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The Enlightenment

During the Scientific Revolution, thinkers like Copernicus, Galileo, and Sir Isaac Newton developed new models for understanding the natural world through observation and experimentation.

This emphasis on reason stood in contrast to longstanding assumptions about the world perpetuated by tradition and religion. It also set the stage for a new generation of thinkers to use the same methods to examine and reimagine social and political life.

The Enlightenment...unpacked.

The Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, was a 17th- and 18th-century intellectual movement in which European politics, religion, philosophy, and science were drastically reoriented. It was less a single, unified movement and more a spread of ideas among philosophers and intellectuals. Their conclusions varied, but these thinkers were brought together by a belief that reason could lead humankind to a better world now rather than in the next life—a direct challenge to the traditional authority of Christianity as well as governments that claimed a God-given right to absolute power.

These Enlightenment thinkers, armed with the learnings of the Scientific Revolution, aimed to apply scientific methods of thinking to reimagine what society could look like.

English philosopher John Locke, an early Enlightenment thinker, aimed to understand humans the way Newton understood nature. He believed humans are born a blank slate, and their characters develop as a result of their experiences. This shared starting point meant all people were born equal—an idea that influenced Locke's religious tolerance as well as his political philosophy.

In his 1690 book, *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke described humans' natural right to life, liberty, and ownership of property and suggested government should be a social contract between ruler and subjects. This meant power would not be absolute, but rather granted in exchange for protection of people's rights.

Enlightenment thinking spread to France to a group of intellectuals known as the philosophes. Early philosophes like Montesquieu and Voltaire were inspired by England's political and social structure. Montesquieu opposed France's absolute monarchy in favor of separation of powers and a system of checks and balances. In his view, these safeguards would prevent a tyrannical ruler from gaining too much power.

Later philosophes like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot pushed Enlightenment thought even further. Rousseau's more radical vision of government rejected existing forms of representative democracy in favor of direct democracy. In *The Social Contract*, he outlined a political system based on full participation by every citizen in every decision.

The Enlightenment spread beyond England and France to other European countries, as a rethinking of the natural rights of humans, the structure of society, and religion's role in government continued to take place.

Enlightenment thought also directly inspired multiple revolutions. The philosophies of Locke and Montesquieu echo throughout the Declaration of Independence and US Constitution. And without the philosophes, the French and Haitian Revolutions may have never taken place.

While Enlightenment ideals were transformative, they were often put into practice unevenly. In many cases, the stated natural rights of humankind were only extended to White men, while so-called rational thought was used to justify racism, sexism, and classism. Slavery and imperialism continued throughout and after the Enlightenment, while women were consistently denied political power. At the same time though, Enlightenment ideas led to increased advocacy for the abolition of slavery as well as women's rights—two movements that gained momentum throughout the 1800s.

While some of the egalitarian ideals of the Enlightenment may remain aspirational to this day, this era had a profound and lasting impact on European and Western society, ushering in an emphasis on reason and knowledge, separation of church and state, and individual rights and freedoms.

In what ways do the ideals of the Enlightenment still influence modern life?