

# The Enlightenment

The characteristics of the Enlightenment are a scepticism towards the doctrines of the church, individualism, a belief in science and the experimental method, the use of reason, that education could be a catalyst of social change and the demand for political representation. Its main social and political consequence was the French revolution.

The core period of the Enlightenment was second half of the eighteenth century. The thinkers associated with the Enlightenment include d'Holbach (1723-89) and the Encyclopedists in France, David Hume (1711-76) in Scotland and Kant in Germany. To understand the Enlightenment we have to look at what preceded it.

The battle of ideas that was to culminate in the Enlightenment began in the seventeenth century. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) advocated the use of scientific method and René Descartes (1596-1650) proposed a critical rationalism. The Enlightenment can be understood as the culmination of the move away from the authority and dogmatism of the mediaeval and the awakening of modernity.

Medieval philosophy combined Christian beliefs with the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. In the medieval world philosophers respected their predecessors and accepted their methods. If a new discovery about nature contradicted one of Aristotle's principles, for example, it would probably have been assumed that it was the discovery that was in error.

Enlightenment thinkers were not content to accept appeals to Aristotle's authority. It could be seen that using experimental methods science was progressing and increasing our understanding of nature, which could not have been done without rejecting some of Aristotle's assumptions.

It was not only Aristotle that was being questioned, using reason and logic philosophers criticised political and religious ideas. What rational answer is there for the justification of monarchy or that you should choose one type of religion over another?

## The Encyclopedists

The *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* was published in seventeen volumes between 1751 and 1765. Its aim was to provide information on every sphere of knowledge, and in particular to promote the application of science in industry, trade and the arts. It is seen by many as epitomising the spirit of the Enlightenment.

Denis Diderot (1713-1784) was the main editor. He was a committed **empiricist** and wrote on philosophy, religion, political theory and literature. He was highly critical of the church's influence on ideas.

Voltaire (pen name of François-Marie Arouet) (1694-1778) also edited and contributed to the *Encyclopédie*. He was anti-Christian and critical of the clergy, the king and the privileges of the nobility. He was highly influential in the rise of liberal thought in continental Europe.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) wrote on music and political economy. Later he quarrelled with Diderot and came to regard the Encyclopédie as the work of the devil.

Rousseau was not alone. In 1752 and 1759 the Jesuits managed to suppress publication, although in each case for only a short period. Diderot however remained firm and by 1772 a further eleven volumes of plates were published. Diderot's ambition "to change accepted habits of thought" was in largely successful.

## **Romanticism**

The romantic period emphasised the self, creativity, imagination and the value of art. This is in contrast to the Enlightenment emphasis on Rationalism and Empiricism.

Its roots can be found in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant. Philosophers and writers associated with the Romantic movement include Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854), and George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) in Germany; Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850) in Britain.

Philosophically romanticism represents a shift from the objective to the subjective: Science claims to describe the objective world, the world understood from no particular viewpoint. Imagine three people looking at a landscape, one is a farmer, another a property developer and the third an artist. The farmer would see the potential for raising crops and livestock, the property developer the chance to build houses and the artist at the shades and subtleties of colour and form. None of these individuals is seeing the landscape objectively; they are seeing it from a particular or subjective viewpoint.

The move from the objective to the subjective is a result of Kant's idea that human beings do not see the world directly, but through a number of categories. We do not directly see "things-in-themselves"; we only understand the world through our human point of view. If we agree with Kant that we can never know things-in-themselves, we may as well discard them. This leads to Idealism; the belief that what we call the "external world" is somehow created by our minds.

The Enlightenment's emphasis on the empirical deterministic universe left little room for the freedom and creativity of the human spirit. The romantic emphasis on art and imagination is a direct critical reaction to the mechanical view of some Enlightenment figures.

The romantic emphasis on the individual was reflected in ideas of self-realisation and nature. Wordsworth thought that the individual could directly understand nature without the need for society and social artifice, salvation is achieved by the solitary individual rather than through political movements.

## **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**

"Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains" Rousseau wrote in 1762. He thought that civilisation fills "man" with unnatural wants and seduces him away from his true nature and original freedom. Rousseau is credited with the idea of the "Noble Savage" who is uncorrupted by artifice and society.

In "Émile" (1762) he describes the education of a free being who is encouraged to develop through self expression the natural nobility and liberty of the spirit.

In the "Social Contract"(1762) he attempts to describe a society in which this natural nobility could flourish. The society would be based on a contract where each individual would give all of his rights to the community, but all collective decisions would be based on a direct democracy (a democracy where each member has a chance to vote on every issue). As all are involved in decision making this contract is seen as legitimate.

The state is seen to represent the common good or the general will. The general will is not to be confused with the "will of all": The "will of all" is what individuals think they may want and includes selfish motives. The "general will" however is what people would want if they were rational and is seen as necessarily good.

If an individual does not want to obey the general will then he must be "forced to be free". Imagine a group of people attempting to cross a bridge that is, unknown to them, weak and dangerous. The gatekeeper refuses to let the group pass and they feel that their freedom is being curtailed as they do not have a full understanding of the situation. The gatekeeper is forcing them to be free; if they were not stopped then they may have perished on the weak bridge. Rousseau likens this situation to the person who does not understand why they should obey the general will. To obey what is best for all is to maximise the freedom for each.