements over religion, people were questioning traditional ways of living and knowing. Thinkers called *philosophes* (“philosophers” in French) were particularly hopeful that they might discover new ways to understand and improve their society.

One belief that the *philosophes* shared is that Nature is an excellent teacher. They believed that there are **natural laws** or truths that people do not always recognize. They believed that if people observe their surroundings they could discover patterns in nature that could be applied to human activities like government and economics.

Another belief the *philosophes* shared was their confidence in people’s ability to use reason to discover truths. In fact, this Enlightenment period in history is often called the *Age of Reason*. Intellectuals believed that if they used the reasoning powers God or nature had given them, they could answer any question. A combination of careful observation and clear-headed reasoning were the two keys to understanding the truth of all things.

One reason the *philosophes* believed in the existence of natural laws was the work of the famous scientist Isaac Newton (1642–1727). By making new observations and studying the observations of other physicists before him, Newton noticed

patterns in the physical universe. Newton proved that the force that pulls objects to earth is the same as the force that holds the planets in orbit

around an unmoving sun. Newton called this force “gravity” and described how it worked in several strokes of genius we call “Newton’s laws.”

The *philosophes* believed that what Newton learned about planets they could learn about people. In other words, if there were rules that explain how objects in the sky behave, there must be natural rules or laws that explain how people behave. They believed these laws were **universal**; that is, they could be found everywhere, and simply had to be discovered. Many a *philosophe* hoped that he or she could become the Isaac Newton of the **social sciences**.

This Mini-Q presents the ideas of four *philosophes* writing about four different areas of human society: government, religion, the economy, and the social role of women. Your first job is to understand what they are saying. Their language is not always easy but the passages are short. Then, as you move from document to document, ask yourself if there is one important idea that keeps reappearing, an idea that is basic to all four thinkers. In other words, answer the question before us: *The Enlightenment Philosophers: What was their main idea?*



John Locke



Voltaire



Adam Smith



Mary Wollstonecraft

Background Essay Questions

1. What two centuries were the centuries of the *philosophes*?
2. What did the *philosophes* hope to accomplish?
3. What two tools did the *philosophes* believe are necessary to find out the truth of things?
4. What is another name for the Enlightenment period?
5. How did Isaac Newton inspire the *philosophes*?
6. Define these terms::

philosophe

natural law

universal

social sciences

Timeline

- 1633** – Galileo condemned by the Catholic Church for arguing that the sun is the center of the universe.
- 1687** – Isaac Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* becomes one of his several pioneering works of scientific inquiry.
- 1690** – John Locke's influential *Two Treatises on Civil Government* is published.
- 1693** – Salem witch trials take place in Massachusetts Bay Colony.
- 1733** – Voltaire writes *Letters Concerning the English Nation*.
- 1776** – American colonies declare independence from the British monarchy.
Adam Smith's important economics book *The Wealth of Nations* is published.
- 1789** – The French Revolution occurs; the chaos and violence that followed within a few years is widely considered to be the end of the Enlightenment.
- 1792** – Mary Wollstonecraft publishes *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Document A

Source: John Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, 1690.

Note: John Locke (1632–1704) lived in England during both the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution. When Locke was born, England's form of government was an absolute monarchy in which the king or queen had power to rule and sometimes asked for advice and assistance from Parliament. In 1689, the English Parliament passed the Bill of Rights. This law reversed the role of king and Parliament making Parliament more powerful than the king.

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“Of the State of Nature”

... (W)e must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature....

There [is] nothing more evident, than that creatures of the same species and rank ... should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection....

“Of the Dissolution of Government”

(W)hen the government is dissolved, the people are at liberty to provide for themselves, by erecting a new legislative, ... for the society can never, ... lose the native and original right it has to preserve itself, which can only be done by a settled legislative, and a fair and impartial execution of the laws made by it. But the state of mankind is not so miserable that they are not capable of using this remedy, ... they have not only a right to get out of [a failed government], but to prevent it.

Document Analysis

1. In what year is John Locke writing these words? How many years was this before the American Declaration of Independence?
2. What does John Locke mean when he says that all men are naturally in “a state of perfect freedom ... within the bounds of the law of nature”?
3. What does Locke have to say about human equality?
4. According to Locke, who has the right to create a new government if the old government fails? What two branches of government does Locke appear to recommend?
5. Based on these two passages, what would you say is Locke’s main idea?

Document B

Source: Voltaire, *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, 1726.

Note: Voltaire was born Francois-Marie Arouet in Paris in 1694. He adopted his pen name and became a prolific writer, eventually composing poems, novels, essays, plays, and over 20,000 personal letters. He remains among the leading historical supporters of tolerance. Voltaire died in 1778 at the age of 83, eleven years before the French Revolution.

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Take a view of the Royal Exchange (trading center) in London ... where the representatives of all nations meet for the benefit of mankind. There the Jew, the Mahometan (Muslim), and the Christian transact together as tho' they all professed the same religion.... There the Presbyterian confides in the Anabaptist (Baptist), and the Churchman (Anglican) depends on the Quaker's word....

If one religion only were allowed in England, the government would very possibly become arbitrary; if there were but two, the people would cut one another's throats; but as there are such a multitude, they all live happy and in peace.

Document Analysis

1. What happens at the Royal Exchange in London?
2. Why, according to Voltaire, is it good that England allows a "multitude" of religions?
3. What is Voltaire's main idea about religion in society?
4. What does Voltaire's main idea about religion have in common with John Locke's main idea about government?

Document C

Source: Adam Smith, *The Wealth Of Nations*, 1776.

Note: The most common economic system in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries was called *mercantilism*. The goal of mercantilism was to make the state (country) rich. Most people at the time assumed that a monarch, who had been granted his power by God, should be in charge of making economic decisions. Common people were not capable of making decisions that would benefit the national economy.

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[Without government interference] the obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord. Every man...is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest in his own way.... The [ruler] is completely discharged from a duty [for which] no human wisdom or knowledge could ever be sufficient – the duty of superintending [guiding] the industry of private people, and of directing it towards ... the interest of the society....

As every individual, therefore, endeavours as much as he can both to employ his capital [money] in the support of ... industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily [contributes to] the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He ... neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it.... (H)e intends only his own gain, and he is in this ... led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.... By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more [effectively] than when he really intends to promote it.

Document Analysis

1. In paragraph one, does Adam Smith support an economic system based on government control or individual decision making? Why?
2. In paragraph two, according to Adam Smith, why do most individuals work?
3. According to Smith, what is the happy and unexpected result when people pursue their own economic gain?
4. In paragraph two, Smith mentions an “invisible hand.” What do you think he means by that?
5. What is Adam Smith’s main idea about trade and economic decision making?

Document D

Source: Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792.

Note: British author Mary Wollstonecraft wrote novels, a history of the French Revolution, a travel journal, and a children's book in addition to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. During the 18th century, most people believed that women should be beautiful, emotional and dependent on men. Therefore, women were discouraged from studying history, geography, and rhetoric, which all teach people how to make logical, reasoned arguments.

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Chapter 2 *The Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character Discussed*

The most perfect education, in my opinion, is ... to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render [her] independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose [skills] do not result from the exercise of [her] own reason.

Chapter 12 *On National Education*

To render mankind more virtuous, and happier of course, both sexes must act from the same principle;... women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge, which is scarcely possible unless they be educated by the same pursuits as men. For they are now made so inferior by ignorance and low desires, as not to deserve to be ranked with them....

In short, ... reason and experience convince me that the only method of leading women to fulfill their peculiar duties is to free them from all restraint by allowing them to participate in the inherent rights of mankind. Make them free, and they will quickly become wise and virtuous

Document Analysis

1. In what year is Mary Wollstonecraft writing these words? What revolution was going on at the time?
2. How does Wollstonecraft believe women compare to men? What does Wollstonecraft recommend in order to make women equal to men?
3. What methods did Wollstonecraft use to reach her conclusions?
4. What is Wollstonecraft's main idea?
5. In what ways are the main ideas of Wollstonecraft, Locke, Smith, and Voltaire similar?

